

Life Chapters 16 & 17: Third degree of Prayer [1]

“In fact five or six years ago the Lord often gave me this prayer in abundance, and I didn’t understand it; nor did I know how to speak of it”. [L16:2]. That would be the years 1559/60; Teresa is a nun at the Incarnation, around this time she writes her first spiritual testimony, discussions have started to take place about founding a new community and most importantly Teresa is living a time of intense and incomprehensible spiritual growth. She is now writing about this in 1565, in her new community of S. Jose. In these five to six years Teresa has moved house three times: Avila [Incarnation] to Toledo [home of Dona Luisa de la Cerda], Toledo to Avila [Incarnation], Avila [Incarnation] to Avila [S. Jose]. In addition she has become a founder, writer and teacher. Her human, Christian and spiritual growth during these years is explained by her in these two chapters and in the fourth degree of prayer [chapters 18 - 21].

Teresa rarely names places or people in this book; this is one of the many “mysteries” of the book of her **Life**. However people and places are very important; spiritual growth always takes place in the reality and events of human life and in relationship with people. We have mentioned the places where this growth takes place; in these two chapters we also meet the people:

Garcia de Toledo OP [1515 - 1590]: He is the one to whom this work seems to be intimately addressed. He is addressed as “Your Reverence”, “My Son”, “My Father”, etc. Sometimes it seems like Teresa is writing a private letter to him. For Teresa he is her friend, the first censor of the book, her confessor, someone who is being guided by her teaching, a priest who is using her teaching in his ministry and, most importantly, someone who is sharing the same spiritual path with her. She is his spiritual director.

“The five who at present love each other in Christ” [L16:7]. It is not clear who these five are. They possibly include **Garcia de Toledo**, **Gaspar Daza** [priest in Avila, close friend of Teresa’s for much of her life, celebrated the first mass at S. Jose], **Francisco de Salcedo** [*“The holy gentleman”*, L23:6, one of the first people to whom Teresa confided her soul], **Dona Guiomar de Ulloa** [*“my companion”*, *“the widow servant of God”*], close friend and collaborator of Teresa’s, especially in the foundation of S. Jose], **Domingo Banez OP** [her favourite theologian, later censor of book]. More important than their names is their symbolic importance. This is the ideal Christian community; living their Christian lives profoundly and sharing in the work of God in the world.

The principle characteristic of this degree of prayer is the growing awareness of the soul’s capacity to enter into relationship; with God and with others. In Teresa’s understanding the soul relates through its faculties or activities. The principle ones being:

Will: The capacity to love resides in the will; both to receive and to give love. Therefore the most important “union” with God is union of the will - a love that loves like God loves, a self-less love, a total giving of self. The will is also the faculty in which free and wise decision making takes place.

Intellect: The capacity to understand, reflect, explain and act. This includes decision making, business affairs, dealings with others, etc.

Memory: All that is inherited and retained from the past. This includes past experience, hurts, fears, etc. The memory can be a great obstacle to change.

Imagination: This includes, dreams, fantasises, distractions, etc. Teresa famously called it “*La loca de la casa*” [*the madman in the house*]. Or years later in the Interior Castle - “*The lizards*” that just cannot be kept out of the castle but are harmless. The most difficult faculty to control!

Teresa is not consistent in her use of these terms. To confuse matters even more the soul is inhabited by a vast range of feelings, emotions, delights, prejudices, etc. Where these reside is not clear but they wield a powerful influence and need to be brought to a place of peace and freedom.

The logic of Teresa’s thinking is that it is “Union of the Will” that matters. When the will is united with God then it gradually unites all the other faculties and capacities also, but this can take a long time and much pain and anguish in the meantime. So a person’s will can be united with God - the person is loving in a profound, radical and mature way but at the same time the other “faculties” can be causing havoc in the persons mind. A person can be distracted, disturbed, “unable to pray”, frantically busy, etc. and yet be united with God; the will totally transformed and at one with God. Teresa has lived this and is struggling to explain it from her experience.