

20. PATH TO COMMUNION

Historical data supports that a praying church has been a spirit-filled and consistently growing church. An example of such a church is found in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 2.: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2.42). The people that this verse is talking about were the new converts; those that added were three thousand. Through prayer the apostles asked for the entire house of Israel to know that God has made Jesus Christ Lord and Messiah, and because of this truth and conviction three thousand converts were added to the group of apostles. The new converts did not pray for a few minutes a day, they devoted themselves to prayer and to being taught by the apostles. They loved one another and devoted their life to charity. Their life and prayer was a wonderful blend of experience. Why churches in the postmodern era are not growing in members? The truth is because they simply are not asking God for it: "You do not have, because you do not ask (James 4.2)." The church is not growing because it is neglecting the holy communion with the Lord.

The Real Path

The best way to pray and continue to be in communion with God is always to look at Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life: "For if they lose the guide, who is the good Jesus, they will not hit upon the right road. It will be quite an accomplishment if they remain safely in the other dwelling places. The Lord himself says that he is the way; the Lord says also that he is the light and that no one can go to the Father but through him, and "anyone who says, I don't know about those other meanings; I have gotten along very well with this one that my soul always feels to be true" (IC VI,7,vi).

Teresa will never intend to lead her disciples in a way that is incomprehensible. She leads them through stages but always focusing her prayerful attention of Christ and his life. That is why she encourages her sisters to take Christ as the model who will always inspire them to newer heights of experience with God: “It is true that anyone whom the Lord places in the seventh dwelling place rarely, or hardly ever, needs to make this effort. (I will give the reason for this fact when speaking of that dwelling place, if I remember.) But such a person walks continually in an admirable way with Christ, our Lord, in whom the divine and the human are joined and who is always that person's companion” (IC VI,7,ix). As we gather momentum towards the summit of contemplation and union with God in the Sixth Mansion, we find very clear indication that there is only and the safest way to reach this summit is Jesus Christ and his teaching.

The Core Essence of Mysticism

Living with God for us Christians is to always live the life of Christ through all the mysteries of his life: passion, death and resurrection. No one can say that the Paschal mysteries are irrelevant because one is able to experience God everywhere and always. This would amount to undermining the very essence of mysticism as it is rooted in Christ and it can be experienced only through the grace of Christ. Well, when we learn from Teresa the art of mystical growth here is what she says: “But I say that a person will not be right if he says he does not dwell on these mysteries or often have them in mind, especially when the Catholic Church celebrates them. Nor is it possible for the soul to forget that it has received so much from God, so many precious signs of love, for these are living sparks that will enkindle it more in its love for our Lord. But I say this person doesn't understand himself, because the soul understands these mysteries in a more perfect manner” (IC VI,7,xi).

Encounter God in Daily Life

Here is a paradox that we all must keep in mind in this process of union with God. As we progress towards the inner cell of the IC, we must not think that a person will be so absorbed in the things of God that he/she will completely forget the world. That is not the goal of what Teresa suggests. There is always scope for charity, service, love and community life if we are going to experience God in the inner cell of our soul. As St. John of the Cross explains beautifully in the *Living Flame of Love* that the soul ascends and descends the ladder of love frequently while progressing on the path of interior life. Teresa affirms: “Moreover, daughters, enjoyment in prayer is not so habitual that there is not time for everything. I would be suspicious of anyone who says this delight is continual — I mean, who can never do what was mentioned. And you should be suspicious too, and strive to free yourselves from this error and avoid such absorption with all your strength. If your efforts aren't enough, tell the prioress so that she might give you some task demanding such care that this danger is removed. For if this absorption continues, it is extremely dangerous at least for the brain and the head.” (IC VI,7,xiii). Any kind of prayer that leads one to just be quiet and do nothing but pray is dangerous. Teresa would always require her sisters to engage in daily activities and find God's presence in each and every bit of their experience. This is the core of mysticism that can really liberate human life and extend its effects marvelously in the world.

Practical Conclusion

She thinks extended absorption in prayer is dangerous for the brain and the head, and should be avoided. If one's own efforts aren't enough to resist this temptation to remain in absorption, then she recommends getting help from another, and perhaps taking on tasks that require full attention.

It is always necessary to keep in mind that God directs our life in accordance with our whole hearted co-operation with His grace. Prayer is not always getting absorbed in contemplation which might happen in our life, but what we need to understand is prayer helps us in our daily life experience to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. If we think that prayer is getting absorbed then it can be understood that our absorption should always make us aware of our brethren who are in need of our help. Love and prayer go hand in hand and our divine encounter with Christ means living like him who always cared for his followers. Life in a community is determined not by the time one spends in prayer, but how much one is capable of serving others through the strength one obtains through that daily prayer experience. This is what we call true encounter with Christ who is waiting for us in the inner cell of our souls

Dr. Rudolf V. D'Souza OCD