

**Text from the Tradition: The Interior Castle by Teresa of Avila** (text drawn from pp. 73-75, 133-134)

*Effort in Prayer Like Water*

The experiences that I call spiritual delight in God...are of a very different kind... Let's consider, for a better understanding, that we see two founts with two water troughs...These two troughs are filled with water in different ways; with one the water comes from far away through many aqueducts in the use of much ingenuity; with the other the source of the water is right there, and the trough fills without any noise. If the spring is abundant, as is this one we are speaking about, the water overflows once the trough is filled, forming a large stream. There is no need of any skill, nor does the building of aqueducts have to continue; but water is always flowing from the spring.

The water coming from the aqueducts is comparable, in my opinion, to the consolations...that are drawn from meditation. For we obtain them through thoughts, assisting ourselves, using creatures to help our meditation, and tiring the intellect. Since, in the end, the consolation comes through our own efforts, noise is made when there has to be some replenishing of the benefits the consolation causes in the soul...

With this other fount, the water comes from its own source, which is God...[it] produces this delight with the greatest peace and quiet and sweetness in the very interior part of ourselves. I mean there is no similarity at the beginning, for afterward the light fills everything; this water overflows through all the dwelling places and faculties until reaching the body. That is why I said that it begins in God and ends in ourselves. For, certainly...the whole exterior [person] enjoys this spiritual delight and sweetness...

I don't think the experience is something...that rises from the heart, but from another part still more interior, as from something deep. I think this must be the center of the soul...what is helpful for explaining this matter is the idea of expansion. It seems that since the heavenly water begins to rise from this spring I'm mentioning, that is deep within us, it swells and expands our whole interior being producing ineffable blessing; This spiritual delight is not something that can be imagined, because however diligent our efforts we cannot acquire it. Here, in my opinion, the faculties are not united but absorbed and looking as though in wonder at what they see.

The...flight of the spirit...is experienced very differently. For sometimes suddenly a movement of the soul is felt that is so swift it seems the spirit is carried off, and at a fearful speed especially in the beginning...It seems that the trough of water filled so easily and gently, I mean without any movement. Here this great God, who holds back the springs of water and doesn't allow the sea to go beyond its boundaries, lets loose the springs from which the water in this trough flows. The powerful impulse, a huge wave rises up so forcefully that it lifts high this little bark that is our soul. A bark cannot prevent the furious waves from leaving it where they will; nor does the pilot have the power, nor do those who take part in controlling the little ship. So much less can the interior part of the soul stay where it will, or make its senses or faculties do other than what they are commanded; here the soul doesn't care what happens outwardly.

## **Teaching on Text from the Tradition:** by Christine Luna Munger

When we encounter Teresa's spiritual writing, it is important to consider the context in which she lived. Teresa was born in 1515 in Spain to a noble family. There was a lot of discord in Spain and in the Christian Churches during Teresa's lifetime. Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses just three years after she was born. Corruption between civic and church leaders was rampant all over Europe, and in Spain the people had begun to rebel against the loss of spiritual leadership by turning to a variety of spiritual practices, many of which were condoned by religious leaders. Even as reforms were taking place among the many religious groups who had grown lax in following their Rules, the state-run Inquisition was suspicious of spiritual practices which might encourage the masses of people toward anything more than rote prayer and cognitive belief.

Considering all this, and that Teresa was a woman writing and leading her own reform in these tumultuous times, the implications of her teachings are remarkable. As indicated by her water trough metaphor, Teresa taught that God works directly and amply in the souls of seekers, and not only, as some religious leaders would have preferred to preserve, through the official channels of right belief and approved ritual. Yet, Teresa was a wise woman. Even as she boldly asserted her own personal knowledge of seeing God at work in direct and abundant manners within the female soul of hers, she consistently consented to having all of her visions and spiritual experiences reviewed by her male religious confessors. Her practical decisions related to founding new, stricter Carmelite monasteries (a total of 17 in her lifetime!) were also submitted to her male superiors.

Nevertheless, even as she submitted to exterior restraints, there were few in her time who had enough theoretical knowledge and personal experience in mystical prayer, to be able to address the fullness of her interior world. Teresa suffered immensely from a lack of competent spiritual guidance through her lifetime, and we can feel the vestiges of that pain through the fervor with which she wishes to share with her Sisters her hard-won understanding of spiritual delights and development.

Teresa draws upon and informs the classical lexicon of coding different spiritual experiences and stages. Though not mentioned directly in this text, the forms of prayer and meditation that require more effort, such as discursive prayer and active reflection on certain mysteries, are part of the "aqueduct" system of her first trough. She instructs that these are valuable and the safest forms of prayer, and that those who are not called beyond this prayer should be content because the later stages bring with them an increase in complexity that causes one to doubt their source. The practice of Recollection (actively gathering oneself to one's center) serves as a bridge between one's effort and God's activity in prayer. In this sense, the living stream of water (that image that suggests God working directly and abundantly in the soul) becomes the substitute for one's own efforts and discipline in prayer. When the stream turns into the sea, we realize that Teresa not only teaches that full union with God is possible, but that God desires to draw all of us toward this realizable delight.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- What is your sense of "who is working" in your prayer and meditation?
- What maps, guides, markers, or assurances have you found to be helpful, or mis-leading, along the way?