

Interior Castle

The Classic Text
with a Spiritual
Commentary

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 CLASSICS
with
COMMENTARY

Interior
Castle

The Classic Text
with a Spiritual
Commentary
by Dennis J. Billy, C.Ss.R.

Teresa of Avila

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In loving memory of
Katherine Mazuryk
“Cha Cha Katherine”
(1910–2005)





I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of a very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions.

—Teresa of Avila



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Introduction



Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) was a contemplative nun, religious reformer, monastic foundress, spiritual writer, and gifted poet. She was also one of the great Christian mystics of all time. She lived during the period of early modern Catholicism, a period of reform and bitter religious rivalry in Western Europe, and when Spain, her native land, was an expanding colonial power and arguably the most powerful nation on earth. She wrote *Interior Castle* at the request of her trusted and learned confessor, Jerome Gratian¹, during a six-month period in 1577 in order to explain to the nuns of her Discalced Carmelite reform the various kinds of prayer they might experience on their journey to God. This work contains her mature spiritual doctrine and is considered by many her masterpiece.

Plan and Purpose

The types of prayer contained in this work range from the most basic of the ascetical life to the highest and most rarefied of mystical states. Although Teresa writes in a practical, spontaneous, easy-to-read style, and makes good use of images and metaphors to convey her teaching, she is still sometimes very difficult to understand. The reason for this comes, in part, from the nature of the mystical experiences she describes and the inherent limitations of human language to adequately convey a person's face-to-face encounter with the divine. Even those experienced in the ways of prayer have a hard time penetrating Teresa's intense yet deeply elusive thought; beginners in the spiritual life struggle with it even more.

My purpose in writing this spiritual commentary is to make the teaching of this Christian classic more accessible to today's readers. I do so, chapter by chapter, by examining Teresa's thought making relevant distinctions, and restating her teaching in a way that makes it less dense and easier to grasp. I do this without diluting Teresa's spiritual doctrine. I have used E. Allison Peers' English translation so that readers can enjoy the classic translation of this text.² I also pose pertinent questions to Teresa's readers to help them probe her thought still further and discover the relevance of her teaching for their own lives. By breaking open the work in this way, I hope to encourage readers to recognize the intrinsic worth of Teresa's teaching and see it as a viable way of understanding the interior life and interpreting one's experience of God.

Teresa's Life and Writings

Teresa was born in Avila on March 28, 1515. Her father, Alonso of Cepeda, was the son of a wealthy Jewish merchant from Toledo who had recently converted to the Christian faith. After the death of his first wife in 1507, he entered a second marriage to Teresa's mother, Beatrice of Ahumada, some two years later. Teresa's mother came from an aristocratic Christian family of Avila. She bore her husband ten children and died when Teresa was fifteen years old.

As a child, Teresa had a deep desire to give her life to Christ. At the age of seven, she even tried to run away with her brother to convert the Moors and become a martyr for the faith. In time, however, this early enthusiasm began to wane. Teresa took her mother's death very hard and gradually set aside her pious interests. To correct this tendency and to offer her sound Christian instruction, her father sent her away to be educated as a lay boarder at the Augustinian convent at Santa María de Gracia. It was there that Teresa first felt the call to enter religious life. She received this inspiration largely through the influence of Mary of Brinceño, who was charged with the lay students at the convent, and by reading the letters of Saint Jerome.

Upon her return home, her father was happy that his daughter had once more regained her Catholic piety, but was adamantly against her becoming a nun. In the face of this opposition, Teresa ran away on November 2, 1535, and entered the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila. In time, her father acquiesced to his daughter's wishes and gave his consent for her to become a nun.

The following year, Teresa received the Carmelite habit and professed her vows. She became deathly ill shortly thereafter and was sent to Becedas to receive treatment from a woman known throughout Castile for her healing remedies. Her health did not improve, and it was during this time that she read and was deeply influenced by Gregory the Great's *Morals* and Francis of Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, a treatise on prayer in which she took great delight. Teresa's health steadily declined, so much so that on August 15, 1539, she went into a coma and was presumed dead. She regained consciousness some four days later, but was paralyzed in her legs for the next three years. When she finally recovered, she attributed her healing to the intercession of Saint Joseph and continued her life at the Monastery of the Incarnation.

All during this time, Teresa continued her life of prayer and even learned to move beyond discursive meditative practices and to simply rest in contemplative silence before the Lord. Although she had sporadic mystical experiences, she entered a period of dryness that lasted for almost eighteen years. In addition, she was held back by her desire to please and win the approval of others.

In 1554, at the age of thirty-nine, Teresa had two experiences that touched her deeply and changed her entire outlook about her spiritual journey. One was an experience of Christ's healing and redeeming power while praying before a statue of the suffering Christ. The other was a deep sense of the Lord calling her as she read the account of Saint Augustine's conversion in his *Confessions*. These experiences gave her deep peace and a sense of the Lord's abiding presence in her life that helped her let go of her fears and worldly attachments and give herself entirely over to the service of the Lord. As Teresa's mystical communion with God deepened, she had great difficulty explaining her experiences to her friends and confessors. Some of them even became suspicious of her and told her outright that her mystical ecstasies were the work of the devil. She continued her quest for sound guidance from learned and holy confessors and eventually found comfort from such men as Saint Francis Borgia (1510–1572) and Saint Peter of Alcántara (1499–1562). These and other learned and saintly men encouraged her in her trials and affirmed that the Lord was working in her.

Teresa's reputation as a reformer began with these intense experiences of personal conversion that led to her desire to change her life and bring it more fully in conformity with God's will. A sense of dissatisfaction over life at the Monastery of the Incarnation led a small group of nuns to gather in her cell in September of 1560 and dream of initiating a reform

in their order. This reform took root gradually and in the midst of great opposition within the monastery, the Carmelite order, and the local townspeople. With the support of Peter of Alcántara, Teresa gained permission from Rome and established a reformed monastery of Carmelites dedicated to Saint Joseph in Avila on August 24, 1562. Her close friend and associate Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591) helped her bring the reform to the male branch of the order and, like Teresa, met staunch resistance at nearly every turn. Teresa spent the rest of her life crisscrossing Spain to further the cause of her reform. She established a total of fourteen reformed Carmelite monasteries in her lifetime and left behind a large literary corpus, the most important of which include *The Book of Her Life* (1562–65), *The Way of Perfection* (1562–69), *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (1567), *The Book of Foundations* (1573), and *Interior Castle* (1577). She died at Alba de Tormes on October 4, 1582, was beatified in 1614, proclaimed patroness of Spain in 1617, canonized in 1622, and declared a doctor of the Church in 1970.³

Teresa's Spiritual Doctrine

Even this brief (and admittedly limited) sketch of Teresa's life tells us that she had intense suffering in her life, had periods of both dryness and deep mystical experience, and felt deeply called to a life of conversion. Her teaching on prayer reflects each of these themes and is found mainly in her *Life*, *The Way of Perfection*, and *Interior Castle*. Because these works were written at different times, for diverse audiences, and for distinct purposes, it is difficult to formulate an overall synthesis of her spiritual doctrine.

Teresa, moreover, spiritually matured over time. Her insights into mystical prayer deepened as she herself drew closer to God and experienced the lasting inner peace of spiritual marriage. When reading her works, therefore, we must allow for growth and expect certain inconsistencies between her earlier and later writings. That said, her teaching on prayer, while not uniform in every point, possesses a remarkable degree of coherence. She assumes the classical distinctions between *oratio* (i.e., vocal prayer), *meditatio* (i.e., meditation or mental prayer), and *contemplatio* (i.e., contemplation) and uses them to develop not a scholarly treatise on prayer, but one rooted in experience and explained through metaphor.⁴

Nowhere in her writings does Teresa lay out the various grades of prayer in a systematic and fully integrated way. Because of limited space, I list them here in an abbreviated and adapted form to help her readers

grasp the general contours of her teaching. This strategy will be of help, provided one remembers that Teresa merges some categories at times and, in some places, does not specifically identify the kind of prayer she is discussing. We summarize these grades of prayer as follows:⁴

1. *Vocal Prayer* uses words to express our hearts and minds to God. It can follow prescribed formulas, as in the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, or be a spontaneous outpouring of the heart. It can be done in private or in a group. It also plays an important role in liturgical prayer. Because it is simple and easy to learn, it is usually the first kind of prayer to which people are introduced. Vocal prayer is "embodied prayer." Through it, a person makes use of the body as a way of giving honor and glory to God. The greatest strength of vocal prayer is the way it can involve the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—in prayer. Its greatest weakness is the way it can degenerate into a mechanized, external display that is void of inner meaning. Vocal prayer is important at every stage of the spiritual life. Even though it is simple and easy to learn, it should in no way be denigrated. Jesus himself encouraged his disciples to pray with meaningful words from the heart when addressing their Father in heaven (Mt 6:7–13).
2. *Meditation or Mental Prayer* for Teresa is "nothing but friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary converse, with him who we know loves us."⁶ It is a discursive type of prayer that focuses the mind on a particular gospel story or mystery of the faith. Through it, a person probes the meaning of a particular belief and makes it an integral part of his or her life. It is practiced in silence and normally for an extended period of time (twenty to thirty minutes). It can be done both privately and in common. There are many methods of mental prayer. Most of them include a period of preparation, some reflection on a particular aspect of the faith, an application of that reflection to one's life, a resolution to do something about it, and a concluding prayer. Through mental prayer, a person is able to consider "in-depth" the meaning of his or her faith. When practiced regularly, it enables one to delve beneath the surface of one's beliefs and to participate with more awareness in the ongoing conversion of life.
3. *Affective Prayer* brings meditation from the level of the head to that of the heart. Although Teresa discusses this grade of prayer in her writings, she does not use the phrase to specifically identify it.⁷ For her, "affective prayer" is merely a deeper kind of meditation. What has

begun as a sustained reflection on a particular aspect of the faith gradually begins to penetrate a person's will and to manifest itself in heartfelt prayers of love and affection. In affective prayer, a person's will functions as the predominant faculty. However, since both reason and will must be present in any genuine act of mental prayer, what we are really talking about here is a matter of emphasis. At this stage, the person praying has become so absorbed in the object of meditation that deep sentiments and inner longings of love for God swell up within the heart and find expression. Affective prayer is mental prayer that has come to term. It is the prayer of mind and heart, but with the heart playing the dominant role. Such prayer must be spontaneous and should not be forced. It is to be judged by the fruits it produces in a person's life and not by the sensible consolation that often accompanies it.

4. *Acquired Recollection* is a simple, loving gaze upon a concrete representation of the divine (e.g., an icon, the tabernacle, the consecrated host). As such, it moves beyond the discursive level of prayer that involves the deliberated movement of the intellect and the will in mental prayer. This grade of prayer is the dividing line between the ascetical and mystical stages of the spiritual life. During it, the person at prayer acts under the influence of grace but is still the primary agent involved in the action. This form of prayer subsumes all the fruits of mental and affective prayer into itself. Unlike these earlier forms of prayer, however, there is no specific "method" or way of going about it. It simply happens. In this prayer, one's spirit has become awakened to the divine and is content with doing nothing else but sitting in the divine presence. A person who prays in this way leads a simple life and shows visible signs of steady progress in the life of conversion.
5. *Infused Contemplation* marks the beginning of the mystical prayer in the life of the believer. Here, the person praying receives an intimate, experiential knowledge of God. This knowledge comes in the form of an intellectual light that illumines the mind and enables the person to have an intuitive, connatural knowledge of the divine. Infused contemplation is a pure gift from God. The person praying can do nothing to instigate its coming or to prolong its stay. At this stage of prayer, the person praying opens his or her mind to God in a vulnerable stance of passive receptiveness. Being open in this way to the illuminating light of the divine is itself a special gift from God and given to those specially chosen for it. Those blessed with the experience of

infused contemplation receive an obscure but assured knowledge of the divine and are given the moral certitude that they are in a state of grace. They are moved to devote themselves more deeply to the interior life and normally need to place themselves under the care of a holy, learned, and experienced director.

6. *The Prayer of Quiet* takes the person praying into an even deeper experience of God. Whereas infused contemplation fills the intellect with the illuminating light of the divine, the prayer of quiet allows that light to penetrate the will. The result is an experience of intense joy and inner consolation. At this stage, the will is captivated and totally absorbed in God. The person praying in this way is given great freedom of spirit, a filial respect and deep confidence in God, a love of suffering, uncommon humility, detachment from worldly pleasures, and the desire to grow in the virtues. At this level, it is normally very difficult for the person to describe his or her experiences of God. As the name suggests, the person blessed with this experience tends toward solitude and repose, but is able to actively engage the other faculties of the soul. The experience of quiet may last for a long time or only a few moments. The person who receives this experience should be grateful when it occurs and, when it passes, should be encouraged to continue to pray in other ways.
7. *The Prayer of Union* brings the person praying to an even deeper experience of the divine. In the prior two stages of contemplation, only the intellect and will are captivated by the illuminating light of God. Here, all the internal faculties become absorbed in this intense, penetrating light. The memory and imagination are particularly affected at this stage. They become totally focused on God and, as a result, leave the person praying free of all distractions and weariness. Those blessed with this experience are certain of their intimate union with God. They experience him with such intensity that they can easily become “beside themselves” by falling into ecstasy. Being absorbed in God in this way can last for a few fleeting moments or a period of hours. During such times, the person can sometimes feel a sensible “touch,” an intense “fiery dart,” or a longer-lasting “wound of love” in the soul. These experiences are not essential to the prayer of union, but are often associated with it. They reveal the heights of mystical experience and indicate an intense relationship of love between God and the person praying.

8. *Spiritual Betrothal* occurs when the divine light captivates the soul's external senses. This stage is an extension of the prayer of union. Now not only the internal sense, but also the external senses of hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch are distanced, either totally or in part, from their ordinary functioning. The person's internal and external senses are so absorbed in God that he or she finds it exceedingly difficult to become involved in external activity. At this stage, mystical ecstasy (in the sense of standing "outside of one's senses") is part and parcel of a person's experience of the divine. It can be gentle and pleasing to the person praying or intensely violent and painful. In spiritual betrothal, the person praying enters into a deep covenant with God. The soul is pulled up out of its senses and becomes totally awake to the divine world. This state of betrothal or conforming union leads the soul to the threshold of perfect, mystical union with God.
9. *Spiritual Marriage* brings about the total absorption of the soul into God. Although the distinction between creator and creature remains, the soul's subjective experience is such that a complete identification with the divine love has taken place. This transformation of the soul into the Beloved is permanent and involves a complete surrender of self. The person seeks God in all things and is willing to undergo the greatest of trials for the love of God. At this stage, the intense spiritual ecstasies of the previous stages greatly diminish—and even disappear. Instead, the person is blessed with a vivid awareness of God's deep, abiding love. It is here, in this inner sanctum, that the person communes with the Trinity in a way that, in this life, cannot be equaled. Only the beatific vision can take the soul further into the mysterious depths of the Godhead. People who experience God in this way possess a deep spirit of detachment and have a strong desire to serve God. They put others before themselves and are willing to undergo great suffering for the coming of the kingdom.

These nine grades of prayer generally correspond to the purgative (grades one to four), illuminative (grades five and six), and unitive (grades seven through nine) ways. It must be remembered, however, that these "stages" of the spiritual journey do not always occur in strict succession. More often than not, they are mingled in a person's life and are very difficult to isolate. Detachment from worldly things, for example, while typically associated with the purgative way, is also necessary for growth in self-knowledge and the acquisition of wisdom, normally associated with the

illuminative way. Each, in turn, is necessary for the intimate communion with God associated with the unitive way. For this and other reasons, it is usually better to ask which of these stages is the dominant emphasis in a person's life at any particular moment and in which general direction he or she is moving, toward or away from union with God. Such a determination is usually a good indication of person's spiritual state.⁸

Interior Castle

Another way of looking at these grades of prayer is to understand them in terms of the seven spiritual mansions of Teresa's spiritual masterpiece, the *Interior Castle*, known in Spanish as *Moradas* ("mansions" or "dwelling places"). Teresa uses the metaphor of the soul as a castle of diamond or clear crystal as the organizing image for her work. Although she recognizes that there are many mansions or dwelling places variously arranged within this castle, she focuses on seven, of which she has some little knowledge. The seventh mansion lies in the very heart of the soul and is the place where God has chosen to make his abode. For Teresa, the spiritual life is all about entering the castle of the soul through prayer and making one's way successively through the various mansions until one enters God's abode and becomes totally one with him. The book consists of twenty-seven chapters of varying lengths and distributed unequally across the various mansions.

Although it will not do justice to Teresa's depth and complexity, a brief description of these mansions will give a general sense of how she organizes and approaches her teaching. In the First Mansions (two chapters), Teresa introduces her organizing image of the interior castle and speaks of the great beauty and dignity of the soul. She also identifies prayer as the gate to this castle, describes the great misery of a soul deformed by serious sin, and emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge for growth in the spiritual life. In the Second Mansions (one chapter), she explains the great importance of perseverance for those wishing to reach the last mansions. In the Third Mansions (two chapters), she speaks of how little security there is in the state of exile, even for those who have reached a high degree of perfection. In the Fourth Mansions (three chapters), she distinguishes between spiritual sweetness and spiritual consolation, discusses the difference between the imagination and understanding, and explains the prayers of infused recollection and quiet, and their effects. In the Fifth Mansions (four chapters), she describes how the soul unites

itself with God in prayer and says what she means by the prayer of union. To illustrate her point, she offers the image of a silkworm spinning a cocoon, dying, and then being transformed into a beautiful white butterfly. In the Sixth Mansions (eleven chapters), she deals with the state of spiritual betrothal by speaking of certain ways by which the Lord awakens the soul and emphasizing the troubles that come to the souls upon whom the Lord bestows this favor. She further explains how God suspends the soul by ecstasy and emphasizes the courage needed by souls who receive such a great favor. She points out the effects of spiritual betrothal on the soul and tells of the intense grief such a soul feels for its past sins. She distinguishes spiritual betrothal from the prayer of union and shows how God speaks to the soul through intellectual and imaginative visions. In the Seventh Mansions (four chapters), she tells of the great favors bestowed on those who enter the state spiritual marriage. She uses comparisons to distinguish this state from the prayer of union and spiritual betrothal. She speaks of the effects of spiritual marriage on the soul and concludes by mentioning what the Lord has in mind by conferring such favors on the soul.

Although Teresa is more concerned with the later mansions and says little about the kind of prayer that goes on in the first three, we can generally assume that the believer is slowly making progress in vocal prayer, mental prayer, affective prayer, and acquired recollection, those stages normally referred to as “the four degrees of ordinary prayer.” In the fourth mansion the believer experiences infused contemplation and the prayer of quiet; in the fifth, the prayer of union; in the sixth, spiritual betrothal; and in the seventh, spiritual marriage. The first three mansions refer to what is typically called the “ascetical” life, while the final four mansions are concerned with the “mystical.”⁹ The understanding that there were various levels of both the ascetical and mystical states would have been very familiar to the Catholic mindset of the time.

As stated earlier, Teresa wrote the *Interior Castle* with the nuns of her Carmelite reform in mind as her audience. She was convinced that the Lord would bless many of them with mystical favors, and she wanted them to have an awareness of what to expect on their inner journey. When she finished the work, she gave it to her confessor, Jerome Gratian, for correction and safekeeping. The original manuscript still exists and is housed today with the Discalced Carmelite nuns in Seville. It bears Gratian’s corrections and those of other censors.¹⁰ The text first appeared in print in the Spanish edition of Teresa’s writings published six years after her death in Salamanca in 1588. There are a number of critical Spanish editions of

Teresa's masterpiece.¹¹ There are also a number of English translations of varying qualities.¹² E. Allison Peers's English translation of the *Interior Castle*, the one used in this commentary, is generally considered the standard version.¹³

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