

20. Early Contemplation

Prayer is always a response to God, for it is God who creates us and holds us in existence; it is God who 'has poured God's love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). In all prayer there is an element of being 'caught up', of being 'drawn'. At the same time in the prayer that we have been focusing on up to this point there has been a lot of 'climbing', a lot of 'striving'. From the beginning we have experienced the gift of God's Spirit, the Spirit of communion that flows between the heart of Jesus and the Heart of God. Through this gift we are drawn to share Jesus' own prayer-communion. Up to this point we have been focusing our attention on the kind of prayer that we experience when we welcome the gift of the Spirit but are still controlling our response. We wish now to begin to describe the kind of prayer that we experience when we surrender to God's Spirit of love and find that we no longer have control over a prayer that comes to us as surprise and as gift.

While praying in our accustomed way, we sense that the movement of our prayer is beginning to change direction. Rather than our stretching out towards God, we are experiencing ourselves yielding to God as we experience a gentle drawing inward, what Teresa of Jesus calls 'an interior recollection felt in the soul' (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 59.3).

'We find ourselves calmed, enveloped by another in a mantle of recollection. A gentle force holds us in recollection ... The Master creates a disposition of silent attention and peaceful submission' (Marie-Eugène, *I want to see God*, page 8-9).

We can long for this prayer and we can prepare for it by practising being silent, but there is nothing we can do to bring about this prayer. It is for this reason that Teresa calls this prayer 'supernatural' (*Interior Castle* IV.1.1). She uses a helpful image. In our prayer we have been drawing water from the well provided by God, and with God's help we have been carrying the water to the garden of our heart and watering it. Now we experience an unexpected welling up from a spring deep inside the garden itself (see *Life* 11.7ff; also *Interior Castle* IV.2.3-4). Teresa calls this prayer 'contemplation.'

Authors distinguish four kinds of contemplation. Common to them all is a sense of being drawn into something mysterious, something sacred.

There is *aesthetic* contemplation: the delight we have when we are experiencing beauty and sense that we are one with it. We may not know it but it is God who is drawing us into communion through the beautiful things God has made.

There is *intellectual* contemplation: the delight we experience through insight. Again we may not realise it but it is God who is drawing us into communion through the apprehension of truth, which is a participation in God's own Truth.

There is a special form of intellectual contemplation that we call *theological*: the delight we experience in accepting the truths of faith and enjoying what they reveal to us of God whom we are seeking.

Finally, there is *supernatural* contemplation, that special graced delight we experience in God, when we experience ourselves being drawn into a communion of love with the source of our being.

Marie-Eugène writes:

'Out of the darkness of the mystery there arises, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a confused light, an I-know-not-what, that makes one find peace and sweetness in the mystery, that holds faith there or brings it back, freeing it from the discursive operations of the intellect and causing it to find rest and support in this light beyond all distinct lights.'

(*I want to see God*, page 463).

John of the Cross is speaking of this prayer in Stanza 12 of his Spiritual Canticle:

O spring like crystal!
If only, on your silvered-over face,
you would suddenly form the eyes I have desired,
which I bear sketched deep within my heart.

John is aware of the importance of theological contemplation, and so of the teachings and traditions of the Church that are the silver plating. The formulas that express in words the truths revealed by God are not empty; they clothe the substance of divine truth itself that is revealed in them. If we submit humbly to this teaching, grace can lead us to penetrate the mystery it expresses. It is one thing to delight in the revealed truth. It is another to experience myself being caught up in the gaze of the One for whom my heart longs.

John of the Cross comments:

‘Faith gives us God, but covered with the silver of faith. Yet it does not for this reason fail to give God to us truly. Were someone to give us a gold vase plated with silver, he would not fail to give a gold vase merely because it is silver-plated ... The truths of faith are called “eyes” because of the remarkable presence of the Beloved which the soul experiences. It seems that God is now always looking at it ... Over the sketch of faith is drawn, in the will of the lover, the sketch of love. When there is union of love, the image of the beloved is so sketched in the will, and drawn so intimately and vividly, that it is true to say that the beloved lives in the lover, and the lover in the beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers, that one can say each is the other and both are one. This is because, in the union and transformation of love, each gives possession of self to the other, and each leaves and exchanges self for the other. Thus each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love. This is the meaning of Saint Paul’s affirmation: “I live, not I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).’

In contemplation our attention is not on any insights that we may receive, important though these can be. Beyond all insights we experience ourselves yielding to what we might call the gravity of grace. We don’t want our attention to wander from the mysterious Presence that is drawing us into communion – the Presence we call ‘God’.

In contemplation we are being transformed into love by the all-consuming love that is God. Like a drop of water we are being drawn into the ocean of God’s love and are being absorbed into it.

Teresa writes:

‘The important thing is not to think much but to love much’ (*Interior Castle* IV.1.7).

Accompanying this experience of love, there is joy, as well as a sense of belonging, communion, and peace. We have experienced moments of this communion ever since we began to pray, but now there is a difference. The current of communion is drawing us beyond images, beyond thoughts. This is the love for which we are made and for which we long. The communion in love that we experience is experienced as gift. We are quite aware of the fact that the silence, the stillness, the welling up of joy or gratitude or sorrow or pleading, is not something that we are initiating. It wells up unexpectedly and our hearts know that we are responding mysteriously to God.

Contemplation can come to any person at any time, for God invites everyone to the intimate communion for which we are created. In his *The Awakening Heart*, Gerald May writes:

‘Contemplation happens to everyone. It happens in moments when we are open and undefended and immediately present’ (page 193).

Contemplation comes naturally to children, for they have not yet begun to find and develop their ego. However, we cannot remain children all our life. To become ourselves and to mature as persons we need to discover and develop our ego. We are not extensions of our parents. We are not to avoid the freedom of being our unique selves by being caught up in and remaining in dependent relationships. Central to finding ourselves is discovering who God is for us and how God has chosen to relate to us. This necessarily involves activity of the memory, the imagination and the mind. To discover who we are and to discover the wonders of the divine presence and action in our lives, it is natural and necessary for us to enter into the kinds of prayer that we have been discussing up to this point, in which we ponder the mysteries of our faith, the history of God's action in the world, and above all the story of Jesus. We will have moments of contemplation, when the divine invades us in ways that are beyond either our control or our comprehension, but for the most part our prayer will be a journey of discovery in which, step by step, we come to know and love God more.

However, as we mature and as we become more committed to prayer, we need to listen to Jesus as he tells us that we will find ourselves only when we learn to 'lose' ourselves (Matthew 16:25), and that we must become like a little child if we are to enter into the domain of love into which he is inviting us (Matthew 18:3). There comes a time when we are ready to let go the ego that we have developed and to surrender in love to God. It is when we begin to surrender in this way that we begin to experience intermittent moments of contemplation.

In these graced moments everything is experienced as a sacrament of the divine; everything is 'charged with the grandeur of God' (G.M.Hopkins). In these graced moments we experience a new kind of presence in which we are not alone but are embraced by the One who gives harmony to the music of creation and 'in whom all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17). Our mind rests in the True that is given, the True that is beyond the truths that we discover through the efforts of reason and logic to which we are committed. Our will rests in the Good that is given, the Good that is beyond any efforts we are making to live a consistently moral life. Our feelings rest in the Beautiful that is given, the Beautiful that is beyond anything that we might appreciate by our own efforts. We can receive these graced moments in the measure that we are willing to let go control and entrust ourselves wholly to God. Whereas before we experienced ourselves seeking and striving, now we experience ourselves receiving and welcoming. This communion is offered to everyone who is willing to surrender to love.

Teresa of Jesus writes:

'It is certain that God gives himself in this way to those who give up all for God. God shows no partiality. God loves everyone. Nobody has any excuse, no matter how miserable you may be, since God so acts with me in bringing me to this state' (*Life* 27.12; also *Way* 19.15).

It is important to remember that we can experience contemplation in the midst of activity as well as in the stillness of prayer, for whenever we are doing God's will we are open to God's gift of God's Self in this way. Our focus here, however, is on contemplative prayer rather than contemplative action, though we are mindful of the call of Saint Dominic to share with others what we have received in contemplation ('contemplata tradere') and of Saint Ignatius of Loyola to be contemplative in all that we do ('in actione contemplativus').

If we are willing to remain open to these graced moments when God draws us beyond all our thoughts and feelings, and if we resist the temptation to take control of them or to possess them or to attempt to reproduce them by our own efforts or techniques, God's longing to be in communion with us is such that transient experiences of recollection tend to deepen, so that we find ourselves wrapped in quiet prayer. In an earlier reflection we spoke of a simple form of prayer in which we held ourselves quietly in the presence of God: a prayer of simple regard. In

some ways the prayer we are describing here is similar. The essential difference is that this experience of contemplative prayer (called by Teresa the 'Prayer of Quiet') is one that we can only receive and welcome as a gift. As noted earlier, we can desire it and prepare for it, but we cannot bring it about. Gerald May writes:

'Any attempt to create a contemplative attitude will lead to frustration or, worse, to self-delusion' (*The Awakened Heart*, page 194).

When we were in control of our prayer we worked for such quiet, now the quiet wells up from our mysterious depths. We are drawn into an experience of prayer from within. Earlier we found ways of quietening our imagination, memory and mind. Now, surprised by grace, these same faculties 'are absorbed and are looking as though in wonder at what they see' (*Interior Castle* IV.2.6). Now, the water that is refreshing our garden 'comes from its own source, which is God' (*Interior Castle* IV.2.4; see IV.2.3). Thinking of God as being in our centre radiating God's love, Teresa states: 'the warmth and the fragrant perfumes spread through our entire being' (*Interior Castle* IV.2.6). Now, the touch of God leaves us dissatisfied with any other pleasure. We long for the communion experienced in the silence and stillness. God has always been offering us, indeed offering everyone, this gift of communion. The difference is that now we are ready to allow ourselves to be 'drawn', to be 'caught up', to be surprised by grace.

Now, our prayer is no longer guided by our previous experience or any efforts of our mind or will. We are conscious of ourselves being moved and inspired. We are conscious of surrendering ourselves in love. God is leading us on the way of love. 'Contemplative prayer is allowing the Source of love to bring us toward the place which is our home' (May, page 195).

We do not want to give the impression that now all is light and love. We are the recipients of a wonderful grace of communion, but we are not yet in heaven. In contemplative prayer we are in the presence of the sacred Mystery that we call 'God'. We are, therefore, in touch with the One who is at the heart of everything. But the closer we come to the heart the more we are drawn into the Mystery of God who transcends any and every creature. Being transcendent, God cannot be contained or controlled. Being immanent, God opens us up to the real world: our own real world in all its grace and disgrace. Contemplative prayer, therefore, opens us to 'the joys and hopes' but also to 'the griefs and anxieties of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way' (Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World*, n.1). It opens us 'to the suffering and brokenness of the world as much as to its joys and beauty' (May, page 193). We should not expect it to be otherwise, for prayer engages us with the ultimately Real.

It is in contemplative prayer that God is transforming us so that, like Saint Paul, we will be able to say: 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). Our mind is being transformed into the mind of Christ. Our heart is becoming his heart. It is his communion of love that we are being invited to experience. Like a log in a fire this will require a profound purification, with much blackening and hissing till our whole being is transformed into fire by the all-consuming fire of God's love. Letting go our ego can be painful.

Let us look now at some of the difficulties that we can encounter in the early stages of contemplative prayer.