

Conversion in the Teresian Mansions

By Bill O'Byrne

Evangelicals are reading the spiritual classics for their insights on spiritual formation, but often find that the mention of a definitive conversion to Christ seems to be missing. In Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* the event of conversion to Christ also seems to be absent. When taken out of context Teresa's statement about how we begin the spiritual life may be confusing for evangelicals, who are particularly sensitive to the importance of conversion, and may hold to a particular formula for receiving Christ as Savior. One writer attempts to summarize Teresa's view, saying "Mental prayer is the gateway that takes one into this castle."¹ It may seem by this statement that salvation is accomplished not by conversion to Christ, but by "mental prayer." Does Teresa of Avila, in her Seven Mansions of spiritual growth, account for the "conversion event," the coming to faith that evangelicals associate with becoming a Christian? If Teresa does not use the word, one might ask how she understands that concept.

While Teresa does not refer to "conversion" in event terms, and even though conversion is not the focus of the Interior Castle, neither is the concept of conversion absent from her writing. What is amazing is how much Teresa *does* say about conversion, given her intent to write about progressing in the spiritual life and her ecclesiastical context where infant baptism was assumed. While she uses other terms to describe it, the way she does describe conversion includes the necessary components of faith and repentance that evangelicals generally associate with conversion. When she writes of those who have just entered the interior castle of the soul, Teresa describes their unconverted state, and how they came to enter the First Mansions:

Many souls remain in the outer court of the castle, which is the place occupied by the guards; they are not interested in entering it, and have no idea what there is in that wonderful place, or who dwells in it, or even how many rooms it has. ...So accustomed have they grown to living all the time with the reptiles and other creatures to be found in the outer court of the castle that they have almost become like them; and although by nature they are so richly endowed as to have the power of holding converse with none other than God Himself, there is nothing that can be done for them. Unless they strive to **realize their miserable condition** and to remedy it, they will be turned into pillars of salt for not looking within themselves, just as Lot's wife was because she looked back.

As far as I can understand, **the door of entry into this castle is prayer and meditation**: I do not say mental prayer rather than vocal, for, if it is prayer at all, it must be accompanied by meditation. If a person does not

¹ John Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 255.

think Whom he is addressing, and what he is asking for, and who it is that is asking and of Whom he is asking it, I do not consider that he is praying at all even though he be constantly moving his lips. True, it is sometimes possible to pray without paying heed to these things, but that is only because they have been thought about previously; if a man is in the habit of speaking to God's Majesty as he would speak to his slave, and never wonders if he is expressing himself properly, but merely utters the words that come to his lips because he has learned them by heart through constant repetition, I do not call that prayer at all -- and God grant no Christian may ever speak to Him so!²

Let us say no more, then, of these paralyzed souls, who, unless the Lord Himself comes and commands them to rise, are like the man who had lain beside the pool for thirty years: they are unfortunate creatures and live in great peril. Let us rather think of certain other souls, who do eventually enter the castle. These are very much absorbed in worldly affairs; but their desires are good; sometimes, though infrequently, they commend themselves to Our Lord; and they **think about the state of their souls**, though not very carefully. ...From time to time, however, they shake their minds free of them and it is a great thing that they should know themselves well enough to **realize that they are not going the right way** to reach the castle door. Eventually, they enter the first rooms on the lowest floor, but so many reptiles get in with them that they are unable to appreciate the beauty of the castle or to find any peace within it. Still, they have done a good deal by entering at all.

You will think this is beside the point, daughters, since **by the goodness of the Lord** you are not one of these.³

So when Teresa speaks of the acknowledgment of one's own miserable state, or of realizing that one is not going the right way, she is speaking of repentance. Elsewhere she speaks of the necessity of humility and self-knowledge in order to begin the spiritual journey.⁴ Similarly, when she speaks of God's mercy and goodness in enabling us to pray and meditate on His greatness, she is speaking of the grace by which we are saved and the faith necessary to receive that grace. Though we would never say that praying saves us, praying the sinner's prayer plays a vital, even indispensable role in the expression of faith and receiving of grace essential to a conversion event. Those who are not humble enough to consider God ("meditate") and turn to God ("pray") are "outside the castle"; they are "in great peril." Even though they may be baptized, they must respond to grace by faith to be included among the "souls redeemed by the blood

² Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. ed. by E. Allison Peers, (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1989), pp. 31-32.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 32-33.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 37-38.

of Jesus Christ.”⁵ While Teresa affirms that even people on the outside are created with God’s image dwelling within them, it is only those inside the castle, who may progress in the knowledge of God through Christ, who is the incarnate and indwelling Image of God.

Teresa's statement that "prayer and meditation" is the entry into the castle must be understood in context. Teresa does not say that any form of "prayer and meditation" is sufficient to save an unbeliever. She is speaking of the prayer of confession and repentance in light of the consideration of a good God, who is gracious to sinners through redemption in Jesus. While Teresa's purpose in the *Interior Castle* is not to delineate how one "gets saved", she unavoidably makes references to conversion as she describes how one draws nearer to God having already entered the Castle. Later Teresa uses more specific terms to describe the deeper levels of prayer essential, as we journey closer to the Center of the castle. The deeper experiences of God and prayer that she describes are the fruit of conversion.

Many evangelicals understand conversion solely in terms of justification, with almost no consideration of the necessity of sanctification. Much of evangelical piety is so focused on the door of the salvation event that it neglects the rooms and even the mansions of increasing intimacy with Christ, which that door was designed to let us enter and explore! Grounded in a solid theology of conversion, Evangelicals can draw on the wealth and experience of writers outside of our tradition, who can help us expand our conception of the processes and practices that are vital to deepening and maturing the Christian life, which is the natural and necessary fruit of our conversion.

Evangelicals have done much to emphasize the need for conversion and clarify its components, but we should beware of reducing conversion to a formula. True conversion is a mystery of God and of faith, involving the Spirit’s hidden work, and one’s inner faith that we cannot always observe or measure by our standards. While we affirm that conversion happens when a sinner repents and believes in Christ and receives God’s saving grace, only God is truly able to see the heart. While our churches strive to confirm and seal a new believer’s conversion, only God knows precisely when conversion has actually taken place, and when repentance and faith are real. Accepting the mystery of God’s grace and of faith in conversion allows us to recognize the fruit of conversion in the writings of authors who may never use the term.

Therefore, we can say that while Teresa does not use the term conversion or delineate a specific model of the conversion event, she does recognize the need for and presence of conversion in the Christian journey. That does not mean that Evangelicals need de-emphasize the importance of a conscious conversion from slavery in sin to salvation by faith in Christ. We have seen how important and helpful it can be for believers to have made a public profession of faith, even if that “event” is a culmination and confirmation of the work of God that may have taken place over many years. Teresa stands solidly

⁵ Ibid, p. 35.

against a cultural Christianity devoid of a living relationship with God in Christ. On the contrary, she was a bold voice in her time for the absolute necessity of a living, growing, intimacy with the Triune God, which begins in confession, repentance, and surrender, all of which continue to grow during a lifelong journey of deepening love for God and neighbor.