

Coalesce Podcast

Episode 031 — Foundational Union with God

Note, terms, scripture, practice



Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582)

Saint Teresa of Ávila: Passionate Mystic, by Mirabai Starr

The Third Spiritual Alphabet, by Francisco de Osuna

Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini

Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics, by Carol Lee Flinders

Following the Mystics Through the Narrow Gate . . . Seeing God in All Things, by James Finley

The Interior Castle, by Teresa of Ávila

The soul moves through seven mansions or dwellings of the interior castle, ever drawing closer to the center:

1. In the first dwelling, the soul becomes aware that there is a castle to be explored and discovers her own longing for God. Monstrous creatures distract and tempt. Teresa saw that the soul's only hope, as Starr says, "is to cultivate a discipline of humility and self-knowledge . . . to recognize her own limitations and praise the greatness of God" through the practice of prayer. The soul moves beyond rote prayer to intimate conversation with God.
2. In the second dwelling, the soul learns to recognize God's quiet voice amid the noise of the world. God's voice comes through the words of teachers, friends, and sacred texts.
3. Prayer begins to feel dry and empty, a test of humility. Starr explains: "If the soul can quit trying to figure God out with her mind and concentrate on feeling him with her heart, if she can learn to surrender her personal will to the inscrutable will of the Beloved, she will progress to the fourth dwelling."
4. Here the senses and mind are stilled in what Teresa names the Prayer of Quiet. Up until now, the soul has been striving through conscious effort, but in the fourth dwelling, the soul begins to experience someone else as the Doer as God takes over.

5. In the fifth dwelling, the soul and God become engaged to marry in what Teresa calls the Prayer of Union. Starr writes: "Here, the faculties are totally suspended. When the soul emerges from this state, she [knows] that 'she was in God and God was in her.'" [5] Teresa uses the metaphor of a silkworm, spinning a cocoon in which to die, to illustrate how it is only by dying to our False Self that we can be transformed and fly to God.
6. God and soul fall more deeply in love and come to know each other through time together in solitude. This love is felt as a deep wound, an unbearable longing, physical ache, and even betrayal. Yet there is also joy and ecstasy, for the wounding comes from God.
7. At the center of the castle, the innermost dwelling, the soul finds union with the Beloved. Starr beautifully describes this experience: "Like rain falling into an infinite sea, all boundaries between the soul and God melt. Union, by definition, transcends the subject-object distinction. There is no longer any lover left to enjoy her Beloved. There is only love."

The Interior Castle, translation by Mirabai Starr

John of the Cross (1542-1591)

[Psalm 42:7](#)

James Finley describes God as "the infinity of the unforeseeable; so we know that [the unforeseeable] is trustworthy, because in everything, God is trying to move us into Christ consciousness. If we are absolutely grounded in *the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing even as it sustains us in all things*, then we can face all things with courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love." (*Intimacy: The Divine Ambush*)

Dark Night of the Soul, St. John of the Cross, by Mirabai Starr

Practice: Spiritual Canticale

James Finley invites us to approach John of the Cross' poem, "The Spiritual Canticale," not just as subject matter. "We are to read it as the opening up of our hearts, that we might rest in . . . this oneness and communion in each other and as each other. In your most childlike hour, you're asked to surrender to that oneness. And a transformative experience occurs. Love is transforming us into itself."

Allow your heart to open that you might rest in your communion with God as you read a selection from John of the Cross' poetic conversation between lovers, between bride and groom:

Bride

In the inner wine cellar
I drank of my beloved, and when I went abroad
Through all this valley
I no longer knew anything,
And lost the herd that I was following.

There he gave me his breast;
There he taught me a sweet and living knowledge;
And I gave myself to him,
Keeping nothing back;
There I promised to be his bride.

Now I occupy my soul
And all my energy in his service;
I no longer tend the herd,
Nor have I any other work
Now that my every act is love

With flowers and emeralds
Chosen on cool mornings
We shall weave garlands
Flowering in your love,
And bound with one hair of mine.

You considered
That one hair fluttering at my neck;
You gazed at it upon my neck;
And it captivated you;
And one of my eyes wounded you.

When you looked at me
Your eyes imprinted your grace in me;
For this you loved me ardently;
And thus my eyes deserved
To adore what they beheld in you.

Do not despise me;
For if, before, you found me dark,
Now truly you can look at me
Since you have looked
And left in me grace and beauty.

Bridegroom

The small white dove
Has returned to the ark with an olive branch;
And now the turtledove
Has found its longed-for mate
By the green river banks.

She lived in solitude,
And now in solitude has built her nest;
And in solitude he guides her,
He alone, who also bears
In solitude the wound of love.