

Preface

Praying is as personal and mysterious as loving. No one can tell us how to pray, just as no one can tell us how to love. However, we need guidance, and I have sought guidance especially from Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) and John of the Cross, two sixteenth century Spanish saints who have been declared Doctors of the Church precisely because of their teaching on prayer. It is not my aim in this book to attempt a comprehensive presentation of their teaching. Rather, I wish to illustrate my thoughts with quotations from their works.

They speak of ‘active’ prayer and ‘passive’ prayer. Active prayer is the prayer that lies within our power to do if we so choose. We can all join others in vocal prayer, or choose to be present at the liturgy. Any one of us, if we so choose, can make time to sit with a scripture passage and reflect upon its meaning for us, and there are other forms of prayer open to us. By contrast, passive prayer is the prayer that we receive. We can desire it. We can prepare for it. We can welcome it. But we cannot initiate it, nor can we control it or repeat it at will. For this reason Teresa and John sometimes speak of it as ‘supernatural’ prayer. God and God alone is its source. They also use the term ‘contemplation’ for it, for, unlike active prayer, it is more a matter of observing than of imagining, feeling or thinking.

The writings of Teresa and John of the Cross are mainly concerned with passive prayer. There were plenty of books available at the time to help people in active prayer. However, this was not the case as regards passive prayer, and both Teresa and John experienced very poor direction from people who should have known better. While their main concern was with passive prayer, they both offer profound help for those whose prayer is active. They also insist on the importance of living a virtuous life if we are serious about prayer.

This book is divided into three parts. In Part One we reflect on the life we need to live and the kind of heart we need if we are to grow in our communion with God. In Part Two we reflect on active prayer: on the ways in which we can learn to pray. Then in Part Three we reflect on passive prayer: the kind of prayer that we may experience when we stop trying to control our prayer and open ourselves to welcome God’s offer of communion.

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