

Praying the “Lord’s Prayer” With Saint Teresa of Avila

Tuesday, March 24th, 2015
The Year of Consecrated Life

Father Nathan Reesman

[Evening Prayer at 6:30: EP I of the Annunciation]

Brief Biographical Note on Saint Teresa:

- Born March 28, 1515, in Avila, Spain; died: October 4th, 1582,
- Spanish Mystic and reformer of the Carmelite Order who along with Saint John of the Cross is considered to be the founder of the Order of Carmelites, Discalced.
- She lost her mother at the age of 14, and she turned to the Blessed Mother as a spiritual mother in a renewed way.
- At the age of 20 she entered the Carmelite Monastery in Avila, Spain, and while there became immediately dissatisfied with how lax the community was in observing the Carmelite Rule and began to actively advocate for reforms.
- In 1562 she founded a new monastery dedicated to a reformed Rule of the Order.
- She suffered a great deal for her reforms at the hands of those in and out of the Church.
- She quickly became known for her mysticism and profound insights on prayer.
- She was canonized in 1622, 40 years after her death.

She writes famously on the Lord’s Prayer in her book *The Way of Perfection*: authored in the mid-16th Century.

Translation and edition used in this presentation:

The Way of Perfection, Teresa of Avila, Translated and Edited by E. Allison Peers; From the Critical Edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, C.D. New York. Image Books, Doubleday. 1991.

The opening words to the book, written in Saint Teresa’s own hand:

“Book Called Way of Perfection: Composed by TERESA OF JESUS, Nun of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel, addressed to the Discalced Nuns of Our Lady of Carmel of the First Rule.”
“This book treats of maxims and counsels which Teresa of Jesus gives to her daughters and sisters in religion, belonging to the Convents which, with the favour of Our Lord and of the glorious Virgin, Mother of God, Our Lady, she has founded according to the First Rule of Our Lady of Carmel. In particular she addresses it to the sisters of the Convent of Saint Joseph of Avila, which was the first Convent, and of which she was Prioress when she wrote it.”

- Much of the work is devoted to guiding her sisters in the ways of prayer, detachment, sacrifices, and community life.
- She writes and comments extensively on practicing God's presence, of trials in prayer, and of the levels of vocal prayer, mental prayer, and contemplative prayer.

From Chapter 26: Good advice for beginners of prayer and to set the tone for this presentation:

“Let us now return to our vocal prayer, so that we may learn to pray in such a way that, without our understanding how, God may give us everything at once: if we do this, as I have said, we shall pray as we ought. As you know, the first things must be the examination of conscience, confession of sin and the signing of yourself with the Cross. Then, daughter, as you are alone, you must look for a companion- and who could be a better Companion than the very Master Who taught you the prayer that you are about to say? Imagine that this Lord Himself is at your side and see how lovingly and how humbly He is teaching you- and, believe me, you should stay with so good a Friend for as long as you can before you leave Him.” Page 172.

On the Lord's Prayer:

- *What follows are a set of points and quotations for our meditation and reflection taken from her exposition on the Lord's Prayer, chapter by chapter*
- *Her exposition on the Lord's Prayer begins in the next chapter, 27, and runs to the end of the book, through chapter 42.*

Chapter 27 “Our Father”

- Teresa pauses on the first word “our.”
- How generous is Jesus to include us in the “our” showing that he truly sees us as his brothers and sisters.

“O Son of God and my Lord! How is it that Thou canst give us so much with Thy first word? It is so wonderful that Thou shouldst descend to such a degree of humility as to join with us when we pray and make Thyself the Brother of creatures so miserable and lowly! Thou dost oblige Him to fulfill Thy word, a charge by no means light, since, being our Father, He must bear with us, however great our offenses. If we turn to Him, He must pardon us, as He pardoned the prodigal son, must comfort us in our trials, and must sustain us, as such a Father is bound to do, for he must needs be better than any earthly father, since nothing good can fail to have its perfection in Him. He must cherish us; he must sustain us; and at last He must make us participants and fellow-heirs with Thee.” Pages 179-180.

- Meditating on this is a remedy for jealousy and contention and division- there are no favorites.

“His Majesty knew what a fuss would be made in the world about who was fashioned from the finer clay- which is like discussing whether clay is better for bricks or for walls.” Page 182.

- We must realize that all of us have not deserved to be made from even the basest clay, so that we find comfort only in him and throw ourselves into his arms.

Chapters 28 and 29: “who art in the Heavens.”

- For Teresa this is a very important point to communicate, namely, that “the heavens” of which Christ speaks in this prayer are to be thought of as the inner space of our own soul and heart.
- God dwells within us.

“However quietly we speak, He is so near that He will hear us; we need no wings to go in search of Him but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon Him present within us. Nor need we feel strange in the presence of so kind a Guest; we must talk to Him very humbly, as we should our father ask Him for things as we should ask a father, tell Him our troubles, beg Him to put them right, and yet realize that we are not worthy to be called His children.” Page 184

“Avoid being bashful with God, as some people are, in the belief that they are being humble. It would not be humility on your part if the King were to do you a favour and you refused to accept it; but you would be showing humility by taking it, and being pleased with it, yet realizing how far you are from deserving it.” Page 184.

Observe this brief mental exercise, and then re-learn it again and again:

- We are to shut ourselves up within the little heaven of our soul, where God dwells
- Imagine our soul to be a great palace, adorned with beautiful things, and living inside of it is a great King who is our Father.
- Imagine he is seated on a throne of immense price and worth- your heart.
- We must learn that we have something within us (God) that is far more precious than anything outside.
- As we dwell with this reality again and again we see how empty are all the attachments of the world.

“I think, if I had understood then as I do now, how this great King really dwells within this little palace of my soul, I should not have let it get so dirty.” Page 188

- God does not show all of this to the soul at first so that the soul does not disbelieve that something so remarkable is possible.
- God slowly fashions the soul to receive the truth of what it contains.
- We should be totally resolved to empty our soul of anything except for him.
- He only gives Himself to us totally once he has seen that we truly desire him.

“All I want is that we should know and abide with the Person with Whom we are speaking, and not turn our backs upon Him; for that, it seems to me, is what we are doing when we talk to God and yet think of all kinds of vanity. The whole mischief comes from our not really grasping the fact that He is near us, and imagining Him far away- so far, that we shall have to go to Heaven in order to find Him.”
Pages 192-3.

Chapters 30 and 31: “Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come.”

- The Lord pairs “Hallowed be thy name and thy kingdom come” next to each other to make us think carefully about what we are asking in our prayer.

- We are asking for his Kingdom. For Teresa, this is an essential item.
- In giving us the prayer, our Lord saw that unless he gave us his Kingdom here on earth, we would not be capable (in this life) of giving sufficient glory to His name.

“To me, then, it seems of the many joys to be found in the kingdom of Heaven, the chief is that we shall have no more to do with the things of earth; for in Heaven we shall have an intrinsic tranquility and glory, a joy in the rejoicings of all, a perpetual peace, and a great interior satisfaction which will come to us when we see that all are hallowing and praising the Lord, and are blessing His name, and that none is offending Him.” Page 197

- We are asking to taste the riches of heaven; this leads her into a discussion of contemplative prayer.
- Contemplative prayer for Teresa is the highest form of prayer, that God grants only to some, and in that state of prayer the soul has totally surrendered to God to the point where they are almost completely passive in this act of prayer.
- This is a higher state than mental prayer, and higher still than vocal prayer as she describes it.

Chapter 32 “Thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven”

- She praises the Lord for instructing us to first ask for his Kingdom, and to ask for it on earth, because without living in His Kingdom, we cannot do his will.
- We are to remember that he offers his Kingdom, and that he gives it to those who show they truly desire it.

“For since my earth has now become my Heaven [because he gives it to us], it will be possible for Thy will to be done in me. Otherwise, on an earth so wretched as mine, and so barren of fruit, I know not, Lord, how it could be possible. It is a great thing that Thou dost offer.” Page 211

- To ask His will to be done in us requires that we completely and freely accept trials and sufferings.
- She points to the Son, praying in Gethsemane, as the perfect example of the petition “thy will be done;”
- His suffering and death follow this perfect petition, showing us what we must be willing to accept from our Father if we utter the same petition with sincerity of heart.
- The Father gives crosses in the same manner that he did for His Son: [read slowly, meditate on this]

“So you see, daughters, what God gave to His best Beloved, and from that you can understand what His will is. These, then, are His gifts in this world. He gives them in proportion to the love which He bears us. He gives more to those whom He loves most, and less to those He loves least; and He gives in accordance with the courage which He sees that each of us has and the love we bear to His Majesty. When He sees a soul who loves Him greatly, He knows that soul can suffer much for Him, whereas one who loves Him little will suffer little. For my own part, I believe that love is the measure of our ability to bear crosses, whether great or small. So if you have this love sisters, try not to let the prayers you

make to so great a Lord be words of mere politeness but brace yourselves to suffer what His Majesty desires. For if you give Him your will in any other way, you are just showing Him a jewel, making as if to give it to Him and begging Him to take it, and then, when He puts out His hand to do so, taking it back and holding on to it tightly.” Pages 213-214.

- Praying “thy will be done” is handing him a jewel, it is making him a gift;
- if it is made with real sincerity, *it draws him to us*, and he transforms us into himself for unimaginable rewards.
- But that transformation only comes through willing acceptance of trials.

Chapters 33 and 34 and 35: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

- For Teresa, this petition concerns the Holy Eucharist.
- How good is the Father to go beyond “thy will be done,” which should be all by itself enough for our sustenance, to also give us the Holy Sacrament.
- And how good are the Father and the Son to allow the Son, in the Eucharist, to be handled by such unclean people again and again, as he handed himself over lovingly in his Passion into the hands of sinners for our salvation.
- He is pleased to stay with us in the Eucharist and not to abandon us.
- He is so good to disguise himself as bread so that we, who are so unworthy, would not be afraid to approach him to receive this great gift.
- This petition DOES NOT refer to ordinary bread:

“With regard to other bread- the bread of bodily necessities and sustenance- I neither like to think that the Lord is always being reminded of it nor would I have you remember it yourselves. Keep on the level of the highest contemplation, for anyone who dwells there no more remembers that he is in the world than if he had already left it- still less does he think about food. Would the Lord ever have insisted upon our asking for food or taught us to do so by his own example? Not in my opinion. He teaches us to fix our desires upon heavenly things and to pray that we may begin to enjoy these things while here on earth: would He, then, have us trouble about so petty a matter as praying for food? As if He did not know that, once we begin to worry about the needs of the body, we shall forget the needs of the soul! Besides, are we such moderately minded people that we shall be satisfied with just a little and pray for only a little? No: the more food we are given, the less we shall get of the water from Heaven. Let those of you, daughters, who want more of the necessities of life pray for this.” Pages 224-225

“As for that other bread, have no anxiety about it if you have truly resigned yourselves to God’s will.”
Page 225

“If would not be right for the servant to go to his master *everyday* and ask him for food when he knew that his master would see that it was given him and so he would be sure to receive it. To do this would be a waste of words.” Page 226

[important to remember here and throughout that she is speaking to cloistered sisters; see below chapter 37]

- Speaks at length of the importance of recollecting our thoughts prior to receiving Communion and also spending time in thanksgiving afterwards.
- She encourages her sisters to offer up their Communion to repair the wounds to the Holy Church.

Chapter 36: “Forgive us our debts”

- We ask God to forgive us as we forgive.
- The phrase leaves no room for us NOT to forgive others
- “Forgiving the debts of others” follows automatically from “thy will be done.”
- This is why the Saints rejoiced to be persecuted: it gave them something to present to the Lord in their prayer.

“This, sisters, is something we should consider carefully; it is such a serious and important matter that God should pardon us our sins, which have merited eternal fire, that we must pardon all trifling things which have been done to us *and which are not wrongs at all, or anything else. For how is it possible, either in word or in deed, to wrong one who, like myself, has deserved to be plagued by devils for ever? Is it not only right that I should be plagued in this world too? As I have so few, Lord, even of these trifling things, to offer Thee, Thy pardoning of me must be a free gift.*” Page 237

- she means that she deserves her earthly wrongs committed by others so much, that she has almost nothing in the way of forgiving others to offer to the Lord for his own mercy, and therefore it makes his mercy towards her even that much more profound]
- It is pride that leads us to believe that we should withhold forgiveness from anyone who wrong us; we have no right to do so.

Chapter 37 Extols the greatness of the Lord’s prayer

- Thus far the Lord has led us who are His own deeper into union with Him with each petition of this prayer.
- He also has taught a prayer in his genius with broad applicability (with its apparent *generality*) DELIBERATELY:

“I have wondered why His Majesty did not expound such obscure and sublime subjects in greater detail so that we might all have understood them. It has occurred to me that, as this prayer was meant to be a general one for the use of all, so that everyone could interpret it as he thought right, ask for what he wanted and find comfort in doing so, He left the matter in doubt; and thus contemplatives, who no longer desire earthly things, and persons greatly devoted to God, can ask for the heavenly favors which, through the great goodness of God, may be given to us on earth. Those who still live on earth, and must conform to the customs of their state [of life], may also ask for the bread which they need for their own maintenance and for that of their households, as is perfectly just and right, and they may also ask for other things according as they need them.” Pages 245-246.

“It must be realized, however, that these two things- surrendering our will to God and forgiving others- apply to all.” Page 247.

Chapter 38-42: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

“Remember I consider it quite certain that those who attain perfection do not ask the Lord to deliver them from trials, temptations, persecutions and conflicts- and that is another sure and striking sign that these favours and this contemplation which His Majesty gives them are coming from the Spirit of the Lord and are not illusions. For, as I said a little way back, perfect souls *are in no way repelled by trials, but rather* desire them and pray for them and love them.” Page 249

- With this petition, we pray for deliverance from the devils that deceive us into thinking that we are acting well or with virtue when in fact we are not.
- For: if we think and act *that way*, slowly our clarity and our resolve get weaker and weaker;
- With this petition we pray for light to flood us so that we can see our snares clearly, and that such poison leaves us.

- She warns against the easy habit of thinking that we are stronger or more virtuous than we actually are; of growing complacent, and of ceasing to be vigilant against temptations.
- She warns of the danger of thinking a grace we have received is the result of our own power, and the danger of thinking we cannot have those same graces taken away at any moment- God can always take them back.

Points from page 253

- The devil deceives us into thinking that we have some virtue or we are strong because we are continually making resolutions to suffer for God’s sake; he lets us truly believe that we are capable of it, and then, relying on ourselves, we fail at the first real test.
- The devil also wants to make us think that we are very poor in spirit, as we easily say that we want nothing or care for nothing and have no needs; yet at the first chance for us to be given something “our poverty of spirit disappears.”
- A truly humble person is always doubtful about his own virtues.

- Beware of the temptation to false humility, especially over self-loathing for past sins committed.

“Sometimes thinking yourself so wicked may be humility and virtue and at other times a very great temptation. I have had experience of this, so I know it is true. Humility, however deep it be, neither disquiets nor troubles nor disturbs the soul; it is accompanied by peace, joy and tranquility. Although, on realizing how wicked we are, we can see clearly that we deserve to be in hell, and are distressed by our sinfulness, and rightly think that everyone should hate us, yet, if our humility is true, this distress is accompanied by an interior peace and joy of which we should not like to be deprived. Far from disturbing or depressing the soul, it enlarges it and makes it fit to serve God better.”

“when you find yourselves in this state, cease thinking, so far as you can of your own wretchedness, and think of the mercy of God and of His love.” Page 257

- Take care not to perform excessive penances so that you have the pride of thinking you are better than others; the same for good works.
- Do not ever try to rest in the security of the idea that a certain sin or habit has been conquered because “we’ve learned.” Always stay away from occasions of sin.
- The assaults against us are constant, especially for those who are intensely striving for perfection, hence the need to always pray for deliverance from them in the Lord’s Prayer
- Cultivating the “fear of God” as a means to avoid sin and overcome temptations. This is a profound disdain for wanting to make any offense against his majesty and his love.
- Cultivating an active sense of being always in his gaze helps to combat temptation:
- This petition of the Lord’s prayer is included because evil is all around us; we are right to beg the Father to save us from it.

“From any sin, however small, committed with full knowledge, may God deliver us, especially since we are sinning against so great a Sovereign and realizing that He is watching us! That seems to me to be a sin committed of malice aforethought; it is as though one were to say: “Lord, although this displeases Thee, I shall do it. I know that Thou seest it and I know that Thou wouldst not have me do it; but, though I understand this, I would rather follow my own whim and desire than Thy will.” If we commit a sin in this way, however slight, it seems to me that our offense is not small but very, very great.”

Page 269

- *Saint Teresa’s summary thought on the Lord’s Prayer:*

“As we repeat the Paternoster so many times daily, then, as I have said, let us delight in it and strive to learn from so excellent a Master the humility with which he prays, and all the other things that have been described. May His Majesty forgive me for having dared to speak of such high matters. Well does His Majesty know that I should not have ventured to do so, and that my understanding would not have been capable of it, had he not taught me what I have said.” Page 279

Concluding Thoughts and Questions