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Along the Path of the Poor: Spirituality of the Anawim

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FR. STEPHEN SÁNCHEZ, OCD

Beatitudes – Signs of the Kingdom

The Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites takes upon itself a commitment to live according to the Beatitudes, that this is to be the basis or core of their life as understood through the lens of Carmel. There are two ‘forms’ of the Beatitudes, a shorter one which St. Luke presents to us in chapter 6 of his gospel (Lk 6:20-23) and which is immediately followed by the ‘woes,’ and those which St. Matthew presents to us in his gospel (Mt 5:1-12) at the beginning of the Great Discourse ‘On True Justice’ which takes up chapters 5-7.

To fully appreciate the value and importance of the Beatitudes, we must understand them in the greater context of Matthew’s Gospel. Immediately preceding ‘The Beatitudes,’ Matthew tells us:

“Jesus toured all of Galilee. He taught in their synagogues, proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, and cured the people of every disease and illness. As a consequence of this, his reputation traveled the length of Syria. They carried to him all those afflicted with various diseases and racked with pain: the possessed, the lunatics, the paralyzed. He cured them all. The great crowds that followed him came from Galilee, the Ten Cities, Jerusalem and Judea, and from across the Jordan” (4:23-25).

Matthew presents Jesus as THE Healer of all ills, as one walking among the marginalized (those from the ‘wrong side of the tracks,’ the ‘people in darkness’) and, as Matthew accounts, ‘everyone’ came to him – those that people in Jerusalem would consider pagans/heathens.

Just as Moses led Israel through the desert, Jesus comes to these people in the desert of their existence, in their marginalization, and then leads them to the Mount where he will sit and feed them with new teaching. In this setting, Matthew presents Jesus as the New Moses, as the bearer and perfecter of The Law – just as Moses received the ‘Ten Words’ (the Decalogue) on Mt. Sinai, we have Jesus ‘on the mount’ giving us, the ‘new Israel,’ the new ‘Words,’ the new signs of the kingdom. They present a ‘covenantal life’ as the core and basis of the relationship with God, of which the ‘commandments’ were meant to be a ‘sign.’

The Beatitudes do not serve as a ‘to-do’ list of virtues, but as a fundamental stance that disposes the disciple to continually receive the kingdom.

SPIRITUALITY OF THE ANAWIM

“In Matthew, the first beatitude, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit,’ sets the keynote for the whole group of nine.”¹ So I will focus on this as the key to understanding and approaching the rest of the beatitudes. Matthew brackets the beatitudes by promising the kingdom of heaven in the first and the last two beatitudes: ‘for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ By sandwiching the others in between these, he is making the point that they are all essential to inheriting the ‘kingdom of God,’ thereby laying out a fundamental stance or worldview for the believer. If you also look at the first and the last beatitudes, you will notice that in these circumstances the kingdom ‘is theirs’ – implying some sort of an already ‘being there,’ even if not yet fully. This presents to us the eschatological tension, the ‘already but not yet,’ of the kingdom.

In that first key beatitude, the word that is translated as ‘poor’ comes from the Hebrew word *anawim*, which is to be understood in a religious sense and in relationship to God. The Greek translation of *anawim* uses the word *praus* (meek) to capture the Hebrew religious overtones that are found in the word *anawim* and not captured in the Greek word for ‘poverty,’ which is seen as a state of deprivation. *Praus* means ‘gentle, unassuming, considerate, peaceful, peaceable towards others, merciful.’

The anawim “are the oppressed, the humiliated, the deprived, the degraded, or the indigent.”² In the Old Testament they are represented by ‘the widow and the orphan.’ “They stand without pretense before the Lord, realizing their lack of self-sufficiency.”³ These people are not anawim because of their state of financial or social poverty, they are anawim because in their need they turn to God – not in bitterness, but in hope as their only source of ‘justice.’ This beatitude implies an approach to life that is one of openness to Divine Providence during their oppression by the ‘self-sufficient’ who do not live ‘justly.’ The poor in spirit recognize that God’s Kingdom cannot be forced or owned, it can only be received.

The criticism leveled against the Scribes and the Pharisees is based on their self-sufficiency; their belief that they can ‘own’ their righteousness and be in control of their destiny through the manipulation and/or completion of a certain set of ceremonies and rituals. These ‘externals’ should be signs of a deeper reality that dwells within them, but if there is not interior disposition then they signify nothing. Self-satisfaction leads to complacency and to obstinacy, which in turn is deaf to the living word of God.

Let us recall the example of ‘the rich young man’ in Matthew’s gospel [Mt 19:16-22]:

“...[he] wanted to discover something he could do in order to inherit eternal life, he wanted to keep himself in the picture. But there is nothing that any of us can do. We must simply receive the kingdom of God like little children. And little children are precisely those who have not done anything...children are a model because they have no claim on heaven. If they are close to God, it is because they are incompetent, not because they are innocent.”⁴

1 “Beatitudes,” *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*. 1967 ed.

2 Downey, Michael, ed. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. The Liturgical Press, 1993. “The Poor”, p. 742

3 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

4 Tugwell, Simon. *The Beatitudes: Soundings in Christian Traditions*. Templegate Publishers, Springfield, Illinois (1980), pp. 6-7.

“It is really only the poor in spirit who can, actually, have anything, because they know how to receive gifts. For them everything is a gift.”⁵

The ‘poor in spirit’ stand in an ordered relationship with God and creation. There is an authenticity about them that rings true. They stand in true humility before the Creator. They do not allow themselves to become ‘fixated’ on any created thing, but are instead thankful and thereby have a great sense of liberation and freedom in their relationships with others and with God Himself. This is the spirituality of ‘the remnant’ through which God promised He would renew the earth.

One can see in the Beatitudes echoes of Isaiah 61 (‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to bring good news to the poor...’) where the Servant of the Lord is proclaiming His mission to the poor, signaling the arrival of the ‘end times.’ “The first beatitude, then, announces that these last times have come: God has finally taken up the cause of His poor and will soon bring on the final stage of the messianic kingdom.”⁶

The Beatitudes proclaim the spirituality of the anawim, the spirituality of the Christ because the Christ himself has come from this holy remnant: He *is* anawim and through Himself He will establish the remnant in faithfulness and righteousness.

“In each beatitude, Jesus states a certain requirement for receiving this blessing from God, then describes that perfect happiness. For example, genuine happiness consists in seeing God, and seeing God requires purity of heart...

These requirements for entering the Father’s joy in the kingdom call us to a new way of life. They promise the moral foundation for fullness of life in the Holy Spirit.”⁷

“The Beatitudes dispose us to be open to the presence of God within us so that our Christian attitudes of social justice, peace and mercy may flow over in daily acts of congenial, compatible, and compassionate love and service. Living the Beatitudes thus tempers what Adrian van Kaam calls the power of the pride form and facilitates the release of the Christ form in us.”⁸

With this understanding of the spirituality of the anawim and a greater capacity to see the weight of what it is exactly that Jesus is proclaiming in the Beatitudes – the beginning of the new Aeon – let us turn again to the first Beatitude:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 5:3)

The spiritual culture of the first disciples and that of the early church would have immediately grasped this beatitude as meaning that God’s kingdom had come to them. That striving for ‘poverty of spirit’ would be a way in which the believer would enter the kingdom by allowing God to reign over their hearts (lives). This would be the beginning of God’s rule over the earth through the submission of each individual believer to the message of the Messiah. At the time the gospels were being written,

5 Ibid., p. 21.

6 New Catholic Encyclopedia, p.194.

7 Hinnebusch, p. 61.

8 Susan Muto, *Blessings that Make Us Be: A Formative Approach to Living the Beatitudes*. St. Bede’s Publications (1982), preface XIV.

the community of believers had come to understand the ‘already and not yet’ characteristic of belonging to ‘The Kingdom’ – that the beginning of the messianic promise of happiness is possible for me even now, if only I allow Him to reign in me, even though that happiness cannot yet be complete or definitive. This eschatological tension is signified in the Gospel parables by the symbols of the mustard seed and the yeast in the parables of the kingdom.

“If the power of the kingdom already works in the world in the Person and Spirit of Jesus, then we should be open to this power in poverty of spirit, and expect many of its effects in our lives here and now. The kingdom will not come to its final completion in the next life unless it has already begun in our hearts and lives now on earth.”⁹

Because of the way our educational systems work and the way that we are taught to dissect things to understand their parts, our tendency is towards linear thinking – sequential steps. We must not allow this type of thinking to enter our frame of mind when it comes to our approach to the spiritual life. The Beatitudes are linked to each other: there is a dynamic and organic relationship that exists among them, and this organic entity must be seen in relationship with the greater organic entity of the discourse on justice which takes up chapters 5–7. It is about learning and integrating a ‘stance,’ a way of relating to the world. Because it is an organic entity, we cannot work towards or sin against one without working towards or sinning against all of them:

“The messiah comes in response to their prayers and longing. They are blessed because of their humility and meekness, their mourning over sin, their hunger and thirst for righteousness, their purity of heart, purified in suffering. These attitudes open them to receive the messiah and the blessings he brings. They are blessed because they receive him, the giver of all spiritual blessings.”¹⁰

The Holy Spirit’s gift of fear confirms the virtue of hope and helps to solidify and perfect this beatitude of ‘poverty’ in the believer: it is God’s inspiration in the soul to profoundly respect God’s majesty and to remember our finiteness, our weakness, and our capacity to sin. This inspired remembrance brings with it the filial fear of offending God, whom we desire to love perfectly in response to His great and perfect love for us. This perfect fear leads us then to trust more completely in God our Father and in His Divine Providence and Mercy. This is not the servile ‘fear of hell’ but the filial fear of offending the ‘One who loves us.’ The gift of fear comprises three elements: a vivid sense of God’s greatness, a lively sorrow for any faults committed, and vigilance in avoiding occasions of sin.

“Since the essence of spiritual childhood is not ‘innocence’ or sinlessness, but trust in God, sinners have great hope. If they turn and repent, humbling themselves before God’s mercy, they will receive the kingdom. It comes as the gift of God’s compassionate love for the little ones, his weak and lowly repentant children.”¹¹

9 Hinnebush, p. 70.

10 Ibid., p. 75.

11 Ibid., p. 80-81

OBSTACLES TO THIS BEATITUDE

- Denial of our limits: physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and spiritual.
- Reliance on our own power to manipulate or control.
- Spiritual pride (certainty in your ‘rightness’).

CONDITIONS TO FACILITATE THIS BEATITUDE

Acceptance of our limits and reliance on God.¹²

Regarding this beatitude, Fr. Benedict Groeschel gives us questions to ask ourselves:

1. Do you detach yourself from a sense of ownership?
2. Do you disengage yourself from the material things you possess: car, house, furniture – or are they often at the center of your attention?
3. Do you feel a certain detachment from other aspects of your life: work, talents, income, health, time, dreams for the future, charitable endeavors?
4. Do you detach yourself from precious or beloved parts of your life: spouse, children, and special friends?¹³

¹² Muto, p. 112.

¹³ Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R., *Heaven in our Hands: Receiving the Blessings you Long For*. CHARIS BOOKS, Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan, p. 163



Renew and Rejoice with Community: The Importance of Community Life in the OCDS

FR. JORGE CABRERA OF MARY IMMACULATE, OCD

1. From the very beginning, God called his people not merely as individuals but in the wider context of a community of faith. In our sharing, I will offer some bullet points of the importance of living our call to Carmel in a community setting and, hopefully, information that may help us respond more faithfully to it. However, many of these points can also be applied in our other community settings, such as our family, parish, etc.
2. Community life is a major and essential source of renewal.
 - a. Renewal doesn't always happen in a pleasant manner. It implies growth and stretching one's capacity to love, which can be challenging and uncomfortable.
 - b. From a theological perspective (faith, hope and love), renewal is a source of rejoicing even when unpleasant because one doesn't get stuck in oneself, but sees the wider picture of God's glory – what he is working in one's life and in the community.
3. Need and importance of mutual support:
 - a. This is one of community life's pleasant sources of rejoicing, the experience of sharing with others who share our aspirations, values, faith, and mission.
 - b. "There is so much sluggishness in matters having to do with the service of God that it is necessary for those who serve Him to become shields for one another [*'hacerse espaldas'*] that they might advance. If any begin to give themselves to God, there are so many to criticize them that they need to seek companionship to defend themselves...And if they don't seek this companionship, they will find themselves in much difficulty" (L 7, 22).
 - c. We live in a time when Christianity and its values are fiercely attacked. We definitely need to stand back to back of each other, supporting each other against the attacks of the enemy and the world.
 - d. The evil spirit loves isolation because it makes us more vulnerable and easy prey to his lies.

4. In humility, not to fully trust oneself: “And it is a kind of humility not to trust in oneself but to believe that through those with whom one converses God will help and increase charity while it is being shared. And there are a thousand graces I would not dare speak of if I did not have powerful experience of the benefit that comes from this sharing. Of myself I know and say that if the Lord had not revealed this truth to me and given me the means by which I could ordinarily talk with persons who practice prayer, I, falling and rising, would have ended by throwing myself straight into hell” (L 7, 22).
5. A space for accountability and self-honesty:
 - a. “I should like the five of us who at present love each other in Christ to make a kind of pact that...we might seek to gather together some time to free each other from illusion and to speak about how we might mend our ways and please God more since we do not know ourselves as well as others who observe us if they do so with love and concern for our progress” (L 16, 7).
 - b. The perception we have of ourselves is very limited. We need the input of others.
6. Some flee community for fear of conflicts, but these are not the problem. They can be a source of growth or division, depending on how we respond.
 - a. When being uncharitable with another we need to apologize as soon as possible before the matter festers. “If by chance some little word should escape, try to remedy the matter immediately and pray intensely. And if things of this sort against charity continue, such as little factions, or ambition, or concern about some little point of honor; when these things begin to take place consider yourselves lost. Think and believe that you have thrown your Spouse out of the house...” (W 7, 10).
 - b. We live in a time in history where factions in the world and in the Church have grown deeper. We need to be very careful, prudent, and discerning. The enemy is very clever and is putting before our eyes causes that seem righteous as a motivation to create factions in the community. It is important to:
 - Know what the Church officially teaches about the different current issues. This is not to be confused with my opinion or that of particular prominent individuals (sadly, even certain priests or even bishops).
 - Stay away from media that ignites your anger.
 - Don’t lose from sight the humanity of those who disagree with you. The evil spirit tries reduce them in our eyes to those areas where they seem to be “the enemy”. We can show love and respect to someone we disagree with.

- “By their fruits you will know them” (Mt 7: 16). Pay attention to the fruits before you accept certain inner motions, thoughts and feelings. Ask yourself: “If I follow and feed these inner movements, where will they lead me?”
 - c. “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” (Author unknown)
- 7. “So, Sisters, strive as much as you can, without offense to God, to be affable and understanding in such a way that everyone you talk to will love your conversation and desire your manner of living and acting, and not be frightened and intimidated by virtue... The holier they are the more sociable they are with their Sisters” (W 41, 7).
 - a. The holier we are, the easier to talk to and more approachable we become.
 - b. Be a good listener, capable of meeting people where they are, and listening to understand rather than to respond or refute. This doesn’t have to mean you necessarily agree with where the person is at that moment in his life. Remember, we are all a work in progress.
- 8. And even though you may feel very distressed if all your Sisters’ conversations do not go as you would like them to, never turn away from them if you want to help your Sisters and be loved” (W 41, 7).
 - a. Do not avoid nor marginalize community members that are unpleasant. True charity doesn’t pursue its own gratification. This offers an opportunity where love can become incarnate and real, and not remain in beautiful thoughts and feelings. We cannot love in the abstract.
 - b. *Story of a Soul C, X 12r^o-13r^o* (p. 343-345 in ICS Study Edition).
 - c. St. Thérèse and Sr. Marie of St. Joseph: Thérèse teaches that within someone who appeared to be a hopeless case because of his vices and weaknesses of character could lie hidden a saint. Someone like this could be especially pleasing to God because of his humility, unseen efforts and relentless hope in God, accepting in peace not having anything to boast about. “What we think of as negligence,” Thérèse wrote, “is often heroism in the eyes of God.” Like the poor widow in the Gospel of Luke (21: 1-4) who put only two coins in the temple treasury, through their sincere and yet unsuccessful efforts such little souls may be giving all they can possibly give. One such soul at the Lisieux Carmel was Sr. Marie of St. Joseph who suffered from mental illness. She lived in the margins of the community because nobody was willing to put up with her very difficult temper except for Thérèse, who got to know well her tormented soul. She once shared with Sr. Agnes: “If you knew her as well as I do, you would see that she is not responsible for all of the things that seem so awful to us...She is to be pitied...she is like an old clock that has to be re-wound every quarter of an hour. Yes, it is as bad as that...If I had an infirmity such as hers, and so defective a spirit, I would not do any better than she does, and then I would despair.”

And yet, Sr. Marie of St. Joseph did not despair, even after the death of Thérèse, her only friend in the convent, even after she had to leave the convent at the age of 55 after 28 years of religious life because of her mental illness, even after wandering aimlessly for years about the French countryside. Despite all this, amazingly she could write the following words to Mother Agnes, through which she reveals her hidden sanctity: “The work of sanctification which my beloved Thérèse began so lovingly in me before she died continues. And I can say in all sincerity that my house is at rest. And I live now in complete abandonment. As long as I love Jesus, and he and Thérèse are pleased, nothing else matters to me”.

Thérèse’s welcoming love brought about transformation in the life of Sr. Marie of St. Joseph.

9. By definition, love/charity makes us step out of our comfort zone. Without this there is not real growth. On the contrary, there is a greater risk of becoming delusional about oneself and one’s spiritual life. It’s too easy to “be holy” when things go our way, according to our preferences, when there’s nobody to challenge or question us.

Example: Measuring our level of holiness by the consolations we receive, rather than by the living charity in visible action.

10. “A person who wishes to be a member of the OCDS must be able to form community:”
 - a. “Be a part of a group that is dedicated to a common goal.” Here lies the importance of the community having a clear sense of its identity and mission. This is why there are Constitutions. Not everything that is good in itself is part of the community’s calling. Otherwise the community will be dispersed pursuing different goals, not all related to what the Church expects of them. There will always be diversity among the community members, but it should be contained within the boundaries of its mission.
 - b. “Show interest in the other members.” Again, not just the ones I like or those who agree with me.
 - c. “Be supportive in the pursuit of a life of prayer, and be able to receive the support of others. This applies even to the persons who for various reasons cannot actively participate in a Community” (Wel p. 17).

An important question to ask yourselves: How am I contributing to the life of the community?

11. The promises the OCDS member makes are an ecclesial act, not just a personal one. This in itself indicates that it is a commitment to the Church in the immediate context of his/her Carmelite community. Attending meetings and events is, therefore, essential. And yet, it needs to go beyond that. Mere passive presence is not enough. It is about being there and building community, being at its service (cf. Wel, p. 66).

Solitude cannot be confused with individualism.

- a. True solitude and contemplation lead us to community.
- b. The community is a valuable means to avoid living a spiritual life in the worldly spirit of individualism; that is, enclosed in our commodity, ideas, and lights.

13. In these times, God calls us to renewal in our concrete, present circumstances. One of the means he offers us is our community. It is an invitation that implies challenges but also joys; growing pains but also new freedom. We are all called to holiness, and this doesn't happen despite community life, but precisely through it. May we respond wholeheartedly, even if imperfectly, to our ecclesial vocation.

Abbreviations:

L = St. Teresa of Avila, *Book of Her Life*

W = St. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*

Wel = Fr. Aloysius Deeney, OCD, *Welcome to the Secular Order of the Discalced Carmelites*



The World is in Flames: A Carmelite Response to Chaos and Confusion

FR. STEPHEN SÁNCHEZ, OCD

It seems to many that ‘the world is on fire’ – and to those of us within the Church, we understand that what we perceive is not the ‘fire’ that Jesus desired for the world: the fire of His Holy Spirit, of His Transforming Love.

So, we ask a few questions: firstly, ‘what is the source of this fire?’

Secondly, how are we as Discalced Carmelites to see and understand this chaos, ‘this fire’, that seems to be engulfing the world? What is to be our stance? [I almost said, ‘what are we to do’ – but ‘doing’ itself can be a distraction and usually is not the answer.]

My usual style of presentation is to first state the fundamentals so as to come to a mutual understanding of the topic or question – trying not to take anything for granted or presuming a fundamental agreement or understanding that may not be present. So let us look at some of the ‘facts’ of the present-day ‘chaos.’

Before we dive into the question, I would like to recall that the Conciliar Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had already put their finger on the pulse of this ‘chaos’ in the world:

“For when man looks into his own heart he finds that he is drawn towards what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot come from his good Creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his source, man has also upset the relationship which should link him to his last end; and at the same time has broken the right order that should reign within himself as well as between himself and other men and all creatures.

“Man is therefore divided in himself. As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness...But the Lord himself came to free and strengthen man, renewing him inwardly and casting out the ‘prince of this world’ (Jn. 12:31), who held him in the bondage of sin.” [*Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), # 13]

As we approach this question of ‘chaos’, we have to seriously consider the fact that much of it comes from within the human heart that is self-alienated and has allowed itself to drift along its own unencumbered egotistic path – not only individually, but collectively. Then the first element to ‘consider’

or ‘ponder’ as contemplatives is the dominant culture in which we as a believing community find ourselves. The realization that the dominant culture, in a very real way, is no longer a ‘believing’ culture: it has lost its fundamental Christian moorings so that there is no real basic structure of support for our faith stance. This reality may very well be the source of this fire itself, or at the least a dominant contributing factor to consider.

Secondly, for the last few decades the sources of public information have lost their objectivity. There has been and continues to be a promoted culture of ‘terror.’ By that I mean that everyone is trying to ‘scare’ us with their latest information, so much so that even advertisements try to scare us into buying their products by proposing several negative ‘what ifs.’ The problems around the question of ‘belief’ in the Gospels is compounded by the very instability of ‘belief’ in general. We are hard-pressed to know objective truths. Where this affects us is that most journalism, of whatever media platform we use, has become about ‘making news’ instead of reporting what is newsworthy. There are several reasons for this, but that is not what I want to focus on – what I want to focus on is the effect that it may have not only on our world view as disciples but also the understanding of the assurance of our personal well-being and safety as a people within the larger society in which we find ourselves.

These are two things that we must seriously consider in our lives not only as Catholic Christians but especially as contemplatives: the lack of a societal support structure for our faith and the lack of objective truth. I will return to this later, time permitting.

Now, on top of these two points, we add the whole emotional/political landscape surrounding the COVID pandemic, also complicated by the previous two considerations stated earlier. The pandemic has been a major disruptor of not only the world at large – supply/distribution, jobs, housing, etc. – but it has also disrupted the ability for community, which is an essential element for us as Christian Catholics and for us particularly as Carmelites. As the world in general and our own smaller private worlds continue to reel from the instability of the world that surrounds us, we should take stock as to what effect this has had on our inner world.

Let us recall that this is not the only time that the world has been in foment. I ask that we consider the times in which our Holy Parents – St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross – lived. It, too, was an age of ‘foment’: not only were there high points, but there were also many low points that seemed to come in multiples. Teresa and John lived in a time when the world at large was at last coming out of the ‘Dark Ages’ which were decades upon decades of wars, famines, plagues, and death rates that we cannot imagine. At the time of Teresa and John, just when things seemed to be getting better, we had religious wars that again caused devastation, which caused famine, which caused starvation and pestilence. There were the religious divisions caused by Luther, the rebellion of England’s Henry VIII, the religious wars in France, and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian, followed by Charles V, who attempted to put out all of these ‘fires’ and right the wrongs committed. On top of this, we had the Council of Trent that convened over 18 years.

What was St. Teresa’s view of the foment she saw in her time? In chapter 3 of *The Way of Perfection*, she tells us:

“Human forces are not sufficient to stop the spread of this fire caused by these heretics, even though people have tried to see if with the force of arms they could remedy all the evil that is making such progress. It has seemed to me that what is necessary is a different approach, the approach of a lord when in time of war his land is overrun with enemies and he finds himself restricted on all sides. He withdraws to a city that he has well fortified and from there sometimes strikes his foe. Those who are in the city, being chosen people, are such that they can do more by themselves than many cowardly soldiers can. And often victory is won in this way. At least, even though victory is not won, these chosen people are not conquered.” (C3, 1)

Because her contemplative life gave her a genuine objectivity of the situation and a deeper consideration of its root cause, Teresa was able to counsel against the visceral response to ‘fix’ the situation through the exercise of power. In the ‘worldly view,’ it was the right thing to do. The emperor, in his desire to keep his empire united and under the ‘faith of our fathers,’ used whatever means were at his disposal to ‘correct the situation’: his intentions were honorable. But Teresa sees that the real question at hand – and the answer to this question – is deeper than the exterior manifestation of ‘correcting’ the situation. The ‘well-fortified cities’ are her communities, the communities of faith.

How did she envision the answer to the ‘fire’ that seemed to be consuming the world? In chapter 1 of *The Way of Perfection* she says:

“All my longing was and still is that since He has so many enemies and so few friends that these friends be good ones. As a result I resolved to do the little that was in my power; that is, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could and strive that these few persons who live here do the same.” (C1,2)

Her answer was to the deeper question of division within the Body of Christ and what she perceived to be an attack on His Body by the desecration of churches, of the Eucharist, and of the murders in the name of religion that were occurring. For her, all of this was something that manifested a betrayal of the fundamentals of the gospel: not the external observance or the ‘right way of doing things,’ but of the essential lack of charity and the efforts of understanding required for adult, fruitful communication.

In the *Book of Her Life* she says in chapter 32:

“I was thinking about what I could do for God, and I thought that the first thing was to follow the call to the religious life, which His Majesty had given me, by keeping my rule as perfectly as I could.” (V 32,9)

Here we have what seems to be a simple answer, but is an answer of some significance. Teresa is saying that the answer is an ecclesial one. She is aware that these individuals, even if they are causing harm to ‘the Body,’ are somehow still connected to that very selfsame Body that they are harming. Her answer to the ‘illnesses’ found in the Body, her ‘antidote,’ was faithfulness to her vocation. That this good was the answer to the problem, not the armies of the Emperor. She believed that through her faithfulness, God in His Goodness would heal the ‘ills’; that through her strong belief and understanding of the communion of the members of the Body, she would be able to contribute to the healing of the Body of Christ through her own desire and attempts at faithfulness to her vocation.

Recalling the admonition of the Vatican Conciliar Fathers – that self-alienation is, at its root, a division within the human person which also manifests itself in society at large – we see that the consequence of The Fall was this alienation, because even though we were made for one thing – union with God Himself – the consequence of The Fall brought about another: a frustrated end and a fragmentation of all relationships. Our First Parents, our Progenitors, by choosing disobedience, chose the consequence of self-alienation. It is this fundamental dis-harmony, this dis-ease is that drives us further from the very source of our healing of this root division in us. It is only through a genuine turning to our Ultimate Good that this fragmentation, this self-alienation, begins to be healed.

There are those persons within our community of faith who seem to see the current world situation in an apocalyptic light and seem to be nervous or anxious about this possibility. Is this the end? They partially remember the scripture passage in St. Luke that tells us:

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.”

But to my mind, it seems that they have forgotten the concluding line of this scripture: “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Lk 21:25-28)

If by chance these are the signs of the final ‘tribulation’ – and the Lord has said that no one knows the time – then shouldn’t the attitude of the faithful be one of expectant joy that the healing of the universe is near at hand? That God’s plan for this age has come to term and that we can finally enter into the New Aeon that the Christ Event initiated? Why then the fear and anxiety? Is it that the Word that has been generously sown, and continues to be sown in our hearts, has fallen among the thorns and the cares of this life and is not allowing that Word to mature in our hearts and lives?

In response to this perspective I would ask that we come to focus on another reality. The reality of our being new creatures in Christ through the sacramental grace of baptism. Each year at the Easter Vigil and during the Easter season, we are reminded once again of the truth of our being – that we are a new creation, that we are children of God, children of the kingdom of light. This belonging to the kingdom is not something passive but something that should stir us to live out this light of Christ that we have received. Yet, the anxieties and worries of each day may distract us from our primary truth. The support structure that our parents and grandparents enjoyed are no longer there for our generation, nor will they be there for the following generation unless we reclaim that kingdom of the light of Christ that we are meant to live. We must not despair, nor should we grow anxious by the chaotic darkness that surrounds us – we must learn once again to confide in the light that is Christ’s.

Recall the opening ritual of the Easter Vigil: the Blessing of the Fire and the lighting of the Paschal Candle. The image of the Paschal Candle being the only source of light in a darkened assembly is the image that should bring us comfort and hope. That no matter how dense the darkness and how vulnerable and anxious we may feel in that darkness, by keeping our eyes on the One True Light we, too, will share in that light and become light ourselves.

We are faithful to that Light of Christ when we are capable of allowing our Christian values to permeate and inform the entirety of our lives. We must reclaim the importance of every believer's cooperation to build and expand the Kingdom of Light. Each member of the kingdom of God that is present in this Church Militant is precious to God's overall design and plan for salvation. We cooperate with that plan by being faithful to our vocation in life, as married, as single, as consecrated. Each gives meaning and balance to the rest. Each is vitally important to the others. Each is only a part of the Whole.

In our friendship with Christ the Lord, we open ourselves to healing grace and by that work of grace we ourselves becomes healers of rifts and divisions: we allow the Light that we received at our baptism to shine through our lives to dispel the darkness of sin and division. The truth is that we *can* transform the world – it is a truth that we must be reminded of again and again until it becomes the center of our self-understanding. It is the truth that must be spoken silently at times and at times boldly in the face of opposition, in the face of a seductive narcissistic culture that asks us to always think of ourselves, our needs, our wants and desires. Let us recall Saint Polycarp's words to the Philippians:

“So prepare yourselves for the struggle, serve the Lord in fear and truth. Put aside empty talk and popular errors...I ask you all to respond to the call of righteousness and to practice boundless patience...Be steadfast, then, and follow the Lord's example, strong and unshaken in faith, loving the community as you love one another. United in the truth, show the Lord's gentleness in your dealings with one another, and look down on no one. If you can do good, do not put it off, because almsgiving frees one from death. Be subject to one another, and make sure that your behavior among the pagans is beyond reproach...”

I would like to end this session by recalling the words of the Baptismal Ritual of the Roman Catholic Rite:

“Receive the light of Christ...this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child... has been enlightened by Christ. He is to walk always as a child of light. May he keep the flame of faith alive in his heart. When the Lord comes, may he go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.” (Baptismal Ritual of the Roman Catholic Rite)

Thank you and God bless each of you in your vocation to be Light in the darkness.

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.”

(Phil 1:10-11)