

Sing the Praise of His Glory in the Heaven of Our Soul **by Fr. Victor Mallia, OCD**

The theme selected for this Congress - DISCALCED CARMELITE SAINTS IN LOVE WITH SACRED SCRIPTURE - immediately brought to my mind our beloved sister in Carmel, Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity. And since we are on the eve of celebrating the first centenary of her death [next year, in 2006] I felt compelled to share with you - on this my first visit to your country and my first encounter with the 'extended' family of the Discalced Carmelites in you the O.C.D.S. Communities in Canada gathered here in Congress - some of Elizabeth's spiritual and scriptural inspirations.

Do not be deceived by my opening words; I am neither a Scripture scholar nor an expert on Blessed Elizabeth ... and I do not pretend to be one! The province of Malta, albeit small in size and number, has a very good Scripture scholar in our dear Father Dominic, and an expert on Elizabeth of the Trinity, so far unique in the whole of the Order, Father Juan De Bono currently Prior of our community in Birkirkara, Malta. Thanks to Father Juan and his notes I was able to put together the material I will be sharing with you this afternoon.

I have heard it said of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity as "*being in love with Saint Paul*"! Nowadays one has to be extremely careful about his choice of words and expressions, even when describing holy men and women. I am sure, though, that you know what "*being in love with Saint Paul*" in this context really means.

Elizabeth of the Trinity of the Carmel at Dijon, France, has been somewhat overshadowed by her near-contemporary, Therese of the Child Jesus from the Lisieux Carmel, also in France. Both French, both Discalced Carmelites, both entered the cloister at an early age, both died at a tender age, one just and the other almost 26 years old! We even find similarities in their childhood years as both had to go through various events that caused them pain but served to eventually shape their distinct and particular character. So much so that the message each gave to the world is so strikingly different.

Therese Martin achieved her holiness by simply presenting herself to God as a little child, happy to know He is there and that He knows of her. She knew that by her own efforts she would not be able to do much for Him, so she just sought to let Him teach her the little way that leads to His eternal happiness.

Elizabeth Catez, on the other hand, had the special grace to realize the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in all the baptized, of which many are scarcely aware and therefore, need to be continuously reminded. She would later write from her Carmel room in Dijon: *I am Elizabeth of the Trinity, that is, Elizabeth disappearing, losing herself, letting herself be utterly possessed by the Three*. Once, when discussing the state of her soul with her spiritual director, just before she entered Carmel, she explained that during prayer *it feels as if Someone is within me, as if I were dwelt in*. To which he rightly answered: 'Do you not understand - quoting St. Paul's words - you are God's temple, and that God's Spirit is dwelling in you?' (1 Cor. 6.19).

One quick look at her writings, shows great love for and familiarity with Scripture; though one can never over-emphasize the fact that she was captivated by the Letters of Saint Paul! It is roughly estimated that her writings, which are not too many, contain about one thousand and fifty-six (1056) quotations from Scripture and all this in just six or so years spent at the Dijon Carmel! These quotations are derived from all over the Holy Bible, but Saint John's inputs and Saint Paul's letters seem to be on top and are her favorites. Indeed she declares that from Paul's writings *my soul received so much strength in times of trials*. As is always the case with holy souls that God chooses to purify for Himself, these so called trials in Elizabeth's life were abundant.

Blessed Elizabeth had been refined, like gold and silver, through successive nights of soul purifying that lead her to the experience and understanding of true faith and mystical love. Her prayer reached beyond the surface of words and feelings and in the emptiness of her soul she could say with the spouse of the Canticle: '*I am very black, but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem ... do not gaze at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has scorched me.*' (Cant. 1.5-6).

And yes, in this nothingness she discovers that God works in this way with those he specially loves and wants exclusively for himself, taking from them all human support, so that faith and love alone might be their only guide and solace. She writes: *Then, when the hour of humiliation comes, when one is brought to nothing, she*

will remember that short sentence: 'But Jesus made no further answer' (Jn. 19.9), and she too will be silent, keeping all her strength - that strength we draw from silence - for the Lord. When she is abandoned, forsaken, in anguish - anguish such as that which drew from Our Lord the great cry: 'Father, why have you forsaken me' (Mk. 15,34) - she will remember that prayer: 'That they may have my joy fulfilled in them' (Jn. 17.13) and draining to the dregs the chalice prepared by the Father, she will find a heavenly sweetness in its bitterness. It would be right to remark here that these words of hers indicate, not only a good knowledge and understanding of the Holy Scriptures, but also a fidelity to the doctrine of her spiritual father in the Teresian Carmel John of the Cross.

As one reads Elizabeth's 'RETREATS', one gets the impression that he is merely going through the pages of a normal Scripture commentary. But these writings of hers expose the means by which she actually discovered her vocation. The Bible was for her a living source that is best described in this verse in Psalm 119, 105: 'Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light in my path.' Praying upon the Holy Books assured her that God was watching over her, confirming her and strengthening her in the living out of her Trinitarian life. It was as if, so to speak, God was calling her through Christ to enter and live within the heart of his word. This is what one of her contemporaries, Mother Germaine of Jesus, wrote later about Sister Elizabeth: "*Beneath this apparent commentary on holy scriptures there is in reality the secret of her holiness which the servant of God (now Blessed) entrusts to us, her ideal fully realized in the evening of her life.*"

These pages written during her illness, when she suffered from insomnia, appear at first to be nothing more than mere simple recollections of her reading in Holy Scripture, accompanied by personal reflections, but they are actually much more. ... in this small collection she tried to express how she had envisioned her function as a PRAISE OF GLORY, how she had understood that one is able, here below, to live a life in heaven. That this was the meaning of her entire religious life is the dominant theme of her retreats." Surely, we are not mistaken in assuming that Elizabeth's desire to pray, continually found solid food in the word of God. She was above all else a contemplative, and recognized her mission within the heart of the Church as a call to adoration. Yes, she exclaims, *I have found him whom my soul loves ... I would like to be quite silent, buried in adoration, in order to penetrate ever more deeply into Him, to be so filled with Him that I can give Him by prayer to those poor souls who know not the gift of God.*

I am sure that even without the need of me pointing it out to you, we see here another very evident similarity between Therese and Elizabeth. Not just in their longing for God and to be with Him all the time but also in their both finding their vocation in the heart of the Church, the former to love the latter to adore. Furthermore, the two of them - albeit that they were living within the cloister away from the world - possessed within them this yearning to live out their proper vocation for the good of others, especially those '*poor souls*' who were not aware of God's gift, namely His love and mercy.

We know that Paul's first letter to the Corinthians inspired Therese of Lisieux to discover her vocation in Carmel; she tells us so. So too, Elizabeth of Dijon got her cue from Paul's letter to the Ephesians and adopted for herself a new name. She writes: *The Apostle says that "we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of His glory" (Eph 1.12). It is there that I have found my vocation. I want to begin now, here below, to be a Praise of Glory.*

At times we find ourselves asking: is this transformation possible? Can it happen to me too? In Blessed Elizabeth we find the answer; she gently encourages us to make it possible. True, she was fortunate enough to discover the Truth and the Way early in her life. Most of us here would be much older than she was when she made this wonderful discovery for herself! But let us not allow ourselves to be put off or lose heart, thinking we are too old to set foot upon new paths that surely lead us to sanctity. Re-reading Elizabeth today poses before us a fresh invitation and a source of great hope that we too, as disciples of Christ and guided by the shining examples of so many of our Carmelite brothers and sisters, may one day make this mystifying discovery. Let us not forget that our Carmelite vocation calls us, first and foremost, to attain holiness through prayer, which is ultimately union with God. In prayer we reach out, from within the heart of the Church, to participate with Christ in uniting all into one for the praise and glory of the All-Holy Trinity. And this call of ours, like that of Elizabeth and Therese, is a vocation that embraces all humanity. Again, Elizabeth's words give us courage here, for she writes: *our grilles will never come between our hearts ... I forget no one. You see, at Carmel one's heart grows wider and can love more than ever.*

Elizabeth's prayer was sustained and enriched by her reading of the Bible, repeatedly drawing strength from God's word especially during times of trials and temptations. She imitated St. John of the Cross in her way of slipping under or going through an event to emerge above it. She abandoned herself freely to God's will. Through her love and familiarity with St. Paul's letters she achieved a very particular orientation, enabling her to transcend all, even herself.

We find ourselves constantly battling with irritations that come from within and from without, not at all sure how to deal with or get rid of them. It is at such moments that we feel inclined to consider closely personalities like Elizabeth of the Trinity and again let their message and example give us the push we need to keep going. As she grew in faith we notice how her intentions became purified; subsequently outward and interior irritations became less and less disturbing for her. Of course there were still moments when she felt frustrated, but her strength was in her faith, in her disposition of silence. To a young friend she wrote: *Build a little cell within like I do, and think how God is there and enter into it from time to time. When your nerves are on edge or something upsets you, quietly take refuge there and tell the Lord all about it.* She makes it sound so simple, but indeed ever so difficult to practice! Yet, again, Elizabeth comes to our rescue as she illustrates to us what it means to live your faith. In other words she is here confirming that in faith one becomes more accepting of himself and of others. She does this, not by just shrugging her shoulders at or giving her back to the cause of the difficulty, but by going right into the core of the matter. And to her the core of the matter is Christ himself, for here in his humanity she discovers his humility. Every day she wished to make her own Christ's humility. This helped her to become immune, so to speak, to the superficial trivialities of life for these, she would argue, carry little importance in the context of eternity. In faith she was again enlightened to perceive God's grandeur, his light illuminating all the shadows of any remaining self-seeking. Here too, Elizabeth, was given the grace of true detachment; not a harsh or uncaring sort of self-denial and detachment, but one free from self, giving her the ability to be more freely attached to God! In slipping under, in silence, she goes through an event to the very heart of God himself, there to dwell everlastingly within the most Holy Trinity, praising and adoring him through all eternity.

What does Elizabeth understand by 'A Praise of Glory'? She answers: *A Praise of Glory is being always in thanksgiving; each of its acts, its movements, each of its thoughts, its aspirations, while the more deeply rooting it in love, are but an echo of the eternal Sanctus*'. Seeing it this way Adoration is not a fearful submission to an overpowering, omnipotent God, but the loving response of the creature towards the Creator.

The word of God, we may safely say, was crucial and at the very heart of Elizabeth's spiritual life. So much so that she writes: *'For God alone may my soul wait in silence' (Ps. 62, 1). Yes, that is the most beautiful phrase as it is sung eternally within the bosom of the peaceful Trinity. 'For the Word of God is living and active ... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (Heb. 4, 12). It is this Word itself which will finish the task of stripping the soul ... The soul must keep the Word and by thus keeping, it is sanctified in truth, according to the desire of the Divine Master ... To those who keep his word, He has promised 'My Father will love them and we will come to them and will make our home with them' (Jn. 14.23).*

To illustrate this even further may I make a final observation. Jesus tells us: 'In my Father's house are many mansions.' Some interpret this saying as a reference to the diversity in the many manifestations of God's creation. Unique before God, we each possess our special way of responding, which makes our development and growth in prayer completely individual. Mindful of this, Elizabeth searched for and found her own way of responding to God. She was so pleased with her discovery and the joys it brought her that she dared recommend it to others without any doubts or fear. So much so that during her final illness she wrote to a friend: *Before I depart for heaven, I feel I must assure you that when I am in my Father's house, I shall pray much for you. I invite you to meet me in that centre of love, for that is where I shall spend my eternity and where you can begin yours already here on earth.* Reflecting upon these words of hers, simple yet so profound, childlike yet so wise, I cannot help asking myself: what made these holy people so sure of their salvation? And again and again the only answer I get to hear is: faith, trust and love! Seek Him to get to know Him, convince yourself that He is in and with you, allow Him to take you by the hand and lead you through his way, adore and love Him there, within you.

It is said that our response at this moment determines the conditions of tomorrow. My only hope and my only wish now is that we all let ourselves go and open ourselves in abandonment to the Holy Spirit. The only secret to this moment forward is to pray always. For in prayer we discover who He is, who alone deserves our love. In prayer Christ reveals how much he, who is the object of our love, loves us. In prayer we are moved by the Holy Spirit to desire to enter, even now, our eternity of adoring Him who is love. Within our inner cell we can all find Him and adore Him. Elizabeth of the Trinity was convinced of this. That is why she wanted and sought to become THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY. Perhaps, in this year marking the first centenary of her death, it would not be too much to ask of her to give us the courage to become **the Praise of His Glory in the Heaven of our Soul**, and I am sure she would be very pleased to do just that. In fact I can hear her, at this very moment, replying to us her brothers and sisters in Carmel: *I leave you my devotion to 'the Three'. Live within, with them, in the heaven of your soul. The Father ... will overshadow you ... The Word will imprint Himself in your soul ... The Holy Spirit will transform you into a mysterious lyre which, in silence, beneath His divine touch, will give forth a marvelous canticle to Love. Then, you will be the Praise of His Glory.*

One final quote, this time from Blessed Elizabeth's prayer to the Blessed Trinity, dated November 21st, 1904. This prayer sums up all we have been sharing together this evening. It says:

*O my Three, my All,
my Beatitude, infinite Solitude,
Immensity wherein I lose myself!
I yield myself to You as Your prey.
Immerse Yourself in me that I may be immersed in You,
until I depart to contemplate in Your light
the abyss of Your greatness.*

N.B. Special website - www.elisabeth-dijon.org