

SEEKING CHRIST'S PEACE: ON CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Talk 4b (03/11/24)

The central teaching from our last talk on prayer according to St. Teresa of Avila is: ALL PRAYER IS MEANT TO BE INTERPERSONAL, meaning intimate, aware and fully engaged as a person with God. Critical in importance, too, is her next teaching: PRAYER IS MEANT TO BE GROUNDED AND RADIATE FROM A VITAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS.

In this talk, we can walk through these central points systematically.

Last talk, we encountered St. Teresa's teaching on verbal prayer, a mode of prayer we all are to employ throughout our lives. We are to go beyond just saying or merely speaking words, or 'talking at God.' She, in effect, directs us to 'talking to God,' and moreover, about matters with meaning, and from our hearts.

This is a habit meant to extend into "mental prayer"—her general name for interior, and especially contemplation's non-verbal, non-discursive prayer. We, therefore, are best to seek to come into all prayer and especially contemplation in an interpersonal way—is what she is teaching. Thus, seeking God's presence is not just a seeking of a consoling feeling or of a quieted mind; it is an intimate interpersonal turning to God with an opening and mysterious raising of one's heart. God begins to invite us to this with his encouraging invitations—gifts of peace and presence—but they are directed to an interpersonal response on our part. Like a child being raised by capable parents being thereby called to a flourishing interpersonal life, with a sort of growing self possession that lovingly opens to others, being present to them, and all in the light of the truth of their relationships and life together.

So far in these talks we have been talking about our interior quieting, as you may well have noted. The next issue is the 'gazing' or contemplative part of this deeper prayer. This can be puzzling, for quieting our hearts in an interpersonal way, might seem to result in just a listening or receiving attitude, a being cared for. Indeed that is true, we come as children to learn, disciples to hear, creatures to be raised and brought into the mysteries of heaven. It is, however, not the whole story.

Rather than just getting knowledge and blessings and stopping there, we are invited into a living love, something like and better than a friendship, even the best of marriages. This new and living intimacy is meant to be central, key to this journey. And again, we must turn to look more deeply into our hearts and their dynamic; after all, we are the ones who are growing, being raised in grace.

I reckon that this area of focus and concern is like a child's self and social development that can be increasingly perfected. And this means for us, even as adults with developed *personae* and some social maturity, we turn to heaven as 'incomplete' or 'imperfect' children of God, with a new journey of intimacy before us. And so we open our hearts toward heaven as 'immature' or 'partially completed' persons, in a living quasi-conversational relationship, vitally 'looking' to whom we have turned in prayer.

This 'looking' in hope is from our depths and increasingly leading into those

depths. Indeed, we look or gaze into God in hope in a way, as a phrase from a C.S. Lewis book goes, "until we have faces"—when we will love the Trinity 'face to face,' so to speak, in the beatific vision. Then we will be fully 'personalized' as a child of God. This is a deep dish to get a taste for, or wrestle with intellectually, but the ever-practical and wise St. Teresa gives a simple, solid, and safe way to seek this new wholeness and holiness.

St. Teresa maintains that this supernatural "looking to God" has a definite practical center on the heaven side of this relationship, and that is Jesus. In the depths of prayer, he is the surest and safest central interlocutor and friend, starting with verbal prayer and into the depths of mental prayer. This is the essence of the 'focus' to which she directs those who would listen to her. Contemplative prayer is, then, a mysterious heart-to-heart encounter with Jesus in faith, before we can see the Trinity face-to-face. (To add to this from her friend, St. John of the Cross, the intellectual and volitional darkness, and even dryness, to be encountered in this interpersonal path, perfects our personhood.)

Lastly, here we can add the light of the Church's teaching on grace to our gaze toward Jesus, or, better, to this mutual knowing in this love's mysterious meeting. **This communion is initiated by the Trinity, it is a gift of divine love.** It is God sharing divine intra-Trinitarian life with us. The divine Goodness 'diffusing' itself in an interpersonal way, it is a new realm of befriending that transfigures us who grow in its new communion of life.

The risen Lord, the Word made flesh, the firstborn of the dead is herein seeking, embracing and raising us into sharing his divine life. Our growing communion with him configures our hearts to his sacred heart. In the mystery of this deep journey of prayer, we begin to know and love the infinite and abiding Father, in the Holy Spirit sent and yet always beyond change, through, with, and in Jesus, having become and becoming our divine friend, teacher, and savior. Jesus is the kindly and gentle and sure light that shines in the darkness of our creatureliness, and failings, the Son given to us.

St. Teresa takes this way, naturally and habitually, and certainly with conviction. And that focus echoes through her advice and actions. We might say this is her consistent teaching on a true and relational "holy mindfulness." This can be found in her writings as well as in others' reflections on her.

In the reading on her feast from her autobiography, this doctor of the Church says that the most blessed and safest way to God is through the humanity of Jesus. "She goes directly to the person of Christ in His humanity: she brings Him to her consciousness as either within her or beside her. This was her manner of entering prayer. 'We behold Him with a simple gaze,' Teresa says, 'and this will suffice us, not merely for an hour, but for many days.'" writes Fr. Kieran Kavanaugh OCD, the recent translator of her works. (In "Christ in the Mysticism of St. Teresa", on the website of Angelfire.) We can turn to Pope Benedict XVI, who talks about her "centrality of Christ's humanity. For Teresa, in fact, Christian life is the personal relationship with Jesus that culminates in union with him through grace, love and imitation." (General Audience, 2/2/11) More to come! (Next: on the four waters.)