

Dimensions of Contemplative Prayer

By Fr. Thomas Keating

Contemplative prayer is the world in which God can do anything. To move into that realm is the greatest adventure. It is to be open to the Infinite and hence to infinite possibilities. Our private, self made worlds come to an end; a new world appears within and around us and the impossible becomes an everyday experience. Yet the world that prayer reveals is barely noticeable in the ordinary course of events.

Christian life and growth are founded on faith in our own basic goodness, in the being that God has given us with its transcendent potential. This gift of being is our true Self. Through our consent by faith, Christ is born in us and He and our true Self become one. Our awakening to the presence and action of the Spirit is the unfolding of Christ's resurrection in us.

All true prayer is based on the conviction of the presence of the Spirit in us and of his unfailing and continual inspiration. Every prayer in this sense is prayer in the Spirit. Still, it seems more accurate to reserve the term prayer in the Spirit, for that prayer in which the inspiration of the Spirit is given directly to our spirit without the intermediary of our own reflections or acts of will. In other words, the Spirit prays in us and we consent. The traditional term for this kind of prayer is contemplation.

We should distinguish contemplative prayer from contemplative life. The former is an experience or series of experiences leading to the abiding state of union with God. The term contemplative life should be reserved for the abiding state of divine union itself, in which one is moved both in prayer and in action by the Spirit.

The root of prayer is interior silence. We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words, but this is only one of its forms. "Prayer," according to Evagrius, "is the laying aside of thoughts".¹ This definition presupposes that there are thoughts. Contemplative prayer is not so much the absence of thoughts as detachment from them. It is the opening of mind and heart, body and emotions--our whole being--to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond words, thoughts and emotions-- beyond, in other words, the psychological content of the present moment. We do not deny or repress what is in our consciousness. We simply accept the fact of whatever is there and go beyond it, not by effort, but by letting go of whatever is there.

According to the Baltimore catechism, "Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God." In using this ancient formula it is important to keep in mind that it is not we who do the lifting. In every kind of prayer the raising of the mind and heart to God can be the work only of the Spirit. In prayer inspired by the Spirit we let ourselves flow with the lifting movement and drop all reflection. Reflection is an important preliminary to prayer, but it is not prayer. Prayer is not only the offering of interior acts to God: it is the offering of ourselves, of who and what we are.

The action of the Spirit might be compared to a skillful nurse teaching the adopted children of a wealthy household how to behave in their new home. Like waifs pulled in off the street and seated at the banquet table in the elegant dining hall, we require a lot of time to learn and practice the proper table manners. Because of our earthy background, we tend to put our muddy feet on the table, break the chinaware and spill the soup in our laps. To assimilate the values of our new home, profound changes in our attitudes and behavioral patterns are required. For this reason we may experience our nurse as constraining in the beginning and heavy on the "don'ts." And yet she always seems to be encouraging in the midst of correction; never condemnatory, never judgmental, always inviting us to amendment of life. The practice of contemplative prayer is an education imparted by the Spirit.

Our participation in this educational process is what Christian tradition calls self-denial. Jesus said, "Unless you deny your inmost self and take up the cross, you cannot be my disciple." (Mark 8:34) Denial of our inmost self includes detachment from the habitual functioning of our intellect and will, which are our inmost faculties. This may require letting go not only of ordinary thoughts during prayer, but also of our most devout reflections and aspirations insofar as we treat them as indispensable means of going to God.

The nature of the human mind is to simplify what it thinks about. Thus a single thought can sum up an immense wealth of reflection. The thought itself becomes a presence, an act of attention rather than of understanding. If we apply this principle to the person of Jesus, we can see that this kind of attention does not in any way exclude his humanity. Our attention is simply given to the presence of Jesus, the divine-human being, without adverting to any particular detail of his person.

Contemplative prayer is part of a dynamic process that evolves through personal relationship rather than by strategy. At the same time a reasonable amount of organization in one's prayer and lifestyle advances the process, just as wholesome food and exercise help youngsters grow to physical maturity.

One of the first effects of contemplative prayer is the release of the energies of the unconscious. This process gives rise to two different psychological states: the experience of personal development in the form of spiritual consolation, charismatic gifts or psychic powers; and the experience of human weakness through humiliating self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is the traditional term for the coming to consciousness of the dark side of one's personality. The release of these two kinds of unconscious energies needs to be safeguarded by well-established habits of dedication to God and concern for others. Otherwise, if one enjoys some form of spiritual consolation or development one may inflate with pride; or if one feels crushed by the realization of one's spiritual impoverishment, one may collapse into discouragement or even despair. The cultivation of habits of dedication to God and of service to others is the indispensable means of stabilizing the mind in the face of emotionally charged thoughts, whether of self exaltation or of self-depreciation.

Dedication to God is developed by commitment to one's spiritual practices for God's sake. Service to others is the outgoing movement of the heart prompted by compassion. It neutralizes the deep-rooted tendency to become preoccupied with our own spiritual journey and how we are doing. The habit of service to others is developed by trying to please God in what we do and by exercising compassion for others, beginning with those with whom we live. To accept everyone unconditionally is to fulfill the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself : (Mark 12:31) It is a practical way of bearing one another's burdens. (Galatians 6:2) Refusing to judge even in the face of persecution is to fulfill the commandment to love one another "as I have loved you" (John 13:34) and to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)

Habits of dedication to God and service to others form the two sides of a channel through which the energies of the unconscious can be released without submerging the psyche in the floodwaters of chaotic emotions. On the contrary, when these energies flow in orderly fashion between the banks of dedication and service, they will raise us to higher levels of spiritual perception, understanding, and selfless love.

These two stabilizing dispositions prepare the nervous system and body to receive the purifying and sanctifying light of the Spirit. They enable us to discern thoughts and emotions as they arise before they reach the stage of attachment or quasi-compulsion. As independence from the thrall of habitual thoughts and desires grows, we are able to enter into contemplative prayer with a quiet mind.

Detachment is the goal of self-denial. It is the nonpossessive attitude toward all of reality, the disposition that strikes at the root of the false self system. The false self is a monumental illusion, a load of habitual thinking patterns and emotional routines that are stored in the brain and nervous system. Like programs in a computer, they tend to reactivate every time a particular life situation pushes the appropriate button. The false self even insinuates that its subtle purposes are religiously motivated. Genuine religious attitudes come from God, not from the false self. By means of contemplative prayer the Spirit heals the roots of self-centeredness and becomes the source of our conscious activity. To act spontaneously under the Spirit's influence rather than under the influence of the false self, the emotional programming of the past has to be erased and replaced. The practice of virtue is the traditional term for erasing the old programs and writing new programs based on the values of the Gospel.

Jesus in His divinity is the source of contemplation. When the presence of the Divine is experienced as overwhelming, we are inwardly compelled to contemplate. Such was the situation of the apostles on Mount Tabor when they witnessed the glory of God shining through the humanity of Jesus. They fell on their faces. Our experiences of God, however, are not God as He is in Himself. God as He is in Himself cannot be experienced empirically, conceptually or spiritually. He is beyond experiences of any kind. This does not mean that He is not in sacred experiences, but that He transcends them. To put this insight in another way, He leads us by means of sacred experiences to the experience of emptiness. Anything that we perceive of God can only be a radiance of His presence and not God as He is Himself. When the divine light strikes the human mind, it breaks down into many aspects just as a ray of ordinary light, when it strikes a prism, breaks down into the varied colors of the spectrum. There is nothing wrong with distinguishing different aspects of the Ultimate Mystery, but it would be a mistake to identify them with the inaccessible Light. The attraction to let go of spiritual consolation in order to let God act with complete freedom is the persistent attraction of the Spirit. The more one lets go, the stronger the presence of the Spirit becomes. The Ultimate Mystery becomes the Ultimate Presence.

The Spirit speaks to our conscience through scripture and through the events of daily life. Reflection on these two sources of personal encounter and the dismantling of the emotional programming of the past prepare the psyche to listen at more refined levels of attention. The Spirit then begins to address our conscience from that deep source within us which is our true Self. This is contemplation properly so-called.

This pattern is exemplified in the Transfiguration. Jesus took with him the three disciples who were best prepared to receive the grace of contemplation; that is, the ones who had made the most headway in changing their hearts. God approached them through their senses by means of the vision on the mountain. At first they were overawed and delighted. Peter wanted to remain there forever. Suddenly a cloud covered them, hiding the vision and leaving their senses empty and quiet, yet attentive and alert. The gesture of falling on their faces accurately expressed their state of mind. It was a posture of adoration, gratitude, and love all rolled into one. The voice from heaven awakened their consciousness to the presence of the Spirit, who had always been speaking within them, but whom until then they had never been able to hear. Their interior emptiness was filled with the luminous presence of the divine. At Jesus' touch they returned to their ordinary perceptions and saw him as he was before but with the transformed consciousness of faith. They no longer saw him as a mere human being. Their receptive and active faculties had been unified by the Spirit; the interior and exterior word of God had become one. For those who have attained this consciousness, daily life is a continual and increasing revelation of God. The words they hear in scripture and in the liturgy confirm what they have learned through the prayer that is contemplation.

-
1. Evagrius, *De Oratione* 70 (PG 70, 1181C).

Taken from Chapter Two of Open Mind – Open Heart by Fr. Thomas Keating.