

6. The School of Suffering: Interior Life

Not long after her profession (November 3, 1537), heart problems sent her to the infirmary. She bore the pain, the forced idleness, the inability to participate in the religious practices, with no less patience than that of the nun who had amazed her. So she won the love of all the other sisters, even those who had formerly criticized and misinterpreted her actions. Her fond father wanted everything possible to be done and, because the doctors could not help, decided to take his daughter to a healer who was famous for her cures. Since the Monastery of the Incarnation was not enclosed, there was no hesitation about allowing her family to care for the young sister. The long trip took them first past Hortigosa. Pedro Sanchez gave Teresa a book [i.e., the *Third Spiritual Alphabet*] by Fr. [Francisco de] Osuna about the prayer of recollection, which was soon to become her guide. The travelers spent the winter at the farmhouse of Maria de Cepeda. Even though as in earlier years she was here surrounded by her loved ones, and devoted herself wholeheartedly to them, Teresa knew how to arrange the day to give herself enough time for solitary prayer; and so she remained faithful to her religious vocation outside the monastery setting. However, her illness steadily increased so that it was a relief when spring came, the time the healer of Becedas had designated for the cure. The long journey was a torment for the patient, but the cure was even worse. Instead of healing her, it only increased her suffering. In spite of all her agonizing pain, she steadfastly continued in contemplative prayer according to the directions in her spiritual guidebook, and God rewarded this courageous fidelity by even then raising her to a high level of the interior life.



→ In her writings, this doctor of prayer later presented the mystical life of grace in all its stages with incomparable clarity.⁵ The neophyte who was beginning, to practice prayer did not yet know what was happening in her soul. But in order to make her further development intelligible, it is necessary to say a few words here about the interior life.

Prayer is the communication of the soul with God. God is love, and love is goodness giving itself away. It is a fullness of being that does not want to remain enclosed in itself, but rather to share itself with others, to give itself to them, and to make them happy. All of creation exists thanks to this divine love spending itself. However, the highest of all creatures are those endowed with spirit, able to receive God's love with understanding and to return it freely: angels and human souls. Prayer is the highest achievement of which the human spirit is capable. But it is not merely a human achievement. Prayer is a Jacob's ladder on which the human spirit ascends to God and God's grace descends to people. The stages of prayer are distinguished according to the measure in which the natural efforts of the soul and God's grace participate. When the soul is no longer active by virtue of its own efforts, but is simply a receptacle for grace, one speaks of a mystical life of prayer.

So-called vocal prayer is designated as the lowest stage, prayer that remains within specifically designated spoken forms: the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the rosary, the Divine Office. Of course, "vocal" prayer is not to be understood as simply saying words. If the mere words of a prayer alone are said without the soul's raising itself to God, this is only an

⁵ In particular in her *Life*, *Way of Perfection*, and *Interior Castle*. The references cited so far are from her *Life*. However, it is recommended that the reader who has not yet dealt with spiritual writings begin with the *Way of Perfection*. The presentation of the Our Father contained in it is a model example of contemplative prayer.

outward show and not real prayer. The designated words, however, support the spirit and prescribe to it a fixed path.

Meditative prayer is one stage higher. Here the spirit moves more freely without being bound to specific words. It immerses itself, for example, in the mystery of the birth of Jesus. The spirit's imagination [*Phantasie*] transports it to the grotto in Bethlehem, seeing the child in the manger, the holy parents, the shepherds, and the kings. The intellect ponders the greatness of divine mercy, the emotions are seized by love and thankfulness, the will decides to make itself more worthy of divine love. This is how meditative prayer involves all the soul's powers and, when practiced with faithful persistence, can gradually remake the whole person. However, the Lord has yet another way of rewarding fidelity in meditation: by elevation to a higher manner of praying.

St. Teresa calls the next stage the prayer of quiet or simplicity. Various activities are replaced by a recollection of spiritual energies. The soul is no longer in a position to reflect intellectually or to make definite decisions; she is completely engaged by something she cannot avoid, the presence of her God who is close to her and allows her to rest in him. While the lower prayer stages are accessible to every believer by human effort, albeit aided by the grace of God, we are now standing at the border of the mystical life of grace that cannot be entered by virtue of human energy, for here only God's special favor grants admission.

If the perception of God's presence is already something which totally captivates the soul and gives it a happiness incomparable to any earthly happiness, then this is greatly surpassed by the union with the Lord, which, at first, is usually granted to it for only a very short time.

At this stage of mystical favor many events occur that are also outwardly recognized as extraordinary: *ecstasies* and *visions*. The energy of the soul is so attracted by the supernatural influence that its lower faculties, the senses, lose their effectiveness entirely. The soul no longer sees or hears anything, the body no longer feels pain when injured, and in some cases becomes rigid like someone dead. But the soul lives an intensified life as if it were outside its body. Sometimes the Lord himself appears to it in bodily form, sometimes the Mother of God or an angel or saint. It sees these heavenly forms as if through bodily perception, or also in imagination. Or its intellect is supernaturally enlightened and gains insight into hidden truths. Such private revelations usually have the purpose of teaching souls about their own condition or that of others, of confiding God's intentions to them, and of forming them for a specific task for which God has selected them. They are seldom absent in the lives of saints, though they by no means belong to the essence of holiness. Usually they only appear during a certain phase and later vanish again.

These souls, who have been sufficiently prepared and tested by repeated transitory union with him, by extraordinary illuminations, and at the same time through suffering and various trials, the Lord wishes to bind to himself permanently. He enters into a covenant with them that is called "spiritual betrothal." He expects them to put themselves completely at his service; at the same time, he takes them into safekeeping, cares for them, and is always ready to grant their requests.

Finally, Teresa calls the highest stage of blessedness "spiritual marriage." The extraordinary



events have now stopped, but the soul is constantly united with the Lord. She enjoys his presence even in the midst of external activities without being hindered in the least.

The saint had to go through all of these stages during a development that took years before she could account for them herself and give others advice. But the beginnings were during that time of greatest *bodily* suffering:

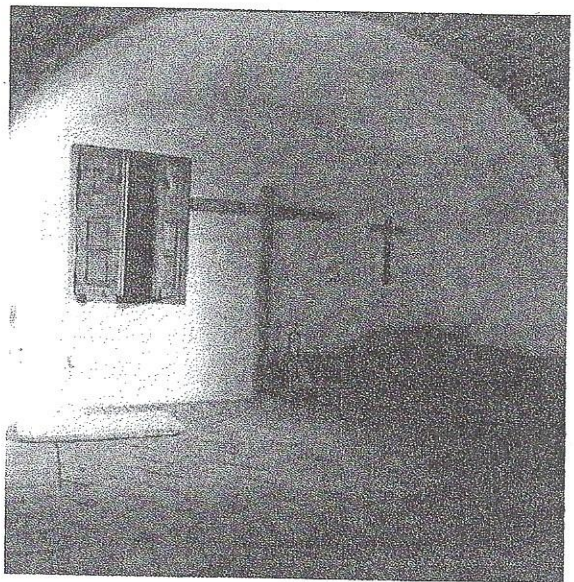
It pleased the heavenly Master to deal with me with such love that he gave me the prayer of quiet. But he often also raised me up to that of union. Unfortunately, I was unfamiliar with either kind. In fact, it would have been useful to me to recognize their value. To be sure, this union did not last long, I believe, hardly as long as one Hail Mary. But it had a great influence on me. I was not yet twenty years old and already believed that I saw the world lying conquered under my feet. I pitied all who had relationships with the world, even if the ties were permitted. I tried with all my strength to be truly present in my soul to Jesus our Lord, our highest Good, our Master. My way of praying was to think about one of the mysteries of his divine life and make a mental image of it. [L, 4, 7]

The effect of her prayer life was an ever-increasing love of God and of souls. If earlier her natural gifts had had an unusual influence on her human surroundings, her supernatural power to love now gave her an almost irresistible force. The first person to experience it was the priest to whom she confessed in Becedas. The insight he had into this pure soul, who blamed herself for innocent little slips with the most bitter regret, disturbed him so much that he himself confessed to his penitent the serious sin in which he had been living for years. Now she could not rest until he had freed himself from these disgraceful fetters. The power of her words and her intercession changed him into a contrite penitent.

After her return to the family home in Avila, the state of the patient got so much worse that there seemed no further hope for her life. Teresa was unconscious for four days. The news of her death spread through the city. Her grave was dug at the Monastery of the Incarnation. The Carmelites of Avila sang a requiem for her. Only her father and siblings continued besieging heaven, and finally she opened her eyes again. At the moment of awakening she spoke some words that implied she had seen some great things during this apparent death. During her last days she admitted that God at that time had shown her heaven and hell, besides her later work in the Order, and the saintly deaths of her father and her friend Juana Suarez, as well as her own.

As soon as a slight improvement began, Teresa moved back to her monastery at her urgent request. But she was confined to her bed for several more years, seemed to be crippled forever, and suffered unutterable pain. She herself describes the state of her soul during this time of trial.

I bore these sufferings with great composure, in fact with joy, except at first when the pain was too severe. What followed seemed to hurt less. I was completely surrendered to the will of God even if he intended to burden me like this forever. It appeared to me that all I wanted was to get healthy so as to withdraw into solitude as my book prescribed. This was difficult in the sick



St. Teresa's cell at Avila