

## Praying with Teresa of Avila (1515 – 1582)

*Considering your strict enclosure, the little recreation you have, my sisters, and how many conveniences are wanting in some of your convents, I think it may console you to enjoy yourselves in this Interior Castle, where you can enter, and walk about at will, at any hour you please, without asking leave of your superiors.*

~ Teresa of Avila, ~

Teresa, who died in her home country of Spain at the age of 67, was a Carmelite nun who wrote prolifically on prayer from a context of illness, spiritual distress and Godly visions. In founding Discalced ('without shoes') Carmelite houses, in the way of Ignatius Loyola, Teresa put into practice her evident leadership skills, and her deep desire to live as close to a hermetic life as possible. Teresa's writings include the 'Way of Perfection', a contemplative commentary on the Lord's Prayer. She also wrote a 'Book of Foundations' for her nun-companions, and recorded her autobiography in her 'Life.'

Her autobiography explores the life of prayer through the image of 'four waters', likening prayer to four ways of watering with a progressive lessening of human effort. The first 'watering' is as if from a well: first we must find the well of prayer, then we must find a vessel with which to draw the water that will nourish our soul. The second way of being drenched in prayer is through a water-wheel: water flows in the stream, but we must catch it, harness it, in order to quench our thirst. Thirdly, prayer is like the stream itself: we enter and are encompassed in prayer. Then finally, the only human effort needed is to stand still, to be soaked by the rain: the fourth image of prayer as water.

This sense of deepening, of prayer requiring progressively less human input, and increasingly more stillness and awareness of the encompassing nature of God's love is taken up and developed in what must be Teresa's most powerful work on prayer: 'The Interior Castle'.

Written over four weeks, initially for the sisters in her religious community for whom an interior castle took the place of external trappings, Teresa was often found 'in a state of reverence and intensity' by those who lived in close community with her. These periods of intense spiritual reverie were accompanied by times of illness. Teresa here imagines "the soul as resembling a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal", where the pilgrim progresses from the outer courtyard to its centre. peeling back layers of identity and experience until a union with God, devoid of clutter, is found.

Inside the castle are seven 'mansions', or 'dwelling places', each one taking us closer to union with God who is waiting for us at the centre. Our journey through the gate into this castle is assumed to be a journey rooted in prayer and meditation.

Moving through the first three mansions, described as the 'purgative way', the pilgrim encounters demons, suffering, set-backs, and temptations to remain in these outer mansions, "lacking determination to quit their present condition." Teresa encourages the reader to continue on the journey, deepening our life of prayer as we move closer to the 'kernel' at the heart of the crystal, and to resist the temptation to settle

for a mediocre prayer life. Much of the journey through these first mansions is a journey of self-discovery.

Like the layers of an onion, Teresa's journey takes us next to the fourth mansion, where 'prayer of recollection' is an invitation to reflect on the life lived so far. This and the final three mansions take the pilgrim to a deeper level of contemplation, or mystical prayer. Increasingly as the soul gives itself over to God in humility through daily prayer and meditation, human distraction and material temptations are left behind,

The final three mansions are experiences of union with God in increasing measure, with parallels to the four ways of watering described earlier. Each stage in our deepening union with God depends on increasingly less human dependence, and greater unity with God. The fifth mansion is a place of preparation for this union as in a promise, or a betrothal; the sixth mansion is a union as of lovers; the seventh is a union, or marriage with God where the soul achieves clarity.

In all of this Teresa affirms her inseparability from her love for Christ and the Church, including participation in the sacraments. She stresses her own lack of insight and wisdom, attributing her works to the voice of God speaking in and through her.

Questions, or gifts from Teresa for today's reader include:

- to what extent is your prayer life connected to times of prolonged mystical meditation?
- what is your response in your prayer life when you find yourself in the 'second mansion', and feel trapped, or 'lacking determination to quit your present condition'?
- describe experiences of prayer that have taken you close to union with God.

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