

Sacred Mystery or Natural Phenomenon? Body of Saint Teresa of Ávila Displayed Again in Spain



In a moment that blends religious devotion with scientific curiosity, the body of Saint Teresa of Ávila, the 16th-century Carmelite mystic, has once again been put on public display at the Basilica of the Annunciation of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Teresa, who died in 1582, is at the center of a deeply rooted Catholic belief: incorruptibility — the idea that the bodies of certain saints do not decompose, seen by many as a divine sign of holiness.

But this latest unveiling comes with a twist. For the first time in over a century, researchers have been granted permission to study her mummified remains in an attempt to determine why her body has resisted decay. The initiative has sparked heated debate — where faith meets science, skepticism, and mystery.

An "intact" body — but not quite

Photos from the last exhumation in 1914 have been compared to current images, but the differences in photographic

quality — the old images are in black and white — make direct comparisons difficult. “It’s hard to evaluate the actual state of preservation from outdated visuals alone,” admitted one researcher involved in the project.

Adding to the controversy, the body of Saint Teresa is incomplete. Over the centuries, several parts — including her heart, an arm, a hand, and a tooth — were removed and distributed as holy relics, a common practice in earlier Catholic tradition. Today, however, this makes a full scientific assessment more complicated.

Holiness under scientific scrutiny

Initial observations suggest the body underwent natural mummification — a rare but documented phenomenon often linked to environmental conditions such as humidity, soil composition, and temperature. For the faithful, however, there is no question: the preservation of Teresa’s body is a divine miracle. “It’s God’s will,” says María del Pilar, a pilgrim who traveled from Seville. “She remained whole because she was pure in life.”

Scientists are less certain. Chemical and biological analyses are currently underway to better understand the cause of the unusual preservation. Meanwhile, skeptics argue that the narrative of incorruptibility lacks evidence. “Until we have concrete scientific results, claims of miraculous preservation remain speculative,” says one Spanish anthropologist specializing in historical mummification.

A trial by fire for the new pope

The case also comes at a symbolic moment for the Catholic Church, just as newly elected Pope Leo XIV begins his pontificate. The handling of this sensitive topic — balancing age-old beliefs with modern scientific inquiry — may well be his first significant challenge. Should he defend the traditional narrative of incorruptibility, or champion a more rational, investigative approach? His response could set the tone for a papacy navigating between faith and the demands of the contemporary world.

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