

Seeking Christ's Peace: On Contemplative Prayer

Talk 17: (04/23/24)

[2717] Contemplative prayer is silence, the "symbol of the world to come" or "silent love." Words in this kind of prayer are not speeches; they are like kindling that feeds the fire of love. In this silence, unbearable to the "outer" man, the Father speaks to us his incarnate Word, who suffered, died, and rose; in this silence the Spirit of adoption enables us to share in the prayer of Jesus.

For most of us silence seems to be something empty, empty of sound, empty of words, empty of communication. But here in this article or paragraph the word 'silence' is used to speak of something full, indeed the fullest kind of life—most joyous, most illumined, and most satisfying. This is the life of God. This is the life we begin to enter in Christ, here, and can irrevocably participate in, hereafter. God is alive beyond motion and change. This is barely conceivable to us. His life, his way of being, is in a full eternal now. In this sense, God's interior silence is full of light and life, and he is alive far beyond having a multitude of succeeding interior words or thoughts.

By faith, we know *that* God's unique interior Word, the Son, is always present in the divine fully alive silence. The Son has assumed our nature, entered personally into creation, to give creatures a participation in his divine life. An essential part of this mission is the Paschal mystery which climaxes in Jesus' glorification. Risen and glorified the Lord Jesus himself sends us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, himself is eternally proceeding within the eternal silence of the Trinity. The Spirit comes to us to raise us creatures into the uncreated communion of love of divine life.

The risen Christ, the Lord, seeks to share his perfect peace, his own supernatural silence in glory, an echo of his eternal silence, with those in his grace. His is a rich peace, with a rich silence, a rich embrace of love for us. Although unaccustomed to this sort of life naturally, in the life of the 'outer' man, we can see as we grow in faith formed in charity, that Jesus shares with us a silence in which we are known and loved, profoundly and accurately, understood and encouraged, sought and secured interpersonally in ways beyond comprehension.

Our ponderings, petitions and praises which come forth from our creatureliness—our processes, and actions—are meant to help us enter into Christ's peace. With an ever-growing love for the goal of our existence and life we enter into God's adoption of us. The doorways and paths of contemplative prayer are part of the journey into these rich realms of silence, where hearts rejoice and are embraced far beyond the capacity of our thoughts to fathom.

As a journeyer, a viator, with his risen glory ahead of him, Christ's prayer life here would have included the three expressions of prayer talked about in the catechism: vocal, meditative, and contemplative. He would have practiced them with an open heart, profoundly open to the Spirit's promptings. The prayer that he gave us, the Lord's prayer, is rich beyond telling, yet simple, in just a few words. The parables and teachings show us his thoughtful grasp of the world present and the world to come, how his mind considered God's plan and ways. And his intimate prayer of simple communion with the Father would have been perfectly rich in the peace given to him, profoundly secured in that loving silence.

For us, this path into prayer in the dynamics of its expressions is one of increasing cooperation in grace. Garrigou-LaGrange, the Dominican theologian who wrote on

contemplative prayer and Christian perfection, taught that this increasing dependence was the opposite of our normal physical dependence on our parents. We begin life totally dependent on our parents, primarily embodied in the mother's care of her infant. As we mature we grow less and less dependent, and more independent.

In grace, we are moved from a somewhat independent life, into the dependence grounded in the nature of the theological virtues, as they are energized by the Holy Spirit. Being a participant or sharer in the divine nature must be a gift, and one that we are to welcome with increasing profundity. This is the process we undergo in grace, the way of authentic holiness.

Early in one's life as an adopted child of God in Christ, it can seem as though we are to act or perform for God, but the course, when deeply examined, is rich in God's mercy and hope humility in us, as God begins to transfigure us more fully. We are being divinized, glorified, drawn into heaven, through the risen Lord. It means that we must come at least to recognize in humility our limitations in the face of our vocation to holiness, and our increasing need to depend on God and his grace.

This means that at the deepest states of this prayer journey we are very much like an infant stilled at its mother's breast. The developmental psychologists at present see the child at birth as completely unable to self-regulate himself in any constructive way. He must be embraced, and comforted and nourished, and in that, he becomes regulated by the mother's stability and health, her heart of love toward this babe. This communion of life enables the fragile and nearly powerless child to enter into his new life.

In the Old Testament, two passages are well-connected to this. The first is about a weaned child on his mother's lap being at peace in Ps. 131. It is the merciful gift of wisdom, the gift of the Holy Spirit that will predominate in heaven—that is at work in the second waters (St. Teresa of Avila's prayer of quiet) and beyond in contemplative prayer—quieting the soul into a deeper communion of life with the Trinity, coming to contentment.

The second is in Elijah's 1 Kgs 19 mountaintop encounter with God, wherein he recognizes God's presence in what is sometimes rendered "the still small voice of calm." Again, this is the gift of wisdom recognizing the drawing near interpersonally of the one who is unutterably full of light and beyond all change.

In the New Testament likewise there are two passages well-connected to this journey into a holy silencing. The first is found in the martyrdom of St. Stephen at the end of Acts 7. He cries out "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*" He is participating in the surrender of Jesus's soul, to the Father, at his death. But now, while Jesus has been made Lord, it is a surrender into the divine care, into the arms of the Lord Jesus, the one who manifests the Father's rich mercy. In contemplative prayer this internal surrendering is an act of white (i.e., bloodless) martyrdom, a spiritual dying to self, and into intimately, profoundly, and mysteriously trusting in Christ.

The second is "*...the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*" (Phil. 4:7) The peace that the risen Jesus gives is recognized as authentically from God. This gift serves to keep the members of the early Church united to him who is the head of this new people of God. For the worshipping faithful, this peace will direct one's will and intellect into the mystery of Christ, who is the new covenant for all the nations (cf. Is. 42:6).

Clearly, in prayer, human journeyers have a path of moving from the realm of thoughts and words into the realm of Christ's peace beyond words and into its silence. Even amid the prayer of His peace, our hearts may be drawn more fully into this journey, by way of short prayers of praise or petition, 'like kindling that feeds the fire of love'.