

Jessica Flores
Learning Experience: 2B
4-MAT #1: Ashbrook
April 7, 2023

A) Abstract Summary

The Christian life is more than working for Jesus. It is about intimacy with the trinity and spiritual development through spiritual formation. Spiritual formation and transformation occur when the Christian is seeking Jesus to know Him intimately. Ashbrook reflects on Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross's work to give the reader an understanding of spiritual formation that leads to transformation. This journey which Ashbrook refers to as his journey with Jesus began at Trappist monastery. There he found God's presence in simplicity and silence. (Ashbrook, pg. 1) Ashbrook encountered brother Boniface who heard clearly from God and carried God's presence. Ashbrook was intrigued and wanted to learn how to hear God clearly and carry His presence like Boniface. Ashbrook's journey revealed the importance of saying less in prayer, listening more to God's holy spirit and enjoying God. Ashbrook learned this type of relationship does not come from church programs and strategies. The type of relationship that leads to transformation is one that resembles that of Jesus in relation to God the Father. Jesus knew the Father intimately. Jesus only did what the Father did, He obeyed and surrendered to the Father's leading and guidance. Jesus understood He could do nothing of Himself but relied on and surrendered to the Father's will.

Ashbrook reflects on Teresa of Avila's work to describe the spiritual journey. Teresa of Avila describes seven stages of spiritual growth that lead to knowing God intimately and in turn loving Him and others. She also speaks on the concept of not trying too hard and allowing God's grace and initiative to empower the Christian. Teresa's seven stages serve as a "road map" for the believer to pinpoint or find where they are in their spiritual journey. After asking God how to describe spiritual life and growth, Teresa received a picture of the soul. The soul or heart was depicted as a clear crystal or diamond castle. In this castle there were numerous rooms, including seven dwelling places and in the center lived the "Sun" illuminating outward. (pg.41) As the Christian grows spiritually, they move closer to the "Sun" in the center of the castle. The "Sun" is our Lord dwelling in the center of our heart. The first mansion is the new beginning. It is when a believer first encounters God's grace, forgiveness, power, love and new depth in relationship with the trinity. (pg.53) Entry into the first mansion is through prayer and reflection. The second mansion is "Between a Rock and a Hard Place". In the second mansion the Christian is still a new Christian, but spiritual growth has occurred. (pg.73) The Christian in the second mansion struggles with the mandate to live righteously and separate unto God. To grow in this mansion the Christian must resist the devil's schemes, pray and persevere. Teresa also emphasizes the importance of seeking out wise counsel in Christian relationships and mentors. (pg.82) "Following Jesus" is the third mansion. Here the Christian is engaging in discipleship, regularly attends church, participates in ministry, has a prayer life, lives for Jesus, and wants to honor God with their life. (pg.91) In the third mansion working for God is mistaken for relationship with God. There is a

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dissatisfaction and a longing for more than just working for Jesus. The enemy keeps the Christian so busy with ministry and work that they are not in contact with God and are not led by Jesus. Growth in this mansion comes from intimacy and responsiveness to God. The fourth mansion is "Discovering the Love of Jesus". In this mansion there is a passion to know God and have an agape love for Him. "As God's beloved, we have heard the call of the Lover and we experience a hunger and thirst and attention to Jesus" (pg.113) The Christian must find their time during the day to abide with the Trinity. This time of abiding in solitude and silence in God's presence facilitates spiritual development. The fifth mansion is "Longing for Oneness with God". In this mansion God is calling the Christian to union with Him. (pg.130) Here the Christian experiences the dark night of the soul as taught by John of the Cross. The Christian experiences a deep dissatisfaction with their own spiritual development (pg.138). The enemy's attacks are allowed by God and are used to measure the level of healing that needs to take place in our hearts. In the fifth mansion growth comes from perseverance, silent communion with God and partnering with God to serve others. In the sixth mansion the Christian is like a fully committed engaged bride that does not know the date of her wedding. Christians are Christ Centered and live according to the Gospel; we find Him in every part of life. In this season the Christian also experiences dark nights of the soul where we do not feel God's presence and still persevere in communing with Him. The seventh mansion is where the Christian experiences full union with the Trinity. In abiding the Christian's silent prayer focuses exclusively on contemplation of God.

B) Concrete Stories and Memories Evoked by Reading:

This reading evoked many memories in my spiritual journey. One memory that stood out was my spiritual journey that took place as I worked my way through seminary and continued serving in ministry. I had equated my value in the works I performed with my hands. Additionally, I believed as a part-time employee not a volunteer at my home church I had to say yes to every assignment sent my way. I found myself so busy that my abiding time with God was neglected. When I attempted to get into God's presence, I felt His absence, this was one of my dark nights of the soul. I was tired of "doing for God", I felt it physically and mentally. The enemy in this phase in my spiritual journey, would try to convince me to give up what God clearly called me to do, that it was not worth everything I was encountering. I felt as though I was doing this on my own. Not feeling God's presence and when I would reach out for help or guidance, I did not get the help I so desperately felt I needed to keep moving forward. The only thing that kept me persevering was the unmistakable knowing that God called me to seminary and ministry. Hence, despite what I encountered, despite the minimal support I received, I persevered. As I read this book, I identified the different mansions I journeyed through in my own spiritual journey. I recollect when God would send me prophetic words such as: 1) He wanted

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me to abide in His presence as appose to constantly working; 2) God wanted me to surrender instead of striving and He continually reminded me He was the sole support I needed. God would send help here and there, but He was all I needed to do the assignment He called me to. The more time I spent in contemplative prayer hearing from God the more I felt His love and need to prune things out of my life. I found myself saying no to ministry assignments, delegating or helping the individual come up with another way to fulfill the assignment without my direct assistance. I came to a place where I would not take on assignments that were not in alignment with God's calling in my life and as Teresa of Avila points out, I noticed that people were not happy with me turning down assignments. Their approval or fear that I would lose my job was no longer the motivator for me saying yes to the assignment and this was liberating. I found that God brought an ease when completing what He called me to do because I surrendered it and my heart to Him. Ashbrook's reading teaches that Christians journey back and forth in these different mansions (or stages in spiritual development), I too identify with this. Although I learned the lessons listed in my spiritual journey, I find that I go in and out of the mansions, there are times I take on too much and I must surrender again to God, prune and seek union with the Holy Trinity.

C) Reflection Questions:

Questions that arose as I read are how to go about finding a Christian mentor? I have found that I glean from those around me, teachings, books, and when I identify a possible mentor, they do not respond or do not have the time to take on a mentee. The second question that arose as I read was, will there ever be a time when my "holy dissatisfactions" come to an end? Dissatisfactions with the difficulty of persevering when I am unable to feel God's presence, dissatisfaction with the fact that when I am at my weakest, I still must fight the lies of the enemy, which try to deter me from God's purpose for my life.

D) Action: what I must do with what I learned

I began planning a holy spirit weekend with our lead pastor and my husband. In this holy spirit prayer retreat, we will incorporate teachings on spiritual development, contemplative prayer and spiritual warfare. It will take place at the Holy Cross Monastery, July 14, 15 and 16th 2023. I will be praying, fasting, planning and organizing this event. The people who participate will be asked to prepare in advance, by fasting, meditating on the Word and having all confessions up to date. The intended goal is to teach others about the stages of spiritual development, contemplative prayer and experiencing the power of the Trinity. We know the Trinity will lead those who attend into transformative change, bondages will be broken, and people will be set free.

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