

# First Mansions

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## *Introduction*

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**T**eresa devotes two chapters to her treatment of the first mansions. In them, she introduces the metaphor of the interior castle and reveals how she came upon it when asking the Lord for help. Because the soul is created in God's image and likeness, it possesses many noble qualities that distinguish it from all other creatures.

The soul is God's paradise, being made by God and for God. He takes delight in dwelling within its innermost sanctum. Teresa laments humanity's general lack of self-knowledge and the decision many make not to embark on the inner journey that will lead them to God. People are so caught up with worldly cares that they are content simply with remaining in the outer courtyard of the castle and do not desire to enter into the soul's first interior mansions.

Teresa also laments the darkness that comes over souls that are completely separated from God. She wishes they knew how much God desired to commune with them and share in their friendship. In this section of her book, she underscores the importance of prayer as the key to the spiritual life. It is the gate leading into the castle and the means by which the soul deepens its relationship with God. For Teresa, these first mansions are the beginning of the spiritual life. Because one can easily turn back at this early stage, she advises extreme caution against the wiles of the evil one.



# Chapter One

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## *Introduction*

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In this chapter, Teresa puts forth the operative image for the entire work. She says that, as she was praying to God and seeking guidance from him about what to write, a thought came to her that would lay the foundation for everything else to come. She began to think of the soul as a castle made out of diamond or very clear crystal. This is a fitting image for something made according to God's image and likeness and that represents the summit of creation. The soul, she says, is very beautiful to God and is something in which he takes great delight. It is so sad that people do not have a greater awareness of their origin and the purpose for which they were created. Such ignorance is tantamount to not knowing one's parentage or one's country of origin.

To follow the image of the soul as a castle made of diamond still further, she says that many people seem to be more interested in the castle's outer walls and external setting than in the luxurious and richly decorated rooms of its interior. In the same way, she says many people are so caught up in worldly concerns that they have little interest in embarking on the inward journey that will ultimately lead them to a face-to-face encounter with God. To possess such a castle and never explore its rich interior is a great human tragedy, for this castle, she maintains, has many inner rooms in a variety of arrangements.

At the very center of this interior castle lies the chief mansion, where God communes with the soul, shares with it the secrets of his inner

Trinitarian life, and bestows many blessings upon it. God grants these favors to whomever he likes. It is a great consolation to know that such favors are possible and that God bestows them on weak and very limited human beings. He confers such favors not because of a person's holiness, but to manifest his power in the eyes of the world.

A person enters the castle through prayer. She says a wise man once told her soul without prayer is like a person whose arms and limbs are paralyzed. Without it, the soul is limp and unable to move along in its spiritual journey. Prayer, for Teresa, is the door and point of entry into the castle. Those who pray can gain access to the first interior mansions of the soul. She reminds her readers that there are many ways of "being" present in a place. Through prayer, a person can be interiorly present to his or her soul. Vocal prayer and meditation are the main ways of prayer for those at this beginning stage of the spiritual life. For Teresa, there is a close connection between the two. Vocal prayer that does not include some modicum of quiet reflection is not really prayer at all.

This initial level of spiritual self-awareness is very fragile and easily lost. Those who refuse to enter the soul's interior castle through the door of prayer live in great danger. Those who make it into these outer rooms are still very much concerned with worldly affairs, but have good intentions and commend themselves to God from time to time. Unfortunately, when they finally enter these rooms, many distractions and worldly allurements get in with them and can create great havoc and confusion for them.

Teresa tells her readers that they are most likely far more advanced in their spiritual journey than those who are either outside the castle or only in the outer rooms. She tells them, however, that she needed to explain this beginning stage in order to develop her later thoughts on prayer and the interior life. She begins this chapter beseeching the Lord in prayer and, in doing so, subtly emphasizes the importance of bringing all of one's needs to God wherever they occur and whenever they come to mind.

## Text

*Treats of the beauty and dignity of our souls; makes a comparison by the help of which this may be understood; describes the benefit that comes from understanding it and being aware of the favors that we receive from God; and shows how the door of this castle is prayer.*

While I was beseeching Our Lord today that He would speak through me, since I could find nothing to say and had no idea how to begin to carry out the obligation laid upon me by obedience, a thought occurred to me that I will now set down, in order to have some foundation on which to build. I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms<sup>1</sup> just as in Heaven there are many mansions.<sup>2</sup> Now if we think carefully over this, sisters, the soul of the righteous man is nothing but a paradise, in which, as God tells us, He takes His delight.<sup>3</sup> For what do you think a room will be like that is the delight of a King so mighty, so wise, so pure and so full of all that is good? I can find nothing with which to compare the great beauty of a soul and its great capacity. In fact, however acute our intellects may be, they will no more be able to attain to a comprehension of this than to an understanding of God; for, as He Himself says, He created us in His image and likeness.<sup>4</sup> Now if this is so—and it is—there is no point in our fatiguing ourselves by attempting to comprehend the beauty of this castle; for, though it is His creature, and there is therefore as much difference between it and God as between creature and Creator, the very fact that His Majesty says it is made in His image means that we can hardly form any conception of the soul's great dignity and beauty.<sup>5</sup>

It is no small pity, and should cause us no little shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are. Would it not be a sign of great ignorance, my daughters, if a person were asked who he was, and could not say, and had no idea who his father or his mother was, or from what country he came? Though that is great stupidity, our own is incomparably greater if we make no attempt to discover what we are, and only know that we are living in these bodies, and have a vague idea, because we have heard it and

because our Faith tells us so, that we possess souls. As to what good qualities there may be in our souls, or Who dwells within them, or how precious they are—those are things which we seldom consider and so we trouble little about carefully preserving the soul's beauty. All our interest is centered in the rough setting of the diamond, and in the outer wall of the castle—that is to say, in these bodies of ours.

Let us now imagine that this castle, as I have said, contains many mansions,<sup>6</sup> some above, others below, others at each side; and in the center and midst of them all is the chief mansion where the most secret things pass between God and the soul. You must think over this comparison very carefully; perhaps God will be pleased to use it to show you something of the favors that He is pleased to grant to souls, and of the differences between them, so far as I have understood this to be possible, for there are so many of them that nobody can possibly understand them all, much less anyone as stupid as I. If the Lord grants you these favors, it will be a great consolation to you to know that such things are possible; and, if you never receive any, you can still praise His great goodness. For, as it does us no harm to think of the things laid up for us in Heaven, and of the joys of the blessed, but rather makes us rejoice and strive to attain those joys ourselves, just so it will do us no harm to find that it is possible in this our exile for so great a God to commune with such malodorous worms, and to love Him for His great goodness and boundless mercy. I am sure that anyone who finds it harmful to realize that it is possible for God to grant such favors during this our exile must be greatly lacking in humility and in love of his neighbor; for otherwise how could we help rejoicing that God should grant these favors to one of our brethren when this in no way hinders Him from granting them to ourselves, and that His Majesty should bestow an understanding of His greatness upon anyone soever? Sometimes He will do this only to manifest His power, as He said of the blind man to whom He gave his sight, when the Apostles asked Him if he were suffering for his own sins or for the sins of his parents.<sup>7</sup> He grants these favors, then, not because those who receive them are holier than those who do not, but in order that His greatness may be made known, as we see in the case of Saint Paul and the Magdalene, and in order that we may praise Him in His creatures.

It may be said that these things seem impossible and that it is better not to scandalize the weak. But less harm is done by their disbelieving

us than by our failing to edify those to whom God grants these favors, and who will rejoice and will awaken others to a fresh love of Him Who grants such mercies, according to the greatness of His power and majesty. In any case I know that none to whom I am speaking will run into this danger, because they all know and believe that God grants still greater proofs of His love. I am sure that, if any one of you does not believe this, she will never learn it by experience. For God's will is that no bounds should be set to His works. Never do such a thing, then, sisters, if the Lord does not lead you by this road.

Now let us return to our beautiful and delightful castle and see how we can enter it. I seem rather to be talking nonsense, for, if this castle is the soul, there can clearly be no question of our entering it. For we ourselves are the castle: and it would be absurd to tell someone to enter a room when he was in it already! But you must understand that there are many ways of "being" in a place. Many souls remain in the outer court of the castle, which is the place occupied by the guards; they are not interested in entering it, and have no idea what there is in that wonderful place, or who dwells in it, or even how many rooms it has. You will have read certain books on prayer that advise the soul to enter within itself: and that is exactly what this means.

A short time ago I was told by a very learned man that souls without prayer are like people whose bodies or limbs are paralyzed: they possess feet and hands but they cannot control them. In the same way, there are souls so infirm and so accustomed to busying themselves with outside affairs that nothing can be done for them, and it seems as though they are incapable of entering within themselves at all. So accustomed have they grown to living all the time with the reptiles and other creatures to be found in the outer court of the castle that they have almost become like them; and although by nature they are so richly endowed as to have the power of holding converse with none other than God Himself, there is nothing that can be done for them. Unless they strive to realize their miserable condition and to remedy it, they will be turned into pillars of salt for not looking within themselves, just as Lot's wife was because she looked back.<sup>8</sup>

As far as I can understand, the door of entry into this castle is prayer and meditation: I do not say mental prayer rather than vocal, for, if it is prayer at all, it must be accompanied by meditation. If a person does not think Whom he is addressing, and what he is asking for, and who it is that is asking and of Whom he is asking it, I do not