

**THE JOURNEY TO GOD  
THROUGH THE SPIRITUALITY OF  
TERESA OF ÁVILA (1515–1582)**

By

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Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF THEOLOGY

In the subject

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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NOVEMBER 2007

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Almighty God for giving me the call and then the fortitude to proceed with a Masters in Theology in order that I could gain further knowledge of Him through my study of Teresian Spirituality and thereby enrich my own spiritual journey to God. I wish to thank especially my supervisor Professor Celia Kourie who was my mentor during this project and who stimulated my thoughts on spirituality with the result that my dissertation is a more comprehensive and fulfilling document on Teresian spirituality than I originally planned. I also wish to thank my friend, Fr. Michael van Heerden for not only accepting the position of co-supervisor for this dissertation, but also for encouraging me to complete this task and sharing with me his insights into various aspects of theology as pertinent to this dissertation. I am also particularly indebted to Sister Bridgit Edman OCD of the Carmelite Convent in Retreat, Cape Town, whose knowledge of Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross is exceptional and who did not hesitate to be critical of the contents of this dissertation where any aspects of this work were not accurate concerning these two doctors of the church.

I would especially like to thank Regine Lord for her advice, her many questions, and her editing of this dissertation. Finally I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my wife, Suzanne who manifested extraordinary patience while I worked on this dissertation even when we were on holiday.

## **SUMMARY**

This study sets out to determine whether Teresa of Ávila's spirituality, especially her treatise, *The Interior Castle*, can still provide an appropriate guide for the journey to God in the world of the 21st century. This remarkable book offers a particularly unique contribution to Christian literature. To accomplish this goal, a study of the nature of Christian Spirituality is undertaken, followed by a brief history of Christian spirituality. This provides a backdrop for an examination of the historical setting against which the *Interior Castle* was written. The study then explores the seven mansions of the *Interior Castle* to gain an understanding of the journey to God and examines some of the most important and recurring themes in the book. The stages and forms of prayer which are central to the *Interior Castle* are discussed and the mystical experiences of the 'dark night of the spirit' and union with God are analysed. Lastly, the findings are evaluated to ascertain whether Teresa's writings are still relevant in this contemporary era for those embarking upon the journey towards God.

## **KEY WORDS**

Christian Spirituality, Teresa of Ávila, Interior Castle, Mysticism, Contemplation, Prayer, Meditation, Humility, Union with God, Dark Night of the Spirit

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# CHAPTER ONE:

## Introduction

### 1.1 The Research Problem

Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582 CE) wrote the *Interior Castle*, which is sometimes referred to as the Book of the Mansions, over a period of six months, from 2 June to 29 November 1577. She was 62 years old at the time. In this book, which has become a classic of Christian spirituality, Teresa describes the soul as a most beautiful globe of crystal or a very clear diamond, with brilliant lights radiating out from a great fire, representing God, who is located at the centre. Differences in the intensity of the light form distinct regions that resemble a series of circles concentric with the innermost part of the crystal globe or diamond. These separate zones, of which the ones that are more resplendent with light are the ones closer to the centre, constitute distinct ‘mansions’, with each in turn containing many others. Using this vision as a map, Teresa penetrates into one mansion after the other, ultimately distinguishing between seven mansions. Her treatise, the *Interior Castle*, is similarly divided into seven parts, each of which in turn consists of several chapters.

For the reader – and the researcher, these ‘mansions’ become luminous signs that mark the stages of the journey towards union with God. Although these signs, at first, seemed frightening to Teresa, she came to realise through personal experience that they were in fact revealing the activity of God in the soul. Teresa uses a language rich in symbols, metaphors and allegories to explain the nature of that hidden action.

In the light of the above, this dissertation seeks to answer the question: can this treatise on spirituality, which Teresa gave to Christian literature in 1577, still provide an appropriate and effective guide to those who wish to find union with God today?

## 1.2 Aim of the Research

The aim of this research will, therefore, be primarily hermeneutical, understood as a ‘fusion of horizons’ between the spiritual insights of Teresa and our contemporary understanding of the spiritual life. This entails a twofold task. Firstly, it means that we will seek to unravel her insights in the context of her time and place; secondly, this will be done, not as an end in itself, but, rather, in order to enrich and enlarge contemporary conceptions of spirituality and show Teresa’s relevance for today:

Projecting a historical horizon, then, is only one phase in the process of understanding; it does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the process of understanding, a real fusion of horizons occurs – which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded (Gadamer 2001:306-7).

This understanding of spirituality, as explored in Chapter Two, sees the life of the Spirit no longer as the preserve of the clergy or religious, but as a reality of human life open to all who feel drawn to the fullness of the human experience. It involves the mystical preparation for the intervention of the Transcendent in one’s life, as well as the effect that this has on one’s involvement in community. This fact makes the insights of Teresa all the more pertinent for today.

What is attractive about Teresa’s writings is that they are not those of a theologian or philosopher; rather, they are written in a way that can be understood by the ordinary person. Teresa’s greatest virtue may be that she acknowledges our humanity and her own. She knows that all of us desire in some way to lead spiritual lives, but that we often do not have the will or the courage to discipline ourselves to be spiritual. Through her description of the seven mansions in the *Interior Castle*, I hope to show that Teresa gives us a practical way of journeying to God, while recognising that we will occasionally have setbacks. At the same time, she gives us hope that it is possible to achieve ultimate union with God through progressive interiorisation.



### **1.3 Research Methodology**

For the purposes of this dissertation, a theological and historical framework will be used. We will see that spirituality and theology are not mutually exclusive disciplines, but that they are mutually enriching and self-corrective. Theology, in many ways, is the historical articulation of the experience of the mystics of all ages. Similarly, for mystical spirituality to contribute to human experience and life, one needs the words and theories of theology to form and give shape to the experience of the mystic.

There is a freshness and uniqueness in each of the insights of the different mystics; nonetheless, because they all speak about the same horizon, there are also common threads, which can be extracted to underpin what is timeless and universal in their appeal. This can only be done when one engages in a historical survey of the development and growth of the discipline of spirituality. This will be presented in Chapter Three in order to give a backdrop to the insights of Teresa and to help extract universal applications of her mystical thought and her unique contribution to the development of her spirituality. It will be shown that the unique character of Teresian spirituality is a union of both Kataphatic and Apophatic methods of prayer (see Section 2.5). In fact, it is my contention that the journey through the mansions is a journey from the Kataphatic to the Apophatic, which parallels the progressive interiorisation of the person.

This research will be carried out within the framework of a literature study of Teresa's works. Teresa's own spiritual journey is presented in the *Interior Castle* as one that reveals the typical progression of the spiritual life: starting from an initial acknowledgement of the presence of God, it moves towards achieving true union with God and 'putting on' the mind of Christ. The writings of both her contemporaries as well as more recent writers in the intersecting areas of spirituality, mysticism, theology and psychology, will be used to provide clarification, expansion and insight. However, it will be the course of development established in the *Interior Castle* that provides the overall framework for my examination of Teresa's works.

This scrutiny of Teresa's *Interior Castle* as well as the study of the auxiliary works will be undertaken within a broadly phenomenological perspective. This means striving for the greatest possible freedom from presuppositions so as to attend to the meaning of Teresa's words within the context of her culture and time. This will be a constructive programme of descriptive and inter-disciplinary analysis. Utilising insights from theology, history, sociology, psychology and spirituality will help to unravel the timelessness of her perspective and the relevance of Teresa's thought for the encounter with the Transcendent.

#### **1.4 Theological Framework**

We have already noted the interdependence of spirituality and theology. A major premise of this dissertation is that the spiritual and theological traditions of the church are primary witnesses to the living out of the Gospel in each new age and within the dynamics of human life:

A law does not exist in order to be understood historically, but to be concretized in its legal validity by being interpreted. Similarly, the gospel does not exist in order to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in such a way that it exercises its saving effect (Gadamer 2001:309).

It will be shown in this dissertation that Teresa saw the saving effect of the Gospel in two fundamental effects in a person's life: firstly, the growth in the life of prayer and a concomitant honesty about one's life; and secondly, a deeper involvement in the community and engagement with others to live a life of love. The post-modern world is all too aware of the living link that should exist between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Since the individual and his/her life is the place in which these two realities are married and thus become the immediate context for God to disclose God's self, every person's response to God will have a uniqueness and individuality of its own. Further, since this relationship engages the whole being, heart as well as intellect, theology and spirituality can never become exclusively the domain of the intellect. But, this does not mean that the spiritual journey does not need the guidance of the living tradition of spirituality and theology. This guidance ensures that the person's prayer and personal appropriation, as well as their engagement with the world, do not become

purely private affairs, set only within the limited parameters of the person's own definitions:

... theology implies participation in a religious faith, so that some experience of the life of faith precedes theology and may indeed be said to motivate it. In this area of experience, as in every other, we seek to 'make sense' of our experience, and the process of bringing the content of the faith-experience to clear expression in words embarks us on the business of theology (Macquarrie 1975:5).

In the final analysis, the spiritual life is a living relationship between two beings: the individual and the living God. But, because these are not of the same order of existence, the element of discipleship and obedience is always necessary. To discern this, one can listen to how others have interpreted discipleship and obedience in their various contexts.

The value of this dissertation is primarily as a contribution in aiding this 'listening' to the experience of others, so as to guide us in how to listen more attentively to the work of God, the Transcendent, in our own lives. It is my contention that the insights of Teresa, especially those captured in the *Interior Castle*, are an invaluable source for this listening. The Church, in declaring her as a doctor of faith, has acknowledged Teresa's value and contribution to the growth of the living tradition of spirituality and theology. This dissertation seeks to make this truth available to people other than the professional theologians:

In the community of faith, there is met what seems to be a quest inherent in the constitution of our human existence. The quest is met by the opening up of the dimension of the holy, which is experienced as addressing, judging, assisting, renewing, and so on. Unless it does have its roots in experience of this kind, theology deals in abstractions and becomes a mere scholasticism. Yet if the theology that speaks out of such an experience of the life of faith is not to become subjective, introspective, and individualistic, it must keep in view the experience of the whole community of faith (Macquarrie 1975:5-6).

In letters written by Teresa after completing the *Interior Castle*, she comments that she was pleased that she had completed this book. Referring to the *Interior Castle* as "the jewel", she stated that it was more valuable than the book about her life, which she had completed in 1565. Teresa felt that, through the process of writing the *Interior*

*Castle* and by consciously and deliberately analysing God's action in herself, God had brought her to greater spiritual perfection. Her spiritual knowledge and experience had become even more profound and more expansive after completing her book. From the heights of understanding that she reached, Teresa was able to discern with greater clarity than before the mystery of God and the duties of the creature. She also came to understand the demands of God and the weaknesses of human beings. She was able to look at the road traversed, measure its stages, and appreciate the difficulties and suffering of souls who had not yet reached their goal. As a result, she can describe these experiences with precision, advise with authority and guide with compassion and love.

## **1.5 Demarcation of Research**

The life of Teresa has been well documented and examined. Her life was certainly well examined prior to her canonisation in the early eighteenth century and her books have survived to the present day, even outside of the Catholic Church. Although outside sources will be consulted, the primary focus of the research will be the words written by Teresa herself. Specific attention will thus be paid to the *Interior Castle*; *The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*; *The Life of St. Teresa of Ávila*; *The Collected Works of Teresa of Ávila*; and *The Way of Perfection*. In order to explore the topic of this dissertation of the journey to God through Teresian spirituality, the following chapters will discuss the journey through the progressive spiritual interiorisation of the person to ultimate union with God.

Chapter One has introduced the research problem, namely, the Teresian spirituality as contained in the *Interior Castle*.

Chapter Two discusses the history and main characteristics of the term 'spirituality' from its early beginnings to our contemporary understanding of the concept. It furthermore charts the evolution of spirituality, which has become a discipline in its own right, and explains the relationship between the two disciplines of theology and spirituality. As Teresa of Ávila is recognised as one of the Catholic Church's greatest mystics, it is important to look at the dynamic between spirituality and mysticism.

Furthermore, since contemporary research shows a positive relationship between spiritual growth and psychological health, it is instructive to examine the dynamic between spirituality and psychology.

Chapter Three looks at the historical setting within which the *Interior Castle* was written. It summarises the important aspects of Teresa's life, and relates these to the historical, social and religious context within which she lived. Thereafter, the reforms that Teresa implemented during her lifetime are discussed, thus providing the background for the historical setting of the *Interior Castle*.

Chapter Four explores the general themes of the seven mansions that make up the *Interior Castle* in order to understand the journeys to God. It maps the spiritual life as a process of progressive interiorisation and relates Teresa's seven mansions to the classic three stages of prayer. Essentially, what unites both is the goal of union with God, reached by means of an ongoing process of detachment from worldly attractions and a growing attachment to the things of God.

Chapter Five examines three of the most important and recurring themes in the *Interior Castle*, namely humility, self-knowledge and silence. According to Teresa, they are not only the foundation for a spiritual life, but in fact indispensable for the journey to God.

Teresa stresses throughout all her writings that prayer is the way to God. Chapter Six, therefore, analyses and discusses the various stages of prayer described by Teresa in the *Interior Castle*, starting with the 'prayer of beginners' and progressing to the ultimate 'prayer of union'. Chapter Seven discusses the state of the 'dark night of the spirit' by seeking to understand what is meant by this mystical experience, its causes and trials, and its effects. This state will also be discussed in terms of contemporary psychological observation and research, looking specifically at the relationship between the dark night of the spirit and depression.

Chapter Eight examines the experiences relating to the Seventh Mansions. It depicts the fulfilment of what began in the First Mansions as a 'prayer for beginners' course, designed for someone who sets out on a spiritual journey towards God, with its

ultimate aim the attainment of 'union with God'. Lastly, Chapter Nine concludes by assessing, firstly, whether there is a fusion of horizons between the spiritual insights of Teresa and a contemporary understanding of the spiritual life and, secondly, whether Teresian spirituality is still relevant for the journey to God today.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **An Understanding of Spirituality**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the history and main characteristics of the term ‘spirituality’ from its early beginnings to our contemporary understanding of the concept. It furthermore charts the evolution of spirituality, which has become a discipline in its own right, and explains the relationship between the two disciplines of theology and spirituality. Since Teresa of Ávila is recognised as one of the Catholic Church’s greatest mystics it is important to look at the dynamic between spirituality and mysticism. Furthermore, since contemporary research shows a positive relationship between spiritual growth and psychological health, it is instructive to examine the dynamic between spirituality and psychology.

This chapter therefore provides a backdrop to an analysis of Teresian spirituality so as to elucidate her particular charism in the light of the historical development of spirituality. More importantly, however, it examines the context of Teresian spirituality. This knowledge will provide support to the hypothesis that the spirituality of Teresa is still relevant in the contemporary world for those who wish to follow her particular path.

#### **2.2 History of the Term ‘Spirituality’**

The term ‘spirituality’ goes back via the French *spiritualité* to the Latin *spiritualitas*. This, in turn, is rooted in the biblical semantic field of the terms *ruach* (breath) and *pneuma* (spirit), which appear in the letters of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. Paul used the adjective ‘spiritual’ to refer to objects that were under the influence of, or were manifestations of, the Spirit of God or, in other words, of the Holy Spirit. Thus Paul spoke of the Law (Rom 7:14), truth (1 Cor 2:13), gifts or charisms (1 Cor 12:1), blessings (Eph 1:3), hymns or songs (Eph 5:19), and understanding (Col 1:9) as being spiritual. It is particularly interesting for our purposes, that Paul contrasted the

‘spiritual person’ (*pneumatikos anthrōpos*) with the ‘natural person’ (*psychikos anthrōpos*) (Schneiders 1986:258), when Paul writes in 1 Cor 2:14-15:

The natural person has no room for the gifts of God’s Spirit. The spiritual person, on the other hand, can assess the value of everything, and that person’s value cannot be assessed by anybody else.

St. Paul’s definition of the ‘spiritual person’ suggests that he or she will be indwelt by, or live under the influence of, the Holy Spirit of God.

Sheldrake (2007:3) asserts that the “... Pauline moral sense of ‘spiritual’, meaning ‘life in the Spirit’, remained in constant use in the West until the twelfth century”. Schneiders (1986:258), similarly, states that “... the meaning of the word ‘spirituality’ changed little until the twelfth century”. Sheldrake (2007:3) writes: “Interestingly, the noun ‘spirituality’ (*spiritualitas*) during the middle ages, most frequently referred to the clerical state”. In other words, ‘spirituality’ was used synonymously with ‘the clergy’. In the seventeenth century, however, the term ‘spirituality’ “... suddenly reappeared and became the focus of much controversy” (Schneiders 1986:259). This was because the word ‘spirituality’ was now used to refer to the interior life, albeit with a broader meaning and application than piety, which was applied to individuals who had an especially affective relationship with God. Schneiders (1986:259) further states that the term ‘spirituality’ was sometimes used pejoratively and in contrast with the term ‘devotion’ or ‘piety’, both of which emphasised human effort in leading a spiritual life, whereas ‘spirituality’ did not. In general, though, the word ‘spirituality’ was used to denote everything that pertained to the interior life of human beings and especially to the quest for perfection “... above and beyond the requirements of ordinary Christian life, whether that quest was orthodox or suspect” (Schneiders 1986:259).

At the end of the nineteenth century, the term *spiritualité* was used to refer to the spiritual life, from where it passed into English in translations of French writings. In this regard, however, McGinn (2005b:28) writes: “... The reasons for the revival for the term ‘spirituality’ in France around the beginnings of the last century remain something of a mystery”. The basic denotation of the term remained substantially the same as it had been since its revival in the seventeenth century, but the emphasis fell



more clearly upon the spiritual life *as lived*, that is, upon the experiential and practical implications of the word.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, a debate was taking place in Christian religious circles as to whether *all* Christians, or only some, were called to the spiritual life. It was finally settled by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) (hereinafter referred to as Vatican II), which declared that all Christians are called to one and the same ‘holiness’; ‘holiness’ here is used as a synonym for ‘the spiritual life’. This call to holiness is reflected in the documents of Vatican II, which call for a renewed focus on spirituality. The document *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963) (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) announces that the primary goal of the entire Council is to intensify Christian spirituality, which is defined as “... the daily growth of the church in Christian living” (Dupuis 2001:70). In the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (1964) (*Lumen Gentium*), two themes had a particularly significant effect on spirituality. The first of these themes was the universal call to holiness and the second was the call to the same holiness cultivated in various duties of life.

In the 1960’s, spirituality became, in many languages, the over-arching concept for everything that had to do with the ‘spiritual life’. This is because ‘spirituality’ is often associated with vague phrases, such as ‘an experience of faith’, ‘religious experiences’, or ‘a new outlook on life’; at the same time, it has also been co-opted by various types of movements, including movements of emancipation, liberation spirituality, peace spirituality, feminist spirituality and many other widespread movements that cannot be ascribed to any established religion.

In this regard, Waaijman (2002:308) states that, although the word spirituality was contextually bound up with the Catholic tradition, “... as a result of the vigorous growth which lived spirituality has established in recent decades, the meaning of the word has been detached from its original Catholic setting”. He also asserts that, because the dominance of the term has been challenged, in his view, “... it is better to relativise the preferential position of spirituality and to listen also to other terms which have been used over time to denote the area of spirituality” (Waaijman 2002:308).

Changes in liturgical patterns and the challenges faced by theology in the twenty-first century and in a post-holocaust, technologically complex world characterised by political and social volatility are all having a profound impact on Christian spirituality. This is further complicated by the fact that the "... the very term 'spirituality' in the Christian context is no longer an exclusively Roman Catholic or even a Christian term" (Saliers 1989:539). Yet within the Christian tradition, spirituality continues to be defined as the struggle to pray and live with a sense of holiness, in the face of the mystery of life and death. It is the challenge of seeking wholeness within human existence in relation to God, one's neighbour and the created order. Interestingly, on this point, Sheldrake (2007:4) confirms that the emergence of spirituality after Vatican II "... recovered a sense that the spiritual life was collective in nature rather than predominantly individual". He continues:

It was also not limited to personal interiority but integrated all aspects of human existence. Further it re-engaged with mainstream theology, not least biblical studies (Sheldrake 2007:4).

Saliers argues that this wholeness of human life, coupled with the demands of the twenty-first century, necessitates the linking of the interior sphere and the engagement of self and community with "... the struggle for justice and the restoration of relationship with nature and the larger cosmos" (Saliers 1989:540). These developments have led to the emergence of a wide range of styles of Christian spirituality. Although these are often in tension with one another, all ultimately seek to answer the haunting question of whether it is still possible, at the start of the twenty-first century, to have faith in God. The next section will thus look at the defining characteristics of contemporary spirituality.

### **2.3 Definition of Spirituality in Contemporary Understanding**

Schneiders (2005:1) argues that "... spirituality, like experience, is notoriously difficult to define". Nonetheless, over the last two decades there has been an increase in the need to understand human experience, particularly in the fields of spirituality, psychology and psychoanalysis. Schneiders, after discussing several variants of spirituality in her literature, arrives at the following definition: "... spirituality as lived experience can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration

through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives” (Schneiders 1998:39). According to this definition, spirituality intrinsically displays the following three fundamental characteristics. Firstly, it is a project in which a person seeks to integrate the different aspects of his or her life. Secondly, the process of doing this involves ‘self-transcendence’, and it is directed towards the ‘ultimate value’ as a person perceives it. Thirdly, the project is shaped by the experience of being consciously involved in the project. According to Schneiders (1998:39), *experience* is the all-determining characteristic. Waaijman (2002:308) concurs with this view when he says:

This category [experience] determines the study of spirituality: spirituality is the field of study which, in an interdisciplinary way, attempts to investigate spiritual experience as such, i.e.: as spiritual and as experienced.

Schneiders (2005:1) maintains: “The ultimate value which generates the horizon of any spirituality relates to the one who lives [experiences] that spirituality to the whole of reality in some particular way”. From this perspective, the appeal to spirituality has captured the religious imagination of contemporary people as encompassing a spiritual quest rather than being an appeal to subscribe to organised religion or to systematic theology. Lesniak (2005:8), similarly, argues that:

... by centering attention on practical lived human experience, spirituality is viewed as a more inclusive, tolerant and flexible canopy to pursue the mysteries of the human spirit and the sacred. Spirituality has become ecumenical and interreligious and not the preserve of any one tradition.

As it thus appears to be difficult to arrive at a working definition of spirituality, it may be easier to approach it from the other side, by stating what spirituality is not. This is another approach used by Schneiders (1986:264), who argues as follows: firstly, as noted earlier, spirituality is no longer an exclusively Roman Catholic term. In fact, it is not even an exclusively Christian term:

People speak intelligibly, for example, of Buddhist, Native American, or African spirituality. Some would maintain that spirituality is not even necessarily theistic or religious (Schneiders 1986:264).

Secondly, contemporary spirituality is neither dogmatic nor prescriptive; thus Schneiders (1986:264) writes:

It does not consist in the application to concrete life of principles derived from theology. Spirituality is understood as the unique and personal response of individuals to all that calls them to integrity and transcendence.

Thirdly, spirituality is concerned with all aspects in the growth of human beings and, consequently, it is not the concern of a select few, but of all human beings who feel drawn towards the fullness of the human experience. Fourthly, spirituality is not concerned solely with the ‘interior life’; on the contrary, spirituality requires the integration of all aspects of human life and experience, both interior and exterior (Schneiders 1986:265). In short, it can be argued that the contemporary understanding of the term ‘spirituality’ is markedly different to that of previous centuries. The main difference is that its current meaning is much broader in every sense, primarily because of its inclusion of all human *experience*.

Schneiders believes that her general definition of spirituality is:

... broad enough to embrace both Christian and non-Christian religious spiritualities as well as secular spiritualities. However, it is also specific enough to give the term some recognisable content (2005:1).

Sheldrake (2007:1) agrees with Schneiders’ definition of spirituality as stated earlier, but suggests in addition that “... the word spirituality refers to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live. In other words, spirituality implies some kind of vision of the human spirit and what will assist it to achieve full potential”. In summary, our understanding of spirituality has expanded beyond the individualistic search for meaning in life and beyond individual self-realisation through focusing inwardly, as the term was originally used in early Christian times. The contemporary use of the term emphasizes more than merely the transcendence of the individual self in isolation, but more importantly, the transcendence of the self together with a community of others.

Having arrived at a working definition of contemporary spirituality, it is now necessary to look at how spirituality relates to and integrates with theology and the contribution that spirituality makes to theology.

## **2.4 Spirituality and Theology**

Theology is defined as "... faith seeking understanding, [and] the effort to understand faith in God's revelation through the historically and culturally conditioned articulation of beliefs and praxis" (Callahan 1989:266). Spirituality, in contrast, is defined as, firstly, a lived experience of faith and, secondly, as the academic discipline that studies this experience: "Theology is the interpretation of this lived experience of faith in the light of scripture, tradition and church teaching" (Callahan 1989:266). When ascertaining the contribution of spirituality to theology, where spirituality is understood in the primary sense of lived religious experience, Callahan maintains that it influences and shapes the content and style of theology: "It is key to our understanding, then, that theology should rely on spirituality as a primary source" (Callahan 1989:267).

The experience of faith, as discussed above, can be related to the experience of God, This is because experiences and images of ourselves inform our experiences and images of God and shape our faith in a creative, redeeming and sanctifying God. From these experiences, spirituality develops, which in turn informs and shapes our theology. At the same time, though, spirituality is a critique of theology: "Our lived religious experience is a valid authority for what we come to believe as true of God's revelation" (Callahan 1989:268). Julian of Norwich (1342–1416 CE), for example, lived according to her personal experience of God's mercy, rather than believing in the Church's current doctrine of the wrath of God. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582 CE) was convinced from *her* lived religious experience "... that we never get beyond the humanity of Christ, even in exalted stages of prayer" (Callahan 1989:268). These two examples question the effect of cultural conditioning on spirituality and theology, and raise the issue of how religious experience is put into words. Callahan contends that it is important to distinguish the religious experience itself from the articulation of this

experience: “While the religious experience may be considered to be universal, the articulation of religious experience is culturally conditioned” (Callahan 1989:269).

Spirituality and theology are thus not mutually exclusive disciplines, as was the traditional model, where spirituality was ‘subject’ to theology. In this regard, Endean (2005:77) cites Schneiders who states that “... spirituality as an autonomous discipline functions in partnership and mutuality with theology”. Endean (2005:77) argues further that, “... although spirituality is nevertheless autonomous, it can move beyond theology’s restrictions”.

From the writers on spirituality quoted above, subsequent to Vatican II, the thinking on spirituality as a branch of theology was liberated from its traditional narrow definition into something vibrant, open and actively concerned with a far richer and wider range of human experience.

Waaajman (2002:396) supports this view. He states that the following viewpoints have come to the fore from the standpoint of interdisciplinary cooperation with the theological disciplines: firstly, spirituality is now regarded as the lived relationship with God, as it is realised within a specific tradition, in other words, in a tradition which finds its bearings within a concrete frame of reference (exegesis, church history, systematic theology). Secondly, the relationship with God is articulated in linguistic and other forms of expression which are indeed connected with, but also differ from, rituals (liturgy), doctrinal contents (dogma), and norms and values (morality). Thirdly, the lived relationship with God is realised within a socio-cultural context (exegesis, church history, systematic theology) and is, again, resumed within a concrete faith and praxis (pastoral theology).

In this regard, Ashley’s observations of spiritual experience are noteworthy. He writes:

... such daring articulation of the experience of God arising from within the history of Christian spirituality can breathe new life into theological systems that have become too closed in on themselves and too obsessed with the drive to logical consistency (2005:163).

Marie-Dominique Chenu, in the work *Une École de Théologie: Le Saulchoir* (1937), articulated this dimension of the relationship between spirituality and theology as follows:

The fact is that in the final analysis theological systems are simply the expressions of spirituality. It is this that gives them their interest and their grandeur.... One does not get to the heart of a system via the logical coherence of its structure or the plausibility of its conclusions. One gets to that heart by grasping it in its origins via that fundamental intuition that serves to guide a spiritual life and provides the intellectual regimen proper to that life (cited in Ashley 2005:163).

In this regard, Endean (2005:76) contends:

... the disjunction between experience and understanding implicit in the study of spirituality, as 'pure experience' cannot be absolute, given that our words and theories are in important ways constitutive of our experience. ... an insistence on Christian theology as normative must stop short of the claim that theology already says everything that needs to be said, if only because of the contradiction between such an attitude and an openness to the freedom of God. ... The doctrine of Jesus Christ as truly divine and truly human, for example, will not specify exhaustively what does and does not count as authentic Christian spirituality, but it may nevertheless specify minimal conditions, which any spirituality must satisfy if it is to be authentically Christian.

Conversely, the appeal to the universality of spiritual experience represents an important, permanent challenge to any spiritual tradition:

We need an account of theology as normative for spirituality in a way that keeps it open to the unconventional and unpredictable; we need an account of spirituality as universal but not shapeless (Endean 2005:76).

In summary, the contemporary debate around the development of spirituality as an academic discipline has resulted primarily in the expansion of this concept beyond its previous, narrow confines within theology, rather than creating something that is totally and fundamentally different from theology. What is important here is the partnership and mutuality between the two disciplines, in that they co-exist in a mutually supportive relationship with each other. While an understanding is needed of theology as normative for spirituality in a way that keeps it open to what is unpredictable and unconventional, so too, in the case of spirituality, an understanding is needed that embraces its universality and limitless horizons.

Having analysed the interrelationship between spirituality and theology, the relationship between spirituality and mysticism will be explored in the next section, as an understanding of mysticism is integral to comprehending how union with God is progressively achieved.

## **2.5 Spirituality and Mysticism**

In the post-modern world of the twenty-first century, a large number of human beings are exploring and experiencing for themselves a spiritual and mystical dimension in their lives and are seeking to incorporate and integrate the spiritual into their everyday life. McLean (2003:13) thus observes:

... striking features of our time include this rekindling of a deeper interest in mysticism and in the ways of experiencing more direct knowledge of spiritual realities ... in its myriad forms.

This observation suggests that people are becoming more spiritually aware and are realising their potential for interior growth and spiritual transcendence, as well as their need for a deeper relationship both between themselves and God and between themselves and their fellow human beings.

McLean (2003:14) argues that people are generally unable to achieve spiritual maturity, depth and integration on their own, and that, for many people, "... their religious experiences have awakened them to the mystical, contemplative call of their own religious tradition". McLean (2003:16) further observes that "... the teachings of the mystics have been one of the best kept secrets of the contemplative and enclosed religious orders of the Christian Church over the centuries".

According to McGinn (2006:xv), "... attraction to mysticism both in Christianity and in other world religions has been on the rise in recent decades". The origins of the current interest in mysticism defy easy characterisation, though, and a widespread revival across many religious traditions is complex. It is useful, therefore, to look at how the mystics themselves imagine and explore the inner transformation of the self,



based on a new understanding of the human relationship to God. McGinn (2006:xv) writes:

For some mystics this understanding is rooted in extraordinary forms of consciousness, such as visions and ecstasies while other mystics insist that such special experiences are only preparatory and peripheral and perhaps even harmful if one confuses them with the core of mysticism as understood as inner transformation.

McGinn (2005a:25) observes:

... even in the first half of the twentieth century, mysticism was generally viewed either psychologically as an example of aberrant psychic states, or as a suspect phenomenon to be measured by guidelines set down according to a few respected mystics, notably Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross.

Mysticism, or what might better be called, ‘the mystical life’ “... is essentially a process, an itinerary or journey to God, not just a moment of a brief state of what is often called mystical union, important as such moments may be” (McGinn 2006:xiv). From this statement, it can be deduced that, without spirituality, a person cannot proceed in the mystical life. It could even be argued that spirituality is the fuel of the mystical life.

The question at this point is: how is mysticism defined? In exploring the definition of mysticism, McGinn (2005a:19) writes:

There is no universally agreed upon definition of mysticism, anymore than there is for religion. In common parlance, the word is often taken to refer to anything that is strange or mysterious. More narrowly it can be understood to indicate the quest to obtain union with God.

Although the word mysticism is fairly recent, in that it was only created in the seventeenth century and did not become popular until the nineteenth century, the adjective ‘mystical’ (‘hidden’ in Greek) had been widely used among Christians since the late second century. This is confirmed by Wakefield (1983:272), who writes: “The meaning of ‘mystical’ lies in the Greek root ‘*mu-*’, which has to do with hiddenness, that which is closed or concealed”.

McGinn (2005a:20) confirms that the foundational layer of the Christian mystical tradition began with Origen (185–254 CE), whose “... biblically based programme of the soul’s purification from vices through loving devotion to the Word made flesh ... set forth the first full exposition of Christian mysticism”. Around 500 CE, Dionysius, the Areopagite, the anonymous monk, created the term ‘mystical theology’ to refer to the “... knowledge that makes contact with the unknown God. Dionysius was also among the first to use the term ‘mystical union’” (McGinn 2005a:19). The same Dionysius furthermore sketched a programme to prepare for the mystical moment in which the soul, following the example of Moses, finds God in the darkness of the unknown. His major work, *Mystica Theologia*, gave ‘mysticism’ an authoritative status. For Dionysius, mysticism is a “... trans-conceptual state of consciousness which experiences God as a ray of Divine Darkness” (Egan 1982:2).

A further description of mysticism is given by Louth (1981:xv) as follows:

[Mysticism is] characterised as a search for, and experience of, immediacy with God. The mystic is not content to know about God, he longs for union with God. ‘Union with God’ can mean different things, from literal identity, where the mystic loses all sense of himself and is absorbed into God, to the union that is experienced as the consummation of love, in which the lover and the beloved remain intensely aware both of themselves and of the other. How the mystics interpret the way and the goal of their quest depends on what they think about God, and that itself is influenced by what they experience: it is a mistake to try to make out that all mysticism is the same. Yet the search for God, or the ultimate, for His own sake, and an unwillingness to be satisfied with anything less than Him; the search for immediacy with this object of the soul’s longing; this would seem to be the heart of mysticism.

The journey to God can be experienced through two paths of mysticism referred to as ‘Kataphatic’ or ‘Apophatic’ mysticism. Kataphatic mysticism, or the *via positiva*, which involves positive speaking about God, is based on the concepts of creation and on God’s love, and uses affective language in speaking of the love relationship with God. Apophatic mysticism, or the *via negativa*, posits, in contrast, that all statements must remain unsaid in deference to God’s hidden reality. Kourie (2008:4) notes further:

*Apophasis*, meaning ‘unsaying’ or ‘speaking away’, subverts the tendency of the mind to arrive at ultimate truth, and acknowledges the

inaccessibility of the divine. Even the most eloquent language mitigates against disclosure of Reality.

Ruffing (2005:393), however, notes: “The relationship between these two spiritual paths has often been asserted to be one of progression”. Ruffing’s progression theory assumes that people begin their spiritual journey by reflecting on the Gospels, on symbols of faith in the Creed, and on developing a relationship with Christ through meditation and contemplative prayer. “Eventually, persons abandon this mediated path to God for the self-emptying, knowing of unknowing and dark contemplation of God more typical of Apophatic mysticism” (Ruffing 2005:393). The earliest representative of the Apophatic approach is the mysterious monk, Dionysius, referred to earlier in this chapter. Since the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Catholic mystical theology has manifested a distinct preference for Apophatic mysticism “... and nearly made it definitive of mysticism itself” (Ruffing 2005:393). Ruffing further comments that this bias has had the effect of “... obscuring the full potential of the flowering of a primarily Kataphatic mysticism as a lifetime pattern for many people” (Ruffing 2005:393).

The significance of mysticism as an integral aspect of Christian life and practice was also reinforced through the writings and experiences of modern mystics during the twentieth century, e.g. Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955 CE), Simone Weil (1909–1943 CE) and Thomas Merton (1915–1968 CE), and through the investigations of theologians, philosophers and other scholars of mysticism. These writers recognised the power of mysticism to transform not only the minds of the mystics, but also its power to transform the lives of others. Of course, mysticism is certainly not a religious phenomenon peculiar to Christianity. Each religious tradition has its own mystical aspect and the specific character of a particular mystical tradition should and must be respected.

Therefore, the ultimate aim of Christian mysticism is to achieve union with God, although McGinn (2006:xv) believes that:

... the notion of ‘presence’ provides a more inclusive and supple term than ‘union’ for encompassing a variety of ways that mystics have expressed how God comes to transform their minds and lives.

God does not present God's self to the human consciousness in the same way that an object in the concrete world is said to be present. From the writings of Teresa of Ávila, encountering God is more like meeting a friend or a loved one; mystics tend to use intensely personal language, especially in their description of their relationship with Jesus Christ. Mystics have wrestled with writing about the presence of God or about the transforming union in God they have experienced, precisely because of the paradox that God is found in absence and negation (most significantly in an experience referred to as 'the dark night of the soul') rather than in the more easily understood, and the more easily verbalised, presence and affirmation.

In support of McGinn's belief in the notion of 'presence', one of the central claims of most mystical texts, and especially of the *Interior Castle*, is that mysticism involves an immediate consciousness of the presence of God. Teresa's writings are a powerful witness to the possibility of entering into a sense of divine presence within the context of ordinary religious observances and in ordinary everyday life. McLean (2003:22) argues:

What differentiates mystical texts and this particular text [*Interior Castle*] from other forms of religious writings is that the presentation is both subjectively and objectively more direct and more immediate.

For this reason, much of Teresa's original text is discussed in this dissertation.

McGinn (2006:xiv) points out:

... a proper grasp of mysticism requires an investigation of the ways by which mystics have prepared for God's intervention in their lives and the effect that divine action has had upon the mystic and those to whom the message has been communicated.

This experience involves transformation. The one issue, which is predominant in all the Christian mystics, is that their encounter with God transforms their minds and their lives: God transforms them and invites, even compels, them to encourage others through their example of love to open themselves to a similar process of transformation. On this issue, McGinn (2006:xvii) states:

That is why the only test that Christianity has known for determining the authenticity of a mystic and her or his message has been that of personal transformation both on the mystic's part, and especially on the part of those whom the mystic has affected.

This test of transformation referred to by McGinn above, to determine the authenticity of a mystic, was also emphasized by Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, and will be explained in later chapters of this dissertation.

Finally, the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984 CE) stated in his 1983 book, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook on Contemporary Spirituality*, that the Christian of the future either will be a mystic or will not be a Christian at all. Whether this hypothesis is true or not, must be the subject of further argument and debate and is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Having looked at spirituality in relation to mysticism, it is now necessary to understand how spirituality is expressed in psychology, and to examine the role that spirituality plays in psychology.

## **2.6 Spirituality and Psychology**

Lesniak (2005:10) advises that a number of writings on spirituality over the last few decades have undergone multiple printings, which is indicative of the proliferation of "... other self-help spiritual manuals" from which a person can choose. Some of these publications include: *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* by M. Scott Peck (1978), *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* by G. May (1988) and *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* by T. Moore (1992).

Essentially, these authors encourage people to take responsibility for their feelings and to be accountable for their own happiness in the search for meaning in their lives through spirituality. Lesniak (2005:10) confirms: "The appeal to psychology in spirituality has had many positive effects in promoting self-knowledge, increased self-awareness, self-esteem...".

Shea (2005:52) argues: “Psychotherapy relates to spirituality much as the psychology from which it comes, relates to it”. This means that, although there are many psychotherapists who are not interested in addressing the spiritual dimension of the person,

... many psychotherapists, perhaps influenced by the thinking of William James (1842–1910), Carl Jung (1875–1961), Victor Frankl (1905–1997), and a number of other thinkers, [do] see the spiritual dimension of the person as integral to the work of psychotherapy (Shea 2005:52).

These prominent thinkers learned from observing their patients that the integration of spirituality into psychological treatment had a profoundly beneficial influence on the mental health of their patients.

Shea (2005:52) enumerates the reasons for this positive influence, leading to the growth of the person through spirituality and psychology, as follows: firstly, our contemporary understanding of spirituality is defined less by a spiritual tradition than by the need to find personal meaning in life. Secondly, spirituality is regarded as an integral and legitimate dimension of the person. Thirdly, it is based on an understanding that spirituality is existential, personal and concerned with growth, while religion is conventional and bound up with ritual. Fourthly, the post-modern world prefers relationships rather than formal structures. And, lastly, there is a greater acceptance within post-modern culture of a ‘holistic’ perspective of the person, which allows the person to be seen as part of a larger whole. Along a similar vein as enunciated in the previous paragraph, Sheldrake (2007:202) observes:

... spiritual guidance is increasingly sought and often involves elements of psychology in tandem with spiritual teaching. Increasing numbers of people are actively seeking an explicit mixture of psychotherapy and spiritual guidance.

However, Barry and Connolly (1982:ix) write that “... spiritual direction differs from moral guidance, psychological counselling ... in that it directly assists individuals in developing and cultivating their personal relationship with God”. Benner provides arguably the tightest summary of the distinction between psychotherapy and spiritual direction:

The most important distinction is this: counselling is problem centred, spiritual direction is spirit centred. The goal [in spiritual direction] is the growth in one's relationship to God, not the resolution of problems (Benner 2002:88).

Indeed, individuals nowadays tend to seek a psychotherapist when some aspect of their lives has become 'abnormal', whether this relates to depression, anxiety, anger or relationship problems. The task of the contemporary psychotherapist is to employ generally accepted practices from applied psychology to help the person to regain what is seen to be a 'normal' state. It can therefore be deduced that psychotherapy is about making people 'normal' again. In contrast, confirms Moon (2002:271), "... spiritual guidance, however, is about abnormal making". Moon (2002:272) explains as follows:

Spiritual guidance counsellors for the most part work with individuals who are already living close to the middle of the normal curve, but desire to become abnormal – abnormally loving, peaceful, joyful, abnormally aware of God and his loving presence.

This is a very interesting comment and an unusual turn-around of the normal/abnormal dichotomy, after all, society is not generally in favour of people being encouraged or helped to become 'less normal', but is based on a strong drive to reduce differences to sameness, heterogeneity to homogeneity, in order to make it easier to exert control over the members of a community, culture, country, nation, etc.

In summary, spirituality and psychology, although they are autonomous disciplines, can, if used together, be used to achieve the ultimate goal of facilitating the spiritual growth of individuals and not only the alleviation of symptoms and the resolution of problems. If spirituality is seen as integral to psychology, it is more able to address the person holistically and to help each individual to find meaning within the project of life integration and the attainment of the ultimate value as perceived by that individual.

Having established the definitions of the terms spirituality and mysticism and their relationship to psychology, it is now appropriate to survey and extrapolate the major characteristics of the four periods of the history as delineated below in order to place

the definitions of the terms in their historical context and appreciate the development of spirituality over the ages.

## **2.7 The History of Christian Spirituality**

### **2.7.1 *Early Christian Spirituality (50–500 CE)***

Zizioulas contends that the Christian Church was born during the period of late Judaism and in response to the history and expectations of that time, So it was influenced by “... the eschatological<sup>1</sup> outlook that marked the Hebrew mind characterised by the expectation of the coming of the Kingdom of God” (Zizioulas 1985:23). This expectation “... was inherited by Christianity and became the dominant factor in the shaping of its spirituality” (Zizioulas 1985:23). Early Christian spirituality differed from the Greek and Pagan religions of that time in that the church’s outlook was not cosmological, but historical: “... it was based not on the observation of nature (seasons, cyclical movement of stars, etc.) but on events” (Zizioulas 1985:23). Creation was an event; it had a beginning and its continuity was dependent on God’s will. From the beginning the Christian faith did not expect humanity’s relation to God to come through nature, but, rather, “... through history and it was through personal relationships that the person’s union with God was realised” (Zizioulas 1985:23).

In this way, early Christian spirituality contrasted with ancient Greek mentality, which looked to the past to explain current reality and the meaning of human existence. Instead, the early Christians looked for the meaning of life “... in the final act of God in history wherefrom all present and past events receive their explanation and significance” (Zizioulas 1985:24). The expectation of the eschatological, messianic era was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, who was expected to be glorious, invested with full power and authority. The eschatological reality of Christians, however, differed from the Jewish expectation in that, in Christianity, the dimensions

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘eschatology’ comes from the Greek word ‘eschatos’ meaning ‘last’. It is “a part of theology and philosophy concerned with the final events in the history of the world, or the ultimate destiny of humanity, commonly referred to as the end of the world. While in mysticism the phrase metaphorically refers to the end of reality and reunion with the Divine, in many traditional religions it is taught as an actual future event prophesied in sacred texts or folklore. More broadly, eschatology may encompass related concepts such as the Messiah or Messianic Age, the end time, and the end of days” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eschatological>).



of suffering, humility, service and love of one's neighbour were seen as the way to glory. This is referred to in scripture in various ways: for example, it is written that those who wish to reach God have to pass through the 'narrow gate' (Matt 7:13); that only when Christians are weak, are they strong (2 Cor 12:10); and that, to reach life, one must lose this life (Matt 6:39). The risen Christ was victorious over the powers of evil because He embodied all these dimensions:

Humanity's relation with God therefore is marked by the celebration of this victory over the powers of evil and death. Christian Spirituality was for the early church characterised by this celebration (Zizioulas 1985:25).

This era of early Christianity was, therefore, characterised by the following emphasis of faith: the early Christians recognised Jesus as God, who together with the Father was prayed to and worshipped and who, as head of the newly redeemed humanity, was regarded as "... the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:29). The role of the Holy Spirit was also important during this era, because Paul taught that all members of the church were, in one way or another, bearers of the Spirit and of the gifts of the Spirit (Zizioulas 1985:27). The idea of new birth in the Spirit was associated in the early church with baptism, whilst the Eucharist was seen as the event that:

... brought together the dispersed people of God 'in the same place' (*epi to auto*) not only to celebrate but also to constitute the eschatological messianic community here and now and as such, it was a spiritual event par excellence (Zizioulas 1985:29).

During approximately the second to the fourth century, Gnosticism posed a challenge to the early church. Gnosticism is a broad term that is used to cover a variety of groups, many of which expressed adherence to Christ. McGinn (2006:483) observes: "Gnostics generally held to some form of metaphysical dualism (i.e. the idea that the material world was evil, the product of a malign deity), as well as the belief that the soul, or its higher part at least was innately divine". Grant (1985:44) comments that it is "... hard to define Gnosticism precisely or even to describe, because the term 'Gnostic' is so imprecise. The Gnostics seem to have been a sort of Christian 'sect'".

Gnostic spirituality, however, survived only in an attenuated, moderately theosophical guise among pagans and Christians who read, for example, the Hermetic literature. The latter were "... treatises and dialogues purporting to convey divine revelations but

apparently derived from philosophical commonplaces” (Grant 1985:59). According to Grant (1985:61), “... the fierce attacks by some of the early church fathers like Irenaeus (130–200) and Origen (185–254) contributed to the demise of Gnosticism”. This demise occurred in the fifth century but, in its heyday, Gnosticism had been a controversial subculture of the early Christian church.

This controversy led to another pivotal point in the development of Christian spirituality in that the fourth and fifth centuries saw the rise of the main Christian theologians. These times also saw the development of “... the dogmatic foundations of all Christianity down to our times” (Kannengiesser 1985:61). For example, Athanasius (296–373 CE) combated Arianism, which denied the divine nature of Jesus Christ, and Augustine (354–430 CE) fiercely refuted Pelagian ethics, which held that humans can save themselves without the grace of God. Both Athanasius and Augustine thus became the ‘fathers’ of the orthodox establishment in the church of their times (Kannengiesser 1985:61).

The Christian church identified itself as a community of faith that was based on the creed canonized at powerful synods; it was decided by such synods that “... no ecclesiastical ‘fatherhood’ was ever to be attributed to those vanquished in the theological battles surrounding the synodal definitions” (Kannengiesser 1985:61). Thus the Church Council of Nicea in 325 CE condemned the heresy of Arianism, and later the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE condemned the Monophysite view that held that Christ was solely divine and not human.

Monasticism and asceticism appeared around 300, when the peace of Constantine (313–315 CE) was declared, and “... there arose a movement that in a variety of ways expressed a rejection of the conventional worldly values” (Gribomont 1985:89). Asceticism arose as a counter-cultural movement among Christians within the Christian Church, which was now also identified with Alexandrian, Antiochene, Byzantine and Roman institutions. There were two forms of asceticism:

... solitary, [which] tended towards excessive contempt for the flesh; and communal, which stressed simple prayer that relished scripture and promoted the necessary attitudes for the interpretation of scripture: deep charity and purity of conscience (Conn 1987:975).

The initial emphasis on martyrdom at the commencement of the early church affected all later interpretations of Christian experience. Martyrdom reinforced the existing tendency of Greek stoical culture to denigrate both the body and the world: “When martyrdom was no longer possible, complete self-denial was sought in asceticism and early monasticism” (Conn 1987:974). In this way, the pinnacle of holiness moved from victory over physical death to victory over ‘the world’.

### ***2.7.2 Medieval Spirituality (500–1500 CE)***

The Medieval period, which is usually referred to as the Middle Ages, covers a time of movement, restlessness and change prompted by the need to adapt to the breakdown in the feudal system and the requirements of a rising bourgeoisie (Raitt 1987:13). There were many developments in Christian Spirituality during this period, but perhaps “... the most significant development in late Medieval Christianity was the rise of devotionalism” (Kieckhefer 1987:75). Devotions flourished in an unprecedented profusion of forms, such as pilgrimages, veneration of relics, Marian devotions, meditations on the passion of Christ, penitential exercises and the rosary (Kieckhefer 1987:75). The Stations of the Cross and Eucharistic devotions, which are still practiced today, developed during the sixteenth century (Kieckhefer 1987:75).

Another characteristic of this period was that:

... a significant increase in opportunities for women to participate in specialised religious roles, saw a great proliferation in the types of roles available. The number of female saints increased markedly. Women’s piety, whether monastic or lay, took on certain distinctive characteristics, which powerful males, both secular and clerical, noted, sometimes with awe and sometimes with suspicion (Bynum 1987:121).

For the first time in Christian history, it was possible to identify a women’s movement (the Beguines) and the impact of female influence on the development of piety. Indeed, that affective spirituality, against which both the Protestant reformation and Roman Catholic counter reformations reacted, was a spirituality based on effusive confidence in the human capacity to imitate Christ. This was “... in part a creation of the religious women of late medieval Europe” (Bynum 1987:121). In this period,

being a nun or a cloistered lay woman (such as the Beguines) was almost the only specialised, religious role available to women. Some Beguines were cloistered, but many were apostolic and, in fact, reacted against being enclosed in a cloister.

Medieval spirituality also interpreted its experience of being human as being in the image and likeness of God. In this regard, it continued along Patristic themes: grace as divinization; intellect, memory and will as reflections of the Trinity (a favourite theme of Augustine); human beings in the image of God as given from the beginning, yet tarnished by sin; and asceticism as a way of developing the true likeness of God (see, for example, *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471 CE)). For medieval people, such as Clare (1194–1253 CE) and Francis of Assisi (1181–1226 CE), for example, “... one becomes one’s true self through conformity to the model of true humanity: Jesus Christ” (Conn 1987:976).

Medieval Eastern spirituality is well represented in Gregory of Palmas (1296–1359 CE). He integrated *hesychasm*, Eastern Christianity’s ancient tradition of contemplative monasticism, into a doctrinal synthesis: “... in his anthropology the whole person is called now to enjoy the first fruits of final deification” (Conn 1987:976). In his theology of union with God, Gregory taught that humanity participates in God’s existence, yet God’s essence remains unattainable and beyond all participation. Gregory emphasised the immediacy and intimacy of the union, while preserving the ultimate transcendence of God (Conn 1987:976).

To summarize, it can be contended that the varied developments in the understanding and practice of Christian spirituality were representative of an organic growth and consistent with the fundamentals of the apostolic faith community. This community was founded on a messianic realization, namely, that the Son of God had become incarnate, making possible, for all time, a historical, personal relationship with the Father. Gnosticism was outlawed in the creedal developments of the early Church, as its understanding of creation as hostile or alien did not square with the life of the Spirit poured out on humankind through the Paschal Mystery. The asceticism of the monastic movement, while at times too extreme, witnessed to the reality of that Spirit and believed that spirituality was not due to the result of nature, but solely due to grace or that which was characterised by the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.

### ***2.7.3 Renaissance and Reformation Spirituality (1500–1600 CE)***

The word ‘Renaissance’ means renewal or rebirth, and one of the things that experienced resurgence during the early 1500s to mid-1600s was popular religion: “The authority of the church as an institution that controlled people’s salvation was still widely respected and late-medieval religion often evidenced a ritualistic flavour” (Bleiberg 2005:269). Two kinds of piety seemed to develop at this time: one was referred to as ‘surface’ piety. This was expressed by people who accumulated indulgences and held onto the idea that “... salvation could be accomplished through the routine channels the church provided” (Bleiberg 2005:269). At the same time, another, deeper sort of piety was growing, based on the “... growth of more internal religious beliefs” (Bleiberg 2005:269). This can be seen in the growth of a number of ‘confraternities’, ‘brotherhoods’ and ‘sisterhoods’. They “... practiced many of the same prayers and rituals that had long been used in Europe’s monasteries”, but, in addition, “... they dedicated themselves to pious works that were practical and beneficial to society” (Bleiberg 2005:269). They were not religious orders in the sense that its members had to take vows, but they nonetheless bound themselves to serving others (Bleiberg 2005:269).

Another expression of spirituality at this time was the practice of pilgrimages: those who could not go to the Holy Land went on pilgrimages throughout Europe. The rise in religious observance was, however, accompanied by an increased interest in mysticism (Bleiberg 2005:269). The church had condemned mysticism for many reasons, not least of which was that all mystics “... attempted to achieve a direct, unmediated union with God”, which effectively meant that they had no need of church mediation (Bleiberg 2005:269). Nonetheless, mysticism influenced many authors, scholars and intellectuals, including Martin Luther (Bleiberg 2005:269). Although mysticism exerted a widespread influence, “... both the church and society at large were distrustful of mystics”, because they claimed they had “... direct knowledge of God, a knowledge that was more personal and subjective than the insights the scriptures and church theology offered” (Bleiberg 2005:269).

Overlapping with the Renaissance, and in some respects growing from it, was the Reformation, which is chronologically located at the juncture between the Middle Ages and modern times (Lienhard 1985:268). The principal figure of this time is Martin Luther (1483–1546 CE) whose message had a significant impact on Christianity. The widespread force of this impact was a result of a widespread dissatisfaction with aspects of the Papal monarchy in the Catholic Church. Cross (1993:1165) writes:

... if down to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century anti-clericalism and divergence from Catholic doctrine remained spasmodic phenomena, discontent continued to simmer against the worldliness and increasing financial exactions that characterised the papacy as an Italian power.

Luther protested against the corruption of Rome and the great abuses attending the sale of indulgences. Cross (1993:1165) pointed out that most, indeed if not all, of the reformation movements, "... like those of the Renaissance, laid stress not upon innovation, but upon return to a primitive excellence". Luther's study of Augustine had led him to question the emphasis of late medieval theology upon 'good works'; later, his historical reading (based on the work of Lorenzo Valla (1406–1457 CE)) raised doubts regarding the validity of papal claims to supremacy. From these traditional origins were derived his attacks upon transubstantiation<sup>2</sup> and clerical celibacy, as were his demands for the abolition of papal power in Germany and for the radical reform of the religious orders. All of these "... found pregnant expression in Luther's celebrated treatises of 1520" (Cross 1993:1166).

Hanson (2005:416) states that perhaps Luther's most significant impact on Christian Spirituality was to "... offer a major alternative to the ascent model of the Christian life". The stages in this ascent are purification, illumination and union with God, and the monastic way of life had been commonly viewed as especially suited to spiritual advancement along this path. Further, the understanding of grace as primarily transformative, the subordinate yet necessary role of humans to prepare themselves for grace, and the higher status given to the call to religious life, all supported this ascent model (Hanson 2005:416).

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<sup>2</sup> Transubstantiation is the change of the substance of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, which according to the teachings of some Christian Churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, occurs in the Eucharist (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transubstantiation>).

Luther's views of grace as comprising primarily forgiveness, the utter dependence of humans on God for salvation, and the equal holiness of secular service all lead to a "... different model of the Christian life that is most basically shaped by Paul's imagery of daily dying and rising with Christ" (Hanson 2005:416). Hanson, using McGinn's distinction between 'mystical elements' and 'mysticism proper' (which arose with Origen and monasticism), says that we can recognise mystical elements in Luther's understanding of faith. For Luther, faith is that which clings to Christ, "... but he had serious reservations about monasticism and the ascent model that often underlies it" (Hanson 2005:416).

The spirituality of John Calvin (1509–1564 CE) was formulated in his *Institutes*, published in 1536 CE (Cross 1993:223). His spirituality includes certain of the doctrinal characteristics of Lutheranism, as well as other elements peculiar to itself. "Among the former are the doctrine of scripture as the only rule of faith, the denial of human free-will after the fall of Adam and justification by faith without works" (Cross 1993:223).<sup>3</sup> A focus on the adoration of God's glory and the centrality of Christ form the core of the Calvinist conception of the spiritual life (Lane 2005:162). In his *Institutes*, Calvin gave the highest degree of importance to the joining together of the Head and the members in the Body of Christ: that indwelling of Christ in our hearts – "... in short, that mystical union by which we put on Christ and are engrafted into His body" (Lane 2005:162).<sup>4</sup>

Amidst all this dogmatic wrangling, it is not surprising that spiritual theology was affected. As Raitt notes, "... spirituality is a difficult term to describe let alone define" (Raitt 1987:454). So, for the most part, Protestants preferred the term 'piety', a term that was acceptable in the sixteenth century, "... when Protestants suspected that beneath 'spirituality' lurked monks, nuns, Jesuits and the erroneous doctrine of works – righteousness" (Raitt 1987:454). Roman Catholics, in contrast, continued on a more solid and unchanging basis, centred on the spirituality of such people as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153 CE), Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582 CE), John of the Cross

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<sup>3</sup> To these, Calvin added the doctrine of the inadmissibility of grace, the certitude of salvation, and absolute predestination (Cross 1993:223).

<sup>4</sup> Calvin's attitude to the church differs from that of Luther. He defended a theocratic polity, subjecting the state to the church, whereas Luther upheld the supremacy of the state.

(1542–1591 CE), Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556 CE) and “... others who were indeed monks, nuns and Jesuits” (Raitt 1987:454).

As can be seen above, in the reformation polemic, Catholics and Protestants tended to respond to issues by emphasising the opposite position and assuming that the other view had no merit. Nonetheless, Conn (1987:977) writes:

... contemporary Catholics in fact can appreciate Luther’s insights and notice relationships to the great Spanish mystics that neither Luther nor Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross consciously intended.

For Luther, speech about God is speech about absence; God is met only in the Cross of Christ, that is, in lonely despair where there are no signs of transcendence, no conceptual nearness and no mystical assurances. Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, according to Conn (1987:977):

.... would agree with Luther’s conviction that one cannot contain or control God. Luther and authentic Catholic contemplative tradition object to the perversion of contemplation into a mysticism, which imprisons God in a set of human experiences.

During the same period as Luther and Calvin, Ignatius of Loyola distilled his religious experience into guidelines for spiritual growth, which he used to train his Jesuit followers. His *Spiritual Exercises*, published in 1527 CE, are an adaptable, imaginative method of meditation and contemplation of scripture designed to assimilate the mysteries of Christ as a contemplative in apostolic action. The idea of the work is to help the exercitant to find out what the will of God is in regard to his future, and to give him energy and courage to follow that will.

This period in history is significant for this study because the spirituality of Teresa was formed during this era, and the events of this period must have been influential in her thinking and in her writings.

### **2.7.4 Modern Spirituality (1700–1900 CE)**

A surprising feature of ‘modern’ Christian spirituality is its continuity with the past. With surprisingly little tampering, the same models and the same influences that



directed late medieval piety still determine the devotion of the modern age (Dupré 1989b:13). Despite this undeniable continuity with the past, especially in the Catholic and Orthodox definitions, modern devotion nevertheless strongly reflects the impact of the fundamental changes in outlook and attitude that have marked the beginning of the modern age and the Reformation (Dupré 1989b:13).<sup>5</sup>

Spirituality during this period was “... like all previous spirituality a creative response to God’s presence discerned in events and ideas” (Conn 1987:979). Responses to the Enlightenment, secularism, atheism and political revolution ranged, on the one hand, from anti-intellectualism in theology and piety, to, on the other hand, redemptive identification with the modern struggles of faith, such as seen in Thérèse of Lisieux (1875–1897 CE) and in attempts to reconcile science and religion, as seen in the work of Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955 CE) (Conn 1987:979).

### ***2.7.5 Post-modern Spirituality (Post-1900 CE)***

Lesniak (2005:7) declares that “... any spirituality is embedded in the culture of its time and place”. The rapid and accelerated change in the past half-century (i.e. 1950–2000 CE) is not only unprecedented, but is hindering individuals and communities from seeking meaning in the world. The world in which we live now in the twenty-first century is a multi-cultural, ‘high-tech’ world. Under the banner of ‘globalisation’ and creating a so-called ‘global village’, the new technologies are making the world seem a smaller place and creating and propagating a capitalist, secular and largely agnostic culture.

The modern world has been formed by a culture that spurred unending progress at whatever cost, the individual power of the rational mind to arrive at universal truths and the modern construction of the self-sufficient individual. The post-modern world, in contrast, faced by globalisation, is beginning to acknowledge the limited nature of the world itself and the inter-dependency of the human species. The complexity of the

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<sup>5</sup> Between 1700 and 1900 CE, there was a widespread need by men and women in most regions of Europe to assert their individual and national identities, which had not been previously experienced. Three factors according to Sheldrake (2007:139) stand out during this time: the Enlightenment, the political revolutions in France and America and the industrial revolution. These are the foundations of what is often described as modernity.

human being means that the individual cannot be regarded as self-contained after all, but only complete in relationship with others. Because of these complexities, more and more individuals are seeking meaning in their lives. The appeal of spirituality has thus captured the religious imagination, more so than organised religion or systematic theology. As Lesniak (2005:8) argues, "... spirituality is viewed as a more inclusive, tolerant and flexible canopy under which to pursue the mysteries of the human spirit and the sacred".

It is paradoxical that, although traditional Western religious practices are declining, there appears to be an ever-increasing hunger for spirituality. What has been lost, though, is the spirit of optimism that existed at the start of the twentieth century, about the human capacity to solve all problems present in the world. Today, traditional patterns of thought and behaviour and traditional institutions, including religious ones, are struggling to deal with a new culture that has become impervious to the answers of the past and presents an overwhelming number of new questions. Sheldrake (2005:499) thus asserts that, "... contemporary post-modern spirituality involves an emphasis on experience, engagement and praxis as the immediate contexts for God's self-disclosure and human response". Sheldrake (2007:173) furthermore writes:

Post-modernity therefore finds a culture where the simple answers and optimism of the previous age are impossible. By the close of the twentieth century, previous fixed systems of thoughts and behaviour had fragmented and the world was understood as radically plural.

Saliers sums up the twentieth century approach to spirituality as follows:

... the twentieth century has witnessed a remarkable convergence and mutual interanimation of diverse traditions of spiritual life. Not only have the ecumenical and liturgical movements created an unprecedented sharing among Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant communions, but the increased social contact of ordinary believers have cut across denominational lines and has made sharing of mutual approaches to spirituality more natural and less proscribed by historical traditions (1989:23).

The growing awareness and understanding of spirituality across religions and traditions as well as within traditions (which have at times been historically polarised) has created an entirely new climate today. At the same time, the most essential and

most venerable of the strands of Christian spirituality both in practice and in theology have emerged with more force, precisely because of this new situation (Saliers 1989:23). The growing awareness of a spirituality that exists across traditions was given further impetus by Vatican II, whose documents reflect concern for such a renewed spirituality.

The document on *The Church in the Modern World* (1965) (*Gaudium et Spes*), which came out of Vatican II, reversed a long tradition of viewing 'the world' as inimical to the church. No longer was the world seen as a sphere divided from 'the sacred' and merely needing to be converted to Christianity; instead, the new approach taught Christians to affirm the value of the world and, in fact, confessed that the church can learn from the world. In this way, Christian spirituality became more authentically biblical, discerning God's presence in the midst of the events of history as well as in the movements of one's inner spirit. Not only was the secular world affirmed as having something to teach the church, but, even more importantly perhaps, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish and all non-Christian religions "... are approached with respectful attention to what they can contribute to spirituality" (Conn 1987:980).

The social situation of poverty and centuries of political oppression, coupled with the new emphasis on the laity and upon direct access to scripture, has produced the most revolutionary changes:

The recovery of a vision of Christian social order distinguished by quality and justice as well as by freedom from political oppression has literally erupted within the framework of the older Catholicism. ... The older more hierarchic forms of Catholicism continue in a diminished power; but, these forms in Catholicism and Protestantism are beginning to recombine in a startling manner (Saliers 1989:525).

For example, Saliers (1989:525) states:

... these developments within Catholicism and Protestantism in Latin America are not without confusion and ambiguity; but, they are changing the face of Christian life in what is now the largest Christian culture area in the world.

When seen from such a global perspective, "... we are thus in an unprecedented situation with respect to Christian forms of worship, teaching and common life"

(Saliers 1989:527). Nearly every Christian body in the world has been forced by this new situation to raise fundamental questions about the meaning and shape of Christian spirituality in the world today. The drive towards Christian unity, which has characterised the work of the World Council of Churches since 1948 CE, "... is but one dramatic manifestation of the contemporary era" (Saliers 1989:527):

The spirituality that emerges from a perception of being one people of God, rooted and grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures, worshipping the God of Abraham and Sarah, the Holy One of Israel whom Jesus Christ manifests in human form is marvellously rich in texture. It is a source and expression of a Christian identity that is both local and global, both embedded in specific cultural forms and transcending the parochialisms of denominational and regional Christian spirituality, faith, worship, doctrine and mission (Saliers 1989:527).

Saliers contends that there is at this time a profound cross-influence in both structure and style between Protestant and Roman Catholic communions. This cross-influence is a function of the contemporary period in which ethnic diversity, cultural pluralism, "... and the profound dilemmas of contemporary existence raise basic questions about the meaning of being Christian as well as the why and how of worshipping the God of Christian scriptures" (Saliers 1989:527).

## **2.8 Conclusion**

The development of contemporary spirituality in general has been fuelled by the recognition of the meaninglessness of modern society and of the search for the 'ultimate', which is a hallmark of post-modernism. Consequently, spirituality has become a significant topic of discussion not just among the clergy, and this has given rise to a plethora of documented accounts of people's search for meaning in their lives. This search can be a Christian approach, where Christ is a central part of the journey of self-transcendence, or it can involve a quest for spirituality in general, where it is a journey of self-realisation in pursuit of some other ultimate value.

It is worth observing that the restoration of the dialogue between spirituality and theology owes something to the theories of post-modernism. Firstly, a modern rationalist approach to knowledge, linked to an emphasis on inwardly consistent but

mutually exclusive disciplines, has given way to inter-disciplinary conversation. Secondly, the rise of post-modernism tends to undermine grand theological systems along with other systems of meaning. “The study of spirituality now espouses a similar modesty” (Sheldrake 2005:500).

Finally, both within and outside of religious settings, growing from special interests and needs, individuals are taking responsibility for their own spiritual growth and seeking out what assistance they need. Contemporary spiritualities value the process of seeking and appreciate the effects that intentional spiritual practices have on a person’s lifestyle:

An individual feels free to choose from the rich tapestry of spiritual options and to belong to multiple communities at the same time for differing degrees of spiritual support. Pragmatism attaches value to the beneficial and visible effects of spiritual disciplines in one’s life (Lesniak 2005:10).

In the third millennium of Christianity, it is only possible to catch a glimpse of the complex tapestry of spirituality that is the legacy of diverse religious traditions and their attendant forms of living. The diversity traced in this chapter substantiates this view. Saliers (1989:535) states that it is no longer possible today to make a straightforward Roman Catholic/Protestant contrast, nor does a simple east/west duality exist. Yves Congar who, in his book *Diversity and Communion*, speaks of the fullness of the mystery of God in Christ, wisely observed that the church, the body of Christ, “... contains [that mystery] by the gift of God, in a way that is not exhausted by the manner in which it is expressed” (Congar 1985:170).

Since spirituality refers to the lived, religious experience of believers, changes in liturgical patterns and the challenges faced by theology in the twenty-first century, and in a post-holocaust, technologically complex world, characterised by political and social volatility, has had a critical impact on Christian spirituality. This is further complicated by the fact that, as Saliers (1989:539) phrased it, “... the very term ‘spirituality’ in the Christian context is no longer an exclusively Roman Catholic or even Christian term”. Yet within the Christian tradition, spirituality continues to be the struggle to pray with a sense of holiness and in the face of the mystery of life and death. It is the challenge of seeking wholeness in human existence in relation to God

and neighbour and the created order. Finally, spirituality is not a doctrine or simply a set of practices but an ongoing experience of a life project. It has as its ultimate purpose the integration of life.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **The Historical Setting of the *Interior Castle***

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will summarise the important aspects of Teresa de Ávila's life, and relate these to the historical, social and religious context within which she lived. Thereafter, the reforms that Teresa implemented during her lifetime will be discussed. This will present the historical setting for the book that is regarded as her masterpiece, i.e. the *Interior Castle*.

Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, whose religious name was Teresa de Jesús and who is commonly known today as St. Teresa of Ávila, was born on 28 March 1515 in the Castilian town of Ávila. She was the third child born to Beatriz d'Ávila y Ahumada, who was the second wife of cloth merchant Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda. When Teresa wrote about her family (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:23), she stated that, in all, "... we were three sisters and nine brothers".

#### **3.2 The Early Spiritual Development of Teresa**

From an early age, Teresa saw martyrdom as the way to heaven. Teresa learnt about martyrdom from books, which played a decisive role in her early development. Throughout her childhood, she and her brother Rodrigo enjoyed reading about the lives of the saints, becoming so deeply inspired by them that, even though she was still a child, Teresa already felt a strong desire to die and go to heaven in order to enjoy more quickly the wonderful things she had read could be found there. This is confirmed by Medwick (1999:9), who notes:

... these martyrs [St. Catherine and St. Lawrence], all devout opportunists (just like Teresa herself), had bought passage to heaven with their life's blood. To a girl with an eye for a bargain, this seemed to be a reasonable price to pay.

In her late teens, she was staying at the home of a devout uncle, Don Pedro de Cepeda who invited Teresa to read to him from his many spiritual books. One of them unexpectedly touched her soul: it was *The Letters of St. Jerome*. St. Jerome lived from 342 to 419 CE, and was known for translating the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into Latin:

St. Jerome's letters or epistles, both by the great variety of their subjects and by their qualities of style, form the most interesting portion of his literary output. Whether he is discussing problems of scholarship, or reasoning on cases of conscience, comforting the afflicted, scourging the vices and corruptions of the time, exhorting to the ascetic life and renunciation of the world, or breaking a lance with his theological opponents, he gives a vivid picture not only of his own mind, but of the age and its peculiar characteristics (Wikipedia 2007:n.p.).

This book motivated Teresa to take a decision she later said she had been trying to avoid, namely, to leave the world and enter a monastery of Carmelite nuns. As she explained:

Reading the *Letters of St. Jerome* so encouraged me that I decided to tell my father about my decision to take the habit, for I was so persistent in points of honour that I don't think I would have turned back for anything once I told him (*Life*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987:63).

Teresa entered the Carmelite convent of the Incarnation in Ávila in 1535 CE at age twenty. In this regard, Kavanaugh (1987:18) writes that "... recent studies have shown that at the time of Teresa's entry, the Incarnation numbered among eleven Carmelite Monasteries for nuns in Spain". In 1537 CE, two years later, after her profession as a nun that same year, she became very ill. In 1539 CE, she nearly died as a result of an illness and, in fact, was paralysed for three years, until 1542 CE. Frohlich (1993:160) observes:

While many commentators have assumed this to be a hysterical paralysis, a recent analysis by a pathologist concludes that Teresa suffered from an aggravated form of Brucellosis (an infection and inflammation of the nervous and glandular systems caused by a bacteria transmitted by domestic animals).

The consequences of this illness plagued Teresa throughout her life and contributed significantly to her ill health.



After the doctors admitted that they could find no cure for Teresa's illness, her worried father decided to bring her back to Ávila, where she remained an invalid and paralytic for three years. During this time, she stayed at her uncle's home; once again, she received from him another book to read: *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, a book written by a Franciscan Friar, Francisco de Osuna (1492–1540 CE). Teresa had read this book in 1538 CE. According to Kavanaugh (1987:92), it was from this book that she learned for the first time about interior prayer, especially the prayer of recollection.<sup>6</sup>

Frohlich (1993:168), however, argues that Teresa would nonetheless be severely critical of the leading *Recogido*, Osuna, for the idea that recollection demanded "... that one be denuded of everything sensual without exception, including the humanity of Christ". The reason for Teresa's criticism was that her prayers were centred on the humanity of Christ and that Osuna's comment was thus contradictory to Teresa's understanding of recollection. These concepts viz. 'prayer of recollection', 'passive prayer', 'prayer of quiet' and 'prayer of union', as understood by Teresa, as well as the distinctions between them in terms of the specialised religious vocabulary of sixteenth century Catholic Spain, will be defined and discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.

The following books also had a significant influence on the development of Teresa's spirituality: a translation of St. Gregory's *Moralia*, which helped her to view her own trials and tribulations in a positive way as a means of serving God; the Franciscan, Alonso de Madrid's *Arte de Servir A Dios (Art of Serving God)* with its emphasis on the humanity of Christ and on mental prayer; and Bernardino de Laredo's *Subida del Monte Sion (Ascent of Mount Zion)*, which describes the union of the soul with God and which caught her attention for its teaching on the state of *no pensar nada* ('not thinking of anything') during prayer. Another book that, according to Thompson (1999:70), had a significant impact on Teresa and her spirituality was Augustine's

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<sup>6</sup> Frohlich (1993:167) further observes that the *Recogidos*, as a spiritual movement, were given definitive expression in *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*. She states that this work had a profound effect on Teresa's own development. Teresa began to follow Osuna's advice, and immediately had an experience of passive prayer, which she called, using the specialised vocabulary of the time, the prayer of quiet and the prayer of union.

*Confessions*. Significantly, Teresa stated that, "... when she read this book, she saw herself in it: "In Augustine, she had found someone who had bared his soul with total honesty, and who was a figure of indisputable authority" (Thompson 1999:70).

With respect to her spiritual life, Frohlich (1993:160) notes that, although Teresa "... did experience glimpses of the higher state of prayer" during her first nineteen years as a religious from 1535 to 1554 CE, at the same time she "... seems to have been neither extraordinarily gifted, nor extraordinarily devoted in regard to prayer". In fact, Teresa "... even gave up prayer for two years (1542–1544 CE) out of humility" (Frohlich 1993:160). As Frohlich put it (1993:160), Teresa felt that she was "... lax and tepid", when it came to prayer at this stage of her life. It was only from 1554 CE onwards, after she had an intense conversion experience while praying before a graphic image of the wounded Christ, that Teresa started to develop rapidly in the life of prayer.

Having summarised the most important aspects that contributed to the spiritual development of Teresa's early life, I will now look at the social, historical and religious context within which she lived and at how the events in sixteenth century Spain contributed to further growth in her spirituality.

### **3.3 Sixteenth Century Spain**

Kavanaugh (1987:21) states that readers cannot readily grasp the reason for Teresa's conflict and fears, nor for those of her confessors, unless they have some understanding of the spiritual movements and problems existing in Spain during the sixteenth century. Spain at that time was experiencing tremendous growth, not only politically, but also spiritually. A deep longing for spirituality had taken hold among the people. This spirituality had at its centre three basic characteristics: "... a call to the interior life; the practice of mental prayer; [and] strong leanings towards high levels of the mystic life" (Kavanaugh 1987:21).

The meaning of the interior life is made explicit in the *Interior Castle*. According to Teresa, when a person has passed through the various mansions of the castle

described in Chapter Four one enters into the most interior dwelling, where one is most centred within oneself. Even in her book *Way of Perfection*, written a decade earlier, Teresa instructs her nuns as to how they should pray and how, by using the universal prayer, the ‘Our Father’, a person can get in touch with their interiority. In a similar vein, John of the Cross (1542–1591 CE), in his book *The Dark Night of the Soul*, also speaks of the interior life. “In his mystical order, the goal of a Christian is to find God who dwells within the soul and to exclude anything that is exterior to the soul” (Sheldrake 2005:372).

Prior to Teresa’s time, there were other highly influential movements: those of St. Benedict (480–543 CE) (who is often referred to as the founder of western Christian monasticism); St. Dominic (1170–1221 CE), who founded the Catholic religious order known as the Order of Preachers or Dominicans; St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226 CE), who founded the Franciscan Order; St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556 CE) who founded the Jesuit Order, and Blessed John of Ávila (1499–1569 CE). Newly founded printing presses at Montserrat and Seville furthermore provided abundant literature on prayer and the interior life: there were translations from the Patristic period (100–450 CE) (Wikipedia 2007:n.p.) from the Italian, Flemish and German schools, from Erasmus, the Scholastics<sup>7</sup>, Protestants and Humanists<sup>8</sup>.

The spiritual rebirth in Spain during the sixteenth century was initiated by the Catholic reforms that took place after the Council of Trent:

The nineteenth ecumenical council opened at Trent on 13 December 1545, and closed on 4 December 1563. Its main objective was the definitive determination of the doctrines of the Church in answer to the heresies of the Protestants; a further objective was the execution of a thorough reform

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<sup>7</sup> *Scholasticism* was the educational tradition of the medieval schools. Cross (1983:1244) writes: “As now understood, it [scholasticism] may be described as a method of philosophical and theological speculation which aims at a better understanding of revealed truths, that is, systematising the data of faith, to attain a deeper penetration into the inner meaning of Christian doctrine”.

<sup>8</sup> *Humanism* was more concerned with individual human beings, with their changing thoughts, values and feelings and with human interaction in society. Raitt (1987:240) states that, “Humanist spirituality was very much a lay phenomenon that testified to a growing sense of dignity of the lay estate; the humanists were for the most part, faithful Catholics but little concerned with the finer points of theology”.

of the inner life of the Church by removing the numerous abuses that had developed in it (Kirsch 1912:n.p.).

The reforms brought about by the Council coincided with the first half of Teresa's life. This affected not only religious and clergy, but laity as well, since a major emphasis was the call to Christian perfection of all the baptized.

Thompson (1999:70) suggests that, during the first three decades of the sixteenth century, Spain was particularly open to new ideas, and especially to the influence of Renaissance Humanism. The works of Erasmus (1466–1536 CE), for instance, with their attacks on decadent scholasticism and monasticism, were very popular. Frohlich (1993:164) confirms this:

Erasmus, who was challenging the hegemony of the scholastic intellectual worldview with his new historical and humanist philosophy, was widely read and acclaimed.

The call of Erasmus to develop an inward grasp of the truth struck a responsive chord throughout Europe, "... but perhaps most of all in Spain" (Thompson 1999:70). The reason for this was that Erasmus' works were in harmony with those of earlier writings, such as the immensely influential *The Imitation of Christ*, which was ascribed to Thomas à Kempis. This openness to the many currents of Humanism was short-lived, however:

The spread of the Lutheran Reform put an end to that, for the Spanish king, Charles V, was also the ruler of the Netherlands and nominally of the Holy Roman Empire, the German States. For that and other reasons a markedly more conservative atmosphere came to dominate Spanish religious life, and though there was a greater pluralism in theological thinking than is generally realized in the second half of the century, this has come to be associated with the triumph of post-Tridentine Catholicism and the ruthless suppression of any strand of opinion deemed incompatible with it (Thompson 1999:70).

Thompson's expression 'post-Tridentine Catholicism' refers to the Council of Trent, discussed above.

Medieval Spain had previously been the most tolerant land in Europe, with Christian, Muslim and Jew living side by side in peace (Kavanaugh 1987:22). During the years

of Teresa's maturity, however, when she was involved in all the politics of her Reform, Spain's political isolation "... went hand in hand with a concerted theological and ecclesiastical reaction against humanist and other anti-scholastic influences" (Frohlich 1993:164). Morón-Arroyo summarises the situation as follows:

... the scholastics reacted with all theoretical and political means in their power in order to sustain what were, in their opinion, the unchangeable pillars of the Church. Thus a struggle ensued which, in Spain, is the cornerstone of intellectual life throughout the sixteenth century (1984:100).

In this constant interplay between politics and religion, the establishment of the Inquisition throughout Spain was used to further the cause of Spanish unity; this also deepened the sense of a common national purpose.

The so-called Spanish Inquisition was set up by Papal approval in 1479 CE and lasted until 1530 CE. It was originally directed against the *Marranos*; these were baptized Jews, who were suspected of having returned to their old beliefs and practices. It was later used against the *Moriscos* (Moors who had been forced to accept baptism), the *Alumbrados* and Protestants (Cross 1993:706). The *Alumbrados* were an Illuminist movement.<sup>9</sup>

The Illuminists were heirs of the fourteenth century *Devotio Moderna* or Modern Devotion Movement, which had countered the intellectual, systematizing approach of scholastic theology with an affective, experiential and practical spirituality (Frohlich 1993:166). It represented urban middle class values and attracted educated lay people and reform-minded clergy. Sheldrake (2007:107) observes: "The spirituality was an interesting mixture with an emphasis on education while being somewhat anti-intellectual"; furthermore, "... although the *devotio* owed something to Flemish mysticism, it preferred quiet piety to mystical enthusiasm".

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<sup>9</sup> "[I]lluminism is a belief system whereby a believer makes the claim that he or she has been illuminated or experienced enlightenment of a spiritual nature" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illuminist>).

Kavanaugh (2000:121) notes that the reform of many of the religious orders in Spain at this time was fostered by the superiors of those religious orders who were conscious of their particular mission, ethos and rule. He adds:

At the same time, spontaneous associations of religious and monasteries gave rise to the communities of the observance. These adopted a life-style that favoured interiority through the intensification of prayer, community life and mortification (Kavanaugh 2000:121).

Frohlich (1993:165), commenting on these reforms, notes that two aspects of the spiritual ferment in the sixteenth century are particularly relevant to the work of Teresa, namely, the general movement for the reform of religious institutions and the Illuminist movement, both of which were particularly influential in the Catholic Church in Europe at the time.

Furthermore, the reform of the monastic orders had played its part in calling members to a deeper life of prayer, particularly by recalling them back to their primitive Rule, which is precisely what inspired Teresa and John of the Cross. On this issue, Kavanaugh (2000:121) states: “From the middle of the fourteenth century, a number of religious orders began initiating reforms. They were reacting against a decline in ideals”. It appears that this decline was the result of a weakening liturgical life, a break-up in community living and an abuse of the vow of poverty through the possession of private property.

Teresa’s reform of the Carmelite order also drew upon elements associated with the Illuminist movement or the *Alumbrados* referred to earlier in this chapter. The *Alumbrados* advocated profound interior prayer leading to experiential union with God. Two schools developed within this movement: the *Dejados* or ‘abandoned’ mystics, and the *Recogidos* or ‘recollected’ mystics (see Chapter Three, Section 3.2). The term ‘abandoned’ meant that “... the seeker [mystic] need not fight against any temptations or exercise effort in the ascent to union [with God]” (Frohlich 1993:166). The *Recogidos*, in contrast, advocated recollection, by which they meant “... renouncing the objects of the senses, the images of fantasy and the ideas of the intellect in order to rest in the pure love of the divinity” (Morón-Arroyo 1984:101). This school drew upon the Franciscan and *Devotio Moderna* traditions of affective

prayer, simplicity and openness to practice by all. It will be demonstrated in Chapter Seven of this dissertation that Teresa drew upon the principles of the *Recogidos* school when she taught her fellow nuns how to pray.

In summary, we have seen how sixteenth century Spain was characterised by spiritual renewal; initiatives took place on all levels, from individuals to organised and established groups. These initiatives led to the implementation of church reforms emanating from the Council of Trent. They also influenced the reforms in many of the religious orders, of which the Carmelites were one. The preferred forms of spirituality of the time were prayer, recollection, asceticism and mysticism. Lastly, the reforms resulted in these orders reverting to their original mission, ethos and rule.

### **3.4 Backbone of the Teresian Reform**

To provide the contextual setting for the reform of Carmel and the spirituality of Teresa of Ávila, it is necessary to describe the history of the formation of the Carmelite Order, its mission and ethos. This history will create the backdrop to place Teresa and her spirituality within the particular time and context in which the *Interior Castle* was written.

It was during the time of the Reformation that the Carmelite reform, initiated by Teresa of Ávila and extended to the friars through John of the Cross, intended to transform religious life into the following:

... a community of loving friends, living in poverty and solitude in order to be completely disposed to God's action for the sake of the needs of the church. Teresa's astute interpretation of her own process of religious development explained in her *Life*, and the *Interior Castle*, and other writings eventually made her a doctor of prayer for the universal church (Conn 1987:977).

The origins of the Carmelites can be traced to the years immediately preceding the approval by Albert, the patriarch of Jerusalem, of their *Vitae Forumulam (Formula of Life)* written between 1206–1214 CE. This formula describes the way of life for lay penitents who lived in separate, small cells, but were still located around a common chapel. Thus, the spirituality of these first Carmelites was that of the "... medieval

eremitic tradition, a tradition that would soon be giving way to the rising mendicant movement” (Egan 1987:51).

Together with other hermits of the Middle Ages, the Carmelites led a life of prayer, silence and solitude in a communal setting. They also advocated a life of penance with an intense relationship to Jesus (*in obsequio Jesu Christi*, as stated in their *Formula of Life*) (Egan 1987:51). These Carmelites were hermits, “... pure and simple without fame in their own time” (Egan 1987:51). The Dutch scholar, Victor Roefs, in fact, has claimed that “... the glory of the Carmelite order is its striking anonymity” (Roefs 1956:244). Because there was no founding father who defined their approach to spirituality (just as Benedict, Dominic or Francis had done with their respective religious orders), the early Carmelites were uncompromising in their beliefs and lived in simplicity. This explains the fact that few individuals or names were mentioned, and why the original Carmelites remained unknown (Egan 1987:50). Nonetheless, troubled by such an absence of heroes, the later Carmelites felt compelled during the late Middle Ages to:

... fabricate as their founder the prophet Elijah, upon whose mountain they came into existence and who had long served as a model for monks. Moreover, medieval Carmelites emphasised a connection with the Virgin Mary in ways that strained even the medieval taste for the extraordinary (Egan 1987:51).

On 1 October 1247 CE, Innocent IV approved the revised *Formula of Life*, which, with his approval, became a formal rule (*regula*). This revision permanently affected the spirituality of the Carmelites, as they were no longer required to accept only eremitic sites; they could now build new foundations, “... wherever they were given to them as long as they were suitable for their observance” (Egan 1987:52). These revisions had a lasting effect on Carmelite spirituality, because it meant that they were allowed to expand beyond their small cells to wherever they would be able to worship God satisfactorily (Egan 1987:52). Their original lengthy period of absolute silence had been shortened to the period from early evening until the following morning and they were allowed to eat cooked meat (Egan 1987:52). This led to a departure from the strictly ascetic way of life towards that of the more popular mendicant movements, such as the Franciscans and the Dominicans; but despite the revised rules, the Carmelites were still not allowed to own property (Visser 2003:216).



The Carmelites chose to align themselves with the mendicant way of life. Yet the Carmelites did not fully obtain all "... the privileges of the mendicants until 1326, when Pope John XXII extended to them the full provisions of Boniface VIII's *Super Cathedram*", which extended to the Carmelite Order the same rights as the Franciscans and Dominicans possessed (Egan 1987:52). Not everyone was pleased with the transformation of Carmelite hermits into Christian friars, however, and the Prior General, Nicholas Gallicus, expressed the voice of dissent in his text, *The Fiery Arrow (Ignea Sagitta)*, published and circulated in 1270 CE (Visser 2003:216). In *The Fiery Arrow*, Gallicus chastised the Carmelites who had elected to exchange their precious solitude for a more superficial lifestyle (Egan 1987:53). He believed that the mendicants' public ministry would destroy the foundation of Carmelite spirituality, which had originally focussed on individual prayer and silence (Egan 1987:53). Gallicus believed that, once the revision of 1247 CE, referred to above, had occurred:

... there was no turning back from what would be the perennial and pivotal tensions of Carmelite spirituality: usually between contemplative solitude and ministerial community and sometimes, as for Teresa's nuns, solitude and community. Yet even Teresa felt the pull of public ministry [which was] not possible to her and her sisters in the sixteenth century (cited in Egan 1987:53).

In fact, Teresa knew only the text of the 'Rule' approved by Innocent IV. Egan states that it is important to realise that Teresa and her medieval Carmelite forebears had an abiding reverence for the text of this 'Rule', "... a reverence shared by centuries of women and men in western monasticism for the various rules by which they lived" (1987:54). Second only to the 'Rule' in importance for Carmelite spirituality was the 'Institution', which was called "... the chief book of spiritual reading in the Carmelite Order until the seventeenth century" (Egan 1987:54).

It was not until 1452 CE that, with the bull, *Cum Nulla*, the papacy gave its approval for the reception of women into the Carmelite order. Furthermore, the growth of the Carmelite sisterhood in the late Middle Ages was in large measure due "... to the patronage and reforming activities of Blessed John Soreth, Prior General of the Order from 1451 until 1471" (Egan 1987:56). These Carmelite sisters were both the predecessors of Teresa of Ávila and of other women Carmelites who did not become

part of the Teresian reform. Egan (1987) comments that no theory has been advanced for the lack of an official Carmelite sisterhood before 1452 CE. All we know is that monasteries and Dominican and Franciscan sisters had existed since the thirteenth century. In the post-reformation church, Carmelite women or men would become prominent in ways that they were not during the Middle Ages.

Perhaps, the integrated articulation of Carmelite spirituality that appealed widely to women occurred only with Teresa of Ávila. Whatever the reasons, women did not hold the place in medieval Carmelite spirituality that they would eventually occupy after the advent of Teresa of Ávila, who later became more affectionately known as Teresa of Jesus (Egan 1987:56). So, as an offshoot of the Carmelite order, Teresian spirituality represented a return to the hermetic existence that had characterised the original Carmelites. Teresa's frequent bouts of ill health had instilled in her an unshakeable faith in God "... whom she believed lived within every human soul and could be communicated with through prayer" (Visser 2003:216). She wanted to return to spirituality through silence and solitude, although she was certain that this could also exist in a community geared to public ministry, "... a seemingly strange contradiction that Teresa firmly believed could be reinforced through faith" (Egan 1987:60).

There were also the distinctive principles of "... reparation by substitution" and "... sanctification through community life" (Hardon 2005:7). Teresa literally embraced the teachings of Christ in her idea of reparation by substitution.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Teresian spirituality and its particular charism required solitude for the recollection of God's word and the growth of the human soul. Teresa supported reverting to the practice of silence for extended periods and also asserted that solitude could only be successfully achieved within an atmosphere of community in the 'alone in a crowd' tradition (Hardon 2005:7). However, like the reformers of her era, Teresa deviated from the hermetic reluctance to engage in public ministry by promoting the idea that everyone had a responsibility to serve as "... a teacher of the church" (Hardon 2005:8). Teresa correctly recognised that belief systems would decline from

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<sup>10</sup> This idea asserted that the strong should support the weak and that the saints should travel among the sinners in order to maintain harmonious spiritual balance (Hardon 2005:7). Furthermore, communities could ensure sanctification because each member would be performing the same tasks of prayer, silence, solitude and religious teachings regularly and in a uniform manner (Hardon 2005:7).

one generation to the next if orthodox teachings were not passed down to future generations (Hardon 2005:8). In addition, Teresian spirituality held to the view that the love of God is represented not in general offerings but in the detailed specifics of each person's unique struggles (Hardon 2005:8). Through God's will, anything is possible. In a similar vein, Teresian spirituality emphasises that self-knowledge encourages growth, which reminds followers that human flaws must always be factored into the equation because ultimate perfection can never be attained in this life (Hardon 2005:8).

The Teresian charism, which led her to undertake the Carmelite reform, was based on a total, wholehearted commitment to prayer and contemplation. The reformed Carmelites were to be made up of a chosen few, pledged to living the Gospel and keeping the 'rule' in solitude and strict poverty (Constitutions 2002). Further stages of Teresa's spiritual experience contributed to the unfolding of her project [i.e. reform] and to a clearer perception of its significance. In the course of being mystically led by God to a deeper knowledge and, as it were, 'experience' of the inner life of the spirit within the church, she came to understand more and more the importance of this pledged focus. The Carmelites were to focus on being at the very 'soul' of the Church, in order to act as a support for the active apostolate of religious reform.

It should be noted that, although Teresian spirituality, as expressed in the Constitutions, incorporated the original Carmelite charism, it took it to another level that made it uniquely its own. Prayer was not regarded merely as an obligation towards God; instead, it was interpreted as a way of actively connecting with God (Hardon 2005:6). Teresa furthermore espoused a belief in grace as a way of acquiring holiness through the sacraments. Nonetheless, while prayer was the only way of realising this grace, a person could never be holy without also being dedicated to the apostolic action of spreading God's word (Hardon 2005:6).

The Constitutions also faithfully maintain the apostolic note in the spirituality of Carmel. The only reason why Carmelites are allowed to interrupt their meditation and leave for a time the silence and solitude of their cells is for the salvation of souls. Paul-Marie (1997:32) writes:

This orientation is clearly marked in the Rule and explains why [Carmelite friars] can be classified among the mendicant orders that by principle are devoted to the care of souls. It is also classified among the orders that are called *mixed* because they are directed to both contemplation and action. Therefore whatever are the dangers of ‘activism’ and the attractions of the apostolate, the [Carmelite] spirituality of the apostolate will never be that of an exclusively contemplative order. When the popes ask the Carmelite friars to give missions, to preach, to undertake good works, the invitation will never be refused on the grounds that the Carmelite’s vocation is purely contemplative.

When the Carmelite order had been introduced into the West in the thirteenth century, it had become more involved in the intellectual and social life of its age and, thus, subject to external influences that brought about its decline. In the case of Carmel specifically, this decline resulted from the gradual abandonment of a contemplative life and the giving up of continual, persevering prayer. Thompson (1999:32) accordingly observes:

... had Carmel remained truly faithful to the central precept of prayer, recollection and a life of union with God – yet at the same time without giving up its apostolate – no Teresian reform might have been necessary.

Kavanaugh (2000:94) notes that Teresa, having set out on the road of reform, “... at a certain point in her life, paused to analyse her situation”. What Kavanaugh is referring to here is Teresa’s desire to proceed with her reform, as measured against the resources at her disposal or the option of waiting for better times. Thus, Teresa (*Foundations*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1985:105) stated:

Here I was, a poor disalced nun, without help from anywhere – only from the Lord – weighed down with patent letters and good desires and without there being any possibility of my getting the work started.

Teresa was referring here to the fact that the general of the Carmelite Order, Giovanni Battista Rossi, had given her permission to found as many monasteries of nuns as she could. She was also referring to the patent letter given to her by the general to found two houses of contemplative friars within the Carmelite province of Castile. Lastly, Teresa could also count on the permission of Don Alvaro de Mendoza, bishop of Ávila, since the first monastery for the friars was to be founded in his diocese. Kavanaugh (2000:95) continues:

... weighed down with all these permissions, she began to achieve her desires. So she personally interviewed the first two friars who were ready to begin the renewed Carmelite life: Antonio de Hermedia and Juan de la Cruz (John of the Cross), a title given him by Teresa herself.

From the outset, although there were separate communities of nuns and friars, there was to be a bond of unity between the Carmelite communities, and evangelical friendship between all the Carmelite religious adherents. John of the Cross played a significant role in achieving this. Teresa led him to share in her spirit and put before him the pattern of life she had introduced for her nuns:

In St. John of the Cross, we have a living image of the true Carmelite. We can apply to him the words of St. Paul: 'take me for your model, as I take Christ' (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1). The vocation of the renewed Carmel is mirrored in his life and his teaching (Constitutions 2002).

John of the Cross set about establishing this way of life, according to the mind and spirit of Teresa, at Duruelo, in Spain. The first meeting between Teresa and John of the Cross in Medina del Campo in 1567 CE, when she was fifty-two and he was only twenty-five years old, was a decisive meeting that led to both recognising a common direction in life. Yet this common direction did not result in a journey that would follow the same path in earthly or spiritual matters. As Kavanaugh (2000:152) puts it: "The two lives did not run parallel in the classic Hellenist sense, nor were they even comparable, despite their being so close, so much in accord, so interconnected". In 1571 CE, when John had become her spiritual director, she looked upon him as the 'father of her soul' who had come to know the *Interior Castle* of Teresa's soul. He, in turn, proclaimed her as the mother of the new Carmelite family.

### **3.5 The Events surrounding the Writing of the *Interior Castle***

Teresa's accomplishments as a spiritual teacher, spiritual writer, and reformer of the Carmelite order are all the more remarkable against the backdrop of Spain during the sixteenth century and the conflict-riddled environment referred to earlier in this chapter. This environment is succinctly summarised by Egido (1980:130):

The reigning climate of suspicion identified Lutheranism, Illuminism, recollection, and mysticism without any great effort to distinguish them

from one another. Moreover, given the combination of ‘orantes’ (prayers), women, and Jewish ancestry, we can understand the real battle which Madre Teresa – with these three counts against her – had to wage so that her ‘spiritual’ orientation not be denounced by the zealous watchdogs of the faith, and so that she might transmit a reform made up of communities of pray-ers (‘orantes’).

With regard to the events at the time when Teresa wrote her book, the *Interior Castle*, Frohlich aptly states that it is astonishing, that:

... in the midst of an agonizing barrage of ill health, worldly demands and outright persecution, she was able to write anything ... let alone a sublime spiritual treatise (1993:169).

Teresa wrote the *Interior Castle* in 1577 CE at the age of sixty-two, in a year that encompassed some of the most distressing and potentially disastrous days of her reform effort. During the months prior to writing the *Interior Castle*, Teresa was biding her time in Toledo, as opposed to being on the road establishing foundations, because of a controversy over her reform at the time.

The controversy in 1577 CE related to reports given to the Carmelite General that Teresa was founding houses for the Discalced Carmelites outside the province where she was allowed to do so, and that this was creating unease among the non-reformed Carmelite order. Medwick (1999:180) confirms Teresa’s unease, adding that “... it must have been tempting [for Teresa] to forget that the Carmelite General, Rubeo had expressly forbidden the expansion of the discalced friars into Andalusia”. The controversy was greatly aggravated by the fact that the discalced friars and, later, Teresa herself, were allegedly disobeying the direct orders given by the Carmelite General, Rubeo. Teresa’s explanation for this disobedience was that she had received an order to create such foundations from the Apostolic Visitor, Francisco de Vargas, whom she accepted as having higher authority than the Carmelite General. Eventually, however, Rubeo, the man who had previously championed her reform, became her adversary because of the disobedience of Teresa regarding the expansion of the discalced friars into Andalusia. Medwick (1999:181) notes that, “... with all her persuasive skills, Teresa could never win him back”.

Around the same time, the king of Spain, Felipe II, upset by the Pope's failure to obtain his approval before issuing orders concerning Spanish monasteries, began issuing various counter orders. The situation quickly became complex because the king, the Pope, various apostolic commissaries, apostolic nuncios, provincials of religious orders, inquisitors, benefactors and confessors were all in disagreement. Frohlich (1993:170) summarises this situation: "Before it was over, John of the Cross (1542–1591 CE) would spend nine months in prison and Teresa would spend her darkest hours believing that perhaps the reform would after all be destroyed".

Surprisingly, in the midst of this controversy, Teresa received the order from Gracián de la Madre de Dios, the first Superior of the Carmelite Reform, to write the *Interior Castle*. When Teresa advised him that her teachings on many spiritual matters, which were contained in her book on her *Life* (1563) and the *Way of Perfection* (1566), were unavailable because these books were held by the Inquisition, he ordered her to write another book in which she would "... only this time paint your experiences in a very general way so that nobody could prove that you were talking about your own life" (*Interior Castle*, in Starr 2003:20).

Teresa objected to this, arguing that she had already said everything she wished to say on such matters in her other books:

... had she not already written several versions of her *Life* in which she stated and explained the Graces that she had received; the *Way of Perfection* in which she gave most useful counsel to her daughters; the book of *Exclamations of the Soul to God* (1566–1569); and was she not still engaged in writing the treatise on *Visitation of Convents* (1576), beside some chapters for the *Book of the Foundations* (1573). What more had she to say? (Marie-Eugène 1953:6)

Even before she began to write *Interior Castle*, Teresa was in such a weak physical condition that she repeatedly stated that she was unable to write anything without the help of a secretary. Her statement in the prologue to the *Interior Castle* elaborates on her condition:

Few tasks which I have been commanded to undertake by obedience have been so difficult as this present one of writing about matters relating to prayer: for one reason, because I do not feel that the Lord has given me

either the spirituality or the desire for it; for another, because for the last three months I have been suffering from such noises and weakness in the head that I find it troublesome to write even about necessary business. But, as I know that strength arising from obedience has a way of simplifying things which seem impossible, my will very gladly resolves to attempt this task although the prospect seems to cause my physical nature great distress; for the Lord has not given me strength enough to enable me to wrestle continually both with sickness and with occupations of many kinds without feeling a great physical strain. May He Who has helped me by doing other and more difficult things for me help also in this: in His mercy I put my trust (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:28).

This is an unusual way to begin a book. Few authors would inform their readers on the first page that they are prone to severe headaches and find it difficult to write. However, the subject of her book concerns matters relating to prayer, which she is writing for the benefit of her sisters and daughters, the discalced Carmelites. Her sole aim, Teresa says at the end of her prologue, is that of praising God in what she may write and of leading others to praise God too.

Teresa commenced writing the *Interior Castle* on 2 June 1577 CE, the feast of the Holy Trinity, when she was sixty-two years old. At the end of July 1577 CE, however, she was called to Ávila, as she wished to have St. Joseph's Convent placed under the jurisdiction of the Carmelite Order. This convent had been under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Ávila since its foundation. Although the *Interior Castle* was written in the space of six months in total (2 June–29 November), it was ultimately only over three months of actual work, since her work was interrupted by the visit to Ávila.

The extremely modest project, which she outlines in the prologue, is in apparent contrast with the development of the book itself. The theme develops without a preconceived plan, and this is a significant aspect of the composition of the *Interior Castle*. Nonetheless, Teresa manifests a clear understanding of the profound mystical experiences she herself has had during the preceding fifteen years. This had been further enhanced by her contact with John of the Cross, who – according to her fellow sisters at the time – had opened up new spiritual horizons for her. As a result, she was able to produce a treatise without hesitations or corrections in a remarkably short period of time. The result is a treasure of her own personal immersion in the spiritual reality she describes.



### **3.6 Conclusion**

Teresa's contributions to Carmelite spirituality are not to be found merely in her writings, for they were "... never anything more than occasional compositions in which were mirrored God's actions in her soul or in her life" (Paul-Marie 1997:35). Her contributions are to be discovered and examined most importantly in her work as a reformer, because Carmel was in a sense modelled after her own understanding of the original Carmelite way of life. Her own, very strong personality certainly left a powerful impression on the reform. The elements that were to characterise Carmelite spirituality henceforth were to be found as much in her writings as in the Constitutions and in the form and conduct of the religious life that Teresa expected her sisters to lead.

Teresa reconstructed the Carmelite ethos, re-established its foundations and created a climate truly favourable to the spiritual life, notwithstanding the immense hurdles. Teresa understood that the whole life of Carmel had to be restructured as a function of the contemplative life: strict enclosure, silence and solitude must be created so that union with God could develop in the most favourable surroundings. In an original yet basically traditional form, the Carmelite order was to live according to the life and spirit of its origins, which can be seen in her sisters' responses to the reform. If John of the Cross and the first discalced were won over to the reform, they discovered in it the primitive spirit, the original foundation without which nothing would grow and without which the reformed Carmelite Order would have no meaning.

Carmelite spirituality has always been an experiment in religious simplicity. It is less about the pomp and circumstance that has often characterised the Roman Catholic Church and more about returning to the basics of prayerful contemplation. The reform movement of the thirteenth century was an attempt to remain as apostolically significant as the other mendicant movements, even at the cost of causing consternation among the traditional Carmelites. Teresa of Ávila endeavoured to reform the reform, so to speak, and, in the process, to incorporate women into what had thus far been an exclusively male domain. Her interpretation of Carmelite

spirituality and her emphasis upon its charism as a gift to be shared through prayer, grace, humility and teaching others, have left a lasting impression.

Against the background dealt with in this chapter, i.e. the development of Teresa's spirituality; the founding of the reformed order of Carmel; and the history surrounding the events in which the book the *Interior Castle* was written, the next Chapter will explore Teresa's journey through the seven mansions of the *Interior Castle*. In this book Teresa aims to give direction and teach her fellow sisters the way to union with God.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### The Seven Mansions of the *Interior Castle*

#### 4.1 Introduction

This aim of this chapter is to describe the journey through the seven mansions of the *Interior Castle* to union with God in the last mansion. This goal is reached by means of an ongoing process of detachment from worldly attractions and a growing attachment to the things of God. This chapter will illustrate that it is through prayer whereby a person begins this process and eventually attains the intimate friendship of God.

The *Interior Castle* is considered a literary masterpiece, which is a sentiment echoed by McLean (2003:73) who states: “It was to become one of the best-known treatises of Christian contemplative literature”. Bielecki (1994:29) confirms: “Many experts recommend that if we are to read only one of her works, it should be the *Interior Castle*, and that work does indeed synthesize her finest teaching”. Apart from this, the book is also important from a spiritual point of view because it contains the synthesis of Teresa’s spirituality. On 7 December 1577 CE, Teresa confirmed in a letter to Gaspar de Salazar, the then Rector of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), that she was pleased with her work and that he would, in fact, find it to be a jewel more valuable than the book of her *Life*.

In the years before Teresa began to write the *Interior Castle*, as we have seen in Chapter Three, Section 3.5, her autobiography was in the hands of the Inquisition. Gracian, her Provincial superior and confidant, requested Teresa to recall what she had written in her autobiography and, in a new book, to “... put down the doctrine in a general way without naming the one to whom the things you mentioned there happened” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:12). Teresa objected to this request and her objection is recorded as follows in the book *Biblioteca Mistica Carmelitana*:

Why do you want me to write? Let the theologians do it! They have studied. I am ignorant and wouldn’t know how to put things. I should get

the terms mixed up and do more harm than good. So many good books have been written about prayer. For the love of God, leave me to my spinning, to reciting the Office and attending to my obligations like the rest of the sisters. I am not cut out to write books and have neither the health nor the intelligence to do it (cited in Gracian 1932:16).

The lack of formal education referred to by Teresa in the paragraph above is, in one way, an advantage. This is because her focus was less on expressing her insights with technical expertise within a systematic theological framework, than on understanding her experiences and expressing these in whatever way and with whatever images and terms came to mind. The disadvantage, however, is her tendency to use theological terms ‘loosely’, which makes it difficult to systemize her thoughts and to co-ordinate them with those of other spiritual writers.

Notwithstanding this lack of coherence, the content is sublime; the book is, moreover, written in a simple way, since it was not written for theologians and philosophers, but for Teresa’s fellow sisters, the Discalced Carmelites. The subject of her book is prayer, and Teresa emphasises the two motives that have induced her to write about it: firstly, she sets out to praise God and, secondly, she does so for her fellow sisters. With regard to the latter, Boyce (1984:2) notes that Teresa says: “It is they whom I shall be addressing”, or, in the more literal Spanish translation, “I shall be talking to them as I go along” (Boyce 1984:2). This indicates that Teresa meant the book to be a conversation with an intimate group of people committed to a common ideal. As she says in the last paragraph of her Prologue to the *Interior Castle*, Teresa’s main aim is to praise God in what she has written and to lead others also to praise him. In the opinion of Marie-Eugène (1953:14), Teresa could not have written the *Interior Castle* “... without special supernatural assistance”, which one can interpret as meaning ‘with the direct help of God’.

In this chapter, by mapping out the contemplative path towards union with God and describing and examining the seven mansions, I will also look at the themes identified by Teresa, which are the characteristics that need to be identified, learnt and experienced, in order to attain union with God.

## 4.2 The Text of the *Interior Castle*

With regard to the central image of the *Interior Castle*, Frohlich (1993:174) states that “... the allegory of the human soul as a castle, at the centre of which God dwells in glory, provides that stable framework within which a great diversity of images and insights are synthesized into an integrative narrative”. The *Interior Castle* is thus about the spiritual journey towards God, depicted as a series of different pathways that ultimately lead to union with God.

The *Interior Castle* thus sets out an itinerary of the spiritual life, which Teresa conceives of as a seed that germinates and grows. In describing this journey towards God, Teresa did not intend the seven mansions to be understood as distinct stages of a journey or as stations through which people must necessarily pass in a given order to reach their destination. Rather, each mansion focuses on a particular point in the spiritual life, thereby helping to develop an understanding of and identification with what is happening to the adherent of the spiritual path. Even more importantly, perhaps, the *Interior Castle* can be read as a ‘manual of spirituality’, with the reader’s spirituality growing and evolving under the guidance of the experiences described by Teresa in each of the mansions.

This view is validated by Boyce (1984:12), who states:

... on the one hand a series of subjects [is] treated [in the seven mansions], which codify spiritual life around certain important moments which the Christian must necessarily integrate in his (sic) life in order to reach holiness; on the other, [the book is] a continual reference to the concrete experience of somebody who knows.

In summary, the text is essentially both a description of, and a guide to spiritual change, progress, surrender, and transformation through the seven mansions, which represent the journey in the life of interiorisation and prayer.

### **4.2.1 Purpose of this book**

In her childhood, as we have seen in Chapter Three, Section 3.2, Teresa longed to die as a martyr, "... not out of any conscious love for Him but in order to attain as quickly as possible, those joys which, as I read, are laid up in Heaven" (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:24). In subsequent years, Teresa was continually seeking union with God; thus she writes:

Recall that Saint Augustine tells us about his seeking God in many places and eventually finding Him within himself. A soul that is often distracted needs to understand this truth, for in order to speak to its Eternal Father and to take its delight in Him, it has no need to go to Heaven or to speak in a loud voice. No matter how quietly we speak, He is so near that He will hear us. We do not need wings to search for Him. We only need to find a place where we can be alone and look upon Him present within us (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:120).

In the *Interior Castle*, Teresa turns towards the depths of her own soul to see God. The whole of Teresian spirituality is encapsulated in this movement towards God who is present in the soul and in the search to be united perfectly with God. The purpose of the book, the *Interior Castle*, therefore, must be to consider, firstly, the presence of God in the soul, which is its fundamental truth; secondly, the progressive interiorisation of the soul, which is expressed as it moves closer to God; and lastly, ultimate union with God, which is its end.

#### **4.2.1.1 The presence of God in the soul**

In the *Interior Castle*, Teresa observes God's presence in the soul and regards it as being of primary importance: God is thus located in the centre of the Seventh Mansions. Furthermore, Teresa emphasises that, "... without His help we are powerless" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:12). The soul, if withdrawn from God,

... will lose its beauty for it had made her realise that any good thing we do has its source, not in ourselves, but rather in that spring where this tree, which is the soul, is planted, and in that sun which sheds its radiance on our works (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:11).

Teresa's own mystical experiences led her to the conclusion that God was indeed present within her soul. Nonetheless, her own inner certainty about this was not sufficient proof when it came to teaching others, whether through her writings or through her speeches. Teresa seemed to need the assurance of the teachings of faith and the pronouncements of theology on the matter.

#### **4.2.1.2 The spiritual life as a progressive interiorisation**

According to Teresian spirituality, once God is discovered in the depths of the soul, all desire is directed towards God within. In order to see God and find God, the soul must be oriented towards its own depth. Marie-Eugène (1953:25) confirms that the spiritual life will be primarily "... an interior life; the movement towards God will be a progressive interiorisation leading to the meeting with Him, the embrace and union in darkness while awaiting the vision of Heaven".

This concept of progressive interiorisation is closely associated with the stages of spiritual development or transformation. One of the basic ideas in western mysticism is that the spiritual life moves through stages in an ascending order:

The traditional Christian understanding of spiritual growth, for instance, was referred to as the 'triple way' or the three stages. The first stage is known as the way of awakening, purgation and purification (*via purgativa*), the second stage as illumination (*via illuminativa*) and the third stage as mystical union (*via unitiva*) (Sheldrake 2005:626).

Pseudo-Dionysius, the Aeropagite, introduces this threefold path in his book *The Celestial Hierarchy* (written in about the fifth century). It subsequently came to be understood in the Christian tradition as the path of purification, illumination and union. Sheldrake (2005:627) observes that: "From Dionysius onwards the tradition becomes firmly established in Christianity's understanding of spiritual development".

This progress from one stage to the next is also described by the well-known Russian ascetic, St. Theophan the Recluse (1829–1861 CE) as follows:

When iron clings to a magnet it is because the power of the magnet draws it. In spiritual matters the same thing is true; it is only clear that God is touching us when we experience this living aspiration; when our spirit

turns its back on everything else and is fixed on Him and carried away. At first this will not happen; the zealous person is still turned wholly on himself. Even though he has decided for God this is only in his mind. The Lord does not yet let Himself be tasted, nor is the man yet capable of it, being impure. Then as his heart begins to be purified and set right, he begins to feel the sweetness of a life pleasing to God; so that he begins to walk in His ways gladly and with love. It becomes his natural element, in which he delights. Then the soul starts to withdraw from everything else as from the cold, and to gravitate towards God, Who warms it. This principle of gravitation is implanted in the fervent soul by divine Grace (cited in Amis 1995:293).

This development in the spiritual life, symbolically described by St. Theophan, illustrates the movement from the self to God and can be explained as the progressive interiorisation of the person on the journey to God. These traditional stages of spiritual growth can also be seen in the writings of Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila who "... all make use of the three stages in their writings" (Sheldrake 2005:627).

In the spiritual exercises of Ignatius, for example, Melloni (2000:38) writes: "Three ways must be followed if a person is to possess this excellent wisdom; the first cleanses the heart, the second enlightens it and the third, unites it with God". As will be seen later in this chapter, with respect to the *Interior Castle*, the first mansions (first to third) refer to the state of purification, those in the middle (fourth and fifth) to illumination, and the final mansions (sixth and seven) to mystical union.

From the above divisions in the stages in the growth of spiritual life, it can be argued that each stage has clear characteristics and distinguishing signs, and each moreover has an appropriate and different set of criteria that allows the individual to discern the relevant stage. Houdek, an experienced Jesuit spiritual director, echoes this:

Though based on the inherited tradition of the Christian community, these stages have indeed been confirmed by my own personal experience as a spiritual director. I have found this general classical pattern to be very much part of the individuated experience of most of the people I have directed (1996:37).



Nonetheless, despite the popularity of this three-fold division, the validity of the three stages of spiritual progression has been questioned both in the past as well as in contemporary times.<sup>11</sup>

In summary, even for Christians today, the three stages of progressive interiorisation, also known as the ‘threefold way’, remain as relevant in the field of spiritual growth as they were when Teresa wrote the *Interior Castle*.

#### **4.2.1.3 Union with God: The goal of Teresian spirituality**

In order to understand what is meant by the term ‘union with God’, Teresa metaphorically describes union with God in the following terms:

We might say that union is as if the ends of two wax candles were joined so that the light they give is one: the wicks and the wax and the light are all one; yet afterwards the one candle can be perfectly well separated from the other and the candles become two again, or the wick may be withdrawn from the wax. But here it is like rain falling from the heavens into a river or a spring; there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:216-217).

In this state of union, which takes place in the Sixth and Seventh Mansions of the *Interior Castle*, the person dwells in continual interiorisation: Christ is known and worshipped as existing within the soul itself, where, to use the metaphor above, the wick and the wax and the light become one.

Teresa explains that, although the union takes place in the soul, it cannot be seen there in itself; however, it can be seen in the good dispositions and virtuous acts that result from this union. All of these acts have only one objective and that is to do the Will of

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<sup>11</sup> The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984 CE), for instance, in his treatise, *The Theological Investigations*, challenged the tradition of thinking of the spiritual life in terms of distinct stages (Rahner 1967:n.p.). Similarly, while the traditional approach to growth in the spiritual life may continue to offer valuable insight today, Sheldrake (2005:389) suggests that “... sometimes individualistic resonances must nowadays be corrected by a renewed emphasis on the collective understanding of discipleship in the New Testament”. This comment is made in the context of the 7 December 1965 Vatican II document, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes*. In this document, the Council described the Christian community as: “United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man” (Pope Paul VI, 1965).

God. Teresa's explanation is further qualified when she defines the visibility of union as follows:

It is when they become the slaves of God and are marked with His sign, which is the sign of the Cross, in token that they have given Him their freedom. Then He can sell them as slaves to the whole world, as He Himself was sold, and if He does this He will be doing them no wrong but showing them no slight favour. Unless they resolve to do this, they need not expect to make great progress (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:234).

The act of becoming 'slaves of God' and glorifying God for doing so completes this submission. Once this submission has happened, the person seeking union with God will have a strong desire to serve and praise God, and to help other souls if they can. When Teresa said, "I want to see God", she meant that the vision of God that she initially had, gave her a continual desire and need to draw from the living God with all her being, so as to achieve the ultimate aim of union with God during her lifetime. Teresa thus invites all who "... want to see God" to give themselves completely to God in order to be transformed by God's love and to do God's will. Her longing to see and achieve union with God lies at the core of Teresian spirituality. The seven mansions as they are described in the *Interior Castle* will now be considered.

## **4.3 The Seven Mansions**

### **4.3.1 Introduction to the Seven Mansions**

The alternative title of the book *Interior Castle*, namely *The Seven Mansions*, prompts the question whether Teresa is teaching that there are seven stages to spiritual growth, or whether the seven-fold castle structure she describes is intended more as a rhetorical device than as a descriptive or explanatory claim. The answer to this question is unclear. On the one hand, Teresa states that there are not only seven but "... many mansions, some above, others below, others at each side; and in the centre and midst of them all is the chiefest mansion" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:5). Each of the mansions can be seen as a series of *moradas* (Teresa, it should be noted here, always refers to the mansions in the plural e.g. first mansions). Frohlich observes that "... the plural title of each of the sections, i.e. *Moradas Primeras*, *Moradas Segundas*, etc., all the way up to *Septimas Moradas*, indicates that this is no simple vision of a

seven-story soul or of a seven-stage progression” (Frohlich 1993:179). Teresa confirms this point when she states:

You must not imagine these mansions as arranged in a row, one behind another ... the things of the soul we must always think of as spacious, ample and lofty; and this can be done without the least exaggeration (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:13).

It can be argued that the division into seven dwelling places is somewhat arbitrary and is reinforced by the fact that Teresa’s descriptions of the various stages often overlap. It is too convenient to compartmentalise spiritual growth into seven neat divisions and that this detracts from the fact that spirituality, as seen in Chapter Two, is without boundaries. Notwithstanding the fact that Teresa’s stages do tend to overlap, it will be seen later in this chapter that Teresa still manages to discern definite transitions in the spiritual journey.

The first three mansions make up approximately twenty percent of the entire book, the *Interior Castle*. Teresa justifies this brevity by pointing out that there are already numerous works describing this early stage of spiritual growth, as she had covered this aspect in detail in *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself* and especially in the *Way of Perfection*. However, this does not imply that the first three mansions are not important or that they should be overlooked: “... all [first three stages] are precious because they give us the true perspective on the spiritual life and maintain us in it. The final end – God, to whom we must attain – is constantly present” (Marie-Eugène 1953:152).

From the foregoing, it is seen that a considered and committed effort is required to progress through all the stages of the *Interior Castle*, in order to reach the final goal (union with God), instead of being satisfied with the first victories. From the very first pages of the *Interior Castle*, Teresa asserts that her soul is directed to achieve ultimate union with God. She also informs the reader in what spirit and with what passion one must undertake the spiritual journey from the outset to the attainment of this final goal.

### **4.3.2 *The First Mansions***

Right from the beginning, Teresa emphasises repeatedly that her story is entirely about the power flowing from the ‘centre of the soul’ where God dwells. Teresa’s image of the castle with God as its centre is primarily addressed not to theologians or philosophers, but to her sisters and, therefore, to ordinary people who wish to set out on the spiritual journey. From the start, the pilgrim must strive to reach the centre, and to see his or her spiritual path from a perspective of the centre. Teresa furthermore stresses that the “... door of entry into this castle is prayer and meditation” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:6).

Teresa emphasises the importance of prayer and meditation in these early stages, stating that “... souls without prayer are like people whose bodies and limbs are paralysed: they possess feet and hands but they cannot control them” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:15). Teresa also describes the three types of meditative prayer that recur throughout the text and which represent deepening degrees of penetration into the mystery of God, and she refers to the predominant prayer as the ‘prayer of recollection’, where the mind is quite active, and where methods and techniques of prayer and contemplation are important. The ‘prayer of quiet’ develops in the Fourth Mansions and the ‘prayer of union’ is only found in the Seventh Mansions. Chapter Six will describe each of these types of prayer in detail.

McLean (2003:97) notes that “... we do not seek the experience of God in prayer merely for its own sake, but in order that the good in our lives may thrive and grow”. This ‘good in our lives’ is the growth in the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. Green supports this assertion, noting as follows:

If we cannot see any real growth in these virtues, something is wrong, no matter how abundant the water of consolation may be. It is, in fact, our growth in the virtues that attracts the Lord after He has first planted them in us (1998:41).

If a person lives a life of prayer with no good resulting from this effort, the motive for the person praying needs to be closely analysed. What is the purpose to be gained

from prayer? Teresa now brings in, at this early stage of prayer in the second chapter of the First Mansions, the concept of mortal sin and describes the state of a soul thus:

No thicker darkness exists, and there is nothing dark and black which is not much less so than this. You need know only one thing about it – that, although the Sun Himself, Who has given it all its splendour and beauty, is still there in the centre of the soul, it is as if He were not there for any participation which the soul has in Him. And, since this soul has separated itself from Him, it cannot be pleasing in His eyes; for, after all, the intention of a person who commits a mortal sin is not to please Him but to give pleasure to the devil, and, as the devil is darkness itself, the poor soul becomes darkness itself likewise (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:9-10).

As the concept of mortal sin could be a study in itself and can not be fully explored and debated in this dissertation, it is sufficient for this purpose to define that in essence, sin is the person's refusal to respond to God's call. Sin is essentially committed by that part of the person that refuses to change, to grow spiritually, to turn to God and to transform. McLean (2003:107) makes the point that "... the soul wishes to stay 'in the flesh', so to speak, and [that it] denies the spiritual dimension and the reality of God". McLean (2003:107) explains that: "Teresa's view of sin is different to the usual theological and legalistic categories and interpretations. Teresa's union with God means [that] she views sin overridingly from a place of love, of the soul's love for God". Notwithstanding the fact that God is at the centre of the soul that loses its beauty, God cannot be directly touched by sin.

Teresa is also concerned that progress in the spiritual life cannot be achieved unless a person has a 'contemplative interiority' – that is, deep self-knowledge (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:13). Her foremost concern, therefore, is to emphasise that full self-knowledge is only possible when one sees oneself explicitly in the light of God:

I do not know if I have explained this clearly: self-knowledge is so important that, even if you were raised right up to the heavens, I should like you never to relax your cultivation of it; so long as we are on this earth, nothing matters more to us than humility. And so I repeat that it is a very good thing – excellent, indeed – to begin by entering the room where humility is acquired rather than by flying off to the other rooms. For that is the way to make progress, and, if we have a safe, level road to walk along, why should we desire wings to fly? Let us rather try to get the greatest possible profit out of walking. As I see it, we shall never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God: let us think of His greatness and then come back to our own baseness; by looking at His

purity we shall see our foulness; by meditating upon His humility, we shall see how far we are from being humble (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:14).

This stress by Teresa on self-knowledge and humility throughout the *Interior Castle*, but noticeably at the beginning of the spiritual journey, is undeniably the foundation on which the spiritual life is formed.

McLean (2003:112) observes that: “The *Interior Castle* is a profound document of the psyche as well as of the soul, and understanding of depth psychological dynamics, is expressed interchangeably throughout the text”. Although Teresa does not have the terminology of modern-day psychology and psychoanalysis to guide her, she uses figurative language, including similes, metaphors, symbols and allegories, in an attempt to describe the psyche and what is happening in the mind of the person seeking union with God:

Her use of the soul includes what we would refer to today as psyche, and her basic assumption throughout is that spiritual growth is generally accompanied by psychological growth and maturity. Scholastic theology spoke of faculties within the soul in an attempt psychologically to nuance interior reality. Teresa attempts to overcome the lack of psychological categories through her use of symbols and imagery (Welch 1982:66).

It is noteworthy that Teresa emphasises the importance of self-knowledge from the first mansions onwards. This emphasis on self-knowledge “... is in accordance with the modern-day psychological approach” (McLean 2003:113). For Teresa, self-knowledge is about honest self-acceptance, together with all one’s needs, vulnerabilities, emotions and limitations. In addition there is the realisation that one is ultimately dependent on God’s healing love.

In summary, the first mansion brings about the awakening of one’s spiritual life and the realisation that entrance into the castle occurs through prayer and meditation. In this way, Teresa constructs the foundation of the spiritual life with an insistence on the importance of prayer and meditation, which leads to understanding oneself with humility.

### 4.3.3 *Second and Third Mansions*

As only one chapter of the *Interior Castle* deals with the Second Mansions and only two discuss the Third Mansions, these are now combined in this section. Together, they complete the introductory portion of the *Interior Castle*, or the first stage, as mentioned earlier. In these two Mansions the soul is anxious to penetrate further into the castle and the openness and attention to the divine centre evolves from the experience of prayer during the first stages in the first Mansions. Although it is not yet a direct experience of God, which is something that only develops in the Fourth Mansions, the person nonetheless becomes more aware of the reality of God, as prayer becomes a more central part of life and as there is a greater focus of mind and attention on God.

Much of this awareness and focus comes from external stimuli, from outside sources such as reading or study. Teresa confirms this when she states:

His appeals come through the conversations of good people, or from sermons, or through the reading of good books; and there are many other ways, of which you have heard, in which God calls us. Or they come through sicknesses and trials, or by means of truths which God teaches us at times when we are engaged in prayer; however feeble such prayers may be, God values them highly (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:25).

We can deduce from this that a person may initially devote more time and attention to prayer in response to external stimuli, some of which may be positive, and some of which may be negative. The first challenge faced by such an individual is to remain in the present moment of prayer and meditation and to allow the mind to become still and quiet within. Teresa stresses that, in the Second and Third Mansions, temptations and trials bring about confusion in the soul: reason, memory, willpower, understanding, faith, hope and love must all be used to overcome the difficulties presented to the soul in order to progress towards God. Understandably, says Teresa, "... it is here that we have need of Thine aid, without which we can do nothing. Of thy mercy, allow not this soul to be deluded and led astray when its journey is but begun" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:27). Further, Teresa warns her readers of the dangers of trusting only in their own strength and in the virtues they have already acquired, which at that stage are most likely to be still very weak.

Teresa emphasises in the Third Mansions that what matters most is love. McLean (2003:154) tries to explain what Teresa means by this: “Love is now coming from a sense of conscience, accurate, educated and directed, and not based on self-love. Loving God is becoming a conscious choice directed towards Him”. Frohlich also contends that, in the first three mansions, Teresa has established all the principles of religious conversion that are necessary to progress to the divine centre (Frohlich 1993:195). Although the journey to our own centre is through self-knowledge (awareness), thereafter, though, God must give the person the gift of religious conversion. Lonergan (quoted in Frohlich 1993:195) refers to this as:

... an ‘above downward’ process in that God’s love has a transformative influence on the natural human capacity for knowing, loving and choosing, which in turn has a transformative influence on psyche and body.

This statement suggests that, after an individual seeker has embarked upon the path towards God with sincerity, goodwill and commitment, it is God’s turn to call the person to holiness. It is not an action that a person can precipitate.

McLean (2003:188) states that, while we are in the Second and Third Mansions, “... we can also experience long periods of distress, depression and anxiety relating to the loss of confidence in the old assumptions we held about ourselves and about those values that society esteems in general”. From this comment it is clear that a person in the Third Mansions must be ready to leave everything for the sake of God, unlike the rich young man in the gospel story (Mt 19:16-22) and should be ready to face long periods of aridity in prayer. The psychiatrist, May, comments as follows on the religious conversion that takes place during these stages and the effects that are part of this journey:

This movement towards an experience of God is transcending any words, concepts or image of God. It is moving towards contemplatively ‘resting’ and ‘being in God’ alone. This is especially poignant and relevant in our age that so strongly values self-determination, self-will, achievement, success and accomplishment and generally devalues ‘not knowing’, suffering and humility (May 1988:99).



This is why Teresa is keen to emphasise that a person must make a concerted effort to develop a deeper understanding of humility and of what is and is not possible. In other words, in the Second and Third Mansions, the person learns a form of surrender and humility that allows abandonment to God so as to attain a more deeply spiritual life.

In summary, in the first three mansions, as the spiritual life becomes more important, there is a gradual shift in priorities, which is indicative of the emergence of new attitudes and values. Matters of the spirit become more real, and what was previously valued and perceived as being important, becomes less so. The comfortable sense of self-worth that was previously measured by earthly achievements is now at odds with, or very different to, what is seen as important in the spiritual life. In this way, the principles set out and to be learned in these three mansions are the building blocks upon which Teresa's treatises of ultimate union with God are built.

#### **4.3.4 *Fourth Mansions***

The Fourth Mansions leads towards a more direct encounter with God. As indicated above, in the first phase (First to Third Mansions), the soul's own efforts, animated by grace through prayer, are paramount. From this stage onwards, however, the part played by the soul in achieving union with God becomes less important and God's part correspondingly greater. The Fourth Mansions leads from the previous mansions of purgation and purification to a greater receptiveness to the action of God and to a progressive spiritual transformation by the action of the Holy Spirit. What this means, according to Melloni (2000:21), is that:

... this dwelling place is stressing the mystical aspect of the tradition – the *pneumatikos* – or 'spiritual' having the sense of proceeding from the Holy Spirit. It is clear that the spiritual is what is open to the action of the Holy Spirit – essentially what does not come from ourselves, but what is received.

As noted earlier, the apostle Paul also makes this observation in his writings.

Further, according to Paul, the world of the spiritual is to be distinguished not from the physical world, but from what he refers to as the psyche:

Now the spirit we have received is not the spirit of the world but God's own Spirit, so that we may understand the lavish gifts God has given us. And these are what we speak of, not in the terms learnt from human philosophy, but in terms learnt from the Spirit, fitting spiritual language to spiritual things. The natural person has no room for the gifts of God's Spirit; to him they are folly; he cannot recognise them, because their value can be assessed only in the Spirit. The spiritual person, on the other hand, can assess the value of everything, and that person's value cannot be assessed by anybody else (1 Cor 2:12-15).

This is Paul's description of the stage where God's action in the soul becomes the driving force. This implies that the spirit of God is God's free gift and that it cannot be achieved through any action of one's own. Furthermore, McLean (2003:202) states: "Throughout the first three mansions, much information, learning, knowledge and experience has been gathered and integrated for developing our psychological, emotional and physical foundation". McLean (2003:202) continues: "In this dwelling place, we are now being asked to give up a good proportion of our rational understanding, and the many mental images of God that we have developed earlier". I do not agree with this statement, as I do not believe that the person gives up anything. Rather, God gives us everything, which transforms our previous understanding of God or our mental images of God. It is also emphasised by Teresa that one is unable to enter these more interior mansions without having lived for a long time in the outer mansions in preparation for the action of the Holy Spirit.

In the Fourth Mansions, Teresa writes about prayer by using the symbolism of water; she thus uses the image of water fountains and basins to describe and understand the different experiences and states of prayer. Teresa writes:

To understand it better, let us suppose that we are looking at two fountains, the basins of which can be filled with water ... these two basins can be filled with water in different ways: the water in one comes from a long distance, by means of numerous conduits; but the other, has been constructed at the very source of the water and fills without making any noise. If the flow of water is abundant, as in the case we are speaking of, a great stream still runs from it after it has been filled; no skill is necessary here and no conduits have to be made for the water is flowing all the time (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:63).

By means of this metaphor, Teresa differentiates between two distinct states: the first involves hard work, in that it is active human prayer, whereas the second is receptive prayer characterised by contemplation and mystical experience. As such, it is analogous to passive prayer, where – to use Teresa’s analogy – no energy, labour or technology is used to bring the water to the fountain. This latter type of prayer Teresa refers to as the ‘prayer of quiet’. She elucidates this further:

In the prayer of quiet, when, instead of coming through conduits, the water springs directly from its source, the understanding checks its activity, or rather the activity is checked for it when it finds it cannot understand what it desires, and thus roams about all over the place and can settle down to nothing. The will is so fixed upon its God that the disturbed condition of the understanding causes it great distress; but it must not take any notice of this, for if it does so it will lose a great part of what it is enjoying; it must forget about it and abandon itself into the arms of love and His Majesty will teach it what to do next (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:63).

For Teresa, these experiences come from the Divine source and cannot be manufactured. No interior spiritual development can be forced or willed by the person. This stage of spiritual development is thus entirely in the hands of God. Consequently, the various prayer experiences that Teresa discusses as typical of this stage lie somewhere between the active meditation that is necessary in the earlier stages, and the ‘prayer of union’ that is characteristic of the Fifth Mansions.

#### **4.3.5 *Fifth Mansions***

From this point onwards to the end of the text, Teresa is concerned with describing the perils and delights of union of the soul with God. But, Cummins (1984b:39) observes that “... even to Teresa, the Fifth mansions seemed to be somewhat obscure and hard to describe”. Why this would be so is not certain, but it may be that Teresa found it difficult to analyse her experience in a rational manner or was unable to put into writing the mystical experience; for how does a person easily express, either in writing or verbally, an encounter with God?

At this stage, it is important to note the following: according to Teresa, it is not necessary for every person to experience every single level within this mansion. In

fact, for some, it will be enough to stand at the front door of the castle, so to speak, whereas others may be content to be simply aware of the spiritual delights offered, without ever entering. As will be seen in Chapter Seven, the choice of entering this mansion is not the person's but God's. The fifth stage marks the decisive entrance into the state that Teresa refers to as 'union'. She is very clear about the meaning of this term:

Here [in the state of union] we are all asleep, and fast asleep, to the things of the world, and to ourselves (in fact, for the short time that the condition lasts, the soul is without consciousness and has no power to think, even though it may desire to do so). There is no need now for it to devise any method of suspending the thought. Even in loving, if it is able to love, it cannot understand how or what it is that it loves, nor what it would desire; in fact, it has completely died to the world so that it may live more fully in God (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:83).

Here Teresa teaches that once the soul experiences the intense degree of union with the divine, it has no desire to be attached to anything concerning the world. It can be argued that the progress from detachment of worldly things is near complete in this mansion. McLean's comment on this definition of union by Teresa is helpful in this regard: "The soul can be, more often than not, doubtful and even confused as to what is happening until we gain more experience and develop more subtle spiritual discernment about these deeper mystical states" (McLean 2003:232). Nonetheless, Teresa gives the assurance that the prayer of union in the Fifth Mansions cannot be imagined, manipulated or manufactured, and thus explains it as follows:

The mind retains a thousand suspicions, and it is well that it should, for as I said, we can sometimes be deceived in this respect by our own nature. A few little lizards can hide themselves all over the place ... they correspond to the little thoughts which proceed from the imagination. However, the lizards cannot enter this mansion, for neither imagination nor memory nor understanding can be an obstacle to the blessings that are bestowed on it (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:84).

Teresa also says that, in this state "... joy is greater than all the joys of earth, and all its delights, and all its satisfactions, so that there is no evidence that these satisfactions and those of the earth have a common origin" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:85). Teresa also cautions us to note the difference between 'union' and 'dreaming'. The main criterion for discerning 'union' is the absolute certainty that remains after such

an experience. She explains: “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” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:87).

This implanting of God in the soul is taken up by McLean (2003:239) who notes:

The fifth dwelling place is explicitly associated by Teresa with the New Testament text, Colossians 3:3: ‘you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God’, hiddenness being the keynote.

The person has achieved this stage of spiritual growth through their own efforts and, from this point onwards, God now initiates and prepares the soul for progress through the remaining mansions. Teresa refers to this ongoing transformation and progressive interiorisation, which happens through the prayer of union, by using the metaphor of the transformation of the silkworm into a butterfly: the silkworm builds its cocoon within which it will die and be transformed into a butterfly. McLean elaborates further on this transformation, noting:

Enclosed within the darkness of a temporarily constructed cocoon it spins this rather extraordinary substance of silk out of sight of the world .... The worm itself is released at the end of its work, no longer the same species, but miraculously transformed into another species entirely – the butterfly (McLean 2003:239).

The analogy to the transformation of the contemplative soul is clear. The growing relationship with God is symbolised by the cocoon, which is necessary for transformation to occur. The silkworm represents the person who has progressed through the first three mansions, growing spiritually and progressively becoming more focussed inwards through their own efforts. These efforts are defined by Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:92) as involving “... penance, prayer, mortification, obedience and all the other good works that you know of”. It is these efforts which construct or weave the cocoon. The cocoon, in other words, is our life in Christ, and it is in the Fifth Mansions that the person’s life becomes ‘hidden’ in God.

Therefore, the continuing theme of this mansion is that the true sign of conversion is interior transformation. Teresa returns repeatedly to this theme: it is not the experience itself that counts, but being truly converted and showing this in action.

Teresa, in these chapters, also mentions the concept of ‘spiritual betrothal’, although this is not yet achieved at this stage of ‘union’. Teresa found that the closest metaphor to describe this spiritual betrothal of the soul to God was to compare it to the preliminaries that precede human marriage. Accordingly, Teresa refers to the steps taken by a couple that first get to know each other, before becoming engaged and then marrying, citing these as the steps of progression through the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Mansions respectively.

Finally, the sense of ‘union’ that is the keynote to this mansion, is in a sense the end of a significant part of the journey, as it is God who takes the initiative from this point onwards. The Sixth and Seven Mansions do not bring radically new states, but rather deeper levels of mystical union. In this way, the last mansions are the culmination of the total integration of the person into the life of God.

#### **4.3.6 Sixth Mansions**

The description of the Sixth Mansions, which covers eleven chapters, is the longest in the *Interior Castle*. The Sixth Mansions is another transitional stage, albeit less radical than the Fifth Mansions: whereas the Fifth Mansions marked the progression into ‘union’, the Sixth Mansions marks the progression from momentary to permanent union.

In the Fifth Mansions, the soul is, as it were, betrothed or engaged to its future spouse; in the Sixth Mansions, the lover and the beloved see each other for long periods of time, and their level of intimacy deepens. The experience of ‘union’ in this mansion appears in more varied guises. Sometimes it involves rapture and ecstasy, “... which carry the soul out of its senses; for if, while still in possession of its senses, the soul sees that it is so near to such great majesty, it might be unable to remain alive” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:143).

Notwithstanding the deepening of this intimacy, as observed by McLean (2003:251), “... the Sixth Mansions is a time of great trials and tests, possibly worse than anything experienced so far”. These trials and tests are referred to by mystics as the “... dark

night of the senses' and the 'dark night of the spirit' as explained in the quotation below. As Chapter Eight will describe the 'dark night of the spirit' in detail, this section will merely provide a broad overview of this aspect. John of the Cross describes these states when he writes:

The first purgation or night is bitter and terrible to the senses. But nothing can be compared to the second for it is horrible and frightful to the spirit. If God intends to lead the soul on, He does not put it in this dark night of spirit immediately after its going out from the aridities and trials of the first purgation and night of the senses. ... In this new state, as one liberated from a cramped prison cell, the soul goes about the things of God with more freedom and satisfaction of spirit and with more interior delight than it did in the beginning before entering the night of the sense ... nonetheless, since the purgation of the soul is not complete, certain needs, aridities, darkness's and conflicts are felt .... Thus to reach union, the soul must enter the second night of the spirit. In this night, both sensory and spiritual parts are despoiled of all these apprehensions and delights, and the soul is made to walk in dark and pure faith, which is the proper and adequate means to divine union (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:396).

A soul in this stage of its spiritual growth needs supreme love and faith to overcome this terrible experience, as described by John of the Cross. Also, these sufferings are more difficult to bear when a person finds themselves in a state of spiritual aridity, when God seems very far away from them and they do not have the support of a learned and experienced spiritual director to guide them in the spiritual life. Underhill similarly confirms the purgation of the soul at this stage, as she writes:

So long as the subject still feels himself to be 'somewhat', he has not yet annihilated selfhood and come to that ground where his being can be united with the being of God .... Here as in purgation, the condition of access to higher levels of vitality is a death; a deprivation, a detachment, a clearing of the ground. The satisfactions of the spirit must now go the same way as the satisfaction of the senses. A dreadful ennui, a dull helplessness, takes its place (1996:114).

The question that needs to be asked at this stage, in reference to the "... bitter and terrible night" described by John of the Cross and the "dreadful ennui" as written by Underhill, is why does God allow the dark night to happen? Matthew provides the following explanation:

‘Night’ presents suffering, not as the only place, but as a privileged place of God’s inflow. In it, love not only comes; love also opens a space for its coming. That it is the God-content of pain: it has power to unlock us at the point we cannot unlock ourselves. This accounts, though, for a second conviction: that healing comes particularly in situations that take us out of our own control, in the kind of pain which is bewildering (1995:78).

In this mansion, Teresa also describes the various ways in which God arouses or wakes the soul through locutions or visions. Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:132) defines these locutions as follows: “Some of them [locutions] seems to come from without; others from the innermost depths of the soul while others again, are so completely outside the soul, that they can be heard with the ears”. Visions are categorised as being either ‘intellectual’ or ‘imaginative’. In an intellectual vision, it is “... conscious to the soul that Jesus Christ our Lord is near to it though it cannot see Him either with the eyes of the body or with those of the soul” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:178). In the intellectual vision, moreover, there is not only the certitude of presence, but also a very clear understanding of who is present. These visions differ significantly from an imaginative vision “... which is quickly gone” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:178).

Frohlich (1993:217) notes that in union with God, Teresa reflects upon three main characteristics of this state: firstly, an increased active love of God and neighbour; secondly, certitude of God’s presence; and, thirdly, an extraordinary understanding of God and God’s ways. Furthermore, all of these three characteristics will be present at least to some degree in a spiritual seeker who has reached the Sixth Mansions. If they are to be ranked, the first appears to be the most essential, the second the most noteworthy and the third as the least essential. As Teresa progresses through the eleven chapters of this mansion, she returns repeatedly to her basic principle of judgment: what is born of God’s love will bear fruit in love of God and neighbour, manifested in the determination of an active self-giving.

It must be noted, though, that even in this mansion, there is not yet a permanent relationship with God. Teresa points out the difficult process of the radical restructuring of spirit that accompanies such union. This restructuring is painful and is often referred to by Teresa as leading to a desire for death. The pain, Teresa states, is the intensity of the unsatisfied desire for God so, notwithstanding all the favours



granted to the soul by God, the soul "... is in a much worse state than before for, although she may have been receiving these favours for many years, she is still sighing and weeping and each of them causes her fresh pain" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:197).

In summary, the most important amongst the trials that can develop in response to the progressive union with God is what has been called the 'dark night of the spirit'. Teresa writes extensively about this stage and devotes nearly a third of the text of the *Interior Castle* to this topic. In addition, though, Teresa describes the many new spiritual experiences that occur from the Fifth Mansions onwards and, as equally important, gives guidelines on how to deal with these experiences in order to discern whether one is on the right path to God.

#### **4.3.7 Seventh Mansions**

At this stage, the soul finally achieves 'spiritual marriage' with God. To use Teresa's metaphors, this is the stage where the two lighted candles become one, and the falling rain merges into the river. There is complete, ineffable transformation and perfect peace, and no higher state is conceivable save that of the Beatific Vision<sup>12</sup> in the next life:

When Our Lord is pleased to have pity upon this soul, which suffers and has suffered so much out of desire for Him, and which He has now taken spiritually to be His bride, He brings her into this Mansion of His, which is the seventh, before consummating the Spiritual Marriage. For He must needs have an abiding-place in this soul, just as He has one in Heaven, where His Majesty alone dwells so let us call this a second Heaven (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:208).

This union in the Seventh Mansions, Teresa notes, is different to the 'union' in the Fifth Mansions, even though in all of these mansions, God is truly united with the soul. In the Seventh Mansions, however, the soul is called to enter completely into its

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<sup>12</sup> The Beatific Vision is defined as follows: "The immediate knowledge of God which the angelic spirits and the souls of the just enjoy in Heaven. It is called "vision" to distinguish it from the mediate knowledge of God which the human mind may attain in the present life. And since in beholding God face to face the created intelligence finds perfect happiness, the vision is termed beatific" (Kirsch 1912:n.p.).

own centre. Teresa struggles with the definition of 'centre' here; she states, for instance:

... the 'centre' of our soul, or 'spirit' is something so difficult to describe and indeed to believe, that I think, sisters, as I am so bad at explaining myself, I will not subject you to the temptation of what I say... (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:220).

The major distinction between this mansion and the others is that "... in this mansion, everything is different. Our good God now desires to remove the scales from the eyes of the soul" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:210). The soul is brought into this mansion by means of an intellectual vision (not an imaginary one), where the Most Holy Trinity reveals itself in all three persons:

It sees these three Persons, individually, and yet, by a wonderful kind of knowledge which is given to it, the soul realises that most certainly and truly all these three Persons are one Substance and one Power and one Knowledge and one God alone; so that what we hold by faith the soul may be said here to grasp by sight, although nothing is seen by the eyes, either of the body or of the soul, for it is no imaginary vision. Here all three Persons communicate Themselves to the soul and speak to the soul and explain to it those words which the Gospel attributes to the Lord – namely, that He and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell with the soul which loves Him and keeps His commandments (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:211).

There is no doubt that what Teresa experiences by means of this intellectual vision, illuminated from within, the soul finally understands the mystery of the Trinity and understands the truth of three Persons in one God. It could be deduced that this vision of the Trinity could be seen as the crowning of intellectual visions. Howells (2002:110) notes that after this encounter, no further visions or special favours are required because the trinitarian structure of the soul is fully formed. Teresa's final view of mystical knowing emerges in terms of this inner Trinitarian relationship with God. Frohlich also observes that, once the soul has entered into the Seventh Mansions, there has been a definite shift in the soul's 'centre of gravity':

Instead of being snatched out of itself and thrown completely off balance by a powerful breakthrough of the transcendent ground, the soul is at home and in perfect peace there. No longer is union experienced as 'proceeding' from the soul's centre for now the soul is permanently at the centre (1993:225).

Teresa therefore confirms that the mystical union with God is neither transitory nor will the senses be so completely absorbed that they will not be able to fix upon anything else. In fact, it reaches the point where the mystical union permeates everyday activities and the soul is able to rest in that relationship. Teresa also mentions that the difference between the spiritual betrothal and the spiritual marriage is similar to the difference between any two betrothed persons and two people who are married. In marriage, the two can no longer be separated.

It is in this treatise of mystical union that Teresa's consistent message of the priority of action and love is emphasised. Persons, who are in this state of mystical union, advises Teresa, can expect to have less exterior peace and quiet, for their focus will be on loving God and loving their neighbour.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The progress and journey to God begins with the realisation that God is present within all souls, and continues with the progressive interiorisation of the soul in order to obtain ultimate, profound union with God. Each of the seven mansions was described by Teresa with the greatest possible clarity, although she humbly emphasized that her descriptions did not preclude equally valid descriptions by others.

The *Interior Castle* is not written in a theological or philosophical manner, nor as a treatise on psychology; rather, it is written so that any reader can understand and embrace its teaching in the same way that Teresa invited her sisters to do so. Teresa also knew that not every sister who prepared herself to receive mystical favours would receive them. But, in spite of the fact that she would not pronounce upon the secret judgements of God, Teresa believed that all Christians were capable of the spiritual journey if they had the resolution and will to do so.

Throughout the history of Christianity, there have been certain persons qualified to guide to the highest states of prayer. It is my view that the *Interior Castle* serves as a roadmap to those on the journey. The writings of Teresa and her spirituality are as real

and applicable today as they were when the book was first written. Notwithstanding the mystical character of the *Interior Castle*, there is a profound store of knowledge and insight into the themes that help build the foundations for the spiritual journey, namely, humility, knowledge of self, silence, prayer and contemplation, the dark night of the spirit, spiritual betrothal and marriage, and ultimately union with God. These themes will be dealt with in the chapters that follow.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### Humility, Self-knowledge and Silence

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines three of the most important themes in the *Interior Castle*, namely *humility*, *self-knowledge* and *silence*. These themes recur in many of Teresa's writings, particularly in the *Way of Perfection* and the *Interior Castle*. Furthermore, they are the foundation blocks for the spiritual life and necessary for the journey to God.

In the early stages of the spiritual journey, humility and self-knowledge are indispensable in all aspects of the spiritual life. This is explained by Teresa as follows:

However high a state the soul may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon it, and this it will never be able to neglect even should it so desire. Humility must always be doing its work like a bee making its honey in the hive: without humility, all will be lost (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:13).

Self-knowledge and humility are emphasized by Teresa as being essential for the arduous process of transformation. This is because it takes a large amount of effort, humility and courage to acknowledge one's faults. This acknowledgement requires an understanding of the self, as discussed later in this chapter, and it is this acknowledgment of faults that is the foundation of humility. It follows, therefore, that self-knowledge is the point of departure for humility; it makes it possible to come to terms with one's 'smallness' relative to the 'greatness' of God, and to realise that one is ultimately reliant and dependant on God. It is axiomatic, then, that this realisation leads to the achievement of humility through self-knowledge.

From the First Mansions onwards, Teresa also stresses that silence is needed to find God in one's soul, particularly as the soul progresses in this quest. It is thus appropriate also to include a discussion of the Carmelite Rule of Silence and how this relates to Teresian spirituality. The present analysis begins with the theme of 'self-knowledge'.

## 5.2 Self-Knowledge

From the First Mansions onwards, Teresa emphasises the need for the soul to learn the importance of self-knowledge:

It is very important that no soul which practices prayer, whether little or much should be subjected to undue constraint or limitation. Since God has given it such dignity, it must be allowed to roam through these mansions. It must not be compelled to remain for a long time in one single room – not at least, unless it is in the room of self-knowledge. How necessary that is even to those whom the Lord keeps in the same mansion in which He Himself is! However high a state the soul may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon it, and this it will never be able to neglect even should it so desire (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:13).

Teresa further advises that self-knowledge is not something that is acquired and then forgotten about: it is a discipline that is actively practised throughout the spiritual journey until it becomes a way of life. Stewart (1997:17) similarly, emphasises the importance of self-knowledge, and adds that it is a gradual process that results in “... a life of prayer ... As a discipline, self-knowledge is not an activity in which a person simply engages. It is a process”. Howells (2002:97) also says that “... the beginner starts with the image of God on the basis of faith, but Teresa says it must be a living faith in order to gain what she calls self-knowledge”. Howells then summarises Teresa’s advice on how this self-knowledge can be acquired:

Teresa introduces the two elements that she will develop throughout the remainder of the *Moradas* (Mansions): first, the dynamic element of the relationship with God, in which the soul is growing in each successive stage of transformation and second, the cognitive element of knowledge of God, which is similarly growing, in relation to the knowledge of self. The first stage of the *Moradas* is the ‘room of self-knowledge’. This is acquired by the active practice of prayer (2002:97).

From the outset of the spiritual journey, then, the person must make a positive choice to proceed. Teresa reiterates throughout her writings that spiritual growth cannot happen by chance or good fortune; it is initially a ‘pro spiritual’ choice by the person, and then becomes a process and journey through the mansions, with the singular aim to achieve union with God. Knowledge of self, through the ‘mirror of humility’, as

described by Teresa, is the foundation of the spiritual journey. This knowledge can be developed both through psychological knowledge and spiritual knowledge, as will be discussed in the next sections.

### ***5.2.1 Psychological Knowledge***

McLean (2003:112) makes the point that "... the *Interior Castle* is a profound document of the psyche as well as of the soul, and [of] her [Teresa's] understanding of depth psychological dynamics". Depth psychology is defined by the Thesaurus Dictionary as "... a set of techniques for exploring underlying motives and a method of treating various mental disorders, based on the theories of Sigmund Freud". The underlying assumption of the *Interior Castle* is "... that spiritual growth is generally accompanied by psychological growth and maturity" (McLean 2003:112). The following quotation from May (2004:100) explains what this means:

There is a gradual easing of the feeling of autonomous effort, the white knuckled striving that seeks to control and manage everything. In place of the striving, one finds a growing willingness, an increasing receptivity in the sense of welcoming with open arms. This is nowhere so obvious as in prayer as the work of meditation eases and the flowing openness of contemplation takes its place.

It is noteworthy that Teresa's continual emphasis on self-knowledge is in accord with contemporary depth psychology. The basis of this approach is that one understands who one is, with all one's limitations, dependencies, vulnerabilities and emotional pain. As McLean (2003:115) argues, "The yearning and desire to move towards deepening states of contemplative prayer and meditation must be augmented by the ongoing struggle to develop an in-depth understanding of ourselves".

According to McLean (2003:115), the "Christian mystical tradition has always emphasised the importance of psychological exploration and maturation". This implies, then, that it is necessary to have a well-developed personality in order to have a balanced view of the self and to make a realistic assessment and appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses. This would furthermore involve:

... [the] function of a healthy personality around the development of sufficient identity, determination and willingness to adapt to life's demands and through these experiences, to be able to integrate and internalise an adequate sense of self-worth and self-esteem (McLean 2003:115).

The question to be asked here is what does this mean? It means that one must be able to observe the choices that one makes every day and to assess whether these choices are determined by conflicting thoughts, feelings, imagination and perceptions. This self-questioning and self-scrutiny of one's innermost motivations gradually leads to a more complete understanding of the reasons behind one's everyday choices and this understanding can then lead to a more conscious decision *not* to respond in certain habitual ways. This is what McLean (2003:120) refers to as the development of "... real self-knowledge – knowing myself, being self-aware".

In contemporary language, the renowned psychoanalyst Jung (1875–1961 CE) refers to the 'shadow', which contains the features of one's nature that are contrary to the customs and moral conventions of society. Jung writes, for example, of the need for integrity, honesty and sincerity in acknowledging this 'shadow' and in examining how it is related to self-knowledge:

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognising the dark aspects as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance. Indeed, self-knowledge as a psycho-therapeutic measure frequently requires much painstaking work extending over a long period (Jung 1959:n.p.).

What does Jung mean by this comment in the context of spiritual growth? It means that one will need to work on the repressed and wounded parts of the personality in order to come to an understanding and acceptance of oneself. It is by acknowledging and reintegrating these rejected parts back into one's life that psychological and spiritual growth is possible. This continual integration and spiritual recovery furthermore allows for progress through the remaining mansions of the *Interior Castle*.



May (2004:153) remarks: “Teresa and John of the Cross demonstrate an understanding of human psychology that seems uncanny for their era”. McLean (2003:143) shares this view:

Teresa has great insight into the nature of the shadow and warns against projecting our shadow upon others. ... She [Teresa] admits that others have their faults but that the primary responsibility for each individual is to attend to their own inner journey that will reveal their own neglected areas.

What is the purpose of this continual emphasis by the foregoing writers on understanding, exploring and learning about the self? It is because the most difficult obstacle to spiritual growth is a lack of self-acceptance. Continual inner exploration and self-acceptance, however, are essential for spiritual growth because the knowledge of God presupposes an intimate and accepting knowledge of one’s self.

Even in the early days of the church, Gregory of Nyssa (c 385 CE), one of the Cappadocian Fathers, pointed out:

Our greatest protection is self-knowledge. We must avoid the delusion that we are seeing ourselves when in reality we are looking at something else. This is what happens to those who do not observe themselves. ... [T]he most secure protection is to know ourselves; each of us must know himself as he is, and distinguish himself from what is not himself, so that he does not unconsciously protect something else while thinking he is watching himself (Gregory of Nyssa 1979:n.p.).

This quotation from one of the early Christian Church Fathers emphasises the need for a permanent sense of self-awareness. To use Teresa’s analogy, it is necessary to be fully within the protective walls of the castle, from where the spiritual journey can commence. The next section will look more closely at the need for personal self-knowledge in order to grow spiritually.

### ***5.2.2 Spiritual Knowledge***

As explained above, knowledge of self is vital for spiritual growth. In this regard, Marie-Eugène (1953:39) writes: “It is only in the light of God that we can now explore the domain of the spiritual knowledge of self, which is what we are before

God, spiritual riches and evil tendencies”. In other words, human nature is made up of positive and negative, good and evil tendencies. It is one’s choices that differentiate spiritual growth from spiritual regression.

These ‘evil tendencies’ are also referred to by Teresa in the *Interior Castle*. Teresa compares them to snakes, vipers and other venomous creatures in the First Mansions. They represent the forces of evil in the soul and the bad tendencies that result from original sin. Teresa emphasizes that the power of evil cannot be ignored: it constitutes one of the most important focal points of self-knowledge. Marie-Eugène (1953:45) similarly, writes:

The spiritual man must know his evil tendencies, especially his dominant ones. The knowledge of self will have no domain more complex, more changing, more difficult to explore, more painful and at the same time more useful to know, than these disordered appetites, the ‘venomous reptiles, so dangerous, and so disturbing’ that each man bears in himself, that have made the saints groan and that, ceaselessly recalling to us our misery, urge us to incessant combat.

Marie-Eugène is arguing here that real self-knowledge is not a theoretical or intellectual knowledge of human nature in general, but a real and very specific awareness of one’s self in all its aspects, both negative and positive, both good and evil. This is both the starting point and a life-long challenge. It implies that one must continually observe, honestly evaluate and be aware of one’s internal feelings and reactions, and of how one is responding to the many external influences, demands and expectations of life.

The evil tendencies of a person, which Teresa represents symbolically as ‘lizards and snakes’ in the First Mansions, are the neglected parts of one’s life and psyche. Jung refers to these ‘lizards and snakes’ in modern psychological language as:

The shadow parts of our psyche, encompassing all the psychic contents that have been driven back in to the unconscious, all the neglected, undeveloped, unacknowledged parts of our personality, the sum total of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the content of the personal unconscious (1953:n.p.).

Jung is thus implying that, throughout the spiritual journey, the ‘shadow parts of our psyche’ (or the lizards and snakes, to use Teresa’s analogy) will need to be recognised, accepted, changed and transformed. This, confirms Teresa, is an ongoing struggle, as obstacles and difficulties will continue to arise throughout the spiritual journey. In fact, Teresa goes so far as to caution the reader:

... nor indeed is the soul free from great peril in the mansion which it actually inhabits; for being among such poisonous things [lizards and snakes], it cannot, at some time or another, escape being bitten by them (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:17).

In summary, it is necessary for spiritual growth to accept oneself as one is, and to become conscious of all those hidden aspects of one’s psyche that are inhibiting spiritual growth. This is precisely why self-knowledge is so fundamental. The next section will discuss humility, which Teresa regards as the foundation on which the *Interior Castle* is built.

### **5.3 Humility**

In the last chapter of her *Life*, Teresa defines humility as truth. She writes: “But at the same time I was filled with much tenderness, joy, and humility. I came to know what it is for a soul to walk in truth, in the presence of Truth itself” (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:306). She reiterates this later:

There are only three things which I will explain at length and which are taken from our Constitution. It is essential that we understand how important they are to us in helping us preserve our inward and outward peace. One of these is love for each other. The second is detachment from all created things. The third, true humility is the most important of these and embraces all the rest (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:11).

The fact that Teresa stresses that humility embraces love for each other is noteworthy because it implies that humility, by definition, must be the absence of self-interest in order for there to be love for each other and love of God. Furthermore, Teresa continues to emphasise that the cultivation of a deepening humility is a sign of holiness:

I repeat that it is a very good thing – excellent indeed – to begin by entering the room where humility is acquired rather than by flying off to other rooms. For that is the way to make progress, and if we have a safe, level road to walk along, why should we desire wings to fly? (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:14)

A further definition of humility is the “... constant forgetfulness of one’s achievements”. This definition is contained in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*<sup>13</sup> and Boosalis (2000:101) also refers to this definition:

This is quite different from having low self-esteem or a general sense of inferiority – indeed, in Christ – like love there is no false humility and no inferiority complex.

Teresa does not understand humility in the same way that the contemporary world would define it. For example, whereas the Thesaurus Dictionary equates humility with being “... unassuming and modest”, Teresa regards it as something far more positive and dynamic, because it is the honest recognition of a person’s faults and failings before God. It is positive in the sense that, instead of being viewed as a sign of weakness (which is implied by the contemporary definition), it is actually a source of spiritual strength. Furthermore, it serves as a defence against various types of pride, which are discussed later in this chapter.

According to Dreyer (2005:349), the meaning and importance of the virtue of humility changes from one era to the next, as well as differing within cultures and civilisations. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, for instance, humility was disdained and equated with low social status. In the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia (480–547 CE) formally defined humility in Chapter Seven of his Rule: using the metaphor of spiritual life as a ladder, Benedict taught the paradox that to climb is to descend, but to descend in humility is to ascend to God. In the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153 CE) wrote about the dangers of pride in his book, *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, and two hundred years later, Catherine of Siena (1347–1380 CE) in her *Dialogue* wrote that the humble soul knows that all she is and that every gift she has comes from God.

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<sup>13</sup> This book by St. John Climacus (ca. 579–649 CE) is an “... ascetical treatise on avoiding vice and practicing virtue so that at the end, salvation can be obtained” (Orthodoxwiki 2006:n.p.).

In this age, particularly in the western culture, which Dreyer (2005:349) describes as "... narcissistic and prone to self-delusion, humility has been marginalised". The definitions of humility given by the Christian writers quoted above do not have the same meaning in the contemporary world because, as argued by Dreyer, humility has become confused with humiliation. Because of this misunderstanding, humility is viewed as inimical to healthy psychological development and as a barrier to self-realisation. It is my understanding that the real reason for this barrier, however, is that the dominant values in today's world, viz., ambition, greed, wealth and personal gratification, are in counterpoint to the traditional definition of humility as espoused by Teresa. To practice humility is, therefore, to assume a counter-cultural stance against a modern world that encourages arrogance and self-actualisation at the expense of others and regardless of the moral rightness of cultivating humility; the fact that it is against the dominant culture means that we struggle to develop it.

The risk of going against the dominant culture results in an increasing resistance to the spiritual call. As McLean (2003:126) cautions, "... such conflicting desires between the call of the world and the spiritual world can provoke strong states of emotional distress, confusion, fear, anxiety and resistance". However, as Dreyer (2005:349) notes:

... humility does not demand that one becomes a doormat. Rather humility is linked with truth about oneself. To be humble is to accept one's creatureliness (humanity), gifts and sinfulness. Both reason and psychological knowledge can be assets in discovering one's true self but humility is ultimately the fruit of openness to God's generous love and mystery.

Teresa, in the chapters dealing with the Seventh Mansions, states that the whole foundation of the Castle is based on the virtue of humility:

For the foundation of this whole edifice, as I have said, is humility, and, if you have not true humility, the Lord will not wish it to reach any great height: in fact, is it for your own good that it should not; if it did, it would fall to the ground (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:234).

It is thus through focusing on dynamic and active prayer in the early stages of the spiritual journey, as opposed to stagnating spiritually as a result of absorption in the

world, that the dynamic mutuality of union in the spiritual marriage is anticipated. The mirror of humility necessary to acquire self-knowledge looks forward to another mirror of perfect mutuality between the soul and God in the spiritual marriage. This issue is more fully explored in Chapter Eight of this dissertation. Finally, in the Christian life, the model for humility is Jesus Christ who possessed a deep reverence, love and patience for others, reflected an interior silence and self-possession and forgave others. Jesus is, then, the antithesis of arrogance and self-preoccupation. The next section explores the differing degrees and forms of humility.

### ***5.3.1 Degrees and Forms of Humility***

Teresa explains why humility is so pleasing to God:

I was wondering once why Our Lord so dearly loved this virtue of humility; and all of a sudden – without, I believe, my having previously thought of it – the following reason came into my mind: that it is because God is Sovereign Truth and to be humble is to walk in truth, for it is absolutely true to say that we have no good thing in ourselves, but only misery and nothingness; and anyone who fails to understand this is walking in falsehood. He who best understands this is most pleasing to Sovereign Truth because he is walking in truth (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:196).

In his book, *The True Spirit of Carmel*, the venerable Jean de Saint-Samson (1571–1636 CE), a lay brother at the Carmel of Dol and of Rennes, who lived some fifty-six years after Teresa, distinguishes between two kinds of humility: one that he calls ‘clear and reasonable’ and the other that he calls ‘fervent’ (cited in Marie-Eugène 1953:389). Marie-Eugène (1953:389) states that “... reasonable humility is illumined by the light of reason and is grounded in a work of self-examination and of meditation on supernatural truths”. This type of humility means a readiness and openness to read, listen and inform oneself as widely as possible on spiritual issues. This will lead to a greater understanding of the necessity of humility in order to live according to the truth, as set out in scripture. Jean de Saint-Samson defines fervent humility as “... more infused than acquired and reveal[ing] the greatness of God and thereby giv[ing] light on the poverty of the soul in relation to Jesus Christ” (cited in Marie-Eugène 1953:389). Marie-Eugène (1953:390) asserts that all the saints are

definite in their confirmation that, “the distance is vast between fervent humility and reasonable humility”. As Teresa (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:106) explains:

When the Spirit of God is at work, there is no need to go about looking for ways of inducing humility and confusion; for the Lord Himself reveals these to us in a very different manner from any which we can find by means of our puny reflections, which are nothing by comparison with a true humility proceeding from the light given us in this way by the Lord. This produces a confusion, which quite overwhelms us. The bestowal upon us of this knowledge by God so that we may learn that we ourselves have nothing good is a well-known experience, and the greater is the favours we received from Him, the better we learn it.

God thus enlightens the person so that the limitless goodness of God is seen relative to the smallness and unworthiness of the person. Regardless of one’s efforts to understand this reality through self-knowledge, those efforts are only preparatory for the greater work of the Holy Spirit and they, by themselves, can never achieve the fervent infusion that the Holy Spirit gives to the mind and heart of a person. It is this discrepancy between the limitations of one’s self-knowledge and the unlimited power of God that gives rise to the confusion to which Teresa refers.

So, fervent humility, which is the fruit of the action of the Holy Spirit, is the one that attracts God’s continual outpouring of love. It is thus this virtue that brings the soul into the Fourth Mansions and provides the further impetus for the progressive interiorisation of the soul towards union with God.

### ***5.3.2 The Way to Gain Humility***

Dreyer (2005:349) writes that “... spiritual disciplines can prepare one to receive the gift of humility but one cannot command it: only pray to remain open to it”. McLean (2003:128) similarly states: “True humility is not easily acquired, neither is it something that is attained once and for all and then requires no effort”. The acquisition of humility thus involves a continuous and life-long struggle.

In the First Mansions, Teresa emphasises that the foundations of humility must be established on knowledge of the self, which is an issue that was discussed earlier in this chapter. Teresa also notes that the examination of one’s conscience could at best

result only in *reasonable* humility, whereas the soul really needs *fervent* humility. It was pointed out above that fervent humility cannot be obtained by a person's own efforts, but only granted by the grace of God. Teresa indicates that, even though acts of humility by themselves have only a small effect, they are nonetheless an indication of our goodwill, which God accepts and rewards. In this regard, Teresa (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:179) gives the following advice:

Always seek humility and realise you are unworthy of these graces and do not seek them. Our Lord regards our intention, which is to please Him, serve Him, and keep Him near in prayer. The Lord is faithful. Be careful not to let your humility break down into vanity. Ask the Lord to deliver you from this, and you don't need to be afraid that He will allow anyone but Himself to comfort you.

Teresa's comment suggests that humility is not acquired instantly: it needs continuous self-examination and self-reflection in searching to find humility through prayer. The activity of prayer opens the soul to God and results in the realization of the person's 'lowliness' in comparison with God's 'grandeur'. It is more than just a realisation of 'lowliness': it also awakens the potential of the soul to encounter its capacity for God in spite of simultaneously experiencing its lowliness. Teresa offers encouragement to the spiritual seeker by pointing out that the soul is capable of more than can be imagined. Humility thus encourages the soul to look forward to what it is capable of in its relationship with God in union. This is not limited by its own nature, but extends to what God wishes to soul to achieve in progressing further to the innermost mansions. The counterpoint to such humility is pride, which is discussed in the next section.

### **5.3.3 *Pride as Opposed to Humility***

#### **5.3.3.1 General Comments**

A definition of humility cannot be complete or fully understood without analysing its opposite: pride, which can only be overcome by humility. Teresa (1957:89) warns strongly of the subtle and insidious dangers of pride and false humility: "I believe the devil is very successful in preventing those who practise prayer from advancing further by giving them false notions of humility". By this, Teresa means that the devil may suggest, for example, that pride is the reason why someone wants to advance in



the spiritual life, which may therefore insidiously inhibit that person's spiritual growth. Teresa's admonition here is to embark on prayer and not be frightened by our own thoughts (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:90).

With regard to the idea that there are 'false notions of humility', McLean (2003:124) adds:

False humility causes a basic unrest, or dissonance, in the heart, because this type of humility tries to possess, grasp or devour something in order to nourish false pride and can have a superficial, controlling, manipulative tone to it. It's humility with hooks to go with it, so to speak.

This suggests that false humility may manifest at the start of the spiritual journey, when one is enthused by one's own self-assessment of one's momentum and by the spiritual activities associated with this progress. This progress may, however, be expressed as false humility and motivated by a desire for self-gratification. This is an understandable reaction, as the person, at this stage of the spiritual journey, despite good intentions and sincerity, may not yet be sure how to relate to God, the self or to other people.

In the understanding of this notion of false humility, Houdek explains this desire for self-gratification:

Because this has been our habitual mode of relating and being, we will unconsciously expect God to act as a spiritual equivalent of the sensual satisfaction that has previously been the focus of our life. We can be enmeshed in a form of spiritual narcissism, from which it is difficult to escape. We may still wish to make God an object, a means to satisfy our own sensual desires, yet another being who is obliged to give us satisfaction and pleasure (1996:20-21).

However, as one is now being called to follow a new direction that differs markedly from what offered by the world, the self may, in fact, be resisting the promptings of the spirit. McLean offers an explanation of this phenomenon:

Our defence mechanisms can kick in ruthlessly – we can deny, rationalise or intellectualise our old destructive attitudes and behaviours. We can convince ourselves that they are acceptable, but this only makes it more difficult to face the truth about ourselves and the type of life we are leading, and turn around towards (2003:126).

The desire for union with God then creates a conflict with one's previous way of life, as expressed in ingrained attitudes and actions. These are based on the values of the world, which emphasize selfishness and self-gratification, and they will certainly hinder one's spiritual growth. This could be referred to as pride of self. The scriptures, too, comment on this type of pride: "The beginning of pride is man's stubbornness in withdrawing his heart from his maker. For pride is the reservoir of sin, a source which runs over with vice" (Sirach 10:7-16). Similarly, in the Book of Proverbs (18:12), it says: "The human heart is haughty until destruction comes, before there can be glory there must be humility". The following sections, then, look at the three most important forms of pride, namely, pride of self, pride of the will and intellect, and spiritual pride.

### **5.3.3.2 Pride of Self**

Teresa comments on this form of pride when she points out that honour is a delusion and that what we are led to believe by the world is honour, is not honour at all:

... it sees that this is just a great lie, and that we are all taken in by it. It understands that true honour is not illusory but real; that it esteems what has value, and despises what has none. For all transitory things are as nothing or less than nothing, and are displeasing to God. The soul laughs at itself when it thinks of the time when it valued money and desired it (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:145).

Teresa is also severe in her condemnation of an inordinate attachment to wealth, honour, reputation, etc. and says that this attachment can be so tenacious that it is only when a person enters the Sixth Mansions that this pride can be totally purified. She also cautions against excessive timidity, which is sometimes mistaken for humility; at the same time, though, she also cautions against using humility as a shield to mask one's lack of courage. In other words, a humility that hinders a person from undertaking great things for God is false: it is merely cowardice. True humility creates peace in the soul, whereas false humility engenders the opposite. Stewart (1997:31) refers to:

... people who do not possess true humility, which is sincerity in the face of one's own deficiencies – because they wish to keep a good opinion of themselves – they fear really seeing themselves.

He also adds that:

... for that reason, they transform their natural cowardice, without perceiving it, into what resembles in the spiritual life: humility (Stewart 1997:31).

It can be deduced from the above writings that true humility is in a spiritual battle with pride of self, which has been described above as self-love, self-interest and egotism. By definition, these involve self-absorption and are thus directly in opposition to the spiritual virtue of humility. The problem with false humility can be that it is really a type of defence mechanism that has the potential to mask psychological problems. Jung observed that both high and low self-esteem are, in fact, defence mechanisms for an inferiority complex:

If we now consider the fact that, as a result of psychic compensation, great humility stands very close to pride, and that 'pride goeth forth before a fall', we can easily discover behind the haughtiness certain traits of an anxious sense of inferiority. In fact, we shall clearly see how his uncertainty forces the enthusiast to puff up his truths, of which he feels none too sure, and to win proselytes to his side in order that his followers may prove to himself the value and trustworthiness of his own convictions (Jung cited in Jacobi 1990:88).

So, at the beginning of one's spiritual journey, it is important not to try to 'do it alone', as it may, in fact, result in a relapse into the 'original life' that one is seeking to overcome. A spiritual director will thus need to guide and help the spiritual seeker to become aware of and understand the dynamics behind these internal struggles and to find the right path to God. The desire for independence, where one believes that one can progress alone at this stage of the journey, may, in fact, be a symptom of 'pride of will', which is dealt with in the next section.

### **5.3.3.3 Pride of the Will and Intellect**

Marie-Eugène (1953:395) defines this as the pride that is manifested in the will and intellect through an excessive emphasis on independence and on the power to

command, a refusal to submit to established authority, an exaggerated self-confidence and a dominating ambition:

... it is this pride that declares the *Non serviam*, I will not serve, and that disorganizes all society, the family as well as civil society, by destroying the subordination which is the principle of order and of collaboration (Marie-Eugène 1953:395).

This refusal to serve is also a refusal to submit to God and, because it is based on arrogance and a mistaken trust in one's own power, it goes against the words of Jesus, "... without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). It is a manifestation of the sin of pride, which ultimately results in agnosticism, liberalism, relativism, atheism, all of which (and other man-made philosophies) are the result of an excessive confidence in one's own intellect. It also causes apostasy and the refusal to approach God. For the Christian, then, it is important to bear in mind that "... God is above all your knowledge and intelligence and that God's thoughts are nothing like your thoughts, and God's ways are far beyond anything you could imagine" (Is 56:8).

This type of pride is manifested by a strong attachment to one's own judgement to such a degree that one does not wish to listen to reason. However, one cannot progress spiritually if one convinced that one is in the right, and if one is saturated with a sense of self-importance. Even if the person is 'theoretically' right in what they understand to be the truth, intellectual pride is still a formidable obstacle to the grace of contemplation and ultimately to union with God. A further obstacle, which will now be discussed, is spiritual pride.

#### **5.3.3.4 Spiritual Pride**

John of the Cross writes about this type of pride, which, he says, beginners in prayer sometimes have:

These beginners feel so fervent and diligent in their spiritual exercises and undertakings that a certain kind of secret pride is generated in them that begets complacency with themselves and their accomplishments, even though holy works do of their very nature cause humility. They develop a somewhat vain desire to speak of spiritual things in other's presence, and sometimes even to instruct rather than be instructed; in their hearts they condemn others who do not seem to have the kind of devotion they would

like them to have, and sometimes they give expression to this criticism (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:362).

A perfect example of the spiritual pride referred to by John of the Cross above is provided by the scriptures in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14): here the Pharisee boasts of his virtue, whereas the tax collector humbles himself for his sin. In this parable, God disregards both the virtue and the sin: in the Pharisee, despite his apparent virtues, God sees only conceit, whereas in the tax collector, who has sinned, he recognises an underlying humility.

Of spiritual pride, Thérèse of the Child Jesus, at the end of her life, wrote in a letter dated on August 7, 1897 to Agnes, the Mother Superior:

Of a proud thought, voluntarily entertained; for example this: I have acquired such a virtue, I am certain of being able to practice it; for that would be to rely on my own strength, and when one had come to that point, one is in danger of falling into the abyss. And if I should say: O my God, I love you too much, you know it, to stop in a single thought against faith, and my temptations would become so violent that I would certainly succumb to them.

It is apparent from this comment that, she was still concerned that a sin of spiritual pride could undermine the foundation of her magnificent ‘castle’ and block the intimacy between God and herself.

To stress the peril of spiritual pride, furthermore, it is instructive to quote from Angela of Foligno (1248–1309 CE) who said:

My children be humble; my children be meek. I am not speaking of the exterior act; I am speaking of the depths of the heart. Do not worry yourselves about honours, not dignities. O my children be little so that Christ may exalt you in His perfection and in yours... Dignities that puff up the soul are vanities that are accursed. Flee them, for they are dangerous; but listen, listen. They are less dangerous than spiritual vanities. To make a show that one knows how to speak about God, to understand the Scriptures, to accomplish miracles, to make a parade of one’s heart lost in the Divine, that is the vanity of vanities; and worldly vanities are, after that supreme vanity, small faults quickly corrected (cited in Marie-Eugène 1953:402).

This quotation on spiritual pride is consistent with the writings of Teresa and John of the Cross. The advice by Angela of Foligno to ‘flee them’ (spiritual vanities), correctly indicates the perennial danger that spiritual seekers may desire others to perceive their spirituality and devotion to God. This is exacerbated if they think of themselves as already having achieved sainthood. The results of spiritual pride appear to be extraordinarily severe and may, in fact, lead to a definite regression in one’s spiritual life. Having discussed the issues of self-knowledge and humility, it is now necessary to look at the importance of silence.

## **5.4 Silence**

Teresa longed to spend time in silence in order to pray. The foundation of the Convent of St. Joseph of Ávila, the first act of her reform, sprang from that need. The Convent of the Incarnation, where she lived for almost thirty years, did not have an enclosure (which is used to separate a part of the religious house from the outside world), and she found that the large number of nuns disturbed the silence that Teresa needed for prayer. Accordingly, Teresa left this Convent with the goal of reviving the ideal of Carmel from its Old Testament origins and implementing perfect observance of the Carmelite Rule. In the light of Carmelite spirituality, the Carmelite Rule is based, amongst other requirements, on a need for the ‘silence of the desert’ in order to live and progress in the spiritual life. The rule, then, is reflected to the degree that the Carmelite life is lived out. The Rule is further interwoven with traditions that preceded and shaped it and with the traditions that followed and were created by it. In this regard, Waaijman (1999:13) writes:

From a spiritual point of view, a spiritual way becomes visible in the Carmelite Rule. The Rule is a spiritual structure in which the parts of the whole are so related to each other that together they form a way which leads to God.

### **5.4.1 *The Carmelite Rule of Silence***

As we have seen in Chapter Three, Section 3.4, the Rule of Carmel was originally written by Albert of Avogadro (1150–1214 CE), Patriarch of Jerusalem. His version of the Rule was written between 1206 and 1214 CE. Waaijman (1999:9) states:

The Rule of Carmel embodies three religious concepts: the eremitic way of life,<sup>14</sup> the cenobitic form of life,<sup>15</sup> and life as a mendicant brother<sup>16</sup>.

When the Carmelites were driven from Mount Carmel (in the extreme north of Israel) by the Saracens around 1238 CE, the Order requested that certain aspects of the Rule be clarified "... because they were in a process of displacement and searching for an identity of their own" (Waaijman 1999:11). Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254 CE) accordingly made some definitive changes to the Rule and from that point on, Carmelites became an official religious order. Waaijman (1999:17) observes:

Albert's text captures the moment in which the Carmelite hermits began to lead a more communal life whereas the text of Innocent IV captures the moment when the Carmelites adopted the model of the modern fraternal or mendicant orders.

With respect to silence, the Rule, based on Innocent IV's version, states in Chapter XVI:

We direct that you keep silence from after compline (prayers at the end of the day) until prime (prayers at the beginning of the day) of the following day. At other times, however, although you need not observe silence so strictly, you should nevertheless be all the more careful to avoid much talking, for as it is written – and experience teaches no less – where there is much talk sin will not be lacking; and, he who is careless in speech will come to harm and elsewhere, he who uses many words injures his soul. And the Lord says in the gospel: For every idle word that people speak they will render account on judgement day. Let each one, therefore measure his words and keep a tight rein on his tongue, lest he stumble and fall by his talking and his fall be irreparable and prove fatal. With the prophet let him watch his ways lest he sin with his tongue; let him try attentively and carefully to practise the silence in which is the cultivation of justice (Carmelite Rule, as quoted in Waaijman 1999:37).

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<sup>14</sup> The Wikipedia defines a hermit as "a person who lives to some greater or lesser degree in seclusion and/or isolation from society. Originally the term was applied to a Christian who lives the eremitic life out of a religious conviction, namely the Desert Theology of the Old Testament (i.e. the 40 years wandering in the desert that was meant to bring about a change of heart). Often – both in religious and secular literature – the term is used loosely for anyone living a solitary life-style" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eremitic>).

<sup>15</sup> The Wikipedia defines cenobitic monasticism as "a monastic tradition that stresses community life. Often the community belongs to a religious order and the life of the cenobitic monk is regulated by rules. The opposite style of monasticism, to live as a hermit, is called eremitic" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cenobitic>).

<sup>16</sup> In the Wikipedia, this is described as follows: "The term mendicant refers to begging or relying on charitable donations, and is most widely used for religious followers or ascetics who rely exclusively on charity to survive" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/mendicant>).

There is no uncertainty as to what is meant here. The potential for gossip and calumny is anathema not only to Teresian spirituality but spirituality in general. Waaijman further elaborates on the importance of silence:

All great Rules know the distinction between the silence of the day and the silence of the night (the latter is also known as the grand or supreme silence). The silence of the night was marked by a strict cessation of speech (1999:218).

The silence of the day is not merely a diminished version of the silence at night, but should rather be observed attentively and carefully, by guarding against excessive talking and by weighing what is said with care, i.e. to keep the mouth in check, so to speak.

This is the Rule that was in place during Teresa's lifetime, as it is still today, and it is not surprising that, in the *Interior Castle*, silence plays such a pre-eminent role in laying the foundation for the progress of a person on the journey to God. Silence in the midst of one's daily activity is also important.

#### ***5.4.2 Silence of Daily Activity***

Teresa believed that daily activity and talkativeness would disturb the silence in which God speaks to the soul. Daily activity can furthermore create anxiety, which destroys recollection and creates obstacles to prayer, invading prayer itself, thus making it nearly impossible to pray. If daily activity takes over one's life to the extent that there is no time or place for prayer and silence, then it becomes problematic. As a counter-balance to silence in one's daily activity, however, Teresa also cautions against 'spiritual gluttony' among those who are too attached to the effects of union with God and therefore recommends that silence be balanced with action in one's daily life.



### 5.4.3 Interior Silence

In addition to keeping the silence for part of the day and speaking only when necessary at other times, and creating a balance between silent retreat from the world and activity within it, the spiritual seeker is urged to cultivate an interior silence at all times. Teresa says that achieving such interior silence is often very difficult:

O Lord, do Thou remember how much we have to suffer on this road through lack of knowledge! The worst of it is that, we do not realize we need to know more when we think about Thee, we cannot ask those who know; indeed we have not even any idea what there is for us to ask them. So we suffer terrible trials because we do not understand ourselves; and we worry over what is not bad at all, but good, and think it very wrong. Hence proceed the afflictions of many people who practice prayer, and their complaints of interior trials – especially if they are unlearned people – so that they become melancholy, and their health declines, and they even abandon prayer altogether, because they fail to realize that there is an interior world close at hand (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:58).

According to the two phases of progress in the spiritual life discussed in Chapter Four, in the first three mansions (the first phase), God intervenes only with general help. Thus the soul takes the initiative in prayer and directs the faculties. From the Fourth Mansions onwards, however, God takes the initiative over the powers of the soul. Each of the two phases requires a different approach to the practice of interior silence. In the first phase, for instance, the soul grows in recollection and interior silence. Teresa advises which method can be used to achieve this: in *The Way of Perfection* (in Carrigan 2000:122), she emphasizes how important it is to “... withdraw the senses from all outward things and reject them so completely that its eyes close and it cannot see them. Thus in the soul spiritual sight becomes clear”. If one cultivates the habit of recollection and makes the necessary effort, one will see the benefits: “... when we begin to pray we will realize that the bees are coming to the hive and entering it to make honey all without any effort of ours” (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:123).

In the second phase, a different method needs to be employed in the practice of interior silence. As Marie-Eugène (1953:433) confirms, “... complete rapture or ecstasy is produced only in the graces of mystical union of the Fifth Mansions and in the ecstasy of the Sixth and last a very short time”. In this state, the faculties are

oriented towards God; but, if the intellect wants to bring the person back, then prayer with God will be interrupted. In this regard, Teresa (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:219) says:

At other times, I find myself unable to formulate a single clear or stable thought about God or anything good. I cannot pray even when I am alone. Yet all the same I feel that I know Him. It is my intellect and my imagination, I think, that are harming me here. My will, I believe, is good, and well disposed to all that is good. But this intellect of mine is so wild that it seems like a raving lunatic. Nobody can hold it down, and I have not sufficient control over it myself to keep it quiet for a single moment.

Although Teresa found this turmoil to be particularly distressing, nonetheless, she managed to look at her difficulties with a sense of humour: “ ... sometimes I laugh at myself and realize what a miserable creature I am and then I keep an eye on my understanding and leave it alone to see what it will do” (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:218).

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, Teresa stresses throughout her writings that, without humility and knowledge of self, the person cannot continue on their journey to God. Achieving humility requires one to continually conquer pride in its various forms. This chapter has outlined the means by which pride can be conquered and humility achieved. Silence is the context in which these fundamental cornerstones of the *Interior Castle* are developed.

In the First Mansions, Teresa refers to the ‘lizards and snakes’ that continue attacking and cause the person to stumble on the spiritual journey. As these setbacks may cause the adherent to give up or to veer off the path, it is important at this stage to have a spiritual director and a strong support structure. Where necessary, it may be helpful to receive some form of counselling, or attend a course in personal growth in order to appreciate the dynamics of the self. During the early stages in particular, it is difficult to use depth psychology techniques on one’s own psyche. At that stage, the adherent is still learning to accept him- or herself with all one’s faults, limitations and deficiencies.

It is through self-knowledge, says Teresa, that we become more alert and aware of the attachments in our life and of the shadow in our personality that holds us back from spiritual progress. By developing our self-knowledge, we become aware of those parts of the self that were concealed in the subconscious: we make them conscious. Although this is difficult and requires discernment and considerable courage, it is an essential requirement for the spiritual journey towards union with God.

It is thus in these First Mansions that the foundations of the *Interior Castle* are being constructed and where humility, as emphasised by Teresa throughout her book, is the cornerstone on which the castle is built. At the same time, even as one begins to turn towards God, Teresa warns, one will suffer and experience pain: this is to test one's determination to change one's life. Internal and external struggles in whatever forms they may take will have to be endured. These trials, Teresa explains, will become more severe as progress continues through the mansions.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **The Stages of Prayer**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to analyse and discuss the various stages of prayer described by Teresa in the *Interior Castle*, from the ‘prayer of beginners’ to the ultimate ‘prayer of union’. This analysis of the different stages of prayer is intrinsic to the appreciation of the writings of Teresa in general, not only in the *Interior Castle*, but also in her earlier writings, e.g. in her *Life* and in the *Way of Perfection*. Teresa defines prayer as the way to God and stresses that prayer is essential for progressing through the mansions of the *Interior Castle*. The main aim of the book, after all, is to be a spiritual discourse on prayer, reflecting one’s relationship with God.

The first part of this chapter establishes what was written about prayer during Teresa’s time. The next sections will look at how Teresa has presented prayer in the *Interior Castle* as a practice that progressively evolves from the types of prayer used by beginners in the first three mansions, to the summit of the contemplative ‘prayer of union’ in the Seventh Mansions.

#### **6.2 Prayer as Systematized by the Carmelite School in the Sixteenth Century**

Through the teachings and experiences of Teresa and John of the Cross, the Discalced Carmelite Order continued to teach that prayer was essential to spiritual growth and effective ministry. The classic steps of prayer that were common in the sixteenth century (namely, preparation, reading, meditation, thanksgiving, offering and petition) were described by the Dominican, Luis de Granada (1505–1588 CE). However, although the early Discalced Carmelites recognized the value of these steps, they thought that individuals should not necessarily be bound to one method of prayer. In another early work, written in 1587 by *Tratado de Oración* and attributed to Juan de

Jesús María Aravalles (1564–1616 CE), contemplation was added to Granada’s six steps of mental prayer.

According to Kavanaugh (1989:86), Jerónimo Gracián (1545–1614 CE) speaks of a quiet form of contemplation, which is exercised with the general gifts of grace:

... theologically the infused prayer may be explained by the gifts of the Holy Spirit or, when extraordinary, by that of graces *gratis datae* which means graces gratuitously given by God. Gracián thought this extraordinary prayer to be the highest (Kavanaugh 1989:86).

Juan de Jesús María Calagurritano (1564–1615 CE), however, in his *Theologia Mystica*, “... speaks of contemplation as an act of the intellect by which one receives an intuition of the truth, which in its turn affects the will” (Kavanaugh 1989:86). These writers are confirming the experience and teachings of Teresa concerning contemplation, discussed later in this chapter, namely, that contemplative prayer is a gift from God and that it does not originate with the person.

Kavanaugh also notes that a second category of authors added a further step to the theoretical systematization of the inherited Teresian spirituality. One of these authors, José de Jesús María Quiroga (1562–1628 CE), who was the historian of the Carmelite Order in 1596, taught that repeated acts of meditation will lead to a habit of meditating and that “... contemplation requires this habit” (Kavanaugh 1989:87). Another author, Tomás de Jesús (1564–1627 CE), strongly emphasized the distinction between two principal kinds of contemplation to which he gave the names ‘acquired’ and ‘infused’. The former, he writes, can be achieved through one’s own efforts with the help of grace, whilst the latter is passive and proceeds only from a supernatural inflow of grace. Using theological terms, he elaborates on this as follows: “Acquired contemplation proceeds from the infused virtues, whilst infused contemplation proceeds from the gifts of God and acts as the principle from which this contemplation is elicited” (Kavanaugh 1989:89). These concepts of ‘infused contemplation’ and ‘acquired contemplation’ require a more comprehensive discussion, because they are particularly relevant to Teresa’s approach in the *Interior Castle*, and are thus dealt with later in this chapter under the heading ‘supernatural contemplation’.

The teachings of these sixteenth century Carmelite writers on meditation and contemplation were continued in the tradition of Teresian spirituality and that of John of the Cross. The sections that follow trace the Teresian writings on these concepts and set out the stages of prayer, starting with the ‘prayer of beginners’ and progressing to the ‘prayer of union’ as experienced and taught by Teresa.

### **6.3 The Analogy of the Two Fountains**

Before discussing the types of prayer in the *Interior Castle*, it is essential to discuss the analogy of the two fountains, as Teresa often refers to the symbol of water throughout her writings in regard to prayer. Teresa explains why this is such an important symbol:

There are certain spiritual things which I can find no way of explaining more aptly than by this element of water; for, as I am very ignorant, and my wits give me no help, and I am so fond of this element, I have observed it more attentively than anything else (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:63).

Teresa uses the water fountains to describe and understand the different experiences and states of prayer:

These two large basins can be filled with water in different ways: the water in the one comes from a long distance, by means of numerous conduits and through human skill; but the other has been constructed at the very source of the water and fills without making any noise. If the flow of water is abundant, as in the case we are speaking of, a great stream still runs from it after it has been filled; no skill is necessary here, and no conduits have to be made, for the water is flowing all the time (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:63).

This first type of basin is similar to active prayer, where much effort is required to bring the water to the fountain. McLean (2003:213) interprets this as follows: “Like the water source, God’s presence is also a long way away, and often it is the inspiration from external sources which stimulates and initiates our life of prayer”. Thus the first basin starts to fill up when one begins to pray, but it is God who

completes the process. At this stage in prayer, it is the person who is doing all the hard work, which is reflected in the image of the long distance.

The second basin, however, is very different, in that it fills effortlessly of its own accord. In other words, as in contemplative prayer, prayer begins with God and ends with the individual. It is therefore said to be passive, in the sense that no effort is expended and the prayer is constantly present:

To the other fountain the water comes direct from its source, which is God, and, when it is His Majesty's will and He is pleased to grant us some supernatural favour, its coming is accompanied by the greatest peace and quietness and sweetness within ourselves – I cannot say where it arises or how. And that content and delight are not felt, as earthly delights are felt, in the heart – I mean not at the outset, for later the basin becomes completely filled, and then this water begins to overflow all the Mansions and faculties, until it reaches the body. It is for that reason that I said it has its source in God and ends in ourselves – for it is certain, and anyone will know this who has experienced it, that the whole of the outer man enjoys this consolation and sweetness (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:64).

Teresa uses the analogy of the two fountains to explain the prayer of quiet, which is fully discussed later in this chapter. The visual impact of this analogy does certainly make the prayer of quiet more understandable to the reader:

When instead of coming through the conduits, the water springs directly from its source, the understanding checks its activity, or rather the activity is checked for it when it finds it cannot understand what it desires, and thus roams about all over the place. The will is so firmly fixed upon its God that this disturbed condition of the understanding causes it great distress; but it must not take notice of this, for if it does so it will lose a great part of what it is enjoying; it must forget about it, and abandon itself into the arms of love, and His Majesty will teach it what to do next; almost its whole work is to realise its unworthiness to receive such great good and to occupy itself in thanksgiving (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:74).

Thus Teresa confirms that, in this prayer, the experience originates with God and cannot begin with the self. I have stressed this aspect previously in this dissertation, but the analogy of the fountains makes this principle all the more obvious and accessible.

## 6.4 The Types of Prayer in the *Interior Castle*

Before looking more closely at the various forms of prayer described by Teresa, it is useful to contextualise them within the mansions of the *Interior Castle* and thus to provide a sequential understanding of the Teresian thesis on progress in prayer.

In the First Mansions, the spiritual seeker is at the start of the journey: a beginner in prayer. The practice of prayer at this stage is primarily *vocal*. Once the Second Mansions are entered, *mental prayer* is practiced, but with "... frequent periods of dryness and difficulty which tempt the soul to give up the effort" (Aumann 1985:192). The other type of prayer at this stage is *discursive meditation*. Teresa recommends that such individuals meditate on Christ, and for those who are more easily distracted in prayer, that they revert to vocal prayer or meditate on some spiritual reading.

In the Third Mansions, one starts to practice '*the prayer of recollection*'. Aumann (1985:192) notes that "... since this stage of prayer represents a transition from ascetical to mystical prayer, it may be experienced in various degrees of intensity". The Fourth Mansions introduces the first type of mystical prayer, namely *supernatural mystical prayer*. The two types of prayer that are perfected in the Fourth Mansions are the '*prayer of passive recollection*' and the '*prayer of quiet*'. In the Fifth Mansions, God invites one into the '*prayer of union*', which also has various degrees of intensity (Aumann 1985:192). As God sparks the soul with greater intensity and achieves union more constantly, one enters the Sixth Mansions and simultaneously a state of 'spiritual betrothal'. This is fulfilled in the Seventh Mansions by means of a 'transforming union', where the Trinity communicates directly (often by an intellectual vision). This is the summit of *contemplative prayer*. Before beginning prayer, however, one needs to cultivate a disposition for prayer, as discussed in the next section.

### 6.4.1 Dispositions for Prayer

According to the writings of Teresa, there are three basic dispositions that one needs to cultivate in order to set out on the way of interior perfection. These are a strong



*determination, discretion* and a great *desire for God*. Each of them will be discussed below.

Determination to persevere with prayer is specifically emphasised by Teresa: “All that the beginner in prayer has to do – and you must not forget this, for it is very important – is to labour and be resolute and prepare himself with all possible diligence” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:28). This strong determination involves a commitment that, in this secular world, McGetrick observes, is something “... that is not valued very much” (1984:19). However, Teresa insists that, once the spiritual seeker has embarked upon the journey, he or she must be firmly resolved to persevere to the end. She laments the fate of souls that have persevered for a long time, and are gradually drawing nearer to union with God, but give up the struggle just before reaching the goal, “... even though they might be just a few steps away from the fountain of living water” (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:74).

The second disposition for seeking union with God is discretion. In contemporary terms, this could be called common sense or good judgment. Cultivating a sense of discretion will also prevent overzealousness. As McGetrick (1984:20) observes:

... people in the Third Mansions are inclined in their zeal and enthusiasm to go to extremes. They generally give too much time to formal prayer, do excessive penances and have too much zeal in helping other people.

In other words, a sense of balance is needed in one’s spiritual life. Continuing in this vein, McGetrick (1984:20) writes: “They come to the conclusion that it is all too much for them, that their health cannot stand up to it and they give up the whole thing”. A firm resolution to persevere until the end (i.e. union with God) is reached should thus go hand in hand with good judgment and balance.

The third prerequisite for the spiritual seeker, in Teresa’s view, is the pursuit of holiness and the willingness to reach the final goal of union with God. In other words, there must be a will to be holy. The word ‘holy’ is one that people in the secular world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not comfortable with, probably because the term is at odds with the contemporary world and its values. However, for one who seeks God through spirituality it means ‘the development of the life of God within’.

## **6.4.2 Prayer of Beginners**

The prayer of beginners belongs within the first three mansions. Teresa defines prayer at this stage as "... simply a friendly intercourse and frequent solitary conversation with Him who as we know, loves us" (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:63). It is rather like a loving dialogue between friends. It is also important for the beginner in prayer to note at the outset the point made by Aumann (1985:190) that "... a person's progress in prayer is a sure indication of a person's progress in the spiritual life". Although Teresa realizes the importance of knowledge, she insists that progress in prayer consists not so much in thinking a great deal, but in loving a great deal.

### **6.4.2.1 Vocal Prayer**

The first stage in this form of prayer is vocal prayer. When the apostles asked Jesus how to pray, he taught them to pray vocally, using the 'Our Father' (Matt 6:7-15). In so doing, Jesus was emphasizing the importance of vocal prayer. The scriptures refer to him praying both in the synagogues and alone. During the course of his public life, Jesus prayed aloud to God on many occasions, such as when he showed his gratitude for the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11:41-42) and when he cried aloud in his agony in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42).

Turning towards God is already a form of prayer, since prayer is, at its most basic level, a conversation with God. At the same time, it is simple and profound enough to express one's most intimate feelings and to present these to God. In this regard, Teresa (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:103-106) advises:

I want to teach you how to practice vocal prayer for you need to understand what kinds of things you are saying.... When I say the Creed, it seems right to me that I should understand and know what it is I believe. When I repeat the 'Our Father', I think it should be a matter of love for me to understand Who this Father is.... You will complain that this is meditation, you are incapable of it. And that you are content with vocal prayer. There are impatient people who do not like to trouble themselves, and it is troublesome to practice meditation when one has not made it a habit.... You are right that I have described mental prayer, but I cannot

distinguish it from vocal prayer faithfully recited with a realization of Who it is we are addressing. We should try to pray attentively.

According to the above, Teresa recommends that beginners in prayer should first use vocal prayer. However, if they only use vocal prayer, they might never make an effort to learn meditation. In her practical way, though, Teresa recognizes that everyone has a different capacity for prayer. She thus assures her readers that, even if one only uses vocal prayer, one can progress a long way on the road to God. Furthermore, vocal prayer can also lead to contemplation, even if meditation is not achieved:

I know there are many people who practice vocal prayer in the manner I have described and [who] are raised by God to the higher kind of contemplation not through their own efforts. Thus, it is important to say well your vocal prayers. I know a nun who could practice only vocal prayers. If she omitted saying her prayers, her mind wandered so much that she could not endure it.... She came to me once in great distress, saying that she did not know how to practice mental prayer, and that she could not contemplate but only say vocal prayers. I asked her what prayers she said, and from her reply, I saw that she was experiencing pure contemplation and that the Lord was raising her to be in union with Him (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:135).

There is another form of vocal prayer, namely, liturgical prayer, which is the official prayer of the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, refers to liturgical prayer as an "... action of the whole Christ" (Chapman 1994:260). This means that it is the whole community, the body of Christ united with its head that celebrates its sacraments. Liturgical services are not celebrated individually, but in the Church as 'the sacrament of unity'. Chapman (1994:261) explains this as follows:

Therefore, liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church. They manifest it, and have effects upon it. However, they touch individual members of the Church in different ways, depending on their orders, their role in the liturgical services, and their actual participation in them. For this reason, rites which are meant to be celebrated in common, with the faithful present and actively participating are celebrated in this way rather than by an individual and quasi-privately.

At this stage of the spiritual journey, however, a beginner in prayer may feel an urgency to progress into the 'higher forms of prayer': he may feel that progress in the spiritual life may be limited if these 'higher' types of prayer are not learnt. It is worthwhile repeating Teresa's view that progress to God is not limited in any way if

one only learns vocal prayer; in fact, one can well progress far on the road to God with this form of prayer alone.

#### **6.4.2.2 Meditation**

The next form of prayer of beginners is *discursive meditation*. McGetrick (1984:21) describes this as "... thinking over a spiritual subject and drawing conclusions from it and trying to apply these conclusions to our own lives". Aumann states, similarly, that discursive meditation can be defined as a "... reasoned application of the mind to some supernatural truth in order to penetrate its meaning, love it, and carry it into practice with the means of grace" (1986:318). The common thread in these two definitions is the application of the love of God by loving other people. This is also in accordance with Teresa's teaching of "... loving a great deal", referred to earlier in this section. The risk here, however, is to turn what should be discursive meditation into an intellectual activity. As McGetrick (1984:21) advises: "... it (intellectual activity) is of no use unless it leads to God ... that is the whole purpose of discursive meditation: it should lead us on to intimate conversation with the Lord".

In order to gain a more complete understanding of the concept of meditation, it is useful to look to another Doctor of the Church, John of the Cross. He defines meditation as "... a discursive act built on forms, figures, and images, imagined and fashioned by these senses. For example: imagining Christ crucified or at the pillar or in some other scene". He further observes that, to advance from meditation to contemplation, God must act:

... with order, gently, and according to the mode of the soul, beginning on the lower steps and from there He must gradually bring the soul after its own manner to the other end, spiritual wisdom, which is incomprehensible to the senses (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:186).

In his preliminary exposition, John of the Cross describes meditation as a state of concentrated attention on some religious object or thought, but emphasises that the progression from meditation to contemplation is a gift from God. This aspect will be fully explored under the section 'supernatural contemplation' later in this chapter.

John of the Cross says of the first stage of meditation that:

It should be known that the purpose of discursive meditation on divine subjects is the acquisition of some knowledge and love of God. Each time individuals procure through meditation some of this knowledge and love, they do so by an act. Many acts, in no matter what area, will engender a habit. Similarly, through many particular acts of this loving knowledge a person reaches the point at which a habit is formed in the soul (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:192).

Here, John of the Cross is stressing the necessity of forming the habit of meditation in the search for God. He further emphasises that:

God desires to liberate [beginners] from the lowly exercise of the senses and discursive meditation, by which they go in search of Him so inadequately and with so many difficulties, and [to] lead them into the exercise of spirit, in which they become capable of a communion with God that is more abundant and freer of imperfections (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:192).

Bearing in mind these commentaries by John of the Cross, at this point it should also be critically questioned whether the need for meditation arises from within us or from God. The real test here is an honest exploration of what is the real focus of one's longing. John of the Cross is aware that religious movement toward God can emerge from personal desires for satisfaction or perhaps out of a need for reassurance. Accordingly, it must then be argued that the test is whether one is making progress in one's spiritual life. If this is not so, which again requires scrupulous honesty, then the whole purpose of prayer may be self-serving.

Another form of meditative prayer at this stage is *meditative reading*. This is one way of practising discursive meditation if one finds it difficult to intellectualize on a spiritual subject. It may then be easier to take a spiritual book and to allow the author, in a way, do the thinking whilst one merely absorbs what is written. Teresa advises that the book to be chosen for meditative reading should be neither instructional nor devotional, but rather a book that provokes reflection, awakens the soul and keeps it in the presence of God. Therefore, simply reading is not meditative reading. Meditative reading should provide for deeper reflection in the presence of God and encourage speaking to God in conversation. In this regard, Teresa explains how she used to pray in her own time of spiritual dryness:

For I believe it would have been impossible for me to persevere for the eighteen years during which I suffered this trial and these great aridities, through not being able, as I have said, to meditate. All that time, except immediately after taking Communion, I never ventured to start praying without a book. My soul was as much afraid to engage in prayer without one, as if it had to fight against a host. With this protection, which was like a companion and a shield on which to take the blows of my many thoughts, I found comfort, for I was not generally in aridity. But always when I was without a book, my soul would at once become disturbed, and my thoughts wandered. As I read, I began to call them together again and, as it were, laid bait for my soul. Very often, I had to do no more than open a book. Sometimes I read a little, sometimes much, according to the favour which the Lord showed me (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:3).

Ultimately, though, Teresa felt that God listens to all forms of prayer, whether it was vocal prayer, liturgical prayer, discursive meditation or meditative reading. The method of meditative reading offered by Teresa as an alternative can thus comfort those who are unable to use meditation. Together with John of the Cross, Teresa is a great defender of the freedom of the soul to submit to the action of the Holy Spirit and, consequently, she is always alert to protect the soul against having to use a systematic formula or a set method for prayer.

#### **6.4.2.3 The Prayer of Recollection**

The prayer of recollection is another form of prayer for beginners, and in the *Way of Perfection*, Teresa states that she always gained great benefits from the use of *interior recollection*. She wrote about it at quite some length, telling her readers that it is a method of prayer that the Lord had taught her. It is called recollection precisely because "... the soul collects together all the faculties and enters within itself to be with its God" (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:124). Teresa writes that she was not able to use her mind discursively in meditation, nor was she able to make use of her imagination. She writes that she could not see the form of Jesus in front of her and that she could not even picture what he looked like: "Of Christ as a man I could think, but never in such a way as to call up His picture in my mind" (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:68).

Teresa observes that in the prayer of recollection, she was aware that Jesus was present to her and that she felt comfortable praying in this manner. Although Teresa did have difficulty with meditation, she also refers to biblical scenes that she found pleasing and useful in this type of prayer. For example, she recalls the scenes from the scriptures where Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, the agony of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, and the scene at the house of Simon where Mary Magdalene washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair. There were other scenes that also inspired her, but what mattered was her faith that Jesus was there with her and that she could converse with God. This was to have been the foundation of Teresa's prayer in the early stages.

Again, Teresa stresses that, at the beginning of the spiritual journey, the soul should not hesitate and it must seek to be engaged with God:

... speak to Him as with a Father, a Brother, a Lord, and a Spouse. He will teach you what you need to do to please Him. Do not be foolish. Ask Him to let you speak to Him. Remember how important it is to understand that the Lord is within us and that we should be there with Him (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:121).

It is this statement that encapsulates the essential part of the prayer of recollection, the primary purpose of which is to form a living sense of intimacy with God. According to the above discussion, one need not have a contemplative temperament for God to make one contemplative.

### **6.4.3 Supernatural Contemplation**

Before discussing the types of prayer referred to by Teresa as '*contemplative prayer*', it will be useful, firstly, to understand what is meant by supernatural contemplation. In Teresa's words:

For even if we wear ourselves to pieces with penances and prayers, and all kinds of other things we can acquire but little if the Lord is not pleased to bestow it (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:172).

In other words, we do not initiate supernatural contemplation. Teresa explains – perhaps rather harshly – that the gift of supernatural contemplation originates with

God, and that, if this is not understood and appreciated, one can literally pray oneself to death, wondering why the gift of supernatural contemplation is not being bestowed. It is not an easy concept to intellectually accept. This is where Teresa's continuing emphasis on humility is particularly relevant.

When Teresa writes about contemplative prayer in the Fourth Mansions, she emphasises that one is entering a new world, and thus she needs God, as it were, to speak for her and to prevent misunderstandings. She therefore says:

I commend myself to the Holy Spirit, and beg him from this point onward to speak for me, so that you may understand what I shall say about the Mansions still to be treated (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:53).

Teresa was worried that she might not be able to express herself clearly from this point onwards. She found it particularly difficult to convert to writing the effect of God's action in her soul through contemplation.

Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:54) also makes the point that, in order to reach the Fourth Mansions, "... one must have lived for a long time in the others" ('others' referring to 'the other Mansions'). However, she then qualifies this comment by adding that "... there is no infallible rule about it, for the Lord gives when He wills and as He wills and to whom He wills, and as these gifts are his own, this is doing no injustice to anyone" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:54).

It is strongly emphasised that, as one learns contemplative prayer, the principle of the Lord's giving becomes the rule, rather than whether or not one is deserving of such favours. This principle may be difficult to accept and some may even feel aggrieved; however, God now chooses those whom he feels can progress into the contemplative life. This principle can also be regarded as the dividing line between 'prayer for beginners', which originates from the individual, and subsequent prayer, which originates from God. This divide could be called the change from 'natural' prayer to 'supernatural' prayer. As Teresa cautions, it will be necessary to accept, with humility, that it is solely God's choice and God's will whether or not to impart God's own gifts. One should also not forget Teresa's admonishment to persevere in the



spiritual life, notwithstanding the trials which may beset one or the perceived lack of progress in one's prayers.

McLean (2003:204) also emphasises that supernatural contemplation is a gift from God, by explaining that in this dwelling place [the Fourth Mansions], "... we have a growing hunger and desire to rest more passively and silently and be alone in His love and presence". St. Silouan (1866–1938 CE) from Mount Athos (where he became a monk at the Greek Orthodox monastery) wrote on the use of contemplation in the following terms:

The human mind and personality only reach the stillness of pure and perfect prayer when from the love of God all created things are left behind ... when a man (sic) utterly forgets the world and his own body so that afterwards he no longer knows whether he was in or out of the body in the hour of prayer. Such superlatively pure prayer is a rare gift of God. It depends not on human effort but on the power of the Lord (cited in Sophrony 1973:96).

St. Silouan is confirming the principle that supernatural contemplation is purely a gift from God.

Teresa's earlier writings before *Interior Castle*, are at times difficult to summarise in logical categories, and her terminology is occasionally interchangeable or may at times even be contradictory. For example, in her earlier writings, when she wrote about the prayer of 'passive recollection' or the 'prayer of quiet', "... she did not distinguish between the 'prayer of quiet' and 'passive recollection' and she often used the word recollection without the adjective active or passive" (Cummins 1984a:27). Teresa had been feeling her way towards a more exact terminology. By the time she wrote the *Interior Castle*, she had become more comfortable with how she interpreted her experience. Teresa acknowledges these shortcomings:

It may be that in writing of these interior things, that I am contradicting what I have myself said elsewhere. This is not surprising, for almost fifteen years have passed since then, and perhaps the Lord has given me a clearer realization of these matters than I had at first (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:65).

In the Fourth Mansions, Teresa writes extensively on the ‘prayer of quiet’. At the same time, though, she also remembers “... another kind of prayer which always begins before this one [prayer of quiet]. It is a form of recollection which also seems to me supernatural” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:68). Teresa is now able to distinguish clearly between the ‘prayer of quiet’ and the ‘prayer of passive recollection’ and even treats them in separate chapters within the Fourth Mansions. Before discussing these two types of prayer herein, it will be useful to look at the various forms and signs of supernatural contemplation.

#### **6.4.3.1 Forms and Signs of Supernatural Contemplation**

There are various forms of supernatural contemplation. For example, according to Marie-Eugène (1953:459), there are aesthetic, intellectual and theological forms of supernatural contemplation. The aesthetic form occurs through the senses, produces an aesthetic emotion, and is a lower form of contemplation. Intellectual contemplation involves the use of the intellect to analyse and determine the meaning of the truth. Theological contemplation occurs at an even higher level: it involves the same attitude of the intellect, penetrates it more profoundly and finally comes to rest in the light of a deeper truth. Marie-Eugène (1953:462) further asserts that the name that Christians reserve for contemplation is actually *theological contemplation*. Although it is still a human form of contemplation, because it is based in reason, it is already supernatural by virtue of its object, namely God. In other words, the fact that it is God who raises the considerations of understanding implies that it is ‘supernatural’ or ‘infused contemplation’. Supernatural or infused contemplation is the highest form of contemplation; it is also referred to by Teresa and John of the Cross only as contemplation. I will also only use the term ‘contemplation’ for ‘supernatural contemplation’, in this dissertation.

With regard to the sign of contemplation, Cummins (1984a:35) observes: “... an effect is produced in the soul by its new ‘sense’ of the divine presence within it. This is not a vision”. Teresa, too, writes about the ‘sense’ of the divine:

We seem to know that He is listening by the spiritual effects, by the feelings of great love and faith of which we then become conscious, also by the good resolutions, with their accompaniment of sweetness that we

then make. This great favour comes from God, and anyone who receives it should value it highly, for it is a very high form of prayer. But it is not a vision. God is understood to be present, as I have said, by the effect which He produces on the soul, for that is the way in which His Majesty wishes to make His presence felt (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:189).

Here again Teresa struggles to express what is happening in her soul but the effect of God's presence is certainly very real in a way that words cannot easily describe. What is certain is that the 'sense' of the divine is tangible, compared to the intangibility experienced in earlier prayer. Furthermore:

The soul is not as tied down as formerly in things pertaining to the service of God. It has greater freedom and readiness for action (Cummins, 1984a:36).

The readiness for action described above at this stage of prayer manifests itself as a great desire to do something for God. Teresa (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:99) observes: "On arriving at this state, the soul begins to lose the desire for earthly things. It clearly sees that not one moment of joy is to be obtained here on earth". This is echoed by Cummins (1984a:36), who states that: "Divine consolations have shown the soul the worthlessness of all earthly pleasures and so it rises above them in a new self mastery".

With regard to what the soul experiences during contemplation, the mystical experience of contemplation is difficult to describe. This is underscored by the fact that Teresa is unable to express clearly what she experiences during this activity. She can only express herself by using analogies and metaphors, which are a hallmark of Teresa's writings in general. In addition, Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:76) states that these experiences may last for a long time or they may be of a short duration, although one is not aware of the passage of time in this state. Teresa further explains that contemplation often produces a suspension of the faculties of the soul in that it is frequently difficult, and sometimes even impossible, for the contemplative to give attention to any other prayers or activities because of this absorption in God.

In summary, the signs of contemplation are, firstly, that the soul is becoming more and more absorbed by God. Secondly, God enters the soul and illuminates it in a way that cannot be attained in one's ordinary state. It is as if one finds oneself in

possession of a mysterious 'knowing' that is far deeper than anything resulting from human faculties. Furthermore, this experience is difficult to describe.

#### **6.4.3.2 Effects of Contemplation**

John of the Cross emphasizes that there should be only one aim in contemplation: to lead to perfect union with God. Therefore, this transformation in God is the single end towards which a truly contemplative soul must tend. Kourie (1992:85) describes the union that takes place during contemplation as "... consciousness of the divine presence that can be expressed as either oneness with God, *unio*; or fellowship with God, *communio*". Furthermore, this perfect union with God:

... is a manifestation of a deeper, permanent way of life, in which the purifying, illuminating and transforming power of God is experienced, effecting a transformation of the mystic's entire being and consciousness (Kourie 1992:86).

Kourie adds that another effect of the mystical experience is:

... awareness, although the sensory-conceptual apparatus of the mind remains in abeyance. Such a consciousness, characterised as it is by non-intellectual, non-sensory perceptions has been considered different from everyday experience (Kourie 1992:86).

Other effects, which may accompany this mystical state, are the extraordinary manifestations of ecstasies, trances, visions, levitations and so forth. It is noted, however, among mystical writers, that these extraordinary effects and the presence of such epiphenomena are not integral to the mystical life and should not be pursued. In fact, John of the Cross is particularly severe with those who do seek such epiphenomena: "... it is not God's will that souls desire contemplation of distinct knowledge from visions and locutions and so on" (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:229). The reason for his admonition is the fact that not all these extraordinary effects are necessarily associated with mystical experience.

Kourie (1992:86) affirms: "Such paranormal phenomena as telepathy, out-of-the-body experiences and so forth, can occur in persons who do not claim to have any real mystical union with the divine". For example, these states may be induced by drugs,

insanity or psychological instability, and may produce a superficial resemblance to a mystical state. It should further be emphasised that "... the real test of authentic mysticism lies in the transcendental content, rather than in any exterior manifestation" (Kourie 1992:86).

Kourie mentions another criterion with respect to authentic mysticism: "Furthermore, a true test of mysticism is to be found in the ethical behaviour of the mystic and his or her overall adaptation to life, rather than in extraordinary gifts". Aumann (1986:335) states, similarly, that "... infused contemplation causes a great impulse for the practice of virtues. This is one of the surest signs of true contemplation". It is clear that a soul that does not end its prayer with an impulse towards solid virtue can be sure that it is not enjoying true contemplative prayer. Aumann further points out (1986:335) that "... a contemplative soul sometimes finds that it instantaneously possesses a degree of perfection in a certain virtue it had not been able to obtain over a long period of time in spite of its efforts".

The foregoing comments by the various authors are clear on the issue of authentic mysticism and how it is discerned. This discussion of contemplation and its signs and effects, has provided a background against which the prayers referred to by Teresa in the contemplative state, namely the 'prayer of passive recollection' and the 'prayer of quiet' can now be understood.

#### **6.4.3.3 Passive Recollection**

Teresa gives an account of *passive recollection* by describing how God very gently draws to God's self the one who has been living 'outside of the *Interior Castle*':

Let us suppose that these senses and faculties (the inhabitants, as I have said, of this castle, which is the figure that I have taken to explain my meaning) have gone out of the castle, and, for days and years, have been consorting with strangers, to whom all the good things in the castle are abhorrent. Then, realizing how much they have lost, they come back to it, though they do not actually re-enter it, because the habits they have formed are hard to conquer. But they are no longer traitors and they now walk about in the vicinity of the castle. The great King, Who dwells in the Mansion within this castle, perceives their good will, and in His great mercy desires to bring them back to Him. So, like a good Shepherd, with a

call so gentle that even they can hardly recognize it, He teaches them to know His voice and not to go away and get lost but to return to their Mansion; and so powerful is this Shepherd's call that they give up the things outside the castle which had led them astray, and once again enter it. I do not think I have ever explained this before as clearly as here (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:68).

Teresa was clearly pleased with this analogy of the king and those who enter his castle. She also emphasises the passive character of this form of prayer: nonetheless, it is not a passing visit from God, but a habitual sense of God's presence in the soul. The presence is felt within the self, and its effects are so deep that there is no doubt that this can only come from God. A particularly encouraging element of Teresa's explanation above is that God as the Shepherd continues to call his flock and even if one has moved away, God does not give up but continues the call.

The prayer of recollection cannot be attained by using meditative practices. As Cummins (1984a:29) writes:

... we are not to imagine that we can attain it [passive recollection] by thinking of God within, or picturing him there. This habit she [Teresa] praises highly for it is founded on truth. But it is not the kind of prayer she has now in mind.

What Teresa does have in mind is the following:

... quite different. These people are sometimes in the castle before they have begun to think about God at all. I cannot say where they entered it or how they heard their Shepherd's call: it was certainly not with their ears, for outwardly such a call is not audible. They become markedly conscious that they are gradually retiring within themselves (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:70).

In passive recollection, the soul is being drawn by God. God makes God's presence felt in such a way that the powers of the soul are not suspended but, in fact, recollected and focused on God. Cummins (1984a:30) explains that: "Techniques for silencing the mind could never bring about this kind of recollection". It should also be noted that Teresa does not advocate any artificial stopping of the mind's activities during passive recollection:

Some books advise that as a preparation for hearing what our Lord may say to us we should keep our minds at rest, waiting to see what he will work in our souls. But unless His Majesty has begun to suspend our faculties, I cannot understand how we are to stop thinking without doing ourselves more harm than good (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:57).

What Teresa is advocating here, is that one should try to keep the distractions of the intellect to a minimum in order to practice a more simplified form of prayer. Cummins (1984a:30) adds: “But the purpose is to perfect rather than suspend its activity”, referring to the activity of the intellect.

For Teresa, prayer is something intensely personal. Her goal is to foster this relationship with God, to intensify and deepen it, and ultimately to use the prayer as a guide for life. Teresa felt strongly that, in order to pray to God, one needs to come into God’s presence. More importantly, if God has not invited someone into God’s presence, then one should approach God actively by one’s own efforts:

When from the secret signs He gives us we seem to realize that He is hearing us, it is well for us to keep silence, since He has permitted us to be near Him and there will be no harm in our striving not to labour with the understanding. But if we are not quite sure that the King has heard us, or sees us, we must not stand where we are like ninnies, for there still remains a great deal for the soul to do when it has stilled the understanding; if it did nothing more it would experience much greater aridity and the imagination would grow restless because of the effort caused it by cessation from thought (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:71).

In summary, active or acquired recollection involves one’s own efforts, albeit aided by grace, to acquire the habitual recollection of God’s presence. In contrast, infused or passive recollection in the Fourth Mansions is dependent on grace: it is God alone who can summon the soul to a recollected state and who gathers the faculties of the soul around the unifying centre of God’s presence.

#### **6.4.3.4 Prayer of Quiet**

Teresa describes the *prayer of quiet* or as she also refers to it the *prayer of divine taste*, as follows:

I still want to describe this prayer of quiet to you. It is in this kind of prayer that the Lord begins to show us that He is hearing our requests. He begins to give us His Kingdom on earth so that we may truly praise Him and strive to make others do the same. This is a supernatural state, and no matter how hard we try, we cannot reach it ourselves. It is a state in which the soul enters into peace, or rather in which the Lord gives it peace through His presence, as He did to that just man Simeon. All the faculties are stilled in this state. The soul realizes that it is now very close to God, and that, if it were just a little bit closer, it would become one with Him. This is not because it sees Him either with its bodily or its spiritual eyes. The body experiences the greatest delight, and the soul is conscious of a deep satisfaction. It is so glad to find itself near the fountain that it is full even before it has begun to drink. There seems nothing left for it to desire. The faculties are stilled and have no desire to move, for any movement they make appears to prevent the soul from loving God. They are not completely lost, though, since, two of them being free, they can realize Whose Presence they are in. The will is in captivity now (*Way of Perfection*, in Carrigan 2000:138).

From this precise description of the prayer of quiet, it appears that God does not manifest God's self, but makes God's presence felt through the peace bestowed on the soul. As the name implies, the prayer of quiet is one in which the soul experiences extraordinary peace and rests with the delight in contemplating God as present. According to Teresa, God gives the soul an intellectual knowledge of this presence. Of the prayer of quiet, Cummins (1984:31) states that: "This has the characteristic of satisfying all the soul's deepest tendencies and appetites, which unexpectedly enter into rest and quiet".

There is no doubt, therefore, that there is a new kind of awareness of the presence of God. Gregory of Nyssa described this experience as the soul being "... surrounded with the divine night in which the bridegroom comes nearer without showing Himself but by giving the soul a certain sense of His presence, while fleeing clear knowledge" (Gregory of Nyssa, quoted in Bouyer 1963:363). Cummins makes a critically important comment in describing this type of experience, when he states that: "There is no question of new faculties in the way that philosophers understand them. The spiritual senses represent qualitative differences in the experience of a divine intimacy that lies beyond the reach of philosophical effort" (1984:32). Cummins (1984:32) elaborates on this point: "In addition it should be made clear that we are dealing with spiritual depth, not the realm of the subconscious". In other words, the prayer of quiet does not entirely inhibit the exercise of the faculties of the soul. The will alone



remains captive, while the other faculties i.e. the memory and the intellect, have a greater awareness of the things of God, whereas the things of the world are not so prominent.

Teresa strives for greater theological accuracy when she describes the prayer of quiet as "... a little spark" of true love for the Lord, which God begins to enkindle in the soul. Osuna, whom Teresa read extensively in her formative years, refers to this 'little spark' in his book, the *Third Spiritual Alphabet*:

In these grades of recollection the understanding is never so far silenced as to be entirely inactive, for it always retains a little spark that suffices to show contemplatives that they are experiencing something that comes from God (Osuna cited in Boyce 1984:33).

These experiences described by mystical writers with respect to this form of prayer all indicate that the soul knows that it is very close to God. The soul is at peace: this is not an earthly peace but a peace from God. Teresa notes another aspect of this type of prayer: while only a few souls reach this stage, even fewer pass beyond it:

I do not know whose fault this is, but it is certainly not God's. For when His Majesty shows a soul such favour as to let it advance so far, I do not believe that He will fail to be more merciful still, unless there are faults on our side (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:104).

Teresa cautions those who achieve this state of prayer to be humble so that they do not fall back "... to the fleshpots of Egypt" (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:105). Teresa's practical approach recognises that one may at this stage still offend God or fall into sin because of human nature: the only solution is to continue with prayer.

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at Teresa's comment regarding those who do not reach the stage of contemplative prayer. She offers practical spiritual guidance on "... this mysterious paradox of how to cultivate longing for God and the hope of obtaining his favours while having no expectations or desires" (McLean 2003:218). There are several reasons why such favours should not be sought: firstly, the soul's motivation must be to experience love towards God without self-interest. This will test the soul's intent and purpose. At the same time, though, infused contemplation can never be acquired through one's efforts alone, because this gift is precisely the opposite of self-

interest (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:66). Secondly, the seeking of favours could indicate a lack of humility toward God and a belief that the self is entitled to such automatic favours. As Teresa puts it: "... there is some lack of humility in our thinking that in return for our miserable services, we can obtain anything so great" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:66). Thirdly, true preparation for this gift is the desire to surrender to God. Teresa thus advises: "... the true preparation for receiving these gifts is a desire to suffer and imitate the Lord, not to receive consolations" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:66). Fourthly, the granting of this grace is exclusively by God's will:

His Majesty is not obliged to grant them to us, as He is obliged to grant us glory if we keep His commandments, without doing which we could not be saved, and He knows better than we what is good for us and which of us truly love Him (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:67).

In summary, Teresa introduces the prayer of quiet as a connecting bond between active and passive prayer. She refers to this type of prayer as being supernatural. This prayer is based on a growing capacity to be loved and to love. While it is difficult to conceptualise, this is because it has its source outside the person and is unrelated to any effort of one's own. Accordingly, it will only occur effortlessly when the time is right and when the soul is more abandoned, open and passive to God. This state is beyond discursive reasoning and the faculties of the human mind. Nothing can be forced or willed in this prayer. It results in a transformation of life, but it needs to be remembered that this stage is only the very beginning of true mystical experience. This is only achieved in the next stages of the mansions in the 'prayer of union'.

#### **6.4.3.5 Prayer of Union**

The *prayer of union* is that state of mystical prayer in which all the internal faculties are progressively captivated and occupied with God. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter Eight; suffice it for present purposes to offer a few preliminary comments.

This union with God distinguishes the prayer of union from the prayer of quiet. In the prayer of quiet, "... great happiness arises in the will from the 'quiet' of all its desires in a foretaste of eternal bliss" (Cummins 1984b:40). However, while in this prayer of

supernatural contemplation, the intellect too is captivated, the memory and the imagination remain free. In the prayer of union, however, all the interior faculties, including the memory and the imagination, are captivated. The essential effect "... is union of the will with God" (Cummins 1984b:42).

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, it has been shown that prayer – and especially contemplative prayer – constitutes the ultimate and crowning experience of the encounter with God. This chapter has followed the various stages of prayer: what began as a conversation with God during the initial ‘prayer of beginners’ evolved into the final ‘prayer of union’, as taught by Teresa. Initially, the prayers of beginners may seem self-centred and focused on one’s own needs. But, as the will is purified progressively, prayer eventually culminates in the final prayer of union, where the will of God is what is desired. The last stage of the prayer of beginners is meditation, which still involves discursive thinking. This so-called natural prayer becomes supernatural prayer in contemplation, which was emphasised as being a gift from God.

The content of contemplation is more indefinite than the content of meditation. Both Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross have given a continuing understanding of contemplation, and both regard contemplation as God’s work within the human being. Contemplation is a form of prayer that is passive and submissive; it aims not at mastery, but at letting oneself be mastered and to be immersed in a power and wisdom that transcends oneself. It was noted that there are various forms and degrees of contemplation, but the term contemplation, as used in the context of Teresa and John of the Cross, refers to infused contemplation, which is fully supernatural. Its object is divine truth itself. It is realized by faith and perfected by the divine intervention of God through the infusion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This chapter has also outlined the effects of contemplation and emphasized that the transformation in God is the single end to which the true contemplative soul will journey.

The life of contemplative prayer is not a permanent state, but is intermittent, according to the will of God. For the contemplative, as the soul progresses to God,

dealing with the intermittent periods causes the greatest pain. Teresa's advice in this situation is to seek the God of consolations and not the consolations of God. Teresa also expresses her anxiety that many souls would reach the beginning of contemplative prayer in their spiritual life, but that few would pass beyond it. She maintains that this is not because of any fault of God, but more likely because of one's own shortcomings. Regardless of where one may be in the stages of prayer, Teresa counsels that one needs to remain steadfast and single-minded in persevering in prayer on the journey to God.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **The Dark Night of the Spirit**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the state of the ‘dark night of the spirit’ by seeking to understand the meaning of this mystical experience, as well as its causes, trials and effects. It will also be discussed in terms of contemporary psychology, looking specifically at the relationship between the dark night of the spirit and depression.

At the outset, it must be noted that the expression ‘the dark night of the spirit’ was not one used by Teresa in her writings. The expression has been borrowed from the writings of John of the Cross, specifically from his book *The Dark Night*. In the *Interior Castle*, the ‘dark night of the spirit’ is what the person tends to experience in the Sixth Mansions: this mansion refers to a time of great trials and tests, which may be worse than those in any other mansion in the *Interior Castle*. However, it must be emphasized that it is not imperative that a person will experience the dark night of the spirit at a specific point along the spiritual journey – or even at all.

The writings of Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross are acknowledged masterpieces: the precision of their language and the clarity of their insight in their treatment of the mystical way are unique. This is because both were particularly attentive to their own interior lives and reflected upon their own experiences during the ‘dark night of the spirit’: they sought to comprehend and integrate its meaning and to articulate it in ways that would make sense to others. But fundamental to their clarity of insight was that they were, above all, authentic mystics. Their writings are an excellent source of knowledge about the experiences of someone going through the dark night of the spirit; moreover, they explain clearly how a person should respond to God at such a time. Few mystics have recorded their experiences of the ‘dark night of the spirit’ in such a precise manner. Lastly, both Teresa and John of the Cross are doctors of the Catholic Church, which means that the church has recognised and

acknowledged their mystical writings as legitimate and that it has accepted their mystical experiences as authentic.

## 7.2 'Dark night of the spirit': A description

People who reach the Sixth Mansions are not yet in a condition of permanent union with God. They are still involved in the demanding process of reforming the spirit that precedes permanent union. This reformation is particularly painful, to the extent that Teresa says that the individual at this stage "... has the keenest longings for death" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:159). Teresa stresses that the soul must undergo a great many trials at this stage of the spiritual journey. These trials are of both an exterior and an interior nature. The joy that is experienced in the Sixth Mansions is intertwined, paradoxically, with a pain of which Teresa says "... I know that this distress seems to penetrate to its very bowels" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:129). Teresa describes this pain as the intensity of the unsatisfied desire for God in the following analogy:

... if my God could be described as the fire, from which some spark will fly out and touch the soul, in such a way it will be able to feel the burning heat of the fire; but, as the fire is not hot enough to burn it up ... the soul continues to feel the pain (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:129).

The unsatisfied, intense desire for God that characterises this mansion is a terrible trial, and yet at the same time is it different from the pain given by 'the devil'. Teresa describes this difference: despite the suffering caused by the unsatisfied desire for God, though, Teresa says that: "I do not myself believe he [the devil] could ever fill the soul with the quietness and peace caused it by this distress" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:162). The advanced state of souls in this mansion also means that they have a greater awareness of their sinfulness. They may also experience "... periods of aridity, during which the soul feels as if has never known God and never will know Him" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:122). Convinced that one has been rejected by God, one may even suffer "... an interior oppression so keenly felt and so intolerable that I do not know to what it can be compared, save to the torment of those who suffer in hell" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:123). The final transition into permanent union

takes all these forms of suffering to the ultimate limits. Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:198) explains:

... it makes a deep wound, not, I think, in any region where physical pain can be felt, but in the soul's most intimate depths. It passes as quickly as a flash of lightning and leaves everything in our nature that is earthly reduced to powder. During the time that it lasts we cannot think of anything that has to do with our own existence: it instantaneously enchains the faculties in such a way that they have no freedom to do anything, except what will increase the pain.

The source of the pain referred to by Teresa above is the total awareness of the distance from God, and it is not merely an abstract or emotional consciousness, for it brings the person close to death "... and leaves the limbs quite disjoined" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:199). One has absolutely no control over this event and one cannot resist it: "It is no more possible to resist them than a person thrown into a fire to make the flames lose their heat and not burn her" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:202). This pain expressed by Teresa as the awareness of distance from God thus becomes the focal point of the soul, which is entirely consumed by a desire for oneness with God, and yet it can do nothing to achieve what it desires most. Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:199-200) elaborates on this state:

... her reason is in such a state that she is not her own mistress, and can think of nothing but the cause of her suffering. Since she is absent from her Good, why should she wish to live? She is conscious of a strange solitude, since there is not a creature on the whole earth who can be a companion to her – in fact, I do not believe she would find any in heaven, save Him Whom she loves: on the contrary, all earthly companionship is torment to her. She thinks of herself as of a person suspended aloft, unable either to come down and rest anywhere on earth or to ascend into heaven.

This paradox of, on the one hand, desiring exclusively to move towards God and, on the other hand, being totally incapable of overcoming its sense of separateness, is difficult to comprehend. On this point, Giles confirms that one needs to experience the dark night in order to comprehend what the mystics are attempting to explain. In referring to *The Dark Night* by John of the Cross, Giles thus states:

The Dark Night does not allow for intellectual speculation and discussion. It demands the attention of the heart, and though it may be exclusive to state, as mystical writers do, that experience alone can verify the truth of

their words, it is fair to say that until we ourselves are drawn into the dark fire that burns away all attachment to the known, we cannot 'see' from a within that is 'without a without' the loving that the soul is having to endure (Giles 1982:44).

The 'fire' referred to here, which 'burns away attachment to the world', is described by John of the Cross as the fire that "... purges the soul and prepares [it] for union with the divine light just as wood is prepared for transformation into the fire" (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:416). Ultimately, "... the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself" (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:416).

Interestingly, Cummins (1991:148) relates the 'dark night of the spirit' to Christ's passion, as he explains:

The night of the spirit takes place in the inmost depths of the soul. Since it is produced by divine light, it involves a new level of spiritual awareness on the part of the soul. It does not belong in the realm of the unconscious or in the subconscious drives of sense appetite. It is genuinely a night of spirit.

He continues: "As a conflict of extremes, it is exemplified in a unique way in the agony of Christ in the garden" (Cummins 1991:149). He concludes his discussion of the conflict of extremes with the following commentary:

The dark night of the spirit is truly a drama. To get some light on its horror and explain its fruitfulness, one must compare it with the drama of Gethsemane, which it prolongs. Gethsemane was witness to the conflict between the purity of God and the sin of the world, waged in the sacred humanity of Christ who bore that twofold weight. In His humanity He was crushed by it, broken, made into nothingness.... The night of the spirit is a participation in that suffering and that victory (Cummins 1991:149).

According to Cummins, the night of the spirit can be likened to the crucifixion of the self where the person willingly dies on the cross and thereby experiences all the torments of Calvary, viz. of persecution, isolation, darkness and a sense of abandonment by God. And yet, all this suffering is the necessary preparation for the resurrection or (in the terms used by the mystics) for union with God.



### 7.3 Cause of the Dark Night of the Spirit

John of the Cross explains that the cause of the ‘dark night of the spirit’ is the action of God in the soul:

This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorance’s and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology. Through this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:401).

This inflowing of God in the soul is “... the language of God to the soul, addressed by pure spirit to pure spirit” (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:437). This God is not the God of fear, but “... is the loving wisdom of God which produces two principal effects in the soul; by both purging and illumining, this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God through love” (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:401). If this inflowing of God into the soul ultimately precedes and prepares the soul for union with God, why is it referred to as the dark night? To help solve this incongruity, John of the Cross (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:401) says:

In answer to this, there are two reasons why this divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul but also affliction and torment. First, because of the height of the divine wisdom that exceeds the abilities of the soul; and on this account the wisdom is dark for the soul. Second, because of the soul’s baseness and impurity; and on this account the wisdom is painful, afflictive, and also dark for the soul.

A major sign of the cause of the ‘dark night of the spirit’ is the pain felt in the soul, not because of God, but because of those parts of the soul that, at this stage, are not yet of God or like God. According to Teresa, this inflow of God into the soul is not a sudden event: it has been preceded by an extended period during which God has already been communicating God’s self to the soul. This has happened through the infused contemplation that characterises the Fourth and Fifth Mansions.

The inflow of God in the Sixth Mansions brings about “... a veritable psychological revolution” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:119). Until that stage, the intellect and the

will have acted according to the laws of human nature. In the dark night of the soul, though, "... they are submissive to God's motion, which comes to them from the depths of the soul" (Marie-Eugène 1997:304). This means that, whereas previously the intellect and will were independent of each other and responded to exterior influences, they are now moved to act by an impulse from God. In other words, the dark night of the spirit is a process whereby the soul is stripped of all illusions. It is this stripping by the action of God in the soul that, according to the mystical writers, leaves the soul trembling and in dark confusion.

#### **7.4 Trials and Suffering of the Dark Night of the Spirit**

At the beginning of the Sixth Mansions, Teresa discusses the trials that happen during this 'dark night of the spirit':

Oh, my God, how great are these trials, which the soul will suffer, both within and without, before it enters the seventh Mansion! Really, when I think of them, I am sometimes afraid that, if we realized their intensity beforehand, it would be most difficult for us, naturally weak as we are, to muster determination enough to enable us to suffer them or resolution enough for enduring them, however attractively the advantage of so doing might be presented to us, until we reached the seventh mansion, where there is nothing more to be feared, and the soul will plunge deep into suffering for God's sake (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:118).

In Teresa's experience, these dark night trials stretch one to the limits of spiritual endurance and, as importantly, to the limits of human comprehension. This brings about a sense of crisis, both spiritual (leading to interior suffering) and bodily (leading to exterior suffering). It would seem that only faith and love can carry the soul through the experience, and thus their importance is continually emphasised by Teresa. The trials and suffering that the person consequently experiences in the 'dark night of the spirit' are different for each person. According to John of the Cross, "... the first purgation or night [i.e. the dark night of the senses] is bitter and terrible to the senses" (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:376). He provides three indications of the dark night of the senses: firstly, the soul finds no satisfaction in either the things of God or in other creatures; secondly, the soul is troubled by the impression that it has turned away from God; and thirdly, the soul finds itself no longer capable of meditating despite fervent attempts to do so (*Dark Night*, in

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:381-382). However, it is the dark night of the spirit, that is even more frightening, as it “is horrible and frightful to the spirit” (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:376). The first purgation refers to that of the senses, which happens in Mansions Four and Five. In the second purgation, however, it is the spirit that is purged, in preparation for union with God in the Sixth Mansions. It is emphasized by both Teresa and John of the Cross that the soul cannot achieve union with God by directly entering the ‘dark night of the spirit’: it needs to be prepared by first passing through the ‘dark night of the senses’, which in effect are the first five mansions of the spiritual journey.

John of the Cross states that, when “... the divine light of contemplation strikes a soul not yet entirely illumined, it causes spiritual darkness, for it not only surpasses the act of natural understanding but it also deprives the soul of this act and darkens it” (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:402). He indicates further that this light shows up the impurities in the soul and creates in them an opposition to the purity of God. In its suffering, the soul therefore recognises its distance from God. This is explained by John of the Cross (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:402) as follows:

The soul, because of its impurity, suffers immensely at the time this divine light truly assails it. When this pure light strikes in order to expel all impurity, persons feel so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against them and they are against God. Because it seems that God has rejected it, the soul suffers such pain and grief that when God tried Job in this way it proved one of the worst of Job’s trials, as he says: ‘Why have you set me against You, and I am heavy and burdensome to myself?’ (Job 7:20).

This opposition that the soul feels to the action of God causes a further type of suffering. John of the Cross (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:403) comments “... that when this divine contemplation assails them more forcibly, in order to strengthen the soul, they suffer so much in their weakness that they almost die”. The prophet Job has also experienced this suffering when he says, “I do not desire that he commune with me with much strength lest he overwhelm me with the weight of his greatness” (Job 23:6). From the writings of John of the Cross, it appears that the knowledge with which God begins to let the soul see itself (relative to the greatness of God) is the root of this suffering.

A third form of suffering is produced where "... the sorrowful soul feels the conviction that God has rejected it, and, with abhorrence cast it into darkness ... the soul experiences all this and even more, for now it seems that this affliction will last forever" (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:404). This, in turn, results in a fourth type of suffering, which is described as follows by John of the Cross (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:405):

The soul experiences an emptiness and poverty in regard to three classes of goods (temporal, natural and spiritual), which are directed toward pleasing it, and is conscious of being placed in the midst of the contrary evils (the miseries of imperfections, aridities and voids in the apprehensions of the faculties, and an abandonment of the spirit in darkness).

Coupled, therefore, with the suffering associated with seeing the soul relative to the greatness of God, the feeling of abandonment and the agonising experience of being in an arid, lonely wilderness, there is not only a sense, but a reality "... where all is blackened and any illumination gone" (McLean 2003:254). The soul feels lost and confused, and unable to comprehend how to engage with this experience. John of the Cross says that "... one ought to have deep compassion for the soul God puts in this tempestuous and frightful night" (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:407). Such are the sufferings that characterize the 'dark night of the spirit'. The underlying cause of all of them, according to John of the Cross' analogy, is the purifying action of God, which cuts into the wounds of sin, in order to open these up and to cauterise them. McGinn (2006:365) states that this state of the 'dark night of the spirit':

... is a mystery that induces both awe that attracts, as well as fear and trembling ... This basic religious attitude is heightened in many mystical accounts exploring the fear and distress that the overwhelming majesty of God brings to those humans who draw near to Him.

Christian mystics through the ages have also noted that certain biblical figures such as Abraham, Job and Elijah experienced a similar sense of deep awe in their contact with God.

Associated with these feelings of distress is the even more frightening feeling of being abandoned by God. McGinn (2006:365) observes:

It may seem paradoxical that those who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of God have so often been visited with periods of abandonment, involving temptations to despair, loss of faith, and even the conviction that they have been damned.

Persons who are tested in this manner often look to the scriptures for guidance and inspiration, especially to Christ's agony on the Cross, when Christ said: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' (Mt 27:46, citing Ps.21:2).

Underhill attempts to give a comprehensive explanation that contextualises the sufferings at this stage of the mystical way:

So long as the subject feels himself to be 'somewhat', he has not yet annihilated selfhood and come to that ground where his being can be united with the being of God.... This is the 'naughting of the soul'. Here, as in purgation, the condition of access to higher levels of vitality is a death; a deprivation, a detachment, a clearing of the ground. Poverty leaps to the Cross; and finds there an utter desolation without the promise of spiritual reward. The satisfactions of the spirit must now go the same way as the satisfaction of the senses. Even the power of voluntary sacrifice and self-discipline is taken away. A dreadful ennui, a dull helplessness, takes its place (cited in Harvey 1999:114).

As God progressively takes over the direction of the soul, the normal activity of the faculties of the will, memory and the intellect is upset, and the soul seems paralysed. To the soul that has been continually enjoying God's presence, this powerlessness and emptiness gives it the impression that God has abandoned it and that "... it is going to founder in a pathological breakdown" (Marie-Eugène 1997:320). Teresa, speaking of her experiences in this state, mentions that her understanding of it was "... so dim that it is incapable of seeing the truth" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:119). She felt dominated by the imagination "... and the nonsense which the devil attempts to present to it" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:119). Teresa further noted that even prayer was impossible or, at least, that it did not seem to have any effect. This is particularly so if the stage is a lengthy, protracted one:

Now what will a poor creature like that do if such a thing goes on for a very long time? If she prays, she might as well not be doing so at all – I mean for all the comfort it will bring her, for interiorly she is incapable of

receiving any comfort, nor, even when her prayer is vocal, can she understand what she is saying; while mental prayer at such a time is certainly impossible – her faculties are not capable of it. Solitude is still worse for her, though it is also torture for her to be in anyone’s company or to be spoken to; and so, despite all her efforts to conceal the fact, she becomes outwardly upset and despondent, to a very noticeable extent. Is it credible that she will be able to say what is the matter with her? The thing is inexpressible, for this distress and oppression are spiritual troubles and cannot be given a name (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:124-125).

This generalized inability and darkness, which have a profound impact on all the faculties, are the psychological phenomena that characterise the ‘dark night of the spirit’. In addition to the internal suffering discussed above, one also experiences profound physical suffering. At the beginning of the Sixth Mansions, Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:120) mentions the illnesses with which the soul has to contend: “The Lord is also in the habit of sending the most grievous infirmities. This is a much greater trial, especially if the pains are severe... I think they are the greatest earthly trials that exist”. On this point Marie-Eugène (1997:326) explains that the “... general conditions of malaise will be the normal effect of the purification or ‘dark night of the spirit’”. He explains further that:

... such conditions render very difficult a diagnosis of the physical disturbances produced by God’s action in the soul. The general malaise does not disclose its cause and the localization that attracts attention may lead astray efforts at diagnosis (Marie-Eugène 1997:326).

## **7.5 Effects of the Dark Night of the Spirit**

At this point in the state of betrothal, Teresa states that the soul desires God so deeply that it becomes restless in this life and begs God to be released from its time of exile. It feels both rooted in God, but very anxious and afraid that it is being led astray by the evil one (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:160). At times, she writes, it wishes to flee into the desert to be with God: “... the soul would like to flee from other people, and greatly envies those who live, or have lived, in deserts” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:160). At other times, it wants nothing but to be in the midst of the world and help others learn to sing God’s praises. It desires nothing but to give God praise.

Teresa also admits, though, that she does not understand everything that goes on in a soul in this state (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:155). The soul has been touched so deeply by God that it wants nothing else but to rest in God's presence. She encourages her readers to focus their efforts to make progress in leading a virtuous life, when she confirms " ... let us also set to and work hard, and practice the virtues, for these are what we most need" (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:163). John of the Cross echoes this point and further emphasises that moral and spiritual purification is the best known effect of the dark night:

People, indeed, are ignorant who think it is possible to reach this high state of union with God without first emptying their appetite of all the natural and supernatural things that can be a hindrance to them, as we will explain further on. For there is an extreme distance between such appetites and that, which is given in this state, is nothing less than transformation in God. Instructing us about this way, our Lord stated according to St. Luke: 'Whoever does not renounce all that he will possess cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:33) (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:127).

Therefore, there is only one true and effective form of purification, which is that of the spirit. John of the Cross (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:398) remarks, that the 'night of the senses' should be called a "... certain reformation and bridling of the appetite rather than a purgation". He adds that "... the difference between the purgation of the spirit and that of the senses is the difference between the root and the branch, or between the removing of a stain which is fresh and one which is old and of longstanding". He further asserts that the purification of the spirit can only take place in a soul that is free from the stain of sin or, as it is sometimes referred to, in a soul in the 'state of grace'.

Moral purification, which is reflected in an increase in the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, goes hand in hand with the psychological redirection that results from leading a more spiritual life. This means that the person is no longer turned towards the senses but is attentive solely to God. This redirection and reorientation focussed on submission to God alone successfully completes the moral purification. It gives the soul its health – "... its health being God Himself" (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:431). John of the Cross says further of this:

The soul, then, touched with love for Christ, her Spouse, and aspiring to win his favour and friendship, departs in the disguise that more vividly represents the affections of her spirit. Her advance in this disguise makes her more secure against her adversaries: the devil, the world, and the flesh. The livery she thus wears is of three principal colours: white, green, and red. These three colours stand for the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity, by which she not only gains the favour and good will of her Beloved but also advances very safely, fortified against her three enemies (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:446).

John of the Cross discusses God's method of leading the three faculties (intellect, memory and will) into the spiritual night as being the means to achieve divine union. These theological virtues of faith, hope and love, through which the soul is united with God, "... cause the same emptiness and darkness in their respective faculties: faith in the intellect, hope in the memory and love in the will" (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:166). By this is meant that in order to journey to God, "... the intellect must be perfected in the darkness of faith, the memory in the emptiness of hope and the will in the absence of all affection" (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:166).

What is being said here is that, in the dark night of the spirit, faith must affirm what cannot be understood by the intellect: in other words, "... faith is the substance of things to be hoped for and that are not manifest to the intellect" (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:166). After all, if it were manifest, it would not involve faith. In a similar way, hope puts the memory in darkness as regards earthly and heavenly objects, "... for if it were possessed, there could no longer be hope for it" (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:166). Similarly, love causes a void in the will by virtue of the fact that the person must love God above all things. Therefore, all affections must be withdrawn from the world, in order to focus wholly on God. In these different ways, the increase in the theological virtues will lead the person to union with God.

In summary, it is noted that the moral purification and the psychological reorientation of the person to God, which are the fruits of the 'dark night of the spirit', have brought the theological virtues of faith, hope and love to a new level of synthesis. John of the Cross (*Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:449) concludes by saying that, "... without walking sincerely in the garb of these three virtues, it is impossible to



reach perfect union with God through love”. Teresa insists throughout her writings that we cannot love God without loving our neighbour. Therefore, the intimate union with God in which the person, in a way, becomes like God through cooperation and participation in the life of God, means that the person is then able to love all things as they were meant to have been loved. The ‘dark night of the spirit’ is thus an immediate preparation for this perfect, loving union with God. Bearing the fore-going in mind, the next section will discuss what the dark night of the spirit means in contemporary terms.

## **7.6 The Dark Night of the Spirit in the Contemporary World**

Some early psychological studies of mysticism regarded the experiences of the mystics as something approaching mental illness or abnormal behaviour. Nonetheless, there are clear differences between mysticism and mental illness, as Kourie (1992:90) points out:

Concerning the charge that mysticism pertains to the pathological, it needs to be stated at the outset, that while there may be certain similarities for example between some types of schizophrenia and certain phenomena associated with mysticism, nevertheless, the differences are such as to abrogate the view that the two can be equated.

The fact that both schizophrenia and mysticism can lead subjects to withdraw from society is incidental. The vital difference is that the schizophrenic has no control over the illness, unless medicated, while the mystic certainly has an element of choice as to how he or she wishes to progress in the spiritual life. Furthermore, the mystic can have and understand extraordinary experiences and at the same time continue with daily living, whereas this is certainly not true of the schizophrenic who lives in his or her own interior world. We saw in Chapter Two, that mysticism has an element of ‘abnormality’, as it goes beyond the norm. However, the mystic is led not to withdrawal, but to an engagement with life, even if not living in the midst of society.

The psychologist William James (1842–1910 CE) has highlighted several significant similarities between mysticism and insanity:

In both, there is the same sense of importance in small events, the same words having new and exciting meanings that other people do not discern, the same feeling of being controlled by external powers, the same sense of mission, the same exalted emotion (James quoted in Meadow, 1984:105).

Despite these similarities, there are significant differences:

... in insanity, the emotion is pessimistic compared to mystical optimism; there are desolations instead of consolations; the meanings are dreadful instead of wonderful; and the powers are enemies rather than friends (James quoted in Meadow 2001:105).

These commonalities and differences mentioned by William James are also identified in research carried out by psychologists and psychiatrists in the latter part of the twentieth century.

There have been a wide range of psychological explanations given of the mystical experience. For example, a study by Prince and Savage (Kourie 1992:91) maintains that "... the mystical experience is a regression to the early experience of the infant being nursed at the mother's breast". Kourie (1992:91) challenges this observation: "... it is questionable whether experiences of being nursed offer the same type of intuitive insight as the knowledge claimed by mystics with respect to reality". Some studies on the mystical experience have even suggested that "... the experience of mystic union in its various forms may be a 'playback' of a record of the mystic's biological conception" (Maven 1972:25). It is difficult to determine whether such research can contribute to a better scientific understanding of the mystical experience, particularly as the results seem out of character with the results of the mystical experience expressed by authentic mystics, such as Teresa and John of the Cross.

Research conducted by the psychiatrist May, however, offers a more apposite explanation of the experiences encountered by Teresa and John of the Cross. On the basis of his extensive research, May comments authoritatively on the dark night of the soul and depression in the contemporary world. May (2004:153) observes that Teresa and John of the Cross "... demonstrate an understanding of human psychology that seems uncanny for their era. They knew the workings of the human unconscious before Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)". May states that these two mystics have, with

amazing accuracy, described psychological phenomena that would later be called “... defence mechanisms, behavioural conditioning, addictive and defective disorders and psychosis” (2004:153). May also adds that, in his opinion “... they had clearer insights into the dynamics of consciousness and attention than most modern neuroscientists” (2004:154).

May (2004) cites several reasons as to why Teresa and John of the Cross were such excellent psychologists. Firstly, they were attentive to their own interior life and reflected upon it. Secondly, they were deeply involved in their community and as spiritual directors they attended to the inner lives of numerous individuals. Thirdly, as community leaders, they were involved with aspects of community life that are today called ‘teamwork’, ‘power struggles’ and ‘group dynamics’. They also had excellent communication skills, which is evident from their poetry, writings and metaphors.

In the contemporary situation there are many psychological ailments, as there probably were in Teresa’s era. But, as depression is such a scourge on humanity today, it is worth reflecting in this section on the dark night of the spirit and on how it relates to clinical depression. It is also worth noting that, throughout the writings of Teresa and John of the Cross, they often refer to a concept of ‘melancholia’, which today is the equivalent of depression, and often part of mental illnesses, from the slightest to the most serious.

The clinical depressions referred to above have common symptoms with which mental health professionals generally agree. Meadow (1984:108) states: “The typically depressed person is deeply sad and lonely. Life seems empty and lacks meaning: the future is bleak”. Meadow also associates the following with the depressed state: “The depressed person has negative attitudes towards self, others, and the world. Life holds no joy or delight” (1984:108). At the more extreme end of the spectrum, “... in the depressed state, the depressed person may feel guilty of unpardonable sins. In extreme cases, delusions and/or suicide may occur” (Meadow, 1984:108). Teresa and John of the Cross pinpoint some of the differences between ‘melancholia’ and the ‘dark night’, as well as how these states should be treated.

Teresa and John of the Cross were concerned that people who suffered from ‘melancholia’ receive the treatment they needed. May (2004:155) observes that:

... this was one of the primary motivations by John of the Cross in developing his three signs of the night, and both he and Teresa had many other insights about distinguishing debilitating depression from more liberating spiritual experiences.

The three signs of the night in the writings of John of the Cross, which are also referred to by May (2004), are, firstly, dryness and impotence in prayer and life; secondly, a lack of desire for the old ways of prayer and living; and thirdly, a simple desire to love God.

In trying to understand what Teresa and John of the Cross encountered as ‘mystical experiences’, it is instructive to look at the insights presented in the research of Fodchuck (2001:28), a member of the British Columbia Psychological Association. She determined that there are definitive ‘marks’ of an authentic religious experience. Firstly, the person remembers details of the experience and is aware of a sense of timelessness. Secondly, there is an experience of ‘incredible’ shifts of consciousness that are beyond words and description. Thirdly, the experience remains engraved in memory. Fourthly, the experience confers a sense of certitude of a divine reality and presence. Fifthly, the experience carries the authority of truth. Finally, the experience increases the desire for God and may initiate the spiritual quest.

These criteria certainly have a distinctly mystical flavour. In Chapter Three of the Sixth Mansions (in the *Interior Castle*), Teresa confirms what Fodchuck’s research indicates: authentic experiences from God give peace to the soul, remain in the memory for quite some time and eventually become reality. Further, as Teresa writes (Chapter Three of the Sixth Mansions), these mystical experiences possess an uncommon clarity, come unexpectedly, require spiritual listening, contain great depths of meaning and convey much more than words themselves. To provide further insight into the differences between the two states, we can also look at May’s earlier book *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit* (1982). In this, May attempted to clarify the distinction between the dark night and depression in modern psychological terms. May (2004:156) said, for example, that:

... a person's sense of humour, general effectiveness and compassion for others are not usually impaired in the dark night as they are in depression. There is also often a sense that down deep, people really wouldn't trade the experience of the dark night for more pleasure.

He also observes that, when he accompanied people through dark night experiences, he never felt the negativity and resentment that he often felt when working with depressed people.

However, one must be cautious, as the distinctions can sometimes be blurred. In May's experience, people often experience depression and the dark night at the same time: "To say the least, the dark night can be depression" (May 2004:156). The experience still involves loss: loss involves grief and grief could become depression. He also confirms that "... primary clinical depression can become part of a dark night experience, just as any other illness can" (May 2004:156). May confirms that, since the dark night and depression often co-exist, it might not be so easy to distinguish one from the other. This is corroborated by the 1976 report by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry in their document 'Mysticism: Spiritual Quest or Psychic Disorder'. The Group concluded that "... distinguishing between mysticism and certain psychiatric disorders is virtually impossible" (Meadow 1984:105).

As the causes of depression are known today, May (2004) advises that it is sensible simply to identify depression where it exists and to treat it accordingly, whether or not it is associated with the dark night. He asserts:

I want to restate this because it can prevent unnecessary suffering and in some cases can even be life saving... it is wonderful if the same person happens to be experiencing something of the dark night as well, but the presence of the dark night should not cause any hesitation about treating depression (May 2004:157).

It could be argued that an experienced spiritual director will recognise pathological signs that are not part of the dark night, i.e. the onset of clinical depression, and advise competent medical treatment.

In some circles, however, it is believed that the medications that are used to treat depression may interfere with deeper spiritual processes, such as the dark night. May disagrees with this view: “Nothing could be further from the truth. To my mind, there is never an authentic reason to let any illness go untreated” (May 2004:158). May is also not certain why people should hold the belief that medication could interfere with God’s work in the soul. He suggests that this thinking is based on a belief that God’s grace is so weak and ineffective that it could be blocked by a chemical compound. His firm response in this regard is that Teresa and John of the Cross “... left that kind of thinking behind four centuries ago and it is high time for modern people to catch up with them” (May 2004:159).

To attempt to summarise the differences between major depression and the dark night, it will be helpful to tabulate them, as presented in the research by the psychologist Meadow (2001:35):

**Table 1: Psychological Differences between Depression and the Dark Night**

<b>Depression</b>	<b>Dark Night</b>
Persistent, depressed daily, sad mood lasting for two weeks or more.	No sustained depressed or sad mood. May feel anguish or “bitterness of soul”.
Diminished interest/pleasure in all, or most activities.	Diminished interest, aversion even, in ordinary and spiritual things.
Excessive introspection.	No excessive introspection.
Negativity, low self-esteem, worthlessness, and inappropriate guilt.	Guilt regarding aversion to prayer and discouragement regarding presence of hidden wounds and character flaws after much spiritual work.
Hopelessness, suicidal ideation.	No hopelessness or suicidal ideation.
Unintentional weight loss or gain.	No weight loss or gain.
Insomnia or hypersomnia.	No sleeping disturbance.
Withdrawal and/or isolation.	In-drawing, longing for quietude, simple, idle contemplation.
Fatigue and/or energy loss	Lassitude due to previously intense spiritual activity. Lack of energy caused by an absence

	of sensory gratification.
Diminished capacity to concentrate.	Desire not to use discursive reasoning. Inability to use imagination to meditate. Decisive but attentive to inner guidance of Spirit.
Anxiety	Fear of having regressed spiritually. Fear of being abandoned by God. Worry about servanthood. Painful solicitude toward God.

The above table is useful because it provides a convenient summary of the differences between depression and the dark night of the spirit. These have been identified by various researchers in this field of study. Importantly, it provides a useful guide, especially for a spiritual director, to note these effects in someone who is progressing on the spiritual journey. It also makes it possible to appreciate and understand the differences between the two states, as both require different approaches.

## 7.7 Conclusion

Regardless of the preparation that a person may undergo, one can never fully prepare for the ‘dark night of the spirit’. Conversely, if it were indeed possible to prepare for it, then the experience would not be ‘a dark night’ at all. Here the mystical path is complicated by the apparent loss of the very basis for spiritual endeavour itself; religious meaning disappears. The mystic feels an absolute sense of abandonment, and the limits of faith and hope are severely tested. The soul’s powerlessness and emptiness, the knowledge it has acquired of its weaknesses and the feeling of having been rejected by God, all intensify this work of detachment and purification that conditions the renewal of the soul’s being and prepares it for the infusion of graces and divine gifts. It is precisely through these gifts of God that the soul moves from dispersion in the world to recollection in the being of God. Notwithstanding this darkness and without the hope of any consolations, the person has to persevere in the task of continuing on the spiritual journey. This is the true mark of the mystic: perseverance and faith in the absence of meaning.

John of the Cross, like Teresa, has emphasized suffering in his writings, because he believes that it is the primary and usually the only manifestation of God’s presence to

us. Suffering awakens the pain of loss, not only within the person, but also the loss and abandonment of the presence of God. Paradoxically, it is as a result of this suffering that the theological virtues are honed to perfection. John of the Cross is certain that the theological virtues and the gifts of God are the fundamental principles for contemplation and the life of mystical union. Furthermore, if these theological virtues are not perfected, then the purpose of the dark night, being the moral purification and complete reorientation of the person to God, will not be attained.

The ultimate union with God, in which the person becomes like God, renders the person capable of loving all things as they are meant to be loved. The 'dark night of the spirit', however dark it may be, is always a secure path to God and is always, ultimately, about life, light and love. Finally, like Peter, a person in this state of darkness will also have to abandon himself or herself to God and say: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life" (Jn. 6:67). The next chapter discusses what it means to achieve union with God, which is the crowning accomplishment of the spiritual seeker of God in this life.



## CHAPTER EIGHT:

### Union with God

#### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter critically examines the experiences relating to the Seventh Mansions, as described by Teresa in the *Interior Castle*. The Seventh Mansions describes the fulfilment of what began in the First Mansions as a ‘prayer for beginners’. For a person who sets out on the spiritual journey to God, the ultimate aim is the achievement of ‘union with God’. It thus represents the culmination of all the work done by the supplicant in the preceding six mansions. The history of the expression ‘union with God’ is uncertain, but Dupré (1989:1) observes:

The Christian concept of *unio mystica* developed through a long and complex process since the term first appeared, possibly as far back as the fourth century; its sources are, of course, in the New Testament. In the Pauline as well as in the Johannine writings life in Christ consists in a dynamic union with God, both with Christ as God’s divine self-expression and with the Father in and through Christ. God’s spirit seals the union and initiates an ever growing participation in the intimacy of the divine life.

Nonetheless, despite this glorious promise of union with God, Burrows (2007:110) says of this final chapter in the *Interior Castle* that “... there is a disconcerting flatness about the Seventh Mansions, a sense of anticlimax”. Once Teresa had achieved this mystical state, she appeared to be incapable of putting it into words. Burrows’ argument is that it was quite likely that it was difficult for mystics to express verbally, let alone in writing, the marvels of God’s mystical union and what they experienced in this state. Burrows (2007:110) further notes that “... the chapters of the Seventh Mansion lack the verve, characteristic of her writing. The reason is simply that there is nothing that can be said about the Seventh Mansion”. This does not mean that there is literally nothing to be said about the Seventh Mansion, but rather that Teresa could not easily express verbally, let alone in writing, what she has experienced. Burrows (2007:110) reiterates that it is difficult for someone who has experienced mystical union to describe this experience, because “... entering into it

we are in a world where human words are meaningless”. This is echoed by Dupré (1989:3) who writes: “A study on mysticism is bound by the limits of expression”.

Given the above, Teresa’s hesitancy in writing the *Interior Castle* is understandable. On the threshold to the Sixth Mansions, she calls to God and the Holy Spirit to help her to express verbally something about the many unutterable secrets which have been revealed to her: “May He be pleased to enable me to explain something of these difficult things, which I know will be impossible unless His Majesty and the Holy Spirit guide my pen” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:112). At the beginning of the Seventh Mansions, her prayer to God becomes even more urgent:

If it be His Majesty’s will, may it please Him to guide my pen, and give me to understand how I may tell you some of the many things which there are to be said and which God reveals to every soul that He brings into this Mansion. Earnestly have I besought His Majesty (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:208).

It is particularly difficult for mystics to encapsulate their transformative spiritual experiences in words. As Dupré (1989:3) asks: “How faithfully does a universalised interpretation reflect the primary experience? Language, especially language about the ineffable never copies; it always creates”. As the mystical world has no easy point of comparison with the everyday world, Teresa, like many other mystical writers, resorts to using symbols, metaphors and allegories. However, even such symbolic representation is a matter of concern for mystical writers. As Angela of Foligno (1888:93) writes: “My words are more of a desecration and a blasphemy than a description”.

Teresa thus chooses to use the symbolism of marriage, which is a significant feature in the Sixth and Seventh Mansions, in order to communicate in words something of the marvels of divine union. Boyce observes that, after Teresa had returned to writing the *Interior Castle* and begun the final chapter of the Fifth Mansions, she changed from one allegory to another:

She left aside for the moment the allegory of the butterfly, which she had been using, and introduced another ‘comparison’, as she calls it, in order to give a better description of the highest stages of divine union in the last series of Mansions. It is the nuptial imagery which she develops into an

allegory. And she claims she cannot find a more adequate image (Boyce 1984:49).

Spiritual betrothal and spiritual marriage are the symbolic terms used by Teresa and John of the Cross to indicate the two stages that encapsulate mystical union. Because this symbolism is so powerful, and used so frequently by mystical writers, it is necessary to define and discuss these terms.

## **8.2 Spiritual Betrothal**

### **8.2.1 Definition**

Teresa presents abundant teaching on the concept of spiritual betrothal in the book of her life and in the Sixth Mansions. So does John of the Cross in his Stanzas of the *Spiritual Canticle*. In attempting to define the term ‘spiritual betrothal’, Teresa (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:136) says: “Then the cloud rises to heaven, taking the soul with it, and begins to show it the features of the kingdom he has prepared for it”. And in the *Interior Castle*, Teresa asserts (in Peers 2004:155): “The soul really seems to have left the body; on the other hand, it is clear that the person is not dead, though for a few moments he cannot even himself be sure if the soul is in the body or not”.

The betrothal is thus a meeting between two persons who desire to be united and to get the opportunity to know each other, but it does not involve any mutual engagement. As will be described later, in the mystical union there is a loss of consciousness and complete suspension of the external and internal senses. However, when the soul regains consciousness, it is absolutely certain that it has been in God. With regard to the betrothal, which is the stage before reaching union, Teresa writes that, the betrothed in this state “... is not deprived of its interior senses; for it is not like one who suffers a swoon or a paroxysm so that it can understand nothing either within itself or without” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:144).

### **8.2.2 Characteristics of Spiritual Betrothal**

It seems that mystical betrothal takes place in a rapture, which draws the soul out of its senses and introduces a period of ecstatic contemplation. Marie-Eugène (1997:518) writes, for example: “The spiritual betrothal bears more resemblance to the spiritual marriage than to the mystical experience of the Fifth Mansions”. The betrothal is furthermore characterised by the receipt of gifts from God. Teresa refers to this in several chapters of her autobiography, as well as in the Interior Castle, where she speaks of “... the jewels which the spouse is beginning to give his bride” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:157).

The jewels that are referred to are, firstly, the discovery of God in divine union, which is “... a touch of God in the substance of the soul” (Marie-Eugène 1997:520). Secondly, as is the case of any engagement, there is also in this stage an exchange of promises and mutual fidelity: in other words, God has revealed God’s choice of this particular soul to be God’s spouse. Teresa thus states that God is taking the soul to God’s self, and she becomes God’s bride: “... and His Majesty told her that it was time she took upon her His affairs as if they were her own and that He would take her affairs upon Himself” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:214). The third jewel is that the restlessness of the soul is removed:

It is not surprising, then, that, as this little butterfly feels a stranger to things of the earth, it should be seeking a new resting place. It cannot return to the place it came from, for, as has been said, however hard we try, it is not in our power to do that until God is pleased once again to grant us this favour (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:94).

These graces or jewels mark the end of the spiritual betrothal and fill the last chapter of the Sixth Mansions. The spiritual betrothal brings to completion the preparatory work of purification. Although this only occurs in perfect union, nevertheless the visits assure the person of God’s action in the soul, which continues to increase until the achievement of spiritual marriage.

## **8.3 Spiritual Marriage**

### **8.3.1 Definition**

In spiritual marriage, a new state is created that is distinct from spiritual betrothal. John of the Cross provides some guidance on distinguishing between the two states when he defines spiritual marriage:

In betrothal there is only a mutual agreement and willingness between the two and the bridegroom graciously gives jewels and ornaments to his betrothed. But in marriage there is also a communication and union between the persons. Although the bridegroom sometimes visits the bride in the betrothal and brings her presents, as we said, there is no union of persons, nor does this fall within the scope of betrothal (*The Living Flame*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:682).

In spiritual marriage, therefore, the person comes to the end of the journey to God, having reached his or her own centre, which is the Seventh Mansions in which God lives. It is in this mansion that the person will live in perfect union with God in this life, and it is characterised by a direct, spiritual perception of the knowledge, love and wisdom of God.

### **8.3.2 Characteristics of Spiritual Marriage**

When Teresa reached the stage of spiritual marriage, she realised that there was a profound difference between just hearing and having the faith to believe in God and God's words, and actually understanding with utmost clarity the spiritual truth revealed by God. Teresa tries to express this realisation as follows:

What a difference there is between hearing and believing these words and being led in this way to realise how true they are! Each day this soul wonders more, for she feels that they have never left her, and perceives quite clearly, in the way I have described, that they are in the interior of her heart – in the most interior place of all and in its greatest depths. So although, not being a learned person, she cannot say how this is, she feels within herself this Divine companionship (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:211).

In the above quotation, Teresa is referring to her knowledge of the three persons of the Trinity that dwell in the centre of the soul. This realisation marks the beginning of the spiritual marriage. In my view, it is not the end of love but the start of a love relationship, which will continue after this life into eternity.

The spiritual marriage, as opposed to the spiritual betrothal that precedes it, has as one of its most important distinguishing characteristics what Teresa refers to as the imaginary vision of the ‘most sacred Humanity of Jesus’. Teresa describes this as follows:

When granting this favour for the first time, His Majesty is pleased to reveal Himself to the soul through an imaginary vision of His most sacred Humanity, so that it may clearly understand what is taking place and not be ignorant of the fact that it is receiving so sovereign a gift. To other people the experience will come in a different way (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:214).

It is important to discuss in depth this ‘favour’ that Teresa refers to, because it is one of the fundamental differences between this mansion and all the others that preceded it. Teresa also stresses that this vision is quite different from anything that may have happened in the other six mansions:

For you must understand that there is the greatest difference between all the other visions we have mentioned and those belonging to this Mansion, and there is the same difference between the Spiritual Betrothal and the Spiritual Marriage as there is between two betrothed persons and two who are united so that they cannot be separated any more (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:215).

What Teresa refers to as the ‘greatest difference between all the other visions’ is the fact that the soul clearly understands what is taking place through the revelation of God to the soul. This understanding arises because “... the vision came with great force” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:215) and “... because of the words which He spoke to her” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:215). This difference implies that the visions in previous states were not experienced in the same way. What is also different during the state of union is the revelation to Teresa of the Holy Trinity and in this regard Teresa’s quotation is significant. In this intellectual vision of the Holy

Trinity, the spiritual truth of the doctrine of faith is revealed to the person in a direct, immediate and personal encounter with God:

Our good God now desires to remove the scales from the eyes of the soul, so that it may see and understand something of the favour which He is granting it, although He is doing this in a strange manner. It is brought into this Mansion by means of an intellectual vision, in which, by a representation of the truth in a particular way, the Most Holy Trinity reveals Itself, in all three Persons. First of all the spirit becomes enkindled and is illumined, as it were, by a cloud of the greatest brightness. It sees these three persons, individually, and yet, by a wonderful kind of knowledge which is given to it, the soul realises that most certainly and truly all these three Persons are one Substance and one Power and one Knowledge and one God alone; so that what we hold by faith the soul may be said here to grasp by sight, although nothing is seen by the eyes, either of the body or of the soul, for it is no imaginary vision. Here all three Persons communicate Themselves to the soul and speak to the soul and explain to it those words which the Gospel attributes to the Lord – namely, that He and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell with the soul which loves Him and keeps His commandments (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:210).

What is described here by Teresa is that the soul attains a new relationship with God and a new kind of understanding, like the two partners in a marriage where the two are united as one body in the sacrament of marriage but are yet distinct from one another within that unified activity. Teresa writes that the vision of the Trinity was so clear that she could see the distinctions between the persons, in that all three persons were represented distinctly. Having reached that point, Teresa remained permanently in the Trinity, regardless of what she was doing in her daily, exterior life. This is also confirmed by Dupré (1989:6): “The final state of permanent union is characterised by an uninterrupted awareness of God’s presence”. In other words, it is precisely the permanent quality of union that distinguishes the state of spiritual marriage from that of the spiritual betrothal, in which the presence is still punctuated by periods of absence.

Teresa explains further that, in the spiritual marriage Christ is in the centre of the soul, and directs the heart, mind and action as if there were only one body, one mind and one spirit. This centrality of the person of Christ in the human soul, emphasises Teresa, cannot be overstated:

The soul, as I have said, neither moves from that centre nor loses its peace, for He Who gave His peace to the apostles when they were all together, can give peace to the soul. It has occurred to me that this salutation of the Lord must mean much more than the mere words suggest, as must also His telling the glorious Magdalene to go in peace; for the words of the Lord are like acts wrought in us, and so they must have produced some effect in those who were already prepared to put away from them everything corporeal and to leave the soul in a state of pure spirituality, so that it might be joined with the Uncreated Spirit in this celestial union. For it is quite certain that, when we empty ourselves of all that is creature and rid ourselves of it for the love of God, that the same Lord will fill our souls with Himself (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:218).

This theme of ‘emptying oneself’ is the real effect of progressive interiorisation: as one clears away the earthly things in the soul, space is made for God. The transformation from the old self into the new self is brought to completion in this mansion. This creates a state of complete acceptance and surrender to God. Through filling our souls with God, there is now a mutual and permanent abiding of God in the soul.

Howells (2002:93) refers to what Teresa identified as the ‘centre of the soul’: “The centre of the soul is the attainment of the dynamic structure of the Trinity, in the mutual exchange between God and the soul of the spiritual marriage”. Teresa focuses on reaching the centre of the soul throughout the progressive stages of transformation. Interestingly, it is not only in the Seventh Mansions that this occurs, as the soul becomes more like God and is raised above nature to the level of God. In fact, it occurs in the early stages of the spiritual journey too, before the person has had any mystical experiences. This likeness of the soul to God, according to Teresa, is found at the centre of the soul.

When Teresa talks about the Trinity, she emphasizes that it is not a relationship that is static, but one that results in an overflowing of love in the soul. This was further explained to Teresa, who heard the following words in this state: “Don’t try to hold Me within yourself, but try to hold yourself within Me” (Howells 2002:111). This is a profound thought and expresses the strange paradox that it is only when the soul has progressed through the mansions that it is sufficiently mature to hold itself within this reality.



The Trinity was not contained in Teresa, but Teresa was contained in the Trinity. Howells (2002:111) explains by saying that Teresa's "... deepest identity was found within the activity of the persons of the Holy Trinity in their internal relations". In other words, Teresa understood how, through her participation in the life of the Trinity, she could see the dynamic interrelationships and union of the persons of the Trinity "... simultaneously with their inner distinctions, and also how her own deepest identity was found in the same mutuality and distinctions between the persons" (Howells 2002:111). This experience transformed her knowledge of her understanding of the Trinity into an "... activity very different from merely holding this truth by faith" (Howells 2002:111). This mystical union gave Teresa the understanding as to how the Trinity could be both three and one; that is, she realised that each person of the Trinity is distinct, and yet they are one substance, one power, one knowledge and one God. This is also why Teresa wrote, of her union with God, that she was one with God and yet distinct from God.

Another characteristic of spiritual marriage is the peace which the soul experiences. Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:210) confirms that "... the soul as I have said neither moves from that centre nor loses its peace". This peace that Teresa refers to comes from the fact that there are now hardly any periods of aridity or interior disturbance, as the soul seems always to be in tranquillity. This is also echoed by Dupré (1989:7): "A divided consciousness enables the mystic to take care of ordinary duties, even to suffer and to be disturbed on one level while preserving tranquillity on another". In other words, the 'centre of the soul', referred to by Teresa, remains unaffected by the things that preoccupy the mind.

Even in spiritual marriage, however, the soul continues in its progress towards God. Perfect fulfilment is not reached in this lifetime. Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:214) makes this very clear: "... this great favour cannot be fulfilled perfectly in us during our lifetime". This is echoed by John of the Cross who also writes that this life is not eternal life but is only a shadow when compared with the longed-for, face-to-face vision of God.

Further, Teresa emphasises that the union with God in the Seventh Mansions does not mean that the body cannot suffer. The body may still experience many difficulties and

trials. As Teresa explains: “Our whole body may be in pain, yet if our head is sound the fact that the body is in pain will not cause it to ache as well” (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:221). The physical, mental and emotional trials in one’s life will continue to be experienced, as they are part of the progressive interiorisation of the person on the spiritual journey, even in the Seventh Mansions. From the writings of Teresa, I believe she implies that this process of transformation continues even into the next world.

In summary, Teresa readily admits that the analogy of spiritual betrothal and spiritual marriage is inadequate; however, she also says that she can find no more appropriate metaphor for describing these spiritual states. As mentioned previously (in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.5), because of the difficulty in trying to put into writing her experiences, Teresa also offers other images for understanding the differences between spiritual betrothal and spiritual marriage. For example, she uses the metaphor of two candles to suggest that those who are betrothed to one another are like two wax candles, the wicks of which have been joined to give off a single flame. Although the light they project is one, they can still be separated. This is comparable to the transitory union of the Sixth Mansions. Spiritual marriage, however, is compared to the rain that falls into a river or a stream, which flows into the sea. The water of the rain is one with the water of the river, and they cannot be separated: the union now is indissoluble. As another example, she says that those who are married are like the light that enters a single room from two different windows. Although the light enters from different directions, the light in the room cannot be separated. Although these metaphors may be inadequate, as Teresa is at pains to advise her readers, what is also apparent from them is that spiritual marriage is unlike anything the soul has ever before experienced.

## **8.4 Union with God**

### **8.4.1 Definition**

Dupré (1989:3), in trying to formulate a definition for union with God, questions whether what is described as *unio mystica* “... refers to an experience or, rather to a state of being that lies beyond experience”. In the latter case, the state goes beyond

what the faith of a particular community presumes to be present in all its constituents. For example, Christians in a state of grace assume that they are all united with God, but this is a union of a different order to mystical union.

Dupré (1989:4) asserts that: “A careful reading of the texts seems to suggest that mystics claim a unitive state of being, but a state that causes fundamental changes of consciousness”. This raises a further question though: “For such descriptions suggest, directly or indirectly, that at the peak moments of the unitive state, consciousness itself recedes or at least comes to function in ways incompatible with ordinary states of mind” (Dupré 1989:4). It would seem, then, that the concentration of the mind has turned from being conscious of self to being conscious of God.

This is echoed by Julian of Norwich (cited in Colledge and Walsh 1978:184) who states:

No soul is at rest until it has despised as nothing [naughted] all things which are created. When it by its will has become nothing [naught] for love, to have Him who is everything, then it is able to receive spiritual rest.

In order for the reader to understand what is meant by ‘naughting’, it is helpful to look at Dupré’s (1989:6) explanation: “The ‘naughting’ of self is the other side of unification. It obviously does not refer to a single act but to a slow and presumably painful process of self-emptying”. This explanation is consistent with the views expressed throughout this dissertation concerning the spiritual journey.

This issue of consciousness – of self and of God – needs to be discussed further. According to Dupré (1989:7), “... the division between a deeper and surface level of the mind runs through all of Western mysticism”. He also observes that in Christianity there is a “... distinction between two or, more commonly, three levels of the soul”. In order to understand what is meant by this statement, it is instructive to look at the particularly precise explanation offered by Richard of St. Victor (d 1173 CE):

We must not understand a twofold substance by these two words [soul and spirit], but when we distinguish between the twin powers of the same essence, the higher is called spirit, the lower soul. In this distinction, the soul and that which is animal remains below, but the spirit and that which

is of the body and subject to corruption, perishes and as a dead body falls back into itself and below its nature. That which is subtle and purified ascends upwards like a breath of air, rises above and transcends itself (Richard of St. Victor cited in O'Brien 1964:133).

The analysis of the division of the soul, put forward so precisely by Richard of St. Victor, implies that the mystic has the capacity to combine a life of contemplation with a life of action. This is the overall message in the *Seventh Mansions*: contemplation in God while serving humanity. This message is also substantiated by the mystical masterpiece, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, whose author is unknown, which unequivocally emphasises the contemplative life: "Having come to participate in God's life, the contemplative also comes to share God's life-giving Love" (Egan 1984:96). It can therefore be said that the state of union with God alternates active charity with contemplative solitude.

John of the Cross points out that conformity with the will of God in this state is the essential effect and the practical criterion of perfect union: "When the soul rids itself completely of what is repugnant and unconfirmed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love" (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:163). Like Teresa, John of the Cross states that a soul must strip itself of everything unlike and non-conformed to God so that it may receive the likeness of God: "And the soul will receive this likeness because nothing contrary to the will of God will be left in it. Thus it will be transformed in God" (*Ascent*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:163). This comment is similar to that of Teresa's view earlier in this chapter where reference is made to the 'emptying of self' and the putting away of all earthly things to make way for God in the soul.

Howells (2002:100) also emphasises the need for detachment for spiritual transformation: "Detachment does away with any idea that we can build our humanity toward God but rather aims to strip away our human will and all other impediments to union". He further stresses that this reduces a conflict of interest in the soul:

Thus we prepare for the discontinuity between the natural and supernatural operations of the soul in union, and paradoxically, in doing so we reduce the conflict between the natural and supernatural stages which contributes to reuniting the divided parts of the soul in union (Howells 2002:100).

It is essential to determine the nature and effects of the authentic union with God, which is now dealt with.

#### **8.4.2 *The Nature of Union with God***

The first quality of this union with God, according to Boyce (1984:59), is that of completeness. What is meant here is that, before the spiritual marriage took place, the relationship between God and the person could be said to be provisional. In union, things are different in that "... there is a definite surrender in love to each other, and interpersonal exchange at the level of being in between these two protagonists of the spiritual adventure" (Boyce 1984:59). In this context, the relationship is complete.

The second quality is that union with God has a distinctive character of permanence. To use Teresa's analogy, in the Seventh Mansions, the innermost chamber has been reached, and it is the centre in which God makes God's permanent abode. It could also be said that God invites the person into this mansion. As Burrows (2007:112) emphasises: "... it is no longer a question of a passing contact with the King dwelling in the centre; this is mutual and permanent abiding". There can only be such permanence when the full spiritual potential of the person has been realised by God's life in the person and, equally importantly, by the person's response to God.

The third quality is the intensity and intimacy of the love in this union. It is a love that unites the soul in an inexpressible way with God. Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:110) says: "... it is all a matter of love united with love". John of the Cross (*The Living Flame*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991:645) says, similarly: "... a stronger love is a more unitive love and we can understand in this manner the many mansions the Son of God declared were in His Father's house". It can be argued that the seven mansions of Teresa can be understood in this way too, namely as a progressive interiorisation of the person to God in seven stages. It must be emphasised that the marriage allegory refers to a purely spiritual union of love, and not a physical, human union (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:108):

The two things [spiritual marriage and earthly marriage] work differently, for in this matter which we are treating there is nothing that is not spiritual: corporeal union is quite another thing and the spiritual joys and consolations given by the Lord are a thousand leagues removed from those experienced in marriage.

A final quality, according to Boyce (1984:62), of this union with God "... is its gratuitous nature". What is meant here is that the soul acknowledges the gifts of God in this state: "It is all His doing. The soul has simply acquiesced" (Boyce 1984:62). Teresa (*Life*, in Cohen 1957:151) confirms this observation: "I do not imagine I am doing anything of myself, but entirely understand that this is the Lord's work ... it is the Lord's own doing and we play next to no part in it". In other words, God is given the honour and the soul experiences humble gratitude for the graces received.

#### **8.4.3 *The Effects of Union with God***

When union is achieved with God, it does not – and should not – only benefit the soul who has achieved such union, but all other beings too. In other words, the soul that is experiencing a union of love with God is in active service of its neighbours through the practice of good works in the world. This is fundamental in Christian teaching and spirituality. It is also clear that, without this stage of union with God, the person can never become as Christ-like as Teresa and other mystics, who have experienced union with God. All that can be hoped for in this life is for the person to continually strive to become increasingly more Christlike, while progressing interiorly.

Boyce (1984:66) refers to this effect of union with God as the "... highest contemplation combined with fruitful service". He is referring to the radical change that takes place in the person at this stage, in that the centre of the person's life is no longer the self, but Christ. "This is the most fundamental effect of union, while all the others of peace, detachment, fortitude and joy, spring from this total identification with Christ" (Boyce 1984:67). The life in the Seventh Mansions is certainly not idle or sterile, but it engenders greater activity and self-sacrifice in the service of others. Teresa is very definite about the aim of prayer and especially about the prayer of union: "This, my daughters, is the aim of prayer: this is the purpose of spiritual marriage, of which are born good works and good works alone".

Burrows (2007:115) notes that another of the effects of divine union is the following:

Teresa observed a self-forgetfulness which is so complete that it really seems as if the soul no longer existed because it is such that she has neither knowledge nor remembrance that there is either heaven or life or honour for her, so entirely is she employed in seeking the honour of God.

Therefore, the soul exists not for itself, but for God alone. In this aspect Teresa is not talking about external matters, but about the interior life of the soul. Teresa (*Interior Castle*, in Peers 2004:232) writes about this forgetfulness of self:

Oh, my sisters, how little one should think about resting, and how little one should care about honours, and how far one ought to be from wishing to be esteemed in the very least if the Lord makes His special abode in the soul. For if the soul is much with Him, as it is right it should be, it will very seldom think of itself; its whole thought will be concentrated upon finding ways to please Him and upon showing Him how it loves Him. This, my daughters, is the aim of prayer: this is the purpose of the Spiritual Marriage, of which are born good works and good works alone.

In Teresa's view, the effect of forgetting oneself and becoming absorbed in love of God is that selfishness and self-centredness are overcome. This gives rise to a purity of intention, even zealously, in doing good works in the name of God.

Another effect of union with God is a longing to suffer for God. This longing, however, does not cause distress in the soul as was the case in the dark night of the spirit. In this state the soul wills only what God wills. It readily embraces suffering when it comes, but is not anxious if there is no suffering. Howells (2002:117) points out that: "The fact that the center of the soul is now permanently at peace does not mean that the whole soul has reached a state of beatific rest". In fact, as Teresa points out, there is still a battle to be fought, in the sense that the person will need to continue doing good works in the world, even if this involves suffering and hardship: "There is still a war to be fought, which is no longer within the soul but outside" (Howells 2002:117). The difference is that the person is now fighting this war as Christ, as He is now the center of the soul. There is furthermore a new spiritual vitality not experienced previously.

## 8.5 Conclusion

In attempting to summarise the extraordinary mystical experience of union with God, it could be seen as the achievement of the progressive interiorisation of the person into the divine life of the Trinity and the achievement of Christ-likeness.. This, then, is the state of complete acceptance and surrender into God's hands. In this state, the soul does not rest in the vision of God, as it will certainly do in heaven. But having attained the state of permanent union with God in spiritual marriage, the person returns to the world to continue to produce good works in love and in accordance with the will of God.

It emerges from Teresa's Interior Castle that the most important effect of union with God is to 'love God and love thy neighbour'. This is, after all, the fundamental tenet of the Christian faith and the main mission of all Christians. It is also the paradox of Christian mysticism, in that it is not possible to take refuge in a God who is disconnected from life and creation. The significant difference between most Christians and all mystics is that the former have no option but to approach this mission by having faith in a God that is unseen but present, whilst mystics who have experienced the mystical encounter of union with God in the Seventh Mansions, approach the same mission with a God that is seen and experienced.

Finally, the mystical experience of union with God may seem rather daunting, in that the achievement of this last stage of the spiritual journey could well be beyond the capacity of ordinary Christians. And yet, Teresa's experience speaks of the living God and provides a roadmap for the journey that shows how every person can achieve holiness even if they do not all reach these mansions.



## CHAPTER NINE:

### Conclusion

The purpose of this research was, firstly, to attempt a fusion between the spiritual insights of the sixteenth century mystic, Teresa of Ávila, and a contemporary understanding of the spiritual life. Secondly, a related purpose was to ascertain whether the Teresian spirituality is still relevant for the journey to God today, in the twenty-first century. Consequently, the research methodology was built on a theological and historical foundation and the research was carried out within the framework of a literature study, looking closely at the works of Teresa of Ávila. The *Interior Castle*, which presents Teresa's own spiritual journey, is widely acknowledged to be her masterpiece. Starting from an initial acknowledgement of God, it reveals a typical progression in the spiritual life through a series of seven so-called 'mansions' towards achieving true mystical union with God. In this dissertation, Teresa's own journey is measured against the writings of others, both her contemporaries, as well as more recent writers, in the areas of spirituality, mysticism, theology and psychology, in order to gain insights from other perspectives.

In order to understand the spirituality of Teresa, the history and main characteristics of the term 'spirituality' were examined. The contemporary development of spirituality in modern society was shown to be fuelled by the recognition of an ongoing search for the transcendent. This search is a hallmark of post-modernism and has restored the dialogue between spirituality and theology. The result has been that spirituality has become a major discipline in its own right, independent of the more contained subject of theology. The twenty-first century is characterised by such worldwide phenomena as postmodernism and globalisation, which impact on all areas of life. These have also had a significant impact on spirituality. As a result, the very term 'spirituality' no longer represents only Christian experience, but applies to all human beings seeking the integration of spirituality into their lives. It was thus shown that spirituality is not merely a doctrine or a set of rules, but the ongoing experience, integration and interiorisation of the spiritual into one's everyday life.

Teresa commenced writing the book the *Interior Castle* at the age of sixty-two, and wrote it within the space of a few months. Various writers consider the book to be a literary masterpiece, because it synthesizes her insights, diversity of images and spirituality into an integrated narrative. The *Interior Castle*, as we have seen in this dissertation, sets out the itinerary of spiritual life through a series of seven mansions. These are to be understood as cumulative stages through which people journey in order to reach union with God. We have seen how each mansion focuses on a particular stage in the spiritual life. This makes it possible to identify and understand what is happening to the person on the spiritual path. This progress through the mansions we have referred to as a process of progressive interiorisation. The journey effectively begins with a decision to follow a spiritual path to God. This sets in motion a process of spiritual change, progress, surrender and transformation. Essentially, what underpins the spiritual life in all religious traditions is a process of detachment from worldly attractions and a growing attachment to the things of God. This is a destiny that it is difficult to fulfil if one falls prey to selfishness and a sense of self-importance. All of these are progressively purified through the Mansions.

It was discussed that the journey to God can be experienced through two paths of mysticism referred to as Kataphatic or Apophatic mysticism. It was shown that Kataphatic mysticism, or the *via positiva*, is based on the concepts of creation and on God's love, and that affective language is used to speak of the loving relationship between God and humankind. Apophatic mysticism, or the *via negativa*, posits, in contrast, that all such statements must remain unsaid in deference to God's hidden reality. The relationship between these two spiritual paths has often been asserted to be one of progression. Irrespective of the path on which the person sets out on the journey, progressive interiorisation is accomplished through the traditional Christian understanding of the so-called 'triple way', a term that refers to the three stages from purification through illumination to the final stage of mystical union. Each of these stages in the spiritual life has clear characteristics and distinguishing signs and, moreover, has different sets of criteria that allow the person to discern where they are on their spiritual journey. Although contemporary thought does not negate this traditional threefold approach to spiritual growth, it does emphasise a move away from only individual resonances to a renewed emphasis on the collective understanding of discipleship. It has been the contention of this dissertation that the

three stages of progressive interiorisation (the so-called ‘triple way’) remain as relevant in the field of spiritual growth today as they were when Teresa wrote the *Interior Castle*.

The founding image of Teresa’s *Interior Castle* is, as the name implies, that of a castle, at whose centre God can be found. The person who is seeking God thus first has to enter the castle, and then proceed through a series of seven mansions. A question often prompted by the analogy of the seven mansions is whether Teresa is teaching that there are seven stages to spiritual growth, or whether the seven-fold castle structure is intended more as a rhetorical device. What we have shown in this dissertation is that the seven mansions are more than a rhetorical device. That is, they describe a real progression within the spiritual life. At the same time, though, the division into the seven mansions is somewhat arbitrary, which is reinforced by the fact that Teresa’s descriptions of the various stages often overlap. It is my contention that it would be too simplistic to compartmentalise spiritual growth into seven neat divisions. This also detracts from the fact that spirituality, as argued in this dissertation, is a unique quest for each individual and so the boundaries between the mansions can be no more than guidelines.

Teresa asserts that commitment and a concerted effort is required throughout all the stages of the *Interior Castle* in order to achieve ultimate union with God, and she emphasises repeatedly that the power needed to progress flows from the centre of the soul, where God dwells. Teresa’s image of the castle with God as its centre is not some abstract theological hypothesis; rather, its purpose is to provide a helpful allegory for Teresa’s Carmelite sisters and for others who strive to reach union with God. Furthermore, Teresa does not employ a highly theoretical and abstract style of writing. On the contrary, Teresa’s style is very accessible, and her advice is practical and down-to-earth. For this reason, we can conclude that Teresa’s writings and her spirituality are as real and as applicable today as they were when the book was first written.

The themes examined in this dissertation give a profound knowledge of and insight into the spiritual virtues that help to build the foundations of the spiritual journey. The important recurring themes throughout the *Interior Castle* are *humility*, *self-*

*knowledge* and *silence*. Teresa emphasises their importance because they are not only the foundation for a spiritual life but, in fact, are indispensable for the journey to God. Furthermore, she also believes that there are three necessary prerequisites to succeed in prayer. The first is to love one another, the second is detachment from all created things, and the third is humility. This emphasis on humility echoes the thought of St. Augustine who added humility to the cardinal virtues of faith, hope and love. This is also why Teresa perseveres in seeking understanding of the self, which she refers to as self-knowledge. For Teresa, humility and self-knowledge are ultimately one and the same. She emphasises that it is by cultivating humility that one becomes willing to look critically and consciously at one's self, and to acknowledge one's weaknesses, as well as one's strengths. Teresa's invitation to discover a more authentic self is what has intrigued scholars in psychology for several decades. They have thus been quick to appreciate Teresa for her capacity to express internal experiences with a clarity and profundity that convey a deep appreciation for the complexities of the human psyche.

It is in the First Mansions that the foundations of *Interior Castle* are laid and where humility, as emphasised by Teresa throughout her book, is the cornerstone on which the castle is built. The *Interior Castle* is also clearly a book of prayer in its different forms. Teresa presents prayer as the way to reach God, and thus describes the various stages of prayer from the 'prayer of beginners' to the ultimate 'prayer of union'. The main aim of the book is thus to be a spiritual discourse on prayer, which is the barometer that reflects one's relationship with God. We have seen how Teresa presents prayer in the *Interior Castle* as a practice that evolves progressively from the first three mansions (vocal prayer, meditation and the prayer of recollection) to the summit of the contemplative 'prayer of union' reached in the Seventh Mansions. It was argued that prayer, and especially contemplative prayer, constitutes the ultimate and crowning experience of the encounter with God. It was noted that there are various forms and degrees of contemplation. But the term contemplation as used by Teresa refers to infused contemplation, which is fully supernatural. It was shown that its object is divine truth itself.

Teresa also expresses her anxiety that many souls are capable of reaching the beginning of contemplative prayer in their spiritual life but that few would pass beyond it. Teresa maintains that this is not because of any fault on the part of God, but

more likely because of one's own shortcomings. Regardless of where one may be in the stages of prayer, Teresa counsels that one needs to remain steadfast and single-minded in persevering in prayer on the journey to God. Before reaching union with God, the person needs to pass through the purgative state of the dark night of the spirit. It was explained in the dissertation that the expression 'dark night of the spirit' was not one used by Teresa in her writings; the expression was in fact borrowed from the writings of John of the Cross, and specifically from his book *The Dark Night*. We have argued that, in the *Interior Castle*, the 'dark night of the spirit' is usually experienced by the person who has reached the Sixth Mansions: this stage refers to a time of great trials and tests. However, Teresa also emphasises that it is not imperative that a person will experience the dark night of the spirit at a specific point along the journey or even at all.

We have seen in this dissertation that, regardless of the preparation that the person may undergo, it seems that one can never really fully prepare for the dark night of the spirit. It was also shown that the mystical path is complicated by the apparent loss of the very basis for spiritual endeavour itself: religious meaning disappears. The mystic feels an absolute sense of abandonment and the limits of faith and hope are severely tested. The soul's powerlessness and emptiness, the knowledge it has acquired of its weakness and the feeling of having been rejected by God forever, all intensify this work of detachment and purification that conditions the renewal of the soul's being and prepares it for the infusion of graces and divine gifts. It is precisely through these gifts of God that the soul finally moves away from the last elements of dispersion to a way of recollected living in conformity with the will of God. What is of importance, however, as this research has shown, is that the person has to persevere in the task of continuing on the spiritual journey, regardless of the 'dark night' and without hope of any consolations. This is the true mark of the mystic: perseverance and faith in the absence of meaning.

From the writings of the mystics referred to in this dissertation, it can be understood that the 'dark night of the spirit' is a process rather than an isolated event. Unfortunately though, it seems that if the person is serious about spiritual growth then the price will be unavoidable suffering. However, it was indicated that the dark night of the spirit and clinical depression often coexist and that it is not easy to distinguish

one from the other. Various qualified and competent writers have provided advice on how to distinguish between them, as it is important to discern whether the suffering a person experiences at any stage in the spiritual journey is caused by depression or by the dark night of the soul. It was emphasised in the research that these two states do require separate professional assessment and, in the case of depression, the individual may in fact need medical or psychiatric treatment. There are many psychological ailments today, as there probably were in Teresa's era also, but depression is particularly pervasive at this time.

The paradox, however, emphasised by mystical writers such as John of the Cross and Teresa is that, at this stage, suffering is the primary and often the only manifestation of God's presence. Suffering awakens the pain of loss, not only within the person but also the loss and abandonment of the presence of God. Paradoxically, it is as a result of this suffering that the theological virtues are honed to perfection. John of the Cross makes it clear that these theological virtues are gifts of God and that they are the fundamental principles of contemplation and of the life of mystical union; if they are not perfected by the dark night, then the complete reorientation of the person to God will not be attained. The dark night of the spirit, however dark it may be, is always a secure path to God.

We have seen in this dissertation that the ultimate goal achieved in the Seventh Mansions, namely union with God, is the fulfilment of what began in the First Mansions as the 'prayer for beginners'. The Seventh Mansions, thus, represents the culmination of the journey in the preceding six mansions. It can also be understood as the achievement of the progressive interiorisation into the divine life of the Trinity and the accompanying transformation by the Holy Spirit to Christlikeness. This is the state of complete acceptance and surrender to God's will. The research has shown that, in this state, the soul does not rest in the vision of God but, having attained the state of permanent union with God in spiritual marriage, the person returns to the world to continue to do good works in the love of God. The contemplative life is certainly not an end in itself. One can only truly persevere in spiritual marriage with God if one is impelled and empowered to selfless action. This means living an ordinary life in an extraordinary way. This way of life, we have shown, is a defining

characteristic of Christian mysticism: union with God impels a person toward an active, outward, rather than purely passive, inward, existence.

The main effect of union with God is, in fact, what all Christians are charged to do, which is to love God and to love one's neighbour. This is the fundamental tenet of the Christian faith and also the paradox of Christian mysticism: the person cannot take refuge in a God that is disconnected from life and creation. The difference between the ordinary Christian and the mystic is that most Christians live their lives with faith in an unseen but present God, whereas mystics, after experiencing God, continue their lives with a God that is seen and experienced in a way which is ineffable.

Finally, we have shown that, while the mystical experience of union with God is open to all people, it is a mystery why not all respond in the same way as the mystics. However, Teresa explains that it is not the fault of God that some people do not progress into the later mansions, but rather the fault of the person. To these, Teresa's experience gives the confidence of hope. This is because her reflections speak of the living God guiding and directing each person along the spiritual path; what is vitally important is not what mansion one has arrived at, but whether one has persevered in the love of God. Every person can achieve this holiness when they decide and embrace progressively the action of the Holy Spirit in their life.

The spiritual life is not something that can be compartmentalised into periods of meditation and prayer, rituals or ceremonies, spiritual reading or guidance, our service or active charity. The spiritual life comprises the totality of our existence, and the final conclusion of this dissertation is that it is the integration of the whole person into the transcendent within them. This, ultimately, is the challenge that Teresa poses to us in the twenty-first century, as she did to her sisters in the sixteenth century.

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