

Module 309: Teresa of Avilla

The Way of Perfection St Teresa of Avila (1566). Introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited for the web by Dan Graves.

“How happy shall we be if by leaving these few, petty things we can arrive at so high an estate!”

This is the writing of a senior nun for her charges, aiming to enthuse them with a love of prayer and teach them how to practice it and therefore grow spiritually.

Some of St Teresa’s writing’s give accounts of her mystical experiences through prayer. Others, like this, are more concerned with instructing the inexperienced.

In this chapter, Teresa aims to explain the difference between contemplative prayer and mental prayer. However, mystic that she is, she has great trouble sticking to the point! Instead it is more a passage of continued freeform thoughts about the life of prayer.

Contemplative prayer is “a Divine union, in which the Lord takes His delight in the soul and the soul takes its delight in Him;” mental prayer is a lesser form of prayer, engaging the mind rather uniting than the soul with God. many sixteenth-century Catholic writers distinguished between mental prayer and vocal prayer — merely saying the words — suggesting that mental prayer was the calling of monks and nuns, while the laity should stick to vocal. Teresa demands more of both parties, calling ordinary people to pray with their minds and the “religious” to the contemplative prayer of the soul.

The Way of Perfection is a classic of Counter-Reformation spirituality, with lasting influence on Catholic attitudes to and experience of prayer.

Chapter 16

Describes the difference between perfection in the lives of contemplatives and in the lives of those who are content with mental prayer.

I hope you do not think I have written too much about this already; for I have only been placing the board, as they say. You have asked me to tell you about the first steps in prayer; although God did not lead me by them, my daughters I know no others, and even now I can hardly have acquired these elementary virtues. But you may be sure that anyone who cannot set out the pieces in a game of chess will never be able to play well, and, if he does not know how to give check, he will not be able to bring about a checkmate.

Now you will reprove me for talking about games, as we do not play them in this house and are forbidden to do so. That will show you what kind of a mother God has given you — she even knows about vanities like this! However, they say that the game is sometimes legitimate. How legitimate it will be for us to play it in this way, and, if we play it frequently, how quickly we shall give checkmate to this Divine King! He will not be able to move out of our check nor will he desire to do so.

It is the queen which gives the king most trouble in this game and all the other pieces support her. There is no queen who can beat this King as well as humility can; for humility brought him down from Heaven into the Virgin's womb and with humility we can draw him into our souls by a single hair. Be sure that he will give most humility to him who has most already and least to him who has least. I cannot understand how humility exists, or can exist, without love, or love without humility, and it is impossible for these two virtues to exist save where there is great detachment from all created things.

You will ask, my daughters, why I am talking to you about virtues when you have more than enough books to teach you about them and when you want me to tell you only about contemplation. My reply is that, if you had asked me about meditation, I could have talked to you about it, and

advised you all to practice it, even if you do not possess the virtues. For this is the first step to be taken towards the acquisition of the virtues and the very life of all Christians depends upon their beginning it. No one, however lost a soul he may be, should neglect so great a blessing if God inspires him to make use of it. All this I have already written elsewhere, and so have many others who know what they are writing about, which I certainly do not: God knows that.

But contemplation, daughters, is another matter. This is an error which we all make: if a person gets so far as to spend a short time each day in thinking about his sins, as he is bound to do if he is a Christian in anything more than name, people at once call him a great contemplative; and then they expect him to have the rare virtues which a great contemplative is bound to possess; he may even think he has them himself, but he will be quite wrong. In his early stages he did not even know how to set out the chess-board, and thought that, in order to give checkmate, it would be enough to be able to recognize the pieces. But that is impossible, for this King does not allow Himself to be taken except by one who surrenders wholly to Him.

Therefore, daughters, if you want me to tell you the way to attain to contemplation, do allow me to speak at some length about these things, even if at the time they do not seem to you very important, for I think myself that they are. If you have no wish either to hear about them or to practice them, continue your mental prayer all your life; but in that case I assure you, and all persons who desire this blessing, that in my opinion you will not attain true contemplation. I may, of course, be wrong about this, as I am judging by my own experience, but I have been striving after contemplation for twenty years.

I will now explain what mental prayer is, as some of you will not understand this. God grant that we may practice it as we should! I am afraid, however, that, if we do not achieve the

virtues, this can only be done with great labor, although the virtues are not necessary here in such a high degree as they are for contemplation. I mean that the King of glory will not come to our souls - that is, so as to be united with them - unless we strive to gain the greatest virtues. ... I will tell you, then, that God is sometimes pleased to show great favor to persons who are in an evil state [and to raise them to perfect contemplation], so that by this means he may snatch them out of the hands of the devil.

It must be understood, I think, that such persons will not be in mortal sin at the time. They may be in an evil state, and yet the Lord will allow them to see a vision, even a very good one, in order to draw them back to himself. But I cannot believe that he would grant them contemplation. For that is a Divine union, in which the Lord takes his delight in the soul and the soul takes its delight in him; and there is no way in which the Purity of the Heavens can take pleasure in a soul that is unclean, nor can the Delight of the angels have delight in that which is not his own. And we know that, by committing mortal sin, a soul becomes the property of the devil, and must take its delight in him, since it has given him pleasure; and, as we know, his delights, even in this life, are continuous torture. My Lord will have no lack of children of his own in whom he may rejoice without going and taking the children of others. Yet his Majesty will do what he often does - namely, snatch them out of the devil's hands.

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There are souls whom God knows he may gain for himself by this means; seeing that they are completely lost, his Majesty wants to leave no stone unturned to help them; and therefore, though they are in a sad way and lacking in virtues, he gives them consolations, favors and emotions which begin to move their desires, and occasionally even brings them to a state of contemplation, though rarely and not for long at a time. And this, as I say, he does because

he is testing them to see if that favor will not make them anxious to prepare themselves to enjoy it often; if it does not, may they be pardoned; pardon us, Lord, for it is a dreadful thing that a soul whom you have brought near to yourself should approach any earthly thing and become attached to it.

For my own part I believe there are many souls whom God our Lord tests in this way, and few who prepare themselves to enjoy this favor. When the Lord does this and we ourselves leave nothing undone either, I think it is certain that he never ceases from giving until he has brought us to a very high degree of prayer. If we do not give ourselves to his Majesty as resolutely as he gives himself to us, he will be doing more than enough for us if he leaves us in mental prayer and from time to time visits us as he would visit servants in his vineyard. But these others are his beloved children, whom he would never want to banish from his side; and, as they have no desire to leave him, he never does so. He seats them at his table, and feeds them with his own food, almost taking the food from his mouth in order to give it them.

Oh, what blessed care of us is this, my daughters! How happy shall we be if by leaving these few, petty things we can arrive at so high an estate! Even if the whole world should blame you, and deafen you with its cries, what matter so long as you are in the arms of God? He is powerful enough to free you from everything; for only once did He command the world to be made and it was done; with him, to will is to do. Do not be afraid, then, if he is pleased to speak with you, for he does this for the greater good of those who love him. His love for those to whom He is dear is by no means so weak: He shows it in every way possible. Why, then, my sisters, do we not show him love in so far as we can? Consider what a wonderful exchange it is if we give him our love and receive his. Consider that he can do all things, and we can do nothing here below save as he

enables us. And what is it that we do for you, O Lord, our Maker? We do hardly anything [at all] - just make some poor weak resolution. And, if his Majesty is pleased that by doing a mere nothing we should win everything, let us not be so foolish as to fail to do it.

O Lord! All our trouble comes to us from not having our eyes fixed upon Thee. If we only looked at the way along which we are walking, we should soon arrive; but we stumble and fall a thousand times and stray from the way because, as I say, we do not set our eyes on the true Way.

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God deliver us, sisters, from saying "We are not angels," or "We are not saints," whenever we commit some imperfection. We may not be; but what a good thing it is for us to reflect that we can be if we will only try and if God gives us his hand! Do not be afraid that he will fail to do his part if we do not fail to do ours. And since we come here for no other reason, let us put our hands to the plough, as they say. Let there be nothing we know of which it would be a service to the Lord for us to do, and which, with his help, we would not venture to take in hand. I should like that kind of venturesomeness [audacity] to be found in this house, as it always increases humility. We must have a holy boldness, for God helps the strong, being no respecter of persons; and he will give courage to you and to me.

Discussion Starters:

Teresa uses the newly fashionable game of chess as an analogy for our approach to God in prayer. In what way does she say prayer is like chess? Do you think the analogy is a good one? Does it reflect your own experience? Is it something we could learn from? Why does Teresa liken humility to the Queen? Do you agree about how important humility is to prayer? What is the difference between humble prayer and prayer

that lacks humility? How can one cultivate greater humility?

How do contemplation and meditation compare according to Teresa? And how are they both related to “the acquisition of the virtues?”

What kind of prayer, according, to Teresa, is it possible for bad Christians to attain to? Why are they able to attain to it?

How does she try to stir up her readers to greater love for God? Do you think this is effective?

Do you think this is a piece that only a Catholic could write? What is most Catholic about Teresa’s thinking, and what is simply Christian?

Bible Verses

Luke 11:1-13

Matthew 6:5-8

Psalm 16

Psalm 18:25-29

James 5:13-20