

## **One**

### **The National Park of the Soul**

Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross are universal masters of prayer. John describes the spiritual journey to God and happiness as the Ascent of Mt. Carmel. I like this imagery because I love hiking to the top of a mountain.

When my kids were young, we began to hike in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. The first time with my kids, I wanted to begin at Fern Lake Trail Head, to Odessa Lake, then up and over to Bear Lake, and loop back to the beginning. However, before we started, a volunteer ranger said, "It's too dangerous to go to the top. There is ice and snow. You can't make it, so don't even try."

Well, he had the uniform, so we believed him. We settled for going to the waterfall and turning back. When we got there, we looked up with longing but remembered we were told we couldn't make it. Just then, we saw two figures coming over the ridge. As they drew nearer it was two old ladies with handbags and dress shoes. Well at that moment, two emotions rushed over me. First, anger that the volunteer ranger had no idea what he was talking about. He had probably never been to the top nor even tried. The second emotion was joy, because we all knew in that instant, if they could make it, then so could we!

## **Two**

The Life of Prayer is similar to this experience.

Most Catholics were taught to say two prayers as a child: the Our Father and Hail Mary. And many people speak to God in their own words

throughout the day. This is vocal prayer. It is the very beginning of the journey but it's certainly not the whole landscape of prayer. There is a whole "national park" of the soul waiting to be explored.

Sadly, many never venture into the amazing spiritual landscape because they did not know it was even there and they were never shown the way, so they never went on to meditation and never reached the mountaintop of contemplation.

Well, Jesus has shown us the way and the Church has given us expert guides in St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. They tell us, "You too can reach the top. Just start out and never quit."

Most don't know the teachings of Teresa and are afraid of John, but I want to open up for you this landscape of the soul from their writings because we have somewhere amazing to go!

## **Three**

### **The Stages of Prayer**

Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross lay out for us the stages in the journey of the soul to union with God and perfect happiness.

John describes it as the Ascent of Mt. Carmel, and Teresa explains it as entering into a Castle or Mansion where God dwells within.

This spiritual journey has been divided into nine stages:

It begins with Vocal prayer, then leads to meditation (the first Teresian Mansion) into affective prayer (the second Mansion). After affective prayer comes the fourth step, prayer of simplicity (third Mansion) often accompanied by the Dark Night of the Senses. Then there is infused contemplation (the fourth Mansion), prayer of quiet, prayer of union (the

fifth Mansion), prayer of conforming union (the sixth Mansion) accompanied by the Dark Night of the Spirit, and finally the ninth step, prayer of transforming union (the seventh Mansion).

We can simplify it and organize it into three forms of prayer: vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation. But without exception, God created every person on earth to reach the top. We just need to set out and not turn back.

Teresa of Avila said, “I am certain that all who do not stop on the way will drink this living water.”

## **Four**

Teresa of Avila gives us three simple steps for Mental prayer or meditation.

Recall the Indwelling of the Father, Son and Spirit. Begin with Vocal Prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to pray. Begin with an Our Father, Hail Mary or any prayer of your choice or just speak to God from the heart.

1. Read or listen to something from the Word of God found in Scripture, Tradition (the writings of the Saints) or the Magisterium (the teaching of the Church). As soon as something strikes you – stop reading.
2. Reflect or think about what struck you in order to understand the supernatural truth, love God for this truth, and then apply that truth to your life. Ask yourself, “Am I living this or not? If I am not living this, then what habitual or root vice(s) are preventing me? Pride, vanity, envy, sloth, anger, greed, gluttony, lust, etc. What occasions of sin, what circumstances prompt me to fall into this vice or sin?” It is essential to learn two things by the double

reflection on the Word of God and one's life. Learn about God and learn about yourself! Learn your dominant habitual sins and the occasions that lead to those sins.

3. Resolution. Choose something practical and concrete to remember or to do that day based on your meditation to stop a vice and practice the conquering virtue

## **Five**

### **Transformational Power of Meditation & Resolution**

The purpose of prayer is that we should change and become more like God.

We will change if, with the help of God's grace, we practice the truth that God impressed upon us during our meditation.

We will not change if we don't.

In fact, we will get worse, because fallen human nature tends toward sin, not virtue, without effort and God's grace.

St. Francis De Sales on the importance of a resolution, "The most important thing of all is that you cling firmly to the resolutions you have taken in meditation so as to practice them carefully. That is the great fruit of meditation, without which it is often not only useless but harmful. Why so? Because the virtues upon which we have meditated but not practiced sometimes puff us up so much in mind and heart that we think we are already what we are resolved to be which no doubt is the case if our resolutions are solid and ardent. But when, on the contrary, they are not practiced, they are useless and dangerous."

(Introduction to the Devout Life, II Chap 8)

Examples of a resolution:

Today I will listen more than I speak

I will not gossip today

I complain too much,

Today I will practice thanking God ahead of time for working everything for good

I am anxious - today I will replace that feeling of Anxiety with an Act of Trust in God

What if I cannot find a resolution?

Remember your meditation all day long.

This remembrance will change the way you think and the way you act.