

St. Teresa's Teaching on the Grades of Prayer

by Jordan Aumann, O.P.

When Pope Paul VI proclaimed St. Teresa of Ávila the first woman Doctor of the Church on September 27, 1970, he selected one of her many titles as the basis for conferring that honor on her: **Teresa of Ávila, Teacher of Prayer**. The same sentiment was expressed by Pope John Paul II in a letter to the Superior General of the Discalced Carmelite Friars to mark the fourth centenary of the death of Teresa:

Teresa considered that her vocation and her mission was prayer in the Church and with the Church, which is a praying community moved by the Holy Spirit to adore the Father in and with Jesus “in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:23)... Saint Teresa considered the life of prayer to be the greatest manifestation of the theological life of the faithful who, believing in the love of God, free themselves from everything to attain the full presence of that love (*L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, November 9, 1981).

In all of her major works—*The Life*, *The Way of Perfection*, *The Interior Castle*—St. Teresa explains the practice of prayer. And it is noteworthy that she did not begin to write until she was 47 years old, after her second conversion and when she was already well-versed in the practice of prayer. Her teaching flows from her own experience and not from books on prayer. She does, however, acknowledge her indebtedness to two authors: Francisco de Osuna, the author of *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, and Bernardino de Laredo, the author of *The Ascent of Mount Sion*. The book by Osuna treated of the prayer of recollection, and St. Teresa states that she was “delighted with the book and resolved to follow that way of prayer with all my might” (cf. *The Life*, chap. 4). The treatise by Laredo described the prayer of union, to which St. Teresa had attained “after almost twenty years of experience in the practice of prayer” (cf. *The Life*, chap. 23).

As we have noted, Teresa began writing her first work, *The Life*, at the age of 47, and she finished it three years later. In that same year (1565) she began *The Way of Perfection*, since the nuns of the first monastery of the reform had asked her to teach them about mental prayer. In these first two works, St. Teresa concentrates on the ascetical grades of prayer, but in *The Interior Castle*, written when she was 62 years old, she gives detailed descriptions of the mystical grades of prayer. Thus, in the Second Mansions of *The Interior Castle* she says: “I want to say very little to you about [the prayer of the Second Mansions] because I have written of it at length elsewhere.”

St. Teresa realized that not all souls travel by the same path to perfection, but that God leads souls by many different roads. At the same time she knew that in order to teach the theology and practice of prayer, one has to follow a basic pattern or structure. The journey to spiritual perfection is a progressive passage from the lower to the higher stages of prayer, from ascetical to mystical prayer. And since St. Teresa treats only briefly of the lower grades of prayer in her definitive work, *The Interior Castle*, it is necessary to turn to her two earlier works for a fuller description of the ascetical grades of prayer.

The Life

In her first work St. Teresa explains the grades of prayer by using the symbol of the “four waters,” or more precisely, the four methods of watering a garden. The first method is by drawing water from a well by means of a bucket attached to a rope. This is the first stage

of prayer and it includes **vocal prayer and discursive meditation**. The individual is active, exercising the faculties and reaping what benefit it can through one's own efforts. But lest the beginners think too much and turn their discursive meditation into an intellectual exercise, St. Teresa advises them "not to spend all their time in doing so. Their method of prayer is most meritorious, but since they enjoy it so much, they sometimes fail to realize that they should have some kind of a sabbath, that is, a period of rest from their labors.... Let them imagine themselves, as I have suggested, in the presence of Christ, and let them continue conversing with him and delighting in him, without wearying their minds or exhausting themselves by composing speeches to him" (*The Life*, chap. 13).

In the first stage of prayer— vocal prayer and discursive meditation — the individual is active, exercising the faculties and reaping what benefit it can through one's own efforts.

The second method of watering a garden is by means of a waterwheel to which dippers are attached. As the wheel is turned, the water is poured into a trough that carries the water to the garden. St. Teresa explains that this stage, in which "the soul begins to recollect itself, borders on the supernatural.... This state is a recollecting of the faculties within the soul, so that its enjoyment of that contentment may provide greater delight" (*The Life*, chap. 13).

The third type of watering a garden is by irrigation by means of a running stream. It doesn't call for human effort as in the two previous methods. Prayer at this stage is mystical; that is, all the faculties are centered on God. "This kind of prayer," says St. Teresa, "is quite definitely a union of the entire soul with God" (*The Life*, chap. 17). She calls it a "sleep of the faculties" because they are totally occupied with God. "Not one of them, it seems, ventures to stir, nor can we cause any of them to be active except by striving to fix our attention very carefully on something else, and even then I don't think we could succeed entirely in doing so" (*The Life*, chap. 16).

The fourth and final method for watering a garden is by means of falling rain. This stage of prayer is totally **mystical**, meaning that it is infused by God and is not attained by human effort. It is called the **prayer of union**, and it admits of varying degrees.

The grades of prayer described by St. Teresa in *The Life* do not correspond to the division of prayer that is usually given in manuals of spiritual theology. There are several reasons for this, and the first one is possibly the fact of the discrepancy of 15 years between her first and the last major work. Secondly, the precise terminology to describe some of the transitional grades of prayer between discursive mental prayer and the prayer of the transforming union did not come into common use until the seventeenth century. Thirdly, since she was writing from her own experience, it is possible that St. Teresa had passed immediately from discursive meditation to a high degree of infused, mystical prayer.

The Way of Perfection

When we turn to *The Way of Perfection*, which St. Teresa began in 1565, we notice that there are some adjustments in her division. Since the first nuns of the Teresian reform had asked her to teach them about mental prayer, it is logical that she would be more precise and detailed, especially when speaking of the earlier stages of mental prayer. One of the most obvious differences in *The Way of Perfection* is that St. Teresa tries to distinguish between the prayer of **active recollection** and the prayer of **infused recollection**.

One need not go to heaven to speak to God, nor is it necessary to speak in a loud voice.

In Chapters 28 and 29 she discusses the prayer of active recollection. After recalling that St. Augustine had said that he had looked for God in many places and finally found God within himself, St. Teresa asserts that one need not go to heaven to speak to God, nor is it necessary to speak in a loud voice. “However quietly we speak, he is so near that he will hear us. We need no wings to go in search of him, but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon him present within us” (chap. 28).

If one prays in this way, conversing with God who dwells in the soul through sanctifying grace, even if the prayer is vocal, the mind will be recollected. It is called **prayer of recollection** because “the soul gathers together all its faculties and enters within itself to be with its God” (*loc. cit.*). This may prove to be something of a struggle in the beginning, says St. Teresa, but if a person cultivates the habit of recollection, the soul and the will gain such power over the senses that “they will only have to make a sign to show that they wish to enter into recollection and the senses will obey and let themselves be recollected” (*ibid.*).

When St. Teresa spoke of the prayer of recollection in Chapter 15 of *The Life*, she said that “this quiet and recollection...is not something that can be acquired.” But in Chapter 29 of *The Way of Perfection* she says: “You must understand that this is not a supernatural state, but depends on our will, and that, by God’s favor, we can enter it of our own accord... For this is not a silence of the faculties; it is an enclosing of the faculties within itself by the soul.” In other words, it is an ascetical, acquired grade of prayer, and not a mystical, infused grade.

What St. Teresa calls the **prayer of quiet** in Chapter 31, on the other hand, is definitely the prayer of **infused recollection**, a type of mystical, infused contemplation. Later on, she will further refine her terminology, but for the moment we should read her description of this “prayer of quiet.”

I still want to describe this prayer of quiet to you in the way that I have heard it explained and as the Lord has been pleased to teach it to me.... This is a supernatural state and however hard we try, we cannot acquire it by ourselves.... The faculties are stilled and have no wish to move, for any movement they make seems to hinder the soul from loving God. They are not completely lost, however, since two of them are free and they can realize in whose presence they are. It is the will that is captive now.... The intellect tries to occupy itself with only one thing, and the memory has no desire to busy itself with more. They both see that this is the one thing necessary; anything else will cause them to be disturbed.

THE WAY OF PERFECTION, CHAP. 31

The predominant characteristics of the prayer of quiet are peace and joy, for the will is totally captivated by divine love. The faculties of intellect and memory are still free and may wander, but the soul should pay no attention to the operations of these faculties. To do so would cause distraction and anxiety. Later on, in the **prayer of union**, it will be impossible for the intellect and memory to operate independently, because all the faculties will be centered on God. But to learn St. Teresa’s teaching on the prayer of union, we must consult her final major work.

The Interior Castle

Using the symbol of a castle containing seven apartments or suites (*las moradas*), St. Teresa identifies the first three as the stages of prayer in the **ascetical phase** of the spiritual life, and the treatment is very brief because she has already discussed the lower degrees of prayer in her previous works. The last four stages of prayer, from the fourth to the seventh

moradas, represent the various degrees of mystical prayer. And at the very outset of her discussion of the grades of **mystical prayer**, St. Teresa advises the reader:

It may be that I am contradicting what I myself have said elsewhere. This is not surprising, because almost fifteen years have passed since then, and perhaps the Lord has now given me a clearer realization of these matters than I had at first.

THE INTERIOR CASTLE, FOURTH MANSIONS, CHAP. 2

The most noteworthy changes in *The Interior Castle* are a clear distinction between acquired and infused recollection, further precisions concerning the prayer of quiet, and the description of sensible consolations and infused spiritual delights.

St. Teresa had previously discussed the **prayer of recollection** in Chapters 15 and 16 of *The Life* and in Chapters 28 and 29 of *The Way of Perfection*. Consequently, in *The Interior Castle* she makes only a brief reference to it, saying that “in the prayer of [acquired] recollection it is unnecessary to abandon [discursive] meditation and the activity of the intellect” (Fourth Mansions, chap. 3). In the subsequent literature on the practice of prayer this **acquired recollection** will be called by various names: prayer of simplicity, prayer of simple regard, acquired contemplation, and the loving awareness of God.

It is in the Fourth Mansions of *The Interior Castle*, says St. Teresa, that “we now begin to touch the supernatural.” She is preparing to discuss the **prayer of quiet**, which she also calls the “prayer of consolations from God.” However, before doing so, she turns back to describe the **prayer of infused recollection**.

First of all, I will say something (though not much, as I have dealt with it elsewhere) about another kind of prayer, which almost invariably begins before this one. It is a form of recollection which also seems to me supernatural.... Do not think that the soul can attain to him merely by trying to think of him as present within the soul. This is a good habit and an excellent kind of meditation, for it is founded on a truth, namely, that God is within us. But it is not the kind of prayer that I have in mind.... What I am describing is quite different.

As I understand it, the soul whom the Lord has been pleased to lead into this mansion will do best to act as I have said. Let it try, without forcing itself or causing any turmoil, to put a stop to all discursive reasoning, yet not to suspend the intellect nor to cease from all thought, although it is good for it to remember that it is in God's presence and who this God is. If this experience should lead to a state of absorption, well and good, but it should not try to understand what this state is, because it is a gift bestowed on the will. Therefore, the will should be allowed to enjoy it and should not be active except to utter a few loving words.

THE INTERIOR CASTLE, FOURTH MANSIONS, CHAP. 3

Thus, the **prayer of infused recollection** is the first grade of mystical prayer in the Teresian schema of the degrees of prayer. In this Fourth Mansion of the spiritual life she also clearly distinguishes the prayer of infused recollection from the **prayer of quiet**, wherein the human will is completely captivated by divine love. And since the will is now operating on the mystical level, the individual experiences peace, sweetness and spiritual delight, which are fruits of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the experience is so intense that the individual passes into a swoon or a state of languor which St. Teresa calls a “sleep of the faculties.” However, she also warns that hypersensitive persons of a weak constitution, bad health or an excessively austere life may sometimes think that they are experiencing a “sleep of the faculties” when in reality it is caused by one of the aforesaid conditions (Fourth

Mansions, chap. 3). Although some authors classify “sleep of the faculties” as a distinct grade of mystical prayer, St. Teresa makes so little of it that it seems to be merely an intensification of the prayer of quiet.

From the Fifth to the Seventh Mansions, St. Teresa treats of the final and highest grade of mystical prayer: the **prayer of union**. In this grade of mystical prayer there are various degrees of intensity and St. Teresa identifies them and describes the phenomena that normally accompany the prayer of union. In the Fifth Mansions she describes the **prayer of simple union** by saying that “God implants himself in the interior of the soul in such a way that, when it returns to itself, it cannot possibly doubt that God has been in it and it has been in God” (chap. 1). It should be noted, however, that although St. Teresa is here discussing the mystical prayer of union, she urges the nuns to “ask our Lord to give you this perfect love for your neighbor,” because “if you are lacking in this virtue, you have not yet attained union” (chap. 3).

In the Sixth Mansions the soul experiences the **spiritual betrothal (mystical espousal)** which is usually accompanied by mystical phenomena such as painful trials and wounds of love, ecstasy and rapture, flights of the spirit, or even locutions and visions. This is the longest section of *The Interior Castle*—eleven chapters—because St. Teresa describes and explains the phenomena that accompany the mystical espousal. She also points out the dangers of such gifts, but admits that if they are received in the proper spirit, they can contribute greatly to the soul’s purification and sanctification. The basic characteristic of this grade of mystical prayer is that the soul is wounded with love for the divine Spouse and seeks every opportunity to be alone with him. It willingly renounces everything that could possibly disturb its solitude.

Finally, in the Seventh Mansions, the soul experiences the **transforming union or mystical marriage**. This is the highest state of prayer that can be reached in this life on earth. St. Teresa begins by discussing the indwelling of the Trinity. The soul “sees these three Persons, individually, and yet, by a wonderful kind of knowledge which is given to it, the soul realizes that most certainly and truly all these three Persons are one Substance and one Power and one Knowledge and one God alone” (chap. 1). She then describes the various effects of the prayer of the Seventh Mansions, and she concludes *The Interior Castle* with some very important observations:

You must not build on foundations of prayer and contemplation alone, for unless you strive after the virtues and practice them, you will never grow to be more than dwarfs.... Anyone who fails to go forward begins to fall back, and love, I believe, can never be content for long where it is.

You may think that I am speaking about beginners, and that later on one may rest; but...the only repose that these souls enjoy is of an interior kind; of outward repose they get less and less.... We should desire and engage in prayer, not for our enjoyment, but for the sake of acquiring the strength which fits us for service.... Believe me, Martha and Mary must work together.... I will end by saying that we must not build towers without foundations, and that the Lord does not look so much at the magnitude of anything we do as at the love with which we do it. If we accomplish what we can, His Majesty will see to it that we become able to do more each day.

THE INTERIOR CASTLE, SEVENTH MANSIONS, CHAP. 4

By collating all the material contained in the works of St. Teresa and taking into account the contributions by later authors on the practice of prayer, we can offer the following schema of the grades of prayer:

- **Vocal Prayer**, with attention to what one is saying or reading and God, whom one is addressing.
- **Discursive Meditation**: consideration of a spiritual truth; application to oneself, and resolve to do something about it.
- **Affective Mental Prayer**: one turns to “other,” namely, God, and prayer becomes “the language of love.”
- **Acquired Recollection**: also called prayer of simplicity, prayer of simple regard, acquired contemplation, the loving awareness of God.
- **Infused Recollection**: the first degree of infused, mystical contemplation.
- **Prayer of Quiet**: the will is totally captivated by divine love; sometimes all the faculties are likewise captivated (sleep or ecstasy).
- **Prayer of Simple Union**: both the intellect and the will are absorbed in God.
- **Prayer of Ecstatic Union**: this is the “mystical espousal” or “conforming union.”
- **Prayer of Transforming Union**: also called the “mystical marriage” because it is the most intimate union of the soul with God that is possible in this life.

About the Author

Jordan Aumann was born on June 15, 1916, in Detroit, Michigan, to Henry John Aumann and Viola Helen Smades. He made his profession of Vows through the Order of Preachers in 1939, and was ordained to the Priesthood in 1945.

He taught for years in Rome at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, and was a Consultor to the Sacred Congregations for the Clergy and Catechetics and for Evangelization.

A renowned author and translator, and former Editor of *The Priest*, he was active in teaching, writing and spiritual direction. Fr. Aumann published eight books on Spiritual Theology and numerous articles. His publications include *Spiritual Theology* and *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, and *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness. The Mea Culpa's of John Paul II*.

Father Jordan died on January 23, 2007, after an extended illness. Mass of Resurrection was celebrated on January 26, at St. Pius V Priory, 1909 S. Ashland Ave., Chicago, Illinois, followed by burial at All Saints Cemetery.

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