

INTRODUCTION:

TO TAME AND BE TAMED



On a beautiful, late spring day in June of '76 in Rochester, New York, I sat down to write some pages on prayer for beginners. The immediate purpose, in response to many people whom I had directed or to whom I had lectured on prayer, was to put in writing what I had been saying to them. They felt it would be helpful to have a written reminder to which they could refer at leisure. At that time, after seven years in the Philippines, I was on sabbatical at my own home in Rochester. Outside my window, the pine trees I loved as a boy now loomed taller than the house. My father was three years dead, but the bird feeder he had placed in the yard was still there as a tangible reminder of all the love he had lavished on this small piece of earth. My mother, thank God, was still very much present, busy about the house which, when we first moved into it in my teens, seemed like a palace to me because it had four bathrooms! Occasionally she and I took time for a cup of coffee or a trip to the store, but much of the time I sat in my room and tried to coax my thoughts on prayer from brain to pen to paper, happy in the knowledge that, after so many years, my mother was somewhere nearby. She was

not really a good critic of what I wrote, although she was the first to read it and I did clarify many of the things I was trying to say after discussing them with her. But she was too supportive to be truly critical.

Thus it was that I was not really sure whether my ideas and experience would be of help to a wider audience. I had in mind that my writing might eventuate in a published book. But my primary audience was the seminarians and sisters and lay people I had been directing and teaching about prayer. My efforts were really a response to their requests. Moreover, it had a rather narrow and well defined focus. It was to be limited to the beginnings of the life of prayer, to be a guide for those seeking to lay the foundations for a solid interior life. It seemed to me there were many excellent works, classic and contemporary—such as those by John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila and Leonard Boase and Anthony Bloom and Thomas Merton—to guide those who were already serious and maturing in prayer. But I felt these works were usually too heavy for beginners, and often brought them more confusion and discouragement than enlightenment.

Apparently others felt as I did, for those three months of writing did result in a published book, *Opening to God*.¹ Many people told me that it did meet a real need for them, and I have been especially happy that it has been used fruitfully in many religious novitiates and with many lay prayer groups—precisely the beginners in prayer whom I had been hoping to be able to help.

Opening to God, however, also elicited one fairly common complaint. Those who had been praying for some years said: “You stopped just at the point where you were beginning to touch my experience. In the epilogue I found myself—and then you were finished!” I was not surprised at this, of course. The book was intended for beginners, and these friends of the Lord were beyond the beginnings of

prayer. But when I suggested that they needed to go on to John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila or the *Cloud of Unknowing*, the invariable answer was, “But I’m not a mystic! Those authors are good for contemplatives, but I’m just an ordinary person.” Often enough they had, in fact, looked into Teresa or John at one time (usually much too early in their prayer lives) and had been frightened away by John’s austerity or confused by Teresa’s wordiness. And so the treasures of the masters remained inaccessible to them now in their need.



Seeking God Beyond the Beginnings

Thus it was that I found myself, as a director, spending more and more time guiding people to these treasures, sharing as best I could the great enlightenment and support which I myself had found in certain key passages such as chapter 11 and following of Teresa’s *Autobiography* and chapters 8–10 of Book I of John’s *Dark Night of the Soul*. The Lord seemed to promote this venture by sending me even more people who needed just this kind of guidance, and by confirming its correctness by the fruits in their lives. Moreover, it seemed that it was not (as I had thought) enough simply to hand them a copy of John or Teresa. I should have realized this earlier, for I myself had puzzled over the masters for years, with a strong sense that the Lord was drawing me to them, and yet often with great frustration because of what I could not understand or accept. And rarely had I found “someone to guide me” (Acts 8:31). Like the Ethiopian whom Philip baptized, I did not see how I could “understand what I was reading” unless I found that “someone.”

Although I have been blessed with at least three great Jesuit spiritual directors in my life thus far—Father Norris Clarke and Father Tom Clarke during my seminary years

and Father Jim McCann in more recent years before his death—I never really did find the guidance I needed in prayer beyond the beginnings. It was not at all the fault of these good men; rather, it was the mark of the times in which I and they were formed. Praying generally meant meditation—something we do, our activity of analyzing the gospel and making applications to our own life situation and resolutions as to how we would serve Christ better. It was all very good as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. Specifically, it did not allow for the possibility that prayer might become less and less what we do and more and more what God does in us.

That this was what was happening in me during those early years I could scarcely recognize at the time. Even if I had been able to recognize the signs for what they were, I doubt I would have been able to believe that they were genuine. It seemed much more likely that my difficulty in doing anything at prayer—a difficulty which gradually became an impossibility—was due to my own sinfulness, to the many failings of which I became more and more acutely aware. When, in later years, I remembered the misery of those times, it made me all the more anxious to be of help to the many confused searchers whom the Lord sent my way. They came, of course, even before *Opening to God* was written. But only in the past two years did I begin to realize that it was not enough to put John or Teresa, or even a relatively recent writer like Boase, into their hands. Nor did it seem sufficient merely to guide them into John and Teresa in personal, face-to-face direction. By now many of my directees were scattered around the world, from Bolivia to Burundi to Brisbane. And even when we could meet personally, direction at this level of prayer proved exceedingly tricky and elusive. The passivity into which the Lord eventually leads us in prayer is so contrary to our natures, and the world into which we enter is so “upside down,” that it seems the same

lesson needs to be learned a thousand times over before it becomes truly our own.

So it was that this book, *When the Well Runs Dry*, came to be written. It is intended for those “beyond the beginnings,” especially those whom I have had the privilege to direct, to help them to remember the lessons we have learned together. Above all they need to learn—to remember—that meditation/contemplation² is not normally a lifetime way of praying, even for active apostles. And they also need to remember that beyond meditation/contemplation is not a splendid oasis of Omar Khayyam filled with delights for the soul (which seems to be what most people understand by “mystic” or “contemplative”), but rather a vast desert of purifying dryness with, perhaps, occasional small oases to sustain the spirit. As we shall see, it is only when we come to love the desert, and to prefer it to the oases, that we are well on the way to God. It is an “upside-down” world indeed! We can well be forgiven for forgetting, for refusing to believe we are on the right road, when our throats are parched and our eyes are filled with sand!

This, then, is what *When the Well Runs Dry* is all about. The easiest part of the writing of the book was choosing the title. It is suggested by a beautiful image of St. Teresa of Avila and is explained in chapter 1 of this book. Whereas *Opening to God* was completed and in the hands of the publishers before the right title came to mind, I had the title of the new book long before I had the book! It not only catches perfectly what the book had to be about, but it also acknowledges the enormous personal debt which I owe to Teresa. In fact, when I began I intended the book to be merely an explanation of, and contemporary introduction to, some of the passages in Teresa and John and others which have been crucial to my own life and growth as a pray-er and as a director.

The Ultimate Test of Personal Experience

That is what I intended when I began writing. I would still hope that one major fruit of the book would be to lead others to find in the great authors on prayer the treasures which I myself have found there. Contrary to my expectations (and hopes), however, what came from my pen is not primarily an exegesis of these classic passages. Instead, the result is what I could only characterize as an attempt to describe my own experience, as pray-er and as director, of the way the Lord works in those he leads to the desert to speak to their hearts (see Hosea 2:16). Teresa and John, Boase and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* are my valued interpreters and guides, but the journey is my own (and that of my many “friends in the Lord”). I would have preferred to speak more objectively about the mystery of prayer, but it appears, from my experience at least, that prayer is truly a mystery (in Gabriel Marcel’s sense: something we cannot objectify and view from a distance because it is intensely personal and involves our whole selves), and thus can only be described in a very personal and subjective way.

One advantage, though, of the more personal approach which evolved is that it has enabled me to see much more clearly what is distinctive and especially valuable in the great writers cited. Their experience of God has a universal quality which enables them to speak meaningfully to the friends of God in every age and culture: universal because it is the same Lord at work in all of us. But this universal experience is realized and expressed by each of them in a highly personal, truly unique way. Moreover, each of us responds to each of them in a uniquely personal way. Thus, Teresa is, and always will be, my “mother” in the life of prayer: her gentleness, her simplicity, her genius for capturing the deepest truth in the simplest, most comprehensible image—all these qualities drew me to her

“at the breast,” and seem even more wonderful as the years pass. She is, indeed, too wordy and rambling, as she herself frequently admits, but this can be an endearing fault in one who loves the Lord as ardently, and speaks with him and of him as unself-consciously as she does.

John of the Cross, by contrast, is intense and single-minded, a very great poet and also a first-rate theologian in the scholastic style of his day. His passion for God is every bit as intense as Teresa’s, and much more lyrically expressed. He does not have her light touch, her self-deprecating wit. But when the time comes when we want the plain, unvarnished truth about where we stand with the Lord and ourselves (and it usually takes considerable maturity to desire or even to be willing to accept such bluntness), John is the man for us. He is, moreover, a master director of souls—the most perceptive and discerning I have ever encountered. The great passages in his writings (at least in my judgment) are those where he is describing and interpreting the way God normally works in the life of prayer. His theological explanations and scriptural exegesis often do not say much to me today; but a passage like chapters 8 to 10 of Book I of the *Dark Night of the Soul*, which I feel may well be the most important single thing ever written on prayer,³ is as valuable today as when John wrote it. John, like the Lord he is describing, is an acquired taste. He is strong meat for the timid, and easily misunderstood by the neophyte, but once one has acquired maturity and a taste for him, most other food seems insipid by comparison.

There are, nonetheless, contemporary authors who can stand in John’s company. Thomas Merton is one and Anthony Bloom another. The one whom I myself have found most helpful is Leonard Boase, S.J. His *Prayer of Faith* is really John of the Cross’s “Dark Night of the Senses” in contemporary dress, and this contemporaneity is a special value of the book.⁴ But Boase also brings a different and

valuable perspective to the mystery of prayer beyond the beginnings. Unlike John and Teresa he is writing primarily and explicitly for those called to live an active, apostolic life in the world. His book makes abundantly clear that what John and Teresa describe is not only for “contemplatives,” for cloistered monks and nuns who withdraw from the world. His insights on “praying always,” and on the apostolic goal of the “prayer of faith” (Boase’s name for the “dark night”)—among many others—go straight to the heart of a Christian in the world today. Like Teresa and John, Boase has obviously lived what he describes.

Whereas these three authors have long been my companions on the journey of prayer, I discovered the *Cloud of Unknowing* in fairly recent years. It is a brief work, disarming and sometimes alarming in its brevity. Its great value for me was the revelation that the unknown author of the *Cloud*, a fourteenth-century Englishman who was probably a monk and was certainly a master spiritual director, was really describing the same experience of the same Lord as John and Teresa—and yet this experience was reflected through the prism of a very different personality, shaped in an English culture quite unlike the Spanish milieu of John and Teresa. The author of the *Cloud* is dry, ironic, understated, pragmatic—and a delight to read. In a way, he is the P. G. Wodehouse of spirituality!⁵



The Challenge for the Reader— and for the Author

John remains my favorite and most trusted guide on the journey to the high places, but Boase provides the contemporary dress and the apostolic orientation. The *Cloud* (along with Teresa) provides the light touch and the common sense, the salt necessary to make palatable the strong

meat of John. The mix is, as I said earlier, highly personal. Yet, it may be helpful to the reader to have this brief account of how I have responded to the great writers on prayer who have helped the Lord to shape my own vision of him and of what he is doing in prayer. No one else, probably, will see the masters in precisely the same way. Nor, in fact, would it be desirable that they do so. But my sharing may help you to discover your own vision, and to see the value of your unique and very personal synthesis of the best that the great teachers can share with you. This, after all, is the primary role of any good teacher (and of any good spiritual director, as John of the Cross stresses so strongly⁶). The synthesis of the student will always differ from that of his or her teachers, because it includes, in addition to all that the teachers can share, the unique element of personal experience.

If this book leads you, the reader, to your own integration of your own experience of prayer beyond the beginnings, it will have achieved its purpose. There are, of course, many other great masters of prayer who do not appear in these pages. This would be a serious flaw if the book were intended as a survey of spirituality or spiritualities, but our goal is a personal vision of the way God works in those he draws to love. What emerges from the authors cited is that his way is essentially the same—because it is always the same Lord of love working—in all the diverse temperaments and cultures on the face of the earth. Once we realize this, the primary need is not for more extensive reading about prayer, but for more intensive living of the life of prayer. In fact, at the risk of hurting the sales of my own book, I must say that the time eventually comes to stop reading and to start living. Too many gurus, no matter how good they be, will only dissipate our energies and retard our growth. John of the Cross says: