

Workshop On "Mental Prayer"

by Ann Angus, OCDS

"Come let us climb the Lord's mountain to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in our ways, and we may walk in his paths." With all our determination let us take these words of Isaiah as an invitation to prayer. Most of us were drawn to Carmel because we wanted to deepen our prayer life. Prayer is the center, the charism and the heart of Carmel. Article 17 of The Constitutions of the Secular Order states "We are called to dedicate a period of time for thirty minutes each day to the exercise of mental prayer, according to the tradition of the Secular Order. We take this time to be with God strengthening our relationship to be true witnesses of God's presence in the world because we know that "the love of God is the soul's health, and the soul does not have full health until love is complete."

It is through prayer that we deepen our relationship with God. Our Holy Mother, Teresa of Avila, tells us in the first chapter of the Interior Castle that souls who don't pray are like people whose bodies are paralyzed. We Carmelites are people of prayer and each of us wants to live a contemplative life. It is a thirst that cannot be quenched as this desire was implanted at our baptism when we were made children of the Father.

Prayer enables us to grow in love and knowledge of Jesus. He is the focus of our prayer and He is our companion in prayer. Teresian prayer is Christ centered. Father Anthony Morello, OCD, in his book *Lectio Divina And The Practice of Teresian Prayer* writes "Carmel's spirituality is rooted in the greater tradition of *Lectio Divina* meaning "divine reading", a particular way of reading and praying over the Scriptures." Scriptures nourish and teach us about the life of Christ and it is the means of learning and acquiring the virtues., The Scriptures draw us to the person of Jesus who is the one we wish to know better. He is the object and the subject of our meditation.

We need to imitate our founding fathers who were drawn to Mount Carmel so that they might grow nearer to God free of worldly distractions. Our holy Mother teaches us to be determined like our founding fathers. The fathers found in Scripture the nourishment and encouragement they needed. So also it is in the Scriptures that we will find the help we need to climb the mountain. The Rule of St. Albert #8 states: "Each of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the law of the Lord in sacred Scripture day and night an keeping watch at his prayer unless attending to some other duty." St. John of The Cross (*Sayings* 158) tells us "Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation."

Teresa describes mental prayer as being a time to be with the one whom we love and who loves us. She suggests that we have a picture of Him to help us to be aware of the object of our love. She used to place an empty chair beside her for Him to sit on. These techniques can help us to be aware of whom we are talking to, reading about and listening to. The Lord is interested in us, what concerns us, and what we have to say. There is no need for well-turned phrases from books or cards written by someone else. It is what is in our heart that matters to Him. Teresa tells us to look at our picture of Jesus during the day and to take a few minutes to reflect on what we shared with Him in our scripture reading. Even if we only have time to say His name slowly and reverently a number of times during the day these little moments will increase our awareness of His presence and help our recollection during prayer.

Listening is a very important aspect of prayer because if we do all the talking we do not hear Him when He speaks to us. In the *W* 29:8, Teresa reminds us that when we pray to be aware that He is very close to us .. because since nothing is learned without a little effort, we should employ the attention you give this method of prayer ... and that if the Lord should desire to raise you to higher things, He will find in you the readiness ... that you are close to Him.

Vocal prayer is very important and we should pray with the awareness that we are speaking to God. Vocal prayer cannot be separated from mental prayer. Vocal prayers prayed with care and attention can lead to perfect contemplation. Teresa tells us in *W* 25.1 that in order to keep us from thinking that little is gained through perfect recitation of vocal prayer, she says that while you are reciting the Our Father or any vocal prayer, the Lord may very well raise you to perfect contemplation.

In Luke's gospel the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Now the disciples knew how to pray but what they desired was to be able to draw closer to the Father as Jesus did when he prayed. Jesus taught them the Our Father that contains all we need to pray when we petition the Father. Vocal prayer and mental prayer are combined when the Our Father is prayed properly.

Our journey in prayer could be compared to climbing a mountain. We have the mountain depicted on our Carmelite shield. This reminds us that struggle is part of our journey and our Holy Mother tells us that we have to be determined if we are to make it to the top. When we first began our Carmelite prayer life, our initial enthusiasm and desire helped us to advance quickly. Yet, after a time progress in prayer became harder and we seemed to face a wall that had no foot hold for us to move up. We learned that to climb higher we needed to travel lightly and detach ourselves from all that might impede our progress. It is through self-denial that we gain the strength we need to acquire the virtues that enable us to make the climb. We need to cultivate the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, as well as detachment and humility. Teresa tells us that detachment and humility are the foundation of prayer. Charity, love and service are the fruits of our prayer life. It is only through death to self that we gain the strength needed to acquire the virtues that will enable us to make the climb.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church recognizes that progress in our spiritual life and progress in our prayer life are intertwined and refers to prayer as a battle. #2725 states: "Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort. ... If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. ... The spiritual battle of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer." Fr. Yves Congar, a Dominican priest, echoed these thoughts when he wrote: "I say to myself you have received the grace of fidelity to prayer, but not the grace of prayer. I have always found praying difficult, but have always remained faithful to it. I feel the need of it and pray often."

The passage in Luke's gospel following the teaching of the Lord's Prayer tells of a man banging at the door of his friend's home for bread. Jesus promises that the door will be opened to those who search with persistence. So we must be persistent and steadfast in our prayer life.

Some of the sisters in Teresa's convents waited 40 years to be contemplatives and Teresa herself waited many years. The trials we sometimes experience at prayer when no consolations seem possible should increase our desire to continue to try harder to climb the mountain."