

The Interior Castle was written in six months in 1577. This masterpiece of mystical theology represents a synthesis of Teresa on silent prayer and the spiritual life. The manuscript is housed in the Carmel in Seville, Spain.

The soul is compared to a castle divided into seven mansions corresponding to the seven degrees of prayer or intimacy with God. Six mansions are arranged around the seventh, the central mansion where God resides. The soul must travel through all the mansions starting from the outside and moving inward before it is introduced into the seventh mansion

Presentation
Mystical Life according to Saint Teresa of Avila

by Emmanuel Renault

(extract from Saint Teresa of Avila and the Mystical Experience, Seuil, coll. 'Maître Spirituels', 1970)

For Teresa, **silent prayer** is the path that progressively leads to the **perfection of charity** and for a few to **union with God**. In the book of her **Life**, she lays out **four principal ways to water** (or types of prayer) **the garden** (of the soul): manually drawing water from a well; using a water wheel; getting water from a spring; and finally, rain.

In the **Interior Castle**, benefitting from a greater experience, Teresa details **seven degrees or Mansions**. The **first degree** of prayer (meditation, prayer of recollection) represents the **beginning stages** (or the first three houses). The **prayer of quiet** (or the fourth house) introduces us to **supernatural contemplation**. In other words, the **will**, one of the three faculties of the soul, participates in **union with God** present within the soul. God who resides in the center of the soul gradually reveals Himself as a known and loving object. The **initial manifestation** of God's presence is in the **will** alone. It finds itself taken over. This **'take-over'** of the soul by God then occurs in the other two faculties; first the **intellect** followed by the **memory**. Finally God introduces Himself into the **imagination**, an **internal sense** along with the **appetites**, and then the **external senses**.

According to the psychological point of view of Teresa, the different degrees of participation of the faculties of the soul

(will, intellect, memory) reflect the degrees of **mystical union**. This union is initially **partial** and **transitory** tending to become **total** and **definitive** as one overcomes the different challenges necessary to experience **transformation** of the soul into God.

The **simple meetings** (fifth house) are followed by the **'engagement period'** (sixth house) and finally by **'spiritual marriage'** which is the symbol of **perfect mystical union of the soul with God**.

The **transition** from one house to the next is not clear-cut. The **advancement** on the spiritual path is often marked by two steps forward and one-step back. The progressive **divinization**, or the becoming divine of the soul, implies a free and total **commitment**, a heroic **loyalty** and an ardent **charity**.

Teresa points out that **mystical graces** are **not** necessary to reach **perfection** and that it is important not to confuse the two.

However, she does recognize the **considerable help** these **graces** bring to the **increase in charity**, to the **practice** of all the **virtues**, to the service of the **Church** and to **facing** the innumerable sufferings and **difficulties** that characteristically befall these favored souls.

We are allowed to aspire to drink from the source of living water, which is **mystical contemplation**. To not believe that it is possible is to ensure that we will never receive it: **"Those who do not believe will not have this experience because it is important for God that we do not limit His works.** (IC 1) However, it is a pure **gift** from God, a strictly supernatural gift. (IC 4) **I believe that the first prayer experience I had was supernatural. What I mean by this is that it is something we cannot**

acquire ourselves through our own effort no matter how hard we try. (Spiritual Testimonies 7). We also need to be careful not to insist that God grant us this experience; that would be hoping the **frog would fly of his own effort.** (Life chp. 22) We can **prepare ourselves** to receive the gift through **humility**, a **pure conscience**, and the **gift of self** in the **service of others** which is the basic principle of **Teresian asceticism.**

God only **gives Himself completely to us when we give ourselves completely to Him.** (IC 4, 3) What is important is to **submit ourselves** to His **will. He gives His gifts that belong to Him when He wants, as He wants and to whom He wants without harming anyone.** (IC 4, 1) It is certain that God does not lead us all by the same path.

It is important to carefully **distinguish** the ‘**soul to soul**’ divine communication, which makes up the **core** of the mystical state from the **secondary** and **accessory** effects, which are a result of this state. These **effects** are composed of extraordinary **psychological** and **somatic** phenomena.

An initial series of extraordinary effects can be grouped under the generic term ‘**ecstasy.**’ Teresa also uses the terms **rapture, elevation, flight of the spirit, of abduction, of transport, of suspension.** This variable vocabulary allows Teresa to underline either the functional or occasional, psychological or the theological differences either in intensity or length, but it is always about the **one and the same supernatural reality.** The experience of ecstasy is caused by the generally brief irruption of divine light and love in to the spiritual faculties (will,

intellect, memory). Energy from these irruptions is completely being used in this intense supernatural activity so the other functions (of adapting, of control and of integration) are slowed down or as if suspended: **the soul pulls itself away from all other activities that it can have, all the while remaining in the body.** (IC 5 1) Ecstasy is a weakness of the being imperfectly transformed into God. The superior spiritual unity of the body and soul is not yet established. When **harmony** is attained in the perfect union of “**spiritual marriage,**” **ecstasy** is a **rare** occurrence and even **disappears.** (IC 7 3) The divine communication no longer takes over the soul by abstracting it from the exterior world and causing painful effects.

Teresa came to see **ecstasy** as a definite part of the **path of mystical union.** She also understood that it can be given by God in His mercy to a totally imperfect soul to bring about **conversion.**

It is sometimes accompanied by other secondary and accidental aspects involving the body: **levitation; catalepsy** (or seizures); **loss of feeling.** This is how **divine communication** experienced in the **soul is manifested in the body.**

These extraordinary phenomena can actually put one’s **life in danger.** They generally compromise one’s health but can also improve it. Pathological manifestation can also appear. Teresa spoke of noise in her head. (IC 4 1) Of course we do not become a mystic if we have a nervous condition, but an authentic mystical life can bring about a weakened nervous system.

Visions, interior words and revelations are in fact not a part of path to mystical union.

They are experienced by certain people to strengthen them while going through **intolerable** tests for the glory of God. (IC 6 II) We can be sure of their authenticity by the lasting and benevolent effects. Whether we want to reject them or minimize their importance, they always produce the desired result.

False mystical states resulting either from a nervous illness, the imagination or a natural weakness are recognizable by their duration, their lack of doctrinal content and effectiveness along with the state of dullness they provoke. (IC 4 3)

As much as it is good and legitimate to desire the gift of mystical contemplation, it is however, not advised that we seek after the other extraordinary graces. Teresa believes ... we need to avoid seeking these favors and she adds: **Believe me, the surest way is to want only what God wants, as He knows us better than we know ourselves, and He loves us. Let us place ourselves in His hands so that His will is fulfilled in us.** Amen