

St. Teresa Helps Beginners In Prayer - by Sr. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

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ST. TERESA HELPS BEGINNERS IN PRAYER

Many Christian mystics have written of the highest states of prayer, and among these is St. Teresa of Avila. But few of those favored with advanced mystical graces have devoted so many pages to the earliest stages. Teresa, the great Carmelite teacher of contemplation, not only describes in detail these first steps of the prayer journey, but even shows us how to arouse others to want to pray. *The Way of Perfection*, a book of instruction she addressed to her own nuns, was in her opinion useful for anyone. In it, she says, "Regarding all the persons who speak with you, if they are disposed and there is some friendship, try to remove any fear they may have of beginning to engage in so great a good (as praying)" (20:3).

How we start out determines the direction we take. "Now that you might so walk along this path of prayer that you do not go astray at the beginning, let us deal a little with how this journey must begin: for the beginning is the more important part - indeed it is the most important part for everything" (*Way* 20:3). If we are confused about where we are going, we will find ourselves using time and energy without making progress. "It is very important for you to know that you are on the right road" (*Way* 22:3).

For Teresa, the right road always means walking in the footsteps of Jesus. He is there as guide at the outset, all along the way, and at the highest peak of contemplative experience. Without Christ, prayer can wander off into a wasteland.

The mysteries of Jesus' life give her the focus she needs. "This is the method I used: since I could not reflect discursively with the intellect, I strove to picture Christ within me, and it did me greater good in my opinion, to picture Him in those scenes where I saw Him more alone. It seemed to me that being alone and afflicted, as a person in need, He had to accept me. I had many simple thoughts like these" (*The Book of Her Life*, 9:4).

Teresa's picturing of Jesus within herself, however, was not by imagining him clearly and vividly. "My imagination was not of use to me, as it is to other persons who can imagine things and thus recollect themselves. I could only think about Christ as He was as man. I could never form any picture of Him myself no matter how much I read about His beauty or how many images I saw of Him." She makes it clear that her sense of Christ being with her was generalized and indistinct. She realized He was present to her, but not as if she could see Him clearly. "I was like one who is blind and in darkness, speaking with a person and realizing that person is with her, because she knows with certainty who is there Such was the case with me when I thought of our Lord" (*Life* 9:6).

Teresa puts herself among those who cannot pray by composing beautiful thoughts or by depicting a real-life mental representation of their Lord. "A book can be a help for recollecting oneself quickly. It helped me also to look at fields or water or flowers. In these things, I found a remembrance of the CreatorThey awakened and recollected me As for heavenly or sublime things, my intellect was so stupid that I could never, never imagine them..." (*Life*, 9:5).

Teresa tells us that "keeping Christ present is what we of ourselves can do" (*Life* , 12:4). She urges us to "speak with Him, asking for our needs, complaining of our labors, being glad with Him in our enjoyments and not forgetting Him because of them, trying to speak to Him, not through written prayers but with words that express our desires and needs" (*Life* , 12:2).

If what we want to say seems to dry up, we can repeat very slowly a line from the Gospels or just a phrase that has special meaning. This repetition is for the sake of gently holding our attention when a swirl of distractions tries to pull us away from God. Whatever effort we make must be done with moderation, never with violence. We can't whip ourselves into a forced attentiveness nor make a direct frontal attack on distractions. Everything Teresa suggests to assist us is temperate and calming. "Just the raising of our eyes in remembrance of Him (Jesus) will have its reward" (*Way* , 23:3).

Teresa's advice is always down-to-earth and proportioned to our limited capabilities. It points to a middle ground between extremes where we gradually learn to rely on our own judgment to make a sensible choice. "Experience is a great help in all, for it teaches what is suitable for us; and God can be served in everythingIt is very helpful not to drag the soul along, but to lead it gently for the sake of its greater advantage" (*Life*, 11:16).

"Gently" is a key word in her instruction on praying. We move at a pace proportioned to the grace imparted to us by the Holy Spirit. **"Follow the way of love even as Christ loved you"** (Eph 5:1).

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