

## **Saint Teresa and the Vocation to a Life of Prayer**

Prayer is at the heart of the Carmelite vocation. When people think of Carmel, the very first thing that comes to their minds is an Order that is devoted to prayer and penance for the good of the Church.

Prayer is fundamental and essential to the vocation of Carmel because we have been so taught by Saint Teresa who was, in the words of Pope Paul VI, “the reformer and foundress of an historical and eminent religious order, a prolific writer of great genius, a teacher of the spiritual life, and an incomparable contemplative who was tirelessly active.”

When Pope Paul VI conferred or rather, as he himself said, “acknowledged St. Teresa of Jesus' title of Doctor of the Church,” he spelled out in clear words the secret of her greatness as a saint and as a teacher. I think the words of the great Pontiff on the occasion of her being declared a Doctor of the Universal Church are so important that I would like to repeat them fully. In this way you will be able to see the role she enjoys as a teacher of the ways of prayer. These are the Pope’s words:

Teresa’s doctrine speaks of these secrets, which are the secrets of prayer. This is her doctrine. She had the privilege and merit of knowing these secrets through experience. That experience was lived in the holiness of a life consecrated to contemplation and simultaneously committed to action. It was an experience that was suffered and at the same time enjoyed, in the pouring out of unusual spiritual charisms.

Teresa possessed the art of expounding these same secrets, to such a degree as to place her among the great spiritual teachers. It is not in vain that the saint’s statue, which is here in this basilica because she was a foundress, bears an inscription that describes her very well: *Mater Spiritualium*.

St. Teresa’s prerogative of being a mother, a teacher of spiritual persons, had already been acknowledged—we might say by unanimous accord. She was a mother who was full of entrancing simplicity, a teacher who was full of marvelous depths.

The tribute of the tradition of the saints, of theologians, of the faithful and the learned, was already assured her. Now We have confirmed it. We have taken care to see that, having been adorned with this magisterial title, she may have a more authoritative mission to perform in her religious family, in the praying

Church and in the world, through her perennial, ever-present message--the message of prayer.

This is the light which is today rendered more lively and penetrating, and is reflected over us by the title of Doctor just now conferred on St. Teresa--the message of prayer! It comes to us children of the Church at a time marked by a great effort at reform and renewal of liturgical prayer. It comes to us who are tempted by the great noise and great business of the outside world to yield to the frenzy of modern life and to lose the real treasures of our souls in the effort to win earth's seductive treasures.

It comes to us children of our time just when we are losing not only the habit of conversation with God, but also the sense of the need and duty to worship and call on Him. The message of prayer comes to us as song and music of the spirit, which is imbued with grace and open to the conversation of faith, hope, and charity. At the same time, psychoanalytical exploration is breaking down that frail and complicated instrument that we are, in such a way that all that can be heard is not the sound of mankind in its suffering and its redemption, but rather the troubled mutterings of man's animal subconscious, the cries of his disordered passions and of his desperate anguish.

The wise Teresa's sublime and simple message of prayer exhorts us to understand "the great good which God does to a soul when He disposes it to practice mental prayer with desire ... because in my opinion mental prayer is nothing else but a friendly way of dealing, in which we often find ourselves talking, in private, with Him who we know loves us" (*Life*, 8, 4-5). This is, in summary, the message to us from St. Teresa of Jesus, Doctor of the Church. Let us listen to it and make it our own.

**Problem Today** - People do not pray as much as they used to, said Pope Paul VI, and they have more problems in this area of life. In fact, many people now claim that they do not need to pray that much, for they are united with Christ and hence all that they do is done prayerfully. What better thing can one do than to be charitable to one's neighbor? Hence if we live to help others and to do good for them, we do not need to engage in formal prayer. That in itself is prayer and the fulfillment of the demands of the Gospel.

I have to admit that this is a strong argument. But I wonder what Saint Teresa would make of all this? What would she say? In reading her works I know exactly what she would say to all of this. She would say that she strongly disagrees with this line of thinking, that it is just the opposite of her own personal experience.

She would especially disagree because for her prayer was a way of seeking Christ, of growing in friendship with Christ and of keeping Him company. Obviously, she would agree on the importance of doing good to others, and of living the precept of charity toward our neighbor as we have been taught. But Teresa, from her own experience, would insist that prayer is a direct way of seeking Christ, of cultivating our friendship with Him and of developing our companionship with Him.

Teresa spent much time in prayer and was aware that prayer had brought her to a state that she was more directly aware of Christ, of what He had suffered for her and of His love for her. She knew that we were made for interpersonal communion with God, we were made, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, to be aware of His love for us, and we are summoned to reciprocate His love. For Teresa, “prayer is nothing more than a friendly conversation with the God by whom we know we are loved” [Life, 8,4-5]. The love of God comes first, and before all else we must respond to His love and take our delight and express our gratitude to Him for this love. Then, we must reach out to our neighbor. But if we do not find God first, we will not and cannot find God in our neighbor.

**Companionship With Christ** - The secret of Teresa in teaching us about prayer is that she is able to lead us to create the right kind of atmosphere for ourselves so that we can truly pray. Teresa reminds us that as we seek to be alone to pray properly, that we need Someone to be with us. What better companion than Christ who taught us how to pray the “Our Father”? She says that if we look to Him, consider how much He loves us and that He taught us the Our Father, we are bound to succeed in prayer. If you can stay close to Christ, strive to develop a companionship with Him in prayer, you will be all right. Teresa would have us meditate on the various scenes of the Gospel, for she found that what is in the Gospel is more precious than anything else that has ever been written. She also knew that in meditating on the Gospel, the truths contained therein will carry over into life. When I begin to image for myself the scenes of the Gospel, scenes that tell me of the divine love, they will affect and change my life, bringing into it a divine way of thinking and of acting.

And that brings me to the point that Teresa loved to stress. The purpose of prayer, for Teresa “is not to think much, but to love much.” It is love that changes us! It changes us from our ordinary way of thinking and loving, and makes us appreciate more the love that God has for us. It also makes us want to reciprocate God’s love.

For example, when I meditate on the scene in Matthew’s Gospel of Christ walking on the water toward Saint Peter in order to calm his fears and doubts, I am reflecting on a powerful scene. I can easily see myself in this picture, and I can see that often I am filled with spiritual fears and doubts. Furthermore, I can see myself, like Peter, in need of the presence of the Lord and of His personal love for me. Another point: I can see that often it has happened in my life that when I take my eyes off Christ and just feel sorry for myself and consider my own misery, I

begin to sink beneath the waves, I just get deeper into my own misery. But what a difference when I keep my eyes fixed on Christ, when I look to Him for my salvation. Then I know that Christ is the most wonderful friend in my life, then I see that with Him I can do all things and that, without Him, I can do nothing but sink back into my own powerlessness.

**Scenes That Teresa Liked** - Most willingly does Teresa share her experiences with us. And when speaking of prayer, she tells us that the scenes of the Gospel that she liked most to meditate upon are the scenes where Christ is alone and in need of human companionship. Examples of this are the times when the Lord prayed alone in the garden and when he was scourged at the pillar. Then Teresa could see that Jesus wanted our companionship and she knew that the Lord would welcome her and never desire to send her away. These are good scenes for all of us to remember and to meditate upon.

**Prayer and the Virtues** - The purpose of prayer, in the mind of Teresa, is not just to bring about nice and consoling feelings. Prayer, according to her experience and way of thinking, must do more --it must bring about the practice of the virtues in our lives.

When I meditate on the Gospel and consider the ways that I have offended the Lord, the result should be that I resolve to practice the virtues that will be pleasing to my dearest friend, Christ. I may see that I have not been nearly grateful enough for all that the Lord has done for me, and hence I must practice gratitude more and more. Or it may be that I am aware of the love that Christ has for me and for all mankind, and now I see that I must love my neighbor as Christ has loved me and as Christ has commanded me to love all others.

**Just Look at Him** - One of the favorite expressions of Teresa in the context of prayer is to remind us that if we do not know what to say to Our Lord in prayer, all we have to do is "to look at Him." It reminds us of the Psalms when we ask God to gaze upon us, or let His divine countenance shine upon us. And we are asking that we can gaze upon the face of the Lord for all eternity. It is love that will make us gaze upon the Lord. What does it mean to gaze upon His face? Gazing means to look with eagerness and studious attention; it implies fixed and wondrous attention, almost meaning that we are so enthralled that our mouths are left wide open with amazement. The wondrous attention that we feel is a sign that we are gazing lovingly upon the face of Christ and upon the scenes of the Gospel.' I think this is just what Teresa is saying to us about prayer.

**His Loving Eyes Are Upon Us** - Again and again, Teresa comes back to this ideal that the loving eyes of Christ are always upon us. Because of this, Teresa has much peace and joy, and feels confident and courageous. The loving eyes of her Lord give her more life, more joy, and make

life fully alive and beautiful. In prayer, Teresa merely wants to respond to the loving gaze of Jesus and allow His love to fill her with new levels and depths of love.

The greatest thing in the world is not to be able to love God, but to know that we are loved by Him. This is the miracle, the thrill of it all. "God so loved us that He sent His only Son for our salvation." And the Son so loved us that He willingly laid down His life for us and with the Father sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in our souls. Truly, in this way, the loving gaze of the Lord is upon us.

**How to Meditate on the Love of Christ** - In the *Way of Perfection*, Teresa several times tells us what mental prayer is all about. For her it means to think of how much God loves you, how little you deserve this love, but how much He suffered for you. When you think in this way of the person of Christ, then you are surely engaging in mental prayer. Let these thoughts melt and break your heart, she often tells us.

Remember that for Teresa, prayer does not consist in thinking much, reflecting much, but it consists in loving much. When these thoughts about His love for you, your unworthiness, and the many things He suffered for you, when these reflections lead you to love the Lord more, when they make you want to serve Him more and sacrifice yourself for Him, then you are praying in the sense that Teresa is describing.

I must always keep in mind that ideas are cheap. It is not difficult to think out new and deep ideas. Anyone can do that. But love is different, then I must commit myself, then I must be prepared to lay down my life for the Lord if the occasion were to present itself.

**The Power of Prayer** - Since you are only aspiring at this point to enter the secular Order of Carmel, you are asking yourselves, no doubt, what is the reason that Teresa insisted so much on prayer? You are also asking yourselves, how can prayer save the world? How can it make it better?

These are good questions. And Teresa would remind us that there is only so much we can do in this world. We cannot enter every cause, even if we wanted to. But all we need to do is to look at the Lord praying for Saint Peter, and praying also for all of His apostles. And we can see that if our prayer life is united with Christ, if it is suffused with His love, that it has the power to change the world. It is a very quiet apostolate, it does not make much noise, but we know that it is love that changes the world. And one of the ways of growing most rapidly in love is through the practice of prayer. In prayer we are one with Christ, we are filled with love. We put aside our egotism and selfishness and let ourselves be filled and guided by the love of the Lord. In union with Him, all prayer is valid and is heard. In fact it is heard because we are one with the Lord. Hence Popes have called the contemplative life, the life that seeks to enter more directly into the love of God, "the most universal and fruitful of all apostolates in the Church." There is no surer way to the heart of God, and there is no more efficacious way of helping the Church and others.

**Prayer Is Friendship With Christ** - In the *Life*, Saint Teresa gave us a classic definition of prayer. She says that “prayer is nothing more or less than a friendly encounter with a God by whom we know we are loved” [*Life*, 8, 4-5]. But why does Teresa define prayer in this way and then never again give this definition? This is in the part of the *Life* in which Teresa is lamenting the time in her life when she gave up mental prayer. And then from her own experience, she exhorts her readers never to make such a mistake. She encourages us to pray regularly each day because prayer is taking Christ to be our Friend. And that is absolutely true. If you pray each day, you will be striving to make Christ your best friend, to allow His friendship to enrich your whole life.

But Teresa stresses that the essence of friendship is to make sure that our will is one with that of Christ. Bringing our wills into conformity with the will of Christ is the very essence of friendship. Once again, she assures us that prayer is not a practice to make us feel good, to give us spiritual comfort and consolation. But prayer is designed to make us draw closer to Christ, to bring our wills into conformity with His divine will.

**Mary and Prayer** - When Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint John of the Cross begin to think of the perfect model of prayer, of whom do they think? The Blessed Virgin Mary, the perfect Christian and the perfect follower of Christ. When you strive to grow in prayer, she is the one to whom you must always look to follow the perfect model.

Carmelites have always done this. Hence in the *OCDS Constitutions*, 29, we read:

In the interior dynamism of following Jesus, Carmel contemplates Mary as Mother and Sister, as “the perfect model of the disciple of the Lord” and, as such, a model for the life of the members of the Order. The Virgin of the Magnificat proclaims the break with the old order and announces the beginning of a new order in which God casts the mighty down from their thrones and exalts the poor. Mary places herself on the side of the poor and proclaims how God acts in history. For Secular Carmelites, Mary is a model of total commitment to God’s Kingdom. She teaches us to listen to God’s Word in Scripture and in life, to believe in it in every circumstance in order to live its demands. All this she did, without understanding many things; pondering all in her heart (Lk 2:19, 50-51) until light dawned through contemplative prayer.

Taking Mary as our perfect model we are bound to succeed in our efforts to draw closer to Christ in prayer.

**Never Give Up Prayer** - If there is one point in the Teresa’s life that we can all identify with it is the period of her young adult life when she was confused about prayer. She had learned the

secret of success in prayer, but after some time she felt she had too many faults and then she concluded that she ought not be a hypocrite any longer. So she gave up prayer for a while, until, by the grace of God, her confessor convinced her to take up this practice so necessary for the Christian life.

Teresa tells us that this was the worst mistake she ever made. She acknowledges that whenever she was faithful to prayer, all went well. Even if she did wrong, she quickly repented and began to make progress again. But the more she allowed herself to be deceived into giving up prayer, the more her spiritual life deteriorated. This is the great lesson that so many have to learn from Teresa. What would she tell you? What advice would she give you? She would say to you: “No matter what, never give up prayer. Keep on praying and you will soon come to the port of salvation.”

Teresa’s definition of prayer is classic in the annals of Christianity. Teresa tells us that “in my opinion, prayer is nothing more or less than a friendly conversation with the God by whom we know we are loved.” Whenever you are doing this, you are praying.

It is interesting that Teresa gave us this definition in the *Life* in a special context and for a special reason. Teresa gives us this special definition at the point in her life when she was returning to prayer and encouraging all others to do the same. She exhorts us to return to prayer if we have ever abandoned the practice. And her reason is clear, prayer is “taking Christ to be our friend.”

Giving up prayer, for her, is like giving up on making an effort to deepen our friendship and companionship with Christ. But above all, in her definition, she stresses that He first loved us, and that in prayer we are fundamentally responding to His love, trying to allow our hearts to be enflamed with His love.

I often think that by the experience of Teresa, I am always able to see clearly the importance of prayer. I try to identify with her, and I can see in my own life (as I am sure you can see in your life) that when I am faithful to prayer, all goes well. As usual, Teresa is right. “The chief mischief,” she goes on to say, “consists in taking our eyes off of Christ.” In prayer we show that we appreciate the eyes of Christ that express His love for us, and we in turn keep our eyes fixed on the one who loves us. We try to bring our hearts and minds into harmony with Him, and this is the very essence of friendship with Christ.

It doesn’t take much imagination to be convinced that this world could be a better world, and that many of its problems could be greatly reduced if we all did one thing--if we were faithful to prayer, if in the words of Teresa, “we took Christ to be our friend”. Soon the world would be filled with more peace and love and joy. May Teresa obtain for us the grace to be faithful to this practice.

Michael D. Griffin OCD

***Discussion points for St. Teresa and the Vocation to a Life of Prayer:***

*What is St. Teresa's message?*

*Why did Pope Paul VI think this is especially valuable during our time?*

*What is Teresa's famous definition of mental prayer? How have you experienced this in your own prayer life?*

*What is the proper atmosphere for prayer? Why does this help? Why does reading the Gospel aid meditation?*

*What does Teresa mean when she says "The purpose of prayer is not to think much, but to love much?"*

*What were Teresa's favorite scenes to meditate on?*

*Why did Teresa insist on prayer? What place do Mary and Joseph have in Carmel?*

*What does Teresa teach us about giving up prayer?*