

11. FIFTH MANSION – (ii)

(From Silkworm to Butterfly)

Teresa experiences a kind of uncertainty and fear as she tries to explain the status of the soul in the Fifth Mansion, for as she confesses that there is no way by which we can understand or speak about them; I mean the deep divine experiences in the depths of the soul. In fact that soul becomes virtually the dwelling places of union, a term bland enough for us, but for a mystic like Teresa, one abounding with meaning and mystery, pointing like a sacrament to the culmination of the love God has for human beings. She hesitates, wondering if it would be better to say nothing more. Nonetheless, with the thought that most of her nuns enter these dwelling places, although there are various degrees, she turns to God for the light needed to go on describing this journey to the center of the castle. She is very keen on helping her sisters to scale through the heights of contemplative experience with God that invites them to participate.

The Prayer of Union

The Fifth Mansion deals with the prayer of union with a beautiful comparison of the processing of the silkworm from its initial stage of being a worm to forming a butterfly. Teresa had recently returned to Castile from Andalusia, where she had learned of the marvelous way in which silk was produced. In her monasteries they didn't have mulberry trees or silkworms, but they probably saw baskets of cocoons, or worked at spinning the silk, or above all heard accounts of how the silkworm is transformed into a little white moth. These accounts stirred Teresa's amazement at the wonders of God's creation. The silkworm moth is the source of the silk. The female lays between 300 and 500 eggs. The natural food of the silkworm is mulberry leaves. Within a 45 day growing period, it attains a maximum length of about three inches. Pupation occurs within a cocoon of continuous white or yellow silken thread, averaging 1,000 yards. The thread

is then preserved intact for commercial use. “When warm weather comes and the leaves begin to appear on the mulberry tree, the seeds start to live, for they are dead until then. The worms nourish themselves on mulberry leaves until, having grown to full size, they settle on some twigs. There, with their little mouths, they themselves go about spinning the silk and making some very thick little cocoons in which they enclose themselves.” (IC V,2,ii). The silkworm which is fat and ugly, then dies, and a little white butterfly, which is very pretty, comes forth from the cocoon (IC V,2,ii).

Growing to be Beautiful

Teresa found in the account of how silk came about a wonderful example for explaining the mysterious work of union with God. The Christian, like the silkworm, must first grow through the ordinary remedies used in the struggle against sin: the sacraments, reading good books, and prayer. When it is grown, it begins to spin the silk by dying to self and its attachments to earthly things and by performing good works. The cocoon, fashioned in this way with the divine help, is Christ, in whom one's life is hidden (Col. 3:3). “This silkworm, then, starts to live when by the heat of the Holy Spirit it begins to benefit through the general help given to us all by God and through the remedies left by him to his Church, by going to confession, reading good books, and hearing sermons, which are the remedies that a soul, dead in its carelessness and sins and placed in the midst of occasions, can make use of” (IC V,2,iii).

In the prayer of union, the soul is placed gratuitously by God in this cocoon. During the time of this prayer, the soul is so united with Christ that it is dead to the world, and through this dying is gradually transformed, as is the silkworm into a little moth. In the end, then, it is not the human being who brings about this transformation, but God, who gives himself out of love.

The Cocoon

Teresa compares the cocoon to the house of Christ; which is the place of God, precisely for the nuns it would be the Cloistered Carmelite convent. “I would like to point out here that this house is Christ. Somewhere, it seems to me, I have read or heard that our life is hidden in Christ or in God (both are the same), or that our life is Christ.” (IC V,2,iv).

She continues to encourage her sisters to get to work in disciplining themselves so that the spinning of the cocoon is complete: “Let's be quick to do this work and weave this little cocoon by getting rid of our self-love and self-will, our attachments to any earthly things, and by performing deeds of penance, prayer, mortification, obedience, and of all the other things you know.” (IC V,2,vi).

Restless Little Butterfly

Our life is a constant process of transformation that takes place by our efforts and through the grace of God. Teresa recognises fully the process as taking place in the soul that is committed to work and worship through prayer. “When the soul is, in this prayer, truly dead to the world, a little white butterfly comes forth. Oh, greatness of God! How transformed the soul is when it comes out of this prayer after having been placed within the greatness of God and so closely joined with him for a little while – in my opinion the union never lasts for as much as a half hour.” (IC V,2,vii).

Our prayer and experience of God is never a target for self-fulfilment rather it is a gift for the community. The restlessness which is found in a soul that is united to God is an unquenchable thirst to serve community. This is an experience of a butterfly that goes from flower to flower enjoying the good things of life; meaning to say that the butterfly is engaged in the works of God going from person to person rendering its valuable services. “Oh, now, to see the restlessness of this little butterfly, even though it has never been quieter and calmer in its life, is something to

praise God for! And the difficulty is that it doesn't know where to alight and rest. Since it has experienced such wonderful rest, all that it sees on earth displeases it, especially if God gives it this wine often. Almost each time it gains new treasures” (IC V,2,viii).

Practical Conclusion

Spiritual disciplines can feel like wasting time. Renunciations can feel like wasting life. But when done with humility instead of religious ambition, they will be united with His greatness and He will be our reward. I encourage you to eat the “mulberry leaves” and “spin your cocoon”. The threads from your cocoon will be made into something beautiful and you’ll find great freedom — in fact, you’ll be able to fly.

A contemplative experience that is shared by people who regularly engage in prayer can help to transform their environment. Not a few people find that if they pray with the gospels, pondering, meditating, contemplating, reflecting on gospel scenes and passages over a lengthy period of time, noticeable changes begin to take place in them. These changes include new insights, new ways of understanding Jesus, God, themselves, the world and other people. But changes also occur which affect their deep personal values and attitudes and their patterns of behaviour. Experiences such as these may start in a retreat, for example, or some other setting in which one is engaging more attentively than usual with the gospels. And if the practice of meditation or contemplation continues in daily life, the changes are likely to be far-reaching: old values are lost and new ones found; aims and ambitions that once were very important now give way to different ones; new commitments replace old ones while former attractions and preoccupations seem slight in the face of this new engagement. Usually the process is a gradual one.

We must break out of the individual and conscious bind in which spirituality has been caught. All personal prayer and discipline should feed into genuine community worship where we can lay aside our ego-awareness and our self-consciousness into a liturgical act in which the community acts and we as persons are carried by the community. This community, however, cannot be limited to the local community. Symbols and words should make the community aware of its unity with the Church of all ages and all places, of all cultures and all times, of all rites and of all jurisdictions, both those now living and those who have gone beyond the curtain of this world's visible scene. The local Christian Church has to transcend its parochialism, not only by conscious education, but also through eloquent symbols and liturgical memorials. There has to be a wide stretching of the 'we-awareness of Christians'. Our prayer and discipline must hold a purpose and goal as St. Paul describes: "so, then, I run knowing where I go. I box but not aimlessly in the air. I punish my body and control it, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be rejected" (I Cor 9.26).

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