

## **Part Three : Drawn into ever Deeper Communion**

### **20. Early Contemplation**

Prayer is always a response to God, for it is God who creates us and holds us in existence; it is God who 'has poured God's love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). In all prayer there is an element of being 'caught up', of being 'drawn'. At the same time in the prayer that we have been focusing on up to this point there has been a lot of 'climbing', a lot of 'striving'. From the beginning we have experienced the gift of God's Spirit, the Spirit of communion that flows between the heart of Jesus and the Heart of God. Through this gift we are drawn to share Jesus' own prayer-communion. Up to this point we have been focusing our attention on the kind of prayer that we experience when we welcome the gift of the Spirit but are still controlling our response. We wish now to begin to describe the kind of prayer that we experience when we surrender to God's Spirit of love and find that we no longer have control over a prayer that comes to us as surprise and as gift.

While praying in our accustomed way, we sense that the movement of our prayer is beginning to change direction. Rather than our stretching out towards God, we experiencing ourselves yielding to God as we experience a gentle drawing inward, what Teresa of Jesus calls 'an interior recollection felt in the soul' (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 59.3).

'We find ourselves calmed, enveloped by another in a mantle of recollection. A gentle force holds us in recollection ... The Master creates a disposition of silent attention and peaceful submission' (Marie-Eugène, *I want to see God*, page 8-9).

We can long for this prayer and we can prepare for it by practising being silent, but there is nothing we can do to bring about this prayer. It is for this reason that Teresa calls this prayer 'supernatural' (*Interior Castle* IV.1.1). She uses a helpful image. In our prayer we have been drawing water from the well provided by God, and with God's help we have been carrying the water to the garden of our heart and watering it. Now we experience an unexpected welling up from a spring deep inside the garden itself (see *Life* 11.7ff; also *Interior Castle* IV.2.3-4). Teresa calls this prayer 'contemplation.'

Authors distinguish four kinds of contemplation. Common to them all is a sense of being drawn into something mysterious, something sacred.

There is *aesthetic* contemplation: the delight we have when we are experiencing beauty and sense that we are one with it. We may not know it but it is God who is drawing us into communion through the beautiful things God has made.

There is *intellectual* contemplation: the delight we experience through insight. Again we may not realise it but it is God who is drawing us into communion through the apprehension of truth, which is a participation in God's own Truth.

There is a special form of intellectual contemplation that we call *theological*: the delight we experience in accepting the truths of faith and enjoying what they reveal to us of God whom we are seeking.

Finally, there is *supernatural* contemplation, that special graced delight we experience in God, when we experience ourselves being drawn into a communion of love with the source of our being.

Marie-Eugène writes:

'Out of the darkness of the mystery there arises, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a confused light, an I-know-not-what, that makes one find peace and sweetness in the

mystery, that holds faith there or brings it back, freeing it from the discursive operations of the intellect and causing it to find rest and support in this light beyond all distinct lights.’  
(*I want to see God*, page 463).

John of the Cross is speaking of this prayer in Stanza 12 of his Spiritual Canticle:

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

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

John of the Cross comments:

‘Faith gives us God, but covered with the silver of faith. Yet it does not for this reason fail to give God to us truly. Were someone to give us a gold vase plated with silver, he would not fail to give a gold vase merely because it is silver-plated ... The truths of faith are called “eyes” because of the remarkable presence of the Beloved which the soul experiences. It seems that God is now always looking at it ... Over the sketch of faith is drawn, in the will of the lover, the sketch of love. When there is union of love, the image of the beloved is so sketched in the will, and drawn so intimately and vividly, that it is true to say that the beloved lives in the lover, and the lover in the beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers, that one can say each is the other and both are one. This is because, in the union and transformation of love, each gives possession of self to the other, and each leaves and exchanges self for the other. Thus each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love. This is the meaning of Saint Paul’s affirmation: “I live, not I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).’

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

In contemplation we are being transformed into love by the all-consuming love that is God. Like a drop of water we are being drawn into the ocean of God’s love and are being absorbed into it.

Teresa writes:

‘The important thing is not to think much but to love much’ (*Interior Castle* IV.1.7).

Accompanying this experience of love, there is joy, as well as a sense of belonging, communion, and peace. We have experienced moments of this communion ever since we began to pray, but now there is a difference. The current of communion is drawing us beyond images, beyond thoughts. This is the love for which we are made and for which we long. The communion in love that we experience is experienced as gift. We are quite aware of the fact that the silence, the stillness, the welling up of joy or gratitude or sorrow or pleading, is not something that we are initiating. It wells up unexpectedly and our hearts know that we are responding mysteriously to God.

Contemplation can come to any person at any time, for God invites everyone to the intimate communion for which we are created. In his *The Awakening Heart*, Gerald May writes:

‘Contemplation happens to everyone. It happens in moments when we are open and undefended and immediately present’ (page 193).

Contemplation comes naturally to children, for they have not yet begun to find and develop their ego. However, we cannot remain children all our life. To become ourselves and to mature as persons we need to discover and develop our ego. We are not extensions of our parents. We are not to avoid the freedom of being our unique selves by being caught up in and remaining in dependent relationships. Central to finding ourselves is discovering who God is for us and how God has chosen to relate to us. This necessarily involves activity of the memory, the imagination and the mind. To discover who we are and to discover the wonders of the divine presence and action in our lives, it is natural and necessary for us to enter into the kinds of prayer that we have been discussing up to this point, in which we ponder the mysteries of our faith, the history of God’s action in the world, and above all the story of Jesus. We will have moments of contemplation, when the divine invades us in ways that are beyond either our control or our comprehension, but for the most part our prayer will be a journey of discovery in which, step by step, we come to know and love God more.

However, as we mature and as we become more committed to prayer, we need to listen to Jesus as he tells us that we will find ourselves only when we learn to ‘lose’ ourselves (Matthew 16:25), and that we must become like a little child if we are to enter into the domain of love into which he is inviting us (Matthew 18:3). There comes a time when we are ready to let go the ego that we have developed and to surrender in love to God. It is when we begin to surrender in this way that we begin to experience intermittent moments of contemplation.

In these graced moments everything is experienced as a sacrament of the divine; everything is ‘charged with the grandeur of God’ (G.M.Hopkins). In these graced moments we experience a new kind of presence in which we are not alone but are embraced by the One who gives harmony to the music of creation and ‘in whom all things hold together’ (Colossians 1:17). Our mind rests in the True that is given, the True that is beyond the truths that we discover through the efforts of reason and logic to which we are committed. Our will rests in the Good that is given, the Good that is beyond any efforts we are making to live a consistently moral life. Our feelings rest in the Beautiful that is given, the Beautiful that is beyond anything that we might appreciate by our own efforts. We can receive these graced moments in the measure that we are willing to let go control and entrust ourselves wholly to God. Whereas before we experienced ourselves seeking and striving, now we experience ourselves receiving and welcoming. This communion is offered to everyone who is willing to surrender to love.

Teresa of Jesus writes:

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

It is important to remember that we can experience contemplation in the midst of activity as well as in the stillness of prayer, for whenever we are doing God’s will we are open to God’s gift of God’s Self in this way. Our focus here, however, is on contemplative prayer rather than contemplative action, though we are mindful of the call of Saint Dominic to share with others what we have received in contemplation (‘contemplata tradere’) and of Saint Ignatius of Loyola to be contemplative in all that we do (‘in actione contemplativus’).

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

find ourselves wrapped in quiet prayer. In an earlier reflection we spoke of a simple form of prayer in which we held ourselves quietly in the presence of God: a prayer of simple regard. In some ways the prayer we are describing here is similar. The essential difference is that this experience of contemplative prayer (called by Teresa the 'Prayer of Quiet') is one that we can only receive and welcome as a gift. As noted earlier, we can desire it and prepare for it, but we cannot bring it about. Gerald May writes:

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

When we were in control of our prayer we worked for such quiet, now the quiet wells up from our mysterious depths. We are drawn into an experience of prayer from within. Earlier we found ways of quietening our imagination, memory and mind. Now, surprised by grace, these same faculties 'are absorbed and are looking as though in wonder at what they see' (*Interior Castle* IV.2.6). Now, the water that is refreshing our garden 'comes from its own source, which is God' (*Interior Castle* IV.2.4; see IV.2.3). Thinking of God as being in our centre radiating God's love, Teresa states: 'the warmth and the fragrant perfumes spread through our entire being' (*Interior Castle* IV.2.6). Now, the touch of God leaves us dissatisfied with any other pleasure. We long for the communion experienced in the silence and stillness. God has always been offering us, indeed offering everyone, this gift of communion. The difference is that now we are ready to allow ourselves to be 'drawn', to be 'caught up', to be surprised by grace.

Now, our prayer is no longer guided by our previous experience or any efforts of our mind or will. We are conscious of ourselves being moved and inspired. We are conscious of surrendering ourselves in love. God is leading us on the way of love. 'Contemplative prayer is allowing the Source of love to bring us toward the place which is our home' (May, page 195).

We do not want to give the impression that now all is light and love. We are the recipients of a wonderful grace of communion, but we are not yet in heaven. In contemplative prayer we are in the presence of the sacred Mystery that we call 'God'. We are, therefore, in touch with the One who is at the heart of everything. But the closer we come to the heart the more we are drawn into the Mystery of God who transcends any and every creature. Being transcendent, God cannot be contained or controlled. Being immanent, God opens us up to the real world: our own real world in all its grace and disgrace. Contemplative prayer, therefore, opens us to 'the joys and hopes' but also to 'the griefs and anxieties of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way' (Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World*, n.1). It opens us 'to the suffering and brokenness of the world as much as to its joys and beauty' (May, page 193). We should not expect it to be otherwise, for prayer engages us with the ultimately Real.

It is in contemplative prayer that God is transforming us so that, like Saint Paul, we will be able to say: 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). Our mind is being transformed into the mind of Christ. Our heart is becoming his heart. It is his communion of love that we are being invited to experience. Like a log in a fire this will require a profound purification, with much blackening and hissing till our whole being is transformed into fire by the all-consuming fire of God's love. Letting go our ego can be painful.

Let us look now at some of the difficulties that we can encounter in the early stages of contemplative prayer.

## **21. Difficulties encountered in the early stages of contemplation**

The first difficulty that we encounter in the early stages of contemplation comes from its intermittent nature. Though we are beginning to learn to yield control of our prayer to the mysterious initiative of God, we are entering into what is for us uncharted waters. Acquired

habits of prayer continue to assert themselves. Love has not yet completely submitted to the light and rapture of the Holy Spirit. The effect of this is that one minute we are engaged in our accustomed prayer, the next minute we experience prayer welling up from the mysterious depths of our soul; then this dries up as suddenly as it appeared, and we are back to our accustomed prayer, reflecting on a scene from the Gospels, or repeating a mantra as we stay with the rhythm of our breathing, or simply holding ourselves in God's presence as we express our longing, our wonder, our gratitude, our sorrow or our pleading. To the extent that we find it difficult to let go control of our prayer we can find the experience of contemplation somewhat disturbing. This is especially so when we are not helped to understand the dynamics of what is going on in our prayer.

The main source of concern is in regard to distractions. Up to this point, we have tried to keep a rein on distractions by attempting to control our imagination, our memory and our thoughts, training them to focus where our heart is: on God, on the mysteries of faith, on Jesus. This vigilance and discipline is a good thing, for it has been in response to grace. But it is still something that *we are doing*. Now, when we experience ourselves being drawn into contemplation, we are out of our depth. We experience losing control not only over our prayer but also over our imagination, memory and thoughts.

Sometimes our imagination, memory and mind experience an overflow of peace from the communion into which God is drawing us. Sometimes these are left behind to freewheel. At these times we will be acutely conscious of our inability to control the images and thoughts that intrude on our prayer. This will seem to be a fault and to detract from our prayer and this can cause a certain unease and suffering. Grieving for what we have known previously we are tempted to escape from the current that is drawing us, we are tempted to leave contemplation and resume control over what is going on in our consciousness.

We have to learn to ignore the movements of our imagination, memory and mind, and to stay with the drawing of grace. To leave the communion of love which we are experiencing as gift and to chase after our distracted mind would be to leave contemplation and take over the controls again as though we were the ones determining the quality and kind of our prayer. Teresa's advice is that we not follow the mind in its distractions, but 'stay at the breast' drinking in the love that God is offering (see *The Way of Perfection*, 31.8-9).

'We can be completely joined with God in the dwelling places very close to the centre, while the mind is on the outskirts' (*Interior Castle* IV.1.9).

'Leave the intellect go and surrender yourself into the arms of God' (IV.3.8; also IV.1.11).

It is here that the intermittent nature of our contemplative experience causes us problems. Our experience of contemplative prayer is intermittent, not because God is inconsistent (God is offering complete communion to everyone, all the time), but because we are not yet ready to respond wholeheartedly to what God is offering. When we lose touch with God's offer of contemplative communion, we have to return to our earlier vigilance and discipline and the methods of dealing with distractions that we know. This means that one moment we are exercising control over our imagination, memory and thoughts in order to focus our attention on what God is doing; then, when we experience ourselves being drawn into the depths, we are to ignore the surface wanderings of our sense faculties; then, when the moments of contemplation cease, we are return to our earlier vigilance and discipline.

Often, while in contemplation, the distractions seem more obvious to us than the gift of communion. John of the Cross asks us to observe what happens when a ray of light passes through a room. If there is nothing to block the light, we do not see it. When there is dust in the air we are able to see the beam of light because of the dust that obstructs it. Distractions are like the dust. They are real, but John's advice is that we see them as revealing the light and keep our

attention on the light coming from God, which is bathing us. It is impossible for our imagination, memory and understanding to follow us into the mysterious depths of communion, for God is beyond all our images and thoughts. Having nothing to hold them focused they tend to freewheel. They can disturb our communion only if we leave it to attend to them. We have to learn to continue to entrust ourselves to God's love. Whatever might be happening to the waves on the surface as they are whipped up by the storm, we are to stay in the depths of the ocean, allowing the current to take us to the heart of God.

It is not only distractions that are a problem. We are sinful, and so our experience of contemplation exposes our need for purification. The light is also a fire, and it purifies whatever resists it. This purification is experienced as suffering. John of the Cross likens it to a damp log in a fire. There is much sputtering and blackening till the log has become coals, transformed entirely into fire.

However, because contemplative communion is, before all else, an experience of love, the bewilderment and the pain of purification are ordinarily pervaded with a sense of being loved.

If we are to experience deeper and deeper communion with God, we have to be weaned from a devotion that relies on feelings. John of the Cross describes the shift in focus that comes when we yield to the gift of contemplation:

'Many spiritual persons, after having exercised themselves in approaching God through images, forms, and meditations suitable for beginners, err greatly if they do not determine, dare, or know how to detach themselves from these sense methods. For God then wishes to lead them to more spiritual, interior, and invisible graces by removing the gratification derived from discursive meditation. They even attempt to hold on to these methods, desiring to travel the road of consideration and meditation, using images as before. They believe such procedure is a permanent requirement. They strive hard to meditate, but draw out little satisfaction, or none at all; rather their lot becomes dryness, fatigue and restlessness. This dryness grows as their striving through meditation for that former sweetness, now unobtainable, increases. We will no longer taste that food for the senses but rather enjoy another food, more delicate, interior and spiritual. We will not acquire this spiritual nourishment through the work of the imagination, but by abandoning ourselves to a more spiritual quiet and repose' (*Ascent II*, 12:6).

We must not misunderstand what John is saying here. John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus insist that we are never to leave Jesus behind. There must always be a place for gazing on Jesus. Responding to God's gift of contemplation, we are to allow ourselves to be drawn, not into images and thoughts, but into communion, into entering Jesus' heart, and so into his prayer, into his communion with God.

'For a better understanding of this beginner's stage, it should be known that the practice of beginners is to meditate and make acts and discursive reflection with the imagination. Those in this state should be given matter for meditation and discursive reflection, and they should by themselves make interior acts and profit in spiritual things from the delight and satisfaction of the senses. For by being fed with the relish of spiritual things, the appetite is torn away from sensual things and weakened in regard to the things of the world. But when the appetite has been fed somewhat, and has become in a certain fashion accustomed to spiritual things, and has acquired some fortitude and constancy, God begins to wean us and place us in a state of contemplation. Some quickly accommodate their senses and appetites to God and, in their activity, pass on to the spirit which God works in them. This happens when our discursive acts and meditations cease, as well as our initial sense of satisfaction and fervour, and we are unable to practice discursive meditation as before, or find any

support for the senses. The sensory part is left in dryness because its riches are transferred to the spirit, which does not pertain to the senses' (*Living Flame*, 3,32).

John's advice as to how we are to react to the gift of contemplation is clear:

'Pay no attention to discursive meditation, since this is not the time for it. We should allow ourselves to remain in rest and quietude, even though it may seem very obvious that we are doing nothing and wasting time, and even though we think this disinclination to think about anything is due to our laxity. Through patience and perseverance in prayer, we will be doing a great deal without any activity on our part. All that is required here is that we liberate ourselves from the impediment and fatigue of ideas and thoughts and care not about thinking and meditating. We must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel God' (*Dark Night*, I.10.4).

'Keep watch and persevere in prayer without doing anything. Preserve yourself free and unhindered by any knowledge or thought, but in peace without worrying what you should be thinking about. It is enough to remain in a quiet and loving attention to God and to discard all anxiety, activity and any undue desire to sense and taste God' (*Dark Night*, I.10.6).

Eugene Boylan in his *Difficulties in Mental Prayer* writes:

'Once our hearts are turned to God, God begins to purify our love and our devotion. Sooner or later God begins to withdraw a devotion experienced in our senses, and our prayer runs "dry". We tend to become sullen and resentful; but if we are generous and try to cooperate with grace, we will soon see that what God wants from us is complete and generous submission to God's will. That is all that matters, and we must learn to find all our satisfaction in doing that. That calls for courage; it calls for faith; it calls for grace ... Now, the senses cannot unite us to God in any full meaning of the word; it is in faith that our Lord espouses us, and until we have learned to live by faith, we are but novices in the spiritual life, no matter to what heights of felt devotion we have risen. The natural blunting of sense reaction that comes from familiarity with and repetition of the same experience – the unconscious realisation, if one may so speak, of the inadequacy of any feeling or emotion to satisfy our deeper needs – these, added to the workings of God's purifications, bring us to a new phase of the spiritual life, where prayer becomes a matter of great difficulty. Although it is usually in the later stages of the spiritual ascent that this state is found in long and constant duration – for it may last many years – yet it often occurs much earlier for shorter periods, and it is only when we have estimated it at its proper worth that we can form any true scale of values of prayer. For such a state, in spite of its apparent sterility and worthlessness, leads to a prayer of tremendous value, one most pleasing to God, and most productive of great virtue and rapid advance for ourselves. It is a state in which one has to love and pray by faith, and for that reason the term "prayer of faith" is used here to denote this type of prayer' (pages 99-100).

At this difficult stage of prayer we should be wary of setting strict guidelines. We are learning to submit now to being drawn to God, and God's light is lighting our way, however faintly and intermittently. Furthermore, people differ greatly. The key is to offer ourselves in peaceful and silent surrender to God who is offering God's Self to us in contemplation.

Listen to Teresa:

‘Abandon yourself into the arms of love, and God will teach you what to do next. Almost your whole work is to realise your unworthiness to receive such great good and to occupy yourself in thanksgiving’ (*Interior Castle*, IV, 3).

Listen to John of the Cross

‘We should proceed only with a loving attention to God, without making specific acts. We should conduct ourselves passively without efforts of our own, but with a simple, loving awareness, as with eyes open in loving attention’ (*Living Flame* 3.33).

John adds that we must be careful not to be attached even to this loving attentiveness. We go to prayer to be with God. Our hearts must learn to be attached to God, not to our experience of God:

‘When it happens that we are conscious of being placed in solitude and in the state of listening, we should even forget the practice of loving attentiveness, so as to remain free for what the Lord then desires of us. We should make use of that loving attentiveness only when we do not feel ourselves placed in this solitude, or inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening’ (*Living Flame* 3.35).

Outside prayer we should respond faithfully to God’s inspiration, inviting us to asceticism. Teresa advises us:

‘Guard very carefully against placing yourself in the occasion of offending God.’  
(*Interior Castle* IV.3.10)

Marie-Eugène offers this advice:

‘At the beginning of the spiritual life, when we are still at the stage of discursive meditation, it is fidelity to prayer that is of the utmost importance. When we become contemplative, it is asceticism which must take the lead’ (page 125).

‘Obedience is the virtue that characterises this period’ (page 148).

Teresa writes:

‘To ascend to the dwelling places which we desire, the important thing is not to think much but to love much, to do that which best stirs us to love ... Love does not consist in experiencing great delight but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything’ (*Interior Castle* IV.1.7).

Teresa also advises those in this state to be particularly careful to be humble and detached (see *The Interior Castle* IV.2.10), to persevere in receiving, and to be courageous (IV.3.9).

We should prepare for prayer but be ready to receive this ‘gentle drawing inward.’

Marie-Eugène (pages 86-88) has this advice:

‘Proximate preparation must be made for prayer by some reading or by the choice of a precise subject. This is our first duty during this period ... Select something quite simple: a text of Scripture, a striking thought, some attitude of our Lord, a word that will shed light upon and recollect the faculties, be calm and keep yourself occupied until it pleases the Master to elevate you to higher regions ... When this preparation does not succeed in providing sustenance for the faculties nor in recollecting them, it is still a guarantee against the temptation of idleness, and services as a sign that you are in contemplative dryness.’

We should persevere in active prayer until contemplation begins and return to it when contemplation ends. This is an area for quite subtle discernment (see John of the Cross, *Ascent* II, 17.7).

Teresa warns us not to use techniques to stop the mind, thinking we can induce this infused recollection:

‘We should let our faculties perform their task until God appoints them to another, greater one’ (*Interior Castle* IV.3.6; see also IV.3.4).

‘What I say we must not do is to presume or think that we can suspend the activity of our faculties ourselves’ (*Life*, 12.5).

Marie-Eugène agrees:

‘Without hiding our legitimate desires for close union with God, we should submit ourselves to the humble labour of our faculties [our imagination, memory, understanding and will] until God stoops down to raise us to loving passive attention’ (page 84).

When we do not experience God drawing us into silence, we must be careful not to fill up the gap too readily with prepared reflections. The key seems to be to keep the heart awake and attentive and directed towards God. We long for communion with God. When we experience ourselves being drawn into contemplation we surrender in peace and silence, and when we do not experience this drawing we are not to lapse into distracted emptiness. Remember that while in the depths of our being we are being held in silence and peace by God, on the surface we may be quite active. As we might attend to an intimate conversation while the noise of traffic roars around us, we can hold ourselves in contemplation, even though the mind and imagination may be very active on other matters. Do not leave contemplation to attend to or resist what are irrelevant distractions.

Finally, let us not forget Teresa’s continual warning to stay close to Jesus lest we get lost in an abstract kind of ‘prayer’ that may have the appearance of contemplation. We cannot reach the goal of divine communion by abandoning the One who is the way to it (see *Life* 22.9 and 27.10). He will guide us as we surrender to God and allow God to draw us into communion.

## **22. Signs of the inflow of contemplation and the ‘night of the senses’**

The difficulties that we encounter in the early stages of contemplative prayer might cause us to wonder if it really is contemplation that we are receiving from God. Could it be that we are caught up in distractions of our own making, because of some infidelity or carelessness? Are we losing our faith and our fervour? It is here, more than anywhere else, that we need the sure guidance of the recognised masters of the spiritual life. Edith Stein, in her book, *The Science of the Cross*, writes:

‘John of the Cross writes for contemplatives whom he wants to take by the hand at a definite point on their way: at the cross-roads where most of them are perplexed and know not what to do, because in the way they have so far pursued they are suddenly confronted by insuperable obstacles. On the other hand the new way that opens before them leads through impenetrable darkness – who would be brave enough to enter on it? The two roads in question are those of meditation and contemplation. So far the hour of meditation has been devoted to exercising the powers of the soul, perhaps according to the Ignatian method: we have used our senses, our imagination, memory, understanding and will. But now these refuse to work; all efforts are in vain. The spiritual exercises, until then a source of interior joy, now become a torment, unbearably arid and ineffective. On the other hand, there is no inclination either to take interest in worldly things. We would like best to be quite still without moving, letting all its powers rest. But this seems sloth and waste of time. This, roughly, is our state which God wants to introduce into the dark night’ (page 24).

John of the Cross offers three indications by which we can test our prayer to discern whether it is indeed our responding to the gift of contemplation that is causing the change, or whether what we are experiencing is the result of our infidelity. The first indication that we are, indeed, being drawn by God into contemplation, is that, no matter what we do, we can no longer meditate the way we used to.

‘The first sign is when we realise that we can no longer meditate or use our imagination to reason. There is no longer any pleasure in doing so, but only dryness’ (*Ascent II.13.2*).

While we can see, we continue to walk by the light of common sense and reason. Now God is drawing us beyond the limits of imagination, memory and understanding. In this divine realm we are blind. God is asking us to let God guide us. Listen to John of the Cross:

‘However much we may try, we cannot purify ourselves by our own effort so effectively to be in the least prepared for the perfect union of love with God, unless God takes us into God’s hand and purifies us in that dark fire’ (*Dark Night, I.3.3*).

‘When they have exercised themselves for some time in the way of virtue, been faithful to meditation and prayer and freed themselves from attachment and love for the things of this world, they have at last gained some spiritual strength in God. By this strength they are able to hold in check the desire for creatures and endure some hardships and dryness in prayer without longing for that better time when they felt more taste and enjoyment in spiritual practices ... Then God turns all this light into darkness, shuts the door and blocks up the source of the sweet waters of the spirit from which they had till then drunk whenever they wanted. Now God places them in darkness so that they do not know where to turn with their imagination and their thoughts’ (*Dark Night, I.8.3*).

So, as already stated, the first indication that we are, indeed, being drawn by God into contemplation, is that, no matter what we do, we can no longer meditate the way we used to.

The second indication is that, while we no longer find pleasure in meditating, we also find no pleasure in focusing on anything else apart from God. The lack of pleasure in other things indicates that our dryness does not come from the infidelity of chasing after other pleasures.

‘The second sign is an awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties upon other particular objects, exterior or interior. I am not affirming that the imagination will cease to come and go (even in deep recollection it usually wanders freely), but that the person is disinclined to fix it purposely upon extraneous things’ (*Ascent II.13.3*).

John reassures us that the fact that we are upset that we find little relish in prayer

‘is a sign that the dryness does not come from weakness or from being lukewarm; for it is the nature of being lukewarm not to care greatly for the things of God’ (*Dark Night, I.9.3*).

The third and most important sign is the presence of a deep desire to be in loving, attentive communion with God. John writes:

‘The third and surest sign is that we take pleasure in being alone and wait with loving attentiveness upon God, without making any particular meditation, in inward peace and quiet and rest’ (*Ascent II.13.4*).

Because God is drawing us into a communion that is beyond our natural powers of understanding, we must journey in faith. John of the Cross speaks of our senses being in darkness. This includes our imagination, memory and understanding, which rely upon our senses. In her book, *The Science of the Cross* (pages 25-28), Edith Stein points out the rich symbolism in John’s describing the lack of pleasure in these sense faculties as a ‘night’. On the one hand, night envelops us and all things; it threatens to swallow us up; what it hides is still there but is indistinct, invisible, without form; it impedes movement and paralyses our faculties; it induces fear; it condemns us to

solitude and is a foretaste of death. On the other hand, night softens and smooths what is hard, sharp or crude; it reveals subtle features that are lost in daylight; it drowns out the noises of the day; it quietens the spirit, freed from the busyness of the day and gives deep and gentle repose. So it is with the mystic night of infused contemplation, which arises from within.

Saint Augustine gives expression to a deep human experience: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you' (*Confessions*, 1,1). We are created for joy, for the joy of complete communion with God, a joy experienced in the depths of our being, and radiating out to our mind and heart, our feelings and all of our senses. We are made to enjoy life and to enjoy it to the full (John 10:10). However, as we have already observed, there are pleasures enjoyed by our senses, which do not flow from this profound centre of communion. On the contrary they distract us from our deepest yearnings. Some pleasure comes from feelings that lack the purity and clarity that is there when our emotions are fully tuned to our deepest longings. Such pleasures are transitory. They fail to satisfy us because they distract us from our heart's deepest longings. We can find it hard to resist giving in to them and they can continue to attract us even when we are in communion with the One for whom our heart longs. This is partly for the pleasure, however superficial, which they give us and partly because they distract us from the pain that is part of growing and the demands of the inner journey and of the truth that such a journey reveals.

There are many impurities in these desires, and until they are purified they are a distraction from, and an obstacle to, the communion with God to which grace is drawing us. Unpurified desires weary, disturb, darken and defile us 'like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud, and there is no peace' (Isaiah 57:20-21). They afflict us and keep us bound. Jesus invites us: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28).

John of the Cross makes it clear that unpurified desires are a problem only when they are voluntarily entertained. We should not be worried about feelings and desires that are part of our nature and that happen without our wanting them. There is no need for these to disturb us:

'I am not writing here of natural desires which are not voluntary, and of thoughts that do not go beyond the first movements, and other temptations to which we are not consenting; for these do not produce any of the evils that we have mentioned. For, although when we experience them we may think that the passion and disturbance which they are producing are defiling us and holding us bound, it is not the case' (*Ascent* I.12.56).

In earlier reflections we looked at many of the things we can do to discipline our senses, feelings and emotions. Here we wish to look again at what happens when we begin to respond to God in the first experiences of contemplative prayer. The fact is that ultimately *we* cannot purify our senses, feelings and emotions. Only God's love can do that, so now we must hand everything over to God and focus on responding as humbly and faithfully as we can to whatever discipline God is gracing us to undertake. We are to learn to look to God and to wait on God.

In offering us the sublime gift of contemplative prayer, God is offering us what our deepest spirit ultimately desires. What used to give pleasure to our unpurified senses, imagination and emotions gives pleasure no longer. Our feelings may rebel, but God is granting us an immense favour. God is offering God's Self to us. We should not be surprised that whatever is not God loses its appeal. Even in prayer we can no longer arouse feelings of devotion at will. Thinking about the mysteries of faith, something that used to give us consolation, now leaves us dry and distracted. We can no longer achieve a sense of quiet communion with God the way we used to. This is because God is weaning us off such attractive, but not yet fully purified, pleasures. God is drawing us beyond the limits that we can attain by our own efforts. God wants to take us where our hearts wish to be but where we cannot go while we are holding on to control.

The lack of feeling in our prayer can be painful, but we are learning an important lesson about our limitations. We are learning humility and reliance on God. We are learning to live by faith. Any experience of pleasure is now recognised as a sheer gift of grace. However, for the most part we will not experience any pleasure at all. This is because something very precious is happening in the depths of our being and God does not want us to be distracted from it. If we are unused to living at this depth, we will miss the more surface feelings, and this can be quite painful.

Depending on how much we need to be purified and how much courage we have to allow this purifying to take place, we may find ourselves in this arid place for a long time. We can be sure, however, that in graciousness, God will always offer us the strength we need to endure:

‘No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it’ (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Each person’s experience here will be different. Some of us will experience more consolation. This may be because we are already so humble and unattached that we readily surrender to love. On the other hand, it may be because we have not the courage to go through the purifying fire of love, and so God meets us on the surface where we are used to meeting. We forfeit the attraction to the depths that we are afraid to explore.

If we are to enter into full communion with God we have to be weaned off surface feelings of consolation, and we have to surrender our reason and live by faith, however painful and bewildering this process may be. We will be encouraged to continue along this path if we recognise that it is precisely God’s love that is taking us into the deep and dark recesses of our soul where our senses may feel nothing, and our understanding is unable to guide us. Since we cannot see God, we must long for God in the darkness. What is happening is expressed well by Marie-Eugène in his book *I am a daughter of the church*:

‘This secret, peaceful and loving infusion from God, which is contemplation, liberates the spirit from its subjection to the senses, and calms the senses themselves little by little in this night, thus permitting us to have free and peaceful commerce with God, who communicates God’s Self to it through the gifts of the Holy Spirit’ (page 66).

One of the main graces of this time is growing in true humility through knowing ourselves as we really are. Let us listen to John of the Cross:

‘We see ourselves so dry and miserable, that the idea never even occurs to us that we are making better progress than others, as we believed ourselves to be doing before’ (*Night I.12*).

‘Softened and humbled by hardship and other trials, we become meek with respect to God and to ourselves as well as to others. Now we are no longer angry with ourselves and disturbed because of our own faults, nor with others because of theirs. We are no longer displeased with God because God does not quickly make us holy. These times of dryness, therefore, cause us to journey in all purity in the love of God, since we are no longer influenced as previously in our actions by the pleasure and enjoyment of the actions themselves, but only by a desire to please God’ (*Night I.13*).

We are surrendering ourselves in love in contemplative prayer, but since God is not an object of unmediated human experience, God remains beyond the direct grasp of our human faculties. Contemplative loving, therefore, occurs in the ‘darkness’ of faith. Faith enlightens, but it is a light that the intellect cannot receive. When we accept to be guided by faith, we are united to God and guided along the way inspired by God, though our intellect cannot see the path. God is leading us on the way of love. Learning to rely solely on faith can be quite painful as we grieve for the kinds

of meditations that we previously had and the pleasure that they brought us. However, if we surrender ourselves to God, we will experience an even deeper and richer delight.

### 23. Contemplation and Faith

Since beginning our reflections on contemplative prayer, we have had occasion a number of times to stress the importance of faith. Before pursuing the relationship between faith and contemplation, we will do two things: we will look briefly at the important role played by faith in everyday life in our acquisition of knowledge; and we will look at the biblical understanding of religious faith.

Because of the wonderful gift of intelligence, we are able to attend to whatever it is that we are experiencing and, in the same conscious act, to be conscious of ourselves as the one having the experience. We are able to explore the meaning of what is happening to us, and come to insight and understanding. In other words, we are capable of knowing reality. Of course we can make mistakes, but if we are careful and reflective, and if we are humble enough to check our conclusions, we can make true, though partial, judgments about the way things really *are*, and not just about the way they *seem* to us to be.

It is obvious that this capacity to know is limited. One limitation is the impossibility of checking everything for ourselves. In fact, we base our acceptance of the truth of most things not on our own knowledge but on belief. We accept many things as true because we trust other people. We trust that the tape measure that we bought in the shop is accurate. When we are in a locality with which we are unfamiliar, we trust the road directory to guide us. This is a reasonable thing to do. After all, many people are using the directory, and there would soon be complaints if there were errors in it. We know how to get to our destination, not because we have checked it out for ourselves, but because we believe that those responsible for the directory know what they are doing. Examples could be multiplied. It would be very unintelligent of us to limit our knowledge to what we have worked out and checked for ourselves. Of course we must be prepared to adjust if we discover that those whom we trust happen to be wrong in some situations, just as we have to admit that we are mistaken in some of the things we were so sure we knew.

There are also areas that, even if we had all the time in the world, we could never work out: they are simply beyond the capacity of any human mind to discover. It is surely obvious that there is a lot more to existence than we can establish by the use of limited human reasoning. To think that the only windows into reality are those that our intelligence can open would be to cut ourselves off from much rich human experience. It would be to act in a very unreasonable way. It is not that in such matters we believe without evidence. It is that the evidence upon which we base belief is not such as to convince reason alone. If we are to be open to reality we must be prepared to go beyond the frontiers attainable by reason. Yet even here reason continues to play an important role. If we are tempted to believe something that contradicts reason, we must not allow ourselves to be deceived. Reason must be respected within its own realm. Truth can be beyond the realm established by reason, but it cannot contradict it.

In accepting as true matters that are outside the realm controlled by reason we are not devoid of criteria. One criterion concerns the source that we trust: we must have reasons for accepting the source as worthy of trust in general and in the precise area which we are accepting as true on his or her word. A second criterion is that what I am believing does not contradict what I know in other areas. A third criterion is the fruit that comes from believing. If believing makes me more attentive to the data of my experience, more thoughtful and reflective in my seeking for truth, more humble in admitting my prejudices and oversights, and more careful in checking my judgments; if it leads to these and other wonderful human qualities, to goodness, even heroic

goodness, to behaviour that is reasonable and responsible, and to a life of greater love, then that is surely a good sign of the reasonableness and value of our belief. This applies to a number of fields of human knowledge, including psychology. Included also is the realm of religious faith. As regards the religious beliefs that are at the heart of the Christian tradition, our reliance is on Jesus himself and on the many wonderful human beings who have believed in him and whose lives have an excellence acknowledged by anyone who cares to investigate. Such faith goes beyond the realm of reason, but it is not without supporting evidence.

Belief, then, plays an important role in many areas of human understanding. When we turn our attention to religious faith, we can learn a lot from an analysis of the biblical tradition. The Hebrew noun *'mnh* (Greek *pistis*), translated 'faith' or 'faithfulness', and the related adjective, translated by such terms as 'faithful', 'reliable' 'secure' 'real' or 'trustworthy', refer to a quality which a person or thing has when it behaves reliably according to its nature. This is a characteristic that God has in its fullness: God is faithful, that is to say, God always acts in accordance with who God is. Thanks to Jesus we know that God is love and so can be depended on to act lovingly. God has made promises and so can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith. God is trustworthy, so we can rely on God and find our security in God.

'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness' (Lamentations 3:22-23).

'You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God' (Psalm 31:5).

When people are said to have this quality, a claim is being made that they are trustworthy. We can trust them, we can rely on them, because what they say and do is in accordance with the way things really are. To possess this quality called 'faith' (to be 'faithful'), we must seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1, 3), we must deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2 Chronicles 31:12-18; 34:12; Proverbs 3:3). Then we share in the faithfulness of God, and we can be relied upon (Jeremiah 15:18). The Hebrew verb *'mn* (Greek *pisteuein*) covers a range of meanings, all related to the concept of reality and security. It includes making things secure, behaving in a way that others can be secure in relying upon us, and also trusting in the faithfulness of another.

Jesus had faith in its human perfection. He always acted towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he revealed who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2). Paul speaks eloquently of his sharing in Jesus' faith:

'It is no longer I who live but 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).

This is part of what Paul means when he writes:

'We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning God had meant us to live it' (Ephesians 2:10).

Jesus' faith in the God he called 'Abba' opened him up to the fullness of communion with God. He is God's perfect work of art. Sharing in Jesus' faith, we will be transformed, becoming beautiful with his beauty, living with him in God's embrace.

We have faith, we believe, when we act in accordance with who we are: creatures who are adopted as Jesus' brothers and sisters, children with him of God. Since God is love, the idea of having faith is well expressed in the word 'believe', derived as it is from the words 'be' and 'love'. To believe is to choose to place ourselves in God's love, accepting that we are loved by God and loving God in return. To love God is to act faithfully in accordance with God's will. We are totally dependent upon God. To believe is to live faithfully in this dependence.

God who is trustworthy is revealing God's Self to us, speaking to us and drawing us by grace into a love-communion with God. The rich biblical concept of faith includes listening to God in trust and surrendering to God's love. God is faithful. To believe is to accept what God says as true, and

to act in accordance with God's will. This is why Saint Paul insists that the faith that he wishes for the Christians is one that finds expression in love (Galatians 5:6).

Similarly, James insists that real faith will always show itself in the way we act:

'What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead' (James 2:14-17).

To believe as a disciple of Jesus means to accept what Jesus says and reveals as true because we trust him. We know how he lived and we know how he gave his life in love. He deeply touched the lives of many of his contemporaries, and those who chose to believe in him found their lives powerfully transformed. They shared their faith with others, and the tradition of faith continues into our own day, transforming lives in love and bringing people to an extraordinary human maturity.

From our brief analysis of the biblical evidence it is clear that to believe in Jesus means to choose to accept his word as true in such a way that we act accordingly. Belief is about decision. It is about choice and lifestyle. It is about trusting. It is also about being worthy of trust. The Catholic Catechism (n. 165) presents Mary the mother of Jesus as an example of someone who shared in an outstanding way in the faith of Jesus:

'We must turn to the witnesses of faith ... to the Virgin Mary who, in her pilgrimage of faith walked into the night of faith in sharing the darkness of her son's suffering and death.'

We recall the words spoken by Elizabeth about Mary:

'Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.'  
(Luke 1:45)

Jesus reproached Peter for failing to trust him when Peter took fright at the waves and thought he was going to sink:

'Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"' (Matthew 14:31)

At the last supper Jesus says to Peter:

'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren' (Luke 22:31-32).

Jesus is praying that Peter will hold on to his trust in Jesus. He is also praying that Peter, though he will lose courage and fail the coming test, will remain faithful to what he has seen and heard, will repent and return.

In a letter from Rome when his own life was about to be taken from him, Peter wrote:

'It is through Jesus that you have come to place your trust in God, for it was God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory. So now your faith and your hope are set on God' (1 Peter 1:21).

Speaking to his disciples just before his passion and death, Jesus declares that they will, in fact, lose faith. But he promises to remain faithful to them. He will go ahead of them and call them again:

'You will all lose faith ... However, after my resurrection, I will go before you into Galilee'  
(Mark 14:27).

Paul writes:

‘If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself’ (2 Timothy 2:13).

Many of the Old Testament writings are about God’s faithfulness and the response of faith that God inspires in us. Here we will be content with one fine statement of faith that concludes the prophecy of Habakkuk:

‘Even though the fig tree does not blossom, and there is no fruit on the vine;  
even though the yield of the olive fails, and the fields afford no food;  
even though the sheep vanish from the fold, and the stalls stand empty of cattle -  
yet I will rejoice in GOD, I will exult in God my Saviour.  
GOD my Lord is my strength, who makes my feet as light as a doe’s,  
and sets my steps on the heights’ (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

Finally, before reflecting on the relationship between faith and contemplation, let us listen to two poems by the Australian lyric poet, James McAuley. The first is entitled *In a Late Hour*: It stresses reliance on God when everything else is failing. It stresses also the love element in belief.

‘Though all men should desert you my faith shall not grow less,  
but keep that single virtue of simple thankfulness.  
Pursuit had closed around me, terrors had pressed me low;  
you sought me and you found me, and I will not let you go.  
The hearts of men grow colder, the final things draw near.  
Forms vanish, kingdoms molder, the antirealm is here  
whose order is derangement: close-driven, yet alone,  
men reach the last estrangement, the sense of nature gone.  
Though the stars run distracted, and from wounds deep rancours flow,  
while the mystery is enacted I will not let you go.’

The second was written a few months before his death:

‘I know that faith is like a root  
That’s tough, inert and old;  
Yet it can send up its green shoot  
And flower against the cold.  
  
I know there is a grace that flows  
When all the springs run dry.  
It wells up to renew the rose  
And lift the cedars high.’

In contemplative prayer we experience what happens when we open our hearts to God. Previously we were guided by our reason as we responded to grace. Now we are taken beyond the arena in which reason is capable of being our guide. As in other areas that transcend reason, we take reason with us, not now as our guide, but as a protection against being deceived. If we believe things or behave in ways that contradict reason, our reason is there to warn us that we have taken a wrong turn. However, reason is no longer capable of being our guide. We are in a realm of experience where we have let go the controls, including the control of reason. We are walking by faith alone, for, as John of the Cross assures us, it is only in faith that we can be united to God (*Ascent*, II. 8). We are yielding to God’s grace drawing us into communion.

We are assisted by the saints who have experienced contemplative prayer and have shared their grace-filled reflections with us. We can be thankful that we have such people as John of the Cross and Teresa to guide us and warn us of the hidden reefs and the deceptive currents that can take us away from the union with God which is the goal of prayer. We have the assurance of our faith

community, the Church, that the teaching of these two saints is consistent with the essential traditions of Christianity. Many holy people have acknowledged how much they owe to the teaching of these two great teachers of contemplative prayer. We have been drawing heavily upon their wisdom in our reflections.

It is faith that guides us at every stage of our inner journey. In the early part of our prayer journey we are assisted by our imagination, memory and our ability to reason. When we open our minds and hearts to contemplation, these necessarily fail us and we must learn to walk by pure faith. We are conscious of ourselves being moved and inspired, but we do not directly experience God as the one moving and inspiring us. We are conscious of surrendering ourselves in love, but God remains beyond the direct grasp of our human faculties. Our loving occurs in the 'darkness' of faith.

John of the Cross prays:

'May my eyes behold you, because you are their light, and I would open them to you alone.  
Reveal your presence, and may the vision of your beauty be my death.  
For the sickness of love is not cured except by your very presence and image.  
O spring, like crystal! If only, on your silvered-over face,  
you would suddenly form the eyes I have desired,  
which I bear sketched deep within my heart' (*The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanzas 10-12).

To grasp the importance of faith in contemplative prayer, let us listen again to Marie-Eugène (*I want to see God*, pages 543-549):

'Since faith attains to God and since God, like a consuming fire, is always ready to communicate God's Self, each act of faith accompanied by love puts us in contact with that burning fire, places us under the influence of its light and its flame. In other words, it procures for us an increase of grace and hence of participation in the divine nature. Whatever may be the circumstances that accompany the act of faith – dryness or enthusiasm, joy or suffering – it attains to the divine Reality, and even if we experience nothing of this contact, we know it has existed and has born fruit ... If, during dryness and powerlessness, we persevere in making acts of faith and of love, we can be assured that our prayer is good, even if we do not experience its effects.

'Mental prayer, attaining to God only by faith, will take its own perfection from the quality of the faith from which it springs. Hence we will find in the development of the life of prayer two phases parallel to the development of the virtue of faith. The first phase, or active prayer, corresponds to that faith which draws light from reason; the second, or passive prayer, is nourished by the living faith that is perfected by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

'Conceptual faith attains to divine Reality, but reverts to the exercise of the imagination, memory, understanding and will, to find in them its light and food. The prayer that corresponds to it will truly be a friendly converse with God, but one that is sustained by the activity of the imagination, of the intellect, or of the will. The activity of these faculties is predominant; hence the name of active prayer ... Perfect faith on the other hand receives from God, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, its light and its measure. In the state of prayer animated by it, we are drawn towards the divine Reality by the obscure perception of it that we receive through the gifts, and we are, at it were, raised above our own natural manner of activity; or at least we continually tend towards the divine Reality revealing itself. This is called contemplative or passive prayer, because the action of God predominates ... In contemplative prayer, since faith finds its food in God, our duty is to calm the activity of the natural faculties, and, by very simple acts, to sustain the attraction that the divine Reality exercises over us. The operation of the gifts requires a silent peaceful

attitude; and the respect due to the divine working, now predominant in us, demands a continued orientation towards the divine.

‘In active prayer we draw from time to time from the divine fountains. In passive prayer, we remain bathed in the purifying waters and flames of the Holy Spirit where we are transformed from brightness to brightness until we resemble the Divine.

‘One might ask if the desire for a deeper and more rapid transformation of love warrants an effort on our part to rise to passive prayer. It would be sufficient, so it seems, to stop the activity of the faculties after an act of faith, in order to prevent a return to the natural acts and to stay in the obscure reality to which we have just attained. Saint Teresa has treated at some length of the attempt (IV Mansions, 3), and declares that it proceeds from presumptuous pride and that it would be useless ... Humility alone can claim to draw down these divine gifts ... We are to resort to the modest forms of active prayer and continue thus in patient and peaceful labour until God lifts us up into passive prayer ... It is good to desire higher and quicker means of arriving at perfect union, but always while guarding against any presumptuous effort to procure them on one’s own.

‘The contemplative in contemplation will have to prefer darkness to all distinct lights – whether these lights come from the formulas of dogma or even from God – in order that, through it, one may remain in contact with the Divine. We will have to watch not to allow ourselves to be drawn away by the disquiet of the lower faculties, not even to put them at peace; nor to let oneself be wrapped up by the sweetness that comes from God, nor to follow after the delight of it in the senses. No matter what happens the contemplative must lift up the antennae of faith above all perceptions and unrest and turn back to the serene and peaceful darkness in which the Infinite is revealing and giving God’s very Self.

‘Faith being the only proximate and proportionate means for attaining to God in our progress towards divine union, we must not prefer any natural light to it, nor any supernatural gift however elevated it may be. This utter detachment from all created goods constitutes the whole of contemplative asceticism. Thus faith and hope are purified, and perfect union with God is realised according to the measure of grace.

‘Distinct knowledge or delights received in prayer are a precious means for going to God, and we may use them with gratitude and humility; but attachment to them can change them into dangerous obstacles. Furthermore they are not necessary for arriving at perfection or even at perfect contemplation ... The state of perfection normally involves a darkness pervading our whole being, which, purified and made amenable to the Divine, finds in it a delightful food. The divine transcendence is better known and hence more obscure than ever, but in that deeper obscurity we glimpse the light of dawn as we tend towards the divine Reality that is penetrating us and to whom we long to surrender ourselves more and more.’

Let us conclude with the dying prayer of Yogananda. Addressing the Risen Christ he prayed:

‘In your temple, by your own hand, light the lamp of your love.

Turn my darkness into light. Turn my darkness into light.’

## **24. The Gifts of the Spirit**

Contemplative prayer is a communion in the prayer of Jesus. The more we surrender to his love, the more we say Yes to his longing to draw us into the intimacy of the love that he receives from the Father. This is the love that he gives to the Father, the bond of love who is the Holy Spirit. In

contemplative prayer we share in the communion of love in which the very Being of God consists.

The communion of love that we experience in contemplative prayer is an experience of Jesus' own Spirit. This is the gift that Jesus gave his contemporaries all through his life. He was able to give this Spirit in a complete way when he reached the goal of his life in the complete self-giving that he offered on the cross. That was the hour that the Beloved Disciple calls his 'hour of glory'. This is the gift that the risen Jesus continues to offer to anyone who wants to be open to his love. This is the gift that comes to us through all the encounters that we have with Jesus, for his one desire is to draw us to enjoy the love that is the fount of his own life. In contemplative prayer we experience a love which wells up from God who dwells in the depths of our being; we are touched by a spark issuing from the fire of love which is God's Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts, the Spirit promised by Jesus (John 14:17).

Paul knew that the only way we can belong to Jesus is by sharing Jesus' Spirit (Romans 8:9). The more we allow ourselves to be led by this Spirit the more we allow ourselves to be taken into the heart of God, the more we enjoy the communion in love for which we are created. Paul prays for the Christians in Ephesus:

'I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love' (Ephesians 3:16-17).

In earlier prayer we respond to the inspiration of God's Spirit inviting us to be in love. In contemplative prayer we offer our whole selves to God, trusting God to do the drawing. This is the work of the Spirit whom Paul calls the 'sanctifying Spirit' (Romans 1:4), the Spirit through whom 'God's love has been poured into our hearts' (Romans 5:5). It is Jesus' Spirit who inspires and directs our contemplation:

'The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit' (Romans 8:25-26).

It is Jesus' Spirit who transforms us through love (2 Corinthians 3:17-18), till we can say with Paul:

'It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. 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).

Since the second century, Christian writers have spoken of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>. The number seven is symbolic and signifies fullness. The traditional list comes from the Greek and Latin versions of Isaiah:

'The spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and piety [not in the Hebrew text]. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord' (Isaiah 11:2-3).

Towards the end of the 4th century, Saint Ambrose wrote:

'Recall then that you have received the spiritual seal, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence, the spirit of holy fear in God's presence. Guard what you have received. God the Father has marked you with God's sign; Christ the Lord has confirmed you and has placed

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<sup>1</sup>Justin Martyr Dialogue with Trypho, chapter 87; Irenaeus Against the Heresies III,17,3.

his pledge, the Spirit, in your hearts' (*On the Mysteries* 7.42 - quoted in the Catholic Catechism n. 1303).

God's love is all-embracing and so there is no limit to the ways in which we are graced by God's Spirit of love. There is value, however, in following tradition by reflecting on the ways in which God's transforming grace acts in our hearts through the seven gifts, which, according to the thirteenth century theologian, Thomas Aquinas, dispose us to respond promptly to God's inspiration. They may be compared to seven sails given us by God to enable us to pick up the divine breeze. They enable us to surrender to God's action and so to move in accordance with the mysterious motion of God rather than our own determined will, however obedient. Aquinas quotes Psalm 143:10: 'Let your good spirit lead me on a level path' and adds: 'No one can inherit the land of the blessed unless he is moved and drawn by the Holy Spirit.'<sup>2</sup> A modern theologian expresses it thus:

'The gifts of the Holy Spirit are special salutary modifications of the openness for God which is intrinsic to human nature. They also hold in check the forces of self-assertiveness, selfishness and sloth which resist the inspirations of grace.'<sup>3</sup>

In speaking of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit we are not dealing with a central dogma of faith. Nor should we be too precise in distinguishing between them or think of them as an exhaustive list. The traditional seven gifts do, however, express significant aspects of the way in which we are graced by God, and they represent a time-honoured way of reminding us of the fullness of God's gift of the Spirit to us. In the Rite of Confirmation n. 25 the Bishop invokes the outpouring of the Spirit in these words:

'All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life. Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord' (quoted in Catholic Catechism n.1299).

Speaking of the sacrament of Confirmation, the Catholic Catechism n. 1303 writes:

'Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace:

- it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation which makes us cry, 'Abba! Father!'
- it unites us more firmly to Christ.
- it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us.
- it render our bond with the Church more perfect.
- it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.'

Let us examine more closely the seven effects on the soul of the Living Flame from the lamp of fire, which is God's love.

### 1. Divine Wisdom

Human wisdom is an acquired skill in judging the best way of acting in the changing and often complex circumstances of life, and in putting decisions into operation. What interests us here is that special wisdom which concerns the purpose of life itself and the way in which we relate to God, the source of life. This wisdom is the gift that is most relevant to contemplative prayer, for it

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<sup>2</sup>Summa 1<sup>a</sup> 2<sup>ae</sup> q 68, a.1-2.

<sup>3</sup>M. Schmaus in *Encyclopedia of Theology* Ed. Rahner, Burns & Oates 1975, page 648.

gives us a special sensitivity and openness to receive God's self revelation to us. It enables us to savour and relish the divine.

When Paul claims that God alone is truly wise (Romans 16:27), he is speaking for the whole of the Biblical tradition:

'I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me.

That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?' (Ecclesiastes 7:23-24).

'The root of wisdom - to whom has it been revealed? Her subtleties - who knows them?

There is but one who is wise, greatly to be feared, seated upon his throne - the Lord.'

(Sirach 1:6-8)

'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Divine Wisdom is God present in creation and in history, gracing all things and 'ordering all things in harmony' (Wisdom 8:1). The Book of Proverbs tells us that God 'rejoices in the inhabited world and delights in the human race' (Proverbs 8:31). The prophet Zephaniah has God dancing to the music of the spheres and the harmony of nature 'renewing the people in divine love, exulting with loud singing as on a day of festival' (3:17). In the Book of Wisdom we are told that divine Wisdom:

'renews all things, passing into holy souls in every generation making them friends of God.

God loves nothing so much as the man or woman who lives with wisdom' (Wisdom 7:27).

It is through God's gift to us, the gift of this Spirit of Wisdom, that we 'learn what is pleasing to God' (Wisdom 9:10). We are assured that if we truly love this divine wisdom and if we earnestly seek it, we will find it, and we will find God (Wisdom 6:12).

Jesus is the incarnation of divine Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30), the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). He invites all who are thirsty to come to him and drink (John 7:37). He invites all who are walking in darkness to come to him, the light of the world (John 8:12). He invites all who labour and are overburdened to come to him and he will give them rest (Matthew 11:29-30).

Paul exclaims:

'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways!

For who has known the mind of God? Or who has been God's counsellor?' ...

For from God and through God and to God are all things.

To God be the glory forever. Amen' (Romans 11:33-36).

All things are *from* God, for God is the origin and source of all wisdom. All things are *through* God, for it is through God's action that we participate in divine wisdom. All things are *to* God, for all wisdom is directed towards God, the goal of our existence.

It is by keeping our eyes on Jesus and by opening our souls to receive his Spirit that we learn wisdom:

'There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.'

(1 Corinthians 8:6)

In contemplating Jesus we see who we really are and we learn how to respond to the action of divine Wisdom in our lives. By his Spirit we are transformed, so that the life of Jesus becomes our life, his thoughts become our thoughts, his responses become our responses, his prayer becomes our prayer.

To speak of divine Wisdom is to speak of God's design for the world. Each of us is created and held in existence by God to be part of the beauty of this design. We will fulfil our purpose only by being open to the inspiration of grace. If we choose to resist grace, God can use even our resistance to further God's mysterious designs. What a personal tragedy it would be for us not to enjoy being part of the beauty of divine communion.

With the gift of contemplative prayer comes an invitation to surrender to God's loving presence in our souls. If we respond in faith and yield to God, then, and only then, all that we are and all that we do becomes suffused with divine Wisdom. Then we can begin to say with Saint Paul: 'I live, no longer I. It is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). It is a journey of faith, for we journey in darkness. Our eyes are unable to take the brightness of God's light. It is a journey of hope, for now we have only touches of the embrace for which we are made and for which our hearts long. It is a journey of love, for it is in being in trusting communion with God that we find peace.

## 2. Fear of the Lord (wonder and awe in God's presence)

The following texts represent a frequently recurring motif in the Hebrew Scriptures:

'The eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,  
on those who hope in God's covenant love' (Psalm 33:18)

'Praise the Lord! Happy are those who fear the Lord,  
who greatly delight in God's commandments' (Psalm 112:1).

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10).

In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux writes (Sermon 38.3):

'The Bridegroom intends to inspire the fear that purifies, that by this purification we may be made ready for the vision we long for. It is a vision reserved for the pure in heart.'

In communion with the transcendent and absolute Other on whom we are utterly dependent, we are faced with our own mortality and sinfulness. We cannot ensure our survival. We are powerless and dependent. Yet revelation opens us to God who is love. The gift of 'fear of the Lord' disposes us to a sentiment of profound awe and wonder at God who holds us in being and who loves us so personally. 'Fear of the Lord' is a foundational religious attitude of living one's life in the presence of God and according to God's will. Something of this sentiment is found in the following words of Isaiah:

'One seraph called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"' (Isaiah 6:3-5).

We are not to fear God in the sense of being afraid, as though God were a threat to us. But we are meant to take seriously our capacity to be lost. We are to fear our sinfulness and recognise our need for God's grace and forgiveness. The Book of Exodus makes this distinction nicely:

'Do not be afraid [God is not a threat].  
God has come only to test you and to put the fear of God upon you  
so that you do not sin' (Exodus 20:20).

An anonymous monk in a book entitled '*The Hermitage Within*' writes:

'The point of departure for great mystical ascents is always the intense activity of the gift of fear. People like insisting on the "filial" character of this fear, but this presupposes a perfectly clear view of everything, which by definition keeps us in an abyss of nothingness below our heavenly Father. Harmless, artificial insults to your self-esteem are not going to

make you humble. Humiliation has its compensations in religion: an “edifying” acceptance of it raises our prestige and ministers to our vanity. But the Holy Spirit will deprive you of self-esteem from inside, by contrasting God’s grandeur and your baseness by its light: to the point perhaps of making you cry for mercy in horror of your abjectness: “Alas for me, I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5).

Julian of Norwich writes:

‘Reverent fear makes us hastily flee from everything that is not good, and fall into our Lord’s breast, as the child into the mother’s bosom, with all our intention and with all our mind, knowing our feebleness and our great need, knowing God’s everlasting goodness and blessed love, seeking for salvation only in God, cleaving to God with faithful trust. The fear which leads us in this direction is gentle and gracious and good and true ... For the natural attribute of fear which we have in this life by the grace-giving operation of the Holy Spirit will be the same in heaven before God, gentle, courteous, most sweet; and thus in love we shall be familiar and close to God, and in fear we shall be gentle and courteous to God.’

(*Showings*, chapter 74)

‘Reverent fear softens and strengthens and pleases and gives rest. False fear (fear that comes from doubt and leads to a lack of trust) belabours, assails and perturbs. Recognise them both, and reject false fear, for God wants us always to be strong in our love, and peaceful and restful as God is towards us; and God wants us to be, for ourselves and for our fellow Christians, what God is for us. Amen’ (The final words of ‘*Showings*’, short version, ch.25).

### 3. Piety (absent from the Hebrew Bible; found in the Greek and Latin versions)

This gift disposes us to be ‘poor in spirit’ (Matthew 5:3), to be ‘humble like a child’ (Matthew 18:4). Saint Paul writes: ‘God has sent the Spirit of God’s Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ (Galatians 4:6).

### 4. Understanding

This gift is especially active in theologians, catechists, and teachers. It enriches the capacity of our minds to grasp the implications of revealed truth and the meaning revelation has for our lives. The Holy Spirit disposes us to integrate our faith and to gain insight into the ways in which other areas of knowledge take on a more profound relevance when seen in the perspective in faith: ‘I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have understanding, I have strength’ (Proverbs 8:14).

### 5. Knowledge

The grace of the Holy Spirit also disposes us to grasp truth more richly and more readily by guiding our judgment to assert truth and to reject error. Our judgments are true to the extent that our understanding is in conformity with the way things are. The gift of knowledge helps us to judge truthfully in the light of who God is and how God has chosen to relate to us. It disposes us to judge all things in the knowledge that nothing can be properly understood without grasping its relationship to God, the source of all being.

### 6. The spirit of counsel or right judgment

This gift enriches our judgment as regards how we should respond most creatively and in a way that is most responsive to grace in the changing circumstances of our life. The Holy Spirit disposes us to make moral decisions under God’s inspiration.

## 7. The spirit of courage

Everyone suffers. We are all tested by life. However, Paul reassures us:

‘No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it’ (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The Holy Spirit is always offering us all the love we need to do God’s will and to tend towards the perfection of love in which holiness consists. The gift of courage disposes us to receive this support and sustenance from God in our trials and so to endure to the end and find salvation (Matthew 24:13). It helps to keep us trusting and alert to God’s grace even when our circumstances tend to reduce us to fear and impotence. The following statement comes from a book describing the crucifix of San Damiano before which Francis of Assisi prayed:

‘It is courage that makes saints, and courage is nothing more nor less than trusting in the grace that comes from God, and that is always present. For, in our trials and sufferings, God is always there ... like the space that surrounds a bird.’

John of the Cross reminds us of our need for this gift:

‘Though the path is plain and smooth for those of good will, you who walk will not travel far, and you will do so with difficulty, if you do not have good feet, *courage*, and tenacity of spirit’ (*Sayings of light and love* n.3).

We conclude this brief survey with the sequence composed for the Feast of Pentecost:

Holy Spirit, Lord of light, from your clear celestial height your pure beaming radiance give.  
Come, Father of the poor, come with treasures which endure. Come, light of all that live.  
You of all consolers best, you the soul’s delightful guest. Refreshing peace bestow.  
You in toil are comfort sweet, pleasant coolness in the heat, solace in the midst of woe.  
Light immortal, light divine, visit these hearts of thine and our inmost being fill.  
If you take your grace away, nothing pure in us will stay; all our good is turned to ill.  
Heal our wounds, our strength renew. On our dryness pour your dew.  
Wash the stains of guilt away. Bend the stubborn heart and will.  
Melt the frozen. Warm the chill. Guide the steps that go astray.  
On us who evermore you confess and you adore, with your sevenfold gifts descend.  
Give us comfort when we die. Give us life with you on high. Give us joys that never end.

## **25. Fruits of the Spirit**

The gifts of the Holy Spirit make it possible for us to surrender to God’s love and to experience contemplative prayer. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are the fruits of the communion with God that we have in contemplative prayer. Their presence in our life is a good sign that our prayer is genuine. Teresa of Jesus writes:

‘When the active works arise from this interior root, they become lovely, very fragrant flowers. For they proceed from this tree of God’s love and are done for God alone, without any self-interest. The fragrance of these flowers spreads to the benefit of many.’

*(On the Song of Songs 7.3)*

‘The will must in some way be united with God’s will. But it is in the effects and deeds following afterward that one discerns the true value of prayer. There is no better crucible for testing prayer’ (*Interior Castle* IV.2.8).

In his Letter to the Galatians (5:16-24) Saint Paul describes some of the fruits of living our lives in response to the Spirit of Jesus:

‘Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.  
For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit,  
and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh;  
for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want ...

The works of the flesh are obvious:  
sexual vice, impurity, unrestrained gratifying of sensual desire,  
idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, selfish ambition, dissensions,  
divisiveness, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

I am warning you, as I warned you before:  
those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is  
love, joy, peace, long suffering in doing good, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,  
gentleness, and self-control ...

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.’

Let us follow Paul’s example and look first at the kind of life we live when we are not living the new life given us by Jesus. Paul speaks first of irresponsible sexual behaviour. He puts this first because the way we relate sexually is central to who we are and to the way we express or fail to express love. He goes on to speak of impurity. We are aware of the harm caused by polluting our physical environment. This is nothing compared to the harm that comes from polluting the mind and heart. He then speaks of a general lack of discipline, whereby we give ourselves over to whatever gratifies our sensual desires.

Paul then lists idolatry. To find out what it is that we worship, we need to look at what it is that ultimately determines the choices we make. Do I idolise my so-called freedom, my reputation, my independence? What do I cling to even when it is clear that truth and love require me to change? He speaks of sorcery. Rather than accepting our human limitations and the mystery inherent in things and placing trust in a loving God, we can be tempted to seek false assurances from people who claim to know the future or to be able to control spirits. Paul goes on to speak of enmities and strife. We think of the terrible results of racism and of other ways of failing to treat people as our brothers and sisters, made in God’s image and likeness.

If we fail to respond to God’s invitation to live as branches of the vine, who is Christ, we will find ourselves acting jealously. In our insecurity, we hold on to what we have so tightly that we treat people as objects and are unwilling to share with others when love requires it. When Paul mentions anger, he is not speaking of appropriate anger, which aids us in defending ourselves and others against unjust aggression. He is speaking of the unreasonable and spiteful passion that can come over us when we fail to get our own way or have our own whims gratified. He speaks of selfish ambition, of stirring up trouble and causing strife as well as dividing people one from another, rather than attempting to reconcile them. He speaks of envy: acting out our feelings of unhappiness that others are prospering, wanting what others have, never satisfied with who we are or what we have. He concludes his list by speaking of the lack of moderation and control in our behaviour as we seek to satisfy what we see as our needs.

In stark contrast to this is a life that blossoms when our behaviour flows from the communion of love which Jesus shares with us, the way we find ourselves behaving once we have handed our life over to the Spirit of Jesus. It is to this way of life that we are led when we are drawn into contemplative prayer. We recall Paul’s words, speaking of what he experienced through sharing Jesus’ life:

‘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).

We are not surprised to find that the first fruit of the Spirit is 'love' (agapê). Paul is referring to something more than the spontaneous feeling that one associates with one's spouse or family; something more than passionate desire, or the affection experienced between friends. He is speaking of the recognition one has of the value of another person in the light of what God has revealed in Christ. He is speaking of the decision to give one's life for others the way Christ gave his life for us. 'Love', as used here by Paul, speaks of faithful commitment to others whatever feelings circumstances may cause to arise within us. He is referring to our sharing in the love of the heart of Jesus.

The second fruit of which he speaks is 'joy': the joy of having Christ living in us; the joy of experiencing his Spirit in our hearts (Galatians 4:6); the joy of knowing that we are heirs to the promise (Galatians 3:29); the joy of experiencing the love of one's brothers and sisters in the faith.

The third fruit is 'peace', a peace for which Paul regularly prays at the beginning and end of his letters. It is the peace we experience when we are in the right relationship with God and are living the life of Christ. It is highlighted in the post-resurrection Gospel narratives (John 14:27; 20:19). It is a harmony that is experienced in every dimension of our lives as Christ's redeeming love gradually transforms our whole being: our soul, our heart, our mind, and our body. It finds expression in the community when differences are no longer sources of injustice or insecurity, but variations that enrich the community as various instruments enrich an orchestra. It will be complete only when all creation unites in a cosmic hymn of praise.

The fourth fruit is 'long suffering in doing good.' This is sometimes translated as 'patience'. It is not the patience of bearing the burdens which life places upon us. Rather it is the patience of continuing to do good, even when it is hard and causes us to suffer, and when we do not see the fruits of our good deeds. Paul is speaking of the passion of love that is determined and persistent and cares enough not to stand back while someone is destroying himself or herself through sin. It is a fruit of the Spirit because it can come only from God; it is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus' giving of his life for us on the cross.

The fifth fruit, 'kindness', refers to whatever is pleasing, desirable, useful, lovely, valuable and morally good. Matthew associates it with the yoke of Jesus as against the yoke of the law (Matthew 11:30), and for Luke it is characteristic of God who is 'kind to the ungrateful and selfish' (Luke 6:35).

Closely associated with kindness is the next fruit, 'goodness': a disposition by which one is ready to do good to others (see 1Thessalonians 5:15). God is 'faithful': his love and his promises will never be withdrawn. One who lives by the Spirit of Christ shares also in this quality, as also in the 'gentleness' characteristic of the heart of Jesus (Matthew 11:28-29).

'Self-control' was considered a most important virtue in the Greek world. For Paul it too is a fruit of the Spirit in that the mastery over one's wayward desires is not something we achieve on our own. Rather, it comes from belonging to Christ. Paul is speaking not of control *by* the self, but of giving over control of the self to movements of grace inspired by the Spirit of Jesus.

Looking back over this list we become conscious of an important and fundamental dimension of Christian morality. Paul does not take away the Jewish law to replace it with a Christian equivalent. The command is not directly to follow certain precepts: it is to 'walk by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:16), to be 'led by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:18). If we do this, the Spirit will cause the above fruits to grow in our lives. We are reminded of Paul's words to the Thessalonians: 'He who calls you is faithful, and will do it' (1 Thessalonians 5:24). Rather than our struggling to obey a law etched on stone, we are to open our hearts and minds to the call of the Spirit, and allow Christ to live in us.

Christian morality is a morality of love, the love revealed by Jesus on the cross. It is not an achievement of the self; it is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not possible without faith, but it is possible with faith, and it is here that Paul places his emphasis. If we are concerned that we are sinning, the answer is not to subject ourselves to a system that is outside us. That will not give us the life we seek. The answer is to become more and more a 'servant of Christ' (Galatians 1:10), more and more allowing his Spirit to penetrate every aspect of our life. To 'belong to Christ' (Galatians 3:29) demands, of course, that we are ready to die with him on the cross (Galatians 2:20), dying to our selfishness (Galatians 5:24) and giving our lives in love for others. It is to live 'in Christ' (Galatians 2:16-17; 3:26-28; 5:6). It is to 'put on Christ' (Galatians 4:6). It is to have Christ as my Lord (Galatians 1:3,10) and my Redeemer (Galatians 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; 4:4-5; 5:1). It is to live by his Spirit (Galatians 4:6).

In contemplative prayer we surrender ourselves to God's love. This is made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love that binds Jesus to his Father. It bears fruit in a life that is an overflow of the communion of love into which God graciously invites us.

We have reflected on the early stages of contemplative prayer. We are ready now to follow the great masters of mystical prayer as they share with us what happened to them in their prayer as they responded to God's invitation to enter more deeply into divine communion.

## **26. The beginnings of transforming union<sup>4</sup>**

We have already noted the first experiences of contemplative prayer when our stretching towards God gives way to a yielding to God. We have been watering the garden of our soul when suddenly a mysterious spring of love wells up from the depths of our being. We have been rowing energetically when a gentle breeze catches our sail and carries us forward. We are pursuing our journey to our centre when a door opens and we feel the warmth coming from the fire that is burning there.

Such is God's longing to share with us the fullness of divine communion, that, provided we surrender to the love that is being offered to us, these transient moments deepen: we experience ourselves wrapped in silence in what Teresa calls the Prayer of Quiet. However, the union with God that is experienced in the Prayer of Quiet does not envelop our imagination, memory and thoughts. Left with nothing to hold their attention, they go off in whatever direction they fancy. We have already discussed some of the confusion and difficulties that this can cause.

Let us accept the guidance of Teresa as she shares her experience as her contemplative communion with God deepened. She tells us that sometimes while she was in the Prayer of Quiet she had brief<sup>5</sup> experiences of a more complete union of love, which she calls the Prayer of Union.

'This is the union which I have desired all my life; it is for this that I continually beseech our Lord' (*Interior Castle*, V.3.5).

The communion with God that she experienced in these brief moments was very different from any previously experienced (*Interior Castle*, V.1.7). She could experience the Prayer of Quiet while engaged in other activities. This was not possible in the Prayer of Union. In this prayer her whole being was drawn into communion.

'When there is union of all the faculties, things are very different because none of them is able to function. The intellect is in awe ... There is no memory or thought' (*Spiritual Testimonies* 59.6).

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<sup>4</sup>The Interior Castle (Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press,1979) pages 85-171 and Marie-Eugène OCD *I am a daughter of the Church*, Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1955, 168-299.

<sup>5</sup> On the short duration of these experiences, see Interior Castle V.1.9; V.2.7; Spiritual Testimonies 59.6.

‘All the faculties are asleep in this state ... During the time that the union lasts, we are left as though without our senses, for we have no power to think even if we want to.’

*(Interior Castle, V.1.4)*

‘God is working in us without anyone disturbing God, not even ourselves.’

*(Interior Castle, V.1.6)*

Teresa spells out some of the characteristics of this prayer. The first is a deep assurance that we have truly been in communion with God who has touched us with love. She writes:

‘God so places God’s Self in the interior of the being that when we return to ourselves we can in no way doubt that we have been in God and God in us. This truth remains with us so firmly that even though years go by without God’s granting that favour again, we can neither forget nor doubt that we have been in God and God in us’ *(Interior Castle, V.1.8)*.

A second characteristic of the Prayer of Union is the knowledge that God is offering us perfect detachment and obedience. God is inviting us to comply faithfully to divine action as God frees us from the last remaining bonds that fetter us and hinder our flight to God. We are not suggesting that God has changed. God is offering complete union to everyone, all the time. It is that we are now ready to welcome what God is offering us.

‘Everything we see on earth leaves us dissatisfied, especially when God has again and again given us this wine which almost every time has brought us some new blessing ... Now we are no longer bound by ties of relationship, friendship or property. Previously all our acts of will and resolutions and desires were powerless to loosen us from these; now we are grieved at having even to fulfil our obligations in these respects lest these should cause us to sin against God. Everything wearies us, because we can find no rest in creatures’ *(Interior Castle, V.2.8)*.

‘We are much more detached from creatures because we now see that only the Creator can console and satisfy us’ *(Interior Castle, VI.11.10)*.

We can experience the gift of the Prayer of Union only if we are resolved to give ourselves wholly to God and if our will is completely subject to God.

‘Whether you have little or much, God wants everything’ *(Interior Castle, V.1.3)*.

‘God does not want our will to have any part to play in this prayer, for it has been entirely surrendered’ *(Interior Castle, V.1.12)*.

‘We have now surrendered ourselves into God’s hands and God’s great love has so completely subdued us that we neither know nor desire anything save that God will do with us what God wills’ *(Interior Castle, V.2.12)*.

‘We have no desire to seek or possess any independent free will. We give to God the keys of our will’ *(Life, 20.22)*.

A third characteristic is that in the Prayer of Union we receive the gift of a deeper love for God.

This is manifest in a fourth characteristic which is God’s gift to us of a profound love of others and a new zeal to be active in the mission of the Church, which is ‘the fullness of Christ who fills the whole of creation’ (Ephesians 1:23), his body which ‘builds itself up in love’ (Ephesians 4:16). Christ ‘loved the Church and gave himself up for her’ (Ephesians 5:25). When our will is united to his we share his love and his willingness to offer himself in love for others. This involves suffering at seeing others offending God, and a desire to suffer with Jesus for their redemption. After the grace of union, ‘having now a clear realisation that the fruits of this prayer are not our own, we can start to share them and yet have no lack of them’ *(Life, 19)*.

‘The surest sign that we are keeping the two commandments of love is that we are really loving our neighbour ... Be certain that the farther advanced you find yourself in this, the greater is your love for God’ (*Interior Castle*, V.3.9).

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘Love makes perfect apostles, for love alone can form worthy instruments of God, and only love’s flame makes apostolic activity fruitful’ (*I am a daughter of the Church*, page 226).

God is bringing about this union. There is nothing we can do to achieve it. However, God respects our freedom. We can dispose ourselves for union by our love (see *Satirical Critique*, 5), and we can choose to remain open to God’s action. Teresa likens the experience to a cocoon in which a silkworm is being transformed into a butterfly. Teresa also suggests that our attitude under grace at this time is to be like wax under a seal: we are to remain soft, quiet and consenting (*Interior Castle*, V.2.12).

For some, this union is a fruit of a special mystical grace:

‘For the short time that the condition lasts, we are without consciousness and have no power to think, even though we may desire to do so ... In fact, we have completely died to the world so that we may live more fully in God. This is a delightful death, a snatching of the soul from all the activities which it can perform while it is in the body’ (*Interior Castle*, V.1.3).

However, God can offer this grace in whatever way God chooses. Things are not yet fully clear, and there is still a process of purification to be undergone before the complete transforming union takes place, which is the goal of God’s dealings with us here in earth. We are enjoying the beginnings of a union that will come to perfection in the Beatific Vision.

#### **The grace of spiritual betrothal**<sup>6</sup>

In 1556, Teresa experienced a deepening of her prayer of Union. In her prayer she experienced Jesus promising to take her as his bride. Overwhelmed with love, she promised to give him her whole heart and soul. She speaks of this mutual commitment as a spiritual betrothal.

‘You will have often heard that God betroths God’s Self to us spiritually ... It is a union of love with love, and its operations are entirely pure, and so delicate and gentle that there is no way of describing them; but the Lord can make us very deeply conscious of them.’

(*Interior Castle*, V.4.3)

‘God uses means so delicate that we do not understand them ... they proceed from the very depths of our being ... We are conscious of having been most delicately wounded, but cannot say how or by whom; but it is certain that this is a precious experience and we would be glad if we were never healed of that wound ... The Beloved is making it very clear that he is with us and seems to be giving us such a clear sign that he is calling us that we cannot doubt the fact, and the call is so penetrating that we cannot fail to hear.’

(*Interior Castle*, VI.2.1-3)

‘It is as though from the fire enkindled in the brazier that is my God a spark leapt forth and so struck me that I felt the flaming fire’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.4).

However, the spark that inflamed Teresa’s heart with love was not yet enough to set her on fire. The promised marriage was not to take place for another sixteen years. The delay increased her desire. The delay is also the cause of pain, like ‘a sudden, sharp wound in the most intimate part

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<sup>6</sup>Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, pages 126-143; *Life*, chapters 20-21; Marie-Eugène OCD, *I am a daughter of the Church*, pages 509-541.

of our being' (*Interior Castle*, VI.11.2), 'a wound in which it seems as though an arrow is thrust into our heart' (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 59.17).

'Very often a desire unexpectedly arises, in a way which I cannot explain. And this desire, which in a single moment penetrates to our very depths, begins to weary us so much that we soar upwards, far above ourselves and above all created things. It is a martyrdom, severe but also delectable; for we will accept nothing earthly that may be offered us, even though it were the thing which we had been accustomed to enjoy most' (*Life*, 20.9).

In his commentary on stanza 18 of the *Spiritual Canticle*, John of the Cross writes:

'In that sweet draught of God, wherein we are immersed in God, we surrender ourselves to God wholly, most willingly and with great delight, desiring to be wholly God's and never again to have anything in ourselves that is alien from God ... Inasmuch as God transforms us, God makes us to be wholly God's and empties us of all that we possessed and that was alien from God. Wherefore we are indeed completely given up to God, keeping nothing back, not only according to God's will, but also according to what we do, even as God has given God's Self freely to us. So these two wills are surrendered, satisfied and given up to each other, so that neither shall fail the other, as in the faithfulness and stability of a betrothal.'

Stanzas 13-21 of the *Spiritual Canticle* describe the *Spiritual Betrothal*:

**[Bride]**

13. Withdraw them, Beloved,  
I am taking flight!

**[Chorus]**

Return, dove, the wounded stag  
is in sight on the hill,  
cooled by the breeze of your flight.

**[Bride]**

14. My Beloved is the mountains,  
and lonely wooded valleys,  
strange islands,  
and resounding rivers,  
the whistling of love-stirring breezes,

15. the tranquil night  
at the time of the rising dawn,  
silent music,  
sounding solitude,  
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

16. Catch us the foxes,  
for our vineyard is now in flower,  
while we fashion a cone of roses  
intricate as the pine's;  
and let no one appear on the hill.

17. Be still, deadening the north wind;  
south wind come, you that waken love,  
breathe through my garden,  
let its fragrance flow,  
and the Beloved will feed amid the flowers.

18. You girls of Judea,  
while among flowers and roses  
the amber spreads its perfume,  
stay away, there on the outskirts;  
do not even seek to touch our thresholds.

**[Bridegroom]**

19. Hide yourself, my Love;  
turn your face toward the mountains,  
and do not speak;

**[Chorus]**

but look at those companions  
going with her through strange islands.

20. Swift-winged birds,  
lions, stags, and leaping roes,  
mountains, lowlands, and river banks,  
waters, winds and ardours;  
watching fears of the night:

21. By the pleasant lyres  
and the siren's song, I conjure you  
to cease your anger  
and do not touch the wall,  
that the bride may sleep in deeper peace.

Another description of the prayer of spiritual betrothal is found in *The Living Flame*:

‘O lamps of fire!  
in whose splendours  
the deep caverns of feeling,  
once obscure and blind,  
now, so strangely exquisite,  
give forth warmth and light to their Beloved’ (Stanza 3).

Commenting on this stanza, John Venard OCD writes:<sup>7</sup>

‘This Stanza deals with matters so profound that St. John exclaims “May God be pleased to favour me here!” We have become God by participation ... like the air within the flame, which is transformed into the flame itself’ (*Living Flame*, III.9). The Spirit is moving the soul as fire moves the air that is enkindled. It is like the overshadowing of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. We experience a deep perception and experience of the grandeur of the wisdom and excellences of God. The caverns, or faculties, are wonderfully infused with the splendours of the “lamps of fire,” the attributes of God. We actually participate in these attributes of God; we see that God really belongs to us by “hereditary possession, with the right of ownership, as an adopted child of God” (page 2).

John of the Cross writes:

‘All that we do is of God, and our operations are divine, so that the one who is joined to God is one spirit with God. Hence it comes to pass that our operations are of the Divine Spirit and are divine’ (*Ascent* III, ii).

### **27. Mystical graces sometimes experienced by contemplatives**

Teresa shares with us some experiences that she had during contemplation. At times certain words came clearly into her consciousness. She was aware of the fact that she was not their source. The words came to her with a certain divine authority, and when she obeyed them they bore powerful fruit (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.5). The first time she had such an experience was in 1557, when the following words were spoken to her by Jesus: ‘No longer do I want you to converse with human beings, but with angels’ (*Life*, 24.5). On another occasion she heard: ‘Do not fear, daughter, for I am and I will not abandon you. Do not fear’ (*Life*, 25.18).

In her *Spiritual Testimonies* she records other ‘words’ spoken to her in prayer:

‘Strive to have the right intention and to be detached in all things and look at me so that what you do may be in conformity with what I did’ (No. 8).

‘Give me your hands. Behold my wounds. You are not without me. This short life is passing away’ (No. 12.6).

‘Do not try to hold me within yourself. Try to hold yourself within me’ (No. 14).

‘Progress does not come by trying to enjoy me more, but by trying to do my will’ (No. 15).

She is aware of the danger of being deceived in this matter and advises people who suffer from a flighty imagination to ignore such experiences (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.2.3). No one should take notice of such ‘words’ before seeking the guidance of a spiritual director (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.11). For two years after her first experience her confessors told her to treat these words as a temptation (*Life*, 25.15). She did her best to obey, knowing that God wanted her to obey her confessors even when they were mistaken (*Life*, 26.5). She is confident that if these experiences

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<sup>7</sup>John Venard OCD *The Living Flame of Love: simplified version with notes*; Sydney: EJDwyer 1990

are from God they will produce a profound peace, and they will lead to a deeper humility (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.11) and to prayer of praise of God. If they are from God they remain, drawing us to a deeper obedience (*Interior Castle*, VI.3.6).

Teresa also had other experiences. She received the promise of spiritual marriage during an ecstasy or rapture.

‘God concludes the betrothal by giving us a rapture which draws us away from the senses’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.2).

‘In a rapture, God carries us off’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.9).

‘The difference between rapture and union is this: the rapture lasts longer and is felt more exteriorly ... We are so occupied with rejoicing with what the Lord represents to us that we seemingly leave the body abandoned’ (*Spiritual Testimonies* 59.7).

In this rapture resistance is impossible. However, there is no loss of consciousness. On the contrary

‘we have never before been so fully awake to the things of God’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.4).

Similar raptures were part of her prayer experience in the subsequent years.

‘It will happen that even though the extreme ecstasy ends, the will remains so absorbed and the intellect so withdrawn, for a day or even days, that the latter seems incapable of understanding anything that doesn’t lead to awakening the will to love; and the will is wide awake to this love and asleep to becoming attached to any creature’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.14).

Teresa speaks also of being suddenly caught up in love. In these sudden ‘flights of the spirit’ we see and learn things that cannot be expressed (*Interior Castle*, VI.5.9), and we experience ‘overwhelming joy and delight’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.11.11).

‘Since we go about with such tender love, any occasion that enkindles the fire more causes us to fly aloft’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.6.1).

We cannot earn such favours, but Teresa is convinced that if we give our whole heart and soul to God, God’s love is such that God would want everyone to experience a similar intimacy.

‘Even though it is true that these are blessings which the Lord gives to whomever God wills, God would give them all to us if we loved God as God loves us’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.4.12).

Teresa tells us of other special favours which she received at this time. Without any image she became deeply aware of Jesus being by her side (*Life*, 27.2; *Interior Castle*, VI.8.2). This made her even more acutely aware of the slightest movements of sin. It also made her more determined to give herself to God and to be available for whatever work God wanted of her.

‘Any fault we commit pierces us to the core of our being, and rightly so’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.8.6).

‘We experience peace and continual desires to please God’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.8.3).

‘To surrender oneself totally to God’s service and to a great purity of conscience because of God’s presence by our side, makes us attentive to everything’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.8.4).

On 30th June 1571, she also received the grace of a habitual awareness of the Blessed Trinity dwelling in her:

‘The thought came to me of how a sponge absorbs and is saturated with water; so, I thought, I was overflowing with the divinity and in a certain way rejoicing within myself and possessing in myself the three Persons’ (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 14).

Sometimes an image of Jesus was part of her experience during such moments of intimacy. This happened for the first time on January 25th 1561 (*Life*, 28.3). In her *Life* she records other images that came to her in prayer. On one occasion she had an image of an angel who pierced her in the depths of her heart (*Life*, 29.13). On May 29th 1563, she had a vision of a dove while reading the *Life of Christ* by the Carthusian, Ludolph of Saxony (*Life*, 38.9). She tells us also how she saw Jesus being taken into the bosom of the Trinity (*Life*, 38.17). These were very different kinds of images from any that we might produce from our own imagination (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.8).

Because the danger of self-deception here is very high, she warns anyone who seems to be having such an experience to be completely open with a spiritual director (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.12). In her case, as with the 'words' that she heard, she was told at first to treat these visions as a temptation (*Life*, 29.5). She did her best to obey, but found that she could do nothing either to bring these visions about or to stop them (*Life*, 29.2). Furthermore her love kept increasing (*Life*, 29.8) as did her desire to 'want only what God wants' (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.16).

While warning us of the danger of self-deception, she acknowledges: 'When visions are from God, they should be greatly prized' (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 65.3). Speaking in general of the many favours given her in prayer, she writes:

'If our Lord had not bestowed on me the favours he has, I think I should not have had the courage to do what I have done nor the strength to endure the trials, the opposition and the criticisms I have received. And so, since beginning my foundations, I have lost the fears that had previously troubled me when I thought I was suffering from delusions, and I have become certain that it was all the work of God. This led me to fling myself into difficult enterprises, though I always acted on advice and under obedience' (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 30).

It is true that such experiences are not essential either to prayer or to holiness. Moreover, they are not free of dangers. We can be misled by pride and illusions. The danger is so great that John of the Cross is adamant that we should pay no attention to such extraordinary graces (see *Ascent II*, 11 and 16-18). If they are indeed from God, their effect is immediate. Teresa tells us that we are to mention them to our spiritual director (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.12), but not dwell on them. Furthermore, along with Teresa (VI.9.15), John warns us not to desire such graces. Let all our desire be for a deeper faith, for it is faith alone that guides us in contemplation. 'The safest way is to want only what God wants' (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.16). One's desire should be only 'to satisfy love, and it is love's nature to serve with deeds' (*Interior Castle*, VI.9.18).

Marie-Eugène writes:

'However extraordinary sensible phenomena may be, they are so complex that, except for cases authenticated by the Church, it is at very least to waste one's precious time and satisfy a vain curiosity to linger with them in the hope of viewing some manifestation of the supernatural, or even of determining their nature and the kind of testimony that they give. A few moments of supernatural recollection or of the prayer of quiet, an act of faith and an act of love, these give God to us more surely and more directly than do all the extraordinary sensible phenomena' (*I am a daughter of the Church*, page 354).

At the same time we should not, in an undiscerning way, dismiss all such extraordinary experiences of God. When these experiences are accompanied by a sincere commitment to the truth, and have about them a simplicity and harmony; when they produce in us true humility, reverence and peace, they may well be gifts from God, given for God's own mysterious purposes.

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘These favours usually have considerable influence in the development of the spiritual life of those who receive them and in the realisation of their mission. This was the case for Saint Teresa’ (page 268).

‘Frequently, at the threshold of the narrow way in which God engages those God has chosen, God places an extraordinary favour which, like a beacon, shows the entrance to it, lights up the way and its steep ascents, and already with its powerful shafts reveals its summit’ (page 271).

It may well be that there is, in some cases, an element of mental illness mixed in with experiences of special mystical graces. This may make discernment more difficult, but it does not mean that the mentally ill person is not being especially favoured by God. After all, we are speaking of a God who hears the cry of the distressed. As Father de Guibert writes:

‘We can very well believe that God particularly favours such persons, by reason of the immense difficulties and hard trials that they meet with in order to realise their ascent in love, in the midst of the obscurities and tempests of their cruel illness’ (quoted, Marie-Eugène, page 365).

Touched by love, we would be wasting our time were we to just be on the look out for the next touch. While we long and wait, let us contemplate Jesus in his mysteries, not as we did when we thought things through in a logical fashion, but with simple faith-filled attention.

‘These mysteries will not be apprehended by the understanding: we will understand them in a more perfect way. First, the understanding will picture them to itself, and then they will be impressed upon the memory, so that the mere sight of the Lord on his knees in the garden, covered with that terrible sweat, will suffice us, not merely for an hour, but for many days. We consider with a simple regard who he is and how ungrateful we have been to one who has borne such pain for us. Then the will is aroused, not perhaps with deep emotion but with a desire to make some kind of a return for this great favour and to suffer something for one who has suffered so much himself’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.7.11).

Finally, the following from Teresa:

‘The highest perfection consists not in interior favours or in great raptures or in visions or the spirit of prophecy, but in bringing our wills so closely into conformity with the will of God, that as soon as we realise that God wills something, we desire it ourselves with all our might, and take the bitter with the sweet, knowing that to be God’s will’ (*Foundations*, 5.10).

### **28. The Night of the spirit<sup>8</sup>**

We have already reflected on what John of the Cross calls the Night of the Senses. The gift of contemplative prayer drew us into communion with God beyond the reach of the imagination, memory or thoughts. Though we were in communion with God in our depths, our consciousness insofar as it depends upon the senses could no longer be part of this communion. John speaks of the confusion and sense of deprivation that we experience as a kind of darkness. To trust the gift of prayer being offered us we had to learn to let go the pleasure we experience through holy thoughts and feelings of closeness. We had to learn the discipline of trusting that the communion we were experiencing was what really mattered and that we were praying in order to be in communion with God not to feel close to God. In this darkness we learned to focus on God’s action within, without being distracted by our senses, by our memory and imagination, or by the

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<sup>8</sup>Marie-Eugène OCD, *I am a daughter of the Church*, Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1955, 300-508.

mind searching for understanding. We came to a certain harmony in which our bodies and our senses submitted to our longing to gaze upon God and to be united with God in love.

With the deepening of contemplation in what Teresa calls the Prayer of Quiet and the Prayer of Union, the inflowing of God is experienced, and with it a deep peace and a profound joy. But for the most part the tide of love seems to ebb. God who has touched us in such an intimate way seems to withdraw and to be absent. We have seen that this is in order to deepen desire, making us capable of more love. It also purifies us of all attachments, making our love more pure. The point upon which we are focusing here is that this is a painful experience. It is as though we are plunged in darkness in the very centre of our being; we long to see the one who has drawn us into love but we cannot. No longer is it our senses and the faculties that depend upon them that are being purified; now it is the core of our ego. We are yielding to God who is drawing us and therefore we are being drawn into a prayer that relies solely on faith. The light with which God illumines the soul cannot be registered by any of our faculties; they are all plunged into darkness. We are journeying in the darkness of faith. Divine warmth and fragrance are not registered in the normal way, for the flowing in of love coming from God draws us beyond ourselves into communion in our inmost dwelling places. The attraction and the union occur in a darkness that John of the Cross calls the 'Night of the spirit'.

Two centuries before John of the Cross, the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec wrote:

'Desire and affection will make your heart expand, so that you will love, thank and praise God and yet fall short in all this, for all that you are able to do will seem as little or nothing compared to what you will wish to do and what love will rightly demand of you. Through such desire your heart will suffer a painful wound. The pain will constantly increase and be renewed through the practice of desirous affection for God, so that you will grow weak from love. Sometimes it will seem that your heart and your senses will be broken to pieces, that your nature will die and come to naught through the impatience of its desires, and that this impatience will have to last as long as you live. But then, when you least expect it, God will hide and withdraw God's hand, placing between God and you a darkness that you will not be able to see through. You will then lament, moan, and groan like a poor, abandoned exile. "Now are the poor abandoned to God", says the Prophet' (*A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*).

Let us listen to two young French Carmelite saints recording their experiences of this night. Therese Martin joined the convent in Lisieux in 1888 and died 9 years later. In a letter composed the year after her entry she wrote:

'God prefers leaving me in darkness to giving me a false light which would not be God's' (Letter 7.1.1889).

The following year, she wrote:

'Jesus took me by the hand, and made me enter a subterranean passage ... where I see nothing but a half-veiled light, the light which was diffused by the lowered eyes of my Fiancé's face! My Fiancé says nothing to me, and I say nothing to Him either except that I love Him more than myself' (Letter, 30.8.1890).

A year before her death she wrote:

'If at times you seem to hide yourself, it is you yourself who come to help me search for you' (15.8.1896).

She continues the same theme just months before her death:

'If you leave me deprived of your caresses, I will not cease to smile. In peace, I will wait for your return, and never stop praying my canticles of love' (31.5.1897).

Elizabeth Catez joined the convent in Dijon in 1901 and died in 1906. Her name in religion was Elizabeth of the Trinity. A letter written the year of her entry includes the following:

‘It is no longer a veil but a thick wall which hides God from me. I find it hard after having felt God so near, but I am ready to remain in this state as long as it pleases my Beloved to leave me in it, for faith tells me that my Beloved is there all the same. Of what use are consolations and sensible sweetness? All that is not God; and it is God alone we seek. So let us go to God in pure faith’ (Letter to M.G. 1901).

In her last retreat just before her death, she wrote:

‘I ought to plunge into the sacred darkness, keeping all my powers in night and emptiness. Then I will meet my Master, and the light which clothes Him as a garment will enwrap me, too, with his light alone.’

This darkness brings its own special suffering. First and foremost is the suffering caused by the profound but passing touch of God’s love. This passing is a cause of pain – the pain of longing for the union to be granted again (see *Interior Castle* V.2.9). Teresa writes:

‘It is as though from the fire enkindled in the brazier that is my God, a spark leapt forth and so struck me that the flaming fire was felt by me’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.4).

The spark, however, was not enough to set her on fire – hence the loving pain of longing.

‘We are left so full of longings to enjoy completely the One who grants these wonderful favours that we live in a great, though delightful, torment ... Everything we see wearies us. When alone we find some relief ... yet when we do not experience this pain, something is felt to be missing’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.6.1).

‘We feel a strange solitude because no creature in all the earth provides us company, not being the One we love. We are like a person hanging. We cannot support ourselves on any earthly thing; nor can we ascend into heaven. On fire with this thirst, we cannot get to the water; and the thirst is not one that is endurable but already at such a point that nothing will take it away. Nor do we desire that it be taken away, save by that water of which our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman. Yet no one gives us such water’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.11.5).

Frequently cited are the words of the Song of Songs: ‘I sought him but did not find him, I called to him but he did not answer’ (5:6).

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘Divine Wisdom reveals herself so as to set us on fire, and hides herself so as to fan the flames of our desires; crushes us to make us docile, and wounds us so as to heal. Thus Divine Wisdom purifies, transforms and quietens us.’

(*I am a daughter of the Church*, page 204)

God seems silent, hidden, absent. This is so that, with our heart thus pierced and hurt by desire, we may finally open up to God, with a greater capacity for receiving God. This is a recurring theme in spiritual writing as we saw in our reflection on longing.

Over and above this pain of unfulfilled longing, there are other causes for suffering that can accompany the deepening of contemplative prayer. Teresa names the following in her *Interior Castle* (VI.1). We can be afflicted by others accusing us of posing to be holy, or by our own imagining that this is what we are doing. We can also be afflicted by others praising us, when we know that all is gift, and that gratitude to God and not praise of ourselves is the proper response to

grace. These disturb us because we are not at all sure of ourselves. We have to learn to take both blame and praise lightly, and quickly turn from both to God.

We can find ourselves being misunderstood by a spiritual director, who may be incapable of giving us wise help. We can be disturbed by thoughts that we are being deceived and are deceiving others. Our reason may assure us that this is not the case, but reason is powerless to help us against such thoughts. Teresa's advice is clear:

'If the Lord has granted you the touch of this love, you should thank him very much. You do not have to fear deception. Your only fear is that you might prove ungrateful for so generous a gift. So strive to better your entire life, and to serve' (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.5).

Finally, we can experience pain because of our sins. Teresa writes:

'Suffering over one's sins increases the more one receives from God' (*Interior Castle*, VI.7.1)

'God's favours are like the waves of a large river in that they come and go; but the memory these people have of their sins clings like thick mire. It always seems that these sins are alive in the memory, and this is a heavy cross' (*Interior Castle*, VI.7.2).

God is now working in us for our final purging from all imperfection till all that remains is love. When all resistance to love is conquered, when we have fully surrendered to love, then and only then there is experienced the peace of being fully in God's love. Let us listen to John of the Cross:

'The dark night is a certain flowing in of God into the human creature, which purges it of the ignorance and imperfections belonging to its very nature. God teaches us in a strange, secret way, educating us to perfect love. It is God who does this; the creature can only be lovingly attentive, listening, receptive, allowing itself to be enlightened without understanding how' (*Dark Night*, II.5.1).

'There is nothing in contemplation or the divine inflow which of itself can give pain; contemplation rather bestows sweetness and delight. The cause for not experiencing these agreeable effects is our weakness and imperfection at the time, our inadequate preparation, and the qualities we possess which are contrary to this light. Because of these we have to suffer when the divine light shines upon us' (*Dark Night*, II.9.11).

With Prayer of Union comes a need for a psychological revolution in which we have to learn to surrender to God in our intellect and will. We have to learn to surrender to God and be guided by God in the depths of our being. In the night of the spirit, our human spirit must learn to receive rather than to determine its own activity. We are so used to being active, even in our searching for God and in our commitment to prayer. In this enforced passivity it will seem to us that God has abandoned us and left us in darkness. Our intellect and our will are being purified till there is no longing in us except to be with God and to do God's holy will. God is digging out the deep roots of sin, consuming us and purging us in order to re-create us in the pure fire of God's love.

John of the Cross goes to the Book of Lamentation to find a scriptural expression of the pain suffered by the soul in this night.

'I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath;  
God has driven and brought me into darkness without any light;  
against me alone God turns God's hand, again and again, all day long.  
God has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones;  
has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation;  
has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago.  
God has walled me about so that I cannot escape; has put heavy chains on me;  
though I call and cry for help, God shuts out my prayer;

and blocks my ways with hewn stones. God has made my paths crooked.  
God is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding;  
God led me off my way and tore me to pieces; has made me desolate;  
bent the bow and set me as a mark for God's arrow.  
God shot into my vitals the arrows of his quiver;  
I have become the laughingstock of all my people,  
the object of their taunt-songs all day long.  
God has filled me with bitterness, has sated me with wormwood.  
God has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes;  
I am bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is;  
so I say, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord."  
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!  
I continually think of it and am bowed down' (*Lamentations* 3:1-20).

Teresa knows how gentle we must be with a person suffering the pain of this purifying love:

'Oh, Jesus, how sad it is to see a person thus forsaken' (*Interior Castle*, VI.1).

This suffering makes us more tender, more compassionate to others, more open to love. We learn to identify with Jesus in his cry: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'

Marie-Eugène writes:

'By a painful experience of our own weakness, of the depths of sin in ourselves and in others, of the hateful power of sin in the world, of its blind violence in all people, we learn humility before God, before ourselves, before the work to be realised in the Church. We progressively discover the human-divine conditions in which the kingdom of God is built up here below, the part of God in it and the part we are to play, the efficacious power of divine love, the indulgent and silent patience that this love requires of the human instrument, if we would triumph over the forces of sin' (page 333-334).

Our experience at this time is one of light and darkness - the measure of each depends on our need for purification and on the courage with which we open ourselves to God's purifying love. John of the Cross writes:

'We never remain in the same state for long, but are continually up and down. This is because we cannot be in the state of perfection, which consists in perfect love of God and contempt of self, without knowing God and ourselves. And so we are given a taste of one - that is exaltation - and then of the other - that is humiliation' (*Dark Night*, II.18).

It is when the fire is less purifying that we experience more the enkindling of love:

'This enkindling of love is not always felt by us, but only at times when contemplation assails us less vehemently, for then we have occasion to see, and even to enjoy, the word which is being wrought in us, and revealed to us. For it seems that the worker takes his hand from the work, and draws the iron out of the furnace, in order that something of the work that is being done may be seen' (*Dark Night*, II.10).

Marie-Eugène adds a caution:

'We must be on our guard against any stereotyped notion of the dark night. The night is always an intervention of divine Wisdom by fire. The divine bellows fan to a blaze the depths of our being with a force and rhythm as varied as are the designs of God for us and as are the forms of sin of which we must be purified' (page 371).

He reminds us also that the purification takes place in the midst of the circumstances of ordinary life:

‘The dark night is a realm of suffering, but also one of peace, a realm where love wounds painfully and with violence, only to purify, to liberate, to heal us and bring us into transforming union’ (page 374).

A valuable caution is offered here by Ruth Burrows who warns us to beware of imagined suffering:

‘Real suffering is received moment by moment and is always bearable’ (*The Ascent of Love*, page 111).

A final clarification is offered in a Carmelite commentary on the teaching of John of the Cross, entitled *God Speaks in the Night*:

‘The dark night is not the trials and afflictions, fears and temptations coming from the world; nor is it the temptations, dryness and affliction from the senses; nor is it the tribulations, darkness, distress, abandonment, temptations and other trials in the spirit. It is the attitude one has in dealing with these. This means interpreting the facts in faith, responding with love, and bearing them or seeking a solution with hope in God. Sufferings are the common lot, The dark night is a grace from God, but one must live it with much effort’ (page 185).

Having looked at the night into which we are plunged as we are drawn deeper and deeper into communion with God in contemplative prayer, let us now seek advice from the masters in the art of prayer as to what we are to do in this darkness. How are we to sustain the feeling of ‘a strange solitude’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.11.5), the pain of longing and the pain of knowing our own sinfulness?

We must first of all remember that the pain is brought about by the flame of love coming from the brazier of the heart of God (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.4). Nothing stands between us and the one we love. The journey, though at times painful, is a journey into the arms of one who is committed to us. Whatever sufferings we have, ‘we know they are great favours’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.1.15). ‘We feel that the pain is precious’ (VI.11.6).

‘The wound satisfies us much more than the delightful and painless absorption of the Prayer of Quiet’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.2).

The only one who can remove the pain is ‘the true comforter who consoles and strengthens us’ (VI.11.9). Moreover:

‘The divine visits of the betrothal complete our purification, enriching us and preparing us in a positive way for the spiritual marriage. With their extraordinary gifts of love in our depths, these visits destroy or render inactive the remaining evil tendencies. The meeting with God in the light, which they procure, perfects our psychological reorientation. Thereafter we are wholly turned towards the Beloved’ (Marie-Eugène, page 538).

In an anonymous work entitled *The Hermitage Within*, a monk has this advice:

‘tirelessly plead for God to give God’s Self to you’ (page 28).

‘You will be reduced to “wanting to believe,” to stumbling along groaning and no longer understanding a thing. “When I sing the bliss of heaven, the eternal possession of God,” wrote St Therese of the Child Jesus, “I feel no joy; for I am merely singing what I want to believe.” You must “behave as if” the light were lighting up your path: you must deepen your faith not by devouring more and more books but by humbly submitting to this withdrawal of light and by putting your whole life, down to its minutest details, under the influence of faith’ (page 45).

Let us listen to Therese of Lisieux:

‘Jesus knows well that while I do not have the joy of faith, I am trying to carry out its works at least. I believe I have made more acts of faith in this past year than all through my whole life. At each new occasion of combat ... I run towards my Jesus ... I sing what I want to believe’ (*Story of a Soul*, June 9, 1897).

The author of *The Hermitage Within* speaks also of humility:

‘Humility will save you. Accept not tasting God’s love, you who have savoured the love of creatures too much; accept walking in darkness without so much as feeling the fatherly hand bearing you without your knowing it. Guide yourself by God’s voice’ (page 47).

This is a theme dear to the heart of Therese of Lisieux:

‘Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart, which makes us always humble and little in the arms of God, well aware of our feebleness, but boldly confident in the Father’s goodness’ (August 3rd 1897).

‘You may think of a little child that is learning to stand but does not yet know how to walk. In his desire to reach the top of the stairs to find his mother, he lifts his little foot to climb the first step. It is all in vain, and at each renewed effort he falls. Well, be like that little child. Always keep lifting your foot to climb the ladder of holiness, and do not imagine that you can mount even the first step. All God asks of you is good will. From the top of the ladder God looks lovingly upon you, and soon, touched by your fruitless efforts, will come down, and, taking you in God’s arms, will carry you never again to leave God’ (*Story of a Soul*).

‘Do all in your power, give without counting, constantly renounce yourself, in a word, prove your love by all the works in your power. But in truth, since this is very little, it is urgent to put your confidence in God who alone sanctifies what you do, and to confess yourself to be a useless servant’ (Advice to a novice).

When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night he was told that he had to be ‘born from above’. This was not something that he could achieve. He was to allow God’s Spirit to engender this new life in him (John chapter 3). This is the Spirit poured out from the pierced heart of Jesus on the cross. We have to learn resignation. We have to learn to surrender our will to the will of God. More than resignation and submission, we are actively to cooperate with grace, to want what God wants with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. All asceticism now is to respect divine initiative. We need to learn to cooperate energetically with grace.

John of the Cross writes:

‘It is a great grace from God when God so darkens and impoverishes us that the senses cannot deceive us. And that we may not go astray we have nothing to do but to walk in the beaten path of the law of God and of the Church, living solely by faith, dim and true, in certain hope and perfect charity, looking for all our blessings in heaven; living here as a pilgrim, a beggar, an exile, an orphan, desolate, possessing nothing and looking for everything from God’ (*Letter to Dona Juana Pedraca*).

Teresa writes:

‘There is no remedy for the tempest but to await the mercy of God’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.1.10).

‘The best way to endure these afflictions of the spirit is to engage in external works of charity and to hope in the mercy of God’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.1.13).

Julian of Norwich received the following advice in prayer:

‘Pray inwardly, even though you find no joy in it. For it does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing, yes, even though you think you cannot pray. For when you are dry and empty, sick and weak, your prayers please me, though there be little enough to please you. All believing prayer is precious to me. God accepts the good-will and work of his servants, no matter how we feel’ (*Showings* ch. 41).

God sustains us by the virtue of hope, so that we continue to tend towards a communion with God which we know by faith but which we do not yet possess in the full measure of love’s longing. Our spirit groans because we seem not to be going forward, but we continue to long and to trust in God who we know loves us, and whom we love. We are to keep our gaze fixed beyond the storms and the darkness on God, who we know by faith is drawing us into communion.

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘The dark night of the spirit brings with it this hour of supernatural hope. God is revealed in the flowing in of grace and the extraordinary favours that mark this period, in that wisdom, secret and always acting, which creates a certain obsession for the divine transcendence. The darkness that prevails makes thicker the veil separating us. Crushed by our misery and weakness, we experience an inability to go toward God, the only object that we can thenceforth desire. We cannot go back, for we are already captivated by divine love. We do not succeed in going toward God and we will not do so, since the divine flame is within us, assailing us. This is the hour of profound hope, ardent and peaceful. God awaits the sighs that mount up from our depths, opening these depths to God’s action. God needs these inner groanings that tell that the work of purification is being accomplished, and that give up to the flame’s action all imperfections’ (*I am a daughter of the Church*, pages 380-381).

We are being invited to be ‘poor in spirit’, completely conscious of our utter dependence on God, and confident, like a child, in a father’s, a mother’s, love. Trust is hope impregnated with love. We are to abandon ourselves to God. We are being called to cling to nothing, not even to remembered graces. For graces are not God.

‘It is best to learn to silence the faculties and to cause them to be still, so that God may speak’ (John of the Cross, *Ascent* III.2).

‘Asceticism consists in our preparing, by mortification and purity of heart, for the spiritual poverty that God works in us; in bearing this poverty humbly and peacefully when God gives it as a grace; in protecting it and furthering it, according to the grace that is given, by the practice of an interior silence ... In this solitude of peace and silent hope it purifies and flowers’ (Marie-Eugène, page 387).

Teresa of Jesus recognises that sometimes the darkness is such that we feel abandoned by God, including having no sense of the presence of Jesus. If this is so, we must accept it. However, she is insistent that we do not be deceived into thinking that we have to try, of ourselves, to distance ourselves from Jesus, as though his humanity could inhibit our entry into a communion with God who is spirit:

‘If we lose our guide, the good Jesus, we will be unable to find our way.’

(*Interior Castle*, VI.7.6)

Jesus suffered. Should we expect to be with him and not suffer? Even though we seem to be in darkness, we are walking with the one who is the light of the world: ‘If you walk with me, you will not walk in darkness’ (John 8:12). Jesus experienced a profound sense of being abandoned by his Father. It may well be the same for us, but we can be confident that in the darkness Jesus is drawing us to himself, and so into communion with his Father: ‘If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself’ (John 12:32). Suffering with Jesus is purifying. It is also

redemptive when embraced in love. In her acute sufferings, physical and mental, Therese could write:

‘O divine Word, you are the adored Eagle. I love you and you draw me to you ... One day – such is my hope – you will come for your little bird, and mounting with it to the fire of love, you will plunge it for eternity in the burning abyss of the love to which it has offered itself as victim’ (*Letter to Marie of the Sacred Heart*, September 14th, 1896).

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘The link that is forged by gazing on Jesus’ suffering, or simply the remembrance of the Passion, has brought about changes in depth. The external traits of the tableau and conceptual forms of thought disappear. The obscure depths find repose in the depths of the mystery of Christ suffering, in an outpouring of painful love that finds strength and love in this meeting. The one who is suffering under love’s action joins Christ who is in agony in his love for the world until the end of time’ (*I am a daughter of the Church*, page 442).

‘The living presence of Jesus remains with us in the Dark Night, hidden from the senses but perceived in deeper regions. We can travel securely in the darkness and reach the end only in that divine company, and in the half-light of the mystery of his suffering’ (p. 444)

There are certain fruits that grace the person who remains faithful to the prayer of faith. In the Carmelite commentary on John of the Cross to which we referred earlier, we read:

‘The first fruit of the Dark Night is freedom. Those experiencing this flowing in of contemplation feel as though they escaped from a dark dungeon and as though the world were an eternal springtime. They draw out much knowledge of God and of self. They also get much humility and become more understanding of others. Many troubles become relative that were once considered major problems. And, most of all, they have a loving solicitude about serving God and are determined to do so without recompense’ (*God speaks in the Night*, page 185).

The last cords holding us back from flight to God are broken. The last deflections of the will under the impulse of desire cease. Nothing now holds us back from a complete surrender to love. In his *Dark Night* John of the Cross writes:

‘You remain in this condition until your spirit is humbled, softened and purified, until it becomes so delicate, simple and refined that it can be one with the Spirit of God, according to the degree of union of love that God, in his mercy, desires to grant’ (II.7.4).

‘When you see your appetites darkened, your inclinations dry and constrained, your faculties incapacitated for any interior exercise, do not be afflicted; think of this as a grace, since God is freeing you from yourself and taking from you your own activity. However well your actions may have succeeded you did not work so completely, perfectly and securely – owing to their impurity and awkwardness – as you do now that God takes you by the hand and guides you in darkness, as though you were blind, along a way and to a place you know not. You would never have succeeded in reaching this place no matter how good your eyes and your feet’ (II.16,7).

The experience of the Night of the spirit leads to a profound humility. John of the Cross writes:

‘The first and chief benefit that this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one’s own misery. Besides the fact that all the favours God imparts are ordinarily wrapped in this knowledge, the dryness and emptiness of the faculties in relation to the abundance previously experienced and the difficulty encountered in the practice of virtue make us recognise our lowliness and misery, which was not apparent in the time of our prosperity ... Now that we are clothed in the garments of labour, dryness and desolation, and that our former lights have been darkened, we possess more

authentic lights in this most excellent virtue of self-knowledge. We consider ourselves to be nothing and find no satisfaction in self because we are aware that of ourselves we neither do nor can do anything' (*Dark Night*, I.12.2).

We are practiced in learning through our senses. Now we are attentive only to God within.

'As we have never experienced that new feeling which drives us forth and dazzles us and makes us depart recklessly from our former way of life, we think we are losing ground rather than gaining and progressing, since we see that we are losing what we knew and enjoyed. We are now, as it were, undergoing a cure in order that we may regain our health – our health being God ... In such a way does this dark night of contemplation absorb and immerse us in itself, and so near does it bring us to God, that it protects and delivers us from all that is not God' (*Dark Night*, II.16).

What we are experiencing is the triumph of divine Wisdom, for, being transformed, we are united to God in undistracted love, we radiate the divine light to those with faith to discern and so are a powerful instrument in effecting the kingdom of God in the world.

'In the midst of these aridities, God frequently communicates, when we least expect, spiritual sweetness, a very pure love, and a spiritual knowledge which is sometimes most delicate. Each of these communications is more valuable than all that we previously sought. Yet in the beginning we will not think so because the spiritual inflow is very delicate and the senses do not perceive it' (*Dark Night*, I.13.10).

Our faith assures us that the darkness that we are experiencing is the consequence of our being drawn by God into intimate communion in what Teresa calls the Prayer of Union and the Spiritual Betrothal. We are being given an experience of being one with God as a spouse. During the period of betrothal the work of the purifying darkness is completed and there is a special quality to the experience of delight, which at times overwhelms us for we know that perfect union has been promised. Let us listen again to a passage from John of the Cross quoted earlier:

'In that sweet draught of God, wherein we are immersed in God, we wholly surrender ourselves most willingly and with great sweetness to God, desiring to be wholly God's and never again to have anything in ourselves that is alien from God ... Inasmuch as God transforms us into God's Self, God makes us to be wholly God's and empties us of all that we possessed and that was alien from God. Wherefore we are indeed completely given up to God, keeping nothing back, not only according to our will, but also according to what we do, even as God has given God's Self freely to us. So these two wills are surrendered, satisfied and given up the one to the other, so that neither shall fail the other, as in the faithfulness and stability of a betrothal' (*Spiritual Canticle*, 18).

Marie-Eugène writes:

'God has been attracted by the perfume of love arising from good works. God is conquered by our silent and ardent gaze ... The discovery of the Spouse in the light of the spiritual betrothal dispels the darkness and brings us comforting peace' (page 529-530).

Let us conclude by listening to the experience of two saints:

'Oh! I love you. I love you more than anyone else in this valley. It is I who come, and I bring you unknown joy. I will enter into the depths of your being. O my spouse! I have rested and taken my repose in you; now possess yourself and repose in me! Love me! All your life will please me, provided that you love me! I will do great things in you; I will be made known in you, glorified and praised in you' (Angela of Foligno).

'Remain silently in God's presence while you immerse yourself, expand, become enkindled and melt in Him' (Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Heaven in Faith*, page 104).

## **29. The grace of spiritual marriage**

Teresa now attempts to share with us her most intimate experience of communion with God in prayer. It has been a long, courageous journey into her centre, made possible only because it has been, from the beginning, a journey of love. On November 18th 1572, Teresa experienced herself being taken by Christ as his bride. She writes:

‘He appeared to me in an imaginative vision, very interiorly, and he gave me his right hand and said: “Behold the nail. It is a sign that you will be my bride from today on”’ (*Spiritual Testimonies* No. 31).

At last, fully purified, she was able to receive the fullness of the transforming union of love with Christ.

John of the Cross writes of:

‘a mutual surrender by total possession in consummated union of love as far as may be in this life’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 27).

‘The person is dissolved in that transformation wherein, inflamed and changed in love, she was annihilated and undone as to all that which was not love, and left so that she knew nothing except love’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 17).

‘When you rid itself totally of whatever does not conform with the divine will, you are transformed in God through love ... The person who has attained complete conformity and likeness of will is totally united and transformed in God supernaturally ... There can be no perfect transformation unless there is perfect purity. The enlightenment, illumination and union of the person with God is in proportion to the person’s purity’ (*Ascent*, II.5).

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘Spiritual marriage comes finally to seal the union and change the promises into a communication of persons in the transformation of love ... Henceforth, in mutual possession, God and the person rejoice in their reciprocal perfect love’ (page 230).

‘Transforming union designates the degree of charity that brings about the perfect union with God which we call spiritual marriage, through the transformation and likeness of love’ (page 567).

‘The person becomes God by participation’ (page 582).

Therese of Lisieux writes:

‘From that day<sup>9</sup> I have been penetrated and surrounded with love. Every moment this merciful Love renews me and purifies me, leaving in me no trace of sins’ (*Story of a Soul*, 8.133).

Teresa first spoke of contemplative union in the Prayer of Union. There the union was fleeting, incomplete and experienced in darkness, though accompanied by the certainty of having been in contact with God. Later she experienced a deeper union, which she speaks of as spiritual betrothal. In the deepest part of her soul she experienced, as it were, a flame of divine love coming directly from God. In the communion of spiritual betrothal Jesus promised to take her as his bride, and she said Yes. Now, in the grace of spiritual marriage, the promise is realised. Now her whole being is drawn into the centre where God dwells. While she is experiencing this pure state of prayer (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.1), she is wrapped in a complete union of will, a complete

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<sup>9</sup>She is referring to the day on which she composed her Act of Oblation - 9th June, 1895.

and constant communion of love, a compenetration of perfect communion. This union is definitive and unbreakable. Her transformation is complete.

To speak of the union as perfect is not to say that it is static or that the person has arrived at her goal. In the prayer of spiritual marriage she experiences the first light of a new day. The day itself, however, is for eternity and is experienced in the Beatific Vision. With the gift of spiritual marriage she is bathed in light, and it is the light of this new day, now beginning. She has been transformed by love, and there is nothing now but love, a love that is now pure. There is nothing that can hinder her growth. The fire has taken hold. To change the image, the water of life is flowing freely between the heart of Jesus and the heart of his beloved. Nothing now can separate her from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Teresa attempts to find images to describe this love:

‘She always remains with her God in the centre of her being. Let us say that the union is like the joining of two wax candles to such an extent that the flame coming from them is but one, or that the wick, the flame, and the wax are all one. But afterward one candle can be easily separated from the other and there are two candles; the same holds for the wick. In spiritual marriage the union is like what we have when rain falls from the sky into a river. All is water, for the rain that fell from heaven cannot be divided or separated from the water of the river. Or it is like what we have when a little stream enters the sea. There is no means of separating the two. Or, like the bright light entering a room through two different windows. Although the streams of light are separate when entering the room, they become one’ (*Interior Castle*, VII.2.4).

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘The love that brings about transforming union can reach greater degrees of perfection and intensity. When we arrive at transforming union, all our natural tendencies and properties are absorbed by love. We are wholly filled with love according to our capacity. But this capacity can ceaselessly be enlarged. Love can go on progressing in new perfection and intensity. In the furnace of the purified transformed person, love continues to kindle divine fires more and more subtle, until it carries us away as its spouse and its conquest into eternal life’ (page 587).

Because purification is complete, aridity and interior disturbances are rare, and the senses, the memory, the imagination, the intellect and the will are, for the most part, stilled. Even when disturbance is experienced, it cannot penetrate into our centre where we enjoy communion with Christ, the Bridegroom (*Interior Castle*, VII.2.10), nor can it drive us away from this communion. In this state of union, we may experience, like Jesus and with him, a crucifixion, but the peace he gives is a peace that cannot be taken away.

‘The cross is not wanting but it does not disquiet or make us lose peace. For the storms, like a wave, pass quickly, and the fair weather returns, because the Presence of the Lord whom we experience makes us soon forget everything’ (*Interior Castle*, VII.3.15).

‘There are no interior trials or feelings of dryness, but we live, remembering the Lord with tender love’ (*Interior Castle*, VII.3.8).

Teresa has been made aware, without images, and in a more sublime manner than ever before, of the presence of Jesus, of God whom he knows as his Father, and of the Spirit of love that flows between them (*Interior Castle*, VII.1.6). She has been utterly transformed, capable only of love. The love that the Father has for his Son now flows freely and without reserve into the heart of God’s bride, and her response is that of the heart of Jesus himself. The following statements of Saint Paul can now be said without reservation:

‘For me to live is Christ’ (Philippians 1:21).

‘I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.’

(1 Corinthians 2:2)

‘All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

‘For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I count them as refuse that I may gain Christ and be found in him’ (Philippians 3:9).

‘May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God’ (Ephesians 3:17-19).

John of the Cross speaks of the intimate presence of God’s Spirit:

‘We call it the breathing of the air, because it is a most delicate touch and feeling of love which habitually in this estate is caused in a person by the communication of the Holy Spirit. Breathing with God’s divine breath, the Spirit raises the person most sublimely, and informs her, that she may breathe in God the same breath of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 39.3).

‘The flame of love is the Spirit of our Bridegroom, which is the Holy Spirit. We feel the Holy Spirit within ourselves not only as a fire that has consumed and transformed us, but as a fire that burns and flares within us. And that flame, every time it flares up, bathes us in glory and refreshes us with the quality of divine life. Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the person transformed in love’ (*Living Flame*, I.3).

‘We shine brightly with the warmth of love ... It is like the air within the flame, enkindled and transformed in the flame, for the flame is nothing but enkindled air. The movements and radiance of the flame are not from the air alone, nor from the fire of which the flame is composed, but from both the air and the fire. It is the fire that causes the air that it has enkindled to produce the movements and the radiance. We can consequently understand how, with all our faculties, we are illumined within the radiance of God. The movements of these divine flames which are flickering and flaring up are not produced only us who are transformed in the flames of the Holy Spirit, nor does the Holy Spirit produce them alone, but they are the work of both us and the Holy Spirit ... This activity of the flames are inspired in us by the Holy Spirit’ (*Living Flame*, 3.9-10).

‘The operations of the memory and other faculties in this state are divine. God now possesses the faculties as their complete Lord, because of their transformation in God. Consequently, it is God who divinely moves and commands them according to his Spirit and will ... They are divine operations. Since the one who is united with God is one spirit with God, as Saint Paul says [1 Corinthians 6:17], the operations of the person united with God are of the divine Spirit and are divine’ (*Ascent*, III.2.8).

Teresa experienced the union of spiritual marriage in 1572, ten years after opening the first convent of the reform, and while she was prioress of the Convent of the Incarnation. In the ten years after that experience she was constantly travelling and organizing. She founded another seven convents as well as working for the reform of the friars. Her love impelled her to carry out the will of her Beloved and so continue his mission. She wanted only what her Spouse wanted and in her case it was that she strive, with all her energy, to renew the Church by establishing places of prayer all over Spain in which men and women would be open in love to God and so call down the fire of God’s redeeming and saving love on the Church and the world.

She now knew herself as God knows her, and so she could leave care of her soul completely to God, while she attended to God's affairs (*Interior Castle*, VII.3.2). Spiritual marriage made her totally like wax under a seal, completely available for God's will, carried out with all her heart and soul, all her mind and strength. Teresa insists:

'The reason for prayer, the purpose of this spiritual marriage is always the birth of good works' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.6).

'One is much more occupied than before with everything pertaining to the service of God' (*Interior Castle*, VII.1.8).

The way in which this sublime grace of spiritual marriage is granted varies from person to person (*Interior Castle*, VII.2.1). Furthermore, God's design for each person is unique. But for everyone, as for Teresa, this transforming union of love will bind us to Jesus and to his mission, in whatever way he graces us to carry it out. Mindful of the fact that 'the Lord looks not so much at the greatness of what we do, but at the love with which we act' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.15), we are all called to experience a deep longing to serve the One who gave himself for us, even on the cross (*Interior Castle*, VII.3.6).

'The Lord can do nothing greater for us than grant us a life which is an imitation of that lived by the Beloved Son. I feel certain, therefore, that the favours which God grants are given to us to strengthen our weakness so that we may be able to imitate him in his great sufferings' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.4).

'Let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have the strength to serve' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.12).

We are not to 'build castles in the air' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.15), but are to love those given to us by providence (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.14).

'Do you know when people really become spiritual? It is when they become the slaves of God and are branded with God's sign, which is the sign of the Cross, in token that they have given God their freedom. Then God can sell them as slaves to the whole world, as Jesus was sold' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.8).

A fourteenth century Flemish mystic, Ruusbroec, assures us that contemplative prayer unites us to God and so to carrying out God's will in our daily lives. He writes:

'A person who has been sent down by God from the heights of contemplative prayer into the world is full of truth and rich in all the virtues. He sees nothing of his own but only the glory of the one who sent him. He is accordingly righteous and truthful in all things and has a rich and generous foundation which rests on God's own richness. He will therefore always flow forth to those who need him, for the living spring of the Holy Spirit is so rich that it can never be drained dry. Such a person is a living and willing instrument of God with whom God accomplishes what God wishes in the way God wishes. Such a person does not attribute these accomplishments to himself but gives God the glory. He stands ready and willing to do all God commands and is strong and courageous in suffering and enduring all that God sends him. He therefore leads a common life, for he is equally ready for contemplation of for action and is perfect in both' (*The Sparkling Stone*, page 184).

This is consistent with the insistence of Saint Dominic that we are to hand on to others what we have experienced in contemplation ('contemplata tradere'), and with Saint Ignatius Loyola who urged those who joined him as Companions of Jesus to be contemplative in action ('in actione contemplativus').

Our main guides to the deeper mysteries of contemplative prayer have been Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross. Towards the beginning of these reflections we noted that prayer for Teresa is essentially something very simple. She speaks of it as 'an exercise of love' (Life 7.12), 'an

intimate sharing between friends ... taking time frequently to be alone with God who we know loves us' (Life 8.5). 'We are a paradise where the Lord finds his delight' (*Interior Castle* I.1.1). 'In its centre take place very secret exchanges between God and us' (*Interior Castle* I.1.3).

However, such is our propensity for self-deception and the distracted nature of much of life that we can fail to listen to our deepest longings and we can fail to dare the inner journey of prayer. We thank God for the guidance and encouragement of Teresa and John, remembering Teresa's warning: 'As much as I desire to speak clearly about these matters of prayer, they will be really obscure for one who has not had experience' (*Life*, 10.9). These two great teachers of prayer have opened up for us the marvels of their own journey of love and they have warned us of the pitfalls. However, in the words of John Climacus, a seventh century abbot of the monastery on Mount Sinai:

'You cannot learn to see just because someone tells you to do so. For that you require your own natural power of sight. In the same way, you cannot discover from the teaching of others the beauty of prayer. Prayer has its own special teacher in God, who grants the prayer of the person who prays' (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 28).

It is for each of us to listen to the call of love in our own hearts and, in the company of Jesus our brother and friend, to dare the purifying journey into the embrace of God. We conclude with the following advice from the same master of the spiritual life:

'Do not hurry to contemplation at the wrong time. Rather, let it come to you, seeking out the beauty of your lowliness, ready to join you for a long time in a spotless marriage' (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 7).