

Prayer: a dialogue with God

David Colhour CP

Prayer is one of those things which is frequently on our list of things to do more of, or things to do better. I frequently hear people ask me, ‘How can I improve my prayer life?’ I don’t think that it is any different for us today than in the days of Saint Paul of the Cross. He was a man who found great joy and great delight in prayer. He believed that if a person was working too hard to pray, then it really wasn’t prayer. If God is Love (1 John 4:8) then spending time with God is spending time in Love.

For Paul, the Cross of Jesus Christ *is* the love of God. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son’ (John 3:16). It is one of those scriptures that is easy to remember. Yet the mystery of this is something we commonly avoid.

Frequently, when Saint Paul of the Cross instructs people about how to pray, he simply invites them to hold a crucifix in their hands and have a conversation with their Crucified Lord. Paul’s instructions are to use anything they see as an entry point into prayer and conversation. The goal of this is not to debate what kind of deity would allow life’s events to happen. Nor is it to figure out ‘why’. Remember, ‘Why?’ questions aimed at some divine plan are always dead ends.

No, the goal is to allow the crucifix to be the doorway into a deeper conversation with the Crucified Love. If the Cross of Jesus is the ultimate expression of God’s love, then speaking to Jesus – prayer with Jesus Crucified – is the ultimate mystery for touching the compassion of God. It is meditation on divine love. It



is being with Christ at a very intimate moment of his unconditional self-giving. It is what Paul calls, ‘Divine Dialogue’. This is the term he uses in a letter to one of his devoted friends, Agnes Grazi.

To her he writes, ‘I dearly desire that the

object of your prayer should be the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, in loving dialogue with him. But understand me well. I want to leave you free to follow the loving attractions of the Holy Spirit. We must pray not in our way but in God's way'. For Paul, this is the format for abundant prayer.

Enter the Divine Dialogue through any of the elements of the Passion of Jesus. Speak directly to him and let him speak to you. Prayer for Paul is always a two-way street. But then, if the Spirit leads you or prompts you, give yourself permission to follow, remaining in the Love of God.

We see the same instruction in a letter to another one of his Spiritual directees, Thomas Fossi. He pens, 'Always bring with you to prayer some mystery of the holy life and Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then, if the Holy Spirit draws you to deeper recollection, follow the breath of the Holy Spirit but always through the means of the Passion. This way you will avoid all deceptions'. For Saint Paul of the Cross, the Passion of Jesus Christ is the doorway for rich and meaningful prayer. This doorway leads to an interiority by which the Holy Spirit begins to draw and form us.

GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT
CALLS US INTO CONTEMPLATION

For Paul, the Holy Spirit is a powerful force at work in all of our lives, functioning beyond our understanding or attentiveness to it. We may frequently dwell on the gifts the Holy Spirit gives to us, as Paul the Evangelist speaks of in First Corinthians. But for Paul of the Cross, the Holy Spirit was far more quiet, more subtle, and yet deeply present and profound. Paul of the Cross understood that the action of the Holy Spirit is one of 'call'. God's Spirit calls

us into relationship; it challenges with truth, it convicts. How frequently we struggle to hold on to things and entities while the Spirit slowly strips them from our grasp. For example, ageing and maturation call us to evaluate what is most important from what is really not so important. Slowly, we can begin to surrender the trivial things of our youth.

Holding onto tokens, trinkets, or material objects wearies us; we frequently watch them get broken, misplaced, tarnished or yellowed by time. We may even curse loneliness when the Spirit calls us into deeper relationship with solitude. Lofty or unreasonable expectations about others or God leave us frustrated and disappointed and we are forced to let go of those expectations. For Paul, the Spirit of Christ is at work in profound small realities that continually shape us and invite us into deeper reflection.

Surrender and letting go is not something we are good at. For many of us, we fight and flee from it. We continue to enter into experiences that clutter and cloud and aren't necessarily life-giving. We attempt to cover the silence of life with noise. We dull the pain in life with alcohol. We hold grudges rather than forgive. We frantically pursue avenues to make us look younger. Paul is convinced the Spirit is more active in our lives than any of us might be conscious of. Paul is convinced the Holy Spirit is perpetually calling us. If we continue to struggle against simplicity, silence, and solitude, then our efforts leave us empty and exhausted.

Thankfully, the persistence of Spirit speaks to us even in the clutter. It is that persistent truth that never goes away, calling us, challenging us to live in an ultimately truthful state. For Paul of the Cross, attentiveness to this truth, which is God's Spirit, will begin to lead one to seek and cherish silence, prayer, contemplation, wisdom and goodness.

If we honestly begin being attentive to him, the Spirit begins to change even our image of who God is. Many people see God as their 'go-to' for help. When they need something, when they have a problem, whom do they go to? The Spirit is at work within these people, calling and drawing them into a little closer relationship. For others, God is much closer, more like a co-pilot on the journey. While these people can appreciate God's loving presence, they are still the pilots maintaining control of the plane. The Spirit is also at work in their lives.

Paul's experience and invitation to those he directed was to see how the Holy Spirit was calling them into a very non-threatening

Sir Ninian Comper's chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, 1935-9

Photo credit: Laurence Lew OP.





St Paul of the Cross preaching in the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere, 1769.

One in the Holy Spirit

'In receiving within your hearts the Holy Spirit with all His superabundant gifts and graces, be united in spirit. This should be a union of faith, hope and charity. The holy apostles prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit 'gathered together as one'. Oh, dear union of charity, which binds and joins hearts to the Heart of Jesus Christ. Oh, sweet charity, rich in obedience, humility, patience, silence, meekness and every good.'

Saint Paul of the Cross, Pentecost Letter, 1750

Paul of the Cross reminds us that the aim of our prayer is to be able to receive the Holy Spirit within our hearts, to open our hearts to the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit. The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to us in Confirmation to be used by us in our daily life; they are Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel (Right Judgement), Fortitude (Courage), Knowledge, Piety (Reverence), and Fear of the Lord (Wonder and Awe in God's Presence). The gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit help us to live like Jesus Christ, in whose name the Holy Spirit is sent into our world: 'The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you' (Jn 14: 26).

But the Holy Spirit does not just remind us of Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, we receive God's love in our hearts, the love which is in the Heart of Jesus Christ, and in this way we become like Jesus; we are transformed into his image: 'The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (Rom 5: 5). This love of God, traditionally referred to as 'Charity', is a special kind of love. Saint Paul the Apostle describes it for us in the First Letter to the Corinthians (13:4): he says it is always patient and kind, never jealous, always ready to excuse, not resentful. Even in this short summary of Saint Paul's words, we can see that this is not the kind of love we meet in many day-to-day situations. This love we call 'Charity' is the kind of love that we find in the very Heart of God himself.

The word 'Charity' in modern English has come to mean sometimes an association that does good works or sometimes merely a hand-out given without much care or concern. The original meaning of the word comes from the Greek word for a gift and, in the New Testament, when it is used to describe God's love, it underlines the truth that the love of God is not something that we can buy or own: like the pearl Jesus speaks about in the Gospel, it is beyond price.

relationship as their friend or companion. He frequently uses the terms 'spouse' or 'beloved'. Remember, Paul was Italian. And whether one suspects it was the culture, the Mediterranean air or even the wine, certainly Paul had a romantic, nostalgic, quixotic flair about him, as evident in these words:

'Remain in loving attention to God, from which is born that sacred silence of love which is a speech most eloquent in the ears of your divine spouse. Contemplate the divine perfection, his infinite grandeur, his immensity, his infinite beauty, goodness, and so on. Let your soul rest in loving wonder and awe, from which is born that satisfaction that God is the infinite good that he is. In this satisfaction the soul rejoices, exults, makes festival and enjoys the riches and grandeurs of her beloved good.' *

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prayer of saint paul of the cross to the holy spirit

O Holy Spirit, Love of the Father and the Son, inflame me entirely with love.

O Spirit of infinite light, infinite sweetness, come into my heart! Come, O Infinite Good! Come, Immense Love! Come, true and only God, into this poor penitent heart! Come, my Love! Come, my Sweetness, O my Light, my Happiness, O my Treasure, O my Riches, O my True Good, O my only Hope, O my God, O my All. Come, for I languish for love. Come, for I can no longer bear not to love you. Come and set me on fire to the marrow of my bones.

This unlimited love of God which is Charity is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, so that we can have the power to love in an unselfish way. The new way of loving shown by Jesus is so important that he says that it is like a watermark or trademark by which his disciples will be recognised: 'By this shall all people know that you are my disciples: by the love that you have for one another' (John 13: 35). Being a group of disciples of Jesus, then, means being united with him and with each other through the love of God which has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. The gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit make us grow in love for one another and unite our hearts to the Heart of Jesus Christ.

The work of the Holy Spirit is to transform our lives so that we can think, speak and act like Jesus Christ; to unite us with one another as members of the Body of Christ which is the Church; to give us the gifts and graces we need in our daily life so that our practice of Charity, the unselfish and unlimited love we see on the Cross, will be a striking witness to others of the power of God's Spirit renewing the face of the earth, as Saint Paul of the Cross writes: 'Oh, sweet charity, rich in obedience, humility, patience, silence, meekness and every good'.

Opening our Hearts to the Holy Spirit

When we seek to live the Passionist Charism in our daily lives, whether as religious or as laypeople, it is the grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit that leads us more deeply into the meaning of this Charism, at the same time helping us to understand how to express it in today's world. In his letter to the Passionists for the Feast of Pentecost 1750, Saint Paul of the Cross tells us to prepare ourselves to

receive the Holy Spirit as a guest, to welcome the Spirit into the inner space that is our heart.

'Most dear sons and brothers in Jesus Christ, the most joyous solemnity of the Holy Spirit being near, each one of you should prepare himself to receive worthily into the home of your heart such a sovereign guest, your Lord and God... Most dear sons, to prepare yourselves for this most sacred solemnity, each one should examine himself well to see whether there be anything in his heart that is not purely for God, and to discover whether in all your actions your intentions are most pure, and are becoming more Godlike from day to day, that is whether they are wholly divine, so that you do everything in God and for his love alone, uniting your works with those of Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

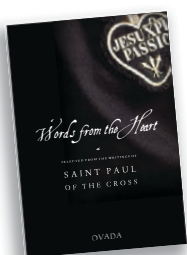
To be open to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit means to seek to 'do everything in God and for his love alone'. When we live and move in the Spirit, we follow always the promptings of the Spirit and, in all our actions, we seek to respond to God's loving invitation. Paul of the Cross tells us that, in order to have purity of intention in all our actions, we need to have the courage to look into our heart, to 'examine ourselves to see if there is anything in our heart not purely of God'.

Through opening our hearts to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, we let our hearts be purified by the love of God and we learn to act according to the mind of Christ. It is through the grace of the Holy Spirit that we proclaim Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life. When, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we live each day in the presence of Jesus, then even the smallest act of love can be united to the love of Jesus crucified and risen. Then we live as companions of Saint Paul of the Cross who says: 'Unite your works with those of Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life'

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