

Prayer Leads to Life of Church

Following are excerpts from a letter by Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the death of St. Teresa of Avila.

When anyone prays, when he lives his prayer, when he experiences the living God in prayer and surrenders himself to Him, the result is that he has a greater appreciation of the Church in which Christ continues His mysterious presence by means of grace. He experiences that he is being urged to show great fidelity to the Spouse of Christ. Deep down in himself he is being moved to work and spend himself for the Church.



When prayer resulting from the stronger action of the love of God shows signs of a close friendship with God and reaches the point that it is a relationship or union of love — the friendship then becomes an

apostolic leaven, a cause of joy to the Church and to men, as if it were a very powerful voice reaching to the heart of God for the good of all His people.

St. Teresa considered the life of prayer to be the greatest manifestation of the theological life of the faithful, who, believing in the love of God, free themselves from everything to attain the full presence of that love. The experience of God consists in that wonderful communion with Him, while the soul is open to His action with a certain prudent wisdom infused by the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, the mind and heart adhere to the Incarnate Word, "to that sweet Jesus," "the gate," through which one goes to the Father and through which He gives anyone a friendly relationship with Him.

Teresa says: "We must enter through this gate, if we want certain great secrets to be revealed to us by the supreme majesty. Therefore one should not look for a different way, even if one were to reach the heights of contemplation, because by this way one walks safely and securely. This Lord of ours is He from whom and through whom all good things come to us."

For this reason at no time does this teacher of holy conversation not lean fittingly on Christ, the Son of God made man, whose friendship and company light

up the way of the spiritual life and lead to the highest experience of the mystery of the Holy Trinity, because the creature "is convinced that these divine persons are never far from him or abandon him, but he sees clearly ... deep down in himself, in some very deep recess, that this divine indwelling is present to him and he experiences it."

It is a question of the lofty gifts of God, which is the intimate familiarity with Him which is brought about by grace, and in the certitude of the presence of God arising from faith and love, flourish and bloom "in the little heaven of our soul." Wherefore, whoever in his way of living is entirely faithful to the love of God dwelling in him, whoever seeks Him with faith, whoever fervently does His will in actions, especially to the point that he devotes himself to his brothers, can share that experience which God does not deny to the little ones in His kingdom to whom the Father reveals the mysteries of His love.

God forbids no one to come to the water of contemplation, as Teresa affirms:

"Indeed, what is more, He calls us publicly and in a loud voice to do so. Yet, as He is so good, He does not force us to drink, and what is still more, He enables those who wish to follow Him to drink in many ways, so that none may lack comfort or die of thirst."

According to St. Teresa, the experience of God is a gift connected with fidelity to prayer. For this reason, she urges us "to practice contemplation." But God who is always faithful, as He discerns those souls who are prepared, desires nothing else than to fill them with His gifts. While "He does not want to force our will, He does not give himself totally to us before we give ourselves totally and unreservedly to Him."

Thus one sees why the holy mother exhorts the spiritual man to give himself to prayer "even though he may die on the way."

"Certainly," she says, "I am convinced that this living water of contemplation will not be wanting to all those who will not stay on the road." This is an outstanding gift which God gives so that we may experience His presence.

This presence is a gift which uplifts man and carries him to a degree of love and of salvation itself of which the Church in the world is the sacrament.

Fr. Albert Shamon



Word for Sunday

Jesus Is The Vine

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Jn. 15/1-8. (R1) Acts 9/26-31. (R2) 1 Jn. 3/18-24.

Last Sunday, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd." This Sunday, He declares "I am the true vine." This declaration is the last of the seven great "I am's" in John's Gospel. On our ears the significance of these simple statements can be lost unless we avert to the fact that "I am" was for the Jews the name of God.

The key word in "I am the true vine" is the word "true." On the door of the Holy of Holies in the temple, a vine was sculptured in massive gold. It was the symbol of Israel, "The Vine of Yahweh," clinging to the house of her God! By calling Himself the true vine, Jesus was saying, in effect, "The Judaic religion is no longer the vine; nor is the Israelitic nation. Salvation is not to be found in being a Jew nor in practicing the Jewish religion. It is to be sought only by living in union with me."

Our Lord used the image of the vine, for the great relationships of life cannot

be expressed in the stark language of prose. Plain language is all right for teaching; it befits instructions that come with a new car, for instance. But to express the deep relationship between God and man, the language of poetry, figurative language, is needed. Because our Lord's hearers were farmers or shepherds, He often drew His comparisons from their direct experiences; hence His talk was often of shepherds and sowers, vines and harvests.

To describe the intimacy of the relationship between Himself and His disciples and to explain why union with Himself was so necessary, our Lord did not use the image of a palm tree. A palm tree has no branches. Nor did He use a fig tree, or other fruit bearing trees, because they do not need husbandry. Instead, He used the image of the vine, for it has branches; and it needs a vine-dresser, for without drastic pruning, the luxuriant vine will never produce the grapes of which it is capable.

The pruning process is twofold. Dead wood (like Judas) is cut away and

burned, for the wood of the vine is so soft, it is good for nothing but a bonfire. On the contrary, the living branches (like Peter) are trimmed to make them more fruitful. The cross, physical pain, anxieties, anguish, doubts, fears, dismay — by such trials, the living branches are pruned.

And what is the purpose of this all — the branches clinging to the vine, and their pruning? To bear fruit — the fruit of giving witness to the world that the death of Jesus is not just the death of an itinerant preacher, but the decisive act by which the world is redeemed.

And the condition for fruitful witnessing to Jesus is to live in Him. As the hand is not a hand unless joined to an arm of a living body, and can do no work unless it is so joined, so a vine branch is not a branch unless it is joined to the vine stock and it cannot bear grapes unless it is so joined.

As the branch cannot endure apart from the vine, neither can we survive spiritually apart from Christ. In His own words, "Apart from Me you can do nothing." "Apart from Me," not "without Me," for dependence on Him is a total absolute. Thus seven times at least, St. John urges, "Live on in ... Live in ... Stay part of Christ."

The result? Abundant fruit. Such a person will turn men's minds to God and God will be glorified.

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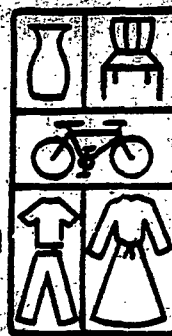
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