

RECOGNISING THE MOVEMENTS OF RECOLLECTION
– based on the maxim *‘Frequently practice recollection to train yourself’*
in **Treatise Six of The Third Spiritual Alphabet**
by **Francisco de Osuna.**ⁱ

Retrieving a forgotten practice

Before beginning his core teaching on the dynamics of recollection Osuna wants to ensure that his readers understand and receive it within the context of the Judaic-Christian tradition of prayer and the study of scripture which was their heritage. He wants to describe it not as something new or an optional extra, but an essential and integral part of the Christian heritage that has been forgotten - *‘Only the name remains’* he says - and the *‘purest and oldest meaning’* of the word needs to be rediscovered. *‘If you ponder and meditate on my word, you will understand something of the value of this devotion and know that, in naming it, I intended to indicate and touch on those parts of Scripture that secretly praise it, and this was so that we might follow it.’* (6:3.168)ⁱⁱ

It is instructive to review a list of the body of spiritual practices and themes of transformation out of which his teaching originates. Many of these alternative ways of naming recollection highlight interior psychological aspects. (6: 1-3. 158-168)

- Withdrawal into the desert - in imitation of the prophets and Jesus Christ.
- Seeking the concealed God - the apophatic way
- Disciplines of abstinence
- Prayers of approach
- Practices to ‘enkindle’ love
- The prayer of welcome
- Prayers of consent to the will of God
- Sacrifices of thanksgiving
- Claiming divine inheritance
- Inviting or evoking divine visitation
- Participating in the raising and ascension ..
- Opening and emptying the self.

Osuna also names the communal spiritual practices which refer to the outworking of recollection in the world - which Osuna sees as a continuation and outward expression of the inner movements in the soul. From the outset

his understanding of the inner life is neither individualistic or disengaged from society. (6.3.167-168)

- Offering sanctuary from evil.
- A just practice of restitution
- The right and just use of spiritual power
- The establishing of the 'kingdom of God' .
- Continuing the 'royal priesthood ' which offers the 'disciplined self' .
- Being called to a life of service

Osuna's synthesis - a practical approach.

Osuna presents his synthesis of spiritual transformation as an extended reflection on the impact of the divine activity of gathering and collecting . The word *recollection*, is therefore a theological word that goes beyond lim colloquial use - namely, of self containment and remembering. He argues that *recollection* is the most useful word to describe both the experience of being gathered up and the thoughtful reflection on this experience. He says of recollection in prayer that *'the purpose of this exercise is to gather together and collect that which is dispersed, and because this devotion collects and brings together so much, the exercise itself is called recollection.'* He elaborates: The word recollection *'includes and embraces within it the names I mentioned earlier, and all of them are in some way reducible to this one which is, as it were, the sum of their perfections.'* (6:3.169)

He is very clear that descriptive knowledge about recollection is inadequate - that it is a process that is best understood through rigorous and ongoing reflection on experience - which will be unique to each person. *'For fear of tiring my reader, I did not explain in detail what I had noted; also, I wished to leave them something to say in pursuing what I had begun, although I do not believe anyone can proceed with words without using and continuing the work with his own hands.'* (6:3.168) .

Osuna identifies ten interrelated spiritual movements in the soul. He describes them on one hand as progressive, yet also simultaneous and continuous. Not so much stages, but as a gradually increasing intensity of God's 'gathering' activity that culminates in a dynamic unity in the heart. As recollection deepens this is increasingly the initiative of God within, which can only be prepared for, desired, recognised, received and participated in.

The ten spiritual movements of recollection.

1. Recollection is a movement which unites people, the basic movement towards spiritual community. Recollection *'gathers together those who practice it and, by erasing all dissension and discord, makes them of one heart and love.'* Relationships of belonging are established through the intuitive recognition of this shared experience of awakening in the heart- of recognising *'the heart stir strongly'*. This is a community of those being awakened, being recollected - rather than by social organisation per se. Osuna offers the old testament story of Joseph's intuitive recognition of his brother Benjamin to illuminate this oneness of heart and love. (Gen.43: 29-30)

2. Recollection is a **'drawing in' of awareness from an exterior orientation** where the self is over-identified with outer roles and concerns. As Osuna says, *'we are to some degree composed of as many pieces as our concerns, and they are brambles that prick the poor person, like the lamb, until he bleeds.'* We are very vulnerable in this state. So the importance of redirecting of awareness towards the heart is that we connect with the spiritual resources in the heart to nourish and restore the whole person. Osuna offers another image that makes the point that drawing in for refreshment enables, rather than avoids, active engagement with responsibilities in life. Osuna says *'This is like the waiter at a banquet who is very hungry after he has finished serving the gentlemen: God willing, he will eat a meal after he has rested and not be content with the few mouthfuls he managed while serving.'* The turning inwards is therefore about creating a free and undistorted relationship with the world by no longer being satisfied with the esteem and security that it can only give in momentary 'mouthfuls.' (6:4.171)

3. Recollection is a movement of **reconciling sensuality and reason**. In this movement the sensual nature *'which previously had run about in a disorderly and unsubmitive way'* is *'welcomed'* and placed *'under the jurisdiction of reason'* - an essential working together of body and mind towards recollection of the whole person. Here Osuna offers the old testament story of the reconciliation between Sarah and the exiled servant Agar as a symbol of this restored relationship. (Gen. 16:9) Through this story he implies that the practice of recollection includes the work of making conscious (welcoming from exile) the instincts and drives of the sensual nature (represented by Agar) and submitting them to thoughtful reason and

freely made choices (the activity of Sarah) .

4. Recollection is the movement that **inclines us toward solitude** and away from many outer stimulations and distracting relationships. This is manifested outwardly by finding space and time for withdrawal to the extent that is practical and helpful for each personality and individual vocation, and inwardly as an increasing desire to stay with single-minded, undivided, simple attention in silence. Osuna suggests that inner solitude brings with it the realisation that the heart is the essential home for the self - which now urgently wants to return home to the heart - *'We are like an eel that slips around into fisherman's hands so it can wriggle back into the water.'* (6.4.171)

5. Recollection is the movement of **quietening or 'calming' perceptions, thought and speech - and intensifying desire** for God. The desire to know about God through image and reason is being replaced by the desire for direct, affective knowledge that is not mediated through the intellect. Osuna evokes the image of the averted eyes that are experiencing a radically different way of seeing. *'Recollected people also look away promptly and humble their eyes, taking no pleasure in seeing anything, for their only wish is to see God in their hearts.'* The will to love is, especially at first, emphasized rather than the role of the intellect. (6.4.171)

6. Recollection is the movement of **focussing and harnessing the power of physical instincts** . His meaning here probably refers to the 'irascible' powers – sexual and aggressive instincts which are being enlivened and transformed. Osuna describes the initial manifestation as a tempering of energies in the *'members of our body'* . When the power of instinct is drawn into the prayer intense ecstasy can be experienced. Osuna compares this state of rapture in the soul to a bird in flight. He also points out that in these deeper experiences of recollection all energy is so taken up into prayer that bodily movement is temporarily not possible . He places no significance on these bodily reactions - and advises his readers not to interfere with the recollection within. (6.4.172)

7. Recollection is a movement of **infusing virtue – of emptying the heart in order to be filled with spiritual wisdom and virtue.** The purpose of acts of self-giving is to create a clear inner space into which wisdom and grace is given and flows out of. As Osuna says , through recollection *'virtues effortlessly enter our house'* - and that ultimately *'goodness'* is not so much a

moral achievement, but spiritual gift that is received in the heart and that multiplies and increases from there. (6.4.173)

8. Recollection is a movement **of realising and fulfilling the true spiritual identity of the self** in the heart. By implication he is saying that the identity of a created (falsely orientated and falsely seen as separate) self is no longer a concern. Osuna says that here, in the depths , the true, '*catholic*' and '*royal*' spiritual identity of the self is known - having all the 'glory of the king's daughter'. The potential of the human person is being made secure . In the stable refuge of the heart the need for a separate self is abandoned – and profound inner rest is possible , even in suffering and persecution. Osuna uses the unusual image of a hedgehog securely concealed and protected by a stone to invoke this hidden refuge in the heart. (6.4.173)

9. Recollection is the **transformation of the powers of the soul in the heart - namely the will, intellect and memory.**

. Here these inner faculties are justified and transfigured ' in the image of God' and operate in a way that transcends their usual way of functioning . Perhaps the reason Osuna associates this aspect of recollection with 'the spirit of the just' is that these human powers are being returned to God as a just restitution. Osuna also says in this transformation of these faculties the soul 'ascends above itself '. Here we might get his meaning if we return to his earlier metaphor of the pot of water transforming and rising as steam - the intellect being transformed in recollection exercises faith, the will into loves, and the memory into hope in God . (2:8.94-95)

10. Recollection is complete in the **dynamic centre of union in the heart which unites 'God with the soul and the soul with God'**. Here the whole personality is illuminated and radiates love and truth from this centre outwards - in the way that transparent crystal refracts light. From this dynamic centre (or height) the wholly recollected person is fully participating in the powerful acts of God within - the '*mighty deeds*' of contemplation that take place in the soul. It is through this full participation in what God wills that Osuna says the human spirit '*shares dominion with God*'. (6.4.174)

(V. S. 06/08)

Treatise 6, chapter 3, page 168. This form of referencing is used throughout.

ⁱ De Osuna, Francisco . The Third Spiritual Alphabet. Classics of Western spirituality series. Translation and introduction by Mary E Giles, Paulist Press 1991, New York

ⁱⁱ Treatise 6. Chapter 3. Page 138. This form of referencing will be used throughout.