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The Spirituality of the Sisters of the Cenacle

This spirituality is marked by Ignatian spirituality but coloured by the experience of a woman named Thérèse Couderc, by a place and a biblical time described in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles: a community gathered with Mary, praying in expectation of the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room of the Cenacle.

What is this spirit?

Four strong emphases: God's Goodness, Self-Surrender, the Holy Spirit, and Mary.

And three attitudes that flow from them: listening, birth, and freedom.

St. Thérèse Couderc wrote: "God is good, he is more than good, he is Goodness." He is only that. This is a valuable aid to discernment. It allows us to sort through what arises in us, in our thoughts, our prayers, our desires, our words, our actions, and see if it is in line with goodness. God can only want what is good. Sort through our images of God, our interpretations of His Word. Is it consistent with a God of goodness?

But we must not mistake goodness for something else. Not a false goodness that can be all-consuming. No, a goodness made up of respect, praise and humble service. But to truly enter into the experience of God's goodness, we must discover, dazzled as we are, that it is first and always God who respects us, praises us, serves us, and wants to share with us who he is and what he has for a mutual friendship.

We are created for this because it is God's very nature to be respect, praise and service. He is goodness. It is always God's initiative and our response is always secondary. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola are there to help us enter into an ever more loving response to this goodness that is God himself.

Thérèse, in this text on goodness, goes on to say that she sees this goodness of God in every creature and in everything: “The goodness of our God has communicated something of his infinite goodness to them so that we may encounter him in everything and everywhere.”

Here we have St Ignatius in his purest form! Thérèse does not see God, but she sees as God sees. She receives from God a gaze that is on the lookout for the goodness that lies within all beings. The encounter with God takes place not outside the world but at the heart of the world. And the mission is not to bring this goodness to those whom we might think are devoid of it, but to awaken a goodness that is already present, already active in every woman and every man, a goodness that is just waiting to be brought to light and recognised, to grow and flourish.

Self-Surrender

This term is found in the second fundamental text of Thérèse's spiritual experience.

Self-Surrender. This term is immense. She says: “to surrender oneself unreservedly to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

But it is always, again, a response to “God's surrender.” God who surrenders himself to us in the ongoing act of creation, in the act of incarnation, in the surrendered body of the Last Supper, in the surrendered breath of the cross. A God of Goodness who surrenders himself and waits for a response. As in the book of Revelation, Chapter 3. The God of Goodness who surrenders himself is at the door of our lives, on the doorstep. He knocks. He waits, tirelessly, for permission to enter. He will never force the door open because he wants a love of freedom. To open the door to him is to surrender ourselves to him in response, because “Love consists in mutual communication,” as Ignatius says.

But this surrender takes place in the most concrete reality of existence. “Surrender yourself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” says Thérèse. Seek and find the divine will in the ordering of your life, says Ignatius (Spiritual Exercises No. 1).

These saints show us a path to union with God, and prayer is not the only place where this can happen. Other places are just as important. Our life in all its dimensions, such as how we use our possessions, our relationships with others, our work, our leisure activities, the economy, politics, etc., are all places where we can seek and find God. This world has been given to us to be a mediator of our love for God. Caring for the world, for others, for oneself is a spiritual experience.

There is only one condition: that we use it in accordance with God's heart. According to the preferences of his heart, in accordance with the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus. By surrendering to the guidance of the Spirit, says Thérèse, by seeking the will of God, says Ignatius.

It means finally learning from Mary. In her, we find the goodness of God at work, he who filled her with grace. The surrender of self in response to God's gift. Mary allowed God to enter our lives. The encounter with God in the act of freedom that was her fiat.

She teaches us to listen so we can give birth to God in our lives and, in turn, be contagious with life.

She gives us Christ as the path to true freedom. She teaches us about Christ.

Between Ascension and Pentecost, in the Upper Room of the Cenacle, there were Mary, the apostles, and male and female disciples. They were remembering Christ. I like to see Mary not only silent but also teaching the apostles and disciples the ways of her Son's life. Totally open to the Spirit, she alone can educate others in the Gospel life. She gives birth to the Church in the life of Christ.

In the Constitutions of our Congregation, there is this sentence:

“To live in the Cenacle is to live with Mary in the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and to share in her giving Christ to others.”

I leave you with this sentence because it is not only for the Sisters of the Cenacle or for the members of the spiritual family of the Cenacle.

It is for everyone because the Cenacle is a spiritual attitude: asking, waiting, letting the Spirit of God animate our lives.

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