

10. Early Contemplation



Prayer, for Teresa, is essentially something very simple. She speaks of it as ‘an exercise of love’ (*Life* 7.12), as ‘an intimate sharing between friends ... taking time frequently to be alone with God who we know loves us’ (*Life* 8.5). She speaks of the heart as ‘a paradise where the Lord finds delight’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.1). ‘In its centre take place very secret exchanges between God and the soul’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.3).

‘Since we do not prize ourselves and one another as creatures deserve, being made in the image of God, we do not understand the deep secrets that lie within’ (*Interior Castle* VII.1.1).

The value or quality of our prayer is measured by the fruit which it produces in our lives: our obedience, our humility and especially our love: ‘It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer’ (*Interior Castle* IV.2.3).

Whatever happens we must not abandon prayer: ‘Whatever wrong you who practise prayer might do, you must not abandon prayer’ (*Life* 8.5).

If we abandon it, we must start again: ‘There is no other remedy for the evil of giving up prayer than to begin again’ (*Interior Castle* II.1.10).

We should not expect the journey to be one of simple progression: ‘There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it is not necessary often to return to the beginning’ (*Life* 13.15).

While there is some value in studying prayer 'from the outside', we will only truly be helped to the extent that we are praying. If we are not praying, we can learn what God is doing in people's lives and we can get some idea of the intimate communion to which God is inviting us. However, we cannot really understand Teresa (or any other teacher of prayer) except to the extent that she helps to shed light on our own personal experience of prayer: 'As much as I desire to speak clearly about these matters of prayer, they will be really obscure for one who has not had experience' (*Life* 10.9).

Fidelity to the prayer practices we outlined in Presentation 6, and to striving to live a Christian life as outlined in Presentation 8 gradually sensitises a person to the movements of God's Spirit drawing us into love-communion. As we recite prayers and enter into the Church's liturgy, as we meditate on the truths of our faith, and especially on the life and teaching of Jesus we have grown from knowing about Jesus to knowing Jesus, and so God. We have experienced moments of deep communion.

There comes a point where, while praying in our accustomed way, we sense that the movement of our prayer is beginning to change direction. Rather than our stretching out towards God, we experience ourselves yielding to God as we experience ‘a gentle drawing inward’ (*Interior Castle* IV.3.3), what Teresa of Jesus calls ‘an interior recollection felt in the soul’ (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 59.3).

‘We find ourselves calmed, enveloped by another in a mantle of recollection. A gentle force holds us in recollection’ (Marie-Eugène ‘*I am a daughter of the Church*’, page 8).

‘The Master creates a disposition of silent attention and peaceful submission’ (page 9).

Prayer is always a response to God, for it is God who creates us and holds us in existence; it is God who 'has poured love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

In all prayer there is an element of being 'caught up', of being 'drawn'. At the same time in the prayer that we have been focusing on up to this point there has been a lot of 'climbing', a lot of 'striving'. From the beginning we have experienced the gift of God's Spirit, the Spirit of communion that flows between the heart of Jesus and the Heart of God. Through this gift we are drawn to share Jesus' own prayer-communion.

Up to this point we have been focusing our attention on the kind of prayer that we experience when we welcome the gift of the Spirit but are still controlling our response.

There comes a point where we experience what feels like a shift in the direction of our prayer. Yielding to this change of direction, this 'drawing', can be problematic for us.

We can be familiar with the theory: God cannot be comprehended in our concepts. God is beyond any images we have of God. We might be aware of the theory, but when we yield to the drawing of grace we find ourselves in a strange place and we are tempted to ignore the yielding and revert to what we know and the joy of meditating.

Reverting to accustomed ways of praying is not a bad thing, and when the experience of being drawn goes it is a good thing to do. It is just that we somehow know that this strange drawing is right and that it is the path to take into more intimate communion with God.

We must be courageous and let go any attachment we have to getting to know more about Jesus, more about God. We somehow know that when we are aware of being drawn beyond concept and image and feeling, to revert to them is being unfaithful, and when we do so what once was experienced as pleasurable no longer is. We must trust our experience.

It is not as though something new is happening. God has always been drawing us into love-communion. Rather, it is that we have not been sensitive enough to pick it up. What is new is our awareness. Teresa advises us to keep up our practices, but not to cling to them when we experience being drawn by God. We must yield to this drawing.

Teresa calls the prayer we experience at this stage of our journey the Prayer of Recollection, which deepens into what she calls the Prayer of Quiet, a stillness and silence unlike the kind of stillness and silence which we can bring about (see Presentation 6).

We can long for this prayer and we can prepare for it by practising being silent, but there is nothing we can do to bring about this recollection and quiet. We know it is a gift.

Teresa uses a helpful image. In our prayer we have been drawing water from the well provided by God, and with God's help we have been carrying the water to the garden of our heart and watering it. Now we experience an unexpected welling up from a spring deep inside the garden we rightly speak of as our 'soul', our 'body', our 'heart', our 'spirit' (see *Life* 11.7ff; also *Interior Castle* IV.2.3-4).

Teresa calls this experience of communion '**contemplation.**'

In our first presentation we offered a definition of ‘soul’, ‘body’, ‘heart’ and ‘spirit’. Since we will be using these terms often in speaking of ‘contemplation’, let us revisit these terms.

The word **soul** speaks of my whole self with special focus on my longing for love-communion. Speaking of contemplation, Teresa says that the ‘happiness comes from a more interior part as from a depth; I think that this must be from the centre of the soul’ (IV Mansions, ii).

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my **soul** (the Hebrew speaks of my vital energy, my life force) longs for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1).

“My **soul** clings to you; your right hand upholds me” (Psalm 63:8).

“I stretch out my hands to you; my **soul** thirsts for you like a parched land” (Psalm 143:6).

“My **soul** longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD;
my body and my heart sing for joy to the living God” (Psalm 84:2).

The word **body** speaks of my whole self, with special focus on my belonging to and relating to the environment, including other people. It includes the aspect of fragility and vulnerability. Along with the rest of creation we are drawn towards union with God.

“O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;
My body (The Hebrew speaks of ‘flesh’) faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1).

The word **heart** speaks of my whole self, with special focus on my connecting with myself and with others in the mysterious depths of my being and experiencing communion there in my centre.

“I give thanks to you, my God, with all my **heart**” (Psalm 86:12).

“I am needy, and my **heart** is pierced within me” (Psalm 109:22).

“I treasure your word in my **heart**” (Psalm 119:10).

“Search me, O God, and know my **heart**” (Psalm 139:23).

The word **spirit** speaks, not of myself, but of my experiencing the gift of God's **Holy Spirit** (the love-communion of Jesus with God his Father, and the love-communion of God with his Son Jesus), and my yielding to the inspiration of this **Holy Spirit**. It speaks of my returning God's gift, entrusting myself to God. **Spirit** is the Latin word for breath. The Genesis account speaks of God breathing life into Adam. We don't hold the breath. We breath it back in trust.

Especially significant is the choice we make to believe that the **Holy Spirit** is present to us, that God is loving Jesus and Jesus is loving God in our 'heart'. Our communion is in proportion to the longing of our "body" and "soul", and to the yielding of our "**spirit**".

“Into your hand I commit my **spirit**” (Psalm 31:5).

“Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your **Holy Spirit** from me” (Psalm 51:11).

“I commune with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my **spirit**” (Psalm 77:6).

“All your creatures look to you to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
When you send forth **Your Spirit**, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground” (Psalm 104:27-30).

“Let your **Good Spirit** lead me on a level path” (Psalm 143:10).

We receive contemplation 'from the spring which is God himself, who produces delight in the very interior part of ourselves ... This delight fills everything, overflowing through all the dwelling places and faculties and reaching the body. It begins in God and ends in ourselves, and our whole exterior enjoys this spiritual delight and sweetness ... This is not something we can imagine for ourselves, and no matter how hard we strive, we cannot acquire it' (*Interior Castle IV.2.3-4*).

Teresa's mystical experience began with a feeling of the presence of God that 'would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was with me or I was totally immersed in Him' (*Life 10.1*).

‘Do not think that this recollection is acquired by the intellect striving to think about God within itself. Such efforts are good and an excellent kind of meditation because they are founded on a truth, which is that God is within us. But this is not the Prayer of Recollection because it is something which each of us can do - with the help of God, as should be understood of everything. What I am speaking of comes in a different way. Sometimes, before even beginning to think of God ... one noticeably senses a gentle drawing inward ... This does not come when we want it’ (*Interior Castle* IV.3.3).

John of the Cross

‘O spring like crystal!
If only, on your silvered-over face,
you would suddenly form the eyes I have desired,
which I bear sketched deep within my heart’ (SC. 12).

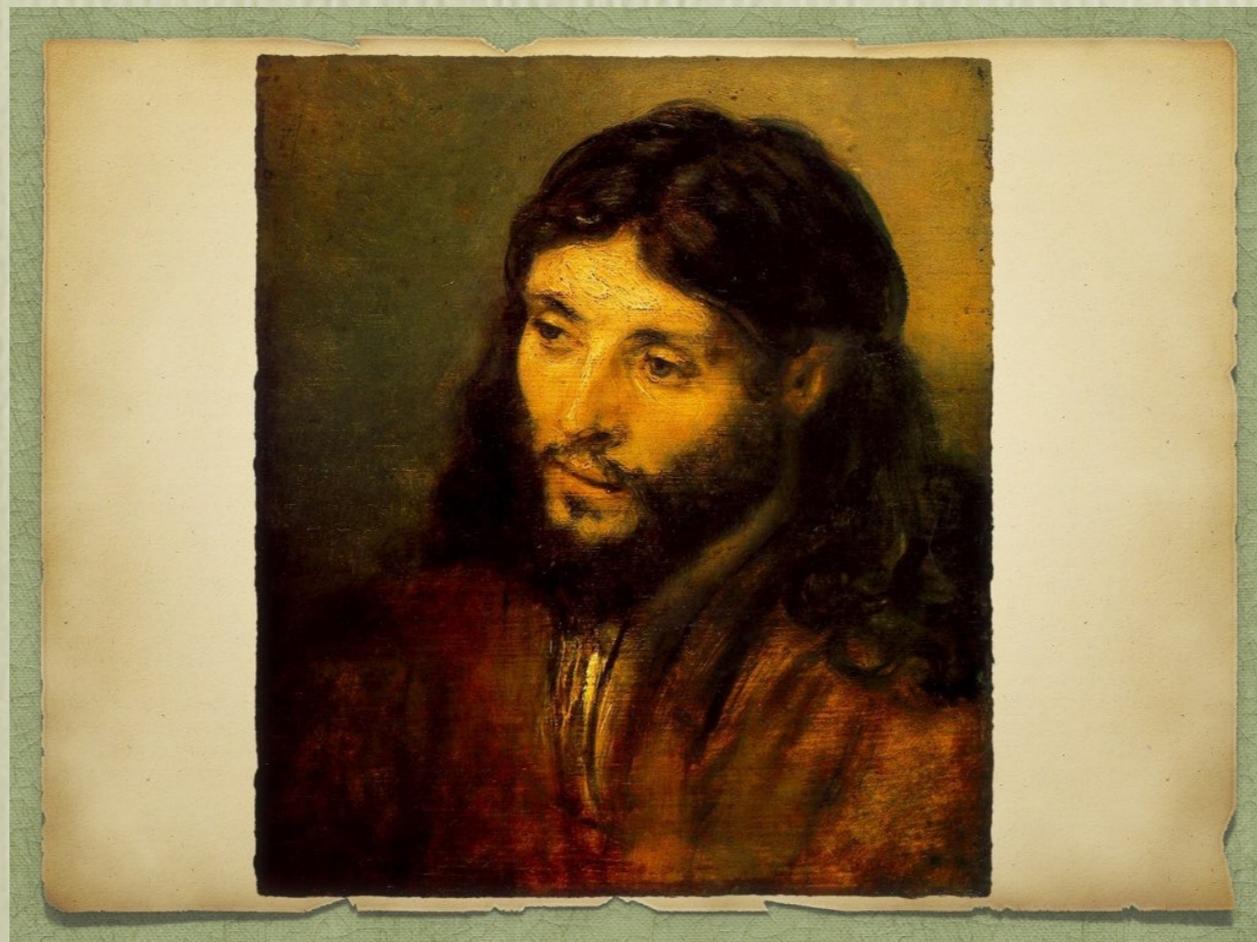
In his commentary on this stanza, John writes: ‘Faith gives us God, but covered with the silver of faith. Yet it does not for this reason fail to give God to us truly. Were someone to give us a gold vase plated with silver, he would not fail to give a gold vase merely because it is silver-plated ...

The truths of faith are called “eyes” because of the remarkable presence of the Beloved which we experience. It seems that he is now always looking at us ...

Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers, that one can say each is the other and both are one. This is because, in the union and transformation of love, each gives possession of self to the other, and each leaves and exchanges self for the other. Thus each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love.

This is the meaning of Saint Paul's affirmation: "I live, no longer I. It is Christ who is living in me. The life I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

John is aware of the importance of theological contemplation, and so of the teachings and traditions of the Church that are the silver plating. The formulas that express in words the truths revealed by God are not empty; they clothe the substance of divine truth itself that is revealed in them. If we submit humbly to this teaching, grace can lead us to penetrate the mystery it expresses. It is one thing to delight in the revealed truth. It is another to experience myself being caught up in the gaze of the One for whom my heart longs.



In contemplation our attention is not on any insights that we may receive, important though these can be. Beyond all insights we experience ourselves yielding to what we might call the gravity of grace. We don't want our attention to wander from the mysterious Presence that is drawing us into communion – the Presence we call 'God'.

In contemplation we are being transformed into love by the all-consuming love that is God. Like a drop of water we are being drawn into the ocean of God's love and are being absorbed into it. Teresa writes: **'The important thing is not to think much but to love much'** (*Interior Castle* IV.I.7).

Accompanying this experience of love, there is joy, as well as a sense of belonging, communion, and peace.

We have experienced moments of this communion ever since we began to pray, but now there is a difference.

The current of communion is drawing us beyond images, beyond thoughts. This is the love for which we are made and for which we long. As Augustine says: “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless till we rest in you.” Our heart is restless; our soul is restless; our body is restless; our spirit is restless.

The communion in love that we experience is experienced as gift. We are quite aware of the fact that the silence, the stillness, the welling up of joy or gratitude or sorrow or pleading, is not something that we are initiating. It wells up unexpectedly and our hearts know that we are responding mysteriously to God.

Contemplation can come to any person at any time, for God invites everyone to the intimate communion for which we are created.

‘Contemplation happens to everyone. It happens in moments when we are open and undefended and immediately present’ (Gerald May: *The Awakened Heart* page 193).

As we mature and as we become more committed to prayer, and more earnest in avoiding sin, we need to listen to Jesus as he tells us that we will find ourselves only when we learn to 'lose' ourselves (Matthew 16:25), and that we must become like a little child if we are to enter into the Dwelling Place of love into which he is inviting us (Matthew 18:3).

We need to be ready to let go the ego that we have developed and along with our ego much of what we have come to know about God and about ourselves, in order to surrender in love to God. We experience ourselves being called into recollection by Love. It is when we begin to surrender in this way that we begin to experience intermittent moments of contemplation.

In these graced moments everything is experienced as a sacrament of the divine; everything is 'charged with the grandeur of God' (Hopkins).

In these graced moments we experience a new kind of presence in which we are not alone but are embraced by the One who gives harmony to the music of creation and 'in whom all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17).

Our mind rests in the True that is given, the True that is beyond the truths that we discover through the efforts of reason and logic.

Our will rests in the Good that is given, the Good that is beyond any efforts we are making to live a consistently moral life.

In these graced moments our feelings rest in the Beautiful that is given, the Beautiful that is beyond anything that we might appreciate by our own efforts.

We can receive these graced moments in the measure that we are willing to let go control and entrust ourselves wholly to God.

Whereas before we experienced ourselves seeking and striving, now we experience ourselves receiving and welcoming. This communion is offered to everyone who is willing to surrender to love.

Teresa of Jesus

‘It is certain that God gives himself in this way to those who give up all for God. God shows no partiality. God loves everyone. Nobody has any excuse, no matter how miserable you may be, since God so acts with me in bringing me to this state’ (Life 27.12; see also Way 19.15).

It is important to remember that we can experience contemplation in the midst of activity as well as in the stillness of prayer, for whenever we are doing God's will we are open to God's gift of God's Self in this way.

Our focus here, however, is on contemplative prayer rather than contemplative action, though we are mindful of the call of Saint Dominic to share with others what we have received in contemplation ('contemplata tradere') and of Saint Ignatius of Loyola to be contemplative in all our activity ('in actione contemplativus').

"Nothing is more productive than contemplation; action is only its radiation outward" (Plotinus, died 270AD; quoted Balthasar 4.298.8)

If we are willing to remain open to these graced moments when God draws us beyond all our thoughts and feelings, and if we resist the temptation to take control of them or to possess them or to attempt to reproduce them by our own efforts or techniques, God's longing to be in communion with us is such that transient experiences of recollection tend to deepen, so that we find ourselves wrapped in quiet prayer.

In an earlier reflection (Presentation 6) we spoke of a simple form of prayer in which we held ourselves quietly in the presence of God: a prayer of simple regard. In some ways the prayer we are describing here is similar.

The essential difference is that this experience of contemplative prayer (called by Teresa the 'Prayer of Recollection' which deepens into the 'Prayer of Quiet') is one that we can only receive and welcome as a gift.

As noted earlier, we can desire it and prepare for it, but we cannot bring it about.

‘Any attempt to create a contemplative attitude will lead to frustration or, worse, to self-delusion’ (Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart*, page 194).

When we were in control of our prayer we worked for such quiet, now the quiet wells up from our mysterious depths. We are drawn into an experience of prayer from within. Earlier we found ways of quietening our imagination, memory and mind. Now, surprised by grace, these same faculties **'are absorbed and are looking as though in wonder at what they see'** (*Interior Castle* IV.2.6).

Now, the water that is refreshing our garden **'comes from its own source, which is God'** (*Interior Castle* IV.2.4; see IV.2.3).

Thinking of God as being in our centre radiating God's love, Teresa states: 'the warmth and the fragrant perfumes spread through our entire being' (*Interior Castle* IV.2.6).

Now, the touch of God leaves us dissatisfied with any other pleasure. We long for the communion experienced in the silence and stillness. God has always been offering us, indeed offering everyone, this gift of communion. The difference is that now we are ready to allow ourselves to be 'drawn', to be 'caught up', to be 'surprised' by grace.



Now, our prayer is no longer guided by our previous experience or any efforts of our mind or will. We are conscious of ourselves being moved and inspired. We are conscious of surrendering ourselves in love. God is leading us on the way of love.

‘Contemplative prayer is allowing the Source of love to bring us toward the place which is our home’ (Gerald May, page 195).

Teresa is not saying that now all is light and love.

We are the recipients of a wonderful grace of communion, but we are not yet in heaven. In contemplative prayer we are in the presence of the sacred Mystery that we call 'God'. We are, therefore, in touch with the One who is at the heart of everything. But the closer we come to the heart the more we are drawn into the Mystery of God who transcends any and every creature.

Being transcendent, God cannot be contained or controlled. Being immanent, God opens us up to the real world: our own real world in all its grace and disgrace.

Contemplative prayer, therefore, opens us to ‘the joys and hopes’ but also to ‘the griefs and anxieties of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way’ (Vatican II, The Church in the Modern World, n.1).

In the words of Gerald May, it opens us ‘to the suffering and brokenness of the world as much as to its joys and beauty’ (page 193).

We should not expect it to be otherwise, for prayer engages us with the ultimately Real.

It is in contemplative prayer that God is transforming us so that, like Saint Paul, we will be able to say: 'I live, no longer I. It is Christ who is living in me' (Galatians 2:20).

Our mind is being transformed into the mind of Christ.

Our heart is becoming his heart.

It is his communion of love that we are being invited to experience. Like a log in a fire this will require a profound purification, with much blackening and hissing till our whole being is transformed into fire by the all-consuming fire of God's love. Letting go our ego can be painful.

In the following presentation we will look at some of the difficulties that we can encounter in the early stages of contemplative prayer.