

Seeking Christ's Peace: On Contemplative Prayer

Talk 18 (04/24/24)

[2718] Contemplative prayer is a union with the prayer of Christ insofar as it makes us participate in his mystery. The mystery of Christ is celebrated by the Church in the Eucharist, and the Holy Spirit makes it come alive in contemplative prayer so that our charity will manifest it in our acts.

[2719] Contemplative prayer is a communion of love bearing Life for the multitude, to the extent that it consents to abide in the night of faith. The Paschal night of the Resurrection passes through the night of the agony and the tomb - the three intense moments of the Hour of Jesus which his Spirit (and not "the flesh [which] is weak") brings to life in prayer. We must be willing to "keep watch with (him) one hour."

My comments on these two articles will focus on Christ's Paschal mystery, in which we participate in the Eucharist, and in our prayer life.

To mature as a human being, is in a way to 'die' to the former, less mature state, and then to progress, or come alive, to a new, more mature one. Christ has given us a life goal of receiving the beatific vision in a glorified body. This means removing the obstacles to receiving such a life and growing in the virtues appropriate to receiving it. We progress in this path through him, with him and in him, in our participation in his Paschal mystery.

As I have noted before, this maturation in Christ is opposite our physical maturation with regards to our natural parents. We are being adopted into divine life, and this means our increasing dependence on God and his grace. This change and growth is beyond our capabilities, but also involves them.

This means our freedom is to yield increasingly to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This begins by us choosing to accept the light of faith. In respect of sin, we set boundaries, to not follow heresy, to not choose mortal sins, and then not to deliberately intend venial sins. Whatever is beyond our freedom's power, we take to prayer and maybe a counsellor of some sort. Freely choosing to nourish our hearts with inspired truth and the sacraments, we can enter more and more fully into the three expressions of prayer. This all effectively means that our free entry into contemplative prayer is the fruit of grace, in our having chosen the holy things that set good boundaries of the heart for it. We have to some extent died to sin, and been raised to new life in Christ.

In this way, we are invited into participating in the depths of Jesus' prayer, his filial worship, and his fraternal love for others. His life was and is filled with the Holy Spirit. Our growth in the Spirit, our participation in Christ's Paschal path—will involve dying and rising, an unfolding purification, and even a kind of intensification and interiorizing of our suffering, as our mode of life in him matures.

Those who have travelled this path of grace have spoken of dark nights of unknowing and of the drying of former ways of affectivity (i.e., a drying of our appetites). These nights of the soul can be simple stretches of interior experience, but *a/so* sometimes involving very trying, exterior circumstances. They are indeed times of torturous cruciform suffering. For instance, probably in accord with the teaching of St. John of the Cross, Pope St. John Paul II spoke of Christ's profound suffering as he prayed in Gethsemane, especially as the Father's response to his prayer was experienced as a profound silence. Christ's abuse from others throughout this 'silence,' and especially with his scourging, his carrying of the cross, and his subjection to suffering its torture—all precede the 'answer' of the resurrection, and all of its new and unending depths of his creaturely communion with the Father, in his glorified humanity.

Our experience of contemplative prayer can at times be like an hour with him in Gethsemane, especially while we are being purified. This is no surprise for those who hold the mystery of the cross dearly, but can be discouraging for those who have yet to do so. Blessed creaturely hope takes its fullest stand at the foot of the cross, in the heart of Our Lady, and in Jesus' heart on the cross, for himself and his mystical body, the Church, in glory's fulfillment.

These purifying sufferings are on the path to bring us to more perfect charity, and hope, and faith, but even as they unite us to God more fully in this life, these holy sufferings can bring us to new horizons of compassion for others. This focus on compassion is characteristic of the charism of the Carmelite tradition, with its very Christocentric, i.e., Christ-centered, presentation of the Christian mystical life—our journey into sharing in Christ's own peacemaking, and peace.

How to accept and enter some sufferings, and not others, is part of what the journey involves. Asceticism can be holy or not. Sufferings from others acting against us, may be better opposed or avoided at times, times that are not our hour for some sort of martyrdom. We are not simply lovers of suffering, holy doormats, or incessant self-torturers. Jesus is our primary light in this, as well as our hearts being drawn into the fruit of the Spirit. (cf. Gal. 5:22f.) Look at his day to day life, ask to see its depths, for that is light for our hearts.

This brings us to two very deep subjects, and they give increasing freedom for us to see what is wise and loving with regard to suffering.

The first is the deep nature of Jesus' own dying. This cannot be seen adequately without accepting his divine action at work in this. He says, "*This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it away from me. I lay it down of my own free will.*" (Jn. 10:17f.) His dying, at heart, is an action, not a simple undergoing, a simple suffering. His surrender of his life, his laying it down, is into the Father's hands, so to speak. It is an entrusting, that honors the Father's goodness and wisdom, after a life of on-going intimate communion with the Father, in filial obedience.

The deepest theological traditions about Jesus' heart hold that from the start of his incarnation, Jesus' soul was created as already possessing the beatific vision. This meant his will and intellect were always profoundly guided by this infallible and holy light. This indeed is wonderful to consider. But it brings us to note that this is different than having the beatific vision in a glorified body. His mortal possession of the beatific vision would shape his free choices (making them always like the choices of the divine nature, basically to bless creation), but his body and soul not being in glory, beyond all temporal suffering, could experience sufferings in a way that severed Jesus' deepest human inner life from the joy that ordinarily would flow from that vision and its Triune love. He could suffer, and that suffering in its deepest moments meant the loss of a holy temporal joy that you and I can barely fathom.

His surrender of his life to the Father, in death, is in a passage of great holy darkness and dryness, with the fire of Holy Spirit burning fully and making this the most beautiful act of *caritas/agape/love*, ever in creation. This act of his heart transfigures all of history, casting all of human history into the light of the divine mercy's glory, and this act perdures in his heavenly worship, intercession, and rule, now.

Contemplative prayer's journey is into Jesus' Paschal mystery of inter-Trinitarian life and love, inasmuch as the infused theological virtues enable us, under the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And this means, and this is the second subject for us to behold: that three expressions of prayer in Jesus' life were born and fostered in the light of his beatific vision. He talked to the Father, thought about the Scriptures and creation, and entered into a silent communion of love with him, in the heart-key of glory. We are called to do that especially with him and the Blessed Virgin, in our vocal, meditative, and contemplative praying—likewise, all of our holy sufferings.

I hope, in the future, to do a little series on his heart in prayer in these talks. It could be rich, if I am able to receive the graces to perceive its outlines sufficiently.