



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“Prayer in Secret, Part 1”
Excerpted from
The Spiritual Journey Part 5,
Divine Love: The Heart of the Christian Spiritual Journey

Fr. Thomas Keating

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:6

The next question I want to take up is how do you get into this marvelous process of ever deepening knowledge of God, ever deepening unity with God, and ever deepening union with other people? It's a fact and even physics today, the quantum mechanics and other sciences, are speaking in religious tones, although they don't mean to; but someone with religious ears notices these sayings with great interest.

For instance, some biophysicists are saying that you can't have a thought – that is, a mental reflection – without affecting everything in creation instantaneously. So, we know from particle physics that particles are separated by enormous distances, if they've ever been joined, react in exactly the same way. When you change the spin of one of them, the other changes without ever being touched, in certain experiments. This tells us that at the source of all there is there's a kind of universal, what shall we call it, vibration? In which the original word of God in creation, the Incarnation, the moment in which the Word of God spoke and things came into being. “Word” in the Greek is not just a sound but is any action that manifests the interior dispositions of someone. So, the “Word of God” as a reality has been present in all creation from the beginning of time, from the big bang, or perhaps; before – if there are other worlds, I don't know. In any case this presence of the “Word” as the Source of everything that is and that continues to support everything in existence so that it doesn't go away is now something that science is preaching, so to speak, or is offering empirical evidence to back up.

THE DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

How, then, are we going to get to this place? How are we going to start this journey? How are we going to access what Paul calls, over and over again in his Epistles, the deep knowledge of God, by which he means not just abstract or intellectual knowledge, but the knowledge of God that is experiential, that alerts us or makes us sensitive to a mystery that we can't enunciate with our

conceptual apparatus, but which is far more real than anything that we can see, feel, think, image, or have any other access to through our ordinary human endowment.

So here is where one of Jesus' wisdom sayings comes to our assistance. Remember that wisdom sayings are not to be taken literally. They usually are metaphorical, and they're meant to awaken us intuitively to depths of meaning and truth that ordinary dissertation can't quite articulate.

Here is his saying and it's in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:6 and it goes like this: "If you want to pray, enter your Inner Room, close the door and pray to your Abba in secret and your Abba who is in secret will reward you." Some translations have "who sees in secret." Well, for God to see is to be, so it doesn't make that much difference, I don't think. But it emphasizes something about God that captures the hiddenness of God, or the secrecy to which Jesus refers in this wisdom saying. What is that secrecy? Well, hopefully, we'll get a little bit of light into it in just a moment. But first, let us look at a few of those terms and see if we can grasp the meaning of this formula as a way of accessing the divine indwelling within us which we've seen is the source of contemplative prayer; as well as unite ourselves to the Paschal Mystery and experience our path as not only sharing in the Paschal Mystery that Christ went through, as we saw in the last conference, but also indicating the way in which we are accountable for everyone else's salvation in some mysterious sense that we don't at this moment fully grasp, but that we will begin to sense this as we progress on "the most excellent way of divine love."

The first thing to notice in this saying is what Jesus calls the Ultimate Reality. He calls this reality not just "Father" which means the Source of everything that is, but "Abba," a loving Father. And so what Jesus is addressing, it seems, is the idea that was so prevalent in his time, of God as absolutely transcendent, far away, withdrawn from sinners, withdrawn from the profane, available only at sacred times or places, or mediated by people with sacred credentials. And this is not what Jesus means by the term. In fact, he is deliberately subverting those overidentifications of the God of Israel with the God of Armies, with the God of Punishment, with the God of Justice – rewarding the good and punishing the evil. In other words, a God who is wonderful, but nonetheless just a wee bit hazardous for the average citizen and, hence, an obstacle. That attitude becomes an obstacle to freely entering into the invitation that Jesus is offering to become one with God and enter into divine union.

To pray the first thing that Jesus suggests we do is to realize that God is Abba – loving, close, relational, concerned, bending over us with tenderness and care, motherly in a certain sense. And this, then, is the necessary disposition to be able to enter with confidence into the Inner Room which, for most of us, is unknown territory. We have never tasted the experience of God and, hence, we're not sure what this must be like, and if we have brought with us from early childhood strict ideas about God or negative ideas about God, then we won't be so readily willing to let go of our own psychological awareness which is presupposed in order to enter the Inner Room where the divine indwelling is waiting for us.

And thus, if we're aware of a negative attitude towards God that causes us to look upon God as hazardous or dangerous or, even worse, as a kind of monster, as some of the gods of the Near East seem to be in Jesus' time, then there's an obstacle. Nobody is going to make friends with somebody they're scared to death of. I mean it just doesn't happen.

THE GOD OF INFINITE MERCY

There's a certain preliminary education, a certain choice of scriptural passages that need to be provided and imparted to people who are considering this journey, who have been psychologically damaged by a negative catechetics in which the dangerous character of God, the punishing aspects of God, have been identified too much or unreasonably. We're not saying that God is not just. We're saying that he's not just just; that God is the God of infinite mercy and this is the God one discovers in contemplative prayer. And that's why contemplative prayer is so important, so much an essential aspect of the Christian teaching and discipline, because that's the way it is and everything else is a mistake as far as emphasis goes.

And so, especially in teaching the truths of faith to little children, one has to keep in mind how delicate is their understanding, how easily they can associate negative ideas of God with images that they have seen on the television, or monsters, or excessive violence. And so, the natural tendency of a child, which is often to trust God, especially if the parents themselves are a window onto God's goodness and care and concern, this is an enormous gift for our emotional stability or sanity. And without it we may very well spend the rest of our lives recovering from childhood.

It's as if Jesus was correcting a certain way of presenting the knowledge of God or the doctrine about God's inner nature; and doing so in direct confrontation with the accepted views and teaching of people of his time.

A second important aspect to keep in mind in trying to understand this text is the word "pray." Remember Jesus says that: if you want to pray. Well, in the teaching of Centering Prayer, we always emphasize that prayer is, above all, a relationship. So whatever one says or does by way of ritual, or serves the needs of others out of love, it's essential that this come from a place of peace and calm and love.

In one of the passages of the Gospel, Jesus says straight out: fear is useless. And although we read about fear in the Old Testament and sometimes in the New, we must always keep in mind that this is a technical term which seems to mean: maintain a continuous awareness of God's presence. It's fear in that sense of alertness, the kind of alertness that is present in an animal that is being stalked or is feeding and wants to be totally present to the present moment, including its dangers. So, to be always aware of God implies always ready to take refuge in this presence against any kind of danger. But the last thing it is, is to look upon God as dangerous. And this is a negative idea that we really must put in the waste basket.

So, when Jesus says: if you want to pray he means if you want, now, in view of your progress in the spiritual journey, if you want to move beyond signs and wonders and expectations of spiritual success in your practice, then try this formula. And thus your prayer (the essential part of prayer – which is the way you relate to God) will begin to expand and move beyond a simple acquaintanceship and the awkwardness that goes with that; or a simple friendliness, in which one can converse with God; or a friendship in which one is prepared to commit oneself to periods of prayer in service of God; and then the letting go or surrender into any, any depths of union that God may want to invite us into.

THE DEEPER KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Prayer, then, is the disposition that expresses our relation to God and how this is translated into action is dependent on that kind of motivation for its value. So the invitation, then, is: if you would like the deeper knowledge of God, if you want to enter into this process that leads to divine union and peace, to the sensitivities of the fruits of the Spirit, to the dance of contemplative prayer and action, in which God guides you more than your own ego and self-centered programs for happiness, then enter your Inner Room.

Some translations have “private room,” but actually only the rich had private rooms in those days. So, again, as a wisdom saying it’s almost, certainly meant to be metaphorical and that’s the way the Fathers of the desert understood it. It means: move off the ordinary psychological awareness of everyday life with its tumult and noise and worries and concerns and the various commentaries on what goes on about people, events, places and our emotional reactions to them. Let go of all your ordinary stimulation for thinking about things. And that will enable you to enter your Inner Room (which is the symbol of the spiritual level of our being – which is intuitive and inclined to silence) and turn towards the innermost center of our being, which is the true self, and the presence of the Trinity, the divine indwelling (which is even more profound at the source – is the source of our being at every level: body, soul and spirit).

The movement, then, is from our ordinary ways of relating to reality to a new way of relating to reality which is simply better, or more profound, or more liberating. Because when we are locked into our ordinary psychological awareness, we’re often dominated by the experience and noise and the tumult and ... our emotional reactions so that we don’t freely respond to reality or evaluate it objectively, but are constantly being influenced and prodded by the values of the local culture or the environment or what people think of us or don’t think of us and so on.

There’s a kind of straight jacket or tyranny of over-identification with what’s going on, on the surface of our consciousness that prevents us from experiencing the deeper level which of its very nature tends to be more centered, more peaceful, more calm and more open to the influence, as time goes on, of the presence of the divine indwelling that is there.

Notice, then, Jesus’ suggestion is to let go of whatever you are thinking about and the stimulation that comes through the senses, or the memory, or the imagination, or one’s planning apparatus, or the noises that come from without or within, and to treat them with complete disregard. In other words, we suggest resisting no particular perception that comes down the stream of consciousness. We suggest, strongly, not retaining – which would mean thinking about some particular perception; not reacting emotionally to any particular perception; and finally, returning to the sacred word when we become aware that we’re thinking thoughts. A thought in the Centering Prayer means a perception, a feeling, a sensation, a memory, a plan, the past, the future, any perception at all, including feelings and emotions. And all of these are to be hidden or left behind when we enter the Inner Room.

To this Jesus adds the injunction: close the door ... to emphasize how firmly we need to let go of external stimuli while we’re engaged in this practice. The Inner Room is the private room it’s not really a place; hence it can be done anywhere, anytime and even with a lot of noise. At the beginning those external helps of silence and solitude are pretty important for most people in order to get a grip on the habit of listening to God’s presence beyond the noises and thoughts and the perceptions of everyday life. And these tend to follow us into the Inner Room – even when the door is closed.

The closing of the door is obviously an act of choice or of the will. So, it means that at least in our will, we've given up the psychological level. So, if thoughts keep coming down – as they will – they're a normal part of this prayer – we don't get excited, disturbed. We just continue to disregard them or to pay no attention to them. And with time the promptness with which we let them go begins to roll back the habits of a lifetime in which we were sitting ducks for any concept that came down the stream of consciousness or any sensation that set off something in our unconscious attitudes, mainly the instinctual needs of human nature for security, affection, esteem, power, control, which we are aware is going on in our conscious life, but at the beginning are unaware of just how much energy we put into those projects so that they have actually turned into demands, not just needs, but demands. And we expect other people to respect our outrageous and unlimited demands for these values. It's not the values that are wrong, they're necessary to survive early childhood. What is the mistake is to invest in them an unlimited expectation to find happiness through these childish programs that will not possibly and cannot possibly work in adult life.

And so, this Inner Room, then, has a chance to take a rest, to get a vacation from ourselves. And there's nothing so relaxing and a much better place to go than Miami or Colorado or any other place, because it's our thoughts that give us the most trouble. And they're kind of a form of torture. And if we could learn to disregard them over time, then the power of our choice and will to remain turned towards God's presence and the divine indwelling within will itself become a habit and the force of the emotional programs for happiness will relativize. And then the energy, instead of going no place fast and being wasted on trivia, will become available for the service of God and for others and for enormous growth of our creativity and everything else that is positive and valuable and good.