

Self-Emptying in the Carmelite Tradition by John Coates

Self-emptying is that link in the chain of Carmelite spirituality found in the writings of all Carmelite mystics. In the Carmelite tradition, self-emptying grows out of an understanding of the person that is somewhat unique to the Jewish Christian tradition. We are created in the divine image. To be in relationship with God and in God with all of creation, is our identity and to separate one's self from relationship with God is a sin. In its extreme, sin creates an inner hell of nonexistence. The person is disconnected from his or her center of identity and there is a constant unbalance. Sin by its very nature causes dissension in the human soul and this brings about total unrest. The self-emptying of sin is self-destruction whereas self-emptying in God leads one toward fullness of life. Our blessed Lord offers believers a unique model of self-emptying.

Since it was only through this self-emptying that Christ could be filled with the spirit of God. The experience of his life, the shock of his death, the awesome wonder of his resurrection, and the empowerment of his Spirit, gave rise to the early disciples proclaiming him Lord, Wisdom, and Word of God, the one who emptied himself to become one of us. The Creator becomes submissive to the creature. This is the great and incomprehensible love of God. Saint Paul encourages the Christian to take on the mind of Christ by emptying the self for God and be willing to do and be all things for the love of God. His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself, to assume the condition of a slave and become as humans are. (Ph 2:6-11)

Saint John of the Cross, with profound insight, sees the self-emptying of Christ as reflecting the mystical marriage between God and mankind. When the time had come For Him, the Eternal Word, to be born He went forth like a bridegroom From his bridal chamber Embracing his bride Holding her in his arms Whom the gracious Mother Laid in a manger (from "Romance") God in Christ embraces humankind as a bridegroom passionately embraces his bride. In the Carmelite tradition, self emptying is built into a mystical self understanding. Our person is a divine fullness awaiting realization through a mysterious path of self-emptying. In the "Spiritual Canticle", the soul is a lover in search of her beloved. The soul is thirsty from the search, bending down to drink from the waters of a mountain stream. As she sees her own reflection in the clear waters, with intense desire for the beloved she cries:

O Spring-like crystal If Only on your silvered-over face You would suddenly form The eyes I have desired Which I bear sketched deep within my heart.

John's commentary says, "That the soul is like a sketch of a drawing and she calls out to the one who did this sketch to finish the painting and image."

"The sketch," John tells us, "Was the image of the Bridegroom, The Word. The Son of God who is the splendor of God's glory and the image of God's substance." The sketch is the soul and the sketch is Christ. It is both God and ourselves. In the final analysis, the experience of God and the experience of self are one. For did not Christ pray. "That we may all be one with me in you and you in me and me in them and they in me." From this perspective, self-emptying has many levels of meaning. We empty ourselves of all that is incompatible with the Divine presence. We empty ourselves of idols (be it wealth, with all of its trappings, pride of intellect, or creature comforts or attachments), of all that substitutes for God in our life, of all that resists the completion of the sketch that is ourselves. We do this by way of prayer and detachment so that the heart's conflicting desires can be purified, transformed and repossessed in God through

love. This is what John calls the active nights of the sense and spirit. At a deeper level, God does the emptying through contemplative prayer - prayer originating in God, as the divine presence pervades and inter-penetrates what is human. This process, which John calls the passive night of the Spirit, is often profoundly painful. God's activity disengages and frees the soul from clinging to everything that is other than God. The reason this purifying by God is so painful is because it brings us face to face with our weakness and shortcomings, our failures and sinfulness, our pride filled lives are laid bare and we can no longer fool ourselves.

We arrive at a new level of consciousness. We see our acts more clearly. As I said earlier, these revelations are very painful to the soul and special graces from God are necessary for the soul to persevere in the love of God lest the person will lose faith in God's love and give up the fight. This is the initial stage of contemplation and the soul will experience dryness, and the emptiness the person experiences which is caused by purificative contemplation of the passive night of the senses is not as keen and profound as in the night of the spirit. Regardless of the difference

in intensity, there is a certain similarity in the contemplative knowledge received. The dark night with its aridities and voids is the means to the knowledge of God and self. This knowledge is the foundation for all other knowledge to come. For the more we know of ourselves, the more we know God. Another level of self-emptying which is experienced in contemplative prayer is that in spite of oft-renewed efforts, one no longer relishes prayer; one even experiences a sense of weariness; one finds prayer irksome and the time given to it endless; faith and trust seem dormant; once alert and joyous, now one acts only by sheer force of will. This is a painful condition, but not devoid of advantages.

When God sees fit to visit us with aridity, it is in order to detach us from all created things, even from the happiness derived from devotion, that we may learn to love God for His sake alone and not just for the gifts God sends us. God wants likewise, to humble us by showing us that consolations are not our right, but entirely free gifts. God also effects a further purification of the soul from past faults, present attachments, and all manner of self seeking. When we have to serve God without any relish, on principle and by sheer will power, we suffer keenly, and our suffering becomes an act of expiation and atonement. One more thing is to be considered, God thus strengthens us in virtue. For in order to persevere in prayer and in well doing, the will must be energetically and steadily exercised, and it is by such exercise that we are grounded in virtue. In the "Interior Castle," Teresa describes "rooms" in the soul through which it journeys toward the center where God dwells. In the sixth dwelling place, she describes a vision in which she sees all things in God. God has them all within himself. Having previously described the soul as an interior castle, she continues: "Let's suppose that God is like an immense and beautiful dwelling or palace and that this palace, as I say, is God himself." Could the sinner, perhaps so as to engage in his evil deeds leave this palace? No, certainly not, rather within the palace itself, that is within God himself, the abominations, indecent actions and evil deed committed by us sinners take place."

Since dryness at times proceeds from our own faults, we must first of all search ourselves, yet without over-anxiety, in order to see if we are not the responsible cause; a) by reason of our tendencies, more or less consented to; b) by a sort of spiritual sloth or by an untimely and excessive straining of the mind; c) by seeking after human consolations, after personal attachments that are too sentimental, after worldly pleasures; for God will not have a divided heart. Once the cause of aridity is discovered, one must with due humility strive to remove it. As we grow in the life of Christ, we will experience a deepening sense of connectedness, of oneness with all things - the yellow jacket that competes for my jelly sandwich on a hot summer's day, to the farthest star that my eye strains to see in the darkness of night.

This realization, this coming to oneness, means that to experience this level of consciousness we must surrender, let go. We must learn how to accept ourselves as limited, finite, fragile, sinful, yet as loving and being passionately loved by God. This God invites me to love others with God's love. This love is an act of the will. We love or strive to love others as God would have us to. This love is pure and seeks no favor or recompense. Whatever is done is done for the love of God, for this person realizes that the only way love of God can be shown is how we interact with those with whom we come in contact. It is God that we must see in our neighbor. God manifests himself in men by natural gifts, which are a participation in His being and in His attributes, and by supernatural gifts which are a participation in His nature and in His life. To better understand the motive of fraternal charity, we should analyze it by considering men and women in their relationship with God. Then they will appear as children of God, members of Jesus Christ, co-heirs with us of the Kingdom of Heaven.

We Read:

The supernatural love of our neighbor is but another form of the love of God. "He that loveth his brother abideth in light; and there is no scandal in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness." (John 2:10-11). To abide in light means to abide in God, the source of all light and to walk in darkness means to be in the state of sin. "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love brethren; whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer. And somewhere else, "Dearly beloved, let us love one another: for charity is God; And every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for God is charity: If we love one another, God abideth in us: And His charity is perfected in us. God is charity: And he that abideth in charity, abideth in God, and God in him. If any man say: I love God and hateth his brother; he is a liar. For he that loveth not his brother, whom he seeth, how can he love God, whom he seeth not? And this commandment we have from God, that he who loveth God, love also his brother."

This God invites us to love others with God's own love. we are Daily to Learn to live in the presence of God by being kind and serving our neighbor by helping our neighbor in anyway we can. How we love our neighbor is an extension of our contemplative prayer life. For the Bible reminds us that, "By their fruits you shall know them ". An honest prayer life produces good fruit. It is spiritually impossible for a person to have a good prayer life and not be transformed into Christ. If a person keeps an account of his or her prayer life in a journal, it will encourage them to live mindfully in the presence of God and to be loving towards those with whom they interact. This will help dealing with distractions and especially dryness in prayer. John of the Cross will teach a person the signs to discern the movement from meditation to contemplation - when dryness is indeed due to self-emptying for God and by God rather than by natural causes or one's own laxity. The signs that John of the Cross gives are a unique contribution towards understanding the inner movements of contemplative prayer, the emptying of the soul by God to enable the soul to have a deeper relationship with God. Silence and solitude are integral to the Carmelite tradition and an integral part of the self-emptying this tradition advocates. Personal practice under a spiritual guide already shaped in the tradition invites personal reflection on one's own experience. Each person enhances the tradition as it passes through his or her uniqueness. This tradition sustains itself and grows through the lived experience of all who follow it as lay persons who are members of Secular Order chapters connected to monasteries of nuns and friars. The tradition is embodied in the lives of individual persons. It stays alive and grows.