

Meeting with the Discalced Carmelite Nuns of the USA

St. Louis (MO), 25 - 30 April 2017

Fr. Daniel Chowning, OCD

Prayer as Transformation: For Whom and For What Purpose?

**We have agreed not to share Fr. Daniel's presentation
beyond the USA/Canada before November, 2017**

In this conference, I want to speak on the theme of prayer and contemplation in the Apostolic Constitution VDQ and, as in the last conference, to reflect on it with a Teresian/Sanjuanist perspective.

Part four of the Apostolic Constitution introduces the essential elements of contemplative life. The Church recognizes that contemplative life is a charism, God's gift to the Church that has survived throughout periods of vigor and decline. In speaking of contemplative life, Pope Francis doesn't define contemplation as an experience of infused prayer beyond the stage of discursive meditation that we might find in the writings of St. Teresa or St. John of the Cross or other mystics, nor does he define contemplative life in terms of enclosure, although he acknowledges the life of prayer and contemplation is lived in the "silence of the cloister" and the "cell of the heart." He defines contemplative life as seeking the face of God and preserving an unconditional love for Jesus Christ.

Contemplative life is a "history of passionate love for the Lord and humanity;" a passionate quest to seek the face of God in intimate relationship with God that unfolds day after day. It is a response to the Lord's love; God's love always goes before us. (1 Jn. 4:19)

Contemplatives are the voice of the Church who ceaselessly praise, thank, implore and intercede for all humankind. In this way, contemplatives are co-workers of God, "helping the fallen members of his glorious body to rise again." (9) As co-workers of God, contemplatives have an apostolic mission in the Church.

In our personal and communal prayer, we enter into deeper intimacy with the Lord and discover the Lord as the treasure of our life. Our intimacy with God grows in the "cell of the heart," in the "solitude of the cloister," and in fraternal life where we strive to live faithfully the evangelical life.

Pope Francis places Mary as the model of contemplative life. Mary is the woman of faith who centered her life in God, the “*one thing necessary*” (Lk 10:42). The contemplative is the one whose heart is “stolen” by God who heals our heart and restores unity within us, thus enabling us to see creation and others with the eyes of faith and love.

The Apostolic Constitution proposes prayer, liturgical and personal as “fundamental for nourishing the contemplative life.” (16) Prayer is the “core” of consecrated life, and even more so for contemplative life. The Holy Father makes an important observation: many people today do not know how to pray, or they limit themselves to a relationship with God in times of need. For others, they pray only in times of happiness. For this reason, the contemplative vocation is prophetic: contemplatives praise the Lord with the Liturgy of the Hours and unite themselves to Christ in personal prayer for all those who do not know how to pray. The prayer life of contemplatives has an apostolic meaning: their life of prayer and contemplation must embrace all humanity, especially for those who suffer.

Much like in chapter two of the Apostolic Exhortation: *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis offers a reading of “the signs of the times;” he lists some of the various sufferings people undergo in our society: prisoners, migrants, refugees and victims of persecution; families experiencing difficulties, the unemployed, the poor, the sick, and those struggling with addictions. In our prayer we bring before God our brothers and sisters who, for whatever reason, cannot come to experience God’s healing mercy, “even as God patiently waits for them.” (16) By our prayers, we can heal the wounds of our sisters and brothers and of our world.

The Holy Father offers two models of the contemplative life as prophetic and intercessory. The first is Mary, our supreme model in the contemplation of Christ. “She is the Mother and Teacher of perfect conformation to her Son.” Secondly Moses, whose arms were raised in prayer, brought about the victory of his people over their enemies. Moses is an eloquent image of the power and efficacy of prayer on behalf of all humanity and the Church, especially on behalf of the vulnerable and those in need. As in the past, so now, we can conclude that the fate of humanity is decided by “prayerful hearts and uplifted hands of contemplative women.” (17) For this reason, the Holy Father urges us to remain faithful to liturgical and private prayer, to prefer “nothing to the “*opus Dei*,” because contemplatives have a ministry of prayer and our communities will become “schools of prayer.”

Two essential themes stand out in this section of the Apostolic Constitution: the meaning of contemplative life, and prayer as intercessory on behalf of humanity, especially the suffering, the vulnerable, and the poor.

Living the Contemplative Life

What does it mean to live a contemplative life? This is an important question because as the Apostolic Constitution reminds us that: “rapid historical changes have taken place over the past decades that call for dialogue” and discernment. At the same time, the essential values of contemplative life – silence, attentive listening, the call to an interior life, and stability – can and must challenge the contemporary mindset because contemplative values are prophetic and counter cultural in a secular society that has lost the sense of interiority. (8)

For Pope Francis, being contemplative means to keep turning our gaze toward Jesus and to let ourselves be looked upon by Him so that his gaze can transform us and “make us more human and help us to lead a new life.”¹ Pope Francis wants us to train our heart’s gaze, to return to our center because “true love is always contemplative.”²

What is St. Teresa’s vision of the contemplative life? To answer this question, we need to return to the sources of her charism.

The charism of a religious institute is an extraordinary gift of the Holy Spirit given to the Church and that continues through time. Your *Constitutions* (1991) read:

“The beginning of the Teresian family within the Carmel, and the meaning of its vocation in the Church, are bound up closely with the development of the spiritual life of St. Teresa and with her charism. In particular, it grew out of the mystical graces which compelled her to renew Carmel...St. Teresa’s mystical experience led her gradually to fathom and, as it were, to interiorize the life of the Church – with its sorrows, the rending of its unity and, above all, the profanation of the Eucharist and of the priesthood. This process contributed to the development and clarification of her initial project. Stirred by these events, she gave her life and that of the new family of Carmel an apostolic sense.” (1.4.5)

The charisms of a foundation are always born out of precise historical contexts. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, founders with their orders, congregations, and movements offer solutions to the

¹ *Contemplate: To consecrated men and women on the trail of Beauty*, Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, p. 8. See also: Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 264.

² *Ibid.* 199.

problems and needs of the time. We can see this with the Teresian reform as well. Teresa makes it very clear in the first chapters of *The Way of Perfection* that the Church was at the heart of her decision to make the foundation of St. Joseph's and return to the primitive ideal of Carmel. Teresa was sensitive to her world and the signs of the times.

“At that time news reached me of the harm being done in France and of the havoc the Lutherans had caused and how much this miserable sect was growing. The news distressed me greatly, and, as though I could do something or were something, I cried to the Lord and begged Him that I might remedy so much evil. It seemed to me that I would have given a thousand lives to save one soul out of the many that were being lost there. I realized I was a woman and wretched and incapable of doing any of the useful things I desired to do in the service of the Lord. All my longing was and still is that since He has so many enemies and so few friends that these few friends be good ones. As a result, I resolved to do the little that was in my power; that is, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could and strive that these few persons who live here do the same.” (W.1.2)

Since the Church was divided and wounded, Teresa wanted to do “the little that she could” to bring about healing. (W.1.1.)

The Protestant Reformation

One of the “great storms” of St. Teresa's time was the Protestant reformation. Teresa knew first hand, although with many information gaps, a Church “divided” by the heresy of “Lutherans,” a term that included all dissidents of the Church that killed priests, destroyed Churches, removed the Blessed Sacrament from the altar etc. She also knew an Inquisitorial Church that sought out heretics, schismatics, false mystics and judaizers, judged them, and even condemned them to death.

Two areas cast a shadow over the Church that Teresa knew. In the first place, it was a sinful Church, deficient and in need of reform. Secondly, as time went on she saw deficiencies and sins in the leaders of the Church: bishops, canons, priests, religious men and women. “In the midst of tempests as fierce as those the Church now endures, what would we be without prayers. (L.13.21)

Despite the Church's deficiencies, Teresa loved the Church and she suffered **for** the Church in order to build it up. She was a true “daughter of the Church.” She also suffered **from** the Church. She knew the Church was too male-oriented, directed only by men, the only ones who could preach, and that male judges kept an eye on and condemned many of the religious practices of devout women, above all those who practiced mental prayer and had mystical

experiences. The hierarchical Church of 16th century Spain was suspicious of contemplative prayer, especially practiced by women.

Spanish Conquest of the New World

Teresa also learned of the Church of the New World through the Franciscan friar Alonso Maldonado who passed by St. Joseph's in 1567 and reported his experience of the Indians who were being exploited by the colonizers, and even mistreated by the missionaries and evangelizers, among whom were seven of Teresa's brothers and sisters.

She realized that secular arms ("human forces") were insufficient to bring about unity and peace within the Church. What was needed were strong friends of God to sustain the weak: women (good Christians) willing to withdraw to a fortified city (a castle) and do battle for the leaders and theologians of the Church by their prayer and sacrifices. "It is the ecclesiastical, not the secular arm that will save us. Since in neither the ecclesiastical nor the secular arm can we be of any help to our King, let us strive to be the kind of persons whose prayers can be useful in helping those servants of the God." (W.3.2)

Teresa states clearly in *The Way of Perfection* that her sisters have not joined religious life only for themselves or for their own sanctification. They have come for the Church. Her daughters must carry the needs and sufferings of the Church close to their heart.

O my Sisters in Christ, help me beg these things of the Lord. This is why He has gathered you together here. This is your vocation. These must be the business matters you're engaged in. These must be the things you desire, the things you weep about; these must be the objects of your petitions -- not, my Sisters, the business matters of the world. For I laugh at and am even distressed about the things they come here to ask us to pray for: to ask His Majesty for wealth and money -- and this is done by persons who I wish would ask Him for the grace to trample everything underfoot. They are well intentioned, and in the end we pray for their intentions because of their devotion -- although for myself I don't think the Lord ever hears me when I pray for these things. The world is all in flames; they want to sentence Christ again, so to speak, since they raise a thousand false witnesses against Him; they want to ravage His Church -- and are we to waste time asking for things that if God were to give them we'd have one soul less in heaven? No, my Sisters, this is not the time to be discussing with God matters that have little importance. (W.1.5)

Teresa believed that the best way to help the Church was to live the Gospel, to be good friends of Christ and good friends of one another, committed to unceasing prayer with an apostolic purpose: to pray for the Church and the world. Teresa knows that the nuns to whom she is writing are enclosed contemplative nuns who are limited in their outreach to the Church in

difficult times. They can't preach or teach. How can they help? By living the Gospel, first of all, in their own community.

“Apart from the fact that by prayer you will be helping greatly, you need not be desiring to benefit the whole world but must concentrate on those who are in your company, and thus your deed will be greater since you are more obliged toward them. Do you think such deep humility, your mortification, service of all and great charity toward them, and love of the Lord is of little benefit? This fire of love in you enkindles their souls, and with every other virtue you will be always awakening them. Such service will not be small but very great and very pleasing to the Lord. By what you do in deed -- that which you can -- His Majesty will understand that you would do much more. Thus He will give you the reward He would if you had gained many souls for Him.” (7M.4.14)

The Teresian Way of Contemplative Life

Having presented to her sisters the purpose of the life together Teresa asks: “What do you think we must **be** like if we are not to be considered very bold by God and the world?” (W.4.2) Teresa's question points to a state of being rather than doing. How must you **be**, in your being, if you desire to be good friends with Christ and one another and to do spiritual battle for the Church?

They are to live a life of unceasing prayer. “Our primitive rule states that we must pray without ceasing.^[2] If we do this with all the care possible -- for unceasing prayer is the most important aspect of the rule -- the fasts, the disciplines, and the silence the order commands will not be wanting.” (W.4.1-2)

By “unceasing prayer,” Teresa doesn't mean unceasing prayer as we read in *The Way of the Pilgrim*; rather, she means prayer as a way of being, that requires silence, solitude, peace, right relationships, and simplicity of life, because prayer and luxurious living do not go together.

In speaking of a life of prayer, Teresa becomes practical and holistic. In effect she says: “You ask me to say something about prayer? Well, wait a moment before I say anything about interior matters, I have to mention some things that are necessary for those who seek the way of prayer, so necessary that even if these persons are not very contemplative, they can be very advanced in the service of the Lord if they possess these things. And if they do not possess them, it is impossible for them to be very contemplative. If they think they are, they are being highly deceived. These three things are: love for one another, detachment from created things, and true humility, which is the main practice and embraces all the others. (W.4) Teresa tells her daughters, and us, what it means to be a contemplative. It is not a matter of spending hours in quiet prayer

or living in a monastery, although spending quality time in contemplative prayer is essential to the Teresian charism. Being contemplative is not about having visions or locutions, rather, it is a matter of how we relate to God, others, creation and ourselves, and according to the doctrine of John of the Cross, how we live the life of faith, hope, and love. In the 7th dwelling places Teresa writes: “I repeat, it is necessary that your foundation consist of more than prayer and contemplation. If you do not strive for the virtues and practice them, you will always be dwarfs.” (7M.4.9)

As I said in my last conference, Teresa leads her sisters, and us, into a process of conversion and transformation of being. If we want to be good friends of Christ, then we have to enter into a process of purification and transformation implied by these three virtues. Commitment to grow in these virtues cements our friendship with Christ. If prayer is relationship, then prayer embraces all of our relationships and implies a process of conversion and transformation of consciousness.

Teresa sees every Carmel as a little castle of good Christians helping the Church by their prayers and sacrifices. I think the image of the castle has another level of meaning. Every person is a castle, a diamond, an oriental pearl, a tree of life planted in the waters of life, that is, of God – symbols of our human dignity as a dwelling place of God. However, St. Teresa’s interior castle is not just an “enchanted castle” like we see in Disney World, but a warring castle, a castle wherein a spiritual battle takes place. To help the Church and the world, we must not only pray, but we must battle with the dark forces in our hearts that contribute to the evil of this world, e.g. our selfishness, anger, violent tendencies, our envy, jealousy etc.

There is a story of a desert father who said that he went to the desert because he was like a dog that needed to be tied up so it wouldn’t bite someone. The desert fathers and mothers believed that the inner work they did in their cell provided an environmental cleanup. The more they were healed of their own selfishness, anger, pride, lust etc., the more society outside the desert was healed and transformed. We believe that contemplation has a healing and transformational effect in the world. A contemplative community is like an energy center that radiates healing. Contemplative love is healing. Therefore, we have to do our inner work and open to God’s purifying action through contemplative prayer, purifying us of the roots of disorder and sin in our hearts. The healing and transforming effect of contemplative love will contribute to the healing of our wounded world, marred by evil, violence and death.

Turning our gaze toward Jesus

I have quoted Pope Francis' understanding of contemplative life: turning our gaze toward Jesus, returning to the center because "true love is always contemplative." Turning our gaze towards Jesus (our Center) is the counsel St. Teresa gives us. One of the most beautiful texts that synthesizes the contemplative life for me according to Teresa of Jesus comes from chapter 26 of the *Way of Perfection*.

If you grow accustomed to having Him present at your side, and He sees that you do so with love and that you go about striving to please Him, you will not be able -- as they say -- to get away from Him; He will never fail you; He will help you in all your trials; you will find Him everywhere. Do you think it's some small matter to have a friend like this at your side? (W.26.2)

Teresa asks the same question in chapter 22 of her *Life*: "What more do we desire than to have such a good friend at our side, who will not abandon us in our labors and tribulations, as friends in the world do? Blessed are they who truly love Him and always keep Him at their side!" (L.22.7)³

For Teresa, contemplation (the contemplative life) is fixing our gaze on Jesus and allowing his loving gaze to transform us. This means taking Jesus as our friend, cultivating an intimate friendship with him, taking time to be alone with the one "whom we know loves us," and walking with him in every aspect of our life: in private prayer, the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, lectio divina, our fraternal and sisterly life, and in the events and demands of daily life. Furthermore, to support a life of loving concentration on Jesus, Teresa established strict enclosure as a means of keeping one's gaze (one's life) fixed on Christ and open for a deeper experience of God. We must remember that Teresa's idea regarding St. Joseph's was to correct the custom of the Incarnation that allowed a lot exits for various reasons: poverty, sickness, consoling benefactors, travels and other things, like she did.

For Teresa, the experience of God is an experience of Christ. Therefore, she counsels us to keep our heart's gaze fixed on him.

³ It is important to remember this question and advise to keep Jesus at our side comes from Teresa's experience of the Risen Lord Jesus (Christological visions) whom she "felt" and then saw at her side. See *Life*, 27-29.

I'm not asking you now that you think about Him or that you draw out a lot of concepts or make long and subtle reflections with your intellect. I'm not asking you to do anything more than look at Him. For who can keep you from turning the eyes of your soul toward this Lord, even if you do so just for a moment if you can't do more? You can look at very ugly things; won't you be able to look at the most beautiful thing imaginable? Well now, daughters, your Spouse never takes His eyes off you. He has suffered your committing a thousand ugly offenses and abominations against Him, and this suffering wasn't enough for Him to cease looking at you. Is it too much to ask you to turn your eyes from these exterior things in order to look at Him sometimes? Behold, He is not waiting for anything else, as He says to the bride,^[2] than that we look at Him. In the measure you desire Him, you will find Him. He so esteems our turning to look at Him that no diligence will be lacking on His part. (W.26.3) "If you are joyful, look at Him as risen. Just imagining how He rose from the tomb will bring you joy...If you are experiencing trials or are sad, behold Him on the way to the garden: what great affliction He bore in His soul; He will forget His sorrows so as to console you in yours, merely because you yourselves go to Him to be consoled, and you turn your head to look at Him." (W.26.4-5)

Jesus Christ was "a living book" for Teresa. (L.26.5) We cannot understand Teresa's prayer or notion of contemplative life without Jesus Christ. She was a miracle of the encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus. Her discovery of the Christ-man was the greatest one of her life. It is the key to her conversions in 1554 before the wounded Christ and 1556 through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Gazing on the beauty of the Risen Lord Jesus healed her affectivity and set her free to love free without egotistic demands. (L.37.4)⁴ Prayer as "friendship" with Jesus dynamically transformed her life. Her relationship with Christ was a progressive dynamic experience that became more intense, interior, real, personal, and human.

"A much greater love for and confidence in this Lord began to develop in me when I saw Him as one with whom I could converse so continually. I saw that He was man, even though He was God; that He wasn't surprised by human weaknesses; that He understands our miserable make-up, subject to many falls on account of the first sin which He came to repair. I can speak with Him as with a friend, even though He is Lord." (L.37.5)

Furthermore, Teresa wanted to connect her sisters to the primitive and eremitical origins of the Order and thus dispose them for a mystical experience of God and supernatural realities. Teresa often referred to this spirit as "eremitical." For Teresa, the image of the old hermits on Mount Carmel was present to her. She felt that her nuns were not only nuns, but also hermits.

⁴ After I beheld the extraordinary beauty of the Lord, I didn't see anyone who in comparison with Him seemed to attract me or occupy my thoughts. By turning my gaze just a little inward to behold the image I have in my soul, I obtained such freedom in this respect that everything I see here below seems loathsome when compared to the excellent and beautiful qualities I beheld in this Lord. (L.37.4)

Returning to the Center

Pope Francis' conception of contemplative life as training our heart's gaze and turning to our center reminds me of a text from the *Living Flame of Love*. In stanza one of the *Living Flame*, John of the Cross draws upon the metaphor of a rock to describe our journey toward the center of our being where God dwells. God is our center, the ground of our being. "The soul's center is God." (Fl.12) Just as a stone gravitates toward its deepest center in the earth, so we are intrinsically propelled toward God because we were made for God, created out of love and for love. John tells us that the journey toward our center is one of love. Love takes us to our center. Becoming centered is a matter of growing in love.

John writes:

"Love is the inclination, strength, and power for the soul in making its way to God, for love unites it with God. The more degrees of love it has the more deeply it enters into God and centers in him. A stronger love is a more unitive love, and we can understand in this manner the many mansions the Son of God declared were in his Father's house. (Jn. 14:2)

Hence, for the soul to be in its center – which is God, it is sufficient for it to possess one degree of love, for by one degree alone it united with him through grace. Should it have two degrees, it becomes united and concentrated in God in another, deeper center. Should it reach three, it centers itself in a third. But once it has attained the final degree, God's love has arrived at wounding the soul in its ultimate and deepest center, which is to illuminate and transform it in its whole being, power, and strength, and according to its capacity, until it appears to be God." (Fl.13)

The more loving we become, the more we become united with God and centered in God, and the more we are centered in God, the more we are healed and transformed so as to radiate God's love in the world.

We often use expressions in our spirituality such as "center," "centered," "interior," and "interiority" to speak of the spiritual journey and the contemplative life. We tend to think of being centered or interior as going to some 'geographical' place within us. Fixing our gaze on the "center" and learning to become "interior" are metaphors, not of a geographical place, but for a quality of being and of consciousness. They describe a manner of relating to God, others and creation. In the Gospels Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not a place, but a Person, God revealed in Jesus Christ. To enter into the Kingdom of God, therefore, is

to enter into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and in this relationship, we are converted, transformed and learn to love as God loves. St. Paul tells us in the *Letter to the Romans* that the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of “righteousness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17) Righteousness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit are qualities of a person’s being and way of relating to life and others.

When we say that our journey toward our center, which is our journey into God in whom we live, move, and have our being (Acts 17:28), is one of love, what do we mean by love? Love is always a dangerous word, especially in our culture, because there are so many misunderstandings about the nature of true love. We tend to think of love as an idealized state, a romantic feeling or a consoling experience when we are affirmed, or feel needed and cared for. We can speak eloquently and “mystically” about love in spirituality. In the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Year of Mercy, Pope Francis wrote: “Love, after all, can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete: intentions, attitudes, and behaviors shown in daily life.”⁵ Dorothy Day often quoted from Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.” Jesus and our saints teach us by their lives the meaning of authentic love, not a “love in dreams.” In Pope Benedict’s first encyclical *God is Love*, he wrote that if we want to know the meaning of authentic love we begin by contemplating the pierced side of Jesus.⁶ The pierced side of Jesus crucified is the model of true love because Jesus gave up his life freely out of love. When Pontius Pilate interrogated Jesus, he tried to intimidate him by saying: “I can save your life or I can take it.” Jesus responded: “No one takes my life from me; I give it up freely.” (Jn. 19:10-11)⁷ Love and suffering go hand in hand because love involves sacrifice.

The Gospels teach us about the radical love of Jesus. “I say to you, love your enemy, pray for your persecutor, turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, give without asking in return, forgive and you will be forgiven; judge not and you shall not be judged; be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful.” (Mt. 5:43-48) Matthew 25 goes to the core of Gospel love: “When I was

⁵ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 10.

⁶ “This is love in its most radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. 19:37), we can understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation, the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move. (*Deus Caritas Est*, 12)

⁷ Reference to Pontius Pilate and Jesus’ response borrowed from Ronald Rolheiser, *The Passion and the Cross*, Franciscan Media, 2015, 12.

hungry you gave me food, naked and you clothed me; sick and you visited me...What every you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do to me.”

In the Fourth Dwelling Places, Teresa says that prayer is not a matter of thinking much, but loving much, “so do what best stirs you to love.” However, she wonders if we understand the nature of love. She writes:

“Perhaps we don't know what love is. I wouldn't be very surprised, because it doesn't consist in great delight but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything, in striving, insofar as possible, not to offend Him, and in asking Him for the advancement of the honor and glory of His Son and the increase of the Catholic Church. These are the signs of love. Don't think the matter lies in thinking of nothing else, and that if you become a little distracted all is lost.” (4D.1.7)

Interestingly, Teresa repeats the same teaching in chapter five of the *Foundations* when she writes that the substance of perfect prayer is not thinking much but loving much. (F.5.2)

However, when Teresa says that the substance of perfect prayer is love, not entertaining sublime spiritual thoughts, she expands her understanding of prayer as love. Teresa asks: “How does one acquire this love? She becomes practical and extends love as prayer to life - to the demands of daily life, especially when it entails obedience and charity.

“How does one acquire this love? By being determined to work and to suffer, and to do so when the occasion arises. It is indeed true that by thinking of what we owe the Lord, of who He is, and what we are, a soul's determination grows, and that this thinking is very meritorious and appropriate for beginners. But it must be understood that this is true provided that nothing interferes with obedience or benefit to one's neighbor. When either of these two things presents itself, time is demanded, and also the abandonment of what we so much desire to give God, which, in our opinion, is to be alone thinking of Him and delighting in the delights that He give us. To leave aside these delights for either of these other two things is to give delight to Him and do the work for Him, as He Himself said: *What you did for one of these little ones you did for Me.*^[2] And in matters touching on obedience He doesn't want the soul who truly loves Him to take any other path than the one He did: *obediens usque ad mortem.*^[3]” (F.5.3)

In other words, love as prayer is not just a matter of resting quietly in the arms of the Beloved. Love is a verb, an action. We acquire this love by being determined to work and suffer in the context of obedience and love: obedience in the sense of the Latin root meaning, “*ob-audire*,” which means to listen carefully, to pay attention. We grow in love by listening carefully to the present moment, to others and their needs, and to the duties of our vocation. When we respond to human need, there is authentic love, and thus prayer. “The true lover loves everywhere and is

always thinking of the Beloved! It would be a thing hard to bear if we were able to pray only when off in some corner.” (F.5.16)

Teresa makes this point in the 5th Dwelling Places where she emphasizes the importance of charity in daily life.

“When I see souls very earnest in trying to understand the prayer they have and very sullen when they are in it -- for it seems they don't dare let their minds move or stir lest a bit of their spiritual delight and devotion be lost -- it makes me realize how little they understand of the way by which union is attained; they think the whole matter lies in these things. No, Sisters, absolutely not; works are what the Lord wants! He desires that if you see a Sister who is sick to whom you can bring some relief, you have compassion on her and not worry about losing this devotion; and that if she is suffering pain, you also feel it; and that, if necessary, you fast so that she might eat - - not so much for her sake as because you know it is your Lord's desire. This is true union with His will, and if you see a person praised, the Lord wants you to be much happier than if you yourself were being praised. This, indeed, is easy, for if you have humility you will feel sorry to see yourself praised. But this happiness that comes when the virtues of the Sisters are known is a very good thing; and when we see some fault in them, it is also a very good thing to be sorry and hide the fault as though it were our own.” (5M.3.11)

When we talk about the contemplative life as training our heart's gaze to return to our center, we are talking about growing in Gospel love, that is, to love as Jesus loved. Of course, in order to grow in this love, which is divine love, we need the very love of God to purify, heal and transform us of all that resists and prevents God's love from possessing our lives and shining through us. It is in contemplative prayer conceived of as “an intimate sharing between friends with the one whom we know loves us” (L.8.5), or as described by John of the Cross: “as an inflow of God within the soul that purges and heals us of our habitual ignorances and imperfections and secretly instructs us in love, that we grow in Gospel love.” (2N.5.1)⁸

In the *Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross, we have a wonderful text that supports St. Teresa's doctrine. John tells us that in addition to prayer and contemplation, we must strive not to fail in our love for God and neighbor by practicing what St. Paul teaches us:

It is worthy of note that God does not place his grace and love in the soul except according to its desire and love. Those who truly love God must strive not to fail in this love, for they will thereby induce God, if we may so express it, to further love them and find delight in them. And

⁸ This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology.^[1] Through this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens. (2N.5.1)

to acquire this charity, one ought to practice what St. Paul taught: *Charity is patient, is kind, is not envious, does no evil, does not become proud, is not ambitious, seeks not its own, does not become disturbed, thinks no evil, rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth, suffers all things* (that are to be suffered), *believes all things* (that must be believed), *hopes all things, and endures all things* (that are in accord with charity) [[1 Cor. 13:4-7](#)]. (SC.13.12)

Patience, kindness, humility, generosity, faith, hope and love, these are the virtues that undergird, accompany, and deepen contemplative prayer.

Prayer and Commitment

When we consider Teresa's experience of prayer as "an intimate sharing between friends," we can see that Teresa's prayer and contemplative ideal is one of commitment and determination to do something. This is evident from the first pages of the *Way of Perfection*; "All my longing was and still is that since He has so many enemies and so few friends that these few friends be good ones. As a result, I resolved to do the little that was in my power; that is, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could and strive that these few persons who live here do the same." (W.1.2) Prayer takes us beyond ourselves. There is a deepening commitment to live one's vocation faithfully and to respond to the demands of the historical situation in which we live

To be committed and determined to do something for the Church and the world is not just the fruit of prayer. For Teresa, prayer itself is commitment and determination to help the world.

Prayer as friendship with God is an immersion into God's world because God is committed to human beings and history. Pope Francis writes that "true love is always contemplative," because contemplative prayer purifies and frees us from the bonds of egotism and transforms our vision and manner of loving; contemplation opens our eyes to the beauty of God's world and our brothers and sisters and fills our heart with compassion for human suffering. The person of prayer, who knows him or herself loved by God, discovers herself recreated and saved by God and now has become an instrument of salvation for others. To encounter God in prayer is to encounter ourselves, to discover our own truth, and then to give ourselves to others, because that is what life is all about: self-gift, love, communion.

This is why Teresa tells us in the Seventh Dwelling Places: "This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works."

(7M.4.6) The person of prayer experiences an inner force toward sharing the love and compassion of God with others. This is something that Teresa observed from her own experience. “I notice in some persons – there are not many because of our sins – that the more they advance in this kind of prayer and the gifts of our Lord, the more attention they pay to the needs of their neighbor, especially the needs of their neighbor’s souls.” (MC.7.9)

We see this in St. Thérèse. We often explain the vocation of the Discalced Carmelite nun in Thérèse’s own words: “In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love.” (Ms. B) What does it mean to be “love in the heart of the Church?” It sounds so beautiful, but what does it look like in real life?

As we know, the fire of God’s love burned deeply in Thérèse’s heart. She felt unrealizable and immense desires to love Jesus and to proclaim God’s Merciful Love to others. She was tormented by the desires to be a warrior, crusader, priest, apostle, doctor of the Church, and martyr. “*Jesus, Jesus, if I wanted to write all my desires, I would need the book of life: where the actions of all the saints are recorded.*” (Ms. B) Inspired by St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, who teaches that love is the greatest of spiritual gifts and lasts forever, Thérèse, discovered her vocation to be love in the heart of the Church. “*In the heart of the Church my Mother, I will be love.*” She wanted to be so united to the Holy Spirit that she would be a loving presence in the Church, in her community, and in this world. Furthermore, Thérèse was realistic. She realized that love cannot remain on the level of dreams, fantasy, and emotions. Love has to be expressed in action. She also knew that love is eternal and has an energy to penetrate walls, borders, countries, Church buildings, and homes and to heal broken hearts and convert lives. Drawing upon the image of ‘strewing flowers,’ she expressed her commitment to concrete acts of love in the present moment and these acts of love would have a ripple effect in our world. They would have an infinite value before God and help the Church militant and those who are suffering in purgatory.

What is so impressive about Thérèse is how she lived intentionally. She applied love with intentionality, awareness, and care in every act and relationship in her daily life and offered those acts of love for the salvation of others. Her heroic acts of faith and love during the last 18 months of her life when she was hounded by obsessive doubts about the existence of eternal life, (a night of faith she shared with sinners and atheists, whom she called her brothers, and for whom she offered her sufferings), demonstrates her profound compassion and concern for the

salvation of humanity. Thérèse challenges us to question our intentionality, our loving, and how we live our contemplative life. Why do we do what we do? What is our motivation when we get up in the morning? What motivates our relationships, our encounters with others, our work, our prayer, our simple actions? What meaning do we give to our sufferings, our conflicts, temptations, and trials? How do we apply love in daily life and in our community interactions? These are serious questions because if we are talking about contemplative life and the apostolic value of our prayer for humanity, then intentionality in our prayer, our relationships and our loving is paramount and crucial.

“The world is all in flames; they want to sentence Christ again.”

“The world is all in flames; they want to sentence Christ again.” How true this applies to our world of the 21st century. Our world is in flames! As I write this on Palm Sunday, two Coptic Churches were bombed in Egypt killing at least 43. Just think of the chemical warfare that has murdered hundreds of men, women and children in Syria. The world in all in flames and the Body of Christ is suffering a crucifixion in the middle east, Syria, Mexico, and large parts of Africa. I read the other day that 20 million people will die of hunger this year! The present situation of immigration in this country and the serious plight of immigrants desperately fleeing from the middle east to Europe and elsewhere is a serious situation in our world. Pope Francis is constantly raising our consciousness to the suffering of immigrants and calling world leaders to open their borders and assist these homeless people.

In the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis offer an analysis of the contemporary reality and exhorts us to “an ever-watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times.” (51)

A few of the challenges the Pope detects are:

- We see an economy of exclusion and inequality. Food is thrown away while people are starving.
- Human beings themselves are discarded. We experience a globalization of indifference and people are becoming incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, or weeping for people’s pain. We are becoming increasingly insensitive to human suffering.
- We see the idolatry of money.

-There is a call for greater security in cities because the inequality between the rich and the poor breeds more and more violence. Violence among young people in the US is escalating.

- Culturally, the secularization of society tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal. We see the rejection of the transcendent and the consequent deterioration of ethics and weakening of a sense of personal and collective sin.

The American Bishops have pointed out that the Church's insistence on objective moral norms, that are valid for everyone, is opposed by many in our culture and viewed as an unjust teaching. The Church is perceived as promoting a particular prejudice and interfering with personal freedom. (64)

-Families are in a real crisis. Marriage is viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed or modified at will.

There are many challenges to inculturating our faith. There has been a breakdown in way Catholics pass on the faith to their young. Many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition. Growing numbers of parents do not practice their faith, or present their children for baptism and teach them how to pray.

Teresa was living in "difficult times" and she told her daughters: "The world is all in flames; they want to crucify Christ again." The world is still in flames and Christ is being crucified every day in Syria, Africa, Iraq, the United States and many other places. What can we do to help extinguish the fires of violence, hatred, religious intolerance, the idolatry of money and indifference to the poor and needy? Teresa said: "*Especially in these times staunch friends of God are necessary to sustain the weak.*" (L.15.5) We are called to be strong friends of God through a life of contemplative prayer and fraternal charity, opening our hearts and minds to the transformative power of contemplation so that we can become vessels of healing and redemption for our world. As Carmelites, we believe that prayer has the power to change hearts and transform the world. We don't consecrate our lives to God for the sole reason of seeking our own salvation, but the salvation of others and to share the gift of God's love, our charism, for the salvation of all. God has loved us so much that he has given us the capacity to love as Jesus loves; Jesus who gave his life for the redemption of all and saved us in order to make us "saviors," along with him, branded by his cross, becoming the slaves of all as he was. (7M.4.8)

Schools of Prayer

How do we as contemplatives evangelize? One way we evangelize is by our life of prayer. By our life we witness to the inner depth of the human person as a dwelling place of God and that only God can ultimately satisfy the human heart. Pope Francis reminds us that many people today don't know how to pray. Many simply don't feel a need to pray or they turn to God in times of need. In other words, there is no real relationship with God. For this reason, contemplatives have a ministry of prayer, a mission to witness to the inner depths of the human person and our hunger for God expressed in a life of prayer. Nothing should "obstruct, divert, or interrupt our ministry of prayer." In this way, through contemplation we become ever more fully an image of Christ and our communities become "schools of prayer." (17) The idea that our communities become "schools of prayer" is vitally important, and by "schools of prayer" I mean places where people can experience the presence of God and be drawn to pray and learn to pray. It is sad that many people don't know how to pray, or even desire to pray.

Number 2 of article five of the conclusions and regulations encourages a spiritual outreach to priests, deacons, other consecrated religious and laity as a means of sharing the transforming experience of God's word and as an expression of genuine ecclesial communion. This is an important directive. How can your monasteries become a spiritual outreach and a "school of prayer?" The form of spiritual outreach to priests, deacons, consecrated persons and other laities will depend upon each community and their discernment. There are many ways we can encourage a spiritual outreach. For instance, inviting people to participate in the liturgy, sharing hymnals and even Psalters, with people who come for Mass and the Divine Office. If possible, allowing people to pray in the chapel. In the *Way of Perfection* Teresa tells us that "your business is prayer;" "God is your business." If this is so, how can we help people to pray, to get in touch with their inner depths?

Conclusion: "Especially in these times staunch friends of God are necessary to sustain the weak."

Teresa saw the importance of staunch friends of God to sustain the weak in the difficult times of the 16th century. The same holds true today in the 21st century with all challenges and trials we face personally, nationally, and globally. Pope Francis writes: “Never forget that your life of prayer and contemplation must not be lived as a form of self-absorption: it must enlarge your heart to embrace all humanity, especially those who suffer.” (16)

I will conclude with these words of our Mother Teresa of Jesus taken from chapter 3 of the *Way of Perfection*:

“Do not think it is useless to have these petitions^[1] continually in your heart, for with some persons it seems a difficult thing for them not to be praying a great deal for their own soul. But what better prayer is there than these petitions I mentioned? If you are uneasy because you think your sufferings in purgatory will not be shortened, know that by this prayer they will be; and if you must still pay some debts, so be it. What would it matter were I to remain in purgatory until judgment day if through my prayer I could save even one soul? How much less would it matter if my prayer is to the advantage of many and for the honor of the Lord. Pay no attention to sufferings that come to an end if through them some greater service is rendered to Him who endured so many for us.

It seems bold that I think I could play some role in obtaining an answer to these petitions. I trust, my Lord, in these Your servants who live here, and I know they desire and strive for nothing else than to please You. For You they renounced the little they had -- and would have wanted to have more so as to serve You with it. Since You, my Creator, are not ungrateful, I think You will not fail to do what they beg of You. Nor did You, Lord, when You walked in the world, despise women; rather, You always, with great compassion, helped them. [And You found as much love and more faith in them than You did in men. Among them was Your most blessed Mother, and through her merits -- and because we wear her habit -- we merit what, because of our offenses, we do not deserve...]^[2] When we ask You for honors, income, money, or worldly things, do not hear us. But when we ask You for the honor of Your Son, why wouldn't You hear us, eternal Father, for the sake of Him who lost a thousand honors and a thousand lives for You? Not for us, Lord, for we don't deserve it, but for the blood of Your son and His merits.” (W.3.6-7)