

Part Two: A Life conducive to prayer

10. Self-Knowledge

Prayer is communion with God. God, the initiator of this communion, dwells in our hearts, drawing us into ever deeper intimacy. As prayer deepens, the real, living God will be revealed to us. God is love and the experience of this in prayer will bring a profound sense of peace and joy to our hearts. As the love-communion deepens we will come to know ourselves more truthfully, because we will come to see ourselves as God sees us.

It is the real me that God is inviting into prayer, the real me precisely as I am now. It is not the me that I used to be. It is not the me that I would like to be. It is not the me that others think I should be; it is the real me whom God is wanting to draw into deeper communion. Of course, if I respond to this grace, I won't remain the same. How could such a love enter my life without changing me? But it is the real me, here and now, who is being invited into this intimacy.

This is a very consoling truth. We don't have to be different to attract God's attention. We don't have to earn God's love. Whatever kind of mess I may be in, God is wanting to love me, here and now. When we doubt this, we have the Prodigal Son and Mary of Magdala and the thief on the cross and the leper and dozens of others from the gospels to remind us. Only those who truly love us see us as we are. God is love. God knows us in our most intimate reality, and he invites us into prayer. This is expressed nicely in the following hymn by Deirdre Browne:

'Come as you are. That's how I want you. Come as you are. Feel quite at home.
Close to my heart, loved and forgiven, come as you are. Why stand alone?
No need to fear. Love sets no limits. No need to fear. Love never ends.
Don't run away, shamed and disheartened. Rest in my love. Trust me again.
I came to call sinners, not just the virtuous. I came to bring peace, not to condemn.
Each time you fail to live by my promise, why do you think I'd love you the less.
Come as you are. That's how I love you. Come as you are. Trust me again.
Nothing can change the love that I bear you. All will be well. Just come as you are.'

We may find this amazing, but it is true. It is the good news preached and demonstrated by Jesus. The more we respond to God's invitation to communion, the more we will see ourselves as God sees us – and God sees us as we really are. From one point of view this is, indeed, consoling, but it does require that we be prepared to let our masks fall away; we have to be ready to stop deceiving ourselves, kidding ourselves, living in a make-believe world. We have to mature. We have to grow up. Love of any kind requires that. How much more the love of God.

If we are going to pray we will place ourselves in the presence of God and, if the communion is real, we will not be able to avoid seeing our real selves in this relationship. This will require a lot of adjusting and we may not like it. An English Carmelite, Ruth Burrows, highlights the importance of self-knowledge for our journey in prayer:

'It seems to me that God has given me the grace to seek the truth and to stand in the truth, and essentially this means the truth about myself ... Early in my spiritual life I was given a deep self-knowledge. This was to be the foundation upon which God wished to build. It forced me into the arms of God's mercy' (*Before the Living God*, page 74).

'Almost always God's greatest gifts are wrapped up in the sacking of painful self-knowledge' (*Ascent to Love*, page 58).

We won't like everything we see, for the real self, the self that is called to holiness, the self that is drawn into the communion of prayer, is not all beautiful - not yet. We are weak, wounded people. Sin has polluted the environment in which we have had to learn to live, and we have given in to

sin ourselves. We have been hurt, but we have also hurt others and ourselves. Even what is good in us has its shadow side.

Self-knowledge, therefore, is not always a pleasant thing. We can be inattentive to our real feelings and to our actual motivation. We can, even unwittingly, be acting in ways that are not truly coming from our heart or from grace, doing what others expect of us or what we have come to expect of ourselves, living according to a pattern that we have learned but that is not an expression of our real self and so is not helpful either to others or to ourselves. Failure to know ourselves can lead to behaviour that is quite destructive.

John of the Cross writes:

‘All our infirmities are brought to light. They are set before our eyes to be felt and healed. Now, with the light and heat of the divine fire, we see and feel those weaknesses and miseries which previously resided in us hidden and unfelt, just as the dampness of the log of wood was unknown until the fire was applied to it and made it sweat and smoke and sputter. This is what the flame does to the imperfect’ (*Living Flame of Love*, Stanza I, 21-22).

In a similar vein Bernard of Clairvaux:

‘There is nothing more effective, more adapted to the acquiring of humility, than to find out the truth about oneself. There must be no dissimulation, no attempt at self-deception, but a facing up to one’s real self without flinching and turning aside. When you thus takes stock of yourself in the clear light of truth, you will discover that you live in a region where likeness to God has been forfeited, and groaning from the depths of a misery from which you can no longer remain blind will you not cry out the Lord as the Prophet did: “In your truth you have humbled me” (Psalm 119:75).

‘How can you escape being genuinely humbled on acquiring this true self-knowledge, on seeing the burden of sin that you carry, the oppressive weight of your mortal body, the complexities of earthly cares, the corrupting influence of sensual desires; on seeing your blindness, your worldliness, your weakness, your embroilment in repeated errors; on seeing yourself exposed to a thousand dangers, trembling amid a thousand fears, confused by a thousand difficulties, defenceless before a thousand suspicions, worried by a thousand needs; one to whom vice is welcome, virtue repugnant? Can you afford the haughty eyes, the proud lift of the head? With the thorns of your misery pricking you, will you not rather be changed for the better? Let yourself be changed and weep, changed to mourning and sighing, changed to acceptance of the Lord, to whom in your lowliness you will say: “Heal me because I have sinned against you.” You will certainly find consolation in this turning to the Lord, because he is “the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3)’ (*Sermon 36:5*).

We are quite capable of deceiving ourselves. We can be working out of false assumptions. We can be swept along by some trendy opinion that claims to be spiritual. We may like it, but it may not be of God and it may well not be drawing us closer to God. We can be as gullible in spiritual matters as we are in other areas of our life. We can have quite unreal expectations of ourself and we can live within quite unreal limitations because we fail to get in touch with the real passion that is somehow blocked off inside us. Others, even those who love us, can blunt our spirit, and we can accept to conform when God is calling us to an eccentric sanctity.

It is essential that our self-knowledge be true. Ruth Burrows writes:

‘Unless getting to know oneself really leads to a change of heart, a more careful and conscientious fulfilment of one’s obligations and a more selfless love for others, it is useless’ (*To Believe in Jesus*, page 57).

A monk writes in a similar vein:

‘Today, people may pay lip-service to their nothingness, but their real preoccupation is with “developing their personality”. The claims we make for our ego are insolent’ (*The Hermitage within*, page 52).

John Henry Newman (d.1890) makes the following points in a sermon entitled ‘Secret Faults, a reflection on “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults” (Psalm 19:12).

- Many are content with such accidental information about themselves as the events of life force upon them. They neglect the duty of self-examination.
- To have only a slight acquaintance with one’s heart is to have a superficial faith.
- Motive? Do I do good for praise, to avoid shame, for the satisfaction of being occupied?
- Do I pray to God to reveal my heart to me?
- I should be suspicious of untested virtue, while remembering that we can fail even in areas where we have been found faithful.
- There is a danger of living a life of self-deceit, thinking far more comfortably of our spiritual state than is warranted.
- Self-knowledge is the fruit of ascetical practice.
- self-love inclines us to hope for and presume the best. This is a danger especially when things are going smoothly and ‘successfully’. Then being content is mistaken for the peace of Christ; natural affection is mistaken for Christian love; natural energy is mistaken for zeal.
- habit can cause us to sin without noticing it.

In the light of what we have written we should not be surprised to hear the great master of prayer, Teresa of Jesus, insisting on the necessity of self-knowledge:

‘However high a state we may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon us, and this we will never be able to neglect even if we should so desire ... Self-knowledge is so important that, even if you were raised right up to the heavens, I should like you never to relax your cultivation of it’ (*Interior Castle*, I. ii).

Teresa insists that we do not gain true self-knowledge by turning our gaze inward on ourselves. We are to focus on Jesus, remaining open to see ourselves in the light reflected from him.

‘We will never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God ... We get a distorted idea of our own nature, and, if we never stop thinking about ourselves, I am not surprised if we experience many fears. It is for this reason that we must set our eyes upon Christ our Good from whom we will learn true humility ... Our understanding will then be ennobled, and self-knowledge will not make us timorous and fearful’ (*Interior Castle*, I. ii).

Similarly, Catherine of Siena:

‘As you come to know yourself you also come to know God better, for you see how good God has been to you. In the gentle mirror of God you see your own dignity: that through no merit of yours but by God’s creation you are the image of God. And in the mirror of God’s goodness you see as well your own unworthiness, the work of your own sin. For just as you can see better the blemish on your face when you look at yourself in a mirror, so if in true self-knowledge you rise up with desire to look at yourself in the gentle mirror of God with

the eye of understanding, you see all the more clearly your defects because of the purity which you see in God' (*Dialogue*, chapter 13, page 48).

And Julian of Norwich:

'Our good Lord want us willingly to accuse ourselves, and to see truly and know our falling, and all the harm which come from it, seeing and knowing that we can never repair it. God wants us also willingly and truly to see and know the everlasting love which God has for us, and God's plentiful mercy. To see and know both together, by grace, is the meek self-accusation which our good Lord asks from us' (*Showings*, chapter 52).

'I saw most surely that it is quicker for us and easier to come to the knowledge of God than it is to know ourselves. For we are so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to self knowledge until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom we are united. But nevertheless I saw that we have, naturally from our fullness, to desire wisely and truly to know ourselves in God' (*Showings*, chapter 56).

Nicholas of Cusa (d.1464) makes the same point:

'Make certain that you find yourself in God' (*On Learned Ignorance*, §179, page 168).

If we fail to see ourselves through the compassionate eyes of God who loves us, we will get only a distorted view. Teresa writes:

'Beware of certain kinds of 'humility' which the devil inculcates in us and which make us very uneasy about the gravity of our past sins. There are many ways in which the devil is accustomed to depress us ... Everything such a person does appears to her to be dangerous, and all the service she renders, however good it may be, appears to her fruitless. She loses confidence and sits with her hands in her lap, because she thinks she can do nothing well and that what is good in others is wrong in herself' (*Way of Perfection*, 39).

In the light of all this let us see, in a general way, what we can learn about ourselves from being in the communion with God that we call prayer. I can learn, first of all, that I am a creature held in existence by the love of God my creator. We are not 'lost' in God, or 'absorbed' in God. Paul's beautiful words: 'I live no longer I but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2:20) should not be misunderstood as though the self vanishes or does not matter or can be neglected and forgotten. God continues to hold each of us in existence, and we never cease being the unique, limited, dependent, graced person that we are. Of course, of ourselves we are and remain nothing. But we are not 'of ourselves', we are of God. To know myself in God is to know my real name, known only to God and to myself (Revelation 2:17). All we are and all we have is gift. This realisation is the ground of humility and of gratitude and of a real spiritual life, for then we realise that in being open to God there is no limit to the life we are called to live. As Jesus said: 'I have come that you may have life and have it to the full' (John 10:10).

Secondly, I can learn that I am someone dear to the heart of Jesus. Because God is our Father-Mother, we have Jesus as our brother. We might reflect on the following statements from Saint Paul:

'You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body' (1Corinthians 6:20).

'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

'Christ Jesus has made me his own' (Philippians 3:12).

'We are the aroma of Christ to God' (2 Corinthians 2:15).

‘Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realise that Jesus Christ is in you?’ (2 Corinthians 13:5).

‘Christ in you, your hope of glory’ (Colossians 1:27).

We remember Jesus’ own promise:

‘If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you’ (John 14:23).

Thirdly, I can come to know that I am a temple of God’s Holy Spirit. Let us listen again to Paul:

‘Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?’

(1 Corinthians 3:16)

‘Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?’ (1 Corinthians 6:19).

‘It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting God’s seal on us and giving us God’s Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment’ (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

‘The Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him’ (Romans 8:9).

If we are to make these general truths personal, we will need to discover the actual ways in which God has shown graceful love to us. In what way am I personally made in God’s image? Thanks to God’s grace, each of us is capable of receiving and giving love in a unique, wonderful and creative way. We cannot love exactly as others love, however we might admire them and however close we feel to them. Each of us has to find his or her own unique way of loving. No two flowers have the same perfume. Not even identical twins are identical in their manner of loving. The key to discovering how I can love is found in being attentive to the actual ways in which God has graced me in my life. Grace is to be relished and remembered, for it is in the light of such graces that we discover who we are. Such remembrance gives rise to gratitude, responsibility and fidelity.

It is important also to discover the ways in which sin expresses itself in my life. Each of us is wounded in different ways by the hereditary and environmental factors that affect our different lives. We call the evil influences and consequent tendencies ‘Original Sin’ for they come from our origins. In different ways we all experience a profound lack of harmony in our being. We experience desires that work against our ultimate longing and our ultimate good. We experience an urge to be independent and self-reliant, or we experience reluctance to let go unhealthy dependencies. Either way we fail to trust in God.

In Baptism we are welcomed into the Christian community which keeps before our eyes the memory of Jesus and which draws us into the ambit of God’s grace in a special way. The darkness is still there for each of us, but the light of the Gospel and the abundance of grace offered us in the community act as a light continually dispelling the darkness so that it does not dominate our lives. We have been freed from Original Sin in the sense that we are given a choice: we are enabled to opt for communion with God rather than allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by distraction and sucked into the whirlpool of a meaningless life, which threatens us with being trapped in darkness.

The problem posed by Original Sin is vastly complicated by our own personal sins. We each have a history of ways in which we have said Yes to sin and have chosen to add our own spiritual pollution to the world. Nothing does us or others more harm than personal sin. If we are to grow

in prayer we will need to see our personal profile and name our sins and realise how little we can do about our sinfulness by our own power. We will need to cry out to God in our distress and we will need courage to believe in God's grace and to take steps to allow the Spirit of Christ to influence our wayward passions and addictions, so that we can truly 'live in love as Christ loved us' (Ephesians 5:2).

Finally, we must recognise the limits of our capacity to probe and to gain understanding of ourselves or of others. God has chosen to express God's Self in each of us in limited and participated ways. We must never lose sight of our own or other's mystery, for we cannot fathom our own being, because we cannot fathom God. If we fail to respect the mystery of the sacred, we are, as Anthony Bloom observes, like a person digging 'to find the source of a spring, the point where the water begins, the point just before which there is no water. In this case it is possible only to destroy not to discover' (*Courage to pray*, page 9).

11. Humility

To enter into communion with God in prayer is to respond to God's loving invitation. If our basic attitude must be to want what God wants, we will need to listen to Jesus as he says: 'Come to me ... learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:28-29). Humility is essential, for in the words of Teresa of Jesus: 'Humility is nothing else than walking in the truth' (*Interior Castle*, VI.10).

Let us begin by reflecting on the ways in which we human beings are inclined to get puffed up ideas about ourselves. We fail to appreciate who we really are and try to emulate others or pretend to them and to ourselves that we are other than our real selves. The advertising media is but one of the clear signs in our public culture that appearance and image are often valued more than truth. One form of pride is that based on externals like beauty, wealth, status, honours, or reputation. Self-adulation and vanity based on such things is quite foolish, as most people see through it, and any adulation they may offer is usually a pretense. This form of pride is widespread, but it is not as dangerous as the forms we are about to describe.

A more dangerous form of pride is that associated with power. Such pride can lead to a refusal to submit to appropriate authority, an exaggerated self-confidence, a false sense of independence, and at times a dominating ambition that over-rides others. Common life-experiences (ultimately the break-down of health and the process of dying) usually expose the error in self-sufficiency and the folly of self-complacency. Everything we are and everything we have is gift, so what on earth are we doing abusing our power to put others down and exalt ourselves? God is the creator; we are creatures. In the words of Jesus: 'I am the vine, you are the branches ... without me you can do nothing' (John 15:5). Paul writes: 'What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Even worse is intellectual pride: the pride of refusing to accept or trust anything that fails to make sense to one's own over-rated intellect. Such a failure to recognise the limits of reason itself and of one's own reason in particular is an indication of a profound blindness and stupidity, but such is the power of the ego that we can fall victim to such folly without recognising it. An important safeguard against this kind of pride is to form the habit of checking our opinion against that of others, and of seeking advice and not making the mistake of thinking we always know best. Teresa of Jesus warns us: 'There is no poison in the world which is so fatal to perfection as having a too high opinion of oneself' (*Way*, 12).

Likewise John of the Cross:

'A humble person does not dare deal with God independently, nor can he be completely satisfied without human counsel and direction. God is desirous of this, for to declare and

strengthen truth on the basis of natural reason, he draws near to those who come together in order to know it' (*Ascent II*, 22,11).

The worst form of pride, and the most difficult to ferret out and overcome, is pride in what a person considers to be his or her 'spiritual achievements'. Thanks to the wonderful gifts God has given us through our family, our education, the opportunities that have come our way, and especially the people who have loved us, our lives have been enriched in so many ways. God's grace gives us a certain refinement and attraction and deepens our capacity to give and receive love. If you would care to recall some very special moments of grace you will remember that you received them with humility and gratitude. When the moment of grace passed its effects remained and we found ourselves immensely enriched.

Marie-Eugène reminds us that it is then that temptation comes. He writes:

'Temptation comes, subtle and unawares. It comes almost necessarily, so tenacious is pride. We use these spiritual riches to exalt self and to attract notice, to serve a need for affection or for domination, or simply to make our personal ideas triumph. One's personality, idolatrous of itself, is substituted for God; and what is received to be used as an instrument and a means, it uses to impose itself' (*I want to see God*, page 399).

In his treatise on the twelve steps of humility and pride, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth century Cistercian, warns against failing to guard the heart, being careless about examining one's behaviour, and the presumption of thinking that we are not like others, and that we have what we think of as a broader view than the church. He warns against being enamoured of our own excellence; focusing attention on where we appear good, and either forgetting our faults or presuming they are forgiven. He warns against enjoying others thinking well of us because we say good things, drawing attention to ourselves, and being pleased to seem better. He warns against really thinking we are better than others, justifying our wrong-doing, and hiding our real faults by appearing to be humble and open while exaggerating unreal faults to take attention away from our real faults. He warns particularly against spiritual pride – the 'fraudulent twist' of thanking God while in our heart 'attributing to ourselves some of the glory and honour that belongs to God. This constitutes a habitual temptation in the lives of religious and spiritual persons' (Sermon 13:3, *Song of Songs*).

We are all too familiar with the crass and subtle ways in which our ego seeks to flatter itself. It is the virtue of humility that rescues us from pride or protects us from succumbing to it. So what is humility? Anthony Bloom writes:

'The word humility comes from "humus" - fertile soil ... capable of making good use of the rubbish we tip into it, capable of transforming our refuse into wealth, of accepting every seed, giving it body, life, growth, to become fully itself without denaturing it ... Like the rich silent, creative earth, we should offer ourselves to the Other' (*Courage to pray*, page 11).

A good way to understand humility is to reflect on Psalm 131:

'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed my soul [The Greek version reads: 'I think humbly of myself'] and have quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.'

To picture humility, we are to look at a two-year old - vulnerable, needy, dependent, but cuddled up against its mother's breast, knowing that everything is okay because of the mother's love. The child knows, however unconsciously, that it is not self-reliant. It needs its mother - but she is

there and so there is no need for fear. This is humility. It fits beautifully with the following scene from the Gospels:

‘The disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven, Whoever lowers himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me’ (Matthew 18:1-5).

The last remark makes it clear that Jesus identifies with the child. He is among the disciples, showing them how to rely on the God he calls ‘Abba’ (‘my dear Father’). Disciples are to share this absolute and total trust, for being in the kingdom of heaven means accepting God as a loving Father, a loving Mother.

When Saint Paul reflected on the humility of Jesus, he could find no word in the Greek language that was able to express what he wanted to say, not even in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible. He had to coin a new word [*tapeinophrosyne*] build up from a verb that he found in the Greek version of Psalm 131. Paul invites his fellow Christians to share in the humility of Jesus:

‘In *humility* regard others as better than yourselves ... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 2:3, 5; see Acts 20:19).

‘I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all *humility* and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4:1-3).

‘As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, *humility*, meekness, and patience’ (Colossians 3:12).

We can reach a certain level of humility by growing in self-knowledge and by being honest about who we really are: that all we are and have is a gift; that we are dependent upon God for everything; that of ourselves we can do nothing. Life teaches us how small we are in the scheme of things. We see the limitations of our good qualities, and we see our faults. We also see how little control we have over things that really matter. The humiliation of sinning has a role here as well. Listen to Teresa:

‘Any good thing we do has its source, not in ourselves, but rather in that spring where this tree, which you are, is planted, and in that sun which sheds its radiance on our works’ (*Interior Castle* I.2.5).

John of the Cross used to say: ‘To be humble is to hide in your own nothingness and to know how to abandon yourself to God’ (*Other Counsels* n.5).

In a similar vein, Johannes Tauler:

‘Above all we must enter our own nothingness. If we were to reach the very pinnacle of all perfection, then it would be even more important that we should sink into the deepest ground, to the very roots of humility. For as the height of a tree depends on the depth of its roots, in the same way the heights we attain in this life are only as great as our humility is deep’ (*Sermon* 48).

Catherine of Siena heard Jesus say to her:

‘The source of humility is a person’s true knowledge of herself and of my goodness. Only when discernment is rooted in humility is it virtuous, producing life-giving fruit and willingly yielding what is due to everyone’ (*Dialogue: The Way of Perfection*, chapter 9, page 40).

In her spiritual autobiography, Therese of Lisieux writes:

‘I prefer to own in all simplicity that God who is mighty has done great things for me (Luke 1:49) – including showing me my littleness and how incapable I am of anything good.’ Also: ‘In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty hands’.

Ruth Burrows writes:

‘Humility is acceptance of the truth about ourselves, not an effort to work up humble sentiments in spite of our obvious excellence! It is seeing and accepting the truth that we are not noble, good and spiritual’ (*Ascent to Love*, page 58).

It is important to note that self-knowledge does not necessarily lead to humility. If we focus only on ourselves we are just as likely to end in discouragement, or even despair. A purer and deeper humility comes from contemplation of God. In the light of God’s gracious love, our least imperfection shows up. However, we experience joy at the truth of who we really are, for, with all our limitations and sins, we are loved by God. Here we learn that of ourselves we are nothing, but we learn this while knowing with a knowledge born of faith that we are not ‘of ourselves’, but are truly held in existence and constantly graced by a God who loves us unconditionally.

Teresa writes:

‘Humility, however deep it be, neither disquiets nor disturbs you; it is accompanied by peace, joy and tranquility. Although we are distressed by our sinfulness, this distress is accompanied by an interior peace and joy of which we should not like to be deprived. Far from disturbing or depressing us, it enlarges us and makes us fit to serve God better’ (*Way*, 39.2).

In an essay on humility, Jan van Ruusbroec has this to say:

‘To be plunged in humility is to be plunged in God, for God is the bottom of the abyss, above everything and beneath everything, supreme in height and supreme in depth. That is why humility, like charity, is capable of continually increasing ... Humility is so precious that it reaches to things too high to be taught; it attains and possesses what words do not attain.’

Let us listen again to Therese of Lisieux: ‘O my only Love, I am happy to feel myself so small, so frail in your sunshine, and I am at peace’ (*Story of a Soul*, 11).

With this trust there is no need to inflate our ego by taking pride in external possessions, or anything as passing and fickle as physical beauty or reputation. There is no need to dominate over others or think we are superior to them. There is no need to think we have to know everything or to measure everything by our poor, limited intellect, and we avoid like the plague the awful sin of taking glory in the spiritual gifts with which God has graced us.

For some people an obstacle to grace is their being too dependent on others for their well-being. For many people, however, one of the greatest barriers to grace is a form of self-reliance that blinds us to the presence of God sustaining and guiding us. As adults we have had to learn habits that are, in fact, a barrier to receiving what Jesus is offering. As disciples of Jesus there is much to unlearn, for we cannot earn grace; we cannot make a success of life by our own efforts; we are not meant to achieve by our own effort.

In the context of one who wants to learn to pray, we must know from the start that we cannot control or master prayer. Jesus looked to God as a child looks to a parent, with total trust and a simple expectation of receiving love. To be his disciple, we must learn to do the same. If you have tried to do this you will know that it is not at all easy, for it cuts at the very core of our pride. We like to be independent and self-reliant. We see it as being adult. Jesus says we have to change all this and become like a child. For an adult this requires being ‘poor in spirit’ (Matthew 5:3).

We are humble to the extent that we know that we are nothing and rejoice in it, recognising that our life and everything in it is a grace of the living God. It is not enough to know this, we should want others to know it and to treat us accordingly, neither valuing us falsely nor honouring us for what is the fruit of grace. Humility is best learned by contemplating the heart of Jesus: 'Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29).

If in our journey in prayer we wish to prepare to receive God's gift of contemplation, nothing is of more importance than to respond to God's grace as God enlightens us concerning our own weakness, so long as we do this in the spirit of a child who is confident in being loved. There is no grace God cannot give to a person who has learned humility. Without humility, no grace is safe.

May we learn to accept ourselves simply as we are and open our hands and our hearts to receive love from God, our Mother, our Father, who holds us in existence and who knows us as we really are. Let us believe that God wants to delight in us, and let us relax back from the foolish path of pride. It is God's love that creates us and holds us in existence. Only God's love can make us truly beautiful with the only beauty that really counts: the beauty of a person who is open to love and who gives love simply and truly. Of such is the kingdom of heaven.

Humility and obedience belong together. Anthony Bloom speaks of prayer as being:

'An attitude of self-surrender which is at the same time extremely active. Self-surrender, because like the earth, humus, we give ourselves without reserve; active, because we are ready to respond to God's every suggestion, every call' (*Courage to pray*, page 12).

12. Obedience

Communion in love between two people is possible only to the extent that they are able to listen to each other, and are committed to do so. We have already seen that it is the transcendent God who takes the initiative in communicating with us and that God does so through the Word and the Spirit. How can we respond if we are not listening for God's invitation to share God's life and to enjoy the intimacy of communion with God in prayer?

It is not accidental that the word for obedience in the Hebrew Bible is identical with the word for listening. Listening from the heart is essentially what obedience requires. The Greek word for 'to obey' is *hypakouein* which is derived from *akouein* (to listen), with the prefix *hypo* ('under'), indicating a listening from a position of submission. The Latin for 'obeying' is *ob-audiens*, from which our English word 'obedience' is derived. *Audiens* means listening and *ob* indicates that the listening is from close contact and not from a distance. We are obedient when we are listening right up close. To obey God is to be close to God and to be listening for the slightest expression of God's will with the desire and intention of doing what God inspires us to do with all our heart and with joy, knowing that God's will is the most beautiful and liberating thing we can do.

Teresa of Jesus writes:

'The whole aim of any person who is beginning prayer – and do not forget this because it is very important – should be to prepare with determination and every possible effort to bring your will into conformity with God's will. The greatest perfection attainable along the spiritual path lies in this conformity ... In perfect conformity to God's will lies all our good' (*Interior Castle*, II,1,8).

She concludes the account of her inner life with the following prayer:

'May it please the Lord, since He is powerful and can hear me if He wants, that I might succeed in doing God's will in everything' (*Life*).

Jesus, whose prayer we are invited to share, constantly insists on the central importance in his life and in ours of wanting only what God wants and of being committed in all things to doing God's will. In essence he is calling us to be attentive to the movements of God in our hearts and in our world. The reason for this is obvious. God is love and God is creating us moment by moment in love and for love. To be guided by God's inspiration is to be guided along the path of holiness. To resist God's inspiration is to resist the gravity of grace drawing us into divine communion. Let us listen to Jesus as he resists the tempter:

'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"' (Matthew 4:4).

Again and again Jesus reveals the importance of obedience:

'My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete my mission' (John 4:34).

'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of the One who sent me' (John 5:30).

'I do nothing on my own ... the one who sent me is with me. My Father has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleases my Father' (John 8:28-29).

'Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want ... if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done"' (Matthew 26:39 and 42).

Jesus asks the same of his disciples:

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven' (Matthew 6:9-10).

'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father' (Matthew 7:21).

'Pointing to his disciples, Jesus said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother"' (Matthew 12:49-50).

'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:19-20).

Luke presents Mary as a model for our obedience:

'Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."' (Luke 1:38)

'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord' (Luke 1:45).

How do we listen to God? There is a special blessing that comes down upon a person who follows the way of life that we are graced to live by God who reveals God's Self to us through nature, through Jesus and the Church, and through our own personal journey. Doing God's will means 'seeking God with all our hearts.' God does not want us to obey blindly or automatically, without engaging our heart. God does not command from the outside as it were. God speaks to our heart and wants our obedience to come from our heart. This is what we mean by conscience: an attentive listening to the movements of our heart that are inspired by God. If we are attentive to our heart and listen to the directions of God that are picked up by our conscience, and if we

humbly and faithfully respond to these inspirations from our heart, we are promised a special blessedness.

‘Heed the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than your heart. Your soul often forewarns you. It is better than seven watchmen in a tower. While you heed your heart, beg the Most High to guide you in the path of truth.’

(Sirach 37:13)

‘More than all else, keep watch over your own heart, since there are the wellsprings of life.’

(Proverbs 4:23)

If we are wondering how we are to listen to God and how we are to know God’s will, we have the basis for an answer already. God is certainly revealing God’s Self to each of us in the very best way and wants us to hear. We don’t have to start the conversation. Our primary task is to listen. To do this, we must, first of all, learn to live an attentive, reflective life. We must stop rushing away from our hearts, for God is speaking to our heart. If we make space for silent prayer, we will be in a position to hear and respond to the God who longs to communicate with us.

Furthermore, we must realise that if God is speaking to us, God is speaking also to others. God speaks to us through the Scriptures, through the saints of our church tradition and through those who love us. Because we are so prone to self-deception, God will always confirm God’s inspirations to us by also inspiring those who genuinely care for our soul and are concerned for our spiritual growth.

John of the Cross writes:

‘God is so content that the rule and direction of human beings be through other human beings, and that we be governed by human reason, that God definitely does not want us to bestow entire credence upon supernatural communications, nor be confirmed in their strength and security, until they pass through the human channel of the mouth of another human being. As often as God reveals something to a person, God confers upon that person a kind of inclination to manifest this to someone appropriate. Until this is done, we usually go without complete satisfaction, for it is not received from another person like ourselves.’

(*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II.22.9)

Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899) reminds us that we find a good example of this in the conversion of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. He experienced Jesus in a dramatic and extraordinary way. Yet when he asked: ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ (Acts 22:10), Jesus did not tell him directly. Rather he told him to go into Damascus, and there a man called Ananias would tell him what to do. So the more attentive we are to others and especially to the community of faith in which Christ has promised to be present, the more we will be able to listen to every word that comes to us from the mouth of God – that is, provided we are also in touch with our own heart and listen there for the echo inside us which says Yes to what we hear. The Spirit helps us to discern God’s word in the many words that continually impact upon us.

The culture around us makes it really difficult to hear God’s word and to do God’s will. The cult of the individual distorts the importance of our own ego, of our own feelings and wishes and rights and ambition. It also tends to separate us from community. The more self-reliant we think we should be, the less we are likely to listen humbly to others and learn from them. The cult of materialism shifts the focus from the heart to material possessions. Things stop being means that can help us build relationships. They tend to be goals in themselves, and relationships suffer in the struggle for the security we think possessions will give us.

Apart from these two serious negative dimensions of our culture, each of us personally has to learn to do God's will also when it goes against the following natural drives.¹

1. We tend to seek joy – that is to say, to seek always what gives us a sense of well-being. God is wiser than our natural desires, and sometimes it is clearly wiser to do something that goes against immediate gratification and is even quite painful. We don't find this easy.

2. We tend to want to look forward to good things in hope, and to act in a way that looks like working out for our benefit. Once again our judgment of this can be quite superficial and even misguided. To follow God's will can mean putting our own future happiness at risk. We don't find this easy.

3. Fear plays a big role in our lives. We instinctively avoid whatever threatens our sense of well-being. 'We dread feeling unwell, unhappy, insecure, miserable, unattractive, downcast' (Burrows, page 32). If God wants to draw us beyond our small egoism and enlarge our heart with compassion and generosity, we might have to suffer some of these negative feelings. We don't find this easy.

4. We tend to grieve whenever something associated with our sense of well-being is taken from us, so we are tempted to hold on tightly to whatever gives us a sense of security. If our hands are so tightly clenched, how can we be open to receive a grace that will enlarge our hearts?

If, however, we are truly convinced of God's love and that God is revealing his will to us moment by moment, then we must decide that we want what God wants more than anything and we must get on with the job of making space for reflective prayer, doing our duty, and caring for others while accepting realistically our own limitations. We must be committed to acting in this way, whatever the feeling and whatever the cost. We don't find this easy.

John of the Cross writes:

'What does it profit you to give God one thing if God asks of you another? Consider what it is God wants, and then do it. You will as a result satisfy your heart better than with something toward which you yourself are inclined' (*Sayings of light and love*, n. 73).

God is love. To disobey God is to sin. Sin closes us off from God's love and reaps its own harvest. God is no lover of distraction, waste and mediocrity. God loves us and wants us to live to the full. May we learn, like Jesus, to want God's will with all our minds and hearts and soul and strength. That is the path to maturity and to peace. It is the way of holiness. Wanting what God wants is the essential attitude required of us if we are to enter into prayer and grow in holiness.

The importance of obedience is at the heart of the teaching of Therese of Lisieux:

'Perfection consists in doing God's will, in being what God wills us to be' (Ms A, 1895, 14).

'My God *'I choose all!'* I don't want to be a saint *by halves*. I am not afraid to suffer for you. I fear only one thing: to keep my own will. So, take it, for *'I choose all'* that You will!' (Ms A, 1895, page 27)

'Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervour, except the accomplishment of God's will, without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way' (Ms A, 1895, page 178).

'My joy is the holy will of Jesus my one and only love. And so I live without fear. I love the night as much as I love the day' (words spoken from her sickbed 21.1.1897).

'It is the thought alone of accomplishing the Lord's will that makes up all my joy'.

(Letter to l'Abbé Bellière, July 18, 1897)

¹ I am drawing here on Ruth Burrows in her book *Ascent to Love*.

Elizabeth of the Trinity (d.1906), a contemporary of Therese and also a Carmelite, writes:

‘The soul must surrender itself to the Divine will completely, passionately, so as to will nothing else but what God wills’ (*Heaven in Faith*, page 112).

In the final retreat before her death, she uses the image of a harp string that is tuned so that it can sound the note intended by Christ when he chooses to play upon it, and she adds:

‘The soul remains under his touch like a lyre, and all His gifts to it are like so many strings which vibrate to sing, day and night, the praise of His glory.’

A Rhineland mystic, Jan van Ruusbroec, writes:

‘As long as our will retains whims that are opposed to the divine union, fantasies of 'Yes' or 'No', we remain children, we do not walk with the giant steps of love; for the fire has not yet burned the whole alloy, the gold is not pure, we are still seeking ourselves.’

Charles de Foucauld prays:

‘Father, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all. I accept all. Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures. I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my spirit. I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you Lord, and so need to give myself into your hands, without reserve, and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.’

Since our focus here is on obedience as an attentive listening to God in our prayer-communion, let us remember the words of Catherine of Siena (d.1380): ‘The merit of obedience is measured by the love in the person obeying’ (*Dialogue: Obedience*, chapter 164, page 355). John of the Cross has the same message: ‘The union of love of God is an habitual and loving attentiveness to the will of God’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 28,10).

13. Detachment

God made us in God’s ‘image and likeness’ (Genesis 1:26). God is communion in love and God’s will is that we share in this communion, the communion enjoyed by Jesus who invites us: ‘Come to me’ (Matthew 11:28), and who prays: ‘May they be one in us, Father, as you are in me and I am in you’ (John 17:21).

God gives us many things, but we must not confuse the gift with the Giver and we should not become so attached to God’s gifts that we continue to hold them tightly when God is asking us to let them go in order to draw closer. How can we embrace God with open arms while refusing to loosen our hold on what is less than God?

What matters in any love is the gift of self. The whole of the New Testament makes it clear that the sacrifice that Jesus offers to God is the sacrifice of himself. Whatever we may offer, if we do not offer ourselves, it is not an offering of love. No person and no thing can substitute for ourselves when it comes to communion in love. In the words of Augustine: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.’ We long to be in communion with God, and it is for our selves that God longs. Because Jesus offered himself, he entered into perfect communion with his Father. In this he showed us the way.

‘When Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, See, O my God, I have come to do your will”’ (Hebrews 10:5-7).

As a young woman, Mary knew that, left to herself, there was no way she could carry out the mission revealed to her by God. God was offering her an unprecedented intimacy. He wanted her

to conceive the Word-made-flesh. This could happen only if God embraced her and breathed into her God's own creative Spirit. God offered her this special love. God could give it only if she consented. God did not ask her to do anything, but rather to allow God to love into her God's only Son. Her response was perfect: 'Let what you have said *be done to me*' (Luke 1:38).

To be so open to allow God to achieve God's loving purpose in us, we need to hold everything that is not God so reverently that we are willing to let it go the moment God calls us to do so. This is the meaning of detachment. A Carthusian author writes (*The Way of Silent Love*, page 84):

'There is no peace without detachment. There is no detachment without effective renunciation. There it is, the hard saying! Our passions carry us towards what is pleasing and delightful, towards what we love. Thus they cause us to avoid what is unpleasant and hurtful, the things we fear or hate. The way of resurrection is the way of death, a curtailment of life, a mortification of the senses. Today, as always, we don't want it. But listen to Christ: "If you would follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).'

The purpose of detachment is that we might be free to make a whole-hearted gift of ourselves to God. The discipline required to maintain this freedom is called asceticism. In her *Way of Perfection*, Teresa writes:

'It is essential that you begin well by making an earnest and most determined resolve not to halt until you reach your goal. You must do this, whatever might come, whatever might happen to you, however hard you may have to labour, whoever may complain about you, whether you reach your goal or die on the road or have no heart to confront the trials you meet' (chapter 21).

'The aim of all my advice to you in this book is that we should surrender ourselves wholly to the Creator, place our will in God's hands and detach ourselves from creatures ... We are preparing ourselves for the time, which will come very soon, when we will find ourselves at the end of our journey and will be drinking of living water from the fountain I have described. Unless we make a total surrender of our will to the Lord, and put ourselves in God's hands so that God may do in all things what is best for us in accordance with God's will, God will never allow us to drink from it' (chapter 32).

Authors speak of 'abandonment' when the gift of self is such that there is no holding back, when we entrust ourselves without reserve (with abandon) to God.

In her *Life*, Teresa writes:

'The mistake we make is to not leave ourselves entirely in the Lord's hands; yet God knows best what is good for us.'

'God cares for us better than we can care for ourselves and He knows of what each of us is capable. What is the use of governing oneself if one has surrendered one's whole will to God?'

The essence of abandonment is expressed in the following statement from a General of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupé:

'More than ever, I now find myself in the hands of God.
This is what I have wanted all my life, from my youth.
And this is still what I want.
But now there is a difference:
the initiative is entirely with God.
It is indeed a profound spiritual experience
to know and feel myself so totally in God's hands,

in the hands of this God who has taken hold of me.’

Listen to Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits:

‘Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, all I have and possess. You have given all these to me; to you, O Lord, I give them back: all are yours, dispose of them according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for this is enough for me.’

(*Contemplation for Obtaining Love* found in his *Spiritual Exercises*)

Listen, too, to Charles de Foucauld:

‘Father, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my spirit.
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you Lord,
and I need to give myself into your hands, without reserve,
and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.’

Ruth Burrows has some helpful advice in regard to asceticism in her book *To Believe in Jesus*. Christian asceticism is reaching out in love to Jesus, knowing that we cannot savour this love in this life, but refusing, in faith, to seek those assurances of feeling for which our nature craves.

‘For the Christian to maintain a hunger for God, a God who does not satisfy our senses, we must take care not to so encompass ourselves with the good things of this world that our need for God is not experienced. If our desire for God is genuine, and we must not confuse real desire for a feeling or emotion, then we will want to express it in concrete forms. Outward expressions strengthen the inner disposition. Hunger for God has to be worked for. It is a sustained act of choosing under the influence of grace ... We cannot seek God always and serve our neighbour with a disinterested love until we have looked at ourselves, and then positively denied this self-seeking and worked against it’ (page 71).

‘Prayer is self-surrender to God at every moment; the reality of our prayer will be the reality of our self-surrender, not how we feel, what we experience, the lights we get and so forth. Prayer is necessarily hard because self-surrender is hard’ (page 85).

In her book, *The Ascent of Love*, she explains that we experience two conflicting movements. The more profound movement is a longing to release ourselves and be taken into the embrace of One who loves us. However, we also seek to control, possess and achieve a fulfilment that is ours. This latter is the self-seeking ego. We must determinedly choose to persist in denying it. Asceticism is flushing out the ego which motivates us, whether we know it or not, to do things that increase our importance in our own or in other people’s eyes. Only God’s love can annihilate the ego, but we must do all we can to resist it, for God respects our choice and chooses to annihilate it only when we have rowed all night against the stormy seas. Ruth has this warning for anyone committed to a life of prayer:

‘Are our reactions prompted by the desire to please God or to have a spiritual life, become a spiritual person? In other words, is our tenacious egotism operating in what is the most supremely satisfying sphere of all?’ (page 56).

If we want to drink at the fountain of contemplation we must be determined to do God’s will:

‘All that the beginner in prayer has to do - and you must not forget this, for it is very important - is to work hard and be resolute and prepare yourself with all possible diligence to bring your will in conformity with the will of God ... You may be quite certain that this comprises the very greatest perfection which can be attained on the spiritual road.’

(Teresa, *Interior Castle*, II Mansions 1).

Let us listen to Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity:

‘If by a simple, loving gaze of faith we remain ever united to him and if, like our Beloved Master, we can say, “I do always the things that please him”, he will be able to consume us, and we will be lost in the immense fire, to burn there at our ease for all eternity”’ (*Letter to Mlle Blanc*, October 1906).

Asceticism is not the same for everyone. God knows what each person needs to let go of in order to draw close to Jesus and so enjoy divine communion. For the rich young man it was material possessions. For the scribes it was pride in their learning. For others it was their negative sense of themselves, and for others their inflated ego. Essential to asceticism is that we are not the ones to decide. We must wait on the inspiration of grace. The goal is to do God’s will. When Peter saw Jesus walking on the water, he did not dare to leave the boat of his own decision. He wanted to go to Jesus and so he prayed: ‘If it is you, tell me to come to you across the water’. It was only when Jesus called him that he knew that he could leave the boat and, keeping his eyes on Jesus, walk towards him (Matthew 14:28-31). The science of detachment is a science of love. Only God has the wisdom to know what it is that we need to let go, and when we are ready to do so.

It is essential that we keep our eyes on Jesus and that we follow his call and not focus on ourselves. When the servants in Jesus’ parable suggested that they go and dig out the weeds that were growing among the wheat, the master told them to leave that to him (Matthew 13:29). They did not have the wisdom to discern wheat from weed and they might dig out wheat by mistake. Similarly, if we were to take charge of our own asceticism we might do ourselves harm. We might even fall into pride, congratulating ourselves on the success of our asceticism.

In her last retreat, Elizabeth of the Trinity writes:

‘It is God’s word that will directly achieve the work of stripping; for it has this particular characteristic, that it effects and creates what it intends, provided, however, that we consent to let this be done.’

The Carthusian writer quoted earlier goes on to say:

‘In speaking of detachment I am afraid of giving too much importance to what is of little consequence. Certainly detachment from things is an essential element of the spiritual life. This does not mean that we are obligated to make a continual effort of the will to be detached. A continual preoccupation such as this is unhealthy and sometimes results in a negative attitude and bitterness that has little to do with Christian simplicity and joy. And in the end it puts too much emphasis on secondary matters. To be continually preoccupied with denying ourselves something is to feed the desire to possess and give it importance ... The true contemplative doesn’t need to make a constant effort to mortify the senses. Only love is necessary, the heart turned to God and the things of God. The true contemplative realises that things are leaving him and detaching themselves from him. He quickly forgets them, so fascinated is he with the discovery of the wondrous Mystery. Let us not be like the fearful people who, on the mountain did not take their eyes from their feet for fear of stumbling and were thus unable to revel in the broad horizon and vast expanses. Let us be bold enough to be joyful. Christ and the love of God are worth it’ (*The Way of Silent Love*, pages 85-86).

The following prayer is from Saint Nicholas of Flüe (quoted in the Catholic Catechism n.226):

‘My Lord and my God, take from me everything that distances me from you.

My Lord and my God, give me everything that brings me closer to you.
My Lord and my God, detach me from myself to give my all to you.'

Teilhard de Chardin in his *Divine Milieu* writes:

'Everything is needed, because the world will never be large enough to provide our taste for action with the means of grasping God, or our thirst for receiving with the possibility of being invaded by God. Yet, nothing is needed, for, as the only reality which can satisfy us lies beyond the transparencies in which it is mirrored, everything that fades away and dies between us will serve only to give reality back to us with greater purity' (page 122).

'Raise me up O matter to those heights, through struggle and separation and death. Raise me up until at long last it becomes possible for me, in perfect chastity, to embrace the universe ... Now the earth can certainly clasp me in her giant arms. She can swell me with her life, or take me back into the dust. She can deck herself out for me with every charm, with every horror, with every mystery. She can intoxicate me with her perfume, her touch ... She can cast me to my knees in expectation of what is maturing in her breast ... But her enchantment can no longer do harm to me, since she has become for me the Body of Him who is and of Him who is to come' (page 154).

We conclude our reflections on detachment with the words of Teresa (*Poesias 30*):

'Let nothing disturb you; let nothing dismay you: all things pass; God never changes.
Patience attains all. The one who has God lacks nothing: God alone suffices.'

13. Detachment

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And this is still what I want.
But now there is a difference:
the initiative is entirely with God.
It is indeed a profound spiritual experience
to know and feel myself so totally in God's hands,
in the hands of this God who has taken hold of me.'

Listen to Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits:

‘Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, all I have and possess. You have given all these to me; to you, O Lord, I give them back: all are yours, dispose of them according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for this is enough for me.’

(*Contemplation for Obtaining Love* found in his *Spiritual Exercises*)

Listen, too, to Charles de Foucauld:

‘Father, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my spirit.
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you Lord,
and I need to give myself into your hands, without reserve,
and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.’

Ruth Burrows has some helpful advice in regard to asceticism in her book *To Believe in Jesus*. Christian asceticism is reaching out in love to Jesus, knowing that we cannot savour this love in this life, but refusing, in faith, to seek those assurances of feeling for which our nature craves.

‘For the Christian to maintain a hunger for God, a God who does not satisfy our senses, we must take care not to so encompass ourselves with the good things of this world that our need for God is not experienced. If our desire for God is genuine, and we must not confuse real desire for a feeling or emotion, then we will want to express it in concrete forms. Outward expressions strengthen the inner disposition. Hunger for God has to be worked for. It is a sustained act of choosing under the influence of grace ... We cannot seek God always and serve our neighbour with a disinterested love until we have looked at ourselves, and then positively denied this self-seeking and worked against it’ (page 71).

‘Prayer is self-surrender to God at every moment; the reality of our prayer will be the reality of our self-surrender, not how we feel, what we experience, the lights we get and so forth. Prayer is necessarily hard because self-surrender is hard’ (page 85).

In her book, *The Ascent of Love*, she explains that we experience two conflicting movements. The more profound movement is a longing to release ourselves and be taken into the embrace of One who loves us. However, we also seek to control, possess and achieve a fulfilment that is ours. This latter is the self-seeking ego. We must determinedly choose to persist in denying it. Asceticism is flushing out the ego which motivates us, whether we know it or not, to do things that increase our importance in our own or in other people’s eyes. Only God’s love can annihilate the ego, but we must do all we can to resist it, for God respects our choice and chooses to annihilate it only when we have rowed all night against the stormy seas. Ruth has this warning for anyone committed to a life of prayer:

‘Are our reactions prompted by the desire to please God or to have a spiritual life, become a spiritual person? In other words, is our tenacious egotism operating in what is the most supremely satisfying sphere of all?’ (page 56).

If we want to drink at the fountain of contemplation we must be determined to do God’s will:

‘All that the beginner in prayer has to do - and you must not forget this, for it is very important - is to work hard and be resolute and prepare yourself with all possible diligence to bring your will in conformity with the will of God ... You may be quite certain that this comprises the very greatest perfection which can be attained on the spiritual road.’

(Teresa, *Interior Castle*, II Mansions 1).

Let us listen to Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity:

‘If by a simple, loving gaze of faith we remain ever united to him and if, like our Beloved Master, we can say, “I do always the things that please him”, he will be able to consume us, and we will be lost in the immense fire, to burn there at our ease for all eternity”’ (*Letter to Mlle Blanc*, October 1906).

Asceticism is not the same for everyone. God knows what each person needs to let go of in order to draw close to Jesus and so enjoy divine communion. For the rich young man it was material possessions. For the scribes it was pride in their learning. For others it was their negative sense of themselves, and for others their inflated ego. Essential to asceticism is that we are not the ones to decide. We must wait on the inspiration of grace. The goal is to do God’s will. When Peter saw Jesus walking on the water, he did not dare to leave the boat of his own decision. He wanted to go to Jesus and so he prayed: ‘If it is you, tell me to come to you across the water’. It was only when Jesus called him that he knew that he could leave the boat and, keeping his eyes on Jesus, walk towards him (Matthew 14:28-31). The science of detachment is a science of love. Only God has the wisdom to know what it is that we need to let go, and when we are ready to do so.

It is essential that we keep our eyes on Jesus and that we follow his call and not focus on ourselves. When the servants in Jesus’ parable suggested that they go and dig out the weeds that were growing among the wheat, the master told them to leave that to him (Matthew 13:29). They did not have the wisdom to discern wheat from weed and they might dig out wheat by mistake. Similarly, if we were to take charge of our own asceticism we might do ourselves harm. We might even fall into pride, congratulating ourselves on the success of our asceticism.

In her last retreat, Elizabeth of the Trinity writes:

‘It is God’s word that will directly achieve the work of stripping; for it has this particular characteristic, that it effects and creates what it intends, provided, however, that we consent to let this be done.’

The Carthusian writer quoted earlier goes on to say:

‘In speaking of detachment I am afraid of giving too much importance to what is of little consequence. Certainly detachment from things is an essential element of the spiritual life. This does not mean that we are obligated to make a continual effort of the will to be detached. A continual preoccupation such as this is unhealthy and sometimes results in a negative attitude and bitterness that has little to do with Christian simplicity and joy. And in the end it puts too much emphasis on secondary matters. To be continually preoccupied with denying ourselves something is to feed the desire to possess and give it importance ... The true contemplative doesn’t need to make a constant effort to mortify the senses. Only love is necessary, the heart turned to God and the things of God. The true contemplative realises that things are leaving him and detaching themselves from him. He quickly forgets them, so fascinated is he with the discovery of the wondrous Mystery. Let us not be like the fearful people who, on the mountain did not take their eyes from their feet for fear of stumbling and were thus unable to revel in the broad horizon and vast expanses. Let us be bold enough to be joyful. Christ and the love of God are worth it’ (*The Way of Silent Love*, pages 85-86).

The following prayer is from Saint Nicholas of Flüe (quoted in the Catholic Catechism n.226):

‘My Lord and my God, take from me everything that distances me from you.
My Lord and my God, give me everything that brings me closer to you.
My Lord and my God, detach me from myself to give my all to you.’

Teilhard de Chardin in his *Divine Milieu* writes:

‘Everything is needed, because the world will never be large enough to provide our taste for action with the means of grasping God, or our thirst for receiving with the possibility of being invaded by God. Yet, nothing is needed, for, as the only reality which can satisfy us lies beyond the transparencies in which it is mirrored, everything that fades away and dies between us will serve only to give reality back to us with greater purity’ (page 122).

‘Raise me up O matter to those heights, through struggle and separation and death. Raise me up until at long last it becomes possible for me, in perfect chastity, to embrace the universe ... Now the earth can certainly clasp me in her giant arms. She can swell me with her life, or take me back into the dust. She can deck herself out for me with every charm, with every horror, with every mystery. She can intoxicate me with her perfume, her touch ... She can cast me to my knees in expectation of what is maturing in her breast ... But her enchantment can no longer do harm to me, since she has become for me the Body of Him who is and of Him who is to come’ (page 154).

We conclude our reflections on detachment with the words of Teresa (*Poesias 30*):

‘Let nothing disturb you; let nothing dismay you: all things pass; God never changes. Patience attains all. The one who has God lacks nothing: God alone suffices.’

14. Indifference

Saint Paul’s appeal to the community at Philippi includes the following:

‘Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things’ (Philippians 4:8).

Since the whole cosmos is filled with the glory of God, to be open to God means to be open to everything that exists. Paul could also say, later in the same letter:

‘I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me’ (Philippians 4:11-13).

The key is to want only what God wants. However good something might be in itself, we must be ready to let it go if love calls us to do so. When alternatives present themselves to us we are to strive to hold them in equal balance till we discover which alternative God wants. When we know God’s will we choose that alternative with all our mind and soul and will and strength.

When we call this ‘indifference’, we do not mean to imply that we are without any inclinations in the matter. We may find that we are much more attracted to one alternative than to the other, and this for any number of reasons. The term ‘indifference’, as we are using it, refers to the state that we come to before making a decision, the state of being ready for whatever God wants, indifferent to our own natural inclinations and preferences. Whatever the apparent relative importance from other points of view, the only ultimate consideration for us is God’s will. To come to a position of indifference may require much self-discipline.

In the final paragraph of Book One of his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John of the Cross writes:

‘In self dispossession the heart is at rest. It wants nothing, because it is grounded on Jesus not on itself. It does not matter whether it feels elated or dejected.’

Robert Bellarmine, in his *The Ascent of the Monk to God*, Grad I, writes:

‘Consider that to be for your real good which brings you to your goal, and that to be really bad which cuts you off from this goal. Prosperity and adversity, riches and poverty, health

and sickness, honour and ignominy, life and death should not be sought after for themselves by the wise man nor are they to be avoided for themselves. If they contribute to the glory of God and your eternal happiness, they are of good and are to be sought after; if they are obstacles to this, they are evil and are to be avoided.'

One of the best statements on the kind of Indifference of which we are speaking is that of Karl Rahner in his '*Ignatian mysticism of joy in the world*'. Because of the ambiguities in the word indifference, Rahner prefers the Spanish '*Indiferencia*' as understood by Ignatius of Loyola.

'Ignatius approached the world from God. Not the other way about. Because he has delivered himself in the lowliness of an adoring self-surrender to the God beyond the whole world and to God's will, for this reason and for this reason alone he is prepared to obey God's word even when, out of the silent desert of his daring flight into God, he is, as it were, sent back into the world, which he had found the courage to abandon in the foolishness of the Cross. From this results the double characteristic which is proper to Ignatian joy in the world: the maxims of '*Indiferencia*' and of 'finding God in all things'. The first is the presupposition of the second.

'*Indiferencia* : the calm readiness for every command of God, the equanimity which, out of the realisation that God is always greater than anything we can experience of God or wherein we can find God, continually detaches itself from every determinate thing which a person is tempted to regard as *the* point in which alone God meets him ... Out of such an attitude of *indiferencia* there springs of itself the perpetual readiness to hear a new call from God to tasks other than those previously engaged in, continually to decamp from those fields where one wanted to find God and to serve God. There springs the will to be at hand like a servant always ready for new assignments; the courage to accept the duty of changing oneself and of having nowhere a permanent resting-place as in a restless wandering towards the restful God; the courage to regard no way to God as being *the* way, but rather to seek God on all ways. Moved by such a spirit, even the passionate love of the Cross and of sharing in the ignominy of the death of Christ is still ruled by *indiferencia*: the Cross, yes, *if* it should please the divine Majesty to call to such a death in life. *Indiferencia* is possible only where the will to flee the world is alive, and yet this *indiferencia* in its turn disguises that love for the foolishness of the Cross into the daily *moderation* of a *normal style of life* marked by *good sense* ...

'In brief: such *indiferencia* becomes a seeking of God in *all* things. Because God is greater than everything, God can be found if one flees away from the world, but can come to meet one on the streets in the midst of the world. For this reason Ignatius acknowledges only one law in his restless search for God: to seek God in all things; and this means: to seek God in that spot where at any particular time God wants to be found, and it means, too, to seek God in the world if God wants to show God's Self in it.

'In this seeking-God-in-all-things we have the Ignatian formula for a higher synthesis of that division of piety into a mystical one of flight from the world and a prophetic one of divinely commissioned work in the world, which is customary in the history of religion. In that formula these contradictions are in a Hegelian sense 'resolved'. Ignatius is concerned only with the God above the whole world, but he knows that this God, precisely because God is really above the whole world and not merely the dialectical antithesis to the whole world, is also to be found *in the world*, when God's sovereign will bids us enter upon the way of the world ...

'Ignatius knows that he can seek and find the God of Jesus Christ also in the world, if this should please God. And so he is prepared in *indiferencia* to seek God and God alone, always God alone, but also God everywhere, also in the world: *in actione contemplativus*

... Once we have found the God of the life beyond, then such an attitude will break out of deep seclusion in God into the world, and work as long as day lasts, immerse itself in the work of time in the world, and yet await with deep longing the coming of the Lord' (*Theological Investigations* III, 290ff).

15. Holiness

The link between holiness and prayer is obvious when we realise that to be holy is to be in communion with God. It is a communion of the real self with the real God. Since God is love, it is obvious that holiness is intimately related to love.

The Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964] reminds us that we are all called to a life of holiness:

'The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful. And so it must be. It is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love' (LG n.43).

Since holiness consists in tending to the perfection of love and since prayer is this experience of being in communion with the all-holy God who is love, the link between prayer and holiness should be obvious. To understand the place of prayer in our lives it is important to understand the nature of holiness.

In the Book of Revelation, the martyrs join with the crucified and risen Christ in singing 'the song of the Lamb'. Their song of praise includes the words: 'You alone are holy' (Revelation 15:4). To understand holiness properly we must see that only God is holy. We recall the vision of Isaiah:

'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of God's robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory"' (Isaiah 6:1-3).

The word 'holy' focuses on God's transcendence. The people are told that they may not approach the mountain where God has chosen to reveal God's Self (Exodus 24:2). For the same reason the tent of meeting is to be pitched *outside* the camp (Exodus 33:7-11). The holy of holies is out of bounds for all but the high priest and even his entry is severely restricted (Leviticus 16:2).

All this changed when 'the Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us' (John 1:14). In Jesus was revealed that God wanted us to draw close. Jesus is 'the holy one of God' (Mark 1:24, John 6:69). He is the tent of meeting (John 2:21). People had always recognised the immanence of God in creation and in history, but those who experienced Jesus came to see that we are drawn into communion with the Holy One not by withdrawal from the body, from the mind, from thoughts and feelings, but by allowing the Holy One to draw us into the heart of the created world where God will transform us. In the light of the Incarnation, we came to the astonishing insight that God is indeed the 'heart' as well as the 'beyond' of everything.

Jesus also astonished us by showing that this is true of sinners and that we sinners are invited to enjoy God's embrace:

'All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"' (Luke 15:1-2).

We sinners are called to be in communion with Jesus and so with the Holy One:

‘For their sakes I make myself holy, so that they also may be made holy in truth’ (John 17:19).

‘It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (Hebrews 10:10).

‘Jesus suffered in order to sanctify the people by his own blood’ (Hebrews 13:12).

We are made in God's image, for God creates us for communion. God, ‘the fountain of all holiness’ (Second Eucharistic Prayer) is constantly pouring the Spirit of love into our hearts, drawing us into divine life and so sharing God's holiness with us. Especially significant for this intimacy are times of prayer when our mind and heart are turned to God in loving attentiveness. It is in prayer that we say Yes to the communion which God is offering us. It is in prayer that we open our souls to receive God's offer of God's Self. It is in prayer that we grow in holiness – a holiness that is expressed in every aspect of our lives.

Let us listen to the New Testament:

‘This is the will of God, your sanctification’ (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

‘May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless’ (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

‘God's temple is holy, and you are that temple’ (1 Corinthians 3:17).

‘I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.’

(Romans 12:1)

‘God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in God's presence in love’ (Ephesians 1:4).

‘As God who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct’ (1 Peter 1:15).

When we speak of a someone as being holy, or when we describe some place as a holy place (a ‘sanctuary’), we are not speaking of a characteristic that is inherent in the person or place, or of something that can be acquired by endeavour or discipline. We are not the initiator of any attitude or action that can result in holiness. We are holy to the degree that God, the one who alone is holy, is dwelling in us in a communion of love which is transforming us into an ever more profound participation in divine life. It is because God, the One who alone is holy, is present uniting us to Himself that we are living in this divine communion. In prayer we consciously focus on this most profound dimension of our lives. In prayer we become holy.

Bernard writes:

‘Show me a person who loves nothing but God and what is to be loved for God's sake, to whom to live is Christ, and of whom this has been true for a long time now; who in work and leisure alike endeavours to keep God before his eyes, and walks humbly with the Lord his God; who desires that his will may be one with the will of God, and who has been given the grace to do these things. Show me such a person, and I will not deny that they are worthy of the Bridegroom's care’ (*Song of Songs*, Sermon 69,1).

Likewise, Therese of Lisieux:

‘Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, well aware of our feebleness, but boldly confident in the Father's goodness’ (words spoken from her deathbed).

Jesus was speaking of holiness when he invited the Samaritan woman to drink from the well of his love:

‘Drink of the water that I will give you and you will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’ (John 4:14).

To grow in holiness we must cooperate with grace. Since God is love, God’s gracious initiative comes to us as an offering, an invitation. Since we are created by God and created precisely for divine communion, the invitation finds an echo in our longing. However, we are free to reject or to accept God’s loving invitation. The transformation which we call holiness and which is union with God occurs only to the extent that we welcome God’s grace and open our minds and hearts and wills and bodies to the transforming action of God’s Spirit - the Spirit of love.

Endeavour and discipline are needed if we are to remain attentive to grace and to allow God’s grace to transform us. We must be careful to be attentive to grace so that our endeavour and discipline is indeed in response to grace and not coming from our own ego. The spring of divine life (the spring of holiness) issues from the Heart of God alone. We need to allow God the vine-grower to prune away whatever is dead wood. We need to cooperate as God the gardener clears away whatever is blocking the spring or hindering the flow of water. We need to keep responding to grace by cooperating in keeping the channels open and clear. We need to allow the water of life to penetrate the soil of our lives. But we do not hold the shears; we do not do the pruning; we do not create the water or initiate its flow. A holy person is not a humanly perfect person. A holy person is one who has allowed himself or herself to be transformed by communion in love with God – a communion initiated and sustained by God.

Herein lies the challenge of becoming holy. We have to learn that we cannot initiate holiness. No amount of control exercised by us can produce or achieve holiness. God is holy. God is utterly transcendent, utterly beyond anything we can initiate. God, however, can and does directly act in our lives. We have to allow the self-as-initiator to be ‘lost’. ‘Those who lose their life for my sake will find it’ (Matthew 10:39). We have to let go control. We have to become like a little child and allow to happen whatever God wants to happen as a result of His love. ‘Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it’ (Mark 10:15).

‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves’ (Mark 8:34). This self-denial is a denial or negating *of* the self (the ego), it is not a denial or negating *by* the self. It is allowing God to initiate rather than the self. It is allowing grace to transform. It is accepting to be loved and to love only insofar as loving flows from the transformation. This requires attentive discipline of our natural tendency to take control. We must resist the temptation to want to ‘possess’ or ‘achieve’ holiness.

This is what it means to be ‘poor in spirit’ (Matthew 5:3). This is what it means to be detached, to be humble. This is what it means to be a child of God. This is what it means to cry out in childlike trust ‘Abba!’ – a cry that can be made only because the Spirit of Jesus has been poured into our hearts. Saying Yes to God’s gracious offer to transform us through divine communion, we allow God to penetrate to the heart of our lives, and in so doing discover that God has drawn us to penetrate to the heart of God’s life. Prayer is making space for God’s transforming action in our lives. Prayer is giving ourselves, like a child, into God’s hands. God will lead us along the path of holiness, for God will take us ever more closely to God’s heart.

Jesus is the mediator who shows us how to walk this journey. Through giving us his love, the Spirit of love that he shares with the Father, he draws us to his heart and so to the heart of God. The journey of becoming holy is a journey of being transformed into Jesus:

‘All are called to union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and towards whom our whole life is directed’ (Vatican II, LG n.3).

‘It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).

Teresa of Jesus (d.1582) insists that the path to holiness and so the journey of prayer is in the company of Jesus:

‘It is for you to look at him. He never takes his eyes off you’ (*Way of Perfection* 26, 3).

‘Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with the One who we know loves us’ (*Life* 8.5).

I conclude with a short piece composed by a 20-year old who was preparing for final vows in a religious congregation. He was responding to a loving call but experiencing something of the cost of following his heart’s desire. The asceticism asked of us is always in order that we may be able to receive and give more love.

‘The mountain stream finds its winding way through the folds of grass and granite to pour its clear freshness into a valley, small and green. Clinging to the bank in the still and shallow waters grew a reed. This reed was not alone. It had enjoyed companionship ever since it first saw the light of day reflected through the water. Naturally enough it had grown to love the other reeds, and the life in the valley with its birds and flowers and children,

One day a mist crept up the valley and covered the reed with its blanket of cold. It felt strange and sad and alone. Then it heard, rising in the distance, the faintest strains of a flute. At least it sounded like a flute. The reed couldn't be sure. The music was coming down the hill, and as it drew nearer it sounded even more beautiful.

The mist was clearing at its approach and now the reed could make out, not far away and coming towards it, a man, a minstrel, and he was playing on something that looked like a reed. But, of course, it couldn't be a reed, for reeds cannot sound like that!

The lone minstrel came closer and knelt down, and, looking deep into the eyes of the reed and asked if it would it come up the mountain with him. What me? But how can I? The valley was the only life it knew. How could it leave it? Where would this man take it? But there was something in the minstrel's eyes that told the reed that there was nothing to fear. So it said Yes, and the minstrel took it in his long and gentle fingers and drew it from the water. They started to climb together. His hands were warm.

They hadn't gone far when the reed looked back and in the clear sunlight saw the other reeds swaying to the breeze and sending each other messages over the rippling water. It felt very lonely. It could call all the reeds by name. It loved them, and they loved it. Why did this man take it away from them? Would it ever see them again? It was frightened, and, as they continued to climb, the air was colder and the wind whispered of other places, unknown. The reed looked into the eyes of the minstrel and hoped.

In the valley ... in the valley were the flowers and the birds and the laughter of the waters, and the leaves that floated by, bringing news of other parts. But they were climbing, above the roofs and the blue smoke that came curling upward. They climbed even into the clouds - the clouds that brought the drops of water it had played with since it could remember; the clouds that rainbowed down light and warmth.

The mountain continued to climb before them. Suddenly the reed found itself in darker cloud, heavy, black and threatening – the tall trees creaking and groaning, lashed by the wind, their gnarled trunks labouring with the chaotic clash of twisted branches. But something in the minstrel's eyes said not to be afraid and the small reed held fast to the hand that clasped it. They continued to climb.

The reed looked back now. It could no longer see the valley. It strained to see the valley, and its heart was torn. Around it was rock, bare, bleak rock; and above - the width of snow. Silence ... Stillness ... Immensity ... Not hills but the peaks of hills. No valley to be seen. Just the peaks of hills, silent and still.

Silent ... but now they had stopped, and a marvellous thing happened. For the silence of the endless snow was broken by the pure tones of what sounded like a flute. But no! The

music came from a reed! from this reed! For as they had climbed, it had gradually left behind the marrow and substance of its own being, and now, unburdened, it was open to the life and breath of the minstrel. It had not dared hope. It had not dreamed. But the message of the minstrel echoed through the silent distances and down into the valley. For they were coming back, back to the other reeds. The mists thinned and vanished before them, and the minstrel bent down and drew other reeds to himself. It had been worth the climb!’

16. Prayer of Intercession

Among the many wonderful stories in the Hebrew Scriptures there are two especially memorable ones that speak of the power of intercessory prayer. One is where Abraham pleads with God to spare Sodom (Genesis 18:20-32). The other is where Moses is helped by Aaron and Hur as he prays for victory against Amalek (Exodus 17:8-13).

The New Testament, too, speaks of the power of intercessory prayer. Jesus himself, we are told, is interceding for us with his Father:

‘Christ Jesus, who died, was raised. He is at the right hand of God, interceding for us.’
(Romans 8:34)

‘He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them’ (Hebrews 7:25).

‘If we sin, we have Jesus Christ as our advocate with the Father’ (1 John 2:1).

Because of this we are encouraged to approach God with confidence:

‘Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16).

Did not Jesus himself tell us:

‘Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened’ (Matthew 7:8 and Luke 11:10).

As we pray for each other, however, let us keep in mind that we may ask for anything, but we must know that only God knows what is best. Let us listen to John of the Cross:

‘Discreet lovers only indicate their needs, that the Beloved may do what he pleases [‘They have no wine’, John 2:3] ... There are three reasons for this: first, the Lord knows what is suitable for us better than we do; second, the Beloved has more compassion when he beholds the need and resignation of one who loves Him; third, we are better safeguarded against self-love and possessiveness by indicating our lack, rather than asking for what, in our opinion, we need. Here we are saying something like: Tell my Beloved, since I have become sick, and he alone is my health, to give me health; and, since I suffer and he alone is my joy, to give me joy; and, since I am dying and he alone is my life, to give me life.’
(*Spiritual Canticle*, 2.8)

There is comfort in knowing that someone is praying for us. The love thus shown us can ease what can otherwise be experienced as a profound spiritual loneliness. The prayer of another can encourage us to look towards God in faith, trusting that ‘the Lord will fulfil his purpose for me’ (Psalm 138:8). We are encouraged also by the words of Deuteronomy:

‘It is the Lord who goes before you. God will be with you.
God will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed’ (Deuteronomy 31:8).

When things are hard we can easily think that there is no hope. The prayer of other people reminds us that we are held in love and that God will continue to fulfil in our lives the purpose he has for us.

We might wonder how effective such prayer is when the person for whom we are praying does not know. It is usually good to tell the other person that he or she is in our prayers. But if this is not possible, or not appropriate, we are reminded that we are all connected to each other even when we are unaware of the connection. We are like branches on a vine. If one branch draws nourishment in from the sun, all the other branches are helped. Ultimately the best help we can give anyone is to be close to God ourselves. A prayerful and open heart draws grace in and this helps the person for whom we are praying. Indeed the whole world benefits from such prayer, for it opens up the world to draw down the fire of God's love. Herein lies the importance of holiness and of prayer.

Of course, other people's prayer for us does not substitute for our own openness to God or our own response to God's grace. Likewise we cannot live other people's lives for them. But we can surround each other with grace. We can draw each other close and encourage each other to believe in God's love, and even when we are not conscious of other people's prayer, this prayer is working, in the words of James McAuley, 'like radium in the dark', giving out the spiritual energy of love.

Henri Nouwen writes:

'Often I have said to people, "I will pray for you" but how often did I really enter into the full reality of what that means? I now see how indeed I can enter deeply into the other and pray from that other person's centre. When I really bring my friends and the many I pray for into my innermost being and feel their pains, their struggles, their cries in my own soul, then I leave myself, so to speak, and become them, then I have compassion. Compassion lies at the heart of our prayer for our fellow human beings. When I pray for the world, I become the world; when I pray for the endless needs of the millions, my soul expands and wants to embrace them all and bring them into the presence of God. But in the midst of that experience I realise that compassion is not mine but God's gift to me. I cannot embrace the world, but God can. I cannot pray but God can pray in me. When God became as we are, that is, when God allowed all of us to enter into his intimate life, it became possible for us to share in God's infinite compassion.

'In praying for others, I lose myself and become the other, only to be found by the divine love which holds the whole of humanity in a compassionate embrace ... Compassion belongs to the centre of the contemplative life. When we become the other and so enter into the presence of God, then we are true contemplatives. True contemplatives, then, are not the ones who withdraw from the world to save their own soul, but the ones who enter into the centre of the world and pray to God from there' (*Genesee Diary*, page 144).

Anthony Bloom writes:

'When we seek God we must love our neighbours, and when we seek our neighbours we must love God. In one of his letters a Russian holy man describes how one day he was asked a question: "Why is it that the workers under your charge work so hard and so well when you do not watch over them, and those that we watch over are always trying to deceive us?" The holy man replied: "When I come in the morning to give them their work, I am overcome with pity for them. They have left their village and their family for a tiny wage, how poor they must be. And when I have given them their work I go back into my cell and pray for each one of them. I say to the Lord: 'Lord, remember Nicholas. He is so young. He has left his newborn child to find work, because they are so poor. He has no other means of supporting it. Think of him and protect him from evil. Think of her and be her defender'. Thus I pray, but as I feel the presence of God more and more strongly, I reach a point when I can no longer take notice of anything on earth. The earth vanishes, God alone remains. Then I forget Nicholas, his wife, his child, his village, his poverty and

am carried away in God. Then, deep in God, I find the divine love which contains Nicholas, his wife, his child, their poverty, their needs, and this divine love is a torrent which carries me back to earth and to praying for them. And the same thing happens again. God's presence becomes stronger, earth recedes. I am carried again into the depths where I find the world that God so greatly loves." Encounter with God, encounter with others. They are only possible when both are so greatly loved that the one who prays can forget himself, become detached from himself, and become only an orientation towards them, for them. This is the fundamental character of intercession' (*The Courage to pray*, pages 14-15).

Prayer for other people's needs can tend to take over our prayer and we can do it with anxiety and be so preoccupied going over the sickness or the troubles of those we love, that there may be in reality very little communion with God going on. There is a way of expressing our concerns for others while at the same time not being distracted from a genuine faith-communion with God.

Firstly, let us be aware that God loves those for whom we wish to intercede. God has been gracing them long before we thought to pray for them. God is gracing them now. Our desire is to be, in our prayer, in communion with all the members of the church, living and dead, praying for them.

Then let us in our imagination take the person for whom we are praying into our hearts. This is the best way also to listen to people: take them and what they are saying into your heart and listen to them there. If someone has asked our prayers, let us take that person into our heart, and then, from our heart, hold him or her up to God. A strenuous effort of concentration is not required. Just simple awareness, as we might stand in the presence of a picture or of a sunset.

Finally, let us put the request aside and just *be* in the presence of God. We do not have to keep on reflecting that we are there on behalf of another: we have already made that clear. We just *are* in the presence of God. God knows our intention and it is simply that God's love will flow freely in this other person, as we hope it does in us. It is enough that God knows.

To pray for others we do not have to be clever or eloquent or even perceptive of their needs; just be ourselves as we are: simple, a little confused perhaps, but wanting God's will, or wanting to want God's will for ourselves and others. It is God's business to take things on from there. We are to do what we can do. We are to fill the water pots with water, and we are to 'fill them to the brim'. We must leave the wine-making to God (see John 2:7-10). It is up to us to remove the stone. The words 'Lazarus, come forth' belong to God (see John 11:41-44). We are dry bones; clothing them with flesh, and breathing the Spirit of life upon them is the work of God (see Ezekiel 37:1-14).

In this way the prayers we pray for others are more trusting. We entrust to the heart of God those whom we have taken into our heart. Do not go over and over their problems. Rather, be ourselves in communion with God in simple trust, and spend the time of prayer open to God's grace and praying that the will of God will be done in our lives and in the world, and that we may be a vehicle of God's grace to others. God certainly hears our prayer and in a way that remains beyond our understanding our prayer opens a way for grace to enter into the lives of others. It is not for us to know the state of readiness of the others to receive this grace, nor the ways in which their reception might affect their lives. We must leave all this to the love encounter with God for which we are praying.

17. Friendship in the Spirit : Soul Companions

We are not meant to journey to God on our own. We are created in the image of God who is love, and so our very existence is an expression of love. Created by love and for love, we are meant to

dwell in love. We are never meant to be alone. Jesus' longing was to bind us all together in love: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12).

We do not love others when we see them always in relation to ourselves, either as extensions of ourselves or as people who can satisfy our needs. To love others we must learn to respect them precisely as other, with their own special and sacred mystery. Simone Weil writes:

'The substance of love of neighbour is attentiveness. It is an attentive regard in which the soul empties itself of itself in order to receive in itself the being that it regards, just as it is, in all its truth.'

We must learn to respect others in their own world and not simply insofar as they relate to us. We are to be open especially to the mysterious ways in which the other person is loved by God. To love another person our heart must learn to resonate in sympathy with the movements of the other person's heart. To love is to recognise that there is a sacred mystery unfolding in our own soul, and that this is also happening in the soul of the other. To love is to go beyond this recognition and to be in communion with the other within this sacred mystery. This is true of all love of another. It is especially true of the love that we know as friendship.

Hence the warning not to confuse love with the experience of falling in love. When we fall in love we experience a partial and temporary collapse of the ego boundaries that we have developed in order to become our own person. We enjoy the feeling of falling in love because it enables us to recapture something of the limitless communion that we knew as children. Of its nature, falling in love cannot last, for true love requires an acceptance of each person's unique otherness. It can, however, lead to true love, for it attracts us to extend our ego boundaries by taking another person into communion. Lasting communion in love is not something we fall into, nor does it always come easily. It is the fruit of much real loving.

It is important also to distinguish between love and dependency. We can be tempted, in the name of love, to constrict others in such a way as to reinforce their dependence upon us. We can be tempted also, in the name of love, to try to avoid having to grow up, by depending on others in inappropriate ways. In the name of love we can be mutually reinforcing an unliberating relationship where everything is done to secure what the other person will do for me, rather than developing real love in which we dare the journey of maturing as people and offer ourselves to each other in a mutually liberating self-offering. To love another person we must want that person's spiritual growth and be ready to sacrifice anything, however attractive and desirable, that is an obstacle to that growth.

To love others we need to be able to turn our attention away from ourselves and our own needs and direct our attention to them. We can do this only to the extent that we have a healthy self-respect and love of ourselves. Did not Jesus say that we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31 = Leviticus 19:16). To the extent that we do not respect or love ourselves we necessarily experience disturbance. A pool that is disturbed cannot reflect clearly. Only to the extent that we have learned to love ourselves as God loves us can we calmly turn our attention away from our own needs and look at the other as other.

The goal is to love ourselves the way God loves us. God knows us intimately and loves us unconditionally. We have already reflected on God's love at some length. Let us here recall the wonderful truth that the Ultimate Reality, the One in whose Being we all share, is Love. Let us do this by listening to the Psalmist telling us that God loves us with the feelings of love that a mother has for the child in her womb. The texts speak of God's 'mercy' or 'compassion', words used to translate the Hebrew *rhm*, which is related to the word for womb:

'Be mindful of your *mercy*, O Lord, and of your steadfast love' (Psalm 25:6).

‘Do not, O Lord, withhold your *mercy* from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever’ (Psalm 40:11).

‘Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant *mercy* blot out my transgressions’ (Psalm 51:1).

‘According to your abundant *mercy*, turn to me’ (Psalm 69:16).

‘Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his *compassion*?’ (Psalm 77:9).

‘Let your *compassion* come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low’ (Psalm 79:8).

‘The Lord crowns you with steadfast love and *mercy*’ (Psalm 103:4).

‘As a father has *compassion* for his children, so the Lord has *compassion* for those who revere God’ (Psalm 103:13).

‘Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is *merciful*’ (Psalm 116:5).

‘Let your *mercy* come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight’ (Psalm 119:77).

‘Great is your *mercy*, O Lord; give me life according to your justice’ (Psalm 119:156).

‘The Lord is gracious and *merciful* ... God’s *compassion* is over all creation.’

(Psalm 145:8-9)

Inside each of us is a child who has been hurt and who needs nurturing. To love ourselves we have to learn to love the child within with the same mercy and compassion that God has for us. If our love for ourselves is to be real, we must love ourselves as we really are. There is a lot to consider here, including our owning of the sinful ways in which we have failed to be the person whom God has graced us to be. But, before focusing on our real or apparent failures, we must realise that the most profound truth about ourselves is that we are creatures of God, and that life is something that we receive moment by moment as a gift. We cannot give ourselves life. If our love for ourselves is to be real, we will have to learn to resist the desires and aspirations that resist grace and so distort who we are. However, it is even more important to recognise and nurture those desires and aspirations that respond to grace. The person we become depends on our openness to the creative grace coming to us from the Heart of God.

This dependence on God does not mean that we are *lost* in God, somehow vanishing into the divinity. On the contrary, God wants us to *find* our unique selves in Him. We lose ourselves when we fail to open ourselves to God’s creative love, when we fail to love ourselves as God loves us. This means loving all of ourselves, including our shadow side, while doing what we can to respond to grace and resist sin.

Julian of Norwich writes:

‘Christ wishes us to be like him in undiminished, everlasting love towards ourselves and our fellow Christians. He does not withdraw his love from us because we sin and he does not wish us to withdraw love from ourselves or from others because of sin. We must unreservedly hate sin and at the same time endlessly love others as God loves them’ (*Showings*, chapter 40).

We can be helped to love ourselves by the love that we receive from others. For this love to be real, however, it is essential that those who love us know us as we really are, for otherwise we know that they are loving only the mask that we are presenting to them. When that happens we know that what we are being offered, however well intentioned, is not genuine love. It is something we have engineered. In any case, unless others have their own reasons for living in a world of make-believe, they soon see through our masks. We have to learn to resist the temptation to want to make ourselves appear attractive so as to be admired, liked and wanted. It is not how we appear that ultimately matters; it is who we are.

If we are going to find our true selves and experience and enjoy true loving, we have to climb out of the cradle where we see everything in terms of gratifying our own perceived needs. Such behaviour is selfish, for we are opting to maintain our present level of ‘security’ and indulge our felt needs rather than risk the giving of the true self and the receiving of another when love beckons us to do so. We need to become aware of the ways in which we do things, motivated by our desire for a return. God, who is love, is gracing us in and through every experience to learn to share in God’s love, which is unconditional. Such a love is the fruit of grace. We cannot make it happen, but we can honestly admit the limits of our loving and we can long that our ‘hidden self may become strong’ (Ephesians 3:16), and that gradually we may learn to respond to God’s grace which is drawing us towards love because it is drawing us towards God.

If we are going to learn to love our real selves, we have to *respect* ourselves (from Latin *respicere*, to look and look again). It is important to know myself now as I am now – as I really am. Not as I would like to be. Not as others expect me to be. Not as I want others to see me. We have to find *courage* (from Latin *cor*, meaning ‘heart’), for we will have to let a lot go, if we are going to extend and transcend ourselves against the resistance of fear. If we are going to learn to love our real selves, we must have *compassion* on ourselves (from Latin *cum + passio*, feeling or suffering with). We must learn how to *console* ourselves (from Latin, *cum + solus*, meaning to stay with ourselves when we are alone; we must learn to *comfort* ourselves (from the Latin, *cum + fort*, being strong with). If we are honest with significant others and they do offer support, let us thank God; but we all know the folly of expecting others to provide the consolation and comfort that can come only from within.

If we are going to learn to love our real selves, we must be *true* with ourselves (note the related words ‘be-*truth*-al’ and ‘*trust*’). We must be *faithful* to our true selves (note the related words ‘*confide*’, ‘*bide*’, ‘*fidelity*’). We must be *devoted* to our own true good (from Latin *devotio*, consecrated, ‘vowed’, to God). We must be *serving* our own true good (note the related words ‘*observing*’, ‘*conserving*’, ‘*preserving*’). To love is to recognise oneself as being, like God, able to ‘create’, to ‘enliven’ (put life into), to ‘encourage’ (put heart into), to ‘enjoy’ (put joy into).

In his book *Anam Cara: spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world*, John O’Donohue prays:

‘May you recognise in your life the presence, power and light of your soul.

May you realise that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you immediately with the rhythm of the universe.

May you have respect for your own individuality and difference.

May you realise that the shape of your soul is unique, that you have a special destiny here, that behind the façade of your life there is something beautiful, good and eternal happening.

May you learn to see your self with the same delight, pride and expectation with which God sees you in every moment’ (page 161).

Jesus said: ‘If you want to become my follower, deny your self and take up your cross daily and follow me. For if you want to save your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life because of me you will save it. What does it profit you to gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit your self?’ (Luke 9:23-25). We speak of self-sacrifice, a term that is capable of a rich, positive meaning, but can also be terribly misunderstood. ‘Sacrifice’ comes from two Latin words, *sacer* meaning ‘holy’ and *facere* meaning ‘to make’. To sacrifice means to ‘make holy’. True self-sacrifice is based on the realisation that only God can make holy. To be self-sacrificing (in the best sense) means to offer ourselves to God, opening ourselves to God’s sanctifying action. It means allowing Christ to live in us and to draw us into communion with God even when this involves allowing much of what we perceive as the self to be diminished. It means to offer our real selves up to God allowing God to unite us to God’s Self and so to bring us to enjoy holiness. It means to

offer ourselves, our true selves, to others in love, knowing that this love which has its origins in God will make them holy too.

We have to face the trials of life, trusting that grace is always present. However unjust a trial may be, God is there and his love can make of the trial an occasion for our purification. (Note that the words *'fire'* and *'purge'* derive from the same root as *'purify'*). This is God's work, so if we are to learn to love ourselves and so be free to love others, we must abandon ourselves confidently into God's hands. John of the Cross writes:

'God is carrying me. Although I am walking at God's pace, I do not feel this pace ... the senses do not attain to what God effects in you at this time. ... You, then, should abandon yourself into God's hands and not your own' (*Living Flame*, 3.67).

There is also a negative and generally destructive kind of 'self-sacrifice' where we do real harm to our true selves (and to others) in the name of being loving to others. True love for others will always be a gift of the real self to another, not a destroying of the self. Sometimes in the name of being 'self-sacrificing' we are really indulging our false self by trying to keep up an image. This happens when, for example, we fail to confront because we want to maintain the image of being an 'understanding' or 'compassionate' person. Another example is when we indulge another person without regard to the truth or to the other person's genuine spiritual good. Such indulging is destructive, for we are, however unwittingly, reinforcing the other person's dependence on us so as to indulge our own need to be needed. We think we are being loving, but it is the feeling of being loving that we are seeking, and not the genuine good of the other person. Paul gives us the key here when he tells us to 'do the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15). Since God is love nothing is true unless it is loving. But since God is truth, nothing is loving if it is not true. Jesus said that the 'truth will set you free' (John 8:32). If we are not genuinely searching for the truth, we can easily deceive ourselves that something is loving when it is really a soft way of avoiding the truth.

Genuine love is self-replenishing activity. Indeed, it is even more; it enlarges rather than diminishes the self; it fills the self, rather than depleting it. It is self-fulfilling because it takes us to deeper levels of self-transcendence. This is especially true of the precious gift of love that we call friendship.

Immediately after telling his disciples that they were to love one another as he loves them, Jesus spoke of them as his 'friends' (John 15:15). We can learn something about the importance of friendship from the encounter between Jesus and Peter in which Jesus speaks about faithful commitment, but in the end accepts Peter's friendship as a basis for trust. The impetuous Peter declared: 'Even though all become deserters, I will not' (Mark 14:29). When the time came, his courage failed and he denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but persistently (the meaning of 'three times'). John has this beautiful scene by the lakeside (John 21:15-17). Referring back to Peter's boast, the risen Jesus says to him: 'Simon son of John, do you love me *more than these?*' The word he uses for love [*agapân*] means: 'Are you committed to me? Will you be faithful to the covenant love we have?' Peter knows he can be fickle; he knows, too, that he is no better than the others. He responds: 'Lord, you know I love you'. However, for love he does not use *agapân*, but *philein*. He makes no claim to being faithful, for he knows he can fail. Rather, he assures Jesus that he is his friend, that he feels for him and cares about him, that his heart is deeply attached to him, that he is fond of him. Jesus' response is immediate: 'Feed my lambs'. He is commissioning Peter his friend to go and share love with those who are hungry for it.

Jesus repeats his opening question, though now he drops out all reference to the others: 'Simon son of John, do you love me [*agapân*]?' He is asking Peter again about his commitment. Once again Peter cannot say yes. He knows his weakness. He can, however, reaffirm his friendship [*philein*]. And, once again, Jesus says: 'Tend my sheep'. Jesus' third question is different. He no longer speaks of commitment and fidelity. Rather he takes Peter's own word for love [*philein*]

and asks Peter if he really is his friend. Does he really care about Jesus? Is he truly fond of him? Peter's hurt is a healing one. Jesus is allowing him to make up for the three-fold denial. With a humble, repentant spirit, he declares: 'Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you'. This is enough for Jesus who, for a third time, commissions Peter to share this love, this friendship with others.

In his book entitled *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran writes of friendship:

'Your friend is your needs answered.
He is your field which you sow with love and reap with thanksgiving.
He is your board and your fireside,
for you come to him with your hunger, and you seek him for peace.
When your friend speaks his mind, you fear not the Nay in your own mind,
nor do you withhold the Aye.
And when he is silent, your heart ceases not to listen to his heart.
For without words, in friendship, all thoughts, all desires, all expectations,
are born and shared, with joy that is unclaimed.
When you part from your friend you grieve not;
for that which you love most in him may be clearer in his absence,
as the mountain to the climber is clearer from the plain.
And let there be no purpose in friendship save the deepening of the spirit,
for love that seeks aught but the disclosure of its own mystery is not love,
but a net cast forth; and only the unprofitable is caught.
And let your best be for your friend.
If he must know the ebb of your tide, let him know its flood also.
For what is your friend that you should seek him with hours to kill?
Seek him always with hours to live.
For it is his to fill your need, but not your emptiness.
And in the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures.
For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.'

Henri Nouwen writes:

'When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who instead of giving much advice, solutions or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief or bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness.'

We are to learn to be free to give according to our friend's capacity to receive and to receive according to our friend's capacity to give. Of course we will be hurt and we must not pretend we are not. We need to learn to take the hurt to our heart and to be gentle with ourselves, trusting the healing power of our heart, for our heart is greater than our wounds. And we must be ready to forgive and to allow the healing that is in our heart to flow out to our friend.

It is a great blessing to be able to share our journey in that special kind of friendship which flows from communion with God and which engages the spirit of those who share in this special love. Teresa of Jesus had a great capacity for friendship. She wrote to a friend:

'I assure you that if you love me dearly I return your love and I like you to tell me of yours. How unmistakable a trait of our nature is this wish for our love to be returned! It cannot be wrong, for our Lord wishes it too'.

She recognised that, especially in the early stages of prayer when we can be plagued by distractions and aridity in prayer, we need help and companionship on the journey:

‘It is a dreadful thing to be beset by so many dangers and to be alone ... For this reason I would advise those who practise prayer, especially at first, to cultivate the friendship and company of others of similar interest ... Since people find comfort in the conversation and human sympathy of ordinary friendships even when these are not of the best kind, I do not know why those who are beginning to love and serve God in earnest should not be allowed to discuss their joys and trials with others - and people who practise prayer have plenty of both’ (*Life* 7.20).

Aelred, a twelfth century English Cistercian, in a treatise on Spiritual Friendship writes:

‘Those who say that one should live perfectly detached - uncomforted, unbothered, loving so little that one takes no pleasure in another’s good, so little loved that one’s bad behaviour leaves behind no scars – such are not human at all.’

In a spiritual friendship there is a harmony of all the vital energies engaged in mutual love - a harmony directed by grace. If our feelings are deeply engaged over things that are of little importance, or if our so-called friendship excludes others and leads us to cut them out of ordinary respect and love, we are not dealing with spiritual friendship. If, on the other hand, the mutual love draws us out to others and into a deeper prayer, these are signs that the friendship is indeed a grace. Therese of Lisieux wrote out the following words of John of the Cross and kept them in her missal: ‘The more you remember your friend, the more you remember the love of God and the greater your desire to love him’ (*Dark Night*, I.4.7).

A number of Jesus’ first followers were disciples of John the Baptist. Yet when Jesus came near, John was happy to watch his friends leave him and join Jesus:

‘He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled’ (John 3:29).

Speaking of those who are committed to prayer and are growing in love for God, Teresa writes:

‘Do you think such persons will love and delight in no one save God? No; they will love others much more than they did, with a more genuine love, with greater passion and with a love that brings more profit. That is what love really is ... If they love anyone they immediately look right beyond the body, fix their eyes on the soul and see what there is to be loved in that. If there is nothing, but they see any suggestion or inclination which shows them that if they dig deep they will find gold within this mine, they think nothing of the labour of digging since they have love. There is nothing which suggests itself to them which they will not willingly do for the good of their friend since they desire their love for that person to be lasting, and they know quite well that it is impossible unless the loved one has certain good qualities and a great love for God ... This love is like that which was borne for us by the good Lover, Jesus ...

‘The heart of such friends does not allow them to practise duplicity: if they see their friend straying from the road, or committing any faults, they will speak to their friend about it; they cannot allow themselves to do anything else ... Happy the people who are loved by such as these! Happy the day on which they came to know them! O my Lord, will You not grant me the favour of giving me many who have such love for me? ... Love such persons as much as you like. There can be very few of them, but none the less it is the Lord’s will that their goodness should be known. When one of you is striving after perfection, you will at once be told that you have no need to know such people – that it is enough for you to have God. But to get to know God’s friends is a very good way of having God; as I have

discovered by experience, it is most helpful ... It is this kind of love which I should like us to have. At first it may not be perfect, but the Lord will make it increasingly so. At first it may be mingled with emotion, but this, as a rule, will do no harm. It is sometimes good and necessary for us to show emotion in our love' (*The Way of Perfection* 6.7 - 7.5).

In his book *The Awakened Heart*, Gerald May writes:

'The heart yearns, in simple, silent pleading, for action that does not mimic love but springs forth from it ... My single desire for God will be of more help to my friends because my single desire for God will birth the kind of action that will really help them. It is not desiring God instead of doing helpful actions, but desiring God as the source of the actions that are going to be really helpful. It is that simple: put efficiency first, and the world gets to be the way it is today; put love first, and the whole meaning of efficiency is transformed' (page 234).

'If we give ourselves more space between feeling and response, and enter that space in a consecrated way, we will find ourselves empowered for whatever response love calls for. I am sure of it. The power then is not just ours; it is the nuclear fusion of divine grace and our dignified willingness ... Authentic loving responsiveness invites us to turn our consciousness toward the exact point where our hearts are already looking: to the source of love. There, and only there, is the wellspring of authentic responsiveness found' (page 240).

'Find your heart as best you can, follow it towards the source of love as much as possible, consecrate yourself, and trust. God's grace is present, God's love is irrevocable, and you can trust it and trust yourself within it. There are no exceptions. There are no places inside you or in the whole of creation where God's love does not exist. It is alive in prisons and hospital wards, in earthquakes and hurricanes, in your own selfishness and addictions. It is always crying out to your heart, and your heart is awake, responding. Seek it and trust it' (page 244).

In his book *The Inner Voice of Love*, Henri Nouwen writes:

'When you 'love' someone or 'miss' someone, you experience an inner pain. Bit by bit you have to discover the nature of this pain. When your deepest self is connected with the deepest self of another, that person's absence may be painful, but it will lead you to a profound communion with the person, because loving each other is loving in God. When the place where God dwells in you is intimately connected with the place where God dwells in the other, the absence of the other person is not destructive. On the contrary, it will challenge you to enter more deeply into communion with God, the source of all unity and communion among people. It is also possible on the other hand that the pain of absence will show you that you are out of touch with your own deeper self. You need the other to experience inner wholeness, to have a sense of well-being. You have become emotionally dependent on the other and sink into depression because of his or her absence. It feels as if the other has taken away a part of you that you cannot live without. Then the pain of absence reveals a certain lack of trust in God's love. But God is enough for you. True love between two human beings puts you more in touch with your deepest self. It is a love *in* God. The pain you experience from the death or absence of the person you love, then, always calls you to a deeper knowledge of God's love. God's love is all the love you need, and it reveals to you the love of God in the other. So the God in you can speak to the God in the other. This is deep speaking to deep, a mutuality in the heart of God who embraces both of you. Death or absence does not end or even diminish the love of God that brought you to the other person. It calls you to take a new step into the mystery of God's inexhaustible love. This process is painful, very painful, because the other person has been a true revelation of God's love for you. But the more you are stripped of the God-given support of

people, the more you are called to love God for God's sake. This is an awesome and even dreadful love, but it is the love that offers eternal life' (pages 53-54).

18. Spiritual Direction/Accompaniment

We are blessed, indeed, if we have a soul companion: someone with whom we can share the love that is a fruit of our prayer-communion with God. Here we look at that special love-relationship we have with a person commonly spoken of as a spiritual director because we confide in this person our prayer experience and open ourselves to him or her as a vehicle of God's guidance. According to Teresa of Jesus it will help if the director is a spiritual friend: 'A great means for making notable progress is to love one's confessor' (*Way of Perfection*, 5).

Teresa knows that we do not go to God on our own. She is also very conscious of the danger of deluding ourselves. It is important that we open our conscience to another, and it is important that that other person be someone who 'has good judgment and experience. If he also is learned, so much the better' (*Life*, 13.16). We need a director who is capable of responding wisely to what we reveal of our union with God. She writes:

'You should try to consult some learned person, if you can, and the more learned this person the better. Those who walk in the way of prayer have the greater need for this counsel; and the more spiritual they are the greater is their need' (*Life*, 13.17).

John of the Cross is of the same view:

'God is so content that our rule and direction be through other human beings and that we be governed by human reason, that God definitely does not want us to bestow entire credence upon God's supernatural communications, nor be confirmed in their strength and security, until they pass through a human channel. As often as God reveals something to us, God confers upon us a kind of inclination to manifest this to the appropriate person. Until this is done, we usually go without complete satisfaction, for it is not received from another person like ourselves' (*Ascent II*,22.9).

Saint Bernard has this warning:

'Let them be warned who are not afraid to enter the paths of life without anyone to guide and teach them, but act as their own pupils as well as their own teachers in the spiritual life. Nor are they satisfied with this; they even collect disciples, the blind leading the blind. How many have we seen wander from the right path, to their great peril, as a result of this? They begin in the spirit but end in the flesh' (*On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 77,6).

Marie-Eugène quotes Saint Francis de Sales along the same lines:

'Saint Francis de Sales, with delicate precision, underlines the fact that we are so lacking in clear-sightedness as regards ourselves because of a certain complacency "so secret and imperceptible that unless we have very good sight we cannot discover it. The very ones who are tainted with this do not know it, if it is not pointed out to them"' (*I want to see God*, 275).

Teresa insists on the importance of exercising our freedom to choose a director with whom our souls know they are at home:

'Praise God that you are able to choose the director to whom you are to be subject, and do not give up this freedom. It is better to remain without a director until you find the right one, for the Lord will give you one if your life is based on humility and you have the desire to succeed in finding one' (*Life*, 13.19).

Teresa also writes: 'If you seek a director unsuccessfully, the Lord will not fail you' (*Life*, 40.8).

John of the Cross warns of the danger of bad direction:

‘Because of the refined quality and purity of these delicate and sublime touches of the anointing and overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, neither you nor your director understand them ... Who will succeed in repairing that delicate painting of the Holy Spirit once it is marred by a coarse hand?’ (*Living Flame* 3.41-42).

The director is to train a person in detachment by directing all the faculties to God in faith, hope and love. This includes detachment from spiritual favours as well. It must be God whom we seek, not our feelings about God. The director is to discern and evaluate a person’s religious experience and growth in prayer and to help discern what God is doing (see *Living Flame*, 3.32-40). The director’s role is to support a person with understanding and compassion during dark periods of trial, when the person is overwhelmed by his or her own sinfulness and the apparent absence of God. Above all, the director must lead people in God’s way, not in the way preferred by the director.

John of the Cross writes:

‘Directors should reflect that they themselves are not the chief agent, guide, and mover, but that the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, who is never neglectful of people. Directors are instruments for directing people to perfection through faith and the law of God, according to the spirit that God gives to each one. Thus the director’s whole concern should not be to accommodate people to his own method and condition, but he should observe the way along which God is leading them, and, if he does not recognise it, he should leave them alone and not bother them. In harmony with the path and spirit along which God is leading them, the spiritual director should strive to conduct them into greater solitude, tranquillity, and freedom of spirit. He should give them latitude so that, when God introduces them into this solitude, they do not become anxious or afflicted with the thought that nothing is being done. Even though a person is not then doing anything, God is doing something in them’ (*Living Flame* 3.46).

‘The director should be kind and peaceful ... and guide people in the way of faith.’

(*Ascent* II,22,19).

Teresa writes:

‘In matters outside their personal spiritual experience directors must not worry themselves to death, or think they understand what they do not, or quench the spirit, for these people are being directed by another Master, greater than any director, so that they are not without anyone over them’ (*Life*, 34.11).

Spiritual direction is a delicate art. People are as diverse as flowers and God has mysterious ways of leading each one into communion. A director, therefore, should act out of spiritual love: a love which is free of self-interest, seeking only the spiritual good of the person, by encouraging the person being directed and helping him or her not to give in to timidity or laziness.

If we are to be helped by opening our hearts to a spiritual director, we will need to have faith that God is working in and through the director. John of the Cross writes:

‘A humble person does not dare deal with God independently, nor can he be completely satisfied without human counsel and direction. God is desirous of this, for to declare and strengthen truth on the basis of natural reason, God draws near to those who come together in order to know truth’ (*Ascent*, II.22.11).

We need to be simple and straightforward with our director, revealing our state as we see it. How can the director be an instrument of our Physician if we are not honest or are selective in what we choose to reveal? Saint Francis de Sales has this advice:

‘Treat with the director open-heartedly, in all sincerity and fidelity, revealing clearly the good in you and the evil, without pretense or dissimulation ... Have extreme confidence in the director, mingled with a holy reverence, in such a way that the reverence does not lessen the confidence, and confidence does not hinder reverence’ (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, III.iv).

Teresa writes:

‘The really essential thing is that you should speak to your confessor very plainly and candidly in describing your experiences of prayer. For unless you do this, I cannot assure you that you are proceeding as you should or that it is God who is teaching you. God is very anxious for us to speak candidly and clearly to those who are in God’s place, and to desire them to be acquainted with all our thoughts, and still more with our actions, however trivial these may be’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.9).

Jesus revealed his will to Paul through Ananias (Acts 9:6ff). If we have chosen to open our heart in trust to a spiritual guide with whom we feel at home, God will not let us down if we humbly listen to the words that come to us through the director. As we listen to the director’s words, let us listen to the echo of those words that arises in our heart. If we are humble, honest and prayerful, the Spirit of God who loves us will know what words we are to follow and will use the director’s response to guide us.

19. Silence and Solitude

If we are to learn to pray we must learn to be silent. To be silent we must learn not to be afraid of solitude. Jesus lived in communion with God in whatever circumstances he was, but he still withdrew at times from people and from activity to be alone and pray:

‘In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed’ (Mark 1:35).

‘Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God’ (Luke 6:12).

‘Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him’ (Luke 9:18).

‘Jesus said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him’ (Mark 14:34-35).

Jesus invites us to share this experience:

‘Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret’ (Matthew 6:6).

It is especially in solitude that we experience the truth that we are never really alone:

‘The Father who sent me is with me, and has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to Him’ (John 8:29).

‘You will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me’ (John 16:32).

We are never alone. God is within us drawing us into communion.

‘Our centre is God ... We are not yet in our deepest centre when we can go deeper in God’ (John of the Cross, *Living Flame* 1.12).

For most of us, a large portion of our waking hours is spent in activity and often with others. We need to remind ourselves that only when our activity is in accordance with the will of God does it have value. We recall Jesus’ parable about the seed that produced a harvest while the farmer was absent (Mark 4:26-29). It is the creative action of God that is the key to a productive life. God

tells the people that things will be different in the Promised Land. In Egypt they had to work for themselves, but:

‘the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, a land that the Lord your God looks after. The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning to the end of the year’ (Deuteronomy 11:11-12).

Let us, then, give ourselves to the activity to which God calls us, leaving the productivity to God; but let us also allow God to draw us into silence and solitude. There we will discover the spring from which the pure waters of inspired action flow.

‘The Lord will fight for you. You have only to keep still’ (Exodus 14:14).

‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Psalm 46:10).

John of the Cross speaks of this silence and solitude in his *Spiritual Canticle*. In Stanzas 14 and 15, the bride declares:

My Beloved is the mountains, and lonely wooded valleys, strange islands, and resounding rivers, the whistling of love-stirring breezes.	The tranquil night at the time of the rising dawn, silent music, sounding solitude, the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.
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In Stanzas 18-19 she instructs the world of the senses to stay outside. She wishes to be alone with the Bridegroom:

You nymphs of Judea while among flowers and roses the amber spreads its perfume stay away, there on the outskirts; do not seek to touch our thresholds.	Hide yourself, my Love; turn your face toward the mountains, and do not speak.
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An obvious area for silence is in our speech. Jesus warns us of what will happen to us if we use our tongue to put others down (Matthew 5:23). The Letter of James is particularly insightful in exposing the evils committed by an unbridled tongue. Disciplining our speech, however, is not only a matter of avoiding sins such as lying or cursing or speaking of the faults of others. We must also learn to be sensitive to the inspiration of God’s Spirit so that we use only those words that come from our communion with God. Jesus is our model:

‘What I say is what I have seen in the Father’s presence’ (John 8:38).

‘What I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me’ (John 12:50).

Words that come from this communion are a vehicle of truth to others and of love. Words that do not come from this communion may not be sinful, but they can create distraction and clutter both our minds and hearts and the minds and hearts of those with whom we are carelessly chattering.

We must be especially careful about speaking of our spiritual experiences. We have noted the importance of revealing to a spiritual director what is happening in our souls, and there can be other situations in which it is appropriate to share our prayer-experiences with another person, so long as we keep the focus not on ourselves but on God the giver of all good gifts. However, sometimes we experience a feeling of unease when we have spoken about our spiritual experiences. Something precious can be lost by indelicate exposure.

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘Giving expression to our experiences lays bare our depths. For a moment the depth disappears; its restful shadows and its silence are dispersed. God, who has sought the deep quiet of our inmost centre for the creative action of God’s divine life, seems hampered by

our being brought to the exterior. Likewise, the communication from outside which was meant to enrich often merely disturbs our silence and the divine action in us by bringing in useless things that are distracting, causing disquiet, increasing the difficulties of interior recollection and inhibiting the divine action' (*I want to see God*, 416).

It is obvious that God calls us to be creative and loving in the way we behave. We must be ready to do God's will with all our mind and heart, all our soul and strength. If prayer is genuine it will bear fruit in the way we live. John writes: 'Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action' (1 John 3:18). We recall also Jesus' insistence on the ultimate importance of the way we express true love in our relationship with others: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat ...' (Matthew 25:35).

In chapter five of her *Book of Foundations*, Teresa of Jesus warns those who prefer a life of quiet and find the demands of action difficult, to check whether they prefer silence because of the feelings of devotion which they experience, rather than because it is God who is drawing them into silence. She reminds them of the central importance of wanting God's will not our own preference.

However, activity, even activity motivated by the desire to love, can be a distraction. Activity needs to be disciplined quite as much as speech if we are to enjoy silence.

Teresa writes:

'We must be careful, in doing good works, even those of obedience and charity, not to fail to have frequent inward recourse to our God. And, believe me, it is not length of time spent in prayer that brings us benefit. When we spend our time in good works, this is a great help to us and a better and quicker preparation for the enkindling of our love than many hours of meditation. Everything must come from the hand of God' (*Foundations* 5.17)

There are two traps to be avoided. We must take care lest attraction to prayer lead habitually to neglect of our duties, and lest carrying out our duties leads habitually to neglect of prayer.

Marie-Eugène writes:

'Activism takes cover under numerous and often noble excuses: necessities of life, urgent duties of one's state, fear lest a certain milieu win and dissipate people, joys to be had in generous action which opens up and enlarges one's power, the aridities and apparently useless abjection of prayer, and above all a great pity for those around us whose extreme material or spiritual misery is a constant appeal to our Christian charity.'

(*I want to see God*, 420)

Silence of the tongue and care not to be always active are helps towards making space for inner silence – the silence in which our heart can be attentive to the One who speaks tenderly to us, the One for whom we long.

'Silence takes us beyond the doctrines and divisions created by the mind. If everyone has a spiritual story to tell of his life, everyone has a spiritual silence to preserve. So it is that we might almost say silence is the tribute we pay to holiness; we slip off words when we enter a sacred space, just as we slip off shoes ... We hold our breath, we hold our words; we suspend our chattering selves and let ourselves "fall silent", and fall into the highest place of all ... Silence could be said to be the ultimate province of trust: it is the place where we trust ourselves to be alone; where we trust others to understand the things we do not say; where we trust a higher harmony to assert itself ... In love, we are speechless; in awe, we say, words fail us' (Pico Iyer, *Time* January 25th 1993).

John of the Cross writes:

‘Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God with the appetite and with the tongue, for the only language God hears is the silent language of love’ (Letter of 22nd Nov. 1587).

‘Forgetfulness of creation, remembrance of the Creator, attention to what is within, loving the Beloved.’

In his *A Letter to John Dryden*, James McAuley writes:

‘Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land.
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,
It works unseen like radium in the dark.’

We have already noticed that there are things that we can do to focus attention and to eliminate certain distractions. However, let us not forget that we do not initiate prayer. We must also remember that the silence that we can achieve is not the silence of communion with God. Spiritual writers warn us against the danger of concocting an artificial silence and thinking that this is communion with God. Let us do what we can to be still and to eliminate distracting words, images and thoughts. Let us do what we can to be attentive and receptive and to prepare ourselves to receive God’s gift, but we must not fall into the trap of manufacturing our own silence and confusing it with the silence which floods us when we open ourselves to God gift of God’s Self to us. Much wisdom can be found in the following statement from *A Carthusian Miscellany*:

‘It is normal that intellectual activity be gradually stilled during prayer; similarly, to the extent that the emotions of the heart are channelled, all kinds of distractions and diversions lose their sense. This means that, with an almost spontaneous movement, prayer of the heart leads us towards silence. Sometimes this experience is especially strong and inevitably one finds oneself exposed to what I might call the temptation of silence itself. Silence is a blessing that tends to seduce all hearts, once they have really had a taste of it. Yet there are many types of silence, not all of which are good. Indeed most types are distortions, rather than authentic prayer of the heart.

‘The first temptation is to make of silence an activity, even if we are entirely convinced we are doing the opposite. Basing ourselves on the fact that intellectual activity has ceased and that our heart is at rest, we imagine that we have achieved a genuine silence of all our being. In fact, even if it has a real value, this silence is a result of a tension on the part of the will, which is the most subtle, but equally the most pernicious of activities. Instead of keeping our heart attentive and alert, we maintain ourselves in an artificial state in which we are not receptive to the Lord but are relying on our own resources. In the case of people with strong and active wills, this can prove a major obstacle to attaining a state of readiness and openness to receive the Lord. Materially speaking, this silence is impressive, but it is silence turned in on itself and dependent on itself.

‘Another temptation is to make silence an end in itself. One imagines that the goal of prayer of the heart, and even of all contemplative life, is silence. One focuses on a purely material reality, rather than on the person of the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. My inner state is what matters and not the relationship of loving receptivity that I have with God. I am no longer even praying; I am merely contemplating myself!

‘A similar temptation consists in making silence a reality in itself. Silence is everything! Once all the ‘noise’ of the senses, the mind and the imagination has been stilled, a genuine feeling of joy arises, and that is enough for us. We seek nothing more. We refuse to look for anything else. Any thought which might enter our minds even if it related to the Lord or came directly from him, would seem to us an obstacle. At such a time, the only divine reality is silence. There is nothing left but the casting of an idol called Silence. It cannot be denied that authentic silence is very important and much to be prized. Nevertheless, if I wish to enter into genuine silence, it is essential to renounce silence from the bottom of my heart. I need not belittle or underestimate it, nor cease seeking it, but I must avoid making it a goal in itself.

‘Above all I must avoid believing that real silence is the result of my own efforts. I do not have to make silence from scratch, as though I were manufacturing something. Too often one thinks that silence only entails establishing peace in one’s intellect, imagination and senses. This is one aspect of silence, but there is more to silence than that. It is also necessary that the very depths of the heart, to the extent that they reflect and express the will, should themselves be silent; that all desires be stilled other than that of doing the will of the Father. Instead of tensely imposing itself on the rest of my being, my will should abide in a state of pure receptivity, listening and welcoming. Only then does the possibility arise of entering into an authentic silence of all my being before God, a silence born of the genuine conformity of my deepest being with the Father, since it is created in God’s image and likeness.

‘God alone suffices; everything else is nothing. Genuine silence is the manifestation of this basic reality of all prayer. Silence truly exists in the heart once all the impurities that were opposed to the reign of the Father have disappeared. True silence is found only in a pure heart, a heart that resembles the heart of God. This is why a pure heart is able to maintain complete silence, even when it is immersed in all sorts of activity, because there is no longer any discord between it and God’ (pages 88-89).

When God draws us into silence, it can happen that we find that the silence overflows into our imagination, our memory and our thoughts. However (and we shall return to this in a later reflection), since God is beyond all our experiences of God, it is also possible that, while we are in deep silence our imagination, memory and thoughts, having nothing to keep them focused, run wild. God, as it were, has taken us into the still depths, but storms can still be lashing the surface of the ocean. We have to start learning a different approach to distractions. Teresa of Jesus warns us against focusing our efforts on attempting to counter these surface distractions. The very effort will disturb the interior silence of communion with God. Stay in the depths where God has taken us and let the storm rage. It need not disturb our silence.

‘When we find ourselves in this quiet (and note well this counsel, for the matter is important), we should not pay any more attention to our thoughts than we would to a madman. For should we want to keep our thoughts near, we will necessarily have to be somewhat disturbed and disquieted. And in this state of prayer everything will then amount to working without any further gain but with a loss of what the Lord was giving us without our own work ... Laugh at the mind which goes off to the more foolish things of the world. Remain in the quiet’ (*Way of Perfection*, 31.8.10).

Solitude

Speaking through the prophet Hosea, God says:

‘I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her’ (Hosea 2:14).

Solitude can play an important role in deepening our silence. We think of Jesus in the desert. Elijah went forty days and forty nights through the desert before encountering God in the silence

(1 Kings 19) and the disciples struggled all through the night on the lonely seas before Jesus came to them (Mark 6:48). In the Song of Songs, we are told 'Do not stir or awaken my love until she is ready' (2:7; 3:5).

John of the Cross in his *Spiritual Canticle* writes:

'If, then, I am no longer seen or found on the common, you will say that I am lost; that, stricken by love, I lost myself, and was found.'

He goes on to warn us against our compulsion to be active and against urging contemplatives to forgo their contemplation for action:

'Great wrong would be done to a person who possesses some degree of this solitary love, as well as to the Church, if we should urge them to become occupied in exterior or active things, even if the works are very important and demand only a short time. Since God has solemnly entreated that no one awaken a person from this love, who will dare to do so and remain without reproof. After all this love is the end for which we were created. Let those, then, who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they may not have reached a prayer as sublime as this. They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labour, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm.'

(Spiritual Canticle 29.3).

'She lived in solitude and now in solitude has built her nest;
and in solitude God guides her, God alone, who also bears in solitude the wound of love.'

(Spiritual Canticle 34)

Henri Nouwen reminds us that we can dare such silence and solitude only when graced by God's love:

'As lonely people we cannot create free space. Our own need to still our inner cravings of loneliness makes us cling to others instead of making space for them' (*Reaching Out*, page 94).

The ultimate criterion by which we are to choose between silent solitude and loving action is always the will of God. The amount of solitude that is appropriate for us depends on God's calling:

'It is for God to direct us, to detain us in solitude or to send us wherever God wills.'

(Marie-Eugène, I want to see God, page 449)