

# **CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IN THE CARMELITE TRADITION**

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I have been asked to speak about contemplative prayer in the Carmelite tradition: a vast subject that covers eight hundred years of history, reflection and lived experience. Practically every Carmelite author has written about it, from the first hermits who gathered on Mount Carmel, inspired by the life of the prophet Elijah, down to the present day.

However, I think it is true to say that in recent years there has been a rediscovery of the centrality of contemplation in our Carmelite charism. Prayer, community and ministry are the accepted pillars of our vocation but contemplation – ‘that loving gaze that sees God in everything’, is once again seen as the central focus of the Carmelite way of life.

It would be easy for me this afternoon to quote the classic teachings of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila on contemplation but I think there is a real need to translate these into our own personal search for meaning and truth. Our experience of God and our spirituality today must emerge from the historical, concrete situation in which we find ourselves and must in turn challenge and enliven it. The contemplative response is not a luxury or an added extra; it is at the very core of how we see life and cope with the challenges and pressures of what we call our postmodern world. Perhaps this is what Karl Rahner meant when he said, a generation ago: ‘The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.’ The real challenge today is between mysticism and despair.

## A Way of Being

Contemplation begins with desire – not our desire for God, but his desire for us. The first and greatest commandment may be to love God with every fibre of our being, but there is something still more fundamental: the realisation that we are loved first. Every contemplative makes this discovery, and in fact bases his/her life on it: that our God is a pursuing God. The whole Carmelite tradition is clear: our desire for God is first awakened by his desire for us. This is the message of our great saints and mystics. *The Dark Night* and *The Spiritual Canticle* of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* – together with every other spiritual classic – celebrate this divine pursuit: the Lover and the beloved seeking each other in the light and the darkness of love's turbulent ways.

The hungers of the heart and the longings of the spirit are the result of God first desiring us and coming to us in love. This is what Iain Matthew, one of our most popular Carmelite writers, calls 'the impact of God': a God who is not a bystander waiting for us to find him but a restless God seeking to make space for himself in our lives. The challenge, of course, for all of us, is to *let ourselves be loved*, as the young French Carmelite, Elizabeth of the Trinity has said, and allow the reality of this love to change our hearts.

It often comes as a surprise that Carmelite writers speak so little about ways and methods of prayer. Instead, they go straight to the heart of what prayer is all about: exposure to this self-surrendering God. Their concern does not consist in the knowledge that we are saved, but in the assurance that we are loved. For them, the focus is clear and what they seek most of all is to awaken the heart to the presence within. 'No matter how much you think you are searching for God', John of the Cross reminds us, 'he is searching for you much more.'

The one we are searching for is here in the very depths of our being, inviting and waiting for our response. This is why the key element of Carmelite prayer is silent, loving attentiveness to the one who dwells within.

The heart of contemplative prayer is love, and love is the only reality that will ultimately change us. Only when we have found a greater and a deeper love can we let go of the lesser loves that can ensnare the heart and hold it captive. Contemplation is the key to freedom of heart; it is a way of opening ourselves to the embrace of God's love. John of the Cross may have a reputation for rugged asceticism but at the core of his teaching is the fact that love is the only reality that will ultimately change the heart from within. John is at pains to remind us that there is no setting out on the contemplative journey, unless the soul is, in the beautiful Spanish phrase, *en amores inflamada*, 'enkindled with love and yearning'.

### **One Dark Night**

Central to all Carmelite teaching on contemplation is the haunting image of the dark night described by John of the Cross, taken from one of his most famous poems, called: 'One Dark Night'. Most of his writing, in one way or another, is a commentary on this poem. John uses this powerful symbol of night to describe a time of great personal crisis in prayer and in one's life in general.

Contemplation may be, as he has described it, 'an inflow of God's love into the heart', but this inflow is as much a source of pain as it is of light. At a certain point on the journey, the lights go out, the spring runs dry, the engine grinds to a halt, the centre cannot hold, the honeymoon is over ... whatever image you wish to use. God is healing and freeing the soul; the light, which in itself is not painful, blinds the soul, causing darkness, pain and confusion.

John's advice is clear and has a universal relevance: darkness is part of the human reality. We need to let go of our accustomed ways of seeing and doing, and enter into a different landscape; sometimes it takes darkness to bring us alive. The poet David Whyte captures this beautifully in his poem 'Sweet Darkness':

It is time to go into the dark  
where the night has eyes to recognise its own;  
there you can be sure  
you will not be beyond love;  
the night will give you horizons  
further than your eyes can see.

Which is exactly what John of the Cross is saying: learn to be at home in the darkness, do not run away from it, do not fight it or even try to understand it, embrace it - 'the night has eyes'. A new and different world is being born, what seem to be death pangs are in fact birth pangs, the soul in darkness is being renewed and transfigured; a new and terrible beauty is born. Painful though it may be, there is in fact no other way except the way of trust and surrender, and ultimately of belief in the creative and transforming power of love. John's invitation to accept 'the dark ray of contemplation' may not be easy, but there is no other way.

### **Dark Night of the World**

And yet John's insight is wider than any individual, personal experience. John Paul II, in his letter to Carmelites, *Master in the Faith*, speaks of the relevance of the term *dark night* to our present age – a term, he says, that refers not just to a phase of the *individual* spiritual journey, but also has a *collective character* as well, a bearing on all life, especially for an age all too painfully aware of the silence or absence of God.<sup>1</sup>

It is no longer enough to speak of the dark night of the soul; we must acknowledge a deeper reality: the *dark night of the world*. Another Carmelite writer, Constance Fitzgerald, expresses this accurately, I think, by the term ‘impasse’. This she sees as an existential cry for deeper wisdom and enlightenment, something that is both personal and global. With profound insight she brings contemporary issues into dialogue with the classical teaching of John of the Cross: ‘In a true impasse,’ she writes, ‘every normal manner of acting is brought to a standstill, and ironically, impasse is experienced not only in the problem itself but also in any solution rationally attempted.’<sup>2</sup>

The whole experience of powerlessness, confusion, and the loss of meaning that characterise the spiritual journey are the very same realities evident in so much of our society today: the political, economic and social vacuum that pervades the modern world. Perhaps the radical breakdown of structures and the seemingly impossible problems in our society are nothing else but a harrowing cry for a different vision and new insight.

Contemplation lives on the frontier of human consciousness and calls out to us from the edges of human experience. It will bring you to a place you did not know you needed to go and confront you with a truth about yourself you really did not want to know. Contemplation is not seeing new things, but seeing things in a new way. True contemplation is subversive and always has been, it affects our understanding of the very nature of God and this in turn affects the character and quality of the way we live. Contemplation both challenges and undermines: Jesus, Ghandi, and Martin Luther King dared to see things in a new way and paid the ultimate price.

The temptation for those imprisoned within this impasse of darkness is either despair or indifference. A world that lacks imagination and creativity is a world that has lost the spirit of contemplation, ceased to look at new horizons, and has accepted the lies told by politicians, experts and global marketing, betrayed by a gospel of despair. We seem trapped into helplessness and a lack of vision: 'Everything,' John says, 'seems to be working in reverse' (1DN 8:3).

Yet it is precisely when we are broken, poor and powerless that we are most open to the dark mystery of God's creative action. Contemplation is not just 'waiting in the dark for something to happen'; it is a dynamic confrontation with the unexplored, hidden places in our lives. Things do not have to be as they are; there is another way. It is the way of faith, not just faith in God, but faith in a process that is bigger than ourselves: the way of contemplation.

### **The Way of Wisdom**

If we deal with the dark impasse in our lives or in society, either by denial or repression, then we are closing our hearts to the life-giving wisdom of the Spirit; we have left no room for grace, for enlightenment or for alternative ways of responding. If we persist in 'doing it our own way', we close the door to new insights and fresh horizons; all we have is more violence, anger and confrontation.

Dark night shows up the 'shadow', contemplative listening reveals the 'light'. Cold logic and the wisdom of this world will never give the answers or solutions that bring ultimate peace and fulfilment. 'John of the Cross,' John Paul II has said, 'does not try to give a speculative answer to the appalling problem of suffering but sifts out something of the marvellous transformation which God effects in darkness.'<sup>3</sup>

Only those who know nothing of prayer, meditation or contemplation think that they are useless exercises, a waste of time and energy. Sitting in meditation, spending one's time in what John of the Cross calls 'the sweet idleness of contemplation', places one at the very centre of the pulsating world. 'The One who sits in meditation,' the Zen masters remind us, 'sits for the whole world.' Nothing in the universe is more intensely alive and active than genuine prayer and contemplation. One act of pure love, John reminds us, is of more value to the whole world than all other acts put together.

There is a crisis of authority in our society today. We no longer believe the clichés and platitudes of our politicians and economists and the global giants of commerce and industry. We feel betrayed and abused. And yet people do listen today when spiritual leaders speak. Why? Because they speak with authority and with compassion. Why is it that the voice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Pope Benedict XVI, Aung San Suu Kyi, Archbishop Tutu, Mother Teresa of Calcutta resonate with such clarity in our hearts in a way few, if any, of our political leaders do? Because they speak 'in the spirit', without self-interest and from within a centre of truth and compassion.

Compassion is the first fruit of contemplation, a compassion born out of a different worldview, a world where people matter and the voiceless have a voice. They look on the world with eyes of love, not of greed or control or power. There is integrity and a ring of authenticity about their words. Their actions are in tune with their words. In the unselfconscious words of one Sufi mystic: 'I am what I do, I do what I am.' On the day she died, in her Carmelite monastery, Thérèse of Lisieux – a woman with no political or social agenda – could say in all honesty and humility: 'I have never sought anything but the truth.' And her words, one hundred years later, touch and transform countless lives. Nothing conquers but the truth; and the victory of truth is love.

## Harnessing the Energy of Love

One of the great insights of John of the Cross is that the best growth – perhaps the only growth – is downwards. It is one of the many paradoxes of his teaching: we grow, not by addition but by subtraction, not by having more but by having less, not by always saying ‘yes’ to ourselves but by learning to say ‘no’. ‘More’, ‘bigger’, ‘better’ may be the catchwords of the commercial world but they are not part of John’s vocabulary. He speaks much more about ‘letting go’, about not desiring, about detachment; it is not the things we possess that hinder us, it is the things that possess *us*. John invites us to travel light and with freedom of heart. As he says and I quote ‘Even as a ladder has steps that we may go up, it has them also that we may go down. Of such is the nature of secret contemplation. For on this path the way down is the way up and the way up is the way down’ (2DN 18:2).

But, once again, this growth downwards also has a collective character. The journey is not only personal, it is universal. When we truly find our own centre, we find the ‘still point’ of the turning world. Nothing is as life-giving as genuine contemplation. The contemplative gaze penetrates to the heart of all human reality; it is the deepest source of energy and compassion for the world. This is the greatest gift the contemplative can give to the world: to see clearly, and to share that vision with others.

Finally, contemplative prayer in the Carmelite tradition embraces the dark night and the living flame, the spiritual canticle and the ascent of Mount Carmel. Presence and absence, joy and pain, discovery and bewilderment, they are all there, a dark mystery full of light: a way of paradox and seeming contradiction; not afraid to be different, re-interpreting the past, challenging the present and opening new horizons for the future.



It was all of these things for John of the Cross, poet, mystic and contemplative. The totality of his experience erupted in a transforming vision of a world redeemed by Christ – the longings of every human heart, the cry of the restless spirit, and creation itself, all gathered into a unity of purpose and harnessed into an energy of love, as he cried out:

‘Mine are the heavens and mine the earth. Mine are the nations; the just are mine and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine; and God himself is mine and for me. What then do you ask for and seek, my soul? Yours is all this, and all is for you.’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Master in the Faith: Apostolic Letter of John Paul II* (December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1990) 14.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Impasse and the Dark Night’, in *Living with the Apocalypse*, ed. Tilden Edwards (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).p 94.

<sup>3</sup> *Master in the Faith, op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> John of the Cross, ‘Prayer of a soul enkindled with love’, *Sayings of Light and Love* 27.