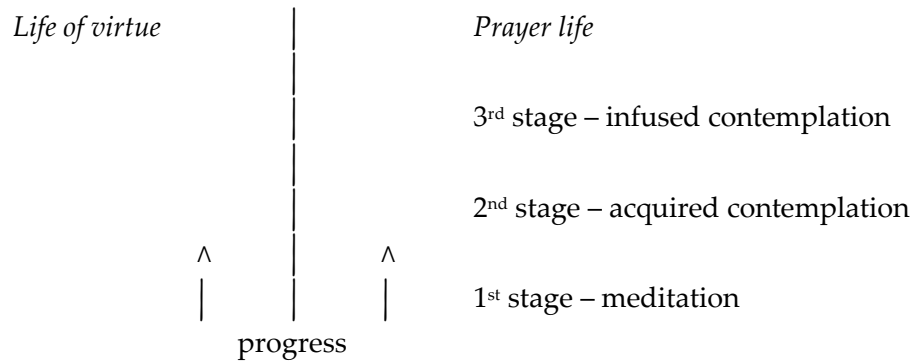


IT MATTERS HOW YOU LIVE

To make progress in our prayer life, we must make progress in our human life. We must grow steadily in the virtues, in faith, hope and charity, in prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. These two lives grow, or diminish, together.



I have cited the words of the sons and daughters in religion of St Teresa (Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, St Thérèse of the Child Jesus and St Teresa-Margaret of the Sacred Heart) for their reproduction of her teachings. Now I want to go to St Teresa herself.

She wrote her *Way of Perfection* for nuns but we non-religious persons may profit from her advice. She first points out how everyone is different and the way one may be called by God (his vocation) differs from the way another is called.

“[T]here are different paths along which God leads souls.” (Ch. 6)

Different souls have differing reactions to the same stimulus.

“[S]ome trifle will cause as much suffering to one as a great trial will to another ; little things can bring much distress to persons of sensitive natures.” (Ch. 7)

Anyone who has read the life of St Thérèse will recall how hyper-sensitive her soul was to events that hardly affected her sisters. Again, something which one will take in his stride, will exasperate another to the point of fury. I can speak with authority here for I have often enjoyed a certain serenity in putting up with rude or demanding people on a hard day only to lose my temper over dropping the keys at the door to my house when the day has come to an end.

St Teresa puts great store in detachment. She tells her nuns :

“Once we have detached ourselves from the world and from relatives... it seems we have done all there is to do and that we don't have to struggle with anything. [But] do not feel secure or let yourselves to go sleep... [Y]ou would resemble someone who very tranquilly lies down after having locked his doors for fear of thieves while allowing the thieves to remain inside the house. And you already know that there is no worse thief that we ourselves. For if each sister is not alert in going against her own will as though doing so were more important than all else, many things will take away this holy freedom...

“A great aid to going against your will is to bear in mind continually how all is vanity and how quickly everything comes to an end...” (Ch. 10)

We have experience of this in our own life. Just consider how the dogs and cats that have peopled our lives over the last five years or so have passed away. *Merry, Manzo, Holly* and *Spot*, among the dogs, have died or been put down, and the cats that we cradled as kittens have disappeared or been bitten by snakes or run over by cars. In retrospect, we can see why Providence makes animals reproduce so fruitfully, for each generation has such a short span of life. *Everything comes to an end !*

To detachment, she adds another virtue essential to our lives.

“Here true humility can enter the picture because this virtue and the virtue of detachment it seems to me always go together. They are two inseparable sisters. These are not the relatives I advise you to withdraw from ; rather, you should embrace them and love them and never be seen without them...” (Ch. 10)

Next, St Teresa adverts to something repeated by Pope Pius XII in his homily on the canonisation of St Maria Goretti, that the life of a faithful Catholic involves a kind of martyrdom.

“The whole matter, or a great part of it, lies in losing concern about ourselves and our own satisfaction... Don't you know yet, sisters, that the life of a good religious who desires to be one of God's close friends is a long martyrdom ? ...

“So let us try hard to go against our will in everything” (Ch. 12)

She soon turns to the business of prayer.

“[M]editation is the basis for acquiring all the virtues, and to undertake it is a matter of life and death for all Christians. And no one, no matter how lost he may be, should set it aside...

“But contemplation is something else. This is the mistake we all make, that if a person spends a little time each day thinking about his sins... they immediately say he is a very contemplative soul and they want him to possess at once virtues as great as those a very contemplative soul is obliged to have... [but] this King doesn't give Himself [save] to those who give themselves entirely to Him...”

It is Almighty God, not the individual, Who leads the soul from meditative prayer to contemplative prayer.

This reminds me of the prayer of the great Swiss saint, St Nicholas of Flüe, which may be found in the Catechism (CCC n. 226) :

“Take from me whatever will hinder my coming to Thee ;
Give to me whatever will lead me to Thee ;
Take me from myself and give me to Thyself entirely.”

Let's now look at the teaching of St Teresa's associate in the reform of the Carmelites.

Here are the first two verses of a poem of St John of the Cross, *One Dark Night*, in my translation.

The night was dark now, and the day long past
When I went out.
The fears that had afflicted me consumed
At length by love's desires no longer loomed,
And quiet now possessed my house at last.

Secure, though in the darkness of that ground
And in disguise,
I climbed the secret ladder in my yearning,
And what desire within my heart was burning,
While never from my house was heard a sound.

His book, *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*, is a commentary on these two of eight verses of the poem which he wrote to mark the passage of the soul to God in the spiritual life. The life of faith is a journey in darkness. St John compares faith to light. He remarks, accurately, that light is invisible. We never see light itself, only ever something lit. In similar fashion, he argues, faith is invisible but it enlightens the things of this world and the next for those who are fortunate to possess it.

St John's texts, *The Ascent* and others of his works, provide us with a scientific analysis of the spiritual life and how to make progress in it. The burden of his teaching, as with that of St Teresa, is that we have to abandon preoccupation with material things and our human desires if we are to succeed. *It matters how you live !*

Religious brothers and sisters take three vows, vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Why those three ? Why not a vow to love, or a vow not to waste time, as St Alphonsus Ligouri did ? The reasons are set out in the *First Letter of St John*, Chapter 2 : 15-16. The Evangelist says there :

“Do not love the world nor the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the charity of the Father is not in him. For all that the world has to offer is the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes and the pride of life which is not the Father but of the world.”

We summarise these three deleterious influences as follows, and against each we place the vow that answers the temptation it offers—

The world	-	Poverty
The flesh	-	Chastity
The devil	-	Obedience

While *we* are not religious, we must yet observe the spirit of these three as counsels of perfection to make progress in the spiritual life. How do we go about it ? This is what St John of the Cross advises in *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*.

“First, have an habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with His. You must then study His life in order to know how to imitate Him and behave in all events as He would...

“Second, in order to be successful in this imitation, renounce and remain empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honour and glory of God. Do this out of love for Jesus Christ. In His life He had no other gratification [or desire] than the fulfillment of His Father's will which He called His meat and food (John 4 : 34). If you are offered the satisfaction of hearing things that have no relation to the service and glory of God, do not desire this pleasure... If you have the opportunity for the gratification of looking upon objects that will not help you come closer to God, do not desire to look upon them... And if in speaking there is similar opportunity, act in the same way ; and so on with all the senses as you can duly avoid the pleasure offered. If you cannot escape experience of the satisfaction offered, it is sufficient

to have no desire for it.

“By this method you should endeavour to leave the senses as though in darkness, mortified and empty of pleasure. With such vigilance you will gain a great deal in a short time.” (Book I, Ch. 13)

Finally, let us look at the comments of St Thomas Aquinas on some splendid teaching of Aristotle to encourage us in this great endeavour. Aristotle notes five marks of love, or friendship—

1. A man wishes his friend to be and to live ;
2. he desires good things for him ;
3. he does good things to him ;
4. he takes pleasure in his company ;
5. he is of one mind with him, rejoicing and being saddened by almost the same things.

St Thomas extends the teaching to the conduct of the man in respect of his own self.

“In this way the good love themselves as to the interior man because they wish the preservation thereof in its integrity ; they desire good things for him, namely, spiritual goods—indeed they do their best to obtain them ; and they take pleasure in entering into their own hearts because they find there good thoughts in the present, the memory of goods past, and the hope of future good, all of which are sources of pleasure. Likewise, they experience no clashing of wills, since their whole soul tends to one thing.

“On the other hand the wicked have no wish to be preserved in the integrity of the interior man ; nor do they desire spiritual goods for him ; nor do they work for that end ; nor do they take pleasure in their own company by entering into their own hearts, because whatever they find there, present, past and future, is evil and horrible ; nor do they agree with themselves on account of the gnawings of conscience according to the words of *Psalm* 49 v. 21 “I will reprove you, and set them before your face...” (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 25, a 7)
