

20. The Beginnings of Passive Prayer

Throughout this book we have been taking as our guides Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. As we have seen they have much to teach us about the discipline needed in our lives if we are genuine in our desire to pray, as well as about what lies within our power to do in Active Prayer.

We are now ready to reflect upon the main focus of their teaching, which is Passive Prayer or Contemplation. They speak of it as 'passive' because, in the words of John of the Cross, 'pure contemplation lies in receiving' (*Living Flame* 3.36). They speak of it as 'contemplation' because there is nothing for us to do except receive in wonder and submit to the transforming effect of God's gift of union.

Of course, all prayer is a response to God, for it is God who creates us and who holds us in existence. It is God who 'has poured love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (*Romans* 5:5). In active prayer, inspired by God's grace, it is we who are determining our response. In passive prayer, the initiative is entirely with God.

In her *Interior Castle* Teresa begins to speak of passive prayer in the fourth stage of the journey into the interior of the soul where full communion with God is experienced. It is important to emphasise that passing through the seven stages is not like climbing a ladder, when each step gives way to the next. There is progress, but prayer of any kind can happen anywhere along the journey. On the one hand, as Teresa says:

There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it is not necessary to return often to the beginning (Life 13.15).

On the other hand, again in the words of Teresa:

While you are repeating some vocal prayer, it is possible for the Lord to grant you perfect contemplation ... You are enkindled in love without understanding how. You know that you are rejoicing in the one you love, but you do not know how. You are well aware that this is not a joy that you can attain through understanding. You embrace it without understanding how, but you do understand that it is a blessing you are receiving ... This is perfect contemplation ... In contemplation we can do nothing. God does everything. The work is God's alone and far transcends human nature (*Way of Perfection* 25).

The point she is making in her *Interior Castle* is that in the fourth stage of our interior journey passive prayer is experienced, though intermittently, and that it increases as we learn to yield to the attraction of God's love and live more intimately and more habitually in communion with God. This often comes after a long period spent in what Teresa calls the third stage, during which in our active prayer our attention moves more and more away from ourselves to focus on Jesus. This process has been the subject of Parts One and Two of this book.

Passive prayer would seem to be the prayer typical of childhood, for a child can do little except receive. A child must mature, however. We have to learn to own our life and develop our ego. We have to explore creative ways of acting in the world and of relating to the mystery that we call God. We have been exploring some of what this means in Parts One and Two of this book. However, there comes a stage in the development of our communion with God when we are called to let go control and allow God to draw us

beyond active prayer, at least as an habitual practice. We must learn to yield to God's love.

John of the Cross likens prayer to the playing of a musical instrument (see *Spiritual Canticle* 38.4). Inspired by God and enabled by God's grace, in active prayer we are, as it were, practising the art of playing the strings of our heart and mind, learning to ponder the mystery of God and enjoy the harmony of experienced communion. In passive prayer we leave it to God to guide our fingers over the strings.

We have already seen how active prayer can become simpler and more recollected. We noted that, having described the prayer of simple awareness, Teresa goes on to speak of a form of recollection that appears similar, but is in fact significantly different. Her words are worth repeating here:

When God grants this favour it is a great help to seek Him within where He is found more easily and in a way more beneficial to us than when sought in creatures, as Saint Augustine says after having looked for God in many places. Do not think that this recollection is acquired by the intellect striving to think about God within itself. Such efforts are good and an excellent kind of meditation because they are founded on a truth, which is that God is within us. But this is not the Prayer of Recollection because it is something which each of us can do - with the help of God, as should be understood of everything. What I am speaking of comes in a different way. Sometimes, before even beginning to think of God ... one noticeably senses a gentle drawing inward ... This does not come when we want it, but when God wants to grant us this favour (*Interior Castle* IV.3.3).

The direction of our prayer has altered. Earlier we were trimming our sails to tack with the gentle breeze. Now we experience ourselves being drawn to let go and yield to an attraction that draws us and over which we exercise no control.

The recollection experienced here is not the result of our decision to simplify our method of praying. It is not the fruit of our controlling our breathing or practising a mantra. It is an experience that we are powerless to induce. Both Teresa and John warn us not to attempt to manufacture this quiet for ourselves (see *Ascent* II.17.7). There is nothing wrong with practising techniques to quieten ourselves down so long as we don't confuse this with the quiet that is God's gift, the quiet that comes with passive prayer. We refer the reader back to the quotation from *A Carthusian Miscellany* in the chapter on A Silent Heart.

Teresa and John also warn us not to resist yielding to the grace of passive prayer by attempting to cling to accustomed ways of praying. Letting go control of our praying is not always easy, and so it is here that we must learn an important lesson. In passive prayer God is drawing us into a communion that is beyond accustomed thoughts and feelings. Our motivation in praying has not been as pure as we might have imagined. We have been seeking God, but we have also been seeking the pleasure of our thoughts and feelings about God. If we are to be in communion with God we will have to learn to let go these thoughts and feelings, for they are not God. In active prayer we were motivated in part by the desire to think about God, to 'taste' God, to 'feel' God. Now, says John of the Cross:

You must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God. You must live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel God. All these desires disquiet the soul and distract you from the peaceful quiet and sweet idleness of the contemplation which is being communicated to you (*Dark Night* I.10.4).

God alone can bring about the detachment. This is why Teresa speaks of this prayer as 'supernatural'. We can long for it. We can prepare for it. However, only the gift of the Spirit can cause this prayer to well up from within. It is for us to welcome it and allow the letting go. The difficulty that we experience in letting go depends on the level of our attachment. It is because of the difficulties that John of the Cross speaks of the experience of passive prayer as a 'dark night'.

The drying up of our thoughts and feelings is necessary, for they are not capable of transforming union. At first we will wonder whether the drying up is the result of our infidelity – and it may be. We may know deep down that we are being called to give up some addictive behaviour, or to rearrange our priorities, but we are not yet willing to do so. Half consciously we avoid intimacy in our contact with God because we know that if we do experience it we will have to look away or be faced with our unwillingness to change our lives. The easiest way to put off repentance is to put off prayer.

As noted in the chapter on Distractions, dryness in prayer can be a lesson in humility. We may well experience a long waiting that impels us to living a life of more consistent virtue, something that is necessary if we are to be ready for passive prayer. However, if we genuinely want to be in communion with God, and if we genuinely live in a way that is consistent with this desire, and if we find that our 'dryness' in prayer spills over into other areas of our life, such that we cannot readily distract ourselves from our disappointment in other ways, we can be confident that our lack of feeling and lack of 'inspiring' or 'consoling' thoughts is the effect of God's grace. God is beginning to take us beyond the limits of active prayer into a more profound communion. John of the Cross assures us that the very fact that we are turning more and more to God

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).

Hearing this said is one thing. Truly believing it is another, and that is why this transition from active to passive prayer marks what is for many the most difficult stage in our prayer. We are tempted to give up. This is especially true for those of us who have a poor self-image anyhow. We find it hard to believe that dryness could be a grace. We automatically presume that we are at fault, and since, no matter how hard we try we seem to be getting nowhere, we are severely tempted to give up prayer and do something more practical.

The difficulty that we encounter is compounded by the intermittent nature of the gift in the early stages of contemplation. 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. In the words of Father Marie-Eugène, love has not yet reduced reason to folly or completely submitted it 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. Moreover, John of the Cross's advice is that we should continue in active prayer for as long as we can. If it is passive prayer that God is offering us, active prayer

will not be possible for our mind is plunged into darkness precisely so that it will not impede our communion with God.

To the extent that we find it difficult to let go control of our prayer we can find the experience of contemplation quite disturbing. This is especially so when we are not helped to understand the dynamics of what is going on in our prayer. We need a lot of love and understanding at this stage and we need wise counseling. This is where we need the guidance of those like Teresa and John who are offered us by the Church as sure guides along what can be a very dark path.

They assure us that while up to this point we have been finding joy in considering the truths of our faith, God is now drawing us to experience the gaze of the One for whom our hearts long. If we accept the loss of the joys to which we have grown accustomed, and if we abandon ourselves in trust to the action of Jesus' Spirit in our souls, we will be transformed 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. Accompanying this experience of love, there is joy, as well as a sense of belonging, communion, and peace. This is the love for which we are made and for which we long. We are more aware than before of the fact that the silence, the stillness, the welling up of joy or gratitude or sorrow or pleading, is from God. We are also more aware than before of the fact that there is nothing we can do to obtain it.

This awareness is essential for there could be nothing worse than our taking any credit for the communion that God is now giving us. That is spiritual pride, the most dangerous sin and one that would surely lead to God having to hold back the communion that God was wanting to offer us. God knows how harmful spiritual pride is for us and out of mercy God would have to hold back the grace in which we were taking pride. We might well be able to concoct our own form of spiritual silence in order to carry on the self-deception, but it would not be true contemplation. The 'long winters' that we experience at this stage of our prayer journey, long winters in which nothing seems to be happening, help preserve us from spiritual pride for we know from hard experience that contemplation is a gift from God. There really is nothing we can do to acquire it, apart, as has already been stressed, from preparing our souls for it. We can clear away the undergrowth and we can dig the well, but we cannot create the spring.

We need to listen to Jesus as he tells us that we will find our selves only when we learn to 'lose' our selves (Matthew 16:25), and that we must become like little children 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 this more profound communion.

If we are willing to remain open to these graced moments when God draws us into divine communion 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 the soul finds itself wrapped in quiet prayer. John of the Cross assures us that the surest sign that this prayer is from God:

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).

Teresa calls this the 'Prayer of Quiet'. When we were in control of our prayer we worked for such quiet, now the quiet wells up from the mysterious depths of the soul. We are drawn into an experience of prayer from within.

Earlier we found ways to quieten 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'(*The Interior Castle* IV.2.6). It is this 'looking as though in wonder' that explains the word 'contemplation'. Now, the only water that is refreshing the garden of the soul 'comes from its own source, which is God'(*The Interior Castle* IV.2.4; see IV.2.3). From the centre of our soul, the fire of God's love radiates out and 'the warmth and the fragrant perfumes spread through the entire soul'(*The Interior Castle* IV.2.6).

This touch of God leaves us dissatisfied with any other pleasure. In those moments when God gives us the gift of contemplation we cannot use our imagination or meditate in the ways we used to, nor do we want to. We long only for the communion experienced in the silence and stillness granted us by God. God is purifying our imagination, memory and understanding in ways that we simply could not do in the earlier stages of active prayer however zealous we might have been. God is transforming our souls 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 which 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 by the all-consuming fire of God's love.

As noted in an earlier chapter, communion with God requires a heart that is willing to be detached from all that is not God. We must work at this detachment, but there are limits to what we can do however courageously we respond to grace. Only God's love can detach us and only the communion offered us in passive prayer can bring about the radical detachment needed for transforming union. The letting go that is an essential element in passive prayer is God's way of delivering us from attachments to *our* desires, *our* feelings, *our* thoughts, *our* growth in grace, *our* selves.

It needs to be repeated that this letting go of our ego can be painful. We need to know what to do in this crucial stage of our inner journey when we find ourselves drawn into passive prayer. Let us listen to John of the Cross as he speaks of a mistake that is commonly made by those who are being drawn from active to passive prayer:

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 aridity, fatigue and restlessness of soul. This aridity 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 pacifying the soul, by leaving it to its more spiritual quiet and repose (*Ascent* II.12:6; compare *Night* I.10.4 and *Living Flame* 3.32).

The key is to keep our heart awake, alert, attentive, and directed towards God. Longing for communion, we are to yield to the gentle drawing of grace when it is offered, and when it is not we are to take up again the active prayer to which we are accustomed.

In passive prayer our attention is not on insights received, important though these are. Nor is our attention on any accompanying psycho-somatic phenomena that we may experience, however impressive these might be. Our attention is to be on God who brings about the transforming union effected by love. In contemplation we are purified, illumined and united to God in love. We are being transformed into love by the all-consuming love that is God, like a log being transformed into flame by an all-consuming fire. In contemplation God communicates a secret wisdom that God infuses into the soul through love. Supernatural contemplation is sustained above all by peaceful surrender and humility. In the words of Teresa:

The important thing is not to think much, but to love much ... Love does not consist in great delight, but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything (Interior Castle 4.1.7).

In offering us the sublime gift of transforming union, 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 very self to us. We should not be surprised that whatever is not God loses its appeal. This includes our own pious thoughts about God, the images of God that have helped us at an earlier stage, and the feelings that warmed our heart when we thought of God's love. These are all good, and they have assisted us as we were drawn to God, but they are not God. 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 in control.

We should be wary of setting strict guidelines for what to do when God grants us the gift of contemplation. God is directing us now, and God's light is lighting our way, however faintly and intermittently. Furthermore, people differ greatly. We should offer ourselves in peaceful and silent surrender to God. Saint Teresa writes:

Abandon yourself into the arms of love, and His Majesty 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 (*The Interior Castle* IV.3.8).

The Spirit that moves us in prayer is the Spirit that Jesus shares with his Father. Through this gift we are being drawn to share Jesus' own prayer-communion with God. This communion always comes as a surprise and as a gift of love. We experience it when we yield to the divine attraction drawing us into God. We can long for this communion with God, and we can prepare for it, but there is nothing we can do to bring it about. Only the gift of the Spirit can cause to well up within us the spring of living water promised by Jesus. When the water is flowing, all striving ceases, words are no longer relevant, and we find ourselves caught up in the silent wonder of communion. Like a drop of water we are being drawn into the ocean of God's love and are being absorbed into it.