

# **The Interior Castle**

*This treatise, called *The Interior Castle*, was written by Teresa of Ávila, a nun of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, for her sisters and daughters, the Discalced Carmelite nuns.*

**Saint Teresa of Ávila**

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# **The Interior Castle**



**Saint Teresa of Ávila**



*Spiritual transcription of Exclamations*

*C-XVII.3–4*

Let this self of mine die,  
that another—greater and better than I—may live in me,  
so that I might serve Him with all my being.

Let Him live and give me life;  
let Him reign, and may I be His prisoner,  
for my soul desires no other freedom.

How can one be free who turns away from the Supreme Good?  
What greater slavery, what deeper misery  
than a soul severed from the hands of its Creator?

Blessed are those bound with the unbreakable chains  
of God's mercy and gifts,  
who find themselves captivated,  
unable to break free!

Love is as strong as death,  
relentless as the grave.

O free will, slave of your own liberty,  
unless you are nailed to the love of your Creator!

When will that blessed day come  
when you are drowned in the infinite ocean of Supreme Truth,  
where you can no longer sin, nor even wish to,  
for you will be safe from all misery,  
fused into the very life of your God?



# CONTENT

The Interior Castle .....	3
CONTENT .....	9
PREFACE.....	13
PRESENTATION .....	17
INTRODUCTION .....	19
PROLOGUE .....	21
FIRST MANSIONS .....	25
Chapter 1 .....	25
Chapter 2 .....	32
FIRST MANSION .....	47
The awakening of the soul and the awareness of its dignity .....	47
Who Inhabits This Mansion?.....	47
The Awakening of Spiritual Awareness .....	48
Prayer: The Door to the Castle .....	48
The Obstacles of the First Mansion.....	48
The First Great Lesson: The Dignity of the Soul .....	49
Saint Teresa’s Advice for This Stage.....	49
The First Fruits Begin to Appear .....	49
The Key Lessons of the First Mansion.....	49
SECOND MANSIONS .....	51
Sole Chapter .....	51
SECOND MANSION .....	59
The awakening of the desire for god and the inner struggle.....	59
Who inhabits this mansion? .....	59
The Great Challenge: The Struggle Between God’s Voice and those of the World .....	59
The Essential Role of Prayer .....	60
Obstacles in the Second Mansion .....	60
The Soul’s First Victories .....	61
Key Lesson: Perseverance Amid the Struggle .....	61
Saint Teresa’s Advice for This Stage.....	61
Fruits That Begin to Appear .....	62
The Central Learning of the Second Mansion .....	62
THIRD MANSIONS .....	63
Chapter 1 .....	63
Chapter 2 .....	71
THIRD MANSION .....	81
Firm commitment and the illusion of spiritual control.....	81
Who dwells in this mansion? .....	81
The Great Challenge: Spiritual Self-Deception .....	81

The Need for Deeper Purification .....	82
The Crucial Role of Humility .....	82
The Turning Point: Trustful Surrender.....	83
Saint Teresa’s Advice for This Stage .....	83
Fruits That Begin to Appear.....	83
The Core Lesson of the Third Mansion.....	84
The Soul’s Crossroads.....	84
FOURTH MANSIONS .....	85
Chapter 1 .....	85
Chapter 2 .....	97
Chapter 3 .....	105
FOURTH MANSION .....	115
The threshold of the mystical life and the direct action of God .....	115
Who dwells in this mansion? .....	115
The central experience: the passage from active to mystical prayer .....	115
How is this prayer experienced? .....	116
The challenge of this stage: detachment from spiritual consolations.....	116
Love begins to transform the soul .....	117
Saint Teresa’s advice for this stage: .....	117
Fruits that begin to appear:.....	117
The key lesson of the fourth mansion: .....	118
FIFTH MANSIONS .....	119
Chapter 1 .....	119
Chapter 2 .....	129
Chapter 3 .....	138
Chapter 4 .....	149
FIFTH MANSION .....	158
Mystical Union and the Transformation of the Soul .....	158
Who dwells in this mansion? .....	158
The central experience: mystical union .....	158
How is this union experienced? .....	159
The challenge of this stage: surrendering completely to God.....	159
The soul lives in a new awareness of God .....	160
Saint Teresa’s advice for this stage: .....	160
Fruits that begin to appear:.....	160
The key insight of the Fifth Mansion:.....	161
SIXTH MANSIONS .....	162
Chapter 1 .....	162
Chapter 2 .....	172
Chapter 3 .....	177
Chapter 4 .....	186
Chapter 5 .....	197
Chapter 6 .....	203
Chapter 7 .....	211

Chapter 8 .....	220
Chapter 9 .....	227
Chapter 10 .....	237
Chapter 11 .....	242
Sixth Mansion .....	248
Final Purification and Spousal Love .....	248
Who dwells in this mansion? .....	248
The great challenge: the purification of love .....	248
The trials of the Sixth Mansion .....	249
The extraordinary graces of this mansion .....	249
Spousal love: the soul's relationship with God .....	250
The final challenge: complete surrender .....	250
Saint Teresa's counsel for this stage: .....	250
The key lessons of the Sixth Mansion: .....	251
SEVENTH MANSIONS .....	252
Chapter 1 .....	252
Chapter 2 .....	260
Chapter 3 .....	269
Chapter 4 .....	281
SEVENTH MANSION .....	292
Mystical Union and Spiritual Marriage with God .....	292
Who dwells in this mansion? .....	292
The central experience: spiritual marriage.....	292
How is this union experienced? .....	293
The effects of spiritual marriage .....	293
The final challenge: living union in the everyday.....	294
Saint Teresa's advice for this stage:.....	294
The key insight of the Seventh Mansion: .....	294
EPILOGUE .....	296
Final Commentary .....	298
The dynamism of the spiritual path .....	298
From self-awareness to self-gift .....	298
A journey of love, not of perfection.....	299
The central role of humility and charity .....	299
The journey never ends .....	299
A universal invitation .....	300
Works by the Same Author .....	301



# PREFACE

This English edition of *The Interior Castle* by Saint Teresa of Ávila is exceptional in two fundamental aspects. Firstly, it presents a modernized version of the original text, carefully adapted to make the saint's words and expressions feel entirely contemporary. The aim was not merely to update the language but to revive Teresa's voice in a register that speaks directly to the modern reader. The essence of her thought and the intensity of her spiritual experience have been preserved, while freeing them from archaisms and structures that, though beautiful in their historical context, could pose barriers to current understanding.

This modernization seeks to convey the vital force of Teresa's words with the same freshness and relevance they had for her initial readers. It is not a betrayal of the original but a way to make it resonate in the heart of the present, as if the saint herself were speaking into our emotional and intellectual language. Her passion, humor, lucidity, and depth are not confined to the 16th century; they remain alive, awaiting to be heard anew.

Secondly, this edition is distinguished by being extensively annotated, the result of a critical and reflective reading that aims to illuminate the nuances of the work, unravel its complexities, and contextualize its teachings. The notes not only clarify philosophical, psychological, or theological references but also invite dialogue, exploring the richness of her thought from an open and contemporary perspective. Each commentary is designed to serve as a guide, building bridges between Teresa's experience and the concerns of the modern reader.

The purpose of this edition is to bridge the vast cultural gap between the religious thought of 16th-century Spain and that of the sincere contemporary spiritual seeker. In a world where traditional religious references have lost their centrality for many, Teresa's experience remains invaluable but risks being obscured by cultural, linguistic, and even psychological differences.

This edition seeks to rescue the invaluable spiritual mastery of Saint Teresa from oblivion and misunderstanding, presenting her not only as a historical or literary figure but as a living teacher whose words can touch, transform, and inspire those in search of profound meaning in their lives. Her teaching transcends dogmas and religious boundaries because it speaks to the universal experience of the human soul in its yearning for fulfillment, truth, and love.

In these pages, the reader will find not just a classic text but an encounter, a dialogue that, if allowed, can become a true spiritual accompaniment. For Teresa does not write as a theoretician of faith but as someone who has walked the path, who has known the lights and shadows of the soul, and who offers her experience as a living map for those willing to delve into the mystery of their own interior castle.

In this mature work, Saint Teresa of Ávila offers a spiritual cartography of the human soul, a journey that traverses different stages of consciousness until reaching full union with God. *The Interior Castle*, considered one of the pinnacles of Christian mysticism, describes the soul as a castle composed of seven mansions, each representing a deeper degree of spiritual experience. As one progresses toward the innermost chambers, their relationship with themselves, the world, and the divine is radically transformed.

In the initial mansions, the soul is still closely tied to the distractions of the external world, dominated by attachments and a self-perception centered on the ego. The individual interprets reality from a standpoint of separation, and their experience is marked by the struggle between worldly desires and spiritual aspiration. However, as they advance toward the central mansions, especially the sixth, this perception changes drastically. The sense of individuality begins to dissolve, and the separation between the "self" and God becomes increasingly tenuous.

The seventh mansion represents the culmination of this journey: the soul experiences complete and permanent union with the divine in what Teresa calls the "spiritual marriage." In this state, the soul and God are fused in such profound love that they can no longer be separated. The individual identity, as previously understood, is radically transformed. However, Teresa insists that this union, though stable and irrevocable, does not imply the functional disappearance of personality. The soul continues living its daily life, fulfilling its responsibilities and interacting with the world, but from a completely renewed consciousness: "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

An aspect of this path of soul perfection worth noting is that it rarely consists of a direct journey from the exterior of the castle to the central mansion, as one does not move consistently in the same direction. It should be understood more as a wandering from the outer mansions toward the inner ones, with many episodes of losing direction and retreating, due to the will not being firmly fixed on God. Thus, the spiritual seeker enters and exits, visiting different chambers and becoming familiar with various experiences. Sometimes, they enter one of the central mansions and experience intense contacts with the divine, but these experiences usually do not last long because they are unfit for their earthly condition and inevitable

identification with the body. At other times, they simply pass near one of the mansions and glimpse what happens inside because the door is open, allowing them to envision what lies within. And on some occasions, they may gain some knowledge of the experience enjoyed in the final mansions in the form of a dream or a vague memory of their future, for time is an illusion, and what they will eventually experience has already been lived.

May this edition serve as an invitation to embark on this journey with openness and dedication, allowing Teresa's words to guide the reader in their own inner quest. Beyond history and theology, this is a journey of the soul toward its true home, a path each person is called to undertake in their own time and manner.



# PRESENTATION

Santa Teresa of Ávila began writing *The Interior Castle* amidst illness, adversity, and threats against her work. It was June 2, 1577, the feast of the Holy Trinity, when, following the suggestion of Father Jerónimo Gracián—who, unable to access the manuscript of *The Book of Her Life*, confiscated by the Inquisition, told her: “Since we cannot have it, recall what you remember and other things, and write another book”—the Saint set out to write with astonishing speed, “as quickly and swiftly as public notaries usually do.”

Though her health was frail and her spirit besieged by concerns, the manuscript reflects an unprecedented serenity. “*Oh, how well that passage is written in the book of my life that is with the Inquisition!*” she would sometimes sigh, recalling her earlier work. However, the effort behind this new book was not hindered by circumstances: amid the loss of the “*holy nuncio*”, the appointment of the new bishop of Ávila, and the continuous travels and decisions regarding the expansion of her reform, Santa Teresa managed to progress up to the third chapter of the Fifth Mansions, where she temporarily halted her work.

She resumed writing nearly five months later, toward the end of October, and completed the book on November 29 of the same year, at the convent of San José in Ávila. Although its composition took less than two months, the depth and maturity of her thought, sharpened by the tribulations of the time, resulted in a masterpiece of Christian mysticism.

Concerned about the fate of *The Book of Her Life*, Father Gracián guarded this new manuscript with great care. After reviewing it with Father Yanguas in Segovia, in the presence of the Saint herself, he entrusted it to María de San José in Seville. Years later, it passed through the hands of key figures in the Teresian Reform until, in 1617, it was taken to the convent of the Discalced Carmelites in Seville, where it has remained to this day.

The full title of the work is *The Interior Castle*, though it is also known simply as *The Mansions* or *The Castle*. In it, the Saint describes the soul’s journey toward God through the allegory of a castle with multiple chambers. From the outskirts, moats, and outer walls to the inner stronghold and tower, where the Lord dwells in His “*personal chamber*”, each mansion represents a stage of the soul’s path toward mystical union. With a meticulous analysis of spiritual life and the undeniable influence of Saint John of the Cross, Santa Teresa offers us a guide to exploring the soul’s inner

richness, using a language that, despite its depth, retains the clarity and intimacy of her personal experience.

*Paraphrase of the preface to *The Interior Castle* in homage to the 1967 B.A.C. edition.*

# INTRODUCTION

This book contains advice and counsel that Teresa of Ávila addresses to her religious sisters and spiritual daughters in the monasteries that, with the help of our Lord and the glorious Virgin, Mother of God, our Lady, she founded according to the Primitive Rule of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. She dedicates it especially to the sisters of the Monastery of Saint Joseph in Ávila, the first she founded and where she was prioress at the time of writing these words.

In everything stated in this book, I submit myself to the teachings of the Holy Roman Church, and if in any way I deviate from them, it is out of ignorance. Therefore, I ask, for the love of our Lord, that the theologians who review it examine it carefully and correct any errors, as well as any other faults that may undoubtedly be found in various parts.

If there is anything of value in what is written, may it be for the glory and honor of God and in service of His most holy Mother, our Patroness and Lady, under whose habit I have the blessing to live, though I am most unworthy to wear it.



# PROLOGUE

1. Few things that obedience has commanded me to do have been as difficult as writing now about matters of prayer. On the one hand, because I do not feel that the Lord grants me either the spirit or the desire to do so; on the other, because for the past three months, I have suffered from such great noise and weakness in my head that even writing about necessary matters is very difficult for me. However, understanding that the power of obedience often smooths the way for things that seem impossible, my will is determined to proceed with good disposition, even though my nature resists, for the Lord has not given me such strength that the constant struggle with illness and various occupations does not cause me great distress. May He, who has accomplished far greater things in order to grant me His grace, be the one to do it, for in His mercy I place my trust. **I**

2. I truly believe that I will have little more to say than what I have already written on other occasions by command, and I even fear that it may be almost the same things. Just as birds trained to speak know only what they are taught or what they hear, and repeat it over and over, so am I, quite literally. If the Lord wills that I say something new, His Majesty will grant it to me or will bring to my memory what I have said before—which would be enough for me, for my memory is so poor that I would be glad to recall even a few things that were deemed well said, in case they have been lost. **II**

If the Lord does not grant me even this, merely making the effort and worsening my headache out of obedience will already be a gain for me, even if nothing beneficial comes from what I write.

3. Thus, I begin fulfilling this command today, on the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, in the year 1577, here in the Monastery of Saint Joseph of Carmel in Toledo, where I currently find myself, submitting everything I say to the judgment of those who have ordered me to write, who are persons of great knowledge.

4. If I were to say anything that does not conform to the doctrine of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, it would be out of ignorance and not ill intent. This can be taken as certain, and that I always have been and always will be, by the grace of God, subject to it, as I have been until now. May He be blessed and glorified forever. Amen.

5. The one who commanded me to write said that, since the nuns of the monasteries of Our Lady of Carmel need someone to clarify certain doubts about prayer, and since it seemed to him that women understand each other better, as well as the fact that, out of the love they have for me, they would pay more attention to what I tell them, he considers that this might be of some use if I am able to express anything beneficial. For this reason, I will address them in what I write.

And since it seems unreasonable to think that this could be of use to others, I would consider myself greatly blessed by our Lord if even one of them were to benefit from it and praise Him a little more. His Majesty well knows that I seek nothing else; and it is very clear that if I manage to say anything of value, it should be understood that it is not by my own merit, for there is no reason for it, given my limited understanding and lack of skill in matters of this kind—unless the Lord, in His mercy, grants it to me. **III**

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Teresa of Ávila suffered from various illnesses and ailments throughout her life, many of which accompanied her during the writing of *The Interior Castle* in 1577. She endured heart and respiratory problems, experiencing episodes of shortness of breath and chest pain that today could be interpreted as symptoms of angina or some form of heart failure. These attacks were severe and caused her significant weakness.

In her youth, around the age of 25, she suffered a serious illness that left her in a coma for several days, leading some to believe she had died. Upon awakening, she was left partially paralyzed for a long period, which permanently affected her mobility. Although she regained some ability to walk, she suffered lasting aftereffects. She also endured severe headaches, likely migraines, accompanied by general discomfort and fatigue.

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Teresa experienced chronic digestive issues, including vomiting, abdominal pain, and loss of appetite, possibly due to a combination of her fragile health and the austere fasting practices of her religious life. She suffered from intermittent fevers that weakened her, which could have been related to chronic infections or common illnesses of the time, such as malaria. Additionally, she dealt with persistent joint and muscle pain, probably due to some form of rheumatism or arthritis, further complicating her already limited mobility.

Despite all these ailments, she wrote *The Interior Castle* in a precarious state of health, often from her bed, at times dictating parts of the text due to physical exhaustion. However, her writings reflect a lucid, passionate mind, profoundly focused on spiritual life—further emphasizing the mystical dimension of her work in contrast to the frailties of her ailing body.

**II** Teresa makes it clear that her intention is not so much to present her own voice as that of God, whom she acknowledges as the true author of any goodness that may be found in her writings. When she explains that she merely repeats what she has heard or read and that her mind is often filled with "noise" she does not wish to put on paper, she is openly confessing that she sees herself more as a *conduit* of grace than as an autonomous author. For her, the true contribution comes from what she has learned through the intimate experience of prayer and communion with God, to the point of emphasizing that, without divine assistance, she would not be capable of writing a single word of value.

This awareness of her own limitations leads Teresa to distinguish between her "*true thoughts*", those she thinks with God, and the ideas or distractions she describes as "*mental noise*." In a way, Teresa is convinced that nothing arising from her limited understanding—without the light of grace—can be of real benefit to her sisters. This is why she insists on the necessity of obedience and humility: she does not write out of personal desire or initiative, but because she has been commanded to do so, trusting that God will use her for the good of others. From this conviction comes her repeated assertion that if there is any merit in her words, it belongs entirely to God; and if anything is poorly expressed, it is due to her own weakness and ignorance.

Thus, the pages of *The Interior Castle* become the living testimony of someone who understands herself as nothing more than an instrument, whose mission is to serve, with sincerity and transparency, the Voice of God that longs to reach all souls.

**III** Here, Teresa makes it clear that the purpose of her writings is not to display theoretical knowledge or showcase personal erudition. She herself admits to feeling weak and uninspired, suffering from severe headaches and struggling with fragile health. Nevertheless, she obeys the command given to her to put her reflections on prayer into writing, acknowledging that she does so primarily with her sisters in mind. Teresa sees herself as nothing more than an instrument, a "*bird trained to*

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*speak*” that merely repeats what it has heard, emphasizing the humility with which she approaches this task.

By insisting that she does not intend to present anything new, she reinforces the idea that these writings are an act of obedience and service: if there is anything of value in them, she attributes the merit solely to God's grace. Beyond her apparent modesty, Teresa highlights a very specific purpose—to help those, like her sisters, who seek guidance on the interior path and wish to strengthen their relationship with God. For this reason, she addresses her community in a direct and familiar tone, knowing that women will understand one another more easily and that this emotional closeness will help her teachings take root in the daily lives of the nuns.

Teresa's ultimate intention is not to compose a theoretical treatise but to provide an accessible guide for her sisters to deepen their prayer and union with the Lord. Thus, the value of her work lies not only in the spiritual insights she shares but also in the attitude of obedience and willingness she embodies. Her choice to serve her sisters, even in the midst of her own suffering, becomes a powerful example of her fraternal love and the depth of her faith—one that seeks to inspire greater praise of God in the souls of others.

# FIRST MANSIONS

## Chapter 1

*On the beauty and dignity of our souls, a comparison is provided to help understand it, and the benefits of knowing and acknowledging the graces we receive from God are explained, as well as the fact that the door to this castle is prayer.*

1. As I was praying to our Lord today, asking Him to speak through me—since I could not find the right words nor determine how to begin fulfilling this act of obedience—it occurred to me to start with the following image as a foundation: to consider our soul as a castle made entirely of diamond or of a very clear crystal, within which there are many chambers, just as in heaven there are many mansions.<sup>¶</sup>

If we reflect on it carefully, sisters, the soul of the righteous is nothing less than a paradise where, as the Lord Himself says, He finds His delight. For how do you imagine the dwelling place in which so powerful, so wise, so pure a King, filled with all goodness, takes His pleasure? I find no adequate comparison for the great beauty of a soul and its immense capacity, and truly, no matter how sharp our intellects may be, they can scarcely comprehend it—just as they cannot grasp the greatness of God. He Himself tells us that He created us in His image and likeness.<sup>¶¶</sup> If this is so, as it truly is, there is no need to weary ourselves trying to comprehend the beauty of this castle. For although there is, of course, the infinite difference between the Creator and the creature, it is enough that His Majesty has said that the soul is made in His image for us to scarcely grasp its great dignity and beauty.

2. It is truly a shame and a cause for deep sorrow that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves nor know who we are. Would it not be great ignorance, my daughters, for someone to be

asked who they are and be unable to recognize themselves, not knowing who their father or mother was, nor the land from which they came? **III**

If such a thing would be sheer folly, how much greater is our own when we do not strive to understand what we are, limiting ourselves to thinking only of our bodies. In a superficial way—because we have heard it and because faith teaches it—we know that we have a soul, yet we rarely reflect on the treasures within it, who dwells there, or the great worth it possesses. As a result, we make little effort to preserve its beauty with the utmost care; instead, all our concern is for the crude outer shell—this body, the mere outer covering of the castle.

3. Let us consider, then, that this castle—as I have said—has many mansions: some above, some below, others to the sides, and at the very center, in the heart of them all, is the most important one, where the deepest encounters between God and the soul take place.

You must pay close attention to this comparison. Perhaps God will use it to help you understand something about the graces He deigns to bestow upon souls and the differences among them, insofar as I have understood them to be possible—for to comprehend them all is beyond anyone's reach, given how numerous they are, and even more so for someone as wretched as I am. However, it will be a great consolation for you to know that it is possible to receive these graces when the Lord grants them; and for those who do not receive them, it will be a reason to praise His immense goodness.

Just as it does us no harm to contemplate the wonders of heaven and the joys of the blessed—on the contrary, it brings us joy and inspires us to long for such gifts—so too will it not harm us to understand that even in this exile, so great a God can communicate with creatures as unworthy and miserable as we are, and that He loves with such boundless goodness and mercy. **IV**

I am convinced that if someone finds it offensive or troubling to believe that God can grant such graces in this world, that person lacks true humility and the proper love for their neighbor. For if this were

not the case, how could we not rejoice that God bestows these gifts upon a brother or sister of ours, especially since this does not prevent Him from granting them to us as well?

Moreover, His Majesty manifests His greatness in whomever He pleases, sometimes solely to make it known, as happened with the blind man to whom He gave sight when the apostles asked whether it was due to his own sins or those of his parents.<sup>v</sup> Thus, it happens that at times He does not grant these graces because the recipient is holier than others, but so that His greatness may be known, as we see in Saint Paul or Mary Magdalene, and so that we may praise Him in His creatures.

4. It could be said that these things seem impossible and that we should be careful not to scandalize those who are weaker in faith. However, it is a lesser loss if they do not believe than if we fail to benefit those to whom God grants these graces. Moreover, those who do believe will rejoice and be stirred to a more fervent love for Him who performs such mercies, so great in power and majesty.

Furthermore, I know I am speaking to people for whom this is not a danger, for they know and believe that God continues to show even greater signs of His love. I am certain that whoever does not believe in this will never experience it personally, for God delights in not having limits placed on His works. Therefore, sisters, may this never happen to those whom the Lord does not lead by this path.

5. Now, returning to our beautiful and delightful castle, we must consider how we can enter it.

It may seem as if I am speaking nonsense, for if this castle is the soul, it is clear that there is no need to enter it since we *are* the castle. It would be like telling someone to step into a room where they already are. But you must understand that there is a great difference between *being* and *being*.

Many souls remain in the outer courtyard of the castle, where the guards stand watch, never concerning themselves with entering within. They do not know what lies in that precious place, who dwells inside, or even how many chambers it contains.

You have surely read in some books on prayer the advice that the soul should turn inward upon itself; this is precisely what I mean.

6. A learned man recently told me that souls who do not practice prayer are like a paralyzed or crippled body, which, though it has feet and hands, cannot move them at will. Such are these souls—so weakened and accustomed to remaining caught up in external things that there seems to be no remedy, nor any hope that they might enter within themselves.

Their habits have led them to constantly associate with the vermin and beasts that inhabit the outer courtyard of the castle, to the point that they have almost become like them. And though they are, by their very nature, so rich and capable of conversing with none other than God Himself, they are unable to do so.

If these souls do not make an effort to understand and remedy their great misery, they will end up like statues of salt for failing to turn their gaze inward—just as happened to Lot’s wife when she looked back.**VI**

7. As far as I can understand, the door to enter this castle is prayer and reflection. I do not mean only mental prayer, but also vocal prayer—provided it is done with true awareness.

For if someone does not consider with Whom they are speaking, what they are asking for, who they themselves are to be making such a request, and to Whom they are addressing it, I do not consider it to be prayer, even if they move their lips a great deal. It is true that, at times, it may still be prayer, even without this attentiveness, but only because on other occasions they *have* prayed with such care.**VII**

However, if someone habitually speaks to the majesty of God as if they were addressing a servant—without paying attention to what

they are saying or whether they say it well, merely repeating words learned by routine—I do not consider that to be prayer. May God never allow any Christian to pray in such a manner! And I trust in His Majesty that among you, my sisters, this will not be the case, given your practice of engaging in interior matters—a great safeguard against falling into such folly.

8. Let us not speak, then, of these paralyzed souls who, unless the Lord Himself comes to lift them up—like the paralytic who had lain by the pool for thirty years—are in great misfortune and danger. Instead, let us speak of those other souls who, at the very least, enter the castle. Though they may be deeply immersed in worldly affairs, they have good desires and, from time to time—even if only on rare occasions—they commend themselves to our Lord and reflect on who they are, though not very deeply.

Perhaps once a month, amid a thousand distractions, they pause to pray, though their thoughts are often scattered elsewhere, for they are so attached to worldly things that, as Scripture says, *“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* **VIII**

However, at times, they manage to pull away slightly and become aware of themselves, which is already a great step toward recognizing that they are not on the right path and toward finding the door.

Thus, they enter the first mansions in the lower part of the castle, but they do so accompanied by so many vermin that they can neither perceive the beauty of the castle nor find peace. Even so, it is already a great achievement that they have managed to enter at all.

9. You may think, my daughters, that this is unnecessary, since by the Lord’s goodness, you are not in such a state. But you must be patient, for I will not be able to explain certain interior aspects of prayer, as I understand them, except in this way. And even so, may God grant that I manage to convey something to you, for it is very difficult to express what I wish to make you understand unless one has experienced it. If you have, you will see that it is impossible to

speak of these matters without touching upon things that, by God's mercy, may He spare us from ever having to endure.

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**I** *"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"* (John 14:2, NRSV).

**II** *"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'"* (Genesis 1:26, NRSV).

**III** This Teresian image—the sense of not knowing who one is or where one comes from—finds a striking resonance in the contemporary thought of *A Course in Miracles*. In Lesson 139, the Course asserts that "all doubt is based on this. There is no question that does not reflect this one: uncertainty about what you are." It adds, "the world is a place whose purpose is to be a home where those who claim they do not know themselves may come to question what they are." Both Teresa and the Course point to the greatest spiritual estrangement as the ignorance of one's divine filiation. In both cases, the path of return begins with the recognition of who we truly are.

**IV** The paradox that Teresa presents—on the one hand, a soul created in the image of God, and on the other, a *"creature so unworthy and full of misery"*—can be approached from a psychological perspective as the contrast between the deepest, most spiritual identity of the human being and the perception we typically have of ourselves on a conscious or everyday level.

Mysticism holds that at the innermost core of a person, there is a transcendent foundation, an interior space where the divine dwells. From this perspective, the human being shares in an exalted dignity that comes from both their divine origin and destiny. At the same time, the experience of fragility, guilt, and imperfection leads us to recognize ourselves as *"miserable"* or *"unworthy,"* aware of our real limitations.

In psychological terms, the *"I"* that perceives itself as limited, flawed, and lacking corresponds to what we might call today the level of ordinary consciousness or, in more secular language, the *ego*. It is the part of us defined by our personal histories, insecurities, and immediate awareness of finitude. Mysticism, however, points to a deeper *Self* (sometimes referred to as the *Self* in transpersonal psychology), which aligns with the inner dimension—the *castle* where God dwells.

The tension between these two realities—the inner greatness versus the awareness of one's limitations—creates a dialectical movement toward spiritual growth. Teresa and the mystics of her time saw humility as essential to avoiding pride, while at the same time, they emphasized the lofty calling of the person destined for union with God. From a psychological standpoint, this humility functions as a safeguard against ego inflation, while the contemplation of the soul's dignity keeps alive the yearning for perfection and union with the divine.

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Thus, the ongoing duality found in Teresa's writings ultimately reflects the dialectic between a *conscious self*, marked by the sense of misery, and a deeper identity, capable of containing divine life. Far from being an irreconcilable contradiction, this polarity forms the *working space* of the mystical experience: the recognition of one's own misery leads to humility, and the certainty of inner dignity fuels the quest for that God who dwells at the *center* of the soul.

**V** "*His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'*" (John 9:2, NRSV).

**VI** "*But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.*" (Genesis 19:26, NRSV).

**VII** Teresa describes the immense greatness and dignity of the soul as a *castle* of crystal or diamond, made in the image and likeness of God, with many mansions and a central chamber where He dwells. However, the difficulty she points out is that we do not usually identify ourselves with this sublime description of our own soul. Instead, we remain on the *outer shell*, the most superficial part of our being, preoccupied with external matters and caught up in distractions and *vermin* that prevent us from discovering our inner splendor.

This misalignment between what we truly are—a *castle* meant to house the King—and the image we hold of ourselves creates a spiritual identity crisis. We do not recognize ourselves as God's dwelling place but rather as limited and fragile beings. Teresa makes it clear that this lack of awareness is *great folly*, for if we truly knew our own soul, we would not devote so much effort to external concerns but would instead focus on safeguarding and beautifying that inner mansion that God Himself has chosen.

The key to reconciling this true identity—the radiant soul—with the way we ordinarily perceive ourselves is the practice of prayer. Prayer, as Teresa understands it, is the *door* leading to the inner chambers where the secret dialogue with God takes place. Shifting our focus in this way helps us to free ourselves from both external and internal *noise*, allowing us to recognize that we are not merely bodies but rather that *marvelous castle* created for union with our Creator.

Thus, the exercise of self-knowledge, of becoming aware of the dignity we possess, is both the first step and the great challenge in beginning to identify with what Teresa calls the *true reality of our soul*.

**VIII** "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" (Matthew 6:21, NRSV).

## Chapter 2

*It speaks of how dreadful a soul in mortal sin is and how God chose to reveal this to a certain person. It also addresses self-knowledge. This is a valuable topic, as there are important points to consider. It further explains how these mansions should be understood.*

1. Before we continue, I want you to reflect on what it means to behold this radiant and beautiful castle, this precious pearl, this tree of life planted in the living waters of life,<sup>I</sup> which is God, when it falls into mortal sin. There is no darkness more profound, no shadow so deep that can compare to it. Even though the very Sun that once gave it light and beauty remains at the center of the soul, it is as if He were not there, for the soul no longer partakes of Him. Though it has the capacity to reflect His Majesty as crystal reflects the light of the sun, it no longer serves this purpose.

This is why all the good works performed by a person in a state of mortal sin bear no fruit for attaining glory, for they do not proceed from that source, which is God, from Whom all virtue comes. Being separated from Him, such works cannot be pleasing in His sight. In the end, whoever commits a mortal sin does not seek to please God but rather the devil, who is darkness itself, and thus the soul is plunged into utter darkness.<sup>II</sup>

2. I know a person to whom the Lord chose to reveal what happens to a soul after committing a mortal sin. She said that if human beings could truly understand it, it would be impossible for anyone to sin again, even if they had to endure the greatest suffering to avoid occasions of sin. For this reason, she fervently wished that all could grasp this reality.<sup>III</sup> I hope that you, my daughters, will feel the same desire to pray earnestly for those who are in this state of total darkness, for their works are just as dark.

Just as clear streams flow from a crystalline fountain, so too are the works of a soul in grace pleasing to both God and humanity, for

they come from that fountain of life in which the soul is planted like a tree, drawing from it freshness and fruitfulness. Without this fountain, the tree would wither and bear no good fruit. In contrast, a soul that, by its own fault, uproots itself from this fountain and instead takes root in another of foul and murky waters will bring forth nothing but wretchedness and impurity.

3. It is essential to understand that the fountain and that radiant sun dwelling at the center of the soul do not lose their light or beauty, for nothing can diminish their perfection. But if a black cloth is placed over a crystal that lies in the sun, it is clear that, although the sun continues to shine, its light cannot pass through the crystal or reflect upon it.

4. Oh, souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ! Understand this and have compassion on yourselves! How is it possible that, knowing this, you do not strive to cleanse the stain that darkens the crystal of your soul? Remember that if your life ends in this state, you will never again enjoy that light.

Oh, Jesus! How terrifying it is to see a soul separated from that light! How desolate the chambers of the castle become! What confusion reigns in the senses, which are like the castle's inhabitants! And the faculties of the soul, which act as its rulers and administrators—how blinded they are, and how poorly they govern! **IV**

In the end, if the tree planted in the soul is the devil, what good fruit could it possibly bear? **V**

5. I once heard a spiritual man say that he was not amazed by the things a person in mortal sin might do, but rather by how little they did, considering the state they were in. May God, in His mercy, deliver us from such a great evil, for there is nothing in this life that truly deserves the name *evil* as much as this, since it leads to eternal ruin. **VI**

This, my daughters, is what should truly cause us fear and what we must ask of God in our prayers. For if He does not guard the city, our efforts are in vain, since we are fragile and inclined toward vanity.

The person I spoke of learned two great lessons from the grace God granted her. The first was a deep fear of offending Him, constantly begging that He would not allow her to fall into sin, having seen how terrible its consequences are. The second was a mirror of humility, as she realized that all the good we do does not originate in ourselves, but in that fountain where the tree of our souls is planted and in that sun that gives warmth to our works.

She said this truth was made so clear to her that whenever she did something good or saw it in others, she traced it back to its true source, understanding that without God's help, we can do nothing. From this realization arose an immediate impulse to praise the Lord, almost entirely forgetting herself whenever she did something good.

6. It will not be time wasted, sisters, for you to read this, nor for me to write it, if we can hold on to these two teachings. The learned and the wise already know them well, but in our simplicity as women, we need these comparisons, and perhaps this is why the Lord wills that they come to our understanding. May His goodness grant us the grace to comprehend them.

7. The things of the soul are so difficult to grasp that someone as ignorant as I am must say many unnecessary and even mistaken things just to get something right. Whoever reads this must have patience, just as I must have patience in writing about what I do not know. At times, I take up the paper as if it were an empty task, not knowing what to say or how to begin.<sup>viii</sup> But I understand that it is important for you that I explain, as much as possible, some interior experiences of prayer.

We always hear how good prayer is and are taught to practice it at certain hours, yet rarely is it explained to us beyond what we can grasp on our own. Little is said about the supernatural works that God performs in the soul. However, if these things are presented in different ways, we will find great comfort in reflecting on this heavenly interior art, so little known among mortals, though many walk this path.

And although in other writings the Lord has granted me some understanding, I now see that there were things I had not fully grasped, especially the more difficult ones. The problem is that, to reach these truths, I will have to repeat things that are already well known, for with my limited understanding, I cannot explain them otherwise.

8. Let us now return to our castle with many mansions. You must not imagine these mansions as rooms arranged in a row, one behind another. Instead, think of the center, the grand hall or palace where the King resides. Picture it like a fruit, a date palm, whose edible part is reached only after passing through many layers. The same is true here: around that central hall, there are other mansions, as well as those above and below.

The realities of the soul must be considered with breadth and grandeur, for its capacity has no limits—it is far greater than we can imagine. And in every part of the soul, the light of that sun, which dwells in the innermost palace, extends.

This is very important for any soul engaged in prayer, whether much or little. Do not confine or limit it. Let it freely move through these mansions, ascend, descend, and explore its depths, for God has granted it such great dignity that we must not force it to remain always in the same place.

Oh, and when it comes to self-knowledge! Though it is absolutely necessary (listen carefully), even for the souls whom the Lord has led to the mansion where He dwells, it will never cease to be fundamental. No matter how exalted they may be, they will always need this knowledge, and even if they wished to do without it, they could not—for humility is a constant labor, like the bee that never ceases making honey in the hive: without it, all is lost.

Yet, also remember that the bee does not remain locked in the hive—it flies out to seek flowers. So must the soul in its self-knowledge: believe me, it must fly at times to contemplate the greatness and majesty of God. There, it will see its own smallness far more

clearly than if it only looks at itself, and it will be freer from the minor miseries found in the first mansions, those of self-knowledge.

And while, as I say, it is a great mercy from God to practice self-examination, both excess and deficiency in this can be harmful. Believe me, with the strength of God, we act more effectively than when we are too preoccupied with our own wretchedness.

9. I do not know if I have made myself clear, for self-knowledge is so important that I would never want there to be any negligence in it, even for those who are very advanced spiritually. As long as we are in this life, nothing is more necessary than humility. That is why I insist that it is good and beneficial to enter first into the mansion of self-knowledge before attempting to ascend to higher ones.

This is the sure path, and if we can walk along a smooth and solid road, why long for wings to fly? Yet always seek to deepen this self-knowledge. In my view, we never truly come to know ourselves unless we strive to know God. By contemplating His greatness, we discover our smallness; by beholding His purity, we recognize our impurity; by considering His humility, we see how far we are from being truly humble. **VIII**

10. There are two benefits to this. The first is that white appears much whiter when compared to black, just as black stands out more when placed next to white. The second is that our understanding and will become more noble and better disposed toward good when we maintain a constant relationship with God. On the other hand, if we never rise above the mire of our own miseries, this becomes a great obstacle.

Just as we said that those in mortal sin have darkened and corrupted thoughts, in a similar way (though not as grave—God forbid, for this is merely a comparison), if we remain trapped in the misery of our own nature, we will never free ourselves from the mud of fears, cowardice, and insecurity: always worrying whether others are watching us or not, whether following a certain path will bring us harm, whether we will dare to begin a project, whether doing so

would be an act of pride, whether someone as wretched as we are should even attempt something as lofty as prayer, whether others will think us better than we truly are, whether we should follow the same path as everyone else, believing that extremes—even in virtue—are not good. Thinking that, because we are such sinners, a possible fall will be even worse; that we may not progress at all and will only be a hindrance to the good; that someone like us does not need anything special.

11. Oh, my God, my daughters! How many souls must the devil have led astray by this path! Many believe that such an attitude is humility, but in reality, it stems from a failure to truly understand themselves. Self-knowledge, if not properly grasped, can become a trap: it locks us within ourselves and distances us from the truth. I am not surprised that this happens when one never steps outside their own inner world, for it is easy to fall into this error.

This is why I tell you, daughters, to fix your eyes on Christ, our supreme good. In Him, we will learn true humility. We can also look to the example of the saints, and in doing so, our understanding will be elevated, as I have already told you. In this way, self-knowledge will not turn into something petty or cowardly. Although this is only the first mansion, it is rich and of great value. If we manage to free ourselves from the minor miseries that surround it, we will be able to move forward to higher mansions.

The devil has very subtle strategies to prevent souls from knowing themselves and discovering the path to God.

12. Of these first mansions, I can speak with considerable experience. That is why I tell you not to think there are only a few rooms in this castle—imagine millions of them. Souls enter these mansions in many different ways, generally with good intentions. However, the devil always acts with ill intent, and he must have legions of evil spirits stationed in each chamber to prevent the soul from advancing from one mansion to the next.

The poor soul does not recognize these traps. The devil uses countless deceptions to ensnare it, something he cannot do as easily with souls that are already closer to the King. In these first mansions, the soul is still very much attached to the world, immersed in its pleasures, preoccupied with honors and vain ambitions. Because of this, the soul's faculties—its senses and powers—are weakened and unable to defend themselves with the strength that God has naturally given them. Thus, even though these souls may desire not to offend God and may perform good works, they are easily overcome.

Souls in this state must turn to God frequently, however they can, and seek the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the saints, for they cannot defend themselves by their own strength alone. In reality, at any stage of the spiritual life, we are always dependent on God's help. May His Majesty grant it to us in His mercy. Amen.

13. How miserable is the life we lead! Elsewhere, I have spoken at length about the harm caused by a poor understanding of humility and self-knowledge. I will not dwell on it further here, though it is what matters most to us. May the Lord, in His goodness, grant that something I have said may be of benefit to you.

14. You must keep in mind that in these first mansions, only a faint light reaches from the palace where the King dwells. Though the soul is not in total darkness, as when living in mortal sin, there is still a lack of clarity that prevents it from seeing things clearly. This is not due to any defect in the soul itself—which I do not quite know how to explain—but rather to the many harmful influences surrounding it: serpents, vipers, and other spiritual poisons that entered with it and block its ability to perceive the light.

It is as if someone were to step into a sunlit room but had dust in their eyes and could barely open them. The light is there, but they cannot enjoy it because of their own blindness. The same happens to the soul that, although not in a state of grave sin, remains so attached to worldly things—wealth, honor, or business—that it cannot perceive its own beauty or delight in the interior light.

To move forward to the second mansions, it is essential to begin letting go of what is unnecessary, each according to their state in life. This is so important for reaching the innermost mansion that, if one does not begin this process, I believe it is impossible to advance. Even remaining safely within the first mansion is difficult if one does not abandon everything that poisons the soul. Among so many harmful influences, sooner or later, one will cause harm. **IX**

15. And what would it be, my daughters, if we, who are already free from these external obstacles—like ourselves—who have entered the more interior mansions of the castle, were to return, by our own fault, to these worldly entanglements? Unfortunately, this has happened to many souls whom God had filled with grace, but who, through their own negligence, returned to this spiritual misery.

Outwardly, we are free from such distractions, but I pray to the Lord that we may also be free within. Guard yourselves, my daughters, from concerning yourselves with matters that do not belong to you. **X** Remember that in nearly all the mansions of the castle, the demons continue their battle. It is true that in some of them, the soul's faculties are stronger and more capable of resisting, but we must never let our guard down. It is essential to remain vigilant in recognizing the enemy's traps, for he often disguises himself as an angel of light.

The devil can harm us in many subtle ways, gradually infiltrating our souls without us realizing it until his work is already done.

16. I have already told you that the devil acts like a *silent file*, working quietly and imperceptibly. This is why we must detect his deceptions from the very beginning. I will give you some examples to help you understand this better.

Imagine that a sister begins to feel great desires for penance, to the point that she cannot find peace unless she is suffering in some way. This is a good beginning. **XI** But if the prioress has ordered that no one practice penance without her permission, and the sister, convinced that in something so good she may disobey, begins to do it in secret,

she may end up harming her health and failing to observe the Rule. Do you see how that good beginning has turned out?

Another example: a sister develops a great zeal for perfection, which is also very good. But from this could arise the tendency to see even the smallest faults in her sisters as great failings. This could lead her to constantly monitor others, to report their mistakes to the prioress, and, at times, even to become blind to her own shortcomings due to her obsession with the perfection of others.

The other sisters, who may not fully understand the spiritual background of her attitude, might not receive it well. This is why, even in good things, we must be careful and discern well the movements of our hearts, for the devil can slip in disguised as virtue.

17. What the devil seeks here is no small thing—he wants to cool the charity and love among us, which would be a great harm. Let us understand, my daughters, that true perfection consists in love for God and neighbor, and the more perfectly we keep these two commandments, the more perfect we will be. Our entire Rule and Constitutions are nothing more than means to help us live these commandments with greater perfection.

Let us set aside that indiscreet zeal, which can cause great harm. Let each one look to herself, for I have spoken enough on this matter elsewhere and do not wish to dwell on it further.

18. This love among us is so important that I would never want you to forget it. If we spend our time noticing small faults in others—which, at times, are not even imperfections but simply misunderstandings on our part that we interpret in the worst possible way—the soul can lose its peace and even disturb the peace of others. Consider how costly such a *misunderstood perfection* would be.

The devil could also plant this temptation in the heart of the prioress, which would be even more dangerous. This is why great discretion is needed. If something goes against the Rule or Constitutions, it should not always be overlooked—correction must be given

with charity, and if there is no amendment, it should be reported to the superior. Done well, this is an act of true charity.

The same applies among sisters when dealing with a serious matter. Remaining silent out of fear that it may be a temptation could, in itself, be another temptation. However, we must be very careful that the devil does not deceive us: we must not discuss these matters with other sisters who cannot provide a solution, for from that could arise murmuring, which would be of great benefit to the devil.

We should speak only with those who can help correct the problem, as I have already said. Thanks be to God, in our community, there is less opportunity for this to happen because of the continuous practice of silence, but it is always good to remain vigilant.

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I *"Then the Lord God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever'"* (Genesis 3:22, NRSV).

*"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb."* (Revelation 22:1, NRSV).

II In this passage, Teresa of Ávila employs the powerful imagery of the radiant castle, the precious pearl, and the tree of life planted in the living waters of God to illustrate the intrinsic beauty and dignity of the human soul. However, when the soul falls into mortal sin, that vital connection with God is severed. Although the divine *Sun* remains present at the soul's center, the soul no longer partakes of its light, and it is as if that presence no longer existed. The analogy of the crystal covered by a black cloth demonstrates that, despite the constant radiance of God, the soul becomes incapable of reflecting that light due to its condition.

In the theological context of her time, mortal sin represented a radical rupture with God, and any good works performed in that state were not considered meritorious for salvation until the person was reconciled through sacramental confession. Teresa appears to affirm this view when she states that works done in mortal sin *"bear no fruit for attaining glory"* because they do not originate from the divine source, which is the wellspring of all virtue.

However, beyond the doctrinal framework, Teresa is emphasizing the spiritual tragedy of disconnection from God rather than simply condemning external actions. Her focus is on the living and transformative relationship with God, and how separation from this source of life impoverishes the soul, depriving it of its full capacity to reflect divine light. This does not necessarily mean that such actions are

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inherently evil or devoid of all value, but rather that, without this vital connection, they lose their ultimate orientation toward union with God.

From a broader and more contemporary perspective, even works carried out in a state of apparent spiritual disconnection can have positive value. These actions may be expressions of the innate goodness of the human being, unconscious reflections of the divine image that persists in the soul, and may serve as seeds that prepare the way for future conversion or a renewed encounter with the divine. While Teresa asserts that these works are not pleasing in the sight of God because they do not proceed directly from Him, it could also be understood that any act of kindness, however imperfect, is an echo of the divine light that never fully vanishes from the soul.

Thus, Teresa's message can be interpreted not only as a warning about the gravity of mortal sin but also as a call to hope: the light of God remains present, waiting to be rediscovered. The "*total darkness*" she describes is not a definitive condemnation but rather a depiction of a condition that can be reversed through a renewed encounter with the source of life and light.

**III** It is quite common in Teresa's writings for her to use the third person when referring to her own experiences, especially when these involve visions, mystical graces, or delicate matters, as is the case here. This literary device serves several purposes: humility (a reluctance to directly attribute elevated spiritual experiences to herself), protection against potential inquisitorial scrutiny, and a means of lending objectivity or distance to what she recounts.

In both the *Book of Her Life* and *The Interior Castle*, we find several passages in which she says "I know someone" or uses similar expressions, though the context and tone strongly suggest she is speaking about herself. In this particular case, the intensity with which she describes the impact of the vision—to the point of asserting that no one would ever sin again if they truly understood it—and the fervent desire that others might also grasp its meaning, reinforce the notion that it was a direct personal experience.

**IV** These faculties that govern the soul, according to the Thomistic paradigm, are memory, understanding, and will. When these are darkened by sin, the soul loses its internal orientation and balance. Memory ceases to recall its divine origin, understanding becomes clouded and unable to discern the truth, and will, weakened, inclines toward lesser goods, unable to seek the supreme good, which is God.

However, this condition is not definitive: the light of God remains present, waiting to be rediscovered and rekindled by the soul that seeks to return to its center.

**V** The devil represents the perverse idea that seeks to divert the soul from God—or, more precisely, convinces it that it is possible to separate from its Creator. However, the devil always lies: though he cannot truly sever the soul from its divine origin, he can make it believe that it is distant. This deception introduces a new

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perspective: the "*birth*" of an illusory identity, the emergence of what is often called the "*individual mind*."

From this illusory standpoint, a world of deception arises—a realm where the soul believes it has separated from God to embark on a *new life* on its own terms, one defined by the very concept of death. This world, in which the confused soul perceives itself as dwelling, is a fictional and irrational domain that distorts divine order, where living inevitably leads to dying and love gives rise to fear.

In this false reality, the soul embarks on an equally imaginary journey of atonement, attempting to redeem itself from a guilt born of a sin that never truly existed. For how could it even be conceived that the soul might succeed in overturning the Will of God, who has eternally willed its union with His beloved Son?

**VI** Here, Teresa is bringing together concepts that, from a ontological perspective, appear contradictory: *evil* and *eternity*. Evil, understood as the absence of good, has no ontological reality of its own; it is a deficiency, not a created entity. God, as the source of all that *is*, does not create absences, and what He does not create cannot have existence in Reality. Therefore, evil can only be considered *real* within an illusory domain—one as fleeting and insubstantial as evil itself.

On the contrary, eternity is a concept that pertains to the divine nature. It expresses the absence of time and, therefore, of change. Everything God creates is immutable and eternal, sustained by His Will, which is likewise unchanging and absolutely real. From this it follows that the expression "eternal evil" contains a contradiction in terms—a kind of ontological oxymoron—since something that is an absence cannot possess permanence in eternity.

It is understandable that Teresa, immersed in the theological pedagogy of her time—rooted in a millennia-old Judeo-Christian tradition—used fear as an instructive tool. In that context, the fear of eternal punishment was a common means to encourage conversion and repentance. However, from a broader and more contemporary perspective, it is evident that the means cannot contradict the ends. To attempt to reach Love through fear presents a fundamental paradox that humanity has taken centuries to begin to recognize—and has yet to fully accept.

Teresa undoubtedly reached a level of holiness and mystical experience that few can even imagine. However, only in her moments of greatest clarity did she manage to free herself from concepts that defy reason and distress the heart. In those flashes of profound understanding, her direct experience of God led her to recognize the absolutely loving nature of the Father—incapable of imposing suffering on His Son to bring Him back to Him. These moments transcend doctrinal boundaries and reveal a more universal and liberating truth: that divine Love is unconditional and eternal, and that any perception of separation or condemnation is, ultimately, an illusory creation of the human mind.

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Thus, although Teresa employs the expression *eternal evil* in this passage, her work is filled with insights that contradict that punitive vision. Her mystical experience, which led her to an intimate union with the divine, bears witness to a God who does not punish but embraces, who does not separate but unites, and whose very essence is pure and unconditional Love.

**VII** This act of approaching creative work with absolute humility—stripping oneself of all personal effort—is the foundation of true creativity. Authenticity does not arise from conscious control or the effort to replicate what is already known, but from the ability to empty oneself in order to become a channel for something greater. Anything that does not originate from this inner emptiness is merely a reworking of the past—reproductions that, while they may be technically sound, lack the spark of what is truly original.

This passage reflects the honest writer’s fear of the blank page—that moment of vulnerability in which one acknowledges one’s own limitations and abandons any pretense of control. It is precisely in that emptiness that true inspiration can emerge. Facing this void requires courage and, above all, trust: the trust that one will not be left abandoned, that the request—the prayer—will be answered.

In this sense, authentic creativity is an act of faith, an exercise in surrender where the creator becomes both witness and vessel for something that transcends them.

**VIII** This *self-knowledge* that the saint speaks of goes beyond merely recognizing personality traits or the individual ego. While it could, in part, be interpreted as an identification with the *lower self*—that is, the individual mind that distinguishes one person from another—Teresa’s approach has a spiritual depth that transcends this more psychological perspective.

Indeed, there is an aspect of self-knowledge that helps us understand our inclinations, limitations, and reactions, allowing us to anticipate how we might behave in different situations. This is useful for personal growth and improving our relationships with others. However, for Teresa, true self-knowledge does not stop at analyzing character or individual traits; it is a continuous exercise in humility that leads the soul to recognize its radical dependence on God.

The self-knowledge Teresa speaks of is not merely a tool for psychological introspection but a means of unveiling one’s own smallness in contrast to God’s greatness. It is not enough to know our virtues and faults; the soul must rise to contemplate the majesty of God. And it is in this contemplation that it truly discovers its own nature—limited, fragile, and incapable of reaching fulfillment on its own. This realization does not lead to despair but to a fruitful humility that opens the door to grace.

Teresa also warns against excesses: self-knowledge that turns into self-absorption can be as harmful as a lack of introspection. Humility must not become self-pity or an obsession with one’s own wretchedness. Just as the bee does not remain in the hive, the soul must not become trapped in its own contemplation. It must fly

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toward God, and in that divine contemplation, it finds the perfect balance between self-awareness and trust in God's mercy.

**IX** Here, Teresa makes a powerful call to simplify life, inviting the soul to shed all unnecessary burdens that hinder its spiritual progress. This is not merely about renouncing material goods but about a deeper purification of desires and inner motivations. Excessive attachment to wealth, honor, or worldly concerns prevents the soul from perceiving its own beauty and from enjoying the interior light that God offers.

To advance to the second mansions, this process of liberation must begin. Each person, according to their state in life, must identify what binds them and makes their path to God more difficult. This detachment does not mean despising the world or human relationships but rather placing everything in its proper order so that nothing takes the place of one's relationship with the divine. Ultimately, it is a matter of priorities.

Failing to practice this detachment makes even remaining in the first mansion risky. The things that poison the soul—whether material worries, excessive ambitions, or emotional dependencies—will inevitably harm it sooner or later. Teresa shows us that the journey toward union with God begins with this inner cleansing: detachment is not a loss but a necessary condition for the soul to open itself to the fullness of divine love.

The challenge of this detachment often lies in the fact that one has not yet recognized the lack of true value in what is being renounced. It is perceived as a sacrifice, as a necessary loss to gain something greater, when in reality, it is not. God does not demand that we give up anything of real value to reach Him. What we renounce are illusions—false promises of happiness.

Thus, detachment is not an end in itself but a means of freeing the soul from everything that prevents it from recognizing its true nature and advancing toward the innermost mansion, where God awaits in all His light and beauty.

**X** Now, Teresa reminds us of the importance of renouncing concerns about worldly matters, especially those that do not pertain to us. This warning is not merely a call to avoid external distractions but an invitation to maintain inner purity and spiritual focus, even for those who have already advanced on the path of contemplation.

Teresa emphasizes a fundamental principle: believing that something external to oneself is one's responsibility can become an obstacle to the spiritual life. This is a common cognitive bias—responsibility can only be exercised where one has true control, and that domain is, essentially, one's own mind. Attempting to control or feeling responsible for matters beyond oneself not only diverts attention from inner growth but can also drag the soul back into the *spiritual misery* from which it had already been freed.

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Taking responsibility for one's own mind is the essential prerequisite for acting rightly in the world. Only when the soul is at peace with itself and free from unnecessary entanglements can it clearly discern how to engage with the world without becoming ensnared by it. Teresa shows us that true freedom is not merely about being free from external distractions but about achieving an inner serenity that allows one to live *in* the world without belonging to it.

Thus, her exhortation to “*guard against worrying about matters that do not concern you*” is not a call to indifference but to inner clarity—the clarity that enables us to discern what truly deserves our attention and what should be left in God's hands or to the natural course of life.

**XI** This observation by the saint may seem questionable from a contemporary perspective. The idea that suffering is a requirement for drawing closer to God suggests a vision of the divine that demands penance and pain as means of purification. However, one might ask: what loving father would require his child to suffer in order to earn his love?

From a broader understanding of divine love, we could interpret that suffering is not an end in itself nor a condition imposed by God, but rather an experience that, at times, can have a transformative value when lived with meaning and surrender. Teresa warns about the subtle deceptions of the devil, who can disguise the desire for penance as an act of virtue when, in reality, it may be feeding spiritual ego or a search for self-gratification through pain.

Thus, rather than asserting that God demands suffering, Teresa seems to highlight the need to discern the true motivation behind our actions. The desire for penance can be a good beginning if it is guided by sincere and selfless love for God, but it can also become a trap if suffering is sought for its own sake or as a way to feel more virtuous.

A truly loving Father does not desire the pain of His children but their growth and fulfillment. The path to God may involve sacrifices and renunciations, but it will never require the loss of anything real. God can only ask us to sacrifice and renounce illusions. And these acts are always meant to free the soul and draw it closer to Love, never to impose unnecessary suffering.

# FIRST MANSION

## The awakening of the soul and the awareness of its dignity

The First Mansion is the entrance to the *Interior Castle*, the symbolic space that Saint Teresa of Ávila uses to describe the human soul on its journey toward union with God. The castle is a place of indescribable beauty, made of pure crystal or radiant diamond, with many rooms and chambers that represent the different states of the soul. At the center of this castle dwells God, radiating a light that illuminates everything. However, the farther the soul is from this center, the darker and more confused its interior becomes.

The first mansions are at the periphery of the castle. Here dwell the souls that have taken their first steps in the spiritual life but are still heavily influenced by the external world. They are inside the castle, yes, but they have barely entered. They have not yet discovered the riches within them nor the living presence of God, who dwells in the depths of their being.

### Who Inhabits This Mansion?

These are people who live with little awareness of their interior life. They may pray occasionally, attend religious services, or feel a certain spiritual restlessness, but their attention remains focused on external matters—work, pleasures, success, social relationships, daily concerns. They have not yet seriously reflected on their relationship with God or the deeper purpose of their existence.

Saint Teresa describes these souls as being full of "*vermin*" and "*poisonous beasts*", strong images that symbolize vices, disordered passions, and worldly thoughts that distract the soul from its true center. Though they may not be in a state of grave sin, their hearts are fragmented, scattered across countless distractions that prevent God's light from shining clearly within them.

However, there is one crucial fact: these souls have *entered* the castle. Perhaps it was due to an inner stirring, a personal crisis, the example of someone close, or simply a vague longing for something more. Whatever the reason, they have taken the first step. And for Saint Teresa, that is cause for great hope.

## The Awakening of Spiritual Awareness

The great challenge of this mansion is the lack of self-knowledge. These souls do not truly know themselves. They are unaware of who they are at their core, nor do they understand the immense dignity they possess as dwellings of God. They live on the surface of their existence, without exploring the inner chambers where the truth of their being resides.

Saint Teresa insists that the journey to God begins with self-knowledge—not to become trapped in guilt or obsessive self-analysis, but to discover the immense treasure within: the image of God engraved in the soul. This awakening is not easy because it requires stopping, embracing silence, and turning inward—something that can feel uncomfortable at first.

### Prayer: The Door to the Castle

Saint Teresa is clear: *prayer is the entrance to the Interior Castle*. But she is not referring to mechanical or repetitive prayer, but rather to a sincere dialogue with God, an act of recollection in which the soul begins to turn toward its own center.

At this stage, prayer can be difficult. The mind is scattered, the heart restless, and distractions seem overwhelming. The soul is still very attached to the noise of the world and struggles to find inner peace. However, every effort to pray, even if imperfect, is a step forward.

Saint Teresa encourages perseverance. The simple attempt to pray, to seek a moment of interior silence, is already a spiritual victory. The key is persistence, even when nothing special is felt. It is like planting a seed—at first, no growth is visible, but with time, it will bear fruit.

## The Obstacles of the First Mansion

**Constant Distractions:** The soul is pulled in different directions by worldly thoughts, worries, and superficial desires. It struggles to focus on prayer or its inner life.

**Disordered Attachments:** There is a strong dependence on external things—success, recognition, pleasure, material security. These attachments act as chains that prevent the soul from moving toward God.

**Spiritual Self-Deception:** The soul may believe it is in a good state simply because it follows certain religious practices, without realizing that its heart remains far from God.

**Fear of Change:** The fear of confronting one's own truth or leaving behind old comforts can hold back the desire to deepen the spiritual life.

## The First Great Lesson: The Dignity of the Soul

Saint Teresa wants the soul to understand something fundamental: even if it is full of imperfections, it is a castle of immeasurable worth. It was created to be God's dwelling place, and its dignity does not depend on what it has done or failed to do, but on the love with which it was created.

This realization can be life-changing. A person who has always lived outwardly, seeking value in achievements or the opinions of others, suddenly discovers that their true worth is within—in their relationship with God.

## Saint Teresa's Advice for This Stage

**Do not abandon prayer:** Even if it is difficult or feels unfruitful, prayer is the only path to self-knowledge and knowledge of God.

**Cultivate inner silence:** Seek moments of recollection, even brief ones, to disconnect from external noise and connect with the heart.

**Reflect on one's own life:** Take time to consider the direction of life, what gives it meaning and purpose.

**Do not fear one's own frailty:** God does not reject an imperfect soul; on the contrary, He patiently waits for it to take the first step toward Him.

## The First Fruits Begin to Appear

**Inner restlessness:** A vague yet persistent longing for something deeper, even if one does not fully understand what it is.

**Awareness of one's fragility:** The soul begins to recognize its limitations—not to become discouraged, but to open itself to God's grace.

**First signs of conversion:** Small decisions to improve spiritual life, let go of negative habits, or seek greater meaning in existence.

## The Key Lessons of the First Mansion

**Recognizing that there is an Interior Castle:** The spiritual life is real, and it is a fascinating world worth exploring.

**Becoming aware of God's presence:** Even if the soul does not feel it, God is already dwelling within, patiently waiting to be discovered.

**Accepting one's own dignity:** Even in its most imperfect state, the soul is an invaluable treasure in God's eyes.

**Beginning the journey:** What matters is not how far one is from the center, but that the first step has been taken into the castle.

In the First Mansion, the soul finds itself on the threshold of a fascinating journey. It may have spent its entire life unaware that within itself lies its true home—a luminous castle. Now, at last, the door has been opened. The challenge is not to remain at the entrance but to dare to move forward, step by step, toward the encounter with God in the mansion where He has always dwelled.