

# The Interior Castle Guide

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### Introduction:

The Interior Castle castle is a visual and experiential walkthrough of St. Teresa of Avila's major work *The Interior Castle*. This interactive castle is comprised of 7 rooms and a pseudo-room. You are welcome to explore the castle at your leisure and interact with the various things in the rooms. Although it seems like the castle is linear in its design, it is not meant to be. You are welcome to wander through the rooms in any order and I encourage you to return to rooms you have already visited to explore it again. St. Teresa wrote in her book that those who venture into the Interior Castle do not venture through it progressively but almost haphazardly. Sometimes a person will spend considerable time in Room 2 but then be brought into Room 4. Then Someone may spend a huge amount of time in Room 3 whereas others will never venture past Room 1. Other people may walk in and out of the castle. I do encourage you to walk around and not focus on "finishing" the castle or simply "progress" through the rooms.

### Room 0: the World

Although this first part of the castle is not a "room" of the original castle, St. Teresa speaks at length about its importance in setting up the castle. The outside of the castle (our dining area) represents the world. The world has considerable pull on us. The distractions of wealth, careers, family, and the cares and concerns of the things of the world can easily distract us from the giant castle which is our interior life. Originally this room would include blaring music, games, and media to distract a person from entering the castle, this set-up is not practical at the moment. If you would like to experience the power of this room, ponder the following questions: what prevents me from prayer: thoughts, ideas, temptations, time? What kinds of things enter my mind and heart that challenge me away from thinking of the things of God? What cares and concerns do I have that occupy my mind and emotions? What thoughts are running through my mind right now? Am I more focused on finishing the castle or entering than exploring and learning? All of these questions and more help us to understand the power of the world its influence on our lives.

Entering Room 1: Before we can enter the castle, we must ponder how to enter the castle. Does a person simply walk into a castle? What if the castle was an analogy for our interior life? Can I simply "walk in"? The answer is yes, you can simply walk in. But the way we enter the castle is not necessarily by stepping through a door. The Interior Castle is an analogy for our souls. In order to enter our souls and encounter the living God who is Lord of our souls, we must begin a life of prayer. We cannot enter the castle by any means besides prayer. To pass the threshold means to begin a life of prayer. We simply do it, and then then journey begins.

Room 1: Encountering ourselves.

Technically Room 1 and Room 2 are very similar. In both of these rooms the focus is on encountering and coming to know oneself. In this first room of the castle we focus on our identity. Who am I? Each of the objects in this room gives us a new perspective on ourselves. Somethings we will enjoy and identify with; others will seem strange or foreign to us. Why do some objects have an appeal whereas others do not? In a similar way, the various images and questions allow you to ponder your own lives and think about ourselves.

The main point of this first room is to encounter our most fundamental identity: being children of God. Nothing is more vital to progressing through the castle than to realize who we are and why we are venturing into this castle at all. The only reason why someone would continue into the castle is to encounter God who gives us the motivation to continue.

At this point, however, many new temptations emerge that can cause someone to abandon their efforts or to fade back into the worldliness of room 0. Many people will choose to go no further into the castle because the world is too attractive and the life ahead too challenging. Others will encounter something about themselves that is too hard to bear or too uncomfortable to reconcile with. Others will be overwhelmed with the task of venturing deeper into one's soul and abandon the effort.

How do we progress from Room 1 to Room 2? The principle way to venture from Room 1 to Room 2 is to desire to progress. The allure of the world is not tempting enough to endure the effort to encounter our truest self and keep going deeper. Sometimes God may lead the soul into the castle and give him/her the help he/she needs to progress. The choice is always before each person: am I willing to dive deeper into prayer and my relationship with God, or is this as far as I am willing to go?

Room 2: encountering sin.

From the moment you enter this room several things should become apparent. This room is unlike Room 1. Room 1 was much happier and light-hearted whereas Room 2 is kind of dark. The next thing you will notice is the large amounts of things in this room that are all forms of temptations. Lastly, you will notice insects, spiders, and snakes throughout the room. All of these objects guide us to the conclusion that this room is about sin.

St. Teresa spends considerable time with the topic of sin. Room 2 is the encounter with specifically mortal sin. Since mortal sin breaks our relationship with God, overcoming or reconciling our sinfulness is essential for progressing into the castle. St. Theresa's high emphasis of the importance of sin in the spiritual life can be off-putting to us, but let's examine her reasoning. Since sin breaks our relationship with God, how can we progress in the spiritual life unless we can reconcile those broken relationships and desire to stop breaking them? It's as simple as that: progress through the castle requires that we continually work to root out sin and work toward virtue.

Overcoming sin: although St. Theresa never mentions the process of overcoming sin in her work, I will elaborate so as to help those who encounter this room. The room is set up to make sin very apparent and to allow us to explore sin in a tangible way. The green glasses help us experience the "green-eyed monster" – envy. The large amounts of sweets, which are always tempting, makes apparent the temptation of gluttony. Each object in this room indicates a type of sin to make it more visible and tangible. The first step in overcoming sin is to recognize the sin, name the sin, and realize its power. Most of the time our struggles come in simply succumbing to a temptation. But if we can name the temptation, then we have a level of power over it.

Our second reaction is to fight against it. The spiritual masters of the church are clear that fighting against sin never works. Jesus is the only one who can conquer sin. We, however, must take the opposite approach and avoid and thwart its advances. As St. Ignatius of Loyola says in his major work *The Spiritual Exercises*, when the devil comes to assault our castle, he will scout the perimeter until he finds the weakest point. Then he sends all of his forces to attack the weakest point. We usually respond by fortifying the wall, but that will only cause him to find the next weakest point. Instead we should fill the castle with light (virtue and prayer) so that he cannot enter the castle. Then it doesn't matter how weak the walls are.

This room should also allow us to reflect on sin in our own lives, realizing their patterns, and making resolutions to overcome them. The final glory of seeing God face-to-face makes it worth the effort. No work is too hard if done out of love.

### Room 3: Persistence

Room 3's focus is easy to understand from a quick scan of the room. The many challenges and tests throughout the room gives us many long-term activities to work on, which is exactly the point. Although Room 2 felt like a lot of work, Room 3 is even more work. The focus of this room is persistence and hard work. Progress in the spiritual life is not a matter of accident or happenstance. True progress in the spiritual life requires discipline and perseverance.

Tips for perseverance in prayer:

1. Find a time that works (in other words that you will consistently pray) and stick to that schedule.
2. Pick an amount of time to pray, no less than 15 minutes no more than an hour.
3. Be consistent about praying each day
4. Pick activities to do during prayer: a Rosary, reading from Scripture, personal conversations with God, spiritual reading.
5. Avoid activities that are not focused on prayer or God.
6. Don't give up

Common problems in prayer

1. Not feeling like we are praying. Many people give up on prayer because they lose the feeling of prayer. When they started out it felt good, but now the feeling is gone. If we are praying for the sake of the feeling of prayer, we are mostly likely praying to ourselves. St. Theresa says that it is better to be distracted in prayer and struggle to pray than to have good feelings. If we are struggling, then we are actually focused on God.
2. Distractedness in prayer. Distractions can be good and bad. The good side of distraction is that they open us up to listen to God. If I am focused for my entire time of prayer on what I want to say and do, am I really listening to God? Distractions have a bad side too. If I let the distractions take me away from prayer or dwell on them without bringing the distraction to God, then I have lost the focus in prayer. Treat distractions like a butterfly. If a butterfly flies into the room, you can spend the rest of the time trying not to focus on the butterfly or acknowledge it and go back to prayer.
3. Not sure what to do in prayer. The Catholic tradition has many types and forms of prayer. Not all work for all people. Keep trying different ones and be willing to keep trying them until something works. The best forms are the Rosary and Scripture.
4. Not feeling motivated to pray. If you are consistent and working to develop a prayer life, this should eventually happen. Like everything else in life, eventually we lose our drive for even the things we enjoy. Just keep going. During these dry patches you will grow the most.

The objects and challenges in this room help to experience the difficulties inherent in persistence and perseverance. Let the challenges push you to develop these virtuous habits.

## Room 4

Before I can describe and explain the next four rooms, we need to find them. When I originally developed this castle, Rooms 4-7 were not available for exploration at the leisure of the participants but only opened when the time was right. This step is critical for understanding a true, active, and deep prayer life. St. Theresa is clear about one major point of our spiritual lives: it is not about us. Rooms 1-3 were all things that we could do and explore. Technically we could do everything in those rooms without God or without reference to God. I can explore who I am without thinking about God; I could root out sin on my own (kind of, the Jews tried and failed); I can become virtuous and learn perseverance and persistence. But this is not an active prayer life since prayer is about our relationship with God. The route into Rooms 4-7 are not on our initiative but on God's initiative. The door must be opened by God and he invites us into these deeper levels of prayer. Until God takes the soul deeper into the castle, the soul can wander in and out of Rooms 0-3 at its leisure continually developing new skills or working on new habits. God could also bring the soul into Rooms 4-7 without the soul exploring much of Rooms 1-3. In the *Interior Castle* St. Theresa comments that she doesn't understand Rooms 1-3 well because she didn't get to explore them as much as Rooms 4-6. To get to Room 4, open the hidden door that is in Room 2. Simply push it open and you can venture into the next part of the castle.

What is Room 4? Room 4 is technically about meditation. Yet, when we think of meditation, we often think either of Buddhism or a type of mental prayer. Neither of these are what is intended by this room. The quotes and riddles on the wall are meant to help you think in different ways. God works in mysterious ways, so we need to think about the world differently if we are to understand God's ways. The room is meant to be a quiet place of repose where you can sit and ponder the mysteries of God.

Contemplative Prayer: Unlike the other forms of prayer which we do, contemplative prayer is not by our choosing. Instead God takes over and praying with and in the soul guiding the soul to deeper levels of prayer. This form of prayer also shows the soul the hidden secrets of God's love and power and takes the soul into the life of God. You cannot choose this form of prayer but must wait for God's action.

Mystical Experiences: at this stage of the castle mystical experiences begin in the soul. St. Theresa says that although mystical experiences can happen at any stage of the spiritual life of the soul, at the 4<sup>th</sup> Room they become more common. Many people assume that mystical experiences, i.e. visions, moment of encounter with God, new insights, are a sign of growing deeper in our relationship with God, but that is not necessarily the case. If a person has a mystical experience and then stops praying or uses that experience as a way to show their greatness, then they have lost all progress. I recommend that most people do two things with any mystical experience: 1, enjoy it while it lasts, 2, let it go but remember it as a moment of encounter with a true and living God. Dwelling too long on them or forcing mystical experiences to return causes a deep level of stress for most people and usually leads them out of the church.

## Room 5:

Room 5 will be the most confusing room of this castle. As soon as you enter, your first response will probably be: “what?” If that’s the case, you understand Room 5. Those souls who get to the 5<sup>th</sup> mansion, or the 5<sup>th</sup> room, have no sense of their progress in the spiritual life. Their lives have been so transformed by prayer as to make no sense anymore. They tend to lose their attachment to the world and desire deeper levels of prayer. To the other people they seem aloof or detached from things. The soul is on the way to union with God and so the things of the world simply don’t matter.

St. Theresa compares this stage of the spiritual journey to that of a butterfly. Throughout Rooms 1-4, the soul was in the larval stage eating and consuming as much as possible. The soul takes in everything that God can give it and continues to grow. Once it reaches the 5<sup>th</sup> mansion it enters the pupae stage. Here the soul waits in darkness and beings the transformation into something new and wonderful.

The vast majority of people will never reach this stage of the spiritual life. I cannot comment more, because this stage makes no sense until you are in it. The main point of exploring this stage is to realize how deep prayer can go. The soul can get to the point where it is so close to God that only the things of God matter to the soul and the things of the world pass away and seem worthless.

Note: Although St. Theresa mentions this point in Rooms 2 and 3, I would like to make her point here instead because it will make more sense. At any point the soul can revert back to previous part of the castle and even completely leave the castle. If the soul gets to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> rooms and then falls into mortal sin, the effects can be devastating. She states that a soul that falls into mortal sin in the 5<sup>th</sup> mansion can become so devastated that it leaves the castle completely and never returns. The further the progress, the greater the consequences. To put this in language that might be more understandable. Image that you were married to a person for 40 years. After 40 happy years of marriage, you find out that your spouse cheated on you. That simple act is more devastating because of those many happy years that if it would have happened in the first few years. The same works for our spiritual life. The closer we get to God, the more devastating sin becomes.

## Room 6: The darkness

The problem with experiencing Room 6 is that the lights will be on and the room is not all that dark. I had originally wanted to black out the room so that it would be pitch black. One way to get a sense of the darkness is to close your eye and pretend that it is dark. This stage of the castle is a very important stage. Everyone will encounter some level of it at some point in their spiritual life. Although St. Theresa does not speak about the darkness in the 6<sup>th</sup> room, the 6<sup>th</sup> room is far too complicated to turn into an interactive experience. Spiritual darkness, however, is much more relatable and common. For that reason we are going to turn to St. Theresa's companion, St. John of the Cross. In St. John's master work *the Dark Night of the Soul*, he chronicles the darkness that the soul goes through as it is being perfected. He speaks of two dark nights: the dark night of the sense and the dark night of the soul. I will start by explaining spiritual dryness and darkness then cover the two dark nights.

**Spiritual darkness and dryness:** These two concepts are immensely common in anyone who has an active prayer life and is consistent in prayer. The only way to diagnose and help someone through the darkness or dryness is if they have a consistent pray life. Without a consistent prayer life, overcoming these two spiritual issues is nearly impossible. Spiritual dryness is when we lose the desire to prayer or the good feelings that come with prayer. It can also be a feeling of difficulty in praying. Spiritual darkness is when we lose the sense of God's presence. Both of these are not problems but signs of progress in the spiritual life. God is working in the soul to make it desire him on its own without his help. The only way to overcome or persevere through these feelings is to simply keep praying and not give up.

**The Dark Night of the Senses:** St. John states that the Dark Night of the Senses comes between rooms 3 and 4. At this point in the spiritual life, God takes away the sensory need for him from the soul. The soul no longer has the feelings once associate with prayer and prays simply because the soul wants to pray. Therefore the person is praying based on their own volition and not because God is helping them to pray.

**The Dark Night of the Soul:** St. John states that this event happens between rooms 6 and 7. At this point in the spiritual life God takes away from the soul all the feelings and senses associated with God. The soul is left with nothing in relation to God. Therefore the soul can freely choose God because it want to choose God for no other reason than to choose God. This is the depth of love. The soul loves God for God himself without any aid from God. Very few saints have experienced this level of spiritual depth: St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Paul of the Cross, St. Therese of Lisieux, to name the more well-known. After this moment of darkness, the soul is ready for Heaven in which the soul will make no other choice than to choose God.

## Room 7: Encounter with God

Congratulations you have completed the castle! This final room is the center and deepest point of the soul: the encounter with the God who made the soul. After all this work we have finally reached our goal which is to meet God face-to-face. During the event for the high schoolers, a monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament was in here so that they could truly encounter God. Now, however, it is simply a beautiful room that has shadows of what it once was. This is the goal: true union with God. I can say nothing more.