

Lenten Reflection

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at Our Lady of Fatima Shrine



Originally, Lent was the time the catechumens prepared for Baptism, and in due course, it became a time too when those who were already baptized sought to renew themselves so that they could partake in the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus with mind and heart renewed and so share more fully in the joy of the Lord together with the newly Baptized in the celebration of Easter. And with the liturgical renewal of Vatican II, we have returned to that in our day as well.

Now, when the catechumens were immersed in the waters of baptism, after each of the three immersions, they were asked respectively, “Do you believe in the Father? In the Son? In the Holy Spirit?” They answered, “I DO BELIEVE”. Our word Creed comes from the Latin word *credo*, which is made up of two parts, ‘cor’ (heart) and ‘dare’ (to give), meaning to give ones heart.

The Middle English verb *bileven* meant ‘to love, to prize, to hold dear’; the noun *bileve* meant ‘loyalty, trust, commitment, engagement’. It was related to the German *liebe* ‘beloved’ and the Latin *libido* ‘desire’. Believing at that level means, being in a state of desiring the Beloved.

The word ‘Lent’ is an old Anglo-Saxon word for Spring, the time when the earth renews itself, a time of new life. Someone may say, but if we have this life already, why all the fuss about renewing it? I think that deep down, or maybe, not so deep down, we know we are capable of more, that we want more, and certainly there is more, and the door to that more can be summed up as a deeper faith in Christ.

“There is much to fathom in Christ, for He is like an abundant mine with many recesses of treasures, so that however deep people go they never reach the end or bottom, but rather in every recess find new veins with new riches everywhere. On this account St. Paul said of Christ: In Christ dwell hidden all treasures of wisdom (Col 2.3)” [SC, 37:4].

As we know, John did fathom these riches: “Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth” he wrote, and continues: “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, because Christ is mine and all for me.” (Prayer of a Soul taken in Love). And John offers counsels that can well serve as Lenten penance that leads to a deeper joy in our faith. 2A13:6,7, he counsels:

Endeavour to be inclined always:

- *not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;*
- *not to the most delightful,*
but to the most distasteful;
- *not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;*

- and, *for Christ*, desire to enter into complete nakedness, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world.

You should embrace these practices earnestly and *try to overcome the repugnance of your will* toward them. If you sincerely put them into *practice with order and discretion*, you will *discover in them great delight and consolation*.

Like John of the Cross, St. Teresa was someone with a deep love for Christ. When one of the confessors asked her for an account of how she spent her day, this was her reply:

“Imagine a person so much in love with another that they cannot be for a moment without thinking of Him. This is how it is with Christ and me. I speak of Him and to Him all the time.”

Like John too, Teresa is concerned that we grow in our love of Christ. One of the big obstacles in our day is our secular society; instead of evangelizing our society, we can allow ourselves be evangelized by it instead. Repentance is a very Lenten word; it means basically to think again, to have another look at how we live, and in this case in how we relate to our society’s values. Believe it or not, this was a concern of Teresa as well, and when she speaks of detachment, this is very often what she is speaking about. She speaks of DETACHMENT FROM PEOPLE, which sounds rather harsh; in fact, Teresa doesn’t use that exact expression; she speaks of “detachment from our relatives”, which sounds even worse! So, how do we arrive at concern about secularism from this?

Teresa is concerned about a healthy spiritual and human formation, one that is evangelical, and that’s the context in which she is writing in her *Way of Perfection*. She wants to avoid at all costs what we today would call a secular mentality. She did not want sisters who were not yet mature in their faith to gossip with those who were equally or even more immature, relatives of that kind.

The challenge for us today is to refuse to allow the secular culture to evangelize us, with its soap operas, its celebrities, its materialism, its philosophy of pleasure and of greed. Even in her day, Teresa observed that there were people who had lost their appetite for spiritual food, and especially that of prayer, the reason being that they had gotten a taste for other food, which was addictive but failed to really satisfy.

Thérèse of Lisieux was very aware of the illusory bright lights, but she was not taken in by them. Referring to the burning bush encounter that Moses had with God in Ex 3.1-10, St. Thérèse says that “Jesus is the flame that burns without consuming.”

“You know, O my God, I have never desired anything but to love you, and I am ambitious for no other glory. Your love has gone before me, and it has grown with me, and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot fathom. Love attracts love, and my Jesus, my love leaps towards yours” [S 256].

Here is the witness of a man who became disillusioned with the bright lights:

“I may, I suppose, regard myself, or pass for being, a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets—that's *fame*. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Inland Revenue—that's *success*. Furnished with money and a little fame even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions—that's *pleasure*. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time—that's *fulfilment*. Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing—less than nothing, a positive impediment—measured against one draught of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are. What, I ask myself, does life hold, what is there in the works of time, in the past, now and to come, which could possibly be put in the balance against the refreshment of drinking that water?” (Malcolm Muggeridge).

Formation, both initial and ongoing is important in this respect. Spiritual reading, whether it be the Scriptures or good spiritual books, is important. Two years ago (2012), the Teresianum celebrated its 75th anniversary. It happened that for the Lent of that year that one of the professors there, Francois Léthel, was asked to preach the Lenten retreat to the Papal household. As part of his reward, we Carmelites, and especially the students of the Teresianum were granted a Papal audience, where memorably, we were told that ... ‘The one thing that all your studies [reading] should lead to is “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:8).

On another occasion, Benedict echoed very closely what Teresa told her Confessor: “There is nothing more beautiful than to know Christ and to speak to others of our friendship with Him.” This central to our lives as Carmelites.

What Pope Francis has to say in *Evangelii Gaudium* both sums up and elaborates a lot of what I've been saying so far: “THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. ...A JOY EVER NEW, A JOY WHICH IS SHARED (Evangelii Gaudium, 1-2). ...[This] joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore. The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts: "It was about four o'clock in the afternoon" (Jn 1:39). So, let remembering our special moments of meeting with Jesus be part of our Lenten journey.

Some people do not need Lenten penance because their lives are already so difficult. Well then, another way of growing in love for Christ is in making the best of difficult times. Consider Teresa's letter (294) to Isabel de San Jeronimo and Madre Maria de San Jose in Seville. They and the members of the community were going through a very hard time of it because of unjust treatment; this was at the time when the conflict between Calced and Discalced was at its height. Teresa by no means condoned the injustice, but pointed also to the opportunity the community had to grow in holiness by their response to the situation:

“The grace of the Holy Spirit be with your reverence, my daughter. I received your letter and that of my sisters the day before yesterday. O Jesus, and what a great consolation it would be for me to be present now in that house, ... so as to share in the treasures our Lord has given you in such abundance! May he be blessed forever! Amen.” Teresa doesn't elaborate here on how they are

to do this, or how she would do so herself. But we do have plenty evidence of her counselling that we look at the innocent Christ in his Passion so that we may love Him the more and imitate Him, and grow in his love by doing so.

Here too, we may recall John of the Cross's advice given in similar circumstances: "Think only that God ordains all, and where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love."

Richard Wurmbrand relates in his book, *Tortured for Christ*, how in his solitary confinement cell in a Romanian prison, he was reflecting on the final Beatitude: "Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven ..." (Lk 6:22-23). Having read it, he realized he hadn't been 'leaping for joy', repented, and there and then began to do so. St Thérèse, during the illness of her father, found positives to be grateful for, 'especially during that time.'

Here's another story from a Romanian prison camp related by Wurmbrand. Milan Haimovici, a man with no formal learning, is sharing his Christian faith, professing that he knows Jesus, that he walks with Him and talks with Him. In response, he is being ridiculed by a fellow-prisoner, a former professor of the Royal Academy of Sciences: 'Jesus has been dead for two thousand years. How can you talk with him? Even admitting that He was resurrected, as you Christians believe, and went to heaven, this heaven is millions of miles away. Don't tell us any more lies. No one can walk and talk with him.' Milan simply repeated, 'I wonder myself how it can happen and have no real explanation, but it is a fact. He walks and talks with me.' A great circle of prisoners listened to the discussion. Continuing, Milan asserted, 'I even see Him sometimes.'

This was too much for the man of science. 'What you say is the greatest lie I have heard in all my life. Since you claim you see Him, can you please tell us how He looks at you: angry, wrathful, bored, indifferent, polite, interested, loving? Does He perhaps also smile at you?'

Milan replied, 'How did you guess that? Really, He sometimes smiles at me.' 'Well, well,' said the professor. 'You are lucky I am not a psychiatrist, or I would diagnose you as having religious mania. Perhaps you can show us how Jesus smiles.' 'I will gladly try,' said Milan.

The scene that followed was the most beautiful in the eighty-one years of my life. Like all the rest of us, Milan resembled a scarecrow. Shorn, dirty, with dark circles around the eyes; only skin and bones, with teeth missing, and in a zebra uniform, he was anything but attractive. But when he received this challenge, his face began to shine—the glory of God can shine through a thick crust of dirt—and a beautiful smile appeared on his lips. Romeo must have looked like this when he smiled at Juliet.

There was a touch of sadness in the smile because of the lost condition of his questioner's soul. But one could read on his lips a passionate love, an unquenchable longing, a sure hope and an ardent desire of a lover to receive the kiss of the beloved. All the splendour of heaven was in this magnificent smile. ... The atheist professor bowed his head and said, 'Sir, you have seen Jesus.' Milan knew how to creatively use life's difficulties to grow in his love for Jesus and to bear witness to Him.

St. Teresa says that we should pray for that kind of love for Jesus because, “If God once granted us the grace of this love, then all things will be easy for us, and quickly and without difficulty we will do great things for him” (L22:14). Let us do so by making the prayer of Paul our own during this Lent:

“This then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name: Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:14-21).