

01. Teresa of Jesus

Showing the way to intimate communion with God



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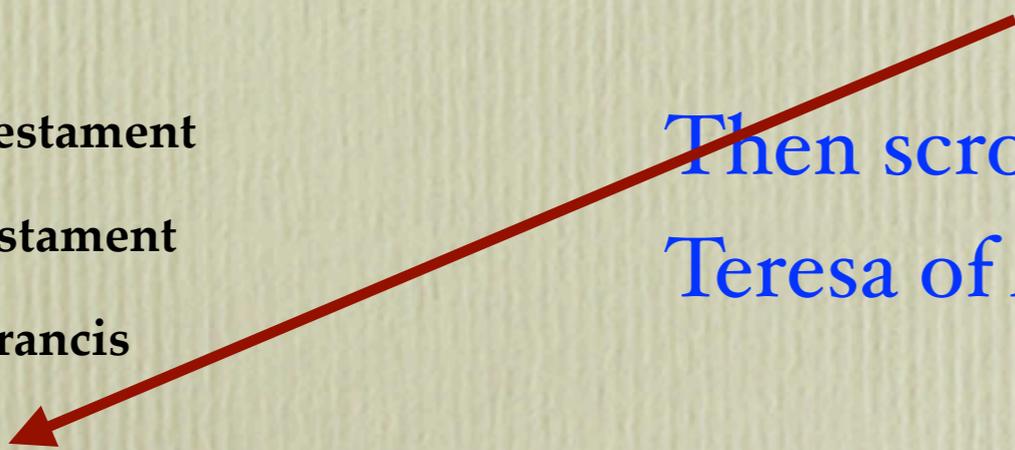
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Prayer

Prayer is the word we use for our experience of being in communion with God.

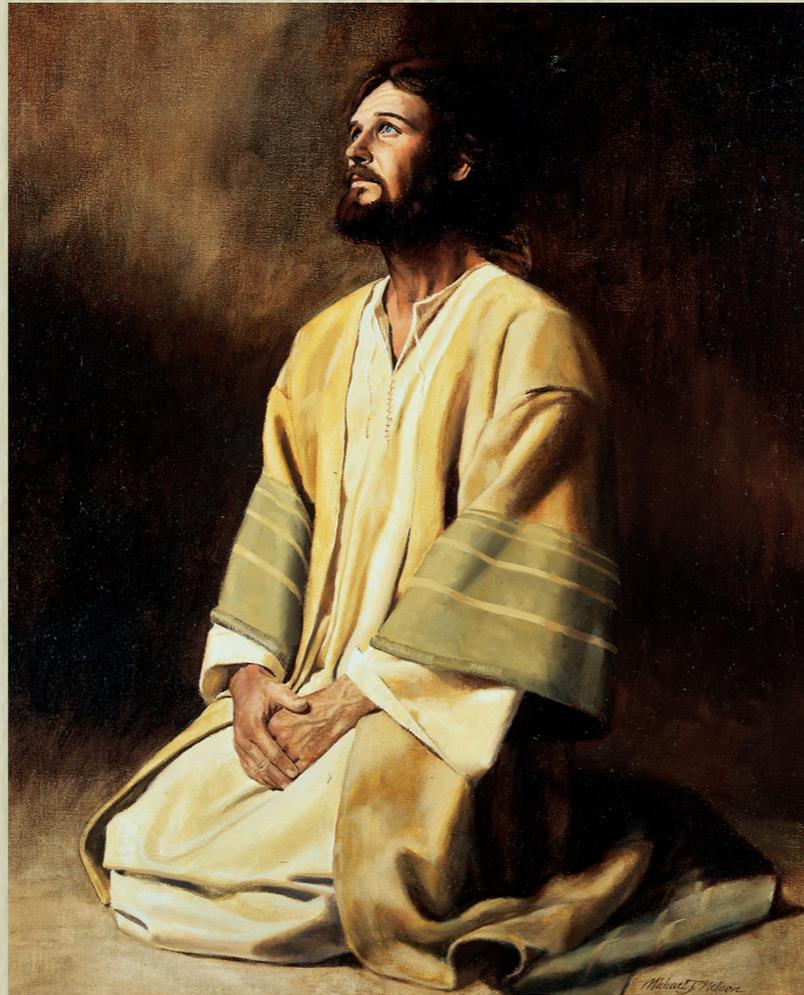
God is the One who is present to us, indeed to the whole of the universe, holding everything in existence. Everything is an expression of God.

We can relate to God in a personal way, and we can relate to God in loving communion. This is essentially what prayer is. Prayer comes naturally to us, though, like everything else, it needs to be nurtured and directed. It can also be stifled.

In the process of discovering and developing our unique selves not all is plain sailing. In some cultures we are tempted to seek to be independent, self-made. In all cultures the classical vices (pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth) take root. They spoil our maturing process, but they cannot wipe out something that is natural to us: our need and longing for ever more intimate communion with God.

Jesus

When we become aware of our intimate communion with God, by whatever means, we need guidance. The Christian community points us, first and foremost, to Jesus of Nazareth.



Jesus kneeling in prayer, Michael Jervis Nelson
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Jesus said once that his aim was to see people live a full life (John 10:10).

For him this meant learning to love God 'with all our heart, mind, soul and strength' (Mark 12:30).

The fruit of this love, and the test that it is genuine, is our learning to love ourselves and others.

Jesus was speaking from experience. He knew he was loved by God and he continued to open himself to welcome God's love and to respond with love.

Others came to see that it was this love-communion with God that showed in the way he loved others.

He wanted to get a fire blazing in people's hearts (Luke 12:49), a fire that would burn away whatever is an obstacle to love.

Being in love-communion with God brought Jesus the most exquisite joy, and he wanted us to experience that joy.

‘I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete’ (John 15:11).

‘You have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you’ (John 16:22).

‘Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls’ (1 Peter 1:8-9).

the salvation of your souls

The word **soul** speaks of my whole self with special focus on my longing for love-communion.

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my **soul** (the Hebrew speaks of my vital energy, my life force) longs for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1).

“My **soul** clings to you; your right hand upholds me” (Psalm 63:8).

“I stretch out my hands to you; my **soul** thirsts for you like a parched land” (Psalm 143:6).

“My **soul** longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD;
my body and my heart sing for joy to the living God” (Psalm 84:2).

My **body** sings for joy

The word **body** speaks of my whole self, with special focus on my belonging to and relating to the environment, including other people.

It includes the aspect of fragility and vulnerability.

Along with the rest of creation we are drawn towards union with God.

“O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;

My body (The Hebrew speaks of ‘flesh’) faints for you,

as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1).

My **heart** sings for joy

The word **heart** speaks of my whole self, with special focus on my connecting with myself and with others in the mysterious depths of my being and experiencing communion there in my centre.

“I give thanks to you, my God, with all my **heart**” (Psalm 86:12).

“I am needy, and my **heart** is pierced within me” (Psalm 109:22).

“I treasure your word in my **heart**” (Psalm 119:10).

“Search me, O God, and know my **heart**” (Psalm 139:23).

Into your hand I commit my **spirit**' (Psalm 31:5)

The word **spirit** speaks, not of myself, but of my experiencing the gift of God's **Holy Spirit** (the love-communion of Jesus with God his Father, and the love-communion of God with his Son Jesus), and my yielding to the inspiration of this **Holy Spirit**. It speaks of my returning God's gift, entrusting myself to God. **Spirit** is the Latin word for breath. The Genesis account speaks of God breathing life into Adam. We don't hold the breath. We breath it back in trust.

Especially significant is the choice we make to believe that the **Holy Spirit** is present to us, that God is loving Jesus and Jesus is loving God in our 'heart'. Our communion is in proportion to the longing of our "body" and "soul", and to the yielding of our "**spirit**".

“Into your hand I commit my **spirit**” (Psalm 31:5).

“Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your **Holy Spirit** from me” (Psalm 51:11).

“I commune with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my **spirit**” (Psalm 77:6).

“All your creatures look to you to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
When you send forth **Your Spirit**, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground” (Psalm 104:27-30).

“Let your **Good Spirit** lead me on a level path” (Psalm 143:10).

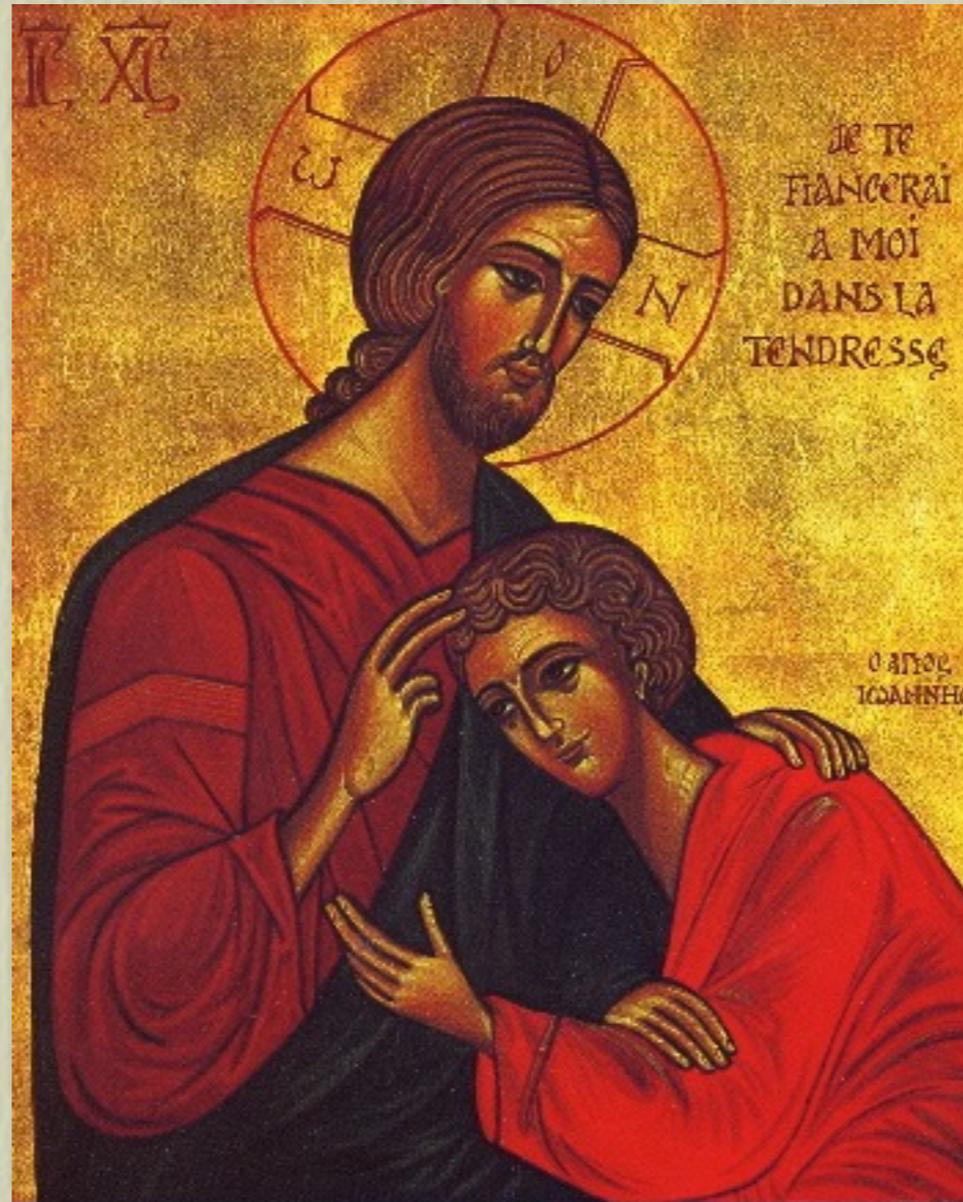
Jesus wanted to get a fire blazing in people's hearts (Luke 12:49), a fire that would burn away whatever is an obstacle to love.

One person who picked up the message and the fire was Paul of Tarsus, and he expressed the aim of life in the most daring terms. We are called and graced, he wrote, to be 'filled with the utter fullness of God' (Ephesians 3:19).

Indeed 'eye has not seen, not ear heard, nor has the heart imagined what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9) – and he is not just referring to heaven. He is talking about here and now as we are 'transformed from one degree of glory to another' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

If we are tempted to think that this sounds too good to be true, we have two thousand years of saintly people to assure us that the joy of living in intimate communion with God is possible, and we have their lives of generous love to show that their communion with God was real. In this retreat we will be listening to one such saint, the Carmelite Sister, Teresa of Jesus.

Jesus promised that he would draw everyone to himself (John 12:32).
He wants to share with us his love-communion with God.



George Viredaz from an icon of Christ and Saint John
Dormition Abbey, Jerusalem. Used with permission.

There will be obstacles hindering the fire from taking hold. We should expect to find the road hard at times and the gate narrow, but Jesus assures us, from his own experience, that it leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14). If we want to live a full life we must dare the journey.

Jesus assures us that God's love for us is never wanting, and Teresa describes the steps we must take to respond to God's invitation to enjoy the communion for which we are made, the communion for which we long.

Prayer is the name we give to our experience of communing in God's love. Prayer is the subject of this retreat.

We each have our own unique path to walk. We have the Church's assurance that the signposts given us by Teresa point us in the right direction, while each person needs to follow their own path, according to temperament and experience.

Teresa certainly shows us her path. If she is going to help us it would be good to know something of her story.

Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada was born in 1515 near Avila, central Spain.



1517 Luther's theses

1534 Jesuits founded by Ignatius

1542 Juan de Yepes Álvarez

Teresa's mother died in 1528 when she was 13. Aged twenty she entered the local Carmelite convent and made her first profession in 1537 (Teresa of Jesus). The following year she suffered a severe paralysis that lasted for 4 years and left her with a weakened heart and poor health for the rest of her life. Her father died in 1543.

Life in the Avila convent was mediocre and Teresa's life was initially no different. She was, however, faithful to the times for prayer laid down in the rule. In 1554, in her 40th year, she had a mystical experience that convinced her that Jesus was present to her and loved her. She had similar experiences over the following years.

In her autobiography she wrote that an experience of the presence of God 'would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt that God was with me or that I was totally immersed in God' (*Life* 10.1).

She wanted to live a more fervent life than was possible in the Avila convent, and obtained permission in 1562, aged 47, to gather a small group of sisters and open the convent of Saint Joseph where they lived according to the ancient Carmelite rule.

There she experienced dwelling in the depths of her soul the presence of the Trinity: of God, of Jesus, and of the love-Spirit that flowed between them.

There, in obedience to her superiors, she wrote her *Life* and *The Way of Perfection*.

Impressed by her life, the Superior General of the Carmelites authorised her to work for the reform of the Order. She met John of the Cross, and persuaded him to help her in reforming the male branch of the Carmelites. She established 14 convents for Carmelite nuns between 1567 and her death in 1582 (See her account of this in her *Foundations*).

In 1577, aged 62, she wrote her masterpiece, *The Interior Castle*, in which she sets out the path that she herself followed, which led her, and she trusted would lead others, into the experience of perfect communion with God.

If that was all we knew about her we might think that what she describes may well be suited for those for whom she wrote – Sixteenth Century Spanish Sisters – but hardly for us whose lives are so different. This is not what the Church thinks and hopefully we will not think it either when we hear what she has to say.

It is not without relevance to add that she was evidently physically quite beautiful, and people found her irresistibly attractive. She was affectionate, intelligent, shrewd, and very practical. In life she called things as they are. Why would her descriptions of prayer be any different? She suffered physically all her life, but never let it get in the way of what needed to be done. If some of her descriptions of her prayer life, her communion with God, seem extraordinary (and they do), her life offers ample evidence of the genuineness of her experiences.

She knew that her experiences were of God, as she felt herself yielding to the gravity of a Love that drew her into communion. She could not doubt that the One drawing her was God who loved her.

Of course she had to be open to the attraction, and she had to let go anything that was an obstacle. Often this was painful, but the communion was never painful. It was everything her heart desired. And she knew that if this is true of her it must be true of everyone. Hence her writing and her encouragement to us to dare the journey. For the goal is what we exist for. She knew that we would find this out for ourselves, each in our own way.

She experienced her prayer as something she was receiving from God who is Love. The experience of prayer is an experience of mutual Indwelling. God is abiding in us and drawing us to abide in God. We are to yield to this drawing. We are to remain quiet and consenting.

One facet of the rich reality of communion is peace.

Another is a new kind of loving of God.

Another is our need to accept to be drawn beyond our accustomed knowing.

Yet another is a loving awareness of Presence.

Prayer

Prayer for Teresa is essentially something very simple.

She speaks of it as ‘an exercise of love’ (*Life* 7.12).

‘an intimate sharing between friends ... taking time frequently to be alone with God who we know loves us’ (*Life* 8.5).

‘The soul is a paradise where the Lord finds his delight’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.1).

‘In its centre very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.3)

‘It is foolish to think that we will enter heaven without entering into ourselves, without coming to know ourselves’ (*Interior Castle* II.1.11).

‘It is for you to look at him; he never takes his eyes off you’ (*Way of Perfection*, 26.3).

We must ‘set our eyes on Christ’ (*Interior Castle* I.2.II).

‘Look on Him and reflect’ (*Interior Castle* II.I.II)

‘Care only about moving quickly so as to see the Lord.’

(*Interior Castle* III.2.8).

Prayer is essentially a personal response to God's mysterious presence.

We each have to find our own unique way of responding to God's loving invitation to communion. We each have to find our own way of communing with God in prayer.

At the same time there are some general principles that can guide us in our response, and we can learn much from the teaching of those, like Teresa, who have journeyed in prayer and who have given expression to what they have learned along the way.

John of the Cross:

‘The language which God hears best is silent love’ (*Maxims on Love*, n.53).

Therese of Lisieux:

‘Prayer is a surge of the heart; a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.’

(Story of a Soul)

Ruth Burrows writes:

‘True prayer is a giving of self to God, an opening of the self to God’ (*Before the Living God*, page 101).

‘Prayer is our saying Yes to God who is bending to us, offering us love, inviting us to intimate friendship’ (*Living in Mystery*, page 96).

Anthony Bloom writes (Courage to pray, pages 5-6):

‘Prayer is the search for God, encounter with God, and going beyond this encounter in communion ... It arises from the awareness that the world in which we live is not simply two dimensional, imprisoned in the categories of time and space, a flat world in which we meet only the surface of things, an opaque surface covering emptiness. Prayer is born of the discovery that the world has depths; that we are not only surrounded by visible things, but that we are also immersed in and penetrated by invisible things. And that this invisible world is both the presence of God, the supreme, sublime reality, and our own deepest truth ...

Anthony Bloom (continued)

‘Living only in the visible world is living on the surface; it ignores or sets aside not only the existence of God but the depths of created being. It is condemning ourselves to perceiving only the world’s surface ...

‘The human heart is deep. When we have reached the fountainhead of a human being’s life we discover that this itself springs from beyond. The human heart is open to the invisible. Not the invisible of depth psychology but the invisible infinite, God’s creative Word, God’s Self.

Anthony Bloom (continued)

‘Returning to ourselves is thus not a synonym for introversion but for emerging beyond the limits of our limited selves. Saint John Chrysostom said “When you discover the door of your heart you discover the gate of heaven.” This discovery of our own depths goes together with the recognition of the depths in others. Each has his or her own immensity. I use the word “immensity” on purpose. It means that the depth cannot be measured, not because it is too great for our measurements to reach it, but because its quality is not subject to measurement at all. The immensity of our vocation is to share the divine nature, and in discovering our own depths we discover God.’

Meditation is important, for we want to know all we can about Jesus and about God, especially from the inspired word of the New Testament. When, in the course of our meditating we find ourselves drawn into communion we ‘should learn to remain in God’s Presence with loving attention and a tranquil intellect’, even though this might seem like being idle. Soon we will find little by little that, in the words of John of the Cross, “a divine calm and peace with a wondrous sublime knowledge of God, enveloped in divine love, will be infused into your soul.”

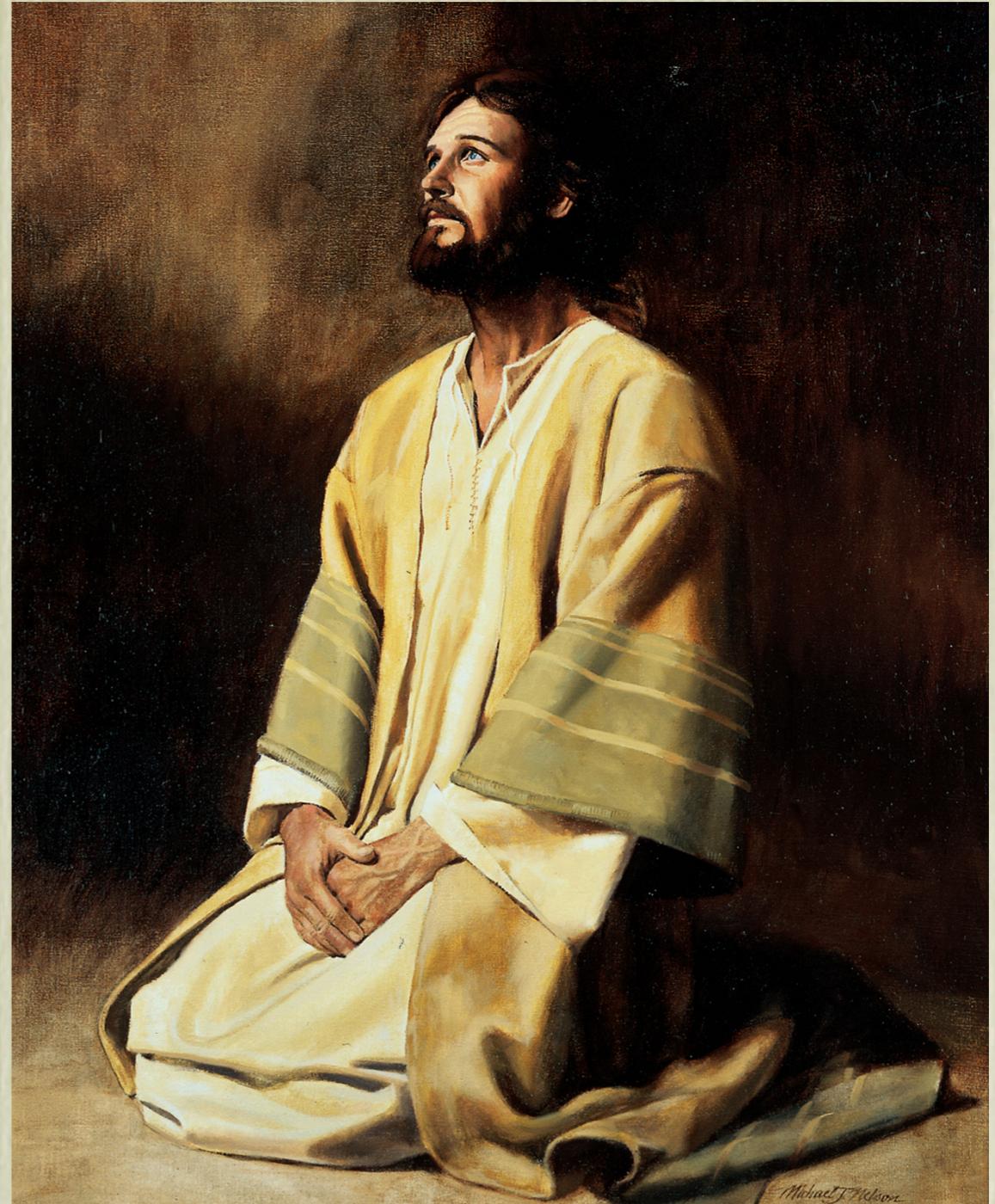
We are God's temple. God dwells in our hearts. The Book of Revelation likens this temple to a 'very rare jewel, clear as crystal. God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb (Revelation 21:11, 23).

The radiance of God reaches each of us wherever we are and draws us to the heart where we will live in God's embrace. Teresa likens the journey into this embrace to penetrating ever closer to the centre as though through the various dwelling places that constitute the interior castle, a castle that is a 'very rare jewel, clear as crystal' (Revelation 21:11).



Jesus

‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father ... I am in the Father and the Father is in me’ (John 14:9-10). ‘Jesus, God’s beloved Son, is the image of the invisible God ... God was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him’ (Colossians 1:15,19). Jesus is ‘the brilliance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being’ (Hebrews 1:3).



Jesus kneeling in prayer, Michael Jervis Nelson
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The Indwelling Trinity

At the Last Supper Jesus promised his disciples: 'I will ask the Father and he will give you the Spirit to be with you for ever' (John 14:16). 'I am coming to you' (John 14:18). 'My Father will love you and we will come to you and make our home with you' (John 14:23).

Teresa assures us that God dwells in our heart as does the Risen Jesus. We know this because we experience the Holy Spirit - the love that flows between God and Jesus. We are constantly being drawn to the heart of the crystal palace. God is inviting each of us to journey to our heart to enjoy the fullness of divine communion for which we are made and for which we long.

This is Jesus' prayer for you and me:

'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:21,26).