

Our Carmelite Promise: A Personal Reflection - Part 1

This is a reflection inspired by Fr. Earley's retreat several years ago. Since it seems to fit the theme of our talks on Our Carmelite Promise, I share it with you today.

MOVIES IN OUR MIND

Several years ago on retreat, I saw a stained glass window in the Church that moved me deeply. It said:

Silence
Of word
And mind
Of the imagination
And of passions
Recollection

And it occurred to me at that moment that *interior silence* is the key to unlocking the most mystical of the beatitudes: *Purity of Heart* . . . for it's through silence that we will come to see the face of God. And this got me thinking about the multitude of interior passions that stifle purity of heart, acting like a fast growing cancer on the movements of the Holy Spirit in our souls. These passions play out in the back of our minds, often without our notice, *like a continual running movie*. What some might dismiss as trivial can actually be quite harmful, as my own experience has shown. It never ceases to amaze me how quickly my own mind can turn to anxiety, worry, complaining, excuses, rash judgment, petty resentments – all in a split second. Allowing useless thoughts like these to take hold of our mind – even for the briefest moment - is to banish Christ from the tabernacle of our heart.

Then it occurred to me that if we are to strive for purity of heart we must also live in *simplicity*. Simplicity means living in harmony . . . in union itself. When we *open the door of our mind to Christ's gentle knocking*, we'll "see the riches of simplicity, the treasures of peace, the joy of grace." (St. Ambrose) The question, then, becomes how do we know when we have purity of heart? When we have purity of intention . . . *love* as our overriding motive. Purity of intention is the fruit of self-knowledge which, in turn, is the fruit of deep prayer. Purity of intention means knowing the state of one's heart at every moment . . . before every thought is completed, any word is said or any action performed. Simplicity, then, is to realize all this and to continually examine our soul and expel any part that is not of God.

So, it would seem, this kind of simplicity is one that is based on self-denial. The ascetical life is sometimes described as nothing less than warfare on self-love. So if the passions of the mind choke

off purity of heart . . . then the mind is where the battle must be waged. And interior silence becomes the means by which we fight. Quite simply, ***we need to turn off the movie running in the back of our minds*** that linger on the trivialities and useless thoughts that so often leads us toward the seven deadly sins.

Time and time again we must fight against our very selves and return to our place of rest . . . in God. Taken seriously, this is a battle that will be waged dozens if not hundreds of times a day. Seen in this light, *silence is mortification* . . . and a joyful sacrifice at that. Silence is where all the false idols we hold so dear are purged one by one from our soul. When you get right down to it, this is the essence of St. John of the Cross' dark night. Further, this interior warfare highlights the wisdom of all the saints: mysticism without asceticism is a sham and a lie.

The mystical and ascetical, then, lead us to the glorious reality of knowing the *indwelling presence* of the Trinity in our souls. Too often, it seems, we over complicate contemplation. On retreat, Father told us "con-templation" simply means "with God in His temple." The temple, of course, is our heart. Our contemplation is perfected when it becomes mystical and permeates all aspects of our life . . . when we begin living the *unseen reality*. And this is where the gifts of the Holy Spirit come into play, for without them we will never hear, let alone obey, His inspiration.

Living the *unseen reality* is to be attentive and receptive to the gentle stirrings of the Holy Spirit at all times. It's to Practice the Presence of God and live entirely in the present moment. Joyful living is to "just be" --- whether in prayer or in action. It's to allow oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit until He completely takes over. When this happens, our lives become intuitive, spontaneous, in rhythm. We move from situation to situation as the Spirit guides us . . . in a state of wonder and awe at everything.

Through silence our fruits will be made known and benefit others; radiating from the core of our being outward. We will shine. Seen in this light, silence is our sacred obligation. And lest anyone think only monastics can practice it; our Carmelite masters teach that silence can be achieved by anyone in any state of life. But truth be told, it's one thing to know "what" to do and another thing entirely "how" to do it! The answer to "how" would seem to have much to do with being *silent to self*-- and LISTENING.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

Often I will spend my lunch hour in some quiet secluded place to be alone with Christ in prayer. And one day I was quite fortunate to hear a remarkable symphony of sounds. Out of my right ear I could hear the joyful chirping of a bird quietly going about his business. Out of my left ear, all I could hear was the loud rumble of a jackhammer. And it occurred to me this little experience teaches much about our interior lives and how we can *cultivate an attitude of silence*.

The chirping sound of the bird is like how God speaks to us: quiet . . . joyful . . . and always present. The jackhammer, of course, is the pull of the world, devil and all our selfish impulses that constantly seek to drown out His still, quiet voice. And these selfish impulses are precisely the

movies we choose to indulge in our minds.

While God speaks to us in many ways - scripture, the sacraments, the people and events of our lives – as Carmelites, we place particular emphasis on recollection. And for this, paying heed to the nature and direction of our thoughts is especially important. We need to become mindful of the seemingly random tugs toward love and goodness that just seem to pop into our minds independent of what we are doing at the time . . . the voice of an ever formed conscience. We must learn to hear that voice and act upon those little inspirations: promptly, cheerfully, generously. In doing so, we'll find that listening is an art that becomes increasingly perfected with time and practice. In the beginning we'll stumble often and hear wrong. But no worry since His will is always done. As the psalmist says, "those who error in Spirit will be given understanding."

So how can we begin to cultivate an attitude of silence and learn to listen? There are things we can do. In fact, much of this is discussed by St. John of the Cross in his teaching of the active night of spirit; specifically the purification of our memory and will. St. John of the Cross' teaching in "The Ascent of Mount Carmel" addresses what we *apprehend* or *become aware of* in our mind; namely our *thoughts* and *feelings*. The active nights teach us how we turn off the movies in our mind to quiet the understanding and become more receptive. We *let go* and *tune-in*.

First step, **let go** all mental preoccupations when we first recognize them. A wise theologian once said: "The perfect man talks to God all the time; the imperfect man just thinks he does when he's really just talking to himself." (Garigou-LaGrange) So in keeping with St. John's teaching, these ongoing *monologues with self* – the movies in our mind - are a great impediment to our spiritual growth. And compounding matters, these preoccupations are so often based on anxiety and worry . . . the arch enemies of the joy and peace Christ teaches us to cultivate in purity of heart.

What we learn from St. John of the Cross is that we must teach ourselves to snuff out these selfish impulses at their "*first movements*." So how do we do that? Fortunately, there's a solution: we simply change the channel of the movie by returning our mind and heart back to Christ whenever we notice it strays. This ascetical practice is the essence of recollection as shown in this key teaching from St. John of the Cross:

What souls must do in order to live in perfect and pure hope in God is this: As often as distinct ideas, forms and images occur to them, they should immediately, without resting in them, turn to God with loving affection, in emptiness of everything rememberable. (Ascent, Bk 3 Ch 15)

This simple act changes monologue with self to dialogue with God. And this dialogue does not need to consist of many words . . . in fact the fewer the better contemplatively speaking. Our disposition is one of interior silence born through the stilling of our faculties which leaves us in a state of watching and waiting just like the wise virgins in the Gospel. It's the simple gaze of Brother Lawrence . . . the loving attentiveness of St. John . . . the naked intent of the Cloud of Unknowing. This is the atmosphere in which we learn to listen. To quote Brother Lawrence, we enter into "an alertness towards God, a wordless conversation with Him."

Dialogue like this lies at the heart of Christ's desire for relationship with us. So we just do it. Then do it again, and again, and again. Soon we'll find a habit forming. And through this simple, repetitive act we'll begin to see a wonderful transformation take place in us. By choosing dialogue we'll almost intuitively begin to moderate self . . . simple recognition of His presence inclines us not to mentally dwell on that which is incompatible with Him. And as self recedes, we become more other oriented . . . as we hear His interior prompts and respond in small acts of virtue. But this is exceedingly difficult work . . . true interior asceticism that places us in the path of all sorts of traps that trip us up. As St. John teaches, the devil uses our memory to prey on our weaknesses. So the key here is to know – really know – our dominate fault; which of the seven deadly sins most easily draws us away from His presence. Passions are one of the ways the devil does his work: he stirs our feelings and emotions until they run amok. When we dwell on these in our mind we're clinging to an attachment and allowing our appetites to control us. While usually not sin, these mental attachments are most often imperfections which render union with God impossible for the period of time in which they control us.

Next step, **tune-in** to the present moment. Once we learn to free of ourselves from the burden of our cares and concerns, we'll be delighted to find we'll often hear God's voice coming in loud and clear in our thoughts . . . just like the little chirping bird. We'll come to just know the little things we can say or do that will demonstrate our love of God or neighbor in the circumstances of every given moment. And by walking with Him in interior conversation in all we do we'll find we have obtained at least some measure of Purity of Heart. Our intention will become more like His. We'll begin to see with His eyes and hear with His ears. We'll begin to love with His heart. Our light will begin to shine so that others can see Him by our simple example. In short, silence of mind and heart places us firmly in the here and now . . . where Christ is to be found.

PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

So now we can look to where this is leading . . . to the teaching of Brother Lawrence. What Brother shows us is how *praying*, *listening* and *acting* go hand-in-hand. Fortunately, what Brother Lawrence teaches lies entirely in the ordinary way so that *all of us* have the means to become contemplatives aided, of course, by grace.

While Practicing the Presence of God is difficult to practice at first, dogged perseverance leads to an intuitive synthesis of praying, listening and acting until it becomes like second nature . . . we ponder always. When this happens, we experience a kind of everyman's mysticism; one that has no need of extraordinary graces such as visions, locutions or revelations. And even infused contemplation is not essential for its practice; although we shouldn't be surprised if that is *His* response to *our* fidelity.

So here's an interpretation of Brother Lawrence's teaching in the light of St. John of the Cross:

Pray in all times and in all ways. There's no surer way to take one's mind off oneself than to put it on another: God or our neighbor. And true prayer that is other-focused begins in *affection* and leads to *simplicity*. So broadly speaking, Carmelite prayer is Prayer of the Heart. It's a loving conversation between friends; the intimate sharing of all one's joys, hopes, sorrows and fears; deep, meaningful and profound friendship; a continuous, interior dialogue. A colloquy or sometimes just a brief aspiration. And it is, in St. Teresa's teaching, the way of prayer that should become our normal state.

But the Prayer of Heart isn't the end of the road. No, the fruit of affection is the Prayer of Simplicity: those brief, intermittent times when the soul becomes so utterly filled with Christ that dialogue is no longer helpful; in fact it's a hindrance. These are the "I look at Him and He looks at me" times. The soul possesses Him in full and words become redundant; silent interior adoration is the way we speak at such times. Though not yet infused contemplation, it's as close to it as we can come while our prayer is still in an active state.

The fruits of this intimate sharing are many; not the least of which is grace in the battle against self-love. Soon we'll see Him moderating self-love tendencies in our thoughts – as our conscience becomes more deeply formed unto His likeness. And from this living in His presence in thought and heart will naturally flow more peaceful, loving and other-focused actions. In short, we are transformed in many small and sure ways.

Listen: Ah, the hard part and the source of most of my falls! My challenge to you my brothers and sisters is this: *Try to spend just one day in interior quietude. Then simply watch your surroundings and all that is going on in it.* Perhaps, then, we'll come to some small understanding of St. John's teaching about the unitive way: "for God, to look is to love (SC 31-33)."

And maybe then we might be given some glimpse into the joys of living entirely in the present moment. We might begin to see a whole new world going on all around us . . . right under our very noses. Things our constant mental introspection and movie making blinds us to. Things like:

- The look of satisfaction on your daughters face when she finally gets her math homework.
- Or how she hangs in rapt attention on every word said by an older relative at a family gathering.
- The preening of a coworker starving for a bit of attention.
- Or the pensive, quiet anguish of a neighbor suffering through severe family problems.
- The joyful exuberance of a couple of friends sharing a good laugh.
- Or the wordless solitude of the old couple sitting next to you at the restaurant whose love transcends the need to talk.

The point of this laundry list is simple: the more we learn to walk with Christ in interior friendship, the more aware we become of the needs in our immediate surroundings and the less likely we'll find ourselves dwelling on self. And when we see - *which is the fruit of listening* - we will intuitively know how to act. This knowing, then, is pure mystical living.

Act: If we listen -- really listen -- we will soon learn to hear all sorts of spontaneous thoughts to simple acts of love just pop into our mind, seemingly from nowhere. Obey these inspirations *promptly, cheerfully, generously*. And don't worry about outcomes -- leave that entirely in His hands. The goal, quite simply, is to spend our entire lives in loving awareness of all the present moments that come to us each and every day. That's where He will be found . . . and where we can learn to lose ourselves in Him or others.

So continuing with our laundry list, here's how the fruit of listening can drive the actions of all our present moments . . . where the little things become the means of sanctity:

- One moment we're drawn to give a word of encouragement to someone who is feeling down.
- The next, we bite our tongue when a troublesome co-worker bothers us.
- Later, we praise God for some small act of virtue we see in that very same co-worker.
- Another moment, we stop our day dreaming to silently adore Him in our heart.
- The next, we change the channel in our mind when we recognize we've become forgetful.
- Later, we pick up that piece of trash in the parking lot instead of stepping over it.
- After that, we smile and nod at a person passing our way.
- Then we say a brief prayer for someone who just happened to pop into our mind.
- Moments later we pitch in and give a helping hand.
- Then we savor a quiet moment as the tree branches gently dance and sway in the wind.

The possibilities in this are endless. And, importantly, we come to see that *praying, listening* and *acting* aren't separate functions . . . but parts of a unified and harmonious whole. It's where the Practice of the Presence of God meets the Little Way. We pray and listen. Listen and act. Act and pray. And, in Brother Lawrence's teaching, we never stop practicing.

Saints of Carmel . . . pray for us that we may learn to become recollected and honor Our Lady by emulating her in the truest sense of what it means to be a Carmelite . . . to ponder always. May the Holy Spirit may be our constant companion, guide, teacher and friend . . . leading us always to Christ our Lord and the Father who sent Him. Amen.