

Reflection on "The Interior Castle"

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The Interior Castle has seven stages. Written in 1577 by St. Teresa of the Carmelite Sisters, it was given to the Discalced Carmelite nuns as a gift. As a member of the Carmelite Secular Order, I attempt to bring forth the essence of this book as a reference for others.

Stage 1: Speaks of the beauty and importance of the soul, and that God's grace can only be benefited through prayer. God has shown us the hideousness of a sinful soul; therefore, He helps us to cleanse and to revamp our souls for He has created us out of His own image (Gen. 1.26). Our soul is like a castle, a mineral rock, or perhaps a courtyard built with sparkling glass. Prayer is the only path to reach the gates of this castle. It rejuvenates those who were once obsessed with earthly pleasures and desires, giving them an opportunity of improvement. However, we must also be careful of traps set by the Devil. He would use all sorts of resources in our surroundings to harm us. One of the easiest ways is to weaken our bonds with our brothers and sisters, and our love for each other.

Stage 2: Examines the value of perseverance and the battle with the Devil. In order to be successful, we must take appropriate measures. Those who choose the interior castle as a destination are likely to hear God's voice. Somehow, the message of God is sent to us, whether through a conversation, a thought, prayer or reading. At times, unpleasant mediums such as sickness and pain are used. Meanwhile, the devil tempts and holds us hostage, putting our values of health and friendships at stake. Therefore, we must fight back and understand that material satisfaction can only lead to later sufferings. We must be brave and carry the cross as a defensive tool, bearing Christ's name, in preparation to move on to the next stage.

Stage 3: Discusses life on earth, and no matter how religious we are, we must remain cautious and calm at all times. At this stage, we who have obtained the scapular of the Mother of God, must dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly and follow her steps. We must lead a committed life, keeping our connection with God, fearing Him and yet praying faithfully, and let go of misleading desires. The most important factor is to uphold our pure intentions, working together with God and not letting opportunities of satisfying God's will slip by. God often tests us through failures and obstacles, but we have to remain serene in order to acquire eternal peace and happiness. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14.9), setting our eyes upon Christ, getting ready with light and oil as we receive God's grace, Jesus says, "If you are willing, it is done." Pain and suffering are unavoidable factors on our paths; this is what God intended to make our beliefs stronger. Be humble and live faithfully, and God will do the rest.

Stage 4: This part compares the difference between the two qualities of prayer: comfort and spiritual guidance. Silent thoughts and prayers bring delight and satisfaction. This pleasurable moment originates from faith and the way we live our lives. However, God is the fountainhead of religious inspirations; "Let God open our hearts." Spiritual happiness comes from afar, where the power of God and mankind combines, as a water fountain, watering our lands in the midst of silence and stillness. God grants us the soul and true peace as the crisp smell of tranquility travels freely through the air. God strengthens us by bringing an utmost understanding and determination within each one of us.

Stage 5: Speaks of the uniting experience between the soul and God and identifies whether it is merely a self-created illusion. Those who have become Carmelites have the vocation of leading a prayerful life, living for God and away from the urban society. To better demonstrate His miraculous power, He demands only our dedication and nothing else. "The King has led us to safety and places us in his humble home" (Psalm). If we let ourselves be subservient to the Lord, we can see that the wonder of His work is beyond our understanding. At this stage, the soul wishes to serve God, introducing Him to others, and at the same time, turning weaknesses into strengths. St. Teresa hopes that no blame would be laid upon God's name, for they would suffer terribly. God wants us to love Him and our neighbours, for if we love others, our love for God deepens. St. Teresa has achieved an intimate bond with God. She explains that the physical world is just a place of rest; our real life is in the greatness of God, as we rush into his open arms of passionate love.

Stage 6: The amount of grace comparing to the amount of suffering He lays upon His people is a proportional ratio. By loving God, St. Teresa is courageous. With high endeavours, she is not afraid to take on sufferings. She has established a powerful relationship with God that no hindrance would be able to stop her. At this stage, the entire soul burns like a phoenix rewarded new life and that all faults are forgiven. God rescues sorrowful souls and gives them comfort, saying, "Do not be in despair. Whether people praise me or criticize me as they reject you, good things will descend upon you." It is through profound understanding that we let God into our souls, allowing Him to take charge. God, then, nourishes it with peace, calmness and righteousness. It is such an abounding state that describing it in words becomes difficult. The soul continues to follow Christ's path and the example of the Virgin Mary, striving towards the purest possible state of our conscience. But which path should we take? We can only leave this decision to God. Perhaps God would place all sorts of crosses upon our shoulders, burdening the soul and giving it tremendous pressure, but He will reward us when the time is right. But at the same time that God's power leaves us in awe, it also comes with an extreme loneliness, where support in the physical world becomes scarce; God lets us into deeper pain. This is His way of polishing up our characters. Yet, He promises to protect us every step of the way.

Stage 7: At this stage, God resides in the soul, leading it onto the journey to His home; establishing a fervent bond with His people. There appears a single light source, as the light of a candle, radiating vibrantly. St. Paul says, "Those who come near God unite with Him and becomes a spirit." The soul would say, "Christ is my life; agony and death are only means of attaining real life." We must forget ourselves completely and devote ourselves to God, seeking His will and asking faithfully, "God, what would You want me to do for You?"

Within every stage of the Interior Castle, there are many steps as well. There, you will find fresh water and luscious lands emerging from every corner. God created this castle with accordance to His own image, welcoming us to enter whenever we wish. Let us now put forth our most humble self, keeping good faith, and serve God with fortitude and pure love.