

4. Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila is considered by many to be the greatest Christian woman mystic. Such was her mystical and mystagogical prowess that on September 27, 1970, Pope Paul VI solemnly declared her a Doctor of the Church - a title she and Catherine of Siena were simultaneously the first women to bear.

I. Teresa of Avila: The silkworm is like the soul. When full-grown it starts to spin its silk and to build the house in which it is to die. This house may be understood to mean Christ. When the soul is truly dead to the world, a little white butterfly comes forth. - St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. Allison Peers (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 71-72.

Teresa of Avila: Considered by many to be the greatest Christian woman mystic. Doctor of the Church. Insisted that her eminent learning came from God. "I shall speak of nothing of which the Lord has not taught me in prayer."

Brief Biography: Entered Carmelite monastery of the Incarnation near Avila at the age of twenty. Three-year paralytic condition that brought her to death's door. She claimed to have been cured through St. Joseph's intercession. Teresa of Avila by Francois Gerard, 1827 Struggle with the life of prayer for the next eighteen years. Definitive conversion took place when she was about forty years old. Began to reform Carmelite life with John of the Cross. Recent studies indicate that his spiritual influence upon her was much less than once assumed.

II. The Book of Her Life: The Book of Her Life has several distinct sections: The first section details her family life. The second section, a magnificent treatise on prayer that likens the soul to a garden. In the third and fourth parts we find descriptions of her extraordinary mystical experiences: Ecstasies, Raptures, Wounds of love, A vision of her place in hell, Visions of Christ's humanity, mystical marriage, and spiritual fecundity. The relatively well-known "transverberation" experience.

III. The Interior Castle: The Interior Castle is her masterpiece. Soul described as an extremely beautiful, diamond castle. Seven stages of "dwelling places" (each containing innumerable rooms) in order to encounter the King in the central mansion. One enters the castle through attentive vocal and mental prayer, described as "nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us."

St. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1964), 20. The first three dwelling places describe the pre-mystical stages of prayer, They differentiate between "acquired contemplation" and "infused contemplation." The fourth dwelling places centers on "the prayer of quiet." This "supernatural prayer" effects a deep consciousness of Christ's entering the soul to utter "whispers of love through the din of a crowd." The core of her will has been satisfied for the first time. Can cause a "holy madness" and a "divine intoxication." Bogus quietude produced by the devil to lead to the person's ruin. Distinction between "sweetness in prayer and spiritual consolation."

Fifth dwelling places describe the "prayer of union," the "sleep of the faculties." Compared to pre-betrothal activity of lovers. The living water is now up to the "soul's neck," causing spiritual delights that far exceed those given during the prayer of quiet.

The sixth dwelling places: People who suffer from severe illnesses, ridicule, persecution, distrust from one's confessor, spiritual darkness, and the seeming absence of faith and of God's presence. Teresa's vision of her place in hell. "Raptures," that is, "irresistible contemplation," the soul seems confirmed in mystical betrothal. Spiritual locutions, that is, interior words, enkindle the soul's union with God and are often so powerful that if God said, for example, "be at peace," the soul would immediately be peaceful. Spiritual inebriation "makes the soul forget itself and it thinks it is in him, and that he and it are one and the same thing, without any division, and so it talks nonsense." Most striking, Teresa's returns to the topic of meditating upon Christ's sacred humanity. Great ambivalence toward apophatic prayer. One must never forget Christ. Distinction between reasoning with the understanding and a simple "dwelling upon" or a simple recollection of Christ within. Christ is mentioned on almost every page in Teresa's collected work.

The seventh dwelling places describe what occurs during mystical marriage, or transforming union. An intellectual vision of the Trinity illuminated her soul. The distinction between the soul's higher ("spirit") and lower ("soul") aspects. Mary and Martha, contemplation in daily life. Profound interior visions, so-called "imaginary" visions of Christ. "Intellectual visions" of Christ - that bypass the imagination, intellect, or will - occurred in her soul's center. Just as two wax candles may become one flame, or rain falls into the ocean to become one water, Teresa's soul became one with Christ. Transforming union and spiritual fecundity, the fruitfulness of her life of service, especially her practical reforms of the Carmelite communities. Love of God and neighbor is the only lasting foundation

for, and genuine result of, the life of mystical prayer.

IV. Conclusion: Teresa's life sharply contradicts the view that mysticism, Church, and authority are intrinsically irreconcilable. An intellectual vision infused her with an understanding of scripture and a determination to carry out its least demands. She did not hesitate to disagree with John of the Cross, Jerome Gratian (one of her key collaborators), or in outmaneuvering bishops and secular authorities, when God's will indicated a certain line of action.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways did Teresa's mystical and ecstatic experiences shape her writings and ministry?
2. Is Teresa's analysis of the "dwelling places" in the mystical life helpful to you on your journey? How so?
3. It is often said that mystics are selfish, inwardly-focused, etc. How does Teresa's life and work disprove this?