



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“The Divine Banquet and Dance, Part 2”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 5,

Divine Love: The Heart of the Christian Spiritual Journey

Fr. Thomas Keating

THE PRACTICE OF CENTERING PRAYER

A part of this dance that I spoke of with the Divine Love is rooted in the practice of contemplative prayer and in the practice of Centering Prayer, which is an effective way of accessing contemplative prayer in our time. Centering Prayer is specifically designed for people in our time who seem to like methods as a way of learning anything. And so, before getting into the source of Centering Prayer, which is very deep in the Christian tradition, I think this is the place to say a few words about the basic theological principles on which contemplative prayer or practices leading to it ... and there are a number of such ... depend or are rooted in ... if they are going to be specifically Christian contemplative prayer and represent that great heritage.

First of all, as a preliminary remark, contemplative prayer is rooted in the grace of baptism. It's basically; a growth of faith that we received in baptism or have accessed prior to that which leads us to baptism in which the presence of God believed to be within us just goes on increasing. And so, the sacrament of the Eucharist is simply a way of enhancing every time we receive it the presence of Christ as God within us at ever deepening levels. And so, we can distinguish, or we should, it seems to me, begin with the doctrine of the divine indwelling.

This is the doctrine that says that the Trinity, the Divine Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose interaction I just very briefly described, is present in us all the time – morning, noon and night – and present everywhere else in the universe in virtue of the fact that other things exist. Wherever anything is, God who is “is-ness” must be present; otherwise, there's nothing there to hold that particular expression of “is-ness” in existence.

The Divine Indwelling, then, is the basis for contemplative prayer and it means that God is, so to speak; present and waiting for us at the inmost level of our being. And it's through the practice of contemplative prayer that faith keeps growing and love keeps growing with faith and gradually the sense of the divine presence becomes more and more a kind of second nature or a fourth dimension to all reality and it begins to manifest itself in everyone else for whom the divine indwelling is the deepest reality about them. So that what is important about each of us is not us but the divine

presence in us. So that it is God in us, so to speak; who is relating to God in everything else. And, thus, this perception of reality is the way it actually is. And the way that most people see it is just upside down or crooked or distorted and this is why it needs to be fixed by a process that leads to an increased sensitivity to prepare us for this dance.

INTRODUCES US TO GOD

In other words, the period of contemplative prayer, is sitting one out; so to speak. Or getting a little instruction in how to respond to the movements of the Beloved which are so graceful, and so firm, and so sure, and so protective, and so delightful. Imagine a dance with such a partner. Incredible! In any case, the divine indwelling, then, introduces us to God and hence it presupposes that we're willing to take the steps to reduce the obstacles in us to the Divine Presence ... to become sensitive to the movements of the Spirit within us.

Along with the divine indwelling goes a package, you might say, or a trousseau, you might say, a kind of wedding trousseau that include all of the potentials that we need – I spoke of it before as DNA – in order to be transformed in our inmost nature. Thus the trousseau consists of the four infused moral virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude, and the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, enumerated in Isaiah, which lead to the Beatitudes, actually, when they are activated, and the eight or nine Fruits of the Spirit that Paul enumerates in Galatians 5: charity, joy, peace, gentleness, self-control, patience, goodness, and fidelity. All of these precious treasures are signs that Christ is truly risen in us. In other words, this is the positive expression of the grace we received in baptism, and it's unfolding within us manifests itself in a great variety of acts and constitutes our kind of spiritual poise. So that the divine Spirit can guide this body, soul and spirit through the intricate steps that the divine action may wish to take with us depending upon our vocation. And God doesn't look for an audience. He enjoys this game with each of us. There's this playful character about God. You only have to look at some animals, like a penguin and a few other things, or lambs gamboling, to realize that this creator has a delightful sense of humor. And if you see how Jesus sometimes dealt with his disciples you see that their faults didn't disturb him much but that he sometimes made a gentle fun of them in order to gently bring to their attention that there was something in their behavior that reflected a selfishness that had to be confronted and let go of.

So, the divine indwelling is the basic root, the most radical in the sense of deeply rooted, root of contemplative prayer. It needs to be constantly refreshed by doing a practice that focuses its attention on consenting to God's presence and action. This, of course, as you know, is the main focus of the Centering Prayer practice. Another way of looking at it: it's a way of learning God's language, which is silence. And hence in contemplative prayer, one adopts a receptive attitude and allows one's usual psychological thinking to be bracketed during the time that one gives oneself to contemplative prayer. So that one can listen to the deeper impulses of God's silence – which is, nonetheless, a true language and which nudges us, little by little, or draws us by way of attraction to the spiritual level of our being, the level of intuition, and spiritual love and beyond that to the true self, which is the self that God actually made, God's idea of us, our uniqueness, as an expression of who God is, of his manifestation or of God's wish to experience human life in a special and perhaps sometimes extraordinary way.

Beyond this presence, then, that is waiting for us and is always available, which we'll go into in more detail in the next presentation or conference, there are two other great principles on which the

Centering Prayer practice and contemplative prayer in general are based, at least in the Christian tradition.

THE FOCUS OF OUR PRAYER

The second one is the focus of our prayer – the basis is the divine indwelling – the focus is on the Paschal mystery which is the word that is used to describe the primary work of salvation which is Christ's passion, death, descent into hell and resurrection.

So, when we are sitting in Centering Prayer or undertake reducing the obstacles in us to the divine love and to the capacity to engage in the intricacies of the divine dance so that it looks simple – it usually isn't simple because of the complexity of human nature – but when it's perfected, it looks like the easiest thing in the world. In other words, one of the fruits of the Spirit is gentleness and this is not only a certain lack of energy for anger and certainly none for revenge, because once in a while anger is appropriate, but it's primarily this gentleness is a way of working very hard to accomplish what one thinks is God's will and then stepping back and allowing the thing to happen as if you hadn't done a thing.

And so, this is the way creation works. God is incredibly gentle. He lays out these incredible activities on the subatomic and the super galactic levels, and yet all the time he does it with complete ease, as if he weren't trying. It just happens. And so, the works of God, in some sense, partake of that gentleness. So that one's efforts for God's kingdom are not so much exhaustive, although sometimes they may be that, but inwardly there is not the tension for success, or control, that damages the work of people who haven't accessed this particular fruit of the Spirit yet and who think that they are doing everything or that everything depends on them, including their own progress in spirituality.

GOD DOESN'T ASK US TO EARN ANYTHING

It's true we have to do a certain reduction of the obstacles in us that clearly need some change, but basically; God doesn't ask us to earn anything. This is one of the mistakes, I think, of some religious traditions, that we think that we have to earn God's favor; or we start out feeling we're unworthy of God, which is not even an issue. Because, I mean, if you're created out of nothing, what have you got to lose? I mean it's ridiculous. But, none the less, people do feel, because of their cultural conditioning unloved or unworthy, and hence when it comes to relating to God, they project onto God the way they think other people think of them; namely, this guy is no good, or who would love him, or who would give him a job, or let's get rid of him, or why doesn't someone shoot him, etc. etc. Whereas God doesn't think that way at all.

So, the Gospel is not about earning the love of God because you've got it already. It's a matter of receiving it. And, believe me, this is more work than going out and getting it because the divine love is so loving and so searching, so gentle but firm, that God accomplishes all things sweetly but firmly as one Scripture text says.

There's no question of God not succeeding in what he sets out to do, but it looks as though he was doing it without even getting out of his armchair; so to speak. It just flows and it's this flowing of spiritual energy that overtakes people who frequent the inner room and the divine presence so that their activity looks exhausting or impossible at times, and yet they scarcely feel it at all. It's not a problem for them because they're sort of being carried along, especially when they are under the

influence of their particular gift or charism by the divine energy; and when they get dropped, like that pencil I described, it doesn't bother them because they never thought of themselves as anything anyway. But they certainly never thought of themselves as undeserving. They simply are what God made them and that's all they want to be. And so, when he puts them down, they know that this is the time to rest or to wait or just – to be.

SHARING IN CHRIST'S REDEMPTIVE ACTIVITY

The Paschal mystery, then, is a sharing in Christ's redemptive activity so that when we sit down in Centering Prayer, for instance, we think of ourselves as sitting on the cross with Christ. Some archeologists think that actually there was some kind of wooden prong that stuck out from the crosses that were made in those days and they were often used, and that the victims straddled that object in order to prolong the sufferings of their suffocation and death.

What we are experiencing, then, in Centering Prayer, is God's presence affirming our goodness, but at the same time, leading us towards an ever-deeper self-knowledge so that we may give up those things in us that are basically selfish and that look to the ego as the great "I" of the universe, which, of course, it is not. And so, people need to realize that the sense of being unworthy of God is neurotic. It should be put in the waste basket as an idea.

Everybody needs God. It's not a question of being worthy or not. The issue is ... will you, like those people in the third category of the great banquet, whether you're willing to come in and sit down with the one who joins us. And it's that joint endeavor, that joint sharing of the human condition with its joys and sorrows, its ordinariness, its profane character, its endless waiting, its deprivations – this is not just our suffering, if we experience that, but rather the experience of the prayer is gradually educating us in what contemplative prayer really is, an education in undeserved mercy.

And so, everybody is not getting there on the basis of their deserts but on the basis of God's generosity and gratuity and other parables seem to say the same thing too.

GOD IS NOT JUST AN ONLOOKER

As we look at what Christ has taken upon himself in his passion, death and resurrection, our realization of what the salvation of the world has cost both him and God because in a certain sense God dies in the crucifixion. If Jesus is God, then in a sense, God dies, or he experiences what death is. Of course, he can't stay dead and of course there is no time sequence in God. But it means that he's taken into himself all our pain and that means the ultimate pain for most people which is death itself. And so God is not just an onlooker or is applauding our efforts from the bleachers. He's come down, sat down with us right in the sufferings that are most acute.

And so what Jesus has taken upon himself, in the great saying of Paul – that God made him who knew not sin into sin – is precisely the consequences of our failure to follow our conscience or in obvious acts of misbehavior that trample on the rights of others and our own true good in order to get what we want or to get away from what we don't want. And so personal sin is that kind of experience, but it's not the sin itself that causes God pain or offense. It's the consequences in us of guilt feelings, humiliation, shame, discouragement, despair, feeling no good, hopelessness, desolation, loneliness. It is those terrible dispositions which are the natural sanctions of going against our conscience. This is what hurts God, because it hurts us! And he loves us and doesn't want us to experience this pain. So, it's precisely this psychological mayhem or utter human misery

as a psychological state that might be called hell itself that Christ has taken upon himself in his passion, death and resurrection.

And if anything hurts God now, it's our attitudes that reflect the pain of an uneasy or a destroyed conscience. But notice this is the precise point where redemption takes place. It's when we accept those natural sanctions and our feelings of failing God or offending God or losing God or rejecting God or whatever it is that's heavy on our conscience from however long a history of living life. It is precisely that that once we accept it that God takes upon himself and redeems it and the very pain becomes part of the transformation of the new self or the true self which enables us to access the true person that God made us to be.

GOD IS TOTALLY JOINED TO US

And so, rather than feeling unworthy of God, the right disposition for the contemplative is to recognize that God is totally joined to us in our difficulties and that the difficulties don't reflect God's displeasure but only the desire he has to assimilate us to his redeeming passion and perhaps to invite us beyond our own healing process to share our pain for the redemption of the whole human family; because the whole human family is the object of God's desire for transformation and it's into this project that he invites us the farther we go into the spiritual journey and the more intimate the dance becomes. The contemplative prayer, then, is really a profound, and the profoundest, perhaps; participation in Christ's passion death and resurrection.

Just to complete that extraordinary teaching that comes to us through the Catholic tradition, there might be distinguished three stages of Christ's assimilation of the human condition in the Paschal mystery. The first one is called the Agony in the Garden. This is the place where Jesus on the night of his arrest after the Last Supper withdrew with his disciples. And he left them, maybe a stone's throw, and they, in their sorrow, went to sleep – which is what most people do when they can't handle grief. So he was left alone to deal with the realization that was experiential that he was being asked by the Father, whom he knew as Infinite Goodness, as no one else has ever done, to take upon himself the exact opposite of what the Father is – which namely is the sinfulness of the world, or the love of sin which is more serious than sin itself; that is, the identification with evil of any kind, or the most intense kind, or any amount of it. And this Jesus calls – the cup; that is to say, the cup of human misery that is filled to the brim that he felt inwardly he was being invited to drink; not just symbolically but in the passion and agony that was ahead of him on the cross and perhaps the further desolation of a descent into the state of consciousness of people who are in hell ... hell conceived not so much as a place but as a state of consciousness in which one feels rejected by God, abandoned by God, desolate, lonely, hellish, hateful to God; in other words, the most terrible human dispositions which are sometimes repeated in certain mental illnesses, like in some schizophrenics and in some sociopaths and the kind of conscience that people in prisons have to carry around with them day to day in situations that are inhumane and inhuman.

And not only that, but the mass of human misery, evil, brutality, torture, death, loss, separation of families – all the human feelings of distress. This is what was in that cup. And at first, he says: Father if it be possible, take this cup from me. Never-the-less not my will but thine be done. Father, if it be possible take this chalice, this colossal, monumental ocean, this space of all creation, so to speak, filled with sin and evil and grief and misery and hatred. Please help. Don't ask me to bear this feeling!

And this is the cry of human weakness reaching to infinity. But then right away comes the courage and the depths of love – it could only be love that could say this – but without the slightest consolation or feeling of reward for love, but simply the sheer knowledge and love of the Father’s goodness going beyond any examples contrary to it that said: Not my will but thine be done. And this is the voice of divine love reaching to infinity and it’s this act that manifests who the Father is perhaps; more than any other revelation ever did or can do.

A DOOR INTO THE VERY HEART OF GOD

This is a window or a door into the very heart of God in which he could give up his only begotten son, the son of his bosom, in whom he lived as God, more than in himself. And to allow this to happen for people who had declined the invitation to the banquet or whom nobody else would have ever thought of inviting. His divinity laying down his life for the poorest and most desperate and needy of creatures, creatures who have enough freedom to experience the fullness of human desolation.

On the cross, then, Jesus finds himself in agony, and notice he calls God no longer Father but God: My God why have you forsaken me? ME, the son of your bosom, the one who knows you the best? And finally, following the Greek Orthodox liturgy which believes that he then descended into the state of mind or the state of consciousness of hell means that Christ took upon himself the ultimate of human misery in the way of feeling, consciousness, and the depths of the spirit, even lost his identity as the Son of God in some degree that seems ... so, so mysterious.

And hence this experience of desolation and hellishness is the moment of redemption in which everybody’s sins are taken away as if they never existed. And it’s out of that place where Christ passively, who cannot save himself (he’s dead) cannot make an act of self-surrender, he has absolutely nothing but the Father’s pure confidence and trust.

And it’s out of that place that he rises to the glory, later fulfilled in the Ascension, of the vindication of God’s love and God’s humility.