

The Way of Perfection

Part 3: Diversity of Paths w/in a Contemplative Community

Chapters 16 Virtues & Progress in Prayer

(summary)

Saint Teresa of Avila

Chapter 16 The difference that must lie between the perfection of the life of contemplatives and that of those who are simply content with the practice of mental prayer. How it is possible that God may at times raise a distracted soul to perfect contemplation and the reason for His doing so. This chapter and the following one are very noteworthy.

Don't think that I have said all I have to say, for I am just **setting up the game**, as they say! You asked me to mention something about the **foundation for prayer**. Though God did not lead me by this foundation, for I still don't have these virtues (charity, humility, detachment), I know of no other.

I now realize that if you don't know how to **set up the pieces** for a **game of chess**, you won't play well. If he doesn't know how to **check** his opponent's king, he won't know how to **checkmate** it either.

You will reprimand me for speaking about a game we do not have in this house, nor should we have it. Here you see the kind of Mother God has given you ...; though they say that the game is sometimes permissible ... How permissible this kind of game will be for us; and how quickly if we play it often, we will **checkmate** this **divine King**, who will not be able to escape, nor will He want to.

2. The **queen** is the piece that can carry on the best **battle** in this game, and all the other pieces help. There is **no queen** like **humility** for making the **King surrender**. **Humility drew the King from heaven to the womb of the Virgin**, and with it, we will draw Him to our **souls** ... The one who has more humility will be the one to possess Him more ... I cannot understand how there could be **humility without love or love without humility; nor are these two virtues possible without detachment from all creatures**.

3. You may wonder why I am speaking to you about **virtues** when you have books to teach you about them and you say you only want to hear about **contemplation**. Had you asked about **meditation** ... I could have counseled all to practice it even without the virtues because it is the **basis** for **acquiring all the virtues**... a matter of life and death for all Christians. No one should set it aside if God has awakened him to so great a good ...

4. Contemplation is something else daughters. We all make this **mistake**. If a person spends time reflecting on his sins daily ... they right away say he is a **contemplative soul** and so want him to at once possess the **virtues** a very contemplative soul is obliged to have; and the person himself wants this, but is mistaken. In the beginning, he didn't know how to **set up the game**. He thought it was enough to know the **pieces to checkmate the King**. That is impossible! **This King only gives Himself to those who entirely give themselves to Him**.

5. Therefore, daughters, if you want to hear about the **way that leads to contemplation**, you will have to bear with me as I enlarge on some seemingly irrelevant matters that in reality are so important. If you don't want to hear about them or put them into practice, stay with your **mental prayer** your whole life, for I assure you and all who aim for true **contemplation** ... that **you will not reach it**.

6. I now want to **explain mental prayer** ... I fear that mental prayer also involves much labor if the **virtues** are not obtained but not in as high a degree as in contemplation. The **King of glory** will not **unite** with your **soul** if we do not make the effort to **gain the great virtues** ... There are times when God will want to **grant a great favor** to someone in a **bad state** to draw them out of the devil's hands.

7. O my Lord, how often do we make You fight the devil in **hand to hand combat!** ... What would it be like, daughters, to see him, with his darkness, next to the Sun ... What shame we Christians ought to have to make Him wrestle arm to arm ... with so foul a beast ... **All that is suffered with love is healed again!** ... no other **medicine** is necessary ... O my God, grant that I might put **medicine** like this in all that causes me **pain and trial!** How eagerly I would suffer these trials if I could be sure to **be healed** with so **soothing a balm!**

8. To return to what I was saying, God thinks He can **win these souls** by these means because He sees they are completely **lost** ... Though they are in a **bad state** and **lacking in virtue**, He gives them **spiritual delight, consolation** and **tenderness** that stir **desires**. Sometimes He even places them in **contemplation**, though rarely and only for a short while. He does this to see if the **favor** will cause them to want to prepare themselves to enjoy Him often. It is a **great evil** though if they do not prepare themselves and instead attach themselves to an earthly thing.

9. I hold that there are many to whom God gives this **test** but **few** who prepare themselves for the **favor of contemplation**. It is certain though that those who do not fail will never cease to receive until a **very high degree** is reached. When we do not give ourselves to Him with the same **determination** with which He gives Himself to us ... He leaves us in **mental prayer** and visits us from time to time like **servants** in His vineyard. But the others are His **avored children**. He keeps them by His side ... He seats them at His table and shares His food with them ...

10. ... What would it matter, when you are in God's arms, if the whole world blamed you! He has the power to free you from everything ... His love for those who love Him is not so small ... Consider that He can do all things and we can do nothing He doesn't enable us to do ... What we do for Him amounts to almost nothing, just a little **determination** ... and from that nothing His Majesty desires us to merit all, let's not be foolish.

11. O Lord, how true that all harm comes to us from not keeping our eyes fixed on You; if we would look at nothing but the **way**, we would soon arrive. We meet with many **falls** and **obstacles** and lose the way because we don't keep our eyes ... on the **true way**. It seems so new to us ... if anyone tells you not to worry about your honor, he seems unchristian And say: "We're not saints."

12. God **deliver us**, Sisters, when we do something **imperfect**, from saying: "**We're not angels, we're not saints.**" Though we're not, **it is good to think that if we try we can become saints with God's help**. Have no fear that He will fail if we don't fail. Since we have come here for no other reason, let us

get busy ... The **presumption** I would like to see present in this house, is to have a **holy daring** which makes **humility** grow. God helps the **strong** and shows **no partiality**.

13. I have digressed, I want to return to what I was saying, that is explaining the **nature of mental prayer and of contemplation** ... May the Lord help me. amen