



Catechetical Series:

What Catholics Believe & Why

SAINT TERESA OF ÁVILA: THE INTERIOR CASTLE

Behold The Truth

Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith
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Contemplative Prayer

- ❖ The great Spanish mystic, Saint Teresa of Ávila, was a master of *contemplative* or *mental prayer*, an inner seeking of God with the heart that leads to a deeper union with Him
- ❖ Teresa defined contemplative prayer as “simply a friendly intercourse and a friendly solitary conversation with Him who, as we know, loves us.” *Life VIII*
- ❖ She understood that this *transforming union* with our Creator, the goal of the Christian life, is not a privilege reserved for a chosen few souls, but a reality attainable by all



The Interior Castle

- ❖ In her masterwork, *The Interior Castle*, the Saint envisions the soul as a kind of crystalline fortress consisting of seven levels of rooms or “mansions,” with the presence of God dwelling in the innermost chamber
- ❖ The goal is for the soul to advance through the different levels of the spiritual life, growing less attached to the things of the world and more in love with God



The Interior Castle

- ❖ Teresa discusses the different grades of prayer, starting with various forms of *ascetical prayer*, which require great effort on the part of the soul
- ❖ The higher levels of prayer, categorized as *mystical prayer*, cannot be attained by human effort, but only passively received as a gift from God



The First Mansions

- ❖ The First Mansions, the start of the spiritual life, consist entirely of *vocal prayer*
- ❖ At this stage, the soul discovers its dignity as a child of God made in the divine image and likeness
- ❖ While the soul at this stage is in a state of grace, it retains some attachment to worldly things and so is ever in danger of falling into mortal sin



The Second Mansions

- ❖ In the Second Mansions the soul begins to practice *discursive meditation*, a focusing on divine truth
- ❖ Being nearer to God, it is able to hear and understand His voice
- ❖ His appeals, though, are not direct, but “come through the conversations of good people, or from sermons, or through the reading of good books,” as well as through “sicknesses and trials.”
Interior Castle, Second Mansions
- ❖ Being more susceptible to the devil’s attacks, though, the soul may become confused and question whether it wants to continue deeper into the castle



The Third Mansions

- ❖ In the Third Mansions the soul takes up the practice of *acquired recollection*, the highest form of *ascetical prayer* (prayer that requires effort)
- ❖ At this stage, the soul conscientiously seeks to avoid offending God even in small ways
- ❖ It takes joy in performing penances; and engages in recollected prayer for long durations
- ❖ It may also suffer extended periods of dryness, which can become a source of discouragement, but are actually signs it is ready to advance to higher levels

The Dark Night of the Soul

- ❖ This dryness often signifies the coming of the “dark night of the soul,” as Teresa’s fellow mystic, Saint John of the Cross, called it
- ❖ The dark night is a bridge from the *ascetical* to the *mystical* life
- ❖ It is not a punishment, but rather a purification: a mercy which the Lord grants the soul in order to usher it on towards perfection



The Dark Night of the Soul

- ❖ The purifications of the dark night come in two waves: the night of sense and the night of spirit
- ❖ The night of sense involves a burning away of self-centeredness in the light of divine love
- ❖ This entry into the light of Christ is described as “night” because God’s omnipotence so far surpasses our finite ability to comprehend Him
- ❖ “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully.” First Corinthians 13:12





The Dark Night of the Soul

- ❖ The second purifying wave, the night of spirit, completes the work of the first, getting to the roots of our imperfections
- ❖ It is an intense experience of the transformative effects of divine grace remaking the soul into what it is truly called to be



The Fourth Mansions

- ❖ To enter the Fourth Mansions is to become fully reliant on God, no longer advancing by one's own efforts, but purely by grace
- ❖ The soul starts to receive intuitive knowledge of the divine through *infused contemplation*, the first grade of *mystical prayer*
- ❖ This type of prayer first takes the form of *passive recollection*, in which the soul's faculties are held captive by the reality of God's beauty and goodness
- ❖ From this flows the *prayer of quiet*, in which the soul experiences an extraordinary peace and rest in God's presence



The Fifth Mansions

- ❖ In the Fifth Mansions, the soul experiences the prayer of *simple union*, a total surrender or dying to oneself in order to live completely for God
- ❖ It is impossible for the devil to deceive the soul engaged in simple union because “His Majesty is in such close contact and union with the essence of the soul that he will not dare approach.”
Interior Castle, Fifth Mansion I
- ❖ Teresa considered this stage a precursor to divine betrothal, a kind of courtship in which God and the soul begin to spend more time together



The Sixth Mansions

- ❖ Spiritual betrothal takes place in the Sixth Mansions
- ❖ The grade of prayer found at this stage is *ecstatic union*
- ❖ This highest form of mystical prayer involves great suffering, just as the highest level of ascetical prayer is marked by the dark night
- ❖ Yet the soul now suffers resolutely, being willing to “plunge deep into suffering for God’s sake.”

Interior Castle, Sixth Mansions I



The Seventh Mansions

- ❖ It is in the Seventh Mansions that the soul experiences *transforming union* with the Blessed Trinity
- ❖ Here in the castle's bridal chamber, the innermost part of the soul, the divine marriage takes place: the most intimate and powerful experience of God's presence one might have in this world, exceeded only by the Beatific Vision in the world to come



The Seventh Mansions

“[The soul] is brought into this Mansion by means of an intellectual vision, in which, by a representation of the truth in a particular way, the Most Holy Trinity reveals Itself, in all three Persons. First of all the spirit becomes enkindled and is illumined, as it were, by a cloud of the greatest brightness. It sees these three Persons, individually, and yet, by a wonderful kind of knowledge which is given to it, the soul realizes that most certainly and truly all these three Persons are one Substance and one Power and one Knowledge and one God alone.”
Interior Castle, Seventh Mansions I



The Seventh Mansions

- ❖ Remarkably, in this state of union the soul is able to maintain its awareness of the indwelling of the Trinity while carrying out the ordinary duties of its daily life
- ❖ Effectively, as Teresa describes it, one is able to be both Martha and Mary: outwardly busy about menial tasks while inwardly sitting at the feet of the Lord.



The Seventh Mansions

- ❖ Transforming union is the very summit of Christian earthly life: the fulfillment of Our Lord's promise:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

Revelation 3:20-21



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