

ST TERESA OF AVILA

SYNOPSIS OF THE INTERIOR CASTLE

Fr Matt Blake OCD

SOUTH WEST REGIONAL DAY

13TH April 2013

The emphasis in the Carmelite Order in the years leading up to Teresa's 500th anniversary has been to listen to her as our Mother, our Foundress, our Inspiration and our Guide. She is a source of renewal and growth for all of us.

This year we are concentrating on the Interior Castle and I thought we would do an overview of the book with possible ways of reading and listening to Teresa as we do so. We could say that this final work of hers is her masterpiece, as the 9th Symphony of Beethoven was his, so this is the supreme expression of her spirit.

Teresa had finished writing her Life 12 years earlier in which she gave us her personal experience, who she is, how she sees her life. Her story of coming to prayer/conversion. Prayer is what makes everything else possible. In Chapters 23-40, we hear of her intimate relationship with God and the founding of her first community. Prayer transformed her and the story of her first foundation is the natural fruit of prayer.

Shortly after writing her life, her sisters asked her to teach them about prayer. She then writes the Way of Perfection of which there were two versions completed in a year. Shortly after writing this, things changed rapidly for Teresa.

She was visited by a priest from the New World who opened her vision to the wider church in the world. She had a second visit from the General of the Order who gave her permission to found other communities. 1573 the Book of Foundations was written and in 1577 the Order started to spread.

At the same time storm clouds were gathering From 1576 to 1578 a stop was put to the work of her foundations and it looked like the end of all that she had put into motion. Her Book of her Life was with the Inquisition. At this point, Fr Gracian asked her to write a book on prayer and in 1577, she wrote the Interior Castle. This was a time when things could not be worse for her. She felt no inclination to write and her health was precarious but in spite of this between June and November she wrote her masterpiece, starting in Toledo and finishing in Avila and hearing about John of the Cross's arrest as she finished.

She rather liked what she had written! It had given her an opportunity to express herself.

To facilitate the overview of the Interior Castle Fr Matt gave each of us a summary of the seven mansions. He then drew parallels with each mansion with various stages in the Gospel - The Good News of Jesus Christ - the 7 levels or 7 depths in our following of Jesus.

Read the 7th Mansion first, that is the deepest centre within us.

In the 1st Mansion Teresa begins with Genesis. The beauty and dignity of the human person, how we relate to others and to God is so entwined as to be inseparable. But we come up against the limitations of the human condition. The importance of self-knowledge. Faced with the reality of life, we cannot do it on our own. Teresa tells us that we are not alone.

She tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ. He is going to be our constant companion on the way. In the 7th Mansion the person is transformed into the image and likeness of God. But in the 1st Mansion, Prayer is the door to this entry. There are no rules, systems or structures for prayer, only the desire of the person:

I WANT TO PRAY.

The Second Mansion as in the gospel is a response to the Call of Christ – it is the vocation stage. Teresa spent 18 years in this state. Here we are encouraged to persevere, not to give up, we are strongly motivated but struggling. We are fighting for inner freedom, from sin, temptation and evil. Teresa loved combat, her fighting spirit engaged in this spiritual combat for inner freedom. We are called to be transformed interiorly and we cannot sort out the world if we cannot come to grips with ourselves. We are called to a life of self-transcendence, to union with Christ and to a life of service.

In the Third Mansion we hit crisis point. Things start to fall apart, love is put to the test. Teresa reminds us of the Parable of the Rich Young Man – so successful in the world, but deeply unhappy. This is the call to radical self-giving and it is the time when marriages and commitments are tested and sometimes abandoned. But the virtues of love, justice, truth, humility, fear of the Lord, silence, and obedience are growing in this mansion.

In the 4th Mansion, the dynamics of the relationship is changing. Although Teresa does not illustrate this change with the Transfiguration episode, it is a crucial episode in the gospel journey. It is the moment when the dynamics between Jesus and his disciples change. In the first three mansions, we can draw a parallel with the Gospels, the crowding flocking around Jesus just to be with Him, to hear his word and to be healed. After the Transfiguration all is change. The transition to the Passion and Death of Christ. This is disconcerting, they are taken aback, shaken up – what is this talk about dying and rising from the dead to new life? God is intervening much more in this mansion. There is nowhere else to go. Love is what matters ‘not about thinking much but loving much and what most awakens love, do it..

The 5th Mansion corresponds to Holy Week, the Last Supper, the Institution of the Eucharist, the Passion, Crucifixion and death of Jesus. God’s grace is taking over and the we are entering more deeply into the sacramental life of the Church, especially the Eucharist.

The 6th Mansion is the total transformation of the person, the living of adult Christianity and corresponds to the post Resurrection Christianity found in the Gospels. All Christian life is lived in the light of the Easter mystery, the meeting with the Risen Christ, the change in the disciples after the Resurrection. Resistance is broken down, and growth and healing are brought to fulfillment in this dwelling place. Teresa never used the expression ‘dark night of the soul’ but in the first chapter we meet this dark night, the suffering and the precarious nature when we are at our weakest. And yet it is precisely here when we are at our most vulnerable that God can transform us. God is transforming us into His son and a radical change is being wrought in the person. This is pure gift – growth and healing working together – we cannot grow unless we face what needs healing within us.

In the 7th Mansion we are given an exposition on human and Christian maturity. Here we are living in the mystery of the Trinity, the spiritual marriage between God and the Person – the Eucharist, in which the union of the person with Jesus is made complete, flesh with flesh, spirit with spirit – the Song of Songs, the Apocalypse all point to this awesome mystery. And all of this for the sake of the church, ‘I die a daughter of the Church’ Teresa said. The Book of Foundations is an extension of the 7th Dwelling – the work of God.

What is prayer for Teresa. It is human, social and spiritual formation. | It is the test of our relationship with Christ and of how we relate to others. In Teresa's time, books on prayer were written that indicated that prayer was a private affair. There was a lot of suspicion too around relationships. Friendship in community was controversial in Teresa's time but Teresa wanted her sisters to be friends and she saw in the society in Toledo the lack of freedom – the constraints of status, marriage, protocol. She wanted her nuns to love one another as Jesus loved.

During the Mid-day Mass Amanda Dillon and Barbara Smith from the Wincanton Community made their First Promise and Jean from Torquay was received into formation. Family and friends were with them to share in the joy and witness of their commitment.

We then retired to the parish room for a shared lunch and the afternoon was given over to Deborah Hawley and | Maria Elena Clasper's talk and slide show on their time of renewal in the Holy Land. Deborah is writing about this in a separate article.

Caroline Dawnay