

Teresa and Prayer

St. Teresa's School of Prayer

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Introduction

For St. Teresa prayer is an interpersonal and real relationship where who you are speaking to is all important. 'Mental prayer, in my opinion, is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us' (L8,5)

Personal Encounter

Christian prayer is a mystery and each definition of it clarifies but an aspect of it. This article asks Teresa what she understands by 'prayer.'

The Word of God

Teresa's encounter with God was based on the Word of God. We can read the following in the **Gospel of John**: God is Love (1 Jn 4,7); God has first loved us (1 Jn4, 10); your heavenly Father loves you (Jn16, 27). Teresa places prayer in the context of **friendship**. Faith in God and in the divine life we receive as a gift of Baptism was something Teresa never doubted. She was called by him to live the life of God that she ignored for a time. But once she had tasted the **living water**, she never hesitated again.

Knowing that she was loved, Teresa learned to love and rest with him in **prayer**, in other words, **conversation and listening**.

Teresa's experience of mental prayer is possible for all of us. "If all are not capable of meditating (her case) or engaging in thoughtful reflection, at least we are **all capable of loving** (W5,2). The emphasis is on the person we encounter. Teresa's definition is about God and his creature who seek one another in friendship and encounter one another in love.

For St. Teresa the method of prayer is simple: "Mental prayer means being aware of and knowing what we are saying and to whom we are speaking; who am I to speak with so great a Lord...that is to make **meditation**."

Rest in Friendship of God

To pray is to **place oneself before God** and to **rest in his good friendship**. So, one rests within oneself where every personal contact is realized, in the presence of a

friend. **We gaze on him whose gaze is on us in the center of the soul.**

For Teresa it is important to seek that encounter and that company. To seek is already to pray because God acknowledges and rewards the effort we make to come to him. It is at the moment of **meeting** that the person and God contemplate (look at) one another. To look or to **contemplate expresses an encounter of friendship and love.**

It is through **prayer**, that Teresa compares to a **door or a gate, that God enters the soul**. Prayer is the habitual seeking of God within and thus to see and be seen. The **delight of God** is to live with his creature, to dwell in intimacy with him and to fill the person with himself which is '**infinite joy**.'

It is not easy to arrive at this loving encounter—it requires **determination**—but let us not tire in seeking the presence in us of the **Friend**. Teresa in fact says that we should never cease entering within ourselves to seek the Lord (for Teresa the Lord is always Christ in his humanity). 'It is through the efforts that we make to seek and be in the Lord's company that God strengthens us and makes us more and more capable of resting in his presence.'

Possible Dangers on the Journey

Achieving a work of the Spirit is not possible without meeting the demon. Here are the dangers that we encounter as pointed out by Teresa:

1/Narcissism is a common danger. Instead of talking with God we talk with ourselves. **2/Pride** is another danger, we believe we are one of the 'elect' distinct from ordinary people. **3/ 'Not walking in the truth'**; a certain tendency of people of prayer is that they must step aside from daily life: 'No sisters, the **Lord wants works**, He wishes, for example, that if you see a sick person to whom you can bring relief you should be ready to set aside your devotion and exercise compassion.'

Prayer Techniques

Teresa criticizes the belief that through techniques we can experience God. She says that no human techniques can capture God. We experience him by **grace**. Teresa preferred that water given by him to all we could draw from our own well. She was open to all that is good and 'everything helps.' There was a **yogic technique** used at that time to control the mind and slow the thinking. This

technique was supposed to introduce one into a profound experience of God. She turned from it. She also disapproved of techniques of **emptying the mind**. But in the Way of Perfection she suggests a discipline to focus the attention, relax and integrate the whole person.

Conclusion

Teresa was a contemplative mystic overflowing with the mystery of God and capable of the prayer of deep recollection and silence.