

Discovering and Living Out Our Identity: A Carmelite Perspective

“We shall never learn to know ourselves except by endeavoring to know God....” - St. Teresa of Jesus¹

Throughout history, many and varied doctrines have been put forth regarding the nature of man. This predilection with the question of the essence of man has existed from time immemorial. The Book of Genesis states that we are created in the divine image. “Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness.”² Our belief as Catholic Christians is that we participate in this divine nature through the Trinitarian presence within us, just as Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him.”³

As Christians, we are cognizant of this truth, albeit in an objective manner and as a mere abstraction, for our comportment attests otherwise. Our words and our actions demonstrate the extent to which this truth is not an integral part of our lives. In an age in which the identity crisis is the zeitgeist, I would like to illustrate the manner in which contemplative prayer allows us to become fully conscious of our true nature: that of being formed in the image and likeness of God our creator and also enables us to live out this identity in our daily lives.

Contemplative prayer is a conduit to the discovery of our spiritual core which for the most part, remains latent, suppressed and buried under the multiple layers of our ego. The first beatitude in the Gospel of Matthew, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, the kingdom of heaven is theirs”⁴ signifies that we can live in the Lord’s presence in the here and now if we maintain a certain state of mind and heart. This surrendering of the mind and the dying to our egotistical self are the key components of contemplative prayer. It is only through the shedding of our ego and by making ourselves vulnerable before the Lord that we are able to experience the divine presence within us. Jesus himself attests to this when he says “Amen, amen I say to you, unless a grain

¹ St. Teresa of Avila, **Interior Castle**. The Classic Text with a Spiritual Commentary by Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2007), Pg. 52.

² Genesis: 1:26. (New American Bible) All scripture verses are from the New American Bible.

³ John 14:23

⁴ Matthew 5:3

of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains but a grain of wheat, but if it dies, it produces much fruit”⁵

Contemplative prayer necessitates that the individual engaged in contemplation empty himself just as our Savior did on the cross,” taking the form of a slave”⁶⁷ in order to bring about our redemption. This “kenosis” or self-emptying is also required on the part of the contemplative so as to as Saint Paul says “put on the mind of Christ”. The absence of thoughts and of words combined with receptivity to the Lord’s will is the catalyst which transforms the contemplative into a receptacle prepared to be filled by the Lord with his love, mercy and compassion.

The greater the frequency with which we practice contemplative prayer, the more apparent do these divine attributes become. Over time, speaking and acting out of love progressively becomes ingrained in us. More often than not, we begin to exhibit transparency in our words and actions. Our behavior becomes far less egocentric. Scripture states that “God is love”.⁷ The discipline of contemplative prayer, brings to the forefront of our consciousness, this inherent and divine characteristic. Through the experience of divine love we are brought to the realization that love which encompasses mercy and compassion is the foundation of our nature.

The domain of contemplation brings about the reversal of qualities and characteristics cherished in the secular world. Autonomy, self-sufficiency and the need for constant activity and distractions are abandoned and replaced by dependence, patience and contentment with inactivity of body and mind. The three latter qualities become crucial to the discovery of our identity as arising from the indwelling of the Trinity. Lectio Divina provides an excellent prelude to prayerful silence. It allows the “I” of the contemplative to recede into the background while the Lord takes center stage. Paradoxically however, it is through the suppression of the “I” that its very significance as being rooted in the divine is clarified.

Contemplative prayer is truly radical in that it takes us back to the roots of our authentic nature. Knowing our identity experientially enables us to “know” others. Saint Elizabeth of The Trinity whose mission it was to make us aware of the dwelling place of the Trinity, the “little heaven” within us, aspired to “draw souls...to go out of themselves in order to cling to God....and to keep them in this great silence within, which will allow God to communicate himself to them and

⁵ John 12:24

⁶ Philippians 2:7

⁷ John 4:8,16. “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him”

transform them into himself.”⁸ Contemplative prayer is a means of partaking in the divine nature; the divine presence within us clothing us with his characteristics. Once the reins of human control are cast aside, the Source within us permeates our being with his essence and begins to mold our mannerisms and attitudes. Our judgemental and critical “eye” begins to dissipate, giving way to a vision governed by the divine lens.

Contemplation allows us not only to experience but to live out God’s unfathomable love and infinite mercy. The immersion in this divine love through contemplative prayer builds up a deep sense of gratitude and security. It eliminates the need to prove oneself, ending competition and jealousy. Making ourselves “little” in the manner of Saint Therese of Lisieux we are then capable of tackling the mundane “with great love” and are able to truly “rejoice with those who rejoice” and “weep with those who weep”.⁹

The truth about our fundamental identity as rooted in the Trinity sets us free: free of internal strife and torment. We discover and experience stability of mind and heart as a result of patient “waiting” and “dying to self” which is so essential in contemplation. Dependence on the Lord leads to total independence. In an age in which the tension between the physical and the mental aspects of the individual runs high, causing great angst, the knowledge that we are bearers of the Trinity liberates us from the feeling of insufficiency as well as from an entire gamut of negative emotions and problems which ordinarily plague us. Total loss of control typically viewed as a weakness is in actuality the source of great strength and interior liberation.

Time spent in prayerful silence may be viewed as an escape from and as a refusal to engage in reality. What may appear to an observer as a passive activity is in actuality, the driving force of an altruistic engagement in life. “Speechlessness” and “thoughtlessness” as well as “smallness” and “emptiness” are in fact synonymous with abundant living.

Frequent or daily reception of the Eucharist has the supreme power to transform us into what we consume. The regular and disciplined practice of contemplative prayer is also transformational. It requires preparation. However, if we take the time and make the effort, the Lord by his grace can bring about a metanoia in us, making us the best version of who we are, just as he intended us to be. The surrendering of our will so that the will of God may be fulfilled in us is the prerequisite to interior peace.

Contrary to the notion held by the Existentialists who postulate that existence precedes essence, we do not believe as Catholics that we “make” or define ourselves in the ontological sense as we journey through life on earth, but that we are molded by God the creator in his

⁸ Elizabeth of The Trinity, **The Complete Works, Volume Two**. Letters from Carmel. (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1995), L335, p.60

⁹ Romans 12:15.

image and likeness. Contemplative prayer brings us into direct contact with our ontological origins: the Trinity being reborn in us and we being reborn and resurrected in the Trinity. Just as our Lord summoned his disciples to cast their nets into the deep in order to bring in an abundant catch, he asks us to let go, to trust in him, to take a leap of faith and to plunge into the recesses of our soul, thereby revealing our identity as entwined in that of the Trinity. This living relationship, this “makarios” is our ancestry, our heritage and our spiritual genealogy which makes us whole. It is indeed an efficacious form of evangelization, for we live and practice the presence of God within us.

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