

Cautions about a form of Spiritual Absorption (Swoon)

(Ch.6)

The Book of her Foundations

by Teresa of Avila

Warns about the harm that can be done to Spiritual People if they do not understand when the Spirit must be resisted. Treats of the soul's desires to receive Communion and of the Delusion that can be present in such desires. There are important things here for those who govern these houses.

I have tried to understand the origin of **absorption (swoon)** I have seen in some who the Lord **favors in prayer** and who strive to prepare themselves to receive these favors.

I am not dealing here with the soul's **suspension or rapture given by His Majesty**. In rapture, the power that takes away our power to control ourselves, lasts but a short while. But, frequently a **form of prayer of quiet** begins, resembling **spiritual sleep**, that **absorbs the soul**. If we do not know what to do, a lot of time could be lost.

2. It is so difficult to explain ... Let me say that I know souls of great virtue who remained seven or eight hours in **absorption**. To them, everything **seems like rapture** ... but they soon abandoned themselves to the absorption, thinking it not good to resist the Lord. Slowly such persons can die or become fools if they do not seek a remedy.

Since the Lord seems to give **delight** that we are very fond of, the soul gets so lost in the pleasure that it does not want to **stir or lose anything of the experience**. Indeed, the pleasure is greater than any of the world's pleasures. And, when the experience happens in a **weak soul** or in one's **imagination**, nature will make souls know a thousand **delightful lies**. In this absorption, the imagination **concentrates on one thing** without becoming distracted ...

3. This experience happens to those with **melancholy** (depression) and those who do excessive penance. When love begins to give pleasure to the senses, these persons allow themselves to be carried away.

This condition can easily be resisted. The strength of the spirit takes hold of nature,

and when this soul is weak, it becomes **subjected**.

4. You could ask me what the **difference** there is between **rapture and absorption** since the **two are the same** — at least in **appearance but not in reality**.

In **rapture**, or union of the faculties (intellect, memory, will), the duration is **short** but the effects are great. Interior lights are given. The intellect does not work; it is the **Lord who works in the will**.

In **absorption**, the **body is captive**, but **not the will, intellect or memory**. These faculties are able to carry on their delirious activity. If they do rest in something, they go back and forth with ifs and buts.

5. Other than it arises from a good source, I see no benefit in this bodily weakness. More is gained by making an **act of love** and **awakening the will to greater love of God** than by leaving it **listless**.

I counsel the prioresses to make every possible effort to prevent the nuns from spending long hours in this **daze that cripples the faculties** and then do not carry out the soul's commands.

If the **absorption** is understood to be caused by **weakness**, take away the fasts and the extra disciplines, and give them duties that will distract them.

6. Even if one does not experience these **swoons**, this action is still needed if the **imagination** is occupied with sublime things of prayer.

Sometimes these people are really not in control of themselves. If the Lord has favored them or they have seen a vision, they will think the vision continues, but it is not so.

Whoever remains in this absorption several days should change the subject of their meditation. If it relates to God, there will be no difficulty in dwelling on another subject since the faculties are still occupied in God....

7. O hapless human misery left in this condition through sin. In all things we need measure in order not to ruin our health ... If one follows this advice, one serves our Lord more.

If a nun finds that a mystery of the Passion or the glory of heaven enters her mind, remains there many days and she is not able to think of something else, let her know she is to distract herself as best she can... If not

she will undergo **harm**. This **absorption** stems from **bodily weakness** or from the **imagination**.

Even if the absorption is delightful madness—or if she has melancholy (depression) --- it can do her great harm...

8. These matters are very **delicate** ... It is very important to understand this chapter well ... especially the prioresses and the mistresses of novices who guide the Sisters in prayer. The Sisters will come to see that if they do not walk carefully in the beginning, much time will be required to remedy similar weaknesses.

9. Let me give one example that will illustrate the subject well.

In a monastery, there is a choir nun and a lay Sister, both most prayerful and virtuous, much favored by the Lord.

When they began to experience great irresistible impulses of desire for the Lord mitigated when receiving Communion... Their affliction increased so much that if they didn't receive Communion, it seemed to them they would die. The confessors saw Communion as a suitable remedy.

10. The matter didn't stop there however. In the case of one of the nuns, her longings were so great she needed Communion early in the morning... the prioress wrote to me that she could not get anywhere with them. By the grace of God, I understood the situation but remained silent until I could go there....

11. The confessor was so humble that he at once agreed with me when I finally went there and was able to speak to him. I spoke to the nuns and told them that it was their **imagination**s that made them feel they would die without Communion and that I too had such desires and would forego Communion as well ... and that all three of us would die. It seemed the best solution to avoid a custom like this in these houses.

12. The harm the custom had caused was extreme. They were convinced that if they didn't receive Communion they would die. I was severe, as I noted that they weren't submitting themselves to obedience, because **they felt they couldn't**. I was able to see their desire was a **temptation**. It was initially difficult for them but decreased over time...

13. With time, all saw that this had been nothing but a **temptation**. They did realize

how good it had been to **remedy** the situation in time ...

14. Let me mention **one other story**. It happened in a monastery of Bernardines. A virtuous nun, through disciplines and fasting, became so weak when she received Communion or was enkindled in devotion that she would immediately fall to the floor and remain there eight or nine hours.

Everyone, including herself, felt she was experiencing a **rapture**. Had a remedy not been provided, much harm would have resulted.

Her confessor, a good friend of mine, told me about it. I told him that the **absorption** was a **waste of time**; it was the result of weakness. As a solution, I suggested they remove the fasts, disciplines and distract her. She obediently did as he said. As she began to gain strength there was no more talk of rapture.

If it had been a rapture, nothing could have prevented it except God's will. As I said a **rapture leaves great effects in the soul** while absorption only leaves the **body tired**.

15. Anything that controls us to a point that **our reason is not free**, should be held as **suspect**. Freedom of spirit is never gained this way. One of the traits of reason is that it can find God in all things and be able to think about them. All the rest is enslavement of the spirit where body and soul are harmed. It is as if the soul entered a swamp and can't get out; to advance it must not only walk but fly. This immobility happens often when a soul feels immersed in the divine and cannot find a remedy because they are suspended.

16. It is not unusual for a weak person to remain stunned for several days. Beyond this, a remedy is necessary.

The good in all this is that there is no sinful fault, but there are difficulties ... It is necessary that souls mortify themselves and come to understand that **refraining from doing one's will** is more fitting than the **experience of consolation**.

17. Our self-love can get mixed in with these experiences ... It has happened to me too that I wanted my own satisfaction more than the love of God. I simply wanted a consolation, a comfort.

18. There was a woman, a great servant of God, in a town where we had a monastery. She received Communion daily but at different churches. She didn't have a

confessor. I personally felt it more important for her to have a confessor than to receive Communion daily but she paid no attention to me...

19. This servant of God fell ill with a fatal illness and so arranged for daily Mass to be said in her house.

The sickness continued and the priest who often said Mass for her didn't think it proper for her to be receiving Communion daily in her house. She died the day he told her that. As the Mass was ending and she had been deprived of the Lord, she became very angry with the priest who told me about it. She died soon afterwards.

20. This incident allowed me to see **the harm done by following our own will.**

Those who approach our Lord so frequently should grasp their unworthiness and refuse to follow their own opinion...

This good soul had the chance to humble herself and so would have merited more from Communion **she didn't.**

The priest was not at fault, it was our Lord, seeing her misery and how unworthy she was, who spoke about entering so wretched a lodging.

This is what **another person** did whose confessor refused to allow her to receive Communion. She felt the loss deeply but wanted to honor God more than herself. She saw the hand of the Lord acting in the confessor by not letting Him enter so **wretched a lodging.**

She obeyed with a deep calm in her soul, although with pain. She would never have gone against what was commanded her.

21. A **love of God** that so stirs the passions that one ends up offending God or so alters the enamored soul's peace, is in fact nothing but **self-seeking**...

22. Concerning this matter, let the prioresses be warned and let the Sisters fear, reflect and examine themselves on how they approach to receive such a great favor.

If they approach to please God they already know He is more pleased by **obedience** than by **sacrifice.**

Well, if this is true, why am I disturbed?

They may be left with a **humble distress** ...

But if the will is very **detached** from all self-interest, it will not feel anything. Rather it will rejoice to be offered a chance to please the Lord in something so costly. It will

humble itself and be satisfied to make **spiritual communion.**

23. In the beginning, and the end, of the spiritual life, these desires to approach the Lord are granted by God.

As for perfection, the beginner is not so advanced, but at the time of Communion they may feel tenderness and feel pain when communion is taken from them, provided the pain is borne with peace of soul and acts of humility result.

When the soul is disturbed, passionate or becomes angry with the prioress or confessor, they should believe that their desire to receive is only a **temptation.** The same is true for someone who decides to receive Communion against the will of the confessor. We must not be the judge of our own case.

That we might have understanding in things so important, may it please the Lord to give us light; and may His help not fail lest we cause Him displeasure through the favors He grants us. Amen