

Love your
neighbor
as yourself

Jesus



I want to
accustom
all the
inhabitants
...to look on me
as their brother

Bl. Charles de
Foucauld

February 2015

Dear Friends in Jesus Christ,

I pray you are well! I apologize for the delay in sending this latest newsletter to you. I'm enrolled in graduate spiritual theology classes with the [Avila Institute](#), so I am back in "student mode." I would highly recommend their courses if you are interested in deepening your knowledge of the life of prayer, and they even offer personal enrichment courses.

My goal for taking these classes is to be able to offer more in the way of retreats, conferences, and spiritual mentorship. The Church in these modern times is facing a unique set of circumstances: people are more educated and have an incredible array of spiritual writings and resources at their beck and call, but that classic guide for growth on the spiritual journey—a good director/mentor—has become quite rare. I hope to do my part to help alleviate that need, God willing.

Also, I recently finished my second book, *Like a Dove in the Cleft of the Rock*. It is based on a retreat that I preached for the [Apostles of the Interior Life](#) in 2013.

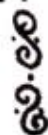
In other news, I will be visiting Vicksburg, MS next month and have made some headway on my search for the grave of Claude Newman. You may read an article about my visit last year [here](#), and I hope to have a new article posted in a week or two with the information that I've found.

So, it's time to get back to the books. I wish you a fruitful Lent!

God's peace be yours,

Matthew

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Prayers are needed and appreciated!
(no postal fee required)



An Excerpt from *Like a Dove in the Cleft of the Rock*

For this newsletter's meditation, I decided to include a chapter from my latest book, *Like a Dove in the Cleft of the Rock*. It is a treatise on the spiritual life that mainly incorporates the *Song of Songs* and the life of St. Mary Magdalene. If you would like to read more, you may order a Kindle, paperback, or hardcover version from amazon.com, or you can read it for free as a PDF at <https://coastcaritas.wordpress.com/writings/>.



Awake in the Night

“I slept, but my heart was awake”
Song of Songs 5:2

BAPTISM IS THE SACRAMENT OF ENTRY into the Trinitarian life. We who have received baptism have been reconciled to God, and joined to the Body of Christ. We have found the God who created us and never abandoned us, even when we were “drinking sin like water.”¹ God redeemed us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and has cleansed us of our sins.

Why must we seek God again if we already believe? We must seek because of our sin and our forgetfulness. When we choose to sin, we show that we do not yet know him as he is, and the truth has not penetrated the depths of the heart. As St. John wrote in his first letter, “He who says, ‘I know him’ but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”² These words of Scripture—words of truth—are jarring. They illustrate the radical and complete call to sanctity for all believers. There would be a temptation to consider the goal impossible to reach were it not for the teaching that sin can vary in its seriousness. If I am tired and speak abruptly to a friend, it has far different consequences for our relationship than if I punch him.

Yet St. John also writes in that same letter, “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”³ Meditating on how we are strung between these two poles of criticism, we become aware that we cannot rest on this road to holiness, and the time that we have to make it to the summit is getting short.

We must also seek because we forget the simplest things. We forget the fundamentals, the basics of the spiritual life, and our hearts become fat and sluggish. We desire arcane wisdom and trivia, and like to put off the real work that needs to be done in the soul. Sublime, pure truth raises merely a yawn.

And so, God in his mercy will often reach out and rouse us from our sleepy complacency. When we sit up in our bed of mediocrity and start to see things clearly, we are not content with ourselves. Fortunately, this is the starting point of

our search. As the Venerable Fulton Sheen wrote, “Whenever there is discontent, God is stirring the waters of the soul.”⁴ We must then make the decision not to throw away this grace, but to rise and continue climbing.

The Beloved in the Song echoes this rising from sleep in one of the most mysterious and lyrically beautiful passages of scripture:

Bride: *I slept, but my heart was awake. Hark! my beloved is knocking.*

Beloved: *Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.*

Bride: *I had put off my garment, how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet, how could I soil them?*

*My beloved thrust his hand through the opening, and my heart was thrilled within me. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt.*⁵

Verse by verse, a picture begins to form. *I slept, but my heart was awake.* The bride’s heart is still listening for the voice of God, and yet she sleeps. Perhaps she has become drowsy because of an attachment to her own comforts, and has forgotten to stay awake in case her Beloved arrives at an hour she is not expecting.

Hark! my beloved is knocking. The Beloved approaches her dwelling in the night, and this passage recalls the words of Jesus in Revelation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him....”⁶ Not content with merely knocking at the door, the Beloved calls, *Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one....* His titles for her emanate the desire within his own heart. He continues, *For my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.* The Beloved has stood for quite some time at the threshold of her dwelling, knocking and calling for her. His desire for her attention will not be put off by discomfort, the passage of time, or any thought that she will refuse to open.

I had put off my garment, how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet, how could I soil them? As she lies in the dark, she ponders the discomfort of leaving the warmth of her bed, dressing, and then soiling her feet as she walks across the room to open to her Beloved. His presence and promises of affection are not yet enough to rouse her out of her complacency. Her delay in opening the door shows the extent that her heart still clings to her own pleasures and will, and does not wholly belong to her Beloved.

My beloved thrust his hand through the opening, and my heart was thrilled within me. This is the verse that serves as the hinge between what came before in this passage, and what comes after. While she lies in bed and contemplates whether rising is worth the effort, the Beloved boldly shoves his hand through an opening in the door. Many translations will describe the Beloved as touching the handle or door latch, but the Hebrew word שָׁלַח, transliterated as “shalach,” is often translated as “to send.”⁷ And so, her Beloved literally “sends forth” his hand. Her reaction to seeing this is a deep thrilling within her. Older English translations, such as the King James or the Douay-Rheims versions, used the word “bowels” instead of heart. Not only does “bowels” bring to mind the deepest recesses of something, but the archaic understanding of this word points to a seat of emotion, such as pity or tenderness.⁸

Meditating upon this passage and substituting the soul and Christ for the bride and the Beloved, we see a deep exposition of the interior life. The soul has heard the call of its Lord, but sits in a state of indecision. It is seemingly comfortable and warm, but it is alone. Suddenly, Christ sends forth an unmistakable dart of grace into the soul. This might be a deep consolation, a word of Wisdom, or even a sudden awareness of insufficiency. The soul then thrills (“rumbles” is a particularly evocative translation of the Hebrew) to his touch, and decides it is time to make a choice. *I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt.* As she rises and walks to the door, the aromatic perfume myrrh is in such abundance on her hands that it is dripping off. This is not simply a poetic detail.

If we are interpreting this passage as a call to awaken to a deeper spiritual life, then where might the bride (the soul) be resting if she is covered in myrrh? The Gospel of John records that Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes that weighed 100 pounds in order to anoint the body of Jesus.⁹ One of the main uses of myrrh in biblical times was to anoint the dead for burial. Could the soul be in a tomb?

This imagery would match what St. John of the Cross wrote about the Night of the Spirit. The Night of the Spirit is an advanced stage of spiritual development where the soul is unable to progress any further on its own, and God performs hidden, painful healings in order to free it from its limitations of understanding.¹⁰ St. John of the Cross writes of this stage, “It feels as if it [the soul] were swallowed by a beast...it is fitting that the soul be in this *sepulcher of dark death* [emphasis mine] in order that it attain the spiritual resurrection for which it hopes.”¹¹ The soul, buried in its futility to progress any further in love of God, must wait for the command of its Beloved to call it forth into the next step of its journey. Only God can work the resurrection of her spirit that is required for her to progress further on the path of love.

If the tomb is an image of the Night of the Spirit, then the soul is there due to no fault of her own, as God has placed her there. But the soul could also be in a tomb of her own making. She could have entered the tomb of her own habits of sin, but God would still come to knock and call for her to rise and open the door to a resurrection of grace. We now see that the Beloved, Jesus Christ, stands at the door as he also stood at the grave of Lazarus, commanding, “Lazarus, come out!”¹²

The Night of the Spirit is a stage that is reached by very few. When the soul emerges from the Night of the Spirit, it enters into the final stage of union with God, where it embraces its Lord in the closest contact that can occur this side of Heaven. For a soul in this Night, opening the door of her tomb leads to the finding and embracing of her Beloved. What about the rest of us who are further down the path of holiness? We may not be in the tomb of the Night of the Spirit, but we certainly have found ourselves in tombs of our own making, caused by our choosing sin over God. If we choose to answer the call of repentance from our Beloved and open the door of conversion, what will we find? Will we see and embrace our Beloved? What happens when the bride in the Song opens the door?

*I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone.*¹³

1 A Monk, *The Hermitage Within*, translated by Alan Neame (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1999), 30.

2 1 John 2:4, RSV

3 1 John 1:10

4 “Problems in Marriage,” Lecture, *Your Life is Worth Living*.

5 Song of Songs 5:2-5 (verse 5:4 is my translation.)

6 Revelation 3:20

7 *Bible Tools*, s.v. “Greek/Hebrew Definitions,” accessed August 6, 2014, <http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Lexicon.show/ID/h7971/page/2>.

8 James N. Lapsley, Brian H. Childs, and David W. Waanders, eds., *The Treasure of Earthen Vessels: Explorations in Theological Anthropology in Honor of James N. Lapsley* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 250.

9 John 19:39

10 Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Three Ages of the Interior Life: Prelude of Eternal Life*, Volume 2 (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1989), 353-355.

11 St. John of the Cross, “The Dark Night of the Soul,” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 404.

12 John 11:43

13 Song of Songs 5:6

