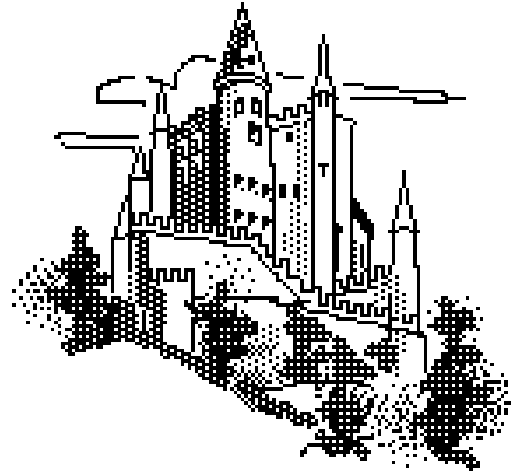


THE FOURTH MANSION - Part II

by Father Gabriel Barry, OCD

I. INTRODUCTION

In the first part of this conference, we discussed, however inadequately, the principle of spiritual growth and something of its theological foundations. We can now turn to Saint Teresa's writings to see how these principles are verified there. She discusses the beginnings of contemplative prayer in six different places. The principal and probably the definitive one is in the *Interior Castle* in the chapters called the Fourth Mansions. About fourteen years earlier, she had covered the same ground in the *Life*, chapters 14 and 15. There she called it the Prayer of the Second Water. The *Way of Perfection*, chapter 31 treats of it in reference to the petition, "Thy Kingdom come." An



interesting section of the *Conceptions of Love of God*, chapter 4, speaks of the same stage of prayer, in the form of a commentary on some verses from the Song of Songs. A digression in her historical narrative, *The Foundations* consists of a number of very sensible warnings against certain illusions that are liable to arise at this time.¹ Finally, there is the *First Relation*, an account of her own experiences written for a confessor in the year 1560.

This conference is an effort to analyze and synthesize the contents of these chapters. All references are to Peers' translation of Saint Teresa's writings.

II. THE MAIN DIVISIONS OF PRAYER

We must first take a few steps backward to survey the entire field of prayer, and to recapitulate some of the points made in previous conferences. In its essence, prayer is a movement of the soul, a reaching out to God, a response to His invitation, an encounter with Him. A recent writer describes prayer as "the believer's fundamental response to the divine call to engage in the ongoing process of conversion."² It can be expressed in many forms, but itself remains the same. However, this is a very important milestone on the road of Christian prayer. It marks the stage when God begins to take a special interest in the soul's progress, and intervenes in a new way to help it. Previous to this intervention, prayer is described as meditative. The name is not entirely accurate, because in fact meditation is only one element in this level of prayer. However, following the example of many spiritual writers, we can retain this designation. It indicates that the main characteristic of this kind of prayer is an active movement to gather knowledge of God

¹Chapter 6

²Stanley: *Faith and Religious Life*, p. 3

and of divine things; and to this end, the soul makes use of reflections of one kind or another. These reflections are derived not only from books but also from what one sees and hears, from vocal prayers or from an uncomplicated form of intuition called the prayer of simplicity.

At the other side of the dividing line is contemplative prayer, such as we attempted to describe in the last conference. It is infused knowledge and love; “Contemplation is to receive,” writes Saint John of the Cross.³ Its characteristic feature is receptivity, docility under the action of God. The efforts and strivings and piecemeal reflections are replaced by God’s superabundant gifts, and these are communicated in a manner notably different from the media of meditation. This is the kind of prayer that Saint Teresa calls “supernatural,” using the word in a rather different sense from that of dogmatic theologians.

Now the Fourth Mansions are the stage when God’s special intervention begins, and the soul becomes more and more passive. Nonetheless, the full transition has not yet taken place at this stage. “The natural is still united with the supernatural in it.”⁴ To be sure, it is the beginning of a new phase which eventually should replace meditation, but as yet this is only a beginning “verging on the supernatural.”⁵ The fullest impact of God’s intervention becomes clearer in the mansions that follow.

III. DIFFICULTY OF DESCRIPTION

Because it is a transition stage, and for reasons already mentioned in the first part of this conference, the Fourth Mansions are not easily described. Many a time, Saint Teresa mentions this fact and bemoans her inability to do better.⁶ As we have said, it is here that the invisible power of God begins to work, at first almost imperceptibly. We are up against mystery. “The very most we can know amounts to nothing at all, for even within ourselves, there are deep secrets which we cannot fathom.”⁷ She goes on to say that the insignificance of our knowledge is due to the surpassing greatness of God and the limitations of our minds. We do of course learn something of that greatness from the wonders of creation, but it is only a fragment of the whole. The same can be said of contemplative prayer, which is an infusion of the divine. We glean some knowledge of it by observing its effects, but what we come to know is only a very small portion of it.

To assist her in explaining the nature of contemplative prayer, especially in its initial stages, Saint Teresa has recourse to illustrations. One set of these is drawn from Scripture. She compares the recipients of contemplative prayer to the apostles who witnessed our Lord’s transfiguration. They are overcome with wonder, but know it is good to be there. In fact they think there is nothing else left to be desired, and try to cling, with might and main, to the present joy.⁸ She also sees a resemblance between contemplation and the graces given to the just man

³*Living Flame* 3:36

⁴Peers II, p. 246

⁵Peers I, pp. 83, 86

⁶cf. Peers II, 230, 231; Peers I, 83, 86

⁷Peers II, p. 237

⁸Peers I, p. 88; Peers II, p. 128

Simeon, on the day when Christ was presented in the Temple. The old man's eyes saw one who seemed to be no more than the child of humble parents. "But the child himself revealed who He was."⁹ So too, though less clearly, the favored soul begins to discover God's presence under very unlikely appearances. "It cannot understand how it knows Him, yet it sees that it is in His Kingdom"¹⁰; a Kingdom, however, which is not of this world.

In addition to Scriptural instances, Saint Teresa uses a number of illustrations drawn from nature and everyday experiences. Her mind was amazingly versatile in the application of these comparisons. In the chapters where she speaks of early contemplation she uses no less than thirteen examples to explain various facets of prayer. She likens it to an apartment in a castle, situated close to where the King of Glory dwells. In other respects, it is like a fountain built directly over an ever-flowing spring.¹¹ Or again, the prayer of the Fourth Mansions is like a fertile garden, full of exquisite flowers and just ready to blossom. "It used to give me great delight to think of my soul as a garden, and of the Lord as walking in it. I would beg Him to increase the fragrance of the little buds of virtue which seemed to be beginning to appear, and to keep them alive, so that they might blossom for His glory."¹² In another context, she compares the recipient of those special graces of prayer to a child at the breast of its mother, who feeds it without its having to ask.¹³ And since it is so dependent on her, it would die if taken away.¹⁴ In yet another place, the Lord Himself is likened to a good shepherd, who takes solicitous care of all His sheep and calls them with a loving call so gentle that they can scarcely hear it, and at the same time so powerful, they cannot resist it.¹⁵

Contemplation itself is a mysterious divine spark, very small at first, but capable of kindling a great fire and sending forth flames of ardent love.¹⁶ Those who receive it must not extinguish it by making frantic efforts of their own; this is like heaping great logs of wood on a small fire.¹⁷ "A few little straws laid down with humility are more to the point here and of more use for kindling the fire than any amount of wood."¹⁸ The fragrance of contemplative prayer is as if in the depths of the soul there was a hidden brazier on which were cast sweet perfumes. "The light cannot be seen nor the place where it dwells, but the fragrant smoke and heat penetrate the entire soul."¹⁹ The will of a contemplative must be like the wise bee that comes back to its home in the hive with a load of honey,²⁰ or like doves that are willing to be fed from their owner's hand.²¹ The human mind does not readily adjust itself to the influx of contemplation, but prefers to go its own way. There is no immediate remedy for this. "The clacking old mill must keep on going

⁹Peers II, p. 127

¹⁰Peers II, p. 127

¹¹Peers II, p. 236

¹²Peers I, pp. 86-87

¹³Peers II, pp. 130-131

¹⁴ibid p. 245

¹⁵Peers II, pp. 240-241

¹⁶Peers I, pp. 90-91

¹⁷ibid, p. 31

¹⁸ibid, p. 91

¹⁹Peers II, p. 238

²⁰Peers I, p. 91

²¹ibid, p. 84

round and round, and we must grind our own flour.”²² Contemplatives themselves must be like good knights, willing to serve their king without present pay, because they are sure of their final reward.²³

As can be seen from this sampling, Saint Teresa’s use of imagery is both effective and beautiful. It proves that, contrary to her own opinion, she was a born poet of a very high order.²⁴

IV. DOCTRINAL PRINCIPLES

Saint Teresa does not devote much space to theological speculation. She did not consider herself competent to do so. However, she was keenly aware of the need to have a solid scriptural and doctrinal foundation for the entire spiritual Life; for that reason, she consulted with all the leading Spanish theologians of the day. The result is that her writings, while not being formally theological, are replete with sound teaching. She had immense respect for those trained theologians who put their learning at her disposal so freely and generously. “I have always been attracted by learning; and I have never found anyone with as much of it as I would like. A truly learned man has never led me astray.”²⁵ She goes on to list the three qualities she liked to find in a theologian: humility, experience and learning. “If it happens that he is also a man of prayer, this is all to the good, but even if he is not, he should still be consulted for the sake of the instruction he can give. I would rather see spirituality based on truth than accompanied by prayer. Learning is a great thing for it teaches us who know little, and gives us light. Then, when we come to the truths in Holy Scripture, we act as we should.”²⁶ Saint Teresa always got on well with these learned men - *Letrados* - even when they were not too much given to prayer, provided their learning was sound. Even when they were not very spiritual themselves, they were not adverse to it, she says, nor ignorant of its nature. “For they are familiar with Holy Scripture where the truth about it can always be found.”²⁷

To persons like these *Letrados*, Saint Teresa entrusted the task of formulating the theological teaching that underlies contemplative prayer. She likewise looked to them for help in the delicate but indispensable task of discerning spirits. Her first great writing, the *Life*, was composed for this main purpose, to enable them to pass judgment on her own case. What she herself put into her writings was in the nature of conclusions, which she and they had arrived at.

Speaking about prayer in general, she says that just as there are many mansions in heaven, there are also many roads leading to them.²⁸ God does not guide everybody by the same road. Even among the great spiritual leaders, there are notable diversities. Saint Bernard does not speak in quite the same way as Saint Teresa, and Saint John of the Cross is different again. Yet, in essence, they are all saying the same thing. So too, among modern exponents of the spiritual life,

²²Peers II, p. 235

²³Peers I, p. 93

²⁴cf. Peers I, p. 97

²⁵Peers I, p. 27

²⁶Peers I, p. 80

²⁷Peers I, p. 81

²⁸Peers I, p. 79

there is considerable freedom of expression. The field is so vast and contains so many mysteries that no synthesis has yet been achieved. Indeed, one wonders if a synthesis is possible. This should not surprise or discourage us. Even in the material world, the variety introduced by God's creative power is amazing. As is well known, no two thumbprints are identical. There are millions of different designs in even the smallest kind of organisms such as plankton. How much more may we not expect variety in the world of the spirit. The writings of Saint Teresa and Saint John were never meant to be normative or definitive statements on the spiritual life. But since their expositions are among the best available, they have sometimes been given an absolute standing by Catholic spiritual writers. Undoubtedly they carry great authority, but they themselves never intended them to be the last word. They are the experiences of two outstanding witnesses, and this in itself is a lot.

Those who have been faithful to grace over a prolonged period and "have had the courage not to deny in darkness what they have seen in light," (Patmore) are usually led into the Fourth Mansions by Our Lord. Saint Teresa confirms this. One must have been tested and purified for some considerable time before He gives the signal to go up higher. But there is no inflexible rule about it. The Lord gives when He wills and as He wills and to whom He wills.²⁹ But, it would be exceptional for Him to give the graces of the Fourth Mansions without some amount of preliminary growth. Spiritual growth however is not quantitative, like that of the body. It is rather a question of greater openness to the Spirit, and greater fidelity to His inspiration.³⁰ In the Fourth Mansions, the great blessings and favors which the Lord showers on a soul cause the virtues to grow faster than ever before. By this is meant that belief in Christ, trust in Him and love of Him are greatly strengthened, and the soul gains some small foretaste of heavenly joy.³¹ The moral virtues too become more solid. This new growth comes about because God has come closer to the soul than ever before. It is like the countryside in springtime, when a new warmth causes the seeds to grow and the foliage to burst into bloom. The divine presence now causes the virtues to increase and brings them closer to God's standards, Who is Virtue Supreme. This produces great joy, not one moment of which could be obtained from earthly sources. No riches, estates, honors or delights can give such satisfaction even for the twinkling of an eye. For this is true joy and peace. God seems to be filling up a void in our souls, a void caused by sin. Furthermore, nothing that we could do, even if we were to wear ourselves out by penance and prayer, would be of any help to bring it to us, unless the Lord Himself is pleased to grant it.³² But when He does grant it, there comes also a sense of inner peace and freedom that can only be described as the freedom of the children of God.

Many persons come as far as this mansion on the road to prayer: "It is the one which the greatest number of souls enter."³³ "There are so many who come to this stage, and few that pass beyond it, I do not know whose fault this is, but it is certainly not God's."³⁴ "I know many souls who reach here, and those who go farther, as they should, are so few that I am ashamed to speak of

²⁹Peers II, p. 230

³⁰cf. Peers I, p. 43

³¹Peers I, p. 84

³²Peers II, pp. 84-85

³³Peers II, p. 246

³⁴Peers I, p. 89

it.”³⁵ In another of her books, *The Way of Perfection*, she speaks of the need for detachment, and how very few understand what it means and still fewer practice it. “I may be mistaken about this, but I have seen it and I know that it happens, and for my own part, I believe that this is why spiritual people are not much more numerous. They do not respond to so great a favor in a practical way. Instead of preparing themselves to receive this favor again, they take back from our Lord’s hands the will He considered His own and center it upon base things.”³⁶ It is interesting to note that Saint John of the Cross, speaking on the kindred topic of purification, writes as follows: “Not all who walk of set purpose in the way of the spirit are brought by God to contemplation, not even the half of them. Why, He but knows.”³⁷ This is one of the areas where we encounter in a very striking way the mystery of God’s providence in contact with man’s freedom. There is no rational explanation why it is that genuine contemplatives are so few.

Since the experiences of the Fourth Mansions arise from the soul’s proximity to God, it is only to be expected that they bring intense joy which flows over onto the senses. This is what spiritual writers call sensible devotion. “We are quite right,” says Saint Teresa, “to feel satisfaction at having worked in such a way (i.e. performing virtuous works of various kinds). But when we come to think of it, the same satisfaction can be derived from numerous things that may happen to us here on earth It seems to me that the feelings which come to us from divine things are as purely natural as those others, except that their source is nobler.”³⁸ The point that Saint Teresa is making here is that the sensible devotion which many people experience in the Fourth Mansions can easily be mistaken for a special divine favor, or sought after for its own sake. And since human nature is very selfish and prone to seek enjoyment inordinately, serious dangers lie hidden here. People are liable to seek the joys of God when they should be seeking for the God of joy. This is one of the big “occupational hazards” of the Fourth Mansions. We shall return to it again in the next section.

In reference to this stage of prayer, Saint Teresa makes the following comment. “It is most important for souls when they begin to practice prayer, to start by detaching themselves from every kind of pleasure and to enter upon their prayer with one sole determination, to help Christ to bear His Cross.”³⁹ This advice she repeats in many places. It is her way of saying that there is a lot of selfishness in human nature which has to be removed. So deep-rooted is it that all the good will in the world cannot heal it for us; God Himself has to intervene. Indeed another of the side effects of the special divine presence which begins with the Fourth Mansions is that one gradually comes to see the many wounds and stains left by sin in the human person. Saint John of the Cross, with unique psychological penetration, describes them for us in the opening chapters of the *Dark Night of the Soul*. These defects have to be burnt away or healed if the soul’s full union with God is to take place. This healing process is a leading theme in all Saint John’s writings, and constitutes one of his most significant contributions to Catholic spirituality. But it is a liberating and cleansing process. The consequences of original sin are gradually removed, and human nature is restored to a state of spiritual health resembling what our first

³⁵ibid, p. 90

³⁶Peers II, p. 133

³⁷*Dark Night* I, 9:9

³⁸Peers II, p. 231

³⁹Peers I, p. 93

parents enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. But the healing process is a very painful experience, and if it were not for the grace of God and a strong spirit of hope, human nature could not endure it. Saint Teresa says of it, however, that it is a small price to pay for the joy that comes from union with God. “All the trials of the world are not worthy to be compared with the glory for which we hope. I would say that not only are they not worthy to be compared with them, but they cannot earn a single hour of the satisfaction, joy and delight which God here gives the soul.”⁴⁰

In this kind of prayer, God seems to do all or most of the work, and the favored soul has only to receive and cooperate. “What the soul has to do at these seasons of quiet, is merely to go softly and make no noise. By noise I mean going about with the understanding in search of many words and reflections with which to give thanks for this benefit, and piling up its sins and imperfections, so as to make itself realize that it does not deserve it.”⁴¹ This is the passivity so characteristic of contemplative prayer. As we shall see however, this can be exaggerated to the extent of becoming a spiritual heresy known as Quietism. But the authentic quiet comes from God.

V. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The Fourth Mansions then, are the scene of God’s special interventions to help the growth of prayer and virtue. This being so, no effort of ours will ever elevate us to this state, which only God’s grace can bring about. Saint Teresa speaks a little sharply of those who think they can induce it, themselves, or having got it, try to prolong it. “This is ridiculous; we can no more control this prayer than we can make the day break or stop night from falling, It is supernatural, and something we cannot acquire.”⁴²

Nonetheless, it can be desired, in all humility. At least in regard to its substance. But we do not know what is good for us. We are never worthy of such favors. However the truth is that God wants to bestow His graces “wherever He finds the vessels empty” to receive them. “Have humility and again humility! It is by humility that the Lord allows Himself to be conquered, so that He will do all we ask of Him.”⁴³ Saint Teresa gives a number of specific counsels to those whom God has led thus far. “If you would progress a long way on this road and ascend to the mansions of your desire, the important thing is not to think much but to love much; do then whatever most arouses you to love. Perhaps we do not know what love is; it would not surprise me a great deal to learn this, for love consists not in the extent of our happiness but in the firmness of our determination to try to please God in everything, and to endeavor in all possible ways not to offend Him, and to pray Him ever to advance the honor and glory of His Son and the growth of the Catholic Church. These are the signs of love. Do not imagine that the important thing is never to be thinking of anything else or that if your mind becomes slightly distracted all is lost.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰Peers II, pp. 385-386

⁴¹Peers I, p. 90

⁴²Peers II, pp. 129, 238, 243; Peers I, p. 84

⁴³Peers II, p. 239

⁴⁴Peers II, p. 233

In the *Life*, she elaborates this. She had just said that when God begins to bestow the favors of contemplative prayer, be it only in an elementary way, all the soul has to do is merely to be calm and make no noise. And once again “noise” means working with the intellect to find great numbers of words and reflections to thank God for this blessing or to prove its own unworthiness. The time for that is now past; it is like piling on great logs of wood, when a few straws, laid on with humility, are more valuable. What she means is that now God is giving knowledge and love and strength directly, and any efforts of ours to enhance God’s action are as insane as trying to water a garden with a bucket, when it is already raining. However, Saint Teresa says, it is not an easy thing to quieten the intellect, especially if it is a lively one. Its natural inclination is to reason things out and search for arguments. But once God begins to feed it in this special way, it must realize that any activity is futile and even harmful. It must realize how near it is to Him, and beg His Majesty for grace and pray to Him for the Church and for those who have been commended to us, and for souls in purgatory; and this is done not by noisy words, but with a hearty desire to be heard. This is a true prayer of faith and is very effective. The will should also make acts of love for Him, to whom it owes so much.⁴⁵ She adds that this kind of prayer may, at the outset, be difficult for people who use their minds a lot. She is thinking again of her friends, the *Letrados*. But for them, too, this is good advice. “Even though they will have no difficulty in making use of their learning before prayer and after, they will have little need for it during their actual periods of prayer, when it will only make their wills lukewarm.”⁴⁶ “At these times of quiet, let them put their learning aside. The time will come when they will use it in the Lord’s service. But in the sight of Infinite Wisdom, there is more value in a little study of humility, and in a single act of it than all the knowledge in the world.”⁴⁷

Saint Teresa adds this very characteristic remark: “I am not speaking here of occasions when these men have to preach and teach, for then it will be only right for them to make use of their learning to help poor people like myself, who have little of it. Charity is a great thing and so is constant care of souls, when undertaken purely and simply for God’s sake.”⁴⁸

It is quite obvious that Saint Teresa was not anti-intellectual or illuministic. She was a firm believer that human beings should use their natural faculties and reasoning powers on every possible occasion except when the good God clearly indicates that they must not be used, as He does, when the Fourth Mansions begin. On this connection, she gives some very sensible advice, exactly parallel to what Saint John of the Cross says in a similar context: “Some books advise us not to try to meditate, but to be attentive and see what the Lord is working in our souls. But if His Majesty has not begun to grant contemplative prayer, I do not see how the mind can be prevented from discoursing, without doing more harm than good Since God gave us our faculties to work with, and He rewards them all, it is not right for us to put them under a spell. We must allow them to fulfill their office, until God employs them in another and higher one.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵Peers I, p. 91

⁴⁶ibid, p. 92

⁴⁷ibid, p. 92

⁴⁸ibid, p. 92

⁴⁹Peers II, pp. 242-243

This seems very obvious advice, but it is not always evident to persons whom God has led to the Fourth Mansions. It is also a very valuable principle in the delicate art of discerning spirits. God's actions transcend human reason and common sense, but He never goes against common sense. And so in the areas which fall within the domain of reason, men must not expect special help or intervention from God. To do so is to expect God to exceed the normal limits of His providence. In relation to the prayer-life, this means that meditation and vocal prayer must continue to be used as long as they are profitable and until God clearly indicates that He is calling one up higher. And even after that, there is no state of prayer so high that it is not necessary often to return to the beginning.⁵⁰

VI. HAZARDS OF THE FOURTH MANSIONS

It must be clear, by now, that the Fourth Mansions are a place of great and wonderful favors. They are a breakthrough into the realm where God acts more freely and effectively than ever before, and the soul receives unprecedented blessings. Since God is now so much closer to the soul, something of His excellence is reflected in it more clearly than at any time heretofore. And yet this is only a beginning, the stage when the garden has begun to blossom.⁵¹ There are, however, some notable dangers to be guarded against and, concerning them, Saint Teresa issues clear-cut warnings. Dangers of this kind may be compared to weeds that flourish in a beautiful garden, side by side with the flowers, simply because conditions are so favorable to growth of all kinds. These "spiritual weeds" are rooted in the natural limitations of human nature and the effects of sin. When brought into contact with the greatness and power of God, their roots, often hidden from sight, begin to flourish in their own perverse way. The result is a set of characteristic hazards which are liable to cause considerable trouble at this particular stage.

Confining ourselves to the portions of Saint Teresa's writings where she speaks of incipient contemplative prayer, we can classify these dangers under four main headings.

First, there is the illusion of imagining that one has now reached the goal, that the Kingdom of God has come to stay and that little else needs to be done except to walk into heaven. This can lead to a great unwillingness to accept the guidance of the Church or anyone whom we imagine to be less enlightened than we. Or it can take the form of an exaggerated "spirituality," making everything revolve around one's possession of grace, even things that are meant to be founded in nature. This may not happen very often, particularly in its extreme form. But it is a real danger, a form of spiritual pride. That is why Saint Teresa insists again and again on the value of humility,⁵² which is another name for a realistic appraisal of what we are, in the sight of God. In this connection, she makes one of her many down-to-earth remarks. She had been speaking of detachment and its importance for those who want to advance in prayer. Those in whom love is

⁵⁰Peers I, pp. 80, 92, 93

⁵¹Peers I, pp. 86, 95

⁵²cf Peers II, pp. 239, 133; Peers I, p. 92

already highly developed, she says, are willing to renounce things for God's sake, without more ado. Even if things were everlasting, they would gladly give them up for Him. But, she continues, there are many who have not reached this high level of love. For them, a lower ideal is often more practical in order to induce them to do things that are necessary. In their case, it is not a low ideal; it is the right one here and now. Similar reasoning can be applied to such considerations as keeping laws, observing a regular schedule and so on. Unquestionably love is the supreme law, but those who are not yet well grounded in it will need whatever support they can get until the full light dawns.

The second fault against which Saint Teresa warns her readers is a spurious kind of contemplative prayer. It is actually a subtle form of self-deception, springing up in the human subconscious and at times baffling in its manifestations. Even good sincere people can be misled. Saint Teresa gives several instances of her own experience.⁵³ Her diagnosis of these cases is refreshing and surprisingly modern. She had probably never heard the word "psychiatry," but she certainly knew the reality, and applied it here, with a typically humorous touch. Speaking of two nuns who were obsessed with the notion that if they did not communicate every day, they would die, she tells how she handled the case. She told them that she too experienced similar desires, and suggested that the three of them should abstain from Holy Communion so that they all could die together. Naturally, as she knew well, nothing of the sort occurred. She tells of another case, where some people fell into a prolonged trance, thinking it was an advanced kind of prayer. "They get into their heads that it is rapture (*arrobamiento*). But I call it acting the booby '*abobamiento*'."⁵⁴ She may write humorously about the strange experiences of these people, but in practice, she treated them with a firm hand and even somewhat sternly.⁵⁵ She believed that to renounce their common sense and allow themselves to be swept along in a tide of emotions was an outrage. The immediate cause of the danger is the intoxicating influences of initial contemplation, replete as it is with strong sensible joys. The hidden weaknesses of human nature cannot support these intense emotional experiences, and a conflict breaks out somewhere in the hidden depths of the soul. At times, though not invariably, this conflict seeks release in one or another of those curious psychological states. Saint Teresa's inborn common sense comes off with flying colors for the manner in which she handles those cases. Persons of lesser spiritual insight might have rated them as mystical experiences and authentic charisms. She classifies them as imbecility, pure and simple. And the remedies she prescribes are: remove the cause of the alleged exaltation; the people who experience it must eat enough and sleep well. They must not be allowed to do severe penances and, especially, they must learn to be humble and obedient.⁵⁶

Here is a good sample of this commonsense approach from the *Book of Foundations*. She had been speaking of certain persons who in their own opinion were so filled with divine love that they experienced uncontrollable urges. They could not resist ecstasies; they had to spend themselves in one way or another. Saint Teresa writes, "Anything which gets the better of us to such an extent that we think our reason is not free must be considered suspicious, for in that way,

⁵³Peers III, pp. 26 foll.

⁵⁴cf Peers II, pp. 245-246

⁵⁵Peers III, p. 31

⁵⁶Peers II, p. 246; Peers III, p. 32

we shall never gain freedom of spirit. . . . Believe me, any love of God (so-called) which stirs the passions in such a way as to cause the commission of some offense against Him, or troubles the loving soul so that it cannot listen to reason, is clearly nothing else but self-interest.”⁵⁷ Some modern Pentecostals bear certain resemblances to the well-intentioned, over-zealous people Saint Teresa speaks of. They are full of religious fervor, but with a strange exaggeration, a kind of intoxication. There is nothing wrong with the joy and exuberance, but another element enters in, a kind of contagious exaltation, sometimes bordering on the bizarre. They would be well advised to study the teachings of Saint Teresa and of Saint John of the Cross before giving approval to these unusual experiences.

The third hazard of these mansions is quietism. The simplest description of it is “counterfeit contemplative prayer.” As a formulated system of spirituality, it did not exist until the century following Saint Teresa’s death, but she was quite familiar with the symptoms, which have been known in the West since the thirteenth century. Indeed quietism represents one of the polarizations towards which human nature is prone. Its basis is that it suppresses human activity and fetters the use of human reason, “in order to let God act.” Now, it is clear that a stage comes in spiritual growth when human activity has to be curbed, and reflections put aside. Saint Teresa explains this in many places when describing the prayer of the Fourth Mansions. Saint John of the Cross is even more detailed in giving the signs of the transition stage. The error of quietism is that it advocates this passivity right from the beginning. It encourages an entirely selfless love of God, in the sense that activity of every kind has to be eliminated. Perfection consists in a purely passive “inwardness” and resignation. Vocal prayer, petition, and meditation, active asceticism and even positive resistance to temptation are suppressed in practice or in principle. Quietism had its good points in that it reacted against dry academic theology and a misdirected type of asceticism. But it ended up by vitiating⁵⁸ dogma and introducing a false kind of mysticism into the Church. Saint Teresa reacted strongly against the quietistic tendencies which she detected in some convents of nuns. She was insistent that they be given solid theological direction. No one more than she knew the need for being “open to the Spirit,” but when this was interpreted in a purely passive sense or led to the strange experiences mentioned already, she acted swiftly and firmly. She instinctively knew that quietism is one of the most serious of spiritual errors, a gross distortion under the guise of higher perfection. Her remedies for those who showed tendencies in that direction were: (1) sound theological and biblical instruction; (2) obedience to an experienced and learned director; (3) detachment from the intense spiritual sweetness and emotional joy that sometimes come with passivity; (4) the firm rejecting of anything “extraordinary,” such as ecstasies, visions, trances and similar extravagances, even when they seem to have certain counterparts in the Bible. In this respect, the Scriptures need careful interpretation as Saint John of the Cross has shown.⁵⁹

There is a fourth danger which, however, Saint Teresa treats of implicitly rather than of set purpose. One might call it a counterfeit “dark night of purification.” In Saint Teresa’s time, it took the form of imagining that any kind of suffering was mystically oriented. The result was

⁵⁷Peers III, pp. 32, 34-35

⁵⁸vi-ti-ate (vīsh ‘ē-āt’) —tr. v.-at-ed., -at-ing., -ates. 1. To impair the value or quality of. 2. To corrupt morally; debase. 3. To make ineffective; invalidate.

⁵⁹II *Ascent*, p. 22

that persons of a certain type of character were likely to classify themselves as great contemplatives, martyrs, “chosen souls,” when in reality they were only paranoids, more needing a psychiatrist than a spiritual director. In modern times it is liable to put on a garb of different color. A certain glamour is given to the “large confusion” that results from arrogance, disobedience, negative criticism, infidelity to religious or priestly vows, dabbling in questionable theology or unauthorized liturgical practices; this is called “courageous” and is said to be preferable to the “lesser certainty of faith.” The result is that some very eccentric people come to be rated as saints and mystics, especially if they espouse an unpopular cause, or get themselves into jail by their unconventional behavior. Now, as always happens, there are two sides to every story. The “mavericks” of our times have often much to justify them. But to attribute their actions to religious enthusiasm and to the Holy Spirit is another thing. To claim that it is best to be insecure, confused and adrift is certainly not correct. Above all, insecurity and confusion are not signs of mystical growth. They are a spurious “dark night,” resulting not from God’s intimate presence but from His icy absence. To deny that faith can be a consolation and a rock of security is to reject some of its obvious biblical characteristics. True, these are not one of its primary attributes and we may have erred in putting too much emphasis on them, while making little mention of the “risks” and “plunge into the dark” which faith requires. Nor can it be gained without conflicts and without giving up many of the selfish securities of daily life. But Jesus Christ promised happiness not only in the other-worldly future, but already here below - “not without persecutions.”⁶⁰ To believe is a fortunate thing; the one who has faith is certainly more happy and no less mature than one who has none. But to speak of faith as something that needs “the experience of the precariousness of this world” in order to live, is nonsense. And Saint Teresa herself would have said so, in no uncertain terms.⁶¹

VII. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND OTHER MOTHERS

It will be noticed that Saint Teresa attaches no little importance to spiritual direction, especially at this critical stage. The reason is that persons who have been led into the Fourth Mansions can seldom see straight, either due to the excessive emotional delight which may run away with their better judgment or on the contrary, aridity may cloud it. In such cases, the only sensible course is to allow oneself to be guided by a prudent director. Both Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross⁶² are agreed that proper spiritual direction is necessary at the stage when God begins to bestow contemplation. They are likewise unanimous that a director must be highly qualified if he is to take on the task of guiding others.⁶³ Furthermore, they say that not many good ones are to be found. Their principal role, at all stages, is to cooperate with God, not to impede His grace. Under this heading comes the very delicate duty of discerning spirits: to endeavor to find out whether a certain impulse or experience is from God, or from the human psyche or from the powers of evil. This certainly calls for special enlightenment and sound judgment. Saint Teresa remarks that in the Fourth Mansions, since there the natural is united with the supernatural, the

⁶⁰Mark 10:30

⁶¹cf Peers I, p. 129

⁶²*Ascent*: prologue

⁶³cf Peers I, ch. 13; also *Living Flame* III, #42 foll.

devil can do the most harm. This is the time when he comes arrayed as an angel of light, to lead the unwary astray.⁶⁴

One of the areas in which a spiritual director will have to use his skill is to establish the right measure between activity and passivity in those whom he guides. This applies not only to the inner human faculties of intellect and will, but also to external behavior. Some persons experience an overwhelming desire to go off into a desert or at least to embrace a predominantly contemplative way of life. Others will want to spend themselves and to be spent in apostolic activity. Others again will want to plunge headlong into mystical experiences and studies. There is probably no time when the temptation is stronger to throw prudence to the winds and launch out on well-intentioned but indiscreet projects of all kinds, many of them beyond the measure of one's natural strength or spiritual maturity. This is a time when a director's skill and tact will be put to a severe test. The good will of his spiritual children must be moderated and channeled aright. It is often a difficult thing to do this, because the recipients of special graces are sometimes convinced that they have attained full spiritual perfection, that they are more or less under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, and consequently they are not bound to obey lesser authorities. Many imprudent things can happen at this stage. It is also a time when certain people complain about the imperfections of the institutional or legalistic Church. Saint Teresa encountered all this in her own day. Notwithstanding that both she and Saint John suffered much at the hands of imperfect churchmen, her consistent advice was: "Obey the Church, cost what it may; don't be looking for loopholes to do things your own way; God asks for obedience, not sacrifice."

Moreover, the graces of the Fourth Mansions, if humbly accepted and acted upon in a sensible manner actually begin to bring about a reconciliation between the active and contemplative aspects of human nature, though the full healing does not come until later. "It is a great favor from the Lord, for it unites the active life with the contemplative. At such times, they serve the Lord in both ways at once. The will, while in contemplation, is working without knowing how it does so. The other two faculties are serving Him as Martha did. Thus Martha and Mary work together."⁶⁵ This theme of Martha and Mary, representing the active and contemplative sides of human nature, is a particularly interesting one in Saint Teresa's writings. What is unexpected is to discover that she, one of the greatest known contemplatives, defends the role of Martha even in ordinary day to day existence. Here is one of her typical comments, hardly acceptable to the "Women's Lib" of latter days: "Remember, there must be someone to cook the meals, and count yourselves happy in being able to serve like Martha."⁶⁶ Her special delight, however, was to find people in whom the two vocations were combined.

A third field of surveillance on the part of a good director is to teach his charges to use reason and common sense to the utmost, and gradually to be able to stand on their own feet, while relying on the grace of God. This in itself is a vast field for reflection, but a particularly important one. Both Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross are very levelheaded guides, notwithstanding the exceptional graces that had been lavished upon them. Indeed, one could say

⁶⁴Peers I, pp. 86, 94; Peers II, p. 246

⁶⁵Peers II, p. 129

⁶⁶Peers II, p. 71

that the maturity of their minds was due in no small measure to their fidelity to grace. They also saw clearly that God does not contradict Himself in His dealings with the world. He has already made provision for man's natural needs by giving him the power to reason and a free will. He will not go back on this. In other words, He will not ordinarily intervene to do things which man is meant to do by the powers already given to him by God. Nor should man expect God to tell him what he was meant to find out by his own resources and research, or to do for him what human skill can do on its own right. To act this way is the right order of things and gives great honor to God.⁶⁷

There are certain times in human life when the use of common sense is more needed than at others. One of them is when contemplation begins. The mystical life has such immense potentialities that unless they are controlled by a zone of clear thinking, they are liable to get out of hand. This is one of the *leitmotifs* in Saint Teresa's description of the Fourth Mansions; "don't be too credulous about experiences that come your way; don't set too much store by them, because it is not easy to say whether they come from God or some other source." Solid virtue, especially humility and charity, is always more valuable.

Few aspects of our religion need to be scrutinized more closely today than popular devotions and practices. It is a trend which has been encouraged by Vatican II.⁶⁸ But it did not begin with Vatican II. One of the best known sayings of Saint Teresa is: "From foolish devotions, may God deliver us."⁶⁹ She wrote this when speaking of the need for sound theology and a proper understanding of Holy Scripture. Applying the standards of good taste and common sense to certain aspects of the spiritual life is an important and very delicate task. On the one hand, there is an inborn tendency in human nature to revert to superstition. This has to be eliminated. On the other hand, neither Saint Teresa nor Vatican II had any wish to foster an arrogant, rationalistic approach to religion. Yet some times in the past, it cannot be denied that many Catholics have been credulous and "formalized" in certain ways. For instance, they tended to regard the world as full of direct interventions from God, or from the devil, leaving little room for human freedom. Asceticism is given a stoical or manichean⁷⁰ slant. The good things of creation and human enjoyments were sometimes regarded with considerable suspicion, if not roundly condemned. Books on private revelations had more authority for them than the gospels. Every alleged apparition of Our Lady or some saint was accepted unquestioningly. Every relic was a true one. Novenas and Nine Fridays had to be performed without a break. Now, as Saint John of the Cross rightly points out, there is an element of truth and good in all this. But somehow, the superstitious side tends to predominate, and this causes a serious degeneration in the spirit of faith which should animate all Christian practices and beliefs.⁷¹ In some cases, the error is quite harmless. It makes very little difference whether or not we believe in the authenticity of the Holy House of Loretto, or in the existence of Saint Philomena or Saint Christopher. But we live in an age when it is only fitting that the Church should apply strict historical and scientific norms to all

⁶⁷cf Peers II, p. 243

⁶⁸see *Lumen Gentium* #67; *On the Liturgy* #13, #34, and many ideas in *Church in Modern World*

⁶⁹Peers I, p. 80

⁷⁰Man-i-chae-ism (mán'í-kě'íz' • m) also Man-i-chae-an-ism (mán'í-kě' • -níz' • m) —n. 1. The syncretic dualistic religious philosophy taught by the Persian prophet Manes about the third century AD, combining elements of Zoroastrian, Christian, and Gnostic thought. 2. A dualistic philosophy similar to Manichaeism, esp. one considered a heresy by the Roman Catholic Church.

⁷¹cf. *Ascent* III, 44:5

areas of religion that fall under human observation. The Christian message will not suffer by a greater use of scholarship and better standards of good taste, even if this means, occasionally the dropping of some pet ideas or the simplification of the liturgical calendar. It is nothing more than the application of truth and reason in its rightful domain. Many of the criteria set out in the *Constitution on the Liturgy* have been inspired by this principle.⁷² However, this is more easily said than implemented, as is only too obvious from our experience in renewing the rites of the Mass, and in making the Church relevant. Nonetheless, it is an ideal to be aimed at, “to serve God in a manner that is worthy of a thinking being.”⁷³ Saint Teresa, were she alive today, would give it unqualified support; with the proviso, of course, that the application of rational principles did not degenerate into rationalism; that arrogant and superior frame of mind which no longer refers back to personal faith or the mysteries of salvation history. The unaided mind of man, wonderful though it be, can never explain even natural mysteries, not to mention the mysteries of God. “And there are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamed of in philosophy.”

VIII. CONTEMPLATION AND THE RESURRECTION

I have mentioned that, although Saint Teresa did not write formal theological treatises, everything she asserts is founded on solid doctrine and this is very important to remember. What she says about contemplative prayer suggests some concluding remarks about its relationship to the resurrection.

In one of the documents of Vatican II, we read as follows: “We can justly consider that the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping.”⁷⁴ The greatest and the final reason for hope lies in the resurrection of Jesus. From its earliest days, Christianity drew a luminous answer from the first Easter. Christ rose from the dead, and because He lives, we too shall live forever. The apostles saw the risen Christ with their own eyes. And He promised them and all of us, eternal life. But once again we are confronted with mystery. The ultimate fulfillment of life is beyond the reach of man alone. It depends on God, Who is the Source of Life. And yet man is involved in this quest. God will not give him eternal life without his cooperation. During his sojourn here below, he is called upon to trust in God and prepare for his final destiny. Moreover, there is a “something” in man himself which impels him to reach out into the unknown: to seek a fullness which is unattainable in this world, and yet in a real sense is part of his true life.

This is the context in which we view contemplative prayer. It is a leap into the unknown, into eternity itself, but it begins during our earthly life. It is a plunge undertaken by man, but with the aid of God. It is hope becoming possession; it is a glimpse of what is yet to be. It is a pillar of darkness, sometimes a pillar of light, guiding us on our journey to the promised land. Everything in man’s nature tells him that deep in his being, he is related to the Eternal God who made him, and this relationship was meant to last forever. Those in whom this realization is stunted draw back from the realities that lie ahead. They dare not face what for them is the future shock. Others contract the horizons of man to the present “now”; thus drying up the well-springs of

⁷²See for instance #13, 16, 34, 92, 93, etc.

⁷³Romans 12:1

⁷⁴*Church- in Modern World* #31

challenge, wonderment and hope. Others again would rush ahead in headlong haste to build a Utopia on empty human dreams. Contemplative prayer, however, is an actual experience of the Kingdom of God as it exists within oneself. The genuine contemplative is the most convincing witness of its reality; the one best equipped to provide future generations with reasons for living and hoping. For the mystery of contemplation may well be described as the special presence of the Risen Savior in the soul, our sharing, in an outstanding way, in His resurrected life and joy. It is the effective beginning of the resurrection of the soul. It is a passage from the death of the old self to the “risen man” who lives in the Spirit with the Lord, and has come to experience Him personally. The transformation described by Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross is the Paschal Mystery, as lived in the individual soul. It is the life given at Baptism, being lifted up to the conscious level. It is, in some sense, an experience parallel to that of the disciples who met Christ after the resurrection and whose hearts were burning within them on account of His nearness.⁷⁵ In this way, the waters of eternal life are given to some members of the human race not just in drops, but in a copious stream, flowing directly from its source, which is God.⁷⁶ To drink from this stream is itself only a foretaste; a preparation for the day when the blessed can feast on all the good things of God’s House and be filled with the torrents of His delight. For in Him alone is the source of life and fulfillment and, in His light, mankind can see the Light.⁷⁷

IX. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Please refer to the OCDS *Rule of Life*, Foreword and Articles 1 through 8.
2. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Peers and/or ICS edition.
3. For those who would like to pursue further, here is a short list of books, if they are available:
 - a. Saint John of the Cross: *Ascent and Dark Night*, also *Living Flame*, stz. III.
 - b. Poulain, A.: *Graces of Interior Prayer*.
 - c. Farges, A.: *Mystical Phenomena*.
 - d. Watkin, E.: *Philosophy of Mysticism*.
 - e. Butler, C.: *Western Mysticism*.
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⁷⁵cf Luke 24:32

⁷⁶Peers II, p. 237; see also *Stages of Prayer*, pp. 32-33, St. Paul’s Carmel

⁷⁷Psalms 35: 9-10

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