

**The Interior Castle:  
A Journey in Faith and Love  
Towards Spiritual Maturity**

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*This Spiritual talk was delivered on the Feast of Pentecost as part of the Teresian Centre series of spiritual talks for 2013. It is the first part of a two part theme on growth in the spiritual life as reflected in the teachings of Our Holy Mother in the Interior Castle. This first part deals with the purification and growth in faith as reflected in the first three mansions of the Interior Castle. The second part which will be part of the Teresian Centre series of talks for 2014 will deal with the purification and growth in love as reflected in the last four mansions of the Interior Castle. This spiritual talk will be available in the Carmel-Lights in June of 2014.*

Through the spiritual path of prayer and contemplation the seed of faith is watered and cultivated through many phases including stages of exhilarating joy and sometimes agonizing crisis of faith until spirituality maturity blossoms and bears its desired fruitfulness in our lives and in the life of the church.

Pentecost is the feast of this spiritual maturity. The spiritual significance of this feast offers us the opportunity to reflect on and relish the notion of faith in the teachings of St. Teresa of Avila as it applies to the fostering and the development of our spiritual lives through prayer and contemplation until we too reach spiritual maturity.

The liturgical feast of Pentecost reveals to us if we open our eyes with faith and love the coming of spiritual maturity in the apostles.

The gift of the Spirit was won for us through the passion death, and resurrection of Our Lord and Savior. And the gift of the Spirit has been given to you and to me through our baptism, just as it was given to the apostles on the first Pentecost.

However, when we consider the scripture readings of this liturgical period we see the apostles seemingly going from infancy to spiritual maturity, from timid and fearful apostles, to bold and daring

witnesses to the faith in the time between the Resurrection and Pentecost.

Do we see faith and witness of this kind in our own lives of faith? Most of us struggle from infancy to spiritual maturity for most of our lives.

Just as in our natural development from infancy to adulthood we pass through many transitions and changes, particularly in adolescence and early adulthood so too in our spiritual lives we must grow in the life of grace from the time of our baptism until spiritual maturity.

This will entail passing through often painful and perplexing situations, many challenges, and transitions in our spiritual life as we search for Christ in the darkness of faith. But this we must do!

Christ Himself we are told in Luke ch.3:52 followed this path Himself. *“And Jesus grew in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and man.”*

We are all able to recognize the various stages of human development from infancy to full adulthood and through trial and error, and perhaps with help from others face the challenges and transitions that enable us to forge ourselves into a mature and well functioning human being.

Can we say the same about our spiritual development? How aware are we of the moments of growth and development in our spiritual lives?

Spiritual growth does take place. How aware are we when it is happening? Do we notice the signs that call for us to deepen our life of faith? Or because of the challenges and difficulties we turn away, stumble over some obstacle, immerse ourselves in distracting external activity, failing then to transition or adjust to the call to deepen our faith and relationship with the Lord.

What took place in the lives of the apostles on the First Pentecost is taking place in you and in me today. We must have the conviction of faith that this is so.

St. Teresa of Avila's whole life was a life of deep and abiding faith in the Lord to whom she gave herself too through a life of prayer and contemplation.

We turn now to the teachings of St. Teresa of Avila for guidance and for understanding in this year of “faith renewal” to enlighten us as to how to grow in our spiritual lives gradually but surely through the pathways of prayer and contemplation until we reach our full stature of spiritual maturity.

There is no better teacher than St. Teresa to show us the path for developing the seed of faith given us in our baptism until it blossoms into full spiritual maturity.

St. Teresa’s synthesis of the spiritual life is based on her lived faith experience as presented in her book “The Interior Castle”. We are told that The Interior Castle is considered and regarded as one of the greatest spiritual classics and synthesis of the spiritual life available.

The Interior Castle is St. Teresa’s symbol for our souls. Although St. Teresa realized that this image of the castle was not perfect she found it to be most useful in offering a synthesis of the spiritual life. Those who desire to seek God through the development of their faith and love are encouraged and advised to enter within themselves for prayer and reflection. (Interior Castle 1, ch 1, 7)

St. Teresa describes the castle as being 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. (Interior Castle 1, ch 1, 1-3)

We are given a unifying outline of seven dwelling places with many rooms in each one using the castle as the symbol of the soul in which we hold these dwelling places within ourselves. We are counseled and called upon to explore and move through these seven dwelling places until we reach the center where God dwells and unites us to Himself.

St. Teresa tells us that it is often very difficult for us to comprehend the beauty and value of our souls (Interior Castle) because we attend more to our bodies and exterior things than to our souls. All our attention is taken up with the diamond’s setting or the outer wall of the castle, these bodies of ours. (Interior Castle 1, ch 1, 2)

Is this not true today as it was in St. Teresa’s day?

At baptism a new life of grace and faith was given to each of us in seed. This spiritual life is dynamic just as our natural life is. It must too, grow to spiritual maturity as we grow to natural maturity. It is a dynamic principle and we must make room for it to grow and flourish.

This new life of faith that we have received in baptism is not superimposed on our natural life and powers. It is not like a house on which we superimpose an additional level. Nor do we take the house that is ours, tear it down, and rebuild it.

Think of it this way, if you had a piece of property that had a house that was deteriorating or wobbly, you most likely would find it too costly to buy another piece of land and build a new house. You would fix the current one.

Now each of us has only one piece of property or one house, in the whole of creation over which God had given us the responsibility for; that is our own being. There is room for just one house. We must make use of the house that is standing.

It will be either the one we construct without reference to Him, or the one God wants to construct through His gift of new life that we have received in baptism. We are given the awesome freedom of will to choose which it will be.

If we choose to take the seed of faith given us in baptism and build and beautify our house or interior castle we will be called upon to renovate this house from top to bottom to make space and room for Him.

This renovation of our house does not happen all at once, for it takes us time to move through the rooms of our house or as St. Teresa would say the dwelling places of the Interior Castle. She counsels that we may have to go back again and again and redo what we have already done as we discover the work of the room was not quite complete.

Growth in the life of faith in other words is not limited to one or two events. Fixing up one or two rooms and were done. It is a process of growth.

In our natural lives when we face the two identifiable major crises in our growth namely entering adolescence and then the beginning of adulthood, we go through a series of experiences and challenges, one builds on the other, and the whole taken together produces the growth in natural maturity.

So it is in our spiritual lives. There are as well two great crises in the process of reaching spiritual maturity. These processes center and revolve around faith and love. St. Teresa teaches us in her writings that the practice and growth in one virtue produces growth in other virtues.

However, for our purposes this evening, it is a question of emphasis. The emphasis on the first crisis is on the growth, purification, and strengthening of faith. The emphasis on the second crisis is on the growth, purification, and deepening of love.

For this evening we will consider only the first crisis, that of faith. St. Teresa attends to this crisis of faith in the first three dwelling places of the Interior Castle wherein we must begin the spiritual journey of renovating and beautifying our house-castle to make the room and space for God.

These three dwelling places are considered ascetical in nature. In other words we are working, striving in faith to renovating our spiritual home to make room for the Lord. We are active here. There is no set time for completing this work. It may be short or it may be years before the work is completed.

But at the end we come to a new stability and evident deepening of faith. The response of faith to the events of our daily lives is the sign of spiritual adolescence. The first crisis of growth in our spiritual lives towards spiritual maturity will have been met.

However we are cautioned by St. Teresa that we must still be watchful and vigilant as in these early rooms/dwelling places it is still easy to fall back. Victory in our spiritual lives is never easy. It is more or less an affair with many setbacks or regressions from which we arise in faith to go on. We begin again each day.

In today's world we search about for a spirituality that we can practice on a daily basis. We search for a life of faith and love that we can fully embrace and practice. Teresian spirituality offers this to us by calling out to us to enter our Interior Castle and explore its many rooms.

In this year of faith renewal and strengthening, let us listen to the teaching of St. Teresa of Avila on faith and the spiritual journey within your soul. Once you open yourself to the teaching of the Interior Castle, you will experience your faith growing, you will encounter the Lord within, and you will have the courage to face both the known and unknown in this spiritual journey.

Practically speaking how does one begin this spiritual journey towards spiritual maturity according to St. Teresa's teaching? Let us set out on the journey within together through some of the early rooms.

I am sure that you will recognize or sense that the rooms are somewhat familiar to you. After all this interior castle is your true home where you will encounter the living God. We can recall St. Augustine's words when he stated that he searched for God everywhere, only to find him in his own heart and soul. God is within you and that is where you must go to find him.

This is the place of faith for it is in faith that we know that God lives here within us.

St. Paul teaches us that in God "we live and move and have our being". Through participation in the life of Christ we though by nature human by our baptism are a "new creation" transposed to a level of life and action that is divine. By our baptism we have entered into the life of faith; by cooperation with this grace and fidelity to it we grow ever more fully to spiritual maturity.

How is it that we are not more conscious of the divine indwelling in our souls? St. Teresa teaches us that it is so easy to pour ourselves out in the exterior world, even to the point of not knowing what treasures we carry within our souls. Turning away from our interior life according to St. Teresa is one of the greatest tragedies.

There are no side doors or hidden passages into your interior castle. You must enter, according to St.

Teresa's teaching, and this is the only way into the castle, it is the way of prayer, reflection, and meditation. (Interior Castle 1, ch 1, 7)

So what prevents us from do so? It is St. Teresa's teaching that darkness and sin obscure our path. There is great damage to souls who commit mortal sin. Mortal sin leaves the soul in darkness. The soul has abandoned the castle, and is living outside in a dark ditch surrounded by all kinds of vermin, reptiles, and snakes. (Interior Castle 1, ch.2, 1)

Living in sin 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. We are encouraged by St. Teresa's teaching then to make every effort not just to avoid mortal sin but venial sin and imperfections of every kind. (Interior Castle 1, ch 2, 1-3)

As we enter the castle through our prayer and reflection it is likely that some of our reptiles or snakes will enter with us, so it is the work of the first mansion or dwelling place to strive to remove any mud or pitch from the crystal so that we will not be separated from the light.

For a whole life of faith to develop to spiritual maturity we must then begin this spiritual journey by cultivating a pure heart and a good conscience.

We are encouraged by St. Teresa to ask God at this stage for two blessings, namely the grace not to fall or offend Him, and the grace to recognize the truth that in doing any good or seeing it done, we recognize the source namely God, deeply understanding that without His help we can do nothing. (Interior Castle ch 2, 5)

St. Teresa teaches that there are many rooms to enter and explore in all the mansions. Her teaching instructs us that we should not just stay in one room or corner of our castle holding ourselves back. Her encouragement however, here in the first mansion is to enter the room where self-knowledge is dealt with rather than fly off to other rooms. (Interior Castle 1, ch 2, 8)

This is the right road, she teaches, and it is a safe and level path. This room is always necessary no matter how far we advance. Without it, Teresa teaches, everything will go wrong. (Interior Castle 1, ch 2, 8)

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 and poverty; by looking at his purity, we shall see our own sin; by pondering humility, we see how far we are from being humble. (Interior Castle 1, ch 2, 9)

In this first mansion we are strongly counseled to keep our eyes in faith on Christ, or whole Good. It is by looking at Him that we grow in faith, confidence, and a self-knowledge that does not make us cowardly but give us great courage to move forward on the spiritual journey.

Even though this is the first dwelling place, we are told that it is very rich and precious and if the soul slips away from the vermin and reptiles (sin and darkness) within it through prayer and reflection, nothing will be left to do but to continue to advance in the life of faith and love until we reach spiritual maturity.

However, we all know from our experience that victory over sin and our imperfections is rarely, if ever, one hundred percent. Our efforts are not without numerous falls and regressions. Even here in the first dwelling place the task of advancing on our spiritual journey seems beyond our capacity.

Who can we turn too for the support and guidance we know we need at this early beginning of our spiritual journey?

Just as in our natural life we have a humble and dependent beginning, so in our spiritual life this is also so. We begin in the first dwelling place. Our faith is a seed which must now be nourished and protected if it is to grow.

There is nothing as daunting to each of us as new beginnings are. We must adapt to this lowly beginning both in our natural life and in our supernatural life. At this spiritual age, we need help.

In our natural life at this stage we need a mother if we are too grow, develop and thrive. So it is in our supernatural life.

Within the Carmelite tradition our Blessed Mother is our mother and patron for the spiritual journey. While Mary is seen as necessary at all stages of our spiritual journey, she is absolutely essential at the beginning of our spiritual journey. We need her to carry us, teach us, to walk with us, to pick us up when we fall, and to dry our tears just as our natural mother would. She is “mother” in our supernatural life of faith. Is it not said of her “Blessed is she who has believed.”

So I encourage each of you to take Mary, as mother, for your spiritual journey in faith, particularly in this year of faith renewal. Keep close to this tender and gentle mother. She will teach you how to grow in faith and love on the path to spiritual maturity.

Mary is the perfect contemplative uniting in herself the capacity to both serve God, and to rest in Him. She is our exemplar of the grace of contemplation which only belongs to those who have passed through the crisis of faith and love on the spiritual journey to union and rest in God.

Now the precise purposes of the crises of faith experienced in these early dwelling places are to free us, release us from dependency on worldly ways so that we move toward making judgments and acting according to faith in our everyday lives.

We are counseled by St. Teresa in the following words concerning entrance to the second dwelling places in our interior castle.

“If people are to enter the second dwelling places, it is important that they strive to give up unnecessary things and business affairs. They should do this in conformity with their state in life. It is something so important in order for them to reach the main dwelling place that if they don’t begin doing this I hold that it will be impossible for them to get there.” (Interior Castle 1 ch 2, 5)

St. Teresa teaches that it is in the practice of detachment that we will find the freedom necessary to surrender one’s own person to Christ in faith and love.

The virtue of detachment in Teresian spirituality is not a negative experience leading us to practices that diminish our love of family, friends, community, or cause us to withdraw from the world

but a spiritual practice that gradually allows us to hold everything in God leading to a deep contemplative presence in Him to everyone and everything. A life of deep faith, prayer and contemplation is always for the world.

When you tell someone you love, I give you my whole heart. You are not handing over a dead heart, but a heart that is now unified and directed. A heart that is even more alive. So it is when we detach ourselves from worldly ways and put our attention in faith and love on the God within us.

Our Lord in scripture tells us “*Where thy treasure is, there also will thy heart be*” (Mt. 6:21). The secret to growth in your faith is in your heart. If you are dissipated among many concerns and worldly activities spilling yourselves out living outside your interior castle, it is because your heart has not yet found its treasures; other desires dispute with the one great desire for God and still hold dominion over you.

Experience teaches us that it takes effort, perseverance and determination to grow in the virtue of detachment. These are the challenges you face in the second mansion rooms. We struggle, make efforts, fail. Then begin anew the next day to respond to the Lord in faith, and not turn back. Detachment takes time.

Saint Teresa teaches us that there are a thousand ways in which the devil attacks us in the second mansion. Arriving at a determination not to return to the first mansion is a constant struggle. Perseverance is most necessary in the second mansion. “One always gains much through perseverance, St. Teresa counsels.” (Interior Castle 2, ch 2, 3)

What helps to de have to assist us in this second mansion with the development of our faith?

We are very much encouraged by St. Teresa’s teaching that in this second mansion all of our faculties are more skilled. Our growth in our faith helps our intellect to see that it is a mistake to think that the things of the world are more valuable compared to the things of heaven. (Interior Castle ch 2, 3)

Our memory shows us where all things of this world are passing, and not to place our joy in them. And finally our will is more strongly inclined towards love when we see that this true Lover (God) never leaves the soul, accompanying us giving us life and being. (Interior Castle ch 2, 3)

“In Him we live and move and have our being” is in prayer and reflection becoming a truth that we live not only in faith and trust but abide in through the deepening of love.

We possess other aids as well in the second mansion. We participate in the liturgical life of the church, the sacraments, and the life of Christian community through our parishes.

We are very much encouraged to build relationships in our lives that support our spiritual journey. St. Teresa was a strong supporter of seeking companions on the path of prayer and contemplation.

She also encouraged seeking out a spiritual director that could help us with our spiritual discernment and encourage us throughout our spiritual journey not only in this part of the journey, the second mansion, but throughout all the mansions.

It is through faithfulness to our prayer and reflection in the second mansion coupled then with responding generously to the various aids available to us that the seed of faith received in baptism will continue to grow in us.

Strengthened then by perseverance and grace we begin to conquer the snakes and reptiles we discover in ourselves in our second mansion, and avoid be bitten or poisoned by them moving in faith, love and the practice of detachment toward the door of the third mansion.

Remember the virtue of detachment enables you to hear His voice more easily, and you more easily recognize His presence in everyday life as your faith grows here in the second mansion. Finally your response in love moves you forward on your spiritual path through the door of the third mansion.

St. Teresa teaches that the key to the third mansion is faithfulness coupled with God’s mercy and grace. “The Lord, she teaches, has done you no small

favor, but a very great one in letting you go through the first difficulties and in His mercy grants you access to the third mansion”. It is a place to cherish. (Interior Castle 3, ch 1, 5)

Those who have entered the third mansion take seriously their life of faith and this is an evident sign of spiritual adolescence. Third mansion dwellers are described as guarding themselves against sin, setting aside time for prayer and recollection, and practicing works of charity towards their neighbors. Overall balance, order, discipline, and a sense of stability are part of one’s everyday life of faith. (Interior Castle 3, ch 1, 5)

However, we are warned that it is possible to get stuck here in the third mansion. Just as in natural development many pass successfully through adolescence and meet its crises, but never reach full natural maturity by becoming a well functioning adult contributing to the life of the family, community, and society so it is in the spiritual life. Many in their spiritual life stay spiritual adolescents for their whole life.

It is possible, St. Teresa teaches, to remain for the rest of one’s life here and not challenge oneself to keep going forward to explore the latter mansions where you inevitable will face the second crisis in spiritual growth that of the purification and deepening of love. (Interior Castle 3, ch 2, 9)

Desire alone will not suffice to keep your faith growing and deepening, St. Teresa counsels. You must act on your desires and persevere in your efforts to achieve your desires to explore the latter mansions reaching out towards full spiritual maturity.

St. Teresa teaches us that we get stuck here in the third mansion because we become self-satisfied with our well ordered lives, and we think God owes us favors and special consideration. (Interior Castle 3, ch 1, 8)

It many not even cross your mind that you need more help from God until all these activities and efforts on which you have based your life of faith start to crumble before your eyes.

We know that through our baptism we have all been called to holiness, and therefore God wants us to

move through all the mansions to union with Him in love.

Therefore you can count on it that He will challenge you to grow and deepen your faith here in the third mansion. It is up to you to challenge yourself to respond.

To help us to do this let us address briefly how one should think about the nature of spiritual progress. The spiritual progress that I've outlined in the first three mansions that we have just considered and reviewed is not the kind of growth that you can feel and understand in the same way as you would judge in some other sphere of activity.

For instance, if you are studying at university, building a career, learning to run a business, raising a family, and judge that you are making headway in these activities you experience a greater facility and satisfaction with your new skill and in your life. You are satisfied and comfortable. These are natural indicators of progress.

But in the spiritual life the indicators of progress are pretty much reversed.

So if you apply natural indicators as a sign of progress in spiritual growth you will become stuck here in the third mansion believing and judging that you are living and practicing your faith in the fullest manner. Everything is in order and as it should be.

There is no doubt that the Lord, as I said, wants you to progress to union with Him, so at some point you will find that the Lord will sorely test you in the third mansion in order for you to make more spiritual progress. It is your choice as to whether you will move forward or stay where you are, or even abandon the spiritual journey altogether.

If we take a moment to look at the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, 21-28 we find an excellent illustration of this point.

This Canaanite woman came forward to speak with Our Lord with ease. She had heard of his compassion, and the many people he had helped. She believed what she heard about Him, and had faith in Him. She likely thought her request was worthy of consideration and that he would help her daughter as He had helped others. It was just as

deserving as some of the other requests Our Lord responded too. She likely spoke to Him in the manner in which she heard other people had done, and they were heard.

She is a very good example of those who have reached the third mansion and a certain degree of faith and expect that things will continue to remain the same forever.

Then, one day we come with our request, and like the Canaanite woman there is no reply. There is only a mysterious silence. Call it dryness, aridity, desolation in prayer. God doesn't seem to hear you. You might question yourself. Did I do something wrong. Am I going backwards? You begin to question am I really a good friend of the Lord's? You might even be tempted to give up your spiritual journey here at the third mansion. You think God is not paying any attention to you, so who needs a friend who turns away when you need him.

So what is happening? You have been doing your best to live a virtuous life and deepen your faith. You go to church, pray and reflect, and do your best to be charitable to others.

In reality, spiritual progress and movement is being made again. If we meet this crisis of faith in the third mansion we will arrive at the door of the fourth mansion.

This is exactly what the Canaanite woman experienced when she approached the Lord. So let us look further into the story.

What did she do in the face of the Lord's silence? To paraphrase she pestered the apostles to the point that they went to the Lord saying she gives us no peace, do something? The Lord doesn't say yes or no. He says that his mission is to the lost sheep of Israel.

What might we do? We go and pester Our Lady or other saints for what we seek?

Notice, notice the delay. The Lord hasn't said no. She waits. What does waiting do to her? Simply put it increases her desire and it seems also to increase her humility.

Her next move is to prostrate herself and plead, Master, help me!

She still doesn't get yes, but the statement that "*It isn't fair to take the bread of the children and throw it to dogs.*"

She accepts this apparent insult, but does not withdraw her request. He still hasn't said no. Is not the Lord offering her an invitation to hope? Is this not what we are offered in the third mansion, many invitations to hope, to increase our desires, and above all to practice humility when we seem to be stalled going nowhere?

With this increase in hope and confidence, and the expansion of her faith she cries out "Even the dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from the table"

Finally, finally Our Lord grants her request. "*Woman, great is your faith*" She received what she wanted. The crisis of faith has done its work in her.

When we are shaken up in the third mansion from our well ordered spiritual life, it is the Lord calling us to a deeper faith. When you think you are going backwards or nowhere or you feel your prayer is a mess full of distractions, and that God isn't listening or helping you think of this Canaanite woman.

You are being invited by the Lord to be less dependent on your own efforts and ways of going to Him. Cultivate the same kind of desire, longing, hope, humility, and perseverance that you see in this story. If you wait in humility you will when the Lord desires it experience the expansion of your faith.

I spoke of two crisis that we face in our spiritual journey to spiritual maturity that of the growth, purification, and strengthening of faith and the growth, purification, and strengthening of love. The first crisis that of faith has done its work if here in the third mansion you have persevered with your desires, increased your hope, and through this crisis you have grown in humility.

You wait now with expectant faith and in humility at the door of the fourth mansion, knowing that the Lord will grant you entrance when He wills, that it is not dependent as you have learned on you and your efforts but on His great love.

You are ready for the second crisis, that of the growth, purification, and strengthening of love in the latter mansions which leads to full spiritual maturity. In these latter mansions your faith will become more and more penetrated by love, and will lead you to union with God who is love.