

## **Ecumenical and Ecclesial Dimension of Contemplative Prayer**

Spiritual Theology has had a very fruitful impact on the ecumenical situation in Sweden. There are still several dogmatical and ethical questions that are difficult to discuss in the dialogue between the different churches. But if you try to start the dialogue in a more spiritual and prayerful way, it is much easier to come closer to each other. In recent years, it is interesting to see how many non-Catholics find help and inspiration in Catholic – and Orthodox - saints and mystics. The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola are widely used by Lutheran ministers. The Carmelite Spirituality has also been well received among many Protestants of different denominations. A Lutheran bishop, Karin Johannesson, wrote a book comparing Luther and Thérèse of Lisieux. The Flemish Carmelite Wilfrid Stinissen's books are very popular among Christians of different background. On the other hand, there are also Protestant authors as Bishop Martin Lönnebo from the Church of Sweden and Pastor Peter Halldorf from the Pentecostal community, whose books are imbued by classical Catholic and Orthodox tradition.

Here I want to offer a few examples from Carmelite tradition to illustrate that the ecclesial dimension of contemplative prayer can help non-Catholic Christians to become more familiar with Catholic Ecclesiology. This more mystical outlook upon the mystery of the Church can make it easier for them to understand how we as Catholics look upon the Church. Of course, this by no means entails that they can accept our entire dogmatical vision upon the mystery of the Church. Still, a more contemplative vision upon the Church can help Christians of various denominations to come closer to each other. If we pray together and go down on our knees together in front of the infinite mystery of our God, we will also grow closer to each other in our vision upon the Church

### *To Pray in the Heart of the Church*

When Christians pray, we always pray as members of the Church. In baptism, we have received the gift and grace of being inhabited by the Triune God. Our personal prayer is always a participation in the dialogue of the Son with his Father. Thanks to baptism, we are the temples of God. The mystery of the Church has been internalized into our very being. This biblical and dogmatical background is also very important on the personal, pastoral and ecumenical level. Prayer is more grace and gift than achievement and result of our own effort. When we really realize this immense sign of God's mercy, our entire life tends to become a life in prayer. We are invited to a constant communion with the Triune God who lives deep inside ourselves, in the innermost sanctuary of our soul. When we really try to receive this grace and become more and more aware

of God's presence, prayer becomes more and more contemplative – or as Saint John of the Cross says - *atención amorosa*, loving awareness. The virtue of faith can grow gradually into contemplation. More and more we can look upon God and everything existing with the very gaze of God himself. We are invited to a constant, prayerful communion with God. This is not only a personal grace, it is something we receive as members of the Church and on behalf of all the Church and her salvific mission in the world.

The more we grow in prayer thanks to the theological virtues - faith, hope, and charity – the more we grow into the innermost mystery of the Church. We *become* Church, the bride of Christ, thanks to the saving and sanctifying love of the Bridegroom. The universal vocation to holiness implies that all the members of the Church are invited to this constant dialogue and relationship with the Bridegroom. Contemplative prayer is the very atmosphere of the Church. It is meant for all the baptized. Unfortunately, very few of them know that they are invited to this deep transforming and mystical union of love with the Bridegroom. As bride of Christ, *anima ecclesiastica*, every Christian is meant to be fruitful for the Church and her mission in the world. Contemplative prayer has a deep ecclesial dimension: souls are saved, souls are sanctified, new life is born.

This ecclesial dimension of contemplative prayer is typical of Carmelite spirituality, especially in the Teresian Carmel. But, as a matter of fact, it is also something ecumenical, a common Christian insight or it ought to be so. Every Christian who lives a profound life of prayer will become fruitful for the Church, in one way or the other. As Christians, we are not isolated individuals, but members of the mystical body of Christ. As Christians, each one of us becomes the bride of Christ. Through our loving, contemplative union with the Bridegroom, our entire life of prayer is so united to him that he can use it for his mystery of salvation. Bride and Bridegroom are one, totally unified. From this perfect union of love new life is born.

*Teresa of Jesus: Her Reform of Carmel on behalf of the Reform of the Church*

Saint Teresa of Jesus tells us in her *Way of Perfection* how much she suffered when she heard about what the “Lutherans” had done in France in order to damage the unity of the Church. It does not seem very ecumenical for our contemporaries, but her main concern was our fundamental unity as baptized. She had also heard about all the souls in America who did not know Christ and were in danger of being lost. At the same time, she realized that her own spiritual life in the Monastery of the Incarnation was lukewarm. She felt that God wanted her do something for the Church in need and at the same time for

the Carmelite Order that was also in need of a spiritual revival. This also implied her own conversion to a deeper life of prayer. She wanted to institute a new way of living the Carmelite charism on behalf of the Church. She wanted to return to the beginning of the Church, just as so many other Christians of various denominations, A community of twelve Sisters and their Prioress should live a secluded contemplative life in poverty inspired by apostolic zeal. Somehow, this should be a female reflection of the community of the twelve apostles around Jesus. “All the sisters should be occupied in prayer for those were defending the Church, the preachers and the learned men who defended her” (*Way of Perfection 1, 2*).

The main intention of the Reform of Saint Teresa was ecclesial and apostolic – and today we could add ecumenical. In her vision, contemplative prayer and life had an intrinsic value for the Church and her mission. Through their contemplative life, the sisters in Carmel should be as brave soldiers defending the Church thanks to their weapons, prayer and penance. By their deep prayerful union with Christ, the Bridegroom, the sisters could become fruitful for the Church and the redemption of humankind. They were supposed to surrender totally to the Bridegroom and his task as redeemer. By growing closer and closer to him in prayer, they could become more and more fruitful for the Church. “When I look at the great needs of the Church, which afflict me so much, it seems to me ridiculous to be distressed about anything else” (*Spiritual Relations, III*).

Teresa reminds all of us that all the baptized are called to the deep nuptial and transforming union to Christ, the Bridegroom. We are invited to grow gradually in contemplative prayer up to the final transformation, the spiritual marriage with him. This total mystical transformation and sanctification in the Lord is the very aim of our life. This is not only a personal grace and gift, there is always a deep ecclesial dimension of contemplation. The mystery of the Church becomes more and more incarnate in each one of us when we come closer to Christ. All our life becomes a loving offering of ourselves and a wholehearted service to him and his work of redemption in and through the Church. Christians of all denominations who come closer to Christ will also come closer to each other and be even more eager to pray and work for a deeper unity of all the baptized in one Church.

Teresa founded her “dovecots”, the monasteries of her sisters, as a service for the mission of the Church. Her sisters do not live their contemplative life just for the sake of their own perfection. They offer everything for the Church and her apostolic mission and unity.. This is also the reason why contemplative

monasteries are so cherished in the part of the world where the Church is beginning her mission. Today we also see that many non-Catholic Christians are very much aware of the ecumenical aspect of a contemplative community. Contemplative prayer brings forth new life in the Church and urges us to work for perfect unity for all the baptized. This insight became very evident when the younger sister of Teresa, Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, was proclaimed Patron Saint of the missions at the side of Saint Francis Xavier. Contemplation and mission belong together.

*Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus: To Live in the Heart of the Church*

Saint Thérèse is sometimes called “Patroness of Atheists”. Her life and spirituality show us God’s longing for universal salvation. In her, God’s infinite and limitless love is very much alive. The merciful heart of Jesus is reflected in her love and longing for salvation for all the sinners and non-believers. She lived in the time of upcoming atheism and she realized that Christ had died also for those who did not believe in him. The Church had a responsibility for their redemption as well. The hidden, contemplative life of Carmel had the special vocation to show the mystical solidarity between saints and sinners. The notion of communion of saints implies that sinners and saints are brothers and sisters. In the Church, sinners are transformed by God’s grace in order to become saints. Thérèse knew that God had saved her in advance from sin without any merit of her own in order to make it possible for her to be the little sister of all the sinners. Her little way is a grace given to the Church to reach out to all those who remain far away from God, to show them God’s desperate longing to redeem them.

Through her experience of God’s absence and total darkness, Thérèse received the grace to participate in the redeeming experience of Jesus himself at Gethsemane. Her total incapacity to pray, her empty hands, show us the paradoxical and transforming power of contemplative prayer. In her hidden life in the enclosure of Carmel, she really experienced the hidden God. This experience helped her to understand from within how the non-believers experienced their life. In her, the compassionate heart of Jesus the Bridegroom became incarnate. As his bride, she received the grace to share his longing to save souls, to redeem all those who did not want to receive him – or did not know how to do so. Her dark night of the soul shows us the deep redeeming force of faith, faith as a theological virtue uniting us to God even in our poverty and utter darkness. Karin Johannesson has remarked that there is a certain spiritual affinity between Thérèse and Martin Luther, especially regarding his vision upon the centrality of the Cross and the doctrine of grace.

Thérèse really identified herself with the heart of the Church, the burning furnace longing for the salvation of souls just at the Sacred Heart of Jesus. “If the Church were a body composed of different members, it could not lack the noblest of all; it must have a heart, and a heart burning with love” (*Autobiography, translation of Ronald Knox, p. 185*). Thérèse wanted to do everything for God, to do everything in the Church. But she realized more than anyone else her poverty and incapacity. At the same time, though, she was totally convinced of God’s infinite mercy. He offered her a place of honour – the heart of the Church – where she could live in constant prayer for the salvation of each and sundry. “I have found my vocation, and my vocation is love. I had discovered where it is that I belong in the Church, the niche God had appointed for me. To be nothing else than love, deep down in the heart of Mother Church; that is to be everything at once – my dream was not a dream after all” (*ibidem*). Here Thérèse shows us the dynamical force of the theological virtue of hope that could make her dream come true.

This mystical experience of the true interiority of the Church – the heart of the Church – can help us to reflect upon the very essence of the ecclesial mystery. We need a more spiritual ecclesiology in our secular world of today. This could also prove to be very helpful for the ecumenical dialogue, because it can be easier for Protestants to approach the Church as a spiritual mystery than as a hierarchical reality. Saint Thérèse was a providential gift to the Church in the time of upcoming atheism. Today we see the results of this situation very clearly. If we want to be useful for the Church, Thérèse shows us her little, hidden way of contemplative prayer as a very fruitful way: “Love, in fact, is the vocation which includes all others; it is a universe of its own, comprising all time and space – it is eternal” (*ibidem*). These words show us that Thérèse is a true disciple of Saint John of the Cross and that she has really assimilated his doctrine of pure love.

#### *Saint John of the Cross: The Gift of Pure Love*

In his *Cántico* and *Llama*, Saint John of the Cross uses the spousal terminology in order to show us the infinite dignity of our human reality. We are invited to the closest possible union of love with the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. The human person, the bride, can be more and more transformed by faith, hope, and charity through her relationship with the Spouse. The higher degree of charity she has reached, the more repercussions will follow for the entire organism of the Church. By no means, growth in holiness and contemplative prayer is only a matter of personal perfection. As baptized, we all live our personal history of salvation and sanctification within the Church, or even inside the heart of the

Church. When the bride has been totally transformed thanks to the development of the theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity, she belongs totally to her Bridegroom and his work of redemption. “Those who are in this state obtain everything they want” (*Llama 2, 31*). In his immense humility, the Bridegroom will always listen to his bride who unites her prayer for salvation of souls to his burning desire for the same aim. Here we really see the fruitfulness of contemplative prayer.

When Saint John of the Cross speaks about the bride, this implies, just as in the entire mystical, nuptial tradition, the Church, the single person and Our Lady. When he comments on the 30<sup>th</sup> stanza of his *Cántico*, he says: “This verse, most appropriately refers to Christ and the Church, for in it, the Church, the bride of Christ, addresses him saying: Let us weave garlands (understanding by garlands, all the holy souls engendered by Christ in the Church). Each holy soul is like a garland adorned with the flowers of virtues and gifts, and all of them together form a garland for the head of Christ, the Bridegroom” (*Cántico 30, 1*). Here the Church is very active, but always in close union to Christ, in order to foster holy souls. It also shows us the intimate connection between redemption and glorification. The bride, whether it be the Church or the single soul or Our Lady, is called to give glory to the Bridegroom by being a wonderful garland. “Thus, the works and prayers of these souls always produce their effect. Such was the prayer and work of Our Lady, the most glorious Virgin” (*3 Súbida 2, 10*). The joint glory of Christ and the Church will be total, when they have been adorned with all the “garlands”, that is all the elect. This text shows us the eschatological plenitude when Christ will be all in all.

All Christians are called to be totally transformed by divine grace. This implies that everyone is invited to grow in contemplative prayer and thus become fruitful for the Church and her apostolate. This mystagogic aspect is of utmost importance for the ecumenical dialogue, not only with the Orthodox but also with the different Protestant denominations. Saint John of the Cross always defended the hidden, contemplative life of the Carmelite nuns. According to him, it offered the nuns an ideal atmosphere in order to grow closer to the Lord and receive the gift of “pure love”. “For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all these works put together” (*Cántico 29, 2*). This pure love is badly needed for the Church and her mission to transmit redemption. Therefore, the Church, always and everywhere, needs the hidden, contemplative life. If it is missing in the Church, something of the essence of the ecclesial mystery is lost. “Because of her determined desire to please her Spouse and benefit the Church, Mary Magdalen, even though she was accomplishing great

good by her preaching and would have continued doing so, hid in the desert for thirty years in order to surrender truly to this love. It seemed to her, after all, that by such retirement she would obtain much more because of the notable benefit and gain a little of this love brings to the Church” (*ibidem*).

*Development of a Carmelite, Contemplative – and Ecumenical - Ecclesiology?*

These three Carmelites who have been declared Doctors of the Church show us something of common interest for all Christians. When they speak about the impact of contemplative prayer for the Church, they do so according to the Carmelite charism. Does this imply that there could be a special Carmelite Ecclesiology? The Carmelite vision of the Church concentrates, evidently, on the innermost reality of the Church. This accent can be very important and consoling for those who feel alone and empty in the secular world of today as well as for those who look upon the Church as an institution among many others. The contemplative gaze upon the Church offered us by the Carmelite Doctors of the Church can help Christians of all traditions and denominations to find healing in her motherly and live-giving womb. In the society of today even many Christians have a very critical and rather negative look upon the Church. The more contemplative vision of these Carmelites can be helpful for Christians of all churches who need to discover the real and profound mystery of the Church.

Other Carmelites have added their own accents to this vision. Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity who wanted to be a *Laudem Gloriam* shows us that adoration and glorification of the Trinity is the very atmosphere of the Church. In a posthumous note she wrote: “I bequeath to you this vocation which was mine in the bosom of the Church militant and which I shall fulfil henceforth unceasingly in the Church triumphant: a Praise of Glory of the Blessed Trinity”. Through her life and prayer as well as through her martyrdom, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, strengthened the bond between Israel and the Church. In one of her texts, she speaks about Queen Esther, symbol of Israel, who comes to the prioress of Carmel, symbol of the Church, in order to ask for help and intercession in the time of persecution. The contemplative prayer-life of the Carmelite nuns, somehow, is the continuation of the prayer of the Synagogue. The Church, the new Israel, is meant to bring divine help and salvation to everyone. Through her intercession, God’s mercy and love can change our hearts and the history of the world.

Finally, a more hidden, quite unknown Carmelite, Francisco Palau, who lived both as a hermit and as an apostle, has added a very special accent to this ecclesial dimension of prayer. He looks upon himself as the bridegroom of his

loved Bride, *Amada*. He lives in a personal relationship with the Church: “I live and I will live for the Church; I live and I will die for her.” His prayer was a dialogue with the Church, where he found Christ and his neighbours in communion. He shows us that there are several ways of being an *anima ecclesiastica* in the Carmelite tradition.

Hopefully, Christians of different traditions and denominations can get some inspiration from these Carmelites and see that contemplative prayer helps all the baptized to find a deeper relation to Christ in the heart of the Church, our mother.