

Seeking Christ's Peace: On Contemplative Prayer

Talk 12 (04/17/24)

[CCC 2710] **The choice of the time and duration of the prayer arises from a determined will, revealing the secrets of the heart. One does not undertake contemplative prayer only when one has the time: one makes time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up, no matter what trials and dryness one may encounter. One cannot always meditate, but one can always enter into inner prayer, independently of the conditions of health, work, or emotional state. The heart is the place of this quest and encounter, in poverty and in faith.**

This is the second of our talks on contemplative prayer in the catechism, and in the section above, it directs our attention toward the topics of perseverance in and the priority of contemplative prayer, and adds that the secrets of our hearts will come to light. Of course, there must be a growing commitment to a basic discipline in one's prayer life, with a suitable adaptability and creativity to keep to one's times and places for prayer (especially if one does not live alone, nor in a convent), and to salt the day with spontaneous moments of prayer. This will yield a harvest of truth about oneself, both about one's strengths and one's weaknesses.

Jesus seems to have put time for deep and long prayer at the ends of the day, before or after his encounters with others. There may have been no set 'times' other than meals, especially the passover meal which he raised to a memorial of his sacrifice, in which there was a gathering of others around him that included prayer. But these were verbal prayers of thanksgiving and blessing. It seems that he could have paused for private silent prayer at moments throughout the day, perhaps with just a few seconds-long glance of contemplation, or longer in a rest after a midday meal. He and his disciples more likely prayed some traditional Jewish prayers or something near them, communally and at certain times, but again that is not like the Discalced Carmelite contemplatives who silently pray together in a chapel an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. (Their special vocation is to be hermits, living in community.) Contemplative prayer for Jesus and most us is primarily a solitary prayer.

He was less in need than we are for structure, but his use of the ends of the day can give those of us who have busy family or social lives a hint about how to set times. I've heard of mothers locking themselves in bathrooms, and letting their husbands take care of the kids, to get a fifteen minute pause for prayer underway. I find that if I want to pray at the end of the day, and I'm tired, a little rest can give way to a midnight prayer. If there is a will there is a way, but do want to find a way. "Make time for the Lord."

Before or after daily Mass fits many people well, and makes the place and time fixed for deep prayer.

In any event, God's supportive love, *grace*, is the river into which we are invited to enter and become immersed. This is the grace especially called that of the Holy Spirit, and we are being drawn into the dynamics of love, human and divine with Jesus.

At the real depths of love, with St. Bernard of Clairvaux we can sense that the "**only measure of love is to love without measure**," which flows down the same channel as the great commandment to love God with all of our capacities. Then, our responses will show that we

both want this and sometimes avoid this. Only God's love is perfect, and we are 'under construction', on a journey into mercifully sharing in his abiding love both for us and for himself.

As we have seen before, we are invited into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. A now invisible and intimately present friend invites us into his presence as he indwells in us. This is challenging, and evokes new depths and modes of focus and trust. And so we are called to a new simplicity of life and new horizons of hope (*faith*). *The heart is truly the place of this quest and encounter.*

Heart is the older, Old Testament word for this place. The newer, New Testament name for this deep point of encounter and grace is our *pneuma*, our spirit. *Pneuma* (spirit) seems to be deeper than heart or a deepening of one's heart through our new ability to seek the internal presence of the Lord. St. Paul will present body (*sarx*), soul (*psyche*), and spirit (*pneuma*) as a totality, wherein we would have likely expected heart to be an included part of the soul, its center.

We will grow in humility, with a new dependence on the all of the things which God has revealed and is doing. St. Therese of Lisieux sees us as coming to God **with empty hands**, which is the path of the *anawim* in the Scriptures, the *poor (in spirit)*. This is how we can more deeply discover our own depths and turn to God, in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, for better and for worse, until death does us unite. St. John of the Cross makes a great deal of how we are, then, purified or perfected through our perseverance through different kinds of *dryness*.

Our ability to arrive at new insights and better resolutions through *meditation* may find hitches and limitations—perhaps, just simply out of our natural limitations. But we are *always* being welcomed into this graced and supernatural path of inner silence and with its loving surrender of oneself to Christ—in a sense, into a heart-deep listening to the Word made flesh, as in the way of Lazarus' sister, Mary.

Now, the risen one breathes forth the Spirit in us, drawing us to him at our deepest center. Our hearts were made for this, even as we come with our wounds, weaknesses, and wanderings. We are met, even in the deepest darkness and dryness, with Jesus' all permeating compassionate and wise light.