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Poetry... Language of the Spirit

THE HOST APOSTOLATE
WWW.THEHOSTAPOSTOLATE.ORG

14, GOATBECK TERRACE,
LANGLEY MOOR,
COUNTY DURHAM DH7 8JJ

thehostapostolate@gmail.com

A well known definition of prayer is ‘raising our minds and hearts to God’. There are many ways of doing this – by action, contemplation, repetitive prayer, reading the Scriptures, Spiritual reading – indeed anything that makes us think of and serve God. We express ourselves in a variety of ways by the things we do, wear, say – or remain silent – and by the way we express our inner thoughts and feelings. Some things are easy to express, as a smile conveys much and even words can encourage, uphold, show happiness, sadness, grief or elation. But some things are difficult to explain and our deepest emotions and thoughts sometimes have to say the almost inexpressible. We are made to communicate. We have eyes to see, ears to hear and receive and voices to use. All these are God given and we use them in accordance with our personalities and gifts, perhaps even more importantly the situation we find ourselves in and the culture we belong to.

Music and singing both play an important part in that holy expression, but so do words. Together they form what we refer to as hymns or holy songs. But do we ever reflect on the importance of words themselves. Of course we are used to speaking, praying using words but what if we cannot express what we feel with what is available to us?

Nearly every culture has in its riches, poetry. Poetry is the use of words to paint pictures in our hearts and minds. There are of course many forms of poetry, long and short, rhyming or not, prayerful or not – but all try to express our feelings and attitudes. They try to sing words without the music, without any distraction, which is often hidden. The words often paint a picture or by their rhythm and rhyme lead us forward, and become memorable. Most of us still remember our nursery rhymes, the words having created a simple memorable picture.

So too, the poems we learnt at school often resisted, but nevertheless remembered, only to be

returned to in later life. A friend remembers vividly the poem ...

I wandered lonely as a cloud

That floats on high o'er vales and hills

When all at once I saw a crowd

A host of golden daffodils

Beside the lake, beneath the trees

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. *W. Wordsworth*

... which she learnt but she did not truly grasp its significance. One day, however visiting the Lake District, Ullswater, she beheld the sight that inspired the poem but then she realised that the poem, as well as being beautiful was about loneliness and solitude and the solace beauty can bring.

While not directly spiritual, it has a spiritual quality that could bring us the reality of the Creator and to reflect on the wonder of His creation.

There are literally millions of poems: humorous, reflective of all aspects of life, friendship, marriage, birth and death, travel, art and of course, our relationship with God. While much poetry has a certain mystical content, and so by its very existence brings us some awareness of the divine – even obliquely – as all good qualities in people reflect ultimately the qualities of God, some poetry however is specifically religious or spiritual.

All the Psalms, (all 150) tell us about the facets of human nature and relationship with God. We hear despair, joy, thanksgiving and adoration/praise. It is spiritual poetry at its best, written as a reflection of journey. They were written, in part, as walking prayer aids, to be recited as people travelled.

‘Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands

Serve the Lord with gladness

Come before His Presence singing’ *Psalm 100*

Or...

‘And He brought me up from the pit of misery

And the mire of destruction

He set my feet upon a rock

He has made my way ready

Psalm 40

Or..‘The Lord is compassion and love
Slow to anger and rich in mercy’ *Psalm 103*

We have only to look at the hymns to see the same inspirational writing, whether scriptural or intercessional.

...‘Lay Your hands gently upon us, Let Your love render our peace’ (Carey Landry), or ‘Be Thou my vision...’ (Eleanor Hull), ‘My God loves me’ (Martini), ‘Abide with me’ (Henry Francis Lyte).

These are poems that almost reflect the deepest yearnings and experience that ordinary words cannot express in any other way. Great Saints have often written what they were experiencing in poetic form, often not desiring to do so but somehow words poured out from their awareness and consciousness of God. Their poems often tell us about God and how He moves among His people. The poetry of St. John of the Cross, about the ‘Dark night of the soul’ does just that. The poetry of Teresa of Avila reflects struggles, as do the words of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. St. Faustyna who was barely literate, wrote out her heart in her poems, and the depth of her relationship with Jesus. Lesser known are the verses of St. Bernadette of Lourdes. The beauty of these poems lies not in the use of words but in that they reflect the power of God to lead, instruct and transform. They also speak to our hearts and define a common desire to be at one with Him. They encourage us on our journey and to not feel alone as others have travelled along that path as well.

Sometimes poetry assists us in difficult situations... Karol Wojtyla, later St John Paul II, Pope, was clandestinely reciting an hour-long epic poem, Nazi megaphones began blaring forth news of a German victory, and he simply shouted out the remainder of the poem over the megaphones. Blessed Titus Brandsma wrote the following lines, looking at a picture of Jesus in his prison cell...

‘If I have Thee alone, the hours will bless, with still cold hands of love, my utter loneliness. Stay with me, Jesus, only stay. I shall have no fear if I, reaching out my hand, I feel Thee near’ (1942)

He also reveals his humanity in the following...

‘I look back across the years
On days that I lived through
But years have not explained to me
The suffering and tears I knew.’ (Amersfoot Prison)

Writing poetry is a gift of God. It enables us to say what we feel but cannot repeat, but it also allows us to share our belonging-ness to human-kind. Some people find they write poetry when some tragedy, illness or trauma hits them, perhaps never to write again. The Lord finds a way for them to write what they feel. The soldiers of both world wars wrote in this manner. These were not thought out ‘clever’ words but they speak of sorrow and pain of the heart and so they touch us and remain, and we become touched by God. Sometimes only one poem comes from our pen but it is profound. Often the Spirit inspires the words and plants them in our hearts and these become our prayer.

As this is the month of Mary the following old poem to Our Lady is a fitting conclusion. Halina Holman



Marigold

I was the favourite of the poor,
And bloom by every cottage door,
Speaking of Heaven’s fair Queen to men;
They loved me for the name I bore
There is no love for Mary now,
And Faith died out when love grew cold;
Men seldom raise their hearts to Heaven
Through looking at the Marigold.
But Mary from her throne on high
Still looks on England and on me
The namesake of the Queen am I
The Lady of the land is she. Anon.



Pope Francis

“Architects, sculptors and musicians, film-makers and writers, photographers, *poets*, artists of every description are called to shine beauty, especially where darkness and grey dominate everyday life. They are custodians of beauty and heralds, witnesses of hope for humanity.” Rome 2016

Feasts in May

1st St Joseph the Worker

3rd Ss Philip & James Apostles

4th English Martyrs

5th Third Sunday of Easter

12th Fourth Sunday of Easter

13th Our Lady of Fatima

14th St Matthias, Apostle

19th Fifth Sunday of Easter

22nd St Rita

24th Our Lady, Help of Christians

25th St Bede & St Magdalene de Pazzi

26th Sixth Sunday of Easter

27th St Augustine of Canterbury

30th Ascension of the Lord

31st The Visitation of Our Lady

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