

Lecture 4. The Interior Castle of St. Teresa de Avila

Overview: The Interior Castle of St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) is a mystical autobiography. It is an effort to interlace autobiography with an experience of the divine—grounded in the tangible love of God. In this work, Teresa gives us a layered understanding of how we are all part of the mansions of the Kingdom. Teresa's spirituality was a grounded one; it was lived in its flesh.

I. Teresa: Carmelite and Doctor of the Church: Carmelite spirituality depends in no small part on the reform ushered in by Teresa of Jesus in the sixteenth century. Her advocacy for a mysticism of the everyday—for encounters with God grounded in Infinite Love and mediated by contemplation and action—sets her apart not only as a Doctor of the Church but as an inspiration for countless numbers, including prominent figures outside the church like the Victorian novelist George Eliot (Middlemarch).

Her many works include *The Way of Perfection*, *Book of Foundations*, *Life*, and *The Interior Castle*, the latter being her masterpiece on the mystical life.

II. The Seven Mansions of The Interior Castle: The Interior Castle consists of seven moradas or mansions: The Mansions of Humility; The Mansions of the Practice of Prayer; The Mansions of Exemplary Life; The Spiritual Consolations; The Spiritual Betrothal and Prayer of Union; The Lover and the Beloved; Spiritual Marriage.

Teresa takes the reader through each of these and combines subtle thinking with homey examples, sublime theory with lived experience.

III. A Spiritual Writer and Icon: Her skillful use of the metaphor of the silkworm is a fine reminder of her ability to take a dimension of nature, an aspect of ordinary life, and spin a reflection that is theologically deep, psychologically penetrative, while remaining intellectually accessible.

Teresa was not an isolationist, withdrawn from human commerce, removed from the cut and thrust of community life. She experienced God and grew in holiness through acceptance of her body, her affections, and her materiality. There is nothing Gnostic or Manichean in Teresa's thinking.

But she was also an icon and a herald, a Renaissance humanist, a reformer, a model of tolerance and a scourge of the tyrannies of a mad fundamentalism and exaggerated religiosity.

• As Teresian scholar Peter Tyler notes: "she was a woman talking to women, articulating the nature of feminine desire and its transformation through the encounter with Christ. As a daughter of Carmel, she appreciated the salty blend of hermit, community and mendicant life that produces the Carmelite charism; and as a child of the Renaissance, she is open to the reform for the Church she loves" (from "Wild Woman with a Gentle Vision" in Tablet, 11 Oct 2014).

Review Questions

1. What was at the heart of Teresa's reform of the Carmelites?
2. What compelled her to write *The Interior Castle*?
3. Why was she called "a wild woman with a gentle vision"?