

## 4. THE FIRST MANSION - II

Prayer is related to our search for meaning, our longing for relationship, and our need to grow. Prayer, however practiced, is an expression of our hunger for God. This hunger is a part of who we are. Augustine's word is more than a pious cliché: "For thee were we made, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." So, that is where we begin as we talk about prayer as a discipline for Spiritual Formation.

Prayer is a hunger. And nothing, absolutely nothing can completely satisfy that hunger. It is a hunger to experience meaning, to know that life has purpose. It is a restless yearning to probe beneath the surface of our being, to penetrate the depth of ourselves and understand those feelings and notions and intuitions that come from we know not where. It is a baffling astonishment at the spontaneous bursting forth of insight. It is a growing pain that occurs, without warning, when we violate our own or another's integrity. Prayer is something deep within us calling to something deeper yet, making us restless, unsettled, even confused because we are vaguely aware that we are not being and doing what we were meant to be and do. I like the way Edward Farrell puts it: Prayer is like a journey, a journey which we can never cease making. It is like thinking for each day a man thinks again, never knowing when he may turn a corner in his thought and find himself in a world he had never perceived before. Each day a man loves, but he never loves today exactly as he did yesterday nor will he love tomorrow in the same way he loved today.

Prayer is a hunger – a hunger for God. When misplaced we hungry for things of the world. Thomas Merton asked, "Who am I?" and responded, "I am myself a word spoken by God." So, Augustine's word is everlastingly true: "For thee were we made, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you." The truth is, we will always be restless, always know the hunger, because our resting in God is always of limited duration. We are

sinners who too often prefer our way to God's way. Our pride does not allow us to be totally dependent on God. We move in and out of a trustful relationship with God. Even though we experience "rest" and meaning, purpose and joy in times of yielding to God's will and way for our life, something within us, our bent to sin and self-reliance, keeps pulling us away from that state of "yielded-ness" and trustful relationship with God. That is the reason a big part of prayer is dealing with our prideful self. We will talk about this more when we talk about naming ourselves and allowing God to name us, and when we consider confession as a primary ingredient of prayer.

Prayer is a hunger. The first beatitude of Jesus (Mt 5.3) in the Sermon on the Mount speaks to this issue. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" is the traditional translation of this word. "How blest are those who know their need of God" is the way the New English Bible renders it. To know our hunger, our hunger for God, is the condition for entering the Kingdom, and for praying. When we do not pray we cannot think of entering the interior Castle. If we do not think of entering the Castle, we can be certain that we are not willing to take a journey to interior life. Here is what Teresa tells us:

### **A Tree with Rotten Fruits**

Teresa gives a haunting description of a soul that has fallen into serious sin and become totally separated from God. In her mind, no deeper darkness exists in the whole universe than one living in own sinful dark world. The actions of such people flow not from the source of all goodness, but from their own self-centeredness and selfish motives: "For just as all the streams that flow from a crystal-clear fount are also clear, the works of a soul in grace, because they proceed from this fount of life, in which the soul is planted like a tree, are most pleasing in the eyes of both God and man. There would be no freshness, no fruit, if it were not for this fount

sustaining the tree, preventing it from drying up, and causing it to produce good fruit.” (IC I,2,ii). Souls that have separated themselves from God have cast a thick black cloth over their hearts that prevents God's light from shining through them. Her insistence on how they need to come out of this deadly sinful condition evokes a great admiration of her desire in serving the Lord.

### Honey Bee

Teresa explains her readers to imagine the mansions being arranged not in neat and ordered rows, but much like the leafy palmetto bush, in a series of outer rinds that conceal a delicious fruit at its heart. She bids her readers to fix their gaze on the center room, where God makes his abode. “The things of the soul must always be considered as plentiful, spacious, and large; to do so is not an exaggeration. The soul is capable of much more than we can imagine, and the sun that is in this royal chamber shines in all parts. It is very important for any soul that practices prayer, whether little or much, not to hold itself back and stay in one corner. Let it walk through these dwelling places which are up above, down below, and to the sides, since God has given it such great dignity. Don't force it to stay a long time in one room alone” (IC I,2,viii). The soul, moreover, should not be compelled to remain in a single room for an *extended period of time*, but be made to feel free to roam through the various mansions. Just as a *bee* moves from flower to flower, so too the soul should feel free to wander first through the rooms of self-knowledge and humility and then beyond, while never quite leaving them behind: “For humility, like the bee making honey in the beehive, is always at work. Without it, everything goes wrong. But let's remember that the bee doesn't fail to leave the beehive and fly about gathering nectar from the flowers. So it is with the soul in the room of self-knowledge; let it believe me and fly sometimes to ponder the grandeur and majesty of its God” (IC I,2,viii). It is better to walk through these mansions with care than to go about haphazardly through other

rooms. Teresa cautions affirming that aimless wandering may not help the soul.

### **“Snakes, Vipers, and Poisonous Creatures”**

Because the forces of the evil one are always at work to divert their efforts away from the path to God, it is very important that a person have recourse to God, the Blessed Mother, and the saints for help in their struggle against temptation. This is what the Holy Mother Church always recommends her sons and daughter to recourse to the holy people's intercession. She also says that hardly any light makes its way from the center room where God makes his abode into these outer rooms. Those who have entered these rooms have so many preoccupations (what Teresa calls “snakes, vipers, and poisonous creatures”) that they are prevented from seeing the light. For this reason, those who seek to progress in self-knowledge and humility and who truly wish to make their way into the second mansions would do well to simplify their lives and put all unnecessary business aside. Teresa expresses with all imagery possible the condition of the soul when it starts entering the first room of the Castle: “Even though they are not dark and black, as when the soul is in sin, they nevertheless are in some way darkened so that the soul cannot see the light. The darkness is not caused by a flaw in the room – for I don't know how to explain myself – but by so many bad things like *snakes and vipers and poisonous creatures* that enter with the soul and don't allow it to be aware of the light. It's as if a soul were to enter a place where the sun is shining but be hardly able to open its eyes because of the mud in them. The room is bright but it doesn't enjoy it because of the impediment of things like these wild animals or beasts that make it close its eyes to everything but them. So, I think, must be the condition of the soul. Even though it may not be in a bad state, it is so involved in worldly things and so absorbed with its possessions, honor, or business affairs, as I have said, that even though as a matter of fact it would want to see and enjoy its

beauty these things do not allow it to; nor does it seem that it can slip free from so many impediments. If people are to enter the second dwelling places, it is important that they strive to give up unnecessary things and business affairs.” (IC I,2,xiv).

### **Gratuitous Gift**

The presence of the soul in the first mansion is a gratuitous gift not merited but given freely. “You shouldn't want to know anything else than the fact that, although the very sun that gave the soul so much brilliance and beauty is still in the center, the soul is as though it were not there to share in these things. Yet, it is as capable of enjoying His Majesty as is crystal capable of reflecting the sun's brilliance. Nothing helps such a soul; and as a result all the good works it might do while in mortal sin are fruitless for the attainment of glory” (IC I,2,i). The soul must make effort to respond to all the good that it gets from God refraining from mortal sin.

### **Inside the Castle**

Inside the Castle, you cultivate a perspective that sees beyond the worries, ambitions, and ordinary issues of your life. This is not easy to do, but give up complaining. Give up being a pessimist. Give up thinking life owes you anything. Give up being lazy and wishing things were easier all the time. In short, give up wishing your life were other than the way it is and do something with the life you have. Reaching for your sacred other requires that you love or appreciate at least part of your life, that you are striving to make the most of your life, and that you recognize that life is a gift. The sacred other is not difficult to find. But your own worthiness and appreciation of your life may be difficult for you to find—and that's the raw truth.

## Journey towards Self-knowledge

You are now in the energy field of the First Mansion. Here, your soul begins its journey toward *self-knowledge*, *illumination*, and *God*. You will come to know, feel, and recognize your soul by working on the spiritual and earthly challenges contained within each room. Each challenge or spiritual exercise has a significance and purpose essential to the evolution of your soul. One room at a time, you increase your self-knowledge and refine it slowly, gradually. The first three challenges you face in this mansion are *power*, *control*, and the *ego*. Teresa led her nuns into the First Mansion through the door of humility, a subject she continually emphasized in her teachings—and a concern of many other great spiritual teachers. There is no more appropriate place to begin.

## Practical Conclusion

Even though the First Mansion holds the potential for illumination, it also contains darkness, because, at this ground-floor level, the soul is still so attached to earthly powers, earthly inclinations and attachments. The external world creates internal chaos and seduces the intellect, pulling it in two different directions, confronting it with two different value systems, two different devotions, two different loyalties, and an earthly and a divine reality; as Jesus said, you cannot serve God and mammon. Seduction of the intellect, to Teresa, is the same as what the Buddha called “illusion.” The medieval mystics cloistered themselves and severed most ties to the outside world, but you will continue to live in the world, even as you maneuver through the rooms of your Castle. For this reason, the First Mansion is where you dialogue with your soul about the tension and chaos created by the pull of two worlds. How does this chaos control your life? How do you use it to your benefit and to others’ detriment? For instance, people create chaos as a way to avoid hearing the truth. You may be one of these individuals or you may be in a relationship with such a person.



Ultimately we all must be afraid of the evil one (devil) who conquers us step by step until we may not even realize our fall: “There's a host of things he can do to cause us harm; he enters little by little, and until he's done the harm we don't recognize him.” (IC I,2,xv).

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