

## THE WAY OF PERFECTION.

Teresa of Avila set up her convents of Carmelite sisters with the object of making them centres of prayer. This would achieve a double result - advance the progress of the individual in union with God and serve the Church's apostolate of bringing the saving grace of the gospel to the world.

In her Way of Perfection a book of spiritual instruction for her nuns at the recently founded St Josephs at Avila, Teresa takes her stand on the principle that the sisters should imitate the Lord and not have any possessions of their own.

"What do kings and lords matter to me if I do not covet their riches .Teresa reminds Carmelites of the prescription of Primitive Rule namely that they must pray without ceasing. This for her includes all else especially the penitential aspect of the religious life. As a preparation for embarking on a life of prayer, and in order to build on strong foundations, Teresa proposes to talk about some predisposing qualities. These are threefold: love for one another, detachment or freedom in regard to everything created and a proper perspective on self.

Teresa's first insight in regard to loving others is to observe that you will put up with anything from people if you love them. As we know Teresa was a woman with a great capacity for love and friendship, in the Way of Perfection she is writing from a background of what she considered her own excessive attachments to friends in the initial stages of her spiritual life. She is anxious then that the heart be reserved for the Lord and not allow its love to be diluted by being poured out on friends . Teresa feels that the greatest return we can make to those who love us is to commend them earnestly to God. People who draw close to God are indifferent whether or not their love is returned . 'We are reminded of the prayer of St. Francis; "O master grant that I may never seek, so much to be loved as to love with all my heart" .Genuine love 'for God is the only love that merits the name. The heart that is given to God cannot love or become attached to someone unless that person is sincerely trying to love God. To do so would be a contradiction in terms. But at the same time such a person will go to enormous lengths to foster a little of the love of God in the person to whom it is drawn.

For Teresa genuine fraternal love approximates the love that Christ has for us; it is a love that constantly seeks the others improvement and progress in prayer and union with God. If we can find a friend motivated in this way then we should be very lucky, for a good means to having God is to speak with God's friends, for one always gains very much from this.

To facilitate a life of prayer, Teresa also counsels freedom in regard to every thing created, and a corresponding giving of oneself to God the creator of all. This is the theme of Bk.1 of the Ascent of Mt. Carmel by St. John of the Cross. This need for freedom extends also to relatives and friends. Teresa felt that in her own past life her attachment to her relatives had retarded her progress in prayer. She was however thinking of people outside one's immediate family,

In treating of growing intimacy in prayer, Teresa uses the lovely image of the king in the game of chess surrendering to the queen who approaches him humbly. This together with the love of neighbour and the freedom of spirit mentioned is the spiritual conditioning needed for contemplative prayer. Teresa feels that the Lord draws people to himself and occasionally even gives them touches of contemplative prayer but this is only by way of a beginning. Such an experience, she thinks, is meant to stimulate desire in the soul and prompt it to prepare itself for further progress. The Lord is only too ready to give himself to those who give themselves to him. However to be actually led into the ways of contemplative prayer is a gift from God. There are parallel paths which are no less exalted but perhaps entail more effort. The way of contemplation also carries its own trials which are by no means light. We should not be tempted to think that because it includes keen delight of a spiritual kind, it is thereby an easy way out.

In St. John's gospel Jesus promised to ' give living water to those who thirsted for it. St. Teresa sees in this an apt illustration of what she wants to tell us about prayer, especially in its passive forms . Prayer of this kind is a fire that burns steadily. The living water of the spirit poured out in it even serves to nourish this flame as we observe when water is sprinkled on a coal fire. You cannot achieve this prayer through a process of active meditation. This kind of love creates a thirst for God that is unbearable and that nothing but God can satisfy.

Teresa here alludes to the element of self-seeking that intervenes even in an apparently good desire. 'In desiring this water there is always some fault, since the desire comes from ourselves: if some good comes, it comes from the Lord who helps us. The level of desire may reach such a pitch that the individual ought to reduce it somehow by some alternative considerations. Teresa here is the soul of discretion and she very wisely advises moderation in all things. She is very insistent that the Lord calls all to contemplation, that is to drink of the fountain of living water. To arrive there what is needed is courage and determination. There are many potential hazards to be faced and overcome on the path of prayer.

St. Teresa tells us very clearly what in her opinion mental prayer is: if while praying I thoroughly understand and know that I am speaking with God and I have greater awareness of this than I do of the words I am saying, mental and vocal prayer are joined(Way Ch.22)

Before one begins to pray, Teresa asks us to consider just two things: 'Whom we are going to speak with, and what we ourselves are, so as to know how to speak with Him.'

Before teaching us how to advance towards contemplative prayer St.Teresa sets out to persuade us to say our vocal prayers well, especially to say the Our Father with the utmost attention and reverence.While doing this it is quite possible to have a 'peak experience ' of contemplative prayer.'

At the beginning this kind of contemplation is somewhat undefined. It is like a blind person groping and feeling their way along a corridor during a power-cut.This is the families unknowing aspect of prayer that we find in the Cloud group of writings and that St.John of the Cross deals with in the Ascent - Night. St.Teresa writes, "The soul is now being enkindled in love, and it doesn't understand how it loves. (Ch.23) Life Chs.I4 and 18.)

How should you then set about prayer and for a start let us confine ourselves to vocal prayer,for example to saying the 'Our Father'? All you have to do is to find some time to yourself and a place to yourself and then picture Jesus beside you as a friend.This is something that can be cultivated and that can very soon become a habit. All that is required is that we pause for a while and simply 'look' at the Lord.This kind of beginning can soon develop into a more intimate heart-to -heart exchange withthe Lord.This will be coloured by each one's subjective mood - speaking with the risen lord at good times and dwelling on his passion when things are not going well-<sup>fc</sup> By lovingly dwelling on the thought that we have a "Father in heaven and uniting ourselves with Jesus as we do so, we tend to become deeply recollected.He is nearer to us than we are to ourselves and so we ought to experience a sense of God's nearness and try to stay close to him". Speak with him 'as with a Father, or a brother, or a Lord or as with a spouse; sometimes in one way, at other times in another".(Ch.28)This approach leads the individual to what Teresa calls the 'prayer of recollection' .Here the energies and the senses are no longer scattered and dissipated on the various things around us.

For us to pray that the Lord's will be done in us involves a readiness to carry the cross with Jesus. This was the result of the prayer Jesus made in the Garden - his willingness to face suffering and death. This is what is implied in the giving of ourselves to God. This is moreover the condition for drinking from the fountain of living water, and thus arriving at the term of our spiritual journey. As the individual surrenders completely to the Lord's will there is no more it can do until He himself draws it onwards. "Not content with having made the soul one with himself, He begins to find his delight in it. and reveal his secrets to it".

In the Eucharist Christ gives himself to us, he reveals himself to the eyes of faith. This is a life-giving presence which nourishes and sustains the soul. Faith can allow the individual to be really present with Christ in the Eucharist to the exclusion of all else. This is also a healing contact with the living Lord whereby we really 'touch' him in his sacred humanity. The Lord can let himself be known to us as we contemplate him in the Eucharist, and like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we can recognise him in the breaking of bread.

In the Our Father Jesus asks that we forgive others in order that we ourselves may be forgiven by God. Injury done by others if freely forgiven ties up with a readiness to suffer something for God. Suffering is an integral part of the contemplative life. Very few people are prepared to accept this kind of suffering and so will not enter into the deeper contemplation of which St. Teresa speaks here. Even good people will draw the line here and definitely won't follow Teresa in what she proposes. It seems to ask too much of human nature.

St. Teresa is ever insistent that we need to be on our guard against the wiles of the devil. St. Paul says that the devil can turn into an angel of light in order to deceive people. One pitfall mentioned by Teresa is the possibility that consolation in prayer may proceed from an evil source. However if the individual cultivates humility this need not be something to be unduly feared. It may even have the altogether beneficial effect of causing the person to strive to be better. It would be more serious temptation to believe that one possessed virtues that were in fact non-existent. Genuine humility is not of the stressful kind but rather brings peace and quiet, whereas a humility that would make us doubt God's love is unsettling. Also any kind of self-assurance is dangerous because we are always liable to waver and relapse into sin and infidelity.

We can place ourselves in the Lord's presence freely and unrestrictedly at any time we wish and experience this prayer of recollection. It only requires that we concentrate our minds on his presence and try to exclude extraneous thoughts. At this point the Lord does not intervene directly to influence the mind and heart in its search for him. The soul needs to proceed steadily and frequently try to 'tune into the divine presence so as to immerse itself in him. This can be done by repeating slowly the words of the Our Father, trying to realise with whom we are engaged in speaking. This kind of spiritual activity belongs to the preliminary stages of the life of prayer, but it can be usefully employed also even when more progress has been made.

The kingdom of God is one of truth and justice, of love and peace, as the preface for the feast of Christ the King says. Jesus has taught us in the Our Father to pray that such a kingdom may be realised on earth. As St. Teresa meditates on this fact she is reminded of the deep peace that can be experienced in prayer, as the kingdom of God grows within one. We then reflect something of the peace of the kingdom of heaven which we hope to enjoy more fully in eternal life.

At this point, or as the individual experiences a sense of peace and quiet in the presence of God we have the beginnings of contemplative prayer. The Lord himself here takes the initiative by pouring his love into the heart through the Holy Spirit. There is a vivid feeling of being close to the Lord in love and of this feeling becoming progressively keener. Teresa describes this stage of prayer like this: "A person feels the greatest delight in his body and a great satisfaction in his soul" (Ch.31.) Here there is obviously a deep concentration on God which carries with it a realisation of what is happening - it is an experience of the presence of God. The whole force of the appetitive faculty is drawn to God as if by a magnet. The will is indeed captivated by the love of God. This kind of spiritual experience is strictly a gift from God so it never becomes the soul's property. It isn't something that can be switched on at will but only when the Lord wishes. Such a feeling is also quite compatible with the mind at the same time wandering in different directions. This is not yet a completely unitive type of prayer in which the individual is inactive. In this prayer of quiet there is some work to be done mostly trying to sustain the quiet by gently stirring the embers of love. What is especially needed at this point also is a generous correspondence to God's initiative so as to ensure further spiritual growth. Diligent preparation is required to be the recipients of these divine 'rewards'

There are two things which afford most protection in every danger and these are the love and fear of God. Love of God must become evident in someone`s life ,it cannot remain concealed.

Teresa reflects in these well known words of hers," it will be a great thing at the hour of death to see that we are going to be judged by the one whom we have loved above all things.".(Ch.40).And again she echoes St.John of the Cross: "How sweet will be the death of one who has done penance for all his sins". (ibid)

The virtue of filial fear urges us in turn to avoid at all costs any rupture in our relationship with God.We are of course surrounded by all sorts of temptations dangers and doubts.There is also the possibility of failing often through human weakness but this should not upset us.We can maintain a quiet confidence in the Lord whom we seek to love and serve.