

THE INTERIOR CASTLE
5TH CENTENARY PREPARATION
FOURTH YEAR OF STUDY
by Gladys McMullin, ocds

This year we are undertaking the study of our holy Mother's book "The Interior Castle" as part of our preparation for the centenary celebrations in 2015.

This book is the last one that our holy Mother wrote and it reflects the growth and depth of her prayer life and spiritual experience in the years following the writing of the Way of Perfection, The Book of her Life, and the Book of Her Foundations.

We are told in the introduction to the Interior Castle that it was her spiritual director and confessor Father Gracian who ordered Teresa to write this book.

Teresa was living at the Monastery in Toledo in the year 1577. She was now sixty-two years of age. She had founded by this time twelve Carmelite monasteries. While confronting many difficulties and trials within the order on an on-going basis, she endured constant ill health.

In a session with Father Gracian at the Toledo monastery Teresa was lamenting that points she had made in the Book of Her Life that described well her understanding of the spiritual life, and bemoaned the fact that the book was not accessible because of the Inquisition in whose hands it remained.

Father Gracian instructed her to recall what she could and to write another book, but not to reveal the one to whom the things and spiritual matters happened. We are told that while Teresa made efforts to conceal her identity by referring to this other person she knows we are told that her talent for doing so was abysmally poor.

Teresa began to write The Interior Castle on the feast of the Holy Trinity, June 2, 1577. Within a little more than a month she had proceeded as far as the fifth mansions. She stopped writing in mid July as she departed from Toledo to Avila. She did nothing again on this work until five months later. She then took up the work again and we are told that she completed the remaining sections which contained more than half the work by November 29, 1577. Thus the actual time spent on this spiritual masterpiece "The Interior Castle was about two months in all".

Before beginning this work, we are told that Teresa prayed. "May he, in whose mercy I trust and who has helped me in other more difficult things so as to favor me, do this work for me."

Teresa's prayer was heard.

Despite all her trials and difficulties, Teresa held firm to her belief that "obedience usually lessens the difficulty of things that seem impossible". In the end Teresa affirms that although writing the book began for her with aversion to the task, it brought her great happiness when it was finished.

"The Interior Castle" is considered and regarded as Teresa's best synthesis of the spiritual life.

Here we are offered a unifying outline of seven dwelling places using the castle as the symbol in which we hold these dwelling places within ourselves and are called upon to explore and move through them until we reach the center where God dwells and unites us to Himself.

These seven dwelling places are organized around two groupings. The first three dwelling places describe what we can achieve through our own efforts and ordinary help of grace. The remaining four dwelling places deal with the passive, mystical, contemplative aspects of the spiritual life.

Teresa says very little about prayer in the first three dwelling places, and spends extensive time on the last four dwellings dealing with what God does in the soul who is receptive. She notes that in her time most writings were dealing with and explaining what we can do for ourselves, and very little was said of what the Lord does in us. It is because of this need for explanation on how God works in the soul, that Teresa felt she could contribute to the understanding of the spiritual life and particularly the action of God in souls through writing *The Interior Castle*.

Teresa is following the same pattern in *The Interior Castle* as she did in *The Way of Perfection*. If you recall when we studied the *Way of Perfection* the first eighteen chapters dealt with what we must do ourselves to lead a life of prayer, namely cultivate a pure heart and a good conscience, and practice humility, detachment and love. These elements are essential as the foundation for a life of prayer. It is only after laying out this foundation that Teresa addresses the four stages of prayer in the rest of the *Way of Perfection*.

Teresa is writing *The Interior Castle* ten years after the *Way of Perfection* having deepened her spiritual life and her understanding of one's interior life of prayer.

It will help you to think of it as going through the *Way of Perfection* now with a depth and breath that was not there in Teresa when she wrote the *Way of Perfection*. She has grown and deepened her own spiritual life to the degree that she now is able, she tells us, to understand things she did not understand back then concerning the spiritual life. The Lord has progressively enlightened her over the years.

Let us briefly address the First Mansions/Dwelling Places which consists of two chapters.

In the first chapter Teresa describes the beauty and dignity of our souls. She offers us the image of the castle, and enlightens us as to the key for the entrance door into our interior castle.

Teresa informs us as she begins her book that it was in prayer with the Lord that she conceived of the idea of the "castle". We are to consider our souls as an interior castle made entirely out of diamond or pure crystal in which there are many dwelling places: some up above, others down below, others to the sides: and in the center and middle is the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place.

So in this book the castle is Teresa's symbol for our souls. Although Teresa realizes that this image of the castle is not perfect she finds it most useful. She bases this on the fact that many of the books of her time on prayer encourage and advise souls to enter within themselves to pray. She too is advising this practice for those who desire to seek God.

We are told that it is very difficult for us to comprehend the beauty and value of our souls because we attend more to our bodies than our souls. She marvels at the magnificent beauty and marvelous capacity of the soul that is created in the image and likeness of God.

Teresa goes on to lament that we limit ourselves considering only our exterior bodies. Seldom do we consider the precious things that can be found in our souls including our God. All our attention is taken up with the diamond's setting or the outer wall of the castle, the body of ours.

However, it is in this interior castle that God grants an abundance of favors to souls. Teresa informs us that the purpose of her writing this book is to enlighten us concerning these favors and the differences between them.

It is, she tells us, a great consolation when the Lord grants them if you know that they are possible, and for anyone to whom he doesn't it is a consolation to praise his wonderful goodness to souls.

We should praise God for giving souls so many varied and wonderful graces and gifts even though we may not ourselves experience these favors. We should be happy for those who do.

Finally in this chapter we are instructed that the key to the door of our castle is prayer and reflection. It is easy, as Teresa states, to pour ourselves out in the exterior world, even to the point of not knowing what treasures we have within. Turning away from our interior life according to Teresa is one of the greatest tragedies.

As Secular Carmelites we enjoy the great benefits of Teresa's teaching on the importance of a life of interiority. We live in the world but through the living out of the Rule and Constitutions of the Secular Order we are not of the world. Our vocation should fill us with gratitude for this great gift.

This year we are graced with the opportunity through the study of the Interior Castle to renew our commitment through continuing our journey through the many dwelling places of our castles.

We are called to use the key to our castle- to enter daily through our prayer and reflection. We are called to beautify our castles through the practice of virtue. We are called by our vocation to encounter the Lord in our castle, for as Teresa teaches, He in His goodness longs to grant souls an abundant of favors and consolations.

What will prevent us from doing so? Darkness and sin.... In chapter two of the first mansions, Teresa focuses on the consequences of sin and its effects on our interior castle or soul. Secondly, she describes in chapter two more about the layout of the castle, and the importance of continuously cultivating self-knowledge and practicing humility.

Teresa begins this chapter with a focus on the damage caused to a soul who commits mortal sin. Mortal sin causes great disorder in the castle. It thwarts and ruins the soul leaving the soul in darkness. The soul, she tells us, has abandoned its castle, living outside in a dark ditch surrounded by vermin, reptiles and snakes.

It is like putting a black cloth or pitch over the crystal so that the sun's brilliance will have no effect on it even though the sun is shining on it. If we truly understood this, she teaches, we would make every effort not just to avoid mortal sin but venial sin and imperfections of every kind. We are counseled to strive to remove any mud or pitch off the crystal so that we will not be separated from the light. If you recall the Way of Perfection this is one of the foundation pillars Teresa speaks of in Chapter 5 for living a whole life of prayer. We must cultivate a pure heart and a good conscience.

Always in prayer we are encouraged to ask God for two blessings as Teresa herself did. We must ask God, beg Him, to not let us fall or offend him, and secondly we must ask that we recognize the truth that in doing any good or seeing it done, we give heed to the source, namely God, and deeply understand that without His help we could do nothing.

The second theme discussed by Teresa in this chapter is the layout of the castle. She cautions us to not think of the seven dwelling places as lined up in file one after the other. Instead we should turn our eyes to the center, the room where the King stays. Surrounding this center room are many other rooms; and there are rooms above and below. We must consider the things of the soul as plentiful, spacious and large; to do this she says is not an exaggeration. Our souls are capable of much more than we can imagine; and the sun which is in the royal chamber shines in all parts.

Teresa counsels that those who practice prayer should not just stay in one corner of the castle, holding itself back. It should walk through these dwelling places which are up above, down below, and to the sides, since God has given it such dignity. Don't force yourself to stay a long time in one room alone.

Except... Except if it is the room of self-knowledge! This room is always necessary no matter how far we advance. Without it, Teresa, teaches, everything will go wrong. Here we discover our lowliness and misery which leads us to practice the virtue of humility. However, this doesn't prevent us from visiting the other

rooms to gather fruit from them, but we should frequently fly back to the room of self-knowledge. It is through the mercy of God that a person practices self-knowledge and humility, and we must remember that if this applies in lesser matters how much more in greater ones.

Her encouragement is to enter first the room where self-knowledge is dealt with rather than fly off to other rooms. This is the right road, she teaches, and it is a safe and level path. Let us strive to make progress in self-knowledge and humility. This teaching is consistent with her teaching in the Way of Perfection.

In Teresa's opinion we never completely know ourselves if we don't strive to know God. By gazing at his grandeur, we get in touch with our own lowliness; by looking at his purity, we shall see our own filth; by pondering his humility, we shall see how far we are from being humble.

In the first dwelling places we must take our Blessed Mother and the Saints as our intercessors as there are many efforts made by the devil to keep us from advancing, and often at this stage we have little strength to defend ourselves. We are counseled to keep our eyes on Christ, our Good. It is by looking at Him that we shall learn true humility, and self knowledge will not make us base or cowardly.

Teresa concludes that even though this is the first dwelling place, it is very rich and so precious that if the soul slips away from the vermin and reptiles within it, nothing will be left to do, but advance.

Source: Interior Castle by St. Teresa of Avila
(Introduction and First dwelling place)