

THE INTERIOR CASTLE

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

1. The Background

When I wrote my Doctoral Thesis in Rome: *The Bhagavad Gita and St. John of the Cross, A Comparative Study of the Dynamism of Spiritual Growth towards God-Realization* (Gregorian University 1995), I tried to summarize both spiritual world-views into three ascending stages, namely *The Purgative Way*, *The Illuminative Way* and *The Unitive Way* through a spiral dynamic ascending growth process towards union with God or God-Realization. Teresa of Avila in her *Interior Castle* (hereafter abbreviated as IC) describes a similar dynamic in her exposition of the doctrine helping the reader to ascend stage by stage practically carving an identical pedagogy but put in a broader perspective of Seven Mansions leading the soul from room to room until it reaches the throne of God himself.

Blueprint

It will be noticed that the first two Mansions belong to the *purgative* life, the third and fourth to the *illuminative*, and the remaining three to the *unitive* life. Compared with similar works, the treatment of the first stage must be called meagre. True, in her *Life* and in the *Way of Perfection* Teresa has dealt with this subject somewhat more fully. Indeed, the last-named work was designed as a treatise on Christian Ascetics, dealing with the purgation of the soul by mortification and the enlightenment of the mind by meditation. There, too, appears the first idea of the *Mansions*, and the passage in question may be taken for the parting of the ways between the two works. However, this is not the only, nor, indeed, the chief reason why Teresa is so reticent about the preliminary stage of the contemplative life. The fact is that she herself did not pass through these experiences. By God's grace she was preserved from childhood from grievous sin and gross imperfection.

Though she never grows tired of bewailing her faults and unfaithfulness, these avowals must be taken *cum grano salis* (with a grain of salt). While yet a child, she sometimes gave way to vanity in dress and wasted her time in reading romances. As a young religious, she was sought after by friends and relatives who took pleasure in her attractive conversation. This proved further loss of time and caused distractions. Owing to acute suffering, she for some years left off the practice of mental prayer, though she faithfully performed all her religious obligations, as far as her weak state of health allowed. This is all. The war of the flesh against the spirit, the insubordination of the lower parts of nature, the fickleness of the will, which so often thwart the most noble aspirations of a soul, were unknown to her. Under these circumstances, we cannot be surprised to find her entering upon the journey towards God at a point which in many cases marks but the closing stage.

A long Way

Teresa who journeys through the castle from dwelling place to dwelling place provides us with a program, feminine yet warlike, of the Christian spiritual life. It is, though, also a book, the last book written by Teresa who five years before her death left to the best of her knowledge what in her experience she had been praising God for. The IC has come to be regarded as Teresa's best synthesis. In it the spiritual doctrine is presented through the unifying outline of *seven dwelling places*, among which there is a division into *two sections*. The *first three groups* of dwelling places speak of what is achievable through human efforts and the ordinary help of grace. The remaining *four groups* deal with the passive, or mystical, elements of the spiritual life. By the term “supernatural prayer” (contemplation), Teresa refers to the whole series of forms and degrees of infused or mystical prayer. By the term “perfect contemplation,” she refers only to those pure forms of contemplation found in the fifth, sixth, and seventh dwelling places.

Background

The IC which reminds one of Dante's *Paradiso* reminds us of one and the other, the soul, purified from earthly dross, is gradually being invested with new and glorious qualities, and is being led through regions unknown until it arrives at the very threshold of the throne of God. Not even the boldest imagination could have designed so wonderful a picture of a soul adorned with graces at once so varied and so true. In one case we know, the poet has drawn abundantly from the treasury of the Angelical Doctor, putting in verse the conclusions of the scholastic theologian. In the other case we can follow, chapter by chapter, the influence of the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas. Teresa had never studied it herself, but her directors and confessors were deeply versed in it and solved her doubts and perplexities on the lines of the greatest of the school men. The IC might almost be considered a practical illustration of certain parts of the *Summa theologica*, as it describes the progress of the soul *through every stage of perfection*. When we have reached the second chapter of the seventh Mansion, there remains but one thing: *the Beatific Vision, and this is reserved for the next life*.

The Timing of IC

The work was begun, appropriately, on the feast of the Holy Trinity, June 2, 1577. Within little more than a month, she had proceeded as far as the fifth dwelling place. She completed the remaining large section, more than half the work, by November 29, within less than a month. Thus the actual time spent on this spiritual masterpiece was a mere *two months*. Actually from mid-July till the beginning of November she did not write a thing as she was too busy in Avila, coming from Toledo looking after the affairs of the house (IC V,4,i). Her health was not good. No trace of these trials is to be found in the IC. Teresa possessed the power of concentration of thought in a marvellous degree. The early mornings and late evenings were

devoted to the composition of the book, while the rest of the day was taken up by the affairs of the Order.

Different Paths to God

It would be a mistake to consider the IC a complete treatise of mystical theology. Like Teresa's other works, it is intensely personal: she describes the road by which she has been led, being well aware that others may be led in a different way. In the heavenly Father's house there are many mansions, not only seven, and many paths lead to them. What gives the work such high value is, that it is the result of a most searching inquiry into the various phases whereby a soul is gradually transformed into the likeness of God Himself. Here Teresa is always at her best. She takes nothing for granted; even her own personal experiences are admitted only after having been fully investigated and found to be consistent one with the other, and conformable to the teaching of the Church and the words of Holy Scripture.

Practical Conclusion

One of her early biographers, Fr. Diego de Yepes, testifies what Teresa told him on the eve of Trinity Sunday in 1577. In fact, God showed her in a flash the whole book. There was "a most beautiful crystal globe like a castle in which she saw seven dwelling places, and in the seventh, which was in the center, the King of Glory dwelt in the greatest splendor. From there he beautified and illumined all those dwelling places to the outer wall. The inhabitants received more light the nearer they were to the center. Outside of the castle all was darkness, with toads, vipers, and other poisonous vermin. While she was admiring this beauty which the grace of God communicates to souls, the light suddenly disappeared and, although the King of Glory did not leave the castle, the crystal was covered with darkness and was left as ugly as coal and with an unbearable stench, and the poisonous creatures outside the wall were able to get into the castle.

Such was the state of a soul in sin.” (*Biblioteca Mística*, vol. 18, 276-278). Just to anticipate what we are looking for in this work is that in the last dwelling place of the IC, Martha and Mary work together. The two sisters in Bethany are two symbols of human life. Martha stands for action, Mary for contemplation. It is necessary that *these two work together* because in the first through the sixth dwelling places there is a disassociation between the two. To reach a union between these two, Martha and Mary, action and contemplation, the two levels have to be united in the same person.

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