

Treasures of Carmelite Spirituality

by Gil Domada, Croire

Introduction:

My life of prayer helped me to clarify my desires and to go to a deeper level in a desire for God, for life-- a more radical commitment --and that is enormously inspiring.

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Part 1 Essential Need

I began to practice silent prayer towards the end of my university studies. When I began working as a young professional, I came to realize after a few months of practice, that silent prayer was not just a pastime for me, but had actually become an **essential need** in my life. I like to use the image of silent prayer being the **cornerstone of my life**. It wasn't the moments filled with great joy during prayer that stuck me, but rather when I would go through the difficult moments with Christ, to live those moments with Him in faith.

It was this experience that allowed me to speak to people about a spiritual life of prayer in a way that was now **backed-up by experience**.

St. Teresa used this word, "**experience**," in the sixteenth century. This is amazing. A

woman who speaks, who writes in the first person.

At the time, this was quite daring at the time. She speaks of her experience; she speaks with authority in a time that was almost the Middle Ages. This type of discourse was reserved for the wise, the doctors, the theologians and philosophers. But, Teresa insisted on her experience, on what she had learned from other's experience and was willing to hold it up for theological review.

Today, people are attentive to giving credit to things rather than to what people say. Empty talk.

Part 2 A Relationship

The practice of silent prayer, comes from the Spanish word, *oracion*. Silent prayer is a way of prayer that is **personal**, distinguishing it from liturgical prayer. It is lived out in a climate of **silence**. It is something that is **intimate** and **personal** with the Lord.

There is something about its daily practice, not about something exceptional. It is a prayer that **nourishes** our daily lives.

We can speak of silent prayer referring to St. Teresa of Avila. She describes this prayer in simple terms, a relationship, something personal. She speaks of it as a **friendship** where there is an intimate exchange with Christ, and so it evolves because it is a relationship. There is a story.

I like to think of silent prayer as the **story of a friendship** with someone special that is not visible with our bodily eyes, except if you have visions which I don't have, but is someone that we look for throughout our entire lives. Though God doesn't change, I do and so the story evolves with the seasons

of life that can be variable, fill us with joy or surprises or throw us into an absence or sadness.

It is not about how I feel, which can be important, and these elements are interesting concerning silent prayer, but are **not** defining elements.

We can turn to mindfulness meditation that can have value, its own importance ... but is not in the same league with silent prayer that has a **primary relational dimension**.

Part 3 Mission

The practice of prayer implies not only something concrete, but it also implies work. Today with the notion of personal development, we are looking for a form of spiritual life that flows, allows for development and a continuity of pleasure, not bad in itself, but there are in a life of prayer disagreeable moments, boring moments and/or feelings of lassitude.

In Carmel, prayer is a place of joy but also of effort, of work and of **mission**. I think in our religious life, there is fundamentally a **mission to practice two hours of prayer daily**, one in the morning and one at night as do our Carmelite Sisters. We mostly experience these hours together in community in the chapel. Interested souls may of course come and pray with us. It is a way of practicing.

It isn't because I'm tired today that I'm going to stay in bed. It wouldn't be right because my presence is expected. It is my **mission in the Church** to pray, not only because it does me good, but because God is calling me to **fill this place in the Church**.

My place is to **intercede**. I bring to prayer -- - which always escapes me—this or that situation of hope, difficulties, suffering and/or joys.

There is an aspect of practicing prayer that implies a dimension of being. I don't know what God is doing or what's happening, but I have something to do. I have to engage myself almost physically, bodily in this work. I really like that expression to practice prayer because it implies not only the head or the intellect but the physical.

Part 4 External Elements

What seems important to me above all else are the essential elements of prayer. Initially, the external elements -- the **time** given to prayer. But what is also really important is the **constancy**, choosing a **timeframe** that seems the most realistic, one I can stick with. It is easy after a week of retreat when all seems euphoric to make an unrealistic commitment. But, it is important to consider what is workable realistically in my life even if I miss a day now and then. We can start out realistically with ten or fifteen minutes a day, gradually increasing that time to twenty minutes, but not more

One of the suggestions that Saint Teresa gives when beginning a life of prayer is that of '**determination**.' In other words, strive to maintain these ten minutes every day and not to go off the rails by trying to impose a half hour on yourself that after a few months will fall by the wayside because it is too hard to maintain.

The **essential element** in a life of prayer is not what I am doing but rather what the

Holy Spirit does in me. This goes beyond our comprehension.

To believe that even if my prayer life is lacking or beyond my limit, I do have my freedom in spite of everything, the important thing is to have **trust** in what the Holy Spirit is doing in me.

Part 5 Place & Personal Ritual

I seek silence and an interior stability for prayer, perhaps in my room, or a church or in nature where I can have quality in my presence to both myself and to God which is important.

In the beginning, it's important to establish a **personal ritual in prayer**. I can start by making a very slow **sign of the Cross** aware of what I am doing. Next, I can **light a candle** followed by what Saint Teresa calls in her own language '**consideration.**' In other words, it is important to have an awareness of being present to myself and to the other.

Presence to yourself means it is important to know yourself, who you are, not just intellectually but corporally as well. That maybe one of the advantages of mindful meditation. I pray with the whole man. First of all my physical presence, not just stopping at the intellect.

To be present for what I am **preparing** to experience, I need a **break to center myself**. Before reuniting with the Lord I need a break or everything will be taking place in the **control tower**, but it will only be thoughts about God which isn't bad, but it isn't quite prayer. **Prayer takes place, first of all, at the level of a relationship.**

The **posture** is important. We need to pay attention to it. Ask yourself what will help you pray? Being Seated? Standing? Half kneeling-half standing? It isn't the same for all people. It is especially important to pay attention to the position of your back for breathing in and out; then the respiration. Strive to have a long and slow respiration.

In the orthodox tradition, there is the prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer. We don't necessarily have to go looking in the Orient. No, we can use the simple prayer, the Jesus prayer. We can engage a simple Biblical prayer said in time with our breath such as: "Lord Jesus, living Son of God," said on inspiration; "Have pity on me, a sinner," said on expiration; an example taken from the Russian Pilgrim.

The **first** work on ourselves is the **break**. Important to consider at the beginning of the prayer to consider who I am bringing into the meeting. The **second** element is the presence to oneself and the presence to God. As Teresa stresses the importance of considering to whom I am speaking.

To continually remind myself in a way continually **surprised** and new that God is interested in me and wants to spend time with me. Measure the distance that can exist between God and me.

In a sense, there is a text that really touched Saint Teresa, that is the text talking about the Samaritan. The woman was surprised that a Jew would come to towards her to speak to her.

When I run a school of prayer where we train participants in the practice of silent prayer. We could each day start the time of

prayer with this surprise: “**What, You, Lord, You have so many things to run in the Church and elsewhere and you find time to spend a moment with me!** This is an **act of faith** we can do.

Measure the freshness of the surprise at the Creator who is interested in His creation. God is interested in me? We can put ourselves in a position to receive a word to show that this relationship is important to us.

Part 6 What to Say to the Lord?

The **third** thing that St. Teresa says: “**What am I to say to the Lord?**” or the body of the exchange. This is the **heart of prayer** based on the time available can be more or less long, among the ingredients that can nourish the relationship are Biblical texts or other spiritual texts. I could receive a word from the tradition or from the Lord that tells me who He is and which helps me understand who I am talking to. I can imagine who God is, but bottom line, it is up to me to know Him as He was revealed to me unrelated to my imagination. I can listen for a word received and perhaps awaken a desire, something new that will touch something in me that is happy or painful.

The dialogue works by listening to the word received, it isn't formed in me and I will be able to say something in return. The text touches me to be able to maintain this relationship, to come back to a verse that touched me. I'll just repeat it or meditate on it such as: “**Wow. I never thought of that story of Jesus multiplying the bread.**”

There are going to be times, seasons in prayer where I will be more stuck by “**reflexive**” prayer --- intelligence. Other

times will be more **emotional** where I am touched in my daily life.

That is the situation where I take an external text or I can nourish my prayer life with what I live on a daily basis ... whether it be big or small, it can spring up and I allow it in prayer in its rightful place. I can say that I experienced this or that thing and that triggers another experience which allows me to re-read and step back and bring it to the Lord to see how it will be clarified.

I like to end this time of prayer by a regular prayer such as the Angelus, or the Hail Mary, and determine the internal attitude at the end of the prayer ---as it is and not how I thought it was. This is a way to detach from the emotional feelings. If I realize that during the 50 minutes of prayer I was mainly distracted which is a fact. So, I admit it but I offer it to God, “Yup, I was distracted but I offer my distractions to you. Figure it out. You know my good will and hopefully I'll do better next time—tomorrow.

Without that, I risk staying at a psychological level where I am telling myself that I am worthless, like yesterday and I'm no longer in relationship. Offer the prayer, as it was lived and remember that it isn't my work. I think one of the biggest traps today is performance, especially spiritual performance. This time it was 3 out of 5. But, really what do we know?

Part 7 Fruits

Personally, the most significant fruit of prayer is that of becoming whole... **being made whole**---The unifying aspect of prayer, between the inside and the outside,

being made into a coherent self, ... all comes together in one direction. As a religious person we live this out in a strong or intense way.

A life of prayer is basically about desire. Saint Teresa talks a lot about silent prayer. She says: **“To those who have not yet begun to practice prayer, Lord I beg you that they would not deprive themselves of such a great good.** It’s not about fearing but about desiring. The desire is the motive, what I want, what lives inside of me that’s lacking.

This desire will be something fundamental. A life of prayer implies a confrontation between our desires and the choices we impose on ourselves. I can’t do it all.

There are 24 hours in a day, so I need to look at my day and prioritize to let go of superficial desires that come from my family and surroundings, the culture I live in –I want to do that because others are doing it.

While other desires that characterize me will be able to emerge as the unimportant ones are put aside leaving place for something more profound.

My life of prayer has helped me to clarify my desires and to descend to a deeper level in a desire for God, for life, for commitments, more extreme, radical harder to describe but that motivate enormously.

I spent a lot of time in things that distracted me and didn’t nourish my profound self, my profound “I.”

The fact of descending down to my deepest level creates that interior center where I can draw deeper within myself. This brings

about a certain stability in life that will permit me to meet life constraints. What do I have within to be able to meet life’s distractions. We are living in a time when people are feeling more fragile than before as we lack former exterior structures and so we need an interior life that is a lot stronger.

I believe that a life of prayer creates men and women who are well-structured within by a desire for God, by something within that through Christ’s grace are able to meet life’s challenges.