

Seeking Christ's Peace: On Contemplative Prayer

Talk 16 (04/22/24)

[2715] **Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. "I look at him and he looks at me": this is what a certain peasant of Ars used to say to his holy curé about his prayer before the tabernacle. This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Thus it learns the "interior knowledge of our Lord," the more to love him and follow him.**

[2716] **Contemplative prayer is hearing the Word of God. Far from being passive, such attentiveness is the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child. It participates in the "Yes" of the Son become servant and the Fiat of God's lowly handmaid.**

The mutual knowing in love, of Christ and of the contemplative soul, is at the heart of this journey. This attentiveness of the soul to Christ is a mode of mystical dying to self, a going out (*ekstasis*) to the beloved. This is a profound discipleship fostered by the Holy Spirit. The face of the risen Lord is turned toward the soul who seeks him, in the darkness of faith, and in deep prayer, in the depths of the heart where Christ indwells. This mutual seeking purifies the pilgrim soul. Gifts of light and life are bestowed on the pilgrim heart to confirm and enrich this most holy interpersonal communion.

Many people are invited into this mutual gazing through the graces of quiet and simple prayer before the tabernacle, or in adoration before the exposed host. The openness of the mature Christian heart, and, indeed at every point in one's life, especially for the contemplative heart, is for everything sound about Jesus. Through his humanity we begin to see the depths and the beauty of the divine intention for mankind. The fruits of this vital and living focus allow one "to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men." As St. Catherine of Siena taught, Jesus' humanity is the bridge between God and man, from God, as a gift of grace.

Whether one is a hermit, or a head of state, a professed religious or a business professional, a manual laborer or a boring intellectual, young or not so young—authentic contemplative prayer brings light to the path of virtue fitted for one's state of life and one's particular vocation. Contemplative prayer especially perfects faith, forming it in charity, as it reaches to God the source of all goodness and into one's holy care for oneself and others. It brings to its fullness in our hearts an echo of Christ's and Mary's generous and full obedience.

Some of the prudent directions implied in these articles today, and the others, are against forms and aspects of *quietism* which are unhealthy and can lead one away from proper and fuller unity with Christ and his Church. Quietism is an *over-quieting* of the heart, to the detriment of good growth in truth and in responsible action. Some quieting of our interiors, on its own and even apart from faith, indeed, can have a calming effect, and certainly be a helpful discipline for minimizing obsessions of many sorts, from anxious patterns of thought to cravings of other sorts. But quieting that quiets us to truth about God, man, and sin is dangerous—a quieting that makes us too passive about our vocations away from sin, and into holiness.

The path of contemplative prayer does give a new appreciation of God's action in our lives and of how much more we can be at peace in his love. But this holy path does not preclude the natural growth and processes in learning and reflective thought, especially as we

can grow in grasping the full significance of the mysteries of Christ's Spirit-filled life and mission, and in our responses to God by way of growing in intellectual clarity and moral action.

Another obvious concern, and this is a very critical one, is seeing an interior quieting of the heart as a *universal, even secular*, way to love 'God', or come to 'wisdom', or into a 'spiritual' life. This is very much like the path that started to be imagined in the Renaissance called the *perennial philosophy*. One of the latest figures to use this basically syncretistic and imprudently irenic, spiritual path's name was Aldous Huxley. [Don't be confused; a much different use of that name, *perennial philosophy*, was coined by Jacques Maritain to look basically at what philosophical tenets and methods were in line with St. Thomas Aquinas' own and then are authentic for the seeking of *philosophical* wisdom.]

The point at issue for our contemplative prayer is that its goal, its direction, is one in *faith's light*. To use a technical term, the *intentionality* of Christian contemplation is unique. It is into a personal friendship with Christ, a most complete discipleship, and, we can rightly add, also intending full union with his mystical body, the Church.

Some quieting will make sense to some because it seems like a simple deep-dive into the unknowability of God. Meeting God's mysteriousness and transcendence is part of the journey of everyone in honestly seeking God. We do always underestimate God's goodness, wisdom, love, and mercy in this life; our knowledge of him here is always mediated, and even finally in heaven, it is never comprehensive. What goes on in meeting Christ in an 'unknowing' darkness for a Christian is also part of this, for the glory of the risen Lord also exceeds our comprehension, and surely participates in the divine transcendence.

One sort of quieting of the soul simply in a direct seeking of this somewhat unknowable God is born of Neo-platonic philosophy, and does have several echoes in some important orthodox Christian writers. The Christian writers in this vein do not deny the center of revelation in Jesus; they are in the Church, seeking the Father, who dwells in unapproachable light. *The problem is that sometimes on its own a path of unknowing can become a way of rejecting revelation, both natural and supernatural, and by way of the latter, faith.* Unknowing can gradually be untethered from seeking the divine in the darkness, and then its focus is somehow and ironically only on self. This can happen, especially as some Buddhist perspectives are imported into instructions on contemplative prayer.

Unfortunately, some popularizers of contemplative prayer have not adequately considered all of these issues, from quietism to faithless mysticism. For that matter, an absolute apophatic way, an ungrounded *via negativa*, is a pitfall for theologians, too. Again, the chief issue is that Christian contemplative prayer's intentionality and reality is *amid the missions of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, into creation*. To dispense with any of that is to walk away from faith and truth into some sort of spiritualism with a legion of troubles in its train.

Responding to this danger, in 1989, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*. Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, signed the document. The Latin title is *Orationis formas (OF)*. Its purpose:

"[M]any feel the need for sure criteria of a doctrinal and pastoral character which might allow them to instruct others in prayer, in its numerous manifestations, while remaining faithful to the truth revealed in Jesus, by means of the genuine Tradition of the Church. This present letter seeks to reply to this urgent need, so that in the various particular Churches, the many different forms of prayer, including new ones, may never lose their correct personal and communitarian nature." (OF no. 1, see APPENDIX 1 of the collection of these talks.)

It goes on to detail several problems found in some modern prayer methods that are not rooted adequately in the faith.