



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“From Contemplation to Action, Part 2”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 4, Contemplation: The Divine Therapy

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WHAT CAN WE DO AS INDIVIDUALS?

So many people, as they begin to feel concern, and a poignant concern for the oppressed, the injustice of the world, the mind sets which treat other people as unequal or less than ourselves. And yet the great question arises in their minds in view of the enormity of global problems: hunger, peace, violence, injustice: “What can I do as a single individual?” Or, again, others will raise the question a little differently: “How can I contribute to peace, to some social ministry, however much I see it’s demanded and it needs to be done, when I, myself, am experiencing so much of the residue of the false-self system, when I myself am aware that I’m still under the influence of excessive demands for bigger and better things out of life, for more and more security. Or when I’m offended and hurt if someone insults me or if I lose a little power over some little kingdom that I’ve built up ever so gradually and lovingly, my nest, for years and somebody comes and throws me out?”

WE DON’T HAVE TO WAIT

Let’s address those two questions because it’s important to realize that one doesn’t have to wait until one has reached the transforming union and has been perfectly purified before one can begin to serve others or to practice those simple invitations of Christ to practice the works of mercy. In other words, Jesus isn’t asking for so much. He says whatever you did to the least of these little ones, my little people, you did to me. So “whatever” doesn’t sound like a great deal. It could be as simple as giving someone a cup of water, a smile, or to be concerned if they’ve lost someone in the family, or to take responsibility to get them medical help or psychiatric help if they’re very disturbed, or to help them to deal with their addictions if they’re hopelessly caught in them. In other words, it’s a non-judgmental way of reaching out to anyone in affliction who is nearby, right under your feet, sometimes. And we don’t have to wait until we can speak to the UN or go to Moscow for some summit conference. Somebody in need is right next door, in your family, at work, on the subway, everywhere you turn, if you’re sensitive. And also, if you take the first step, sometimes the whole journey opens up.

A PRISON MINISTRY

There's a delightful example in a book on applying the Gospel to daily life which addresses this question also. And in this story this couple had been engaged in a prison ministry, in visiting prisoners and convicts on a regular basis to encourage them. And this one convict, they found, could get a parole if he had a job. Now they had a restaurant business with an out service, and so they said: "Well, we'll hire the guy." They prayed over it and they felt moved when they were praying and peaceful to hire the guy, even at some risk to their business. So, they did so. And he was delivering their service to the different homes and parties and weddings that was part of their business.

THEY WENT BANKRUPT

Well, as their clients heard about the fact that this representative had just been in jail, they began to change their order, and went to other companies. And so, little by little, their business went down, and they went bankrupt. And so, they prayed over this. And they decided: "We'll still keep this guy. We'll start a new business and he'll be part of it from the beginning." And so, they started a new business. And little by little it began to become more successful than the previous one. The man had great talent and when he was accepted because he was part of the new business, everything went very well.

A STEP INTO THE UNKNOWN

Now suppose this couple had said: "Oh, I can't be bothered. We don't want to risk our business," He would still be in jail. And the potentialities that that man had, whatever the reason he was to be in jail, would never have had the opportunity to flower and possibly to allow him to make a contribution to society. And so, what we sometimes think is a disaster, and indeed, is a disaster: just because you do good doesn't mean you won't go bankrupt. But it does mean that God may be providing you with a better business, a better way of living. And so, the one step that you take out of charity is a step into the unknown. It's an adventure in faith and it can lead to ramifications that we never in the world could possibly have dreamed of.

Charity, that is, showing love, is the greatest investment there is. If you want to put it into statistics or business terminology, you can't lose. But you may not get the return that you're expecting. But you'll get something infinitely better. You may lose on these sub-human levels, but you will reap your investment on the higher levels of consciousness, inner freedom, and the joy of service, which Jesus seems to say ... if you do it right, for the love of God, is the greatest happiness there is.

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

Notice the seventh Beatitude that corresponds to the transforming union is "Blessed are the peacemakers." Jesus doesn't say, "Oh blessed are the peace-lovers" because these are the people who don't want you to rock the boat, who want a feigned peace, who want things to look peaceful, who want to sweep under the rug all their shameful or embarrassing situations. Like the capitalistic system is embarrassed by the homeless and the unemployed. So, we try to hide those people. The Russians are embarrassed if someone disagrees with their ideology. So, it's the dissidents ... they try to get them out of the way. So, every mind set, bias or prejudice is afraid of peace-makers, but not of peace-lovers. They can deal with them because they can appeal to their desire not to have their own lives ruffled up by the oppression and the misery and the suffering of other people.

NOT SUBSTITUTE SACRIFICES

As long as I am comfortable, the hell with everybody else. This is the mindset of the mythic membership level of consciousness. It's a sin if it's conscious because this is to disregard not only our own personal growth but the duty of a human being to respect the rights and the needs of others. Our spiritual journey can only grow in the social context; hence it involves always a right submission to God [points to apex of triangle under philosophical model chart], not a magical attitude towards him which is typical of mythic membership consciousness and the typhonic consciousness, but on that true relationship which manifests a true religious attitude which is to offer God not substitute sacrifices, the project of selfishness, but ourselves. That's true religion and God is not interested in any other gift unless it manifests that disposition. And then we are in relationship to others of equality.

REASON SLAYING THE DRAGON

And here, again, to grasp the full ramifications of our mythic membership over-identification. We are still in the patriarchal culture that arose about three thousand to two thousand BC, symbolized by Zeus, reason slaying the dragon, symbol of the emotional life. And this has led to the subjection of women. Certainly, by no stretch of the imagination, can we say that men and women are still not treated equally in all the cultures of the world. And in some of them, the injustice, the inequality is greater than others, depending on where that culture is in its gradual evolution.

YOU NEVER LEAVE

But the downward pull of regressive tendencies is so strong in human nature that again it requires the Gifts of the Spirit making us hunger for justice. This is the only thing that will eventually get us out of the fascination of self-centered projects and the support of our culture that tends to reinforce those early attitudes.

Hence, again, the value of an institutional commitment to Beatitudes to offset the institutional commitment to selfishness and the exploitation of others. And finally, we have this relationship to the earth for which we are stewards and have the obligation to pass on the environment intact to the next generation. We're not the only members of the human race and to think: "Well, what happens after I'm gone, fine?" You never leave! You may have a new relationship to the earth and the human family. But whatever your attitude to it was when you were alive, it will continue after death to your weal or to your woe. And that's the meaning of the last judgment. Humanity isn't going to go away. Whatever you did to the least of these little ones, that's what's going to happen to us in eternity, according to Jesus' teaching, which is coming out of the higher levels of consciousness, indeed the very highest levels; and hence, is wisdom.

THE POOR IN BRAZIL

The great archbishop, Dom. Helder Camara really started what are called the Base Communities in South America and Central America. Which are just people reading the Gospel as if they were part of it, as if they were the characters in the Gospel; and applying those principles, not only to their daily life, but as a community. In other words, here is the first time to my knowledge where a group of people have addressed the question, can you lead the Beatitudes not just as an individual, but as a community, as an institution? If there were a few institutions with that "magna carta," they would change the world. Because then there would be a network of individuals practicing the Beatitudes,

and the power that is inherent in each individual would be multiplied geometrically, astronomically, as a group of people actually puts the Beatitudes into effect as an institution.

HE'S JUST A LITTLE MAN

I had the privilege of introducing Dom. Helder as a speaker at a summit meeting of world religions held in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. And he spoke in this vast cathedral, and I think it's the second largest on earth. And he's just a little man about so high, and deeply wrinkled, with these huge sacks under his eyes. And, of course, he speaks with broken English. No one could understand a word he said. But just to look at this man was all you had to do to know what he stood for.

HE STARTED TO SPEAK

We had a private meeting of spiritual leaders from different world religions at the UN religious center there, and he started to speak about the situation in Brazil. The focus of this meeting was to raise the consciousness of people about the necessity of a commitment to peace, and especially a commitment to peace springing from religious conviction as an essential aspect of true religion in our time, given the magnitude of violence and war. In other words, we were encouraging the world religions and the churches to speak as one voice in saying that war in our time is totally unjust, indefensible, unacceptable and hence, their co-religionists should refuse to take part in it, even in defense. Because in our time defense involves the destruction, the monumental destruction of the innocent. But to learn to oppose violence with non-violent means. This is the gradual movement of some of the best minds in the world religions.

JUST ONE RESPONSE – TEARS

Dom. Helder Camara represents the poor like nobody I've ever seen. He started to speak about the poor. This ... It's really a misnomer to call these people that he has served all his life poor. They're destitute! Jesus said: "You'll always have the poor with you." He did not say the destitute. They are our responsibility. If anyone is destitute, we have to do something about it, some way and soon. And even though we can't move or seem to move, to want to, to pray for it will at least raise the consciousness of people we know and love to what this future must include. As he spoke about the poor, he suddenly choked up. He just couldn't speak anymore. And these gentle tears started coming down those furrowed and wrinkled cheeks. Those bags under his eyes, like fountains kind of filled up with water and came down over his face. For five whole minutes, as his mouth twitched every now and then and we thought that maybe he could speak, we waited for him to say something. He couldn't talk. The memory, the realization of the poor, the destitute and their plight left him with just one response ... tears. Nothing ever convinced me more of what it means to be poor than that face. And here is a man who has spent his life, perhaps more than almost anyone else except a very few, to reach the destitute and to arouse the conscience of the world, of nations, of his own country, and of his Church, to the plight of people under such incredible destitution out of which there is no hope to arise. And so, these Base Communities are infusing into this hopeless situation the spiritual principle that can give those people, at some point, the creativity to band together and to demand their rights in non-violent ways.

WE DON'T HAVE TO WAIT TILL WE ARE PERFECT

We don't have to wait till we are perfect or till there's some world organization that we can join. Jesus sent his disciples out two by two to work miracles and to preach the Gospel before they were remotely prepared to do so, and still less prepared for the success that followed their ministry. And so, when they arrived back from this great ministry, they were so excited they were telling him: "The demons are subject to us in your name, Lord." They were so excited, they expected him to pat them all on the back and applaud them. On the contrary, he said, "Oh don't get excited about that kind of stuff. Anybody can work miracles with a little psychic energy. What you should rejoice over is your names are written in Heaven."

That is to say, you have the destiny to be transformed and the capacity to transmit your personal transformation, that is your absorption of the divine mystery, your assimilation into the Word of God, into daily life among the people you know and with whom you live. And it's the very failure of your efforts to serve that teaches you little by little how to serve, which is with complete dependency on the divine inspiration, mercy, so that you serve without demanding success. And this is what changes the world, maybe not in your lifetime, but it will bring people into union and unity with the Ultimate Mystery whom we call God.