

Our Carmelite Promise: To Ponder Always In Imitation of Mary

The Way of Recollection

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. 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 focus on the importance of Mary; specifically the words we say: "entrust this, my Promise, to the Virgin Mary, Mother and Queen of Carmel."

We're members of an Order devoted to Our Lady in very particular way: to emulate her model of prayer to ponder always and to walk in spiritual simplicity until our lives become a continual living and breathing Magnificat. Mary's example challenges us to grow beyond set devotions to seek mature friendship through the Teresian example of mental prayer until it's becomes habitual ... where we are continually recollected:

The particular aspect of the Blessed Virgin Mary that must be present in any person called to Carmel is that of an inclination to "meditate in the heart." All the other aspects of Marian life and devotion can be present, for example, the Scapular, the Rosary. They are, however, secondary to this aspect of Marian devotion (Ratio #75).

Thus, to "ponder always" is to be recollected. Our guides today will be St. Teresa and the individual who had perhaps the greatest influence on her ... Francisco de Osuna.

BACKGROUND ON OSUNA

While St. Teresa and St. John are considered the crown jewels of 16th century Spanish mysticism, both owe a large debt to their predecessor Francisco de Osuna. He was born around 1492 and was a Franciscan priest from southern Spain who taught in the years just prior to our Carmelite masters. The principal work he is known for is "The Third Spiritual Alphabet," a treatise on recollection, the "narrow gate" we must walk with no exception.

Through Osuna, Teresa developed her teaching that humility is the basis for everything and that “entering within” is the means by which we find Christ in prayer. And we find many of the expressions she would later take as her own ... images like the wax seal and the hedge hog curling up as illusions to infused prayer. Further, Osuna’s way was primarily affective; the key ingredient behind the Teresian concept of mental prayer “as a loving conversation between friends.”

And like Brother Lawrence’s Practice of the Presence of God, Osuna’s teaching on recollection is meant to be our habitual state. There’s to be no difference between our formal times of prayer and everything else we do. Recollection is meant to be prayer without ceasing ... a “holy habit” that is acquired only through years of practice quieting ourselves. Then, prayer no longer requires work or conscious effort. Rather, it becomes ingrained in us until it becomes like second nature ... as effortless and natural as breathing. This is His gift to us ... where grace and virtue meet.

But perhaps Osuna’s greatest contribution to St. Teresa was his relentless hammering away that the heart and mind must be kept in continual custody ... the remedy to the “wild horses” that so plagued her. Without first learning to quiet and still the faculties, the soul can never learn to hear the Master’s voice who speaks to us in the language of silence.

A BRIEF TOUR THROUGH THE THIRD SPIRITUAL ALPHABET

So let’s take a brief look at some of Osuna’s maxims from “The Third Spiritual Alphabet” to get a taste for his teaching and the influence he had on Teresa . . .

On friendship with God as the basis for everything:

1. Friendship and communion with God is entirely possible in this life of exile. This communion is more certain than anything else in the world and nothing is more joyous, more valuable or more precious (p45).
2. The joy of such friendship is so great that God invites us to it as if to a remarkable festival; for God’s festivals are none other than rejoicing with his friends (p47).

On the means we must employ to enter into this friendship:

1. Seek this communion through whatever means possible, the soul must be ever watchful, not resting but fixing its heart only on God (p48).
2. Choose the most fruitful method for you and hurry! (p 49).
3. If you wish better success, do not go out of yourself but look for God in your heart. He is nearer to you and deeper within you than you are yourself (p 50).

On recollection as the cure for the distracted mind:

1. Wherever you go carry your mind along, for no one should go divided unto himself. Do not allow the body to travel one path, the heart another (p50).
2. He who possesses his mind and reins in his reflections truly loves his soul and in this will find much goodness (p53).
3. A secure mind is like a continual feast (p53).

Osuna also addresses our attitudes and dispositions ... how we are to wait for God in our hearts. Echoing the Gospel, he cautions us to be ever watchful ... “the Lord does not wish to apprise us of the exact time of his arrival, for we are to be ready to welcome him at whatever hour and time.” (p241) Habitual recollection, then, is the means by which we are to be continually attentive.

Like Teresa, Osuna describes our Lord as a gentleman who, “being very courteous, does not wish to enter into the houses of our hearts unless we ourselves are there to welcome him. So He knocks at the doors of our consent with his holy inspiration.” (p241) And it’s through distractions that we fail to welcome Him ... each time we assent, we lose sight of Christ and our union suffers. So important is this Osuna declares “if you analyze evil, you will discover that it begins when the heart is distracted and scattered.” (p244) He then makes a variety of pleas that no doubt struck St. Teresa to the very core:

Nothing is more fleeting in me than my heart; how often it abandons me to run after evil thoughts and how many times it offends God. Vain, restless, fickle, my heart runs away as it pleases, deaf to divine counsel. It cannot be contained within itself and changes more often than the most changeable thing. Distracted by an infinity of things, it roams here and there through countless experiences in endless search of rest. When my heart is totally miserable from all this effort, it reappears, drained of all repose, feeling no peace within but all out of sorts with itself, and then, fleeing once more in a confusion of wills, it changes advice, builds new things, destroys the old, rebuilds what it just tore down, reorders and rearranges things, again and again, because it no longer desires what it thought it desired, and so it never can stay in one place. (p246)

He continues in a manner that foreshadows St. John of the Cross from “The Ascent”...

Fleeing from heavenly to earthly considerations, my heart is open to vanity, curiosity carries it off, desire seduces it, delight deceives it, luxury sullies it, envy torments, ire disturbs and sadness wearies it, so that finally it is cast to all the vices, miserably unhappy and all because it chose to abandon the one God who could satisfy it. (p246)

Osuna concludes: "I am not united with God and therefore am divided within myself." (p247)

In these passionate laments, Osuna reveals the great need souls have to discipline their unruly hearts ... the dangers of interior dissension being simply too great for souls walking the way of perfection. If "con-templation" means to be with God in His temple ... then interior battles like this are how we banish Christ from our very hearts. Thus, Osuna directs souls to continually quiet the understanding and put to rest the speculation, scrutiny and analyzing of the intellect to reach out to God in the loving simplicity of our hearts ... what St. Teresa would later describe as to "not think much, but love much."

IMPACT ON ST. TERESA

Knowing St. Teresa's own struggles with a distracted mind and heart – the wild horses that plagued her – it's easy to see how such teachings spoke to her and showed the way out of her life-long dilemma. These internal battles were especially acute in her early life in Carmel. She was young – familiar with popular devotional books - but knowing very little about prayer itself. Then her uncle wisely discerned what was missing and introduced her to "The Third Spiritual Alphabet." The impact, she tells us, was immediate:

My uncle gave me a book. It is called The Third Spiritual Alphabet and endeavors to teach the prayer of recollection. And although during this first year I read many good books, I did not know how to proceed in prayer or how to be recollected. And so I was very happy with this book and resolved to follow that path with all my strength. I began to take time out for solitude, to confess frequently and to follow that path, taking the book for my master (Life, p67).

As St. Teresa describes, prior to reading Osuna she paid little attention to venial sins and imperfections – especially the type of interior struggles Osuna described in his laments. And that nearly destroyed her. But now,

His Majesty began to grant me many favors. He granted me the prayer of quiet. And sometimes I arrived at union, although I did not understand what the one was or the other or how much they were to be prized. (Life, p67).

And young and impressionable though she was, Teresa discovered a method of recollecting her mind and heart that was all her own: reading a few short lines from a book as a means to spark interior conversation with Christ:

My thoughts ran wild. With a book I began to collect them and my soul was drawn to recollection. And many times just opening a book was enough; at other times I read a little, and at others a great deal, according to the favor the Lord granted me (Life, p69).

TERESA'S NEW CONTRIBUTION – Describing the Gateway to Infused Prayer

Active recollection in the manner of Osuna led Teresa quickly and naturally to the passive recollection she did not yet understand but would later describe in such sublime detail. She went from wandering outside the castle and wading in the moat ... to knocking on the door of the King's inner chamber. What a marvelous surprise and grace this must have seemed!

So the grace of contemplation began to flower. Later, the Lord granted her further gifts: first the ability to *understand* what she was experiencing; then the ability to *explain* it to others. In time her teachings expanded on what she learned from Osuna to add something new: marvelous descriptions of the mysterious intersection where our action in prayer gives way to God's initiative in infused contemplation ... the active yielding to the passive.

Let's turn to "The Way of Perfection" to show how this passing to the infused occurs. As mentioned, the soul uses a book, picture or other suitable method to gather the faculties:

This prayer is called recollection because the soul enters within itself to be with its God. And the Divine Master comes more quickly to teach it and give it the prayer of quiet than He would through any other method (Way of Perfection, Ch 28).

She continues . . .

If the recollection is true, it is felt very clearly for it produces some effect in the soul ... there is a withdrawing of the senses ... the eyes close ... the faculties are drawn inward ... the soul is aware of being strengthened and fortified (Way of Perfection, Ch 28).

During this prayer, the intellect continues to work though the effort becomes simplified. Our interior conversation slows ... words are replaced by a simple gaze. Perhaps, then, the Lord will take us by the hand to cross the bridge to infused prayer as St. Teresa describes in her descriptions of the prayer of quiet:

The soul enters into peace or, better, the Lord puts it at peace by His presence. The soul fails to understand how it understands for this state resembles an interior and exterior swoon. The person feels the greatest delight in his body and a great satisfaction in his soul. The faculties are still; they wouldn't want to busy though they are not yet completely lost (Way of Perfection, Ch 31)

In the prayer of quiet, we come to know the words of the Baptist in an experiential way: We must decrease so that God can increase. Our efforts wane and Christ takes the initiative ... a comingling of active and passive prayer ... part natural and part supernatural:

At most, a gentle word from time to time is sufficient, as in the case of one who blows on a candle to enkindle it again when it begins to die out. But if the candle is burning, blowing on it will in my opinion serve no other purpose than to put it out (Way of Perfection, Ch 31).

Our will has been made captive as we gaze upon Him in silent wonder and awe. Yet our intellect and memory still roam free ... the last vestiges of the "wild horses" hanging on for dear life. For this, St. Teresa counsels "when the will finds itself in this quiet, it shouldn't pay any more attention to the intellect than it would to a madman" (Way of Perfection, Ch 31).

And here it would be fitting to provide a few words from St. John of the Cross on how to respond to the Lord's initiative and not stifle the gift He wants to give. In the beginning, the silencing of the faculties in contemplation can greatly trouble the soul for we don't recognize it for what it is; thinking it mere idleness. And sometimes contemplation is so subtle that we trample it underfoot by striving to keep our mind active ... to continue "doing" rather than to simply "be." Either way, St. John counsels:

such persons should not mind if the operations of their faculties are being lost to them; they should desire rather that this be done quickly so they may be no obstacle to the operation of the infused contemplation God is bestowing (Dark Night, Book 1, Ch 11).

THE CULMINATION OF ST. TERESA'S TEACHING

St. Teresa's teaching on infused prayer reached its pinnacle in "The Interior Castle;" a treatise on "the kingdom of God is within." She teaches that our soul is like a castle containing many rooms and Christ is to be found in the innermost chamber. Her depictions of prayer states neatly fit this analogy ... we move from room to room until we find Christ in true union.

The following illustration was inspired by Susan Muto's "Where Lovers Meet." It's not meant to be a comprehensive description of the mansions; rather an illustration of one just aspect of it. Specifically, how Teresa's prayer states flow from one another and how the prayer of the higher mansions is simply deeper experience of what came before.

When the soul prays with vocal prayers we are said to be in the first mansion. When we work our minds and hearts discursively, as in lectio or meditating on the mysteries of the rosary, we have moved to the second.

With time and grace we move beyond set prayer for a more continuous recollection in the manner of Osuna and we find ourselves talking to God in the silence of our hearts in all we do. We have entered the third mansion. Our cup being continually full, we have done what we can to prepare ourselves for the infused graces St. Teresa shows. Thus, at some point during prayer the individual might begin to feel the inner call to contemplation. The soul no longer feels any desire to ponder on the Lord, His mysteries and so on. He feels drawn to let it go ... to simply "be" ... to rest in His presence as the Cure of Ars says ... "I look at Him while He looks at me." This is the recollection of Osuna giving way to that of Teresa. Our activity may be greater or lesser, affective or simplified ... depending on how God can best work in the soul.

Perhaps this stillness deepens. The senses "notice a gentle drawing inward like a hedgehog curling up or a turtle drawing into its shell" (Interior Castle, IV). This is recollection moving from the active to passive and becoming the prayer of quiet. We're now entering the fourth mansion. Here our will is completely captivated by our Lord but not in a way that is considered or analyzed. We're not thinking "I love Him because ... or for this or that reason." We simply love in a silent, non-conceptual way. All the while our intellect and memory might roam free like so many "wild horses." But we have no desire to pay attention to them ... we let them go. To latch on is to resist the grace being given ... to bring passive prayer back to active ways. This is what St. John warns against.

Perhaps this inner silence deepens even further. Distractions cease entirely and intellect, will and memory are all completely stilled by God. This is the "pure" contemplation of the prayer of union which is no longer human but entirely supernatural. We're brought to the "sleep of the faculties" ... the silent wonder and awe of the fifth mansion where the Lord is tasted in an experiential way.

This deepening silence falls in the "ordinary way" ... the path of contemplation that's a possibility to all. For some, though, the "extraordinary way" beckons ... where the profound silence of the prayer of union becomes the environment where imaginative visions and

locutions are inwardly experienced. The soul has now entered the sixth mansion. This phenomena, though, is really just a spiritual type of imperfection that ultimately needs to be purged. And so we also find St. Teresa's version of the Dark Night in this mansion where all remaining imperfections are purified.

These trials lead to the seventh mansion where the soul finds itself gloriously transformed into a likeness in love with Christ. Here the soul still continues to pray as before ... only in a more mature way. If praying vocally or discursively, the soul is quick to hear and answer the Master's call to infused contemplation. And its prayer never ceases; the recollection of Osuna no longer being a struggle but has become internalized to the point of being second nature ... as easy and effortless as breathing.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully these brief illustrations shed some light on the Carmelite teaching on recollection ... the way we're taught to ponder always in imitation of Mary. Much ground has been covered so perhaps some closing counsels from St. Teresa are in order regarding infused prayer.

First, all of these prayer states can occur in a single time of prayer ... we move from room to room as our prayer becomes progressively more silent and interior. Second, this journey through the mansions is short in duration. The entire time from laying down our rosary, being interiorly drawn into the stillness of recollection and possibly quiet or union is typically no more than 15-30 minutes as Teresa explains. Third, we should never forget infused prayer is a gift ... one that he may grant often, infrequently or never ... depending on the grace He wishes to bestow.

Lastly, to best prepare ourselves for the infused graces the most important thing is to continually practice the active recollection of Osuna. It's a habit we're to acquire. A main reason souls aren't raised to contemplation – even the pious and devout among us - is that they scarcely think of Christ in their daily activities let alone speak to Him continuously. As St. Teresa says "practice this recollection often during the day. Then should the Lord desire to raise you to higher things He will discover in you the readiness" (Way of Perfection Ch 30). "A person should desire no other path, even if he be at the summit of contemplation; on this road he walks safely" (Life, Ch 22).

Saints of Carmel ... pray for us that we may learn to imitate Mary by pondering always. May we practice recollection continually by joining our minds and hearts to Christ in everything we think, say and do. Amen.