

Commentary on Prayer to the Trinity.

The outstanding aspect of Elizabeth's life and spirituality was her devotion to the Trinity, to whom she referred familiarly as "the Three" or sometimes even "my Three". Today we finish the series by looking at the prayer she composed to the Trinity, a prayer remarkable not only for its contemplative depth but also for its utter passion.

On 21 September 1904, the feast of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary, the nuns of the community of the Carmelite monastery in Dijon, of which Elizabeth was a member, renewed their vows as they did on that date every year. Later that night, alone in her cell, Elizabeth poured out her heart in a prayer that not only sums up her whole life in God, but serves as a map of the spiritual journey for all of us.

The prayer to the Trinity

O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me to become utterly forgetful of myself so that I may establish myself in you, as changeless and calm as though my soul were already in eternity. Let nothing disturb my peace nor draw me forth from you, O my unchanging God, but at every moment may I penetrate more deeply into the depths of your mystery. Give peace to my soul; make it your heaven, your cherished dwelling-place and the place of your repose. Let me never leave you there alone, but keep me there, wholly attentive, wholly alert in my faith, wholly adoring and fully given up to your creative action.

O my beloved Christ, crucified for love, I long to be the bride of your heart. I long to cover you with glory, to love you even unto death! Yet I sense my powerlessness and beg you to clothe me with yourself. Identify my soul with all the movements of your soul, submerge me, overwhelm me, substitute yourself for me, so that my life may become a reflection of your life. Come into me as Adorer, as Redeemer and as Saviour.

O Eternal Word, utterance of my God, I want to spend my life listening to you, to become totally teachable so that I might learn all from you. Through all darkness, all emptiness, all powerlessness, I want to keep my eyes fixed on you and to remain under your great light.

O my Beloved Star, so fascinate me that I may never be able to leave your radiance.

O Consuming Fire, Spirit of Love, overshadow me so that the Word may be, as it were incarnate again in my soul. May I be for him a new humanity in which he can renew all his mystery.

And you, O Father, bend down towards your poor little creature. Cover her with your shadow, see in her only your beloved son in who you are well pleased

O my 'Three', my All, my Beatitude, infinite Solitude, Immensity in which I lose myself, I surrender myself to you as your prey. Immerse yourself in me so that I may be immersed in you until I go to contemplate in your light the abyss of your splendour!

A prayer for everyone

The prayer is a beautiful one, and it is possible to be misled by its poetic language and mystical imagery into thinking that it is not a prayer for those of us less advanced along the spiritual road than Elizabeth was at that time. But we would be mistaken in so thinking. This is a prayer for every stage, but it is *particularly* suitable for those of us who seem not to be making very much headway, or who are burdened with the weight of our own weakness – perhaps some addiction or habit that is keeping us in a state of helplessness. This was Elizabeth's own view, as we can see from a letter she wrote a week after writing the prayer to a relative, the Abbé Chevignard, to thank him for the good wishes he had sent for her feast day on 19 November. The Abbé Chevignard was a young seminarian, who was at that time preparing for his forthcoming ordination to the priesthood. Elizabeth was still filled with the emotions that had given rise to her prayer, and the letter summarises her understanding of how she was living it out in her daily life.

Let us be a sort of new humanity for him, so that he can renew in us all his mystery. I have asked him to establish himself in me as Adorer, as Redeemer and as Saviour, and I can't tell you what peace it gives me to think that he will supply for all my powerlessness and that, even if I fall at every moment that passes, he will be there to lift me up again and to carry me away even deeper into himself, to the depth of that divine essence where we live already by grace and where I want to bury myself so deeply that nothing will ever be able to draw me forth again.

In what follows, we explore how this prayer can serve us as a map for the journey.

O my God, Trinity whom I adore

The prayer begins, as the whole spiritual journey must begin, by the orientation of the self towards God in that most essential attitude of the creature towards the Creator – adoration. No true spiritual journey can begin unless our hearts are fundamentally oriented towards the object of our desire. Of course this does not mean that there will not be many "false gods" along the way, idols that will have to be shattered before we can go further, but it is essential that our deepest desire is for life and truth. If that is our inner focus, then our faces are turned towards God

Help me to become utterly forgetful of myself so that I may establish myself in you

Once we have turned in the direction of God, we have already set out on the journey. The royal road lies straight ahead, and if only we could follow it without detour, all would be well. But as everyone who has ever tried it knows, the greatest distraction on the way is the false self. This self, convinced that it knows best, leads us away from the road and into all sorts of thorny, rocky laneways, paths to nowhere. The ignoring, forgetting and letting go of the false self is a life's work. We are all obsessed with whatever image we have of ourselves. It is very dear to us and as long as we cling to it, it is a block to the development of the life of God within us. The journey towards God is a journey away from the false self, which is why the Gospel tells us that we can only save our life by losing it. However, self-forgetfulness is not something we can ever achieve by ourselves. It is the work of God in us to lead us away from the little false idols of ourselves that we worship and into the depths of our true selves where we are already united with God. That is why Elizabeth asks for this grace at the very beginning of her prayer.

O my beloved Christ

She then addresses each of the persons of the Trinity in turn, beginning with Jesus, the one who is closest to us because he was one of us, like us in all things except sin. Understanding that the whole purpose of the spiritual life is to reach the freedom of the children of God, Elizabeth contemplates the Child of God par excellence and takes him as her model. But she does not confine herself to being like him: she asks him to identify her with all the movements of his own soul so that she may have "that mind in her which is in Christ Jesus" as St Paul exhorts us.

Jesus is our way, our truth and our life. This is a shocking statement if we really hear it. He is our life. We must live through him and with him and in him. When his life replaces our own, when we live from his life, the battle with the false self has been won.

O Eternal Word, utterance of my God

In order to have in us the mind of Christ, we have to listen to him. We need food for the journey, and we will be fed with the Word. But Jesus will never force this food on us: we must hunger for it and we must assimilate it. This we do through prayer and meditation on the Gospels. Knowing this, Elizabeth asks for two graces: the grace of contemplative prayer: "I want to spend my life listening to you" and the grace of removal of all resistances: "to become totally teachable so that I might learn all from you." As everyone who practices prayer knows, resistances are very often unconscious, but can place a huge obstacle in the way of God's transforming action. We are creatures who spend much of our lives in denial – denial of our own needs, of others' needs, of our own weaknesses. True prayer brings us face to face with the truth about ourselves, and very often we are so

alarmed by what we see that we hurry away as fast as we can. So we need to ask for help to spend our lives listening to the Word, because what we hear will not always be to the liking of that false self. To remain before God in the attitude of a pupil, open, receptive and ready to learn all that God wishes to teach us demands courage, but it will bring us into the fullness of life and joy.

Through all darkness, all emptiness, all powerlessness

It is inevitable that into the spiritual life will come a time of darkness and weakness, when we are tempted to give up the journey. This is usually a crucial point in the whole adventure, leading us ahead in leaps and bounds once we do not lose heart. This is the "dark night" of John of the Cross, that nevertheless is "more lovely than the dawn" , because it "has united the Lover with his beloved, transforming the beloved in her Lover". At this point in the prayer Elizabeth teaches us the secret of remaining steadfast in the darkness: she asks Christ to help her to keep her eyes fixed on him who is the Way, the Truth and the Light, the "beloved Star" whose radiance will illumine even the deepest darkness.

O Consuming Fire, Spirit of Love

And now Elizabeth turns to the Spirit whose creative love will accomplish in her all that she has already asked for. She wants to become for Jesus a "new humanity" and asks the Holy Spirit to overshadow her as he overshadowed Mary. The purpose of this "new incarnation" is to allow Christ to renew in her "all his mystery." To use the words of St Paul, she wants to complete in her own flesh "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His Body, which is the Church" (Col. 1, 24). This is our vocation too: this is how the risen Jesus continues to manifest himself to the world. He lives through his body which is the church, of which all Christians are members. With his mind in us, we bring him to all those who need him and we continue to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is among us.

And you, O Father

Finally Elizabeth addresses the Father. In this very Christocentric prayer, it is not surprising that Elizabeth's only request of the Father is that he would see in her only his Beloved Son. Elizabeth's view of her place in relation to the Trinity is clear: she is the child of the Father, brought to birth by the creating Spirit of love. But this brief request of the Father goes to the very heart of the whole prayer and the goal of the whole spiritual life. In asking the Father to see in her only his beloved Son, Elizabeth is asking (and we in turn also ask) to be brought into the very life of the Trinity, where the Father, looking at the Son, imparts himself wholly to him in a never ending exchange of love and life.

O my `Three', my All, my Beatitude

And so this wonderful prayer ends with a longing for union with the Triune God. Transformed by the Holy Spirit into another Christ on whom the Father can look with pleasure, wholly surrendered in love, the Christian prays to be totally absorbed into the life of God:

My All, my Beatitude, Infinite Solitude, Immensity in which I lose myself! Immerse yourself in me so that I may be immersed in you.

Only one thing now remains: the final departure, to contemplate "in your light the abyss of your splendour." Or, as another great Carmelite put it:

O living flame of love

that tenderly wounds my soul in its deepest centre!

Since now you are not oppressive,

now consummate, if it be your will:

tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!

(John of the Cross: *Living Flame*)