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# Retrieving Teresa of Avila's Resiliency in the *Interior Castle*

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*This article examines Teresa of Avila's articulation of and response to spiritual suffering in the* Interior Castle. *It applies a feminist hermeneutic to the text in order to locate the resources that contribute to Teresa's resiliency in the face of this suffering. This approach to the text reveals that Teresa's use of contemplative prayer and interactions with her community facilitate a direct engagement with her suffering so as to make it manageable. Her successful navigation of the spiritual journey allows her the opportunity to share her insights toward resiliency with her community by speaking honestly about her experience in her writings. This article's approach to reading the* Interior Castle *lifts up Teresa's experience as a potential resource for women today who may have difficulty locating a sense of agency in their own experiences of suffering.*

**Keywords:** Teresa of Avila, Christian spirituality, suffering, resiliency, feminist theology, contemplation, Martin Laird

The theme of suffering as described in Christian spiritual texts can often be difficult to interpret for the contemporary reader. References in this genre of texts to suffering, pain, darkness, or other themes that today might be considered "personal difficulties" affecting the human person lend themselves to two common forms of interpretation. The first is to attribute them to the effects of the author's mental or physical health. This would mean that any theological insight garnered from these texts must be interpreted within the context of the biological processes at work in the life of the author.[1] The second is to explain away these references as metaphorical or symbolic explanations of theological themes. In this view, a desire for death

[1] For an example of such a study, see Marcella Biro Barton, "Saint Teresa of Avila: Did She Have Epilepsy?," *Catholic Historical Review* 68, no. 4 (1982): 581–98.

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on the part of the author that results from his or her experience suffering would not be interpreted as actually verging on suicidality but would merely be given a rhetorical function, such as representing the gravity of one's desire for divine relationship.[2] Regardless of whether one pursues the former or the latter approach, interpretations such as these that rationalize the presence of suffering come at the risk of justifying or sacralizing it.[3] It is here that a problem arises. Such justifications, to the extent that they allow a person to continue to suffer when there are ways to help them heal or experience reprieve from their suffering, contradict the affirmation of human flourishing that is central to the Christian faith.[4] One may acknowledge that suffering is at times unavoidable, but it is never willed by God for its own sake. Feminist, womanist, and other contextual theologies have made this point apparent.[5]

Although these are certainly available readings of these texts, they entail certain additional difficulties when applied to texts by female authors. More specifically, they threaten to perpetuate the patriarchal hermeneutics that have historically dismissed women as authorities of their own experiences, especially when they describe their varied experiences of suffering. If there is indeed something revelatory about these texts, their liberative possibilities will be discovered only when one probes the authors' own responses to and interpretations of their experiences.[6] In other words: the author may not necessarily be the sole interpreter of her experience, but she must be viewed as the primary interpreter to the extent that she can claim these experiences as her own. With particular regard to Christian spiritual texts written by female authors, what would it mean to take the experience of spiritual suffering

[2] See Slavomír Gálik, Sabína Gáliková Tolnaiová, and Arkadiusz Modrzejewski, "Mystical Death in the Spirituality of Saint Teresa of Ávila," *Sophia* 59 (2020): 593–612.

[3] Adjacent to this would be soteriologies that argue that God in some way willed the death of Jesus, such as Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo*. For an ecofeminist retrieval of Anselm's soteriology, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

[4] For a theological analysis as to why such justifications routinely constitute inadequate responses to the experience of human suffering, see Jessica Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood: A Theology of Life with Depression* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022), 49–111.

[5] For example, see Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "The Passion of the Womb: Women Re-living the Eucharist," in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 323–34; Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Reading of Biblical Narratives*, 40th anniversary ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 65–91; M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Second Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023), 15–40.

[6] "Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women [or any person] is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive." Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 18–19.

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seriously as a component of the Christian spiritual journey without giving it salvific necessity? Spiritual suffering is defined here as any suffering that can be attributed to a spiritual cause. This suffering may manifest in spiritual, emotional, physical, relational, or other kinds of consequences. Salvific necessity, meanwhile, refers to a soteriological understanding that would require one to undergo an experience of suffering that is largely considered to be avoidable or excessive. This understanding may be juxtaposed with an account that finds meaning in an experience of suffering that is deemed to be unavoidable.[7]

This article addresses this question through a feminist retrieval of Teresa of Avila's response to spiritual suffering in the *Interior Castle*.[8] It is necessary to clarify what is meant by "feminist" in the context of this article. It does not involve retrieving Teresa as a "proto-feminist," although such work would likely be valuable. It does not entail using Teresa's writings in order to move toward a post-Christian symbolic universe with the claim that traditional Christian language and symbols are too patriarchal to be redeemed for theology today. "Feminist" in this context, rather, refers to the contextual approach taken with regard to our reading of Teresa's work. Who Teresa was, the particular issues that she was responding to, and the manner in which she responded to them in the midst of her own particularity bear relevance to any theological interpretation of her work. Acknowledging Teresa's experience of herself as a religious woman in sixteenth-century Spain barred from receiving formal theological education is integral to understanding her work properly. And in light of these considerations, the feminist approach of this article proceeds in a manner that upholds Teresa's dignity, authority, and flourishing as a human being. To do otherwise is to risk losing sight of the redemptive possibilities of Teresa's work. Therefore, this article centers Teresa's account of her own experience by highlighting the resources that contribute to her resiliency in the face of spiritual suffering. By resiliency, I intend a social sciences' understanding: "The ability to succeed, to live and to develop in a positive and socially acceptable way, despite the stress or adversity that would normally involve the real possibility of a negative outcome."[9]

This reading indicates that vulnerable engagement with one's experience of spiritual suffering can mitigate that experience until it passes. For Teresa, this vulnerable engagement takes the form of practicing contemplative prayer,

[7] See Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 199–217.

[8] For the original Spanish version of the text, see Teresa de Avila, *Castillo Interior*, ed. Tomás Álvarez (Burgos, Spain: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2011).

[9] S. Vanistendael, "Clés pour devenir: la résilience," in *Les Cahiers du BICE* (Les Vendredis de Châteauvallon, Geneva: Bureau Internatoinal Catholique de l'Enfance, 1998), 9; Found in Boris Cyrulnik, *Resilience: How Your Inner Strength Can Set You Free from the Past*, trans. David Macey (New York: Penguin, 2009), 5.

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participating in fellowship with her community, and crafting her writings. Her work reveals that a commensurate response to spiritual suffering would not entail rationalizing it (although one may choose to attribute some kind of meaning to it), but, rather, choosing to navigate it through and in the company of others by means of the resources at one's disposal. When understood this way, Teresa's approach to weathering spiritual suffering, and our retrieval of her approach, can serve as a resource for women today whose experiences of suffering—both explicitly within spiritual experiences and more broadly—have routinely been dismissed.

## Assessing the Context: The Methodological Difficulties of Reading the *Interior Castle*

The *Interior Castle* is likely Teresa's most well-known work and is her last major piece of writing, written just five years before her death in 1582. It was written at the behest of her confessor, Fr. Jerome Gratian, after the confiscation of her autobiography, the *Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus*,[10] by the Spanish Inquisition under the suspicion of heretical content. Although the *Life the Holy Mother of Teresa of Jesus* was never formally condemned, its absence meant that Carmelite communities lacked access to Teresa's written instruction on prayer and the soul's union with God. As such, the *Interior Castle* treats many of the same themes as the *Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus* but now from the perspective of a mature Teresa, who is cognizant of the particular spiritual needs of the Discalced Carmelites as well as of the shape of her own spiritual progress.

Teresa's writing indicates two different audiences for her work: those who have or are currently undergoing similar spiritual experiences to the ones that she recounts and those who are not. She acknowledges the difficulty of translating these experiences and even remarks that they will seem foolish to those who have not yet experienced them.[11] In one sense, this foolishness is to be expected because her discussion of these experiences is not necessarily for them but for the one suffering. She writes, "Although I hadn't intended to treat of these [matters], I thought doing so would bring great consolation to some soul going through them, for it would learn that these trials take place in souls to whom God grants similar favors."[12] Teresa names the experiences (i.e., the different forms of suffering) that these people are weathering, which they have

[10] Teresa of Avila, *Autobiography of Teresa of Avila*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc, 2010).

[11] Vanistendael, "Clés pour devenir: la résilience," 7.1.11.

[12] Vanistendael, "Clés pour devenir: la résilience," 6.1.2.

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likely been unable to name for themselves. This move offers a sense of connection; the literary Teresa of the *Interior Castle* meets those who similarly suffer like her in the midst of their isolation. By the very act of reading the *Interior Castle*, the spiritual journeyer can come to recognize that she is not suffering alone. Teresa keeps her company in her sorrow and alleviates, at least in part, the interpersonal distress that they may be undergoing. Teresa's very writings in this way can act as resources for resiliency when taken in conjunction with contemplative prayer and activity.

The consolation this work provides, however, is not to the exclusion of the second audience. Having been made aware of what their companions might be undergoing, the remaining members of the community are summoned to action on their behalf. Knowledge, here, serves as a call, a call to the wider community to reach out in vulnerability through the compassionate listening and physical ministry to the suffering community member. There is no safety found in separating oneself from the one who suffers. Rather, the community of persons surrounding the one who suffers act as the necessary outlet by which the suffering person processes and endures the experience. This means that it takes an involved and supportive community to help the person weathering this experience to affirm her dignity and to live in hope of new life. Teresa's advocacy, here, reflects an anthropological truth: to support another in her time of need demands the (often-implicit) acknowledgment that suffering, though never desirable in and of itself, nevertheless constitutes an unavoidable element of our finite earthly lives as we now experience them. As liberation theologian, Dorothee Soelle, notes, "Our only choice is for whose sake we suffer, not whether we have to suffer or remain free from suffering."[13] One's honesty and openness regarding this condition may be understood as a first step in learning to navigate it. Teresa, having successfully navigated her own spiritual journey, has, indeed, begun this process by opening up about her own story and holds her readership to the same standard. These dual invitations to vulnerability—in sharing one's story and remaining present to the other within her experience of suffering—give Teresa's writing an efficacious character in addition to a descriptive one.

Although Teresa clearly intends the *Interior Castle* to be of practical use to Discalced Carmelites undergoing similar spiritual experiences to herself,

[13] Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984), 133, 178. This understanding is similar to what Catholic theologian and ethicist James Keenan will later define as "mercy": the "willingness to enter into the chaos of others so as to answer them in their need." For Keenan, this willingness is the defining attribute of Catholicism. James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from Catholic Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 91–92.

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her writing does not exhibit the clear language that might be expected for this purpose.[14] In fact, there are several factors that guard against a direct, straightforward reading of the text, primarily the context and character of her writing and particular identity of the author. As already mentioned, Teresa's previous writings had been subject to inquisitorial confiscation, and her opponents actively sought her ruin. This scrutiny meant that Teresa had to be exceptionally careful with her writings. It is not uncommon, then, for Teresa to refer to her "womanly dullness of mind" or her own stupidity in order to reject her own authority and rhetorically outmaneuver a hostile readership.[15] Gratian also orders Teresa to keep the references in her work "general" in order to avoid unnecessary attention.[16] This means that she will rarely directly reference her own experience. Instead, she will allude to a person she knows to whom such experiences occurred.[17] Lastly, Teresa's concern for humility means that she will sometimes deny her own extensive spiritual progress in order not to appear superior to her fellow Carmelites.[18]

These factors contribute to the potential difficulty of a feminist reading of Teresa's work. In light of the aforementioned considerations, this reading must

[14] Alison Weber specifically refers to Teresa's language as the "rhetoric of obfuscation," which Weber argues Teresa uses, at least in part, to protect herself from additional scrutiny. Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 98–122.

[15] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," in *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2017), 1.2.6, 1.2.7; Noelia Bueno-Gómez, "Self-management and Narrativity in Teresa of Avila's Work," *Life Writing* 15, no. 3 (2018): 305–20, at 308. There is primarily scholarly agreement that Teresa's self-deprecating comments in her works function rhetorically, at least in part. Her position as a woman writing authoritatively about theological matters leaves her in a precarious position and subject to inquisitorial reprimand. Her references to her own lowliness and pitiful state help to alleviate these threats. André Brouillette takes the opposing position that these self-deprecating comments are not simply rhetorical devices but actually aid in the work of *deshacer*, a "being undone" by the Spirit. Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, meanwhile, argues that "For male and female readers alike, Teresa's humility underscored her sincerity." Her humility serves a rhetorical purpose in both dismissing her own authority and winning over her audience. André Brouillette, *Teresa of Avila, the Holy Spirit, and the Place of Salvation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021), 137; Weber is cited in note 8. Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 69.

[16] Antonio De San Joaquin, *Anotaciones al P. Ribera*, vol. 8 (Madrid, 1733), 149–50. Found in Kieran Kavanaugh, "The Interior Castle–Introduction," in *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2017), 263.

[17] For example, Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 1.2.2.

[18] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 7.1.2.

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begin from a position that affirms Teresa's full humanity and promotes her flourishing. It must hold Teresa, a full-grown human adult, as a competent (yet complicated) storyteller. Teresa is the chief authority of her own experience even when her rhetorical choices would not portray her as such. What this means is that, regarding her flourishing vis-à-vis her spiritual suffering, our reading should defer first to Teresa's interpretation of her own experience before applying our own interpretations. For instance, Teresa's positive evaluations of suffering do not necessarily indicate a belief on her part that all suffering is inherently meaningful. Rather, Teresa can locate what might be named a positive aspect of suffering on account of her belief in God's ability to direct any human experience to the good (cf. Gen 50:20). In particular regard to suffering, God desires for us only the spiritual benefits that may result from the unavoidable earthly experience of having been tested, not the suffering itself.[19] Julia Feder captures this point well in her retrieval of Teresa's account of her suffering for survivors of sexual trauma today:

> This [her account] can sound like Teresa understood suffering as salvific and God as desirous of human suffering and is a particularly unhelpful way of thinking about suffering in the context of sexual violence. This would not be an incorrect interpretation of Teresa, but it does require nuance. Teresa believed that suffering presented an opportunity to grow in intimacy with God … Teresa understood suffering as an opportunity to serve God if it was borne well. It is not suffering itself which Teresa sees as salvific, but instead it is the opportunity to practice the patience that suffering presents.[20]

The intensity of one's suffering, like presence or absence of ecstatic prayer, does not speak to one's spiritual superiority or inferiority in Teresa's account. In this way, Teresa quite remarkably resists the contemporaneous fascination with excessive penance that characterized late medieval/early-renaissance piety, which she views as dangerous to spiritual progress rather than desirable.[21] What this means for our work today is that a feminist reading must avoid attributing meaning to an experience that Teresa is unable to attribute meaning to herself while respecting any meaning that she *is* able to assign to it. As will become evident in the following section, Teresa's recognition of a variety

[19] "All these sufferings are meant to increase one's desire to enjoy the Spouse [God]." Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.4.1.

[20] Julia Feder, *Incarnating Grace: A Theology of Healing from Sexual Trauma* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023), 53.

[21] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 1.2.16, 4.3.11. For a treatment of penance and early modern piety, see Gretchen Starr-Lebeau, "Lay Piety and Community Identity in the Early Modern World," in *A New History of Penance*, ed. Abigail Firey, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, vol. 14 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 395–417.

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of forms of spiritual suffering along the spiritual journey is not the same as her making a positive value judgment of that suffering.

### Characterizing Spiritual Suffering in the *Interior Castle*

The literary structure of the *Interior Castle* governs the theme of suffering within the text. The work recounts the spiritual path of the soul, dually depicted as both a crystal castle and the journeyer within it, on its path toward spiritual marriage with God, traveling within itself through seven successive stages of deepening interiority.[22] Though the stages are referred to by number, movement within this castle is not strictly linear. Each stage or "mansion" contains within it sets of "dwelling places," which need not be exhausted in order for the soul to progress sufficiently along the journey.[23] The existence of many dwelling places indicates that the spiritual journey for Teresa lends itself to personal inflection as opposed to strict uniformity among its journeyers. Teresa, then, addresses what a "completionist" journey may look like (that is, one that entails passage into all seven stages) but resists what may be termed an "exhaustive" view of the spiritual journey (one that traverses every single dwelling place within each stage).

Teresa's treatment of a variety of forms of suffering is most clearly defined in her considerations of the fifth and sixth sets of dwelling places. These dwelling places are the home of the spiritually advanced, who are preparing to enter the most intimate of relationships with God in the seventh stage. What distinguishes these stages from the first four is that the kinds of prayer available during them are divinely initiated, such as the prayer of union or prayer of rapture. The intensity of these forms of prayers leaves the journeyer in a particularly vulnerable state, meaning that the times not spent in union are susceptible to particularly acute forms of suffering. The kinds of suffering experienced during these stages may be broadly classified as "spiritual suffering" because Teresa interprets them as derivative of one's spiritual location within the castle. In other words, someone just beginning the spiritual journey is unlikely to be undergoing such experiences. Teresa mentions a variety of experiences that can be considered as forms of "spiritual suffering." For the

[22] For a reflection on Teresa's choice of castle imagery as being relevant to her historical location, see María M. Carrión, "Scent of a Mystic Woman: Teresa de Jesús and the Interior Castle," *Medieval Encounters* 15, no. 1 (2009): 130–56.

[23] André Brouillette associates Teresa's use of dwelling places with the significant influence that the Gospel of John has upon the work, especially John 14. Brouillette, *Teresa of Avila, the Holy Spirit, and the Place of Salvation*, 191.

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sake of our purposes here, we will group them under headings that differentiate them by their immediate causes: restlessness, interpersonal distress, physical illness, and vicarious distress.

The restlessness that is characteristic of the fifth and sixth stages is a consequence of the intensity of prayer during these stages. After experiencing the prayer of union and later on the prayer of rapture, the soul feels torn. Teresa recounts how the little butterfly—her image for the soul—grows restless. "The difficulty is," she writes, "that [the butterfly] doesn't know where to alight and rest."[24] Similar to St. Paul's dilemma in Philippians 1:19-26, the soul does not know whether it wants to cling to God in union or remain on earth in God's service. It feels the particular effect of its detachment from earthly things, recognizing that its only rest can be found in God.[25] These ecstatic experiences are neither the height nor the culmination of the spiritual journey, and the existential tension present in this stage will only increase as the journey continues, most especially in the transition from the fifth to the sixth mansion.[26] This pain can go on for years and increases with each experience of union. Teresa graphically describes this suffering as follows:

> With the strongest yearnings to die, and thus usually with tears, it begs God to take it from this exile. Everything it sees wearies it. When it is alone it finds some relief, but soon this torment returns; yet when the soul does not experience this pain, something is felt to be missing. In sum, this little butterfly is unable to find a lasting place of rest … And even though, on the one hand, the soul seems to feel very secure in its interior part, especially when it is alone with God, on the other hand, it goes about in deep distress because it fears the devil may in some way beguile it into offending the One whom it loves so much.[27]

[24] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 5.2.8.

[25] In her *Meditations on Song of Songs*, Teresa acknowledges that she does not know Latin. However, it is also clear that she is nevertheless familiar with the works of Augustine, who famously begins his *Confessions* by writing that God "has made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." This section of the *Interior Castle* likely has Augustine in mind. Teresa of Avila, "Meditations on the Song of Songs," in *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2017), 1.2. See Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.7.9, and Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), I.I.

[26] Bernard McGinn, "'One Word Will Contain within Itself a Thousand Mysteries': Teresa of Avila, the First Woman Commentator on the Song of Songs," *Spiritus* 16, no. 1 (2016): 21–40, at 32.

[27] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.6.1–2.

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This suffering is so great that Teresa eventually longs for death because it would end her feeling of separation. This pain reaches the innermost part of the human person. The soul has undergone such an intense process of detachment that it feels apart from all things, even God, except during the explicit experience of union. It is as though her suffering "breaks and grinds the soul into pieces."[28] Teresa associates this feeling with the preemption of the lasting security characteristic of the seventh set of dwelling places, but anticipating this union does not lessen the intensity of the anguish of this restlessness. There can be no true relief from restless suffering until God brings the soul into the seventh mansion. As such, this form of suffering serves as the context for the next two forms of suffering and can intensify the pain associated with them.

Interpersonal distress, the second form, concerns suffering associated with strained relationships developed along the spiritual journey. The restless suffering just mentioned puts Teresa into a strange predicament. On the one hand, the soul, having briefly experienced the heights of union with God, does not want to return to earthly life but knows that it must. On the other hand, ecstatic experience has isolated the spiritual journeyer from her fellow community members, making that return all the more difficult. Teresa's story is that of many holy persons who find themselves rejected by their communities on account of their spiritual dedication. Teresa describes the sorrow of having "her friends turn away from her" because of her public experiences of rapture. They gossip about how she acts as though she is better than them because of her prayers (which Teresa clarifies repeatedly is not the case) and that her actions must be the result of the work of the devil.[29] This calumny transforms what should otherwise be a joyful experience into an additional trial. As a result, Teresa feels alone, with few people around her in whom she can safely confide.

Her friends' gossip becomes more painful when her confessor also does not believe her account. In Teresa's case the confessor is inexperienced, and Teresa lacks the proper verbiage to describe her ineffable experiences. The confessor's anxiety starts to make Teresa doubt whether these experiences are truly from God. She begins to worry that not only has she been deceived in her experiences of union but that she might actually be intentionally deceiving her confessor as well. Teresa writes, "All this would amount to nothing if it were not for the fact that in addition comes the feeling that it [the soul or journeyer] is incapable of explaining things to its confessors, that it has deceived them. And even though it thinks and sees that it tells its confessors about every

[28] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 5.2.11.

[29] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.3.

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stirring, even the first ones, this doesn't help."[30] In other words, the directives of the confessor have made Teresa begin to doubt herself as an authority of her own experience. The repercussions of this dynamic are particularly pronounced for Teresa as a woman in religious life. The clerical resources ostensibly made available to help Teresa—and perform a liturgical function otherwise unavailable to women—have actually made things worse. The confessor has become a stumbling block to her because of his own insecurities; "I have had a great deal of experience with learned men, and have also had experience with half-learned, fearful ones; these latter cost me dearly."[31] As a result, she begins to question whether she has made more of this experience than there actually was, and this questioning has become utter torment for her. Teresa continues, "When the confessor contributes to the torment with more fear, the trial becomes something almost unbearable—especially when some dryness comes between the times of these favors."[32] Teresa's experiences with her former friends and her confessor indicate that interpersonal distress demonstrates a clear psychological element to its torment in addition to its relational element.

The third type of suffering during these stages pertains to a bodily illness. The nature of Teresa's health issues has been the subject of much speculation.[33] However, she seems to differentiate the bodily illness associated with spiritual suffering at this stage from her ongoing health problems when she comments that "The Lord is wont also to send [the soul] the severest illnesses. This is a much greater trial, especially when the pains are acute … [they are] the greatest exterior trial … because they then afflict the soul interiorly and exteriorly in such a way that it doesn't know what to do with itself."[34] Although Teresa does not elaborate upon what this particular illness might be, her inclusion of physical illness alongside her mention of spiritual sufferings indicates an inherent connection among body, mind, and spirit in her anthropology. The spiritual cannot be completely isolated from the mental, which cannot be completely isolated from the physical, and this excruciating pain penetrates all three aspects of her human identity.[35] There is no part of her left

[30] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.9.

[31] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 5.1.8.

[32] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.9.

[33] For example, see Barton, "Saint Teresa of Avila"; Michael McGlynn, "Saints Who Make Themselves Sick: A Note on Teresa de Jesús and the So-Called Placebo Effect," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 88, no. 3 (2011): 341–47.

[34] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.6.

[35] Teresa does, however, distinguish between the mind and the intellect. The intellect and other faculties of the soul can be occupied with God even when the mind is "distracted." This insight gives her great comfort. Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 4.1.8.

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unaffected by the spiritual journey. Additionally, her description of this suffering as the "greatest exterior trail" indicates that, while being of a different sort than the forms of spiritual suffering already mentioned, it is explicitly a physical suffering that has a spiritual cause and consequence. In a religious tradition like Christianity that has historically associated women with the body and men with the spirit, Teresa's work indicates that the bodily suffering of women merits attention as a legitimate trial of the spiritual journey.[36]

The final category of spiritual suffering, vicarious distress, may be understood as a consequence of the transformation that the soul has experienced throughout the spiritual journey. Teresa writes, "I know the torment a certain soul of my acquaintance suffers and has suffered at seeing our Lord offended. The pain is so unbearable that she desires to die much more than to suffer it." She continues that Christ, too, experienced such suffering, and that "I believe without a doubt that these sufferings were much greater than were those of His most sacred Passion."[37] What distinguishes this kind of suffering is that its immediate cause primarily pertains to another, in this case to God.[38] It is a suffering that results from having witnessed sin committed against God rather than having the sin committed personally against oneself, to the extent that these phenomena might be distinguished. Teresa's mentioning of this fourth form of suffering is a subtle indication of her spiritual progress and concomitant deepening sensitivity. Prior to the event of union, the soul would likely have been unaffected by these offenses because they did not attack the soul directly. However, the event of union, no matter how brief, has begun a process of identification of Teresa with God, wherein God's sufferings have become Teresa's sufferings and Teresa's sufferings have become God's sufferings.[39] The illusion of earthly separation has begun to fade away, and the human-divine spousal identification has begun.

Yet in addition to gaining a deeply moving concern for another, vicarious distress indicates a change in Teresa's self-evaluation. This deeper identification with God subsequently awakens Teresa to the reality that she is unable to

[36] Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (April 1960): 100–12, at 103–04.

[37] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 5.2.14.

[38] Vicarious or "proxy" suffering is not a new concept during this time but dates back at least to the High Middle Ages. See Gavin Fort, "Suffering Another's Sin: Proxy Penance in the Thirteenth Century," *Journal of Medieval History* 44, no. 2 (2018): 202–30.

[39] The question of whether God suffers is beyond the scope of this article because it is a metaphysical question. Here, we are concerned with Teresa's account of her own experience. Teresa's spirituality is so deeply centered upon the humanity of Christ—and particularly Christ's willingness to suffer with us in our humanity—that it is appropriate to discusses "offenses" against God using this language.

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transform the world apart from God's help.[40] In one sense, this recognition is considered a positive development according to Teresa; it pertains to the purgation of the will that the spiritual journey requires. She even comments that "A few years ago—and even perhaps [a few] days—this soul wasn't mindful of anything but itself."[41] The soul has now gained a wider awareness of itself in light of the omnipotence of its creator.[42] Only those acts united to God's will can ever be fruitful. At the same time, however, Teresa feels an immense frustration in her inability to compel others to love and reverence God as they should.[43] She wants to defend God's honor and bring all people to the love of God but feels powerless to do so. The magnitude of this concern weighs heavily upon her (cf. Matt 19:40). Although the previously mentioned forms of spiritual suffering create great hardship for Teresa, her juxtaposition of this fourth kind of suffering with Christ's suffering of the Passion suggests just how threatening Teresa finds this form of suffering.

Although we differentiate them here, all four types of spiritual suffering can occur simultaneously during the fifth and sixth sets of dwelling places, thus compounding their effect upon the spiritual journeyer. This reality should give one pause. If Teresa's account may be understood as a foretelling of the spiritual journey for all who choose to embark upon it, one may ask why anyone would choose to do so, given how she describes it? Why would one choose to accept the possibility of such suffering when entrance to these later stages is not required for salvation?

At a practical level, pursuing spiritual maturity in spite of the potential spiritual suffering reflects a truth about the human condition already apparent to Teresa. Noelia Bueno-Gómez notes that, for Teresa, neither a virtuous nor sinful life can guarantee the absence of suffering. It is in some ways an unavoidable characteristic of human life under the veil of sin. As Teresa says, "Times of war, trial and fatigue are never lacking" and "in one way or another, there must be a cross while we live."[44] This means that even if one resists making significant progress on the spiritual journey so as to avoid these four forms of suffering, there remains the ever-present possibility of suffering in some way. But the unavoidability of suffering means that to choose a certain path in life, knowing that it will entail in some way a kind of suffering, is to

[40] Bueno-Gómez, "Self-management and Narrativity in Teresa of Avila's Work," 393–96.

[41] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 5.2.11.

[42] This awareness finds its completion in the seventh mansion, wherein Teresa notes that "the soul's pain lies in seeing that what it can now do by its own efforts amounts to nothing." Teresa interprets this pain positively because God empowers the soul to do all that is required. Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 7.3.3.

[43] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 5.2.10.

[44] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 7.2.10, 5.2.9.

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begin already the process of its management.[45] Recognition of this is as important in the secular life as it is in the spiritual life, while understanding there are differences between them. As Terrance G. Walsh notes for Teresa, if the mystical state and its effects (and I would argue any state that human beings experience) cannot be integrated with the other facets of one's life, then these mystical states threaten to be inhuman.[46] Because Teresa understands spiritual marriage with God as the ultimate end of human life, any experience that necessarily precedes this marriage must be reconcilable with our humanity. The act of electing such a path must then be interpreted according to a sense of agency on Teresa's part as opposed to a sense of resignation.

But, I caution, Teresa's approach should not be understood as one of stoic resolve, as her narrative in the aforementioned text might suggest. Navigating spiritual suffering is not simply a matter of deciding that suffering is unavoidable and pushing forward. Instead, Teresa's approach is the approach of one who trusts deeply in the love of God that has seen her through the journey thus far and that will continue to see her through it to its end. Therefore, any struggle of the spiritual journey is contradistinguished by the great love and joy experienced alongside it. Teresa writes that in the spiritual life, "The important thing is not to think much but to love much … The Lord doesn't look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done. And if we do what we can, His Majesty will enable us each day to do more and more."[47] So if the spiritual journey is really about growing in love (as Teresa considers it to be) and coming to know and love the God who always loves God's creatures first, then surely that same love will not leave one to face these trials on one's own. Teresa's response to spiritual suffering, then, depends upon the virtue of hope that is at the very heart of the Christian faith.

This position should not be interpreted as the rationalization of suffering warned against in the introduction. Teresa does not explain away the presence of suffering nor does she advocate that we should increase our suffering to attain more help from God.[48] Rather, her approach is a pathway to resiliency in the face of it. Teresa believes that God gives the person whom God calls

[45] Bueno-Gómez locates this management primarily in Teresa's expression of her desire to suffer. Noelia Bueno-Gómez, "'I Desire to Suffer, Lord, Because Thou Didst Suffer': Teresa of Avila on Suffering," *Hypatia* 34, no. 4 (2019): 755–76, at 761.

[46] Terrance G. Walsh, "Writing Anxiety in Teresa's Interior Castle," *Theological Studies* 56, no. 2 (1995): 251–72, at 262.

[47] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 4.1.7, 7.3.16.

[48] The latter is akin to the rather strange position that Paul finds himself arguing against in Romans 6.

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to deeper intimacy the necessary resources for navigating the spiritual journey and its associated sufferings with integrity.[49] Therefore, the resources for resiliency in the later stages depend not so much upon human initiative but human cooperation with divine initiative. It is a response that is as active as it is receptive to God's workings. Paying attention, then, to Teresa's recommendations at different junctures can help one locate the resources that contribute to her resiliency in the face of spiritual suffering as she awaits the security of the seventh mansion.

### Resources for Resiliency

As already mentioned, the focus of the fifth, sixth, and seventh sets of dwelling places is upon the human response to divine activity, which attests to the reality that movement between the later stages is not humanly initiated. Resiliency during experiences of spiritual suffering, then, entails human–divine collaboration in some form. Moreover, it is important to note that Teresa does not take a "one size fits all" approach regarding her recommendations. Just as there are different forms of spiritual suffering, so too are there different resources available for their navigation. Paying attention to what Teresa specifically recommends at different junctures both affirms her status as a spiritual authority and helps one to locate the resources that contribute to Teresa's resiliency during her most precarious moments.

Before turning to Teresa's recommendations, let us review, briefly, the possible obstacles that make the pathways to resiliency during spiritual sufferings all that much more difficult to navigate. If we take Teresa's experience as demonstrative of some of the common difficulties experienced along the spiritual journey, we can with some certitude say that the journeyer feels alone, often times distant from God and others. She walks around with a gloomy temperament, despising the very idea of company. She grows listless and disinclined toward the consolations of vocal and mental prayer.[50] In other words, the spiritual journeyer is in a difficult state and makes for poor company. What previously came easily to the journeyer now feels impossible and, in the case of physical illness in this state, Teresa writes that the soul would prefer martyrdom than its continued endurance.[51] As will be discussed shortly, although

[49] "After all, God gives no more than what can be endured; and His Majesty gives patience first." Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.6.

[50] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.13.

[51] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.6.

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there are several activities that would prove beneficial to the spiritual journeyer during this time, the intensity of this suffering results in little desire on her part to engage in them.

Teresa anticipates this difficulty in the very beginning of the *Interior Castle*. Referring to her own writing difficulties, Teresa resolves that "But knowing that the strength given by obedience usually lessens the difficulty of things that seem impossible, I resolved to carry out the task [of writing] very willingly, even though my human nature seems greatly distressed."[52] As a woman in religious life, Teresa is no stranger to the vow of obedience that characterizes her situation. Now, when she is the most vulnerable, this obedience becomes an asset for her. The varied nature of her suffering makes many of her regular activities, such as prayer or daily chores, feel impossible. It would be unsurprising if she had little motivation to complete them. Furthermore, the restlessness she feels at being caught between heaven and earth would counter any desire to resume what might be considered a "normal" life. But the resumption of daily activities does not depend upon her desire but rather her knowledge that they are what is expected of her.[53] In this way, Teresa's resiliency in the face of spiritual suffering begins prior to her performing any action in particular; it begins with her disposition. She writes that "Our security lies in obedience and refusal to deviate from God's law."[54] Teresa's commitment to obedience, here, is a sign of her agency. Whereas in other instances, obedience may be a symbol of one's acquiescence to one's oppression, here it is a symbol of her liberation. She refuses to let her suffering have the final word on her experience. Her choices reflect the comfort of knowing that one has completed what is required, especially when it is difficult to do so. Teresa's obedience, here, colors her engagement with the two primary resources that she names as contributing to her resiliency: contemplative prayer and communal activity.

As may be expected, there is not just one type of prayer in Teresa's configuration. There are forms of prayer, like the prayer of union or rapture, that are completely divinely instigated. As such, these are not the forms of prayer that Teresa recommends in response to suffering because they are not accessible by human initiative (and therefore cannot be recommended). There are other

[52] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," prologue, 1.

[53] A strong parallel to Teresa's obedience would be the character of Mrs. Joad, or "Ma," in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. As the family's life falls to pieces in the wake of dire poverty during the Great Depression, it is Ma's resolve that holds the family together. At each juncture, she makes specific choices not because they are what she would like to do but because she knows they are what is expected of her as the matriarch of the family. Her resolve gives her the strength to act when other members of the family feel powerless to do so. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

[54] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 5.3.2.

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forms of prayer, such as vocal or mental prayer, that are also unappealing to Teresa because of the intentional reflection that they require afterward, which may be difficult to sustain at this time.[55] Instead Teresa suggests that one turn to contemplative prayer, which does remain available to the spiritual journeyer during this time of suffering.

Contemplative prayer is the form of prayer that characterizes the fourth set of dwelling places and marks the beginning of supernatural experiences along the spiritual journey.[56] Although prayer would have been an expected component of religious life, it should be noted that the decision to recommend contemplative prayer is a contentious one. Jodi Bilinkoff notes that vocal prayer would have been the preferred mode of prayer at this time given mental or contemplative prayer was subject to Tridentine counter-reformation suspicions. If we understand spiritual or theological knowledge as a source of religious authority, Teresa's own context may be characterized as a power struggle between *letrados* ("learned men" who had formal training in theological studies) and *espiratuales* ("spiritual ones" who gained religious knowledge directly through the practice of prayer).[57] Private mental prayer was often perceived by the former to be a guise for Protestant pietism because the church hierarchy had no direct control over it. Bilinkoff writes, "They [*letrados*] feared that unregulated mystical experience would lead to heterodox opinions, especially on the part of women, widely thought to be weaker, more impressionable, and more vulnerable to the snares of the devil than men."[58] Nevertheless, Teresa fiercely advocated for this form of prayer, citing the profound impact it had already had upon her own spiritual development.[59]

Contemplative prayer can result in one of two phenomena: consolations or spiritual delights. Teresa describes consolations as being human in origin. They may result from experiences outside of prayer, such as seeing a friend after a long period of time away. Teresa does not find fault with consolations but acknowledges that their effect tends to fade over time because of their human origin. It is not uncommon to be left more anxious than before one started, especially if these consolations are taken as ends in themselves. Spiritual delights, on the other hand, can also result from contemplative prayer

[55] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.13.

[56] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 4.1.1.

[57] Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth Century City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 142.

[58] Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa*, 143.

[59] Although Teresa's prayer practices would remain under suspicion for the remainder of her life, her relative independence may be attributed to the support of the Bishop of Avila, Alvaro de Mendoza, who interpreted Teresa's reform movement as demonstrating Tridentine values. Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa*, 144, 148–51.

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but have their origins in God. They grant a sense of comfort and surety, even if this effect is not as strong as that of the prayer of union in the later stages. Contemplative prayer in this regard serves as a way of disposing oneself to divine encounter without ever demanding it.

Teresa specifically recommends contemplative prayer for scenarios characterized by the bodily illness and vicarious distress forms of spiritual suffering, as each of these forms engender a sense of powerlessness. The illness of the third form of suffering may make one physically unable to perform one's daily chores, and the sense of futility characteristic of the vicarious distress can make one question the point in trying at all. But engaging in contemplative prayer is a way for Teresa to claim a sense of agency in the midst of her powerlessness. How does contemplative prayer do this? In his trilogy on contemplation, Martin Laird addresses this question by relating the benefits that contemplation can offer to individuals experiencing depression or other mental/emotional difficulties. Although these difficulties are not necessarily the same as the sufferings Teresa describes, their similarity allows Laird's consideration to serve as a helpful reference for this examination.

Laird argues that, when used as a regular practice, contemplation allows the practitioner to let thoughts and emotions (especially intrusive thoughts or emotions) come to him or her without triggering the work of the "reactive mind," which would immediately begin an internal dialogue, raising their anxiety.[60] Instead, the contemplative allows these thoughts to "simply be" and to "pass through" the mind without allowing them to disturb one's inner sense of stability. Laird describes the fruitful version of the contemplative life in terms of a mountain and its surrounding weather: though the mountain cannot remove itself from its weather pattern, the weather has no real power to disturb the security of the mountain.[61] They coexist. Laird, then, does not argue that contemplative prayer will necessarily "cure" someone from a particular mental state because "the Light [of contemplation] does not demand that depression go away if it does not happen to go away," but rather that contemplation bars mental anguish from becoming the dominant force by which one understands oneself.[62] The contemplative retains a sense of agency over his or her own life. The weather does not dictate what the mountain is, even if the face of the mountain is buffeted by its winds and precipitation. The depressive

[60] Martin Laird, *An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 161.

[61] Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 89.

[62] Laird, *An Ocean of Light*, 3:217.

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or anxious thoughts, therefore, may still be present but now become manageable in light of the workings of the person as a whole. Laird offers the story of a monk named Brendan and his experience with depression and contemplation to illustrate this point:

> Over the years, Brendan spoke less of being depressed. He might say, "I have depression" or "depression is present." But we could not in truth equate "self" with depression. He was much more receptive to the presence of depression. Instead of bouncing off or thrashing against depression he simply allowed it to be there, as though entrusted with this difficulty, but without demanding that it go away if it wasn't going away, which it usually didn't. One day Brendan tried to share this liberating transition to a brother monk. The monk didn't have the foggiest idea of what Brendan was talking about and said, "Wow! You sound really depressed. You know, the doctor comes here once a week. He's very understanding. You can talk to him about anything." Brendan rolled his eyes and returned to what he was doing. Depression maintained its heaviness, but Brendan had realized for himself that depression does not go as deeply as he goes. The label of depression does not adhere to identity.[63]

Brendan's story should not be taken as a justification to avoid seeking treatment for mental illness when such treatment is available. Rather, Laird argues that experiencing a form of mental distress does not mean that one is broken or in some way is "defective goods." In other words: the nature of one's struggles does not say anything about one's personhood. Our mental, psychological, or spiritual states are aspects of our lives that can be integrated together like any other aspect, which the practice of contemplation helps to facilitate. In the absence of contemplation—wherein one may choose to ignore these elements as a way of escaping their ill effects—such a move would actually allow these struggles to have power over us in a much more profound way, thus exacerbating their resulting difficulties.

Teresa's recommendation that one practice contemplative prayer during the sixth set of dwelling places, particularly during the experience of the physical illness and vicarious distress in the spiritual journey, yields similar considerations to Laird's account of contemplation. Even though it may be difficult at this juncture, Teresa recommends that the spiritual journeyer continues to contemplate the humanity of Christ, who is one with her in her experience of suffering. She comforts her reader with the following anecdote:

> Perhaps [Christ] will respond as He did to a person who before a crucifix was reflecting with deep affliction that she had never had anything to give

[63] Laird, *An Ocean of Light*, 3:208–09.

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> to God, or anything to give up for Him. The Crucified, Himself, in consoling her told her He had given her all the sufferings and trials He had undergone in His Passion so that she could have them as her own to offer His Father. The comfort and enrichment was such that, according to what I have heard from her, she cannot forget the experience. Rather, every time she sees how miserable she is, she gets encouragement and consolation from remembering those words.[64]

In this scenario, contemplative prayer did not end Teresa's suffering. Instead, it offered the opportunity to vulnerably engage with this suffering and to make it manageable by addressing it directly. Teresa's experience indicates that, as difficult as it may be, it is the journeyer's obligation to dispose herself as far as she is able to receive the graces that God may choose to give, including during experiences of distress. Trying to ignore one's distress does nothing to help resolve it. At times, this may entail simply acknowledging the difficulty and asking for help in a prayer of lament, as Teresa does in the aforementioned story. In this way crying out for help or in lament can be a step toward resiliency.[65] Here, contemplating the humanity of Christ grounds the journeyer when everything seems distant or impossible. Obedience motivates when desire is unable. Teresa continues:

> When the fire in the will that was mentioned is not enkindled and God's presence is not felt, it is necessary that we seek this presence … Since we know the path by which we must please God, which is that of the commandments and counsels, we should follow it very diligently, and think of His life and death and of the many things we owe Him; let the rest come when the Lord desires.[66]

Teresa demonstrates her resiliency by deciding to do what is required of her, even when she knows she will not feel the expected benefits. The security of this decision grants comfort in the time of difficulty, and, as small as this decision may seem, it has helped her to integrate her experience of suffering into her larger spiritual life. When God chooses to lift Teresa out of her misery by bringing her to the seventh mansion, she will be well disposed to receive it.

Despite the benefits of contemplation, this act of resiliency is not always the most appropriate response to every kind of spiritual suffering. Teresa notes that in instances of restless (the first kind) or interpersonal distress (the second kind), often the consolations of prayer do not reach the soul. Additionally, time apart from others, which would commonly be the context of such prayer,

[64] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.5.6.
[65] Soelle, *Suffering*, 70–74.
[66] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.7.9.

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can actually make the suffering worse.[67] Instead what the journeyer needs in this instance is a form of grounding in the material world that counteracts the feelings of restlessness and isolation. What she needs is to interact with other people, even if she does not want to.

On a basic level, the company of others becomes a matter of practical necessity for her. During a time when Teresa feels utterly distant from all of creation, she needs someone to handle the basic necessities for her; someone who ensures that she is eating, drinking, and moving around throughout the day. As simple as these activities may seem, their importance cannot be overstated. In evaluating the risk to Teresa that such feelings of restlessness and interpersonal distress pose, it is unlikely that she would actively choose to do something drastic that would end her own life, even if she says that she desires death. Prohibitions against suicide in Christian moral teaching are well established. But these feelings pose a much subtler and therefore more dangerous threat to Teresa's well-being. Although she may not deliberately choose to end her life, Teresa in her listlessness may allow herself eventually to fade away from a lack of self-concern. Unfortunately, most of us have known someone who has had great difficulty taking care of his- or herself during periods of great distress in life; the potential danger is anything but hypothetical. The very real threat to Teresa's bodily existence posed by these forms of spiritual suffering must therefore be taken as seriously as Teresa describes it.

The larger context of her vocation is well suited to the caring ministry that she requires. Monastic life entails the obligation to care for and support its sick members, and this experience is no different.[68] Her humble allowance of her community to perform these tasks for her fulfills the basic obligation to preserve her life in resistance to her desire for death.[69] She cannot hope to someday be moved by God from her present condition if she is not alive to be

[67] "If it prays, it feels as though it hasn't prayed—as far as consolation goes, I mean. For consolation is not admitted into the soul's interior, nor is what one recites to oneself, even though vocal, understood. As for mental prayer, this definitely is not the time for that, because the faculties are incapable of the practice; rather, solitude causes greater harm—and also another torment for this soul is that it be with anyone or that others speak to it." Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.13.

[68] Bueno-Gómez, "I Desire to Suffer, Lord, Because Thou Didst Suffer," 766.

[69] Bueno-Gómez, "Self-management and Narrativity in Teresa of Avila's Work," 312. Lisa Fullam discusses humility in the *Interior Castle* as "responsive, self-transcendence [and] self-knowing." Perhaps we can interpret Teresa's humble allowance of the community's help here as her growing in self-knowledge of the goodness of her own life and existence on earth. Such a revelation would be empowering rather than humiliating, in the more conventional sense. Lisa Fullam, "Teresa of Avila's Liberative Humility," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (2014): 175–98, at 180.

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moved. Teresa depends upon the prelates and her fellow sisters to take care of her in her dependency as she awaits God's activity.[70] Having her basic needs met then allows Teresa the mental space necessary to approach her suffering in the midst of her vulnerability. As difficult as it may be, Teresa recommends that the soul of the sixth stage be honest about her experience to those in authority over her. If she finds her confessor to be unhelpful, as is the case in the scenario described previously, then she can turn to her prioress.[71] Her honesty with these figures grants them the ability to support her and discretely direct the community's support as well. Sharing her experience also allows her access to some of the stabilizing benefits associated with contemplation when that form of prayer feels unavailable.[72] Finally, depending upon these relationships gives Teresa a reason to remain upon the earth when she would rather depart from it.

Although she feels useless, this dependent Teresa still has something to offer to her community, which also contributes to her resiliency. In the context of the interpersonal distress, Teresa invites the reader to engage in good works: "The best remedy (I don't mean for getting rid of them, because I don't find any, but so that they may be endured) is to engage in external works of charity and to hope in the mercy of God who never fails those who hope in him."[73] Engaging in these good works allows her to take control of what is in her power to affect. In this way good works can also prove beneficial regarding the fourth kind of suffering—vicarious distress—because they help the journeyer affirm a sense of agency in the midst of her feelings of inadequacy. For instance, Teresa cannot control the opinion of those around her, but she can work toward offering her most authentic self to them through her acts of love. She can meet their bitterness with her compassion. She can be an asset to her community and feel as though she belongs there and makes a difference. This

[70] "Let the prelates take care of our bodily needs; that's their business. As for ourselves, we should care only about moving quickly so as to see this Lord." Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 3.2.8.

[71] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.8.8–9. Christopher Bellitto notes that even in this suggestion Teresa advises caution. An insecure or spiteful prioress can use humility as a weapon to belittle those whom she feels threaten her authority in some way. Humility can become an act of belittling (which should really be understood as false humility) rather than a pursuit of self-knowledge/self-understanding. One needs practical wisdom to be able to discern who is a worthy conversation partner. Christopher M. Bellitto, *Humility: The Secret History of a Lost Virtue* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023), 98–99.

[72] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 4.3.13.

[73] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 6.1.13.

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is not to say that her value to her little community depends upon her instrumental usefulness but is rather an acknowledgment that, in the midst of her despondency, Teresa's good works solidify her place there. When both God and creation feel infinitely distant, Teresa becomes a conduit of God's love for her community, which in turn contributes to her resiliency in the face of her distress.

### The Fruits of Resiliency

Teresa's writing reveals how she has grappled with the intense and varied difficulties characteristic of the spirituality journey. The question becomes: Just what does it mean to be effectively on the other side of them? What are the results of her grappling? One may be surprised to find that Teresa's sufferings do not necessarily come to a neat "resolution." It is not as though Teresa's life suddenly becomes easy, free from strife. But, upon arriving at the seventh mansion, Teresa's embrace of these resources of resiliency grants her a new sense of agency to persevere in the midst of suffering, an agency that she in turn offers to her readers however they might need it.

In the most immediate sense, embracing these activities preserves Teresa in the midst of her precarity until God welcomes her into the spiritual marriage of the seventh mansion. Once Teresa has reached this secure place, one finds that her relationship to suffering has changed significantly. Here, she can actually say that she desires to suffer:

> She desire[s] to live very many years suffering the greatest trials if through these [she] can help the Lord be praised, even though in something very small. If [she] knew for certain that in leaving the body the soul would enjoy God, [she] wouldn't pay attention to that … [she desires] to be always either alone or occupied in something that will benefit some soul. There are no interior trials or feelings of dryness, but the soul lives with a remembrance and tender love of our Lord.[74]

As already stated, this is not Teresa's exaltation of suffering as meaningful in and of itself but rather Teresa's embrace of security in her union with God. Her understanding of suffering remains instrumental. Suffering, although never pleasant nor a "good" thing, does not pose the same threat to this union that it once did. She is able to feel God's presence in the midst of everything. The union of spiritual marriage has shifted her priorities in that she no longer desires to flee the world but to love and minister in the very heart of it. In this

[74] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 7.3.6–8.

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sense, the restless suffering that once plagued her has now resolved. If remaining on earth in God's service will entail suffering, then this suffering is what Teresa desires to the extent that it be necessary. It is not a suffering that she is helplessly subject to but one that she freely chooses to engage.

Regarding the other forms of spiritual suffering, a resolution is less clear. Teresa does not comment on whether her bodily illness has gone away, and perhaps this lacking comment indicates that she has learned to live with it. Alternatively, in knowing that "times of war, trial and fatigue are never lacking," Teresa recognizes that these trials "are such that they do not take the soul from its place [with God] and its peace."[75] At the very least, we can say that Teresa's experience of bodily illness does not distress her as much as it once did. Meanwhile Teresa's vicarious distress clearly remains given her identification with God has only become that much more pronounced in the seventh mansion. But this distress no longer incapacitates her. Her acknowledgment that she may only be able to serve God "in something very small" does not deter her from pursuing this path boldly and courageously. Vicarious distress becomes a sign of a healthy spiritual life, so long as it is not overwhelming.[76]

The more difficult question is that of interpersonal distress. The reader unfortunately does not read again about the poor confessor or the friends who betrayed Teresa. We simply do not know to what extent those relationships were or were not repaired. There are some hints, however, pertaining to how the spiritually mature Teresa now relates to them, with particular interest regarding how she now relates to her friends. There are three possibilities concerning how these relationships turned out. The first is that the friends continued in their betrayal of Teresa, meaning that they would be better called her persecutors than her true friends. If this is the case, then Teresa does address them in writing about the seventh mansion. Teresa comments how the soul now feels love for her persecutors "in such a way that if it sees these latter in some trial it feels compassion and would take on any burden to free them from their trial and eagerly recommends them to God."[77] In this instance, Teresa is able to continue the good works that sustained her during her interpersonal suffering, even if these works do not repair the relationship. Her good will is based upon God's love for God's creatures rather than upon the consolations that might accompany a friendship. In short: she loves them because God loves them and hopes for their conversion. The second and third possibilities

[75] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 7.2.10.

[76] In *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, Teresa comments that only a dead body is unaffected by a pinprick and uses this analogy to describe the soul who is dead to the effects of sin. Teresa of Avila, "Meditations on the Song of Songs," 2.5.

[77] Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," 7.3.5.

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are that the friends either stopped their betrayal and reconciled with Teresa or stopped their betrayal but never reconciled. In both instances, the immediate cause of Teresa's interpersonal distress has ceased and the possibility (not necessarily the actuality) of a renewed friendship begins. Whether this possibility was ever lived out is left to the mystery of Teresa's untold story.

It is in light of Teresa's resiliency amid interpersonal distress that we can understand the *Interior Castle* as a work directed toward this community. Thus far, we have examined Teresa's depiction of spiritual suffering in the *Interior Castle* and the resources she engages in order to successfully navigate this suffering. But Teresa clearly intends the *Interior Castle* to be a practical work for her community, especially in the absence of her *Life*.[78] If Teresa's writing is taken simply as a description of her own story, then her recommendations within it can just as easily be ignored by a particularly hopeless journeyer. In other words: if Teresa intends for her work to be effective in combatting hopelessness or the domination of the soul by suffering along the spiritual journey, then it must, in fact, effect something in the reader. If Teresa had become irreparably scarred by her interpersonal distress, writing such a work would have been impossible.

The very fact of Teresa having written the *Interior Castle* is a testament to her survival, for it contains the reflections of a Teresa who has come out on the other side of such an experience with integrity. Hence, recognizing Teresa as the authority of her own experience can help women today claim their own agency in a world that routinely dismisses their pain and suffering. Our retrieval invites a renewed consideration of suffering as it pertains to Christian life, in particular one that affirms and names the lived experience of the suffering person without attributing undue spiritual necessity to that experience. Spiritual texts, such as the *Interior Castle*, should not be understood as static, historical documents but rather as rich and living sources that engage the messiness of the human condition. They function as sites of invitation to greater vulnerability toward God and others for anyone who chooses to engage with them.

[78] Indeed, she begins the work with this in mind: "The one who ordered me to write told me that the nuns in these monasteries of our Lady of Mt. Carmel need someone to answer their questions about prayer and that he thought they would better understand the language used between women, and that because of the love they bore me they would pay more attention to what I would tell them. I thus understood that it was important for me to manage to say something." Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," prologue, 4.

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