

‘SET ME AS A SEAL UPON YOUR HEART’

Image and Imagelessness in Teresian Prayer

Mary Frohlich

IN CHAPTER 9 OF HER *Life*, St Teresa of Avila tells about a key event of transformation in her spiritual journey. It took place during Lent of 1554, when she entered an oratory and saw a dramatically bloody statue of Jesus. Her heart broke with the sudden affective awareness of Christ's outpoured love and of her own lack of grateful response to him.¹ This turned out to be far more than a passing wave of intense emotion. Her seventeen-year phase of lukewarm prayer and frequent distraction gave way to a new, heartfelt dedication to prayer. Over the following months the graced moments of knowing God's love for her, and of knowing herself as a lover of God, multiplied. Within less than a year, she says, 'His Majesty began to give me the prayer of quiet very habitually—and often, of union—which lasted a long while'.² Describing some of these new contemplative experiences more fully, she says:

I sometimes experienced, as I said, although very briefly, the beginning of what I will now speak about. It used to happen, when I represented Christ within me in order to place myself in His presence, or even while reading, that a feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was within me or I totally immersed in Him. This did not occur after the manner of a vision. I believe they call the experience 'mystical theology'. The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself. The will loves; the

¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976), 9.1.

² *The Book of Her Life*, 23.2.

memory, it seems to me, is almost lost. For, as I say, the intellect does not work, but it is as though amazed by all it understands because God desires that it understand, with regard to the things His Majesty represents to it, that it understands nothing.³

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Teresa here describes what she elsewhere affirms was her typical method of prayer, namely, actively representing⁴ and companioning the human Christ within herself. But at this juncture she sometimes found her soul 'suspended' so that the thinking intellect and the image-making memory were both inoperative, or nearly so. This experience is what she will later call 'union'.⁵ This text introduces a dialectic between prayer with our ordinary active faculties of thinking and image-making, and prayer that radically transcends these. Prior to this time Teresa was comfortable relating to Jesus by thinking about and imagining him as a man. Now, however, she has been awakened to something so much more; she has begun to experience the gift of contemplative union. Mere thinking and imagining suddenly appear totally inadequate to this new reality; but without them, who is Jesus? She wonders: is it time to leave behind his mere humanity and plunge into sheer divinity?

Thus Teresa, in her own unique spiritual journey, confronted a perennial issue that each of us must face at certain key transition points in our path of contemplative transformation. This essay explores the depth and subtlety of what Teresa later teaches about these questions.

Teresa's First Mystical Crisis

At the point in her life when Teresa began to be drawn into the fullness of contemplative prayer, her developing mystical life was almost shipwrecked by this problem. Since both she and her spiritual advisers were disturbed by the new experiences she was beginning to have, she began searching through some spiritual books that were popular at the time for help in understanding them. She reports that she found an

³ *The Book of Her Life*, 10. 1.

⁴ In Teresa's usage, the term 'represent' fundamentally seems to mean 'to make present' in a way that results in knowledge. The human person sometimes represents Christ actively, and at other times passively receives what God represents. In either case, the resultant knowledge can be either cognitive (that is, intellectual) or spiritual (that is, holistic and personal).

⁵ See, for example, her discussion in *The Interior Castle*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980), V. 1.3.

account of this experience of ‘not thinking of anything’ in Bernardino de Laredo’s *Ascent of Mount Sion*.⁶ This was one of the major texts of the *recogidos* or ‘recollected ones’, who taught a form of prayer that Ciriaco Morón-Arroyo describes as ‘renouncing the objects of the senses, the images of fantasy, and the ideas of the intellect in order to rest in the pure love of the divinity’.⁷ Thinking that she had found soul friends in Laredo and other *recogidos*,⁸ Teresa abandoned her usual prayer method of actively representing Christ within herself in favour of this new approach. Apparently the result was that she experienced certain kinds of delightful absorption, for she says that for a time ‘there was no one who could have made me return to the humanity of Christ; as a matter of fact, I thought the humanity was an impediment’.⁹

Here we reach the nub of the issue, as Teresa understood it within the context of the debates going on in her era. Some of the *recogidos* appeared to be teaching that once a person reaches the cusp of the higher forms of contemplation, which radically transcend ordinary forms of perception, thought and imagination, the appropriate practice is intentionally to strip one’s mind of everything related to corporeality. Taking this to its logical conclusion, even the slightest imagining or thinking about Jesus in his embodied human form would be an impediment to the highest contemplation and, therefore, should be abandoned at this stage. Teresa’s period of experimentation with this approach—which lasted a year or less¹⁰—led her to a passionate, lifelong conviction that it is dangerously misguided. In 1562 she devoted the whole of chapter 22 of her *Life* to the issue, and she returned to the theme with equal fervour again in 1577 (22 years after the original experience) when she wrote *The Interior Castle*. In chapter 7.6 of the Sixth Dwelling Places, she says:

To be always withdrawn from corporeal things and enkindled in love is the trait of angelic spirits not of those who live in mortal bodies. It’s necessary that we speak to, think about, and become the

⁶ *The Book of Her Life* 23. 12.

⁷ Ciriaco Morón-Arroyo, ‘“I Will Give You a Living Book”: Spiritual Currents at Work at the Time of St Teresa of Jesus’, *Carmelite Studies*, 3 (1984), 101.

⁸ Paul Mommaers reports that it was actually Bernabé de la Palma’s *Via spiritus* that tripped Teresa up (*The Riddle of Christian Mystical Experience: The Role of the Humanity of Jesus* [Louvain: Peeters, 2003], 69).

⁹ *Interior Castle*, VI. 7. 15.

¹⁰ It was certainly concluded by the summer of 1555, when she received wise counsel on the question from both Diego de Cetina and Francisco Borja.

companions of those who having had a mortal body accomplished such great feats for God. How much more is it necessary not to withdraw through one's own efforts from all our good and help which is the most sacred humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. I cannot believe that these souls do so, but they just don't understand; and they will do harm to themselves and to others. At least I assure them that they will not enter these last two dwelling places. For if they lose the guide, who is the good Jesus, they will not hit upon the right road. It will be quite an accomplishment if they remain safely in the other dwelling places.

Thus we see that for Teresa (as for many of us), a moment of opportunity for spiritual transformation emerged at a period in her life when she had been for some time caught in an unhappy impasse of spiritual mediocrity. For her, the catalyst was seeing with her bodily eyes a statue of Jesus beaten and bloody. In that moment she was given to herself in a completely new way, and she was flooded with profound compunction and love. A transformation had occurred, and she came out of the oratory determined to be faithful to the grace she had just encountered. She knew instinctively that this required two things: to do something to nurture the grace, and to give oneself up to the grace. It required, in other words, something active and something passive. Setting out with a beginner's precipitate fervour, she immediately took a wrong turn on both fronts (active and passive). We might call this a 'happy fault', since she learnt so much from it—and we too can learn so much.

First Pitfall: Trying to Grasp and Control Our Spiritual Experiences

Teresa's adoption of the method of actively stripping one's mind of all thoughts and images is a classic example of the pitfall of control. Actually, we should not completely blame the *recogido* authors that she was reading for this. When one reads their texts today, one sees that they were much more nuanced in their teaching than a simplistic description of 'stripping the mind' would suggest. Their method of prayer, however, did lend itself to this unnuanced interpretation, and this was the direction in which Teresa, the beginner, took it at first. She thought that in this way she could, by her own efforts, grasp and keep the experience of spiritual depth that had been awakened in her. It took some time and experience before she fully realised that, since

the heart of that spiritual depth was an encounter with Jesus himself, it could not be achieved by intentional emptying of the mind.

Second Pitfall: Inappropriate Surrender

In Teresa’s case, the second pitfall emerged directly out of the first one. As she engaged in this practice of intentionally stripping the mind of thoughts and images, she discovered a kind of technique for awakening a state that she calls ‘absorption’ and that apparently was quite delightful. She says:

There are some principles and even means that certain souls use, by which it is thought that when a person begins to experience the prayer of quiet and to relish the enjoyment and spiritual delights given by the Lord, the important thing is to remain always in that state of delight [But] I would be suspicious of anyone who says this delight is continual For if this absorption continues, it is extremely dangerous, at least for the brain and the head [My mistake] consisted of not delighting so much in the thought of our Lord Jesus Christ but in going along in that absorption, waiting for that enjoyment. And I realised clearly that I was proceeding badly.¹¹

It seems that at the stage of first hazy glints of contemplative union (elsewhere called the ‘prayer of quiet’), Teresa found herself taken over, in some sense, by a seductive pleasure that was not leading her deeper into the relationship with Christ, but instead was inviting her to seek the pleasure itself. By calling this ‘absorption’, she suggests that there was an element of loss of control involved; but rather than being surrender to the love of God, it was simply surrender to enjoyment.

In Teresa’s world-view, spiritual powers that do not belong to God must belong to the devil; so she quickly ascribed this seductive experience to the power of the devil who, she says, wants to make us lose devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.¹² Since for her the Blessed Sacrament represents the continuing presence of the humanity of Jesus,¹³ she is suggesting here that the most harmful aspect of this inappropriate kind of surrender is its minimisation of the central role of the humanity of Jesus.

¹¹ *Interior Castle*, VI. 7. 13–15.

¹² *Interior Castle*, VI. 7. 14.

¹³ Cf. *The Book of Her Life*, 22. 6.

Teresa and the Transforming Seal of God

Thus we see that, in one way, what Teresa teaches is very straightforward: 'Jesus is the way'. She is most at pains to insist that the real centre of prayer must *always* be companionship with Jesus, human and divine. She writes:

And I see clearly ... that God desires that if we are going to please Him and receive His great favours, we must do so through the most sacred humanity of Christ, in whom He takes His delight. Many, many times have I perceived this truth through experience. The Lord has told it to me. I have definitely seen that we must enter by this gate if we desire His sovereign Majesty to show us great secrets.¹⁴

Impressed with God's Seal

With this as her constant lodestar, Teresa goes on to tell us a good deal more about what she learnt about activity and passivity, images and imagelessness, in prayer. The key to her unique insight, I think, can be found in a set of terms that keeps on turning up, over and over again, in her writings. The most frequent of these is *imprimida*, 'impressed'. The image evoked is that of a seal that is impressed into soft wax, leaving its own identifying shape permanently in the wax. The specific place of this impressing action is sometimes named as the memory, sometimes the soul and sometimes the heart. Other similar images are *esculpido* ('sculpted' or 'engraved') and *estampese* ('stamped'). All of these—impressed, sculpted, engraved, stamped—are strong images of an action that gives a fresh shape and identity to the depths of the human person. Contemplative transformation, then, is ultimately about God's seal, God's image, being impressed into the core of our humanity.

Teresa sometimes uses these words in an active sense, as when she speaks of 'engraving' Christ upon her soul by gazing on a picture or by representing him imaginatively within herself.¹⁵ She regularly comments that by nature she is not very good at conjuring up an imaginative picture of Christ, so she usually prefers to have a book or an image as an aid.¹⁶ As she enters upon the deeper contemplative journey, however,

¹⁴ *The Book of Her Life* 22.6.

¹⁵ *The Book of Her Life* 22.4.

¹⁶ *The Book of Her Life*, 9.6.



she frequently speaks of having visual, aural and intellectual knowledge 'impressed' upon her. For example, after a detailed description of a vision of the risen Christ, she says: 'That majesty and beauty remain so *impressed* that they are unforgettable'.¹⁷ And in another place, distinguishing true spiritual consolations from 'little devotional feelings', she says that the true consolations are 'a gentle refreshment—strong, deeply *impressed*, delightful, and quiet'.¹⁸

This impressing action is clearly God's work, not ours. In Teresa's own words:

The Lord puts what He wants the soul to know very deeply within it, and there He makes this known without image or explicit words When it comes, I say that we neither act nor do anything; all seems to be the work of the Lord. It's as though the food were already placed in the stomach without our eating it or knowing how it got there.¹⁹

Thus, with this terminology of 'impression' and 'engraving' we discover both the active and passive elements of what Teresa learnt about companioning Jesus in prayer. Actively, we are to engrave the mysteries

¹⁷ *The Book of Her Life*, 28.9 (my italics).

¹⁸ *The Book of Her Life*, 25.11 (my italics).

¹⁹ *The Book of Her Life*, 27.6.

of Christ's life upon our memory; passively, we must await the action of God who will 'impress' Christ's form upon our being.

Images and the Image

In order really to understand what this meant for Teresa and what it may mean for us, we need to take a short detour to sort out two meanings of the word 'image'. On the one hand, it refers to images that we conjure up in our minds and psyches; for example, I think about my mother, and a hazy picture (trailing various feelings and memories) appears in my mind. This kind of image is basically a substitute for physical presence. If my mother were present, I would focus on her and not on an image of her. Images of this sort are also notoriously subject to distortion, because all sorts of contingent influences—other memories, strong emotions, cultural expectations, a few glasses of wine—can make a huge difference in what gets conjured up in one's inner mental world.

On the other hand, image can have a far more substantive meaning, as in the text from Colossians: 'He is the image of the invisible God'. The meaning in this case is not that Jesus is a hazy, weak substitute for the invisible God, but rather that he actually makes the invisible God present and visible. He 'bodies forth' the presence of God, giving the invisible God a concrete dwelling place within the world of flesh and blood.



Nineteenth-century Russian icon of Christ

It is important to note that the Greek word that is translated 'image' here is actually *eikon*, or icon. The same word is used in the Septuagint Greek translations of Genesis 1:26, 'Let us make humankind in our image'. In the traditions of Eastern Christianity (Orthodoxy), the spirituality and theology of the icon have been highly developed. The icon is not

merely a painted picture but a form of God's coming forth to us in the world. It is more important that we let the icon look at us than that we look at the icon. The opposite of an icon would be an idol, at which one gazes believing it to be a complete and finished representation of God. The icon is a dynamic presence of God, a living connection with God, more than it is a 'picture'.

I think similar distinctions underlie what Teresa teaches about images and contemplative prayer. I will explore this in three sections, looking at contemplatives and active imaging, the role of 'visions', and the final transformation and 'spiritual marriage'.

Contemplatives and Active Imaging

In her *Interior Castle*, Teresa writes about being questioned by people who were not happy with her teaching that those who have already been contemplatively awakened still need actively to practise representing the human Christ. Perhaps these questioners were referring to John of the Cross's idea that one of the three signs of readiness for the contemplative transition is the inability to continue the practice of meditation.²⁰ Teresa agrees that this may be true as far as discursive meditation is concerned. She says, however, that instead of thinking laboriously about the mysteries of Christ's life, one should simply 'represent' them by means of the memory. In this way one can 'dwell' on Christ in the mysteries in a way that enkindles love. She is adamant that this practice 'will not impede the most sublime prayer',²¹ and that even the very advanced sometimes need to do this in order to rekindle their tender awareness of Christ's presence.

What Teresa seems to be saying is that the contemplative learns to let thoughts and images—including those that one conjures up through natural means—function in the way that icons do. The thought or image is held gently like an open door, inviting the presence of the one it represents. Teresa affirms that, using this method, she could sometimes spend days being nourished by a single representation.

But how does one learn to do this? Once again, there is an active and a passive element. Years of participation in the liturgy and of

²⁰ John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 1.9.2–8 and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.13.2–5, both in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).

²¹ *Interior Castle*, VI.7.7–12.

actively pondering and thinking about the mysteries are the normal way for the memory and imagination to be formed for this transition to a way of holding them that is much lighter and more receptive. The events of Christ's human life are woven deeply into one's memory by these years of active pondering, so that one is ready to hold them in a simple, gentle and non-discursive manner. Still, the contemplative transition that Teresa is describing engages an even more profound dimension of how memory is shaped. When God definitively breaks into our lives, we are sealed with memories that remain in our hearts forever.

Teresa on 'Visions'

In Teresa's case, one of her first such experiences took place many years before she wrote the *Life*. She says that one day while she was in the monastery parlour, distracted by a frivolous friendship, Christ appeared to her 'with great severity ... making me understand what He regretted about the friendship'. She continues: 'This vision left such an impression on me that, though more than twenty-six years have gone by, it seems to me it is still present'.²²

The incident was not a happy one for Teresa, but it was a moment of truth—even if she did not fully appreciate the fact until many years later, after her conversion in the oratory of the wounded Christ. After that she describes many occasions when she had an awareness of God 'impressed' upon her in this way. For example, after her first intellectual vision, in which she knew that Christ was at her side even though she saw nothing with either bodily or spiritual eyes, her confessor asked her how she knew that it was Christ.

'He told me many times', I answered. Before He told me He impressed upon my intellect that it was He Without being seen, it is impressed with such clear knowledge that I don't think it can be doubted. The Lord desires to be so engraved upon the intellect that this vision can no more be doubted than can what is seen; and even less, because when we see we sometimes suspect we may have fancied what we saw.²³

Thus, Teresa teaches that when we actively conjure up images of Jesus in our mental world, this is a good and even necessary activity in

²² *The Book of Her Life*, 7.6.

²³ *The Book of Her Life*, 27.5.

so far as it helps to keep our memory of the presence of God alive. Yet vastly more substantive in their transforming effect are the occasions when the living presence of God is bodied forth at the very centre of our being. In these encounters a person is sculpted into the icon of God that the human being was created to be. This is what Teresa refers to as having the knowledge of God ‘impressed’ upon her soul. It is a living, dynamic encounter that reconstitutes one’s very being as Christic.

Paul Mommaers spells this out more thoroughly when he comments on this type of experience:

Obviously the Unseen does not hold before [a] person’s sensible and/or spiritual eye a picture-like representation, a figure, that allows one to gain an idea of God [Rather,] God’s form affects the human being as a whole. The person’s consciousness in its entirety is touched, and touched in the strong sense of the word: God strictly impresses his form into the conscious stuff of the body-heart-mind complex In brief, without presenting any figure, God represents himself in the human person who, far from looking at God’s image, feels his form.²⁴

It seems that this is what Teresa means when she talks about having ‘visions’. The language here is difficult, because the transcendent reality of God is beyond all form, all image; and what Teresa means by ‘vision’ is not primarily an interior picture or spectacle. Rather, it is the knowledge of a real presence that literally ‘in-forms’ and therefore ‘trans-forms’ one’s deepest being.²⁵ In an ‘intellectual vision’ this takes place imagelessly, while in an ‘imaginative vision’ images mediate the presence. While many spiritual writers place intellectual visions at the peak of mystical transformation, Teresa in some ways gives precedence to imaginative visions—because in them we are sealed with the mysteries of the life of the risen Christ, the Image of the transcendent God.

One of the most powerful moments in Teresa’s process of being thus ‘impressed’ with the form of Christ came in the vision described at the very end of the *Life*, chapter 40.5:

²⁴ Mommaers, *The Riddle of Christian Mystical Experience*, 17.

²⁵ Mommaers, *The Riddle of Christian Mystical Experience*, 81.

Once while I was reciting with all the Sisters the hours of the Divine Office, my soul suddenly became recollected; and it seemed to me to be like a brightly polished mirror, without any part on the back or sides or top or bottom that wasn't totally clear. In its centre Christ, our Lord, was shown to me, in the way I usually see Him. It seemed to me I saw Him clearly in every part of my soul, as though in a mirror. And this mirror also—I don't know how to explain it—was completely engraved upon the Lord Himself by means of a very loving communication I wouldn't know how to describe. I know that this vision is very beneficial to me each time I remember it, especially after receiving Communion.

Here Teresa affirms not only that Christ has been engraved upon her being, so that in herself she sees only Him, but also that this utter transparency of her being has been engraved upon Christ, so that in him she sees her true self. As Mommaers puts it, 'Teresa's "sight" of the invisible Image is tantamount to her perceiving that she is one with the Unimagined'.²⁶ The vision opens Teresa to her true being as an 'icon' of Christ.

Spiritual Marriage

Since this vision is recorded in her *Life*, which was completed in 1565, it had to have taken place at least seven years before Teresa's 'spiritual marriage' of November 1572. What more can there be beyond such a radical transparency of the divine person and the human person to one another? The answer seems to be that whereas such a vision forms the human person in divinity—or, in other words, divinises her or him—the spiritual marriage rehumanises this God-formed life.

Although, in *Interior Castle* VII.1.6, Teresa says that entrance to the Seventh Dwelling Places occurs with an intellectual vision of the Trinity, this supposedly 'highest' vision is not the culmination of Teresa's spiritual transformation. This occurs, rather, with the spiritual marriage which, she says, is inaugurated by an imaginative vision of the most sacred Humanity.²⁷ From then on, the raptures that had suspended the normal human faculties of perception, thought and behaviour almost completely disappear.²⁸ Instead, spiritual life becomes

²⁶ Mommaers, *The Riddle of Christian Mystical Experience*, 83.

²⁷ *Interior Castle*, VII.2.1. Two paragraphs further on, Teresa says that the imaginative vision is followed by yet another intellectual vision in which the spirit is 'made one with God'.

²⁸ *Interior Castle*, VII.3.12.

a matter of sharing Christ’s human life and doing his works. As she proclaims: ‘This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works’.²⁹

Once again Mommaers spells things out very clearly. He says:

Teresa comes to realise that the *divine* impression is such that it causes its *human* expression. There is for her no inmost, peaceful enjoying of *Christ*, the Lord, without also feeling his ‘impulse’, an ‘interior movement that proceeds from the centre of the soul and awakens the faculties’. And what are the human powers so strongly urged to do? To serve and to suffer in the way that *Jesus* did.³⁰

Review: The Dwelling Places

As a way of bringing together what we have learnt from Teresa, I should like to review it in terms of Teresa’s various Dwelling Places. I shall also try to show its relevance to those of us who may not feel that we share (yet!) in Teresa’s unique gifts of visions and spiritual marriage. One aspect of this is remembering that although Teresa presents the Dwelling Places as sequential—and in one sense they are—she also says that we can move around among them in many different ways.³¹ Thus, another way of looking at them is as a range of modes or potentialities of our human personhood, rather than as strict ‘stages’.

First, the problem of images begins to arise at the point when hints of a contemplative form of prayer—sometimes called ‘infused contemplation’—begin to emerge. This is more or less the Fourth Dwelling Places in the *Interior Castle*. Prior to this, we are generally contented to pray with ordinary thoughts and images. But once the delights of the prayer of quiet are glimpsed, these seem too small, even distracting. The risk at this juncture comes because our apprehension of God’s action in us is often very vague and unfocused. It is not yet strictly content-free or imageless; all that we are able to recognise is the amazing influx of affective delight or peace. It is possible for us to become absorbed in that pleasure and to neglect or abandon the appropriate content of Christian life—active discipleship in mind and behaviour—

²⁹ *Interior Castle*, VII.4.6.

³⁰ Mommaers, *The Riddle of Christian Mystical Experience*, 94.

³¹ See, for example, *Interior Castle*, I.2.8.



Fifteenth-century Cretan icon of the Trinity

because we do not see clearly its relationship to Christ or even to our own ordinary human life.

The question of images becomes even more acute, however, when contemplative prayer opens out into what Teresa calls 'union' (Fifth Dwelling Places). She describes union as a state in which the faculties are completely asleep both to the world and to ourselves, so that we are incapable of thinking, of understanding, or even of consciously loving. It is beyond every form of consolation that we have previously experienced.³² As far as our ordinary consciousness

is concerned, this is a contentless and imageless state. In fact, a person can be quite shocked by what seems to be the deconstruction and subversion of the imagined story of God that has served very well up to this point. The risk, once again, is that in this state of bewilderment we can take a wrong turn and presume that the emptiness, the imagelessness, is ultimate truth.

The profound challenge of this stage is to let Christ be himself in us—that is, unimaginable and untameable in his divinity—without failing to continue to love and follow him in his humanity. The problem is that the two aspects may seem to have disconnected from one another.³³ Teresa's solution is to teach that we must proceed in the faith that they are not disconnected, and that images of the human Jesus held gently in memory will be a door for us into God's infinite presence. There is a delicate balance in which we must continue to 'engrave on our

³² *Interior Castle*, V. 1.3–5.

³³ See Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), for discussion of this sense of disconnection.

memories' the revealed mysteries of God from scripture and Christian tradition without grasping on to our own small ideas and images of God.

The Sixth Dwelling Places are where Teresa mainly locates 'visions'. As I have said before, Teresa is not talking here about interior pictures or movies, but rather about an action of God that bodies forth God's own self in the centre of the human soul, thus 'impressing' God's form and identity upon the person. The notion of 'image' takes on a new meaning here, for what matters now is Christ who is the Image of the invisible God and we who are created to be images of the Image. What is called an 'intellectual vision' is 'imageless' in the ordinary sense of the term, yet in it the identity of Christ the Image is deeply impressed into the human person.

Here I think it is important to pause for a moment for the sake of those of us who do not entirely identify with Teresa's very special gift of visions. Probably few of us have visions with the extraordinary depth, intensity and fruitfulness of hers! Yet I think her teaching about how God does the work of engraving God's own image on our heart and mind and soul *does* apply to all of us.

One of the key places where we can be aware of this is in the power of certain memories of grace in our lives. For example, I remember when I was thirteen years old (before I was even baptized) being overwhelmed one summer day by an awareness of sheer love. At the time I had no idea what had happened to me, but forty or so years later the details of the memory are still fresh and it is an important part of my unique story of grace. That is only one example; you have your own memories of God breaking into your life in a way that was unmistakable, unforgettable, and is still a source of grace for you every time you recall them. While these may or may not be 'visions' of the kind that Teresa is discussing in the Sixth Dwelling Places, I think they *are* the action of God impressing knowledge of God into us in a way that transforms us in Christ's image.

Teresa's Seventh Dwelling Places and the spiritual marriage are where the full integration of divinity and humanity, the Unimaginable and the Image, takes place. The person who has been broken open to divinity in union and sculpted in the divine Image through 'visions' is

now sent forth simply to be ‘humanity fully alive’—that is, to be the icon of God in the world.³⁴

To Be Fully Human

In the words of T. S. Eliot, ‘The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time’. Simply to be fully human—as Jesus was fully human—is the end of all our exploring. When Teresa says that without fidelity to the humanity of Jesus we will not enter the last two Dwelling Places,³⁵ she teaches that finally spiritual transformation is not about being annihilated in divinity and passing over into imageless infinity. Jesus’ humanity reveals to us that to be human is to be the image of God, and to be the image of God is to body forth in the world the infinite love of the transcendent God. Looking back from the perspective of someone who knows from experience the pitfalls that we will encounter in this journey of transformation, Teresa assures us that, from beginning to end, the good path is companionship with Jesus, the Image of the invisible God. Daily, we are being transformed by this living seal that has been set upon our hearts.

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³⁴ Martin Laird develops the concept of *logophasis* for this movement beyond both *kataphasis* and *apophasis*, image and imagelessness. He writes: ‘As a result of apophatic union, in which concepts, words and images have been abandoned, characteristics of the Word are taken on; the Word indwells the deeds and discourse of the one in apophatic union. Hence a new discourse emerges: the Word says itself (hence the term *logophasis*) through deeds and discourse.’ (Martin Laird, ‘“Whereof We Speak”: Gregory of Nyssa, Jean-Luc Marion and the Current Apophatic Rage’, *Heythrop Journal*, 42 (2001), 3.

³⁵ *Interior Castle*, VI.7.6.