

Rejoicing in the Lord

December 14, 2014

By Rev. Brian Mullady, O.P.Third Sunday of Advent
Readings: Isaiah 61.1-2a, 10-11;
1 Thessalonians 5.16-24;
John 1.6-8, 19-28

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5.16-17). The season of Advent is established by the Church as a time of penance, the purpose of which is to prepare the soul for the joy of the coming of the Lord.

The first and most obvious coming was his birth into the world at the first Christmas. That birth so long ago in Bethlehem would have no meaning without the grace which occasioned it. Christ came to earth to redeem us and to bring us back to the grace we lost in the original sin. This grace prepares us for the second coming which will occur at the end of time. The first coming in Bethlehem was in weakness and suffering; the second coming at the end of time will be glorious, and Christ as triumphant judge will sift the hearts of the human race.

The Seed of Conversion

Between these comings is a third coming – the coming of Christ into the soul by sanctifying grace – which in light of the first prepares for the second. This grace is brought to us in baptism. Ours is not the baptism of John, which was merely a testimony of the need for conversion, to “make straight the ways of the Lord” (Jn 1.23). The baptism by Christ goes much further; it confers grace and with it all the virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit, for it is the extension throughout time and space of the flesh of Christ born of Mary.

Christ’s flesh itself is anointed (Messiah or *Christos*) because he is the person of the Word of God who takes human nature from Mary. “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and release to the prisoners” (Is 61.1). This liberty is much more an inner freedom of soul than an exterior practice. The Messiah brings the inner life of God to us by elevating us to know as God knows and to love as God loves.

This grace is the seed of conversion of heart, the seed of the life of God given to us by Jesus which makes him our friend. It does not automatically transform us, however. With free will, we must cooperate in that transformation. Growth in prayer is an important means and a measure of our cooperation in this conversion of heart.

Saint Teresa of Avila tells us that prayer is nothing but a loving conversation between friends. Christ has changed our souls by his grace, and when we realize how much we are loved by God, our free response is to give thanks and return his love. Christ is our friend, and when we embrace this friendship each of us begins a loving conversation of friendship with our Lord.

Growth in spiritual life means a progressively deeper union in which God and the soul become more and more one in knowing and loving. Of course, man still remains man, and God remains God. But the inner transformation that prayer brings allows the praying heart more and more to acquire God’s ways of knowing and loving.

Detachment and Meditation

There are two practical steps necessary for the transformation by which the life of the Trinity influences our lives. The first is a moral transformation. When Teresa of Avila begins to write about prayer in her book *The Interior Castle*, she says little about methods of meditation, though there were many common in Spain in her day. She speaks first, rather, about gospel living. Her teaching is that lack of growth in prayer is not a problem of failing to find the right technique, but one of a worldliness that is too contented. She speaks first about removing sin, and then about practicing the ordinary virtues of one's state of life. This is what is commonly called "detachment."

Detachment does not mean suppressing strong attractions to persons or things. It is not fundamentally a matter of the passions or emotions. It involves, rather, fixing the will on something as the source of final happiness. Detachment involves identifying our faults and the necessary virtues of our state of life. It then requires that we address our faults and seek to practice the virtues. This may sound simple, but anyone who attempts it knows it is a great cross; for after the Fall, no one but Jesus and Mary has virtue easily.

Still, we must learn to practice detachment on a daily basis, for it prepares our free will as the soil in which the seed of friendship with Christ might grow. We know that in the gospel, the seed which fell on unprepared soil died (Mt 13.3-9). The preparatory practice of detachment is both negative and positive: it involves both rooting out the weeds and thorns and fertilizing, watering, and plowing the soil. Moreover, the practice of the virtues is essential. Aristotle says in his *Ethics* that the virtues prepare the soul for the contemplation of divine truth. When one has the seed of grace, this is especially true.

This moral preparation should be accompanied by meditation, for in discursive meditation the active preparation of detachment is fulfilled. Teresa of Avila recommended a seven-part method of mediation: preparation, reading, meditation, conversation, thanksgiving, offering, and request. Other spiritual authors offer variations on this approach, but all have a few things in common. This first is that after preparing the heart, one must think about God. This is not the kind of distant or abstract thought one would have, say, in a course in theology. Instead it is an attitude of attention to the very presence of the Beloved.

Reading and meditation can greatly aid in this process; indeed, scripture is among the most potent places where the very love of God is graphically shown to us. We do not read scripture to pick it apart and analyze it, or just to get through a certain number of pages in a sitting. Rather, we read to remind ourselves of the truth of God's love for us.

After dwelling on God's love revealed in scripture, we realize its infinite goodness and desire to return it in thanksgiving and humility. In such moments we may experience a union with the God that even exceeds expression in words. Teresa speaks of "a friendly converse of the soul with God, in which the soul speaks intimately with him by whom she knows she is loved." This conversation leads us to turn to God as a loving friend and to request his aid.

God Transforms Us

With this transformation begun, God takes the soul at its word and begins to issue an influx of his life and love. He truly begins the transformation in love, and control passes from us to God. Infused contemplation begins this way. In the words of Saint John of the Cross, "If the soul is seeking God, its Lord is seeking it much more." God elevates the soul, and we must learn to be receptive, even though this is often very difficult. The dark nights begin. We may experience a flatness or aridity of the senses in prayer. Feelings cease. We come to realize that none of the ways we intellectually conceive of God does justice to him.

Eventually, however, prayer leads to our resting in God. The inner life is still. But because we tend to prefer to be active and to control our experiences, we find this distressing. God may feel far from us. We may feel like we are in darkness, but such darkness is only a matter of perception. If we are not in a state of mortal sin, then obviously God is most present. Even so, to see things from the vantage of eternity is very foreign to us. Thus what we wait for is not God's presence – for he is already there – but rather some understanding of *how* he is present. We must remember that this experience and understanding comes from God; it is not something we have the power to cause on our own.

All this differs greatly from the various mind-altering Eastern mediation techniques, for God is not a technique. By his love, he changes our way of looking at things so we can see everything from the vantage of his eternity, not our time. We must simply and in humility continue to pursue prayer. We may become unable to meditate at times, but when this happens we must simply be content with that union and love, with our resting in God.

Teresa of Avila uses the metaphor of a wedding to describe the summit of prayer. The soul becomes more and more transformed in Christ; spiritual courtship, spiritual engagement, and spiritual marriage characterize the progress of this union. Eventually nothing is left but the beatific vision. So deep is the longing and fulfillment of love here that Teresa of Avila cried out, *Muero porque no muero* ("I am dying because I do not die").

Spiritual authors often speak of this experience in ethereal terms, but in fact it is not at all ethereal. Anyone who enjoys this union sees all things in God, and that vision has very practical effects such as the spiritual works of mercy – bearing wrongs patiently and forgiving others, for example.

This is why God was incarnated and came to earth. This is the reason for the first coming, and it is fulfilled in the second coming. The engraced, prayerful soul can cry out: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Is 61.10).

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

Rev. Jordan Aumann, O.P., "St. Teresa's Teaching on the Grades of Prayer," available at: <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=7725>

Benedict XVI, "Keep the Holy Bible within Reach," available at: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/b16chrstpryr8.htm>

Dom Eugene Boylan, *Difficulties in Mental Prayer*, available at: <http://www.ecatholic2000.com/boylan/untitled.shtml>

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents

Arthur Devine, "Prayer of Quiet," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12608b.htm>

Rev. Thomas Dubay, S.M., "St. John of the Cross," available at: <http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Baptism by Christ confers grace and all the virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit, but it does not automatically transform us. We must cooperate in that transformation.***
- ***Detachment is not fundamentally a matter of the passions. It involves addressing our faults and seeking to practice the necessary virtues of our state of life.***
- ***Reading and meditation can greatly aid our adopting an attitude of attention to the very presence of the Beloved.***
- ***What we wait for is not God's presence – for he is already there – but rather some understanding of how he is present.***
- ***This understanding comes only from God. It is not something we have the power to cause on our own.***
- ***Spiritual union with God is not at all ethereal. Anyone who enjoys this union sees all things in God, and that vision has very practical effects such as the spiritual works of mercy.***