



# THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

## “The Spiritual Senses, Part 1”

Excerpted from

*The Spiritual Journey Part 4, Contemplation: The Divine Therapy*

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### LEVELS OF ABSORPTION

One of the great ways in which the Fathers of the Church explained the spiritual journey in their time, an extremely rich teaching that might be useful for us also, is under the analogy of the spiritual senses. In other words, this is another way of explaining the gradual deepening absorption in the awareness and presence of God, especially in prayer, that St. Teresa described in these four ascending or descending, if you prefer, levels of absorption in God during prayer [Prayer of: Full Union, Union, Quiet, Simplicity].

### MARY AND MARTHA

Now in the Scripture there are two examples of the progress or a certain depth of contemplative prayer that are illuminating, and we'll start from there. The first one is Mary of Bethany at the feet of Jesus listening to his Word. Now the image that we are given in Luke's gospel is of this household where Jesus often spent the night on his trips to Jerusalem, a kind of place of retirement, or to get a little rest in between his heavy teaching schedules in the temple, when he was in the great city. And he was sitting there, apparently talking with Mary of Bethany, who was sitting at his feet while her sister Martha was preparing lunch, and busy about setting the table and arranging the food in the different courses. She complained that Mary was just sitting there at a time when she thought it would be more helpful if she could assist with the chores. But Mary, then, was attentive to the Lord's words and, in fact, the Scripture says she was listening to his word.

### SHE WAS LISTENING TO HIS WORDS

There are several translations that are available, and one is that she was listening to his words, as you are listening to mine. Another translation is that she was listening to his word, in the singular ... which suggests that she was already beginning to move beyond the content of what he was saying to the one who was speaking, to his presence. And you know how it is when you're in the presence of a fascinating person. They're chatting away and all of a sudden, there's a blurring process that takes place, and you don't hear what they're saying anymore because you've moved beyond listening with

the ears, to a kind of heart listening, or attentiveness, or what might be called spiritual attentiveness. You're listening to the body person rather than the words, which are only one part of the person.

## **LECTIO DIVINA**

Now, this is the process, then, that we described earlier as Lectio Divina. And to understand the spiritual senses from several points of view, let's begin with that one; that is to say, using the Word of God in Scripture, as we presented it in its traditional way, as listening to the Scripture or the text, rather than reading it. Even if you are reading it, it's an attitude of listening attentiveness, of that rapt attention that we see exemplified in Mary of Bethany, sitting at his feet and oblivious of the chores that were urgent. Now when we're doing Lectio Divina, that is reading the Gospel as an interview with Christ, as a heavy date, as an encounter ... not to learn something, not to prepare a sermon or to teach somebody, but just as an interview, a tête à tête, that is to say. It's a heavy date ... I guess we'll settle for that word, because one is trying to cultivate the friendship or acquaintanceship of this person who fascinates you, and in this case of Scripture, the person is Christ, or God.

## **TO MOVE BEYOND TALKING**

So as she, and we, are listening as we read the sacred text, let us say, in the parameters of a half an hour interview or heavy date ... a point comes when one begins to move beyond the particular words to the person who is speaking, the eternal Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ, who we believe in the Christian tradition, is disclosing himself to us in the text and offering us the text of the Gospel as topics of conversation. And the conversation, now, is beginning to move beyond talking into the kind of general loving attentiveness to the body person of the one who fascinates you that we spoke about a little earlier.

## **THE A POINT OF SPIRITUAL ATTENTIVENESS**

So here, Mary, then, exemplifies in the Gospel, this process of interiorization of the Word of God which goes beyond the words to the person who is speaking to us and enters into union with that person. The word, then, is assimilated at ever deepening levels of attentiveness. And when we are alert to the person of God, speaking to us through the text and the self-disclosures therein, then one has reached a point of spiritual attentiveness, alertness, awake-ness, and this is the purpose and movement of Lectio Divina when it's done correctly; and, I might add, of any method of contemplative prayer which is designed to use a sacred symbol as the starting point, the diving board, you might say, into the spiritual level of our being and to awaken our alertness, our attentiveness on the level of person-to-person, being-to-being conversation, which might better be called communion ... an interaction, or a relationship that is more intimate than simply conversation, because communion involves the whole person and relating to the total-body person, rather than just their voice or what they are saying. So, the voice, or what they're saying, is simply the introduction into who they are. And in the case of Jesus, he is the Divine Presence in human form, and this is what he's trying to give us, not just the meaning of words or of symbols of the mystery.

## **THERE IS A BLURRING PROCESS**

So, returning once again to Mary of Bethany's experience and by analogy our own as we make use of Lectio Divina, there is this blurring process that takes place, which is not a reducing of our alertness, but the movement of our attentiveness from the particular to the general and, indeed, an enhancing

of our awareness or alertness rather than its reduction. And so Lectio Divina, then it's first purpose ...

### LECTIO GIVES US GOD'S THOUGHTS; THESE DRIVE OUT THE FALSE SELF

... is to give us God's thoughts and these good thoughts kind of push out the ordinary run of worldly concerns and self-centered programs, and the whole world of the false self system around which our thoughts and reactions to events circulate and produce behavior in accordance with the value systems of our childish programs for happiness: security ... pleasure ... power, as absolutes.

### THE BLURRING

Now here we're trying to understand what is happening psychologically to Mary of Bethany, as a paradigm of what is happening psychologically in the process of interiorizing the Word of God or the words of Jesus in the Scripture, until we enter into attentiveness at the level of our spiritual faculties, to the Person of the Word, the Son of God, speaking through the humanity of Jesus and his concepts. So, having left aside, then, the thoughts and the concepts in some degree as this process deepens, one also begins to lose track of the images and reflections that you were making on the texts or the words that you were hearing in Scripture. And now one is beginning to wait upon God, listening to his person and entering into union with that person. And this is what I mean by the blurring: the thoughts, the concepts which initially are very helpful and important in establishing one's convictions of faith and getting acquainted with Jesus' way of thinking, ...

### SPIRITUAL AWARENESS DEEPENS BY GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH JESUS' WAY OF THINKING

... with God's compassionate love for everyone as Jesus unfolds it there in his parables in the Gospels. And so, what is arising now is not concepts or particular acts of relating to concepts, but rather the presence of the mystery in Christ, the Divine Presence, beyond concepts, beyond feelings, and beyond our particular acts, except to maintain ever so gently that focus.

### THE A SURRENDER TO THE PRESENCE

Now this is the purpose of the sacred word in the Centering Prayer. It presupposes the acquaintanceship, the friendliness with Jesus established through Lectio Divina or some other means, or the service of our neighbor ... any number of ways in which God begins to make himself known in our lives. And this is awakening in us, then, this openness, this emptiness of thoughts which is not a blank, but which is simply a surrender to the Presence. And to maintain that surrender, given the distractive-ness of human nature, we need some little help. And that help is simply the sacred word, which gently, ever so gently, maintains our attentiveness to the Presence. It doesn't create the Presence. It doesn't hold it in place. It simply holds us in the attitude of waiting upon God in general loving attentiveness. Not to his words, not to concepts, but to the Presence itself.

### THE KEYSTONE

It's a being to being conversation, a spiritual interaction, that until it becomes habitual and thus becomes the contemplative state ...

### DEEP RESTING IN GOD'S PRESENCE AFFIRMS OUR BASIC GOODNESS AND TRUST IN GOD

... has a lot of vicissitudes and, as we've seen in this course, there are obstacles to it that have to be dealt with. And this deep resting in God's presence is the keystone of the whole program because this is what is building up affirmation of our basic goodness, trust in God. And thus, our defense mechanisms are going down and the emotional damage, trauma, and tensions of a lifetime are being evacuated at times through our awareness during the period of contemplative prayer that serves as a channel of evacuation for this junk. And it's the emptying out of those obstacles which impede the free flow of the human and divine energies within us and hence make it difficult to relate to others and to God, or to maintain ourselves in relationship to the present moment with its gift of total reality. All of this junk is gradually unloaded in the process of the purification's that we described in the night of sense.

### **THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING**

The sacred word, then, is not a magic carpet to bliss or to some spiritual place. It's simply the take-off point that is designed by the process of quieting the mind ...

### **THE SACRED WORD HELPS AWAKEN SPIRITUAL ATTENTIVENESS BY QUIETING THE MIND.**

... to awaken spiritual attentiveness or what the author of "The Cloud of Unknowing" means precisely by that term. The "cloud of unknowing" means we no longer during the time of prayer are knowing or are trying to know God through concept, symbol, gesture, ritual. But we're trying to know him as he is in himself through pure faith, opening ourselves to his presence within us at the deepest level of our being, the source of our being, a presence that has always been there but is covered over by the layers of the false self system ...

### **CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER DISCOVERS OUR INTIMATE UNION WITH GOD.**

... that hide from us this greatest reality of life. Contemplative prayer is the movement to recapture or to discover our intimate union with God that is always there but which we have never known how to access.

### **GOD IS GENTLY INVITING US**

Every form that leads to contemplative prayer, and the sacraments are such methods, spiritual reading, various disciplines of meditation, good works, the service of others, the love of nature as a manifestation of God. In all of these ways God is gently inviting us to become aware of the mystery of his presence within us and then to perceive it everywhere else.

### **THE POINT OF DEPARTURE**

The take-off point for this movement into spiritual attentiveness can be various. In fact, any one of the sense faculties can be the point of departure if it is used correctly ... our diving board into this awakening process, or the birth of spiritual attentiveness within us. I mentioned one, listening to the Word of God, and this is very congenial to the Judaic- Christian tradition that is accustomed to relate to God by listening to his revelation in Scripture. But it's not the only way. And Christian tradition has hallowed other ways. The main principle here that applies to all of them is that a sacred symbol is simply the starting point and a way of helping us maintain that loving attentiveness when it's challenged by the flow of thoughts from the imagination, reactions from our emotional system,

memories, and all the things that come down the stream of consciousness in the way of particular thoughts when you try to quiet the mind.

### **THE SACRED GLANCE**

Another take-off point is the sacred glance [gaze]; that is to say, looking at God. And this is enshrined in one of the great traditions of the East, the Byzantine tradition of the icon, and here is one of them. The icon, rightly understood, contains the mystery that is depicted in the sacred image. Thus, it's not historical or a photographic image of some person or event in Scripture. It's rather a symbol in which, through prayer and through the dedication of the artist, the mystery is believed to be actually present in the picture. So that as you look at the icon, you are in touch at this deepest level with the mystery that it represents. And thus, this is a way of awakening that mystery and of the spiritual attentiveness which is the purpose of each one of these sacred symbols. Actually, in Russian Byzantine iconography and the spirituality of Mount Athos, it's not so much we who are looking at the image, but the image, the mystery, is looking at us. Looking, then, is extremely simple. You don't have to open your eyes, because if the mystery is looking at you, then you're in its presence without even the effort of looking, but simply by being there, whether you see anything or not.

### **THE SACRED BREATH**

A third method that is hallowed in the Christian tradition is the sacred breath. Now breath, in the Greek, is pneuma or spirit. And so, when we speak of the third person of the Blessed Trinity as Spirit, it literally means breath. And breath is that life force that sustains most of communication, whether it's talking, singing, laughing, sobbing, arguing, or whatever. And, above all, it's the breath that expresses itself in an embrace or in a kiss. And so the Fathers of the Church spoke of the Holy Spirit as the most sweet kiss of the Father and the Son, interpreting the breath as the sacred kiss in which the Father and the Son, the two infinitely distinct relationships in the unified oneness of the Godhead, mutually give themselves away to each other forever in this total self-giving love that is not an aspiration for oneness as it is in human love, but is a sigh of infinite bliss and satisfaction because they possess each other.

### **BY THE BREATH OF THE SPIRIT, GOD THE FATHER AND SON LIVE TOTALLY IN EACH OTHER**

Now breath has been in our tradition applied to our own human breathing, so that when one sits in the posture of prayer and inhales, one is symbolically breathing in this sacred breath of the Spirit and then breathing forth this divine love into the atmosphere, into everybody, into the human family. And, I suppose, you could visualize it also as exhaling the false self system, if you prefer that symbol. In any case, it's this breathing of God that becomes the take-off point, identified with one's slow gentle inhaling and exhaling as one sits in the presence of God and awakens or allows the Spirit to awaken our spiritual faculties to the divine indwelling, this mysterious but real presence of God within us as the source of our life at every level of human activity.

### **THE IMAGES HAVE BEEN LEFT BEHIND**

What happens, then, as one practices the sacred word as the take-off point, or the sacred glance towards God, or the sacred breath, is that one begins to realize that these gestures are like what is happening on the spiritual level, where one is in the presence of God "as if" you were looking, "as if" you were hearing, "as if" you were breathing the Spirit. But you're no longer on the external level. You're not involved in the external senses. But you're involved in the awakening of a spiritual

experience which is removed from the senses; but is similar to them. In spiritual things you can't explain what is happening because there's no language for immaterial experience. Language depends on images to express itself or to speak. And so, on this level the images have been left behind, so all the spiritual senses that awaken as different levels of spiritual attentiveness are not sense experiences, but rather they are experiences that are like the senses.

#### **IT'S AS IF WE WERE LOOKING AT A TREE**

Because in trying to articulate or point out something of that spiritual experience, we have to use the closest analogy in the sense world that we can find; and this analogy is the external senses. And then these same sacred symbols sustain that focus once the rational, the image, the emotional reactions blur out. It's as if you were looking at a tree and then your gaze expands and you're looking at the whole woods. Only in this case the difference is maximal, because when you move from a tree to the woods, you're still on the same horizontal plane of reality. Here you move from the senses to the Spirit and there's a vast difference in the vertical plane that we're dealing with on those two levels. And so, spiritual attentiveness, then, is the fruit of the practice of listening to the Word of God, of looking lovingly upon God, icon, or at the tabernacle, or at the Eucharist exposed on the altar, or in breathing, following one's own breath as a symbol of opening, receiving, and surrendering to the Spirit. And at that point, then, one becomes aware of the undifferentiated presence of God beyond thinking, feeling and particular acts. And this is where every method of contemplative practice is designed to bring us.