

TO WEAN THE SOUL OR TO ABANDON MEDITATION

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"When the appetite has been fed somewhat, and has become in a certain fashion accustomed to spiritual things, and has acquired some fortitude and constancy, God begins to WEAN THE SOUL, as they say, and place it in...the state of contemplation". (F 3,32) [1]

1. INTRODUCTION

Starting November 1990, the Church is celebrating the 400th anniversary of the death of St. John of the Cross (SJC), one of the most important mystics in the history of religion. In the last few years I have guessed at a possible influence of SJC on St. John Baptist de La Salle. La Salle does not mention SJC directly. However, in certain areas of spirituality there is a certain similarity that would lead one to think of a direct or indirect influence of SJC on La Salle.

The Discalced Carmelites had houses in France in the time of our Founder and some of the writings of SJC had already been translated into French. However, the mystic John of the Cross had not been canonised by the Church yet, and because of the bad influence of quietism his teachings were under suspicion.

One of the areas of possible influence is in meditation-contemplation. This article would like to present some of the important ideas of SJC on meditation-contemplation. Its relation with the prayer of 'simple attention' is quite clear. Besides, SJC might be able to help us and lead us once 'simple attention' has been reached. This is a theme on which La Salle is rather brief and SJC tends to be rather long.

2. MEDITATION AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

"God gives many souls the talent and grace for advancing, and should they desire to make the effort, they would arrive at this high state (contemplation). And so it is sad to see them continue in their lowly method of communion with God because they do not want or know how to advance, or because they receive no direction on breaking away from the methods of beginners." (A. Prologue, 3)

From this and other quotations it can be seen that SJC thinks that the number of contemplatives should be high, since many souls have the talent and grace to be so. To continue in a lowly method of conversation with God is to continue using meditation as the means of contact with God. And God wants them to walk on a higher road which is the road of contemplation. The high state of union of the soul with God, that God wants the soul to acquire, can be reached only through the means of contemplation.

To know when and how to leave meditation, and when and how to contemplate presents a double problem, i.e. the problem might come from the teaching of the spiritual director or from the soul itself. SJC speaks of the *"three blind men who can draw the soul off the road: the spiritual director, the devil, and the soul itself."* (F 3, 29)

However, let us concentrate on the role of the director and that of the soul.

1. The soul might not want or know how to go forward in spite of the great desire God has of making it move forward. For SJC, meditation is for beginners only; one cannot be a

beginner all one's life, and the sooner the beginner leaves this state and moves forward to that of 'proficient' or 'perfect', the more will he benefit and the greater will be the glory of God. *"Some souls, instead of abandoning themselves to God and cooperating with him, hamper him by their indiscreet activity or resistance. They resemble children who kick and cry, and struggle to walk by themselves when their mothers want to carry them; in walking by themselves they make no headway, or if they do, it is at a child's pace"* (A. Prologue, 3)

Contemplation is the true high-way to reach communion with God; it is the way in which God himself takes the soul and carries it in his arms as the mother carries her child, so that it will not get tired and may be able to walk quickly.

2. The problem may come from the lack of understanding of the spiritual director. He might not be well enlightened and so makes the soul lose time, making *"the soul go back and so double the work of the poor soul"* (A. Prologue). "For, some spiritual directors are likely to be a hindrance and harm rather than a help to these souls that journey on this road" (A. Prologue, 4). *"Oh, what an excellent place this is to advise souls on whom God bestows these delicate unions, to watch what they are doing and into whose hands they commit themselves, that they might not turn back"* (F 3,27).

Some might think that they do not have the gift of prayer and in reality they do, while others might think that they are very advanced and in reality 'it is little more than nothing'. *"It will happen that while an individual is being conducted by God along a sublime path of dark contemplation and aridity, in which he feels lost...someone will proclaim that all of this is due to melancholia or depression..."* (A. Prologue 4). *"Many individuals think that they are not praying when, indeed, their prayer is intense. Others place high value on their prayer while it is little more than non-existent"* (A. Prologue 6).

It might be good to mention that SJC rarely speaks of 'prayer of contemplation'. Contemplation does not limit itself to a method of praying, during the time dedicated to 'mental prayer'. Contemplation is a 'state' of being, a way of living, a focusing on life. This state is maintained both during the time of prayer and in the anonymity of travelling in a crowded bus, in the passion of a just strike, or in the day-to-day work to earn a living and build a better world.

SJC mentions that to enter this state is a grace from God and not the result of one's own effort. *"This first night belongs to the beginners at the time when God begins to put the soul in the state of contemplation"* (1A 1,3). *"In the first place it should be known that if a person is seeking God, his Beloved is seeking him much more. And if the soul directs to God its loving desires, which are fragrant to him as the pillar of smoke rising from the aromatic spices of myrrh and incense (Ct. 3,6), God sends it the fragrance of his ointments by which he draws it and makes it run after him (Ct. 1,3), and these are his divine inspirations and touches"* (F 3,28).

Contemplation is a means for God's action and at the same time an end in itself. *"The darkness of the soul is required for the effective guidance through faith to supreme contemplation"* (2A,4). The whole of Book II of *The Ascent* can be summarised as a journey towards and through contemplation. Contemplation is a unique means to lead the individual in all the perceptions of the understanding, and also the goal to be obtained in the dark night.

3. MEDITATION

St. John of the Cross deals with meditation when speaking of the natural imaginary perceptions, in the second book of *The Ascent* to Mount Carmel. He speaks of meditation as a means which has to be passed through: he points out its limitations, as well as its usefulness, to encourage the individual to move forward. The shorter the time spent in meditation the better for him (2A, 12).

Even though meditation can be of the discursive kind (reasoning and effort to understand predominate), or imaginative meditation (in which imagination contributes its part), for SJC both belong to the 'interior bodily sense' that

he calls 'imagination and fantasy'. His opinion of these two ways of contacting God is: *"For our discussion there will be no need of differentiating between them. Meditation is the work of these faculties, since it is a discursive act built upon images and figures, imagined and fashioned by the senses. For example: the imagining of Christ crucified, or at the column, or in some other scene; or of God seated upon a throne with resplendent majesty; or the imagining and considering of glory as a beautiful light, etc...; or of picturing any other human or divine object imaginable"* (2A 12,3).

His sentence is rather severe: *"The individual cannot reach the union with God before the activity relating to these perceptions ceases. Such perceptions are incapable of being the proper and proximate means of this union"* (2A 12,2). *"The soul will have to empty itself of these images and leave this sense in darkness if it is to reach divine union"* (2A 12,3).

According to SJC it is not possible to reach perfect union with God by means of meditation. The exercise of meditation has to cease to be able to move forward to perfect union. However, many spiritual directors can do a lot of damage to many souls because they do not understand the ways and properties of the spirit; they make individuals lose the union of these delicate ointments with which the Spirit anoints them and they instruct them in other baser ways, useful only to beginners, which they themselves have used or read somewhere (F 3,31). These baser ways are the discursive and imaginative meditations that do not go beyond their natural capacity with which the soul does not progress much.

4. SIGNS INDICATING THAT IT IS TIME TO ABANDON MEDITATION

St. John of the Cross says that *"it is not suitable to abandon meditation and the use of the imagination and forms and images before or after the spirit demands it"* (2A 13,1). It is not good to leave discursive meditation before time otherwise the individual might have to come back afterwards. Even though these forms of discursive and imaginative meditation are not useful to the proficient, they serve as remote means for beginners to dispose them and accustom the spirit to spiritual things. Discursive and imaginative meditation may be the way to empty the senses of forms and images which are low, passing, secular and natural. The signs that indicate that the individual is ready for contemplation and should abandon meditation are as follows:

First sign: *"The first is the realisation that one cannot make discursive meditation nor receive satisfaction from it as before. Dryness is now the outcome of fixing the senses upon subjects which formerly provided satisfaction. As long as one can, however, make discursive meditation and find satisfaction, one must not abandon this method."*

Second sign: *"The second sign is the awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties upon other particular objects, exterior or interior"*.

Third sign: *"The third and surest sign is that the person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without acts and exercises (at least discursive, those in which one progresses from point to point); and that he prefers to remain only in a general loving awareness and knowledge without any particular knowledge or understanding"* (2A 13,2-4).

These three signs must go together for the individual to be able to abandon meditation and enter contemplation. It is not sufficient to have one or two of the signs as they might come from distractions or from lack of diligence.

The first two signs are quite easy to observe, but the third, especially at the beginning of being in this state of contemplation, this loving awareness, is not easy to specify. This awareness is rather subtle and delicate, almost unnoticeable.

But as one begins to be in the habit of reaching peacefulness, contemplation will grow. Little by little, this loving awareness of God will become clearer and clearer, and will bring the person peace, rest, taste and delight more than anything else in the world.

5. SPIRITUALITY AND MEDITATION-CONTEMPLATION

Spirituality is the study of spiritual life and therefore must reflect the experience of Christian life. This reflection is made in two directions: on the intellectual content of faith and then on the manifestation of this faith in life. In this life, experience is where it is possible to observe the communication of God in action. Spirituality is concerned with the dimension of communion and friendship between God and man.

Meditation-contemplation forms part of the living manifestation of God in the believer. Theology helps one to understand this experience better, and at the same time draws information from it that will help it in its reflection. In this way the experience of meditation-contemplation is a source of information for spirituality and theology. To know how to behave in this experience is as (or more) important as to know how to interpret God's message.

If one takes care to apply oneself faithfully to meditation-contemplation it might hold the key to the integration of the different aspects of Christian living: integration of knowledge and affectivity, of communal and individual living. Mystagogy (as the introduction to mysteries) cannot ignore meditation-contemplation if it wants to be fruitful.

What gives impulse to meditation-contemplation is theological life and the growth of the theological virtues both in their passive and active aspects. St. John of the Cross has given the theological virtues the place that corresponds to them in the life of communion with God. Vatican II gives them their due importance. It is in meditation-contemplation that these virtues grow and are purified. Meditation-contemplation is one of the means by which God manifests himself to man, and by which man answers God. It is a question of establishing immediate and personal contact with God that will manifest itself in one's whole life.

Modern man's hunger for experience should lead us to provide facilities so that meditation-contemplation can be a practical answer to this need. It has to be presented in its totality and as a 'necessary option' for every Christian.

Since we do not know the method of prayer that Jesus used, there is a multitude of methods of Christian meditation, not all of them equally fruitful. The demands of the freedom that the spirit gives to God's children and the necessity to follow a good method come together in meditation. To wish to go forward with the freedom of the children of God demands the acceptance and practice of an efficient method. St. John of the Cross gives few details about the method of meditation, but he appears as a great master and a demanding teacher when he deals with contemplation. St. John Baptist de La Salle is a very methodical teacher in his Method of Mental Prayer which deals with both meditation and contemplation.

NOTE

The following signs are used in referring to the major works of St. John of the Cross: A = Ascent to Mount Carmel; N = The Dark Night; C = The Spiritual Canticle; F = The Living Flame of Love. Following these identifying letters, the number of the book and chapter or stanza are given, followed by the number of the paragraph.