

Excerpts from Teresa's *Interior Castle*

First Dwelling Places

Prefatory Comment to Teresa:

Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* chronicles the progression of the soul's relationship with God through seven stages of increasing intimacy and depth. The seven *moradas*, or "dwelling places," convey where we are, developmentally, in terms of both our self-awareness and our relationship with God.

The First Dwelling Places represent a space of spiritual awakening as we become aware of our deeper reality as persons created in the image and likeness of God. Two scriptural references and three interconnected metaphors ground and convey this stage in the life of the human person. The first scriptural reference is to Gen. 1:26–27—the reminder that humanity was (and therefore, each of us is) "created in the image and likeness of God." Teresa uses this passage not as a point of reference to a past moment, but as a reflection on our origins that has no point of reference to history. To say that we are "created in the image and likeness of God" is to point to a timeless reality that

each of us must discover for ourselves in order to determine its truth. The premise that the image of God resides within us then provides a grounding for entering ourselves in order to uncover, recover, and form a relationship with the God and the self who are embedded in the mystery of that process. The second scriptural reference is to John 14:2: “In God’s house there are many rooms.” If God is present in all of creation, this presence is a constant relational reality in which we are called to live intentionally. To be aware of God’s presence in us and in others provides the necessary perspective for us to explore our possibilities as human beings, created both for a relationship (with God and others) and toward a purpose that, alone, we may not be able to realize. This relational context enables us to experience and explore the space of our being in a totally new way. While John’s reference to “God’s house” is traditionally understood (even translated, at times) as “heaven,” Teresa reminds us that heaven is not a geographical but a relational reality—a qualitative way of being that God’s indwelling presence, actuated in us, gives to all time and space. We are created for this relational reality, our being strains toward it, and we are meant to live it out, here and now. Such a realization imbues our existence with far deeper significance, possibility, and even urgency, as we see our longing to belong as a soulful way of understanding ourselves and our world. Teresa’s language about the soul’s beauty, its “great dignity” and value accentuates the esteem in which we are held by the One who created us.

Originally, in the *Book of her Life*, Teresa had described the soul not so much as a “castle made of crystal,” but a “garden where God takes delight.”¹ And the soul’s progress toward union with God had been depicted in terms of four ways of watering that garden, each one requiring less active work on the part of the soul, until, in the fourth

1. L 11:6: “The beginner should take into account that she is beginning to make a garden in which God will delight, but in very unfruitful soil that has many weeds. His Majesty will pull out the weeds and plant flowers instead. So let’s consider that this has already been done when a soul is determined to advance in prayer and has already begun a practice of prayer, and so, with the help of God, we must try, like good gardeners, to take care to water these plants so that they will not die off but instead will blossom with flowers that emit a great fragrance, so that our Lord will take pleasure there and will come often to this garden to delight amidst its virtues.”

stage, the soul took in rain directly from heaven. Although Teresa's experiences of prayer eventually surpassed the stages of prayer described in the *Life*, the framework of the garden, fragrant and delightful, as a space for union with God, is not entirely superseded by the metaphor of the castle with many rooms. In fact, Teresa retains the garden image even in the *Interior Castle* (I:1:1), drawing upon it to reinforce the idea that we are created for a union that delights both us and God, and, however difficult that it may be for us to imagine when we are enmeshed in sin, God truly takes delight in us.

Passages from Teresa's *First Dwelling Places*

Today, while beseeching our Lord to speak for me because I could not come up with anything to say nor did I know how to get started in carrying out this obedience, there came to my mind what I shall now speak about, which will provide us with a foundation. And it is this: that we consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms,² just as in heaven there are many dwelling places; since, if we consider it well, sisters, the soul of the just person is actually a paradise where God takes delight.³ And what do you think it will be like, this place where a king so powerful, so wise, so pure, so full of all good things, takes delight? I cannot find anything comparable to the great beauty and profound potential of the soul. And really, our own understanding, no matter how keen, can hardly comprehend such a thing, just as we cannot comprehend God, even though God has told us we are created in God's own image and likeness.⁴ (IC I:1:1)

It is no small pity and confusion that, through our fault, we do not understand ourselves nor do we know who we are! Would it not show great ignorance, my daughters, for a person not to know who his parents are or what country she comes from? How much more blindness do we show when we don't try to come to know ourselves!

2. Cf John 14:2.

3. Prov. 8:31.

4. Gen. 1:26.

We get taken up by our bodies and think that's all there is to us, even though we have heard people tell us that we have souls. Yet we seldom consider all the great riches contained in the soul or Who we contain within us, and so we make little effort to preserve our own deepest beauty. (IC I:1:2)

So let us consider that this castle has, as I have said, many dwelling places: some up high, others down below, others on the sides; and in the center and middle of all, it has the main dwelling place, which is where the most secret things pass between the soul and God. It is necessary for you to take into account this comparison; perhaps God will be served by it to give you to understand something of the favors God is pleased to grant our souls, and all the different types of them, in so far as I have been able to understand what is possible. Indeed, it would be impossible for anyone to understand them all, since there are many of them—much less someone as wretched as I am. Still, it will give you great consolation, when the Lord gives you to understand it, to know what is possible. . . . (IC I:1:3)

Turning to our beautiful and delightful castle, now we should consider how we are to enter it. Here I seem to say something silly, because, if this castle is the soul, it's clear that there is no reason to really enter, since it is within us. How stupid to tell someone to enter in a room he is already in. But you should understand that there are many ways of being inside: many souls are in the outskirts of the castle, which are where those that guard it are, and they don't even really care about entering inside, nor do they know what a precious place it is, nor who is inside, nor even the rooms that it contains. You will already have heard in some books on prayer that the soul should enter into itself; well, that is what I mean. (IC I:1:5)

Insofar as I can tell, the doorway to enter into this castle is prayer and consideration. I don't mean mental more than vocal; since prayer must always be with consideration. The person who pays no attention to whom she is speaking and what she is asking and who is the one asking whom, isn't really praying, however much the lips may move. Anyone who has the habit of speaking with the Majesty of God as

though speaking to a slave, without taking care to see how he is speaking, but saying whatever comes to his head or what he has said at other times, I don't think is praying. Please God may no Christian pray this way. (IC I:1:7)⁵

Before going on I want to say that you should consider what it would be like to see this brilliantly shining and beautiful castle, this pearl from the Orient, this tree of life planted in the very living waters of life—that is, in God—when it falls into mortal sin. There is no darker darkness nor anything more obscure and black. . . . For the works of a soul in a state of grace are like clear streams flowing from a crystal-clear fountain. They are clear, because they proceed from this fount of life in which the soul is planted like a tree, and that is why they are most pleasing in the eyes of both God and humankind. . . . But in the case of a soul that separates itself from this fountain by its own fault and plants itself in another [place] where the water is black and foul smelling, everything that flows from it is equally wretched and dirty. (IC I:2:1-2)

Here we should consider that the fountain and that resplendent sun that is in the center of the soul does not lose its splendor or beauty; it is always within her, and nothing can take away that beauty. But, if a very dark cloth is placed over top of a crystal that is in the sun, it's clear that, even though the sun still shines within it, its clarity will not have the same effect on the crystal. (IC I:2:3)

We always hear about what a good thing prayer is . . . yet only what we ourselves can do in prayer is explained to us; little is explained about what the Lord works in a soul [through prayer]; I mean about the supernatural. (IC I:2:7)

Turning back to our castle with many dwelling places: you shouldn't think of these dwelling places as if they were in line, one after the other, but keep your eyes on the center, which is the room or palace where the king is, and consider a palmetto plant that has many coverings surrounding the flavorful part that you get to in the middle.

5. Teresa's basic, working definition of prayer, taken from L 8:5, is: "Prayer is nothing more than intimate conversation with a friend. It means taking time frequently to be alone with the One whom we know loves us."

It's the same way here: all around this central room there are many rooms. For the things of the soul must always be considered plentiful, spacious and large; it is difficult to exaggerate the abundance and generosity of the soul. It is capable of much more than we can imagine, and the light of God in this palace shines in all parts. And this is important for all people who pray, whether they pray a little or a great deal: one should never hold oneself back, nor stay in a corner. Instead, let yourself walk all around these dwelling places—up and down and all around, since God has given us such great dignity. Only then can we prepare ourselves to enter the place where God resides. (IC 1:2:8)

Second Dwelling Places

Prefatory Comment to Teresa:

If we take Teresa's invitation to self-knowledge seriously and enter into the castle of the soul, we proceed rather rapidly to the second dwelling places, where we actually begin to hear the voice of our Beloved, God, calling us gently to approach the inner center of ourselves. The deepening awareness of the presence of God within us brings with it an increased responsibility to *become* a person ready, willing, and able to take on the high calling of authentic, adult relationship with God. As we "begin to realize that our understanding of ourselves has been partial at best and false at worst," we are placed in the midst of the dilemma of making difficult choices away from our more ordinary habits and patterns and toward cultivating that relationship.⁶ Teresa refers to the soul at this stage as "mute"—that is, unable to respond appropriately to the loving call of God to partnership—and therefore, keenly aware of the need for grace. As I have noticed before:

In the second dwelling places, the soul hears the call of God to a deeper, more godly way of life, and the soul desires to be good—to heed and respond to this call. But, as it realizes repeatedly that it is unable to do so, it can feel crushed with shame. This is a humbling kind of self-knowledge, at times painful to the soul, as it crashes against its own limitations. . . .

6. Ahlgren, *Entering*, 31–32.