

22. IMAGINARY VISION

A divine imaginary vision, granted while a person is awake, is almost always accompanied by at least partial ecstasy (for example, the momentary loss of sight) so that the soul may distinguish the interior apparition from external impressions; there is ecstasy also because a soul enraptured and united to God loses contact with external things. No perfect imaginary vision occurs without an intellectual vision, which makes the soul see and penetrate its meaning: for example, the former may concern the sacred humanity of Christ; the second, His divinity.

Imaginary visions should not be desired or asked of God any more than sensible visions; they are in no way necessary to holiness. The perfect spirit of faith and infused contemplation are of superior order and prepare the soul more immediately for divine union

Right Direction

Speaking of visions we need to understand what is the true meaning of such experiences. A true vision should lead one to love of God and love of neighbour. Anything that hinders love is not a helpful means towards union with God. That is why Teresa is very careful in guiding her nuns in this dangerous path of getting tempted to experience visions.

The vision gives the soul both a deep sense of God's grandeur that fills it with great fear and an increased sense of its own insignificance. In such a vision, God reveals himself directly to the soul, without any intermediary. When the vision passes, its effect on the soul may cause it to remain in ecstasy for a long time.

Golden Reliquary

To describe what an imaginative vision from God resembles, Teresa uses the image of a golden reliquary with a precious stone hidden in it. Even

though the soul has never seen it, The vision gives the soul both a deep sense of God's grandeur that fills it with great fear and an increased sense of its own insignificance. In such a vision, God reveals himself directly to the soul, without any intermediary. When the vision passes, its effect on the soul may cause it to remain in ecstasy for a long time.

Teresa spends some time discussing how people can deceive themselves into thinking they have had an imaginative vision when they are only making it up themselves. She is suspicious of people who claim to have such visions for extended periods of time. She also says that when people create such things themselves, what they see with their imagination is usually constructed in stages, whereas visions from God come whole and entire in a sudden flash. In authentic imaginative visions, moreover, the soul experiences deep inner peace and has no doubt whatsoever that the vision comes from God.

Dangers of Visions

Visions can be deceptive as Teresa warns her nuns of the evil one misleading them in various ways. That is why there should be always caution exercised in accepting the visions as true. “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). This experience of vision can be so dangerous that a person can easily get intoxicated and leave or neglect the important tasks of daily life.

Personal Experience

Teresa admits of having gone wrong in her own personal life seeking enjoyment rather than doing the will of God. She writes “The mistake it seemed to me I was making wasn't so extreme; rather, it consisted of not delighting so much in the thought of our Lord Jesus Christ but in going along in that absorption, waiting for that enjoyment”(IC VI,7,xvi). What we do, then, is quite simple: keep Christ present. The representation of Christ is not a matter of how clearly you can image him to yourself, but of your faith. You represent him to yourself through faith.

For Teresa, then, being present to Christ by means of the prayer of recollection, whether in meditation or in the repetition of words from Scripture, amounts to what we ourselves can do. Then all that is necessary is to persevere and embrace all that takes place on the way which is nothing but carrying our daily crosses and following Christ.

At this point we must refer to her earlier statement which is so powerful can help us understand what she means by not giving much importance to visions and especially imaginary visions: “They must have a great and very determined determination to persevere until reaching the end, come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don't have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses” (*Way* 21.ii)

According to the reflections of Teresa there is always a need for prudence and discernment in the way of prayer and contemplation. As the soul comes closer to the innermost dwelling of God within the soul, there is greater danger that the soul might give undue importance to trivial matters of spiritual life which may eventually mislead the soul in a wrong direction.

Teresa, who is not the founder of Carmelite spirituality but its foremost exponent, managed to synthesize the whole spiritual life around the symbol of friendship. Mental prayer, the keystone in her system, is “nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.” (Life 8.v). It is not surprising that our communities, which are the sacrament of our union with God, yearn after this same deep friendship. It is part of our charism. Sometimes we achieve it; sometimes it remains a challenging ideal. Friendship depends on transparency and sharing, and while this is a matter of choice, it is not always possible to every individual. It is hard to be personal and interpersonal. But both elements are the secret of life, whether in marriage or religion. I think Carmel calls married people to that kind of intimacy, and married persons challenge us by their authentic struggle to become themselves. Becoming ourselves, on the bottom line, is all that we have to do.

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