

St. Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to locate St Teresa of Avila in the contemporary terrain of centering prayer. Centering prayer is a new term but an old reality, originating with Thomas Merton's insight into centering as the movement from the false to the true self and developed as a prayer form by the Cistercians Basil Pennington, Thomas Keating and others, and by the Benedictine John Main. This form of prayer seeks to maintain a contemplative contact with God beyond any particular images and concepts through the use of the holy word or mantra. The prayer is contemplative in thrust but active in method, inasmuch as it is within human possibility and choice and recommends itself to mature Christians, who have thought and prayed *about* God enough and now are looking for the "more," that is, a deeper, more personal contact with God.

Following the suggestion of Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., in a philosophical reflection called "Finding Grace at the Center,"¹ I believe that centering prayer is a broader category than the one form described above and that it should apply to at least three forms: (1) mantric way of dark faith as above; (2) the prayer of fantasy or guided imagery; and (3) the prayer of life experience or consciousness examen.² The latter two forms involve the use of imagery, reflection and affections. Guided imagery is designed to evoke God from the unconscious; and consciousness examen, as the name suggests, identifies God working in one's conscious experience. For the purposes of this study only the dark faith form and guided imagery will be addressed, since Teresa's practice and reflection veer between these two forms. Consciousness examen as a

prayer form does not seem to have entered her purview.

Broadening centering prayer in this fashion is neither arbitrary or pointless. Teresa's experience and doctrinal exposition include elements from both methods; far better then to put the two under a common umbrella. The very nature of contemplation and the privileged ways of achieving it are at stake in this inquiry. Contemplation, as the obscure, infused, loving knowledge of God, is beyond images and concepts. But it does not follow that this gift of wisdom is always experienced as apophatic, that is, dark, negative and contentless. Contemplation can also be experienced as kataphatic, that is, as light, positive and concrete. In this case God might be experienced *in* as well as beyond the image.

The classical question of the role of the Sacred Humanity in prayer enters here. Teresa reacted against a widespread opinion of her contemporaries that held that all created reality, even the Sacred Humanity, had to be bypassed in the highest mystical union. Teresa wavered on the point and eventually disagreed. What was her position in this matter in the active forms of contemplative prayer, which she called "recollection" and others subsequently named 'simplified affective prayer?' Did she find God in the Man Jesus Christ, and therefore in image, or was she striving to get beyond image and concept? In what sense are aspiring mystics to "empty" themselves of images and concepts? Are they to leave aside normal thinking and even the expression of spiritual affections, as the mantric form of centering prayer directs? Or is simplified affective prayer a viable bridge from meditation to contemplation? The question is how does one best tune into the Reality of Christ, in dark

faith or in image? We would search out the Holy Mother's teaching in this matter as a practitioner and theorist of centering prayer.

Her "method" of centering prayer was inspired by Francis of Osuna in his book, *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*.³ The theme of this book is recollection, which means presence and in-touchness with the indwelling God; the way to recollection is the *via negativa*, journeying inward beyond all creature competitors. Teresa on reading this book "resolved to follow that path" (L, 4, 7).⁴ At prayer her basic thrust was "to keep Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, present within" herself, using her imagination, not in the style of discursive meditation, but by simple representations of Christ "interiorly," in some mystery of his life, especially the Passion (L, 4, 7). She bolstered up the austere approach of relating to the transcendent Reality of the living Christ by making simple gospel reflections. Both contemporary methods of centering prayer seem to be involved. The prayer that resulted was Teresa's active mental prayer, her "practice of prayer" from 1538, when she first came in contact with Osuna, to the end of her life.

How are we to evaluate this prayer of Teresa? Is it centering prayer, and if so, which form? Does contemporary theory on centering prayer throw any light on Teresa's experience? Or does Teresa illuminate this area of spirituality today, helping us to better understand and appreciate the way of dark faith and the way of fantasy?

Our aim is to examine the way Teresa prayed in her pre-mystical days, especially in the eighteen-year period between 1538 and 1556 when she struggled to bring more of her life to the Lord. The method she developed became her normal way of prayer both in the liturgy, vocal prayer and in her daily mental prayer for the rest of her life. It is an important area of inquiry both for understanding Teresa and for spiritual theology today.

To this end we shall first examine Osuna's capital teaching on recollection in order to see where Teresa is coming from. Then in the second part we shall examine briefly the theory and practice of the two forms of centering prayer to provide points of comparison. Finally we shall examine Teresa's procedure and her doctrinal statements about this "practice of prayer."

Francis of Osuna

The term recollection (*recogimento*) was an important one in sixteenth-century Spain. It described, not so much a method of prayer, which it has come to mean from St. Teresa, as a whole way of interiority, a withdrawal from ordinary occupations and even normal thinking processes in order to be caught up in God. It was the way of illuminism and of the *Alumbrados*, both terms with questionable connotations now but originally orthodox and positive. Adherents sought interiorization and downplayed externalism; eventually they split into an heretical faction and an orthodox one. The former were the *dejados*, who cultivated abandon (*dejamiento*) and so emphasized the divine action that no place was left for human cooperation. All behavior, however immoral, was accepted as God's working, and the result was an excessive, sometimes scandalous quietism.

The other group, the *recogidos* or recollects remained orthodox. They were the vanguard of the revival movements in the religious orders. They too emphasized the divine initiative and action, but they saw the need for human collaboration, for concentration on the Sacred Humanity, and for affective prayer.

Osuna belonged to the recollects. For him recollection meant getting in touch with the indwelling God, the faculties "collected" and attentive to the fountain of living waters within. Recollection was a way of life, designed for the perfect or would-be perfect

(163). The goal was “mystical theology,” that is, infused contemplation, the hidden, loving knowledge imparted exclusively by the indwelling Christ (161). Ascetical efforts of “pious love and exercising moral virtues to prepare and purge the soul” (162) prepared for this gift. The whole process was best called recollection out of a whole thesaurus of synonyms, says Osuna, because it gathered together what was dispersed and achieved a union with oneself with others and with God (169-173).

Recollection was the popular word then for what is called centering today. Both are a life’s work accomplished by multiple exercises, attitudes and supernatural gifts. For Osuna no one method is *the* prayer of recollection, *the* Centering prayer. Teresa speaks of recollection in a similarly inclusive way, but she also designates two specific prayer forms that she calls “recollection,” one of them active (W, 28-29), the other passive or semi-passive (C, 4, 3). Both consist in silencing the faculties and shutting oneself within oneself. Active recollection is self-directed, passive recollection divinely induced, as by the shepherd’s whistle.

Osuna, on the other hand, designates three kinds of prayer of recollection: vocal, prayer of the heart, and “mental or spiritual prayer,” the latter two being meditation and contemplation respectively. Teresa’s prayer of recollection as we shall see, hovers between these latter two and leans heavily toward contemplation. It is a specification of Osuna’s “special recollection,” by which he means formal prayer, in which “you are to retire into your heart and leave all created things for the length of two hours: one hour before and one hour after noon, at the most quiet time possible” (388).

Osuna is a typical proponent of the *via negativa* that is, the approach of downplaying the created and seeking God directly beyond all images, concepts and representations. But he is not a purist, any more than Teresa, and in

his presentation of recollection as the way to perfection he does not limit the search to negation. Along with his decided preference for seeking God in silence and solitude, beyond human props, he is a strong advocate of reflection on the Sacred Humanity, especially in the mystery of the Passion, holding with St Bonaventure that “no one can call himself devoted to the sacred passion unless he spends most of the day contemplating it in one manner or another” (177).

The *via negativa* for Osuna is primarily affective detachment. Effective detachment, which means actual by-passing, such as living in silence and solitude, is the right climate; it is a necessary means to the freedom that is affective detachment, whereby one is willing to use or forego the object according to God’s will. Early in the text he counsels the developing contemplative to be blind, deaf and dumb: blind to God by “holding fast to what is in our hands without understanding it” (100) and blind to “everything that is not God” (103); deaf to “imagination and distractions” (104); and dumb to words and reflections (105-106). This strategy quiets the three faculties of the soul and prepares the way for the real and experiential knowledge of God that is “the state of recollection” (106). The following typical directive is repeated over and over again:

...For life to rise up from the heart like a richly abundant spring, we have only to guard the heart with all vigilance, unburdening and clearing it of all created things so that the one who created it may emerge with the life of grace (132).

Usually he is calling for a decision of the heart for God and not the wholesale rejection of the created and human. Osuna’s way is the gentle search for God in quiet and solitude. He ends his first foray into his method of emptying and despoiling with a beautiful chapter on meekness, the “quality of repose” that characterizes the bypassing of the

normal human mode in favor of the *via negativa* (107-112).

Osuna is as inexorable as St. John of the Cross. But like John his demand is to reject competitive thoughts and loves and to rise above one's own mental processes as inadequate to attain God as he is. He is not fostering a frontal attack on all mental activity as a simplistic, literalist reading of the text would suggest. He is not saying that any image, however subtle and unassuming, is the enemy of recollection. Images run wild, yes; imagery and reflection as the main burden of the consciousness, yes; but image as image, no. It is doubtful if the psyche can even function without an image, even in the contemplative states. So the language and categories of Osuna need to be read in the context of his century; his spiritual writing suffers from the cultural and philosophical limitations of the period. Almost aware of this fact Osuna writes in the prologue:

...Because some matters of mystical theology cannot be understood in ordinary language nor comprehended without immediate experience of them, we shall clarify that the most blessed Humanity of Christ Our Lord and God in itself neither impedes nor hampers recollection, regardless of how refined or lofty it is (39).

Absolutist statements, such as "empty your heart and pour out all created things" (131), tediously abound in the treatise and continue to raise doubts, if not about the Sacred Humanity, at least about thinking at prayer.

No pensar nada (thinking nothing) is a case in point. Osuna espouses the shibboleth and interprets it to signify the movement into God's level of being and understanding, beyond reason, beyond the human mode. It does not mean coma or even ecstasy, but zeroing in on God beyond created analogues. As a matter of fact, in its highest actuation *no pensar nada* means *pensarlo todo* (thinking everything) (565). *No pensar nada*, in other words, is a mystical phrase that expresses a

direction; in itself it says too much and too little. But it must have captured Teresa's mind. Who cannot imagine the youthful Teresa de Ahumada delighting in these words of Osuna:

...It is not without reason that Scripture so often commands us to enter within ourselves and turn to our hearts. Each person is to rest within himself and not go outside; he is to close the door over himself, sealing himself inside, so that God may commune secretly with the soul. The soul must not open the door of the senses nor slip the bolt of vigilance that locks the door. Otherwise he will depart who comforted you in that closing of the door... (566).

Francis of Osuna was not the only significant spiritual master forming Teresa. Besides her Carmelite heritage she was in touch with the main spiritual movements of the time, all of them emphasizing interiority and mental prayer. Osuna had the honor of launching Teresa on the project of second conversion. She found the world of *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* congenial and immensely appealing. Osuna gave direction to her thinking. He did not deliver ready-made answers, certainly not in the questions of this study; on the contrary, he left open the practical questions on how to proceed. Teresa did not have to contradict anything she read in the book; she had only to specify it. Her debt to Osuna is obvious to anyone who reads the two authors. And without invidious comparisons it is also clear that the disciple in this case is greater than the master.

Centering Prayer

Morton Kelsey distinguishes between religious experiences which are "usually called contemplative experiences" and the "meditative use of images."⁵ The contemplative experiences are imageless; they have been promoted in Western Christianity since Plotinus in the third century and they have a long pedigree of mystical writers behind them, preeminent in modern times being Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

Kelsey, strong proponent of the imaged way, wants to right the balance and reinstate the validity and advantages of imaged meditation.

The choice of the two epithets, contemplative and meditative, is felicitous. Contemplation connotes encounter, and meditation suggests integration. In both cases centering is the goal, contemplation locating one's true self beyond one's self in God, and meditation bringing order and calm self-possession in the midst of multiplicity in a human life. The two forms of centering prayer come out of two different spiritualities: the imageless out of the classical, contemplative spirituality of the past, the imaged from the holistic spirituality of the present. The first zeroes into God in a sheer, unhampered way, beyond the nitty-gritty; the other searches for the center in the bodiliness, the emotionality, the piecemeal, historical and social character of human life.

Imageless centering prayer is contemplative in orientation, but in itself it is not contemplation. Contemplation is always from the inside out, pure gift from God communicating himself; centering prayer is the active effort to enter within and to stand at the threshold of the inner chamber where God dwells, waiting to be touched by God. Contemplation is that divine touch; all other contemplative disciplines are preparation and disposition. When contemplation occurs, when there is "total silence in darkness," the practitioner is to "remain quiet, receptive," even stopping the mantra according to one school of thought.⁶ There is no need to split hairs and define exactly when centering prayer leaves off and contemplation begins. Centering prayer is active prayer, contemplation is passive, and the incipient contemplative will often be at a loss to distinguish the two moments.

Imageless centering prayer is practiced in the following way. After the initial physical predispositions of good posture, deep breathing, and an alert, relaxed state of mind

the person gets in touch with his/her deepest reality, where he/she is image and dwelling place of God. This initial act of faith gets beyond words and formulas to the Reality beneath them. There is a sense of Presence and a loving attention to God, both of which are maintained and deepened over the period of the prayer, usually about eighteen minutes, by the rhythmic repetition of the holy word or mantra synchronized with the breathing. The mantra has no magic power. It is a name of God, like "Abba" or "Jesus," or a short phrase like "Maranatha" or "Jesus, mercy." The mantra specifies this prayer form and is repeated throughout. It becomes less obtrusive with time, being listened to and then heard within rather than spoken.

The mantra is a focusing agent, not a source of insights that call forth affective responses. Insights and affections, holy thoughts and desires, resolutions and aspirations are all distractions in this prayer form. Pennington compares the mantra to piped-in music in a bus or store; it is to occupy the imagination and mind, so that the heart can give full attention to God. The mantra is to help change the flow of consciousness from the outside in, from the plethora of thoughts and feelings of the psyche to the silence and quietude before the Mystery within, the ineffable God who is *Todo y Nada*, everything and no-thing. Content-wise the holy word is a confession of poverty, an acknowledgement that there is no adequate thought or feeling for God, that the emptiness of objectless "pure consciousness, which is the source and ground of normal consciousness, is closer to the truth and closer to God than the tangled translations of our own understanding. Human thoughts hopefully dissolve into the "learned ignorance" of unknowing, and human desires are traded off for the one capital Desire that is God. The genius of the *via negativa* is being applied with the one important addition of the mantra. It remains to be seen in our time, as Philip Novak argues,

whether guided imagery can ever take the place of this proven and universal contemplative discipline.⁷

The exercise is concluded with the slow recitation of the Our Father. The purpose here is to facilitate return to normal consciousness from the Alpha level likely to be induced by the centering prayer. The Our Father here is an example of imaged prayer. The words bring holy thoughts and desires to awareness, but even more importantly they trigger in the unconscious personal images and feelings. The latter allow us to get a deeper hold on ourselves for the surrender of faith to God. This is the genius of imaged prayer.

Kelsey, like many modern authors, especially those influenced by Jungian theory, sees spiritual growth in terms of integration and wholeness. Imaged prayer is encounter with God, through the Risen Christ, who is the Icon of God, contacted by us in the image. Kelsey is fond of pointing out that for ten centuries preceding Teresa and John of the Cross the imaged way was the normal way of Christian contemplation. Since Teresa and John the *via negativa* has dominated the tradition and prejudices spiritual persons against image and feeling at prayer. If, however, one thinks of transcendence as wholeness, as the integration of the parts in a unity that is greater than the sum of the parts, a new perspective opens up on spirituality and the image can be rehabilitated. This integration is not cheap grace. One must quiet down to hear what the inner person is saying through its own language of the image.

Kelsey writes:

...The idea that inner images, which can appear spontaneously to any of us, might lead beyond one's personal psyche was never considered. Therefore, mysticism was no longer seen as something which ordinary people might hope to experience.⁸

Imaged centering prayer uses concrete human experiences — a gospel story, a fantasy, a dream, pictures, music, bodily

movement like the dance — to help one enter the hidden and deeper levels of one's life.

These outside factors are the instrument, but the inside image from one's life is the vehicle of self-revelation. Inside images are the agents of integration, becoming "symbols," a word whose etymology is the Greek *syn* and *bolein*, meaning to place together. Symbols unite the outer and inner levels, the conscious and the unconscious, ego and Self, the human and the divine. These images, which stir up profound affective activity within us, represent us as we are—our moods, feelings, brokenness, yearnings, freedoms and unfreedoms, sinfulness and union with God. The image allows us, not only to think about, but to experience these parts of ourselves, and the experience gives self-knowledge. The process is not heady or speculative but a matter of "feel," of the hallowed word in Ignatian spirituality *sentir*, which is not just sensible or emotional feeling, but intellectual evaluation as well. These feelings are nurtured by the image, so that a person cultivates self-knowledge and self-possession by befriending the inner symbols of one's being such as the dream. Integration takes place and higher meanings about one's life surface in the consciousness. With the eyes of faith one gets beyond the nuts and bolts of the psychological dynamics and peers into the emergent human being, oneself, who is image of God and symbol of God. This experiential revelation of ourselves in our dissimilarities and similarities is the revelation of God, since we are a word bespoken by God. In getting more in touch with ourselves we touch God.

The encounter with self can thus be the encounter with God. Guided imagery, it is true, can be merely psychic and need not include supernatural transcendence. Transcendence in this sense is gift and grace, a matter of God's self-disclosure in the human experience. Without this graced aspect guided imagery could be an endless procession of images and feelings that never get beyond

themselves, a merry-go-round that never moves closer to the Center. In this case there would be no referent outside the created image itself, no relationship to God, no Mystery, no cosmic Christ. This is the hazard in imaged prayer, just as projection is the hazard in imageless prayer. The self experienced in the image must be the God-self, the Christic self, just as the God experienced in silence and darkness must be the real God and not the projection of one's imagination or understanding or unconscious needs.

John of the Cross seems to relegate imaged prayer to a non-contemplative status, thereby identifying this prayer with discursive meditation. He writes:

...We must also empty [the imaginative power and phantasy] of every imaginative form and apprehension that can be naturally grasped by it, and demonstrate the impossibility of union with God before the activity relating to these apprehensions ceases... The advice proper for these individuals is that they must learn to abide in that quietude with a loving attentiveness to God and pay no heed to the imagination and its work.⁹

Commentators either accept this evaluation or by rethinking the Sanjuanist synthesis in different philosophical categories explain it differently.¹⁰ The contemporary theology of Karl Rahner or Edward Schillebeeckx would have no difficulty agreeing with a revision of this teaching. Without entering into the hermeneutical debate, a more accepting attitude toward the image in prayer and one not in contradiction to St John and certainly more hospitable to St Teresa is well stated by Robert L. Schmitt, S.J., in his study of the image of Christ as feudal lord in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

...The image is obviously not Christ and yet is meant to describe him. The image interprets and points to Christ, Christ as he has been encountered and experienced by Ignatius. It is meant to facilitate the encounter, to act as a type of introduction, to help the exercitant understand what Christ has been and is saying to him and doing for him.¹¹

This point of view will be useful in evaluating Teresa's method of prayer. She seeks the transcendent Christ and God, even as she comes by experience to recognize the never-ending role of the Sacred Humanity in prayer. To speak the Humanity of Jesus is to speak image. Teresa, heir of the eschatological spirituality of the *via negativa*, is also a realist, who presents a holistic teaching on prayer.

Teresa's Method of Centering Prayer

Until Teresa read Osuna, she "did not know how to proceed in prayer or how to be recollected" (L, 4, 7). As a child she had a natural bent for real prayer, which is personal relationship and contact with God. Her initial training in the convent of the Incarnation disrupted this spontaneous style, according to Efrén Montalva, because it foisted artificial and arbitrary meditation forms upon her and left her uncoordinated in the use of her mind and heart in prayer.¹² Osuna restored order by returning her to her original direct approach to Christ. From this point forward Teresa was launched on the project of resolving her ambivalence and her lack of psychological and spiritual integration in order to bring her whole self to Christ in the surrender of faith.

Our purpose in this third part is to address one factor in this project, her way of praying. We shall examine first her own experience on the background of the imageless and imaged forms of centering prayer. Then we shall look briefly at the doctrinal formulations of her method both under the rubric of recollection and simple, affective prayer.

In 1538 Teresa, twenty-three years old and a Carmelite nun for three years, found herself mysteriously ill for the second time in her young adulthood. The illness has still not been adequately diagnosed. It was a severe physical breakdown aggravated if not caused by the conflicts and pressures in this exuberant nun of high idealism and fledgling wings.

With her father and another religious from the Incarnation she had come to Becedas to consult a *curandera*. The cure prescribed could not begin till the following spring and it was autumn at the time. The trio returned to Uncle Peter's home where Teresa was introduced to one of her most favored books, Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*. For the next nine months Teresa devoured this book, finding the appropriate solitude there in the country to cultivate the life-giving recollection Osuna taught. One of the key occupations she restructured was the way she prayed.

How did Teresa pray after this? Her prayer was founded on the presence of Christ within her. The prayer was not an imagining of his presence; it was a realization of his presence experienced in faith.¹³ Maintaining the contact was the struggle. Her contact point was pure love (L, 9, 5), the "naked intent" of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, without any support system of reflection. The way was "most laborious and painful," Teresa wrote and gave the following reasons:

...For if the will is not occupied and love has nothing present with which to be engaged, the soul is left as though without support or exercise, and the solitude and dryness is very troublesome and the battle with one's thoughts extraordinary (L, 4, 7).

A beachhead was secured: she was in touch with the living Christ, presence to Presence. But she was praying "over her head." She did not love God enough or was she integrated psychologically or spiritually to practice this simple loving attention to God. The method belonged to the advanced, who proceed by way of love (L, 9, 5) without a lot of reflection. Teresa knew that she should have been meditating discursively, but she was unable to use her imagination or her discursive intellect. Dicken suggests that the reason for the impossibility was the unrecognized presence of the dark night of the senses;¹⁴ Efrén Montalva¹⁵ and Tomas Alvarez¹⁶ speak of lack of coordination in her thinking and the uncontrollable wanderings of

her imagination, the faculty she was later to call "the madman in the house." My opinion is that both causes were at work. Her solution was to have a book at hand, to read it as needed, and to use holy pictures (L, 9, 4; 22, 4), nature scenes like "fields, or water, or flowers" (L, 9, 6), and above all, to use simple gospel reflections, especially to "represent" Christ "interiorly" (L, 4, 7).

All these "strategies" belong to the same one category of image. They do not include a mantra; Teresa does not seem to have favored the repetition of formulas. Her supports captured her mind and spoke to her heart. Most of them were exercises of active imagination. Even the book served to collect her wandering mind and pull herself together by a special power (L, 4, 9), a function Holy Communion also performed and rendered the book superfluous. The pictures (W, 34, 6-7), nature, and the representations of Jesus were more obvious guided imagery.

Teresa described her early gospel reflections in this way: "since I could not reflect discursively with the intellect, I strove to picture Christ within me in those scenes where I saw him more alone" (L, 9, 4). This picturing is not speculative but personal; there was no picture (she could not use her imagination: L, 9, 6) but a sense of his person which was quickly integrated with the real Presence within her soul. The anonymous monk of the Eastern Church who wrote a little spiritual classic called *Jesus* may well have caught Teresa's "representation":

...This union with the person of Christ is only possible if we set up before us, if we carry within ourselves, an intensely real image of Jesus. An image does not mean imagination nor a mental picture (although at the beginning that can be useful), but a definite interior vision, with hazy definition, which cannot be described outwardly.¹⁷

The images were not a parallel track. The sweat on Jesus' brow, for example, which she would have wiped away but held back because of shame and embarrassment, was

perceived marking his face now. In the famous *Ecce Homo* incident the sight of the vivid statue “broke her heart” and she fell down “before Him” with “the greatest outpouring of tears” (L, 9, 1). The recall of the gospel statement, the stirred affectivity and the resultant affect-laden perception of *Jesus passus* alive now in his glorified state within her were the imaged centering prayer that added to the original sense of presence and concretized, maintained, and nurtured her union with Christ.

This was not discursive meditation (L, 9, 5). It is looking at Jesus through the windows of a gospel vignette and perceiving, that is, imaging the gospel that was being relived at that moment in Teresa. Full presence was the objective, and the imaging collected her soul in “remembrance” and recollection (L, 9, 5), two words that eventually name the prayer described. The Reality, the Christ, was not seen; he was in darkness, as happens between two friends in a dark room (L, 9, 6). The imaging process puts the Presence in better focus and makes for a more integrated experience.

Sometimes the total experience is strong as in the peak experience of the *Ecce Homo* (L, 9, 1) or relating St Augustine’s conversion to herself (L, 9, 7). In both cases there is a deep grasp of her whole self as well as the Lord and a profound self-offering in love. At other times the images are relatively weak pointers to Jesus, of a piece in the early years with her fragmented psyche and her moral ambivalence, and in later years the limited input possible to her in the face of the pervasive graces of infused contemplation. Similarly, the peak experiences were probably watersheds that gathered the daily streamlets and showed the cumulative effect of many lesser efforts, or else they were significant mystical graces such as the *gustos* (the grace of “quiet” or infused love) in the *Ecce Homo* incident.

Teresa’s prayer seems to manifest the same ebb and flow, summits and plains that marked her ecstatic experience later on. In her practice of prayer from the beginning there are high points of contact in which she is present to Jesus in pure faith; when this sense faltered and needed shoring up, she moved into a simple gospel reflection. The first moment is the counterpart of imageless prayer; the second corresponds to imaged prayer. This order was reversed in her mystical years (L, 23, 1), when she learned to begin with the gospel scene and let herself be transported into absorption in God. Whatever the order of these two elements of her experience, her prayer seems to include both approaches, neither one in its pure state, but custom-made to suit her own personality and the grace of the time. Her prayer was a combination of encounter and integration, immediate presence and the “meditative use of images.”

When Teresa lost sight of the role of the image in her prayer, as she did toward the end of her eighteen-year struggle, thus from 1554 to 1556, she was in danger of floundering (L, 23-24). She seemed to be falling too facilely into mystical absorptions without bringing her “self” into the prayer. At least this was the fear of the two directors she consulted, when she continued to observe a lack of improvement in her life. Eventually they concluded she was deceived by the devil (L, 23, 14). This erroneous judgement was a blessing in disguise. While the verdict almost crushed her, it did lead her to consult some young Jesuits, who returned her to the pattern of imaged contemplative prayer. This was liberation for Teresa.

Through their help she was able to see through the excessively abstract and possibly unrealistic prayer and reinstate the role of the image as well as mortification outside prayer as guards against illusion (L, 22, 1-3; 23, 16-17; 24, 2). In her religious climate once there was an experience of felt-presence to God, particularly in an intense, apparently mystical

way, there was a tendency to abandon all human effort and think it unnecessary if not an intrusion. Teresa “strove to turn aside from everything corporeal,” including the Sacred Humanity (L, 22, 3). Her delight in mystical absorptions was so great, that “there was no one who could have made me return to the humanity of Christ” (L, 22, 3). This was a temporary and much regretted departure from her Beloved (L, 22, 4). This error was not only prejudicial to the Risen Lord; it fostered an illusory prayer unconnected with her life, as Diego de Cetina told her. Such prayer lacked foundation, the foundation or real life mediated by the image of the Sacred Humanity (L, 23, 16). According to Cetina technique was less important than her affective state. He proceeded to urge her to free herself for a full surrender to God by cultivating a more authentic prayer, that is, a more wholehearted desire for God (“a return again to prayer”) and the denial of contrary desires (“mortification”). She was not to repeat this mistake again. For the rest of her life she never took her eyes off Jesus.

Teresa translates her experience into doctrinal terms in the description of active recollection (W, 28-29), passive recollection (C, 4, 3), in discussing the role of the Sacred Humanity (L, 22), and in distinguishing meditation and simplified affective prayer (C, 6, 7).

Active recollection moves the center of consciousness from the outside to the Presence within, closing one’s eyes literally and as the symbol of rejection of outside competitive forces (W, 28, 6). In passive recollection the movement within just happens and an intense recollection ensues. Until the Lord moves in this sovereign way, Teresa counsels the readers to practice, not discursive prayer, but simple attention to what the Lord is doing. She vehemently opposes “stopping the mind” (C, 4, 3, 4), or holding one’s breath (C, 4, 3, 6), or trying not to stir or to allow the intellect or desires to stir. The ill-conceived

effort to “stop thinking” (*no pensar nada*) will likely produce the opposite effect (C, 4, 3, 6). Simple attention to the experience or to supportive imagery is the best human cooperation. In Teresa there are no dichotomies between imageless and imaged contemplative prayer. Attention to the divine Presence is capital; “shutting oneself within oneself” is the defense against exteriority; whatever contributes to one or the other of these two basic attitudes is valid centering prayer.

Teresa’s teaching in the later dwelling places does not change. In the higher stages of spiritual growth we are to seek the presence of God if it is not already a given reality in our prayer. We are not to sit around like “dunces wasting time waiting for what was given us once before” (C, 6, 7, 9). Two ways of seeking are available, one “discursive thinking,” the other “representing truths to the intellect by means of the memory” (C, 6, 7, 10). The former is meditation, and that is no longer an option at this stage (C, 6, 7, 11). But recalling the mysteries of Christ’s life and letting them speak to the contemplative “whom God has brought to supernatural things and to perfect contemplation” is another (C, 6, 7, 11). Teresa states her position in a clear synthesis of much that we have said. Referring to the simple loving recall of the mysteries of Christ’s life, she writes:

...I say that a person will not be right if he says he does not dwell on these mysteries or often have them in mind, especially when the Catholic Church celebrates them. Nor is it possible for the soul to forget that it has received so much from God, so many precious signs of love, for these are living sparks that will enkindle it more in its love for our Lord ... The mere sight of the Lord fallen to the ground in the garden with that frightful sweat is enough to last the intellect not only an hour but many days, while it looks with a simple gaze at who he is and how ungrateful we have been for so much suffering (C, 6, 7, 11).

Conclusions

By way of summary I would like to draw the following conclusions from what we have considered:

(1) Teresa's method of mental prayer was neither purely imageless or merely imaged. Her emphasis on real encounter has affinity with the Pennington form of centering prayer, but her use of the image places her more properly in the Kelsey stream. If we must choose one or the other category, it would be imaged centering prayer with the rider that the sense of the real Presence is the heart of her prayer. The older name, simplified affective prayer, or even active recollection, which is basically Teresa's own choice are probably more accurate designations but less likely to be immediately intelligible and attractive to our contemporaries.

(2) This form of imaged contemplative prayer is neither meditation nor contemplation in a Sanjuanist sense; it is not the equivalent of "loving attention," which is imageless contemplative prayer in St. John of the Cross (A, 2,12, 8; 2,13, 4). Does this face pit the two saints against each other in their teaching about the transition to contemplation? This is an age-old debate, which deserves study in the context of centering prayer. My own bias is that they differ in emphasis but not in substance. Their divergences are due to the nature of their writings and to their own

personalities. Teresa is the pragmatist who deals in the concrete order; John is the theoretician who deals in absolutes and not in "how-to" teachings.

(3) Teresa's method is not pure guided imagery since she starts from a deep awareness of the presence of Christ in faith and constantly returns to this base. The guided imagery does not seek to find the Lord but to bring more of the self into the prayer. Simple reflections and affective outpourings serve to bring together the imaginative-intellectual affective self before the Lord.

(4) Teresa's teaching on the beginnings of contemplation is an immense contribution for our generation, which prefers the holistic, incarnational, human way to God over any exaggerated spiritualism. At the same time she is a corrective against horizontalism. Placing her in the context of today's literature on centering prayer serves to make her teaching more actual. Her method is a model of simplicity: get in touch with the Lord present within and nurture that presence by simple reflections and affections. The way from meditation to contemplation is rendered more smooth, a gradual shift, perhaps without the rupture of the crisis form of the dark night described by St. John of the Cross (N, 1, 8, 3). Once again Teresa vindicates her title as "Doctor of the Church" and "teacher of prayer," especially for practical spiritual direction. May God be glorified in this beautiful "Daughter of the Church."

¹ Thomas E. Clarke, "Finding Grace at the Centre," *The Way*, 17(1977), 12-22 and also in *Finding Grace at the Center*, eds. Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating (Still River, MA: St. Bede Publications, 1978), pp. 49-62. In the latter collection the last two pages of the article are edited, so that only one method of centering prayer is suggested, that of dark faith. One of the chief contributions of this article is thereby lost.

² A full presentation of these three forms of centering prayer is recorded by Ernest E. Larkin in eleven audio cassette tapes under the title "Centering and Centering Prayer," (Kansas City, MO: NCR Audio Cassettes, 1982).

³ Francis of Osuna, *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* trans. Mary E. Giles (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). Cof. *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. References to this book will be by page within parentheses in the body of this article.

⁴ References to the works of St Teresa are from the I.C.S. ed.

⁵ Morton Kelsey, *The Other Side of Silence* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 129.

⁶ Thomas Fidelis, OCSO, of Conyers, Georgia, has printed these directives on a prayer card. John Main, OSB insists that the mantra is always retained in centering prayer.

⁷ Philip Novak, "Spiritual Discipline and Psychological Dream Work: Some Distinctions," *Studia Mystica*, 2 (1979), 47-58.

⁸ Kelsey, *The Other Side*, p. 130.

⁹ St John, A, 2,12, 2, and 8.

¹⁰ For a literal following of John's terms and obvious teaching, see Marilyn M. Mallory, *Christian Mysticism: Transcending Techniques* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum Asen, 1977). For a re-evaluation in Hegelian categories, see Georges Morel, *Le sens de l'existence selon S. Jean de la Croix* (Paris: Aubier, 1960-61).

¹¹ Robert L. Schmitt, "The Christ-Experience and Relationship fostered in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6, (1974, 5), 242-43.

¹² Efrén Montalva, *Santa Teresa por Dentro* (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1973), pp. 126-32

¹³ Tomás Alvarez has written beautifully on this aspect, as so many others, of Teresa's prayer. See his "Una classica esperienza di preghiera," *Rivista di Vita Spirituale*, 29 (1975), 586-612, esp. at 606.

¹⁴ E. W. Truman Dicken, *The Crucible of Love* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 173, 176 and 287-88. Teresa's solution to her inability to meditate discursively, according to Dicken, was the development of her method of "affective prayer," an ancient conversational form of prayer known to history but temporarily obscured in the sixteenth century milieu of highly organized discursive meditation. The prayer is affective activity with very little imagination and intellectual content, contemplative in orientation, and unlike highly intellectual discursive meditation compatible with the ligature and impossibility to meditate associated by St. John of the Cross with the passive dark night of the senses. I heartily agree with these observations, as will be seen in this third part of my study.

¹⁵ Montalva, *Santa Teresa*, p. 129.

¹⁶ Alvarez, *Una classica*, p. 597.

¹⁷ A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Jesus: A Dialogue with the Saviour*, trans. A Monk of the Western Church (New York: Paulist Press Deus Books, 1965).