

The Shepherd's Call: Teresa And The Prayer of Recollection

By: Eugene McCarthy, OCD

To the Living Water'



‘Wandering mind’, ‘inability to meditate’, ‘cannot reason with the mind’... Does this all sound familiar? Certainly it was for Teresa of Avila, as we can see when she tells us, in *The Way of Perfection*, of her own efforts to pray. She also describes her distress in coping with distractions like living with a madman (L 30:16; W 31:8)! In fact, she admits that until the Lord taught her the prayer of recollection, she did not know what it was to get satisfaction or comfort out of prayer. For this reason, she is anxious to pass on her insights to others: she says it is a way of prayer that, once the Lord has granted it, we would not exchange for any treasure.

Teresa’s teaching on the prayer of recollection is one of the most original and helpful contributions she makes to the whole journey of prayer: ‘for many years I endured this trial,’ she says, ‘of being unable to concentrate on one subject, and a very sore trial it is’ (W 26:2). She had no doubt about the importance and necessity of prayer. For her, it is not just one more thing with an outlandish name: it is a ‘royal road’ (W 21:1.5) along which we are all called to travel, a sure and safe way that will ultimately lead to the fountain of living water. But there are difficulties and hazards along the way and Teresa herself seems to have encountered most of them. Some, she acknowledges, were of her own making; others simply through lack of either experience or knowledge. Now, as she looks back, she wants to offer whatever help and guidance she can to others.

The Way of Perfection is Teresa’s most accessible book. Written for her own sisters in the newly founded convent of St Joseph’s, it has an easy and relaxed style, that of a mother talking lovingly and affectionately to her daughters. Despite her protests that she does not know where to begin or what she is going to say, the book falls easily into four clearly defined divisions. The first few chapters speak about the importance and value of prayer; the second and third sections discuss the nature of prayer and the foundations on which it is based; the final and longest section is built around her famous commentary on the Our Father. It is in these chapters, specifically 26-29, that she speaks about the prayer of recollection.

Prayer of Awareness

Teresa’s teaching on the prayer of recollection must be linked to her understanding of prayer as she describes it a few chapters earlier: ‘mental prayer,’ she states quite

simply, 'has nothing to do with keeping the lips closed' (W 22:1). What is much more important is the attitude and the awareness we bring to it. Prayer, for her, involves most of all having 'a clear realization and full consciousness' (W 22:1) of what we are doing—an attention and awareness which, in her opinion, are much more important than the words we use. When you speak to God, she says, it is only right that you should think of who it is you are addressing, and what you are saying. And she assures her readers that, if they give due attention to these two points, they will be engaging in true prayer for a very long time. The whole dynamic of Teresian prayer is toward simplicity and a personal relationship with God—establishing an open and receptive heart, focused and attentive to his presence: 'do not, I beg you,' she writes, 'address God while you are thinking of other things' (W 22:8). And it is this 'thinking of other things' that ultimately opens the way for her to speak about the prayer of recollection.

Prayer of Companionship

The prayer of recollection can rightly be called the 'prayer of companionship'. Indeed, the first thing Teresa asks is that we seek the companionship of Jesus (cf. W 26:1; 29:4). Against the backdrop of the Our Father, she admits that the best remedy she herself found for distractions in prayer was to fix her mind on the person of Christ, present and close to her. This relationship with Christ is an essential quality of Teresian prayer and is beautifully captured in her reassurance: 'The Master is never so far away that the disciple needs to raise his voice in order to be heard' (W 24:5). 'Imagine,' she says, 'that this Lord Himself is at your side and see how lovingly and how humbly He is teaching you' (W 26:1). Practical as ever, Teresa suggests using whatever supports are helpful: a good book, 'simply as an aid to recollection' (W 26:10); or an image or a picture, 'not to wear round your neck and never look at, but to use regularly whenever you talk to Him' (W 26:9).

Here, Teresa is reiterating the famous description of prayer which she gives in chapter 8 of her *Life*: prayer as friendship with Christ, keeping him company, talking to him often, in a heart-to-heart conversation of love. 'If you become accustomed to having Him at your side, and if He sees that you love Him to be there . . . you will never be able, as we put it, to send Him away, nor will He ever fail you' (W 26:1). And she adds, persuasively, 'Do you think it is a small thing to have such a Friend as that beside you?'

Personal Response

It is important to remember that, for Teresa, the prayer of recollection is something that is within our reach, and not something mystical or 'supernatural': it 'depends upon our volition, and . . . by God's favor, we can enter it of our own accord' (W 29:4). This is a prayer of faith, which can be achieved by our own efforts and faithfulness to grace. It springs from a faith-awareness of God's abiding presence in the soul and the knowledge that we already share his life through grace and the gift of the Spirit.

The whole dynamic of Teresian prayer is toward simplicity and a personal relationship with God—establishing an open and receptive heart, focused and attentive to his presence: 'do not, I beg you,' she writes, 'address God while you are thinking of other things'

And yet, for Teresa, there is an important similarity and an overlapping of experience. In fact, one of the main reasons she is so enthusiastic about the prayer of recollection is because of its openness to contemplation. In chapter 25 of *The Way of Perfection* she gives an almost poetical description of 'perfect contemplation': the soul is drawn 'without any sound of words' to the side of the Divine Master; it is 'enkindled in love' without knowing how and 'knows that it is rejoicing in the object of its love', again without knowing how. 'It is a gift of the Lord of earth and Heaven, Who gives it like the God He is' (W 25:2).

Despite the many extraordinary favors Teresa herself received, she is adamant that the essence of contemplative prayer is not to be found in them. The test—the only test—is the awakening of a true and genuine love for God, a deepening of friendship and intimacy with him, a detachment from all that hinders the soul's response; and all of this goes hand in hand with an unselfish generosity in the service of love. These are the qualities of contemplative prayer, gifts received sometimes in joy, more often in pain and dereliction of spirit: God molding and shaping the soul in the image and likeness of Christ.

*The movement
toward contemplative
prayer is often so
subtle and
imperceptible that
the soul itself is
hardly aware of it.*

Prayer of Presence

Teresa sees these very qualities coming into play in the prayer of recollection. This is why it can also be called a 'prayer of presence', an awareness in faith that God is within, close and personal; a prayer of friendship, open to and aware of the reality of this presence. It is a prayer of love, silence and listening, not a prayer of many words: 'the important thing is not to think much, but to love much' (IC4,I,7). The whole direction of the prayer of recollection is toward simplicity and attentiveness. There is nothing small or self-centered about it. It is a prayer that opens the heart in generosity of service, awakening compassion and love for others.

The movement toward contemplative prayer is often so subtle and imperceptible that the soul itself is hardly aware of it. 'These people,' Teresa says, who have heard the Shepherd's call, 'are sometimes in the castle before they have begun to think about God at all' (IC 4,3,3). Teresa also uses the image of the sea voyage when, with 'a little good wind' (W 28:5), the journey can be made much more quickly and directly than by land: a way, she suggests, by which the soul can travel a long way in a short time. She makes the same point with her favorite image of water, drawn from a well with 'great labor' (L II:7) or rising spring-like from within, flooding the soul with grace. 'It is called recollection,' Teresa says, 'because the soul collects together all the faculties and enters within itself to be with its God' (W 28:4), close to the fountain of living water. The prayer of recollection is the link, the bridge, that opens the heart to receive the greater and more purifying graces of contemplative prayer. In this prayer, the 'Divine Master comes more speedily to teach [the soul], and to grant it the Prayer of Quiet' (W 28:4). The heart is open and listening, ready for the Shepherd's call, however gently and quietly it is perceived.

Mount Carmel, Oct-Dec., 2005.

CARMEL CLARION

May - June 2006 Volume XXII No. 3

