

The Prayer of Divine Contemplation

During the last three weeks we have spoken about three types of prayer: Vocal Prayer, Meditative Prayer and the Prayer of Contemplative. Today I would like to address the fourth type of prayer known as Divine Contemplation.

This type of prayer is something that happens only by divine favor. We cannot learn this type of prayer by using the right methods or saying the right words. It is not a skill to be practiced or a talent to be learned. There are no formulas that help us to reach this type of prayer. This type of prayer is a pure gift from God. God gives this gift as he pleases, but only if a person is properly disposed to receive it. Although it is God's desire that everyone should arrive at this level of Divine Contemplation, there are very few souls who ever receive this gift because most are unwilling to fully surrender themselves.

While we cannot do anything to receive this gift of Divine Contemplation, we can remove obstacles that would prevent the reception of this gift. St. Teresa says that God wishes to give this gift to every soul, but there are very few people who ever dispose themselves to this grace. To attain this grace of Divine Contemplation a person must be purified from their attachment to sin. St. John of the Cross describes this purification as a walking through the dark night. He says that there are two "dark nights" that we must walk through in order to reach the stage of mystical union with God – which is accented by the gift of Divine Contemplation. The first "dark night" is the dark night of the senses when we are detached from the things of this world. By this dark night our hopes are unshackled from the things of this world so that we place all our hope only in the favor of God. The second "dark night" is the dark night of the spirit. Through this dark night of suffering, we are detached – not simply from the things of this world – but above all even from our very selves. We have no other aspirations than the aspirations that are fixed to the Will of our loving God. If we are willing to walk through these two dark nights, we will properly dispose ourselves to the gift of Divine Contemplation.

What is this gift of Divine Contemplation? It is described as a mystical union between God and the soul. Through this prayer we are completely and wholly united to the perfect will of God. It is the Seventh Interior Mansion of which St. Teresa speaks in which God is our everything. In this Contemplative life we find joy only in the things of God. Even if we live in the modern, chaotic world, our hearts will be steadfastly united to Jesus Christ. At this level of Divine Contemplation, a soul will find joy even in suffering - if that suffering is perceived as the Holy Will of God. St. Teresa of Jesus describes the experience of the mystical union in the following words:

I saw close to me toward my left side an angel in bodily form...the angel was not large but small; he was very beautiful and his face was so aflame that he seemed to be all afire...I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away; nor is the soul content with less than God. The pain is not bodily but spiritual, although the body doesn't fail to share in some of it, and even a great deal. The loving exchange that takes place between the soul and God is so sweet that I beg Him in His goodness to give a taste of this love to anyone who thinks I am lying. (*The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*).

We can never reach the end of prayer or the fullness of Love in God. He is infinite love and always calls us to something more. Thanks be to God in Jesus the Christ. Peace, Fr. Dave