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Title: “The Right Disciplines at the Right Time: Understanding the Journey with Teresa of Avila” by Tom Ashbrook

I was sitting at Holy Trinity Abbey in Huntsville, Utah, staring off toward the craggy snow-capped mountains, wondering what this turn of events in my life might mean. A year earlier, a Trappist Monastery would have been the last place I would have thought of going; now, I couldn't stay away. While I had once thought of myself as a mature Christian leader, I now realized that the God of the Bible was a huge mystery to me. What had once been a fairly satisfying spiritual walk, (as long as things were going well), had now become a deep longing, a restless dissatisfaction, and a foggy confusion about what God was up to in my life. I felt that there must be more, much more, to this life with God, but what? I soon realized that I was not alone in my hunger and thirst or in my confusion.

Like many others in the past few decades, I had begun to explore the ancient spiritual disciplines, discovering the wonderful truth that, when we make space for God to speak into our lives, He meets us and we are touched and blessed. For me, the disciplines of solitude, silence, and contemplation, learned at Holy Trinity Abbey, set me on the path of ongoing discovery of what God had in store for my relationship with Him. But why was I only just discovering this now? Shouldn't I have been practicing these disciplines all along? Teresa of Avila's writings were soon to provide the answer to that question.

The assumption behind my question was that the practice of spiritual disciplines must be a principle or program – a one-to-one equation of cause and effect. “If I do this, then God will do that. The more I work these disciplines, the more I will become holy or effective. The truth is, of course, that the Holy Spirit works the transformation of spiritual growth. We

can cooperate, but we can't make it happen. Spiritual disciplines often need to be done in quite different ways as spiritual growth happens in us. So, despite a new emphasis on spiritual disciplines today, it may be that many of us have been doing "the right disciplines" but at the wrong time. How can we tell?

The difficulty is that we may be confused about the journey of faith. Many of us have no real understanding about the path of spiritual growth beyond the foundational practices of basic discipleship. Once we have committed our lives to Christ; studied and learned the fundamental truths of Scripture; developed a regular practice of prayer; discovered our spiritual gifts; joined a small group; and gotten to work in some program in the church, then what? That was just my condition as I sat at the Monastery in Utah. As I was to find out, there are a lot of "then whats" ahead of me, enough for a lifetime! For me, some clarity began in those years at the Monastery, when I was introduced to the amazingly simple but profound outline of our spiritual journey, the Seven Mansions described by Teresa of Avila. Once I understood the path of our journey and my place along the way, I began to realize why I was so hungry for the new disciplines of solitude and silence, and why they could be used to accomplish in me now that could not have happened before.

Teresa of Avila and the Seven Mansions of Spiritual Formation

You may be asking, "Who in the world is Teresa of Avila"? We'll just do a sketch here, but a good history can be found in the introduction to her collected works.¹ Teresa was born on March 28, 1515, in Avila, Spain, in a well-to-do, noble family. Despite chronic health problems she entered the Carmelite order that focused on a life of prayer. At about forty years old, she

¹ Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*; Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1987).

underwent a “second conversion,” related to reading the *Confessions of Augustine*. Her faith was strengthened and a deep relationship with God in Christ flourished. With her new zeal for Christ, Teresa became increasingly critical of the church and monastic communities of her time, feeling that they had yielded to the norms of secular society. So, in 1562 she founded the Convent of St. Joseph in Avila, which followed faithfully the values of simplicity, poverty, and charity to undergird the formation of a life that was truly given to loving God in prayer. Other similar monasteries were soon established. Teresa also founded convents of friars, having as her collaborator, John of the Cross. She became a prolific writer to communicate her insights about spiritual growth. Of particular interest to our topic is Teresa’s *Interior Castle*, written at age sixty-two.² Teresa was known as an excellent manager and waged a long and ultimately successful struggle to have the “Discalced” (barefoot) Carmelites separated from the older order. The reawakening of religious fervor that she brought about in Spain was amazing! Soon after her death the movement spread beyond Spain and across Christendom, having a profound effect on the church of her time. She was canonized in 1622, becoming the first woman “Doctor of the Church.”

We see from Teresa’s life that she was not an “ivory tower” mystic who was separated from the difficulties of life or the challenges of the world. Teresa might be considered a “church planter” in her own church culture, a gifted leader and organizer, and the spiritual director for hundreds of ordinary people. She faced the many of the same issues that we face today in our changing culture, and her insights were born out of her daily walk with God in the context of pain and struggle. While many of us may not be impressed with canonization or doctoral titles, they show that the church of her time deeply affirmed her faith and spiritual insights. These insights have been studied and explored by Christians of all walks ever since.

² Ibid. Vol. 2.

One day, Teresa was asked by her superiors to write an explanation about the progressive development of one's spiritual life. As she prayed about her assignment, she received a picture of the believer's as a beautiful castle. It was made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many concentric rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions. In the center of the crystal castle is the "Sun" illuminating outward. Teresa envisioned that as we grow in our spiritual relationship with Christ, we are drawn closer to this divine Sun, being transformed into His likeness and a deep intimacy and cooperation with Him. In the Seventh Mansion, the center, the King of Glory lives in great splendor and illumines and adorns all the dwellings as far as the outer ring. So, closer we move toward the center, the more intense His light. Our journey is not linear, but we are like pilgrims who travel here and there, explore this region and that, but are drawn closer and closer in our relationship with God by the power of His love. Although Teresa does not directly quote the passage, it is obvious that Jesus' encouragements about eternal reality deeply informed both Teresa's image and her understanding of how God works in our present spiritual growth:

"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also." John 14:1-3. NASU

There are subtle but important insights here that is foundational in understanding Teresa's description of our spiritual journey. First, it happens in our interior relationship with God. The Trinity indwells us and we experience Him "inside." While most Christians would affirm God's presence in us, we often talk and think as if He were "up there," or "out there." We use phrases like "God showed up," as if He weren't present all the time. We really mean to say that we experienced His presence, but the language betrays our tendency to look exteriorly for relationship and communication with God. Teresa says that we experience God, not only in

outward circumstances, but mainly within. The second important truth in this passage is that it is Jesus who comes to us and takes us onward. It is not up to us to make our own way.

This description of the seven mansions of spiritual growth provides a framework in which to understand various stages of the work of the Spirit and of our cooperation with Him. Her paradigm is amazingly simple, paralleling the two main movements of human development in every culture: growing up into adulthood followed by falling in love and getting married. Teresa described these mansions as they are reflected in our prayer life, in our relationship to others, and in the physical, emotional and spiritual transformations that take place in each mansion. Deepening intimacy with the Trinity and the resulting fire of love produces our desire and the power that transforms and restores the image of God within us. Teresa agrees with many mystics of her time that the very goal of spiritual transformation is a love relationship with God. While holiness, service for God, and wholeness are certainly important aspects of spiritual maturity, Teresa sees them as byproducts which naturally flow out of an increasing and loving union with God.

Well, let's take a journey through the Teresian Mansions, describing the stages or phases of our spiritual growth as we go. As you imagine each mansion, try to recall times when you might have visited or even lived in that mansion. Remember that the journey is not as linear as it may sound; we explore and visit and return and then, visit again, and then move on a little deeper toward increased intimacy with God. While Teresa did not entitle the mansions, I find the following titles helpful to understand their progression.

FIRST MANSION - Saved Yet With a Worldly Focus

The First Mansion is where we hear and respond to the Gospel of God's love and forgiveness in Christ and become a Christian. We make our initial discoveries about the

Kingdom of God, through Scripture and Christian relationships, and began to learn what it means to be in the world, but not of it. Our focus, however, is largely on getting God's help to obtain the things we haven't been able to get for ourselves and seeking God for deliverance from the addictions that have been causing us so much pain. Despite our growth in the First Mansion, the true light of Christ is hard to discern, and demonic and self-deception is great. But God continues to draw us to Himself by responding to our prayerful calls for help. Our faith deepens. The exhortations in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 and James 4:1-4 reflect the issues we face in this First Mansion of our Christian journey.

SECOND MANSION - Divided Loyalties - The Battle Between the Kingdom of God and the World

In the Second Mansion, we have come to earnestly desire to live life God's way. But the pull of the world with its false pleasures and gratifications is still strong. The conflicts of loyalty become more intense, as we face our significantly mixed motives. We experience increased spiritual attack. The enemy hammers away with the deception that the world, rather than God, is the source of security, significance, and happiness. Hopefully, our struggles draw us more deeply into prayer where God touches our heart with His love and draws us onward into a deeper relationship of trust. The Second Mansion, however, usually doesn't feel much like spiritual growth. The struggles and conflicts feel more like back-sliding, and it is often a time of discouragement as we experience our share of failures. But God is relentless in His faithfulness and love and calls us closer. Galatians 5:16-25 and Ephesians 6:10-18 illustrate some of the issues we face in the Second Mansion.

THIRD MANSION – Discipleship - Life in Order

Teresa makes a huge jump from the Second Mansion to the Third because she wants to spend time on the later mansions of spiritual transformation. Now, we have developed a relatively balanced life of “discipleship.” Put in contemporary terms, our spiritual growth is marked by regular church attendance and ministry, consistent prayer, concerted effort to live the Christian life, and a genuine desire to please and honor God. While the temptations of the world are still real, the more subtle temptations of pride, jealousy, envy, etc., are more threatening. God continues to meet us in our study of the Word, worship, sermons, and difficult events, calling us deeper into prayer. Our prayers are still dominated by requests for God’s favors and thanks for His blessings. While major issues of sin and addiction may have been overcome, we are being enlightened at a deeper level regarding the depth of sin and the mixed motives that still lie within. Our life in the Third Mansion is focused on serving God faithfully and most of us spend many years here as our “home” mansion. It is interesting to note that the attributes of the Third Mansion are often all that we are taught in our discipling process. Salvation, assurance, godly living, and ministry can be seen as “all there is.” But Teresa says that we aren’t even half-way to what God has for us. There is more, much more! Look at Ephesians 4:1-3 and Philippians 2:12-16 as examples of Third Mansion life.

FOURTH MANSION - Touched by Love

In the Fourth Mansion, God begins to reveal Himself to us through profound touches of His love and presence. We are given the beginnings of grace to “see” and “feel” God in prayer and in daily life. Our attention is shifted more toward the Giver than the gifts, and we find a longing for deeper intimacy with Him and a correspondingly greater desire to love others.

Supernatural experiences in prayer begin here, according to Teresa. At the same time, however, we see more clearly just how wounded we are and begin to realize and confront the difficulty we have in loving and being loved freely. It is in the Fourth Mansion where God begins to “set the agenda” for our prayer times, and our desire to listen increases. Teresa calls this new responsiveness in prayer “infused contemplation” because it is given to us by God. We begin to “taste the love of Jesus” in a way not experienced before. One of the troubling “symptoms” of journeying in the Fourth Mansion is an impatience with exhortations to work harder and do more. Worship songs and hymns of love speak to our hearts, while more Bible knowledge, “practical” sermons, or classes may feel dry and unfulfilling. The Fourth Mansion is an exciting time, but only a taste of what is ahead! Read over Philippians 3:7-11 and John 21:15-17 to gain a better insight into our journey in the Fourth Mansion.

FIFTH MANSION - The Call to Union

The Fifth Mansion is a time of transition where our discipleship focus moves even further from “doing” to “being,” from serving to loving. God calls us to begin to experience the fulfillment the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus in John 17, the call to union with God. Listening prayer has become a regular part of our experience, with times of deep and adoring silence, times of just being with God. A hunger for God deepens and intensifies, and our motives are purified. In this mansion, Teresa says that our “Mary and Martha” have learned to work together as worship and work have become intertwined and balanced, both as an experience of God’s love and as an act of loving Him in others. There is a growing awareness of God’s holiness compared to our own sinfulness that increases our humility. Because of this new awareness, we often feel dissatisfied with our ability to really serve God fully enough to express our love for Him. While

there may have been temptation to feel self-satisfied with the successes and growth in the earlier mansions, we are now more aware of how far there is to go. As we, the “beloved,” desire to love God more purely, we become more aware of our woundedness and yearn for healing that will give us freedom to love and to be loved more fully. Like the Second Mansion, the Fifth may not “feel” much like growth to us. Teresa believes that most Christians enter the Fifth Mansion to some extent, but may retreat back because they haven’t been taught about this sometimes frightening dimension of life with God. Romans 8:38-39 and John 17:20-26 describe many of the experiences that become foundational in the Fifth Mansion.

SIXTH MANSION - Spiritual Betrothal - Falling in Love With God Alone

The Sixth Mansion is marked by even deeper experiences of God’s transforming love with a corresponding passion to serve Him in love. This “falling-head-over-heel-in-love” phase in our relationship with God produces both great joy and great pain. There is now a desire to live with God alone, to sense His presence continually, and to serve Him in utter responsiveness and obedience. Times of prayer can become intense experiences of the fire and passion of God’s love and our love for Him. In these last two mansions, the “dark nights,” described by John of the Cross, are also experienced, where God can seem totally absent or hidden. But even with the presence of the dark nights, the Sixth Mansion is characterized by a deep longing for God and a “counting as loss” those things that don’t facilitate greater intimacy and devotion. Psalm 27:4-6 and Philippians 3:12-14 express the intensity of this phase of our spiritual formation.

SEVENTH MANSION - Mystical/Transforming Union

The Seventh Mansion represents the ultimate in intimacy with God that we can experience in this life. It is marked by a complete integration of mind, body, and spirit, in the life of Christ. Mary and Martha have become one. We can truly say with the Apostle Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Life in this mansion is a leveling time, with less pronounced highs and lows, where we live continually and transcendently in the present moment, in the fullness of Christ’s love. Here we find a relative perfection, combined with a freedom to truly be ourselves. Strengths and weaknesses are all opportunities for the experience of the ongoing transformation that comes through union with Christ. As with the former mansions, the Seventh Mansion represents an ongoing process rather than a destination. We continue to journey more and more intimately into the depths of God’s love and live out more fully His love for the world. Read Ephesians 3:14-19 and Galatians. 2:20 in light of what we have discussed about the Seventh Mansion and the goal of our life with God.³

Spiritual Disciplines and the Teresian Mansions

Let me tell you a story about the relationship between spiritual disciplines and our understanding of the spiritual formation process. Some years ago, my friend Wayne and I were driving to a dinner meeting. I’ve known Wayne to be an experienced Christian leader having led many to a new life in Christ. As the drive continued, Wayne shared that he felt like his spiritual life had dried up. While he still had faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, Bible study had become boring, and his prayer life felt like talking to a brick wall. Wayne’s voice cracked as he said, “I

³ A more systematic description of the Teresian Mansions and a “Mapping Tool” to help locate yourself in the Teresian Mansions are available in Tom Ashbrook’s book, “Mansions of the Heart,” available from Tom at tom.ashbrook@crmleaders.org.)

can lead others in discipleship, but it seems that personally, I am stuck.” After a time of silence and reflection for both of us, I asked him, “What are you doing about it?”

“I am memorizing the book of Philippians.”

“Oh, is that book of the Bible less familiar to you?”

“To the contrary, Philippians has been really meaningful for me. God has always spoken powerfully through it. I figure that if I memorize it, God can bring specific passages to mind when I really need that particular truth.”

“Is it working?”

“No.”

“What do you ‘feel’ like doing, Wayne?” Another long pause.

“I am ashamed to admit it, but I feel like doing nothing.”

“Would you rather ‘do nothing’ with God or without Him?”

“Oh, I’ve tried the ‘without’ part and know better. I guess the nothing would have to be with God.”

“Why don’t you try it?”

Some months later, Wayne emailed me. “Tom, I am absolutely amazed! As I dropped all my efforts to fix my relationship with God, the dryness gradually lifted! God has shown Himself to me in the most unexpected ways! I’m beginning to see how much He loves me! Where do I go from here?”

The problem for Wayne wasn’t lack of faith or love for God, but a misunderstanding about use spiritual disciplines (which ones and how to use them) as his spiritual journey progressed and his faith matured. He had misinterpreted a deep work of God in his heart (probably in the 4th and 5th Mansions) as “back-sliding” and was miserable from beating himself

up. Now, he needed to just listen to God, love Him for who He is, and learn the freedom of a beloved son rather than the “work ethic” of a servant.

You see, as we recognize the true depth of our transformational journey, as Teresa of Avila describes it, we realize that there is much more to being loved by God and loving Him back than simply practicing a set of tasks or disciplines. While we do need to be intentional at every phase of our spiritual growth to cooperate with God in His work in us, and our use of spiritual disciplines will depend upon where we are in process.

Let’s use the disciplines of Scripture reading and prayer as examples. In the early Mansions, we need to study Scripture to learn who God is and how to live in His Kingdom. In later Mansions, we need to meditate upon Scripture, listening for God’s still small voice as He leads us intimately in our walk together. Our prayer life rightly changes from just telling God what we need, to a more listening posture. But to jump into meditation and contemplation before we are ready can be fruitless and frustrating. Early on, issues of obedience are importance disciplines, while later, issues of love and trust become central to living life within the Trinity.

While Teresa of Avila has provided us a roadmap of sorts, she would be the first to caution us to never try to navigate it ourselves. Jesus says in the John 14 passage that He will come to us and take us to where He is. Growth is a matter of listening and responding, yielding and following, loving and being loved in the context of who we are and where we are in process. Wherever we are, no matter how far we have traveled, the most exciting part of our life with God still lies ahead! Maybe there are spiritual disciplines that we haven’t even discovered yet!

Biographical Sketch about the Author:

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