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MEDITATION ONE  
*The Interior Castle*

**Theme:** For Teresa, the soul is like an interior castle. The goal of the spiritual journey is to be united with God, who resides in the inmost center.

**Opening prayer:** God of glory, let me know your presence in me.

ABOUT TERESA

In 1577, Teresa wrote one of her major works, *The Interior Castle*. Composed near the end of her life, this book represents the culmination of Teresa's spiritual experience. Teresa attempted to explain the beauty of the inner life of the soul, the stages in a life of prayer, and the characteristic joys and trials of each stage.

Teresa pictured the soul as a beautiful mansion in which God resides in the centermost place. This interior castle contains seven dwelling places. We start our spiritual journey in the most exterior dwelling (the first) and, God willing, move toward the seventh. A person enters this seventh dwelling—one's own center—only when God allows it. In the innermost dwelling, the person becomes united with God in continuous, conscious love.

As Teresa began writing *The Interior Castle*, she struggled to find the best image that she could think of for representing the soul. She prayed that God would give her the words to best express the truth of what she wanted to say. Eventually, the image of the interior castle came to her mind:

. . . We consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places. For in reflecting upon it carefully, Sisters, we realize that the soul of the just person is nothing else but a paradise where the Lord says He finds His delight. (*The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 2, p. 283)

**Pause:** Reflect on what God's indwelling presence means to you and on what image best represents God's presence.

### TERESA'S WORDS

I don't find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of a soul and its marvelous capacity. Indeed, our intellects, however keen, can hardly comprehend it, just as they cannot comprehend God; but He himself says that He created us in His own image and likeness. . . .

It is a shame and unfortunate that through our own fault we don't understand ourselves or know who we are.

Wouldn't it show great ignorance, my daughters, if someone when asked who he was didn't know, and didn't know his father or mother or from what country he came? Well now, if this would be so extremely stupid, we are incomparably more so when we do not strive to know who we are, but limit ourselves to considering only roughly these bodies. Because we have heard and because faith tells us so, we know we have souls. But we seldom consider the precious things that can be found in this soul, or who dwells within it, or its high value. Consequently, little effort is made to preserve its beauty. All of our attention is taken up with the plainness of the diamond's setting or the outer wall of the castle; that is, with these bodies of ours.

Well, let us consider that this castle has, as I said, many dwelling places: some up above, others down below, others to the sides; and in the center and the middle is the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place. (*Interior Castle*, pp. 283–84)

### REFLECTION

Today, as in Teresa's time, external affairs and realities can very easily lure us into ignoring our own soul. Even when we acknowledge that fact (or the possibility) that we may possess a soul, we rarely think of entering into it, or we candidly admit we do not know quite how to do this.

For Teresa, the door of entry into the soul was prayer and reflection. And those who start to practice prayer often experience a strange exhilaration, a new peace, a more vivid life. As with any exercise, prayer may seem laborious and unproductive at the beginning. But once beyond these beginnings, a new realm of intimacy, resourcefulness, and security gradually manifests itself. God invites us toward the center of our interior castle.

✠ Teresa spoke of the soul as a castle or a garden in which God takes delight. How do you allow God to delight in you? Dialog with God about the delight you find in yourself as God's friend. How do you celebrate the delight that you find in your soul? If you have not expressed delight in God's presence in your soul, perhaps you can hum, sing, or whistle a favorite hymn of praise or thanksgiving. Do not worry about the quality of your voice, the strength of your whistle, or even about your ability to remember the song's lyrics. Just hum, sing, or whistle, knowing that God is in your soul and enjoys your recognition of God's presence.

✠ In early stages of prayer, we may become bogged down in what Teresa called "a mud of fears." Instead of being able to relate to God, our fears clog our attention.

Let your mind explore. Ask yourself what some of your fears are, and write a list or a description of your fears. Then write about how these fears affect your emotional and spiritual life.

Next, sit quietly. Close your eyes. Put your fears aside for a moment and concentrate on your slow, deep, rhythmic breathing. Relax.

✚ As you continue to breathe slowly in and out, imagine the deepest part of your soul as a wonderful garden or a room, the innermost place in your interior castle. This place is filled with light, warmth, security, and love. See, hear, and feel this place in your soul where you meet the loving God.

As you draw close to God, take off your fears also. Offer each fear to God. Ask God to free you, to wash away your fears. Then, walk into the water, allowing it to refresh and cleanse you. Let all tensions go. Thank God for this baptismal cleansing.

Hear God's response: "Be not afraid. I am with you." Repeat these words softly over and over in a prayer.

✚ Use Jesus' name as a repeated prayer.

✚ With soft music playing in the background, sketch on paper or model in clay an image that depicts the indwelling of God in your soul.

### GOD'S WORD

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for whatever you please and you will get it. It is to the

glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit and be my disciples. I have loved you just as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy be complete. (John 15:7-11)

**Closing prayer:** Life-giving God, I believe that you are ever dwelling within me. Draw me to yourself in light and love. Teach me to walk happily in all my inner spaces.

MEDITATION TWO  
*Beginning to Pray*

**Theme:** As we begin a heartfelt conversation with God, we become aware of both the freeing power of grace and the crippling effects of sin.

**Opening prayer:** O loving Creator, heal me with your resounding word and your gentle spirit.

ABOUT TERESA

In her writings on beginning to pray, Teresa spoke of the soul as being crippled or even paralyzed. Having been paralyzed herself, Teresa understood that relearning to coordinate one's own movement comes gradually and only with painstaking effort that initially may be difficult and seem unrewarding. Beginning to pray may be difficult and seem unrewarding too, but is therapy for the paralyzed soul.

Teresa wrote about a wise man who told her once that people who do not pray regularly are like paralytics. Despite having hands and feet, they cannot direct the movements of these limbs.

Teresa recalled the passage in John's gospel (5:1-9) concerning Jesus' healing of the lame man. In this story, the movement

beyond paralysis comes as a grace of God. This is true of inner paralysis also. Healing may come early in life, or it may come after many years, depending on one's training, desires, and the freely given gifts of God. But prayer establishes the contact with God, the source of all healing for body or soul. Teresa assumed that we would always be delighted in the experience of God's enabling grace.

**Pause:** Recall the experience of prayer in which you were aware of the presence of God bringing you inner freedom.

### TERESA'S WORDS

Whoever has not begun the practice of prayer, I beg for the love of the Lord not to go without so great a good. There is nothing here to fear but only something to desire. Even if there be no great progress, or much effort in reaching such perfection as to deserve the favor and mercies God bestows on the more generous, at least a person will come to understand the road leading to heaven. And if one perseveres, I trust then in the mercy of God, who never fails to repay anyone who has taken Him for a friend. For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us. (*Life*, p. 96)

## REFLECTION

Teresa's writings affirm, according to the traditions of the church, that God offers all humans the graces they need for salvation. One of these graces is the gift of prayer in which we enter into ourselves and speak to God, who loves us. Like any friendship, friendship with God takes initial effort, time, and personal presence. In this relationship, we may become aware of our weaknesses, our inabilities, and our destructive propensities. At the same time, we can come to realize that a new mode of life is beckoning and attracting us.

✚ Teresa posed some questions that are worth reflecting on in this age of information and verbiage but of less communication:

Do I approach personal prayer as an attempt to speak to God, the one who loves me?

Do I allow myself to become discouraged when I feel inept in expressing myself to God?

Do I avoid prayer because it seems so unreal?

✚ Reflect on the quality of the conversations in your daily life: your way of getting another person's attention, your tone of voice, your sincerity about being heard, the content of your message, your ability to hear another person, and the verbal or nonverbal gestures that you use to close the conversation. Continue this reflection by examining how others communicate

with you. Write a summary of these considerations.

Next, reflect on the way you approach and speak with God and on the way God approaches and speaks with you.

Do you speak with God like you speak with other people?

Are your expectations the same or different?

Do you find yourself trying to hide aspects of your life from God?

Do you tiptoe around issues with God the way you might tiptoe around issues with other people? Is this necessary?

End this reflection by talking with God about the relationship and communication that you share. Ask God to send you whatever you need in order to deepen and enliven your relationship.

✚ In what areas of your spiritual or emotional life do you find yourself paralyzed or crippled? Find a friend to talk to about this, or write a letter to yourself explaining the whole situation. Finally, offer these areas of paralysis to God. Discuss them. Maybe you will be healed or find release soon, maybe not. Can you rest in God's hands with or without remedy?

✚ Trusting in the mercy of God, take time and find a space to be alone with the One who loves you. Speak your mind and heart; listen with your mind and heart.

✚ Meditate on the passage from John's gospel in "God's Word." Imagine yourself as the one with whom Jesus is speaking.

## GOD'S WORD

After this there was a Jewish festival, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem next to the Sheep Pool there is a pool called Bethesda in Hebrew, which has five porticos; and under these were crowds of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed. One man there had an illness which had lasted thirty-eight years, and when Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had been in that condition for a long time, he said, "Do you want to be well again?" "Sir," replied the sick man, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is disturbed; and while I am still on the way, someone else gets down there before me." Jesus said, "Get up, pick up your sleeping-mat and walk around." The man was cured at once, and he picked up his mat and started to walk around. (John 5:1-9)

**Closing prayer:** God, you know my heart. When I hear your voice, I realize that I am sometimes too broken to respond. In your mercy, heal me. Let me walk. Let me walk around in the temple of my soul and in the temple of your world.