

SEEKING CHRIST'S PEACE: ON CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Talk 3 (09/11/23)

This series of talks initially presents doorways and helps into contemplative prayer; we are basically seeking to quiet our spirits to be receptive to the risen Christ's merciful, relational and fulfilling peace (*shalom*). His peace is one of a living communion with Him (with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and all created persons united with Him) and openness to his transfiguring graces. So our resolute interior path is to be one of increasing receptivity to Christ and his actions in our lives.

The catechism's teachings on our vocation to holiness are clarifying and helpful here:

§ 2013 "All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity." All are called to holiness: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In order to reach this perfection the faithful should use the strength dealt out to them by Christ's gift, so that . . . doing the will of the Father in everything, they may wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbor. Thus the holiness of the People of God will grow in fruitful abundance, as is clearly shown in the history of the Church through the lives of so many saints.

§ 2014 Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ. This union is called "mystical" because it participates in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments—"the holy mysteries"—and, in him, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God calls us all to this intimate union with him, even if the special graces or extraordinary signs of this mystical life are granted only to some for the sake of manifesting the gratuitous gift given to all.

§ 2015 The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes:

He who climbs never stops going from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that have no end. He never stops desiring what he already knows.

Thus, even the path of contemplation and contemplative prayer, shares in the Paschal mystery of our Lord. And it is entered into while seeking communion with Him, through the Holy Spirit. And it is entered with an openness to on-going conversion, lifelong, profound, and centered in charity, Christ's rich and mysterious love (cf. §1822), the Sacred Heart's merciful 'opening' for us as fellow human beings.

Before we move on from basic doorways to more varied discussions in support of contemplative prayer, I intend to offer two more doorways; the first in this talk and the

other in the next. These may be of help to those who have not found the verbal or 'calling on the Lord' doorway helpful, or perhaps sense a simpler path is even better.

When you think about it, Our Lord perfects the commandments of the Old Testament by showing their spirit and broader implications, and deepening the roots of this new way of life interiorly. For example, he teaches that an attitude of interior lust is sinful, as is an interior posture of anger. Living with an *interior awareness* is natural in the grace of Christ, and many of us have already met our own imagination when we pray silently—making words, speaking, with our imaginations.

Today, I want to speak of the Cloud of Unknowing's teachings as a doorway. This basically amounts to imagining your interior self entering into an infinite cloud, colorless, enveloping, and yet lovingly embracing, and even permeating us. (The image is as close to not having an image as one can get.) This is, one might say, using an image to go beyond images, interiorly.

This image is best regarded as a sacred cloud linking all of the images in Scripture of God's presence as being hidden in a cloud: especially, the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, in the Transfiguration's overshadowing on Mt. Tabor, and in the Ascension of Jesus. It is a doorway of unknowing in that, as with the verbal doorways, we don't seek discursive conversation or meditation that involve our reasoning; we seek the eternal Trinity's mysterious presence in the risen Christ indwelling in us, through the Holy Spirit. This *cloud of unknowing* doorway is best known through the classic 14th. century book with that title, and its sequel, *The Book of Privy Counseling*.

Try this: after some discursive prayer, like an interior Our Father and Hail Mary, one can just go gently into the cloud. If thoughts come, just gently turn back into the cloud. As one enters the cloud more deeply let all images fade away or diffuse, a little like softening the volume of your interior verbal repetitive prayer.

This *unknowing* (or this *apophaticism*) which is common at some point to all the doorways to Christian contemplative prayer is a sort of *human wonder humbled to know that the risen Christ's majesty and mystery, indeed his reality and that of the entire Trinity, are too sublime to have but little justice done to them in human knowing this side of heaven*. And essential, necessary, and integral to this way is that we have trusted the summit of divine revelation in Jesus and the Spirit to bring us into God who is Trinitarian love. The full truth of that glorious revelation in the missions of the Son and Spirit exceeds what we can perceive; we can apprehend this truth, but not comprehend it, not fully grasp it. This divine love, nevertheless, gently seeks and holds us.

Because the interior quieting part of this doorway is in the *unknowing* part of its name, it is very easy to make this a 'heady' doorway, i.e., imagining it as primarily one's intellect entering a sort of quieting. But this quieting entry into the *cloud* can be conceived also as embracing one completely, and even centered in one's core, one's heart. I find the core-centered imaging more fruitful and intimate, while being lovingly 'met' there in this sacred darkness by the Lord Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

You can try this prayer-doorway now, if you like, or continue using a doorway you are used to. Again daily and frequent practice is desirable and recommended.