

Seeking Christ's Peace: On Contemplative Prayer

Talk 11(04/15/24)

[CCC 2709] **What is contemplative prayer? St. Teresa answers: "Contemplative prayer [oracion mental] in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us." Contemplative prayer seeks him "whom my soul loves." It is Jesus, and in him, the Father. We seek him, because to desire him is always the beginning of love, and we seek him in that pure faith which causes us to be born of him and to live in him. In this inner prayer we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself.**

This begins a sequence of talks based on the catechism's treatment of contemplative prayer. Beginning with a definition or characterization of this mode of prayer is a major step in a path meant to be rich and seminal, and well-worth pondering.

Our personal invitations into contemplative prayer are often vague, but comforting or enticing, with rich feelings of joy and experiences of deep tranquility. In the catechism's definition of contemplative prayer, we can be encouraged that someone adept at it, gives us a warm and mysterious, interpersonal framework that encompasses its depths. Such prayer is born of a love on God's part for us that is *befriending*, and St. Teresa's response, born of her cooperation with grace, also speaks of her *frequently* coming into this sort of communion, with the *Lord Jesus*, whom our souls were fashioned to love.

Then, the mention of *pure faith*, added by the framers of this section of the catechism, tells us more of this sort of journey into communion with God—that it is one in which *faith* itself in each of us is purified and perfected—"to be born in him [i.e., Jesus] and to live in him."

This treatment of contemplative prayer in the universal catechism of the Church is the fruit of God's grace for the Church's life. The conclusion of the Church's recent looking into contemplative prayer's place in our lives is that contemplative prayer is a fruit of our baptismal graces, of our being adopted children of God in Jesus Christ. As created persons, we, the baptized, are joined to the triune Creator in a new covenantal relationship, through the interpersonal missions of the eternal Son, and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, in her last major work on the life of prayer, *The Interior Castle*, St. Teresa of Avila, will speak of Jesus as dwelling in the center of our souls, and her co-laborer in Carmelite reform, St. John of the Cross, will speak of Jesus' love in his work, *The Spiritual Canticle*, and of the Holy Spirit's actions in *The Living Flame of Love*.

This treatment in the catechism is also crafted in the context of Catholics and others being aware of other religions and paths of spirituality, as Vatican II noted and commented on in its document concerning non-Christian religions, *Nostra aetate*. In previous times, one could presume a framework of Catholic faith and its sacramental life for Catholic readers, e.g., when one picked up an introduction to contemplation like *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Presently, there can be many sorts of confusions about the interior life wherein people glibly equate the paths and experiences of others in other religions, with what is in ours and possible in ours. The Carmelite doctors are especially suited for assisting in the present day, since they lived in an era of Spanish history when Catholics were aware of Muslim and Jewish belief and thought, and in the Catholic culture of their day, they themselves could take part in the very refined orthodox theological guidance possible from Dominicans and Jesuits, around the time of the Council of Trent.

Not all mystical life is the same, we can basically say. While every spiritual pilgrim is a human being, with wondrous potentials, not all are equally influenced by grace, nor by explicit faith. Some non-Christian spiritualities, indeed, are not even monotheistic, or even in any way theistic. We have the light of Christ, of the eternal Son's Incarnation.

Faith and its focusing purification:

By nature, God is not visible to the senses. He must visibly act, to reveal Himself, and through time graciously guide that revelation to have a fuller impact, for the Church and in her members. Therefore the Incarnation of the Son speaks to this need of ours, and this opens us to an interpersonal encounter with the risen Christ with His loving presence through grace.

When we personally draw near to Jesus (of course, with both his humanity and his divinity), we are being drawn to the *most direct* and *proper* truth of God. When we meet and know him, we meet and know the Father. "No one comes to the Father, except through me." This means also that we are drawing near to an immensely wise and great friend, with an incomparable love for us. This cannot be forgotten, this inequality, the mercy of this.

In glory, Christ is Lord, sharing with us and drawing us into this light beyond light. His glorified humanity is in a state beyond our imagining and understanding. His activity as Lord is beyond our comprehension. The risen and glorified Christ is '*present*' everywhere in his authority, with a '*nearness*' to all who call upon him in truth, even '*indwelling*' by his love in the baptized. His love of us brings us into the mystery of the greatest human friendship, the greatest journey of a human heart, an always new exodus of love into the depths of his love.

In us any *experiential* knowledge of God in this life is somewhat incomplete; His love is inexhaustible, always willing to give us a deeper taste of Himself. And so the *seeker* must reach beyond, and not rest in today's experience, and be always open to more of this transcendent light.

Thus, the Incarnation fits us into what can be called a '*qualified*' *apophatic*, or *via negativa* path to seeking God, i.e., a way involving somehow going beyond thoughts and our ordinary use of our imaginations and even our experiences, in a kind of *grounded transcendence*. God, the Holy Trinity, for the faithful, is not an absolute mystery, but a revealed mystery.

Through the Incarnation, the Trinity is revealed and '*perfects*' that revealing through grace. God makes this revelation increasingly more actual in us, more intimate, and more uniting. This revealing, of course, reaches its climax in the immediate vision of the Trinity in heaven. Before then, through the entire personal mission of the Son in a human nature, a proper, unique knowledge of God is mediated to us. His entire human life and actions—both *before* and *after* his loving, sacrificial death on the Cross—and then His risen glory, His sharing of His life in the Sacraments, and His indwelling in us through the Holy Spirit, and so on—are all proper and essential expressions of God's self-revelation.

There is a wondrous and pervasive invitation in the entire life of the baptized to meet and grow into a reciprocal personal communion with Christ when, where, and how he comes to us. This journey, within our prayer-life and outside of its deep intimacy, is deepened with meditation on Christ, his mission, and its graces. And so, the catechism rightly adds that in contemplative prayer: "we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself."

In this mode of prayer, we are not necessarily always non-discursively dwelling in an interior silence. Our meditation can be stirred into motion, in a way that can complement or even assist in this mysterious communion of faith. [This can be a sort of a reminder, too, that many from whom we learn about contemplation and contemplative prayer have themselves been great speculative theologians, like Sts. Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas and others.]