

47. Life of Prayer (Catechism n. 2697-2724)

1. Making other people's prayer one's own (Catechism n. 2700-2704)

Yielding to Love Chapter 12

‘A simple way of praying that is available to anyone is to repeat prayers composed by other people. However, since prayer must come from the heart it is important to find prayers that speak to our heart, prayers that we can make our own and that we can pray honestly and attentively. Repeating prepared prayers can appear simple, but Teresa (Way of Perfection n.25) assures us that such prayers can take a person into the most intimate contemplation.

“While you are repeating some vocal prayer, it is possible for the Lord to grant you perfect contemplation ...

The Way of Perfection 25 continued

‘You are enkindled in love without understanding how. You know that you are rejoicing in the one you love, but you do not know how. You are well aware that this is not a joy which you can attain through understanding. You embrace it without understanding how, but you do understand that it is a blessing you are receiving ... This is perfect contemplation ... In contemplation we can do nothing. God does everything. The work is God’s alone and far transcends human nature’.

If you find that this way of praying appeals to you, you will find encouragement from Saint Therese of Lisieux who writes: ‘Sometimes when I am in such a state of spiritual dryness that not a single good thought occurs to me, I say very slowly the ‘Our Father’ or the ‘Hail Mary’, and these prayers suffice to take me out of myself and wonderfully refresh me’ (Story of a Soul, chapter 11).

While any prayer can be helpful, there is, of course, a special place here for the prayer given us by Jesus himself: the ‘Our Father’(see Matthew 6:9-13). Much of Teresa’s Way of Perfection is devoted to showing what a rich prayer this is. Included among her many pieces of advice is the following: ‘If you are to recite the Our Father well, one thing is necessary: you must not leave the side of the Master who taught it to you’ (Way of Perfection 24). Praying the Our Father in this way with Jesus can help us to focus our mind and heart on the movement of Jesus’ Spirit drawing us into his prayer.

2. Meditation (Catechism n. 2705-2708) – see the previous reflection.

3. Examen of Consciousness

Yielding to Love Chapter 14

‘Good musicians take great care of their instruments. Violinists are constantly checking the tension on the strings to keep their violins in tune. In a similar way, if we are committed to a life of prayer we need to monitor our lives, for the quality of prayer is best assessed by examining our attitudes and reactions. As Jesus said: ‘you know a tree by its fruit’(Matthew 12:23).

It is good to take time regularly to reflect on our lives with a view to noticing the movement of the Spirit of God in our hearts, and our attention or lack of attention to God's presence and inspiration. This practice of regular reflection is sometimes called an examination of conscience. This is accurate, as long as we do not limit our focus to observing where we have gone wrong. We must learn to be sensitive to the light, even more than to the shade, for if we neglect to look for the light we are in danger of stumbling from darkness to darkness, from sin to sin.

A few moments of reflection over our day provide the opportunity to note and relish with gratitude moments of communion with God, which might otherwise be forgotten and leave no trace. Such reflective prayer provides the opportunity also to note and express our sorrow for the times when we were inattentive. It makes us more sensitive to the action of God in our lives and we get to know God more intimately. We also become more sensitive to our habitual ways of responding to God, both positive and negative. We get to know ourselves better, always in the atmosphere of trusting prayer. The following suggestions might prove helpful.

Whatever we are feeling and whatever is happening to us, we begin by placing ourselves trustingly in God's presence and, in the company of Jesus, we search our memory for something, anything, however apparently insignificant, for which we can feel grateful. This will sometimes be difficult, but there will always be something. Having found it, let us focus upon it, savour the moment, and express our thanks to God. Can we say: 'Whatever you may do, I thank you'. We open our hearts to receive the Giver of all gifts.

Next, we pray to God to be able to see our day in the light of faith. We ask Jesus to look into our eyes and show us what he sees. We ask his Spirit, dwelling in us, to reveal to us our soul, remembering the words of Jesus: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'. The pure in heart will also see themselves as God sees them.

As a third step and in the presence of Jesus, we look back over the day at the places where we have been, the activity in which we have been involved, the people whom we have encountered. We ask God: 'Please show me now where you were then and what you were saying to me.' We keep our attention on God, on waiting for God to reveal what God wants to show us.

This is not a time for looking in at our lives as though we were an outside observer. It is important to remember from the inside. We pray to recall the feelings, the movements of heart (or lack of them). We are not simply remembering, we are asking the Spirit of Jesus to shine gently in our hearts and to reveal how God was present in the moments of our day. Even when the surface of our lives is being whipped up by storms, there is an undercurrent drawing us into communion with God and 'guiding us along the right path.'

We will recall moments when what Saint Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit will be apparent. We will recall moments of 'joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22). These are moments when we were in communion with God and were responding to God's love. We thank God for them. We will also recall moments when the fruits of the Spirit were absent.

We may also recall moments when we rejected grace, when we sinned, when we followed a habitual line of self-gratification, neglecting the deep longing of our hearts. These are moments when we were not in communion with God. We express our sorrow and open our heart to God's healing and forgiving mercy.

If something quite significant stands out, either positive or negative, we delay over it, savouring either our gratitude or our sorrow. We are to be especially attentive if we find that something is disturbing our feelings, or if we discover that we are doing something that we don't want to reveal to our spiritual director but wish to keep secret.

We ask to be more alert to the grace which God is certainly offering us to continue listening attentively and to take steps to avoid the inattentive or sinful behaviour which we have observed. We finish the reflective moments with an act of longing and love, looking forward with expectation to the wonderful ways that God will be loving us in the time before the next reflection.

We will find that regular attention to the state of our soul such as we have described is essential to the fine-tuning of our spirit. It takes only a few minutes, and can save us from wasting our lives in activity that does not come from our heart.

In Japanese the expression 'too busy' when written in kanji is composed of two radicals, one representing the heart and the other representing destruction.

Jesus challenges us: 'Even if you were to gain the whole world it would be worthless if in doing so you lost your life'. An unreflective life is not a life that is worth living.

To summarise

- Place myself in God's presence. What do I feel grateful for today?
- Ask Jesus to let me see my day through his eyes.
- Ask Jesus to show me now what he was trying to show me during the day: the good and the bad.
- Delay on anything that stands out, expressing gratitude or sorrow.
- Pray to be more attentive and sensitive to God's inspiration.
- Conclude with an act of longing and love.'

4. Contemplative Prayer (Catechism n. 2709-2719)

The Catechism begins its treatment of Contemplative Prayer with the following statement:

n. 2709 ‘What Is Contemplative Prayer? St. Teresa answers: "Contemplative prayer [oracion mental] in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us"(Life 8.5). Contemplative prayer seeks him "whom my soul loves"(Song of Songs 1:7). It is Jesus, and in him, the Father. We seek him, because to desire him is always the beginning of love, and we seek him in that pure faith which causes us to be born of him and to live in him. In this inner prayer we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself.’

‘We are made for love. It is our longing to be in communion that drives our basic desire to know. It drives all our ways of engaging the world. It is our longing for communion with God that drives all our praying. Though this longing is natural, our practical, busy, everyday lives, especially in the extroverted world in which most of us live, can mean that we live largely unaware of it. When we do become aware of it, we can wonder what is happening to us and we are tempted to wonder if it is real. Maybe it is something for saints, but not for us.

It is vital that we listen to this yearning, and we may need encouragement to do so. The experience of the Psalmist can help: ‘O Lord, all my longing is known to you; my sighing is not hidden from you’ (Psalm 38:9). ‘As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?’ (Psalm 42:1).

We must trust this longing. Like the deer longing for flowing streams we may not know what direction to take, or we may not have the energy to run. Let us be gentle with ourselves. It is God who has placed the longing in our heart, and, provided we attend to it, we will continue to find ourselves drawn. We do not have to go anywhere to be with God. God is within us. We are simply to say Yes to God as God draws us inwards into our own heart where God longs to be in communion with us. Give in to the longing. Create times of stillness. Learn to 'waste time' in prayer, listening to the murmuring of the longing as it washes over the rocks of uncertainty, doubt, inexperience and novelty.

The experience of the Psalmist can help persuade us that in experiencing this longing we are not alone: 'O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water' (Psalm 63:1). We are encouraged, too, by the words of Jeremiah, which tell us of God's response to our longing: 'When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord' (Jeremiah 29:13).

Teresa tells us that if we wish to grow in prayer we will need the eyes and the heart of an eagle. She assures us beginners that, though great desires for God can mask illusions and pride (we might fancy ourselves as better than others), the answer is to be found in humility and trust, not in the blunting of desire.

She prays: 'No, my God, no; no more trust in anything I can desire for myself. Desire from me what you want to desire, because this is what I want: for all my good is in pleasing you' (17th Soliloquy).

'Before the Spouse belongs to you completely, He makes you desire him vehemently by certain delicate means which you do not understand' (Interior Castle 6.2.1).

To begin a life of prayer we must be attentive to the invitation of God whose Spirit is drawing us into the very centre of our being where God has made a home as in a temple.

To persevere in prayer we must, with awakened and attentive heart, stay in touch with the longing of our soul for God, for, as John of the cross reminds us: 'God does not place his desire and love in the soul except according to its desire and love. Anyone truly loving God must strive not to fail in this love, for you will thereby induce God, if we may so express it, to further love you and find delight in you'(Spiritual Canticle 13.12).'

‘Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross speak of this prayer as ‘passive’ because, in the words of John of the Cross, ‘pure contemplation lies in receiving’(Living Flame 3.36). They speak of it as ‘contemplation’ because there is nothing for us to do except receive in wonder and submit to the transforming effect of God’s gift of union. Of course, all prayer is a response to God, for it is God who creates us and who holds us in existence. It is God who ‘has poured love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’(Romans 5:5).

In active prayer, inspired by God’s grace, it is we who are determining our response. In passive prayer, the initiative is entirely with God.

‘While you are repeating some vocal prayer, it is possible for the Lord to grant you perfect contemplation ... You are enkindled in love without understanding how. You know that you are rejoicing in the one you love, but you do not know how. You are well aware that this is not a joy that you can attain through understanding. You embrace it without understanding how, but you do understand that it is a blessing you are receiving ... This is perfect contemplation ... In contemplation we can do nothing. God does everything. The work is God’s alone and far transcends human nature’ (Way of Perfection 25).

Passive prayer would seem to be the prayer typical of childhood, for a child can do little except receive. A child must mature, however. We have to learn to own our life and develop our ego. We have to explore creative ways of acting in the world and of relating to the mystery that we call God. We have been exploring some of what this means in Parts One and Two of this book. However, there comes a stage in the development of our communion with God when we are called to let go control and allow God to draw us beyond active prayer, at least as an habitual practice. We must learn to yield to God's love.

John of the Cross likens prayer to the playing of a musical instrument (see *Spiritual Canticle* 38.4). Inspired by God and enabled by God's grace, in active prayer we are, as it were, practising the art of playing the strings of our heart and mind, learning to ponder the mystery of God and enjoy the harmony of experienced communion. In passive prayer we leave it to God to guide our fingers over the strings.

- Teresa explains the difference between Simplified Active Prayer and the beginnings of Passive Prayer:

‘When God grants this favour it is a great help to seek Him within where He is found more easily and in a way more beneficial to us than when sought in creatures, as Saint Augustine says after having looked for God in many places. Do not think that this recollection is acquired by the intellect striving to think about God within itself. Such efforts are good and an excellent kind of meditation because they are founded on a truth, which is that God is within us. But this is not the Prayer of Recollection because it is something which each of us can do - with the help of God, as should be understood of everything. What I am speaking of comes in a different way. Sometimes, before even beginning to think of God ... one noticeably senses a gentle drawing inward ... This does not come when we want it, but when God wants to grant us this favour’(Interior Castle IV.3.3).

‘When we let go the attempt to control our prayer, we allow a gentle drawing inward’(Interior Castle IV.3.3). Earlier we were trimming our sails to tack with the gentle breeze. Now we experience ourselves being drawn to let go and yield to an attraction that draws us and over which we exercise no control.

The recollection experienced here is not the result of our decision to simplify our method of praying. It is not the fruit of our controlling our breathing or practising a mantra. It is an experience that we are powerless to induce. Both Teresa and John warn us not to attempt to manufacture this quiet for ourselves (see Ascent II.17.7). There is nothing wrong with practising techniques to quieten ourselves down so long as we don’t confuse this with the quiet that is God’s gift, the quiet that comes with passive prayer.

John of the Cross writes: 'You must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God. You must live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel God. All these desires disquiet the soul and distract you from the peaceful quiet and sweet idleness of the contemplation which is being communicated to you' (Dark Night I.10.4).

The drying up of our thoughts and feelings is necessary, for they are not capable of transforming union. At first we will wonder whether the drying up is the result of our infidelity – and it may be. We may know deep down that we are being called to give up some addictive behaviour, or to rearrange our priorities, but we are not yet willing to do so. Half consciously we avoid intimacy in our contact with God because we know that if we do experience it we will have to look away or be faced with our unwillingness to change our lives. The easiest way to put off repentance is to put off prayer.

Up to this point we have been finding joy in considering the truths of our faith, God is now drawing us to experience the gaze of the One for whom our hearts long. If we accept the loss of the joys to which we have grown accustomed, and if we abandon ourselves in trust to the action of Jesus' Spirit in our souls, we will be transformed by the all-consuming love that is God. Like a drop of water we are being drawn into the ocean of God's love and are being absorbed into it. Accompanying this experience of love, there is joy, as well as a sense of belonging, communion, and peace. This is the love for which we are made and for which we long. We are more aware than before of the fact that the silence, the stillness, the welling up of joy or gratitude or sorrow or pleading, is from God. We are also more aware than before of the fact that there is nothing we can do to obtain it.

This awareness is essential for there could be nothing worse than our taking any credit for the communion that God is now giving us. That is spiritual pride, the most dangerous sin and one that would surely lead to God having to hold back the communion that God was wanting to offer us. God knows how harmful spiritual pride is for us and out of mercy God would have to hold back the grace in which we were taking pride. We might well be able to confect our own form of spiritual silence in order to carry on the self-deception, but it would not be true contemplation. The 'long winters' that we experience at this stage of our prayer journey, long winters in which nothing seems to be happening, help preserve us from spiritual pride for we know from hard experience that contemplation is a gift from God. There really is nothing we can do to acquire it, apart, as has already been stressed, from preparing our souls for it. We can clear away the undergrowth and we can dig the well, but we cannot create the spring.

We need to listen to Jesus as he tells us that we will find our selves only when we learn to 'lose' our selves (Matthew 16:25), and that we must become like little children if we are to enter into the domain of love into which he is inviting us (Matthew 18:3). There comes a time when we are ready to let go the ego that we have developed and to surrender in love to God. It is when we begin to surrender in this way that we begin to experience intermittent moments of this more profound communion.

If we are willing to remain open to these graced moments when God draws us into divine communion beyond all our thoughts and feelings, and if we resist the temptation to take control of them or to possess them or to attempt to reproduce them by our own efforts or techniques, God's longing to be in communion with us is such that transient experiences of recollection tend to deepen so that the soul finds itself wrapped in quiet prayer. John of the Cross assures us that the surest sign that this prayer is from God: 'is that we take pleasure in being alone and wait with loving attentiveness upon God, without making any particular meditation, in inward peace and quiet and rest'(Ascent II.13.4).

Teresa calls this the 'Prayer of Quiet'. When we were in control of our prayer we worked for such quiet, now the quiet wells up from the mysterious depths of the soul. We are drawn into an experience of prayer from within.

Earlier we found ways to quieten our imagination, memory and mind. Now, surprised by grace, these same faculties ‘are absorbed and are looking as though in wonder at what they see’(The Interior Castle IV.2.6). It is this ‘looking as though in wonder’ that explains the word ‘contemplation’. Now, the only water that is refreshing the garden of the soul ‘comes from its own source, which is God’(The Interior Castle IV.2.4; see IV.2.3).

From the centre of our soul, the fire of God’s love radiates out and ‘the warmth and the fragrant perfumes spread through the entire soul’(The Interior Castle IV.2.6).

‘In passive prayer our attention is not on insights received, important though these are. Nor is our attention on any accompanying psycho-somatic phenomena that we may experience, however impressive these might be. Our attention is to be on God who brings about the transforming union effected by love. In contemplation we are purified, illumined and united to God in love. We are being transformed into love by the all-consuming love that is God, like a log being transformed into flame by an all-consuming fire. In contemplation God communicates a secret wisdom that God infuses into the soul through love. Supernatural contemplation is sustained above all by peaceful surrender and humility. In the words of Teresa: ‘The important thing is not to think much, but to love much ... Love does not consist in great delight, but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything’ (Interior Castle 4.I.7).

We should be wary of setting strict guidelines for what to do when God grants us the gift of contemplation. God is directing us now, and God's light is lighting our way, however faintly and intermittently. Furthermore, people differ greatly. We should offer ourselves in peaceful and silent surrender to God.

Saint Teresa writes: 'Abandon yourself into the arms of love, and His Majesty will teach you what to do next. Almost your whole work is to realise your unworthiness to receive such great good and to occupy yourself in thanksgiving'(The Interior Castle IV.3.8).

The Spirit that moves us in prayer is the Spirit that Jesus shares with his Father. Through this gift we are being drawn to share Jesus' own prayer-communion with God. This communion always comes as a surprise and as a gift of love. We experience it when we yield to the divine attraction drawing us into God. We can long for this communion with God, and we can prepare for it, but there is nothing we can do to bring it about. Only the gift of the Spirit can cause to well up within us the spring of living water promised by Jesus. When the water is flowing, all striving ceases, words are no longer relevant, and we find ourselves caught up in the silent wonder of communion. Like a drop of water we are being drawn into the ocean of God's love and are being absorbed into it.'

The Night of Faith (**Catechism n. 2719**)

see *Yielding to Love* chapter 23, pages 187-195.

Our faith assures us that the darkness which we are experiencing is the consequence of our being drawn by God into more intimate communion. During the period that both Teresa and John liken to a betrothal, the work of the purifying darkness is completed and there is a special quality to the experience of delight which at times overwhelms the soul: the soul knows that perfect union has been promised.

John of the Cross assures us: 'In that sweet draught of God, wherein the soul is immersed in God, it wholly surrenders itself most willingly and with great sweetness to Him, desiring to be wholly His and never again to have anything in itself that is alien from God ... Inasmuch as God transforms the soul into Himself, God makes it to be wholly His and empties it of all that it possessed and that was alien from God. Wherefore the soul is indeed completely given up to God, keeping nothing back, not only according to its will, but also according to what it does, even as God has given Himself freely to the soul. So these two wills are surrendered, satisfied and given up the one to the other, so that neither shall fail the other, as in the faithfulness and stability of a betrothal'(Spiritual Canticle 27).'

Perfect Communion

- Teresa & John of the Cross speak of this as a ‘spiritual marriage’.

‘This spiritual marriage is incomparably greater than the spiritual espousal, for it is a total transformation in the Beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life.’

(John of the Cross Spiritual Canticle 22.3)

‘The soul always remains with its God in the centre. Let us say that the union is like the joining of two wax candles to such an extent that the flame coming from them is but one, or that the wick, the flame, and the wax are all one. But afterward one candle can be easily separated from the other and there are two candles; the same holds for the wick. In spiritual marriage the union is like what we have when rain falls from the sky into a river. All is water, for the rain that fell from heaven cannot be divided or separated from the water of the river. Or it is like what we have when a little stream enters the sea. There is no means of separating the two. Or, like the bright light entering a room through two different windows. Although the streams of light are separate when entering the room, they become one’(Teresa Interior Castle VII.2.4).

‘The soul shines brightly with the warmth of love ... It is like the air within the flame, enkindled and transformed in the flame, for the flame is nothing but enkindled air. The movements and radiance of the flame are not from the air alone, nor from the fire of which the flame is composed, but from both the air and the fire. It is the fire which causes the air which it has enkindled to produce the movements and the radiance. We can consequently understand how the soul with its faculties is illumined within the radiance of God. The movements of these divine flames which are flickering and flaring up are not produced only by the soul that is transformed in the flames of the Holy Spirit, nor does the Holy Spirit produce them alone, but they are the work of both the soul and the Holy Spirit ... This activity of the flames is inspired in the soul by the Holy Spirit’(John of the Cross Living Flame 3,9-10).

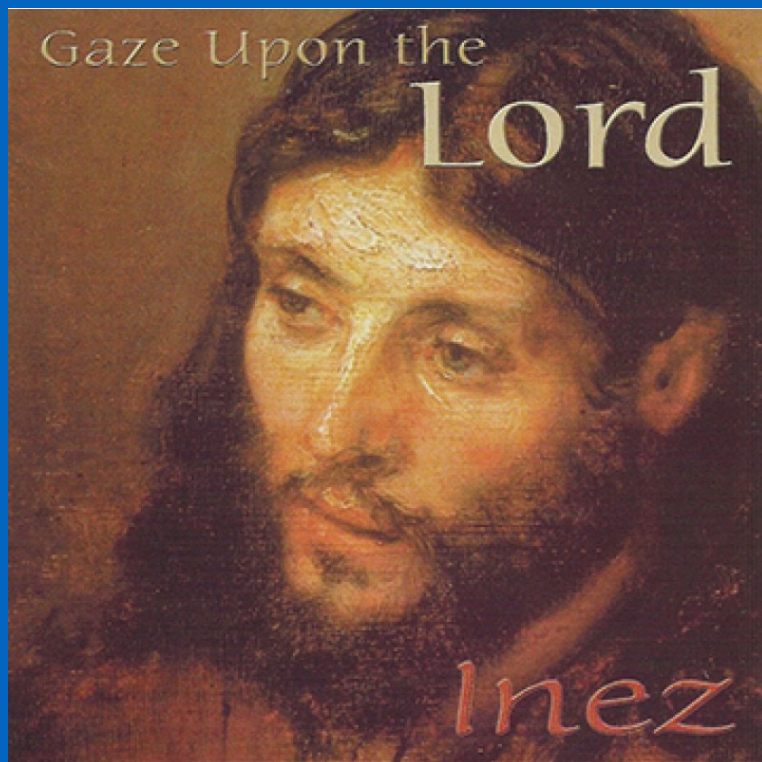
‘Let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have the strength to serve’(Teresa Interior Castle VII.4.12).

n. 2709

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In this inner prayer we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself.'



Gaze upon the Lord
Clare of Assisi

Woman's Song of God
Songs inspired by the writings
of Women Mystics

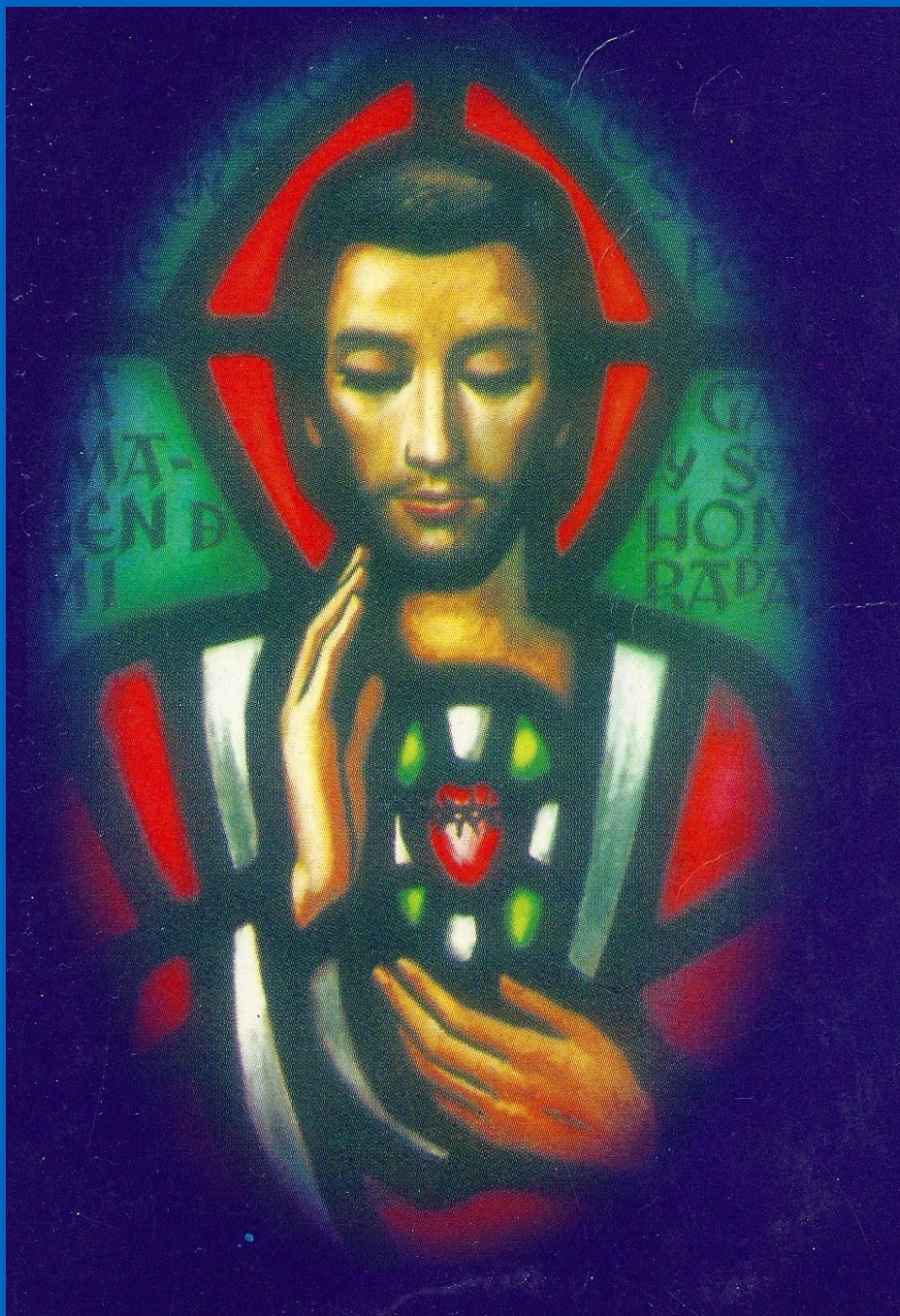
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Gaze upon the Lord.
Gaze upon his face.
Gaze upon the One
who holds you in his embrace.

Gaze upon his life.
Gaze upon his love.
Gaze upon his coming forth
from heaven above.



Look upon the Lord.
Look upon his way.
Look upon his heart.
It opens to each day.

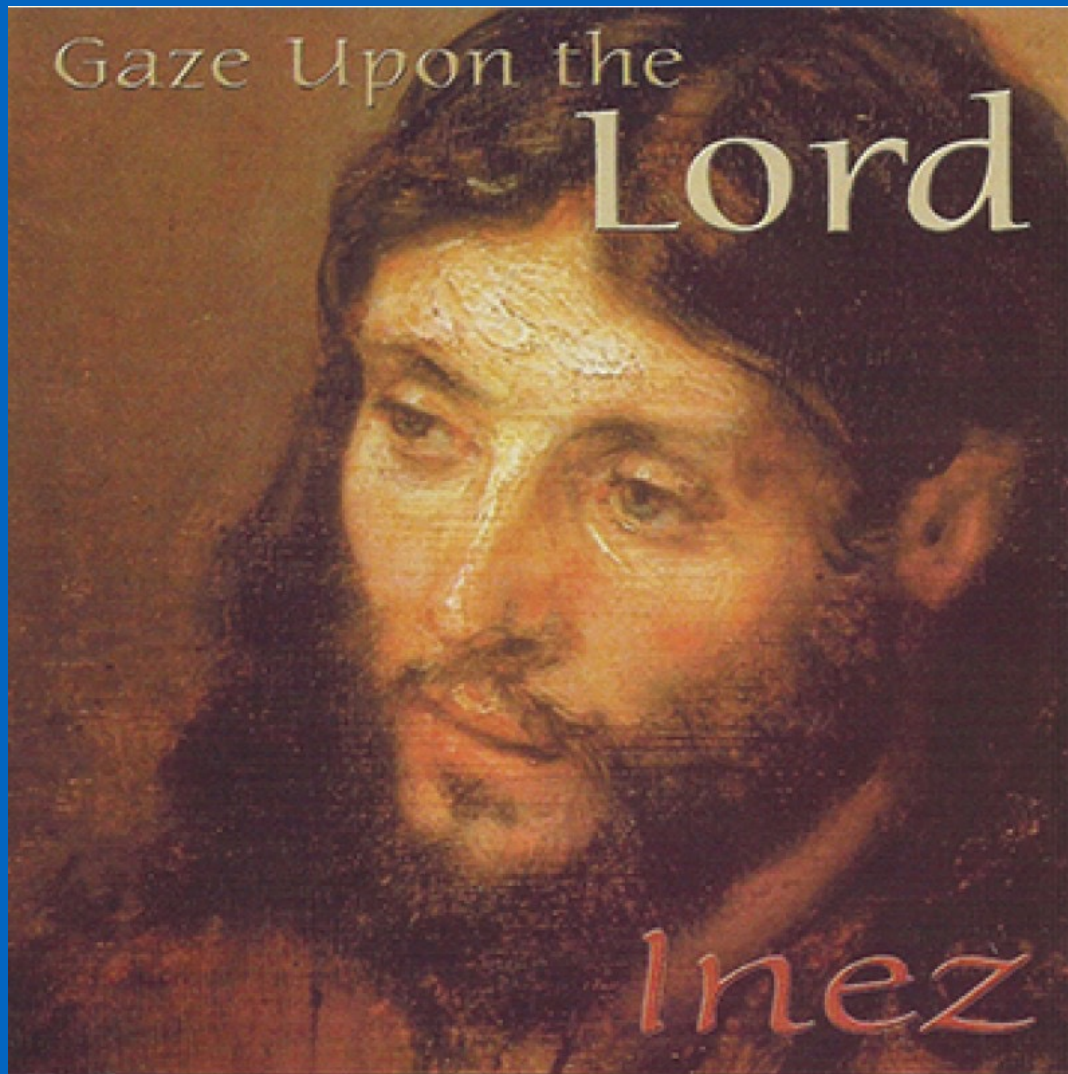


Though he was despised,
the lowest of all men,
look upon his sacred cross
which brings life again.



If you open to life's pain,
then with him you shall reign;
and allow your heart to hear,
then with him you'll rejoice.

Open to his cross
the wounds of each day's love.
Then you'll know the splendour
of his kingdom above.



Gaze upon his life.
Gaze upon his love.
Gaze upon his coming forth
from heaven above,
from heaven above.