

Saint Teresa of Avila and Women's Liberation

A chapter of a recent book by Malachi Martin entitled *The New Castle* explores the image of the castle. Over the centuries, in architecture, art and literature, the castle has symbolized “an ideal of human existence on earth.” The castle has been the symbol not only of power and security but of the greatness of a people and the ascent of the human spirit. Jerusalem, Mecca, Rome are castles in history.

So also is a book like *The Interior Castle* written by Saint Teresa of Avila, who lived and died among the castles of sixteenth century Spain. This book is a call to greatness, to the ultimate in human possibility. It is also a call to freedom, to that process of liberation whereby man and woman alike become truly free persons. This book can be used to show how profoundly Christian contemporary liberation movements can be, and specifically what is the heart of a valid women's liberation movement.

Women's lib means different things to different people. Whatever the modality, however, it is essentially the call to personal freedom. It is the hope and effort of women everywhere to be and to become themselves. Until now, the question a woman has had to ask of male society was this: “Who do you want me to be? What do you want me to do?” Young women particularly have had to play games with their male counterparts. If they wanted to get or keep their man, they were wise to let the boys win in athletic or academic competition. This was true in tennis or debate—at least until Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King. For the girl to best her boyfriend was to lose the match.

This attitude has affected many areas of masculine-feminine relationships. It has dictated much of the behavior of courtship and marriage, American style, and even invaded

the sanctuary of convents where religious women tended to kowtow to male ecclesiasticism. Much of this has changed or is changing now precisely because women's lib is in the air. This is truly a gain because in Christ there is neither “male or female” (Gal. 3:28).

The question women should be asking is this: “Who am I? What do I want to do?” Men should ask the same question. Indeed, in this area of self-determination and liberation, the day may come when man's liberation will be more urgent than woman's is today. Men need liberation from oppressive middle class values like the necessity of unlimited financial or professional advancement, or the inversion of roles in the family where mama rules the roost and daddy minds the baby. In the rat-race that is materialistic America and in the matriarchal society in which men have often dropped out domestically, men will need liberation also, and what is said in this paper applies to them as well as to women.

In the image of the castle the answer to the question “Who am I? What am I to do?” has been answered rather negatively by some contemporary authors. For them, the castle as a symbol of human achievement and fullness of life is a chimera, a snare and a delusion; it beckons, it enthralls, but it betrays. Franz Kafka, for example, in his book *The Castle* sees life as a labyrinth of human frustration and hopelessness. Man is an ant among ants, caught in the pressures of massive oppression with no way out of the labyrinth. Bela Bartok, the Hungarian composer, describes, in *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, a palace with no windows but with seven doors. The doors are entrances into disappointment and contradiction because behind each door lies one of man's hopes and desires destroyed. The last door is the most

tragic of all. It opens to the death of love, slain by violence.

Teresa's Castle

Bartok's castle has seven doors that lead nowhere. Teresa of Avila's interior castle has seven rooms or series of rooms called the mansions that lead closer and closer to God. Each series of rooms describes a stage of progress in the journey to God. They are stages of growth. For Teresa, the castle is life, and at the center of life dwells the Lord, the ground of all being. "We ourselves are the castle," she writes, "and the door to the castle is prayer."

Note, Teresa says "prayer," not prayers. For her, prayer is life itself. To grow in prayer is to grow in life, and for Teresa growth in life meant growth in freedom, love, joy, exuberance and enthusiasm. Her particular insight was that such growth is more inward than outward. It is getting next to oneself, being in touch with one's deepest self. For Teresa this meant to be in touch with God in a most intimate and personal way because the Lord Jesus Christ dwells in the center of each person. The journey within, however, was the journey into outside reality, too. It was the *entré* to liberation, to freedom "spacious and unflawed, which is walled about with God" (Francis Thompson).

Prayer in this context, therefore, is not any one particular form but the search for the deepest reality that you are. Prayer, in fact, is *the way* to answer the question: "Who am I? What am I to do?"

Only each individual can answer the question, and it can be done only by getting next to oneself. It is not enough to imitate somebody, to do all the right things, to be a nice person and a good worker. It is not enough to have the approval of authority or peers to be really yourself. Good behavior, high achievement academically and socially, participation in school events and involvement in problems of the city and the world—all these

things are good but they are not enough. They are the first steps. They are the entrance into the castle itself, shaking off the ugly toads and slimy reptiles that inhabit the moat that runs around the castle; but learning to do the right things is only the first step in learning to *be* yourself.

I do not mean to minimize the importance of doing the right thing. It is crucial. But it is not all there is. Good moral behavior is a precondition or preliminary for self-development. No one can hope to be truly free if she is the slave of passion or human respect, if she takes the path of least resistance and gives in to her selfishness and egoism, if she is lazy, proud or self-indulgent. The first three mansions of the interior castle emphasize the reform of life. Conversion has to be consolidated by a discipline that stabilizes a person in the practice of a true Christian life.

Still, in spite of its basic importance, behavior in itself is superficial. It is the outer rim of your life. It is only a beginning. It is the stage of infancy or childhood in human development. It will not make you a free, joyful, lively human being.

Many people reach this stage of growth and are highly acclaimed by their friends. They think the right thoughts, have the right values, do the right things. But in their hearts they are empty. They are conformists, conventional middle-class Americans, and they feel like mechanical men. They are not "turned on." They are dead inside. What is lacking? Why are their lives so uninspired and uninspiring?

Saint Teresa of Avila in the "Third Mansions" of her *Castle* comes up with this answer. The lives of these people are skin-deep. She says, "Enter within yourselves, my daughters, and get away from your own trifling good works, for these you are bound as Christians to perform, and indeed many more." The daughters in question are her contemplative nuns. They are very good

people, “on the straight road to salvation,” living “carefully ordered lives” in an “eminently reasonable” way.

What is their Achilles’ heel? They have constructed a fragile house of cards based on expediency, insecurity, dealing with themselves and others instead of living out of the wellsprings of their own being, freely, lovingly, generously, with honest-to-God commitment and fidelity. They are full of “attachments,” a favorite word of Teresa best translated in contemporary language as neurotic needs and hang-ups.

Teresa’s Life

Teresa’s own life illustrates what I am saying. She was always a good person. However humble her protests in the first chapters of her autobiography about her misspent youth, all the evidence points to her never having done anything seriously wrong before or after her entrance into the convent. She loved people and people loved her; she once remarked that she never met anyone who did not like her.

But she was not happy. For eighteen years she struggled to reconcile “these two contradictory things—the life of the Spirit and the pleasures and joys and pastimes of the senses” (*Life*, ch. 7). A Dutch psychiatrist has analyzed Teresa’s life and concluded that she suffered from a “vital uprooting.” She was not in touch with herself. Instead she was “running,” compulsively seeking to make up for the emptiness within herself, especially her lack of self-acceptance and self-love, by identifying with everyone who came along. She was extroverted all right, but in an unhealthy way. Her constant reaching out to people was a crutch; it was for her own sake rather than for her friends’ needs and welfare. Thus her involvements were not the result of real love of others but of the imperious need she felt to be loved by others, to be approved and reassured.

The principle behind Teresa’s arrested development is the same inadequacy many people experience today: good behavior cannot be used to cover up imperfect motivation. Life does not consist in giving a good performance, making a fine show, having the appearances without the substance. This is the message of the “Third Mansions” of the Interior Castle.

People who stay on the rim of life, concerned about the outside of the cup but not the inside, are not at peace. In fact, they are bored to death. Who would not be bored if all he had were his “petty little works?” Yet these same mediocre people are complacent and self-satisfied because they don’t know any better. The fact is, they have stopped growing and the challenge has gone out of their life.

A famous modern educational psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg, maintains that the vast majority of good Americans are at this stage of moral development. They are strictly conventional; the best of them are “law and order” people. This does not mean that they are bad; it simply means that they do not live from the inside out and hence they are less than truly free. His analysis of human growth, based on twentieth century research, parallels with amazing accuracy Teresa’s interpretation of her own life experience. What Kohlberg calls stages three and four of moral development—conventional morality—Teresa, calls the “Third Mansions.” It is a limited stage of human growth and can be called the plateau of human mediocrity.

What can be done to move upward and forward, What can be done to become more fully ourselves? What is the secret of growth into human freedom?

Teresa’s Answer

Teresa’s answer is to recognize that the Lord must bring us beyond ourselves and into ourselves. Listen to this sage and common sense advice she gives to one

unliberated man who was the slave of his own avarice:

...A rich man, who is childless and has no one to leave his money to, loses part of his wealth; but not so much that he has not enough to spare for himself and his household—he still has enough and to spare. If he begins to get restless and worried, as though he had not a crust of bread left to eat, how can our Lord ask him to leave all for his sake? If this man cannot resign himself because the Lord has not led him thus far, well and good; but he ought to realize that he lacks this freedom of spirit and in that case he will pray for it and prepare himself for the Lord to give it to him (Third Mansions, ch. 2).

Teresa urges people to accept themselves honestly where they are at, to work patiently yet relentlessly toward changing their attitude, and especially to wait for the healing power of God's grace. In Teresa's own life, the breakthrough came in the form of mystical graces of prayer. This was in accord with her own contemplative vocation and the role of mental prayer in her life.

God may well work in a similar fashion in our own lives. The Charismatic Renewal and the Jesus Movement have demonstrated this fact in the lives of many people in our own time. They have been touched often out of due time, before they bore the burden of the day's labor and effort, that would bring them into the "Third Mansions." Often suddenly and always graciously God comes in some very tangible and effective way into the lives of people who till then hardly knew him.

More often, however, it seems that God brings us forward in our personal development through other people. Martin Buber poses our question and gives a contemporary restatement of Saint Teresa: "What is to be done? If you mean by that question, 'What is one to do?,' there is not any answer; one does not do anything; one cannot help himself. He who contents himself with explaining what one is to do, talks and lives in a vacuum. But he who poses the question—

What am I to do?—is taken by the hand by comrades he does not know and they answer: *You shall not withhold yourself...* He nods and as soon as he nods he feels on his hands the blood warmth of togetherness" ("Roadsigns on a Merry-Go-Round," CBS documentary film).

The ultimate answer to human development, to human liberation and the achievement of freedom is, paradoxically, to expect it from others, to wait on the Lord, to let go and let the life-giving Spirit, who is the Lord and who works through other people, convert us to himself.

Teresa's life and teaching illustrate this principle. According to her, women have a mystical vocation because they are more open and vulnerable to God's grace. With Jesus and with Saint Paul she proclaimed the strength-in-weakness theme. She did not always understand this principle. Her vocational choice of the convent was dictated by other worldly values. Neither marriage nor religious life attracted her. Not marriage, because it seemed like servitude; not religious life, because it seemed dull and dreary. Teresa really wanted instant mysticism, to be transported out of the nitty-gritty human condition into the divine realm of immediate divine union. It took her the best years of her life, roughly from age twenty-three to forty-one, to realize that true growth is slow growth, that one must come to terms with human limitations, including the faults of a very affectionate and vivacious feminine personality. One struggles patiently and persistently, but one waits on the Lord for full redemption. This was Teresa's discovery of the femininity of the Christian vocation. Long before her the Fathers of the Church had taught that before God every soul is feminine. Men as well as women follow the same path to real sanctity.

Sanctity is not a voluntaristic conquering of Mt. Everest, but it is learning to accept reality, being open to God's Word,

being receptive like desert sands to the downpour of the spring rains. Once Teresa realized this, she exemplified perfectly the saying of Leon Bloy: the more holy a woman, the more a woman she is.

The chapter in *The New Castle* referred to in the opening paragraph of this paper actually introduced the castle motif to discuss a particular question. The author raised a question about the Arab world: can it assimilate the technology of the Western world? Until now, Mecca, the castle of the Mohammedan world, with its minarets and arabesque columns and arches, has symbolized spiritual strength and greatness. Can Mecca integrate Western science and know-how into its life without losing its spirituality? The question remains open and

only history will give the answer. But the author points out the secret of Islam's past greatness. The secret is in the very name Islam, which means "submission" or in the word Muslim, which means "submissiveness." Mohammedans attribute their greatness to their submission to the Spirit, to "the great God, Allah, in the footsteps of Mohammed, his prophet."

In the footsteps of Saint Teresa of Avila, with a confirmation from Lawrence Kohlberg and Martin Buber, we arrive at the same conclusion. Full growth into freedom, liberation, whether that of women or any other group, is ultimately gift, the gift from God, who pours his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who is given to us (Romans 5:5).