

The Way of Perfection, (Chapter 26) and Helena, age 6 weeks

Abstract

The reciprocal gaze between God and the human person is ineffable, something experienced but rarely 'caught' by those who have experienced it, such people struggle to approximate the experience and usually admit a failure to do so adequately. There is a human experience, however, which may contain a reflection of this gaze, i.e. the gaze between mother and infant. As a human experience it will only be a pale reflection but it may still throw light on what takes place between God and the seeker (or one-who-is-sought). In this paper the teaching of St Teresa in chapter 26 of *The Way of Perfection* is examined in the light of recent perceptions of the effect of parent-infant interaction in early life on human development. Teresa recommends her sisters to seek the 'Lord Himself' as a friend and companion in prayer. Rather than struggling to meditate she asks them to simply look at him. He is, she says, looking at them continually, waiting for them to return his gaze.

The paper goes on to consider the effect of the mutual interaction between Helena, age 6 weeks, and her mother, in order to illustrate the effect of the gaze between them and the 'proto-conversation' which takes place. The understanding of what takes place between this human pair is then compared with the type of prayer which Teresa is advocating. It is suggested that the human facility for developing (in every sense of the word) into the best person that he or she could be, through the sensitive, reciprocal interaction of mother and child, is a reflection of the effect of the reciprocal gaze which takes place between Christ and the one who prays in the way Teresa suggests.

In conclusion the paper considers how the relationship between this human experience and the divine-human experience could add to our understanding of Teresa's teaching on prayer.

The names of the mother and infant discussed in this paper have been changed: they are real people. I have used the text of *The Way of Perfection* translated by Otilio Rodriguez, OCD and Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD¹. Quotations from Scripture are from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

Introduction

This study is situated in the area of mystical theology; it seeks insights into the human-divine relationship, from Scripture and from the insights of Catholic spiritual writers and is informed by insights from human psychology, particularly the (relatively new) psychology of the relationship between infant and carer which began with John Bowlby's post WW2 research into the emotional health of orphans. The theory of 'Attachment' which he, and others, developed from this work was expanded and modified by later developmental psychologists and neuroscientists². They were faced by a challenge from scholars who deplored the apparent emphasis which this theory laid on the importance of the first three years³ - and the pre-birth months - but the theory holds within clinical practice. Put simply this theory states that what happens in the earliest months of life (including life before birth⁴) is crucial to every aspect of human development. From the infant's point of view the part of 'what hap-

¹ Otilio Rodriguez, OCD and Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC, 1980

² Eg Stern D, Beebe B, Schore A and Gerhardt S.

³ See eg Bruer J, *The Myth of the First Three Years*, 1999

⁴ See Glover V, Maternal depression, anxiety and stress during pregnancy and child outcome; what needs to be done. *Best Pract Res Clin Obstet Gynaecol.* 2014 Jan;28(1):25-35. doi: 10.1016/j.bpobgyn.2013.08.017. Epub 2013 Sep 18.

pens' that matters is the intimate, all-absorbing, reciprocal relationship of love between him and his first caregiver⁵ which determines his/her formation.

In this regard some of the insights of mystical theology terms chime with such an understanding and the connection between the two domains has been made by analogy. Spiritual writers have focussed on the relationship with God and often compare the intimacy of this relationship with that of human relationships, understanding at the same time that that these are not the same - because God is greater than human understanding⁶. The direct connection, addressed here, between the two relationships - and the implications of this connection regarding spirituality and human nature- have not yet been examined in any detail.

The Way of Perfection

The Way of Perfection has been described as a vehicle for 'some of Teresa of Avila's most original ideas on prayer, as well as the most practical and helpful'⁷. It is more than a guide to prayer because Teresa would have understood prayer as something which involves every aspect of human life, so that the Way is a guide to Christian life⁸.

The book is formed of two parts, the first part relating to 'education for prayer' and the second part, from chapter 22 is the commentary on the Our Father⁹. Chapters 26-29 are about the prayer of recollection and involve an introduction to the Our Father¹⁰.

The Prayer of Recollection

This prayer bridges the forms of prayer which were referred to as 'active' at that time because they were self directed, and the forms of prayer described as 'passive', or contemplative, where the initiative was seen as God's.

The Real Teresian Method?

Rodriguez writes of the prayer of Chapter 26 of the Way as 'the real Teresian method [of prayer]'¹¹. Alvarez, however, says that Teresa never proposes a method of prayer¹². Teresa prefaces the chapter by stating that she will describe a method of 'recollecting the thoughts'. The word used 'recogi-

⁵ Although this is generally presumed to be the mother the role of the father is not to be underestimated, it may, however be different. The first caregiver may also be someone other than a parent.

⁶ Job 36:26, 1Cor 1:25, Isaiah 55:8-9, Isaiah 40:28, Ps 147:

⁷ McCaffrey E, The Writings of St Teresa of Avila, p 51

⁸ Blake M, Way of Perfection, 1

⁹ Alvarez, St Teresa of Avila 100 Themes on Her Life and Work, 324

¹⁰ Alvarez, St Teresa of Avila 100 Themes on Her Life and Work,330

¹¹ Rodrigue, The Teresian Gospel, 48

¹² Alvarez, St Teresa of Avila 100 Themes on Her Life and Work, 426

miento', relates to a form of quiet prayer which had been practised by Franciscans in Spain, probably since, at least, the early sixteenth century¹³

For Teresa 'Recollection' is a preparation for the Prayer of Quiet and the beginning of contemplation¹⁴. Teresa refers her reader to her earlier autobiography for her extensive teaching on the subject. The prayer of recollection is what is possible by human effort¹⁵ but it is also a prayer which God may take up.

An Extract from Chapter 26

The following is the section of Chapter 26 which is the subject of this paper.

'Then, daughters, since you are alone, strive to find a companion. Well what better Companion than the Master Himself who taught you this prayer? Represent the Lord Himself as close to you and behold how lovingly and humbly He is teaching you. Believe me, you should remain with so good a friend as long as you can. If you grow accustomed to having Him present at your side, and He sees that you do so with love and that you go about striving to please Him, you not be able - as they say - to get away from Him; He will never fail you; He will help you in all your trials; you will find Him everywhere. Do you think it's some small matter to have a friend like this at your side?

2. O sisters, those of you who cannot engage in much discursive reflection with the intellect or keep your mind from distraction, get used to this practice! Get used to it! See, I know that you can do this; for I suffered many years from the trial - and it is a very great one - of not being able to quiet the mind in anything. But I know the Lord does not leave us so abandoned; for if we humbly ask Him for this friendship, He will not deny it to us. And if we cannot succeed in one year, we will succeed later. Let's not regret the time that is so well spent. Who's making us hurry? I am speaking of acquiring this habit and of striving to walk alongside this true Master.

3. I'm not asking you now that you think about Him, or that you draw out a lot of concepts or make long and subtle reflections with your intellect. I'm not asking you to do anything more than to look at Him. For who can keep you from turning the eyes of your soul toward this Lord, even if you do so just for a moment if you can't do more? You can look at very ugly things; won't you be able to look at the most beautiful thing imaginable? Well now, daughters, Your Spouse never takes His eyes off you. He has suffered your committing a thousand ugly offenses and abominations against Him, and this suffering wasn't enough for Him to cease looking at you. Is it too much to ask you to turn your eyes from these exterior things in order to look at Him sometimes? Behold, He is not waiting for anything else, as He says to the bride, than that we look at Him. In the measure you desire Him, you will find Him. He so esteems our turning to look at Him that no diligence will be lacking on His part'.

Introduction to an observation

Turning now to the infant observation; the participants are Helena, and Maria.

¹³ Tyler P, Teresa of Avila Doctor of the Soul, 44

¹⁴ Way of Perfection, 25:4, 17:7

¹⁵ Way of Perfection, 25:3

Helena is the first child of Maria and her husband Ben, they were observed when Helena was 6 weeks old and the observers impressions noted later¹⁶. Such face to face interaction as takes place between them has been described as a 'dance'¹⁷ and a 'proto-conversation'¹⁸ because of the reciprocal nature of the engagement. It is suggested that there is a similarity in the nature of this interaction and the prayer which Teresa is describing in chapter 26 (although the exchange between Maria and Helena is a completely human interaction). It is further suggested that the human facility for developing into the best person that he or she could be, through the sensitive, reciprocal interaction of mother and child, may be a reflection of the effect of the reciprocal gaze between Christ and the believer which Teresa describes.

Note. This paper focuses on a human mother and child. This is not to neglect the idea that the equally valuable interactions of fathers and children. These may be different in some ways, however, and could be the subject of further study. The mother could be a mother by adoption but the differences in the development of the mother-infant bond would merit further study

Moments with a Mother and Infant (observation notes):

Helena is now six weeks old,
She cries with a raw need
She turns to the breast, she fusses, finding and losing the nipple, then suckles.
Her mother holds her on her lap, so they are - face to face.
She gazes at the infant, who, at last,
opens her eyes and looks and looks,
into her mother's eyes of love
with a look of wondering, - she is totally absorbed.
Her eyes light up, and her mouth opens.
her eyes widen, her pupils dilate, she becomes completely still,
slowly her face changes and then she smiles, at her Mother.
That moment is slow - a still moment like forever.
She tilts her head a little and looks again at her mother, waiting.
Maria speaks, in a lyrical high tone while Helena is very still.
Then Maria is still as Helena circles her arm and moves her legs, then she makes a half
smile and 'speaks' to her mother, 'Goo',
It is not even a word but it is her conversation, her response.
She is completely involved with her partner in this 'dance',
Maria, drawn by the sound, murmurs in response and there is a flood of feeling ...
At this moment there is nothing else.

¹⁶ The technique of 'infant observation' was developed by Esther Bick and incorporated into the training of child psychotherapists in the Tavistock clinic (Reid S, *Developments in Infant Observation*, preface x). The observers arrange to spend time regularly with a mother and infant in the family setting, observing the relationship without comment or judgement, tolerating and noting their feelings. Observations are not processed at the time they are made but taken to a supervisory seminar so that the observer can understand about their subject both in particular and generally. (See also Ed. Miller L, *Closely Observed Infants*, chapter 3, Rustin M, *Observing Infants: Reflections on Methods*).

¹⁷ Stern D, *The First Relationship*, Introduction 3

¹⁸ M. C. (1979). The epigenesis of conversational interaction: A personal account of research and development. In M. Bullowa (Ed.), *Before speech: The beginnings of human communication* (pp. 63–77). London: Cambridge University Press; cited in Csibra G, *Recognizing communicative intentions in infancy*, http://www.cbcd.bbk.ac.uk/people/scientificstaff/gergo/pub/index.html/MandL_ostension.pdf, accessed 16 06 15

Praying this prayer

St Teresa turns to the subject of vocal prayer in this chapter, beginning with an examination of conscience, then an act of contrition and the sign of the Cross¹⁹. Her nuns are then advised to form the image of Jesus and look at him²⁰. Walsh says that this action is very similar to that of ‘discursive meditation’ where a person meditates on the life of Christ, using the imagination to construct a picture within the mind, in a way which would have been familiar to one who knew the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola²¹. Teresa, however, says that this is a way which may be used by those sisters who struggle with such methods. She is not asking them to think about Christ, nor to form concepts or even reflect on him. She is asking them to simply look at him, as if they would see what his disciples saw: ‘... what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at ...’²², with ‘the eyes of [their] soul[s]’.

Within this simple suggestion lies a challenging thought. She writes as though Jesus is there to be seen, if only a person would attend to his presence. She had previously described seeing Jesus very clearly²³. In that, as well as this instance, however, the seeing is done with ‘the eyes of the soul’. A vision informed by eyes of the soul rather than bodily eyes could be less clear but Teresa has said:

‘I saw Him with the eyes of the soul more clearly than I could have with the eyes of my body’²⁴.

Seeing Jesus

Scenes from the life of Jesus do not need to be imagined: all Teresa’s sisters need to do is to respond to his initiative. He is beside each one. If they do not see him and feel his presence it is not because he is absent. This said though, Teresa herself had experienced that longing for the Beloved when he is experienced as unavailable. In her poem ‘In the hands of God’, she calls out to Christ as if he had turned his gaze away from her, begging him to look at her:

‘Look at me, Sweet Love,
Sweet Love, look at me,
What do you want of me?’²⁵

Nevertheless she can tell her sisters that they only fail to be aware of Jesus because they have not turned their gaze towards him.

To do this she has to overcome their reservations regarding the possibility of seeing Jesus and becoming aware of his presence. To do this she makes a statement which spins the seeker’s perspective around. She is told: ‘your Spouse never takes His eyes off you.’

¹⁹ cf St Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises,

²⁰ Way of Perfection, 26:1

²¹ Walsh W, St Teresa of Avila, 285

²² 1 John 1:1

²³ Life chapter 28.

She described the vision as ‘imaginary’, understanding it to be ‘less perfect’ than an ‘intellectual vision’ but ‘more perfect’ than one seen with the ‘bodily eyes’ Life chapter 28:5.

²⁴ Life 7:6

²⁵ Poem 2

To look at Jesus Christ will not be difficult because he is the most 'beautiful thing imaginable' and here she presents a picture of tenderness. In a direct reference to the Song of Songs²⁶, she writes of Jesus as the 'Spouse' who gazes continually upon 'the bride'.

Next Teresa's wry humour is brought to bear on a domestic scene: marriage as it was lived in her time. She reminds her nuns: 'See what subjection you have been freed from, Sisters!' The 'good wife', is so subject to her husband that she must always reflect his moods but with Jesus Christ: 'He is the one who submits', and wants each one to act towards him like a 'lady with authority to rule'. Whatever mood the nun is experiencing she should look to the Lord in those times of his life, death and resurrection which match her feeling and he will meet her there. Even though he is burdened with the Cross, he will 'forget His sorrows' and look at her with eyes which are 'so beautiful and compassionate, filled with tears;' because she has looked at him. The topic here is spousal relationship but such an intense and loving gaze also occurs in the relationship of a mother and infant, in a way which reflects this divine-human relationship.

There are similarities between descriptions of parent-infant interactions and Teresa's account, although one is natural and the other is supernatural²⁷. Jesus matching the nun's mood of grief or joy, prefigures Stern's description of the 'communing attunement' and 'tuning' behaviours observed in mother-infant dyads, which enable the mother to enter into the mood of her infant, experience his emotion within herself or contain and regulate his physical and emotional state²⁸.

Similarly, Teresa's prayer, which follows this section; a cry coming 'from the compassion of [the nun's] heart', has similarities with the empathy a child develops when he experiences sensitive care²⁹.

Again - Teresa urges her nuns to think often of 'the love [Jesus] has for you' because he is always preoccupied just as the mother Winnicott (the paediatrician and psychoanalyst - 1896-1971) describes in her condition of 'Primary Maternal Preoccupation', that state of 'heightened sensitivity', which is 'almost an illness' from which she will recover³⁰. Teresa's description of Christ, gazing continually on those he seeks, longing for their response, points to a similar preoccupation but this is no temporary state and it draws the disciple into a preoccupation with him which leads to mutual indwelling³¹.

The disciple formed in this way seeks proximity with the Lord, like the infant in Bowlby's (1907-1990) attachment theory: always seeking proximity with his mother³². He is born with a need to gaze at her face and in his early days and weeks he returns frequently to look at her³³. Church teaching is that the human person, sought by God, is naturally drawn to respond to him³⁴.

Recent perceptions of the effect of parent-infant interaction in early life on human development

²⁶ Song 2:14

²⁷ With regard to the relationship between natural and supernatural experience see the section on the Spiritual Senses: von Balthasar and the Spiritual Senses

²⁸ Stern The Interpersonal World of the Infant, 148f

²⁹ Karr-Morse and Wiley Ghosts from the Nursery 187-9

³⁰ Winnicott D Primary Maternal Preoccupation p 61 in Mariotti P The Maternal Lineage

³¹ cf John 14:23

³² Bowlby J, A Secure Base 26-7

³³ Murrey L, The Social Baby, 19

³⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 27

Recent studies have provided insights into the importance of relationship in the development of the human mind and body and, from the perspective of ‘theological man’, the human spirit. What they have now opened up has brought about a new understanding of the integrity of the human person which has reshaped approaches to child care, educational theory, human relationships and arguably, to spirituality. Whereas human growth could once have been understood as the maturing of man’s existing potential into the adult form of what it was destined to be, recent evidence proves that much more is involved. It is now understood that humans are relational beings from their beginnings. Relationship shapes the very architecture of the infant brain³⁵.

Ideally this experience of relationship should be positive. Human parents, however, are not perfect. (Theologically they are ‘fallen’). In terms of infant mental health this has been viewed as the problem of the parents ability, or inability, to understand their infant, to keep him in mind and respond sensitively to his cues.

Some of the conclusions from studies pointing to the importance of the first three years of life, have been challenged and a case has been made to the effect that the need to support families and infants in the early years has been overstressed. The loss or lack of human support can actually be formative for a Christian and to claim that trauma in early life cannot be overcome would be to preclude the action of grace. A notable and well documented example of healing after early trauma is provided in the case of St Therese of Lisieux who experienced attachment disorder due to the events in her early life. Her healing and growth into human and spiritual maturity is documented in her autobiography³⁶.

Opposing claims do not diminish the particular quality of this time. It is a time of complete dependence. This pre-literate time is almost inaccessible to memory³⁷, the infant lacks the protection of reason, intellect and experience and yet what he experiences during this time is, arguably, more deeply embedded in the personality than later memories³⁸. He is more open to the love of another at this than any other. time

In order to become the rational, creative, relational person a he is called to be, i.e. one with spiritual as well as physical, social, rational and emotional gifts; a child needs love. It is not always available and it is not perfect but a loving sensitive carer who is attuned to her needs is key. Where there is damage healing may occur later but the original need, according to psychoanalytic psychotherapist Sue Gerhardt, is the reason ‘Why Love Matters’³⁹. While this may at times have been overstated, insights about the importance of the emotional security provided by a loving [mother] in the early years of life have been promulgated by psychologists studying ‘attachment’ behaviour remain convincing. The case made by Bowlby, Karr-Morse⁴⁰, Gerhardt, and others is that a person develops the ability to love through receiving love - especially in early life.

The relationship between this early human experience and the divine-human experience

³⁵ Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters* 49

³⁶ St Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*

³⁷ Fernyhough C, *The Baby in the Mirror* 3-4

³⁸ see above on the Internal Working Model of the Child, Bowlby, *A Secure Base* 165

³⁹ Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters*

⁴⁰ Karr-Morse R, *Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence*,

So it is that in his vulnerable state an infant is most open to receive the direct face to face love of his mother and in time the love will be returned⁴¹. There is an interesting aspect of this maternal-infant love, however, - it thrives on face to face interaction but its origins lie in a time when each person involved was invisible to the other. Before the mother felt her child's movements and before the child heard his mother's voice above the internal sounds of her body, a bond was forming. The mother begins to form a picture of someone who will not be visible to her until after the birth⁴². Similarly, the unborn child cannot see his mother's face but he is aware of her through his other senses in a 'bodily reciprocity'⁴³. The newborn infant, who has had very little opportunity to use his sight, will seek out his mother's face within minutes of birth⁴⁴. In time the dance which will take place between them involves turn taking, reciprocal activity and sequences of engagement and disengagement with each other⁴⁵. This is a love relationship with each person relating to the other as an I to a Thou. In this dynamic each demonstrates their potential as lover to beloved and also their potential of beloved to divine Lover⁴⁶.

This potential is achieved through the human yearning to see God⁴⁷, the one who first sought him⁴⁸ and who always loves him. Just as the ideal mother is always gazing at her child, so Christ is always gazing on his loved ones. In describing a way of prayer that is intimate, trusting and personal Teresa portrays the divine human relationship as if it were as commonplace and yet as sublime as the most everyday human relationships, that of a husband and wife or a mother and child. In her earlier book, *Life*, she had said

‘It's like the experience
of two persons here on earth who love each other deeply and
understand each other well; even without signs, just by a glance,
it seems, they understand each other. . . . without our knowing how, these two
lovers gaze directly at each other, as the Bridegroom says to the
Bride in the Song of Songs' . . .
O admirable kindness of God, you allow me to gaze upon you . . .⁴⁹

now she brings her sisters and daughters into the moment when they perceive his loving gaze upon them and can respond to it with the trust, love and confidence of a child⁵⁰.

Conclusion

The insights of Teresa of Avila, in Chapter 26 of the *Way of Perfection* open up the possibility of a divine-human relationship which is characterised by trust, intimacy and reciprocal love. Her picture,

⁴¹ von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 17 and *Love Alone the Way of Revelation* 65

⁴² Raphael-Leff, *Psychological Processes of Childbearing* 71

⁴³ Buber, *I and Thou* 76

⁴⁴ Murray L, *The Social Baby* 19

⁴⁵ Beebe B, *Mother-Infant Research Informs Mother-Infant Treatment*, 10-11

⁴⁶ Buber, *I and Thou*, 79

⁴⁷ cf CCC 27 and CCC 2548 which cites Gregory of Nyssa, "The promise [of seeing God] surpasses all beatitude. . . . In Scripture, to see is to possess. . . . Whoever sees God has obtained all the goods of which he can conceive."

⁴⁸ John 6:44

⁴⁹ *Life* 27:10-11

⁵⁰ Jesus takes a little child as his model for the human approach to God,, an approach of humility, trust and confidence and he teaches his disciples to approach God with the boldness of a child approaching his father in the familiar word - 'Abba'!

of her sisters looking up to the one who gazes lovingly at them, and who humbles himself to accommodate their feelings, is like a domestic interior showing a close human relationship.

This relationship is formative. When this bond develops as it should, the child becomes the best person he can be, with opportunity to grow into the person God intends him to be. This is a relationship between human beings, however, so it will always be prone to mismatch and misunderstanding. It may go awry. The unthinkable may happen: the mother may be lost to the child. At its best, however, the mother-infant bond may reflect something of the love of God for the human person, a love which led him to give his only child to be formed in the same experience of early life.

In the case of the divine-human relationship, the weakness and the possibility of a failure to love, lies only on one side of the pair. As Teresa tells her sisters, their divine spouse never stops looking at them⁵¹ even though they may forget to look at him. Whatever they may lack in ability he, as the perfect companion, can make up. His gaze, which they discern and return, his sensitivity, his desire to accommodate their feelings and heal their wounds, will form them into people who are stronger because of their dependence upon him.

⁵¹cf Isaiah 49:15