

The Beginnings of Contemplative Prayer

Chapter 1

I am a Daughter of the Church
Blessed Fr. Marie-Eugene, ocd

This prayer is a little spark of true love for the Lord which He begins to enkindle in the soul. Life

At the beginning of the fourth Mansions, Saint Teresa writes:

Before I begin to speak of the fourth, Mansions, it is most necessary that I do what I have already done---namely commend myself to the Holy Spirit, and I beg Him from here on to speak for me...
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...**God's intervention** in the spiritual life, especially in the life of prayer, is a delicate and complex problem... To be able to solve ... the problems raised by the intervention of God, Teresa would like to have much learning.

... It would be useful to have some learning ... To explain what is meant by general or particular help...

How are we to distinguish **special help** which raises prayer to a supernatural level from **general help** which assists human activity in ordinary prayer? ... Here is the criterion Saint Teresa stresses... Speaking of the **first kind of prayer** she experienced that seemed to her supernatural, she writes:

... One which despite all our efforts, cannot be acquired by industry or diligence, though we can certainly prepare for it, and it must be a great help if we do. Spiritual Relations

And again:

... We can acquire but little if the Lord is not pleased to bestow it. Life

... What are the first forms of God's supernatural action in the soul? ... The response is two-fold: the **logical** order involving the normal development of the life of grace in the soul; and the **chronological** order which is the **order God follows**.

We will focus on the **logical order** but the **chronological order** merits our attention. Saint Teresa notes in this regard:

God is sometimes pleased to show great favor to persons who are in an evil state...though not in mortal sin ... and yet the Lord will allow them to see a vision... to draw them back to Himself. Way

The **graces** enumerated by the Saint--visions, interior words...raptures-- are **not** properly speaking contemplative graces ...but they are precious graces. Usually they bring about a **conversion**... They **reveal** the supernatural world as a living reality ... They **dilate the soul**, create in it great desires ... that nothing can now satisfy, short of the divine life ... glimpsed for an instant.

... Such graces ordinarily bear **lights** for the **future**. It would be imprudent for the soul to interpret them on its own. The **experienced eye** will see in them ... the **form of perfection** and the **way** God desires for the soul He has captivated. Thus they are of great **benefit** to the one entering upon the way of prayer. One needs to cultivate the memory of them... And thank God for His graces.... These first favors are painful and sweet wounds...

...According to Saint Teresa **profound mystical grace is exceptional**.

Ordinarily, divine Mercy submits to the laws of a **progressive conquest** of the soul; follows the **logical order**. Saint Teresa notes

in a "Relation" to Father Alvarez, that it was that way with her:

The first kind of prayer I experienced which seems supernatural ... is an interior recollection of the soul. Relations

This **passive recollection** is the first stage of the divine invading and **proceeds the prayer of quiet...** In the Interior Castle she writes:

The effects of this kind of prayer are numerous...First of all I will say something ... about another kind of prayer, which almost invariably begins before this one. IV Mansions

The first beginnings of contemplative prayer according to Saint Teresa are **passive recollection** and the **prayer of quiet** or **divine consolations...** Belonging to the **same period of spiritual life**, we must place the **prayer of contemplative aridity or of faith**, of which John of the Cross speaks at length in the Ascent of Mount Carmel.

A. Supernatural recollection

It is not until the Interior Castle and the Relation to Father Alvarez written at about the same time that Saint Teresa distinguishes it clearly from the prayer of quiet. She writes:

It does not involve remaining in the dark, or closing the eyes, nor does it depend on anything exterior. A person involuntarily closes his eyes and desires solitude ... The senses and all exterior things seem to gradually lose their hold on him, while the soul, on the other hand regains its control.

It is sometimes said that the soul enters within itself and sometimes that it rises above itself; ...Let's suppose that these

senses and faculties (the inhabitants of this castle, which is the figure that I have taken to explain my meaning) have gone out of the castle, and, for days and years, have been consorting with strangers, to whom all the good things in the castle are abhorrent. Then, realizing how much they have lost, they come back to it, though they do not actually enter it, because the habits they have formed are hard to conquer. But they are no longer traitors and they now walk about in the vicinity of the castle. The great King, who dwells in the Mansion within the castle perceives their good will, and in His great mercy desires to bring them back to Him. So, like a good Shepherd, with a call so gentle that they can hardly recognize it, He teaches them to know His voice and not to go away and get lost but to return to their Mansion; and so powerful is His Shepherd's call that they give up things outside the castle which had led them astray, and once again enter it. I don't think I have ever explained this before as clearly as here.

The Saint wants to stress that **supernatural** recollection is something quite distinct from **active** recollection described in the Way of Perfection. Active recollection is an **excellent method** which **disciplines** the faculties, **facilitates** prayer, and **prepares** one for **perfect contemplation**. It is "**in our power**" and anyone who wants to arrive at it must not grow discouraged. Passive recollection on the other hand is a pure **gift** from God, not attainable through our own efforts. Saint Teresa writes:

It is a great favor if God grants us this favor (recollection). Do not suppose that the understanding can reach Him by trying to think of Him as within the soul, or the imagination, by picturing Him there. This is a good habit and an

excellent kind of meditation for it is founded upon a truth-- namely that God is within us. But this isn't the prayer I have in mind, for anyone (with the help of the Lord) can practice it for himself. What I am describing is quite different. These people are sometimes in the castle before they have even begun to think of God at all. I cannot say where they entered it or how they heard their Shepherd's call: it was certainly not with their ears, for outwardly such a call is not audible. They become aware that they are gradually retiring within themselves; anyone who experiences this will discover what I mean: I cannot explain it better. IV Mansions

This supernatural recollection is certainly ... a sign of His presence. The Master does not yet manifest Himself; ... The soul feels calmed, enveloped by some unknown power in a mantle of recollection.... It's powers have become docile... Each one has resumed the place assigned to it by the divine order in the soul.... And is filled with delight There are degrees in supernatural recollection. At times it seems to be produced by a call so delicate that it is almost imperceptible; at other times it declares itself by a strong rapture ... leaving the soul's faculties powerless... It may be that this passive recollection won't be followed by any other manifestation; that it was given to calm interior agitation or to make active prayer more peaceful. More often it is a prelude to greater favors... Supernatural recollection heralds and prepares the way for divine visits. Saint Teresa writes:

His call to those who receive this prayer is a special one and aims at making them intent upon interior things. IV Mansions

And again:

A person closes his eyes and desires solitude; and, without the display of human skill there seems gradually to be built for him a temple in which he can practice the prayer already described.

This supernatural peace and recollection that God has sent as a messenger before Him remains in the soul after each one of His passings as the most authentic and most characteristic **sign** of His action. Our God is a God of peace.

B. Prayer of quiet or of divine taste

Having announced Himself by the prayer of passive recollection, God "**begins to give us His Kingdom**" in the prayer of quiet. (Way) ... Saint Teresa has left us in her writings many descriptions of this prayer... One of the earliest descriptions Teresa gives us in the Way of Perfection:

Now, daughters, I still want to describe this Prayer of Quiet to you... It is in this kind of prayer... that the Lord ... begins to show us that He is hearing our petition: He begins to give us His Kingdom on earth so that we may truly praise Him... This is a supernatural state... we cannot reach it by ourselves... the soul enters into peace ... the Lord gives it peace through His presence, as He did to that just man Simeon... all the faculties are stilled. The soul ... realizes it is now very close to its God, and that, if it were a little bit closer, it would become one with Him through union. This is not because it sees Him either with its bodily or spiritual eyes ... Yet it sees that it is in the Kingdom (or at least is near to the King who will give it the Kingdom), and it feels such a reverence that it dares to ask nothing ... The body experiences the greatest delight and the soul is conscious of a deep satisfaction. So glad is it merely to find

itself near the fountain that, even before it has begun to drink, it has had its fill. There is nothing left for it to desire. The faculties are stilled and have no wish to move for any movement they make appears to hinder the soul from loving God. They are not completely lost, however, since two of them being free, they can realize in whose presence they are. It is the will that is in captivity now. Way

In the book of her Life, Teresa writes on the same subject:

The powers are not lost nor do they sleep. The will alone is occupied, in such a way that, without knowing how, it becomes captive. It allows itself to be imprisoned by God. Life

In these two descriptions it is clearly shown that in the prayer of quiet, **God's action** is upon the **will**. But then a **confusion** is possible between **passive** recollection and the **prayer of quiet**; they do not seem to be distinct. In the Interior Castle, with **riper experience**, Saint Teresa gives a simpler description... which explains the **nature** of the prayer of quiet, its **origins** and its **effects**. Saint Teresa compares **two basins**, one receives water brought from a distance by an **aqueduct**; but she continues:

To the other fountain the water comes direct from its source, which is God, ... its coming is accompanied by the greatest peace and quietness and sweetness within ourselves ... I do not think that this happiness has its source in the heart at all. It arises in a much more interior part ... I think this must be the center of the soul... Apparently this heavenly water begins to flow from this source of which I am speaking--- that is from our very depths-- it spreads ineffable blessings ...

The fragrance it experiences we might say, is as if in those interior depths there were a brazier on which were cast sweet perfumes; the light cannot be seen nor the place where it dwells, the fragrant smoke and the heat penetrate the entire soul, and very often the effects tend to the body. Observe and understand me here, there is no heat felt, nor is any fragrance perceived: it is a more delicate thing than that...IV Mansions

While the will is held sweetly captive by the divine delights it is savoring, what is the state of the other powers? Saint Teresa shows us that this can vary according to circumstances. At times they... share the sweet banquet of the will. They try to ... deepen the quietude of the will by their own efforts but they only succeed in agitating ... it. They are throwing logs on a spark at the risk of putting it out:

The other two faculties, the intellect and the memory help the will so that it may become more and more capable of enjoying so great a blessing, though ... Even when the will is in union, they hinder it.... They are then like doves not pleased with the food given them....and go in search of food elsewhere, but are so unsuccessful they return...Just so these faculties come and go to see if the will will give them a part of what they are enjoying. Life

... By their **restlessness**, these powers have made themselves incapable of tasting the divine delights. At other times the intellect has no part in the banquet of the soul; and is **disturbed**:

It may happen that the soul is enjoying the highest degree of quiet, and it has soared so far aloft that what is happening seems not to be going on in its own house

at all; it really seems to be a guest in somebody else's house, looking for other lodgings, since its own lodgings no longer satisfy it and it cannot remain there for long together. Way

Thus the **fourth Mansions**, characterized by **quietude**, are paradoxically mansions of much **restlessness**. Again it may happen that all the faculties are plunged in these **waves of living water** and are **inebriated** by them. The soul is so **filled** with the **water of grace** writes Saint Teresa that:

It is unable to go forward....yet neither can it turn back... It is like a person holding the candle ... who is soon to die a death he longs for; and in that agony it is rejoicing with great joy...

The faculties retain only the power of occupying themselves wholly with God; not one of them ... ventures to stir ... many words are spoken, during this state, in praise of God... But the faculties have no orderly form. The intellect counts for nothing here; the soul would like to shout praises aloud, for it is in such a state that it cannot contain itself-- a state of delectable disquiet. Already the flowers are opening, see they are beginning to send out their fragrance. Life

The prayer just described is the **third degree of prayer**, or the watering of the garden by **irrigation**, which Saint Teresa clearly distinguishes in the book of her Life from the prayer of quiet as the **water of grace flows more abundantly** and the **virtues are stronger**.

We find though that Saint Teresa has changed her opinion in the "Relation" to Father Alvarez and in the Interior Castle. She writes in the "Relation": This prayer is called a **sleep of the faculties**; the faculties (of the soul- will, memory and intellect) are **not** so completely absorbed or suspended

that it can be called a **rapture**. Though **not complete union**, the soul is often aware that the will alone is in union.

Contrary to what she stated in the book of her Life, she now attaches this **prayer of inebriation** to the simple **prayer of quiet** because the faculties or powers although inebriated with grace, are **not united to God**. The sensible effects are more intense, the efficacy of grace greater than in the prayer of quiet, but the mode of God's action is the same: the **will alone is truly captivated**.

Saint Teresa observes in the Interior Castle, that her explanation differs from what she said elsewhere:

In this state the faculties are not, I think, in union, but they become absorbed and amazed as they consider what is happening to them.

It may be that in writing of these interior things I am contradicting what I have said elsewhere. This is not surprising for almost fifteen years have passed since then, and perhaps the Lord has now given me a clearer realization of these matters than I had at first.

Such is the prayer of quiet that sweetly holds captive the will, "a little **spark of true love** for the Lord which He begins to enkindle in the soul," a "**pledge** that He is already choosing it for great things if it will prepare itself to receive them." Life

C. Contemplative dryness or prayer of faith

The name suggests a prayer apparently quite different from the prayer of quiet; yet it is the name applicable to the first forms of contemplation described by Saint John of the Cross in the Ascent of Mount Carmel and in the Dark Night of the Soul.... There is a description in almost the same terms as

those used by Saint Teresa of the signs indicating that a soul should pass from discursive meditation to the state of contemplation. These psychological signs are well-known...

For Saint John of the Cross, contemplation is a loving knowledge.. It consisted essentially in receding light from the Sun that is God, constantly warming souls with His love.

This divine light ... normally produces the effect of darkness in powers not adapted to receive it. Dark night is characteristic of contemplation. It is experienced in the powerlessness, the aridity, the distaste of the faculties ...unable to engage in operations which they previously found contentment and profit.

There is a certain peace however in this desolation. The soul enjoys being alone... In quiet and repose, without any activity of the powers, fixed in a loving knowledge. So subtle and delicate ... That the soul has no awareness of it, missing keenly ...sensible satisfactions of which it is now deprived. These first forms of contemplation are marked by dryness, powerlessness and desolation.

A little later the soul is then like one to whom water has been brought, says the Saint; then

It drinks peacefully without labor... No longer forced to draw water ...through meditation... So that as soon as the soul comes before God, it makes an act of knowledge, confused, loving, passive and tranquil... It drinks of wisdom and love and delight. Ascent

Farther on the Saint describes a state in which the soul remains as it were in a great forgetfulness....

The cause of this forgetfulness is the purity and simplicity of this knowledge

which simplifies, purifies and cleanses it from all its apprehensions... and leaves it in a state of forgetfulness and without consciousness of time. This prayer seems seems to the soul extremely brief...the soul has been tied in pure intelligence, which belongs not to time. Ascent

However they may differ, these first degrees of contemplative prayer show us an authentically supernatural action of God, exercised over the powers of the soul. A delightful flood of love or of light springs from a deep source and flows into the will or the intellect or sometimes both.

... The faculties drink from the springs of living water, yet God doesn't give Himself in immediate contact with the soul directly. There may be an inebriation of the faculties to the point of mystical sleep, but not complete union, Saint Teresa would say.

... The faculties relive this living water only intermittently. Contemplation is imperfect. These **first beginnings of supernatural prayer** are truly a **preparation for the prayer of perfect contemplation.** Do they not **sustain the faculties, make them more pliable, spiritualize them, purify them?**

This **initial contemplation** is aiming towards and is the **pledge of union**; what God has begun, He will bring to completion if the soul is **faithful.**

When the soul has emerged from the beginner's state but has not yet arrived at perfect union, these **first forms of supernatural prayer, quietude and contemplative dryness** will be its **habitual climate.** This will be the **base** from which God will elevate it higher and to which it will promptly return; for until the **state of union is reached,** these seizures of the soul you God can be but transient. Amen