

"Prayer is an act of love, words are not needed. Even if sickness distracts from thoughts, all that is needed is the will to love." Saint Theresa of Avila

Approaching God through the Sacred Humanity of Christ

[Source](#)



As one final reflection before our Saturday evening Schola Christi gathering, I thought it might be helpful to consider the question of approaching the presence of God through prayer. For the Christian this approach is distinctive in light of the Incarnation of our Lord and no one teaches us about this better than St. Teresa of Avila. She came to understand that our prayer not only should expressly reflect and be shaped by this mystery but it must be so. Fr. Kiernan Kavanaugh, OCD explains Teresa's view and its development as follows:

"Everyone who sets out on the spiritual journey to God faces the same problem, How can I come into touch with God who is infinite and pure mystery to all creatures. The Buddhists might say: with reference to God we cannot even speak; you must sit in the silence, and you might begin by counting your breath. Or a Hindu might give you a sacred word, a mantra, techniques and methods of prayer. Moral and ascetical life have been devised to answer this question.

Teresa, of course, approached this problem as a Christian. Now the Christian believes that God Himself has entered our world and provided us with the way to

Himself through Jesus Christ. . . . She goes directly to the person of Christ in His humanity: she brings Him to her consciousness as either within her or beside her. This was her manner of entering prayer. But because of her fragile nature and a mind that was so susceptible to digression, so alert and active, as the reading of her writings demonstrates so clearly, she felt torment over her inability to concentrate her attention. As a result she resorted as well to other supports and strategies in order to be present to Christ."

Kavanaugh tells us Teresa did this in a number of ways.

"First, Teresa had a great natural capacity for friendship and for conversation. She used this gift as a means of approaching Christ. Friendship became a major factor in her understanding of prayer and the spiritual life as she worked it out in her writings. Her definition of prayer involves being alone with a friend and sharing intimately. And God in taking on our humanity in Jesus offers us a human as well as a divine friendship by which we may approach Him.

Secondly, Teresa related to Jesus out of her life situation and particular mood at the time of prayer, She discovered that Christ through His early experiences, His earthly mysteries, was always ready to adapt to our situation. 'They say,' Teresa writes, 'that for a woman to be a good wife toward her husband she must be sad when he is sad, and joyful when he is joyful, even though she may not be so.' It is the Lord who acts this way with us. 'He submits to your will. Behold Him on the way to the garden.'

Thus, an intimate and familiar relationship with Christ must be sought and developed. We cannot ignore the humanity of Christ without hobbling ourselves in our prayer and severely limiting our knowledge of Him. This familiarity goes both ways. Teresa was not inhibited, nor should we, in sharing our struggles and feelings with our Lord. When words are lacking, Teresa tells us, the Lord has given us means to express what is needed at the moment.

Kavanaugh explains:

"Speaking to Christ, spontaneous prayer, was not too great a problem for Teresa. She often in her writings will be carried away into prayer speaking to the Lord in familiar ways, praising His attributes and lamenting her miseries. 'Since you speak with other persons, why must words fail you more when you speak with God?' But if we don't have words of our own, there is the Our Father 'that He taught us, and continues to teach us as to its meaning. We may recite it slowly and take even a whole hour to recite it once.'

Teresa would also draw close to and find Christ by entering into the very events described in the Scriptures:

"Another strategy that came easy to Teresa was to relive the Gospel scenes by relating to Christ as did certain persons in Scripture accounts of the Samaritan woman or

Mary Magdalene or St. Paul at the moment of his conversion or St. Peter in tears or the Virgin Mary at the foot of the Cross. The story of Our Lord's life provided her with many ways by which she could approach the person of Christ and experience the power of His words and the actuality of His divine influence. At the center always was Jesus Christ."

This is important for us to grasp in our own approach to Christ. He is the Lord and governor of history and through the gift of his Spirit continues to exert his influence in our lives:

"Jesus Christ became the Master of history through His earthly life, death, and resurrection. It is through the mysteries of His earthly life that Christ now exerts, through the work of His Spirit, His influence upon the life of the Christian. All the mysteries of Jesus' earthly history, from the cradle to the grave, have been mysteriously endowed in His glorified humanity with an entirely new, enduring actuality."

This is not simply an intellectual exercise, but something that leads us into the very heart and life of Christ. Through this means we are able to relate to Jesus and it is here that he can touch us most profoundly and where we need healing and grace.

"How can I relate in a most intimate and personal fashion to the risen Christ so far above and beyond my reach? I can only relate to Christ on the level of the spiritual life at which I now find myself. It is through His human experience His childhood, and public life, with His temptations, triumphs, frustrations, and disillusionment, that I am offered the possibility of relating to Him. Thus it was through the various mysteries of His earthly existence (perpetually real and actual in Himself) that Christ touched Teresa in the innermost recesses of her being and so can touch each of us."

This, for Teresa, is the preeminent means through which we encounter and experience Christ. We must not undervalue his humanity or we jeopardize our ability to participate fully in His life and the life of grace.

"From her experience she had to stress strongly that in any Christian spirituality 'the most sacred humanity of Christ must not be counted in a balance with other corporeal things.' Why is this so? First, it is important to remember that Christ in His risen body is no longer subject to the space and time context in which we live. Vatican II says: 'Christ is now at work in the hearts of men through the energy of His Spirit.' There is, then, a fullness of graces, a plethora of gifts of the Spirit and of infused virtues which exist in the sacred humanity of the only-begotten Son and of which He desires to make all His brethren participate. The Holy Spirit enfolds the humanity of Christ, glorifies and spiritualizes it, in such a way that the fire and the kindled coals appear to be one and the same. In St. Paul it is revealed that the risen Christ will in turn raise up all the just through love for them and for His Father. The glorious resurrection of the just will be a

visible manifestation of the overflowing love that the human will of the Risen Christ bears them."

*All of this is perhaps best captured in Teresa's own words in her work **Interior Castles**:*



"If Christ Jesus dwells in a man as his friend and noble leader, that man can endure all things, for Christ helps and strengthens us and never abandons us. He is a true friend. And I clearly see that if we expect to please him and receive an abundance of his graces, God desires that these graces must come to us from the hands of Christ, through his most sacred humanity, in which God takes delight.

Many, many times I have perceived this through experience. The Lord has told it to me. I have definitely seen that we must enter by this gate if we wish his Sovereign Majesty to reveal to us great and hidden mysteries. A person should desire no other path, even if he is at the summit of contemplation; on this road he walks safely. All blessings come to us through our Lord. He will teach us, for in beholding his life we find that he is the best example.

What more do we desire from such a good friend at our side? Unlike our friends in the world, he will never abandon us when we are troubled or distressed. Blessed is the one who truly loves him and always keeps him near. Let us consider the glorious Saint Paul: it seems that no other name fell from his lips than that of Jesus, because the name of Jesus was fixed and embedded in his heart. Once I had come to understand this truth, I carefully considered the lives of some of the saints, the great contemplatives, and found that they took no other path:

Francis, Anthony of Padua, Bernard, Catherine of Siena. A person must walk along this path in freedom, placing himself in God's hands. If God should desire to raise us to the position of one who is an intimate and shares his secrets, we ought to accept this gladly.

Whenever we think of Christ we should recall the love that led him to bestow on us so many graces and favors, and also the great love God showed in giving us in Christ a pledge of his love; for love calls for love in return. Let us strive to keep this always before our eyes and to rouse ourselves to love him. For if at some time the Lord should grant us the grace of impressing his love on our hearts, all will become easy for us and we shall accomplish great things quickly and without effort."