

# On Becoming a Passionate Lover in the Teresian Carmelite Tradition

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*“I have come to cast fire upon the earth;  
and would that it were already kindled!”*

(Luke 12.49 NRSV)

To burn for, and to be grounded in the reality of God’s Love for us, is the most important thing we as Secular Carmelites can do with our lives. Becoming a passionate lover of God in the Teresian Carmelite tradition is our vocation and our heritage as Carmelites.

Becoming a passionate lover of God alone is not enough for a Secular Carmelite. As St Teresa teaches in the Interior Castle, a genuine contemplative life of prayer and passionate love of God must always lead to service to others.

As we journey within our interior castle through its many rooms to its deepest centre, where the Divine Guest resides, we will find ourselves catching on fire and our passion will ignite as it responds to God’s love.

Once we have caught on fire we are impelled, not only impelled, but love demands that we become ever more creative in our relationship with God. Passionate lovers are always looking to the good of the other. We know this through our deepest experiences of human relationships.

We are impelled towards service to others in His name and for His Love. Holy Scripture confirms this. St Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians (5.14) states that the love of Christ impelled Him. *“And He died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”*

The closer we come to God as we move through the rooms of the Interior Castle, the greater is the passion which flows through us. Intimacy with God has a way of charging us with ever more energy and fire so that we may witness to Him and His irresistible love through our service to others in His Name.

Based on the teachings of St Teresa, we can believe that the Secular Carmelite who practices unwavering fidelity to their vocation, and faithfully maintains their prayer and meditation, will not be able to be sterile or dispassionate in their love. Paraphrasing St Teresa “they will love others much more than they did, with a more genuine love, and with greater passion, and with a love which brings more profit; that is what love really is.” This is the image of the passionate lover of God.

At the Centenary Congress in 2015, I spoke to you on “Dating the Divine in the Teresian Carmelite Tradition”. That presentation reflected primarily on the first three mansions of the Interior Castle.

Since the 2015 Congress many of you contacted or approached me to inquire if I had developed further materials on the Interior Castle that could be shared. Members wanted to understand more clearly how to move forward in their spiritual lives as Secular Carmelites.

Just as we know from our own experiences that dating is only the first step in developing a relationship, so it is with the pursuit of Divine Intimacy that we may say that ‘Dating the Divine’ is only the first step in the pursuit of Divine Intimacy.

No one dates forever. One takes the relationship to the next level or moves on.

Dating today for the most part is far different than what it was when most of us were young, and very different in our Holy Mother's time. Today you may have one or two dates and end it, or immediately move in together without the union of marriage.

When we dated, it was generally for a year or two, and then there was another period of engagement leading to the union of marriage. This latter pattern resonates far more with the early 16<sup>th</sup> century experience of our Holy Mother St Teresa. As we know she drew on these stages of marriage as an analogy in her explanations of moving forward towards spiritual marriage and union with God in the Seventh mansion. In accordance with Teresa's teaching we begin our spiritual journey by entering the Castle.

We enter the Castle through prayer, and we use our time and energy to come to know ourselves, cultivating a pure heart and a good conscience. We make efforts to practice renunciation of our worldly ways by slowly and gradually practicing the virtue of detachment. We come to realize the need for the virtue of humility and the virtue of love through obedience.

By the time we reach the door of the Fourth mansion we have established a spiritual practice and enjoy a certain comfort with our spiritual lives. We attend community meetings, fulfill our obligations of the Office, and Holy Mass, and our 30 minutes of Meditation daily.

It is here that our Holy Mother cautions us that we can get easily stuck in the Third mansion. Instead of moving forward we get stuck in our comfortable and stable spiritual life in the Third mansion.

If you think about it, our Holy Mother was stuck herself. She tells us in the Book of Her Life that she spent 18 years at the Incarnation enjoying many hours in the parlor, visiting others, being frivolous, and was not serious about advancing in her spiritual life.

We could say that she is the expert at Dating the Divine. Eighteen years is a long time just to date! Therefore her caution concerning being stuck in the Third mansion is based on her own experience and bears listening to.

Envision this for a moment!

You are at the foot of Mount Carmel. As a Secular Carmelite you have chosen to climb Mount Carmel.

Envision yourself ascending the mountain trail. You are high on the mountain trail. You are breathing in the cool fresh air; feel the sunlight, warming and heating your body wherever it touches you.

As you look out below you see a lush valley and a beautiful lake spread out before you. You hear quiet sounds out in the distance, birds calling out to one another.

The scene is so beautiful. It reflects God's glory and you lift your heart up in prayer. You have had a hard and difficult journey to reach this far.

You have three options now.

You can decide that this is enough for you. It is so beautiful here that you will treasure this experience, but due to the efforts, frustrations and difficulties in reaching this far, you decide to descend the mountain and turn away from this spiritual journey.

Or you can decide to pitch your tent here and remain right where you are now. You eventually become stuck on the mountain side, neither ascending nor descending. You have substituted God's glory in His creation for God Himself.

Or you can give thanks for this experience of God's creation on the mountainside. But you are the passionate lover so you desire and long to seek the Beloved Himself at the top of the mountain.

You choose the third option. As a passionate lover you continue your ascent up Mount Carmel.

As you round a bend in the trail, you see that you are approaching an ancient door on the side of the mountain. This is the ancient door that the first hermits of Mount Carmel entered through, and all those Carmelites who followed over the centuries in their ascent of Mount Carmel.

This ancient door looks somewhat familiar to you. Yes, you have seen this door in your interior castle.

You tried to get in the door but could not. You even kicked it once or twice but to no avail. You waited there for a while hoping someone on the other side might open it. When nothing happened, you wandered off to explore more rooms in the castle.

Now that you have seen this ancient door on the mountain side, you note that there is no door knob on it. There is a small sign where the door knob should be that states: **Invitation only, wait here, be receptive, carry no baggage. Whatever you need will be given to you.**

I wonder, you say, is this the way into the ancient door in my interior castle.

Who better than our Holy Mother to answer this question. For does she not teach that many souls enter the Fourth mansion on their spiritual journey? 'It is very well populated', she says. Let us listen to her and the spiritual guidance she gives on waiting for the invitation, being open and receptive, carrying no baggage, and advancing as a passionate lover of God.

In her teachings on the Interior Castle, Teresa describes in the first three mansions our very active movements in seeking Divine Intimacy on our spiritual journey to become passionate lovers of God.

In the first three mansions you are actively striving, acting, doing. You are given the keys to enter and pass through the first three mansions and their rooms; namely the key of prayer and reflection gains you entrance to the castle and the First mansions, the key to the Second mansion is the beginning of the practice of detachment, and the key to the Third mansion is fidelity to your spiritual practice and determined perseverance, coupled with the mercy and grace of God. Through these means you are getting to know yourself and the Beloved. You are dating the Divine.

If we do persevere and have found ourselves in the Third mansion we generally have become accustomed to setting aside periods for prayer and reflection. We have developed at least some facility for discursive meditation and maintaining our focus and attention on the Lord. This prayer is termed simple or active recollection. However, when you finish exploring the rooms of the Third mansion and find yourself at the ancient door which leads into the Fourth mansion you don't seem to have the key to enter. You don't know how to move forward on your spiritual journey to become a passionate lover.

What does Teresa teach us that can move us forward?

Teresa teaches us that the Lord keeps the key, and opens the door from within when He chooses to do so.

You were given the keys to the first three mansions and you were able to turn the lock in the doors of each with your personal activity and initiative. Not so now.

There comes a time when we are weaned from our dependence on our own activity with periods of dryness, and lack of consolation. It is here that we make our choice.

We can choose to give up prayer and its present difficulties. Many do so. Or we can just say to ourselves, I will stay where I am. It is comfortable enough. I am meeting all my obligations as a Secular Carmelite. The passion and fire of a lover is not evident here.

Or we can say I want more, I want it all. This is when the seed of passionate love begins to emerge, and the passionate lover listens intently for the voice of the Beloved on the other side of the door.

We must believe that He wants us to advance, and if we are faithful to our Secular Carmelite vocation He will not withhold His favors, and if He does, as our Holy Mother states throughout her works, we will receive all when we reach eternal life.

The Lord is now the primary source of activity. Our posture now must be one of humility, openness, readiness and receptivity; one of watching, waiting, and listening for the Lord to lead us through the door of the Fourth mansion should He desire to do so.

Our Holy Mother cautions us not to think that the prayer of quiet (infused recollection) of the Fourth mansion is acquired by the intellect striving to think about God within itself, or by the imagination imaging Him within itself. Such efforts, she teaches, are good and an excellent kind of mediation because they are founded on a truth, which is that God is within us.

But this isn't the prayer of infused recollection because it is something each one can do with the help of God. But what she is speaking of comes in a different way... One noticeably senses a gentle drawing inward. In the case of this recollection, it doesn't come when we want it but when God wants to grant us the favor. (IV 3,3)

It is through this teaching that our Holy Mother distinguishes between active recollection experienced in the first three mansions, and the prayer of quiet (infused or passive recollection) in the Fourth mansion where we experience a sense of being drawn within by the indwelling itself.

There is a noticed difference in this experience. In the first we are actively making the effort, while in the second way we are receiving the prayer directly from the source within; from the Divine Guest within us. While in the first way we have to maintain our efforts to stay with the Lord, in the second way, since the source within is inexhaustible, we tend to become still and experience quiet while attending to the Lord within us.

We wait and watch at the door of the Fourth mansion. We do so with attentiveness and alertness. Cultivating receptivity in faith our prayer is often simply wordless and silent. Prayer without words is silent prayer. This is not a silence between moments of noise, but a rich silence filled with God, more accurately a silence on fire with His abiding Presence.

In silent prayer we listen intently. It is here in silent prayer that we begin to hear His Voice, His invitation to journey further into the interior castle.

Recall Moses in the Old Testament. This voice that speaks to us in the silence of our hearts is the same voice that spoke to Moses from out of the burning bush. This Voice set his silence on fire.

Try then to sense or feel the difference between active and passive methods of prayer as it is important in one's spiritual journey as a passionate lover of the Lord to recognize the favors the Lord is granting you.

If you don't notice the difference in your own experience between the prayer of active recollection and the prayer of quiet, how will you give thanks and praise to God for the favor given you in your prayer life? We must pray for the graces necessary to be sensitive and receptive to God's gifts. We must be constant and persevering in our efforts, for as our Holy Mother teaches "in our perseverance is all our good". (IV 3:9)

We are counseled by our Holy Mother to be always open, ready, receptive, to His continued gifts. We acknowledge them, accept them, and allow them to set us on fire leading us more deeply into our interior castle and to the door of the Fifth mansion.

Our God is a consuming fire!

His fire continues to draw us inward towards the Center of our interior castle. We, Our Holy Mother teaches, will find ample company in the Fifth mansion should the Lord's burning fire draw us ever more deeply into the rooms of the Fifth mansion.

The door into this mansion is the gift of the prayer of union. This prayer is generally termed infused contemplation. Our Holy Mother describes this prayer as intense, and more complete than the prayer of quiet. Its fire is vehement and transformative.

All of the faculties, both the physical and the spiritual senses, are suspended whereas in the prayer of quiet it was only the will that was suspended.

Think of all of these senses, both physical and spiritual, as doorways into your interior castle. You use these doorways to help you enter within to be with your God in a rich and varied way.

God enters your interior castle without going through any doorway in the Fifth mansion.

Recall after the Resurrection, Christ appeared in the upper room where the apostles were praying without coming through the door. He just appeared within the room. In the prayer of union, He appears within the rooms of the Fifth mansion without the normal way of entering; that is, through our faculties.

The prayer of union is above all earthly joys, and above all delights, above all consolations and still more than that. It is all a matter of love united with love, Teresa informs us. (V4.3)

Teresa teaches us that one of the greatest frustrations or challenges that we may experience, if we should enter the Fifth mansion, is the struggle and inability to clearly understand our experience. We must simply accept that this is God's work, the work of a Passionate Lover.

Since this is so, we are encouraged to be brave and courageous in begging the Lord to give us His grace in such a way that nothing will be lacking through our own fault; that He show us the way and strengthen us on this spiritual journey.

The nature of the prayer of union is not so much a state of life (for instance we understand from analogy the state of marriage, single life, and religious state are permanent frameworks for living one's life).

The prayer of union is a brief experience which may happen only once in a lifetime. During the time of union, Teresa teaches that the soul is left as though without its senses. It is like one, who in every respect, has died to the world so as to live more completely in God. (V 1:4) It lives within the fire of God's passionate love for the soul, and it is transformed into that fire.

God so places Himself in the interior of the soul that when it returns to itself it can, in no way, doubt that it was in God and God was in it. This truth remains with it so firmly that even though years go by without God granting the favor again, the soul can neither forget nor doubt that it was in God and God was in it. (V 1:9) Teresa teaches.

One of the best images that Teresa draws on to represent the prayer of union is the image of wax being impressed by a seal. "For indeed the soul does no more in this union than does the wax when another impresses a seal on it. The wax doesn't impress the seal upon itself; it is only disposed. I mean by being soft. And even in order to be disposed, it doesn't soften itself but remains still and gives its consent. Oh' the goodness of God. All you want is our will and that there be no impediment in the wax." (V.2:12)

The words of the Song of Solomon (8:6) bring us confirmation from Holy Scripture of Teresa's analogy.

*"Set me as seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement fire."*

As Secular Carmelites we are called, each and every one, to this transformation and union with God in Christ. Believe that God calls you.

Make every effort not to fail in doing what you are able to do with His sustaining grace to prepare yourself for the prayer of union if and when He chooses to grant it whether it is once or many times in this life.

The passionate lover is never idle, but always strives to advance in its love of the Beloved. If we apply ourselves to the practice of the virtues and service to others in the Beloved's name, we will continue to be drawn deeper into the interior castle and the flashes of fire will propel us even to the entrance of the Sixth mansion.

The flashes of fire that have drawn the soul to the door of the Sixth mansion only increase in intensity should the Lord grant the soul the favor of entering the Sixth mansion. This Sixth mansion is characterized by an intense and burning fire of internal and external suffering and may or may not be accompanied by the experiences of mystical phenomenon.

Teresa describes the Sixth mansion in these words. "Now the soul is fully determined to take no other spouse. But the Spouse does not look at the soul's burning desires that the betrothal take place, for He still wants it to desire this more, and He wants the betrothal to take place at a cost: it is the greatest of blessings."

Trials and sufferings then are the door to the Sixth mansion. Teresa teaches that however intense or unexpected our sufferings be in this mansion, our willingness to embrace these trials and sufferings is rooted in our burning desire – the fire within our hearts - to be one with God following the example of Christ.

Recall the Book of Tobias in the Old Testament (Tobias 6: 18-22) where the angel instructed Tobias that he must wait three nights before being united with his bride. St John of the Cross assists our understanding of Tobias' instructions from the angel through his interpretation of these Scripture passages as it pertains to our journey to union with God.

On the first night he was ordered by the angel to burn the fish heart in the fire.

The fish heart symbolized the human heart that must burn and be purified with the fire of Divine Love before it is able to enter into spiritual marriage in the Seventh mansion.

The other aspect of the Sixth mansion is the potential for mystical phenomenon. These experiences are supernatural in character, and we are cautioned not to seek such favors. There are many holy persons who have never received one of these favors; and others who receive them but are not holy, Teresa tell us.

The soul should think not about receiving more, but about how to serve more for what already has been given to it. "This is the best remedy for helping us to endure and persevere; that is to engage in external works of charity and to hope in the mercy of God who never fails those who hope in Him." (VI:1:13)

Tobias, on the second night, was told by the angel that he would be admitted into the society of the holy patriarchs, the fathers of faith. One must proceed by faith alone but not a faith that is exclusive of charity and service, and not by seeking extraordinary favors.

Through the purifying fire of trials and sufferings as well as the favors one might have received in the Sixth mansion the Lord is preparing the soul to be escorted into the Seventh mansion of which there is no closed door between the one and the other. Teresa again, as she has often done throughout the Interior Castle, stresses the need for courage. The grace of courage will strengthen one for the passing through the door into the Seventh mansion. Courage is the fire burning hot and fierce within the passionate lover's heart.

"In the seventh mansion the union comes about in a different way: our good God now desires to remove the scales from the soul's eyes and let it see and understand, although in a strange way, something of a favor He grants it." Teresa informs us.

She continues. "When the soul is brought into that dwelling place, the Most Blessed Trinity, all three persons, through an intellectual vision, is revealed to it through a certain representation of the truth. Through an admirable knowledge the soul understands as a most profound truth that all three Persons are one substance and one power, and one knowledge, and one God alone." (VII, 1:6)

The door then to the Seventh mansion is this intellectual vision of the Holy Trinity. And it is not a passing awareness. Teresa states: "Each day this soul becomes more amazed, for these Persons never seem to leave it anymore, but it clearly beholds... that they are within it." In fact, "the soul finds itself in this company every time it takes notice." It is living with the Divine Guest.

The angel told Tobias that on the third night he would obtain the blessing which is God. When the night passed the angel also told Tobias he would be joined to his Spouse, who is the Wisdom of God.

Teresa teaches us that the spiritual marriage itself takes place when "His majesty desires to show Himself to the soul through an imaginative vision of His most sacred Humanity so that the soul will understand and not be ignorant of receiving this sovereign gift." "He has desired to be so joined with the creature, that just as those who are married cannot be separated, He doesn't want to be separated from the soul"

Fire and Flame, His transforming Love has set ablaze the passionate lover that is the soul!!