



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“What Contemplation is Not”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 4, Contemplation: The Divine Therapy

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The chief act in contemplative prayer is the consent of the will to God’s presence and the surrender of ourselves. Contemplative prayer is not a technique. It’s true it makes use of methods, as we saw, using them as a starting point, a diving board, a take-off point, to awaken spiritual attentiveness. But it’s not a magic carpet to bliss. It’s not a spiritual happy hour.

Contemplative prayer is prayer, which means it’s a relationship with Christ. And the faculty that is most involved in this process is the will. And the will’s chief act is consent rather than effort. The presence of God is already here, hence effort is inappropriate to access it, because that would be to suggest that it’s in the future, that something has to be done to find it. It’s true that things have to be done, but the most that that concerns is the dismantling of the false-self system; in other words, not doing the things that are separating us from the sense of God’s presence.

Each grace, each level of human development of prayer is very useful. It’s a grace, but it’s incomplete unless we continue to grow, both in understanding of the gifts we have and in growing beyond the gifts that we might have into what is involved in the substantial transformation of the human organism into the divine manifestation that human beings were created to be.

WHAT IS THE ESSENCE OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER?

The question now arises: what is the essence of contemplative prayer? If it is not manifested in charismatic gifts, para-psychological phenomenon or mystical phenomenon, which are really para-psychological phenomenon, but inspired by God himself through some interior grace that overflows into the other faculties, or by some physical manifestation. This is a very important point to keep in mind, because so many persons who are in the contemplative path, and I’m thinking especially of those who commit themselves to a lifestyle of contemplation, such as monks, nuns, cloistered persons down through the centuries, are committed to the cultivation of this interior spiritual awareness. And yet many of them will tell you that they have never experienced the inflow of divine grace according to the pattern laid out in St. Teresa and other spiritual writers. There has been a tendency in spiritual writers in the Christian tradition to identify contemplation with the interior unfolding of the spiritual senses and the interior unfolding of deeper levels of absorption that one experiences or feels. Feels not in the sense of the sense feelings; but feels in that “as if” manner in

which the spiritual senses have their kind of feelings, spiritual feelings. Okay? We're talking, then, about this level [points to "Path of Full Union, Union, Quiet," etc.] or this path into the transforming Union that is characterized by the "felt" presences of God at ever-deepening levels.

This has always been regarded as, at least by many spiritual writers, as the essence of contemplative prayer. And you'll find in some text books on the subject in spiritual theology that statement, either made or presupposed. The question arises: can you be on the contemplative path without experiencing the exuberant mysticism of St. Teresa or others? And this is rather a crucial question, as I've said, for people in a contemplative lifestyle. And it will be for you, if you commit yourself to Centering Prayer, which is a path into contemplation and is aimed at transforming union ultimately, passing through the purifications of the night of sense and spirit.

A CONTEMPLATIVE?

I would simply now ask a further question: "What do you mean, please, by a contemplative?" If you mean the exuberant mysticism of the inflowing or felt experience of God, then, yes, there are very few contemplatives like that in the cloister. If you mean the essence of contemplative prayer ... which is pure faith, and which is secret, even from the one who is growing or developing, then I would say: "There are lots of them!"

THE SECRET STAIRCASE

I was impressed to see the same evolution of experience repeated in Ruth Burrows' book, *Guidelines to Mystical Prayer*, in which she describes two nuns that she was closely and intimately related with: one was a sister in the convent of Carmel; the other was an active religious, very busy, leading a very heavy and draining ministry in the world. Well it was the active sister, of course, who was the exuberant mystic. And the other sister was the plodding, faithful, obedient religious who practiced contemplative prayer day after day, experiencing it most of the time in the way that we described it in the night of sense, only it kept on going. And instead of coming out of the night of sense, they went into the night of spirit, without any transition. And hence they kept going, going, going without any of these spiritual senses manifesting themselves in the way that we spoke of earlier. And Ruth Burrows said they both arrived at the transforming union at about the same time, the exuberant mystic a little before.

St. Teresa says, although it's interpreted in various ways, that interior ecstasy is a short cut to divine union. So that may be its purpose. It may be a special way of hastening the ordinary process of the dismantling of the false self that has to take place before the transforming union can arise in all its fullness. And so, Ruth Burrows extrapolates that the exuberant mysticism is rare and it's really a kind of charism to enable these people with a lot of psychological experience to explain it and to share it and to encourage the mass of contemplatives who are led by the "secret staircase," as St. John of the Cross calls it.

IT'S UNCOMFORTABLE

It's really St. John of the Cross, that great master of the nights, who perceived that contemplation ... is already present in the night of sense. You remember his basis for this is the fact that in the night of sense, one's interest or value in the projects for happiness that used to absorb all our attention relativizes, because now God is secretly infusing into the spirit the awareness that only God can satisfy the unlimited need of the human spirit for happiness with its unlimited need for truth and

love. No created thing can fill that. Until the night of sense, we hope, or we think, or we expect creatures to fill it, or experiences, or something to cover up that basic existential hunger for God. In the night of sense, all those measures fall flat. And it's not a rejection of creatures, but simply the awareness, the relativizing of them, so that one sees their true goodness, but no longer tries to extract an absolute happiness from them. And so, this is great freedom indeed. ... But it's uncomfortable because one mourns for all the good things one is losing without realizing that one is well rid of them, at least insofar as one was over-dependent on them for one's happiness.

A RAY OF DARKNESS

This brings us, then, to the great insight of John of the Cross that contemplative prayer is fundamentally a "ray of darkness." He's actually quoting Pseudo-Dionysius, the early Syrian monk of the sixth century, who influenced Christian tradition so deeply and who might be called the "founder of apophatic contemplation" ... based on moving beyond all concepts and the human faculties into the undifferentiated presence of God within. John of the Cross, then, foreseeing some of the insights of quantum mechanics, perceives God, then, as this immense energy (without giving it that term) that is localized in us; and hence, the phenomenon that we experience in our localized interpretation is not God and is not the immense energy that transcends any faculty whatsoever to perceive, but is simply our interpretation or the radiance of God's action in us.

IT'S ONLY PURE FAITH

It is only pure faith, which transcends every human experience, that actually accesses God totally in his purity and all the time. And his example is that if a ray of light went through a perfect vacuum, you would not know it was there, because there was no dust which the energy could reflect upon. What we see as light is only the reflection of energy. And what we perceive as spiritual light is only the reflection of the divine energy. And what we feel in our spirit, even, is only a reflection. It's pure faith that accesses the whole of God, provided you consent, and provided you don't demand of it some experience which would be localizing. If you accept it as it is, then this divine light is constantly beaming into our body, person, soul and spirit, organism, all the time, all day long, in every situation as long as we consent and remain tuned to that ultimate message of the universe.

THE BEATIFIC VISION

Our false-self system and even our spiritual reactions and experiences are still only dust compared with the immense purity, power of the divine energy in heaven. ... God provides us with the ability to perceive him just as he is; we call that the beatific vision. In this life it is not possible to see him just as he is and live, according to John. But we can consent to knowing him in the darkness of faith. And in that darkness arises the invincible conviction of his presence. When that is a habit and established, you're in the transforming union, which is the restructuring of consciousness, not just an experience or set of experiences.

And hence, if we could grasp that insight of John of the Cross, it would free us from an immense amount of distress in the journey. Most of our troubles come from our expectations which are not fulfilled, from not meeting some standard that is written in a book, or which is the common agreement of spiritual directors in our time. The narrow way leads to life.

And this teaching of John of the Cross is all the difference between taking an express elevator to the top of the Empire State Building, or whatever the equivalents are, or taking a local. Now if you take

the local, it stops at every floor. And at every floor, the view is better: the vista is more magnificent; the real estate is more expensive.

TAKE THE EXPRESS ELEVATOR

The wisdom, then, since life is short, of starting early on this journey, and taking the express elevator to the top is: disregard all the phenomenon that might occur in between as a by-product of the unloading of the unconscious or of the purification of our potentialities from this straitjacket of the false-self programs for happiness, that are involved in trivia. ... The ray of darkness, then, is the way of pure faith which perseveres in the contemplative practice without thinking of self, worrying about where one is on this journey, comparing oneself with others, judging others' gifts as better than ours and feeling jealous. All this nonsense is wiped out if you recognize and surrender to the essence of the spiritual journey, which is to accept God as he is and where he is: which is in our inmost being, in pure faith, and to surrender ourselves to that presence and to whatever the psychological content of our prayer is.

THE TRUE SELF OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE

To return a moment to Ruth Burrows' experience. This dear nun, who had plodded all the way, never had any felt experience of the inflow of grace; but had persevered in her prayer when it was dull, boring, no change, routine, same old faults, same old distractions, same struggle with primitive emotions, same unloading of trauma from early childhood. At some point she was walking in the garden on a retreat day, and all of a sudden, she was aware that she was completely changed; that the "I" of her ego-identity had just reduced itself virtually to nothing, and the big "I AM" of God, and the presence of the risen Christ within her just grew bigger and bigger. So that the source of her identity was now no longer the self that she had known, but the true self of Christ's presence within her and the risen life of Christ manifesting itself in everything she did, wherever she went, sleeping or waking, and which was communicating to her the energy to fulfill her vocation with untiring and tireless determination.

IT'S COMMITMENT TO THE JOURNEY

Thus, it is commitment to the journey and fidelity to the practice that leads to transforming union, not experiences. Now experiences may help to bring you to this disposition. And even your mistakes and how you handle them God uses to help you. And sometimes you need them in order to heal the wounds of the emotions; so that if no one else ever loves you, at least you know that God loves you. And he proves it by the lovey-dovey embraces or whatever you need. But once the emotions have been healed, then he gets down to business and begins to treat you like an adult. And you're in for the narrow path that leads to life, the way of pure faith; and to manifest that conviction in your relationships.

Pure faith, then, is not just an interior state. If the divine energy of pure faith is beaming into your spirit all the time, then it's going to have an effect in your life. And this is what Jesus meant when he said, "By your fruits you shall know them." So, the person who is moving towards or in transforming union is manifesting who they really are by how they live.

And so, there is, then, a "lights on" mysticism and a "lights off" mysticism. It's a blank. You don't see it. Or, as John of the Cross describes it, it's a "hidden staircase." To use that symbolism, some people are invited into the Interior Castle of St. Teresa through the front stairs, but others are

referred to the service entrance, the back stairs. And so, they climb through the back stairs, the hidden entrance which is not known even to themselves. And that's really hidden.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

What difference does it make?! As long as you get in the house and start climbing! So, to make the front stairs everything and to disregard the back stairs is to make a serious mistake. The divine light of faith, sheer energy, is entirely ours by consent. And by giving ourselves to that Presence, it heals the wounds of a lifetime and brings us secretly, step by step, to the transforming union and then to all the fruits of the Spirit and the Beatitudes, along with the immense energy to serve our community, the church of God, and the whole human family and to enter into fully Christ's redemptive program, which is to transmit to every human being the divine light, life and love in its maximum.