

Our Carmelite Promise: To Ponder Always In Imitation of Mary

Practicing the Presence of God

The last couple of months we've been discussing various aspects of our Carmelite Promise. First we spoke about the nature of a promise and what it means to make one. Next, we focused on the discernment of spirits. Then we began a discussion on recollection as the Carmelite way to ponder always in imitation of Mary. Once again let us briefly revisit the words of our Promise:

I [], inspired by the Holy Spirit, in response to God's call, sincerely promise to the Superiors of the Order of the Teresian Carmel and to you my brothers and sisters, to tend toward evangelical perfection in the spirit of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, obedience, and of the Beatitudes, according to the Constitutions of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites, for [3 years/rest of my life]. I confidently entrust this, my Promise, to the Virgin Mary, Mother and Queen of Carmel. (Constitutions)

Today we'll continue our discussion on recollection as that lies at the heart of our way of prayer. Previously we discussed the recollection of Francisco de Osuna that can lead, God willing, to the infused states of quiet and union as taught by St. Teresa. So too can recollection lead us through the broader prayer stages of the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways as we'll soon see. Our guide will be Brother Lawrence whose Practice of the Presence of God shows how recollection immerses us in a profoundly interior spiritual journey that leads us directly into the nights of St. John of the Cross.

OUR NEED TO PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

Brother Lawrence is sometimes described as St. Therese's spiritual big brother. He lived in a Carmel in France roughly 100 years after the time of St. Teresa and St. John. He was familiar with their teachings and knew it intimately in his heart ... if not so much in his mind. In fact he proclaimed the theology of it all to be rather confusing.

So rather than trying to figure things out in the manner of a theologian, he resolved another path for himself ... to spend his entire life in God's presence, speaking to Him in all he did and recalling his mind the first moment he noticed it strayed. Though Brother Lawrence lived in a monastery, his way is applicable to everyone no matter what one's state. He's the everyman's mystic.

And if ever there was a shortcut in the spiritual life, the Practice of the Presence of God is it. In fact he said so himself calling it the shortest, truest and safest path to union with God. Why?

His way forces us to confront an important aspect of our fallen nature: the incessant talking to ourselves we continually do in our mind that causes us to be forgetful of God and makes us prone to all manner of sins and imperfections. This forgetfulness, of course, is a principal concern of St. John of the Cross whose teaching on the purification of memory will be the focus of future talks. For now, though, let's look to Father Garrigou-Lagrange who summarized the problems an unchecked mind poses to those seeking greater friendship with Christ:

As soon as a man ceases to be outwardly occupied he begins to carry on a conversation with himself. If he is young, he often thinks of his future; if he is old, he thinks of the past. (Three Ages, Vol 1, p40)

The root problem, as we can see, is interior conversation that causes us to lose sight of the present moment where God is to be found. And pride further stifles union by placing "self" as the focal point of all things:

His thoughts almost always fall back on what is inferior to him; his self-love leads him to wish to make himself the center of everything ... and his happy or unhappy experience of life makes him usually judge persons and events very differently (than God) (Three Ages, Vol 1, p40&41)

In the beginning, perhaps, we mistook this talking to ourselves to be deep prayer. Then, through God's grace, we came to realize that God is not actually part of these interior conversations and what was formerly very satisfying now becomes an almost unbearable cross:

In a man's hours of solitude, this intimate conversation begins again in spite of everything as if to prove to him that it cannot stop. He would like to interrupt it yet he cannot do so. The center of the soul has an irrestrainable need which demands satisfaction. The soul must converse with someone other than itself (Three Ages, Vol 1, p43).

What the soul senses in its very depths is that monologue with self must become a dialogue with God. And this is the shortcut Brother Lawrence shows.

A SHORT CUT TO GOD

When we resolve to Practice the Presence of God, we'll find ourselves thrust into all the deep theology of St. John of the Cross. Like Brother, though, we don't necessarily need to know all the theology but we do need to know how to respond to circumstances and events.

Through the simple act of Practicing the Presence of God we're placed in the active night of sense, the entrance to the purgative way. Mindfulness of God makes us naturally conscious of doing our best not to offend Him in the slightest way. Through shame at first and love as we mature we'll moderate our excesses and begin to practice detachment from what we now see as harmful attachments. Time and again Brother Lawrence expressed one over-riding maxim that encompasses the entirety of the spiritual life ... the very essence of nada:

We must keep constant guard over ourselves not to do, say or think anything that might displease him (Letter 15).

There come great difficulties in putting this maxim into practice before a "holy habit" is developed. And Brother warns us not to be surprised to feel a deep repugnance as we first begin to go against our nature. Everyone who seeks God this way will have many falls before he's made perfect in its practice: as Scripture says "the just man will fall seven times a day." In true Carmelite fashion we persevere:

(In the beginning) I fell often but I got back up just as quickly. It seemed to me that all creatures, reason and God himself were against me and that faith alone was on my side (Letter 2).

And by Practicing the Presence of God we prepare ourselves to be placed by God, if He so chooses, in the passive night of sense. The more we speak to God in the silence of our heart, the more our hearts will become inflamed with love. Describing the ways of prayer was Brother's great delight:

There is no way of life in the world more agreeable or delightful than continual conversation with God; only those who practice and experience it can understand this (Letter 3).

A brief lifting up of the heart is enough. No one sees it and there is nothing easier than to repeat these little inner adorations frequently throughout the day (Letter 6).

Gradually become accustomed to adoring him in this way, asking him for his grace, offering him your heart during the day, while at work, at every possible moment. (Letter 9).

Our way of prayer evolves as the Holy Spirit teaches. At times we might be like the young couple on a dinner date gushing on and on about everything. This is the "loving conversation

between friends” called the Prayer of Heart. Other times, we may be more like the old married couple who eat in silence ... content with each other’s company ... passing the salt and pepper back and forth in anticipation of the other’s needs. This is the Prayer of Simplicity; what Brother describes as an indistinct view ... a general and loving awareness ... a simple gaze. It’s like inwardly smiling at He whom we know is present.

And through this Prayer of Simplicity we find ourselves disposed for the gift of infused contemplation – the hallmark of the illuminative way - as our active recollection yields almost effortlessly to St. Teresa’s prayer states of quiet and union. These varying ways of interior conversation are what’s meant by the “method-less method” that is the Practice of the Presence of God.

And through the Practice the Presence of God we’ll find ourselves firmly placed in the active night of spirit. As already mentioned, we’ll become profoundly aware of the thoughts and feelings that continually run through our mind and make us forgetful of Him. Let’s look at some of Brother’s counsels. As always, he’s straightforward and practical in his advice:

We must restrain our minds from wandering away for any reason whatsoever. We must make our hearts a spiritual temple where we continually adore him (Letter 15).

Thoughts spoil everything: that’s how trouble starts! We must be careful to reject them as soon as we notice that they have nothing to do with our present occupation or our salvation and begin again our conversation with God (Conversation 2).

We must work faithfully, without turmoil or anxiety, gently and peacefully bringing our minds back to God as often as we find ourselves distracted (Letter 4).

And there’s more. The Practice of the Presence of God may propel us into the interior trials of the passive night of spirit as we’re prepared for the Trinitarian life of the unitive way. Seeking to maintain continual presence to a God who remains unseen and unfelt is a supreme act of faith. Thus, fear of deception and illusion is a concern as Brother’s own Dark Night shows:

The fear of self-deception began to take strong hold of his heart and his state appeared so uncertain that he no longer knew what would become of him. This consequently caused him such terrible torments that he could only convey them by comparing them to those of hell. No matter how he prayed, fears and disturbing anxieties increased his pain so that all at once his spirit was paralyzed. The solitude he had regarded as a safe haven now seemed like a stormy sea. (Eulogy)

But writing his letters some 40 years removed from trials lost in the distant fog of memory, Brother could confidently state the folly of his youthful fears:

I cannot agree to calling this self-deception, since the soul in this state desires God exclusively. If this is self-deception then it is up to God to correct it; may he do with me as he pleases (Letter 2).

And in this statement we see the solution to the dark night. Despite inner torments, Brother teaches us to *plunge ourselves into the abyss of Faith in complete abandonment and trust*. In doing so, we're transformed in marvelous ways ... in the mysterious union where our virtue meets His grace. As we practice faith, we are given a more lively faith. As we practice hope, our hope is made more enduring by His invisible hand. As we practice love, we are given a love that can withstand all things. And so it is with all the virtues. Such is the reciprocal gift of friendship that is born of the Practice of the Presence of God.

TOWARD FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD THROUGH THICK AND THIN

But Brother's great lament was that too few souls learn to seek God in this way of continual friendship. Through him we deduce the reason souls aren't brought to infused contemplation is they scarcely think of God throughout the day let alone talk to Him continuously. Those on the other hand who are faithful to the Practice of the Presence of God will no doubt come to taste intimate friendship ... for God is very giving to those who seek Him in this way. Here's what Brother teaches:

Think of God often, night and day, in all your activities and even when you relax. He is always near to you and with you; do not leave him alone. You would consider it rude to leave a friend who is visiting you by himself; then why abandon God and leave him alone? Do not forget him. Think of him often, adore him continually, live and die with him. This is the true occupation of a Christian (Letter 10).

Brother Lawrence lived as though only he and God existed in the world and he wouldn't even pick up a piece of straw from the ground were it not for love of Him. This is friendship practiced to a heroic degree. It's also a friendship fully grounded in the ordinary events of life ... our love being continually proved by the Little Way we more commonly associate with his sister in Carmel, St. Therese.

To get to this point, though, we need to have some understanding of how friendship is developed and nurtured in our interior life. It's said that God gives consolation to prove his love to us and desolation so that we may prove ours to Him. And this is what we now consider.

Faithful Practice of the Presence of God is a defining characteristic of the Illuminative Way. Here, propelled by a habit of contemplation – both acquired in the manner of Brother Lawrence and infused if God wills - the soul feels the consolation of walking in God's Light. The soul mysteriously senses Christ to be present in everything it does ... in all its thoughts, words and actions. He's present as friend ... teacher ... guide ... Lord and Savior. All the virtues gloriously arrayed are what the soul experiences. The tranquil night ... or so it seems.

Then one day things change and our joyous life in the Light slips away like sand running through our fingers. We're left in desolation. Instead of walking beside us, Christ now steps back, puts his hand on our shoulder and with a smile and a gentle nudge pushes us forward. It's like a father holding the hand of his little child just learning to walk ... then releasing his hand and saying "go."

The soul now finds itself in an uncomfortable position of confusion and uncertainty. It's as if the soul is lost in the woods at night and the lantern has gone out. Nothing but the soft glow of the moon is available to guide our steps. And we get side-swiped by the branches, thorns and thickets. Then a new kind of light comes upon us ... a "ray of darkness." Instead of joyous presence we're now faced with absence. And our contemplation brings the terrible gift of self-knowledge. In this dark light, the soul no longer sees itself as a Saint in the making; rather all its good works seem as naught.

A tremendous gulf opens as the soul is faced with the reality of Christ as we now see Him ... and what we've come to know of ourselves in comparison. It seems a deep chasm – an impassible abyss – separates us from the Christ we once knew so well. And there's no way across.

And all because He let go of our hand.

What is such a soul to do? Lovingly accept the trial as long as it lasts, patiently endure it in loving acceptance ... and never give up. Because even in the midst of these inner trials, the soul knows deep down that Christ will return. In fact, he never left ... we just don't know it to be so.

We might ask why a soul walks in His Light for a while ... and then everything goes dark? To this we can look to St. John of the Cross for guidance. God does two things in this night: he illuminates and He purifies. And what's the purpose of this? To rid us - pull up by the very roots -

our habitual imperfections. And embracing this purification is how we prove our love to Him. Consolation and desolation, then, work hand in hand to forge a true and lasting friendship. But for now the soul isn't quite ready. So we find ourselves in alternating periods of Light followed by darkness and all the while we're never quite able to put two and two together. And why not?

This is the time St. Teresa calls the spiritual betrothal. Both God and soul have agreed they're going to be together but the soul isn't quite ready to do its part to bring union to fruition. It's like the soul says "I'm willing to give you 95% ... but I still need 5% just for me." This 5%, of course, being the habitual imperfections the soul still clings to. Christ, being the gentleman He is, simply shrugs and says "Ok, I'll be here when you get back." So he turns off the Light of His presence ... and gives us the ray of darkness.

What we're still learning is that God isn't satisfied with 95% ... He wants 100%. He's not satisfied with spiritual betrothal ... He wants spiritual marriage. But He's willing to wait if that's what WE want. And in waiting we chose with habitual imperfections ... for we're making a conscious choice to **forget about Him** when we pursue our little indulgences ... even if it's just for a little while.

When God gives us the Light of illumination He's saying ... "I am with you." And when He gives us the ray of darkness He's saying ... "Are you ready to come back yet?" When this dawns on the soul, the gift of self-knowledge has accomplished its task. We see reality as it truly is, we commit ourselves to cooperate in pulling up this little imperfection and we move to a deeper room in our interior castle. Most important: we **remember Him** more faithfully.

And the ray of darkness goes out ... the light of illumination returns ... and Christ is back again. And this cycle goes on ... and on ... and on ... until no more habitual imperfections remain.

LIVING FLAMES OF LOVE

Then, perhaps, we'll find ourselves in the perpetual light and peace of the 7th mansion or unitive way ... the place from which Brother Lawrence speaks. Susan Muto describes this as a union where:

The soul is no longer able to speak of the bestowal by God of a *passing touch* but of an *all-consuming awareness* of the indwelling presence of the Three Divine Persons. The soul sees, not with human eyes but with a kind of visionary *seeing into* or intimacy with Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Where Lovers Meet p93).

The cycle of absence and presence ends and only the complete harmony of soul with Divine Light remains. While Brother Lawrence was always very hidden about revealing personal details – preferring instead to offer advice and encouragement to those walking his path – he, nevertheless, drops numerous clues about his intimate friendship and Trinitarian life:

Far from chastising me, this King, full of goodness and mercy, lovingly embraces me, seats me at his table, waits on me himself, gives me the keys to his treasures, and treats me in all things as his favorite (Letter 2).

If on occasion I turn away either because of necessity or weakness, inner movements so charming and delightful that I am embarrassed to talk about them, call me immediately back to him (Letter 2).

It seems to me that peace of mind and soul comes to me in my sleep. Even if I were capable of suffering, it would be from not having any suffering at all. My tranquility is so great that I fear nothing (Letter 5).

He prays everywhere, not using many words, but secretly in the depths of his soul. He prays while walking, conversing, resting, reading or working. He praises God continually and in all his actions gives glory to God, like the seraphim of Isaiah (Ways of Brother Lawrence).

And I (experience) him in such a way that I can sometimes say I no longer believe, I see (Letter 11).

We can also turn to a younger contemporary of Brother Lawrence ... another French mystic living just a few short miles from the Carmelite monastery who echo's the good brother and anticipates their equally French spiritual sister St. Therese. It's through the pen of Fr. de Caussade who provides some of the most insightful commentary into the experience of the indwelling Trinity born of the Practice of the Presence of God:

For these souls, their hearts tell them what God desires. They have only to listen to the promptings of their hearts to interpret his will in the existing circumstances. God's plans, disguised as they are, reveal themselves to us through our intuition rather than through our reason. They disclose themselves in various ways: by chance or by what seems to be a compulsive thrust which allows no choice of action, by a sudden impulse, by some supernatural rapture, or very often by something which attracts or repels us.

He continues,

to obey this apparent disorder is to have reached the summit of virtue and it is one we do not reach without long years of effort. It is, quite simply, perfection.

And why?

The soul gradually falls into the habit of acting always by an instinctive following of God's wishes. Such a soul realizes that it can do nothing better than deal with whatever crops up first without all the careful thought it formerly used to need ... following those promptings of grace which cannot lead it astray. And what grace does is nothing short of marvelous to those who observe it with clear eyes and intelligent minds. There are no rules, yet there is perfect organization; no proper arrangements, yet all is well ordered; no serious thinking, yet profound conclusions; no effort, yet everything done well; no foresight, yet swift adaption to every new happening. (Abandonment to Divine Providence, p105)

The Practice of the Presence of God: a pathway to union that's easy to understand but difficult to practice. All it requires, though, is a simple choice on our part ... to give our "yes" just as Mary did. A choice that brings remarkable good to our souls and becomes the pathway by which we traverse all the sublime teachings of our Carmelite masters.

Saints of Carmel ... pray for us that we'll always Practice the Presence of God and come to have some taste of life in the indwelling Trinity ... a promise Our Lord opens to all. May we emulate Brother Lawrence to never give up such glory for trifles. Amen.