

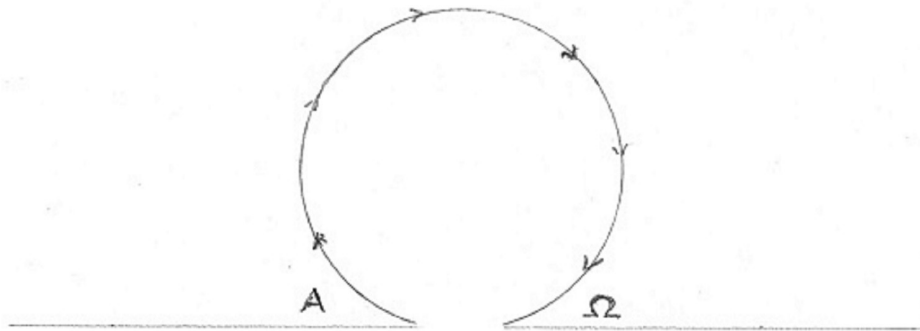
WHERE ARE WE GOING ?

*Let nothing worry you
Let nothing frighten you
All things are passing
God alone abides
Patience gains all
He who has God lacks nothing
Alone God suffices*

Seven maxims of St Teresa of Avila

At the commencement of the Church's most important Solemnity, the Easter Vigil, as the priest prepares the Easter candle for lighting he says : *Christ yesterday and today... the beginning and the end. Alpha and Omega. All time belongs to Him, and all ages, To Him be glory and power through every age for ever.* God is our beginning and our end. At the moment of conception we begin to live and to be. God gives us an immortal soul and we will live forever. And yet, of course, we must die. The great paradox of human life is that we are born to die. But death is not, as pagans think, the end. It is the beginning, as Mary Queen of Scots said as she contemplated her coming death at the hands of her cousin, the illegitimate daughter of Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth.

We begin from God. Our life should be spent in God's care, for we will return to God. The mystical theologian known as the Pseudo-Denis (5th- 6th century AD) first formulated the circularity of this earthly passage.



It is God Who gives us life and being at the moment of conception through the instrumentality of our parents. We come from God; and we will return to Him—whether we want to or not! Little Anna Maria, born just 7 months ago, has just started out on her life's journey. You, young people, are a little further advanced, while I, in my seventies, am approaching the end of the earthly passage. This life is a proving ground for eternal life with God which is what He intends for every man, but He made us free and He will not have us if we choose to reject Him. St Augustine put the issue in his *Confessions*, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are not at rest until they rest in Thee."

It is the body that dies at death ; the soul endures, immortal. The Church makes the point in her sacred liturgy. The antiphon for the invitatory psalm of the *Office for the Dead* runs, “Let us adore the Lord for Whom all men are alive.” Here is the truth the intending suicide fails to grasp. Just as a man did not bring himself into existence, he cannot take himself out of existence.

If we realise—not just know but *make a reality of it in our lives*—that God is *the end* of our existence, we will strive to grow closer to Him every day. This brings us to the most important question of growth in the life of grace. Prayer is, to this life, like breathing which is why Our Blessed Lord insisted on it. So, let us consider what we should do about fostering the life of prayer.

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There are in the Church many schools of spirituality such as the Benedictine school, the Augustinian, the Dominican, the Franciscan, the Carthusian, and so on. Of these many I want to draw your attention to two : the Ignatian school and the Carmelite.

The *Ignatian* grew out of the background of the founder of the Jesuits, St Ignatius. He sought to make his followers soldiers of Christ. His school of spirituality involves exercises with strict rules marking progress and great emphasis placed on silence. The retreats fostered by this school are well known for their rigour and their length.

In contrast is the *Carmelite* school. The Carmelites were founded on Mt Carmel in the Holy Land in the 12th Century, though the details are uncertain. What is not in doubt is that the religious, Teresa of Avila, set about reforming the order and returning it to its original rigour in the 16th Century. She was to write in *The Way of Perfection* :

“News reached me of the harm being done in France of the havoc the Lutherans had caused and how much this miserable sect was growing.”

She resolved to do what she could for Christ and His Church.

“All my longing was, and still is, that since [Christ] has so many enemies and so few friends that these friends be good ones.”

Time was to be dedicated each day to prayer and to silence. The order's members wore no shoes and are known, in consequence, as the *Discalced Carmelites*. She was supported and assisted by a number of priests who formed an order of men with the same rigour. Among them was the religious known to posterity as John of the Cross. The spirituality developed between Teresa and John of the Cross has been endorsed for its admirable exposure of the structure of the spiritual life. There are three stages corresponding to the ages in the life of man, childhood, adolescence and adulthood, each marked by a particular form of prayer.

Perfect	Infused contemplation	God does the work
Proficient	Acquired contemplation	[God works [& [I work
Beginners	Meditation	I do the work

As I progress in the spiritual life, *the way I pray* changes. Why it changes may be seen from a passage in *Psalms* 45 verse 11. St Jerome rendered the passage in his translation into the Latin Vulgate as follows :

vacate et vigilate quoniam ego sum Deus...

That is, "empty (yourself and you will see) since I am God..." Largely as a result of a commission replacing St Jerome's Latin translation of the original Hebrew with its own version, this has been rendered in the Grail version of the Psalms as—

"Taste and see that the Lord is good..."

the banality of which destroys the force of the original.

But of what am I to empty myself ?

When we engage in meditation, we apply our minds to the various mysteries of our Redemption effected by Almighty God—*the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin ; the Annunciation of the Lord by the archangel Gabriel to Our Blessed Lady ; the birth of Our Saviour ; His presentation in the temple ; His contending with the doctors in the temple ; His submission to St Joseph and Our Lady in the home in Nazareth ; the beginning of His public ministry with the miracle at Cana ; His baptism ; His teaching throughout the three years of His public life ; his betrayal and handing over to the Jews ; His crucifixion and death ; His Resurrection and His imposition of their ministry on the Apostles ; His Ascension into heaven ; the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, and the beginning and development of His Church...*

Aided by the feasts and memorials that recur each liturgical year, as by the mysteries of the Rosary, we engage in a careful consideration of each of these steps. We ruminate over them that we may realise God's love for us and the love we ought render Him in return. The soul does not abandon these considerations when the time arrives to progress to the next stage of prayer, but takes them as a given. The God with Whom the soul now spends his time is the God *Who was born, who lived, who suffered and Who died for us, Who rose gloriously from the dead and ascended into heaven.*

Whereas in the first stage, our attention is engaged in thinking, in the next, our task is to *stop* thinking for, as St Teresa says, "We do not come to God through much thinking, but through much loving." All prayer requires application. When we engage in meditation we must work. When we pass to the next stage we must work too, a *different* sort of work, turning our minds from distractions, thoughts, interests, that it may be open to God's influence. I have mentioned the book of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a member of St Teresa's Order, called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. A series of interviews with the religious brother and his letters, it is one of the simplest of religious books to read and the perfect support for us when we move into the second stage of prayer. The life of another of St Teresa's daughters, St Thérèse of Lisieux, is just as effective.

To conclude, let's consider the remarks of another of St Teresa's daughters, St Teresa Margaret of the Sacred Heart (1747-1770), which returns us to the theme of this lesson :

"Everything comes to an end: therefore take heart for we pass from one thing to another until at last we arrive at eternity. Even seeing how the things of this life end so quickly ought to console us, because the nearer and more quickly we are approaching that end towards which all our activities should tend."
