

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Contemplation Defined in General

The word contemplation comes from the Latin *contemplatio* derived from *contemplare* which means "to gaze upon" or "to gaze attentively." Contemplation in general refers to a mode of knowing which involves the "immediate presence of an object to the mind" (E. Wilhemsen, *Cognition and Communication in John of the Cross*, 123). This means that which is seen or known is made present to the person free of any analysis or abstraction or discursive reflection. In this sense, there can be many different contemplations of things, experiences or even people. We can behold the splendor of a sunrise, without analyzing or commenting on it. We simply behold it in awe and wonder and perhaps with a certain absorption and deep awareness. We can have similar contemplative moments when peering into the face of a newborn child or sipping a very fine wine or looking at the starry night sky.

Contemplative Prayer

The term "contemplative prayer" refers to a very specific kind of contemplation since the "object" of prayer in general is really not any thing at all, not some object among all the objects in creation but the very being of God who is in fact no-thing-at-all, that is, God is not some other thing among all the other things of my experience, but God is Being itself--the ground, life-giver and sustainer of all other beings.

If prayer can be defined as communication with God, then contemplative prayer is a very special form of this communication. More accurately, contemplative prayer is the communication of God to us--entering into our consciousness, absorbing our focal awareness in love, bringing with it a certain union and absorption, but always in love and humility.

Thomas Merton writes that, "Contemplation is the highest expression of (one's) intellectual and spiritual life. . . . It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. . . . It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond reason and beyond simple faith" (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1). This is an echo of James: "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity" (James 4:17).

Contemplative prayer takes its beginning in authentic self-discovery--real knowledge of self, of who we are before God. This discovery is a revelation, through prayer, that the satisfaction for which we long in life ultimately cannot be found in any thing, in any created reality. One learns that the self is in fact a temple in which we encounter the offer of perfect fulfillment in an absolute love.

Contemplation: Path of Humility

Teresa of Avila tells us that: "It is foolish to think that we will enter heaven without entering

into ourselves, coming to know ourselves, reflecting on our misery and what we owe God, and begging Him often for mercy" (*Interior Castle* 2.1.11). There is a tendency to see contemplative prayer (mystical experience) as an elitist phenomena, reserved for the elect. The truth is that it is the most humble of all prayers and given only to the humble seeking always to be hidden in God (i.e., without attracting attention to oneself). Teresa says that: "Humility, like the bee making honey in the beehive, is always at work. Without it, everything goes wrong. . . . While we are on this earth nothing is more important to us than humility" (Ibid., 1.2.8-9).

Contemplative Prayer as Pure Gift

John of the Cross defines contemplative prayer as: "nothing else than the secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love" (*Dark Night* 1.10.6). Contemplative prayer is the pure gift from God of God's very self to the person. It is not the product of what we do. We cannot produce or demand it by any ascetical or religious practice. This doesn't mean however that contemplative experience only comes to lucky souls. In fact contemplation only comes to those who dispose themselves to it, although not to everyone. Why not? Only God knows for sure, but the mystics offer us clear guidelines which reveal to us the manifold ways in which we cripple our spiritual growth and prevent God from giving us that which God so desires to give us--God's self in total love. (See Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Complete Works*, 95.)

Contemplation comes in darkness and obscurity (paradoxically, this darkness is the experience of a supernatural light so great that our finite minds often perceive it as divine darkness). Contemplation is a gently burning flame of love that ignites best the one who is in dryness, the one who has surrendered every selfish desire and self-centered attachment. It is very subtle, and in the beginning can be "overlooked" by one who is used to working with words, images, ideas, concepts and affections in prayer. Contemplation is none of these--they are foreign to it--these things can obstruct and block it. As St. Teresa points out, "The Lord will give you understanding . . . so that out of dryness (in prayer) you may draw humility--and not disquiet, which is what the devil aims after. Be convinced that where humility is truly present God will give peace and conformity--even though He may never give consolations--by which one will walk with greater contentment than will others with their consolations" (*Interior Castle*, 3.1.9).

Contemplative prayer is the dark, loving awareness of God's presence within us. To reflect on it, to seize it, analyze it or grasp it is not to have it. Contemplation is what God does within us. Paradoxically, we do act though in a passive way by simply being a receptacle for God's love and grace. We do not resist, but surrender. Ultimately, contemplation is our empowerment by God to love as God loves! [See John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* 39.]

The soul's promise is the promise of an eternal fulfillment. In this sense we have everything to gain, everything to have. Paradoxically, the promise contains within it the fulfillment. In contemplation, the person has nothing to achieve for God accomplishes all. Before the contemplative moment, one must strive for that moment in one's surrender. We must strive in order to not strive. In the contemplative moment there is no striving. Only the knowledge and love of God. This fills our whole being, permeating all we do with love so that the contemplative truly

becomes a contemplative-in-the-world-for-others. It spills over into all our relationships in love, joy, peace and generosity. The poet, Joseph Campbell beautifully describes the contemplative moment in these lines: "When rooks fly homeward and shadows fall, When roses fold on the hay-yard wall, When blind moths flutter by door and tree, Then comes the quiet of Christ to me" (*When Rooks Fly Homeward*).

Contemplation and Action

Ultimately, all mystical graces are given to us--not for ourselves alone--but for the Church, the whole Body of Christ. Contemplatives therefore become contemplative beings-in-the-world-for-Other! John of the Cross tells us that until a person reaches final, perfect union with God she must "practice both the active and contemplative life" (*Spiritual Canticle* 29.2). For Teresa, the active and contemplative lives are not incompatible and can be sustained together in ongoing recollection even as we work: "This is a great favor for those to whom the Lord grants it; the active and contemplative lives are joined. The faculties all serve the Lord together: the will is occupied in its work and contemplation without knowing how; the other two faculties serve the work of Martha. Thus Martha and Mary walk together" (*Way of Perfection*, 31.5).

Neither is pure contemplation totally passive. Thomas Aquinas states that: "In contemplation the mind is not at pause but fully active" (*Summa Th*, 1.58.1). Aquinas comments elsewhere that it is "better to light up than merely to shine, to deliver to others contemplated truths than merely to contemplate" (*Summa Th*, 2.2.188.6).

Concluding Reflections

In all the literature on contemplative prayer, there is little clear description of it. There is no argument--contemplation is not easy to describe or explain. This is one of the primary sources of confusion though. How does one know when or if one is contemplating? It is not always obvious, especially to the beginner (and even the advanced remain "beginners" as they stand before this awesome Mystery).

We are all given different gifts and our gifts can never be judged by the world's standards. The world's greatest mystics are only rarely recognized through a special literary, healing, or ministerial gift. Most live and die hidden from others and themselves! Contemplative prayer inevitably leads to simplicity in life and relationship, and paradoxically to greater love in depth and intensity. This simplicity most often disguises the contemplative. They are hidden in God, and they are the last to know the depth or breadth of their interior life and love. And this too is a grace, since the false self (autarkic pride) waits anxiously to capture the least bit of spiritual accomplishment in order to puff the self up with self-congratulation and importance.

It is therefore spiritually very dangerous to get anxiously caught up in trying to figure out one's prayer life, especially by using others as a measuring rod. No two people are alike, and each is uniquely called to be who they are before God. We live in a commodity culture and this often spills over into the life of prayer in terms of spiritual possessiveness, acquisitiveness, performance

and achievement. These things are deadly on the spiritual path and can lead us to self-absorption and even despair. Thank God if I don't appear to myself as another great mystic, but remain always a beginner--humble, simple and sometimes lost along with my fellow travelers.

Theory is important, but not as a yardstick of our own spiritual growth (leave that concern to God and your spiritual director or spiritual friends). A good rule is this: "theory for others, practice for me." What is meant by this is that I should learn a little theory so as to help others to discern their own unique path unto God, but practice is what I concern my own spiritual life with--practice, practice and more practice. We must "pray unceasingly, without losing heart." The paradox of prayer practice is that the more we pray the more effectively we do God's work in the world. To paraphrase Karl Rahner: mysticism is the condition for the possibility of effective social transformation, i.e., prophetic action, and prophetic transformation is the mediation of mysticism, i.e., contemplative-being-in-the-world-for-others. Look, for instance, at the prophetic witness of Catherine of Sienna, Ignatius of Loyola, John Woolman (anti-slavery Quaker) or Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa, with all that she accomplished-- never had a fund-raiser!--is said to have spent five hours a day in prayer.

Theory is always going to be extremely inadequate and self-dissatisfying. How can our poor, simple ideas ever begin to capture the depth experience of our mystical relationship with God? Notions of achievement and accomplishment belie our tendency to want to be prideful self-actualizers. This is the source of so much dissatisfaction in the life of prayer. We fear not being loved by God or perhaps not being loved as much as a Teresa of Avila or a Julian of Norwich. This is pride in its negative projection of believing we are loveless and unlovable. Often we spend a vast amount of energy in the life of prayer trying to get somewhere or have some experience that will prove to ourselves that we are loved by God. Perspective is what counts though. While no one is righteous in themselves, Christ makes us so. Focus not on self but him! God is all forgiving, all loving, all-for-us. Let us not forget it. "How precious is thy steadfast love [*hesed*] oh God!"