



PARISH OF OUR LADY & ST SIMON STOCK, KENSINGTON

## PARISH LENTEN REFLECTIONS

3<sup>RD</sup> - 31<sup>ST</sup> MARCH 2022

### *Five Carmelite Saints*



ST EDITH STEIN



ST TERESA OF AVILA



BLESSED MARIE-EUGÈNE OF THE CHILD JESUS



ST JOHN OF THE CROSS



ST ELIZABETH OF THE TRINITY

**FR MATT BLAKE OCD**

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### *Five Carmelite Saints*

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## Parish Lenten reflections with Fr Matt Blake OCD



### *First talk: ST EDITH STEIN*

The purpose is to help us to enter more deeply into this season of Lent, this sacred season, and each week I'm using one of our Carmelite saints, just drawing some reflections, always with the same purpose of helping us to live this season fruitfully. Of course we're very aware this Lent is like no other, we can say that every year, but we say it in particular with the shadow of war hanging over us and all the many other issues that face our world – and there are so many - it's not just the war, but Covid, the environment and so much else that hangs over us – the shadows that hang over us.

And today St Edith Stein is particularly appropriate. She was born in 1891 and died in 1942 in Auschwitz. She was born into a Jewish family and then became an atheist and at the age of thirty converted to Catholicism and became a Carmelite nun in 1933. She spent the last nine years of her life in Carmelite convents, both in Cologne and later in Echt in Holland.

What I would like to draw upon is a writing of hers in the last six months of her life, just some reflection she gives as introduction to her famous book on St John of the Cross, entitled *The Science of the Cross*.<sup>(1)</sup> I pick this out so it can help us live more deeply this season of Lent. The particular issue that she is focussing upon and this is how she words it: *What we have often heard and long-known 'leaves us cold.'*<sup>i</sup> I think we can all identify with that. We've been here every year of our lives, we hear the same Bible stories, we attend the same masses and liturgies and at times it just doesn't speak to us. And she is commenting about all the Christians around the world who somehow are left cold by this. She gives a reason, pinpoints the reason why we're left cold by this. She tells us that *many believers are depressed, because the facts of salvation history do not at all (or no longer) impress them as they ought and lack the strong influence on their lives that they should exert.* The facts of salvation history – the Bible, the story of Jesus Christ, the readings that we have particularly during the season of Lent, all the church's seasons, but particularly Lent, focus on the great events of salvation history: the story of the Exodus and the story of the death of Jesus Christ, these great Biblical stories of how God saves his people. They either no longer or do not impact upon the lives of people. How real are they for us? How do they impact upon our lives as we hear them? That is what Edith pinpoints as the reason why we're left cold, this is not for us what it really should be. This is not as alive as it should be.

How can we do something about this? What pointers does she give us to help us with this? She gives us three - the first one she entitles: *The Science of Christianity or the Science of the Cross*. That's a term we might find a bit off-putting and she realises

that herself, but of course it's taken from St Paul. Paul speaks about the wisdom of the Cross; the wisdom of God being revealed on the Cross. How does Edith take this, how does she take us into this? For her it is not something big, something way out there somewhere, something unobtainable, for her it is the fundamentality of our faith, it is the fundamental reality of our humanity. Again, let's hear her words: *We are dealing with a well-recognised truth*, she says, *a living, real and effective truth. It is buried in the soul like a seed that takes root there and grows, making a distinct impression on the soul, determining what it does and omits, and by shining outwardly is recognised in this very doing and omitting.* So we are speaking about something that is deep within the human being, in that deepest place within, that place that determines the choices that we make, the deepest, most profound, most personal choices that we make. That's what we're speaking about; that is the place that we go to, that is the place the Cross of Jesus Christ speaks to. The term that she uses is *it makes an imprint there.* The Cross of Jesus, Jesus upon the Cross, speaks to us in the deepest place within us, it's revealing to us the truth that's already sown there deep within; it's a seed that is nurtured and nourished by the wisdom Jesus Christ, by the wisdom of the Cross. She said: *from this living form and strength in one's innermost depths, a perspective of life arises, the image one has of God and the world, and therefore one can find expression for it in a mode of thinking, in a theory.* In other words, if we really have allowed Jesus upon the Cross to speak to our deepest selves, we have really allowed that wisdom, we have really reflected on that wisdom; then it gives us a way of seeing the world around us - God and humanity - it changes our whole perspective on life. The Cross of Jesus Christ changed how humanity sees God and sees itself. But what Edith is trying to point out to us is that this is not something strange, some new wisdom that has somehow come from somewhere - it has already been there, it has already been there in the great plan of God in creation, it is already something that we have the instinct to recognise. So that's the first pointer that she gives to us: allow the Cross to speak, to speak to our deepest selves.

Then she gives another pointer, and it's what she calls *holy realism.* Again it's a phrase that needs a certain amount of exploring; it is something that is fundamental to who we are as human beings. She says: *Holy realism has a certain affinity with the realism of the child who receives and it responds with unimpaired vigour and vitality, with uninhibited simplicity.* So it's our capacity to respond - uninhibited, with simplicity, like a child can respond, but she goes on to say that this kind of response is not a childish one but is ultimately the greatest of human maturity. The person who is living this *science of the Cross*, this way of living that Jesus Christ on the Cross shows us; that person will have a way of relating to what is happening around, responding to what it happening around them; that person will have what she calls this *holy realism.* They are able in other words to see truth, they are able to see the truth of what is happening, the truth of the other person, of themselves, of God. So the person's responses, the person's attitudes, reactions are transformed by this new way of living, of Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ who died for us on the Cross reveals to us. He has revealed to us the greatest wisdom of God, and the person who lives by that wisdom brings that wisdom to everything that she or he does, says, reacts to, responds to, decides upon, etc.

Then she goes on to give a third pointer. And here she is speaking about St John of the Cross, but she could be speaking about anybody. She says that John of the Cross was an artist; he could express this artistically - the artist: the means of expressing.

Again of course that is fundamental to Christianity, right from the beginning, all the great works of art, the beauty of how we express it, whether that be in music or in poetry or in art, in gestures of charity - however that might be, however it is expressed - the person living by this wisdom of God. The person in whose life the events of salvation history really make an impact, that person has the capacity to express it, with beauty, with clarity, in service. And she said it's not just about putting something out there, the artist doesn't just sculpt Jesus upon the Cross or paint Jesus upon the Cross - the true artist, she said, becomes that themselves. In a sense you could put it like this: they paint themselves as the picture; their lives are the artistic expression of the wisdom of Jesus Christ, the wisdom of the Cross.

So then, what Edith Stein is saying to us in very simple terms is that everything that the Bible says, everything that the gospels say, but most particularly what Jesus Christ says to us from the Cross is real, it impacts upon our lives. But more than that, we are born with, we are created with the capacity to see this, to understand it, to respond to it, to live from that place within us where it really makes an impact upon us and then our lives become an artistic expression of this, our lives communicate this, our lives somehow take on something of the power of Jesus Christ upon the Cross.

I want to finish with something that might help to perhaps illustrate this a little bit, because this might just be sounding a little bit vague. Edith, in the months leading up to her own death in the early 1940s, when her life was under great threat, being of the Jewish race living in a country occupied by Germans. How does she live it? She tells us that the Biblical figure that she relies upon, that she identifies with, is queen Esther. She identifies with that oriental queen in that book in the Bible, that queen who found herself cut off from her people but found herself interceding on their behalf before her husband the king. Edith saw herself as having this role of simply being before God, interceding before God, crying out to God on behalf of all people.

That also is what we can do in this Lent. We may feel totally helpless before what is going on in our world: *what can I do - nothing*. To that Edith Stein would respond, *that's not true*. Through prayer we can do everything, through prayer there is no limit to what we can do, prayer enables us to be everywhere and in solidarity with everyone everywhere. That's what Edith believed, that's what she continually spoke about and taught to others in the years and months leading up to her own death. It was the conviction she lived by; she recognises that most of the world do not see this or understand it, but she saw her life as bearing witness to that truth.

So I'd like to end now by praying the prayer of Esther that became so important to Edith. In a sense, her life became this prayer; it is a living demonstration of how the facts of salvation history, the scriptures, become real and personal to somebody.

#### THE PRAYER OF ESTHER (Esther: 4:17-C)

*Queen Esther took refuge with the Lord in the mortal peril, which had overtaken her. She besought the Lord God of Israel in these words:*

*My Lord, our King, the only One, come to my help for I am alone and have no helper but You and am about to take my life in my hands.*

*I had been taught from my earliest years in the bosom of my family that You, Lord, chose Israel out of all the nations and our ancestors out of all the people of all times to be your heritage for ever and that You have treated them as you promised. Remember, Lord, reveal Yourself in the time of our distress.*

*As for me, give me courage, King of Gods and Master of all power; put persuasive words into my mouth when I face the lion, change his feelings into hatred for our enemies, that the latter and all like him may be brought to their end.*

*As for ourselves, save us by Your hand and come to my help for I am alone and have no one but You, Lord. Amen*

**3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022**

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

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Notes

(1) *Introduction - The Science of the Cross*. Edith Stein. Translated by Josephine Koepfel, OCD  
ICS Publications, Washington DC. 2003.

## Parish Lenten reflections with Fr Matt Blake OCD



### ***Second talk: ST TERESA OF AVILA***

This is the second of our five talks and today I will draw from St Teresa of Avila. And there is a particular significance why St Teresa has been chosen for today, and that is because this Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> March is the fourth centenary of Teresa's canonization, which took place on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1622. Five saints were canonized in St Peter's basilica in Rome at what is sometimes described as the greatest canonization ceremony ever. There was St Isidore the Farmer, patron of Madrid; two Jesuits, St Ignatius of Loyola and St Francis Xavier, and the founder of the Oratory, the Italian St Philip Neri and St Teresa. These five greats of the spiritual life were canonized in Rome.

The most obvious thing to say about Teresa is that the reason she is canonized is that she's a woman of prayer and one of the greatest teachers of prayer in the history of Christianity. So prayer is what I want to speak about today, prayer being a very important part of Lent, of the journey that we go on in Lent. Obviously the entire Christian year is a time of prayer, but Lent particularly is a time of prayer.

And so I want to draw a few reflections on prayer from St Teresa, particularly from the early part of her *Way of Perfection*,<sup>(1)</sup> the book she wrote for her sisters in the convent in San Jose in Avila to help them with their prayer. The two fundamental points – we could say the foundation of all her teaching on prayer are these two things: one, an understanding of the enterprise, the task, that we have undertaken; and secondly, what kind of people are we? We could say that the foundation of all of Teresa's teaching on prayer, the great enterprise that has been undertaken, are based upon those two ideas. Prayer for Teresa is not just something that a person does, one activity among other activities or a fulfilment of one's religious duties or anything else, it is life itself, it is a way of living human life, it is the most true, most real, most life-giving way of living human life, and not only that – and very importantly for St Teresa – it is the greatest contribution a human being can make to this world. Prayer for her is not something that one does for one's own benefit or to enrich one's own life, but prayer is a great service of the Church, of humanity, the mission of Jesus Christ; there is nothing greater or more important that a human being can do. And Teresa looks around her world, the world of sixteenth century Spain and sixteenth century Europe and she said: *the world is in turmoil* and she said to her sisters *what must we do?* It's very typical of Teresa – there's a big issue, we must do something – and for her, prayer is not a question of *we can't do anything else, so let's pray about it* – no, it wasn't like that – for Teresa, prayer is the most important thing that can be done here. All these other projects and schemes, they might or might not do some

good, but it is only prayer that can completely transform the world, it is only prayer that can bring God into our world, it is only prayer that can bring the pain and questions and anxiety of our world to God; therefore she said to her sisters: *we are going to live our vocations as well as we can, we are going to live the gospel as perfectly as possible* – this is greater than anything anyone can do. For her, what was so important was that anybody setting out on the road of prayer should know the great significance of the work they were doing. This is partaking in the greatest work of God – you must know how big and how important this is – not only must you know how big and how important it is, you must be determined to carry it through to the very end.

I just want to read a little text from Teresa where she emphasises that when starting out on something you must want to finish it. This is from Chapter 21 of *The Way of Perfection: To those who want to journey on this road* – and that is the road of prayer – *and continue until they reach the end, which is to drink from this water of life, I say that 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 do not have the courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses* – in other words, nothing must be allowed to get in the way of this. Know that this is a very important road, enterprise, one is setting out on and be determined to carry it through. So be aware, know the greatness, the importance of what one is doing.

Then the second fundamental for Teresa is what kind of people are we? Because for her, as I have already said, prayer isn't one activity in a person's day, or a particular part of a person's life; it is the whole of a person's life – not only the whole of a person's life – but it is the whole of a person's life that has been changed, that has been transformed; it is a whole new way of living and a whole new way of seeing life. There are three things that she picks out to express this: love of neighbour, detachment, and humility; those three are the characteristics of the person of prayer. We might be surprised – surely prayer is about our relationship with God? Why would she start by speaking about our relationships with other people? But for Teresa, this is fundamental – how we relate with others, how we relate with those around us, those whom we need to relate with all of the time. That's how she concludes at the end of the *Interior Castle*: we can't really know what our relationship with God is, but we can know what it is with those around us, the people we live with, the people we work with, the people we have to deal with each day – that we can know. So, for Teresa, the person of prayer has the capacity to enter into deep, real, truthful relationships with others; that doesn't mean that they get on with everybody, because of course they won't, but there will be integrity, a truthfulness in the way they relate. But there's another aspect to this and Teresa herself suffered greatly from it in her own life, hence she puts such emphasis upon it: that is, she knew from experience about human relationships that are not life-giving, that are not healthy, that are immature, distorted – there are so many words that we could use – the damage that they do to the person and the damage that they do to the person's prayer life. They have a very direct effect on a person's prayer life. So these relationships can be a real obstacle to the life of prayer. So to be able to enter real, good, healthy human relationships is essential for living a life of prayer. The person who is living a life of prayer is purified, is transformed within, therefore their relationships are also and they



learn ever more deeply the tragedy of distorted and damaging human relationships and their effects on the world around them and everything else.

The second characteristic of the person of prayer is detachment and we need to be careful how we understand this. To be detached is to be free, to have that inner freedom that enables one to relate in the way that Teresa has just spoken about, that inner freedom, to be attached to nothing. In other words, nothing gets in the way of one's freedom, nothing gets in the way of one's capacity to love, nothing gets in the way of one's relationship with God, nothing is more important than God.

To go back to that great principle of St John of the Cross – it is not the amount of goods that one has, it's one's relationship with them. Detachment is not about whether one has or hasn't, it's about the freedom that one has from what one has or hasn't. A person might have nothing but might be very envious that I don't have that – that person is not free, that person is not detached, whereas a person can have everything in the world yet have a heart that is free; that person is truly detached. Detachment for Teresa is essential for prayer. Elsewhere she says that if a person's prayer life is in difficulties, if a person is struggling to be faithful to what they have committed themselves to, look and see at how the person is living, because she said in all likelihood there is some failure in detachment. That for her was the root cause of most of the difficulties with prayer. The heart is not free and if the heart is not free then the heart cannot receive or give love.

The third characteristic is humility, which she said was the most important one of all and contains the other two. Humility can be difficult to define; again, it can be misunderstood. It's not about humiliating or putting a person down; humility is truth; it is living in truth. All growth in prayer, she tells us, involves a growing in humility, the person who is growing in prayer is growing in humility. Humility is a fruit of prayer, a consequence; it is a fruit of true, human maturing; we grow in humility in a truthful knowledge of ourselves, a truthful way of seeing ourselves and seeing others and seeing the world around. Humility is a growing in our understanding of God, a growing in one's right attitude towards God, a growing in one's capacity to depend on God, to rely on God, to put everything into God's hands, to live knowing who God is and who I am. Humility is always going to be a living in truth, a growing in truth, it is a growing away from anything that puts myself centre stage, that turns me into a god. Humility gives a person the capacity to relate in a real and truthful way with others, in a way that allows the other person to be free and to grow. A person who is truly humble can respect the other person and never puts them down. A person who is truly humble enables and facilitates and encourages the other person to grow, to mature, to become themselves. In other words, the other person is not a threat, because the truly humble person is at home with being who they are, is at home in their own skin, we might say; is at peace with themselves and their reality and therefore they can truly be at peace with the other person, even and perhaps especially when the other person is different, or the other person perhaps has gifts that they don't have – there's no place for jealousy or rivalry or ambition or anything like that in the person who is truly humble.

So those three: love of neighbour, detachment and humility give us a sense of the kind of person the person of prayer is, because for Teresa, the person of prayer grows into, becomes, the most real and most mature of human beings. We grow through

relationship; therefore the most mature of human beings is the one who has grown through the greatest of all relationships - the relationship with God. So the life of prayer is about one's relationship with God, one's relationship with others and through all those relationships, growing into, becoming a true human being, a human being made in the image and likeness of God, a human being who lives the fullness and the beauty and the truth of humanity. That, for Teresa is what a person of prayer is. As she famously said, *prayer is a friendly conversation with the one that we know loves us*. Teresa takes that to its very conclusion – a growing in that love, that friendly conversation in love that leads to, that enables, that gives the person the freedom to grow and to become who God has created them to be.

10<sup>th</sup> March 2022

*Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/Sx5GMuDUVgw>*

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## Notes

- (1) *The Way of Perfection in The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila, Volume 2*  
Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD.  
ICS Publications, Washington DC. 2012.

## Parish Lenten reflections with Fr Matt Blake OCD



### ***Third talk: BLESSED MARIE-EUGENE OF THE CHILD JESUS***

This is the third of our five Lenten reflections and today the reflection I take is from Blessed Marie-Eugène. We celebrated quite recently his ordination and his entry into the Carmelite order in 1922, exactly a hundred years ago. He died in 1967 and was beatified a few years ago.

The theme I want to draw from his teaching is baptismal grace (1). One of the aspects of Lent, in fact the fundamental aspect of Lent and the origin of Lent, is that it is the season of preparation for baptism, and it became very early on the season of renewal of baptism. We renew our baptismal promises at Easter, but it is a season when every Christian is invited to reflect on what it means to be baptised, on what baptism does in our lives: the change that baptism brings about, the possibilities that it opens up for us. And so I want to take just a little bit of Blessed Marie Eugene's teaching to help us to enter deeply into this. There can be many other things that we do in Lent, but all are at the service of this fundamental of living more deeply the grace that God gave us in baptism when we were baptised into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, became members of His Church and were given the priestly, prophetic and kingly power of Jesus Christ. That is what changes everything and is something that was very important in the teaching of Blessed Marie-Eugene.

I just want to read a little text first. He is talking about baptismal grace and he is speaking about it in terms of hope:

*Our great hope is our baptismal grace. We need to be aware of this reality; it is absolutely necessary that we be conscious of this treasure which we have been given, which we possess. Our great treasure is our baptismal grace, we must value it rightly above all else; it determines our eternal destiny and throws light on the path we should follow in this world, the furrow we are meant to plough. Let us not be led astray by other truths, whose importance and necessity I do not deny, but which sometimes risks overshadowing this great truth, leaving this treasure in darkness.*

That puts it very well for us, the conviction that he had, and looking around the church in his time when he was ministering in the first half of the twentieth century up to 1967, this is even more true today. So often this is left a little bit in the shadow, a little bit outside of our thinking - what it means to be baptised, the grace that we were given then, this unique gift of God that we have been given that God never takes back, that no matter what may happen in our lives and no matter how we may live, this gift is never taken from us, whoever has received it has it for ever.

And in the midst of this paragraph he picks out two things in particular: *it determines our eternal destiny* – we are children of God. That doesn't just mean after our death, though of course that's part of it, but the eternal destiny of the life we live here, this life of grace, we live a life that is determined by the fact that we are reborn as children of God. St Paul rightly describes baptism as an entering the tomb and coming out again, a dying and a rising with Jesus Christ; in other words we are living already, by virtue of the fact that we are baptised, a life that is eternal. But then he gives this second point: *it throws its light on the path we should follow in this world, the furrow we are meant to plough*. That's a gospel image that he brings in here; we plough a furrow in this world, we leave our mark; our baptismal grace determines that, throws light on the path that we should follow. It is from that grace of baptism that we discover who we truly are and the life that is right for us to live; what kind of people we are, what kind of people we are meant to be. How does somebody with the grace of baptism live everyday lives in this world?

I want to read another paragraph where he goes deeper into this. He began by saying how important it is for us to be aware of this and to hold on to this awareness of the gift we have been given. *Once we are aware of our baptismal grace* - he then gives us four things:

- *the seal it confers,*
- *the light it gives,*
- *the orientation it ensures,*
- *the hope it bestows.*

*We have an anchor in life for our souls.*

I just want to reflect on these four things – the grace that gives our souls the anchor it needs in this world; in other words, the key to living life well in this world.

*The seal it confers* - that's an image we associate more with confirmation than with baptism, but of course it is baptism which gives that fundamental seal. Let the words of confirmation be sealed with the Holy Spirit – that seal, that stamp, that indelible mark - another term that's often used. Something that happens to us, that change that's brought about that's irreversible, that is fundamental to our identity. A fundamental change takes place with baptism, a fundamental change in who we are, an indelible one, permanent, cannot be changed and like any seal it confers our true identity and it gives power, authority. So the seal that is put on us at baptism.

Secondly - *the light that it gives* - the light of Jesus Christ, the light of the Holy Spirit. This image of light, the light that has come into the world, that light that on the one hand shows us what truth is; a light that guides us, a light that ensures that we live in the truth - so this light that is Jesus Christ, his presence in our lives.

The third is *the orientation it ensures*. In other words, we know the direction; it gives direction to our lives. It is baptism that directs us - where are we going, who are we, what direction do our lives take? It ensures that we take the right direction.

And fourthly, *the hope that it gives us*. Hope is the theme running right through this, as we have seen. And hope isn't just about something that's going to happen in the future, hope is a way of living life in this world, it's a way of living life that takes us beyond the everyday, what is visible. It's like we're living in this world, but our hearts are set on something that is bigger and greater, our hearts are set on the life that lasts forever, but it is the fact that our hearts are set on that that gives us the strength and the courage to live our lives well here. The person who lives with true Christian hope lives a profound commitment to life in this world. It doesn't take one out of this world but rather gives the person the inspiration to insert themselves ever more deeply into life in this world. So these four fundamentals, he tells us, constitute *the anchor for our souls*.

Then he goes on to develop this a little bit: *It seems that despair cannot touch us any more and all our anxieties are quieted*. What a wonderful statement. We never despair, even in the midst of the kind of difficulties our world is living through at the moment. A baptised Christian never despairs, because a baptised Christian has this grace, lives with this hope, so despair cannot touch us, so whatever anxieties or worries we have, they are quieted when we return to this great source that we have - the grace of baptism that we have been given. So now more than ever is a time to return to this grace and to allow this grace of baptism to orientate our lives.

*God loves me*, he said, *God gives me His grace, God calls me, He is my hope, what more do I need?* This is a very short talk, so I haven't the time to really go into it as much as I would like to. There are two directions he then develops in his teaching on this: one is prayer and the other is service or mission, or purpose, goal - whatever word we want to use.

Firstly, *prayer* - because of our grace of baptism, when we truly grasp what this means - fundamental to our prayer that brings us face to face with God, with the reality, with the existence, with the truth of God. I know that God loves me, that I have been given this life, this grace of God; then I want to know God, I want to see Him, come face to face with him. That's why, for Marie-Eugene's teaching on prayer, a fundamental passage in the Bible, (the first reading we have this Sunday), is Moses and the burning bush. He tells us that that is the starting point for his teaching, there Moses comes face to face with the reality of God. There were many great things that Moses did in his life - all of his achievements - but this is by far the most important and fundamental: he stood before God, before the reality of God; he stood on sacred ground. God is real for us. When the grace we have received in baptism is real for us, when we live lives aware of it, then God is real; prayer brings us face to face with the reality of God. Like Moses, the burning bush is there in our lives. God is real; he's a fire that is burning in our lives.

The second aspect he develops in his teaching is: *the furrow that we plough in this world, the contribution we make to this world, the good that we do, the mission that we're given and that we accomplish, the practical living out of the grace of baptism in our lives*. That has a certain quality to it, an orientation; it is lived with the light of the Holy Spirit; it's always a work of grace, a work of the Holy Spirit. There's a quality to what this person does, there's a depth to what he or she does. Life is not lived at a superficial level - whatever is done, whatever decisions are taken, whatever standpoints are lived by, they come from that place within, they are the fruits of the

grace of baptism. When the grace of baptism is lived, and lived well, everything that a person does, every viewpoint and attitude and belief that a person holds, every relationship that the person has comes from this grace of baptism and is an expression of this grace of baptism. This is something so fundamental to the teaching of Blessed Marie-Eugene; it's a starting point we might say, because it is, when we think about it, the starting point of Christianity and it is the reason why Lent is the most important season in the Church's year. It is the season that brings us back to our starting point, to the fundamental of who we are as baptised Christians, people who have the grace of baptism; how we live that, how we live our relationship with God, and then the consequences, the fruits of that relationship, how they are lived and experienced.

Marie-Eugene spent his life training, forming, guiding what he called *apostles* - people from every walk of life, every situation in life, who would be apostles. It wasn't about achieving great things or getting great fame, but it was living in a deep and authentic way one's baptism and where that happens great good always flows from it. Most of the time that good is very hidden, but it is real, it is effective and that's what we today hold on to, each one of us. If we live our baptism well, if we live with ever deeper awareness that we've been given this greatest of all gifts, the grace of God, the light of God, put there within us then we have the gift, the capacity to live life really well and then our lives bear great fruit, do great good in this world, because they are lives of hope, lives that are rooted and anchored in true Christian hope.

17<sup>th</sup> March 2022

Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/8NXYRtmIO9w>

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## Notes

- (1) 'Baptismal Grace' in *Where the Spirit Breathes – Prayer and Action* Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, OCD. Translated by Mary Thomas Noble. St Pauls, Alba House, New York. 1998



*Fourth talk: ST JOHN OF THE CROSS*

We're very aware that this evening is the vigil of the Feast of the Annunciation and so that feast is very much the background to what I have chosen to take as a reflection from St John of the Cross. Sometimes people feel having the Feast of the Annunciation in the midst of Lent doesn't quite fit. This is a feast we normally associate with Christmas and indeed it is part of the Christmas story and we hear all the readings we have for the Annunciation, particularly in the gospel, throughout the Christmas season; it's very much a Christmas story. And yet, with the help of John of the Cross we will see that perhaps not - maybe it also fits very well into our season of Lent.

My starting point is one of John of the Cross' poems, which I'm going to read in a moment. Many of you will be familiar with this poem, which John wrote in prison and it's what's known as his *Romances on the beginning of John's gospel on the Word becomes flesh.*<sup>(1)</sup> But in this poem, all set within the mind of God, the Trinity, we have the whole history of God's relationship with His people, and it all converges upon the incarnation, God becoming human. I just want to read the critical part of it from our perspective today, when he gets to the incarnation. It's all written in terms of a great love story; all of creation is created by God the Father as a bride for the Son. Here these first words are on the lips of Jesus, before he comes into the world:

*"I will go and tell the world,  
spreading the word  
of your beauty and sweetness  
and of your sovereignty.  
I will go seek my bride  
and take upon myself  
her weariness and labours  
in which she suffers so;  
and that she might have life,  
I will die for her,  
and lifting her out of that deep,  
I will restore her to you."*

So there is summed up the purpose of Jesus coming into this world. It is an act of love; it is to make known the beauty and sweetness and sovereignty of God the Father, of the Trinity, to make God known to our world. It is to take upon himself all the burden of humanity and of all of creation; because by the Bride in this poem, the

author means not just all of humanity or all the created world, he means the entire cosmos and very importantly, the entire heavenly world - in other words everything outside of the Trinity, everything that God created is Bride of Jesus Christ. And so Jesus is taking on all of this as an act of love for the Father.

And he said: *that she may have life* - it is to give life; he is the life coming into the world; *I will die for her*, so the original intention of God is to die; *and lifting her up out of that deep, I will restore her to you*, so this is the whole salvation of all of creation; lifting up the whole of creation. In another place, John of the Cross, describing this, tells us that God created the world in all beauty and clothed everything in beauty; but with the incarnation he lifted up everything, because he has become part of creation. Therefore everything is raised up, all of creation, everything. And then it comes to the enacting of all of this. Now it is God the Father who is speaking:

*Then he called  
the archangel Gabriel  
and sent him to  
the Virgin Mary,  
at whose consent  
the mystery was wrought,  
in whom the Trinity  
clothed the Word with flesh.  
and though Three work this,  
it is wrought in the One;  
and the Word lived incarnate  
In the womb of Mary.  
And he who had only a Father  
now had a mother too,  
but she was not like others  
who conceive by man.  
From her own flesh  
he received his flesh,  
so he is called  
Son of God and of man.*

That's an extraordinary text and it brings out the fundamental point of the Annunciation - God has this great plan and the entire plan of God is made dependent upon the yes of Mary, *at whose consent the mystery is wrought* - everything, from the beginning of creation, the creation of heaven and earth, all God's dealing with his people, his becoming human, being birthed, dying, rising - everything is made dependent upon the yes of Mary and that reveals the very nature of God. God does not impose himself, God is a respecter of human freedom, that freedom to choose, that freedom to say yes; Mary says yes in all freedom.

John of the Cross elsewhere in his writings tells us how this is so. How is it possible for Mary - to use a phrase from John of the Cross - *to give the perfect yes of love?* Mary could give the perfect yes of love; and she can do that, John tells us, because unlike the rest of us, Mary has from the beginning lived totally by God's grace. All the rest of us, even the greatest saints in the world, have to grow into this, have to



grow and mature, be purified into the fullness of living God's grace. Mary from the beginning does and in that way we can understand the doctrine of her immaculate conception. She lives the fullness of God's grace, therefore she has the inner freedom to say yes - a yes that has no constraints, no preconditions, no doubts - a total giving of herself. *I am God's servant, God's handmaid*; so she is able to say yes on behalf of all humanity, all creation, all the heavens and all the earth; yes to the fullness of the mystery of her son Jesus Christ, of his coming into this world, because for St John of the Cross the greatest of all the mysteries is the incarnation; God becoming one with humanity, that's God's greatest deed - to become one of us; far more than making us or even saving us, they're all things he does for us in a sense, we could say, from outside. But becoming one of us, sharing in our life, sharing in our pain, sharing in our fears and doubts – everything that entails the human condition.

I will just read a few more lines from the poem. The birth has taken place, which John in the poem depicts as a marriage feast, the wonderful feast that has taken place:

*whom the gracious Mother  
laid in a manger...  
Men sang songs  
and angels melodies  
celebrating the marriage  
of Two such as these.  
But God there in the manger  
cried and moaned;  
and these tears were jewels  
the bride brought to the wedding.  
The Mother gazed in sheer wonder  
on such an exchange:  
in God, man's weeping,  
and in man, gladness,  
to the one and the other  
things usually so strange.*

There are no limits to what God took on, to what Jesus embraced and became part of - the whole human condition, including death, including being put in the tomb, including all the tears of humanity - and to be able to say yes is critical, and the whole teaching of John of the Cross, we could say, is of each individual growing, maturing, being purified, that we can come to the place of spiritual growth where each of us can say this yes of love.

We could ask ourselves the question about Jesus himself, following the logic of John of the Cross' teaching: did Jesus say this full yes of love – because Jesus lives a human spiritual life. We could say that Lent tells us of the two places where Jesus gives his yes. At the very beginning of Lent, at the very beginning of the gospels, we have the temptations in the desert, where Jesus in that very spiritual experience in the desert says yes, despite and in the midst of the very strong temptations of the devil. Nothing is going to take him off-course: he is saying yes to the will of God, yes to his true identity and mission. And the other place where Jesus says the complete yes of love is in the garden of Gethsemane – yes, to the will of God, totally and completely. *Thy will be done*. That will of God, nothing will stop it, there are no limits. He takes

it to its final conclusion, he completely takes on the tears and suffering of humanity, as John's poem tells us. He says yes completely to it, to what his mother had already said yes to at the moment of conception. In other words, John of the Cross' poetry and his teaching shows us that everything about this great mystery of Jesus Christ, of God becoming human, is dependent upon and requires humanity's consent: Mary at the Annunciation; Jesus himself, in the temptations, in the Garden of Gethsemane. That is the nature of our relationship with God, a relationship with God in which the human being grows into the fullness of human freedom, in which the human being grows into the fullness of love, in which the human being is totally united with God.

In the incarnation God and human become one. As John of the Cross' poem says, he is son of God and son of man; from the Father he takes his nature as God, from Mary he takes his nature as human; he needs both and in him both are united, become one. But that is also what happens in the spiritual life of each person – we become one with God. In John of the Cross' teaching, the high point, the point of arrival in the spiritual life is always union with God, a union of love, a union of wills; God's will and the will of the human being becoming one – what happened with Jesus in Gethsemane, *Thy will be done*. So it's the union of God and humanity.

St John of the Cross then shows us in this poem that Mary is the first and complete disciple of Jesus Christ. She shows us the way of discipleship because she has said yes to discipleship, she has said yes, fully and freely to everything God wants to do in her; and in doing so, for all that God wants to do in her she makes something truly great possible - the greatest act of God's love and God's wisdom possible.

So as we celebrate this feast of the Annunciation, let us be mindful and reflect on what a truly great event it is. God becomes one with us and shares in all the human condition, and this year we pray for Ukraine and Russia and we pray that that same love and that same wisdom of God will be seen and heard in those lands and will bring about peace and reconciliation.

24<sup>th</sup> March 2022 – Vigil, Feast of the Annunciation

Transcribed from the recorded talk: [https://youtu.be/C7H\\_ejTmYDQ](https://youtu.be/C7H_ejTmYDQ)

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## NOTES

- (1) *Romances in The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*.  
Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD.  
ICS Publications, Washington, DC. 1991.

## Parish Lenten reflections with Fr Matt Blake OCD



### *Fifth talk: ST ELIZABETH OF THE TRINITY*

Today it's St Elizabeth of the Trinity that we're reflecting upon and what I am particularly drawing from is her last retreat, a beautiful little document <sup>(1)</sup> that she wrote during her last retreat, from 15 - 30 August 1906. She was dying, in great pain, very weak, suffering. She described her retreat as *my novitiate for heaven* and it's a beautiful way of seeing spiritual preparation for eternal life, spiritual preparation for entering into the fullness of life, the fullness of love, the fullness of union with God; so she saw this stage of her life as a time of privileged spiritual growth.

I want to read first of all a little passage, a comment on this time by her prioress, Mother Germaine. She had suggested to Elizabeth that she write down some reflections during her retreat but she also gives us another perspective on it.

*During those blessed days, Sr Elizabeth was drawn towards Calvary. Her beloved master spoke to her of his Passion, not in words but by opening up new horizons to her on the love hidden in the Cross. He made her understand that her dreams of union would find their realisation in suffering. The generous child, enraptured with love more than ever, became intoxicated with the divine chalice whose bitterness became changed for her into infinite sweetness.*

Just to tease that out a little bit. In this time of suffering for her, which she was living at a spiritual level, she is sharing in the Passion of Jesus Christ, but not at some external level, she is sharing in the spiritual experience of Jesus as he went to his death. And the particular insight that her mother Prioress picks out there is the love. She is being drawn into the love, she is being drawn through the suffering into the fullness of love that's expressed upon the Cross and therefore the pain, the suffering, is transformed, she tells us, into the greatest of sweetness.

Those who were closest to Elizabeth over these days - the sisters in the Carmel and others who had encounters with her - say that never, at any stage in the months leading up to her death, did they see any trace of self-pity in her or any kind of turning in on herself. And that's not to be understood as some kind of human heroism, because that's not what it is, she was very weak and in great pain, because they had no understanding at the time of the illness that she had - Addison's disease - and they had no way of alleviating the pain. But she is living it at a spiritual level, her heart is all the time on God, she's all the time focussed on God, this is her spiritual

journey with God - that's what she's living at a deep level. I just want to dip in a little bit to the beautiful text that she wrote as a result of this. She wrote entries for each day and this is a little quote from the fifth day:

*The soul that wants to serve God day and night in His temple – and that's from the gospels – I mean this inner sanctuary of which St Paul speaks when he says 'the temple of God is holy and you are that temple.' The soul must be resolved to share fully in its Master's Passion. It is one of the redeemed, who in its turn must redeem other souls, and for that reason it will sing: 'I glory in the Cross of Jesus Christ – that again is from St Paul – with Christ I am nailed to the Cross - and again – I suffer in my body what is lacking in the Passion of Christ for the sake of His body, which is the Church.*

There she is entering deeply into these words from scripture. What you find in this retreat is quote after quote from scripture – but not just quoting them to back up what she is saying – rather, in a different sense, she is entering into the meaning of these scriptural passages. What she is living is the Bible, what she is living are these words of scripture, but not at an intellectual level: at a very deep personal level she is living the Word of God. She is so united with God. This is her novitiate for heaven where she is uniting herself so closely with God that the Word of God is her word, that her life speaks the Word of God. It is the Word of God that she is living.

At the beginning of the tenth day, again words from the gospels: *'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'* – then she goes on to say – *when my Master makes me understand these words in the depths of my soul, it seems to me that he is asking me to live like the Father in an eternal present, with no before, no after, but wholly in the unity of my being in this eternal now. What is this present? This is what David tells me 'they will adore Him always because of Himself'.*

Being perfect there is not some state of being, rather it is just who she is – *the Master makes me understand* – that's how she's living. It's as if God is bringing her into these words of the gospel and showing her what they mean, what they mean for her now, or to put it better, what they mean for her in eternity, because that's what he's preparing her for, he's preparing her for full and total union with Him. So to be perfect like the heavenly Father is to be truly like Him, like Him in a way that can never be changed, a way that is eternal, that has no beginning or end, but is just now. *To be like the Father* - that is pure gift of God, something God is giving to her.

Just a few little thoughts from the eleventh day: *The soul has entered into this vast solitude in which God will make Himself heard.* Then she quotes from St Paul: *'His word is living and active and more penetrating than a two-edged sword.'* *It effects and creates what it intends, provided, however, that the soul consents to let it be done.* So the Word of God is penetrating right into her, it is doing that which it says it will do. Whatever God says is real, is true, is now in her, provided, she said, the soul consents, and of course she has given her total consent. That is her prayer now, her prayer is consenting, her prayer is simply consenting to everything, fighting nothing, controlling nothing, giving everything. That is how she prays. *It is the whole Trinity who dwells in the soul that loves Him in truth* – that full union with the Trinity in love – *and thus it has, she said, as St John of the Cross says, a certain resemblance to the divine being.* That is the soul of the person; the soul of the person resembles God

when it can consent to the Word of God becoming alive, becoming real in it. That's what she is learning through experience now. She may have heard these words many times in preaching, in reading, but now she is listening to the words in her experience and in particular she is listening to their meaning through her human fragility, her human weakness, her suffering, her approaching death. In this experience she is hearing the truth, the meaning, of so many different passages of scripture. As I said, this retreat is full of them, passage after passage that she is hearing and entering deeply into these truths.

I want to look at another passage and this time she's reflecting on Mary. Mary as being the one who has lived this most completely; Mary, the first disciple of her son and the one who has followed him spiritually, and Elizabeth sees herself here as following Mary spiritually, just as Mary followed her son spiritually, lived the spiritual life of her son. That's what Elizabeth now sees herself doing – living the spiritual life that Jesus lived and in particular the spiritual life that Jesus lived on the way to the Cross and upon the Cross. So this is from the fifteenth day of this retreat:

*This Queen of Virgins is also the Queen of Martyrs, but again it was in her heart that the sword pierced, but everything took place within.* Remember the sword piercing is the prophecy of Simeon in the temple at the beginning of Luke's gospel. Here Elizabeth tells us that that sword was a spiritual sword that pierced her heart – all this took place within her. She's living spiritually, in other words – martyrdom – she's living spiritually what Jesus is living upon the Cross: the sword pierces the side of Jesus on the Cross, the sword pierces her heart spiritually. Elizabeth goes on: *Oh how beautiful she is to contemplate during her long martyrdom, so serene, enveloped in a kind of majesty that radiates both strength and gentleness.* We could say the same about Elizabeth in these days: *a long martyrdom – that's what she's living, but – so serene, enveloped in a kind of majesty that radiates both strength and gentleness.*

She goes on to say of Mary: *she learned from the Word Himself how those must suffer whom the Father has chosen as victims, those whom He has decided to associate with Himself in the great work of redemption, those whom – again to quote St Paul – 'he has foreknown and predestined to be conformed to His Son', crucified by love. She is there at the foot of the Cross, standing – and that's the Jewish posture of prayer – she's standing – and Elizabeth emphasizes that word standing. She's standing there, she's praying – Elizabeth goes on – full of strength and courage and here my Master says to me: 'behold your mother' – he gives her to me for my mother.* Elizabeth is now the disciple Jesus loved, there with Mary, and she is given Mary – *now that he has returned to the Father and has substituted me for Himself on the Cross, so that I may suffer in my body what is lacking in His passion for the sake of His body, which is the Church. The blessed Virgin is again there to teach me to suffer as He did; to tell me, to make me hear those last songs of His soul which no one else but she, His mother, could overhear.* So Mary is teaching her the songs of Jesus upon the Cross, the songs of His soul, the prayer of Jesus, the contemplative life of Jesus.

We could put it another way; Mary is teaching Elizabeth and teaching all of us how to live well, how to die well, how to prepare for eternity. Mary is teaching Elizabeth and teaching all of us how to prepare for the fullness of love, the fullness of life, for union with her son, a union that is brought about upon the Cross, when God and humanity are totally reconciled. So it is Jesus who lives in her as she makes this retreat. She's

living, as I said, the spiritual life of Jesus and that is a way for us to see Lent, to see this time preparing for Easter. We live in our own way the spiritual life of Jesus; we are in some way drawn in to that love, that chalice of love, that love that is expressed there. We are living the death of Jesus at a spiritual level; that is what Elizabeth shows us here, that is what she bears witness to.

Let us pray that Mary may help us also to know her son deep within, know her son who lives in our hearts, who lives in our souls, who lives his life there, who communicates his love there within us, and in doing so every experience of our lives, particularly all pain and suffering and struggle, become a prayer, become a spiritual union with Jesus Christ, become a preparation for that fullness of love, that fullness of union with Jesus.

31<sup>st</sup> March 2022

*Transcribed from the recorded talk: <https://youtu.be/Kehp-n0S6KQ>*

## NOTES

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(1) *The Last Retreat of 'The Praise of Glory' in Always believe in love – Selected writings of Elizabeth of the Trinity.* Compiled and introduced by Marian Murphy. ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 2017