

“The Witness of Contemplative Women in the Heart of a Secular Society”

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“This year there will be a pilgrimage of the relics of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux through Sweden and the other countries of Northern Europe. I am very curious and wondering how she will be received in our post-Lutheran and secular society. Thérèse was the person who helped me to find my vocation as a Carmelite. She has helped innumerable people to realize that they are loved by God and that this implies that they have a special and unique vocation. God wants to do something beautiful with all of us. Even if he does not need us, he wants to show us that our loving response to his love means something for him and for his work of salvation. Thérèse saw that her vocation was to live in the heart of the Church. She wanted to do everything for God. She wanted to take upon herself all the vocations within the Church. No single vocation was enough for her. At a certain moment, she realized that she could do everything for God and live all these vocations in the heart of the Church.

I think that Thérèse can help many people in our secular society to see their value and dignity. Every single person, whoever he or she is, needs to see that it is something great to be a human being, created in the image of God. A hidden and contemplative life, as that of Thérèse, had no visible influence and impact on society. Still, her message of God’s immense mercy and love of every single person can remind many of their unique dignity and vocation. As we know, Thérèse also had a special love of those who did not believe in God. She wanted to eat their dry bread and share their sense of God’s absence. During her dark night of the soul, she even lost the experience of faith and in that way she could in a vicarious and mystical sense share the experience of non-believers. This mystical solidarity is a very important accent in contemplative life in a secular society where

few people have faith, or rather think that they do not believe in God. Often, I hear people saying I cannot believe in God, but I would like to do so. Of course, this is already faith in its humble beginning. Thérèse shows what it is to be “mother of souls” whether they believe in God or not. In our secular society, this motherly aspect of contemplative life could be a prophetic sign, and as such it will also encounter critical and aggressive response.

The Bride, Mary, Church, Soul:

Female contemplative life could help our society to rediscover that it needs a heart. This, of course, is also the role of Our Lady who in herself is the heart of the Church, the total realization of the ecclesial mystery. Only Mary can give us a perfect idea of the essence and the very being of the Church. The mystery of the Church is female, to be the bride of Christ, the Bridegroom. This bridal mystery is very much needed in our time of technological and secular supremacy. More than ever before, the female, motherly mystery of the Church has to be proclaimed and lived. The female, contemplative vocation is a witness that can help many, both men and women, to see what the Church is in her innermost reality. In our sexualized atmosphere it is not easy to speak about the notion of “the bride of Christ”. Still, it is very much needed in order to grasp the deep meaning of our relationship to Christ. The bridal aspect of faith is a remedy to the loss of mystical identity that many Christians experience today. It is not so easy for a man to grasp that he as well is called to live this bridal relationship to Christ. As the mystics always remind us, the human soul is female in its relationship to the Bridegroom Christ. This, by no means, implies a loss of male identity, but it opens up to a deeper comprehension of the female aspect of the Church, of faith, hope and love. That is also the reason why the contemplative female vocation is a necessary witness of something essential in our Christian faith and vision. Where this vocation is lacking, something is missing in the life of the Church. That is also the reason why Bishops from all over the world are trying to get a foundation of

a Contemplative monastery of women in their diocese.

When we meditate upon the innermost mystery of the Church, we open up to the person of Mary. In her, the female bridal aspect of the Church is evident. Can this classical spousal and mystical outlook help our society of today to rediscover something forgotten and denied? Maybe this bridal aspect could be a prophetic outcry in our society of technology, consumerism, and wild capitalism?

A Contemplative Community as Sacramental Sign of God's presence:

The secular atmosphere of our society, where female empowerment and emancipation is so important, is supposed to be open to the input of women on all levels. But often this special vocation of Contemplative women is forgotten or unknown. Still, it is interesting to see how open many men and women in our secular society of Sweden are to this vocation. Even those who seem to be totally unreligious can show a deep veneration for a contemplative nun. Sometimes people phone to the Carmelite nuns and ask for prayers, but simultaneously they add that they are not religious at all and do not believe in God. There must be a profound human aspect that comes alive in the image and icon of the contemplative woman. Just as Mary is the new Eve in the New Covenant at the side of Jesus, the new Adam.

In a surrounding where most people do not believe in God and often live alone, a community of contemplative women can offer a very important message. Their only purpose is to show that life's innermost value is to show that it is a gratuitous gift from God and that it is right and just to surrender our life totally to him in a life of prayer and silence, of sacrifice and adoration. This life is lived in communion. So many people long for communion with others, but somehow they have lost the capacity to live in a profound, lifelong communion with someone else. As every Christian community, a female contemplative community is an image of the communion in God himself, the Blessed

Trinity. It is part of evangelization to show what it means to live together in community in a world of individualistic culture. So much loneliness needs to be healed. It is a message of hope to invite people to the invisible reality called communion of Saints.

Mystical Prayer – a Special Grace for Women?

In the communion of Saints, all spiritual treasures are common to all believers. We may use the prayer of Thérèse of Lisieux and that of Teresa of Avila. There is no private property, it is for the common good. Still, Teresa of Avila – in accordance with her friend Saint Pedro Alcántara – says that mystical prayer is a grace that seems easier to receive for women. It is more natural for a woman to look upon herself as the bride of the Bridegroom Christ, called to be totally transformed by his grace. Still, every single human being is invited to receive the grace of spiritual matrimony, perfect contemplation and total transformation in Christ. The Saints and Mystics use various vocabularies but they speak about the same reality. Traditionally, the human soul is regarded as female, as responsive and totally open to the Bridegroom.

Actually, at least in our part of the world, there are more women entering contemplative life than men. There seem to be more women nearly everywhere who cherish prayer and attend liturgy. Is that a sociological fact or something deeper? Is the female soul more open to God than the poor male soul? Still, we know that many women have played an important role to teach men to pray. How many boys have not been taught to pray by their mothers! How many female Saints have not inspired men, even the very tough and cool ones, to open up their hearts to Jesus in prayer! Men would need this gift of prayer and female influence in a society where violence seems to reign. In a society where weapons seem to reign, contemplative women can proclaim the prophetic message of Saint Teresa of Jesus: our only weapons are prayer and penance.

Call to Conversion in a Selfish Society:

In every society, there is a need of conversion, of more justice, peace, and reconciliation, of more love of the poor and marginalized. Female Saints as Bridget of Sweden and Teresa of Calcutta have always had an important impact on society. They and so many other female Saints have lived a life of profound contemplation, but at the same time they were able to bring the fullness of the Gospel to so many others in society. We need these female prophets badly in our society where most people seem to care more for their selfish wishes than for the common good. Contemplative life is not blind for the needs of the poor and downtrodden. Contemplation opens our hearts for those who suffer and are persecuted. Contemplation helps us to see the face of Jesus in every single person who needs our help and love.

How could this female charism become more evident in the heart of our contemporary secular society? We see that many female congregations who live a more active apostolic life seem to die out. Also some contemplative communities have difficulties to attract young women. Still, more than ever, this female contemplative vocation is needed in our time. All of us are called to a more profound conversion and a closer relationship with the Bridegroom, but we need those who help us by giving us a good example. We need the witness of contemplative women in order to create a society that is less heartless and more open to Jesus Christ and his gospel. We pray to the Lord and ask him to strengthen this charism in the heart of the Church, so that this witness can be fruitful for our contemporary society.