



# Striving to Make Progress

*Renovare Devotional Classic*  
Sunday 11/18 @ 10 am  
Great Hall

Epiphany Seattle Spiritual  
Formation Forum

## Background

Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada (1515 – 1582) was born in Avila, Spain, in 1515. At the age of twenty she entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation. While there she battled many serious illnesses, especially between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty. She lived a very devout life at the convent and was known to have occasional supernatural experiences.

In 1555 Teresa experienced what she called a “second conversion,” which changed her spiritual life decisively. She began experiencing visions more often, most notably, visions of Christ piercing her heart with a spear. Under the direction of her spiritual counselor, she began working on a project to establish new Carmelite houses that were devoted to the contemplative life. Later John of the Cross<sup>1</sup> worked alongside her in this effort.

Teresa began her writing career with a spiritual autobiography, and it was quickly noticed that she had a gift for writing about the spiritual life in elegant yet simple terms. Her most famous work on prayer is *Interior Castle*, which she wrote following a vision. In it she describes the soul’s journey from the outside of a castle and through many rooms as it strives toward the

center room where the soul can unite with God completely. In the spirit of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Teresa uses allegory to describe the spiritual journey we all face, with its attendant obstacles and joys.

## Excerpts from *Interior Castle*

### 1. Strive to Escape the Poisonous Sins

This chapter has to do with those who have already begun to practice prayer and who long to leave the first stage, or room. However, they may not have the strength or resolve to leave the first room. They may have difficulty avoiding occasions of sin, which is a very grave condition. It is a great mercy that they should strive to escape the poisonous sins of the first stage of prayer, even if it is short-lived.

In some ways, these people will face more difficulty than those who are content at the beginning level. However, they are further along, and therefore in less danger of falling away, and have a greater hope of going farther in the “castle.” God is so anxious that we should grow close to him that he calls us unceasingly to approach him. Many souls at this stage find his voice so sweet that they are grieved at being unable to respond to him immediately. This is why they suffer more than beginners.

## 2. God Looks into Our Souls

God appeals to us through other good people, through sermons, or through the reading of good books. Sometimes he calls through our sicknesses and our trials as he bids us to pray. However feeble such prayers may be, God values them highly.

God looks into our souls and perceives our desires. If our desires are good, we cannot fail. Nevertheless, the assaults of the devils that are made upon the soul are terrible. Again, this is why the soul suffers more at this stage than does the beginners. Whereas before the soul was somewhat deaf and blind and had no will to resist, now it has begun to hear and see and resist as one who is about to gain victory.

It is at this stage that the devils will attack the soul with the earthly pleasures of this world, like snakes who bite with deadly poison. They trick the soul in thinking that such pleasures will last an eternity; they remind the soul of the high esteem in which it is held in the world; they place before it the many friends and relatives who will disagree with the manner of life you have now begun.

## 3. Wonderful Capacities

Oh, Jesus! What confusion the devils bring about in the poor soul, and how distressed it becomes, not knowing if it ought to proceed or return to the first room, i.e. the beginning stages of prayer.

But on the other hand, you have blessed us with wonderful capacities to help us along the way! **Reason** tells the soul how mistaken it is in thinking that these earthly pleasures are of the slightest value in comparison with what it is seeking. **Faith** instructs the soul in what it must do to find true satisfaction. **Memory** reminds it how all of those pleasures come to an end, and how all those who once engaged in those pleasures – who seemed to find such enjoyment in them! – are now dead and buried. People who were once prosperous are now beneath the ground, and we trample on their graves.

The **will** inclines the soul to love God, the One in whom it has seen so many acts and signs of love. In particular, the will shows the soul how this True Lover never leaves it, but goes with it everywhere and gives it life and being. Then the **understanding** comes forward and makes the soul realize that, for however many years it may live, it can never hope to have a better friend. For

the world is full of falsehood and these pleasures which the devil pictures to it are accompanied by trials and cares and annoyances. It reminds the soul that if it were to go back from this stage, it would never again find security or peace. It is reflections of this kind which vanquish devils.

## 4. The Vain Habit We Fall Into

But, oh, my God and Lord, how everything is ruined by the vain habits we fall into and the way everyone else follows them! Our faith is so dead that we desire what we see more than what faith tells us about – even though what we see is that people who pursue these things end up with nothing but misfortune!

All this is the work of the venomous snakes of sin that bite us early in our journey. Like one who is bitten by a snake, your whole body swells up with the poison. Only the great mercy of God will preserve us. The soul will certainly suffer great trials at this time, especially if the devil sees that its character and habits are such that it is ready to make further progress: all the powers of hell will combine to drive it back again.

## 5. We Must Be Resolute

That is why it is very important for us to associate with others who are walking in the right way – not only those who are where we are in the journey, but also those who have gone farther. Those who have drawn close to God have the ability to bring us closer to him, for in a sense they take us with them.

Let us firmly resolve not to lose the battle we fight. For if the devil sees that we are willing to lose our life and our peace, and that nothing can entice us back to the first room, he will soon cease from troubling us. But we must be resolute, for we fight with devils, and thus, there is no better weapon than the Cross.

## 6. Content with the Consolations

I feel I must repeat this important point: at the beginning we must not become content with the consolations we may receive at the early stages. That would be like building our house on sand. At this stage you are beginning to build a beautiful castle, and you must build it on strong virtues, not temporary consolations.

Neither should we complain about a lack of consolations at this stage. Rather embrace the Cross

which Jesus bore upon his shoulders and realize that this Cross is yours to carry too. We are free in the same measure we are able to suffer.

You may also make the mistake of thinking that you will be better able to bear your trials if God will only grant you inward consolations. Remember that God knows what is best for us, and that we are not capable of asking for what is best for us. All that beginners in prayer must do is this: labor and be resolute, preparing themselves with diligence to bring their will into conformity with the will of God. This ability is the greatest thing that can be accomplished on the spiritual journey.

### **7. Do Not Lose Heart**

If we go astray at the beginning and want the Lord to do our will and lead us as our desires dictate, how can we be building on a firm foundation? I must remind you that it is the Lord's will that we should be tested and that even allows evil vipers to bite us. When we are affected with evil thoughts that we cannot cast out, or when we enter a spiritual desert that we cannot find our way out of, God is teaching us how to be on our guard in the future and to see if we are really grieved at having offended him.

If, then, you sometimes fall, do not lose heart. Even more, do not cease striving to make progress from it, for even out of your fall God will bring some good. I know of a man who willingly took poison in order to prove that his antidote was powerful enough to save him. Sometimes God allows us to fall in order to reveal to us our sinfulness and to show us what harm comes as a result of sin. Our sins can have the effect of leading us back to God and striving all the more.

### **8. Gently Begin a Time of Prayer**

Let us, therefore, place our trust in God and not in ourselves, relying heavily on this mercy and not fighting the battle alone. When you feel the beginnings of temptations, do not fight back with strenuous efforts, but rather, gently begin a time of prayer and recollection. At first it will be difficult, but after a while you will be able to do it easily, and for long periods of time.

Do not think that you must stop doing your work in order to pray. The Lord will turn all of our work time into profit as long as we continue in a spirit of prayer.

There is no remedy for the temptations that we face except to start at the beginning, and the beginning is prayer. The only way to lose is to turn back.

### **9. The Door to This Castle Is Prayer**

Some of you may think that since turning back is such a terrible thing, then it would have been better not to have begun at all. Remember, it is even more dangerous to have never begun. The door by which we enter this castle is prayer. It is absurd to think that we can enter heaven without first entering into this castle and finding out our own sinfulness and how much we owe to God for our redemption.

For our works have no value unless they are united with faith, and our faith has no value unless it is united with works. May God grant us the ability to see how much we cost him, to see that the servant is not greater than the Master, to see that we must work if we would enjoy his glory. For this reason we must pray, lest we continually enter into temptation.

### **10. Communion with the Trinity**

In this seventh dwelling place the union comes about in a different way: our good God now desires to remove the scales from the soul's eyes and let it see and understand, although in a strange way, something of the favor he grants it. When the soul is brought into that dwelling place, the Most Blessed Trinity, all three Persons, through an intellectual vision, is revealed to it through a certain representation of the truth. First there comes an enkindling in the spirit in the manner of a cloud of magnificent splendor; and these Persons are distinct, and through an admirable knowledge the soul understands as a most profound truth that all three Persons are one substance and one power and one knowledge and one God alone.

Here all three Persons communicate themselves to it, speak to it, and explain those words of the Lord in the Gospel; that he and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell with the soul that loves him and keeps his commandments.

### **11. Use No Force**

You will not be able to enter all the dwelling places through your own efforts, even though these efforts may seem to you great, unless the Lord of the castle himself brings you there. Hence I advise you to use no force if you meet with any resistance.

Once you get used to enjoying this castle, you will find reset in all things, even those involving much labor, for you will have the hope of returning to the castle which no one can take from you.

## Bible Selection: Titus 3:1-8

**3** Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, <sup>2</sup>to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. <sup>3</sup>For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. <sup>4</sup>But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup>he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water<sup>[a]</sup> of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. <sup>6</sup>This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup>so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. <sup>8</sup>The saying is sure.

## Reflections

*For some reason, Teresa of Avila has always been difficult for me to read. Maybe it is her allegory of the castle with its various rooms or stages in the life of prayer, each one drawing us deeper in until we experience habitual union with God and "spiritual marriage." Far from being in the third room or at the fifth stage, I often feel that I'm still on the front porch! She just seems so far beyond anything I would ever hope to experience...or even want to experience!*

*The great thing, though, that we can learn from Teresa is that progress can be made in the spiritual life. As we develop consistent habits of prayer, temptations that once dogged us no longer have the same drawing power. This is a wonderful reality to know, and Teresa of Avila can help draw us in to this reality.* -Richard Foster

## Reflection Questions

1. "God appeals to us through other good people, through sermons, or through the reading of good books," writes Teresa of Avila. Which people, which sermons, and which books has God used to appeal to you?
2. In section 3, Teresa describes how reason, faith, memory, the will, and understanding work together to help us overcome our desire for sin. In your own words,

explain what each of these capacities does in its efforts to help us turn from sin.

3. According to Teresa, God actually uses our trials and temptations to reach us "how to be on our guard in the future." What would your spiritual life be like if you had never experienced any kind of temptation?

## Extra Credit

If you are interested in getting know Teresa of Avila better, look at some of the resources listed below:

1. Twelve Interesting Facts about Teresa of Avila - <https://aleteia.org/2017/10/15/12-interesting-facts-about-st-teresa-of-avila/>
2. ***The Interior Castle***, Teresa of Avila. Teresa received the image of this book in a vision on Trinity Sunday, 1577, in which she beheld "a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven, there are many dwelling places." Each room moves us closer to the center where "the King of Glory dwells in the greatest splendor."
3. Watch Rowan Williams talk about Teresa of Avila at Boston College in this YouTube video entitled **What the Outsider Sees: Teresa of Avila and the Contemplative Vision**: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXMETb6g67s>
4. ***Teresa of Avila***, Rowan Williams. Archbishop Rowan Williams's study of Teresa of Avila exemplifies his own deep spiritual theology. This book makes use of recent historical research on Teresa and her society and provides a full introduction to all her major works. It shows Teresa as more than just a chronicler of paranormal states of consciousness. She emerges as a genuine theologian in her own right, with a powerful contribution to make to contemporary understanding of God.

Epiphany is a Place of Gathering and Conversation

Epiphany Parish is place where belonging takes precedence, and relationship is primary – relationships between individuals and their own innate gifts, among people, and between people and God

### Epiphany Promises You

Belonging over believing  
Relationship is primary  
Doubt is welcome  
Conversion-free zone  
No obligations, fees or expectations

### Contact Us

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