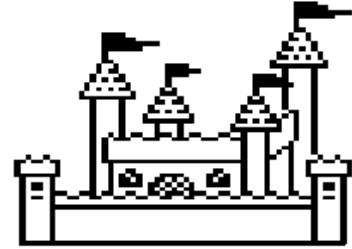


# THE THIRD MANSION

by Father Gabriel Barry OCD

## I. INTRODUCTION

This mansion is an important landmark in the progress of a soul towards spiritual maturity. It is the phase of recollection; that is to say, when meditation and reflection and the other spiritual activities which had been in use hitherto are set aside, though not entirely abandoned. Prayer grows more simplified; it takes the form of a concentration on Christ, really present to us and within us. The acts of love grow in intensity, while there are few formal reflections.



This is what spiritual writers, St. Teresa included, call the prayer of recollection. It is also referred to as the “prayer of simplicity” and “acquired contemplation.” It seems best however to avoid this last term and to reserve the name “contemplation” for the kind of prayer that comes with the special intervention of the Holy Spirit in Mansion IV and beyond. The Contemplation of the Third Mansion is not of this kind, though it marks the highest level of prayer that one can reach without special graces. As St. Teresa points out, this kind of Third Mansion prayer is within the reach of all, and brings many blessings. For that reason, everyone should aspire to it. I would like to say something about it now, after making a brief survey of some matters already mentioned.

## II. RECAPITULATION

In our advance towards union with God, there are various degrees of growth of Spiritual maturity, through which we must pass. They are determined by the influence of the Holy Spirit, and the measure of our response to His grace. The more generous we are, the more He can give. This, I think, is the implication of the parable of the talents which concludes with the words: “the man who has something will have more given to him and he will have plenty. But as for the man who has nothing, even that nothing will be taken away.”<sup>1</sup> The sense is that all followers of Christ are expected to make good use of the gifts, which He gives them. To neglect them deliberately is to frustrate all growth in grace.

Corresponding to each of these stages of development, there is a characteristic way of acting and praying. If we may adapt the words of St. Paul, “when we were children, we acted like children. But when we grew up, we also outgrew childish ways.”<sup>2</sup> This means that the manner of practicing virtue and praying becomes more mature. We can detect this kind of growth, but it is not easy to analyze it. Neither human experiences nor divine grace can be easily divided into strict categories and labeled. There are many who regret that we have even to attempt such a dissection; it tends to disfigure the wonderful unity and deep beauty of the mysteries of our faith. But there seems to be no alternative if we are to express them in human concepts and words.

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<sup>1</sup>Matt. 25:29

<sup>2</sup>1 Cor. 13:11

Both St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross make use of the analytic method in speaking of prayer, though obviously aware of its limitations. In fact it conveys only fragments.

The first three mansions form a unit by themselves. They correspond to the prayer of the First Water, in the *Autobiography*, and deal with the pioneering efforts of the soul, in a state of friendship with God, to cooperate with actual grace and sacramental grace. At this stage, the acts of the human will remain essential to the practice of virtue. As St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, “man is so acted upon by the grace of The Holy Spirit that he also acts himself.” This means that all this while, a lot of hard work will be required. “It is most important for souls, when they begin to practice prayer, to start detaching themselves from every kind of deliberate pleasure except God: and to enter upon their prayer with one sole determination, to help Christ to carry His cross. Anxious, like good knights to serve their King without pay, since they are quite sure of their true and everlasting kingdom which we are striving to attain.”<sup>3</sup>

As we have seen, meditation is the characteristic prayer for all who are passing through this stage of spiritual growth. But the word “meditation” must not be restricted to the formal reasoning process which usually goes by that name. It covers all forms of prayer in which the human effort is uppermost, St. Teresa mentions several varieties: e.g. vocal prayer, meditative, reading, picture making, cultivating a personal friendship with Christ. The last step in this portion of the ladder of prayer is recollection.

### III. THE PRAYER OF RECOLLECTION

This is the kind of prayer that eventually comes spontaneously, one might say, to those who have been faithful to our Lord and to the practice of virtue. This does not mean, of course, that there have been no difficulties or fluctuations. Human nature does not mature in straight lines; even the best have their weak moments, their failures, and perhaps even relapses into sin. The most important thing at this stage is a ready will to stay with Our Lord, or to return to Him, should we have the misfortune to turn aside from following Him. At this time, the will is acted upon and strengthened by a growing spirit of faith and hope rather than by distinctive reasoning or considerations. This phase begins in a simple way, when short fervent aspirations replace systematic reflections, reasoning is not put aside, but it is being gradually replaced by a more intuitive approach, less complicated and more fruitful. But no matter what form it takes, it needs a solid doctrinal foundation, drawn from scripture and theology. The will and the heart at all times need the guidance of the mind, enlightened by the spirit of faith. If this guidance is not provided, there is grave danger of exaggerated emotionalism and other kinds of self-deception.

There are not many specific references to this kind of prayer in the *Interior Castle* itself, but the *Way of Perfection*, chapter 28 and 29 fill in the picture. St. Teresa says that this is the time when one becomes really serious in the business of following Christ. One loses interest in worldly things, not because they are evil or wrong, but because they are now less important. “So, in due time, one rises above them like a person entering a strong castle, in order that it may have nothing more to fear from its enemies. It withdraws the senses from all outward things . . . and

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<sup>3</sup>*Life* 15, Peers I, p. 93

the soul's spiritual sight becomes clear.”<sup>4</sup> St. John of The Cross explains it as follows: “The soul will find itself in this loving and peaceful state of waiting upon God, without in any way exercising its faculties, and without working actively at will, but only receiving.”<sup>5</sup>

Formal meditation is not in fact an encounter with God, though it leads one to the door of the mansion where the meeting takes place. “If Christians go no further than formal meditation, they never meet God; they meet only their own intellect, while they watch ideas go by.”<sup>6</sup>

By following Christ, by walking in faith, by coming to know and love God better, through every means in ones power, one prepares to enter that superior exercise of faith which is contemplation. Human efforts alone are insufficient to bring this about. “We may as well try to make the sun rise,” says St. Teresa. But we can prepare for it in lowliness and simplicity of heart, and the prayer of recollection is in a true sense the ante-chamber of this other nobler mansion.

In the eyes of St. Teresa, the prayer of recollection itself was no mean gift. Until our Lord showed her this method, she confessed she never derived any satisfaction or comfort from prayer. She continues: “It is called recollection because the soul collects together all the faculties, and enters within itself to be with God.”<sup>7</sup> “Do you suppose it is of little importance that a soul which is often distracted should come to understand this truth, that in order to speak to its Eternal Father, or to take its delight in Him, it has no need to go to heaven or to speak in a loud voice? However quietly we speak, He is so near that He will hear us.”<sup>8</sup>

The big hazard in this kind of prayer is the risk of slipping into an effortless but superficial kind of dreaming. It is easy to imagine that we are praying, whereas in fact we may only be browsing with a feeling of natural joy or well-being. For this reason, St. Teresa is very insistent that reasonable self-denial and a determined effort to practice virtue must accompany this prayer of recollection. “We must, to the best of our ability, try to prepare a worthy place for Him who is coming to us. But everything must be oriented to a quiet search, so to speak, for our Lord. It is a good thing to meditate from time to time. But we must occupy ourselves particularly in looking at him who is looking at us and remain at his side with our minds hushed in silence. We can keep him company, talk to him, pray to him, humble ourselves before him, have our delight in him.”<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. INTIMACY WITH CHRIST

As is obvious, this is a very simple kind of spirituality, and also most rewarding. St. Teresa herself had learned from bitter experience that it was the only safe way to genuine holiness. But there is a condition, the same one that Christ himself specified in the gospel, namely the renunciation of self-love. The less of self-love that is in us, the more room there is for God. On the contrary, indulgence of the senses closes up the avenues of grace, and puts obstacles in the

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<sup>4</sup>*Way of Perfection*, 28, Peers II p. 116

<sup>5</sup>*Ascent II* 15:2

<sup>6</sup>Huyghs: *Tensions and Change* p. 91

<sup>7</sup>*Way of Perfection*, 26: *Life*, 12

<sup>8</sup>*Way of Perfection*, 28

<sup>9</sup>*Life*, 13

way of Christ. “Love makes us quicken our steps, and holy fear makes us look where we are setting our feet.”<sup>10</sup>

This is the time when the Lord’s command to pray always becomes possible. For unless we keep close to Christ during our waking hours, it will not be possible to be recollected at the time set aside for formal prayer. To quote a well-known spiritual maxim: “If we ignore God’s presence all the day, we can hardly expect to find Him waiting for us, when we come to pray in the evening.” This does not mean, of course, that we must force our minds and imaginations to concentrate on God, even in the midst of absorbing occupations. It simply means that we have to give our Lord the principal place in our lives and to advert to Him spontaneously, both when the mind is free, and even when it is pre-occupied with other matters. For everyone knows that where their treasure is, their heart is also to be found. This advertence to Christ, far from diminishing one’s joy or competence in daily living, actually enhances and strengthens them. There is no higher or better motivation for our actions than the love of God. It embraces and elevated everything. This means of course, that our prayers should penetrate and uplift our daily round of thoughts and actions and activities: it should not be just something tacked on, but rather a new source of strength, welling from within and giving Christ-like quality to all that we do.

## V. DEEPER RECOLLECTION

In the *Way of Perfection* St. Teresa writes: “I conclude by advising anyone who wished to acquire this manner of prayer, since it is in our power to do so, not to grow weary of trying to get used to the method I have described, for it means gaining the mastery over oneself little by little, and it is not labor in vain. To conquer oneself in this way is to make good use of the external senses, in the service of the interior life.”<sup>11</sup>

This kind of prayer is based on the fact that we live in the presence of God. It begins with a strong and perhaps painful effort to make this a conviction and reality: to place God in the forefront of our thoughts and aspirations and joys. This does not appeal readily to the natural man, since God is invisible and intangible; as a result, the senses feel cheated and empty. But by persevering in our efforts, by using what helps and reminders we can find—St. Teresa even suggests making use of an actual picture of our Lord—the all abiding presence of God does gradually become a living reality and remains, in spite of distractions or absorbing work.

St. Teresa never wearies of encouraging everyone to practice this manner of prayer which is as fruitful, and which can be acquired without the intervention of mystical favors. But it must be remembered that we always need the grace of Christ to pray. Prayer, even in its humblest form is a gift from God, to be asked for, humbly and perseveringly. It also calls for an effort on our part, but not violence. The prayer of recollection is not infused, in the strict sense of the word, but it does come from God, and is not the fruit of idle day-dreaming. All this calls for perseverance and

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<sup>10</sup>*Way of Perfection*, 40

<sup>11</sup>*Way of Perfection*, chapter 29

patience and once again, St. Teresa marks down these virtues as among the special ones of Mansions III.

## VI. THE THIRD MANSION

Let us now turn to St. Teresa's description of this very interesting mansion and of the class of people who belong there. Quite a number get this far, she says.<sup>12</sup> They are very much in earnest, and do all they can to avoid sin. They are generous and well disciplined in their actions. Their life is well regulated; and like the rich young man, they are eager to do even more.<sup>13</sup> She admits to being pre-occupied with that young man.<sup>14</sup> He is perhaps a fairly good example of the type of person who is to be found in Mansions III, full of fervor, zealous in keeping the commandments, eager to advance, and yet unwilling to make the one sacrifice that would really allow him to grow spiritually. St. Teresa points out in connection with the Third Mansion that although the people in it have come a long way, they are not as perfect as they imagine. They are very reasonable people, but actually are moving only at a snail's pace. This is due to a lack of trust in our Lord, but since they are not yet aware of this, they try to build up all manner of security, trying to avoid mistakes and becoming excessively careful. It is worthwhile to read the two chapters St. Teresa wrote in describing those inhabitants of Mansions III. Compare it with another description, given by St. John of the Cross in the *Dark Night*, book I Chapters I-7. Of the two, St. John is the more profound and analytic, but St. Teresa too has unsurpassable insights as she describes these worthy people, so full of good will, and yet making many blunders. A fruitful source of imperfection is the false quest for security they indulge in. Of course, it is very natural for every human being to want security, but there is so much more of self-seeking and self-indulgence mixed up with this desire that it would be a disaster if we were to find the kind of security we are looking for. That is why God withholds it until self has first been purified of its base yearnings and false glorification. This is done mainly by two virtues, holy fear and humility. These are the virtues that all must look for, and continually beg our Lord to bestow. Then there is no real security in this life, St. Teresa says,<sup>15</sup> but we can obtain a vast measure of it by putting all our trust in Him, and learning to fear Him, in the way a child is full of reverential fear for his father or mother, yet relies on them absolutely. It is good for us to walk in this kind of noble fear which is quite compatible with true love. Those who are full of eagerness to grow up unto Christ want to do so overnight, as it were. When they find they are not advancing as fast as they wish, they become impatient.<sup>16</sup> But they must learn the sweet art of waiting, realizing that God knows best what is good for them.

Nor must they feel depressed if they discover they are still far from being saints. This is a common experience and sometimes the reactions have been far from humble. St. Teresa, understanding though she was, said that such people almost "drove her crazy" and she sometimes wondered what would become of them.<sup>17</sup> The suffering that proceeds from hurt self-love is

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<sup>12</sup>p. 59, 62

<sup>13</sup>Matt, 19:16-22

<sup>14</sup>pp. 59,60

<sup>15</sup>p. 56

<sup>16</sup>Ibid p. 60

<sup>17</sup>p. 62

pitiable. “But it is useless to discuss it with them,” writes St. Teresa, “for they brood over their woes, and make up their minds they are suffering for God’s sake, and then they never really understand that it is all due to their own imperfection.”<sup>18</sup> If they are sincere persons, as they usually are, God in one way or another and little by little, instills into them the virtues of humility. But if they are strong willed and self-opinionated, they can become convinced that they are great saints, enduring big trials for justice sake, and misunderstood by all. These are the self-made martyrs and self-constituted prophets, who, as St. Teresa says, “consider they have acted in a highly virtuous way, and wish others to think so too.”<sup>19</sup> It is very much at variance with the teaching of the gospels, and the example of God’s good servants. Authentic saints and holy people can still have many failings, but no one ever found them lacking in humility or eager to display their virtues. “And if we have not progressed as far as this then let us practice humility which is the ointment for our wounds, and if we are truly humble, God, the physician will heal us, in due course, even though He may delay.”<sup>20</sup>

## VII. ST. TERESA’S PRESENTATION

It is truly a delight to read over these two chapters of the *Interior Castle* that describe the Third Mansion. Technically, they are poorly constructed. There is no climax, and ideas are jumbled all together. But these ideas are so rich, and the whole is suffused with such splendid common sense, deep psychology and delicate humor that one scarcely notices the defects. Everything St. Teresa has to say is down to earth; but side by side, there is an unmistakable plan or “soaring impulse.” The power that these contrasts generate is indescribable. It is a quality to be found largely in St. Teresa’s manner of writing.

And then there is that delicate sense of humor! She enjoyed these pious folk of the Third Mansion who are trying so hard to be holy, and so often making themselves so laughable. Here is a passage in which, tongue in cheek, she tells them not to take themselves so seriously. “Let us look at our own shortcomings and leave others alone; for those who lived carefully ordered lives are apt to be shocked at everything. And yet we may well learn important lessons from the very persons who shock us! Our outward comportment may be better than theirs, but this, though good, is not the most important thing. There is no reason why we should expect everyone else to travel by our own road.”<sup>21</sup>

In speaking of the Third Mansion, it is well to advert again and again to St. Teresa’s notion of prayer: “more a matter of loving God than of thinking or speaking about Him.” Perhaps if we take the example of a happy closely-united family; seated around the dinner table we can get some idea of what prayer should be. They are not expressly thinking of one another; yet each one is keenly aware that the others are present. If one gets up to go, they would advert to it. If someone makes a small request, all the others would hurry to oblige. There are no rules about set speeches or elaborate etiquette, yet everyone acts properly, and speaks politely. This is only an

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<sup>18</sup>p. 63

<sup>19</sup>p.63

<sup>20</sup>p.65

<sup>21</sup>p 60

illustration, one however, that our Lord himself used to convey some notion of the kingdom of heaven, with its joy, happiness, freedom, and love. During our earthly life we cannot enjoy the full freedom of the children of God. For one thing, we do not yet see God face to face, nor hear His voice with our mortal ears. Nevertheless, we are in communication with Him through faith, at every moment of the day. “In Him we move and live and are waiting outside.” We have been invited by Christ; we know that everything is ready; it is only a matter of time until the door is thrown wide open. This “anxious watching” is the kind of prayer that many people practice. It is reflected in several of the psalms, such as the *De Profundis*.

## VIII. SELF-DENIAL

Towards the end of the second chapter which treats of the Third Mansion, St. Teresa makes a few important remarks. “What matters is . . . that we practice the virtues and order our lives as God ordains. Let us desire that, not our wills but His, be done . . . without self-denial, this stage is arduous and oppressive.”<sup>22</sup> This is an important topic, and calls for separate treatment. Without a wholesome spirit of self-denial, we cannot be followers of Christ; we cannot truly pray. Prayer and self-indulgence do not go together. If self-denial is out, the earthly life of Christ is out as far as we are concerned, for He must increase and we must decrease. And the one who is unwilling to go against their self cannot be a follower of the Lord.

To this topic of Teresian self-denial, which of course coincides with gospel teaching, we should definitely address at some future point. It is impossible to understand Christian prayer without it.

## IX. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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3. For those who would like to pursue further, here is a short list of books, if they are available:
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