

INTERIOR CASTLE EXPLORED is a penetrating interpretation of St Teresa of Avila's central teaching on prayer. But it is more than a contemporary Carmelite commentary on that 16th-century Carmelite classic; it is also, in its own right, a guide to the life of deep union with God.

First published in 1982, *INTERIOR CASTLE EXPLORED* has itself become known as a spiritual classic written by a widely-praised and bestselling author.

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INTERIOR CASTLE EXPLORED RUTH BURROWS ocd



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St Teresa's teaching on the Life of Deep Union with God

RUTH BURROWS ocd

Fourth Mansion, Part I

It is when we come to the fourth mansion that our problems start. Here, says Teresa, we 'begin to touch the supernatural'. 'Supernatural prayer,' 'infused contemplation', these for Teresa, mean the same thing, and we are going to add 'mystical contemplation' as synonymous, also. This entity, whatever it is, is the theme of all her writings. The ascetic path she marks out, whether in the *Life*, the *Way of Perfection* or the first three mansions of the *Interior Castle*; the insistence on the hard work needed to detach ourselves from ourselves; the practice of the virtues and fidelity to prayer, all are orientated to the reception of infused contemplation. She sees it as something utterly precious, a pearl beyond price, to be desired with ardour and laboured for with everything we have, not because we can actually acquire it, for we cannot, but its bestowal demands a generous preparation on our part. What is said here of St Teresa can be said equally of St John of the Cross. This talk of infused contemplation did not originate with them, they took over without question a terminology already well established.

What then is this 'infused contemplation'? Is it something only a very few privileged persons may aspire to or is it something that is the very stuff of human fulfilment? A cloud of bewildering misconceptions envelops and obscures the subject; it has hung over it for centuries. This chapter is an attempt at explanation, if indeed one can speak of explaining what is of God himself. I hope two things will strike the reader as we progress: firstly that what is said here is wholly in line with tradition; secondly, that, within that tradition, a bold break is being made, a break with age-long, popular, even 'professional' interpretation of the tradition. Unless both are seen, then either I have not expressed myself well or am being misread.

Let me begin this discussion with personal reminiscences which, I imagine, will ring bells in many a mind. There were not many books in our small library when I entered Carmel many years ago, but what few there were immediately put one in a mysterious, alien world. Here was a strange vocabulary that bore no relation, it seemed, to the rest of life. It was like a spiritual code. A rapid glance down the index of what is a recognised classic of the mystical tradition, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, by A. Poulain, SJ, published in the early years of this century, will give an idea of what I mean: Mystical graces or touches; Prayer of Quiet, Prayer of full union; Five spiritual senses; The soul attains to God by a spiritual touch; Physiological features of ecstasy; On the ligature during the prayer of full union, etc. and this is to confine ourselves to the less esoteric topics. What does it all mean? What relation has it to real life? Reading through the gospels, redolent with everything that is real in life, where does this strange jargon fit in? These were the questions I asked myself. Clearly some people saw sense in it, saw a connection with the gospels, with real life, even if I could not. Worse, reading what Teresa has to say of her own states of prayer, states such as Poulain and many others would consider utterly sublime, as most intimate communications of God, around which treatise after treatise has been written throughout the centuries, far from being impressed, I found myself put off. It seemed to cheapen God and I found myself hoping it wasn't God! What I see I was really saying, is 'it can't be God'. That conviction, timidly held by sheer intuition and common-sense so long ago, I now maintain unwaveringly. For many, many years, I have wrestled with the problem, seeking intellectual clarity. No author has helped me save John of the Cross, but it was a long time before I could understand him comprehensively. All others, it seemed to me, assume the identity of what Teresa *describes* of her state of prayer, that is, what she *felt* of that state, with the *state itself*; what, in her case, *accompanied* the mystical state with the *reality itself*. My conviction is that anything that can be described, given an account of, simply cannot be the mystical encounter in itself. Why is this so? Because the mystical encounter is precisely a *direct* en-

counter with God himself. Both Teresa and John are quite sure of this; it is the fundamental statement they make about it: this water flows 'direct from the source'; 'God has drawn near', he is 'very close'; and for John of the Cross it is 'an inflowing of God into the soul'. They see earlier forms of prayer as 'indirect'; God speaking, communicating, etc. through 'natural' channels, in the 'ordinary' way. Infused or mystical contemplation is *God in direct contact*; God himself, not a created image of him, and therefore 'supernatural' in regard to the subject; contacting in a way beyond the ordinary faculties, therefore 'supernatural' in its mode, also. This, I am certain no one will dispute. When we insist that this encounter with God himself, must, of its nature, bypass, or transcend our material faculties we are saying that it must be 'secret' – John of the Cross insists on this – 'from the intellect that receives it'.

What then are we looking at when we are shown these marvellous, so-called 'mystical experiences' such as Poulain has in mind? We will confine ourselves to Teresa herself. What are we looking at? She herself loved the images of garden and water. Let us think of her as a garden, a very fertile garden irrigated by a deep underground spring which never fails. Over this garden a beautiful fountain plays and our first impression is that this fountain is the source of the garden's fertility, that this it is that irrigates the soil, and, we have to say, if the garden were conscious, it would think so too! We are mistaken and if we look closely we shall see that what we are looking at is not a real fountain at all, it is a phenomenon arising from the particular district the garden is in, the particular consistency of the soil, and the temperature. Moisture from this well-watered garden is caught up and overhangs it like a fountain playing, and perhaps the soft, moist canopy above does refresh the flowers. But certainly it is not the source of the garden's fertility. We are suggesting that, in Teresa's case, there *is* a connection between the underground spring which cannot be seen and that which can be seen, the beautiful pseudo-fountain. In other words, the 'favours' in her case, are an effect of the mystical grace but they are *not* the mystical grace nor in anyway essential to it. They only make the garden more beautiful and interesting to

observe.

Now let us visit another garden. A lovely sight! A glorious fountain arcs from one end to the other, breaking up the light, lovely as a rainbow. We are lost in admiration – and so is the garden – but . . . one moment . . . look at the cabbages! Look at the flowers! Where are they? A few withered stalks, we can hardly see them. The ground is parched and barren, there is no underground spring. What has produced this fountain then? There could be lots of explanations, some scientific trick or other, particular minerals in the soil, but what is certain in this case is that it has nothing to do with an underground spring, for clearly the spring isn't there! In some cases, and definitely so in Teresa's case, the mystical grace overflows as it were into the psychic powers. But we can *never* assume that similar experiences must spring from the same mystical source. And we would stress again that, even in the case of such as Teresa, this overflow has little significance compared with the reality of the grace, as the illusory fountain compared with the underground spring. 'By their fruits you shall know them'. But the fruits of genuine mystical contemplation are of a very special quality indeed.

Another illustration of the relationship between the mystical grace and its possible overflow is that between goodness and charm. We all see this, don't we? Some people are richly endowed with that mysterious quality we call charm. What is it? We can't say. Some have it, some do not. But have we noticed now quite ordinary goodness, accompanied by charm, begins to glow? Only too easily the goodness is over estimated; it begins to dazzle us. Too easily we fail to see that it is the charm which is dazzling us. An equal goodness in one devoid of charm would be overlooked. It is probably true that goodness and still more, holiness give a special quality to charm, but in itself it is absolutely distinct from it. Holiness without charm is rarely recognised. On the other hand, you can have fascinating charm and the popularity that goes with it, with very little goodness. Again, it is a question of the quality of the flowers and cabbages, not the beauty of the fountain that matters.

Insisting on this distinction between the mystical encounter

itself and the possible effect of this in the psychic powers, is to oppose centuries of high esteem for 'the feeling of the presence of God' to single out perhaps the most modest claim to mystical grace. Yet it is hard to see how any open, intelligent mind could fail to see the inherent contradictions in treatises on mysticism, where this esteem is present. You see them in Teresa's own writings and her inevitable self-questioning which drove her to seek authoritative assurance for what was happening to her, because, deep down, 'something isn't quite right somewhere'. Somewhere, there is a huge question mark. You find it verbalised, for instance, in the disputed question as to whether the call to the mystical life is for all; whether infused contemplation is essential for holiness or whether one can be holy and yet not have received this gift. These questions have absorbed the attention of grave men over the centuries, leading to the formation of different 'schools' of spirituality – one holding one view, another the other. The Carmelite school had to devise a form of prayer called 'active contemplation' to cope with the problem. How simple the answer to all this did we but concentrate on the teaching of the gospels and carefully hold in mind the distinction made above.

See the trouble Poulain runs into when he asks if it is presumption to desire the mystical state:

If the supernatural states of prayer were merely means of sanctification, graces of sanctity, the question of desiring them would present no difficulty. But they are extraordinary graces, privileges, divine familiarities, bringing with them marvels of condescension on God's part, and elevating the soul to heights that are regarded without exception by ordinary people as sublime. (*The Graces of Interior Prayer.*)

This passage surely epitomises the contradiction running unsolved through the tradition. It comes from the fact that the attention and emphasis are on the human partner in the relationship of prayer. The criterion for assessing a state of prayer is taken to be what the human partner either does or feels. If they are aware of the presence of God, as they would say, if they feel 'held', are absorbed, then we can assume the

presence of mystical prayer – this *is* mystical prayer; on the other hand, if there is none of this 'suspension', no feeling of God's presence, then we have to say the prayer is not mystical. But when we think about it, is not this an extraordinary thing to do? Surely the very essence of prayer, even in the early stages, is to be there for the God whose very nature is to give. This is superlatively true in the mystical prayer, for this, par excellence, is 'what God is doing'. How can we possibly think that it is all that important how the human partner comports himself, whether he uses his mind in this way or that, whether his psyche produces this or that, as though God's activity in us is dependant on such things. How can we think that what we feel or don't feel, what we know or don't know is all important. If we have faith, surely we *know* that God gives himself without measure and we won't attempt to gauge the depth of the giving by our totally inadequate plumb lines of sense.

Let us take up the point of sanctity. Poulain is telling us that mystical graces are distinct from 'graces of sanctity'. What is sanctity? Poulain suggests that it is a degree below the 'privileges', the 'divine familiarities' of mystical union. Surely sanctity necessarily implies these, sanctity *is* mystical union. Surely the message of the New Testament is that union with God, divine intimacy, familiarity, unheard of privilege, is what man is for, it is the promise of the Father offered in Jesus and for which he died. We are called to be sons in the Son, heirs of God because co-heirs with Christ, sharing in the divine nature, filled with the fulness of God. If mystical union is not one and the same thing with this promise of the Father totally effected in a human being, redemption completed, then it is something bogus. There can be no higher gift than what the New Testament tells us is the common destiny of man.

W.H. Vanstone in his book *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, has a moving passage on the lavishness of God and the destiny of creation. It is the heart of revelation:

The activity of God must be limitless creativity. It must set no interior limit to its own self-giving. It must ever seek to enlarge the capacity to receive of the 'other' to which it gives.

The infinity of the universe must be understood, with awe, as the expression or consequence of the limitlessness of the divine self-giving: for the divine aspiration to give must ever enlarge the bounds of that which is to receive. Nothing must be withheld from the self-giving which is creation: no unexpended reserves of divine potentiality: no 'glory of God' or 'majesty of God' which may be compared and contrasted with the glory of the galaxies and the majesty of the universe: no 'power of God' which might over-ride the God-given powers of the universe: no 'eternity of God' which might outlive an 'eternal universe'... From this self-giving nothing is held back: nothing remains in God unexpended.

This Self-squanderer does not carefully weigh out his gifts, offering 'divine familiarities' to a few, withholding them from others; he is not overflowing generosity to some, miserliness with others. He is always giving himself insofar as he *can* be received and he is always trying to enlarge the capacity so that he can give himself more fully. Without any doubt there are some and perhaps only the few, who have entered in this life into profoundest intimacy with God, but this intimacy, this state of mystical union simply cannot be attested by such psychic experiences as Poulain speaks of. Jesus himself gives us the criterion. It is loving 'as I have loved you', keeping his commandments as he keeps his Father's, it is living as he did in total surrender. This conformity with Jesus, this total surrender, is impossible to human effort, a divine gift is needed, an infusion of divine energy, the Spirit of Jesus himself, the Promise of the Father. This is precisely what we mean by mystical, infused contemplation.

If we strip to the bone what both Teresa and John have to say of the gift, we find: it is *pure gift*, something we can never achieve for ourselves...! however much we may practise meditation, however much we do violence to ourselves, and however many tears we shed, we cannot produce this water in those ways... It is something entirely *new*. It is not a deepening of what has gone before, an increasing expertise, not a continuation, but a break.

It is, as already said, a *direct* encounter with God.
It *purifies* and *transforms*.

Although it can never be achieved it calls for a *generous preparation*.

Do we not see that this is just what the new Testament is telling us of the Father's promise: the 'kingdom of God' in the synoptists, 'eternal life' in John, living with the life of Christ in Paul. When, in the *Way of Perfection*, Teresa begins to speak of the first mystical graces, significantly it is in the context of the Pater Noster, 'Thy kingdom come,' 'He begins to give us his kingdom on earth!' (*Way*, xxxl)

The theme of the kingdom, is for Jesus, the song of his heart; it is springtime breaking in on a wintered world, bringing the world into flower; he laid down his life to bring it in. His parables reveal the secrets of the kingdom to those who can really hear what he is saying, to the little ones of humble heart. Sometimes the kingdom is seen as something coming upon us, or as something within us. Listening to the parables we can be diverted, I think, from their deepest meaning by fixing our attention on what might seem a collective aspect of the kingdom: the seed sown so humbly in Israel will have a world-wide impact for instance; but does this really make sense? God does not give himself to collectives but only to individuals. If the kingdom does impregnate the world of men it can only be because individual hearts have received it. Only individuals, transformed into love are the presence of Love in the world. The leaven is offered to an individual heart to be its transforming principle, offered to be accepted or rejected. If received, there is no end to its inherent power to transform. The seed, welcomed in well-prepared soil has a dynamism of its own which will burgeon into a magnificent fruitfulness; if the soil is unwelcoming through its unpreparedness, the seed comes to *nothing*.

The forgiving love of the Father goes after us as we wander away, escaping from him who is our happiness. Only in his embrace do we find our salvation, only in his embrace are we cleansed of our filth and clothed in beauty. We can accept that embrace of love or we can spend our lives evading it. As W.H. Vanstone points out so movingly, the self-squandering love of God, runs the risk of failure. It is part of the kenosis that the Gift, which is of course, himself, is out of his hands – it can be

scorned. The triumph or tragedy of love rests with us. There are parables that reveal our own hearts to us – part of us which does accept love but at the same time part of us that rejects it: the drag net, the field of wheat and tares. Offered to all without exception, there are few that surrender wholly to it, some more, some less, some hardly at all. Truly we can substitute for the ‘kingdom’, the strange, unlovely terms, infused contemplation or mystical contemplation. How I hate using them; each time I feel a revulsion but must do so if I am to succeed in what I long to do, wipe the slate clean of all images so that everyone can know that there is not a mysterious realm of spiritual reality from which they are debarred. If they wish, they too can be filled with all the fullness of God, ‘heights’, says Poulain, (and how many with him!) ‘regarded by ordinary people as sublime’, and, by inference, not for them. The tragedy of it! This is the work of the Adversary from the start. What is the result? An indolence or apathy that seems justified . . . ‘such things are not for us’. Fixing our attention on an illusory fountain, mistaking it for the ‘fountain of living water’ of which Jesus speaks, we have turned away. Yet, if *you* ask of him, he will give *you* living water, says Jesus.

Is not the whole theme of the gospel of John that of something wholly new breaking into the world of men, something divine, something from heaven, a direct encounter with God such as has not been before, and which man, of himself, can never attain or dream of? It is offered freely to all – Jesus cries aloud in the stress of his desire to give – a pure gift. It can never be forced on us, it must be accepted simply because it is the gift of love. Accepted, it purifies and transforms the water of our humanity into the wine of God. It brings into being a wholly new way of God’s being with his people, a dwelling in their inmost hearts where he is worshipped in spirit and in truth, in temples which he himself must create. It is an unfailing spring of life-giving water replacing the stagnant pool of man’s sinful existence, set in his inmost heart continually renewing the life which is the only true life of man, the life of God himself. It is divine bread, nourishing him and making him live by God, transforming him into God, enabling him to live with an incor-

ruptible life which the body itself is to share and so death will have no meaning. By this new thing men become sons of God. To accept Jesus Christ means accepting his death, entering into it with him: this is the only gate by which this wholly new thing can invade. The cross, surrender to death in order to be created anew, to be born again of the holy Spirit – these awesome thoughts must be present always when we think of mystical union.

There is nothing whatever in the new testament to suggest that this holy gift, the kingdom, eternal life here and now, hits the headlines, compelling assent. Quite the contrary. Jesus suggests its hidden character, lost as it is in the ordinary texture of life. The seed is growing but the farmer does not see it; it grows silently, hiddenly, attracting no attention. His own life among us was just like that and he was scorned and rejected because it was just like that. He repelled the demands for signs and wonders to prove the presence of divine activity. The sign of the outpouring love of God, to be received by all who wish, is the surrender of Jesus on the cross. This is the most divine, the supreme act of creation, the summit of being, and yet, what struck the senses? The tumultuous wind of Pentecost, shaking the foundations of the world, the tongues of fire are only pictorial images of the hidden activity of God, the promise of the Father which indeed shakes our world to its foundations and fills us with the fire of love.

To press home the point still further, read what the scripture scholar, C.H. Dodd has to say of the ‘mutual indwelling’ in the last discourse of the gospel of John. It involves ‘the most intimate union possible between God and man, a real community of being, a sharing of life . . . it is a dynamic incursion of divine energy through which man may speak and do the words and works of God.’ A perfect description of infused contemplation according to Teresa and John of the Cross. Dodd goes on to ask if John the evangelist can properly be called a mystic and considers various uses of the term:

Cosmic emotion is not very common and it is possible for the philosopher to interpret it as unity with ‘God’ in a pantheistic

sense, and so to give colour to what is a theory of the universe. It is possible to interpret certain abnormal psychological states as 'possession' by the divine Spirit. But in neither case have we evidence that union with a personal God is attained. For the only kind of personal union, I repeat, with which we are acquainted, is love. John says that this is in truth the kind of union with God given in the Christian religion . . . it is essentially supernatural and not of this world, and yet plants its feet firmly in this world bearing the fruit of self-sacrificing love for the neighbour. It is not cause but effect of the out-pouring love of God.

Dodd concludes: 'Whether this should be called "mysticism" I do not know.' Both Teresa and John of the Cross would answer emphatically, 'that is just what it is!'

The term 'mystical' is by no means confined to Christianity, as well we know. It is one of the words Christianity took over from the cultured world. The word suggests awareness of mysteries, an experience of transcendence, exaltation, a vision through and beyond what immediately strikes the senses, a passing glimpse of an unseen world. When Christians, in their religious acts, felt something of this – after all, it is a human phenomenon and Christians are human – they naturally fell back on an accepted word. It is this range of experience, commonly dubbed 'mystical' that we need to look at, for by and large, it is precisely this that is confused with the truly mystical, the breakthrough into this world of the divine. The first is a human act and therefore labours under the limitations of 'flesh and blood'; the second is a divine act that transcends these limitations. The confusion of the human psyche with the theological, biblical concept of soul or spirit is common, and is the source of our misunderstandings. Or, even if we do allow the distinction, it is assumed, at least in practice, that the mystical life will inevitably manifest itself in an increase of the psychic powers. This is not so. There are many people who have well-developed psychic awareness. We can conveniently call them 'sensitives'. We find them among all sorts of people in no way religious. What they have is a natural endowment and we can not even say a high endowment. It seems to belong to more pri-

mitive peoples. Children have it, as a rule, and it seems to be a stage on the way to full self-awareness. To surrender to psychic impressions would be to become less rather than more human. Generally speaking, psychic powers diminish as self-awareness grows. Now, certain practices associated with the spiritual life, at least unconsciously foster psychic power though this may not be their direct aim: control and silencing of the mind, fasting, lack of sleep. Some practices of Yoga and other philosophies positively induce psychic states as highly desirable states of consciousness. Transpose these same effects into a Christian context of prayer and they are mistaken for true mysticism. We have to admit that generally speaking, those who have left us an account of their journey of prayer, have been among these 'sensitives' and have themselves failed to distinguish between these psychic effects and the mystical grace itself. Teresa was a marked 'sensitive'.

If we have paid attention to modern scientific investigations of the psyche, and it is unreasonable to think we can understand Teresa and other mystics if we have failed to do so, then we shall have come to the conclusion that it is a most mysterious, largely unexplored dimension where almost anything might happen. Were it not scientifically attested one would find quite incredible a great deal of what is claimed: exquisite music creating a feeling of immense happiness and taking away all fear of death; scents that seem to come from no natural source; knowledge of things to come, of what is happening at a great distance; a feeling of being out of the body, looking down at oneself; seeming to be carried to the threshold of death; a paradisaical ecstasy. There is no end to what goes on in the world of the psyche. This vast range of experience, often awesome and mysterious, belongs to, is part of our material being. It is not of the 'spirit' in the scriptural, theological sense. It is of 'flesh and blood' as Paul has it that cannot enter the kingdom. It belongs to man as 'animate being', that which we share with the material creation and, in itself, has nothing to do with 'spirit' except in so far as everything material is for the growth of spirit. It is possible to have most lofty 'spiritual experiences', and yet be a mere embryo when it comes to capacity for God. Likewise,

such experiences, when in a context of religion and Christian prayer can assume a significance they haven't got. They can operate freely in the earliest stages of the interior life and unless we are clear as to the basic materiality of them, we can be led astray. In those liable to them, who enter the mystic way, they can continue to operate and again can be misinterpreted. Of themselves they are human experiences and, as with everything else, can be used or abused. Understood, used humbly, they can be an incentive and help; God may positively make use of this apparatus when he sees it would help but we must realise that the apparatus is the same in kind as that with which we understand a book, are uplifted and inspired by music, moved by another person: these are all sensible means which God uses to teach and guide us. In themselves they belong to the realm of sense which cannot know spirit directly. The chart may illumine what is written here.

An ambiguity cuts through Teresa's writings on infused contemplation. She is often conscious of it herself but does not know how to solve it. There is no doubt that she confused, indeed identified, in a way John of the Cross never did – he was at pains in his writings to demonstrate to the contrary – what her psychic nature echoed back from a mystical grace, with the grace itself. In her case there is something more and this is what we have elsewhere referred to as 'light on'. This is the time to say what we can about it.

The 'light on' experience is not the mystical grace itself, it reveals it. It seems we must say that it is supernatural in the strict sense, that is, that it is of God and not, in itself proper to the human experience of God in this life. That being so it is wiser to leave it in its mystery and concentrate not on its nature but on what it does. What it does is precisely to illuminate the mystical happening which, of itself, is secret. Presumably, it will perform a different function in different people according to God's plan. In Teresa's case, its function seems to have been to reveal her own soul to herself, enabling her to see God's action in her. What we have to grasp is that this gift, puts a person in a class apart – their experience is *fundamentally different from ours*. It is a very rare gift and all of us do well to take

for granted we are 'light off' no matter how great our psychic perception and consequent 'spiritual favours'. It is very hard to demonstrate that 'light on' is not identical with what we normally put under the generic term 'spiritual favours'. From reactions to what was written of the subject in *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, it is clear that the distinction is not grasped. We must labour it as it is most important. Inevitably the 'light on' person lives in great loneliness once they have begun to realise that others do not share their vision. Teresa, it seems, could never clarify the difference between herself and others; she knew it by effect: her knowledge and certitude contrasted with the ignorance and lack of certitude of others. 'Light on' is the source of the great confidence with which she wrote in an age when there was much to fear and when she had every natural reason for not being sure. It is the source too of her sense of superiority over her nuns and even over the famous prelates and theologians sitting in judgement on her state of prayer and her writings. Unless we accept the reality of this mysterious phenomenon operating in Teresa, we cannot understand her writings.

Although meant for our blessing, 'light on' has not proved an unmixed one, and this because it has not been recognised as *abnormal* and *not* the mystical grace itself. Because it fulfils a prophetic role in the church, it is the bearers of it who, by and large, are the masters of the spiritual life. They are the ones who have written about the path to God. This is not to say that all who have written on the mystical life are 'light on'. By no means: Teresa certainly was. It is possible but not certain that John of the Cross was also. It is true that we don't need this propheticism absolutely, all we need is to follow Jesus in the gospels and keep his commandments of love. However he chooses to give us light through one another, for our blindness and sinfulness hamper us continually. The 'light on', with their overwhelming sense of the reality of God helps us all. Those whose vocation is to a prolonged exposure to God in prayer, to a great inwardness, have a special need of the help of this charism. They can learn from these 'seers' what cannot otherwise be known. Enquiring man is always going to ask: 'What is

union with God?' 'What is the mystical state?' 'What does it mean to say that Jesus and his Father come to *dwell* in the believers?' *How* is it? *What* goes on? Very, very few people know of these things by lived experience; these seers tell us as best they can. By and large, we intellectualise merely, we do not *know* . Only if we recognise this special gift operating in Teresa and acknowledge that it is not the mystical itself but only illuminating it, and, at the same time recognise the abundant upsurge of psychic energy triggered off by the 'sight' of the mystical happening, can we receive her precious wisdom, make use of that which her 'light on' was given for. As said, we won't find the clarification in Teresa herself, we have to sift for it. She was continually confusing three things: the mystical grace, her 'light on' experience of it, the psychic response, and not infrequently this confusion leads to absurdity. Let me illustrate: she is expatiating on the immense blessings infused contemplation brings with it and how could it be otherwise since it is as embrace of God himself, it is a 'spark of divine love enkindled in the soul', it's the 'purest gold of divine wisdom'. Very rightly we ask 'but would God offer this precious gift, which, after all, is only what Jesus is talking about as the gift of his Father he embodies, to the few only? We know it is offered to everyone who will accept it.

You will desire, then, my daughters, to strive to attain this way of prayer and you will be right to do so, for, as I have said, the soul cannot fully understand the favours the Lord grants it there or the love which draws it ever nearer to himself.

She knows of only one way to obtain this favour (and this we can accept unreservedly as it is what our Lord himself teaches us), to practise what has been said in the earlier mansions and then try to be utterly humble. It is humility that obtains this grace. So far, so good. If we have this humility 'you will not think you merit these favours and consolations of the Lord or are likely to get them for as long as you live.' No distinction is present in her mind at this moment between the embrace of love, the nearness of God, the pure gold of divine wisdom and 'favours and

consolations'.

But how', you will ask, 'are we to gain them if we do not strive after them?' . . . There are several reasons why they should be striven for. The first is because the most essential thing is that we should love God without any motive of self-interest. The second is that there is some lack of humility in our thinking that in return for our miserable service we can obtain *anything so great* [italics mine, to draw attention to the clear reference to the 'gold of divine wisdom']. The third is because the true preparation for receiving these gifts is a desire to suffer and to imitate the Lord, not to receive *consolations* [italics mine]; for, after all, we have often offended him. The fourth reason is because 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 do what is good for us and which of us truly love him. That is certain truth, as I know; and I also know people who walk the road of love, solely as they should, in order to serve Christ crucified, and not only do they neither ask for consolations nor desire them, but they beg him not to give them to them in this life. The fifth reason is that we should be labouring in vain; for this water does not flow through conduits as the other does . . . however much we may practise meditation, however much we may do violence to ourselves, and however many tears we shed, we cannot produce this water in those ways; it is given only to whom God wills to give it and often when the soul is not thinking about it at all.

The first three points and the fifth Teresa makes here are faultless when they apply to the mystical grace itself. The fourth reveals the confusion. God is not obliged to grant 'them' to us as He is obliged to grant us glory if we keep his commandments. What does she mean by 'them'? In this instance the word must apply to 'favours and consolations' for, as we have already shown, the grace of infused contemplation is essential to holiness. This life giving 'touch' is the salvation which Jesus offers to all whereby we become children of God in very truth. Teresa concludes her reasons for not striving after – what? with, 'I am sure that if any of us achieve true humility and detachment . . . the Lord will not fail to grant us this favour (which one?) and

many others which we shall not even know how to desire'. How utterly true this is of the gift of infused contemplation itself! At another time Teresa warns us that these 'favours' can be counterfeit. Anyone receiving them must make sure they are growing in humility, detachment, love of neighbour and all the virtues. If not, then they must be fearful and believe they are not of God, who when he visits the soul, always enriches it. Is it conceivable that the embrace of God, his life-giving touch, can be counterfeited? Who is like God? The divine touch must be of such a nature and at so profound a depth that imitation is impossible. What Teresa means here is that all sorts of 'experiences' may be had which are apparently identical with the effect of God's touch in her but which, in others, do not flow from this contact with God in the centre of the soul. She seems to suggest also that a genuine 'favour' which, again, she wrongly identifies with the divine touch, may, at times, foster pride, and warns us to be careful and to remember that everything is his gift. But surely this is quite absurd. How could the touch of Life itself harm us? It is as if we were saying that the healing touch of Jesus might serve to increase the leprosy! But as we have observed earlier and it is worth repeating, only too easily, 'favours' do induce a secret pride because it is assumed they are 'direct-God'. In themselves these things are of no great significance, and are of common occurrence in many contexts, and can be stimulated in many ways, conscious and unconscious. Their presence *never* proves the divine touch; it is when we think they do that all sorts of illusions and dangers follow. Teresa constantly throws onto the scales of her ambiguity, the weight of the effects on a person's life. These in the last analysis – and of this she is absolutely sure – prove or disprove the reality of infused contemplation.

To strengthen the position we are maintaining in regard to 'experiences' which is of such great importance to a clear understanding of mysticism, it will be good to add the witness of one who was close to Teresa in her life time, who had reason to know her spiritual life, had read her writings and witnessed gross misunderstandings growing up around them – John of the Cross. I am not alone in detecting in John's work a deliberate if

delicate corrective to mistaken interpretations of Teresa. Although he himself, as the *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame* bear witness, knew the fire and the dance (though I think there is more to be said in reference to these two books but this is not the place for it), in his systematic exposition of the mystical life in the *Ascent* and *Dark Night*, he hammers home time and time again that infused contemplation of its very nature is hidden, most secret to the one receiving it. He counsels ruthless detachment from 'impressions, images, representations in which spiritual communications are involved' (or might be involved). This detachment 'from all that relates to its (the soul's) natural condition, the sensual and rational parts as well as the sensual', opens the soul to God's pure action, 'the deeper spirituality within'. He is certainly not detaching us from the deep communications of God; his purpose is to free us for these.

Lastly, we will call another witness, young, but wonderfully wise, Thérèse of Lisieux. Here is a mistress of spirituality every bit as much as her mother, Teresa of Avila. She trod a path totally barren of 'favours'. She lived in a religious milieu that assumed beyond question that 'favours' were the authenticating sign of great spirituality. Undismayed, perfectly content, she went her way. It wasn't a case of making the best of it. Rather, she grasped that her very darkness was Jesus' presence; that her experience was wholly authentic, a union with Jesus in his lowly manhood, *and that this is what union with God must mean in our mortal life*. She felt no need as did her brilliant mother, of countless directors to assure her of the truth of her way. It was uncomplicated by the dangerous tangle of undergrowth and overgrowth which, almost to the end, fostered a vague uneasiness in Teresa. But did not Jesus say: 'In that day you will *know* . . . you will not need to ask . . .'

Before we take up Teresa's text again, there is one more misunderstanding which obscures the truth of infused contemplation. Teresa is quite clear that we don't have this gift to begin with. Prayer, she says 'begins to be supernatural'. She adds that usually people have had to spend a considerable time in the earlier rooms of the castle before coming to this one where

there is a *beginning* of supernatural prayer. In other words she assumes the need of a generous preparation – we have to prepare the soil for the precious seed. Popularly it is taken for granted that those of us who are baptised Christians, who try to serve God following our Lord, are already in the kingdom, we belong to those blessed ones who ‘receive him’ and are therefore made his children born not of flesh, not of the will of man but of God. In other words, we have received our new birth, our whole being is now supernatural and so is our prayer. Too easily, promise, potentiality have been expressed in terms of facts, fulfilment. If we look carefully at the gospels have we any reason for thinking that we, unlike others, have received the kingdom? Are we shown anyone in the gospels who actually did? Are we better than they? The point is that Jesus was rejected, even by his own. When the hour of scandal came they lost faith. Our baptism, the privilege of our Christian calling is affirming that *this* mystical union is what life is for, this is what God is calling us to do, this is our vocation. It is not a ‘hey presto’, it is done.

What we call the history of salvation is enacted, or should be, in every human heart. There is the stage of preparation, of promise. God sets to work to educate his sinful people, to give them some sort of knowledge of what he is like so that they can imitate him. It would be impossible without this long preparation for man to recognise, still less accept God as he is in himself. He reveals himself in signs and figures; through the events of history he trains and forms his people until the time has come for his direct intervention. This people can actually produce Jesus. Jesus, the most obedient son, is a product of this long formation. To him God can communicate himself totally. That is one side; on the other, in this Man, God himself is incarnate in his world, offering himself to men in the form of a servant, not – and this is of supreme importance, it lies at the very heart of a right understanding of infused contemplation – as the Lord of Glory. The climax of history has come, the crisis. Will man accept or reject their God? We know the answer. So terrible is the force of sin, of resistance to God in the human heart, that it crucified Jesus. But Jesus passed the test. He

accepted his Father in his bitter suffering and death. This death proved the source of life for those who ‘saw’ God in this humiliated, suffering being. Jesus, having surrendered completely to his Father was received into his inmost heart, wholly transformed in his fires. He who was one with us, in flesh and blood like ours, suffering all the limitations of material being, is now Spirit and, as such, the source of Spirit for all his brethren. Through this Spirit men are transformed into God but in the same measure that they enter into the death/surrender of Jesus.

We, chronologically, are in the third era, that of Spirit. Jesus has lived, was crucified and is now risen. We live in the new age. But we must be careful in our thinking. It is of relatively little moment that we live in the new age chronologically. What matters is that we do so in reality. Just as the vast numbers living in the era of Jesus historically speaking were not so in reality but still in the era of the old testament, so with us. Each of us begins in the old testament and maybe we never move out of it in this life; it will depend on our desire. We are invited to do so – the preparation is preparation *for* something, not a value in itself. To move out of it involves really accepting Jesus and this means ‘earthquake’, the overturning of our world, the end of it, a death in order to rise to the new life in Jesus, which means that then we will be *in reality* in the era of Spirit. We can see here the scriptural foundations for the traditional teaching that there are three ages or three stages in the Christian life. Those who have entered deeply into the mystery of God and man know that this is so, they know it cannot be otherwise through the very nature of things. In Teresa’s terminology, the first three mansions are the old testament of the soul; the preparation for the visitation of God; it is religion of the ‘flesh’. The fourth, fifth and sixth are the soul’s encounter with the suffering Son of Man, a sharing in his death. The seventh is the risen life, the age of the Spirit, when all is Spirit.

Fourth Mansion, Part II

Teresa puts us on the alert with her opening sentences. What she has described so far is relatively simple but now the task facing her is complex for she must try to describe a work no longer human but divine. An entirely new element is coming into being and she warns us that we shall be in danger of misunderstanding her unless we ourselves have considerable experience of it. This new thing is intimately connected with the king who dwells in the heart of the castle. The rooms into which Teresa now brings us are really inside the castle – the others were merely outer courts – and therefore something of the radiance and beauty of the king reaches us. We cannot come to these more interior rooms, she says, until we have lived for a long time in the outer ones, learning, so to speak, the manners of the king's court. The preparation, the old testament of the individual, preparing to receive his God in person. Now is the hour and moment; now the Lord begins to give us his kingdom, simply because now we are in a position to recognise it and welcome it. The first grace of infused or mystical contemplation is given.

In order to understand Teresa and so benefit by her guidance, we must discern carefully the very heart of the grace she is describing from the unimportant accompaniments we have already discussed. We have to remember also that she is viewing it as 'light on' and this will make her actual experience of it totally different from ours. Nevertheless, it is precisely this 'light on' view that enables her to see what is happening and this is the greatest help to us. Let us then look first of all, at what she describes of her own experience. Typically she begins with telling us just what it felt like – very, very different from the feeling experience of former times. She goes to some length to clarify this. The feeling experiences of the earlier mansions she

calls 'spiritual sweetness', those of the fourth and later mansions, 'spiritual consolations'. Buried in her contrasting descriptions of both experiences is the essential core of difference between the two stages. In the former what is experienced flows through the ordinary channels of communication – like water flowing rather noisily through conduits into a basin. In the latter, the water flows *straight from the source*, not merely filling the basin but overflowing onto all around it. Recall for a moment what has been said of 'light on'. It reveals God in the soul, shows what he is doing. Thus Teresa, in this mysterious way, 'saw' God present, loving her, embracing her. She speaks of something happening in her depth. What had happened before – she sees clearly – was not in her 'interior depths' (they were not there), but was all to do with her thoughts and feelings about God, her good works, her grief over her sins; that is with natural activity concentrated on the things of God. Now, it isn't she who is doing the work at all, something *happens* in her depth. In her case, every particle of her being responded with spontaneous delight; psyche and body participated in the feast of love. She seems to make no distinction between this blissful felt experience and the actual grace. The water seems to be at one and the same time the grace itself and the delightful feeling. But note the inevitable ambiguity which forces her into difficult positions. At the very outset of this mansion she informs us that the reptiles from the moat cannot do the same harm here as in former mansions. Nevertheless they harass and upset us and force us to struggle. This is a boon, she says. It would be dangerous for us to be in this state of consolation always and she is suspicious of any prolonged absorption in it. Rightly we may object that, if this consolation is the mystical grace it cannot possibly harm us even though it were permanent, and is it possible for the devil to counterfeit a truly mystical grace?

Teresa then is sure that what is happening to her is, in fact, the king, in her inmost centre, making his presence felt. The automatic reaction is a state of great peace, and delight. (Prayer of quiet). But the important thing from the human side, from our side, is that the 'will' is united to God. Whatever we may feel and think, says Teresa, there is ultimately only one

way of knowing that the will has known this union with God, and that is the effects of this prayer and the actions which follow. These will prove or disprove that we are more grounded in, dedicated to, God. What does Teresa mean by 'will'? After all, we cannot really speak of ourselves as having a will, having intellect and so forth. If my will is choosing God it means that this human consciousness which is me, is choosing God, and this human consciousness cannot choose unless it is knowing. Thus to speak as if the will could be occupied with God while the understanding is not is a contradiction. However, the point Teresa is making is important and we must try to grasp it. What we usually mean by will and understanding relates to our material being, commensurate with ourselves. As we have tried to explain, to begin with there is nothing more to us than this materiality. We are 'flesh' in the scriptural sense. When we relate to God consciously, when we pray we do so with what we are: we try to know him and love him within the bounds of what we are, which is 'flesh'. But what is happening in this mansion is transcending this materiality. A new dimension of being is evolving. Though Teresa speaks of progression within to what is already there, we say a new mansion is coming into existence and this has the quality of 'spirit'. A new sort of life is beginning with its own needs and its own operations and these latter are not circumscribed by material limitations. Again, it isn't that we have a deeper will, a more searching understanding than hitherto; rather, the evolving being that is me is being given a divine knowledge of God and inevitably leaps up to embrace Love showing himself in uniting himself to me. As the divine contact is utterly secret from 'flesh' – the latter *cannot* know of it so – so is the human response which now likewise partakes of spirit. Only 'light on' can actually 'see' this new dimension of being and its response to the divine encounter.

Teresa describes a grace which seems to absorb the whole of her. Then a sort of split state. She still sees that the 'will' is absorbed in God but 'thought' is not absorbed, it wanders here there and everywhere. She admits herself that it was not until she reached the seventh mansion that she really understood what was happening at this time. She distinguishes between un-

derstanding and thought. If 'will' is occupied, so must 'understanding' be, for the first is impossible without the second. The evolving spiritual self is occupied with its Love, but thought – that is the material mind which formerly has had a good, worthy job – now finds itself redundant and, highly indignant makes all the fuss it can, interferes, wanders around dabbling in everything.

So much for a 'light on' experience. Now for ourselves. Two burning questions: what is the normal experience of the first mystical graces; and, can we know we have received them? The answer to the first is that experience will be precisely *non-experience* in the usual, popular sense of the term and the reason is very simple, based on the nature of the grace itself as we have already stressed. An encounter has taken place in the depth of being, in the growing point of spirit, and human consciousness, essentially material, can know nothing of it directly. To say the experience is precisely non-experience is not the same thing as saying there is no experience. Non-experience is a sort of experience. But no amount of spiritual feeling, no matter how sublime, no matter how closely it seems to tally with what Teresa describes, is an experience of the grace itself. Does this mean then that we can never know it save through the rare phenomenon of 'light on'? Do those advanced in the spiritual way not know it at all? The answer is that they do know it but do not know how they know or what they know. What is more, we have to say, I think, that they do not know it at the time it happens but only, looking back, they know it has happened. Sometime in their life they are going to know. This is certain. However, at this moment we are considering very early graces and of these we must say I think that they cannot be known. But they are not without effects and these can be known though perhaps we ourselves cannot evaluate them correctly.

God wills us to keep our eyes closed and not seek to peer into his face. Any attempt of that kind would lead to illusions which are only a form of idol making. Think of his word to Moses, 'you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live . . . Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the