

Our Carmelite Promise: Faith as Unknowing

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.

In previous months we touched upon the beatitudes and what it means to make a promise. Then we went into greater detail on discernment of spirits and recollection. Today we will focus on the phrase "tend toward evangelical perfection" and try and come to some understanding of what that might mean.

First, it should be noted, we say "tend toward." This indicates walking the way of perfection is a process or journey we continually undergo. There is no arbitrary finish line that says here is where we stop ... there is nothing more we need do. There's always room for growth ... even for those who might meet one of the many benchmarks Carmelite's use to define perfection such as transforming union or spiritual marriage. To stand still in the spiritual life is to regress.

Second, we need to come to some understanding of just what we mean when we speak of perfection ... for it can be approached from many different angles. As Carmelites, our understanding of perfection is about growth in virtue ... most especially the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Love. So the theological virtues will be the subject of our next few talks.

Today we will focus on the first of these – Faith – and approach it from its contemplative dimension; Faith as unknowing. Why this perspective? Well, as St. John of the Cross shows, Faith is the path we must walk to find union with God ... and unknowing is the means we must travel to find perfection in this virtue.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF UNKNOWING

Carmelite teachings are always grounded in Scripture. To explore the roots of our understanding of unknowing, we can look to St. Paul and his teaching on Faith in his letter to Hebrews. Here he teaches:

Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of *things not seen*. By faith we understand that the universe was ordered by the word of God, so that what is visible came into being *through the invisible* (HE 11:1,3)

Right away we get some clues as to what unknowing means; phrases like ... things not seen ... through the invisible. So Faith, then, is our assent to revealed Truth. In the words of our Creed ... “I believe.”

St. Paul then traces our Faith history beginning with Abel to Noah, then Abraham, Moses, David and all the prophets. He concludes:

All of these died in faith. They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth (HE 11:13). Though approved because of their faith ... God had foreseen something better for us, so that without us they should not be made perfect (HE 11:39-40).

Again more clues about unknowing ... saw it from afar ... strangers and aliens on earth. And while fullest perfection was closed to these faith-filled souls of old, it has been opened wide for us today through the person of Jesus Christ who makes our Faith perfect. We then have a duty to walk the way of perfection as St. Paul shows:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. (HE 12:1-2)

Sayings like “rid ourselves of every burden that clings to us” sets the stage for the broad range of teachings St. John of the Cross gave us that fall under the banner of Nada. Further, it’s the rationale for why Faith is a Dark Night as we will soon see.

But first, let’s skip to the next great teacher on Faith as unknowing as shown in the short book “Mystical Theology.” The true identity of this author remains a mystery. It’s apparent, though, he had great affinity for St. Paul and the Neo-platonic teachers of his day ... so much so that that he was long thought to be Dionysius, the Athenian convert St. Paul mentions in Acts. The stuff of legend; he is now known to us simply as Pseudo-Dionysius.

The opening words of “Mystical Theology” are an exuberant celebration of unknowing in prayer form:

Trinity!! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! Guide of Christians in the wisdom of heaven! Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence. Amid the deepest shadow they pour overwhelming light on what is most manifest. Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty. (Mystical Theology)

Again our definition of unknowing expands: unsensed and unseen ... sightless minds.

This work had immense influence on all mystical writers in the thousand or so years prior to the time of our Carmelite masters. Its major contribution was to show there are two ways of approaching God. The first, affirmative theology, makes use of “images, forms, ideas” in St. John’s terms. It’s the application of our mind to try to define God through the use of words: God is light ... goodness ... truth ... wisdom ... power ... might and so on. The use of thoughts like this is the food of meditation. Related to this are all the sensible feelings and consolations born of our meditative efforts.

Negative theology, on the other hand, sets all of this aside. It recognizes that affirmative methods ultimately fail because God simply can’t be grasped by our concepts of Him. Nor can feelings ever be reflective of union. So the negative is the way of contemplation. And where meditation is abstract - putting God in a box in a manner of speaking to help us learn with our natural understanding - contemplation is experiential; a knowing and tasting of God as He really is. It’s the mystical understanding of Faith ... one that seeks a living encounter with the Triune God who, nevertheless, remains hidden and in darkness separated from us by only a “thin veil.” Thus, the way of perfection in Faith means the affirmative must ultimately yield to the negative. It’s the doorway we must pass.

Here’s how Pseudo-Dionysius describes the experiential encounter with Christ found in the silence and solitude of our hearts ... echo’s that can be found in all St. John’s works:

Leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with Him who is beyond all being and knowledge.
(Mystical Theology)

He continues,

The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing. (Mystical Theology)

And here we might pass, God willing, through the doorway which is His gift of infused contemplation:

... the more it climbs, the more language falters and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely since it will finally be at one with Him who is indescribable.
(Mystical Theology)

There is, of course, the practical matter of just “how” one comes to pray in this way. For that, we turn to the latter work “The Cloud of Unknowing:”

When you go apart to be alone for prayer, put from your mind everything you have been doing or plan to do. Reject all thoughts be they good or be they evil. Do not pray with words unless you are really drawn to this; or if you do pray with words...do not weigh them or their meaning. See that nothing remains in your conscious mind save a *naked intent* stretching out toward God. (Book of Privy Counseling)

And in language that foreshadows St. John's night of spirit and St. Teresa's silence of the faculties:

Just as the cloud of unknowing lies above you, between you and your God, so you must fashion a cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and every created thing (Cloud, Ch 5)

The author is speaking of distractions that must be set aside for they're an obstacle to union ... a task that must be undertaken "with no exception." And in recognition of the relationship encounter, The Cloud teaches "by love (alone) may he be touched and embraced, never by thought." He concludes by quoting Scripture ... "Be still." (Cloud, Ch 5-7)

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS' CONTRIBUTION: Unknowing as Night

St. John of the Cross adds to our understanding by answering another practical consideration: "when" souls should begin praying in this way. We now turn to his famous 3-signs:

The first (sign) is the realization that one cannot make discursive meditation or receive satisfaction from it as before. Dryness is now the outcome. The second sign is an awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties on other particular objects, exterior or interior. The third and surest sign is that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God without particular considerations. (Ascent, Book 2, Ch 13)

So there's a specific time to enter into this way of prayer. Manifestly, it's not the way of beginners ... those just starting their walk in Faith. Using St. Teresa's terms, we're speaking of souls leaving the 3rd mansions for the 4th. These are the devout, well versed in prayer and the ascetic practices. Most important, God is beckoning them for more - but in a seemingly counter intuitive way. He calls them to lay aside the affirmative way of prayer - meditation - by making its practice distasteful. And a new doorway is opened ... the way of contemplation.

St John speaks of our proper conduct at this time:

All that is required of them here is freedom of soul, that they liberate themselves from the impediment and fatigue of ideas and thoughts and care not about thinking and meditating. They must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God (Dark Night, Book One, Chapter 10)

And so our imagery of unknowing expands: naked intent ... cloud of forgetting ... loving attentiveness. To this St. John adds another ... the Dark Night. In this image the night of sense – where we are purged of our appetites and desire for consolation – is likened to twilight where all that pertains to sense must fade from sight. The night of spirit – where we are deprived of rational light and blinded – is midnight where we learn Faith in pure darkness. Dawn – the light of approaching day – is the fruit of our deprivation where the thick, impenetrable cloud of darkness that previously separated soul from God is reduced to the “thin veil” of St. John’s Canticle. Perfection in faith is now visible on the horizon.

At first, night is seen as suffering because it “wearies, torments, defiles and weakens” the soul as we are deprived of God’s spirit in our pursuit of sensory excess. God generally purifies us in this first night through the ordinary circumstances of life: illness, misunderstandings with others, separation from loved ones and so on. Later, our trials become progressively more interior as we enter the second night where suffering becomes acute to the point of feeling separated from God and abandoned by Him. Then, mysteriously, night may become “tranquil and serene” as the wet, green wood of our soul dries and becomes one with the flame. We are drawing closer to the God we so ardently seek.

And Faith is the way of perfection we must walk through these nights. Why? Echoing Pseudo-Dionysius, St. John states:

Nothing in this life that could be imagined or conceived and understood by the intellect can be a proximate means to union with God (Ascent, Book 2, Ch 8). Only by means of faith, in divine light exceeding all understanding, does God manifest himself to the soul. The greater one’s faith the closer is one’s union with God (Ascent, Book 2, Ch 9).

So we reach out to the unseen and invisible ... using only our naked intent ... in loving and peaceful attentiveness ... shorn of all in our conscious mind that separates us ... and enduring all manner of interior and exterior trials ... in order to find intimate relationship with Christ in the silence of our hearts.

ST. THERESE AS PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

And what better example of this way of unknowing do we have than our very own St. Therese! If by Faith we reach out into the unseen and invisible and yet, paradoxically, find intimate union with Christ ... then St. Therese is a wonderful model for us to follow; a true disciple of St. John of the Cross. Celine had this to say about her sister:

Therese lived on bare faith her entire life. There was no soul less consoled in prayer. Nonetheless, people believed she was flooded with spiritual consolations, so unctuous were her words and deeds, so intimately was she united to God (A Memoir of My Sister, p103).

Therese’s lot was that Jesus told her nothing. So deep was her Faith that even as a teen she proclaimed “He is going to no trouble about carrying on a conversation with me! (Letters 74) And yet, “He is giving me a peace so great that it is doing me good! (Letters 76) This is the essence of paradox ... how she simply willed to believe that the nothingness she felt in the depths of her soul was in fact Christ Himself.

It was the coexistence of seeming contraries: joy and suffering ... aridity and serenity ... nothing and everything. Thus she gave us her description of her interior life as “Jesus sleeping, as usual, in my little boat” (Story of a Soul, p165). And this experience of unknowing evokes imagery of night particularly her own ... but one, nonetheless, that’s accessible to all:

My Fiance says nothing to me, and I say nothing to Him except that I love Him more than myself ... for I am more His than my own. I don’t see that we are advancing towards the summit of the mountain since our journey is being made underground, but it seems to me that we are approaching it without knowing how (Letters 110).

She continues that “my soul is always in the subterranean passage, but it is very happy! (Letters 115)” This was the spiritual understanding she came to know from various trials she endured from her youth. Just as St. John teaches, her purification came through the ordinary circumstances of life. Her great accomplishment: the ability to see these trials in a purely spiritual way ... as a gift ... which allowed her to travel through the nights quicker than most of us who slow down the process by resisting, complaining and desiring to be rid of all that troubles us.

But Therese would have none of that and she always found a way to profit from the trials and tribulations of daily life. We see this in the death of her mother, Pauline leaving home soon thereafter, her serious childhood illness healed only by the smile of the Virgin, a long crisis of scruples cured by her Christmas conversion, her long struggle to enter Carmel followed shortly after by her father’s mental illness. Through all this, she detached herself from everything that could separate her from the love of Christ.

The culmination of all this, of course, was the crisis of Faith she endured just prior to her death. When she coughed up the first blood of her final illness she had what might seem an unusual response: transports of joy over the thought of going to heaven. She entered a brief, consoling period ... one that fortified her for what was to come:

At this time I was enjoying such a living faith, such a clear faith, that the thought of heaven made up all my happiness and I was unable to believe there were really impious people who had no faith (Story of a Soul p211).

This innocence with regard to the shortcomings of others was to be the cause of her final purification ... not of her own imperfections for those had likely already been purged; rather her suffering was redemptive ... for the good of souls. Now Jesus denied her one last great hope:

He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness and that the thought of heaven up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment (Story of a Soul p211).

Joined now intimately to souls, Therese found herself mocked by the voice of sinners inwardly telling her the harrowing destiny that awaited her:

You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog that surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound ... the night of nothingness (Story of a Soul p213).

Therese's response to this interior onslaught was truly heroic. Rather than give in to despair, she practiced ever more frequent acts of Faith ... her spiritual life reduced to the utmost simplicity of a purified will that proclaimed "I WANT TO BELIEVE." (Story of a Soul, p214) In short, she practiced the teaching of St. John of the Cross to turn off the movies in her mind that continually sought to present these crushing thoughts to her. She denied the hand of the devil by simply refusing to dwell on them. Rather, she changed the subject of her thoughts by returning to Jesus in recollection ... the spouse who remained hidden, as usual, behind an unpenetrable wall. She was truly living the words of the Gospel ... "Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe." (Jn 20:29)

MYSTIC OF THE ORDINARY

Lastly, we should probably make some parting comments about one other aspect of Therese's experience of Faith as Unknowing. Much of St. John's teaching on the Dark Night of Faith concerns the purification of our intellect through renunciation of all extraordinary phenomena. In this, Therese was the mystic of the ordinary.

It's a common misconception to equate mysticism with extraordinary phenomena like visions and locutions. For the most part, the "extraordinary" was not the way of St. Therese. However, there's no doubt she had abundant experience with the "ordinary" way of contemplation described so wonderfully by St. Teresa. While she chose to remain hidden about such prayerful experiences her writing, nonetheless, are full of examples of the type of fruit that can only flow from infused graces.

Further, her style of contemplation was typically arid in contrast to the joyful and consoling type we often associate with mystics. St. John and St. Teresa both show that style isn't what makes a mystic . . . for arid and consoling contemplation are but opposite sides of the same coin. As such Therese probably had less in common with her spiritual mother, St. Teresa, than her spiritual father, St. John of the Cross. Carmelite scholars have noted St. Therese struggled with the experience of God as described by St. Teresa, but was right at home in the world of St. John of the Cross who provided her only spiritual nourishment outside Scripture in her last years. Two theologians went so far to say her Little Way "democratized the Dark Night" and "put contemplation on the streets" (John and Therese, p148&149)

The emphasis on the ordinary, however, doesn't mean we should consider St. Therese to have been without sublime experience. It's hard to see the creation of "The Story of A Soul" outside the context of

St. John's teaching where human thought comingles with the Divine to produce inspired writing under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. And her sudden and exponential growth spurts in love and knowledge have the unmistakable marks of yet another mystical experience: the Divine touch.

Finally, another theologian theorized that mystics can be either "lights on" or "lights off" and that seems to have certain merit when trying to understand the mysticism of St. Therese in relation to a St. Teresa - Therese being the premier example of the latter with Teresa the former. Intimate union with Christ was so ingrained in Therese's make-up that maybe all these things just seemed natural and commonplace to her. It's plausible that mystical experience like inspired thought and touches were very much a part of her interior life ... but she might have been unaware of it; focused as she was on the person of Christ whom she ardently sought. Or, perhaps, she *did* realize these things for what they were ... which is why she went to such great lengths to keep so much hidden among the wonderful teachings she revealed.

Saints of Carmel ... pray for us that Faith be the one and only Light we follow. Amen