CHAPTER – 5

AWAKENING OF THE SELF AND PRACTICE OF PRAYER

In this chapter we shall discuss of the experiences of a soul in the beginning stage of its spiritual journey. This will help us to explore the experience of spiritual awakening in the life of Mariam Thresia and of her active prayer life.

1. Spiritual Awakening of the Self

There is an awakening for the soul to enter into the spiritual journey. It can happen abruptly or gradually. The souls which are privileged from childhood to be in an environment of faith will have a gradual maturing of faith leading to a higher spiritual consciousness. The life of St. Therese of Lissieux was an example for such a maturing of faith and entering into mystical union. The souls which are leading a life of lukewarmness in the spiritual level are also awakened with special graces to a fervent Christian life. St. Teresa of Avila testifies her lukewarmness and how God awakened her in order to make a significant progress in her spiritual journey.¹ In certain other cases the awakening happens instantly as in the case of St Paul, through a heavenly intervention (Acts. 9:1-19). There are others who live in the depth of unbelief or in deep bondage of serious sinfulness or never heard of gospel nor baptised. These souls too are given sufficient graces to awaken them into higher spiritual realms. St. Augustine of Hippo is an example for such case.² The souls thus awakened are in the beginning stage of the mystical journey. A beginner in spiritual life is one who desires to turn away from sins and to live in the ordinary state of grace. Fighting against all sinful affections and bad habits, such souls desire to acquire Christian perfection.³ The souls in mortal sin cannot enter into the mansions. St Teresa of Avila says that a soul in mortal sin is a dead soul and consequently it is incapable of movement, besides such souls make the chamber of the castle dark.⁴

² R. Martin, The Fulfillment of All Desire, 39, 40.
⁴ St. Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, 34, 35.
1.1 Spiritual Awakening in Mariam Thresia

The autobiography of Mariam Thresia starts: “From my early childhood, I had experienced an intense desire to love God.”\(^5\) Thresia’s curious question to her mother at the age of three and a half about the mystery of the Holy Trinity reveals her intense desire to know and love God.\(^6\) The pious mother instilled in her love for a God who died on the cross for the whole humanity. At that tender age she started to meditate on the passion of Jesus, the Son of God, and do acts of penance to imitate Him.\(^7\) To play with friends is an enjoyment and is natural to the children. She avoided such occasions telling: “Wasting time is painful to God.”\(^8\) St. John of the Cross says that to undertake the journey to God, the heart must be burned and purified of all creatures with the fire of divine love.\(^9\) The young heart of little Thresia burning with the fire of love prompted her to get up in the night to pray. Noticing it her mother asked Thresia to sleep by her side. Her response was not to compel her to do that and that the age of sleeping near her was over by the age of two and a half.\(^10\)

1.2 Desire for Perfection

The essential characteristics of the beginners described by Adolphe Tanquerey in the book *The Spiritual Life* are: a) beginners live habitually in the state of grace b) they have a certain desire for perfection and c) they have, however, some attachment to deliberate venial sin.\(^11\) Young Thresia’s desire for perfection was remarkable. At the age of six she knew what sin was. To remain in the state of grace she insisted the parish priest to hear her confession and she was given the permission.\(^12\) Ridicules of her friends and neighbours could not change her from the decision to attend Holy Mass daily.\(^13\) Thresia’s spiritual father, Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, wrote about her: “An enthusiasm to study religious matters, an intense desire to love God and a yearning for meditating on the passion of the Lord could clearly be seen in Thresia even in her early years … At that age itself this child entered the path of suffering and contemplation.”\(^14\) It is very clear that from a very tender age Thresia was awakened to the spiritual journey.

2. Practice of Prayer

St. Teresa of Avila says: “As far as I can understand, the door of entry into this castle is prayer and meditation.”¹⁵ Prayer is considered as the basic exercise for any soul to begin the spiritual progress. The prayer is needed not only for entering the castle, but it has to be continued till the end of the spiritual journey. As the soul progresses in prayer passing from one mansions to the other, the grade of prayer starts changing. The clearest and the best classification of the grades of prayer are given by St. Teresa of Avila. They are 1) vocal prayer 2) meditation 3) active recollection 4) infused recollection 5) prayer of quiet 6) prayer of union 7) prayer of ecstatic union 8) prayer of transforming union.¹⁶ Among these, the first three grades characterize the prayer of the soul in the beginning stage. They are acquired by one’s effort but with the help of grace. Hence it is called active prayer. The remaining grades are infused prayer and they belong to the mystical phase of the spiritual journey. Though the grades are classified according to the intensity of the experience, it is not necessary that every soul should follow the order.¹⁷ We shall discuss the active prayer in general and then about Mariam Thresia’s active prayer life and her special devotions.

2.1 Vocal Prayer

Vocal prayer is any form of prayer expressed in words whether written or spoken. It includes prayer of petition, adoration, thanksgiving, contrition and all the sentiments a soul expresses in relation to God. The two requirements for vocal prayer are attention and devotion. By attention intellect is applied and by devotion will is applied towards God. Even if the soul arrives at the height of mystical union, vocal prayer cannot be omitted completely. It is always beneficial, either to arouse devotion or to give expression to the intensity and fervour of one’s love to God.¹⁸

2.2 Discursive Meditation

Discursive Meditation or Mental prayer is a movement of heart and mind to God. St. Teresa of Avila says “mental prayer in my view is nothing but friendly discourse and frequent solitary converse with Him who we know loves us.”¹⁹

¹⁵ St. Teresa of Avila, _Interior Castle_, 31.
¹⁸ Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 316-318.
¹⁹ St. Teresa of Avila, _The Life of St. Teresa of Avila_, 50.
Discursive meditation is defined as “reasoned application of the mind to some supernatural truth in order to penetrate its meaning, love it and carry it into practice with the assistance of grace.” In meditation both intellect and affection are at work. Intellect moves the heart and motivates to act. The most important element in meditation is the act of love aroused in the will on the presentation of some supernatural truth by the intellect.

2.3 Active Recollection /Affective prayer

As the soul advances in meditation or discursive prayer by constant practice, the affective element predominates over the element of reflection reducing it into a minimum. When the heart is moved, other faculties easily collaborate and get recollected. This advanced stage of ordinary prayer is called active recollection. It is called recollection because the soul collects together all the faculties and enters inside to be with its God. This is also called affective prayer as affective element predominates here. It is termed as active because it is acquired by the person’s active and positive efforts. During the meditation when one may yield to affection, then the soul should move to acts of love. When these movements become more and more frequent, the individual makes the transition from discursive meditation to active recollection. Though one may enter into active recollection, discursive meditation is a requisite. Because it is the discursive meditation and spiritual reading that supply the material which will stimulate the activity of the will for affection. Active recollection helps spiritually a person to concentrate and to feel the presence of God. It prevents the mind and the faculties from becoming restless. As the person is in the company of God, he /she is free from the occasion of sin. Psychologically it provides a delightful relief from the dry labour of discursive meditation. Active recollection is the best disposition and preparation for the mystical contemplation.

2.4 Active Prayer in Mariam Thresia

The ardent desire to know and love God from the age of three and a half led Thresia to a deep prayer experience. At that tender age she used to ask her mother the

meaning of the vocal prayers that she recited. Her devout mother gave her satisfactory answers and instilled in her the love for Holy Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, especially the Son Jesus who suffered and died on the cross for her sins and for the sins of the whole humanity. Msgr Moothedan narrates that “Tears used to rush to Thresia’s eyes as the pious mother narrated our Lord’s sufferings. She was never tired of mummy’s passion sermons.” Thresia’s special devotions are an outcome of her active prayer life. She had special devotion to the crucified Lord, Holy Eucharist, Sacred Heart of Jesus, Infant Jesus, Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, Holy Family, Guardian angel and special love for the souls in the Purgatory.

2.4.1 Great Love for the Crucified Christ

Christian spirituality is a participation in the mystery of Christ. St. John of the Cross’s counsel for active entering into the night of the senses is to have a habitual desire to imitate Christ. Thresia’s life was centred on the crucified Lord. It was a spiritual entertainment of the young Thresia to crawl on her hands and knees bearing a heavy stone on her back meditating on Jesus carrying the cross. The words of her mother about Jesus crucified for the atonement of the sins of the world had imprinted a deep mark in the heart of little Thresia. Her sole desire was to reduce the pain of Jesus. All her penance was to share in the suffering of Jesus. All her deeds were an expression of her immense love for Him. Participation in the Holy Eucharist was for her an expression of the re-enactment of the Holy Sacrifice of Calvary. The active participation in the Holy Eucharist meditating on the passion of Jesus explained in detail in the Autobiography reveals her great love for the passion of Christ.

Thresia advised her followers to remember the passion of Jesus occasionally during the time of recreation too. She knew that meditation on the crucified Jesus will help to forgive others, suffer any sorrow or humiliation or privation, to ask pardon for the sins from the depth of the heart and to control the senses. Thresia insisted that her daughters meditate on the passion of Jesus, and fix the attention on the Christ crucified for a complete renewal of life.

2.4.2 Holy Eucharist – Daily Spiritual Food

As a child, Thresia expressed an exceptional love and deep faith in the Holy Eucharist. Even before she reached the age of six, she daily attended Holy Mass, in spite of her companions’ ridicules and her mother’s discouragement.\textsuperscript{32} Thresia had intense desire to receive Jesus in the heart, so she continuously requested various priests with tears for the purpose. Hence, at the age of ten, before the customary age for receiving the Holy Communion, she could receive Holy Communion.\textsuperscript{33} Later Holy Eucharist became the centre of her life and great source of strength. Even when she was not well somehow she would go to participate in the Holy Eucharist and receive Holy Communion.\textsuperscript{34} Participation in the Holy Mass was for her a meditation on the passion of Jesus. Every word and every gesture had meaning for her. At the time of offertory she offered herself and prayed for all the living and dead, for all sinners and for the intentions of the Church.\textsuperscript{35} She had deep awareness of the mystical body of Christ. She prayed thrice in the Holy Mass for the Church and for all the people. Thresia’s deep love and faith in the living presence of Jesus in the tabernacle is very much expressed in her beautiful and inspiring prayer for the visit to the Blessed Sacrament.

My divine Jesus, in how many tabernacles you dwell all alone without having any visitors during this night. I offer you my humble heart. Let all my pulsations be a prayer of love for you. You are always behind the veil, keeping close watch over us. You have no sleep because of your love for us. You are not weary in keeping watch over the sinners. Beloved Jesus, sweet Jesus, lonely Jesus, let my heart be a lamp burning bright only for you. Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, sweet custodian, protect the earth that is tired out, and its sinners. Amen.\textsuperscript{36}

2.4.3 Blessed Virgin Mary – Her Constant Companion

“Even at a tender age, Thresia chose Blessed Virgin Mary as the mother of her soul and body and consecrated herself wholly to her.”\textsuperscript{37} She had special love and devotion to Mother Mary. She wrote: “Every Saturday I used to fast in honour of

\textsuperscript{34} Vithayathil, \textit{Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia}, 30.
\textsuperscript{37} Vithayathil, \textit{Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia}, 16, 17.
Blessed Mother and recite a full rosary until I learned how to read ... I used to recite a full rosary at midnight and meditate on the sorrows of Blessed Mother. 38 When Thresia’s mother died at the age of twelve, she accepted Mother Mary as her own mother. 39 At the age of marriage, when she was compelled to marry saying that there would be no one to take care of, her reply was “I have good hope that my spiritual mother would not abandon me, even if you all forsake me.” 40 Without any hesitation Thresia would pray rosary, a prayer honouring Mother Mary, any time and anywhere. 41

Thresia imparted her love for Blessed Virgin Mary to her followers. In one of her exhortations she asked: “Do you love our Blessed Mother? How do you love her? The day in which you should be burning with love of Blessed Mother is approaching. When you go to attend Holy Mass ... Do you know whom you are going to receive? Are you worthy enough to receive Jesus? When you go to receive Holy Communion you should exchange your hearts with Blessed Mother.” 42 She used to ask them to pray to Blessed Mother with great devotion and to imitate her humble life. 43

2.4.4 Sacred Heart of Jesus

Thresia used to fast and offer special prayers on first Fridays, the day which is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. 44 In one of her letters to the spiritual father she has expressed her profound faith in the Sacred Heart. 45 In the letter 15, she asked the spiritual father to give an exhortation before the Mass starts so that people may not sadden the Sacred Heart of Jesus by their evil deeds. 46 Thresia once asked Fr. Vithayathil to start a novena in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the conversion of a great sinner. 47

Thresia used to exhort her followers that they should be totally dedicated spouses of Sacred Heart by surrendering their will fully to the Lord. 48 She says:

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39 Vithayathil, Diary, 44.
40 Vithayathil, Diary, 77.
41 Vithayathil, Diary, 77.
44 Vithayathil, Diary, 57.
46 M.Thresia, ‘Letters’, 60; Vithayathil, Diary, 98.
47 Vithayathil, Diary, 86.
“Look at the Sacred Heart! It is pierced open only for His love of us.”\(^49\) On 15 August 1904, Thresia was given the Sacred Heart of Jesus as a token of her love for Him.\(^50\) Often He would tell her the secrets of His Heart.\(^51\) One instance is: “On the first Friday of April 1905 one hundred members of the society of Sacred Heart of Jesus received Holy Communion in the parish church. That day the Lord appeared to Thresia with great sorrow. To her question why He looked so sorrowful the Lord replied: “Today is the day on which my beloved devotees of the Sacred Heart comfort me. But one of them received Holy Communion sacrilegiously and that is why I am so sorrowful.”\(^52\)

2.4.5 The Holy Family

The family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the Holy Family of Nazareth, had a very special place in the life of Thresia. Fr. Vithayathil’s Diary cites many occasions which acknowledge the close relation of Thresia with the Holy Family. During the trials and diabolic tortures the Holy Family very often used to come to help and console her.\(^53\) In 1905 Mother Mary requested Thresia to decorate her room with flowers on Fridays and pray the full rosary. The Holy Family would be present on the occasion and on all those who assembled to pray the rosary would be given special blessings.\(^54\) In the exhortations she asked her sisters: “Why don’t you offer your goods to the Holy Family? You have to do it respectfully.”\(^55\) To an aspirant she wrote that it was the Holy Family who brought her to the Congregation.\(^56\) A litany in honour of the Holy Family is prayed everyday from the time of Thresia to this day in the Congregation.

2.4.6 Infant Jesus

In the letter 19 Thresia wrote: “We must fulfil the offering to Infant Jesus with much love and hope. Besides the recitation of the litany to Infant Jesus, you must

\(^{50}\) Vithayathil, Diary, 47.
\(^{51}\) Vithayathil, Diary, 177; Vithayathil, Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia, 74.
\(^{52}\) Vithayathil, Biography of Mother Mariam Thresia, 74; Vithayathil, Diary, 98.
\(^{53}\) Vithayathil, Diary, 75, 87, 120, 131 etc.
\(^{54}\) Vithayathil, Diary, 120. Fr. Vithayathil has recorded that this practice was continued till her external signs were stopped. However the exact period when the external phenomena were stopped has not recorded.
\(^{56}\) M. Thresia, ‘Exhortations’, 137.
offer into His hands whatever you feel like doing.” 57 After the Holy Communion she would experience the presence of Infant Jesus and spend a long time in recollection. 58 Thresia used to recite the rosary of Infant Jesus every day. In preparation for Christmas she exhorted the Sisters to meditate constantly on the humble birth of Infant Jesus so that they may not get immersed in worldly pleasures. 59

2.4.7 St. Joseph

Thresia accepted St. Joseph as her own father. 60 A short prayer that she wrote down manifests her faith in and devotion to St. Joseph: “Oh Most powerful St. Joseph in consideration of the deep sorrow you experienced because of your mental agony when you thought of leaving Mary, and the joy you felt at the revelation of the great mystery of incarnation of the Word of God through the angel, please obtain for me from God the favour I asked for, amen.” 61 Thresia requested her daughters to choose St. Joseph as their patron. 62

2.4.8 Guardian Angel

Thresia had special love and faith in the protection of guardian angel. Among the four short prayers written by Thresia, one was addressed to the guardian angel. She acknowledges guardian angel as her father who protects from all the dangers of body and soul and asks to keep her away from all unholy things and to praise and adore Holy God on behalf of her. 63 Thresia had great confidence in the guidance of the guardian angel. She says to her followers: “Dear children your guardian angel will inspire you what to do.” 64 One of her letters to her spiritual father is seen signed by guardian angel. The content of the letter was a message to spiritual father given by the guardian angel. 65 Fr. Vithayathil has recorded many times about the appearance of the guardian angel to Thresia. Once in the form of a young boy dressed in white, came to rescue her from the diabolic torture, 66 to inform various matters concerning her, 67 and to give Holy Communion when she was unable to attend Holy Mass. 68

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57 M. Thresia, ‘Exhortations’, 64.
58 Vithayathil, Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia, 17, 77-79.
60 Vithayathil, Diary, 4.
65 M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 55. There is a difference in the signature of the Letter.
66 Vithayathil, Diary, 26.
Thresia has experienced the richness of meditation and prayer from her tender age. Even though she attained the higher forms of prayer, she continued the practice of meditation and prayer and exhorted the followers to do it with more fervour and concentration. She said: “What is most pleasing to God is meditation.”69 “You must say ejaculations all the time. Do acts of humility. You must have the awareness that you are in the presence of God.”70 “Take special care about your prayer life”. “Meditate frequently on the passion of the Lord.”71 She was convinced that it is meditation that makes a person a saint.72

67 Vithayathil, Diary, 139.
68 Vithayathil, Diary, 57, 74, 108, 133.