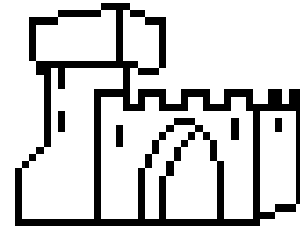


THE FIRST MANSION

by Father Gabriel Barry, O.C.D.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is not easy to speak about Christian prayer. Like all the basic things of life, it is something eminently simple and beautiful, and to analyze it or subdivide, tends to obscure this fact. Even St. Teresa, great authority though she was, reacted strongly when asked to write about prayer. In very first page of the *Interior Castle*, we read: “Few tasks which I have been given have been so difficult for me as this present one of writing about things related to prayer.”¹



In spite of the high degree of inner maturity she had attained, she was reluctant to write about these matters of the spirit, more especially when there was a question of communicating them to others. She knew that, try as she may, she could never be entirely successful. Some of the human heritage of sin was bound to show through what she would write. Also, like all of God’s good servants, she felt no urge at all to tell “the secrets of the King.” Quite rightly, she distrusted any kind of undue eagerness to speak of God’s special favors. But she also knew that the power of God was working through her, that truth and light and goodness would come from Christ and flow on to the pages of her book.

With that in mind, she set aside her hesitance, and did what her superiors had asked. The result was *Interior Castle*, one of the great classics of spiritual writing. It presents the interior life of man in terms of a castle made out of single diamond, comprising seven courts or mansions. The beauty of this castle is unsurpassable and resplendent; it is a veritable pearl of the orient.

One after another, St. Teresa leads us through the inner rooms of this wondrous palace, until we reach the last mansion where the King of Glory dwells. God’s life and light are felt throughout the entire castle, but his abode is in the deep center, at the very heart of reality. For in truth, God is the foundation of all reality, and His splendor pervades it all.

St. Teresa uses all the powers of her virile, luminous mind to describe the various mansions of the castle. Each one represents a stage of perfection and virtuous endeavor to draw closer to God. Each one, too, has its own special characteristics. But this sevenfold division is not meant to be understood in a materialistic sense, as if there were seven clean cut compartments arranged one after another, and once we had passed through any of them, we leave it behind forever. This is not what St. Teresa meant. We ought to think of it more in progressive terms of expanding

¹prologue Peers: p.199

growth, as St. Teresa herself indicates when she uses the imagery of the tree or palmito.² Right through the full range of the spiritual life, there is a consistent growth in maturity and depth.

For example, those in the First Mansion are largely at the stage of repentance, the stage of those called by Christ to metanoia and a new way of life. They have found God; they are returning to him, like the prodigal son, after having eaten the food of swine.³ They are striving to consolidate their relationship with Him by practicing self-denial, and by building up habits of prayer and virtuous living. But obviously, this attitude, though characteristic of the First Mansion, does not end there. It continues throughout all the mansions. Rather I should say, it is caught up in the characteristics of the Second Mansion, in a gradual process of deepening and transforming. Later on, the Third Mansion supervenes to take in the other two, making them more solid, more balanced and better related to divine love. And so on through the others.

This conference is confined to discussing the first Mansion. I propose to refer to a few of St. Teresa's statements. But it would be well to read all she has written in the two chapters that comprise this Mansion, as well as what she has to say in her *Autobiography* concerning *First Water*.⁴ These are supplemented by many chapters in the *Way of Perfection*, which is full of practical advice.

II. PRAYER

But before going on, let us revert for a moment to the subject of Prayer. Petition is the basic human prayer. At one and the same time, it is a call for help and a cry of praise, welling up from the soul of man. It is also our way of cooperating with God, asking Him to do what we could never do of our own unaided strength. The prayer of petition, then, at least implicitly, is an act of trust and faith, and contains some amount of incipient love. Christ Himself, has taught us to use it in the *Our Father*, "a prayer that included all we need, both spiritual and temporal."⁵

However, prayer does not consist in petition alone. Having in some measure got to know who God is, it is natural for us to want to deepen that acquaintance. This brings about another attitude of mind, which can best be expressed as a "search" for God. St. John of the Cross speaks of this in the magnificent poems, *The Dark Night* and the *Spiritual Canticle*. For example:

On a dark night
Kindled in love with yearnings
—O happy chance—
I went forth without being observed,
My house being now at rest.

²Peers, pp. 205, 207

³cf. Peers p. 215

⁴Peers, Vol I pp. 62 foll.

⁵St. John of the Cross: Ascent 3. 44. par. 4

This “searching” for God causes another manner of prayer to come into prominence. It is known by various names: interior prayer, silent prayer, meditation, mental prayer. It is not a distinct kind from petition, which may in fact be expressed in a non verbal way. But this inner form of prayer rises above both words and mere petitions. It concentrates on the more spiritual aspects of man’s reaching out for God. But it never ceases to be an acknowledgment of our condition as creatures, recognizing who God is, who we are, and our continual need for God. At least implicitly, the element of petition remains. St. Teresa’s commentary on the *Our Father* which concludes the *Way of Perfection* shows clearly that the seven basic petitions which our Lord taught us, can lead even to the heights of mystical prayer. All authentic prayer is ultimately fashioned from the stuff of faith, trust and love.

III. SPIRITUAL GROWTH

At one end of the scale, then, is man, created and finite, with his great endowments, his many limitations, his achievements and failures. At the other end is God, the Uncreated, the Infinite, the All-loving and All-wise. He has made man to His own image, and He wants man to pray. This means that He wants man to draw near to Himself, to wait for Him in loving patience, to commit himself to Him in love. That is how we learn to be worthy both of God and of the nature He has given us. Striving to know God is not just a vain or futile impulse on the part of man. God Himself has planted it in the deep heart’s core, for eternal life consists in knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent.⁶ The longing for the infinite is part of man’s very being. If there were no original sin, his entire life would have been an uninterrupted and ever-deepening communion with God. He would live in His abiding presence, as did our parents in paradise. Prayer is one of the principal means of bringing a gradual restoration of that happy condition.

However, in our present state, there can be no direct and immediate contact between the finite creature and the Infinite God. Just as the blazing light of the sun has to be toned down to be adapted to the human eye, so too, the Light that is God has to be attuned to the human spirit and the medium by which this is done is faith, “the proportionate means of communion with God.” In order that these two extremes be united, namely the soul and Divine Wisdom, it will be necessary for them to attain to agreement, by means of a certain mutual resemblance. It follows that the soul must be simple and pure—Not that God would not give spiritual wisdom all at once if the two extremes, which are human and divine, sense and spirit could concur and unite in one act without the intervention of many other acts.⁷ This means that a gradual rapprochement takes place. God takes the first step by his grace, then man responds, and so on until man and God meet in the Beatific Vision of eternal glory. Progress in prayer is an ever deepening experience of Him who comes closer and closer to us. We, on our part, open up more and more to receive Him, and as St. Augustine has pointed out this capacity is the greatest gift we have.

⁶John 17.3

⁷Ascent of Mount Carmel II. 16.7:17.4

It will be obvious that various stages of growth or illumination can be distinguished in the movement of the soul toward God. Spiritual writers have made many distinctions, approaching the question from different points of view. In these conferences however, we mean to comment mainly on St. Teresa's seven fold scale in the *Interior Castle*, she describes seven steps or stages that can be detected in spiritual growth, from the time when the soul turns to God in repentance, right up to the time when she is transformed into Christ in love. This division is based on the experience or reaction of the human spirit in relation to God. At one stage man's own efforts are most in evidence; later one becomes more conscious to God's work. But as I have already indicated, there is a real continuity from beginning to end, and the essential elements which constitute Christian prayer are presented from the outset.

IV. IN THE FIRST MANSION

The First Mansion is inhabited by men and women whom God has began to draw to Himself from the life of lukewarm Christian living or worldliness. They belong to the class, mentioned in the first conference, Who are not without certain good convictions, but who rarely pray. "They are very much absorbed in worldly affairs," writes St. Teresa, "but their desires are good. Sometimes, though infrequently, they commend themselves to the Lord; and they think about the state of their souls, though not very carefully. Full of a thousand preoccupations as they are they pray only a few times a month, and as a rule they are thinking all the time of their preoccupations, for they are very much attached to them and where their treasure is, there is their heart also. From time to time however, they shake their minds free of them....Eventually, they entered the first room of the floor. They have done a great deal by entering at all."⁸

In one way or another God attracts persons of this kind to Himself. This experience is what the Bible calls, "the revealing of the sin." God implores them to return to Him, to change their hearts, to mend their ways, to renew their minds. He gives them the light to perceive the reality of sin, a deliberate spurning of our Creator's love, a choice of darkness in preference to light. And truly as St. Teresa says, "no thicker darkness exists than sin; there are things gloomy or black, but this is much more so."⁹ By contrast human words cannot describe the singular loveliness of a soul in grace. It is a paradise in which God takes delight, a spiritual castle, all crystal clear with brightness. "We can hardly form any adequate conception of the soul's great dignity and beauty."¹⁰ This is what is brought home to those who are in the process of returning to God. They develop a deep supernatural "sense of sin," and a great appreciation for the things of God.

One of the most obvious effects of this divine intervention is the growth of that gift of the Holy Spirit, which we call "the fear of Lord." This holy fear is characteristic of the First Mansion. It consists in a deep reverence for the greatness of God, wonderment at His power and a concern lest we might lose Him through our own fault. It shows itself in a hundred different ways such as

⁸*Interior Castle I 1.* p.204 ed. Peers

⁹ibid p.205

¹⁰ibid. p. 201

care in avoiding sin, cutting down on self indulgences, experiencing deep sorrow for infidelities, even for small ones. It makes one fear to offend our Father in heaven, because He is so good. St. John the Evangelist says that in the beginning this fear “expects punishment,” but as it matures, it becomes more perfect, for in the love there can be no fear. Servile fear is driven out by perfect love.¹¹ In other words, filial love and reverence become one, “making peace and perfect health to flourish, and enlarging the rejoicing of those that love God.”

However, these wholesome effects cannot be expected all at once. In the First Mansion, the note of vigilance is still much in evidence, lest, as our Lord says, our hearts become coarsened by the cares of this life.¹² He is a wise man who fears evil and keeps away from it.¹³

The First Mansion likewise brings a big increase in the knowledge of oneself. This is but another name for incipient humility, which is not the same thing as introspection, though it may well begin with reflection on one self, together with ones manner of acting and motivation. Genuine humility does not make one self-centered; rather, it relates one to God. It enables us to see ourselves as we stand before Him. We were made to the image of the Creator, with all that this implies in terms of living a God-like way of life. But unfortunately we are capable of sinking to the depths of moral degradation, black and foul and evil smelling.¹⁴ And when this happens we should not be surprised at the dire consequences; rather it is a wonder those in sin don't do worse.¹⁵

True humility gives us the right insights into God and ourselves, into the meaning of good and evil; and its value is permanent, even for those whom the Lord keeps in the higher mansions where He Himself dwells. For no matter where one may climb on the latter of prayer, self-knowledge is always indispensable. In fact, it cannot be overlooked if prayer is genuine because it grows spontaneously as one draws near to God.¹⁶ It is the natural consequence of reflecting on His greatness and majesty. We come to understand what we are, far better than by thinking about ourselves. Self-examination is alright in its own place, but one can have too much of a good thing. “And believe me”, St. Teresa continues, “we shall reach much greater heights of virtue by thinking upon the goodness of God than if we stay in our own little plot of ground, and tie ourselves down to it completely.”¹⁷

All this is characteristic of the First Mansion. And although it is only a beginning, it contains, as St. Teresa points out, riches of great price and vast expanses of heavenly mansions. Undoubtedly, she was thinking of our Lord's words “There are many rooms in my Father's house.” And whoever is with God, is in His House, even though we may not yet see Him in the clear vision of

¹¹ John 4:18

¹² Luke 21:34

¹³ Proverbs 14:16

¹⁴ Interior. Castle I. 2. p.206

¹⁵ Interior. Castle II. p.206

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 208

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 209

eternity. In God's Church on earth too, there is room for all kinds of people. The only condition for their admission to the castle of prayer is that they be truly sorry for their sins and resolved from now on to turn to God. This is indeed a paschal liberation, a freedom from the slavery of sin. This is the Spirit which inspires the many psalms which celebrate the great deeds of God's salvation. "I called to the Lord in my distress; He answered me, and set me free."¹⁸ Those in the First Mansion experience a real taste of this freedom. And though it is as yet only a pale foreshadowing of what is to come, St. Teresa wishes them to avail of it. "You must not think of these rooms as just a few, but as a million."¹⁹ This freedom of spirit has to be fostered right from the beginning. It is part of the power that we receive in baptism to act in the right way.²⁰ This is a precious grace, but a costly one to buy. It eventually substitutes the law of Love for outward laws, but sets no limits to what one ought to do. The love's law is the most demanding of all.

But in the beginning, "the light from the palace occupied by the King hardly reaches these outer mansions at all."²¹ St. Teresa struggles to explain this. "There is actually plenty of divine light even in this The First Mansion, she says, but those who are in it are often so absorbed in possessions or attachments or business or selfish pursuits that they so not perceive it. It is like entering a place bathed in sunlight, but with eyes so full of dust that one can hardly open them."²² For this reason, those in the First Mansion are not all safe from relapsing. Indeed this is one of the places where our Lord's exhortation to vigilance is particularly relevant. Likewise, one who wishes to move ahead will be well advised, as far as his state permits, to put aside all unnecessary affairs and business."²³ This is the beginning of the journey on the long narrow road that leads to life. It is a time when the devil and human weakness do their utmost to discourage those who are trying to move ahead, a time when we must in all sincerity pray that petition of the Our Father, "Do not allow us to be led into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." On this theme, St. Teresa has much to say, both in describing Mansion I and the others that constitute the Castle of Prayer. For the Evil one is like a noiseless file "who works secretly to undo all the fabric of virtue."²⁴ We must therefore earnestly beg God to be delivered from his wiles.²⁵

All this finds expression in prayer. If we keep in mind that prayer is a lone watching for God, a reaching out after him, a heartfelt petition to Him for the help we need, and which can be found nowhere else, then we readily see that the experiences of the first mansion constrain one to pray. Failure alternating with constant search for what is good, and the counter-attraction of evil, the realization that "true perfection consists in the love of God and our neighbor," and that we must keep aiming at this goal right to the very end of the road,²⁶ all this brings us to our knees to ask

¹⁸Ps. 115.5

¹⁹Interior Castle II. p. 208

²⁰Gal. 4: Romans 8: etc.

²¹Interior Castle II. p. 210

²²pp. 210-211

²³ibid p.211

²⁴*Life* 31. p. 213: Interior Castle 1.2: p.211

²⁵*Way of Perfection* 38-42 pp. 168 foll.

²⁶ibid p.212

for strength from on High. In this The First Mansion, prayer itself takes on a characteristic shape. Our next conference on The Second Mansion will try to outline what it is.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Please refer to the OCDS *Rule of Life*, Foreword and Articles 1 through 8.
2. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Peers and/or ICS edition.
3. For those who would like to pursue further, here is a short list of books, if they are available:
 - a. Saint John of the Cross: *Ascent and Dark Night*, also *Living Flame*, stz. III.
 - b. Poulain, A.: *Graces of Interior Prayer*.
 - c. Farges, A.: *Mystical Phenomena*.
 - d. Watkin, E.: *Philosophy of Mysticism*.
 - e. Butler, C.: *Western Mysticism*.
 - f. Grandmaison, L.: *Personal Religion*.
 - g. Knowles, D.: *What is Mysticism?*
 - h. Underhill, E.: *Mysticism*.
 - i. O'Brien, E.: *Varieties of Mystical Experience*.
 - j. Lossky, V.: *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*.
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