

The Heights of Prayer: Contemplation

My soul yearns for thee in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks thee. ~ Isaiah 26:9

CONTEMPLATION is the ultimate form of Christian prayer. The problem with describing contemplation is that it is something beyond the ability of words to convey. In a sense, it is a mystery or, perhaps, more accurately it can be described as mystical. The two most notable writers of the experience of contemplation are St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross, contemporaries who knew each other well and who worked collaboratively to reform the Carmelite religious order in Spain in the sixteenth century. Their works are a great treasure of the Church. St. Teresa, who was frequently favored with contemplative experience, explained it as “nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us”¹ (CCC 2709). These words echo the description of Moses’ experience with God when “*the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend*” (Ex 33:11), but they are remarkably inadequate to explain the experience of mystical contemplation.

In contemplation, the soul’s attention is riveted on the Lord himself “*whom my soul loves*” (Song 1:7; see also Song 3:1-4). He, and he alone, satisfies. It is an intense and intimate union, a true communion in which the person is wrapped up in God, as a simple peasant gifted with this form of prayer told his pas-

tor: “I look at him and he looks at me” (CCC 2715). Human words are useless in this total absorption in God; the soul listens to the Word of God.

In this highest form of prayer, God is the initiator. Contemplation is a gift from God that cannot be sought. This experience is a grace, a gift that requires deep humility and a willing self-surrender to a covenant relationship with God, a communion in which God takes the initiative to create his image and likeness in the soul. The contemplative yearns to be obedient to his will, to be a child of God, to imitate the humble obedience of Jesus (see Phil 2:8) and the “*let it be to me according to your word*” (Lk 1:38) of Mary at the Annunciation. It is an utter surrender to God in childlike abandonment, or in the overwhelming sorrow of a truly repentant sinner. There is a readiness and eagerness to watch with God in silence, in love, and in self-surrender. Contemplation is sharing in the prayer and life of Christ himself. Everything is seen in light of God’s truth, love, and compassion.

The contemplative learns to make time for this kind of prayer regardless of health, emotions of dryness or sadness, or demands on his or her time. Entering a state of exterior and interior silence, the soul surrenders itself to the Holy Spirit as an offering, so that he may purify and transform it, a process that sometimes causes the contem-



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¹ St. Teresa of Jesus, *The Book of Her Life*, 8, 5 in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, tr. K. Kavanaugh, OCD, and O. Rodriguez, OCD (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976), I, 67

plative to enter a “dark night of the soul,” as St. John of the Cross called it, in which the soul is completely bereft of the experience of God.

In contemplation, the soul is no longer conscious of the world, nor are the senses performing their normal functions. It is a state of being in the body, but not of the body. The soul has no way of transmitting the tremendous

joy it is experiencing. Exceedingly unusual and mysterious events are sometimes associated with contemplative prayer, such as ecstasy, rapture, transport, and levitation. In ecstasy, the soul is drawn by God into a gentle but overpowering spiritual embrace, akin to a trance. When this embrace is at its height, it is described as rapture, or suspension. Transport is like a flight of the spirit, wherein the soul is surrendered and God takes it wherever he wills. St. Teresa of Avila described levitation as the soul being carried off with the whole body, so much so that the body itself is raised from the ground.

Many intense contemplative experiences occur either at the reception of the Holy Eucharist or at the consecration of the Eucharist at Mass. For example, St. Philip Neri, a saint known for his humor, had to bang his fist against his head to keep from drifting into rapture when he pronounced the words of consecration. Other priests like St. Francis Borgia and, in the last century, St. Pio of Pietrelcina spent so much time in profound contemplation that they could rarely celebrate Mass in public.



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Finally, contemplation is not a retreat from the world. Like all forms of Christian prayer, it must bear fruit in charity; no Christian can grow in union with God without growing as well in the works of love that come from an overflowing heart.

It is worth repeating again and again that we are to respond wholeheartedly and with a zealous enthusiasm to the universal call to holiness. St. Paul emphasizes this in speaking to laymen and laywomen when he urges us to be “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19). The Church believes that, if Christ has directed us to be perfect as his “Heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48), there is no reason why all of us — single, married, priests, and religious — should not strive for and attain holiness. This means the attainment of the highest reaches of prayer, contemplation, and total transformation and union with the Divine. It is possible, and we should yearn for it and strive for it with all the might of our longing hearts.

(CCC 2690, 2709-2719)

The difficulties experienced during periods of dryness and the “dark night of the soul,” the danger of seeking mystical experiences for their own sakes, and the risk of misinterpreting supernatural signs as from God when they might instead be from Satan make it necessary for most individuals desiring a life of contemplation to place themselves under the care of a spiritual director, a person gifted with wisdom, discernment, and faith itself based on experience of the spiritual life.