

11. December 2020

The birth of the Lord in us, Part 6
“The inner life”

The reflections of this week lead us step by step into the encounter with contemplation.

There is a rich tradition in our holy church which describes the deeper encounter of the soul with God and also invites us to embark on such a journey. We know of communities which are completely devoted to contemplative prayer and which in this way bring the concerns of the Church and the world to God. They withdraw completely from the world and let the flame of love for God burn in their hearts.

Certainly this is a special vocation which does not go out to every person. But on this inner path, which the contemplative Carmelites, for example, follow, there are insights and directions that are important for all people who want to deepen their faith. Just as one learns in the world from masters of their subject, so we can go to school with those who have realised the inner life very intensively in their lives.

At the end of the last reflection I said that we should seek times of retreat in order to come into deeper contact with the Lord and to respond to His desire to communicate with us in a familiar way.

Sacred Scripture says: *“But when you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place” (Mt 6:6a).*

St. John of the Cross, one of the outstanding spiritual teachers, explains it this way: *“It must be remembered that the Word, Son of God, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is present in essence, but hidden in the innermost being of the soul. Therefore, if the soul wants to track him down, it must, according to the inclination of the will, go out from all things and gather itself in the highest degree in itself, as if all the rest did not exist... God is thus hidden in the soul, and it is here that love must seek him who wants to lead a contemplative life.” (“Spiritual Canticle” 1,6)*

So God lives in us and he invites us to seek him in our soul.

The spiritual teachers teach us that we must not allow ourselves to be absorbed by external things. This is an essential point for deepening our inner life. We are very quickly determined by external things, we let ourselves drift easily, we attach our

heart to transitory things, to people and seek comfort in them, we put our hope in them, etc.

All this, however, prevents us from going deeper and meeting God in our soul. We are, so to speak, already busy and occupied. Most of the time these occupations are so intense that they also affect the time that we actually want to dedicate to God. Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene, a Discalced Carmelite priest, writes¹:

“But I understand, my God, that to find you I must go out of all things, out of the noise and fuss of the outer life, out of the chatter about worldly things, out of the curiosity that draws me out to see, to hear, to know. Going out with the will from this whole outer world, which constantly wants to capture my attention, my thoughts, my inclinations. Help me to silence my useless curiosity, my too much chatter. Help me to go right through all the vicissitudes of life, all its intrusive attractions, its bustle, its dizzying performances, without my eyes and my heart sticking to these things to seek satisfaction, consolation or personal interest in them.”

If this is especially true for those souls who live a life of total solitude, it is also true for all those who wish to deepen their way with the Lord. It is an illusion to think that our spiritual life will deepen if we are not prepared to leave behind that which prevents us from doing so, if we are stuck in superficial life and have our “home” there.

How strange it is for us Catholics or at least should be, for example, if in a contemplative monastery a lifestyle is practised which has adopted worldly customs. We would perceive this as a contradiction and speak of a secularisation of the monastery.

But it is also strange if we Christians do not follow the path of inner transformation and our habitus is like those people who do not yet know the Lord and cannot yet receive the grace which God has prepared for us. In a certain sense, they are also a contradiction and take part in the increasing secularisation of the church.

The deepening of our spiritual life is thus not only dedicated for our fruitfulness, but it also has an effect on the testimony to other people who are searching for God.

¹ P. Gabriel a S. Maria Magdalena O.C.D., “Geheimnis der Gottesfreundschaft“ [Divine Intimacy] (Freiburg: Verlag Herder Freiburg, 1957), 41. Translated by br. Elijah.

In addition, the deepening of the spiritual life is particularly urgent in the present time, as the external conditions are increasingly limiting the practice of faith. The invitation to come closer to Jesus is all the more necessary if we are to deepen our path of following Christ.