

THE INTERIOR CASTLE.

The Interior Castle is considered to be St. Teresa's masterpiece and a classic among the spiritual literature of the western Church. The aim of this outline is to provide a kind of 'guided tour' of the Castle in so far as that is possible. This famous image of the Castle suggests, I think, the magnificence of the walled city of Avila where St. Teresa was born. As Teresa was trying with some apprehension to set out her doctrine of prayer in obedience to her confessor, Fr. Gratian, who asked her to write it, she conceived the idea for the book as follows:

"It is that we consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places". Ch.1

Thus the book acquired its 'alternative' name 'Morades' or 'Mansions'.

Teresa took very seriously indeed the point made in the opening book of the Bible, namely that we are made 'in the image and likeness of God.'

This is the source of our dignity and the reason we can say that each individual can reflect from within the very beauty of God. Teresa wants us to centre our thoughts, to make a journey inwards, to enter the gates of the city of Avila and not wander around on the dry and arid embankment surrounding the walls. She wants us to have a full share in the life and activity and security within.

Teresa's point is that we can enter the holy place and there enjoy an audience with God. In Ch.1 we find her first statement about prayer:

"The door of the castle is prayer and meditation." Prayer and meditation sets us thinking along the right lines; through them we get the atmosphere and feel of the spiritual world in which God is everything and we are nothing. It is a question of priorities, and it should begin to dawn on us that we are made for God alone. People who keep on praying and meditating very soon make some progress, they enter the second mansion. They begin to hear the insistent voice of the Lord calling to them to approach nearer to him. We need to summon up all our resources of courage at this stage so as to keep at it and not abandon the effort to make progress - or as St. Teresa would say to return to the first mansion.

Nobody has described spiritual joy better than Teresa, yet at this point she would tell people not to think too much about consolation. She wants us to travel further inwards and get used to the growing pains of the journey. Later on the individual will recognise that the voice it hears has been the voice of the bridegroom calling to his bride.

The problem encountered here and for some time to come is that the kind of consolation experienced is of a limited type, it is more sensual than spiritual and so does not reach the centre of the personality where alone we can meet God. Cfr. St. Jn. We are now at one of the 'growth points' of spiritual life and this is located at the transition from the second to the third mansion. Prayer seems to have run into the 'snag' stage where nothing seems to be happening. This is a very well documented condition in spiritual literature. When you reach this kind of impasse the only thing you can tell yourself is, 'I cannot give up prayer'. After these initial phases of spiritual striving a marked development takes place. This new stage of spiritual growth would correspond to Teresa's description of herself and others in what she calls the third mansion. This phase, she tells us, is marked by a certain safeness, even calculation on the part of the individual, what Teresa calls a 'well-ordered life.' We may be interested to know that Teresa thinks most people who take prayer seriously still remain at this point all their lives. In treating of this stage of growth in 'Life' Teresa observes that they will never imitate St. Peter and throw themselves into the sea. They will be so good that they will be easily shocked by the snippets of scandal they hear from time to time. They will tell you how terrible the world has become and lament the complete breakdown in morality at the present time, worse, they think, than at any previous period in history. People like this weigh everything carefully before they give it to the Lord; they parcel themselves out rather than deliver themselves wholly to Him. They will never be guilty of the madness and spontaneity of a St. Francis of Assisi. There is absolutely no

fear that they will kill themselves by penance. I think that we recognise that this whole approach betrays a creeping selfishness that will only yield to the surprises and fire of the Holy Spirit.

In her 'Interior Castle', St. Teresa views the progress made through the first three mansions as something ordinary, something which is the fruit of sustained prayer. We presuppose always however, the grace and help of God. When she comes to treat of mansion four however, Teresa introduces a distinction; the progress and effects that we notice here are directly the work of the Holy Spirit.

At this stage for Teresa the heart is dilated by the love of God. She says it is as if "sweet perfumes were cast on a brazier in the interior depths of the soul". Teresa now begins to talk about a sense of deep stillness in the mind which tends to take different forms such as the 'prayer of recollection' and the 'prayer of quiet.' Her descriptions are classic." The person retires within himself like a hedge-hog or tortoise withdrawing into itself." Here the heart simply keeps silence, watches and does nothing. As we continue to follow Teresa's guidance from the fourth to the fifth mansion we see that contemplative prayer takes a deeper hold on the soul. Teresa reminds her readers, " All of us who wear this sacred habit are called to prayer and contemplation." There is a new confidence born in Teresa at this stage, it is a confidence that flows from closeness to God. This type of prayer yields immense satisfaction:

"This joy penetrates to the very marrow of our bones".(Mansion 5).

There is an unshakable conviction that this is none other than an experiential encounter with God in prayer.

Both St.Teresa and St.John of the Cross refer to this advanced development in prayer as a union of the powers of the soul with God. A transformation is taking place and Teresa uses the beautiful image of the silk-worm at work to convey her meaning. Through the persistent industry of the silk-worm spinning its cocoon, a beautiful white butterfly will eventually emerge.

It is important to notice however at this stage how close St.Teresa's position is to the Gospel.She never becomes lost in some mystic dream world.She states.:

"The Lord really asks two things; love of his majesty and love for our neighbour."

Teresa prefers this to any kind of self-analysis as regards mystical states or any desire to determine the exact type of prayer that is being experienced.

Teresa now continues to talk about the fifth mansion in her progressive treatment of the life of prayer. She, in common with St.John of the Cross, and other mystical writers, employs the image of spiritual betrothal and spiritual marriage to describe union with God.Here in this mansion Teresa is reminded of the growing intimacy between two people that leads to engagement and marriage. This she sees as wholly a gift from God and she describes what happens in terms of a visit by the Lord to the individual.

Next we find that at the outset of the sixth mansion, Teresa regards the soul as someone 'wounded with love'. This theme is beautifully elaborated by St.John of the Cross in the 'Spiritual Cant'. There follows a great desire for perfect union with God,and Teresa vividly describes this growth in divine intimacy which is really the pain of love. There is now an overwhelming awareness of the Lord's presence and nearness. This feeling can occur quite suddenly and without prior warning. Teresa describes this experience as like a spiritual fragrance that diffuses itself powerfully through all the senses.

At this point in her spiritual growth, Teresa herself heard words which communicated effectively to her such assurances as 'It is I, fear not'.

She also talks about an experience of rapture which is literally a 'breathless' and 'speechless' state and the individual loses touch with his surroundings. A variation or intensification of this experience is referred to by Teresa as 'a flight of the spirit'. She says she feels as if she had been in another world very different from this one'.

St. Teresa devotes Ch. 6 to describing the pleasing effects of what she considers are definite marks of divine favour.

The individual at this point is passionately in love with God and longs to be present with God and united to him. The soul feels alienated from worldly things and filled with an indefinable but real joy.

In the following chapter Teresa interrupts her descriptions of spiritual sweetness to insist on the need for continued and close contact with the sacred humanity of Jesus. Lest there be any temptation to rest exclusively in a rarefied type of mystical prayer, Teresa makes here her renowned plea for the place of Jesus even in advanced stages of spiritual growth.

"If she loses her guide, the good Jesus, she will be unable to find her way (6.Ch.7)."

Her devotion to the humanity of Jesus was coupled with a deep inner conviction of his presence by her side.

She refers to this experience as 'an intellectual vision'. Teresa gives us a graphic account of what she calls 'an imaginary vision' through which Christ was also present to her. It is however not a dead but a living image that she speaks of. Allied to this was an experience within the soul of the oneness of God with his creation. "It realises how all things are seen in God, and how within himself he contains them all." (Ch.10).

This reminds us very much of Dame Julians' vision in her 'Revelations of Divine Love'. Ch.11 of that treatise begins:

"After this I saw the whole Godhead concentrated as it were in a single point and thereby I learnt that he is in all things." (Cfr.Ruysbroeck. Bk. Of Supreme Truth. Ch.9).

Earlier on in her treatment of the sixth mansion we may remember that Teresa hinted at 'the pain or wound of love'. Now she becomes more specific: there is a rapid growth of love in the soul and this sometimes expresses itself by means of a deep inner wound caused by a fiery arrow. We have a full account of this unusual phenomenon in the Life of St.Teresa written by herself. It occurs in Ch.29 and the experience she describes there is known as the transverberation of her heart, an incident that has been depicted by Bernini in his famous sculpture in St.Peters in Rome.

We may compare what happens here with what St.John of the Cross talks about in Stanza 8 of the Sp.Cant.

"And being brought near death by the arrows you receive, from that which you conceive of your beloved."

John in his prose commentary has this to say:

"These touches (of God) so impregnate the soul that she can truthfully say she conceives."

It would be hard to find bolder or stronger terminology than this in spiritual literature.

The experience of transverberation could be accompanied by other physiological phenomena such as the disjuncting of the limbs and a decreased pulse rate.

We now move on to consider the ultimate stage of spiritual development, namely the seventh mansion.

Teresa now pursues the nuptial imagery which has here its closest application. The Lord is now prepared to enter into a special covenantal relationship of love with the individual who has sought him earnestly and faithfully.

"For 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." (M.7.Ch.1).

Again, 'In the spiritual marriage the union is like what we have when rain falls from the sky into a river of fount; all is water, for the rain that fell from heaven cannot be separated from the water of the river. (Ch.14).

