Saint Theresa was a nun who was canonized (made a Saint by the Church) because of the spiritual visions she experienced. She lived during the middle of the 16th century in Spain—at the height of the Reformation.

When we look at the Ecstasy of Saint Theresa by Bernini we have to consider the entire space of the chapel. The chapel is called the Cornaro Chapel, after the Cornaro family who owned it and commissioned Bernini to sculpt Saint Theresa. Saint Theresa wrote several books in which she described her visions.

This is her description of the event that Bernini depicts:
Beside me, on the left, appeared an angel in bodily form.... He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest rank of angels, who seem to be all on fire.... In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul content with anything but God. This is not a physical but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it—even a considerable share.

Saint Theresa describes her intensely spiritual experience in very physical, even sexual terms. Why? We know that an important goal of Baroque art is to involve the viewer. Theresa is describing this in physical/sexual terms so that we can understand. After all, being visited by an angel and filled with the love of God is no small experience. How can we ordinary mortals hope to understand the intensity and passion of this experience except on our own terms?
The first thing that we notice when we walk into the chapel is that we have the *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* in front of us, and on either side of us, on the side walls, we see what look like theater boxes. In the boxes, seated figures in appear to be talking and gesturing to each other. Perhaps they are kneeling in prayer as they watch the scene of the *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*.

Who are these figures in the theater boxes? They are posthumous portraits of members of the Cornaro family (many of them were Cardinals). Behind them Bernini created a fabulous illusion of architecture—a coffered barrel vault, doorway and columns. And, if we follow the metaphor of a theater, it feels as though we've got the best seats in the house! And importantly, what's happened is that we have immediately become a part of the work of art. It surrounds us, and we are literally inside of it. This is, as we have seen, a typical feature of Baroque art—breaking down the barrier between the work and the viewer, to involve us.