

CONVERSATION
WITH CHRIST

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by
Peter Rohrbach

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TO
OUR LADY OF MOUNT CARMEL—
WHO WATCHES OVER US WITH EXQUISITE TENDERNESS,
GUIDES US WITH UNERRING PRECISION, AND PROCURES
FOR US MYRIAD HAPPINESS—
THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY AND
GRATEFULLY DEDICATED

Do not be astonished at the difficulties one meets in the way of mental prayer, and the many things to be considered in undertaking this heavenly journey. The road upon which we enter is a royal highway which leads to Heaven. Is it strange that the attainment of such a treasure should cost us something? The time will come when we shall realize that the whole world could not purchase it.

—St. Teresa of Avila

Preface to the 1980 Edition

THE WORLD has changed in many ways since the initial publication of this book, but the fact that it continues to be published in edition after edition over the years suggests that there might very well be something quite changeless about what the book discusses.

Conversation with Christ is an attempt to explain and outline St. Teresa of Avila's teaching about personal prayer, first described by her so lucidly in her 16th century writings. Indeed, since the initial publication of this book, St. Teresa has been declared a Doctor of the Church, which is yet another testament to the validity and permanence of her teaching. However, her teaching about prayer is not something unique in the history of Christianity, a private and recondite doctrine, but rather it is an explanation of the basic doctrine about prayer as expressed in the pages of Scripture.

In the earliest pages of Scripture God is presented to us as a *person*, and as a person who desires to establish a relationship with his creatures. The primary vehicle of that relationship, as outlined in Scripture, was prayer, and the long biblical narrative is a continuing account of mankind's attempt to remain in faithful association with his God. The psalms, for instance, are a factual reportage of the ancient Jew's prayers to God, demonstrating how those early believers worshipped Yahweh, how they expressed their

gratitude to Him, how they sought His assistance, and how they evidenced their love for Him.

Jesus, entering the scene of human history, continued to emphasize that vital necessity of prayer for an authentic religious life, both in His teaching and in the practical example of His life. In the few years of His public ministry, Jesus was involved in an extremely active life, teaching and healing and laying the foundations of Christianity, but He was simultaneously a dedicated Man of prayer. We see Him stealing away from the crowds to give Himself to private prayer, even spending whole nights in prayer or rising early before His disciples to pray alone. He taught His disciples the Lord's Prayer, and He frequently commented on the value and the efficacy of prayer. "But when you pray, go to your private room," He said, "and when you have shut the door pray to your Father in the secret place."

What St. Teresa has done so brilliantly is to describe precisely *how* a person can indeed contact God through prayer. Despite her reputation as a soaring Spanish mystic, she was an eminently practical person, and that practicality shines through her teachings about prayer: she is an instructor who shows, in step-by-step fashion, how the individual can contact God and then sustain that relationship.

It is also important to note that St. Teresa argues for the necessity of both private and liturgical prayer. And, again, this represents fidelity to the scriptural message: Jesus was a Man of private prayer, but He also prayed publicly with his disciples, particularly at the Last Supper. This is a critical point to note today when there seems to be a lessening enthusiasm in some quarters for what we call mental or private prayer. Vatican Council II addressed that question sharply in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* when it stated: "The spiritual life, however, is not confined to partic-

ipation in the liturgy. The Christian is assuredly called to pray with his brethren, but he must also enter into his secret chamber to pray to the Father in secret.”

As a matter of fact, St. Teresa chided as a fundamental distinction between private and public prayer: for her, all prayer should entail contact with God, and if any form of public prayer did not involve that contact then it was not, in her terms, prayer. Her teaching, therefore, tells us how to contact God, whether it is expressed privately or in communion with others. More modern religious authors have termed this experience “an effort of conscious communication with God.” Teresa of Avila, in a now classic phrase of religious literature, called it a *conversation with Christ*. And she shows us the way to achieve it.

Peter Thomas Rohrbach

January 15, 1980

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Part I

**The Nature
of Meditation**

“Prayer is . . . conversation with Him.”
—St. Teresa

Chapter 1

The Purpose of Meditation

A GOOD DEAL of the confusion surrounding meditation results from a failure to recognize its basic, fundamental purpose. Simply stated, the aim of meditation is to provide a framework or setting for a personal, heart-to-heart conversation with Christ. If this primary goal is retained in mind throughout our entire discussion of meditation, much of the mystery will fade away.

St. Teresa sums up the whole matter with one magnificent sweep of the pen in her classical definition of mental prayer:

Mental prayer is nothing else than an intimate friendship, a frequent heart-to-heart conversation with Him by whom we know ourselves to be loved.¹

Therefore, all that precedes meditation, all that accompanies it, and all that follows it, has for its primary aim the stimulation of this conversation with Christ. Let us repeat it again—for it is of extreme importance—meditation, in its final analysis, should be basically a friendly conversation with Christ.

The practice of meditation has assumed frightening proportions in the minds of many. It is regarded warily as some type of mental workout which leaves one better prepared to serve God, a spiritual “setting-up

1. St. Teresa, *Life*, viii.

exercise." The assumption, therefore, is that meditation is intended only for intellectuals, and is definitely not something to be undertaken rashly by those further down the intellectual ladder. Nothing could be further from the truth; meditation is for all, university professors, and grade school graduates alike.

First of all, the word "meditation." The term is confusing; for in this conversation with Christ, meditation is only one part of the process. By entitling the entire procedure "meditation," we are in effect calling the whole by one of its parts. St. Teresa preferred to designate the process "mental prayer," and in her writings one finds the terms "mental prayer" and "prayer" predominantly employed in place of "meditation." But to preclude further difficulty, we will continue to designate the entire process by the more widely accepted term "meditation," with the tacit reservation that meditation is but one of the divisions of mental prayer. In following this pattern, we will here employ the word "consideration" for that part of prayer which is specifically the meditation.

Meditation, then, is interior prayer without the aid of rosaries, prayer books, or missals. It is the prayer in which we talk to God in our own words. It is distinguished from vocal prayer which employs the words and sentiments of some saint, spiritual writer, or the liturgy itself.

St. Teresa rather chides at the sharp distinction made between mental and vocal prayer. The erroneous assumption in many quarters is that conversation with God is the aim of mental prayer, but not of vocal prayer. St. Teresa is vigorous in her assertion that we must talk to God in both mental and vocal prayer. Vocal prayer, she staunchly maintains, in which interior contact with God is absent, is no prayer at all.² During

2. "I do not allude to mental prayer more than to vocal prayer. For, if it is to be

vocal prayer we rely on the formulae of some other person; in mental prayer we attempt to stimulate a direct conversation with Christ using our own words and thoughts.

While it is important to remember what meditation *is*, it is equally important to remember what it *is not*. It is definitely not spiritual reading, nor examination of conscience, nor the formation of rules for better conduct.

Modern methods have lent to the general confusion by attempting to cram spiritual reading, examination of conscience, and amendment of life into the period of meditation. These practices have a definite position of importance in the spiritual life; but that position is not the period of meditation.

Spiritual reading is quite necessary in our times to center our hearts on the true purpose of life in face of the unrelenting media which constantly channel a materialistic philosophy of living into our lives and homes. But this is an exercise distinct from prayer. It is also imperative that we examine our consciences daily if progress in virtue is to be made. Concomitant with this should be the formation of definite resolutions for the future. But again, these are not the primary functions of meditation. Meditation is conversation with Christ, and our talk with Him will often conclude with a promise to be more faithful in the future. This, however, is something that flows from our conversation; it is not a necessary part of it, for it may or may not be present on different occasions.

In employing the term "conversation," St. Teresa, of course, does not intend to infer that it is requisite to

prayer at all, the mind must take a part in it. If a person neither considers whom he is addressing, what he asks, nor what he himself is who ventures to speak to God, although his lips may move with many words, I do not call it prayer." St. Teresa, *Interior Mansion*, I, i.

formulate explicit words interiorly—although this is advisable for those beginning the practice of meditation. The habit of meditation should bring us into loving contact with Christ, and our affection for Him may be expressed with or without words. At times it will be entirely proper to remain in Christ's presence as did the apostles on Mount Thabor—"Lord, it is good for us to be here."³ Our affection for Christ may be manifested in a loving "gaze" upon Him; or in any number of wordless expressions of our love for Him. All of these forms of contact are included in the phrase "conversation with Christ."

Nor is meditation limited to contact with Christ alone. We may hold our conversation with God, our loving Father, or with the Blessed Mother, or any of the saints. But to simplify our discussion, we shall continue to speak throughout of conversation with Christ.

But at the outset, let us remember the fundamental aim of meditation as proposed by St. Teresa: the attainment of a friendly, intimate conversation with Christ. If this be retained in mind throughout, a giant step will have been taken along the road to successful meditation.

3. *Luke* 9:33