

# Social activist, feminist, nun

The BBC have called her Europe's most radical nun: Sister Teresa Forcades i Vila talks to Sarah Meyrick in the run-up to her appearance at the Greenbelt festival



Rallying call: Sister Teresa at a rally on Catalan independence in Barcelona last year

**S**PEAKING to Sister Teresa Forcades i Vila takes a few attempts. She lives in a Benedictine monastery about an hour's drive north-west of Barcelona, high up on the sacred mountain of Montserrat. The mobile signal proves impossible. We settle on speaking on the community landline, but the nun who picks up the phone has repeated difficulty transferring the call to Sister Teresa's office. ("You need to understand she is 90 years old, but she was my novice mistress and I love her," Sister Teresa explains.)

Mostly, though, it is because Sister Teresa, aged 51, is constantly in demand. In the past few years, she has become one of the most influential left-wing public intellectuals in Europe, spearheading an anti-capitalist movement that campaigns for Catalan independence, the Procés Constituent. Her campaign calls for a radical new political and social model, based on self-organisation and social mobilisation, where banks and energy companies would be nationalised and all citizens would have the right to a home and a dignified wage.

She has spoken on out on subjects as diverse as the national debt and the pharmaceutical industry, and is a regular on TV chat shows and on social media (she has her own YouTube channel). *The Guardian* calls her "one of the most outspoken leaders of southern Europe's far left".

This is what brings her to Greenbelt, where she will be sharing her views on the state of Europe's political, economic, and religious affairs in the light of Brexit and the lurch to the Right. "I understand that Greenbelt is a festival connected with spirituality and justice, and this is a dear topic for me," she says. "You cannot separate love of God from love of human beings, especially those who are suffering. That is why they have invited me."

So how does she define herself? The answer is immediate. "First and foremost, a monastic," she says. "I entered the monastery 20 years ago, in 1997. It remains the basis of my spirituality and my social commitment. I am a Benedictine [nun], a physician, and a theologian."

She did not, however, grow up in a Christian family. "My family had reasons to be wary of the Catholic Church," she says. "The fascist dictatorship of General Franco was in close alliance with the Roman Catholic Church. Although my parents had been baptised, and their three daughters were baptised, they resented the linkage between the Church and the totalitarian regime."

As a result, it was not until her teenage years that she encountered the Bible at school. "When I was 15, I read the Gospels for the first time, and my reaction was anger. I felt I had wasted 15 years not knowing such a God exists." It was, in part, "a necessary teenage rebellion" against her upbringing, she says. But this was the start of an exploration of the faith that has shaped her life.

She was drawn to a parish in

Barcelona's harbour area which was strongly committed to social justice, and runs one of the largest projects for the homeless in Catalonia. "It does not provide shelter or food, but human interaction. Homelessness is not the point. We say, 'You are marginalised, and you consider that you do not count, but you do count.'" Her parents had instilled in her theoretical human values, she says, but this was her first experience of their practical application.

How did her parents respond to her conversion? "Their values have always included respect for others," she says, with a laugh. "But they tried to dissuade me."

The call to the religious life came only after she had studied medicine at the University of Barcelona and in the United States. She continued her studies after entering the monastery, and has doctorates in both public health and theology.

Now, she says, her family have more or less come round to her calling. "We have a day at the monastery for families coming up, and I expect them to come." She adds that, like the harbour parish, the monastery is "the type of Catholic church that they can be comfortable with".

Sister Teresa has not been afraid to criticise some aspects of her Church. She has publicly accused it of being misogynistic and patriarchal. "It's not a casual thing but a structural thing. You can trace it back to the New Testament, where it says women should not be allowed to speak. I don't believe every sentence in the Bible is the word of God. The responsibility belongs to the interpretation of the texts. I believe that [interpretation] should be a communitarian effort. We can do it, but we move a bit slowly."

In spite of her trenchant views, she has felt supported within the Church, "by the parishes and people, in my community, by my bishop". She has recently published (in Spanish only, so far) a book, *The Challenges of Pope Francis*. She is optimistic about his papacy. "But I am always careful. I believe the real change for social justice never comes from above, even with an open-minded pope. It always has to have a struggle from below."

She refers to the words of Pope John XXIII, who said that it was "time to open the windows and let the fresh air in" at the opening of the Second Vatican Council. "What

comes in is what is already out there," she says.

She points out the change in the make-up of the RC Church. In 1910, 65 per cent of Catholics were European; a century later that figure has fallen to 24 per cent. "That cultural diversity makes it difficult to make certain changes all at once. Many places — such as Brazil and Germany — are ready for married priests, for example. The Pope has told the Bishops' Conference of Brazil to go ahead. If you wait until the whole world is of one mind, nothing will change."

She is passionate about embracing diversity, which, she believes, lies at the heart of the Trinity. "Diversity is not a lesser evil, if we cannot achieve unity," she says. "If God is diverse — as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — we should not [simply] tolerate diversity. It is our ultimate reality."

**S**ISTER TERESA was already making waves in the Church when she found herself catapulted on to a much bigger stage. In 2009, because of her public-health background, in the peak of the pandemic, she was asked to give a speech on swine flu. She researched the subject, and gave an hour's talk, in which she said that the flu vaccine had been rushed into research and production, and lacked proper scientific basis for public use.

"I was expecting it to be edited, to a few fragments," she says. "But I was asked [by the producers] if it could be posted whole. More than a million — almost 1.5 million — people read it, and it was translated into several languages. Suddenly, my name had reached a wider public."

Horrified that the interests of the drug companies were being put before the needs of the sick, she wrote a study on the pharmaceutical industry. Suddenly, everything she said was reaching a far wider audience than before, and attempts to discredit her followed. "The Church has taken the critique better than the rest of society," she says. "For example, [the newspaper] *El País* said, 'She says she is a physician.' That is appalling — they could so easily check."

"This has been very surprising, but has given me an understanding of the mechanisms of power. But I would be scared if I was trying to make a living as a physician, and support a family."

The prominence opened the door

to a much more public political life, and the campaign for Catalan independence. "From the beginning," she says, "it was a project to politicise what had become something real in the streets: a social majority that wanted to stop the neoliberal politics that were happening in Spain."

Speaking about the struggle for independence, in an interview in the *Telegraph*, she said: "We perceived a social majority in Catalan society that wanted to break with the neoliberal system. It is true that not all of them want independence from Spain, but they might eventually understand that this is the best way to bring about the change they desire."

She draws on the work of the man described by *The New York Times Magazine* as "America's most prominent Marxist economist": Richard Wolff. "I know it is not easy," she says, "but you can't have an undemocratic economy and a democratic society."

Sister Teresa is currently living separately from her monastery to focus on her campaigning. Her community offered her the opportunity to take a sabbatical of up to three years: the kind given to nuns to allow them to look after a sick parent. ("I said, 'Yes, but my mother is not sick.' They said, 'No, but society is sick; so you can go and take care of it.'")

She emphasises that this is a "temporary, exceptional arrangement" to allow her to participate fully in conversations about the future of Catalonia, because the community recognises that she has an important part to play.

It has not been plain sailing: she misses the rhythm of the monastery. "We have six hours' work, five hours' prayer, *ora et labora*, and that has been my life for 20 years." These days, her usual pattern — when she is not travelling or attending meetings — she escapes to "somewhere quiet that no one knows about" from Monday to Wednesday, spends Thursdays and Fridays on her political work, and returns to the monastery to teach on Saturday, and to spend time with the community on Sunday.

This works "for now", she says, although it has not been easy. "It has helped me appreciate more how good the monastic life is for me, but it feels a bit unbalanced." There have been some unexpected compensations: spending more time with her mother, and learning to pray alone, in a more personal, intimate way. But she gives the strong impression that she is torn between the two calls on her life, and will happily return to her monastic life the moment the three years are up, in August next year.

By way of illustration, she tells a story about an olive tree, very dear to her, that she was given when she took her vows, and planted within the monastery. "The day we decided [on these three years], one of the biggest pine trees fell on top of the olive tree, and split it down the middle. I rushed there, and as a doctor I wanted to put a cast around the tree. I wrapped it in a blanket, and brought the two halves together, and tried to recover it."

"A year later, I found it was split; but it lives, and it produces olives. I don't know what I would have done if one half had died. I was very happy that both halves are still living."

*The Church Times is Greenbelt's media partner [www.greenbelt.org.uk](http://www.greenbelt.org.uk).*

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