

Seeking Christ's Peace: On Contemplative Prayer

Talk 15 (04/21/24)

[2712] **Contemplative prayer is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more. But he knows that the love he is returning is poured out by the Spirit in his heart, for everything is grace from God. Contemplative prayer is the poor and humble surrender to the loving will of the Father in ever deeper union with his beloved Son.**

[2713] **Contemplative prayer is the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty. Contemplative prayer is a covenant relationship established by God within our hearts. Contemplative prayer is a communion in which the Holy Trinity conforms man, the image of God, "to his likeness."**

[2714] **Contemplative prayer is also the pre-eminently intense time of prayer. In it the Father strengthens our inner being with power through his Spirit "that Christ may dwell in (our) hearts through faith" and we may be "grounded in love."**

It is an incomprehensible mercy to be an adopted child of God in Christ. And God's wise loving-kindness is the primary source of this life; we grow to receive this new life more and more profoundly as we mature in Christ.

Each of these three articles could bear explanation in the course of several books, but together they are like a rich beginning, followed by two descriptions of a flourishing interior life, as one of God's children, choosing divine life above and amid all things.

This being a sharer in divine life, and growing to participate in it now more fully, has its surprising and blessed paradoxes. Our development as children of God means an increasing dependence upon and cooperation with God's grace. We become more free to receive this new life more fully, and be incorporated more fully into a dynamic relationship with the Trinity who is eternal love.

This growing dependence upon God is the opposite of our physical dependence upon our parents; we become more independent of them physically as we grow as children. The truth of our humble state and the poverty of our own resources in the face of our vocation to live and grow as God's children draw us to turn to God for the Holy Spirit's infusion of more and more light and help.

With grace's assistances, we can grow in integrity, with a deep interior harmony of action resembling the blessed and peaceful life of the Holy Trinity. This is accomplished as we grow in faith as disciples of Jesus, and into a deeper, more interior relationship with the risen and graciously indwelling Lord, and into his likeness.

The traditional dynamics or priorities of the spiritual life are helpful in putting all of the pieces together in this picture. Each of these dynamics or priorities has a lifelong course, a path of on-going conversion. It is the light of virtue and the graces of the unitive dynamic that principally draw us into contemplative prayer.

I use the term *priorities*, for the third gives full meaning to the others, and the first is most necessary, and the second grounds both of the others. To call them *stages* and separate them is often not how God's grace leads our hearts, nor true to how they are interwoven. God wants our growth from the start, and that means these priorities can be woven together in various ways when our hearts begin to turn to him consciously and responsively.

These priorities are about abiding in the sanctifying grace and growing into the infused virtues of our baptisms. Mortal sin is a rejection of our baptismal adoption, and deliberate venial sin is using our choosing in an unholy way. Faith helps us to see the purpose of our lives in full perspective and all of what God has provided for our holiness. Caritas' communion with God is only fulfilled in heaven, but can be wonderfully profound here. In the simple, yet intense gift of contemplative prayer our hearts are being prepared for that face to face enjoyment of God, the irrevocable finalization of our adoption.

Here is a brief sketch of these lifelong priorities. God's care for each of us is indeed very personalized, for we each have different strengths and weaknesses, missions and paths. Each of us has a unique place in the journey of the Church through human history. But this schema has been found perennially helpful in our gracious, family vocation to holiness.

1) The purgative or purifying dynamic is to turn from sin, of course, mortal, then deliberately venial, and then being attentive to longer dynamics in our character that lead variously to forms of tepidity of heart and dullness of the mind. To the end of our days, we should be able to see at least the first movements toward sin at work in our hearts in quotidian activities, and hopefully seeing no more than that by the end of our journeys.

2) The illuminative way is about virtue. The virtues of faith, hope, and charity call us into revealed truth and the proper sources for that, first, in a basic way, and then, in a maturing way. These virtues are so rich that a lifetime of persistent, devoted care to cultivate one of them would not be sufficient to exhaust the blessings in any one of them. Most people are happy with a complacency in which they see themselves better at this than most of their neighbors. Maturity in faith and hope is to be found in Our Lady and the saints. Maturity in charity is in Christ, Our Lady, and the heroic lives of those in his body. There is a necessary draw in these theological virtues into a supernatural (i.e., more divine) way of living. As our response to the Trinity deepens in these theological virtues, the moral virtues, already begun to be fostered in charity, take on new depths as ways to keep our hearts open to on-going conversion. Our minds will be increasingly illumined by sacred doctrine, indeed all ennobling truth, and our wills drawn to offering ourselves to the Trinity in worship, that is faithful, filial and full. Humility and magnanimity (generosity) are key moral virtues in this dynamic.

3) The unitive way is about complete interior adherence and conformity to Christ. This is perfected by the Holy Spirit through promptings that open our hearts to the paths of his seven gifts. If truly sought, there will be evident growth in the fruit of the Spirit. Again, only our Lord and the saints, especially the great doctors of the church, are suitable teachers here. You can't train for the olympics without coaching, and picking a half-hearted part-timer as a guide ends up with the bland leading the bland, or worse. *To not grow is to lose ground*—is the traditional and enduring rule in everything about spiritual maturity. Hope, of course, will grow more deeply as one abides in such a supernatural quest, and will be purified and transfigured to be surely grounded in God's saving and sanctifying love.

Within the gift of contemplative prayer we simply and intensely seek all that God lovingly offers and wills to give us in Christ. Our lives become more focused and fruitful. Our merits are in receiving his gifts, for which we are embellished with more gifts which prepare our hearts for the ultimate gift and reward, beyond our best ken or imagining: eternal life, an irrevocable sharing in God's own life. [More about these very rich paragraphs will become evident in the following talks.]