

Prayer is an act of faith

David Colhour CP



Fresco in the Chapel of the Crucified, Church of Sant'Angelo, Vetralla

St Paul of the Cross encouraged people not to allow their personal feelings to be the controlling element of their spiritual life. This is not an easy thing to learn, and I suspect it is even more difficult in western twenty-first century culture where individualism and non-conformity are proclaimed values. The process of letting emotions and feelings simply be and not govern one's choices and behaviours is truly an experience of death and resurrection. For when I begin seeing that I am more than my feelings, then I am invited to discover a whole lot more about who I am. I also find that I am not enslaved to those feelings and emotions. And this leads towards freedom.

As I ponder this and continue to read the letters

of St Paul of the Cross, I sit in a kind of awe pondering how he instructs people to see their faith. Faith for him is not about trying to bend your mind around all the precepts of the church. Nor is it an intellectual exercise. For St Paul of the Cross, faith is something which is lived out. It requires action, and it is deeply rooted in active prayer.

Personally, my biggest crisis of faith occurred back in the days of my theological studies. Perhaps this is a time of crisis for many theology students. Simply discovering how much cannot be proven and how much is merely made up made me feel like there really wasn't much 'God' in our theology or our church. Everything I held to be true because people had told me it was true was all shot through

'Centre yourself in your interior.'
Chapel of St Joseph's Retreat,
Monte Argentario



with holes. I vividly remember the image I used to describe how I felt. It was as though my faith was the carpeting I had been standing on. And as I continued through this crisis, I felt that the carpet had been pulled out from under my feet. Yet through this crisis, my prayer was still real. It was filled with defiance, anger, patience and challenge. God's answer to me was an invitation to look down at what I was standing on. Sure it wasn't the carpet. For the first time I realised that when the carpet was pulled out, I didn't fall down. And I realised what I was really standing on was my faith. I more clearly saw what I truly believed, and I also saw how God held me up.

Paul of the Cross is adamant in insisting that people pray with faith. Prayer is an activity which may at times be quiet, but it is never passive. It demands that one be attentive to God. It pleads that one's will and soul be poured out to God. It maintains that one's participation does not regress to a safe place in the mind but rather stays engaged in the depth of the soul. When a person prays this way, then the prayer comes from what the person knows is real and true. Here at this place one finds that authentic, active, participatory faith being brought to light. Listen to Paul's writings as he instructs and guides people in their prayer:

Remain detached from your own comfort, from rejoicing and understanding. I would not say this did I not know that for some time God has been drawing you to holy prayer. The just one lives by faith. O sister, how beautiful it is to remain in pure and living faith in the Divine Presence through holy prayer with loving attention on our Beloved Good and without any feeling of this, without rejoicing in this sweet Divine Presence, which puts the heart in paradise without our knowing it is so. O my sister, this is an excellent prayer of highest detachment, in which the faithful soul seeks not itself, but God, and rejoices in the higher part of the soul to be crucified with Christ. I beg you not to pay attention to the noise from the lower part of your spirit, but simply remain vigilant to crush the wicked suggestions of the enemy with a simple act of your will, without forcing head or breast.

to Rose of Gaeta, 19 March 1733

I told you at other times that God wishes more recollection from you in pure faith, and I would wish that you often centre yourself in your interior, and with a lively faith.... I pray the Lord to help you understand and practise what I am teaching. In this recollection in the flame of holy love all the remains of sin are destroyed and the soul is renewed in God.

to Maria Cherubina Bresciani, 15 December 1761

Look at him with compassion but with a lively faith and with love, and take account of those drops of Precious Blood and ask: 'Jesus, my dearest, for whom are you suffering?' Listen as he replies to your heart: 'Daughter, I am suffering for you, for your sins, because I love you'.

to a daughter of Girolama Ercolani, 19 June 1762

As regards to prayer, be obedient to the attractions of the Holy Spirit and, when God holds you in a repose of faith and holy love on his divine bosom in a sacred silence, stay there and do not pass on to any explicit acts, but walk in faith without curiosity of mind, etc.

to Maria Angela Cencelli, 8 May 1762

Do not leave off arousing your heart and your spirit to your Beloved Good God, but do that gently and without straining head or breast. Say, for example: 'O my soul, how can you be unmindful of your God? Ah! my God, you are with me, in me. I live entirely in you and of you. O my soul, look upon your God

with the eyes of faith! God lives in you. You breathe in God, you walk with God, you work in God. O Joy! O Love! O fire! O Love!

to the Marchesa Marianna della Scala del Pozzo,
22 May 1730

Prayer, then, for Paul of the Cross is an act of faith. As we continue to practise our prayer with greater depth, we find ourselves growing. It is a growth of faith, understanding, appreciation, awareness, and tolerance. Ultimately, one of the rich blossoms which blooms from it is pure and holy joy. Because Paul understood this, he attempted to guide others to stay in the garden and do the required garden work, even when times were troubling and that individual may not particularly feel like it. Faith then is our guide. For it is much richer and more stable than the fleetingness of feelings. Paul will write to his good friend, Agnes Grazi, about her prayer, 'Every effort should be made to pray in pure and living faith, to seek God alone, to live in him, to languish with love for him, to remain at rest in his divine Majesty'. And in another letter he will add, 'I don't want you to be uneasy about anything that happens in prayer, but in everything be at one with what pleases God. Oh, how I rejoice that prayer is made in faith! This is the loving way in which God has always inspired me to direct you'.

I don't think this relationship between prayer and faith is any new fangled kind of teaching. I can see the same emphasis in the scriptures where Jesus is trying to teach Peter to move deeper into his heart and away from the plans of his head. Peter is one who is comfortable staying in his head and creating plans to promote his fame and glory. If you look at stories such as the Transfiguration (Mk 9: 2-9), Peter wants to stay there on top of the mountain and build three booths. Building is a sign of permanence and it may start out as simply building booths for Elijah, Moses and Jesus, but soon will come concession stands and Peter might even figure out that charging admission can bring in lots of money. And Jesus has a different plan. Jesus has been at prayer and has been listening to the plan of his Father.

Then there is the story of the time Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1: 30-38). The next morning Jesus is up early and goes out to pray and Peter comes to get Jesus because he has people in his house who need to be healed. Jesus does not go back to Peter's house because he has a different plan. And he says to Peter, 'We must move on'. It certainly isn't

the plan of Jesus' Father to go backwards.

Or how about the time Jesus tells Peter he has to go to Jerusalem. Peter actually takes Jesus aside and begins to remonstrate with him (Mk 8: 32). Peter is convinced his plan is better than Jesus'. And again Jesus has a different plan. Peter the planner keeps running into Jesus the lover and Jesus keeps softening the heart of Peter. Peter really won't get it until after the Resurrection. Then he has the experience of death and resurrection and the faith of death and resurrection. And finally he can lay aside all of his well intended plans and begin living, and praying out of his experience of death and resurrection. Look how God transforms Peter! This transformation happens not in the mind but in the soul of reflected experience. And for St Paul of the Cross, the ability to pray from what is real and authentic is far superior to praying from what may be a great plan or even a fantasy. In my experience of ministry, I am amazed at how many times people set aside that which is real and true to speak about that which they think I want to hear.

Lastly, where did Paul of the Cross learn about faith and prayer? We can see some of the influences St John of the Cross had with St Paul of the Cross. In this area of prayer and faith they are strikingly

'Ah! my God, you are with me, in me.'

A street corner in Castellazzo, near the Daneo family home



A Meditation on the Passion

Blessed Dominic Barberi CP

What are the lessons Jesus teaches us from his cross? They are so varied, profitable and exalted that we could not want them improved. Even his position is a lesson. Look at him. He is raised in the air so that we might recognise him as mediator between heaven and earth, between God and humanity. He also teaches us exiles to lift ourselves above the earth to a certain degree, to free ourselves from worldly attachments: like an eagle enticing her young to fly, and hovering over them (Deut 32: 11). He is deprived of everything; let us divest ourselves of worldly aspirations and bad habits. What do we want from earth? What do we desire? What are our expectations of this treacherous world? Ah! If we truly had the spirit of Jesus Christ, we would say with the Apostle: I am crucified to the world and the world to me (cf. Gal 6: 14).

His heart burning only with a desire to be mer-

ciful to us, despite his pain, aloneness and sorrow, Jesus, immediately on being raised between heaven and earth, offers a prayer befitting his immense kindness. He sees his cruel enemies gathered at the foot of the cross to harass him with their insults and blasphemies. Yet, instead of asking heaven to avenge him on them, he makes his first words a prayer that will discredit forever all vindictiveness, rancour and dissension: Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing (Lk 23: 34).

But, divine Saviour, is it right that crime like this should go unpunished? Does not your honour demand adequate restitution? Are you not forgetting your responsibilities, your justice? Yes, Jesus forgets everything but his boundless mercy. Nailed to his cross, he becomes peacemaker between heaven and earth. At this solemn moment, how could his divine heart be preoccupied with any other sentiment than mercy? How could he speak anything but words of forgiveness?

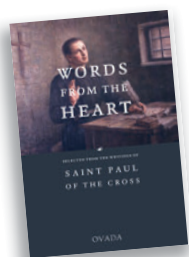
O my Jesus, this is too favourable a moment for me not to take advantage of it. Look at me here at the foot of your cross, burdened with numberless sins, but full of trust in your infinite mercy.

similar. It is highly likely that St Paul of the Cross began learning and reflecting on it while being influenced by the Carmelites in his younger days. And Paul was so convinced of its truth in his own prayer that he insisted upon it in the lives of all those he directed. Most profoundly, Paul is convinced that this is how God transforms us. In Paul's own words, 'As you are crucified with Christ, you become more and more transformed in God through faith and love'. We conclude with a quotation from a letter to one of his favourite spiritual daughters, Agnes Grazi:

The time will come when your mind will clear, that is, will become obscure, and you will walk more in faith. These sensible things will cease, which, while they may be good, are things for babes on milk. The just one lives by faith. 'O dark night, night more lovely than day. Night which can unite the lover and the beloved, the lover transformed into the beloved.' So sang a great saint. He sang of the night of holy prayer in faith, but he sang of a night brighter than day. Courage! I end for I am in a hurry. I hope we shall speak. Pray for me and God inflame you with love. Amen. – to Agnes Grazi, 26 April 1736

Words from the Heart

Selected from the writings of St Paul of the Cross



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Words from the Heart is a selection from the writings of St Paul of the Cross (1694–1775). This translation of Paul's Diary, his Preface to the first Passionist Rule and a selection of his letters, with its preface and notes provide the best short introduction to his writings available in English, covering the formative period in Paul's life, his response to a personal vocation from God and his attempts to incarnate that response through the founding of a new community.

This book is a useful resource for those seeking a deeper understanding of the spirituality of St Paul of the Cross.

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