

Turning to the Mystics



Teresa of Avila: Session 6

with James Finley

Jim Finley: [music] Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. [bell]

Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time here together seeking spiritual guidance from the Christian mystic, St. Teresa of Ávila. We come now in this session to the seventh and final Mansion of the soul and the ways that she bears witness to the profound mystical communion with God that is realized in this Mansion.

I thought it would be helpful for us as we come to the end here of our reflections on Teresa to step back, to attempt to kind of take in the spiritual worldview of contemplative Christianity that we saw in Thomas Merton, and when we do St. John of the Cross next, and all of these Christian mystics, because it's the light of God shining out from this vision that illumines the path. They mark out for us along with just this unitive, mystical state of Christ consciousness, God consciousness is realized.

In this passage, I'll only be quoting two passages really by giving preference to this reflection, hopefully that will help you to take in this vision. It's so important to be patient with this because it takes a while for the breadth, or depth, or richness of this vision to kind of prayerfully soak into us so it starts becoming our way of seeing through our own eyes what Christ saw in all that he saw, which is this mystery of incarnate infinity, this mystery of the generosity of God, the path, then, along which this vision is consummated that these mystics are marking out for us.

And so, in the light of this attempt here to step back and take in this vision, I invite you to join me in going back and reflecting on how Teresa began all of this at the very beginning of fighting our way into the first Mansion of the soul, and to see there in that first Mansion, really the first three mansions, is that the directional flow, or the qualitative or tonal quality of the journey, had about it the sense of our sincere intentions to respond to the call of God coming to us from the depths of the seventh innermost mansion of the soul that opens out upon God's heaven in us, beyond us, reaching out mysteriously to touch and awaken our hearts in the midst of our confusion, in the midst of our wayward ways. And so, being so awakened to the path through whatever circumstances the awakening came to us—through love, the love lost, or suffering, or joy, or creativity, however it touched us to personally turned towards God—we set out then to seek God, to kind of find our way with God's help to become ever closer, ever more one with God.

As we engage in this sincerity, for example, committing ourselves to a daily quiet time with God, or *Lectio Divina*, reflective meditation and prayer, and so on, and then to let that carry over into more Christ-like attitudes as we go through our whole day, we realize that we meet there what she refers to as the reptiles, which are really internalized habits of the mind and heart that compromise or in some ways violate our fidelity to this infinite love of God that's unexplainably faithful to us in the midst of our wayward ways. We struggle with this, and we work at it, and we fall down and get up and start over again. Through that fidelity, through that constancy, we grow in character. We grow in stabilizing the internalized grace, which is lived as our faith, the measure of which is love, and in which we look forward to with hope.

And so, we have this faith. We have this love. We have this hope that when we die, we're not annihilated but consummated, and we'll cross through the veil of death into glory, into unmediated, infinite union with the infinite love of God as our destiny, our ultimate destiny.

The sincerity of seeking to live this way in prayer carried over into daily life day-by-day is really holding us. It's really kind of the essence of everything, really, that the currency of the land is holiness, this sincere desire to continue seeking to draw closer to God, who guides us and draws us ever onwards and sustains us throughout the learning curve of our life up to our last breath.

Then we saw in the fourth Mansion, beginning of the fourth Mansion, it's in the midst of this sustained sincerity over time, there comes a certain moment in which we begin to realize that as we sit in prayer, embodying our intention to reach out and draw closer to God, and we're faithful to God, the energy stream, that intentionality toward the hidden center of union with God, one with us in the seventh Mansion, opening out upon paradise, we begin to realize the flow of an energy coming from the opposite direction. That is, we begin to realize that it's not our sincere intentions of seeking God, but, rather, in the midst of our seeking, we discover God is seeking us, not just seeking us, but, rather God—and this is the subtlety of the fourth Mansion, which begins the beginning of the mystical, which she calls divine favors—we begin to sense that the infinite presence of God is with great delicacy flowing into the intimate immediacy of our very presence, beginning to bring about a certain state of a kind of transsubjective communion, a certain kind of mysterious oneness with God, of God's presence flowing into, uniting, and merging with the intimacy of our very presence into the beginnings of a unitive state.

In this unitive state, which is a kind of an event-- And this is so delicate that this influx of this love may go on for quite a while before we get subtle enough or delicate enough to calibrate our heart to a fine-enough scale to discern that it's occurring because this is not God coming into us mediated through our belief, mediated through our feelings, mediated through our convictions, this is the unmediated presence of very God flowing into the very presence of our self in this communal state. It evokes a sense of absorption, a kind of a quiet amazement. Like you kind of hold still to kind of take in like what's happening here. You fall into a stance of the quiet, and the quiet is the freely chosen stance of responding to the heart's recognition that the time has come to love more and think less. That is, it's actively choosing to surrender yourself over to this love that's touching you, pouring into you with such great delicacy.

And so, I honestly think—and I guess I'm sharing this with my own sense of going to Thomas Merton for spiritual direction at the monastery when I was out of high school—imagine you could have Teresa of Ávila for your spiritual director. Wouldn't that'd be great? Once a month, you meet with her and talk, and she would sit with you. If you were in the first three Mansions, I think you'd sense that she was very patient, very accepting, very open, kind of where are you at in your growing desire to be faithful to God in prayer, faithful to God in life, faithful to do God's will. But also, she would be leaning in, also looking, so when she began to pick up intimations that you were alluding

to this new phase of this intermingling of your presence with the presence of God, she would encourage you, I think, to not be afraid, that God's infinitely in love with you, maybe, just maybe, that God's decided not to wait until you're dead to begin to grant to you in some obscure but intimate manner, the celestial union of infinite union with the infinite love of God, even while you're here on this earth and to trust it, and then to discern in your heart the authenticity of this, and heightening your integrity to your fidelity, integrity to your

sensitivity, integrity to your doing God's will in all things. That's where these amazing transformations start to occur, where the water, this imagery of water flowing into you, from some unseen, not from afar through effort but without effort, flooding into you quietly from some unseen place in the depths of yourself, the seventh Mansion. And your heart, like a fountain, expanding to contain the water that flows into it, you realize your heart's being enlarged to divine proportions, that this infinite love is transforming you into itself, with such great delicacy.

In the fifth Mansion, this process, ever so subtle, ever so delicate, ever so intimate, ever so personal, for each person as he or she experiences it. In the fifth mansion, this influx of this love becomes so pure or becomes so atmospherically delicate that the reflective intentional self, being infused in this unitive way, can no longer be the basis for what's occurring, and the reflective, intentional self goes into kind of a deep sleep, and really, it's a kind of a mystical death because, really, you're dying of love. So, the reflective self, intentional self, the physical, emotional self, and its intentionality reaches the influx point of union. And in that union, in a sense in the seventh Mansion, which is really the point at which God's infinite love is giving itself to the intimate immediacy of your very presence, like the infinite presence presencing itself in a communal state of presence under presence, and a presence of this sense of this union, the obscurity of this communion, so, when the moment passes, and reflective consciousness illumined by grace returns, you don't know for sure if anything happened.

But something did happen because you're different. You're different. You have a conviction in your heart that you were in God, and God was in you. You have a deepening desire to only do God's will in all things, and as a butterfly with tattered wings, that you can't live on your own terms. You can only live on terms of this love that's taking you so unexplainably to itself in the depths of the silence, in the depths of your body, in the depths of your soul, and all of that.

And so then, in the sixth Mansion, this process, instead of a momentary state that moves us into this living in the luminosity of the state of the fifth Mansion. In the sixth Mansion, this unitive state starts happening all the time, in an ever-more habitual way, back and forth across every aspect of your life. And the mark of this is rapture, rapture meaning that in this prayer, that God accesses you, and in a sense, carries you off into this union. So, in that rapture, you're carried off into this celestial communion where God can grant favors and awarenesses of the things of God. And each time you return from the rapture, you know that what was so clear in the rapture is so beyond anything you could ever explain to anybody, and it starts touching every part of your life—your relationship with others, your health, your so on—every part of your life is being pervasively woven into this transformative state of dying of love until nothing will be left of you but love.

And since God is love, and you are who you are in the love of God, the union is mysteriously being consummated within yourself, in the midst of the day-by-day.

She also says, don't forget, in the third Mansion, in the beginning of the fourth Mansion, I think. She says, "Sisters," she's talking to the sisters of Carmel, and she

says, “we’re cloistered nuns, but married people experience this in their marriage.” See, this happens as it happens. It’s in the midst of the marriage, in the midst of parenting, in the midst of the ending of a marriage, in the midst of the child going off here or there, in the midst of a ministry or of a service to the community, or in the midst of art, or the midst of poetry, or the midst of creativity, in the midst of the call to spend long times alone, whatever it is, that you’re kind of in the midst of the givens of your life, which is the occasion for this transformative event, that’s so unexplainably happening to you. And here we can see the value of having Teresa because where can we go to have someone help us understand this? Where can we go to have someone to help us discern the integrity of this, the validity of it grounded in the fact that we’re becoming ever more humble, ever more grateful, ever more sensitive, ever more patient, ever more trusting, ever more in this transformed state?

And so, what happens then-- And also visions and locutions, meaning you’re in this, just this unexplainably diaphanous sense for the living and the dead and the spirit. --you’re just in this transsubjective state of consciousness and celestial openness in the concreteness of your life. Pardon me for speaking of it in this way, but I can only poetically allude to it, but in you, it’s in spiritual direction, it would be how you stammering to find the words to express this, or to realize that she’s talking about something that you’ve had intimations of in your own life.

So now, in the seventh Mansion, let’s say, you’re living this way, and this can go on for quite a while, this delectable death, this way. You could die this way; I mean, what a life. Well, what is the seventh Mansion then? In the seventh Mansion then, in the light of this, which creates the context for the seventh Mansion, in the second chapter, she gives two images to help us understand the distinction between the sixth-- By the way, in the consistency of her subtle clarity, remember how she helps us to see, as we move from one Mansion to the next, we pass through a door, and the door has three aspects to it—it’s prayer, the intimacy of prayer, humility, an experiential self-knowledge. She says the distinction between the sixth and seventh Mansions is the one distinction that has no door. So, it’s almost a kind of an opening up for the flowering, or the blossoming, or consummation of the sixth Mansion into this state of mystical marriage, being married to God in this unitive state. And so, here’s her distinction then, between the sixth Mansion and then in the seventh Mansion, Chapter III:

*“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.”*¹In other words, in the sixth, in this phase, it’s just as union is occurring. But there remains intact in me that here I am, this flame, the flame of me—*“This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.”*—and here’s God’s flame. What’s happening is God’s flame and my flame burn in a communal flame, a communal flame in which the distinction between me and God in my nothingness without God remains.

1 St. Teresa of Avila (author), E. Allison Peers (editor and translator), *Interior Castle* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc.) 152-153.

She continues, “*But here*”—that is, now in the seventh Mansion—“*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.*”

²In the session I was sharing where it was so great Mirabai Starr joined us and we referred together, she referred to this passage. In other words, how I put it to me, it seems, there is a place of union, so obscurely complete that you and God mutually disappear as dualistically other than each other. And I think what happens here, and to state another way, I think to poetically get at this, too, it helps me to think about it. She says that, in the state, raptures cease.

Why would raptures cease? Because if a rapture is being carried off by God into the realm of God in the seventh Mansion, you can only be carried off to the extent you’re still not inseparably one in that communion of the seventh Mansion. There’s this celestial transsubjective communion of our self and God. But if you now abide in that communion, there’s nothing to be carried off to. That is, there’s the rapturous quality of the divinity of the intimate immediacy of the unfolding of each new moment in the circumstance in which you find yourself.

We’ll put it another way, so we can get at this mysterious point. It is as if what happens here, it seems to me, is that the self, when you say I, when I would speak, it’s not the me of my ego consciousness, nor is it the me illumined by faith seeking to be ever more one with God, nor is it me experiencing the influx of God pouring into me, but rather the me now becomes the transsubjective communion of the seventh Mansion itself in which in some mysterious way, your words are your words, yet they’re no longer just your words at all. It is now the words of God resonating in your words, touching hearts.

And I think, really, this is why, just simply, it isn’t your emotion. It isn’t your affective communion and ego, but rather it is somehow the very affective intimacy of your own heart is in some way the intimacy of the heart of God as one heart, like one mind, one life, one love, one body, one oneness like this. And this is why I think this is how the lineage has handed on in these people is that in some sense to be in the presence of such a person, you sense you’re in the presence of God, because this person has no ego. Let me put it another way. It isn’t that they don’t have an ego, but rather the ego itself has been subsumed by and permeated by the divinity of the ordinariness of the human experience in the world.

And here then, I’d like to read the second passage, which is the Introduction to the Interior Castle. The Introduction, now that we’ve been sitting with the Interior Castle, it’s helpful in hindsight to look back to see how she introduces it. I think we touched on this way back when we were starting. So, you’ve got to realize here, she’s writing this introduction as a seventh-Mansion person. And there’s this providential dialogue in which she was asked, “*Would you please write what you have learned about this union with God in prayer?*”

And so, she’s writing this as a seventh-Mansion person, and here’s what she says, Introduction, or forward, whatever. “*Few tasks*”-- She’s sitting down, starting to write this. By the way, I think I mentioned this before when I got to go to Ávila through the kindness of Caroline Myss, and I was in the monastery. They had a facsimile there of the Interior Castle, and she wrote it longhand, first draft. It’s kind of like the sacramental of the purity of the

2 Ibid., p. 153.

sharing of her.

And here's how she starts as a seventh-Mansion person, which helps us understand what it's like to be such a person in our own learning curve toward this transformation, as God wills. *"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--"*³ That is, I want to start this, but I don't honestly think that the Lord has given me the spirituality to do it and certainly has not given me the desire to do it. I'm going to do it, but I don't want to do it.

"--for another," reason why it's so difficult, *"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."*⁴ That is, she's more advanced in years, she's getting close to her own death. Now, the Inquisition was going on. There were the foundations going on. There were her ongoing serious health problems. And she just felt she was just beyond herself in kind of the fragility of her day-by-day experience of herself in her life.

So, it's even hard to write about necessary business—correspondence and keeping up with her email kind of thing—even that's a bit much, much less writing something like this of such profundity or depth. *"But, as I know that strength arising from obedience has a way of simplifying things--"*⁵ That's a lovely statement. If I don't know if I can do it, but if I believe in my heart God's calling me to do it, then I know that with God's grace I can do what I'm not up to do, which makes the writing of her work a work of love, a work of the sharing of the letting God speak through her to help us.

*"--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 with both sickness and with occupations of many kinds without feeling a great physical strain. May He Who has helped me by doing other more difficult things for me help also in this--"*⁶

And she goes on to elaborate her woes about writing this, pointing out she's already written her Life, her spiritual autobiography, and she's also written The Way of Perfection. And she goes on to say, *"I don't know if I have anything more to say. I think maybe I said it all. And I don't even remember what I said,"* as another reason for this. And then she goes on and writes it, and we're all so glad that she did.

What's very funny about her is at the very end, when it's all finished, she says, "I realized at the beginning I complained about how hard it would be." But then she says, "You know what? It wasn't as hard as I thought." It was like the flow of it. She was in the flow of it. And you can feel it when you read it, that flow. So, I have one last thought as an encouraging word here for us, with Teresa and with all these mystics, and the thought is this: insofar as you're on this path—well, let's imagine, too, this person who has come to the state of mystical marriage, this unitive state where you're on your way to being so drawn to it—when

3 Ibid., p. 13.

4 Ibid., p. 13.

5 Ibid., p. 13.

6 Ibid., p. 13.

you look back to a time in your life where the spiritual awakening had not yet occurred, maybe you were all just kind of lost in the intensity and the complexities and struggles of the exteriority of things, it was there that you were awakened.

How so? Because God, from the innermost seventh Mansion of the soul, opening out in this celestial oneness with God in paradise, saw you there, came to you in your confusion, and touched your heart. And when you were touched and you started to turn toward God in sincerity, “I think I’m going to pray every day. I’m going to meditate. I’m going to try to be the person I know Christ is calling me to be,” and overtaken by habits of the mind and heart that kept bringing you down, bringing you down, as you sought to, every time you gave up, you decide to start all over again. Why? Because from the innermost seventh Mansion, God was touching you and sustaining you and renewing you in the midst of your ongoing struggles and faltering ways. And so, too, with each step of the way, unbeknownst to you how you were already being reached out to in your very being, where all things were flowing from God sustaining us and flowing in the awakenings along the way from the very earliest beginnings; and, therefore, here’s the final thought:

Because this is so, that I can see how God befriended me in my confusion, I can learn to be at home with the confused. I can learn to be at home with the lost. I can be at home with those who have no idea yet how loved they are by God. And it takes one to know one. I, too, as long as I’m on this earth, I’m a pilgrim of the absolute—I, too—and I’m at home with them because God was at home with me, and I’m at home with them. And just maybe, just maybe in the authenticity of my presence in all of its complexities, just maybe my presence might allow some of this light to shine through and touch them, touch them, touch them.

And this is how Jesus lived. Jesus lived in them, “That God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son,” and Jesus walked the streets of a complicated, busy, beautiful, divine, and sometimes cruel, brutal, and unfair and scary world. And so, this is where I think it all comes full circle, really, for us, because it’s never other than where I am right now as I share these words with the givens of my life. We’re all in the midst of something. And it’s never other than where you are in the midst of yours. And it’s waiting for us there to be opened up to that, surrender to that, be open to that God has begun this work, will bring it to completion. And so then, it’s a grace, then, to sit in Teresa’s presence. And in this presence, we can sense we’re in the presence of God.

So, let’s end, then, with meditation. I invite you to sit straight and fold your hands in prayer and bow. Repeat after me: Be still and know I am God. Be still and know I am. Be still and know. Be still. Be. [three bell chimes followed by silence]

[bell] Bow. We’ll slowly say the Lord’s Prayer together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us. St. Teresa of Ávila, pray for us.

So, this ends, then, our reflections on the Castle. There are a few more sessions coming up here. There are persons who are going to be, we’re going to be talking about the sixth and seventh Mansions together. I am so delighted to hear that, just like Mirabai joined us, Richard Rohr has agreed to join us to be interviewed by Kirsten for a talk, which is great. I’m so honored that he chose

to do that. And we'll take a break for a while. And then probably in January, I think we'll start again next with St. John of the Cross. We find our way to God in a journey through a dark night into this love. So, peace and blessings to all of you until next time. [music]

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. So, if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.