

SEEKING CHRIST'S PEACE: ON CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Talk 4a (03/10/24)

St. Teresa On the General Nature of Prayer and More

[This begins a short series on St. Teresa's teachings on prayer.]

Prayer is a matter of coming into living contact with Jesus; it is not just recitation and repetition. Simply going through the motions doesn't deserve the noble title of "prayer," and it won't lead to the union of our souls with Jesus. It was only through her living contact with Jesus that St. Teresa began to love him.

Before she started praying with sincerity and devotion, St. Teresa was typically preoccupied with waiting for her allotted prayer time to end and listening for the striking of the clock (This is reassuring for those of us who find that prayer challenges our attention spans.) St. Teresa actually spent more than eighteen years struggling in her prayer, pulled between conversing with God and being caught up in the activities of the world.

In her approach to prayer, Teresa shows a levelheadedness and psychological insight that readily puts beginners at ease. She starts with vocal prayer—focusing on the familiar ground of the Our Father—and moves imperceptibly, painlessly into mental prayer. The novice is never quite sure when she or he has crossed the line. Teresa makes the transition seem as natural as going from dialogue into devoted silence with a loved one.

She recommends disciplined attention to God our Father "because it is impossible to speak to him and to the world at the same time." She also realizes, however, that this is sometimes easier said than done. Assuring her followers that prayerful concentration can be very difficult during stress or illness or "when our heads are tired," she advises simply praying as best they can or busying themselves with some virtuous action.

She recognized the need to focus on whom we are praying to with our minds, not just our mouths. In the Interior Castle she wrote, "If a person does not think [of] Whom he is addressing, and what he is asking for, and who it is that is asking and of Whom he is asking it, I do not consider that he is praying at all even though he be constantly moving his lips."

Teresa also compares a person's relationship to Jesus with a woman's relationship to her husband. A good wife knows her husband. She understands him, cares for him, and is attentive to him. When he speaks to her, she listens. And when she speaks to him, she knows the person she's talking to. Because of their personal knowledge, their conversations have the potential to be more than mere exchanges of words. Similarly, if a soul knows Jesus, understands him, cares about him, and is attentive to him, prayer can be truly meaningful. At the root of prayer is a relationship of love.

Her reasonableness is irresistible. How can we reject a teacher who assures us that there's no point in worrying about our occasional inability to pray? "You mustn't weary yourself by trying to put sense into something—namely your mind—which is for the moment without any," she quips.

[We can ask for her help to become more prayerful:]

St. Teresa,
teach me to pray.
I trust in your seasoned direction.
Because you struggled for years with mental prayer,
you can understand my insecurities and weaknesses,
my habit of procrastinating.
Today, right now,
I am ready to pray.
Do your best with me.
Mother my spiritual progress.
Come, Holy Spirit,
open the door to my interior castle!

[The preceding was from various Franciscan sources on the internet; they are digestible presentations on the center of her faith, and her basic teachings on the prayer paths familiar to most people.]

[Here then are some of the things offered by St. Teresa, that concern us when occupied by the duties of the state of our lives, or hampered by issues of health --- and voluntary personal prayer (i.e., outside one's obligations for Mass and communal celebrations of the liturgy of the hours). It is important to recognize as our abilities and dispositions to pray may change day to day. We should look for the best times to pray normally, and keep to them as best we can. We might be better with shorter times than longer, in some seasons of our lives. We too, might best somehow find a way respond to the Spirit's personal invitations, his promptings, whenever he knocks at the doors of our hearts. Prayer, especially deeper prayer, is a gift and it involves virtue, but it also is interpersonal, and suited to our vocation longterm and in the moment. She is not saying give up. We are called to respond creatively to the Creator, perseveringly to Eternal Love. Teresa was especially focused on guiding those who entered Carmel to love God above all things, in their contemplative vocation. (The Mass, the liturgy of the hours, and two hours of silent prayer, all every day, is the basic schema of that life, aside from the various duties that keep the community going, and other disciplines to support the interior life. They live like the early desert hermits together, one might say.)

[A primary focus presumed in her advice is in the virtue of charity, Christ's love, insofar as first we receive it from him and then we can participate in it, returning it. Her way into the depths of this is focused on her personal relationship to Jesus: He is Lord, friend, teacher, sought in all things and above all things. Her focus is like that of the great doxology of the Mass: "through him, with him, in him," He is "the way, the truth, and the life," as St. John the Evangelist wrote. Jesus is to be loved with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. She is walking and talking in the age-old wisdom about love: "Love seeks union with the beloved," and "Nothing stirs love as much as to be loved."]