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Teresa of Avila's Inward Journey to Spiritual Growth

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ABSTRACT:

This article describes the basic structure of Teresa's understanding of spiritual growth as depicted in her seven "dwelling places" in the Interior Castle. It places emphasis upon where God invites our cooperation (cooperative grace) and where God acts alone (operative grace). The article includes how this spiritual growth affects our prayer and our relationships with other people.

Teresa of Avila's Inward Journey to Spiritual Growth

by Anne Cabill

This essay will trace the soul's journey through Teresa of Avila's seven mansions. Teresa draws us into her treatise of the *Interior Castle* by explaining that "our soul [is] like a castle made entirely out of diamond or of very clear crystal."¹ This image is her central metaphor for seeing our souls truly as dwelling places for God. In the very center of our soul, God shines like the sun, forever and always, but our sins and transgressions block this glorious

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- 1 Mary Frohlich, "Teresa of Avila (1515-82): The Interior Castle," in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, ed. Arthur Holder (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 209.

light. There are many mansions consisting of millions of rooms to accommodate the varied ways and people who choose to enter. In moving through the dwellings in the castle, one grows in self-knowledge and may ultimately be drawn into union with God. But there is great diversity in the ways that different people actually make the journey.² This growth toward intimacy with God involves an interior seeking, and sadly, she says, many remain outside the walls in the courtyard.

The keys to entering the first mansions are prayer and reflection. Prayer, according to Teresa, is quite simple. “Prayer is nothing more than intimate conversation with a friend. It means taking time frequently to be alone with the One whom we know loves us.”³ A sign that one has entered the first mansion is the experience of a spiritual awakening.

From here, one moves quickly to the second mansions, drawn by “the call of God to a deeper, more godly way of life.”⁴ Here the soul desires to be good and to respond to God’s call. One begins to hear God’s call “through words spoken by other good people, or through sermons, or through what is read in good books, or through illnesses and trials, or sometimes through a truth that we glimpse during the moments when we are in prayer.”⁵ In 1554, Teresa herself experienced what Augustine calls a *convertere*, a turning toward God. Upon reading and reflecting on Augustine’s Confessions, she felt called in her heart by the Lord.⁶ She began praying, as she instructs her Discalced Carmelites, to bring her will into conformity with God’s will. These prayers and responses to God’s invitation allow one to grow in virtues and open the doors into the third mansions.

2 Frohlich, “Teresa of Avila,” 209.

3 Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, “Wise Action in a World of Suffering and Injustice: Teresa’s Vision for Today,” in *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Theology and Spirituality in the Carmelite Tradition*, eds. Peter Tyler and Edward Howells (London: Routledge, 2017), 109-110.

4 Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, “Excerpts from Teresa’s Interior Castle,” in *Enkindling Love: The Legacy of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 22.

5 Michael Rubbelke, “The Carmelites Part I: Teresa of Avila,” (PowerPoint presentation and lecture, Saint John’s University School of Theology and Seminary, Collegeville, MN, Nov 8, 2022), Slides 12.

6 Bernard McGinn, “True Confessions: Augustine and Teresa of Avila on the Mystical Self,” in *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Theology and Spirituality in the Carmelite Tradition*, eds. Peter Tyler and Edward Howells (London: Routledge, 2017), 9.

The third mansions are rooms of people who are comfortable and living well-ordered lives. On the one hand, they do what they are supposed to do: pray, go to Mass, receive the sacraments, and practice charity. “They have achieved everything that can be accomplished by human effort.”⁷ However, they are in danger of becoming complacent in their spiritual growth; if lacking in humility, they are in danger of thinking they have “made it” and have no need to search further. These first three dwelling places provide fertile ground for active growth, both in self-knowledge and in an understanding of God’s will for us.⁸ The consolations found here are a result of “our own virtuous works,” or cooperative grace, as God helps in these works.⁹

If one continues to seek God in humility, another leap in spiritual growth occurs that leads to the second set of three dwelling places. “For the first time, the soul directly hears the Lord’s own voice....This ‘prayer of recollection’ is the first way that an entirely new kind of spiritual experience begins to manifest itself.”¹⁰ God is initiating growth now. Prayers lead to an expansion of the heart and an increasing desire to please God. Teresa’s discernment and basic spiritual principle is to do “what best stirs us to love.”¹¹

This expansion of the heart leads one to the fifth mansions, where an absorbing transformation takes place by Divine desire, or operative grace. Teresa uses the metaphor of a worm growing into a butterfly to describe this growing union into God. “The essence of union consists simply in total surrender of one’s will to God. Surrender of will makes the soul soft, like wax prepared to receive the impression of God’s seal; it goes forth from the experience of union as God’s [chosen].”¹² The soul experiences an expanded love of neighbor, such that it suffers pain when seeing the suffering of others in the world.

7 Frohlich, “Teresa of Avila,” 213.

8 Rubbelke, “The Carmelites,” Slide 11.

9 Ahlgren, “Excerpts,” 37.

10 Frohlich, “Teresa of Avila,” 213.

11 Ahlgren, “Excerpts,” 35.

12 Frohlich, “Teresa of Avila,” 214.

Father Iain Matthew speaks to Teresa's prayers in the sixth mansions as re-presenting the Resurrected Christ through prayer as an encounter:

I wish to affirm that Teresa means more than 'imagine Christ' by the verb 'representar.' Represent, yes, but as 're-present,' allow to be present again, attend to the presence of, Christ. This matters because it highlights a difference between prayer as mental exercise and prayer as encounter; between prayer as evidence that I am a spiritual person, and prayer as testimony that, however fumbling I may be, the risen Christ is exercising here his lordship.¹³

In these prayers of "representar," Jesus the Christ is indeed resurrected and lives in Spirit with all his earthly history and bodily experiences. This is prayer as *encounter* with Jesus in his humanity, the Risen Christ whom one can accompany, befriend, and converse with through mental prayer. "Mental prayer—prayer with the mind, the heart, not just with the lips—is then a personal relationship, and one in which the Other's love is primary."¹⁴ In the sixth mansions, one experiences a spiritual betrothal to Christ, whom one meets in one's soul through prayer. From this intimacy, one begins to experience locutions, raptures, and intellectual visions. These extraordinary experiences can draw persecution from others, such as gossip, undue praise, and suspicion.¹⁵ Teresa is clear about our inability to enter these last dwellings on our own. "And however great the effort we make to do so, we ourselves cannot enter. God must place us there and then God enters as well into the center of the soul."¹⁶

In echoes of Bonaventure's seventh stage of growth, when drawn by God into the seventh dwellings, one consummates a mystical union. Led by Christ, one enters into a dynamic relationship with Trinity. The purpose of this inner marriage is so we may imitate Christ in "good works, good works."¹⁷ From her working in concert with the Trinity, Teresa was

13 Iain Matthew, "St. Teresa: Witness to Christ's Resurrection," in *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Theology and Spirituality in the Carmelite Tradition*, eds. Peter Tyler and Edward Howells (London: Routledge, 2017), 85-86.

14 Matthew, "St. Teresa," 83.

15 Rubbelke, "The Carmelites Part I," Slide 15.

16 Ahlgren, "Excerpts," 47.

17 Frohlich, "Teresa of Avila," 216.

imbued with an inner fortitude. It was this mystical strength that allowed her to reform and expand the discalced Carmelites, to work with John of the Cross in reforming the male orders of Carmelites, and to write her published works, even into old age. This mystical relationship is summarized well by McGinn:

Thus, although the mystical self appears to us as the result of an interactive process, the interaction is really God working within us. This insight helps us understand that our growing recognition of the unknown existence of the true self is never static; it is an unending journey, a progressive conversion, a deeper appreciation of the unknown.¹⁸

Through her journey into the mansions of the soul, Teresa of Avila describes prayer as experiential: an ever-deepening encounter with God who leads one further into the mansions of the soul by means of operative and cooperative grace. From Teresa we learn that spiritual growth toward God is an inward movement. It is the journey of the mystic, which ultimately leads a seeker into union with God.



18 McGinn, "True Confessions," 18.

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