

# AT THE CENTER OF THE SOUL<sup>1</sup>

## A Commentary on the Sixth and Seventh Mansions of St. Teresa<sup>2</sup>

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From earliest Christian times, one of the characteristics of people dedicated to lives of asceticism and recollection has been their undefinable mystical experiences, very often including intimate and mysterious phenomena. The privileged persons who have had such experiences all agree with regard to the intense, unnatural joy involved, but are equally adamant in declaring that it is practically impossible to describe similar experiences in detail.



And in fact, reading the works of these "mystical souls," we appreciate the impossibility of an adequate description of their experiences of the ineffable and divine, the profound raptures of their souls, their practical possession and vision of God. One factor, however, is quite evident: the attainment of such a loving knowledge and union with God, where the soul practically feels one with Him, is the result of a continuous series of Divine graces, of self renunciation and endless generosity.

### Our Journey Towards the Soul's Center

In an increasingly, we might say, impassioned journey, St. Teresa leads us through the mansions of our souls—through the various levels of our consciousness, modern students would say—which lead to the central mansion where God Himself dwells. She teaches us that prayer is the vital key that allows us to enter this enchanted castle, exposing the soul to the Divine Sun and gradually leading it from preoccupations with worldly affairs to the thresholds of divine intimacy in the seventh mansions.<sup>3</sup>

According to St. Teresa, the normal process leading to total union with God progresses from stages of simple meditation, made with good will and perseverance, to a state of continual active recollection which, in turn, brings the soul to the prayer of quiet. This eventual state of union with God occurs at the "fount of living water," issuing from the wedding chambers of the Castle. We may arrive there, not so much due to ascetical practices, but rather thanks to entirely gratuitous gifts of God.

Once granted the gift of the prayer of quiet, Teresa tells us in *The Way of Perfection*, the soul enters decisively into the sphere of the supernatural, in the world of contemplative prayer. Here, God treats the soul as He wills, drawing all its energies to Himself, illuminating it with supernatural light and ardor. Ordinary human activities, although not suppressed, are transferred to a totally higher level of mystical life and experiences. From the combination of man accepting the gift of love, and God offering Himself to man so completely, we might say that a new existential structure is created where man understands and judges with an entirely new perspective.

The divine "invasion" begins in man's will, the faculty that has love as its object and directs the other human faculties. From here, God's activity radiates to all the other faculties, reducing them to a state of complete passivity in the prayer of simple union. This initial full experience of God will be of very brief duration: the prelude to another more perfect one—similar to the first really close encounter with a future spouse.

When granted the gift of ecstatic prayer, an intermingling of suffering and intense joy, the soul receives the vision of a completely new world with divine horizons. It enters this world step by step until being enveloped in a flame of love and pain at the threshold of the seventh mansions, the terminal of this interior journey.

This is full, but still a transitory, union—the mystical betrothal, not marriage, of the soul with the Christ-God. The will, intellect and memory, enraptured by Him, have no further time for anything beyond the Divine Beloved; the

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from the Italian by Rev. Sean Conlon, O.C.D. of the Teresianum, Rome, Italy.

<sup>3</sup> Please note that St. Teresa refers indiscriminately to the soul as "it" or "her." We follow the translations as we find them. Again she writes of the sixth or seventh Mansion-at other times of the sixth or seventh Mansions. In all cases, our translation follows the original source.

entire substance of the soul is absorbed in loving and the lower faculties become more docile to the Spirit. While experiencing such ecstatic prayer the soul can sometimes spend entire days under the spell of this love, with other periods of a kind of "divine folly": "Such a soul would gladly have a thousand lives so as to use them all for God, and it would like everything on earth to be a tongue so that it might praise Him" (*Interior Castle*, VI,4,14-15).<sup>4</sup> And after this experience the soul must suffer intense purifying pains of love as a final preparation for transforming union.

### **Final Purifications**

The grace of the mystical union of the sixth mansions that allows a glimpse of the hidden beauty of God's own life, confers on the soul an immense capacity for love, although still leaving it lull of burning desires and indescribable anguish. The ever-increasing desire to see and possess God, God and nothing else, becomes sheer torment.

The soul at this stage has renounced everything for God; left aside every semblance of worldly attachment. Transformed by love, self-sacrifice and suffering, the soul seeks God alone but finds that He seems to keep withdrawing from it: "The more she learns about the greatness of God," writes the Saint, "while finding herself so far from Him and unable to enjoy Him, the more her desire increases" (*Interior Castle*, VI,11,1). The more the soul learns just how much this great God and Lord deserves to be loved, so much more does her love for Him grow: "And gradually, her desire increases, so that she experiences great distress, which cannot be surpassed by any such things on earth..." "the soul feels at such a point of destruction that she dies with a desire to die. The torments of which I speak are not physical, but afflict the most intimate center of the soul." The soul, accordingly, suffers from "a strange solitude," suspended between heaven and earth with a burning thirst that forces it towards the only fountain that can slake it.

St. John of the Cross writes along the same lines. This divine flame reveals the soul's unlimited capacity for loving—while simultaneously it experiences its emptiness and yearning—"an experience worse than death" (*Living Flame*, III,18). These extraordinary graces automatically eliminate any bad habits that might still remain despite the soul's mystical experiences. It is at this stage of the spiritual life that the soul's purification is completed and it is prepared for the total mystical union of the seventh mansions (*Interior Castle*, VI,11,2).

St. Teresa compares the intense sufferings at this stage of the soul's development to the pains of Purgatory: a period of intense suffering, granted, but also one of hope and peaceful awaiting, where Love wounds and consumes, but only with a view to purification and transformation into closer unity (*Interior Castle*, VI,11,3 and 6). St. John of the Cross writes in a similar vein. Souls at this stage of contemplation will never go to Purgatory, he holds, or, if so, it would be for a very brief spell, because one hour of similar suffering here on earth is worth more than many hours in Purgatory (*Dark Night*, II,6,6; 20,5).

God's process of gradual purification, again St. Teresa points out, is by no means totally negative or, as she says, "darkness." During the darkness the soul receives all kinds of divine favors and illumination. It will be made much more aware of an overpowering divine presence that gives it security, equilibrium, courage and immense strength. She explains it as follows: "This is a distressing thing but it produces the most wonderful effects and the soul at once loses its fear of any trials which may befall it.... The soul has far more contempt for the world than it had Previously, because it sees that it can be comforted and satisfied only by the Creator" (*Interior Castle*, VI,11,10-11; cf. also *Dark Night*, 11,17,7).

These illuminations-cum-suffering are essential, so that the soul may become fully aware of the riches that this "bittersweet" love has granted it and will take full advantage of them, abandoning itself totally to God's action. These present gifts are only a foretaste of more extraordinary ones to come. "Ah, God help us, how you afflict your lovers! Yet all this is very little by comparison with what you bestow upon them later. It is well that great things should cost a great deal...and if the soul is purified its sufferings are no more than a drop of water in the sea...the

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<sup>4</sup>All direct quotes from the works of St. Teresa have been taken from the *Interior Castle*, tr. and ed. by E. Allison Peers, Garden City, NY: Doubleday (Image), 1961. [Note: this English language translation varies from that of the ICS Collected Works vol. 2.]

anguish is of such a kind that nothing can relieve it; nonetheless, the soul suffers it very gladly, and, if God so willed, would suffer it all its life long" (*Interior Castle*, VI,11,6).

### **The Soul's Paradise**

The soul's journey towards total union with God is approaching its climax. The loving flame gradually, joyfully becomes a transforming and permanent union; originally restless and anxious, it is now profound and peaceful. "When our Lord is pleased to have pity upon this soul, which suffers and has suffered so much out of desire for Him, and which He has now taken spiritually to be His Bride, He brings her into this Mansion of His, which is the seventh, before consummating the Spiritual Marriage" (*Interior Castle*, VII,1,3). We are now entering the world of God—the highest mansions of this diaphanous castle, representing the ultimate in mystical prayer and an immediate preparation for the Beatific Vision.

To understand properly the intimacy enjoyed in the seventh mansions, we must keep in mind the whole Castle-allegory adopted by the Saint. "We must not consider the soul now," she writes, "as mean and insignificant, for each is an interior world, wherein are the many and beautiful Mansions" (*Interior Castle*, VII,1,5). "In speaking of the soul we must always think of it as spacious, ample and lofty; and this can be done without the least exaggeration, for the soul's capacity is much greater than we can realize.... Fix your attention on the center, the room or palace occupied by the King" (*Interior Castle*, I,2,7).

While in the other mansions, the faculties, senses and passions remain free agents, here in the seventh mansions—this "center" of our soul or "spirit"—God alone rules. "A king is living in His palace" (cf. *Interior Castle*, VII,2,10-11). Should a soul that has reached this point in the spiritual life try to be self-sufficient, it will return to a state of auto-independence. With normal graces it may still remain in any of the first three mansions. But, on its own, it would be impossible to progress any further. God alone, by means of most extra-ordinary graces, can introduce it to the fourth, fifth or sixth mansions.

In the fourth mansions (prayer of quiet), divine intervention is at a minimum and does not interfere too much with the human faculties. Rather, it simply corresponds with their innate longing for God and allows them quite a lot of personal freedom and initiative in their search for union with Him. In the fifth and sixth mansions, on the other hand, (prayer of simple union and ecstasy), the soul is totally overwhelmed and rendered completely passive by God's intervention. "God now visits the soul" personally and prepares it for Spiritual Marriage.

God, however, does not operate on His own in these intimate, mysterious contacts. The senses and the faculties, writes the Saint, still serve as "intermediaries" (*Interior Castle*, VII,2,3). They open the floodgates and provide occasions for visits and revelations. Although in a minor key, they are still necessary go-betweens at this stage, in the soul's search for total union with God.

In the seventh mansions, however, St. Teresa emphasizes: "God Himself dwells, and I do not think there is any need of a door by which to enter" (*Interior Castle*, VII,2,3). At this stage her teaching is very precise. Whereas in the fourth, fifth and sixth mansions it is rather God that seeks the soul, in the seventh mansions it is the soul, now completely recollected in itself, that enters God's dwelling. But this extraordinary meeting of the soul with God in the same seventh mansions can only take place when the soul is totally detached from itself and from all created things.

God alone exists here and invites only souls who have proved themselves faithful in this incredible type of interior martyrdom, to dwell with Him. The gift of Baptism has already prepared a type of heaven in each soul—a dwelling place for the Blessed Trinity. But now it is natural that this special gift of knowing, loving and fully appreciating participation in His personal nature should be reserved by God to the center of our souls. Naturally the majority of us cannot fathom this direct communication between God and the soul, as we have not been granted these particular graces.

The privileged souls who do arrive at the center of the mansions, enjoy the actual presence of God Himself. They must make extra-special efforts at this point to accept His gift and unite themselves completely with Him. The essential meeting between man and his Creator, to which all believers aspire, takes place at this mysterious center

where all human faculties, senses and passions are coordinated. God is speaking to man from the depths of his own heart and soul.

The soul, now completely recollected in itself, begins to appreciate fully the treasures of grace and virtue received in Baptism. It now understands the gradual, and what should be, logical, progression from the reception of this sacrament to enjoyment of the Beatific Vision. With the reception of Baptism every soul automatically enters into a certain proximity with God, but when it reaches this peak of perfection it is totally transformed in union with Him.

### **Union with the Incarnate Word**

Entrance into God's mansions, for St. Teresa, simply means the soul's union with Him. True love, at all levels of life, craves for closer union with the person we love—an effort to be totally united in body and in spirit. This is obviously impossible when we are treating of human love. It is an entirely different matter when we are referring to the love between God and a soul that has been perfectly purified; the soul is now in God and God in the soul: "the soul is made one with God" (*Interior Castle*, VII,2,3).

St. Teresa describes in detail this ideal of the "most sovereign union of spirit with Spirit" (*Interior Castle*, VII,4,10) in terms of matrimonial union—an analogy used from time immemorial by Christian writers. She calls it precisely "a divine and spiritual matrimony" (*Interior Castle*, VII,2,1), signifying the most sublime possible complement on this earth of the soul's union with God begun at Baptism.

This mystical marriage takes place between the soul and Jesus, the Word Incarnate. For Teresa personally, it began when she had a vision of Jesus—as a human person—"appearing in great glory."

At variance with, and possibly as a reaction to, some other mystics, Teresa claims that the Humanity of Christ is the door leading to the mystery of God, even in the highest states of mystical prayer: "...if He is to give us His great graces, everything must pass through the hands of His Most Sacred Humanity.... I have seen clearly that this is the door by which we are to enter, if we would have His supreme Majesty reveal to us His great secrets. So, then, I would have you seek no other way, even if you were arrived at the highest contemplation" (*Life*, 22,9-10; cf. *Interior Castle*, all chapter 7).

This union of the soul with the Christ-God has very precise and distinctive characteristics. We are speaking of complete union: in the somewhat tumultuous rapture of the "marriage" there is a substantial encounter and communion between the soul and God: "God Himself, abiding in the soul's center, fills it with fervent desire, by means so delicate that the soul itself does not understand them... for these are influences so delicate and subtle that they proceed from the very depth of the heart..." (*Interior Castle*, VI,2,1). In the seventh mansions, on the other hand, the entire soul, stripped of every vestige of creature attachments, enters into its very center in a perfect donation of itself (cf. *Interior Castle*, VII,1).

Whereas in the sixth mansions the soul's transformation was limited to the will alone, it is now extended to the sense faculties as well, which now begin to harmonize perfectly with the spiritual faculties and the will.

The union taking place at this apex of the spiritual life is both complete and definitive. St. Teresa compares the difference between the sixth and seventh mansions to that "between two persons who are betrothed (engaged) and two who are united so that they cannot be separated any more (married)" (*Interior Castle*, VII,2,2). "In Spiritual Betrothal (sixth mansions), the two persons are frequently separated... in Spiritual Marriage, however, the favor of the Lord is not so: the soul remains all the time in that center with its God" (*Interior Castle*, VII,2,4). She continues: "For He has been pleased to unite Himself with His creature in such a way that they have become like two who cannot be separated from one another: thus He will not separate Himself from her." The soul becomes one with God...: "We might say that union is as if the ends of two wax candles were joined so that the light they give is one: the wicks and the wax and the light are all one; yet afterwards the one candle can be perfectly well separated from the other and the candles become two again, or the wick may be withdrawn from the wax. But here it is like rain falling from the heavens into a river or a spring; there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens. Or it is as if a tiny streamlet enters the sea, from which it will find no way of separating itself, or as if in a room there were two large windows through

which the light streamed in: it enters in different places but it all becomes one" (*Interior Castle*, VII,2 passim). Not only does the beloved experience God's action as He attracts and dominates the will, but the soul is also perfectly aware of God's continual presence. God had now become the principle of life for the soul, which can now repeat with absolute confidence the words of St. Paul: "it is not I that live, but Christ lives in me" (cf. *Interior Castle*, VII,2,5; 3,1).

St. John of the Cross would speak of this state of perfect and definitive union as follows: "The union wrought between the two natures and the communication of the divine to the human in this state is such that even though neither changes its being, both appear to be God. Yet in this life the union cannot be perfect, although it is beyond words and thought" (*Canticle* 22,4).

This depth of possession and interrelated union between soul and its God signifies the climax of all Christian experience and cannot be disturbed in the least by any external occurrence whatsoever. Already in time, and while still on this earth, the soul has achieved its goal and has entered the most pure and intimate part of its being where God abides in His own personal dwelling.

The soul now possesses God—not in the intellectual sense as in the Beatific Vision but in an experimental way. It is aware of God's ineffable and vivifying presence within itself and the resultant transformation. But even this advanced state of union, the Saint points out, is not yet utterly consummated, nor can it ever be in this life. Thus, in the seventh mansions, as in those preceding, there is a continual grasping after God, an unquenchable desire to suffer and to serve Him for His greater glory. She writes, with all her experience of love's dynamic impatience: "Love, I believe, can never be content to stay for long where it is" (*Interior Castle*, VII,4,9)

We understand now that this mystical union as described by St. Teresa is nothing less than a divine possession of the soul which must express itself in apostolic activity. This activity, however, transformed as it is by grace and infused virtues, becomes practically divine activity. In no way are we speaking here of Pantheism: the most intimate union that can take place here on earth is not in the ontological order (conflux of natures) but rather at the level of life and action.

Thus, we may refer to the union of the seventh mansions between God and the soul as a profound communion, but always retaining a certain distinction between the two. The soul is united with God without losing itself in the process. In no way does God nullify the human personality—on the contrary, He elevates it to far greater potentialities. And it is precisely here, in this state of union, that we discover a man's maximum expression of freedom, inasmuch as the human will—the foundation of man's liberty—becomes the will of God.

### **The Holy Trinity**

Mystical Union with the Incarnate Word is the soul's guarantee of a total manifestation, to itself, of the complete Divine Mystery. God reveals Himself in His fullness in this seventh mansion: the Divinity as such is no longer the sole object of the soul's contemplation; the three Divine Persons of the Trinity are now in direct communication with the soul. St. Teresa describes the experience as follows: "But in this Mansion everything is different. Our good God now desires to remove the scales from the eyes of the soul, so that it may see and understand something of the favor which He is granting it, although He is doing this in a strange manner. It is brought into this Mansion by means of an intellectual vision, in which, by a representation of the truth in a particular way, the Most Holy Trinity reveals Itself, in all three Persons. First of all the spirit becomes enkindled and is illumined, as it were, by a cloud of the greatest brightness. It sees these three Persons individually, and yet, by a wonderful kind of knowledge which is given to it, the soul realizes that most certainly and truly all these three Persons are one Substance and one Power and one Knowledge and one God alone; so that what we hold by faith the soul may be said here to grasp by sight, although nothing is seen by the eyes, either of the body or of the soul, for it is no imaginary vision. Here all three Persons communicate Themselves to the soul and speak to the soul and explain to it those words which the Gospel attributes to the Lord—namely, that He and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell with the soul which loves Him and keeps His commandments" (*Interior Castle*, VII,1,6).

Every genuine contemplative life leads to this goal of divine intimacy and we might say that there is a deep-rooted attraction towards it in all sincere Christian souls. Once this "center" has been reached the love of the soul

concentrates on it ever more intensely. Any further "infusions" which it might receive are regarded as preparatory or complementary, but always secondary, to this essential and unique union.

This experience of the Trinity will remain in the soul's consciousness forever: the soul will be continually drawn towards the vortex of God's life while all its activity will be governed and influenced by His presence. And even the most demanding external activities will not interfere in the least with this intimacy of grace, this vital interchange of love. Harmony between the lives of Martha and Mary, begun tentatively in the prayer of quiet, has now achieved lasting perfection: action and contemplation can never again be distinct but are totally identified. "Each day the soul wonders more," writes the Saint, "for she feels that the three Divine Persons have never left her, and perceives quite clearly that They are in the interior of her heart—in the most interior place of all and in its greatest depths" (*Interior Castle*, VII,1,7).

Already on this earth, the soul now knows and in a certain sense understands, the greatest of all mysteries, although still in an obscure way. The vision and possession of God—the realization of every Christian vocation and eternal destiny decreed by God from creation—is thus fulfilled on earth.

The soul's vision of God in these mansions, sublime though it may be, still remains in the realms of faith—a faith, granted, which is particularly penetrating and illuminating. Dawn is now approaching. The blinding mystery of the Most Holy Trinity has not yet been fully disclosed but the veil of Faith has become so delicate and transparent that the Presence of the same Trinity, as it were in the background, is continually manifest. Through breaks in the clouds, so to speak, the soul gazes silently on the visions of Life, Light and Love which constitute the mystery of the Trinity:

The soul seems on the threshold of eternity. In the light of this Vision and Presence, all virtues are perfected. Faith becomes more illuminated. Hope, while retaining its essential desire for the Beatific Vision is, nonetheless, at perfect peace in a total abandonment to the Will of the Beloved. He belongs to the soul and the soul belongs to Him. The desire to see Him beyond this period of exile is not quite so compelling or urgent as previously, because, writes St. Teresa: "they look within themselves and remember that they have Him with them continually." Love triumphs over all and the soul, its prisoner, offers itself totally to Love and no longer has anything else to do other than to love. Its prayer has become a continuous and simplified act of love. All intellectual and sense faculties combine in a marvelous orchestration to the praise and glory of God. St. John of the Cross refers to it thus: "a very little of this pure love is more precious in the sight of God and the soul, and of greater profit to the Church than are all these works together" (*Spiritual Canticle*, 29,2).

At this stage the apostolic and ecclesial value of prayer and of the contemplative life can be fully appreciated. When considering this sublime state of the spiritual life we cannot help thinking of the Blessed Virgin, who, according to St. John of the Cross "was raised from the very beginning to this sublime degree of union" (*Ascent*, III,2,10). This extraordinary grace of divine union was granted to Our Lady immediately, whereas it will only be granted to "ordinary" souls as the result of continuous and arduous efforts.

The "light" projected from this Divine Presence can vary from blinding brightness to waning dimness: "This Presence is not of course always realized so fully, I mean so clearly, as when it first comes .... But although the light which accompanies it may not be so clear, the soul is always aware that it is experiencing this companionship" (*Interior Castle*, VII,1,9). Although not yet in heaven, the soul is very close, obviously, to the Beatific Vision.

Despite this fluctuating intensity of the soul's realization of its union with God, there is an underlying illumination that assures it of its constant contact with Him. Not only that, but an added certitude that the three Divine Persons are present at the center of the soul and "have taken up their abode there" (*Interior Castle*, VII,1,9).

### **Profound Peace and Self-Forgetfulness**

Due to this absolute certainty of the presence and possession of God, the soul is filled with joy and lives in total self-forgetfulness and profound peace. It knows that it is possessed by God and that this union will last forever: "Great is the mercy which He grants the soul in never going away from her and in willing that she shall understand this so clearly" (*Interior Castle*, VII,1,9). The soul has come to understand that the original defeat of man has been

reversed in its person: hence its union with God is a definitive and glorious divine conquest, productive of so much joy and inner peace. St. Teresa writes: "The soul here delights in the tabernacle of God. . . the sign that it has discovered firm ground amidst the waters and storms of this world..." (*Interior Castle*, VII,3,13). "She has found her rest. . . the soul no longer has that solitude which it was wont to have, now that it is enjoying such companionship" (*Interior Castle*, VII,3,12). God has introduced it into His personal mansion—which is the soul's own center—to be with it and to be the object of its contemplation. In this temple God and the soul enjoy one another's company in the most profound peace and silence (*Interior Castle*, VII,3,10,11,12). Words and thoughts have been replaced by divine light: all that remains is the deep silence of love. Of this intimacy of the spirit, St. Thomas Aquinas would also write: *Deus honoratur silentio*—(God is honored by silence) (*In Boetium De Trinitate* q.2,a.1,ad 6).

The soul no longer has aridity, external disturbances or ecstasies, due to the fact that this union takes place quite beyond the realm of the sense faculties. No more violent mystical raptures are experienced, as in earlier mansions and even in the midst of external problems and afflictions the soul remains calm and peaceful (*Interior Castle*, VII,3,7,10,12).

The Saint explains, however, that this unalterable peace is only present in the depths of the soul removed as these are from the promptings of the devil or the agitations of the senses. These latter by their very nature are automatically excluded from the seventh mansions. Hence, it is incorrect to think that once arrived at these mansions and this state of union, the soul is immersed in utter peace and tranquility, which overflows to the external body and senses—in short, a state of paradise on earth with nothing human or worldly remaining. Not so, St. Teresa points out—the soul is still bound to a body and is living on earth.

Trials and sufferings, even more than previously, continue to be the soul's lot and it may still commit imperfections: "Do not, of course, for one moment imagine that because these souls have such vehement desires and are so determined not to commit a single imperfection for anything in the world, they do not in fact commit many imperfections, and even sins." Teresa hastens to add though: "Not intentionally however, for the Lord will give such persons very special aid as to this" (*Interior Castle*, VII,4,3). In the midst of this great peace the Lord does not wish that the soul should ever forget its misery, and accordingly it remains very humble. At the very end of the book that describes the highest possible attainments of the spiritual life St. Teresa still reminds us that: "humility is the foundation of the whole edifice" (*Interior Castle*, VII,4,2,3,8).

"There coexist then," continues the Saint, "turmoil and troubles with a great peace." "It would almost seem," she precises, "that the soul is divided" (*Interior Castle*, VII,1,10; 2,10). We are reminded here of what must have taken place in the soul of the Redeemer during His Passion and Crucifixion, though on another scale altogether. Theologians make an attempted comparison—feeble though it be—between Christ's suffering soul, especially in Gethsemane and on Calvary, and the highest mountain peaks whose summits are above cloud-level. Gales and storms may whip the mountainsides and cause havoc, while nothing disturbs the summit. Above the darkness and the hurricanes it remains serene and bathed in brightness.

### **Action and Contemplation**

We must repeat yet again that the extraordinary phenomena of grace and peace which we have been describing, occur only at the depth of the soul: they are strictly mystical manifestations without any corporeal or external repercussions. St. Teresa returns to this point repeatedly, e.g.: "We are talking of interior matters, daughters; as regards exterior ones there is lit tie tit be said" (*Interior Castle*, VII,3,3). And elsewhere: "As I have already told you, the only repose that these souls enjoy is of an interior kind; of outward repose they get less and less, and they have no wish to get more" (*Interior Castle*, VII,4,10).

These interior graces are granted the soul "to strengthen our weakness, so that we may be able to imitate Christ in His great sufferings. His Majesty can do nothing greater for us than grant us a life which is an imitation of that lived by His beloved Son" (*Interior Castle*, VII,4,4). As a result this exalted state of the contemplative life avidly seeks an outlet for charitable work in God's service. The soul's burning need to be with God alone in these seventh mansions is tempered by its desire to work and to suffer for His glory.

The more progress the soul makes in this prayer of perfect union, the more it feels the need of helping its neighbors: "His food consists in our bringing Him souls in every possible way, so that they may be saved and may praise Him forever" (*Interior Castle*, VII,4,12). St. Teresa repeats this concept continually: "This, my sisters, I should like us to strive to attain: we should desire and engage in prayer, not for our enjoyment, but for the sake of acquiring this strength which fits us for service" (*Ibid.*). And again: "This, my daughters, is the aim of prayer: this is the purpose of the Spiritual Marriage of which are born good works and good works alone" (*Interior Castle*, IV,4,6).

Just as all genuine apostolic work flows from contemplation, in the same way, authentic contemplation tends automatically towards activity. Action and contemplation merge and become a single unity. Thus we find the gift of contemplation closely associated with a highly-tuned practical sense of everyday affairs in the great mystics, not to mention the involvement of many of them in heroic external activity.

St. Teresa herself is an outstanding example. Although longing for solitude and an undisturbed, continuous tête-à-tête with God, she accepted in loving obedience the onerous task of reforming her Order and founding numerous new convents, despite the harsh journeys and unending intrigues involved. Particularly in the closing years of her life when divine interventions and mystical phenomena were so evident in her person, does St. Teresa present us with such a striking example of the union of contemplation and activity—which, as we have seen, is one of the distinctive features of the seventh mansions.

There is absolutely no doubt that Teresa had personal and intimate experience of the phenomena we are describing, especially during the latter ten years of her life. And it is precisely during these years that we find her most active—be it in her correspondence, her journeys and meetings—without even mentioning her continual ill health. The two factors of our human nature—the human and spiritual—are perfectly combined in her and we get the impression that she garners all her human personality and talents from the depths of her spiritual experiences.

Perhaps the greatest lesson that St. Teresa offers us—both in her writings and by her example—is that there is not a necessary incompatibility between contemplation and the active life. In actual fact, they are inseparable vocations; one has need of the other as cause for effect, as love calling on love. Teresa's life is a continual reminder that the Christian apostolate is not so much a matter of mass media as of life and spirit. It may be summed up as follows: first being, then working; loving and then acting. The technique of every true apostolate is found on the sanctity and fervor of the individual apostle.

Progress in the interior life will guarantee more consistency and perfection in apostolic work. If our thoughts and aspirations are continually elevated, St. Teresa assures us that our external work will have a corresponding perfection. "God alone suffices." He will unify our external activity and our interior aspirations. The generous Christian will become a contemplative and the contemplative becomes an apostle.

## **Conclusion**

St. Teresa's account of progress from the first steps of ascetical prayer to the sublime development of grace and communion in the seventh mansions provides us with a fascinating description of a soul's itinerary towards union with God.

The various stages of the spiritual journey each represent a different type of prayer. It began with a laborious search for God in meditation, which, with due fidelity, gradually becomes more simplified and recollected. Concepts, images and words are the typical expression of this prayer of beginners.

An initial, direct communication from God makes it impossible to continue meditating and is the first sign of contemplative prayer as such. At this stage there is a direct encounter between divine intervention and the simplified activity of the soul—a direct result of the latter's sustained efforts during the period of "meditation." Expression by word or thought becomes increasingly more difficult; the soul can only express its love in silence.

The living, purifying flame of God gradually becomes more intense and takes possession of man's will and entire being. As a result, the soul's prayer becomes God's prayer; progressing from the original "yes" of mystical betrothal to the threshold of heaven's eternal prayer as experienced in the seventh mansions.

Entrance to God's dwelling in the seventh mansions is paramount to complete union with the Divine—a union, however, which is in perpetual progress. And union with Christ leads automatically to union with the Blessed Trinity in its mystery of mysteries. This latter union with the Trinity, while continuing to fluctuate in intensity, remains permanent; the soul enjoys an immense peace combined with an ardent longing for apostolic activity.

In the seventh mansions the soul though remaining a pilgrim on earth is led to the intimacy of divine life. The world no longer holds any mystery for the soul immersed in God. The veil of Faith is drawn aside giving us a vision of eternity; hope gives way to possession; love alone remains in celebration of its definitive victory.

