

## **Our Carmelite Promise: A Living Hope**

Today we continue our ongoing discussion of our Carmelite Promise. Let's begin, as always, by reviewing the words we say:

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.

Previously we focused on the phrase "tend toward perfection" as it relates to the theological virtue of Faith. Today we address Hope. The catechism states:

Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit (CCC, 1817).

Theologians teach that Hope cures two contrary spiritual defects that put our interior lives into jeopardy. The first, presumption, is the false confidence where we place undue emphasis on "our work" as means to sanctification. The second, discouragement, is the opposite where we see effort on our part as too difficult, thereby leading us to sloth or even despair. In both cases, trust in God is lacking ... although for different reasons. Thus, "the aim of the purification of hope is to free the virtue from all alloy of inordinate self-love (Three Ages, Vol 2, p183)" that causes us to excessively rely on our strength or habitually give in to our weaknesses. And herein lies one of the many balancing acts of our spiritual lives ... and Hope is the means by which we strike that balance.

Today we'll address three characteristic traits of a strong and vibrant Hope: unceasing prayer, sanctification through the duties of the present moment and unwavering confidence and trust in God's infinite mercy. Putting these traits into action lies at the heart of our Carmelite vocation.

### **RECOLLECTION**

For several months we've explored in detail Carmelite teachings on recollection. We discussed the ways of Francisco de Osuna and Brother Lawrence to center our mind and heart on Christ in all that we do. Then we looked at how this unceasing prayer opens the door to the infused prayer states St. Teresa describes in her mansions and how it also guides us through the prayer stages of purification and illumination St. John of the Cross shows in his nights.

And it's through St. John of the Cross we learn that perfection in Hope must be accomplished through purification of our memory ... the interior faculty responsible for presenting forms and images to our mind that takes our gaze off God and places it squarely on us. The goal of St. John's teaching is to show the path to union where:

In all its thoughts it turns immediately to the Beloved; in all converse and business it at once speaks about the Beloved; when eating, sleeping, keeping vigil or doing anything else, it centers all its care on the Beloved (with) anxious longings of love (Dark Night, 2.19.2).

Getting to this point, though, is no easy task and requires cooperation between God and soul that begins with our efforts in the active night of spirit and is brought to fruition by God in the trials of the passive night of spirit. Here we're brought face to face with the knowledge we can't will ourselves to holiness through brute force and that God must complete in us that which we're unable or unwilling to do on our own. As passive trials are God's doing, though, let's focus our attention on the purifying work we must undertake to "follow (the) method of disencumbering, emptying and depriving the faculties of their natural authority (Ascent, 3.2.2)."

St. John begins with a statement that is typical of him in its starkness and brutal honesty: "There is no way to union with God without annihilating the memory as to all forms (Ascent, 3.2.4)." The work of recollection, then, is specifically devoted to this annihilating task by continually redirecting our thoughts back to God whenever we notice we've strayed. This, in a nutshell, is the entirety of what our two masters of recollection – Brother Lawrence and Francisco de Osuna – teach us to do.

Failure to maintain custody over the wanderings of mind and heart lead to all manner of harm; particularly improper judgments of people and situations born of a perhaps unconscious reliance on the truth we place on our personal beliefs and opinions. Thus, unbridled passion causes us to find solace in self and refuge in what is transient and beneath God. The devil, of course, preys on this by inflaming our thoughts and feelings to pride, greed, anger and so on so that our natural imperfections give rise to venial or even mortal sin. Here St. John gives another important maxim to encourage us to persevere in this most difficult of work:

The devil is unable to do anything in the soul save through the operations of its faculties. If the memory is annihilated, the devil is powerless, for he finds no means of getting his grip on the soul and consequently can do nothing (Ascent, 3.4.1).

He continues,

The soul is incapable of truly acquiring control of the passions and restriction of the inordinate appetites without forgetting and withdrawing from the sources of these emotions. Disturbances never arise in a soul unless through the apprehensions of memory. When all things are forgotten, nothing disturbs the peace or stirs the appetites. As the saying goes: what the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't want (Ascent, 3.5.1).

Discipline and self-control, then, lead to the peace and tranquility spiritual persons longingly seek. The result is a deeper degree of purity of heart and a more informed conscience where souls can more resolutely resist the temptations of thought and feeling that lead us astray and cause us to be forgetful of God. St. John describes this happy state as “the sum of all perfection” whose characteristics are “forgetfulness of created things, remembrance of the Creator, attention turned toward inward things and loving the beloved (Poetry #14).” Our whole being, then, resonates with an attitude of Hope where we live a continual Advent of watching and waiting. Simple attentiveness to our Lord in recollection makes us like the wise virgins whose lamps are continually lit in anticipation of the bridegroom.

Our work begins with cultivating an attitude of silence as we've shown in earlier talks. Silence of body and spirit disposes the soul to listen and hear the Master who dwells in the deepest center of our soul ... the teacher and guide whose soft, subtle voice rarely rises above the loud din of an undisciplined mind and heart. When we learn to change the channel of the movies running through our mind and hear the gentle stirrings of the Holy Spirit whose voice rises like incense from the depths of our being; we're one step closer to living the reality St. Paul promises: “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me (Gal 2:20).”

To reach this happy state, we can glean some counsels from St. John of the Cross:

- 1) Devote your mind and heart to the task before you in the present moment. God's will is done by fulfilling the duties of our state in life as we will soon see
- 2) When not otherwise engaged, worship God continually in the silence of your heart and, as often as possible, in the midst of your activities
- 3) When you notice your mind has strayed, gently and lovingly call it back to the Lord. Do not allow yourself to rest in your joys, hopes, sorrows and fears but view these as means to elevate your mind and heart to their source and end ... God
- 4) And as St. Teresa says ... let nothing disturb you ... or recollection will be lost.

## PRESENT MOMENT

Closely aligned to recollection is the concept of the sacrament of the present moment and for this we turn to Fr. De Caussade, considered one of the most important mystical teachers between the time of St. John of the Cross and St. Therese. Though a Jesuit, Father's spirituality more closely resembled the Carmelite, especially St. John with whom he had a great affinity. Like John, Father wrote from the point of view of the soul as a blind man who finds his only light and guide in the darkness of faith. And foreshadowing Therese, de Caussade taught that abandonment to the will of God in loving trust and confidence is the principal means of our sanctification.

So similar was Therese's understanding of abandonment there's speculation she must have been familiar with Father's teaching. De Caussade's book, "Abandonment to Divine Providence," was published just prior to Therese's birth and it was immensely popular in France. Perhaps it even made its way to Mr. Martin's bookshelf! It's known, however, that de Caussade strongly influenced fellow Jesuit Fr. Pichon, Therese's early spiritual director, so it's likely she first learned abandonment through his sermons and in confession. Setting speculation aside, though, we can look to Therese's own words to see the present moment was a living reality to her:

If I did not simply live from one moment to the next, it would be impossible for me to keep my patience. I can see only the present, I forget the past and I take good care not to think about the future. (ADP,p16)

Hope, then, means finding God in the here and now. And how do we do that? Father's teaching, which so wonderfully anticipates the Little Way is simply this: most of us live very humdrum lives filled with a multiplicity of trivial and mundane tasks. We don't need to aspire to great things because God speaks to us moment by moment in the ordinary events of our lives. So every act ... every thought ... every second carries significance for these everyday moments are stamped with the will of God and our loving "yes" to whatever comes our way is the means of our sanctification. Let's take a look at a few of his maxims:

Each moment (brings) a duty which must be faithfully fulfilled. Those spiritually inclined need nothing more (ADP, p22).

What is the secret of finding this treasure? There isn't one. This treasure is everywhere. It is offered to us all the time and wherever we are (ADP, p25).

If we do not concentrate entirely on doing the will of God we shall find neither happiness nor holiness no matter what pious practices we adopt...We must realize that

we cannot be really fed, strengthened, purified, enriched and made holy unless we fulfill the duties of the present moment (ADP, p31).

So every moment of our lives can be a kind of communion with his love, a communion which can produce in our soul fruits similar to those we receive with the body and blood of the Son of God (ADP, p48)

What practical Carmelite-like advice! Though our masters didn't often use the expression "present moment," they were intimately aware of its meaning and implications. St. Teresa often communicated these sentiments in her teachings on obedience. For example, in Chapter 5 of "Foundations" we find an extended teaching on finding perfection in the here and now by setting aside our desires for the need of others. In wonderfully Carmelite terms, she summarized the importance of the present moment by counseling her daughters:

not to be sad when obedience draws you (away from prayer) to involvement in exterior matters. Know that if it is in the kitchen, the Lord walks among the pots and pans helping you both interiorly and exteriorly (Foundations, p67)

As she teaches, this can be a very painful exercise because it means setting aside our will for His; perfection in which means forgetting entirely about pleasing ourselves in order to please God. In this case, by taking care of those He's given us. In short, no matter how delightful our "turning inward" in prayer might be, if it doesn't lead to a more virtuous and heroic "going out" toward others then our prayer is in vain.

The difficulty St. Teresa describes is the tension between active and contemplative works which take on a particularly Carmelite understanding in the Dark Nights. This tension is an interior trial, one not readily noticed by others. And it's an aspect of the hidden lives we Carmelites lead ... where so much depth and richness lies below the surface of our souls that most times only God can see it. As a result, very extraordinary souls in the eyes of God may seem very ordinary in the eyes of others. This hiddenness - and all it entails - is the essence of what de Caussade means by the sacrament of present moment:

So their lives, although really extraordinary, show nothing which is not quite usual and ordinary. They fulfill all the duties ...just as others apparently do. We can investigate them closely but we shall find nothing special or striking about them. Their lives seem commonplace. It is their dependence on God's will which settles everything for them. God uses them to help other souls (ADP, p77).

Prayer, of course, should never be divorced from action which is why the marriage of recollection and the present moment is how we put the virtue of Hope into action. As we have

shown, recollection teaches us to hear and follow the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Discernment to de Caussade is simple for prayerful souls:

In order to keep on the straight road leading to perfection, we must make quite sure that all spiritual promptings we receive are from God. We shall know they are not divinely inspired if they withdraw us from the duties of our state of life. For these duties are the clearest indication of God's will and nothing should supersede them (ADP, p32).

And,

We should at once obey these promptings of grace without relying on our reason or considering the matter at all. There is never a moment when there is not some virtue to be practiced (p81).

All of which leads us to abandonment ... the key ingredient to living the demands of the present moment and the virtue of Hope to its fullest. Let's again look to some of de Caussade's councils for abandoned souls:

All I want is for you to carry on as you are doing and endure what you have to do – but change your attitude to all these things. And this change is simply to say I will to all that God asks (ADP, p35).

If we carefully fulfill the duties imposed on us by our state of life, if we quietly follow any impulse coming from God, if we peacefully submit to the influence of grace, we are making an act of total abandonment (ADP, p66).

For those who have surrendered themselves completely to God, all they are and do has power. Their lives are sermons. They are apostles. God gives a special force to all they say and do, even to their silence, their tranquility and their detachment, which, quite unknown to them, profoundly influences other people (ADP, p60).

And here we see how recollection and living in the present moment flower into a Hope that, God willing, becomes heroic. And what better example of this do we have than our very own St. Therese!

### **CONFIDENCE AND TRUST**

One of St. Therese's biographers defined hope as "love in the process of becoming" (With Empty Hands, p107). How wonderfully this quote captures the essence of the words of our Promise to "tend toward perfection." Perfection is not an absolute and we will never reach a

point where we can say the work of our sanctification is done. Growth is the key ... even for the Saints among us! We can see this, for example, in St. John's Spiritual Canticle. If textbook perfection of spiritual marriage and transforming union is reached by the middle stanzas, what need is there for him to say more? Because even with perfect charity ... one continually driven by the breath of the Holy Spirit ... growth in depth and intensity of love is always possible.

And we can see this in the example of Therese's own life. We know from her writing she fell prey to the first spiritual defect discussed: the belief we can will ourselves to holiness through our own sheer effort. Much of her understanding of "littleness" can be traced to the growing realization she could not produce perfect love on her own, causing her to increasingly turn to God "for whom nothing is impossible" (Luke 1:37).

At the beginning of my spiritual life I used to ask myself what I would have to strive for later on because I believed it was quite impossible for me to understand perfection better; I learned very quickly since then that *the more one advances, the more one sees the goal is still far off*. And now I am simply resigned to see myself always imperfect and in this I find my joy (Story of a Soul, p 158)

So God is elusive and our search for Him is one of perpetual motion ... He can never be fully grasped. No sooner we reach one mountain peak that another one appears far off on the horizon. In Therese's case, the more she loved the more she wanted to love. However, she came to know we will never love as He loves ... God will always surpass us. The powerlessness of our love strikes to the heart of what Therese means to be "little" as we can see in these words spoken in her dying days:

Your love has gone before me and it has grown with me and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot fathom. Love attracts love and, my Jesus, my love leaps toward yours; it would like to fill the abyss that attracts it, but alas! It is not even like a drop of dew lost in the ocean! For me to love you as you love me I would have to borrow your own love and then only would I be at rest (Story of a Soul, p256)

The implication is love will never fully reach the desired goal ... we will always be God's debtors. For lesser souls, disillusionment is the trap; the second spiritual defect mentioned at the outset. And this, perhaps, is Therese's great accomplishment: turning the possibility for despair on its head. Therese often used words like trust ... confidence ... surrender ... abandonment as synonyms for Hope. And these interchangeable virtues were wrapped in a mantle particularly her own ... holy boldness ... even audacious certitude.

To illustrate, theologians teach Hope is closely linked to desire. And St. Therese's desires soared! She recognized that discouragement is a form of pride and instinctively knew the way to avoid the spiritual defects mentioned wasn't to rely on human nature as the means of

sanctification. Thus her oft repeated prayer: “O my God, I want to base my hope on You alone (Prayers).” And from this was born the bountiful and unshakeable confidence for which she’s known ... expressions of which can be found throughout her writings:

On the desire for total self-giving from her oblation to Merciful Love:

I am certain, then, that you will grant my desires; I know, O my God! That the more you want to give, the more you make us desire (Story of a Soul p276)

On her desire to be a saint:

God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness (Story of a Soul p207)

On the certainty of littleness as her special path:

The Lord is so good to me that it is quite impossible for me to fear Him. He has always given me what I desire or rather He has made me desire what He wants to give me (Story of a Soul p250)

On her posthumous mission:

God would not have given me the desire of doing good on earth after my death if He didn’t will to realize it; He would rather have given me the desire to rest in Him (Last Conversations p102)

The boldness of Therese’s desires reached a crescendo in her parting words from Story of a Soul. Our fully transformed saint had reached such a depth of simplicity that Faith, Hope and Love no longer operated as separate virtues in her soul requiring, as perhaps for most of us, discrete acts in which to grow. Rather the three theological virtues were now fused into a harmonious, living and breathing whole and the entirety of her spirituality could be reduced to one simple aspiration: “Draw me, we shall run (Story of a Soul p254).” Here she united herself fully to the prayer of Jesus in the agony in the garden. Her zeal for souls was such that she no longer even had to express the desires of her heart beyond “Draw me” ... for she knew that He knew and nothing more need be said. For our sake, perhaps, she asked and answered this question:

Perhaps this is boldness? No, for a long time You permitted me to be bold with You. You have said to me as the father of the prodigal son said to his older son: EVERYTHING that is mine is yours (Story of a Soul p255-6)

## **PARTING COMMENTS**



## Our Carmelite Promise – a series of talks by David Travers, OCDS

Hopefully we have shown in these few words of this talk that the unceasing prayer of recollected souls, living the sacrament of the present moment and boldly trusting in God's infinite mercy are ways we can learn to grow in Hope and thereby put into action the words of our Promise to "tend toward perfection." We will do our Carmelite masters proud to emulate them in this way!

Saints of Carmel ... pray for us that we may come to say just as St. Therese: "my folly is to hope." Amen.