

Preface

I intend this to be a sort of handbook for someone interested in beginning or continuing in the path of Christian contemplative prayer. It is meant to have resources to guide one into this path, and to abide there well. This, I don't believe, could or should be your only reading in this area.

I would hope that if one was seeking to enter or grow in this way, you might have a spiritual or theological adviser of some sort. One might help you with the difficult to understand sections of these talks. I try to simplify things, but sometimes I use rather dense phrases, which someone with some training may help elucidate. My theological training is as a Thomist, a disciple of St. Thomas Aquinas, which can help in interpreting some of the things I raise. (He was an early member of the Order of Preachers, the religious order of which I am a member, which is more often called the Dominican Order.)

I was encouraged to do this work by the fact that there is a treatment on contemplative prayer in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The treatment there is, of course, meant to support those in the Church who do have a formal contemplative vocation, but it is not only meant for such people called to be monks or nuns. Contemplative prayer is part of the gift of the life of prayer given to the children of God by baptism, and God's generosity in sharing this mode of prayer should not be underestimated.

I want to provide a well-grounded context in Catholic life for entering into contemplative prayer, and abiding in its path. Most of us sense a call to be more spiritual, and sense that call as rooted in growing more deeply into prayer. This is an interior journey, and so the language for it is sometimes both traditional and personal, i.e., idiosyncratic. I use the notions of doorways into this mode of prayer that are offered to us, and I maintain that it is the Holy Spirit who must be the ordinary and usual guide into the depths of contemplative prayer.

These talks are meant to support that journey with a sort of minimum of exterior resources. The talks began as weekly conferences for retired, active, religious sisters, in a situation where there was a need sometimes to periodically re-present the talks, sometimes in a modified order. And so the numbering of the talks has had an *ad hoc* history. Please, feel free to look at the talks in any order, especially after the first few talks.

The more I entered into this project, the more I saw the need to follow the Catechism (and its compendium version), and the Carmelite doctors, more profoundly in their Christocentric teachings. I had originally called the talks *Being Peace*, a phrase which I believe comes from Thich Nhat Hanh and his tradition's mindfulness. After that revision of my focus, I could see more of what was lacking in a mindfulness path into this prayer, and even in the 'Cloud of Unknowing' path, the one I had originally entered decades ago.

I sense, too, that I must add that, in general, mindfulness is a natural path of our hearts into wonder about all things, exterior and interior. It involves a quieting of our hearts for truly personal living; as such it is a universal path spoken of in various ways in things as varied as traditional philosophy's contemplation and most spiritual traditions and even holistic psychotherapy. The 'faith' context of Buddhism sees the universe as one, a unitary ultimate reality. As such its practitioners seek to escape *dukha* (*suffering*), and impermanence and isolation/identity. Their journey involves some awareness of the goodness of the human heart in seeking fulfillment, but is not as yet open to an explicit worship of the Creator and the graces of redemption.

Grace perfects nature, and so some insights from the Buddhist practitioners of mindfulness can be somewhat helpful in Christian spirituality. (I recommend Tara Brach's True Refuge as a practical approach to mindfulness and holistic growth. Of course, John Kabat-Zinn's work is noteworthy, but it does also encourage one to espouse the overall Buddhist outlook.)

Another area of serious concern bears raising here: suffering, asceticism, and the path for contemplative prayer. In the early Church, the desert fathers often practiced asceticism at a heroic level, but none of them were saints by virtue of their asceticism alone. The most eminent Church Fathers do place asceticism in the profile of the proficient or perfect life in Christ, mostly, in a sort of 'grace perfects nature' trajectory, viewing the Christian life as a perfection of the ancient philosophical life with its purifying asceticism. But the enduring teaching of the Church is that the essential virtue in

sanctity is *caritas*, not physical deprivation, nor a life of patience in constant suffering.

True also, the Apostle Paul, and many of the founders of many holy charisms, have had remarkable devotion amid and in such things as fasting, and watching. Most notably, the great doctor of the mystic life, St. John of the Cross, has talked about realms and deep passages of darkness and suffering, in a magnanimous Paschal journey with Christ and into his graces; indeed, St. John's 'passive purgations' are graced passages that accomplish in us what we cannot do for ourselves, gifts in our seeking of a most loving communion with God.

The promptings of the Holy Spirit perfect our Christian virtues, as the universal doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas teaches. The Spirit leads us all to the virtue of penance, of on-going conversion of our hearts into the Trinity. Some ascetic moderation of lower pleasures is surely part of its path, but not in some sort of isolated perfectionism, i.e., without some sort of living relationship of ourselves with the risen Lord or the Holy Spirit or both, in some way avoiding God's befriending love. Paths that are truly self-defeating, and self-deceptive, indeed self-torturing, are to be found in simply wanting to suffer, as a response to God. It is a *dolorist*, not a Christian way to hear, "Pick up your cross and follow me," in a way devoted to suffering that avoids (1) the call to on-going and growing discipleship with Jesus ('follow me!'), (2) one's life as a loving member of the Church in the age in which we find ourselves, (3) the virtuous care of one's own soul, and (4) the just duties of one's state of life.

Contemplative prayer is not presented in the catechism as something only for full-time ascetics, or special victim souls, or the founders and members of contemplative orders. And the doctor of the Church who is to the fore in this presentation for the Church universal is St. Teresa of Avila, not so much known for her asceticism, as for her devotion, her *humanitas*, and her overcoming of many exterior obstacles to her vocation to found a reform of the Carmelites. One might say her asceticism was largely to be found in the daily circumstances of her vocation, or it was otherwise interior, most aptly in terms of conversion, in the focus of her response to grace, in spending time alone with her friend, as she describes contemplative prayer.

In general, it is right to hold in high esteem the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and to expect that God will draw you to them in some fuller way. In general, you will be called away from the capital vices, the seed sins that give birth to other sins. Deeply want what God teaches us to ask for in the Lord's prayer. Love the Mass and the Scriptures. And prayerfully use your mind to explore and to understand the truth of these things and also, especially the theological virtues. The holy mystery we are being invited into is being an adopted child of God in Christ; this is the perfection of our nature that encompasses and exceeds the deepest and best hopes of our nature, of our hearts. It seems prudent to me that we must consider both how little we know of this perfection, at any point in our lives, and how little we know of how best to move from where we find ourselves to where we would hope to be. This invites us to humility about the transfiguration of our hearts.

God may well call every practitioner of contemplative prayer to renounce some, if not many things, along the way, to simplify one's life and purify one's heart, so as to be set on the one thing necessary, so to speak. And too, the bishop and eminent doctor, St. Augustine of Hippo, will remind us that God is to be enjoyed (*frui*) and everything else to be employed (*uti*) unto that end. The authentic Paschal path in the Spirit, and not of the flesh, as the Apostle Paul teaches, bears its fruit in "*agape/caritas*, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22f.). Self-control without the other aspects of this spiritual fruitfulness is more like some sort of callous continence than true virtue. And suffering is not at all unique to the saints, is it?

I am saying begin: pray, believe, and seek *caritas* above all other virtues. Many inept people like to draw fantastic maps to perfection, imaginatively, with various unhealthy and incomplete versions of generous love and utter devotion. I want to caution you about this. If you bind yourself this way, or may let others do that to you, fly with hope to the Untier of Knots, and ask her to help unite your life and virtues to her son's. Ask her for the help to say 'yes' fully, and to put all the trust you can muster now in God's love and tailored plan for you. If you want to be a holy butcher or a holy stockbroker, a holy waitress or a holy mom, a holy priest or a holy nun, or a holy whatever, God's love will guide and provide. St. Thomas Aquinas said, if you want to be a saint, will it. And by that, he includes verbally and honestly asking God for this path persistently and humbly, for the right steps and attitudes to take, with an openness to the changes in you that he wants, and according to his timing.