

Seeking Christ's Peace: On Contemplative Prayer

Talk 4e (04/04/24)

St Teresa's basic advice for beginners in prayer's life is first about recollection, and then second, a deepening will for communion with God with a growing detachment from everything other than that. Recollection comes first, and it is directed at being interpersonally focused toward God. Then after learning that generally in prayer, the interior quieting, to be alone with him we know loves us, means effectively being increasingly detached from everything else, in various ways and degrees.

Her advice is immediately aimed at those who have a lifelong contemplative vocation, not a mixed vocation of contemplation and action, although her own vocation as a foundress effectively was a mixed vocation. Such advice for a mixed life is to be found in another doctor of the Church, St. Francis de Sales, whose teachings I hope to summarize in another short series later. But her advice aims at a solid grounding for the deepest sort of prayer, and her teachings are integral to de Sales, who might well be seen as the prototypical pastor of the future Vatican II era call to an interiorized personal holiness and to prudent and generous Christian humanism and good neighborliness.

The last two waters in St. Teresa's schema are about sublime modes in the graced life of prayer; the earlier waters are about our beginning to receive God's gift of salvation and holiness, by our initial cooperating with his grace. The last two waters and the last three dwellings are principally for those who have cooperated fully with God in a habitual proficiency and maturity. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., the most recent translator of her *opera omnia*, in his introduction to her mature work, the *Interior Castle*, mentions that she taught that the last two dwellings are not accessible to those not Christo-centrally rooted in their prayer. So her Christocentric advice has a longterm payoff; as well as lining up with the basic and deepwater faith teachings of St. Paul the Apostle, and the remainder of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John. ***Her basic deep perspective is that Christ dwells in the depths of our hearts, and the life journey of prayer is his gift of inviting us and welcoming us into an increasingly deeper communion with him, as he mercifully gives himself to us.*** These are indeed deep, but warm and life-giving waters.

There is no telling how deep one's prayer life may become in a mixed setting or vocation, or in a 'Martha to Mary conversion' season of our lives, so St. Teresa's teachings and focus are always valuable for their perduring wisdom. So with profit now we might cherish the rich interiority into which she directs us.

She has a simplicity of soul that can give us all a salient personalist perspective for our spiritual lives in Christ. Her heart is open to sound theological guidance, but is not itself over-complicated by an intellectual, theological complement to her contemplation, as are some of the analyses of her deepwater friend, St. John of the Cross, or drawn out as those of her pastoral admirer, St. Francis de Sales. Like her namesake, St. Therese of Lisieux, she uses the simple and direct light of the Catholic faith to the maximum advantage in charity's central love of God. This is indeed a help in an age of intellectual skepticism and confusion, indeed in any age, and for all vocations in all of the Church's mission and life, and not in a way that inclines others to fideism's tepid small heartedness. Her heart is simple and focused, yet rich in both humility and magnanimity.

We can accurately say that St. Teresa's interpersonal approach to prayer constitutes her interiority. And her interiority, then, is *ecstatic*, not in the sense, of always joyful or rapturous, but it is consistently *going out* to the divine Other, the divine Thou, in Jesus. Indeed she has distractions from this, but they can be seen as distractions precisely from this interpersonal focus.

From her directors, she understands that her ordinary internal experiences (including both distractions and quiet) are more immediately constituted by her imagination. Her will and intellect are deeper, spiritual faculties, at work in less immediately obvious ways, but are essentially occupied in acts of the virtue of charity. Thus, the journey's success may not be measured by its experiences, but by the entirety of our willingness to persevere in its path, including bearing fruit in the 'little' things of our 'day to day' (as the little Therese reminds us).

Teresa's is not a morbid, self-obsessed looking inward. She is seeking the Beloved dwelling in her, giving himself to her, mysteriously, as she increasingly enters into his presence, embrace and loving action.

This can be a path yielding at least some, if not an abundance of, freedom into virtue for many of us who can find ourselves obsessed with various modes of fixations on ourselves: anxious, shame or guilt-ridden, scrupulous, conceited (caught up in our own thoughts and plans), hypochondriac, self-doubting, fearful, 'Martha'-ed about accomplishing things, and more. As obsessions for many of us, in these we return again and again to such fixations, even after we have addressed these things responsibly. Teresa is saying there is a path to quiet, centrally with rich and intimate relationship (*shalom*) that can be sought and prayed for, even by the consistently self-troubled and self-bound.

Her famous pointing to the Our Father as the *way of perfection* says also that this interior interpersonal path is meant to embody the heart and depths of the Lord's prayer's great and astounding hopes. Her interpersonal interiority is a path of worship and obedience, a path of being loved by God, which frees her also to love others and ourselves well.

As the Our Father includes the flourishing of all of our vocations in the Church, with their particular journeys --- this journey into the four waters of grace, into the interior castle of our souls, implicitly includes all of the concerns of our vocations and others': achieving their aspirations and overcoming their obstacles.

For Catholics today her interior path includes an implicit prayer to be a truly good neighbor, from the heart, to all of our contemporaries, all of humankind, as *Gaudium et spes* has directed us anew and in a refreshing and salvific way into social dialogue and action and aspiration.

Our contemplative journey is part of a mysterious offering of ourselves with our concerns into union with Christ --- meaning, too, that our intentions to make intercessions for others are also being drawn into this dynamic within contemplative prayer and its mystery, along with all of our cares for the weak, the vulnerable, the suffering, and so on.

Ultimately the journey is also a part of our ecclesial union with the Mass and Christ's heavenly worship. It is an interior and spiritual way of dying to self with him, and rising to new life with him, aimed an irrevocable sharing in the life of the Trinity.