

The Life of Prayer

The Order of Carmel in the Catholic Church is the Order that has prayer, particularly interior prayer, as its most outstanding characteristic. With the reform in Spain in the 16th century by St. Teresa of Jesus the emphasis on prayer is even more evident.

In St. Teresa's Interior Castle, her literary masterpiece on the Christian life, she tells us that the door or entry into the Castle is prayer. The first three mansions refer to the initial stages of the life of a devout person and here St. Teresa speaks of the need to obey the Commandments, the frequent reception of the Sacraments, and the practice of prayer, vocal and mental prayer when possible, and the other practices of Catholic life including good works.

When she begins to speak of interior prayer in the Fourth Mansion St. Teresa counsels her daughters in the reformed monastery of St. Joseph in Avila and all who seek a life of interior prayer, to find a companion for the journey. What better companion can there be but the Lord Jesus Christ who taught us to pray during His life on earth. He tells us to shut the door of our soul and to speak to our Father in secret.

St. John of the Cross writes in stanza 1 of the Spiritual Canticle "Where have you hidden... Beloved and left me moaning?" St. John immediately answers "God then is hidden in the soul, and there we must seek Him with love."

A person who is eager to begin a life of interior prayer should choose a quiet place and prime time to be alone with the Loved One daily or frequently. Words are not always necessary but to embrace Him within and experience Him with loving affection. Just to be in the presence of the one loved becomes a special joy as we know from our human experiences.

As God draws the person to Himself He often bestows what is called in the spiritual life sweetness and consolation as we are powerfully drawn to Him in quiet prayer. However when we become strong enough in our love for Him, He withdraws the consolations that we might seek the Beloved for Himself alone. There follows the time of purification and trials, both exterior and interior, that enables the person to advance along the way of prayer to future union with God.

The major works of St. John of the Cross through poetical images and symbols so beautifully portrays the spiritual journey of the interior life. So often John is known for the "Nada" of the Ascent and Dark Night but actually he is the doctor of "Divine Love". It has been suggested to begin to read St. John of the Cross with the Spiritual Canticle in order to grasp the beautiful and fulfilling purpose of the spiritual journey, namely Union With God in Love. The exercise of the "Nada" is necessary for the person to be able to see the faults and defects that lay hidden deep in the soul. The light of the Holy Spirit shines on these dark places that the person might see them, be aware of them, and in time be purified of them by the fire of Divine Love.

The Spiritual Life is a lifelong journey that ends only with natural death. For one who loves God this spiritual knowledge is even more important than our education in the natural order which supports ourselves and our families.

May all who seek the only true goal in life say: "Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?" in order that all may seek Him ever as one hidden and approach very near Him when we consider Him higher and deeper than anything we can reach. In this way we will seek Him in Faith. In Christ, Mother Maureen