

14. SIXTH MANSIONS

(Darkness, Trials, the Cross)

The description of the Sixth Mansions, which covers Eleven Chapters, is the longest in the *Interior Castle*. The Sixth Mansions is another transitional stage, even though less radical than the Fifth Mansions: whereas the Fifth Mansions marked the progression into 'union', the Sixth Mansions marks the progression from momentary to permanent union.

It is better Higher Up

The famous preacher D.L. Moody told about a Christian woman who was always bright, cheerful, and optimistic, even though she was confined to her room because of illness. She lived in an attic apartment on the fifth floor of an old, rundown building. A friend decided to visit her one day and brought along another woman – a person of great wealth. Since there was no elevator, the two ladies began the long climb upward. When they reached the second floor, the well-to-do woman commented, "What a dark and filthy place!" Her friend replied, "It's better higher up." When they arrived at the third landing, the remark was made, "Things look even worse here." Again the reply, "It's better higher up." The two women finally reached the attic level, where they found the bedridden saint of God. A smile on her face radiated the joy that filled her heart. Although the room was clean and flowers were on the window sill, the wealthy visitor could not get over the stark surroundings in which this woman lived. She blurted out, "It must be very difficult for you to be here like this!" Without a moment's hesitation the shut-in responded, "It's better higher up." She was not looking at temporal things. With the eye of faith fixed on the eternal, she had found the secret of true satisfaction and contentment.

Sixth Mansions and the Dark Night

At the outset, it must be noted that the expression 'the dark night of the spirit' was not one used by Teresa in her writings. The expression has been borrowed from the writings of John of the Cross, specifically from his book *The Dark Night*. In the *Interior Castle*, the 'dark night of the spirit' is what the person tends to experience in the Sixth Mansions: this mansion refers to a time of great trials and tests, which may be worse than those in any other mansion in the *Interior Castle*. However, it must be emphasized that it is not imperative that a person will experience the dark night of the spirit at a specific point along the spiritual journey – or even at all.

The Presentation

God does not present God's self to the human consciousness in the same way that an object in the concrete world is said to be present. From the writings of Teresa, encountering God is more like meeting a friend or a loved one; mystics tend to use intensely personal language, especially in their description of their relationship with Jesus Christ. Mystics have wrestled with writing about the presence of God or about the transforming union in God they have experienced, precisely because of the paradox that God is found *in absence and negation* (most significantly in an experience referred to as 'the dark night of the soul') rather than in the more easily understood, and the more easily verbalised, presence and affirmation. The intensity of Teresa's writings is seen in this Mansion specifically. She uses her writing skills to the best in narrating the interaction between the soul and God.

Outside of one's Senses

In the state of spiritual betrothal of the sixth mansions, it takes hold of the exterior senses and gives the person the experience of mystical ecstasy, of

being “outside of one's senses.” Her presentation of the mystical life is thus a process whereby the Holy Spirit gradually takes over more and more of the soul's inner recesses and eventually has measurable (although fleeting) effects on the bodily senses. When seen in this light, the mystical experiences themselves are not important in the state of spiritual betrothal, but only that Spirit is deepening his penetration of the soul. The experiences themselves are nothing more than effects of this ever-deepening penetration and should be understood and appreciated as such. Teresa advises her readers that these experiences are gifts of God and cannot be obtained through human effort. They are not to be actively sought out and should not be the primary focus of one's prayer. God alone must be the sole object of one's prayer. Teresa's presentation of the mystical life, moreover, is extremely Christ-centered. She asserts that contemplating the mysteries of Christ with a simple penetrating gaze will enable a person to grow in humility and self-knowledge and lead to the most sublime state of prayer. She also asserts that those who consciously try to forget about Christ will fail to make further progress into the heart of the soul's interior castle.

Balance

Teresa believed that daily activity and talkativeness would disturb the silence in which God speaks to the soul in this stage. Daily activity can furthermore create anxiety, which destroys recollection and creates obstacles to prayer, invading prayer itself, thus making it nearly impossible to pray. If daily activity takes over one's life to the extent that there is no time or place for prayer and silence, then it becomes problematic. As a counter-balance to silence in one's daily activity, however, Teresa also cautions against ‘spiritual gluttony’ among those who are too attached to the effects of union with God and therefore recommends that silence be *balanced with action* in one's daily life.

Ready for Crosses

Interior sufferings of a person in this stage are not quite visible to others externally. On the one hand a person rejoices because there is certainty of God's closeness and experience that gets deepened and on the other there is acute absence of God which actually torments the soul but that the certainty of God's closeness helps the person to accept trials easily. "But it is an incomparably greater trial to see oneself publicly considered as good without reason than the trials mentioned. And when the soul reaches the stage at which it pays little attention to praise, it pays much less to disapproval; on the contrary, it rejoices in this and finds it a very sweet music. This is an amazing truth. Blame does not intimidate the soul but strengthens it. Experience has already taught it the wonderful gain that comes through this path" (IC VI,1,v).

Incapacity to Understand

People of faith have always suffered the incomprehension of their closeness to God through their sufferings. "It seems the soul has no longer any need of reflection to understand this, for the experience of having suffered through it, having seen itself totally incapacitated, made it understand our nothingness and what miserable things we are. For in this state grace is so hidden (even though the soul must not be without grace since with all this torment it doesn't offend God nor would it offend him for anything on earth) that not even a very tiny spark is visible. The soul doesn't think that it has any love of God or that it ever had any, for if it has done some good, or His Majesty has granted it some favor, all of this seems to have been dreamed up or fancied. As for sins, it sees certainly that it has committed them." (IC VI,1,xi). Such was the condition of great many souls who loved God; but in their ongoing journey they even experienced darkness of God's absence and abandonment.

Trials

As Patriarch Job was tested in the hands of Satan, so will every soul be tested at the appropriate time. The trials will be excruciating and continuous. It should be kept in mind that God uses at times the people around us to persecute us and through this way God will purify us. But God has the choice of letting Satan to do the job too. Purification has to take place in order that the final encounter with God becomes easy and lasting: “The soul's understanding is so darkened that it becomes incapable of seeing the truth and believes whatever the imagination represents to it (for the imagination is then its master) or whatever foolish things the devil wants to represent. The Lord, it seems, gives the devil license so that the soul might be tried and even be made to think it is rejected by God. Many are the things that war against it with an interior oppression so keen and unbearable that I don't know what to compare this experience to if not to the oppression of those that suffer in hell, for no consolation is allowed in the midst of this tempest.” (IC VI,1,ix).

Sufferings

According to Teresa one of the main features of this stage is the torments and sufferings that soul has to endure because of nature of this process of union. The imperfect soul coming closer to God is a path to sufferings and pain. “Well then, what will this poor soul do when the torment goes on for many days? If it prays, it feels as though it hasn't prayed – as far as consolation goes, I mean. For consolation is not admitted into the soul's interior, nor is what one recites to oneself, even though vocal, understood. As for mental prayer, this definitely is not the time for that, because the faculties are incapable of the practice; rather, solitude causes greater harm – and also another torment for this soul is that it be with anyone or that others speak to it. And thus however much it forces itself not to do so, it

goes about with a gloomy and ill-tempered demeanour that is externally very noticeable.” (IC VI,1,xiii).

Practical Conclusion

People who reach the Sixth Mansions are not yet in a condition of permanent union with God. They are still involved in the demanding process of reforming the spirit that precedes permanent union. This reformation is particularly painful, to the extent that Teresa says that the individual at this stage “... has the keenest longings for death” Teresa stresses that the soul must undergo great trials at this stage of the spiritual journey. These trials are of both an exterior and an interior nature. The joy that is experienced in the Sixth Mansions is intertwined, paradoxically, with a pain of which Teresa says “... I know that this distress seems to penetrate to its very bowels”. Summing up I reflect on an inscription on the wall of a prison cell in Europe “*I believe in love even when I don't feel it. I believe in God even when He is silent.*”

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