

St. Teresa on Prayer (Life)

'Those who are beginning to be the servants of love', that is how St. Teresa describes people who are resolved to **devote** themselves to a life of prayer. (Life Ch.11). This resolve directs us to "Him who so greatly loved us". Teresa then asks why this strong resolution doesn't bring us immediately to the possession of complete love. This failure she attributes to a lack of generosity on **our** part. We should do all we can to obtain this blessing, especially by preparing ourselves to receive it. We need to make a full surrender of ourselves to God. God will give Himself to anyone who keeps trying. The Lord will also supply the necessary courage to face the inevitable obstacles placed in our way by the devil who wishes to inhibit the possibility of spiritual development.

The preliminary stages of prayer, then, are the most difficult and involve the greatest degree, of application. "In the other degrees of prayer the chief thing is fruition, although, whether in the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the road, all have their crosses, different as these may be. For those who follow Christ must take the way which He took, unless they want to be lost" (Ch. 11).

Teresa searches about for some way of describing this whole process and she hits on the comparison of someone cultivating a garden. A garden can be irrigated in any of four different ways: first, simply by taking water from the well; second, by the use of a water-wheel and buckets; third, by a river or stream and fourth, by a heavy fall of rain.

In the Book of her Life Teresa sees the development of the life of prayer as happening in four stages. She will explain the four stages or degrees of prayer by reference to the four different methods of watering the garden. In this way we have the well known description of the four waters.

Teresa has presupposed that the Lord has cleared the ground for the beginner and has sown the necessary plants of virtue. What is needed now is that the seedlings be cultivated. Beginners in prayer then need to work hard at the task of drawing water from the well. By this she means that some effort must be made to keep the senses recollected or concentrated on God. This can be difficult because of the distractions we allow ourselves. Then they, (beginners), have to endeavour to meditate on the life of Christ and this fatigues their minds.

Thus far we can make progress by ourselves - of course with the help of God - for without that, as is well known, we cannot think a single good thought. Teresa thus insists on the need for divine grace in the spiritual enterprise. She shows herself aware of Our Lord's words in the discourse at the last supper: "For cut off from me you can do nothing". (Jn 15..51).

The beginner will inevitably encounter difficulty and will sometimes feel completely inept and dry. Not alone that, but he may experience a positive dislike and distaste for engaging in the work of meditation. This could be a critical point of growth. Many people will not want to continue pursuing a line which is contrary to what their feelings dictate. But Teresa sees this as a temptation and says that at this point it will be necessary to recall that Jesus had a difficult life and endured the suffering of the cross. This whole process is part of our testing-time and a preparation for a deeper spiritual life.

The main thing is 'to desire to be alone and to commune with God'. If we try to be indifferent to the presence or absence of emotional satisfaction when we pray, that is a mark of growth. We must try to give rather than receive, 'it is in giving that we receive'. The reason why some people make no headway is that they refuse to embrace the cross from the beginning. It doesn't matter if our meditation is intellectually unsatisfying, what is important is that we long to think about God and love Him. Nor is there any point in forcing ourselves when we feel out of sorts; we can always engage in activity that will benefit others at such a time. Teresa even suggests a walk in the country at this point!

In Chapter 12 Teresa continues to discuss the first stage of prayer.

We should keep in mind, of course, that Teresa is looking back on her own spiritual development from a very advanced stage. Consequently she feels that a certain amount is left to our own initiative at the outset.

But all the same she is careful to point out that everything is a gift of God, What the individual can do is to reflect on the sufferings of Jesus and on other themes such as future glory or the resurrection of Christ. It is possible for the

soul to imagine itself in an intimate relationship with Christ, and engage in a loving dialogue with him, 'ask him for the things it has need of, make complaints to him of its trials, rejoice with him in its joys and yet never allow its joys to make it forgetful of him'.

This is an approach which is suitable and necessary at all stages of the spiritual journey. No formal prayers need be said but we should use whatever is subjectively found best. We must not try to force 'supernatural' effects; this would show a lack of humility in the spiritual life and could only do harm. After all we are already getting more than we deserve from the Lord !What Teresa means in this context is that we must not try to enter a passive stage of the spiritual life until the Lord leads us into it. This means that we must continue working normally, with our minds reflecting and dwelling on the topics suggested.

Teresa begins Chapter 13 by warning us against certain pitfalls. Initially, she says ,we should try to appear happy and free. "There are some people who think that devotion will slip away from them if they relax a little". So here she delivers some homely advice and very wisely talks about the need for relaxation which discretion dictates. Then she very characteristically appeals for courageous effort. We need to have dreams and desires if we are to achieve anything. It would be a misunderstanding of humility to want to dampen our ardour in relation to God.

Teresa here indicates another trap common with beginners: they want everyone to be extremely spiritual! A similiar temptation is to feel distressed at the failings of others. The corrective for this type of censoriousness is to look at the attractive qualities in our neighbour while keeping our own defects before our eyes. The ideal in fact would be to think everyone else is better than yourself.

Teresa rounds off her treatment of this first water by advising people not to spend the whole period of prayer in the actual work of meditating, even when they find it going well. She would prefer if they would sometimes just remain quietly in the presence of Christ. "If we can we should occupy ourselves in looking upon Him Who is looking at us; keep Him company; talk with Him; pray to Him; humble ourselves before Him; have our delight in Him.."(Ch.13).

Second Water:

We now move on to speak about the second degree of prayer. Here we have to presuppose that a great deal of growth has taken place. For St. Teresa this is the prayer of the second water. At this point, much of the labourious undertakings of the first stage can be dispensed with. Here some labour-saving devices are employed for watering the garden. Teresa now talks about using a pulley and buckets whereby the garden receives more water with less effort. This means that a great deal of progress has been made in the art of meditation. The shape of one's prayer has now merged into what can be described as the prayer of quiet. She visualises the person becoming absorbed by the love of God or Christ. I suppose one could accurately describe this as 'being in love' with God. This stage of the prayer life Teresa describes in Chapters 14 and 15 of her 'Life'. She tells us tersely that it is a concentration of the faculties within the person. She tells us that the will becomes captive, allowing itself 'to be imprisoned by God ,as one who well knows itself to be the captive of Him Whom it loves'.

Teresa tells us that what is experienced in this recollected form of prayer has tremendous effects in helping one to behave in a more Christ-like way. There is a very pronounced growth discernible here. She says that the Lord begins to communicate Himself to the person. She tells us this is 'true joy'. She is emphatic that this feeling of satisfaction is not self-acquired. God is the giver and He seems to be very near. She certainly underlines the experiential nature of this state - it's not so much that we know God understands us, but that we realise He understands us.

She discusses the fact that she doesn't know whence or how this satisfaction comes to her. Teresa would like to deal in somewhat more detail with this state as it was insufficiently dealt with in the books with which she was familiar. She repeats the little phrase, these things are 'verging on the supernatural'. There is also an element of struggle involved in this state no less than

in the first. "The soul suffers many trials for the Lord wants the poor gardener to think that all the trouble he has taken in watering the garden and keeping it alive is lost." (Ch.14) The Chapter concludes with Teresa lamenting the fact that having experienced these favours from God and realised they were from Him, yet she offended Him again. There is a little scriptural phrase which is sung nowadays and which might serve as a text for what Teresa deals with in these two chapters: 'Be still and know that I am God'. It is the Lord who bestows this repose and it is useless to try to prolong it. "It dares not move or stir, for it thinks that if it does so this blessing may slip from its grasp". (Ch. 15).

Teresa has a very high opinion of this stage in prayer. She makes the interesting observation that many people reach this point but few pass beyond it. It seems that here you meet the temptation to return to the flesh-pots of Egypt. It's not so much the fact that you are liable to commit sin - this goes without saying, for St. Teresa, the temptation is to give up prayer.

This is how Teresa describes this phase of prayer: "This prayer then is a little spark of true love for the Lord, which He begins to enkindle in the soul, and His will is that it should come to understand the nature of this love with its attendant joy". All effort must be put into nurturing this spark and one hopes it will survive and catch fire later. Teresa again issues a warning about overdoing mental activity at this point. It is better, she thinks, to throw a few straws on this spark than to pile on logs of wood - by which she means clever reflections. But in this transition period, mental and vocal prayer are not to be discarded; they still have a place alongside periods of complete quiet. It is possible to counterfeit this divine quietude, but this is one of the places where Teresa isn't particularly worried about deception. If the person is humble, the satisfaction will be thankfully received and the determination to endure hardship will act as a corrective to such deception.

Teresa says that although there is such a thing as spiritual growth, it is not like physiological growth and we are literally cut down to size occasionally! This means that there are times when we have to get back to basics. Strong foundations are needed in this business and Teresa appeals to Our Lord's injunction, "Take up your cross and follow me". One of the signs pointing to the Lord's presence is a divinely induced humility. He gives a special light which produces this, but she doesn't say exactly how He does it. Another grace which He bestows is an intense desire to make progress in prayer whatever the obstacles. There is an awareness of a love for God developing within one, and a tendency to want to be on one's own occasionally in order to enjoy the Lord's presence.

Teresa's last word in this connection is that this prayer is the beginning of all blessings. There is such a vivid awareness of God that you are sure He is with you. However the consciousness of failings and weaknesses again induces a feeling of fear and apprehension. So Teresa concludes her discussion of this stage of prayer and spiritual development. It's a kind of interim period, perhaps, for a full-blown mystical life. I think this section is a very valuable part of her treatise on prayer. It is very pertinent to the needs of religious and lay-people who are trying to deepen their relationship with God.

The question arises of course why we balk at this point and experience no further growth. Teresa confessed herself puzzled by this problem. She concludes that it is to be attributed to 'grave faults'. This seems rather harsh and perhaps her approach is coloured by her ardent Spanish temperament which tended to see things in black and white with very few shades of grey. For her it was all or nothing. The reality of the situation, however, is that not everyone is made

of the same mettle as Teresa, and people can only respond to God according to their capacity. So we could say that failure to advance in a spectacular way need not be due to 'grave faults'. Her ecstasies remind us of the outpourings of courtly love, which is simply the human Teresa responding fully to the torrent of divine love.

Third Water.

The early stages of prayer have involved quite a lot of labour as we have seen. Teresa now feels that definite progress has been made. In the third degree the garden is watered much more abundantly by a river or stream. The Lord does more than merely help the gardener; in fact He seems to be the gardener Himself, 'for it is He who does everything.' She describes this condition as a 'sleep of the faculties' in the sense that they are not really 'lost'. We are given to understand of course that this is a very delightful feeling indeed. The idea seems to be that the person's energies are occupied with God or absorbed in Him - 'I live now not I, but Christ lives in me'. The predominant theme of prayer here seems to be the urge to praise God continually and have others praise Him also. 'It would fain be all tongue so that it might praise the Lord' (Ch.16). The tone here seems very elevated but the underlying motive is quite understandable; it's simply that Teresa is in love with God and is gripped by a 'heavenly madness'. In one sense this is fairly common. In St. Paul, in the saints, mystics and spiritual writers. Teresa turns aside to wonder why it is that preachers do not stir their hearers more than they do. She writes, "They are not like the Apostles, flinging it all (worldly wisdom) aside and catching fire with love for God". (Ch.16).

What happens in this state is entirely owing to God's initiative. In Ch.18 Teresa refers to 'visits of the Lord to the soul' and she states that the gardener accomplishes in a moment what we couldn't achieve by ourselves in twenty years. Teresa calls this prayer a 'union of the entire soul with God', but the faculties enjoy and understand what God is doing. Moreover the person can be active here, it can be both Mary and Martha at the same time. She goes on to describe a deeper kind of union which involves a lot of turmoil on the part of memory and imagination. In this context she remarks that the soul must take no more notice of the will than it would of a madman!

Teresa concludes her description of the prayer of the third water by saying that the body shares in the soul's joy and delight.

Fourth Water.

In the fourth degree of prayer we are dealing with the rain that falls from heaven. This means that it is completely the work of God, His gift. In the preceding stages the gardener had some hand in the task. A sense of indefinable rejoicing characterises this fourth stage, but the reason for the rejoicing eludes the understanding.

Teresa tells us that this rejoicing engages all the senses to such an extent that they cannot express this rejoicing; the body is powerless and the soul cannot express its happiness. The ability to communicate the experience or not is used as a kind of criterion; if the person cannot communicate this state then it is union of the faculties with God; if it can communicate it, then it is not union. Teresa confesses herself confused by the distinction between 'mind' and 'soul' or 'spirit', in her efforts to explain union of the faculties. She would like, however, to explain how the soul feels at this time. Union, she says, is self-evident, 'two different things becoming one' We are reminded here of the scriptural use of the figure of marriage which of course the mystics are fond of employing as a metaphor for union with God. The onset of this union causes Teresa to express her gratitude to God in an intimate outpouring. She then refers to some phenomena which accompany the state she is describing. She first refers to elevation of the spirit and union as if they were both the same thing, but immediately goes on to suggest that the elevation or flight of the spirit is more conducive to spiritual growth than union.

The symptoms accompanying union are quite severe! There is the onset of a kind of delightful fainting fit and though outward strength diminishes, that of the soul increases. There is a feeling of great delight and the whole condition lasts about half an hour. One day as Teresa was wondering what the soul does during such an experience, she heard the Lord saying to her, "It dies to itself that it may fix itself more firmly on me". (Ch 18)

We are told in Ch 19 that this state is accompanied by the gift

of tears, tears which assure Teresa that it has not all been a dream. Teresa also says that this blessing or favour of union brings a number of other benefits of which humility is noteworthy.

Another advantage of this state is that the person is ready to share his riches with others, and in fact goodness is radiated by such a person. Teresa tells us that she herself was different in that she had not kept herself free from occasions of sin. For that reason weak souls like herself should take courage even if they should again commit sin. So if you have begun to practice prayer you mustn't vacillate with the thought, 'If I am going to fall again, it will be better for me not to go on practising prayer'. In any event, she says, prayer is the one thing that will bring us to the haven of light. Teresa says that she herself gave up prayer for a year and a half or at least for a year. She now describes the joy of the repentant sinner who has turned for help to the powerful sacraments of the Church not only for healing but to eradicate the evil within it.

Comparing herself to other people who were better than herself but who didn't seem to receive as many blessings as she did, she comes to the conclusion that God is holding on to their reward to give it to them in a 'lump sum'. Her weakness, on the other hand, required more immediate assistance. It was in this connection that Teresa heard the words,

'Serve thou me and don't interfere with this'. This in fact sparked off the series of locutions which she subsequently received. Teresa tells us of some misgivings she had - she felt that she oughtn't to aspire to a close friendship with the Lord. Afterwards she attributed this feeling to the devil. After all, she had thought, she wasn't saying sufficiently well the divine office enjoined on her by the Church. The Dominican, Vincente Barron, helped her out of this predicament. She repeats, 'To lose one's way seems to be the same thing as giving up prayer.'

Teresa warns that even if you receive advanced graces in prayer you shouldn't expose yourself to temptation. The trouble is you think that you now value God's gifts above everything else but, Teresa says, the soul is like an unfledged bird not yet ready to fly.

In Chapter 20 Teresa goes on to distinguish between union and some kind of ecstatic experience. The latter is more beneficial, as she has already hinted in Ch. 18. The soul feels lifted up by the Lord as the sun gathers up the vapours and it hears secret things about God's kingdom. The symptoms are much the same as before, but this time the divine action is more irresistible.

There is hardly any need to add that this is a delightful feeling. Teresa says it's like being 'carried away', and in addition there may be the unusual experience of levitation. One of the effects of God's presence on Teresa was that she realised that He was all-powerful. The other effect is that the detachment involved here extends to the body as well, whereas union effected only a spiritual detachment. This detachment issues in a painful experience which she now describes. The essence of this seems to be a kind of impenetrable solitude. This aloneness finds expression in the words, 'Ubi est Deus tuus'. It is interesting that Teresa recited this verse in the divine office and understood its meaning, although it was only afterwards she realised that in the vernacular it did in fact mean 'where is thy God'. A fairly severe picture of inner and outer distress follows, so that even the bones become disjointed. Teresa tells us that this purifying suffering was the greatest blessing given her by God.

In Ch. 21 Teresa continues to discuss ecstasy. The Lord can work powerfully in one during the time of receiving such a divine communication. "Everything was a means by which I was enabled to know and love God the better, to realise what I owed Him and to be grieved at having been what I once was".

Teresa then concludes this remarkable treatise on prayer by assuring us that the Lord's favours are only a foretaste of the reward we shall receive in the life to come.