

24. What is Union with God?

In the last Chapters of the Seventh Mansion Teresa elaborates on Union with God. Teresa describes in detail the soul's experience of spiritual marriage. It is the final stage of mystical contemplation, where the soul reaches the inner sanctum of the interior castle and perceives the quiet indwelling presence of the Holy Trinity. It senses this divine presence apart from any mystical rapture or suspension of the senses. Unlike the soul's experience of union in the fifth mansions and spiritual betrothal in the sixth, the soul is no longer blind and deaf to the communion of divine love within it. In this seventh mansion, God removes the scales from the soul's eyes and enables it to see him face to face.

For us Christians union with God is union with Christ. It is our salvation. Salvation is not mostly a matter of relocation; it is a matter of transformation. It does not consist primarily of ending up in the right place, but being made into the right person. And this happens when we are immersed in Jesus the way a fish is immersed in the ocean, when we are united to Jesus (though more deeply and more profoundly) like a bride is united to her groom. With this understanding of union with Christ, discipleship suddenly takes its proper place. It's not extra-credit work to earn something. *It's the means by which* we experience union with Christ more fully and deeply. If we want Christ, we will want to be disciples. If we don't want discipleship, then we might desire to avoid pain, but that's not the same object as desiring Christ.

From Christ to God

The whole point in the writings of Teresa is union with God mediated

through Christ the King. There is no compromise on this subject. She continues always to insist that it is only by imitating Christ that we reach our goal. Teresa is using this image or imagination of an Interior Castle that is deep within our being, in our will, our memory and in our intellect. When the New Testament writers ask us, “Set your minds on things that are above” (Col. 3,2), it’s not a command to crane our necks and look at the skies, but to look for a reality beyond what we can naturally see. When they tell us to “fix our eyes ... on what is unseen” (2 Cor. 4.18), it is our imagination that must respond. Or, take that most frequent biblical command to “remember.” “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22.19). You can’t remember without engaging your imagination. And that tragic refrain “But they forgot” (Judg. 3.7; 1 Sam. 12.9; etc.) can be diagnosed as a failure to call to mind, that is, a failure of the imagination.

Union with Christ tells you a new story about who you are. If you are “in Christ,” you too have been given a new identity. God has called you into a new life, rooted in a history that predates you, anchored in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. You discover who you are “in Christ,” and you are given the DNA to prove it, the Holy Spirit. You once were lost, but now you are “found in him” (Phil. 3.9). This truth can change everything for you, but living in this new reality will require your imagination. The Christian message is simple enough for a child to understand. At the same time, the Bible says that because of the new life you have been given in Christ, “from now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view” (2 Cor. 5.16). Coming to see your union with Christ is like finally putting on a pair of desperately needed glasses—Wow! Look at that! We see ourselves, and everything else, with new eyes.

The Indwelling

Teresa knows that God alone is holy and that all possible human holiness

is derived from communion in Christ's sanctity. For the Christian, this communion carries the Trinitarian seal. From the moment of Baptism the believer is sealed with the grace of the Trinity. As for the fullness of this grace, Jesus makes the supreme promise of the indwelling: if anyone is faithful to me in life, “we will come and make our dwelling in him.” What is special about Teresa, and other mystics, is that they not only hear and believe these words but experience them. Teresa writes, “Oh, God help me! How different is hearing and believing these words from understanding their truth in this way! Each day this soul becomes more amazed, for these Persons never seem to leave it anymore, but it clearly beholds... that they are within it. In the extreme interior, in some place very deep within itself, the nature of which it doesn't know how to explain, because of a lack of learning, it perceives this divine company. (IC VII,1,vii).

Different Procedure

This grace is different from that of the fifth and sixth dwelling places in which God unites the soul with himself. Now he unites the soul with himself, not by making it blind and deaf as he does in these other two dwelling places of union; in this dwelling place, God desires to remove the scales from its eyes and let it see and understand, although in a strange way, something of the favor he grants it. Then Teresa goes on to explain more: “When the soul is brought into that dwelling place, the Most Blessed Trinity, all three Persons, through an intellectual vision, is revealed to it through a certain representation of the truth (IC VII,1,vi)). The prayer of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity bears witness to this fact: ‘O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me forget myself entirely so to establish myself in you, immovable and peaceful as if my soul were already in eternity. May nothing be able to trouble my peace or make me leave you, O my unchanging God, but may each minute bring me more deeply into your

mystery! Grant my soul peace. Make it your heaven, your beloved dwelling and the place of your rest. May I never abandon you there, but may I be there, whole and entire, completely vigilant in my faith, entirely adoring and wholly given over to your creative action' *Prayer of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity*. (CCC 260)

Practical Conclusion

As we discover through the last few Chapters of the IC, we will come to know how intense was the experience of Teresa of the indwelling of the Holy Trinity. This part has shed enough light as to what extent a human being can experience the Divine in the depth of the soul. This unforgettable experience expands as the whole being gets ready to be united to God. This extraordinary grace is a gift and leads one to see God in everything around. The Scripture says that those who belong to Christ are so intertwined with his life that when he died, we died with him. "For you have died," Paul wrote to his very living audience, "and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). Everything that was supposed to hit us, even the judgment of God for our sins, hit Jesus. He blazed a path against hostile forces, seen and unseen. He made a way to glory. One man made a way for all to live (1 Cor. 15:22). We are hidden in Christ. That's the best picture of union with Christ.

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