

COULD CARMELITE SPIRITUALITY PROMOTE GOOD MENTAL HEALTH?

A brief Tribute to Saint Teresa of Avila in the 500th anniversary of her birth

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SUMMARY

Often it is overlooked that Christian Spirituality involves a personal relationship of a human being with God. It is of interest that both the Protestant Reformers and the exponents of the Catholic Counter Reformation agreed upon this. Two of the greatest exponents of the Counter-Reformation, both of whom were made Doctors of the Church because of their teaching on Prayer were Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. This year is the 500th anniversary of the birth of Saint Teresa of Avila. Here, as a Catholic Psychiatrist, I argue that the teaching of both saints about the prayer life, properly understood, tends to improve self worth, and therefore must tend to help persons with mental health problems.

Key words: Prayer - Carmelites – spirituality - self worth

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INTRODUCTION

Often it is overlooked that Christian Spirituality involves a personal relationship of a human being with God. It is of interest that both the Protestant Reformers and the exponents of the Catholic Counter Reformation agreed upon this. Two of the greatest exponents of the Counter-Reformation, both of whom were made Doctors of the Church because of their teaching on Prayer were Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. This year is the 500th anniversary of the birth of Saint Teresa of Avila. Here, as a Catholic Psychiatrist, I argue that the teaching of both saints about the prayer life, properly understood, tends to improve self worth, and therefore must tend to help persons with mental health problems.

St Teresa was born on 28th March 1515 when Spain was at the height of religious and political ferment. She joined the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila in 1535 (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014). Teresa aimed to create a small community based on the principles of the early Carmelite hermits and oriented towards more solitary prayer (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014).

In 1554 Teresa had a radical religious experience of Jesus Christ which led to a deep spiritual life (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014). From then on, Teresa was convinced that prayer was best understood as a living friendship with Christ (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014). In other words a relationship of one person with another. 'Prayer is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends' (St Teresa of Avila).

In 1562 Teresa founded St Joseph's, the first monastery in which her reforming ideas were to be followed (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014). Throughout the next fifteen years she established

a further sixteen communities of nuns dedicated to prayer (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014). In 1568 a small group of friars also joined the reform... One was her great friend and counsellor, John of the Cross.

Teresa taught her approach to prayer through her writings (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014). She tended to use vivid images drawn from daily life, likening prayer to the different ways of watering a garden, and describing the soul travelling towards God as through a castle (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014).

St Teresa of Avila is now seen as one of the great Christian teachers of prayer, by Catholics and Anglicans alike. However, she never described a formal method for how to go about praying (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014). In fact, she aims her advice at those of her fellow nuns who, like herself, have 'minds so scattered they are like wild horses' and find that they are unable to practise intellectual or thought-based meditations (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014). In fact, Teresa's teaching is drawn from her own experience of struggling to pray, and from her awareness that all prayer is ultimately the gift of God (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014).

She was aware that at that time, reciting vocal prayers was the only form of prayer recommended for women, so Teresa took this as her starting point and showed how, when said attentively, even the most ordinary of vocal prayers can lead to the highest forms of mystical encounter (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014). However, at the same time, the relationship between the necessary hard work at prayer required of the individual, and the complete gratuity of God's action, remained a constant theme throughout Teresa's teaching (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2014).

When Teresa advocates reciting vocal prayers such as the Our Father or Hail Mary she warns that they should also be accompanied by recollection (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2 2014). A recent publication suggests that by this she means attention or 'mindfulness', sometimes also described as mental prayer. For Teresa, mindfulness is an awareness of God's presence (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2 2014). 'We should see and be present,' she says 'to the one with whom we speak.' This means both striving to become aware of God's closeness and actively bringing ourselves into this presence (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2 2014).

This mental prayer or 'mindfulness' is strikingly similar to the mindfulness which is taught in Psychology today (Andre 2014) as a means of helping persons who suffer anxiety or depression which are caused in CBT terms by 'Negative thoughts' (Greenberger 1995).

Later, her Colleague, John of the Cross would, in his 'Ascent of Mount Carmel', would argue for detachment from distractions, both from objects and thoughts which 'got in the way' of mental prayer (John of the Cross Ascent of Mount Carmel First Rate Publishers 2014).

Similarly, in Mindfulness based CBT, the same detachment from distractions is advocated (Andre 2014).

In her best description of prayer, Teresa describes the soul as a castle containing many rooms, with God himself dwelling at the centre (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2 2014). The soul's progression through the various stages of prayer is like its journey through the castle to the innermost rooms (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2 2014). At the centre, the soul is united with God and shares in his divine life (The Carmelite Forum of Britain and Ireland 2 2014, Teresa of Avila-Interior Castle 2013).

Teresa's view of the human person

Teresa's concept that God lives in the very centre of the Human Person (Teresa of Avila-Interior Castle 2013) gives the Human Person infinite dignity. There is an implication that in a fully whole Human Being, THE INFINITE is actually joined with the Human Being, (and here I use the words 'the infinite' as an expression of the most ultimate being, whatever one may wish to call Him).

But such a union with the infinite 'living within' the human being must give infinite dignity to the human person... a statement which challenges the person who does not have self esteem because of what he/she has suffered, and provides reassurance and hope (Teresa of Avila-Interior Castle 2013). So it could be argued that Teresa's model of the Human Person could be used to help those who have been traumatised and have 'Borderline' symptoms, in terms of presenting a model by which they could recover their self esteem, although one would not wish to minimise the difficulty in enabling patients with such problems to accept and utilise such a model.

The Dark Night of the Soul

Teresa and John of the Cross's aim was to achieve union with God in Prayer, which is, of course, different from the aim of Mindfulness, as used psychologically. Hence, some further psychological states which John describes are not described in Mindfulness, and go beyond what is needed for therapy.

Hence, John describes 'The Dark Night of the Soul' (John of the Cross – Dark Night of the Soul 2003), which is in effect, the confusion that a person who is attempting to meet God in Mental Prayer has detached him/herself from all distractions, but is unable to communicate with God, leaving him/herself in a dark void... But John, in his poem of the same name, describes this state optimistically as an adventure - a challenge... an escape into the night to meet his beloved.

Thus 'The Dark Night of the Soul' is a religious state of the prayer life (John of the Cross – Dark Night of the Soul 2003)... not to be confused with the illness 'Depression'... Depression has specific symptoms - sad mood, inability to enjoy, poor appetite, poor sleep, poor concentration, suicidal thoughts... And so Depression needs to be treated appropriately by a competent doctor.

Love

On the other hand, John gives us another image... 'The living flame of love'... When he meets his beloved, then the intensity of their friendship causes union between the human being and his beloved (John of the Cross – Living flame of love 2015)... Just in the same way as Teresa, talking of the human person entering the interior castle, describes meeting the Infinite Friend, who gives the human person dignity inside...

In the end, the consciousness of a human person that he/she loves and is loved is an extremely affirming experience for that person, and so can be argued to be effective in preventing depression, anxiety, and poor self esteem.

Friendship

Teresa's most consistent understanding of prayer is that it is friendship with Christ. Prayer is what happens when friends spend time together, sharing joys and sorrows, or enjoying silent companionship. As such, prayer is above all a task of love, and 'the important thing is not to think much but to love much.'

Pain

But such support in friendship does not remove such things as physical illness... It will, however, help the human person bear the pain such illness causes... In exactly the same way as mindfulness techniques can be used to help patients cope with physical pain... A Maltese Teresian Friar used the phrase 'climb upon your cross... and rest' (Sammut 1996).

Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing make you afraid. All things are passing.

God alone never changes. Patience gains all things. If you have God you will want for nothing. God alone suffices.

St Teresa of Avila

Balance between Contemplation and action

For Teresa, however, the point of prayer is not that it should be some pleasurable experience; prayer should always result in good works. As the soul becomes used to spending time with God, it grows in the strength to serve others, to endure trials and to practice the love of neighbour which is the only possible proof of our love of God. This balance between contemplation and action describes the Human Person fully alive, fully integrated with both the God who actuated and joined with the person as a result of the person's Interior search... (Teresa of Avila *The Interior Castle* 2013)... And with society, to whom The person brings him/herself, functioning at the highest level... This commitment to work in 'union with God' reflects exactly the commitment we doctors make to rehabilitate our patients into the world, to achieve 'Social Inclusion' in the 'Recovery Model' of Mental Illness (Sederer 2014)... Indeed 'Social Inclusion' is now itself seen as necessary to give the Human Person back its Dignity... indeed as a Human Right.

Teresa's view of union with God internally and action externally is well expressed in this poem attributed to her...

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Teresa of Ávila (attributed)

CONCLUSION

In attempting to discuss Christian Prayer we have used Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross as case studies since it was their teaching on prayer which caused the Roman Catholic Church to nominate them 'Doctors of the Church', and therefore exemplars of how to pray.

Teresa of Avila gives us, in 'The Interior Castle' an extraordinary image of the dignity of the Human Person... John of the Cross, who spent all his working life as a spiritual director of her nuns, is a very effective psychologist, whose ideas are still studied by some psychologists (Sullivan 1982).

The teaching of both helps to provide models of thought which both emphasize the importance of the nature of the human person and encourage healthy thought patterns. Thus this teaching could be argued to help prevent mental disorders.

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