

SECULAR CARMELITE RETREAT AT KENSINGTON

26TH- 30TH JULY 2021

*Deepening our prayer life
in the Carmelite Tradition*

transcripts of ten talks

Part 2: Talks Six to Ten

FR MATT BLAKE OCD

C O N T E N T S

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**Secular Carmelite Retreat at Kensington
26th – 30th July 2021 with Fr Matt Blake OCD**

St Teresa of Avila's 'Spiritual Testimony' from Seville, 1576, (Part 1)

Over the past three talks I have looked at a document from John of the Cross – three or four chapters from the second book of his *Dark Night*, chapters toward the end, where he's drawing together his teaching for us. I now want to look at a similar document from St Teresa again, it's perhaps among the lesser known of Teresa's writings. It really consists of two documents from when Teresa lived in Seville in 1576 and it is the second document in particular that I want to spend some time with. To give a little bit of the background: Teresa's in Seville, she's founded her Carmel there, they've run into great difficulties and she has been reported to the Inquisition. The first of three documents is really a defence of her life and her prayer and two versions of it have come down to us. One is the version she actually wrote and presented to the Inquisition and the other one is a copy that she herself wrote. They are almost identical but there are some slight changes in it. The second document was probably not given to the Inquisition, it is most likely, though we can't be certain, it was a document Teresa wrote for a Jesuit who was helping her, advising her, and who was her spiritual director at the time, and this is the document I want to spend some time with. It's a little more than year before she will write the *Interior Castle* and it's often considered to be the first sketch of the *Interior Castle*, but, as we shall see, it doesn't cover the full spiritual journey, rather she begins, as she tells us, with infused prayer. In terms of the *Interior Castle* it covers the 4th to the 6th *Dwelling Places*. She covers areas of the spiritual life.

Now I want to pick out two things from the previous document that she wrote for the Inquisition. Two things are striking: all she wants to do is to serve the Lord and do everything she can to ensure that others also serve the Lord. That's always her aim in everything that she does: that her life may be of service to God and that she does everything she possibly can to help other people, to save souls – to *do good for souls* to use her terminology – that is her aim in everything she does. There is a second thing I want to pick up from that document that is very striking: she is speaking about the various people she consulted at different times. She gives lists of the theologians and experts that she consulted with. What that shows us – and I mentioned this in passing this morning in speaking about St John of the Cross – is the importance that Teresa gave to theology, to the knowledge of scripture, to learning as a requirement for prayer. To live the life of prayer, to live the spiritual life, the mystical life, that she is such an expert in, one needs a solid foundation, and that solid foundation is knowledge of the scriptures, a healthy, correct theology. That's so important, and at a time when women like Teresa didn't have the possibility of doing serious formal studies, the only way Teresa could get that knowledge was through the friendships, relationships she had with all these what she calls 'learned men', and looking at the list she gave, it is a list of the most learned men in Spain in the sixteenth century. She was in contact with all of them; some of them at various times in her life, with some she continued a correspondence throughout her life. But all the time, that desire for knowledge, understanding, learning. And we see this expressed also in books and the importance of books for her. Again, that was another very problematic issue in her

time, but it's an important point for us to take in, the importance of learning and she sets that out so strongly in this defence that she writes of her life and of her prayer for the Inquisition.

Let's have a look at this document. It's written in Seville in 1576. One of the difficulties some people will have is finding these in the editions of Teresa's writings because different editions have them in different places. What I have here is from the *Spiritual Testimonies* nos. 58 and 59¹, but if you're following other editions it will be nos. 4 and 5 from the *Spiritual Relations*. Look for the two documents she wrote in Seville in 1576, that's where they will be found in whatever edition of her writings that you are following. So she begins this document about prayer by saying how difficult it is to write about these things and to write about them with any clarity. Remember now she has written the book of her *Life* – twice – written the *Way of Perfection* – twice – and she's written other shorter writings, she's written quite a bit of the *Book of Foundations* already. She has a lot of experience of writing and writing about spiritual matters, but it doesn't get easier for her, in fact the further she goes, the more difficult it is to express what's really going on within, because what she is speaking about is not of this world, but the realm of God. She is trying to put the spiritual into comprehensible, earthly human language and that's very difficult. Then she says something that is very important to her: *What I can certify is that I shall not mention anything I have not sometimes or many times experienced*. That for Teresa was so important. She already told us that ten years earlier when writing *The Way of Perfection* she would only write from her experience. Her experience, that's the source for everything, or as she puts it elsewhere, the presence of Jesus Christ in her is the living book, that's her living book, that is the main source for everything that she writes. Though she will draw from all these theologians and learned men and listen to them and read every book she can get and listen to so many other people – she has a great range of expertise to call upon – the main source for everything she writes is based upon what she experiences and from the understanding of her experiences, because that is what she recognises would be most helpful to other people. In other words, Teresa is writing the book that would have helped her at the time when she would have needed it, because, again, understanding of what is happening is so important.

This morning I quoted exactly that from St John of the Cross: his reason for writing his books was so that the people who are walking on this road, making this journey, would understand. It's not an understanding in the sense of having some wonderful technical understanding, it's more an understanding in terms of knowing this is OK, knowing this is right, because John of the Cross is always telling us that the person is in total darkness, therefore there is no knowledge or anything any expert could say that would be of help to them. Teresa also knows that this is beyond any human understanding, yet some kind of understanding is necessary. We must draw from the Church's tradition, from the wealth of wisdom and understanding that's passed down to us. That's why John of the Cross and Teresa are so important to us as Carmelites; we cannot pray without them, we cannot pray without feeding ourselves constantly on their wisdom, because that's how we come to know this is OK, this is right, I can live this. It's an understanding in the sense that lets us go, persevere, and enables us to continue on this road. It's an understanding that prevents us from going off on tangents and going on wrong roads; it's an understanding that keeps our spiritual life soundly rooted. It's that kind of understanding that's so important, that's what Teresa

wants to communicate because she knows very well that need herself and the ends that she had to go to get this understanding. And some of the people she spoke to did not understand her and some told her she was on the wrong road etc. The struggle that she had in finding it herself meant she needed others who could give her this understanding, but the main source of that now for her is her own experience. Because prayer for Teresa is never theory, it's never some formula that we follow, set of rules that we implement, it's not that, it can never be that. Prayer for Teresa is living authentically our own lives. It is a personal living experience unique to each one of us, it's a living reality within us and therefore she has to start with herself and her own living reality – this is alive within her; it's what is keeping her alive.

The first prayer she speaks about she strangely places in the last paragraph of the document. She's not beginning at the beginning; she's beginning at what we might call the awareness of the presence of God, or the action of God in her prayer, or what she calls the beginning of supernatural experience. In terms of the *Interior Castle* it's really the *Fourth Dwelling Place* onwards. Here is how she puts it: *I recall one that comes before what I mentioned and it is a presence of God. It's not a vision of any kind. It seems that each time one wants to pray to God one finds him.* Somehow God is there, whenever one wants to be with God there is a sense of presence and that sense of presence is not coming from herself but from God. She said that is the first sign that God is intervening and something supernatural is taking place, not in any way that can be seen or heard, but he's there. She then goes on to speak about what she began with, that she calls *an interior recollection felt in the soul*. What might that be? She gives us a very good term: *prayer and recollection*, this is so often used by Teresa but it can be very difficult for us to understand what she means by this. Sometimes what she's speaking about refers to what we can at least work at ourselves or get to ourselves through concentration and commitment. But that's not what she's speaking about here. She speaks about something that is God-given and this is how she explains it – just as we have exterior senses: we can see, we can hear, we can feel, we can sense the presence of somebody, we can have a sense what's happening around us – so she says that in the interior, in the soul, there are senses, and through these senses the soul seems to want to withdraw, away from outside noise. So it's something deep within that is making the person withdraw – to want silence, to want to be alone. But it's not coming from just 'I'm a bit fed up today and I want to be away from everybody,' it's not coming from something that's within the human dimension. Deep within there's this pull toward solitude, toward silence, for communion with God in solitude. She said: *In this state none of the senses or faculties are lost, all are left intact, but they are left that way so that the soul may be occupied in God. And this explanation will be easy to understand for anyone to whom Lord has granted this prayer, and for those to whom he has not, there will need be at least for many words and comparisons.* It is something like the sense that there's communion with God going on within that is not in any way affected, or disturbed or brought about by what's going on around or by what the person is doing. This hasn't come from the person's efforts or initiatives or desires, but somewhere deep within, God is pulling, calling the person to a deeper prayer, a deeper recollection.

That's what Teresa calls the first step. We see this in Teresa's *Fourth Dwelling Place* and we see it beautifully expressed in an image that she uses of the shepherd and the shepherd's whistle. She said that at the beginning that the sound of the whistle is so

subtle the person doesn't hear it, but gradually with a deeper listening the person begins to hear this whistle, to hear the call of the shepherd. Another way of expressing it would be that what's happening here is that a different kind of listening, or a deeper listening, or an interior listening – something that's not audible is heard. The image of Elijah comes to mind, who on Mount Horeb heard the sound of deep, profound silence. A new kind of hearing, that subtle whistle that's heard, and what Teresa calls *a pleasing interior quiet and peace flows over a person. All it wants is to love*. That again is going to be emphasized much more strongly when she writes the *Fourth Dwelling Place* of the *Interior Castle* where she said that this is all about love and wherever there's an opportunity to love, just love. That's what it's all about. Here she tells us: *This happens and it doesn't happen, it lasts a little while and sometimes longer, sometimes it's there and sometimes it's not*. The *Fourth Dwelling Place* is very much like that, you're in and out; it's happening and it isn't, because it's a transition and because the person still hasn't learned that deep interior listening. There's a shift taking place; at another level what's taking place is that the person is learning love, that call to love, the pull toward love, but it's a different kind of love, the beginning of mature, adult love, grown up love. That's what's beginning, and the beginning coincides with the beginning of a deeper listening to the Lord. Because the more the Lord is listened to in silence in a deep place within, the only response that has meaning, that is appropriate, is the response of love. We saw that in a very different way with John of the Cross's *Ladder*, this continual growing in love as contemplation becomes deeper. That's what Teresa is expressing here in a very different way. All the person wants to do is to love. The person has very little, if any, knowledge or understanding of what's taking place, but what the person has are these impulses and the desire to love. So in this little paragraph she is setting out what she will expand much more a year later in the *Interior Castle*.

Then she goes on to another aspect of this, which she has already spoken about in the book of her *Life*, which was twelve years earlier, and which she will revisit in the *Interior Castle*. *Although this prayer is not complete union, the soul sometimes and even often understands that the will alone is united, and this is known very clearly. I mean it is clear in the souls of people.* (The will of course is where love is). *The will is completely occupied in God*. In other words the person is loving, the person is expressing love and acting out of love and only wants to love, *but it sees that it lacks the power to be engaged in any other work. The other faculties are free for business and service of God*. And here is how she sums it up: *Martha and Mary walk together*. This is something very important in Teresa's teaching, and tomorrow is the feast of Martha and Mary, very appropriate to have it during this retreat. So what is Teresa getting at here when she is speaking about Martha and Mary walking together? Here we are in what we might call the early stages of contemplation, of supernatural prayer, prayer in which God is taking over and there is this very strong pull toward silence and solitude. The person's only desire is to love; the person is overwhelmed with this love for God and for others. At the same time, she finds herself engaged in all kinds of work, projects and everything else. Teresa at the time she was writing this was extremely busy, and preoccupied with troubles. She has to go, she said, to Fr Francis to ask him if this is possible or is she being deceived. This is Francis Borgia, the Third General of the Jesuits – now a canonised saint. She turns to him and he says *Yes*. It is as if the person has a sense that they are living two lives. Later, when Teresa's prayer advances and grows to a deeper level this will no longer be a problem. In the *Seventh Dwelling Place* it's not a problem at all, Martha and Mary

are the one person, Martha and Mary are being lived together. Martha and Mary, of course, comes from that gospel passage where Martha is doing all the serving and Mary is sitting there listening and it appears as if Jesus is siding with Mary, saying the better part is to be listening rather than doing the serving. But in Teresa's thinking, the two are one. At this stage we could say that Martha and Mary within Teresa are both operating, but there's a certain kind of confusion or conflict within her; can this be right, can you really be engaged in all of these works and be dealing with these problems and issues and at the same time be totally at one with God interiorly? Will all these activities somehow compromise or take away the peace that is there deep within? And so she hasn't resolved this yet, she's just marvelling at the fact that this is what's happening, because of course the theory she would have thought at the time would be if you want the quiet and recollection, you've got to stay away from activities and you've got to have all this time to yourself and be in solitude. Of course that was impossible for her in the midst of all the problems and activities, day and night working, but she realises that she can give herself totally to this work and at the same time that peace is there within, that sense of God's presence. So Martha and Mary are together. Life carries on for her.

This is why experience is so important for her, because experience here goes against or appears to go against the theory she would have been taught so often, going against the prevailing thinking of the people who would have been teaching prayer in her day. Her experience is different, therefore she trusts the experience but also checks it out, and there was no better person in the world at the time to check it out with than Fr Francisco de Borgia. And he reassures her, that, yes, not only is this possible but it is very common in people's experience.

Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/FiqlPA0aYC8>

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Teresa's 'Spiritual Testimony' Part 2: Deep inner spiritual experiences

Yesterday I began to look at a document of St Teresa's that she wrote in Seville in 1576, looking at some of the stages of growth in prayer. Here Teresa is attempting to explain the process, the journey of prayer, to a Jesuit priest who was her spiritual director and advisor at the time. I want to begin by reading the very first line of this document. Here is what she says: *These inner spiritual experiences are difficult to speak about and still more so when one wants to speak of them intelligibly.* So she's speaking about deep inner spiritual experiences; that's what everything today is going to be about. Teresa has these in abundance but also she knows many other people who have them. So there are two challenges facing her. She said they're difficult to speak about, yet of course there is a great need to speak about them. When we experience something profound we need to express it – whether we express it in words or in actions or in music or in art or in symbols – however we express it there is a need to express something profound, whether that's an emotional experience, a deep hurt, but the deepest of all interior experience is spiritual experience and therefore there is this need to express it. But of course then there's a second difficulty, because Teresa not only wants to express this, but she wants to express it intelligibly, in other words in a way that other people will understand, and in Teresa's case, that will help to teach and instruct others, so that's an even bigger difficulty. The consequence is that the more one tries to make one's explanation intelligible, the further away it is from the experience itself. So in order to give an explanation that is in some way intelligible, that other people are going to recognise and make sense of, one has to recognise that one is quite a distance away from the experience.

As I mentioned yesterday, this document was written a little over a year before she will write her *Interior Castle* and one can see already so much of the thinking that will go into the *Interior Castle* already here, we could say, in nucleus. The seeds are here, particularly of the Fourth and Sixth Dwelling Places. Most of this document is taken up with the material she will cover in both of those dwelling places with a little bit of the fifth, but not that much. We can see what she is doing: she is going to those places that are most difficult to explain, the most difficult of experiences, that's what she's trying to get across here.

We left yesterday, looking at what is in her *Fourth Dwelling Place*: the growing in love, the deep listening that the person now is gradually becoming aware of. On this feast of Martha and Mary she speaks about these two, what might seem contradictions, yet they're not, of deep contemplative listening and service, and both of these happening together in the person and her struggle to understand this and her conversation with St Francisco de Borgia.

Now I want to look at the type of prayer she speaks about in the *Fifth Dwelling Place*, that of Union. It is this deeper prayer that she goes into. *The intellect is as though in awe, the will loves more than it understands, but it doesn't understand in a describable way whether it loves or what it loves.* The person knows they're loving, the person knows that love is going deeper, but can't explain it, can't put words on

what it is that the person loves or how it is that the person understands that they love. The *Fifth Dwelling Place* is probably the part of the story that Teresa finds most difficult to put into words. Why is it so difficult? It is so difficult because it is the mysterious work of God that is taking place. The *Fifth Dwelling Place* is the place of change and transformation, but that is brought about by God, therefore the person is being brought more and more into the unfamiliar, into the new, into the mysterious, is being taken beyond anything they have known or understood before now. *The soul*, she said, *might be more occupied in what it enjoys*. The soul, the inner world is happy, is at peace, but the effect it is having upon the person is very bewildering. But there is something else also that keeps happening, and this is how we know it is authentically of God. She said: *by the wealth of humility and other virtues and desires left in the soul one discerns the great good that comes to one through this favour*. So, great good is coming to the person though the person doesn't know where from, or how, or what is going on. But note the three things that she picks out: the wealth of humility – humility is always a sign of closeness to God; whenever a person authentically experiences God there is a growth in humility and the other virtues; they are becoming a better person in all sorts of different ways. And when Teresa comes to writing the *Fifth Dwelling Place* a little over a year later, she will put a very strong emphasis on love of neighbour. She doesn't show it here in this document, but that is where she will show the growing in virtue. The *Fifth Dwelling Place* is sometimes described as the dwelling place of love of neighbour because while the person cannot understand what God is doing within, though the person is aware that great change is taking place, what the person feels and expresses – this need to express – the way the person expresses this comes through love of neighbour, because love is growing. Growing in prayer is always a growing in love and we saw this when we looked at St John of the Cross and his ladder. Because it is not love in the normal human sense of the word, it will often feel and be experienced in an unfamiliar way. It may not look like love or feel like love, or one may not be conscious that it is love, but in reality it is love. *Loving without the feeling of love* is how she puts it elsewhere – having compassion without the feeling of compassion. So the person is simply doing what they are doing, almost without being aware that they are doing it with a deeper love.

So it is growing in virtue, and a third thing – so it is humility, the growing of the virtues – growing in love, and desires, these again are a gift of God. But they are desires that have now been purified, they are desires that come from spiritual maturity and ultimately they are desire for God; nothing less than God can satisfy these desires, and the person is very aware of them. So there is a sense that on the one hand there is purity and growth, but on the other hand there is a long way to go, because the closer one gets to God, the greater the sense of who God is. So the desires are growing. But, she said – and this *but* always comes in – but the union cannot be described. So what's actually happening cannot be described. What's being described are the effects or the feelings or the understanding or lack of understanding that the person is left with, but in reality what's inside cannot be described, even though she said, *the soul is given understanding, it doesn't know how it understands or how to describe it*. And, as she keeps saying over and over again, for somebody who has no experience of this, so much will make no sense, but for those who have experienced it, this will make perfect sense. They will just know what is being spoken about and that is what matters. The person who picks up Teresa's writings needing what she is writing about will see here something of who they are and what they are experiencing and

that is what's needed, more than some rational explanation, in the sense that this is OK, this is right, somebody knows what I am experiencing, somebody understands this.

The next prayer she speaks about – we're looking at paragraphs 17, 18 and 19.² Everything from now on in some way or other comes into Teresa's *Sixth Dwelling Place*. Here she is speaking about what she calls a wound: *Another type of prayer is a kind of 'wound' in which it seems as though an arrow is thrust into the heart or into the soul itself, thus the wound causes severe pain which makes the soul moan, yet the pain is so delightful the soul would never want it to go away. The pain is not in the senses, nor is the sore a physical one, but the pain lies in the interior depths of the soul without resemblance to bodily pain.* This is where it gets very difficult for us reading the writings of Teresa and so many others who are trying to speak about the interior life, because they are speaking about something that is totally outside of the physical and human domain, yet we have no other language to describe it, so we have to use human, earthly, physical language. Here she is trying to describe something in terms of being a wound, and pain, yet there is no wound, you could medically examine the person and there is no wound. The pain, she said, is not experienced in the way physical or psychological pain is felt by the senses, it isn't felt at all by any of the senses, but pain is the only word she can use, even though it doesn't resemble other kinds of pain in any way. So she speaks about pain and wound, yet a pain and a wound that bear no resemblance to any physical, psychological or any other kind of pain or wound known to humanity. But it's the limits of language. She said the experience cannot be explained save through comparisons and these are rough comparisons but she cannot speak in any other way. That's why we have to be so careful when we listen to the saints speaking about pain and suffering; what they're speaking about is very different to normal pain and suffering that we know in human life and in human experience, and language can mislead us here.

It seems this wound of love rises out of the intimate depths of the soul. Its effects are great. These wounds are like some longings for God, indescribably alive and refined. Many of you will be familiar with the text in John of the Cross's *Living Flame*, in which he is describing the charismatic gift, the particular gift of the Holy Spirit that founders receive. Obviously he is thinking about Teresa and he is speaking in terms of this wound in the deepest centre, in the deepest place within. The deepest place within is the place of meeting with God. He is using almost identical language to what Teresa is using here. We could put it another way: somebody who feels profoundly moved by the Holy Spirit feels it in the deepest place within, a place beyond description. The person becomes aware of somewhere deep within that they were not aware of before now and out of that there comes an energy, a life, an inspiration. The deepest place within is saying two things: one, is that is where God is, that is where we meet God, in our deepest centre, but also it is the place of the deepest truth of *who the person is*. So the person who responds to God, responds to the presence of God, to the call of God, to the inspiration of God, to the desires that God gives the person, is doing so authentically themselves, from the most authentic place within them, or to put it another way, from the true self, this is where one responds from, this deepest place within where these longings for God come from.

To explain it a little bit more I'd like to look at another instance when Teresa explains this a few months later, when writing a letter to her brother Lorenzo on 17th January

1577. In May of that year she would begin writing the *Interior Castle*. Lorenzo has obviously written her a letter saying that these things were happening to him and he didn't understand them. It's interesting to see how Teresa responds to her brother about the incomprehensible change that is happening in his prayer life. It is well worth going through the letters of St Teresa and picking out the letters that she writes to her favourite brother Lorenzo. They really form a course in spiritual direction. When Lorenzo returns from Peru, he very much comes under his sister's direction; he wants to live a prayer life and she becomes his director and in these letters she is directing him. In this letter, paragraph 5: *as to what you told me you experienced, I don't know what to say because it is certainly beyond what you can understand and it is the beginning of many lessons*. She does not know what to say because she is thinking of herself in that place. She said: *it's beyond what you can understand and it's also the beginning of many blessings*. So those two things go hand in hand. The less that one understands in prayer, the more that the blessings begin to be seen or when we do not understand what is happening in prayer, that's OK, look at the rest of your life, see the blessings that are there, look for the blessings. For someone who is struggling to pray or is bewildered or confused by what's happening in prayer often the most helpful thing to do is to look at the rest of your life, look at the blessings in your life and that is the sign that whatever's going on inside that can't be understood, God is doing something – just trust in God – the blessings are the signs of God's work. So it's the beginning of many blessings, she said, *if you do not lose them through your own fault*. Of course one could, but she knows Lorenzo is not going to, because he's very committed and generally a person at this stage is already very committed. She goes on to say: *I have already passed through this kind of prayer and the soul afterwards usually finds rest. It is a touch of love that is given to the soul, which you will understand if it goes on increasing. But you do say you do not understand*. So he will eventually understand, this is a touch of love that God is giving. *It is a wound caused by the love of God in the soul, one doesn't know where it comes from or how or whether it is a wound or what it is, but it feels this delightful pain that makes it complain*. 'Wound' seems to be the only word she can come up with: she is talking about something that is beyond explanation. There is another aspect to it that she tells Lorenzo about, it's another of what we might call the fruits of this, and it is what we call detachment. *For when the soul is truly touched by this love of God the love it has for creatures is taken away without any pain; I mean in such a way that the soul is no longer attached to any love*. So the attachment to others, creatures, the world, goods, anything, it's the attachment that is taken away. In other words, all love is purified when one is touched by God, all the person's other loves are set free, are purified. She said: *this doesn't come about without this love of God. The Love of God that brings this about as the love of God takes hold of a soul*. So it is the fruit of God's love, what God's love is doing. That's what it always is, it's always an act of love because that's how God works in the soul, though that love may take all kinds of different forms. It could be an unfamiliar love but it's a love that's bringing about this change that is effectively a whole new life. It's difficult to understand or explain the nature of this new life that love brings about.

That's what Teresa is learning to explain. It's one of the great gifts we have of Teresa that we have such a range of her writings in which we are shown the various learning processes that are taking place. Looking at these documents we see that she is learning how to explain this, she is learning how to put this in some better language

because she knows – whether it be her brother Lorenzo or so many people who are coming to her, speaking with her – the need that there is for understanding.

Just think back to something I said yesterday when introducing this. Teresa showed in a document she had written the importance she placed on the knowledge she had received from theologians, scripture experts and from learning; how important that was for prayer, how important it was to have a solid, well-founded theology when one prays, a right understanding. But that has to be linked with, combined with another kind of understanding and that is the understanding that comes from within, or what might be technically called mystical understanding or spiritual understanding. There are two kinds of understanding then that are being combined here in what Teresa is saying to us. All the time she is trying to express the understanding that is coming from her relationship with God, but she is using the language that comes from the other kind of understanding that theologians and books and the wealth that tradition and learning has handed on to her. And that combination is necessary, because prayer can never remain something in the head. It can never remain a theory or an idea, and on the other hand, it can never be something that we simply run away with ourselves, get carried away by. Prayer requires understanding, experience, we need to know that this is authentically God and not the work of the imagination or some phantasy that the person has taken on. So all the time she is helping her reader to understand what is taking place, to look for the signs that this is authentically of God and to express it in a way that is both intelligible, comprehensible and that is in line with the tradition that she has been taught and has received.

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26th – 30th July 2021 with Fr Matt Blake OCD**

Teresa's 'Spiritual Testimony' Part 3: Understanding our spiritual experiences

I will be reflecting upon St Teresa and this particular *Spiritual Testimony*³ that she wrote. When we think about St Teresa as a writer she is fulfilling three needs as she writes. One is the personal need, Teresa is a person of words; we know that from very early on in her life, she wrote, she read, she was never happy unless she had a new book: words, words, words. She needed words; to read words, write words, express herself in words. Now when she is dealing with the most profound of human and spiritual experiences, the need to express and the need to express in words is very strong and challenging. She has a profound personal need to express. Secondly, and this story goes right through her life, she has a need to be able to explain to her spiritual directors and confessors and the learned men, the theologians she is consulting and this is the constant question: *Is this right?* That was the question that hung over her all the time, is what she is experiencing right? And the third goal of her writing is to teach. She is a natural teacher and she has been teaching throughout her life and she is always teaching prayer and always has in her mind, how can she help others? And that isn't just a natural ability, as we have seen over and over again, the deeper her prayer life goes, and she tells us this so many times, especially when she is describing a new stage or a development of her prayer life. The need to help souls, the need to help others, the need to share this with others is so great and it's coming from that spiritual life that she is living within.

In the particular part that we're looking at, she's dealing with the most difficult experiences. I am reluctant to use the word rare, because these experiences are not as rare as we might think. Certain aspects of these experiences might be very rare and very personal to certain individuals and Teresa herself tells us this, many people have experiences of God, God is always communicating himself to his people, but it's our inability to recognise this or our closing our minds to it that can cause problems. So the experiences she is describing, or attempting to describe, she would say are quite common, but people do not recognise them. God is not tight fisted with his gifts; he is always communicating his gifts. So now she brings us to a number of experiences and she gives them various titles: *union* we have already come across, *interior quiet*, *interior peace*, *rapture*, *suspension*, *transport*, *the flight of the spirit*, *an impulse*. There are various different words traditionally labelling certain experiences of prayer, not always clear or easy to understand, and why? For the same reason as I gave this morning, but now at a much deeper level, God is communicating himself, God is giving something and doing something in the deepest centre of the person. But what the person deals with and experiences is not an experience of God in itself, or what God is doing in itself, but the effects of this are sometimes very confusing and disconcerting, and the whole body, mind, of the person can be affected by this. Sometimes Teresa said this was just for an instant, sometimes for longer. But that never makes the experiences physical or psychological experiences; they are always spiritual experiences.

To illustrate what I'm saying, I will work from a passage in the gospel reading this coming Sunday.⁴ We have a statement there that God gave them bread from heaven,

the *manna* in the desert. Now that is bread from heaven, it's not earthly, it's not of this world, it's always spiritual, yet the people have to go and collect it, grind it and bake it and eat it, and it physically nourishes them and sustains their physical lives, yet it remains spiritual, it is a spiritual reality, it is of heaven, of God, it remains a gift of God, it remains a spiritual experience, though it affects and enriches and nourishes the physical. And the kind of experiences Teresa is speaking about are so profound and so totally overwhelming that they affect her whole physical being in different ways. But that's not what the experience is and if that's not understood it can then give rise to so much misunderstanding. *Because it is the effects that matter*, she said, *and the effects left in the soul are great and there's a forgetfulness of self in the desire that so tremendous a Lord and God be known and praised.* So that's a key sign of spiritual growth: a forgetfulness of self, of any focusing upon the self, any self-centredness. In other words, it is a growing in love, to use Teresa's famous expression: *a love that has no self-centredness whatsoever in it.* So love is growing; that's always a sign, forgetfulness of self and a great desire – and I mentioned desires this morning, this growing in desires – all the desires are focussed on God, and *the desire is that so tremendous a Lord and God be known and praised.* Let others know this, that's why Teresa is writing, that's why Teresa is sharing this, that desire is there in whatever way it can be fulfilled.

In my opinion, she said, *if the suspension* – and that's the particular gift she is speaking about here – *is from God, the soul cannot remain without a deep awareness of its inability to do anything there and of its great misery and ingratitude for not having served him, who solely out of his goodness grants it so wonderful a favour.* So the soul has not earned this, this is not a reward. Its inability to do anything, its helplessness is because the divine, the spiritual is so much stronger than the human. Everything physical, everything of this world is just weakness in comparison with this other world that the person has somehow in some mysterious way been touching into.

Then she goes on to other experiences: *courage is necessary because God is taking the person.* But what all of this is saying is that there is no limit to what God can do in a person or the effects of what God is doing in a person. The person's life has changed, the person lives a life that's beyond their understanding, yet there is a knowledge of God, she said, being communicated, *some knowledge the Lord gives in the soul's intimate depths that makes it seem to the soul that its higher part is being carried* – it's being carried into another world. God is communicating with us all the time and it is this new way of hearing that I mentioned earlier that is bearing fruit, is enabling the person to become more attuned to what God is doing, yet it always remains something beyond the person's understanding and it becomes more and more beyond the person's understanding. This is the opposite of how things work at a human level – with any human enterprise, the more one learns about it, the more experience one acquires, the greater is one's understanding of whatever it might be. In the spiritual realm it's the opposite, the more experience one has, the further one goes; the deeper one goes, the less one understands. In the early stages the person thinks they understand things about the spiritual life and thinks that they know what needs to be done and what this is and that is, but the further on they go, the less they understand, because they are entering deeper and deeper into a mystery. With any human science, any science of this world, the person is learning about something that is within the world's orbit and the human orbit, whereas when it comes to the divine, the person is going beyond that to a place they cannot understand, so it's the less they

can understand, because they are going into a deeper mystery, but at the same time there is a deeper peace, a sense that this is right, this is OK. The kind of courage Teresa speaks about here is a God-given gift to go with this, to stay with it. *So courage is necessary*, she said, *for the soul to surrender itself into the arms of the Lord to go wherever he may want to bring it.* And that is of course the great mystery here. Teresa is explaining this from her own experience, from what she has learned and how it has been for her, but she knows that other people have come as far or further than she goes, but their experience of it is going to be very different: how they will hear God and feel him, or not, experience him, or not, will be very different. What will be similar will be the effects. We have seen this over and over again, there will be a similarity there but no spiritual life follows some set pattern; that is the way of the world; the spiritual is beyond every pattern. God relates to every person individually, personally, and so the person is always being taken into the unknown. This is entering unknown territory, and no matter how well we might know Teresa or John of the Cross's descriptions, what it will be for each one of us is going to be different, but the outcome will be the same. This is what Teresa calls the virtues, the growing in love, selflessness etc.

Let's hear a little bit of what she says here: *The virtues, in my opinion, are left much stronger from this experience.* Whenever a person grows in virtue, becomes a better person, that's a result of God's work and now that's taken to a very high level. *For the soul desires and devotes itself more entirely to understanding the power of this great God in order to fear and love him. Without our being able to resist, he carries the soul away. Indeed as its Lord, it has led to a deep repentance for having offended him and fright at how I dared to offend such great Majesty, an intense longing that no one offend him, but that all praise him. I think those extraordinary desires for the salvation of souls and the taking part in this work and that God might be praised as he deserved must have come from this experience.* These are the desires that are with Teresa over all these years, that get deeper and stronger, and now she can see that they're not coming from her, but from her experience with God. That's what's preoccupying her all this time. She words it so well here: *extraordinary desires*, she said, *for the salvation of souls – that people will know God, will enter a relationship with God – and taking part in this work.* She wants to take part in this work in whatever way, and of course her books and her teaching and prayer, everything is part of this work – and *that God be praised as he deserves.* Those three things, they come from the experience of God, they come from what God has done within.

Then she uses two images: the flame, the fire – a much used image by John of the Cross, but Teresa also uses it. The flame, that is the Holy Spirit, giving out flames, giving out light. Another very Teresian image is of the bird, the little bird, or as she will describe in the *Interior Castle*, it will be the little butterfly. The bird, the butterfly – to be able to fly – the image of flight because the spirit flies, the spirit comes in the form of a dove. *It seems that that little bird, the spirit, escapes from the misery of the flesh and the prison of this body, and thus it can be more occupied in what the Lord gives it.* That deep inner freedom that she's all the time longing for and trying to express: we can fly, there are no limits, aim high. Over and over again she's saying this to people in her spiritual advice to them: don't think we're destined for something small, or limited. If we are children of God, if we are made in the image and likeness of God, if we can speak and listen to God, if God communicates with us, if God pays all this time and attention to us, why do we limit ourselves, why do we

put ourselves down, why do we think we can do so little? And it's a theme Teresa returns to over and over again, and now more so than ever. It's not coming from pride or presumption, it's coming from a place of deep humility, it's recognising the truth that what God has created us for and destined us for is something far greater than what we ourselves think, or where our minds or our bodies limit us to.

Then she goes on to another aspect of this: *All of what I am speaking about here* – she will expand this much more when she writes her *Interior Castle*, in fact she will devote eleven chapters to it in the *Sixth Dwelling Place*. Here she is including only a short part of this document because we know that she feels the need to explain this, but really is struggling to. Put simply, in the *Sixth Dwelling Place* and in this document Teresa is trying to explain to people what it means to live human life as in this world before the face of God, to live human life experiencing God, having strong experiences of God. Those experiences are generally going to take two forms: one being an experience in some way of the presence of God, of the action of God in one's life, of the words of God, of the grace of God and the effects of the direct experience of God. But the other part is going to be about experiencing God's absence, or experiencing what simply appears to be rejection by God or distance from God. That is something that we find over and over again in Teresa and John, we find it in so many different places. Just to give a little bit of what she says here – we will find it expanded in the *Sixth Dwelling Place* in the first and the last chapter, different aspects each time, but in the first chapter it is much more systematic. Here it is not systematic but perhaps it's much closer to what her experience was. The *Sixth Dwelling Place* describes it as the most difficult place a human being could find themselves in in this world: but God is here, he's right here with you, you think he's not, but he is. In the last chapter God is absent, but of course he's not actually absent at all, he's present, but what the person is experiencing is an absence.

She puts it here in this way: *But suddenly there comes to it a remembrance of its separation from God or some word appears that refers to this separation.* Suddenly in the midst of having profound mystical experiences of God, she's separated from God. *This remembrance is so powerful, she said, and has such force that in an instant the soul seems beside itself.* And of course it is so devastating because the person is now so absorbed and transformed by the love of God, and then in an instant realizes that it is separated from God – to be separated from the one I love is devastating. *The fact is that it seems everything the soul understands then adds to its pain and that the Lord doesn't want it to profit in its entire being from anything else, nor does it appear to be alive, it seems to be in so great a solitude and so forsaken by all, that this abandonment cannot be described in writing.* It's abandonment beyond any kind of human abandonment. Things here are very deeply felt and very real, so feeling abandoned by God is beyond all other abandonments and it also means that the person also feels abandoned by everybody and everything. Teresa describes it sometimes in her writings, this profound abandonment, and yet of course it is a profound experience of God, because the power of God is so great that the human being can neither sense the presence or absence because the power of God is so strong. So this sense of being abandoned she's trying to express here cannot be described in writing, she said. *For the whole world and its affairs give it pain and no created thing provides it with company, nor does it want any company, but only the Creator, it only wants God and it sees that having such company is impossible. It only wants God* – therefore it is praying, this person is praying because the person wants God, that's prayer, that's

profound prayer even if the person thinks that they're not praying. So often people think *I can't pray*; that itself is a prayer, to feel one can't pray. To feel that God is absent, that is a prayer, because if one really was cut off from God one wouldn't even have a sense of God's absence. To have a sense of God's absence is a sign that one has a very strong sense of God's presence – you can't have one without the other. To feel God's absence so profoundly is a sign of a very close relationship with God, it's not a sign of the opposite. When a person feels God's absence, when a person feels abandoned by God, that's a sign that this is a person in a profound relationship with God. The feelings are human reactions to whatever is happening: physical, psychological, emotional reactions, they're not in themselves anything spiritual. The spiritual is much more powerful because God doesn't go away, God doesn't take back his gifts.

It doesn't know what to do with itself and from time to time God gives it a knowledge of himself in a strange and indescribable way, so that it might see what it is missing. There's almost a sense that God was playing games with the person, but that's not how God works. The person is shown just how abandoned they are, just how far away they are, because of course it is showing how near they are, but the person isn't able to absorb that, see that, at this stage. There's no knowledge on earth, at least of what I have received, equal to this divine knowledge. So something is going on here that is so totally beyond anything that human beings can experience. However, the effects are still always positive, it leaves the greatest effects and improvement in the soul. So an experience of God's absence, when looked at, actually shows that God must be here, because this person is a good person, this person is doing good. And again, she said, she has to turn to the learned men to explain this to her, and this time the person she mentions is John of Avila, who is now also a canonised saint and Doctor of the Church. She turns to him for advice on this: why is it that a human being can be experiencing the greatest sense of being cut off from God, that God is absent, that they are totally unable to pray, that they are totally unable to feel any kind of sense that they are at one with God, and yet that person is able to do the greatest of work and be able to be very helpful to other people and be able to clearly be a good person: charitable, loving, caring, but with no sense themselves that they are doing any good or that it is bearing any fruit?

This is an enormous paradox in a person who is actually very close to God. Teresa struggles to work out is this true, is this real? And John of Avila writes yes, and affirms that this is right, this is true. We can see that Teresa is grappling with the deepest contradictions and paradoxes of the spiritual life. The things that are going to cause people difficulties in their spiritual journey, she has experienced them – not only has she experienced them, but more profoundly and more vividly than most people do. Most people haven't got the kind of awareness of these things that Teresa had but God in his wisdom has given her the gift of this insight, that she can assure us and help us when we need this, because she knows there are many people who have experiences like this, in one way or other. People really long for God who are in reality very close to God, and are doing great work with great generosity and self-sacrifice and yet think they are doing nothing, think that God isn't with them, think that their prayer has no value or they think that they are unable to pray. They cannot see the good that they are receiving and the good that they are giving and that is what Teresa here in her writing is coming to understand herself and is communicating to us.

Transcribed from the recorded talk: https://youtu.be/mywOGnFi_GM

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St John of the Cross on the place of Jesus Christ in the spiritual life

Today I will be looking at a passage from St John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 2, Chapter 22, which is one of the key passages in his writings regarding the place of Jesus Christ in the spiritual life. I'm looking this morning to complete what we have been reflecting upon over the past few days. We have been reflecting on Teresa and John's teachings on the process or journey of spiritual growth and transformation that happens in the life of prayer and contemplation, looking at different texts from both saints. This journey is always one accompanied by Jesus Christ, following Jesus Christ, living the life that Jesus himself lived and it is always a journey rooted in and enriched by the scriptures, and that's what I want to spell out today, both now and in the afternoon in a different way.

We could begin by reminding ourselves of the very beginning of the Carmelites, the Rule of Carmel, those people who settled on Mount Carmel, that biblical mountain, to live a life of prayer in the land of the bible, in the land of Jesus. At the heart of the Rule of St Albert is the injunction: *meditating day and night on the law of the Lord*.⁵ What that means is living with the scriptures as a companion. It's not so much meditating in the sense of a mental exercise or some serious study, though undoubtedly they did that, it's much more about being accompanied by the scriptures, living with the scriptures, breathing the air of the scriptures, absorbing the atmosphere of the scriptures. And the other phrase is *living in allegiance to Jesus Christ*.⁶ It's Christian life that we're living, the life of Jesus Christ, the following of Jesus Christ, discipleship of Jesus Christ, a life that is lived as closely as possible to the life that Jesus Christ lived.

So with this background, I want to make some comments about this very well known chapter in St John of the Cross's writings. The context of this chapter in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is that John is now writing about faith, what it means to live in faith. Remember I mentioned a few days ago the three garments that a person is wearing, the person living a mature, Christian life is wearing these three garments and the inner garment is the white garment of faith. So here in this section of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* John is spelling out in detail what it means to live by faith, because for John that is the only means there is to communion with God. We can only speak with God through faith, we can only relate with God through faith, it is faith that enables us to relate with God. So what is the right way to relate to God? That is what John is spelling out here and going into great detail, because that's so essential to living a true, right, healthy spiritual life – to know the right way to relate to God.

We can imagine John writing this, because the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, we are told by witnesses, was written over a long period of time, probably over a number of years and may have originated as conferences he was giving and teachings he had been giving and therefore people are coming back and asking him questions. In this particular section he was addressing what was a major issue in his time and we see this very much in Teresa's experience as well. People receiving visions, hearing words, having direct experience of God and Teresa gives us an enormous amount of

teaching on this and John in his writings refers the reader to Teresa. John in his writings puts it so strongly that we shouldn't be seeking these things: visions, revelations, locutions, all these things that people prized very highly in John's day, because the true Christian road is a journey of faith, living by faith and not by extraordinary experiences. And so that's what John is writing but then he says a question arises and that gives him the opportunity to give us this very important reflection. If we read the Bible we find that people like Moses, Abraham, Elijah, Gideon, David and Nathan spoke directly to God, went to God and asked God questions and God responded to them and God seemed to invite this and want this and praised them for consulting him. Why can't we do the same? Why does God not work like that in us? And this gives John the opportunity to spell out for us the place of Jesus Christ in the spiritual life. What John is saying is that the coming of Jesus Christ has changed how human beings relate with God. The Old Testament speaks about a way of relating with God that is as yet incomplete. We could perhaps put it like this: that the Old Testament is like a long lesson in people learning how to relate with God. Gradually over time, over centuries, a vast wealth of experience is built up in how to relate with God and that is brought to completion in Jesus Christ. Only with the coming of Jesus Christ do we really learn how to hear God and how to speak with him. As John puts it, *Before the gospels, faith was not yet perfectly grounded. It was only when the law of the gospels was established that faith was perfectly grounded.* Obviously faith goes back to Abraham, he is our father in faith who first related with God personally.

So faith is there and is developing, but it is faith in Jesus Christ that is the most developed faith. *Only with the coming of Jesus Christ is the fullness of what faith is revealed. Everything before that, all the answers that God gave, all the visions that the prophets had – locutions, revelations concerning the mysteries of our faith – are matters touching or leading up to it. But now, he said, in this era of grace (this comes at the beginning of John's gospel) he gave them grace and truth – that's what the Word coming into the world gave. Now that faith is established through Christ and the gospel law made manifest, there's no reason for enquiring of him in this way or expecting him to answer as before.* – and here's the important statement that's fundamental to how John of the Cross sees Jesus, it's taken straight from John's gospel – *In giving us his son, his only Word for he possesses no other, he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word, and he has no more to say.* The Word, John's gospel tells us, the Word that comes into this world, the Word that becomes flesh. Or as another famous phrase of John of the Cross tells us: *God the Father spoke only one word ever, only one word and that word was his Son and that Word he spoke in eternal silence.* What a wonderful phrase from his *Sayings of Light and Love*. Everything is said in Jesus Christ, everything we would ever want, long for, is there in Jesus Christ.

*Fix your eyes on Jesus Christ*⁷ – that's the life of the Christian. He quotes the beginning of the *Letter to the Hebrews*⁸ that in ancient times God spoke in many and varied ways through the prophets but now he speaks through his Son. All these varied, other ways of speaking were pointing to Jesus; everything is contained in Jesus. And so John says: *to question God, or to receive some other revelation or something else would not only be foolish behaviour, but would also be offending him by not fixing their eyes entirely on Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty.*⁹ So to be expecting something else is in a sense a rejection of Jesus Christ. .

John now gives us a wonderful passage which he puts on the lips of God the Father:¹⁰ (John knows the bible so well, from beginning to end and this passage helps us to see not only how John sees Jesus, but also his understanding of the scriptures):

God answers as follows: 'If I have already told you all things in my word, my Son, and if I have no other word, what answer or revelation can I now make that would surpass this? Fasten your eyes on Jesus alone because in him I have spoken and revealed all, and in him you will discover even more than you ask for and desire. You are making an appeal for locutions and revelations that are incomplete, but if you turn your eyes to him, you will find them complete. If I spoke before, it was to promise Christ, if they questioned me, their enquiries were related to their petitions and longings for Christ in whom they were to obtain every good, as is now explained in all the doctrine of the evangelists and apostles. So everything that he has ever said before, everything in the entire bible, is about Jesus Christ and everything now that God would say to us is about Jesus Christ – it's the gospels, it's the teaching of the gospels.

(It's interesting that we can see this is borne out in the experience of Teresa, whom people often think is different to John of the Cross. People who have examined Teresa's revelations, visions and locutions, who have meticulously gone through her writings, agree that everything Teresa says she heard is to be found in the scriptures. She never said she heard something that's not already in the scriptures; all her hearing – though she never hears anything in a physical sense – is always the word of God, it's always an entering into the word of God, therefore it is always about Jesus Christ, it's never something else and the Jesus Christ that she sees is always the risen Lord, it's the gospels, it's never anything else).

John continues in Chapter 22: *So fix your eyes on him then and you will discern hidden in him the most secret mysteries and wisdom and wonders of God. And he quotes here from St Paul's letter to the Colossians¹¹: In the Son of God are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God. – such an important line for John of the Cross, that in Jesus all the treasures are hidden, there's nothing else we could want that's not hidden in Jesus Christ. If you want to go further into that, there's a beautiful text in the *Spiritual Canticle* [Stanza 37:4] in which John again quotes that line from St Paul and goes into greater detail: *Those rich treasures that are Jesus Christ: Jesus, he said, is like an abundant mine with many recesses of treasures. No matter how deep individuals go, they never reach the end or bottom, but every recess has new veins and new riches; and, all these riches and marvels that the holy doctors have discovered and saintly souls understood in this earthly life there's yet so much more to be discovered.* So everything we could ever want is in Jesus Christ.*

John then goes on to teach how this is put, quoting the words of Jesus dying on the cross, *It is consummated, it is finished.* John interprets these as saying that everything that God would want to say is now finished. But of course it must be interpreted and gone deeply into, and this mine that is Jesus Christ is never exhausted, there is more wisdom and understanding to be discovered. We need guidance and help, and our spiritual lives, our lives of prayer and contemplation are always an entering ever more deeply into this treasury, into this mine that is Jesus Christ. John of the Cross has the guidance to do that.

There are four things:

Firstly, *fix your eyes on Jesus Christ*, Jesus Christ walks beside us, is with us.

Secondly, the Gospels, the whole Word of God, the scriptures, they are the guide. There isn't a page, a paragraph in St John of the Cross's writings in which we don't find the scriptures quoted, referred to, or the imagery of the scriptures used.

Thirdly, the Church, which is of course the body of Christ in this world. The Church is the authentic interpreter of everything.

Fourthly, the ministers of the Church, those who are our guides and teachers.

God speaks through all of these. This is how God speaks with us now. This is how we commune with God. But John then digs back into the scriptures and shows us that this has always been the way, but going back into the Old Testament, God spoke not just directly but also through people, he gives the example of Moses and Aaron. God speaks through people and human reason and therefore whatever God spoke had to be interpreted by human beings – even the prophets did not act unless the word was interpreted by people. And so it is with the Church, the word has to be interpreted in order that it be rightly understood. So these are the means by which we commune with God: Jesus Christ; the gospels, the word of God; the Church; and the ministers and teachers, the saints and doctors of the Church and all of these people who help us to come to a deeper understanding of the word of God. John shows us through the scriptures how this has always been. *God is so pleased that the rule and direction of human beings be through other humans and that a person be governed by natural reason.* So, human beings and natural reason, God works through these. *that he definitely does not want us to bestow entire credence on his supernatural communications or be confirmed in their strength and security until they pass through this human channel of the mouth of another human person.*

We can see how St Teresa puts this into practice so well in her life – she would hear the Lord telling her to do something but she wouldn't do it unless her confessor told her to, and if her confessor told her to do something different to what the Lord told her, she would do what the confessor told her, not what the Lord told her. But then, she said, the Lord would change the mind of the confessor and he would come to tell her to do what God wanted her to do. She would never act on what she hears God telling her to do; she would only act on what human beings tell her, because God speaks through the Church. She would be confirmed by what God tells her within, what he inspires her, but human reason and the voice of the Church will always be her main guide.

That's how God speaks with us now and for John of the Cross this is so important. We cannot live the spiritual life without coming to know Jesus well, listening to his word. If you want to hear this put more strongly, go to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* Book 2 Chapter 7. Observing how Jesus lived and listening to his word, because, John tells us that Jesus is not well known, even by those who consider themselves his friends. So, *fix your eyes upon Jesus Christ*, that is the most sure road of the spiritual life and do not look for extraordinary or special favours or gifts from God because, he said, among the many reasons – one could be led astray, one could misinterpret these – but also, he said, they are not signs of holiness. The only true sign of holiness is

faith, living by faith, and, as we have seen particularly through St Teresa, growing in the virtues, growing in love, they are the sure signs that one is on the right road, not visions or revelations or anything like that. But then John at the end of this chapter puts in a surprising paragraph – but if God deals with a human being in a different way, that’s God’s choice. He advises spiritual directors very strongly: *Spiritual fathers should not show severity, displeasure or scorn in dealing with these souls. Since God is leading them by these means there is no reason to oppose it, or become frightened or scandalised over it. The spiritual father should instead proceed with much kindness and calm. He should give these souls encouragement and the opportunity to speak about their experience.*

Here we see a side of John of the Cross that people sometimes don’t see. John is very strong in his principles and he is for one reason in particular and that is because we are dealing with the most important thing in our lives. The most important thing in any human being’s life is their relationship with God, there’s nothing more important than that in any of our lives, therefore we have got to tread with extreme care and respect for what God is doing and how God works. It is tragic to go astray, go wrong, take a wrong route, etc. So for John the principles are very important: this is the right road, what one should follow, but John knows that people are different, and that God’s ways of relating with people are different, so God is never limited by any principles that we might come up with. So God is going to work in people in a variety of different ways and John shows great flexibility. He can be strong on principles but be very flexible and broad minded when it comes to individual people and that’s the greatness of John’s writings and teachings, it’s the flexibility, the broadness in how he approaches people. He says over and over again that everyone should take from this whatever is right for them and not be restricted to any particular teaching that might not be right for a particular person or might not be what they need at a particular time. So there should be great flexibility and openness in dealing with individuals and how individuals approach this, because God has a unique relationship with all of us. So John is very strong in his principles but very flexible in the application of them and very understanding when it comes to people. Therefore, whoever it is and however they are living, whatever their situation, John’s advice always is to give encouragement, affirmation, help, support, to everyone. Never condemn, never criticize, never show displeasure, he said, that’s so important, even if someone sees things in a very different way, be very encouraging and accommodating.

That’s how John works with people. His principles are very strong: Jesus Christ, *fix your eyes on Jesus Christ*, walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, live a life as Jesus Christ lived, but know that Jesus Christ, that God, the Holy Spirit is working in each one of us in a very unique and personal way.

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**Secular Carmelite Retreat at Kensington
26th – 30th July 2021 with Fr Matt Blake OCD**

From the beginning our hearts must be set on the goal

This is the tenth and final talk of our five-day retreat. To conclude I will make an overview of what we have been talking about. Throughout this week we have been focussing on St Teresa and St John of the Cross and looking at aspects of how they present to us the spiritual journey, the process of growing, purification, change, transformation that this entails. One of the principal reasons why both of them write about this and want people to know comes from their conviction that no matter where we are or might think we are in the spiritual life, it is very important to have our hearts and our minds focussed on the end of the road, the goal. The most important thing right at the beginning is to know the goal. Where are we going to? Where are we setting out for? Sometimes people will say things like: I just want to have enough for going on for now, I'm happy with what I've got. Teresa and John would say no, it's the goal, the end of the road, that's what one's heart must always be set upon.

I want to read one text by Teresa from the *Way of Perfection*¹²: *Now returning to those who want to journey on this road and continue until they reach the end, which is to drink from this water of life, I say that how they are to begin is very important, in fact all-important. They must have a great and very resolute determination to persevere until reaching the end. Come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road or even if they don't have courage for the trials that are met or if the whole world collapses.* That's a very powerful statement and it is given by Teresa with great conviction. This is the conviction behind everything that she teaches, that she writes.

I want to pick out a few things from it: She's writing for those, she said, who want to journey on this road. We have to really want this – it's not enough to simply wander onto this road, keeping one's options open: well I might go a little bit down this road, see what it's like, whether I like it or not. One has to really want it and that really wanting it has been put there by God, is a gift of God, a call of God. She's writing for people who really want this. One has to really want it and not only want to walk this road but to continue until one reaches the end – not half way, not 75%, not even 99% – it has to be 100%. And equally John of the Cross would tell us this in all kinds of different ways. This is so important to our understanding of their teaching: continue to the end, because the end, she tells, is to drink from the water of life. That's from the story in John's gospel of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman, and Jesus says to her: *I will give you living water that will well up inside you to eternal life.* That water that gives life, life that will well up inside her from the deepest place within her. *Give me that water,* the woman says to Jesus. That's Teresa's prayer; time and time again she speaks about this and how important this living water is to her and how important that gospel episode is to her. Water, such an important image in her writings, because this is quite literally a matter of life and death. This is what it means to live; this is what life is – to want to live. Teresa is a woman who wants to live, is determined to live. So, to continue to the end, which is where life is, it's a determined, conscious

choice for life. Then she says *I say that how they are to begin is very important, in fact all-important.* That's critical to Teresa's whole teaching – how we begin, the attitude of life that a beginner has. We see the same in John of the Cross, he speaks so often of beginners, but we might be inclined to think that the one he considers to be a beginner might be quite different from what we might consider a beginner to be. What he would consider a beginning to be would be a mature adult decision to commit oneself to this. A definitive step in one's life, the beginning of taking the spiritual life seriously, and these are the people Teresa is speaking about here, it's very important how we begin.

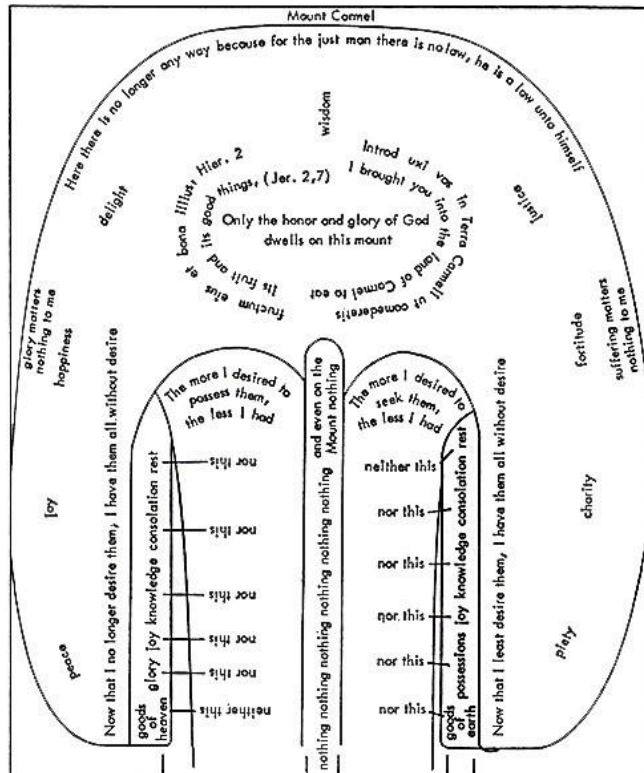
Earlier in this book she is speaking to her sisters in her first community. This book is meant to be about prayer and the starting point in what she teaches them about prayer is not how to do it, but rather the starting point is two things. One is the purpose of prayer – we must know that this is a very important undertaking, in fact so much so that this is what's going to change the world, this is what the world most needs, this is the greatest service we could give to the world. So a person needs to begin with aiming big, we're going to get to the end of this road, we're going to recognise the importance of the undertaking. It's big, the biggest undertaking of a person's life. That's where she begins: the world is in flames, we've got to do something about it, this is what we're going to do, we're going to pray and that prayer will change the world. So convinced is she of that, and rightly so, because when people pray, when people form a community of prayer they are quite literally transforming how human beings live their lives, they are bringing the life of God into this world. And the second starting point she gives is, put very simply: *What kind of people are we?* It's not a matter of I deciding to do something. To pray, I've got ask myself the question *What kind of a person am I, what kind of a life am I living?* Because one thing is absolutely certain when somebody sets out on a life of prayer, and that is that the person is going to be changed by the experience. *This is going to change me forever; this is going to change my life.*

We've seen over the past few days how both St Teresa and John of the Cross write about this journey, the kind of change that takes place, and it could be summed up in that the person grows in love. This is a journey of love, of growing and maturing in love. Love totally transforms the person, changes the person from the deepest place within. The change that love brings about is never superficial, it is always profound change. Love doesn't change us from outside; it changes us from within, from the deepest place within. So, what are we setting out to do and what kind of people are we? That's the important starting point for prayer. So how we begin, she said, is so important. This determination – a word that Teresa loves – to persevere to the end. Whatever may happen, even if one dies even if the world collapses, nothing is going to throw this person off course, because this person is engaging in the most important enterprise they could ever engage in. Nothing is more important than this; therefore nothing is going to throw this person off-course.

If we were to go to John of the Cross and say to him *I feel called to live a life of prayer, I want to go deeper, I want to live this life that you are speaking about, that you are teaching.* What might he do, what might he say? Most likely he would take out a piece of paper, postcard size, and he would draw for us his sketch of Mount Carmel, putting in the various bits of teaching into it. He would do that for the reasons I have been speaking about, that we have a visual image in front of us. The

person takes this around with them, looks at it, spends time with it. This is where we're going to, this is what it is about. And central to it, at the top – that's where he wants us to be looking at, not the bottom, the centre – and right at the centre at the top are the words *only the honour and glory of God dwell on this mountain*. That says everything about what it means

ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF TERMS USED IN ST. JOHN'S ORIGINAL DRAWING.



And if we live at that place only the honour and glory of God is alive, dwells in this place. In this place of meeting with God only the honour and glory of God lives, that's the water that Teresa is speaking about, that is life, that's the source of life, that's where life comes from. Here God comes first, here God is everything. When a human being meets God, the honour and glory of God is there. So that's where Carmelite life is, that's where Carmel is lived, in that place of meeting with God, that place where only the honour and glory of God lives, nothing else lives here, everything else is dead, this is life.

And around it he puts a passage from Jeremiah¹³ *I brought you into the land of Carmel to eat its fruit and its good things*. I brought you here, you haven't come here, God has brought you in. This is totally a work of God; you are where God has brought you to be, you are what God has transformed you into, or enabled you to grow into or become. And this land of Carmel, the atmosphere of Carmel, the environment of Carmel – to be brought into this privileged special place, environment, life-giving place, to eat of its fruits and its good things, to be nurtured and nourished here. Carmel is a place of nurturing, of nourishment, of going to the waters of life, drinking from the waters of life. Carmel is a place where we can all grow and flourish.

Perhaps John of the Cross expresses this best in his *Spiritual Canticle*. Quite apart from all the wisdom that is shared in that *Canticle* – that poem and that commentary, that wonderful piece of work – at its most fundamental, the *Canticle* is a whole world, a whole environment that we're brought into, that we can soak ourselves in and be absorbed in and draw life from all the different aspects of it. It's like a complex world, but a world where God is given honour and glory. It sings, it celebrates what it means to live at that place where love of God transforms us, or what it is to sing that

love song, that love song that's there in the soul. So, *to eat of this fruit and its good things*, John expresses that so well in the *Canticle* for us. But here in this line from Jeremiah he sums up what Carmel is about and he wants the person at the very beginning to have this before their eyes. This is what it is about – nothing less than this. And then all around this at the top of the mountain are the wonderful things that the person is living, what it really means to live. The very top line: *Here there is no longer any way, because for the just man there is no law, he is a law unto himself*. In other words you're just living now; you are yourself. The person has become totally themselves or totally transformed in God. There's no need for anything else, they have life, the person has it to the full, they are a law unto themselves, that's what real maturity is. This is somebody who is living totally by the will of God, therefore they need no rules, they need no structures or systems, they simply are, the person just lives. And then he dots around so many aspects of this living: peace, joy, happiness, delight, piety, charity, fortitude, justice: these virtues, these attributes of God – God is all of these things in their fullness. Now the person is all of these things by participation in God, and the very central one at the top is wisdom, because wisdom is God's greatest gift, that is the greatest gift God gives, the Bible gives great store to wisdom. Also summed up very simply but very profoundly, the attitude of mind of the person: *Glory matters nothing to me, suffering matters nothing to me* – suffering and glory – neither matter because the person has both. The person has everything that they need and the journey up there is the journey of letting go of everything that does not belong in this place and that is everything that we could become attached to, everything that can limit us and compromise us. So it's *nada, nada, nada* – nothing – all the way up to the very top, it's a letting go of everything so that one is free, one is totally free.

I began this retreat by reading a prayer, the introduction to John of the Cross's *Sayings of Light and Love* and I read that prayer and commented on it. Those *Sayings of Light and Love* tell us so much about John and his method of teaching and how he sees the human being. If we were to go to him for spiritual direction – and there are several witnesses who have spoken about this – he would give us a little line, a sentence or two: *Go away and think about this, come back whenever – a week, a month, six months and we'll speak about it*. What is that saying to us? Among other things it is saying this: that John's conviction is that everything that's needed to live what he writes about is already there within. Everything that is needed to live at the top of this mountain, where *only the honour and glory of God live*, is there within the person. His role is to draw it out, in the original sense of the word to educate, to draw out of the person, not put something in, but draw out what is already there. God has already placed within the person everything that is needed to them, has already placed within the person everything that is needed for the fullness of life, and there are no exceptions to this, there are no people beyond this or for whom this does not apply. So John's conviction that it is there within; but each of these sayings is different. He won't give the same saying to everybody; he will give different ones, because what is going to draw life out of one person might be very different to what will draw life out of somebody else. Each person has to find their source of life, that's what made John such a great teacher. He had that flexibility that I spoke about this morning, which we saw in that paragraph at the end of Chapter 22 of Book 2 of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, that flexibility. He could be very firm in his convictions but very flexible and open because each person is different, each person is unique. That's why he favoured poetry over instruction and teaching, because with a poem we can each draw

what is right for us at a particular time. The same with these phrases, these sentences, short little teachings and reflections; we can draw from them whatever speaks to us, whatever is right and that is the spirit with which to read John of the Cross and Teresa and also the scriptures and the gospels and everything else, with that spirit of openness that takes us beyond what the words are saying to what God is saying, to what our hearts are saying at this moment, to what speaks to us at this moment.

Going back to my first talk, John showed us how precious words are, how a precious word can be life-giving to a person on this journey, how a precious word can change life, how the right word can fill the person up and give the courage and strength that's needed. Only in silence can we hear that word, and ultimately that word is Jesus Christ himself, spoken in eternal silence, spoken all the time in the silence that is there within us, that silence that is the deepest place within us. It's from that silence that all our life comes. It is that silence that gives us life.

So as we conclude, we pray that we may hear that word, hear that silence, that that word, that song, that silent song that is there within us may be our source of life, may give us life, may enable us to live in that place where *only the honour and glory of God lives*, in that place our lives become a song of *the honour and glory of God*, our lives sing *the honour and glory of God*.

Let us pray God's blessing upon all partaking in this retreat. May God bless us, may God give us strength, may God pour his grace into us, may God set us free, that we may live and love and be his praise and glory forever.

Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/obNC2dsXsL4>

NOTES – Talks 6 – 10

Talk 6

¹ *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila, Volume 1: Spiritual Testimonies, nos. 58 and 59*, pp. 418 – 433. translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez ODC. ICS Publications, Washington DC, 1987.

Talk 7

² *Ibid. Spiritual Testimony no. 59.* pp. 430 – 431

Talk 8

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Exodus 16:2 – 4. 12 – 15

Talk 9

⁵ Psalm 1:2; Jos 1:8, quoted in the Primitive Rule of St Albert in the section on Continual Prayer.

⁶ Rule of St. Albert, Constitutions, Local Statutes for England and Wales, Part III: 17. *Witnesses to the experience of God.*

⁷ Letter to the Hebrews 12:2

⁸ *ibid.* 1:3

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ The Ascent of Mt Carmel, Book Two, Chapter 22, para 5. *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, ICS Publications, Revised Edition 1991, page 230

¹¹ Col. 2:3

Talk 10

¹² Way of Perfection Ch. 21 para.2, *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila, Volume 2*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez ODC. ICS Publications, 1980, page 117

¹³ Jeremiah: 2:7