



19. March 2023

LENTEN ITINERARY

Day 26: "Contemplation - a little heaven"

Let us begin today by talking a little about "recollective prayer", which is able to lead us to the "antechamber" of contemplation, the part that we can contribute so that the Lord finds the ground prepared and can grant us contemplative prayer, if He wills it.

The foundation of recollective prayer is the presence of God in our souls. It is that immeasurable presence through which He is in us as Creator and Sustainer, so real that *"in Him (...) we live, and move, and exist"* (Acts 17:28). At the same time, it is that friendly presence through which God dwells as Father, Friend and sweet Guest in the soul in a state of grace, inviting it to live in communion with the three divine Persons.

The prayer of recollection consists in the awareness of this great reality: God is in me and my soul is His temple (cf. 1 Cor 3:16). In the depths of this temple I recollect myself in order to adore, love and unite myself to Him.

Thus exclaims St. John of the Cross: O you soul, then, most beautiful of creatures, who so long to know the place where your Beloved is, that you may seek Him, and be united to Him (...). Rejoice, then, and be glad in Him with interior recollection, seeing that you have Him so near. Then love Him, then desire Him, then adore Him, and go not to seek Him out of yourself".

And St. Teresa of Avila remarks: "We are not forced to take wings to find Him but have only to seek solitude and to look within ourselves."

St. Teresa considers the prayer of recollection as the most sublime among the active forms of prayer, and points out that there are only two requisites to attain it: to concentrate all the powers of the soul and to withdraw with God within oneself. Although this initially involves effort, with the passage of time "recollection becomes much easier and more pleasurable, the senses obey better, even if one has not yet completely freed oneself from distractions".

The saint strongly recommends practising this form of prayer, saying, "Those who are able thus to enclose themselves within the little heaven of their souls where dwells the Creator of both heaven and earth, ... may feel sure that they are travelling by an excellent way, and that they will certainly attain to drink of the water from the fountain."

It is therefore a matter of perceiving the presence of the Lord in oneself and entering into an intimate dialogue with Him. There, in the depths of our soul, we find everything; and so we learn not to turn outwards and to intensify our inner life.

The prayer of recollection can also be practised by the faithful who live in the world, if they take the time to enter into their "little heaven", where the Holy Trinity has made His dwelling place (Jn 14:23).

According to St. Teresa of Avila, the transition from more active to contemplative prayer takes place in the fourth chamber of the soul's "inner castle". This fourth chamber, which she describes as the prayer of quietude, constitutes the link between the more ascetic and the more mystical stages of the spiritual life. From this point onwards, it would be God Himself who would take the reins. The human part would be to allow God to act, allowing oneself to be transformed by an ever more intimate relationship with Him.

St. Teresa illustrates this process of transformation by comparing it to the silkworm, which becomes a butterfly. It must be nourished by good meditation, spiritual reading, prayer and liturgy, until these forms of piety reach their limits. Once this point is reached, the soul must begin to weave a cocoon; a place where it will die to its former appearance, shedding all that it has clung to. If the person is willing to let go of everything, a mystical experience may be granted.

St. Teresa describes this experience of God in these terms: "God Himself connects Himself with the interior of the soul, so that she, coming to herself, can in no way doubt that she was immersed in God and God in her".

This experience transforms the person at the root, just as it happens with the caterpillar that becomes a butterfly.

What we have said so far about contemplation might suffice for a first impression. We will return to this theme indirectly when we talk about the "passive purification of the spirit". However, tomorrow we celebrate the Solemnity of St. Joseph, and there is much we can learn in our Lenten journey from this saint, whom St. Teresa of Avila loved very much.