

REKINDLING WONDER FR. CHRIS SEITH — 2023-12-14

On the Feast of St. John of the Cross, Fr. Chris Seith gave his second talk to TASTE entitled "Rekindling Wonder." By sharing wisdom from this contemplative saint, he invited us to enter into darkness and silence which is very difficult when everything in this world is shouting "attend to me, focus on me." In contrast, St. John of the Cross said that we need to quiet all that noise so we can focus on what is important. In this talk, Fr. Seith demonstrated how we have lost our capability to feel with our heart and how we compensate for it by "manufacturing" experiences of wonder. But Fr. Seith did not leave us there alone and stranded with dull senses. Rather, he showed us how we can authentically rekindle this wonder by transforming our hearts, distancing from our devices, and drawing closer to God.

Abolition of Man — C.S. Lewis put his finger on the pulse of society in a work called the "Abolition of Man" and when he said *"The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts. The right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments."* Fr. Seith believes that this is precisely the problem with our society today — people have lost the capacity to feel anything and impressionable students are easily swayed by prevailing false sentiments. Fr. Seith said we have the mind and the body, but the heart has been given no role and we are becoming "men without chests." For each of these three parts, C.S. Lewis clarified and highlighted specific roles — the mind (reason), the body (appetites or desires/urges), and the chest/heart (soul/passion for truth). Given these 3 complementary roles, it is obvious that all 3 were meant to work together.

MANUFACTURING WONDER — In Fr. Seith's work with young people at the Seminary and at Catholic University, students come in and say "Father, I wish I were able to cry and to feel something." Often, the temptation is for Fr. Seith to say it is not about feelings, rather they are not being reasonable. But, there is a real thirst for fullness of life. We recognize we are not living correctly and we are not attuned to reality. Young people are picking up on this and because people are no longer moved by beauty, we have to "manufacture experiences of wonder. Moreover, these experiences have to get more and more extravagant, more and more ridiculous to make us laugh, to make us joyful, to make us sorrowful, to make our hearts break, and to make us sad. To feel anything, it has to get more and more extreme because ***we have lost the capacity of being moved by reality.*** Unlike us, Jesus felt it ALL because He was moved by reality. As a young priest, Joseph Ratzinger who became Pope Benedict said that "Whoever is simultaneously immersed in God and in the godforsaken creature is bound to be torn asunder. Such a one is truly crucified". We know when we see something beautiful and we are moved to tears and just how jarring that is for us. How difficult it must have been for Jesus to simultaneously behold the beatific vision of the Father and those who are deprived of His presence. Seeing both of these in their fullness, how could He have functioned? On the other end of the spectrum is what people are experiencing nowadays — the absence of either of those. We are cut off both from the beauty of goodness and from the horror of depravity. We just don't care, yet we feel like we should. When we sin, we have to manufacture how terrible it is in our mind because although we know it is bad, we do not actually feel it. We go to confession and say I can not believe I did this. But there is something forced about that because we know we should feel bad about it.

TWO TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE — To be attuned and appreciate the grandeur of reality, we have to be a certain type of person. It is not about having more information or the right information that would allow us to know how good or bad this is. Rather, we need to be able to see ourselves in the other, in communion with the other, and that they somehow relates to us. When we look at the beauty of a sunset and see ourselves as part of it and that WE radiate that same beauty, that will move us. Conversely, when we see that we are disconnected from it, our hearts are saddened. This relates to how the ancients define the two types of knowledge. **KNOWLEDGE BY COGNITION** is a kind of mere theoretical knowledge. Based on the intellect alone, it is cut and dry since it is distant knowledge and simply information. On the other hand, **CON-NATURAL KNOWLEDGE** is a knowing through direct experiences. To give an example of con-natural knowledge, Fr. Seith highlighted the relationship between his parents. He said that if you were ask his dad to talk about his mom, he would literally just take a moment, laugh, and then start tearing up. That's about as far as his dad would get because ... how can you possibly articulate the mystery that is his wife. He is so close to her, he has suffered her presence, and has received con-natural knowledge that comes about because of a union of their hearts. In summary, knowledge by cognition is knowledge "ABOUT" the other, whereas con-natural knowledge is knowledge "OF" the other. To get con-natural knowledge, we must be attuned to another's heart. We have to be close, we have to be able to live with someone and we have to suffer their presence.

TWO TYPES OF HEARTS — As C.S. Lewis would say, I can not be locked away in the casket or coffin of my selfishness. I have to be taken out of that to let another affect me. He points out why we are afraid. In the same quote he says *"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal."* Why? Because the animal will die and if you fall in love with this animal, it is going to hurt you. So, he says if you want to make sure you keep your heart intact, *"Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."* The only place outside of heaven where we can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell. The alternative to tragedy or at least to the risk of tragedy is damnation. Consider this when we are afraid of: 1) being hurt, 2) having another affect us, or 3) not being in control of our own life. When we try to avoid the vulnerability of love by not opening our hearts, we end up getting a foretaste of hell. This is what young people are experiencing when they avoid having a heart capable of breaking. Rather, it is better to be someone who has what the prophet Ezekiel calls a heart of flesh. "I will remove the **HEART OF STONE** from your flesh and give you a **HEART OF FLESH**." This is the promise of Salvation that our Lord holds out for us — to take us out of the hell of our apathy and give us again hearts that that can be broken by beauty and love, by having our life in another.

OUR DEVICES ISOLATE US — Our devices make us uniquely incapable of having hearts that can be broken. Many know the myth of the narcissist — he sees his reflection in the water, falls in love with his own reflection, and dies from despair because he is not able to get that beauty in the reflection and he is so fixated on himself. But what we often forget about this myth is that he did not even realize he was looking at himself. He is obsessed with himself and has no idea that's what he is looking at. When we look at our screens on our devices, we too are looking at ourselves and we also do not realize it. Our devices are here for our convenience and to make everything conform itself to us so that we never have to suffer the discomforting experience of not being in control. So when we are at a line at the coffee shop, we reach for our phones so that we do not have to be aware that we are bored, and maybe a little lonely, and have no one to talk to, and that we are uncomfortable reaching out to somebody else because they are on their phone, and this is making us feel alienated. To avoid all of this, we reach for our phone to at least numb the sense of alienation. What are people longing for as they go to their screen? They want to hear someone say I care about you and you are not alone. But they are not able to hear that because they are so afraid of not hearing that, they can not receive it as a gift. So we grasp that device to have the semblance of another's presence with us. We look through our photos on our phone of people who love us and think we are with them, but we not. We are separated from them and that hurts us. This allows our heart to expand in vulnerability so that when we are with them, it means something to us. We can be moved in wonder that another is with us. While this is what we are longing to hear, we are afraid of not hearing it so we numb the pain and distract ourselves. Everything about our phone is oriented to make things comfortable for us. Although it is not a bad thing to have things at our convenience, the problem is that they are with us all the time and they are designed to do just that. They become an additional appendage and we no longer think of ourselves apart from our phones. Everything is fixated around us and our comfort. If the point of life is to get out of ourselves and to have a life with another and if this device is designed so that our lives are within ourselves all the time, then we are damaging our capacity to be moved by wonder and love and to find connection and real communion with others. So while everyone seems to be at our fingertips with our phones, they get no closer than our fingertips and they do not come into our heart and we do not come into theirs.

TWO TYPES OF WORLDS — Those who create these devices and the apps on them do so for the purpose of keeping us attentive and hooked to them. It is amazing how they use our psychology against us. For example, once we watch one YouTube video, the next time we go to YouTube, it will present similar videos. But it is like slot machines — literally using the same addictive qualities that casinos use to make their slot machine addictive. Next, we will be presented videos that are like the original, but just a few that are not, so that there is the sense that maybe the next one will be what we are looking for. This creates an artificial longing that is being imposed upon us and this is why we find ourselves in front of YouTube for two hours and wonder why we were even there. Meanwhile, we become more dull to ourselves and our own desires, to others and their hearts. This strategy keeps us going to the next task and so it constantly keeps us in the **WORLD OF UTILITY**, rather than in the **WORLD OF RELATIONSHIP**. We have commercialized all our relationships. We ask ourselves, what is the purpose and what is next, rather than just the being together. We do the same thing in our prayers when we tell God: 1) what we want to talk about, 2) the things that we want to figure out, 3) what we need Him to tell us to do next in our life, and 4) the help we need to handle a situation in our family. And the Lord responds "It is really good to see you. Can we just hang out first since it has been a little while?" And even then, we are thinking yeah that is nice, but we have things to do. Because we are starting to lose a sense of how to live any other way, we pray as we live, and we live as we love, and all our loves are becoming commercial, and so we live in that way of just the next task and we pray accordingly. Sadly, this is what's going on in our hearts.

DRAWING US CLOSER — Where do we go from here? The temptation is always what do we have to do to get ourselves out of hell. Fr. Seith invited us to consider that is the wrong question since it assumes that God is not active in our heart already. If we ask — what do we have to do to get ourselves out of hell, then every heresy alarm should be going off in our brain. The question should be, God what are you doing in our lives to draw us to freedom and to yourself? God, you love us and care about us and want us to enter into your life and we can not do it. So Lord, what are you doing to come into our lives? How are you working in our hearts? The apathy itself might be an invitation from the Holy Spirit. In our dullness and sadness, we can sit with our Lord like lovers do when someone is sad and you just want to be with that person. To sit with God in that place of emptiness and to invite Him into it — that is the starting point. Then, the practicals of what do we do become about preserving what God is doing within us. It is just about the relationship, not that we need to stay away from this. It is more that we are actually being drawn into communion with another and we just want to be attentive to that. We want to stay with Him — with this one who is constantly dwelling within us. Saint Teresa of Avila said if she had known who it was that dwelt within her, she would not have left him alone so frequently. Once we begin, then we start making adjustments and then it becomes easier. While we previously thought this just doesn't fit into our life and it is an imposition, now we actually want to be with the Lord. We would rather experience silence and nothing than this noise. After the encounter with God, a healthy aestheticism preserves the encounter and the relationship.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL — Fr. Seith shared a famous poem from St. John of the Cross to help immerse us in this. He talks about a soul that has been tired with love's urgent longings, that something aflame has awakened within him and it becomes his guiding light and it guides him into darkness and it is the only light he has that gets him through this darkness. It is what it feels like when we start distancing ourselves from all these artificial lights. It feels like we are in darkness, but the longing in our heart is the light that guides us through it. That darkness joins the lover to the Beloved Bride and gives us that con-natural knowledge that can transfigure us into the other and awaken a sense of wonder within us.

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