

MISSION: Prayer 8 **“Contemplation”**

Have you ever heard a little kid shouting, "Let me see, let me see!" as he pushed his way to the front of a crowd? Since the only thing my vertically challenged kids will ever dunk is a donut, one of them is often on my shoulders when anything interesting is happening. (I'm thinking of naming my next boy Zacchaeus.) Just being near the object of interest isn't enough. "I need to see, Daddy!" Ironically, their grubby hands often darken my own vision.

The other senses are certainly useful and great, but there is something about sight that helps us fully realize another's presence. Our kids need to "see" us watching when they perform. A boy and girl are "seeing" each other when dating. We go to "see" our relatives on vacation (again!). Seeing helps us to a deeper knowledge of the other person. "Where there is love, there is the eye," wrote Thomas Aquinas.³¹ Contemplation, the third and highest stage of prayer, is the intimate sight and loving knowledge of God. It is the possession of his Presence, the only Presence that satisfies. "We wish to see Jesus" (Jn 12:21).

Practically speaking, contemplation is where things get a little hairy in a book about prayer. Why? Because this is very hard territory to describe. Even the great saints of prayer like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila struggled to provide a true glimpse of the highest levels of union with God. It is so otherworldly, so supernatural in origin that it's hard to fit into natural, human categories. But we're going to try anyway, because this is what we're after. Contemplation isn't just something reserved for saints. It's part of how we become saints.

Before attempting to define and discuss contemplative prayer, it's helpful to take a step back and restate a few key points. All prayer is ultimately directed to union with Christ. Prayer is a means. Its goal is God. But as with everything good, we can't achieve it without his grace, apart from which we "can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). This is especially true in contemplative prayer, where he is both the cause and the end, as we'll see. We have our part to play in preparing for it, but he alone can make it happen.

We need God's help because the final goal set before us is beyond comprehension. It is nothing short of becoming "partakers of the divine nature" of God (see 2 Pt 1:4). That's the gift he offers - a share in his divine life, full membership in his

family. But for that to happen, we have to become like him, and we can't do that on our own.

I'm not talking about becoming more virtuous or getting to more Masses. That's certainly part of it. I'm talking about the whole enchilada; becoming like him because you've been "filled with all the fulness of God" (Eph 3:19). That's what begins to happen in contemplation. It's the consummation of our earthly spiritual life, the final plank in the bridge from time to eternity. God is made manifest in our very being - even if it doesn't seem so at first.

Slowly but Surely

Contemplation of God doesn't happen overnight. Like all the stages of prayer, it is typically a gradual process that unfolds over a lifetime. The different stages of contemplation - for there are several - are a growth of love. Often, people don't even realize they've begun the contemplative life. John of the Cross calls contemplation "a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God."³² It is a seed of transforming love quietly sprouting in the depths of the soul, moistened by the living waters of Christ himself. Given its mysterious nature, it's difficult to identify the movement from meditation into contemplation. But we're going to give it a shot.

Let's start by talking about what it is not. Because it's a more passive form of prayer, contemplative prayer differs from meditation. Meditative prayer consists of your actions, such as reading spiritual books, rubbing the varnish off rosary beads, and visualizing passages of Scripture. In other words, you're focusing your faculties on the mysteries of Christ. You're actively seeking out the truths of God. In contemplation you stop. John of the Cross says the difference between meditation and contemplation is "like that existing between toil and the enjoyment of the fruits of that toil; between the drudgery of the journey and the rest ... at its end."³³

Everyone knows that learning *about* something isn't the same as experiencing it. In meditation we learn what we need to do in order to unite ourselves to God, but the uniting still must take place. He must communicate himself to us in a real way that goes beyond our various (though necessary) spiritual pondering. That's what happens in contemplation.

While there are multiple levels of contemplation, generally speaking it is not something we initiate. (Some spiritual authors call the transition between meditation and contemplation "acquired contemplation," a form of prayer which still retains our initiative.) Infused contemplation, the entry into mystical prayer, is not something we can make happen. It's "an intimate sharing between friends" that comes from God.³⁴ It is a gift poured into us by God.

That doesn't mean we have no role in this spiritual drama. God's not going to give himself to just anyone. We have to demonstrate our desire for him. We must set the table for this great gift to be served. How do we do that? Primarily through meditation and doing our best to grow in virtue and holiness. We work at putting on our spiritual "Sunday best" every day in preparation for the arrival of the King. And we have to do it every day, because this is a process that takes time.

Slow growth is something a lot of people misunderstand or even try to get around. As twenty-first-century humans, we are accustomed to immediate gratification. As long as we have the cash, we can get pretty much whatever we want or need right away. But growth in the spiritual life and the art of prayer is not something that happens quickly. Any prayer "technique" that promises a quick and easy road to intimacy with God is simply false — especially if it involves campfires and multiple rounds of "Kumbaya." Just as transitions in the natural life are gradual as we move from infancy to adulthood, there aren't really hard markers in the spiritual life. It's not like you suddenly come to a posted sign during your prayers that declares: "Congratulations. You are now entering contemplation."

So how do you know you're there? As God begins to quietly pour himself into you in a new manner, you'll find indications of his presence in the way you live. That's the primary indicator. Lots of people think they'll be overwhelmed by emotion or incredible feelings when they achieve deep union with God. And, yes, it can and does happen. Bernini's famous sculpture *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* beautifully depicts how this great saint was enraptured and overwhelmed by the presence of God when she reached the highest levels of contemplation.³⁵ Her own description of the event tells how one of God's highest angels pierced her heart with a flaming dart, leaving her "all on fire with great love of God."³⁶ In another otherworldly experience she said: "It seemed my soul wanted to leave my body because it didn't

fit there nor could it wait for so great a good.... The glory of this rapture was extraordinary."³⁷

It might not be the initial or daily experience for everyone, but this "wonderful interior joy" described by Teresa and others shouldn't surprise us.³⁸ After all, we're talking about union with Almighty God. The Infinite taking hold of the finite. Ultimately, this is what we're made for. It's everything.

And yet we don't want to overemphasize experience or feelings, because this is a trap many fall into when analyzing the interior journey. We equate our mere human impulses with the voice of God, which often leads us astray. Consider yourself blessed if God rewards you with extraordinary experiences like that of Teresa and others. It's a great gift and foretaste of heaven. But the true litmus test of growth is how we're living, not our feelings - which tend to come and go faster than the taste of Fruit Stripe gum.

Even if we're receiving special graces - visions or "raptures" from Our Lord - spiritual union with God can't be separated from the day-to-day activities of our life. We are a union of body and soul. Spiritual growth must necessarily affect the way we act in the material world. When someone drops in out of nowhere at dinnertime and we don't freak, we're growing in prayer. When our child draws with permanent marker on the freshly painted wall and we don't scream words not even soap can wash out of our mouth, we're growing in prayer. If someone cuts us off in heavy traffic and we keep smiling with both hands on the wheel ... well, you get the idea. Growth in prayer is indicated by overall growth in virtue, a life lived more like Christ's. "You will know them by their fruits," says Our Lord (see Mt 7:16).

Humanity to Divinity

At this point you might be thinking: "Got it, Matt. It satisfies us like nothing else. It helps us live more like God. It can even lead to some pretty fantastic experiences. But I'm still in the dark here. Give me a solid definition of contemplative prayer." Fair enough. I don't know of a simpler one than this: contemplation is the manifestation of Jesus in your soul. It is the normal culmination of the life of prayer. "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (Jn 14:21). If we're doing what we're

supposed to do, contemplative prayer is the final preparation for heaven. It's the stage of our becoming consumed and filled up by God as we prepare for full union with him in heaven.

"Manifestation of Jesus in my soul, huh? That's still a bit nebulous. Can you feel it, Padre?" Maybe. "Can you taste it?" Not sure. "Can you smell it?" I'm starting to worry about you.

When trying to put a finger on contemplation you have to check your human notions at the door. We're dealing with the supernatural inflowing of the infinite God into our very finite being. It's like pouring the ocean into a thimble. That's why you don't find "cut and dried" definitions of this stage of prayer, even in the writings of masters like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. Instead, they give us really "helpful" terms like "warmth" and "fragrance" to describe the phenomenon. (I guess you can smell it after all!) Not even their vast experience and knowledge can define it to our satisfaction.

The reason is that in a sense, as we move from meditation to contemplation, we're moving from humanity to divinity. We're moving from a human mode of praying to a supernatural communion. Meditation has sharpened our sight of God. The hours, months, and years spent in this stage of prayer have reordered our view of the world - we've placed Christ at the center and changed the way we live. But that's not the end. "We are meant to pass through the Sacred Humanity, to the Divinity which it veiled and clothed," says Father Leen.

As we have seen, the goal of prayer is participation in the divine life of God. That's the whole point of the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Joined to his life through the sacraments and prayer we become divine. We don't become one of the Trinity, mind you. We are never equal to God, though lots of people think they are. Rather, through his loving grace we become what he is by nature. He gives himself to us, his children. He grafts us into the Divine Family tree. In the life of prayer, this grafting is realized through contemplation.

"Whoa, Padre. This sounds like some pretty high-level stuff. Are you sure it isn't reserved for monks and nuns hanging out in monasteries and nunneries or whatever you call those places they live? Are you saying it's for the average Joe and Judy, too?" That's exactly what I'm saying. Yes, there are many levels of

contemplation as we ascend to God, and certain vocations (might) provide more opportunity to climb to higher stages, but infused contemplation is for every Catholic. It's the natural end of our earthly prayer life, the final stepping stone to heaven, where we start getting close enough to "see," just like kids on my aching shoulders. Our limitless God begins to satisfy our eternal longings and fill our "capacity for the unlimited."

Contemplation helps us to not only see God more clearly, but ourselves, too. We truly understand that the more we give ourselves to God, the more satisfied we'll be. This realization totally transforms a person's view of the "work" it takes to progress in prayer and the spiritual life in general. Before, we had to constantly fight against our desires for the bright, shiny objects that vied for our attention and distracted us. Even if we successfully shunned the baubles of this world, we still wanted them. But as we move into contemplative union with God, this changes. The things that keep us from him actually become unattractive.

Our joy at this point is in him alone. We're changing. Mysteriously, happiness and longing grow rapidly side by side. While our soul is "never at rest," says Father Leen, "it is never restless; though it is never satisfied it is never dissatisfied."⁴⁰ Why? Because we know we're moving toward that Person alone who can offer the intimate union for which we long. The inner thirst is being quenched bit by bit. But it's a paradox. The more he sates our hunger, the more it grows. For this reason Paul exclaimed, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). In other words, the further we travel toward God, the more we are satisfied, though our desire to fully arrive in his presence increases. It's kind of like vacation.

I hate the long car trips which accompany family vacation. I want to get from point A (home) to point B (the beach) as fast as possible. Forget detours to see the largest ball of twine on earth. My children are lucky if we stop for the bathroom. "You'll have to hold it, kids. We just passed the last rest stop on earth. Maybe we'll catch it on the way back."

Like other parents, my displeasure at vacation travel is somewhat related to the fact that I generally travel with a pack of half-tamed human children possessing bladders the size of a small marble. (Passing another rest stop is like playing chicken with a semi-truck. You have to be brave - or stupid.) I'm kidding, of course

(kind of). I can't really blame their agitation. If I spent hours on end strapped in tighter than a launch-ready astronaut, I'd be a bit irritable, too. When I was a kid car seats were as much a reality as floating cars. If there were no regular seats left, parents put the youngest on their lap and let them steer. It was great driver's ed.

But even as I endure long travel as an adult I've noticed something. The longer the trip goes, the happier I become. I might have lost my mind along the way, but my desire to arrive at vacation paradise is slowly being satisfied the more miles I put behind me, even though I'm not yet there. The pain in my back now serves as a reminder I've already covered a lot of ground. The yelp of a child loses its power to annoy as I start to see signs for my exit. If the car breaks down now, we can simply leave it and walk the rest of the way. (Yeah, right!) I'm getting closer. I'm getting more relaxed. I'm good. But I still really, really want to get there; to lie on the sand listening to the crashing waves, hearing the seagulls, and smelling the salt in the air.

Your Presence Is Required

Alas, life isn't always a beach, but as we move toward union with God, the former pain we experienced seeking earthly satisfaction changes to longing. Pain turns to desire. While we're never fully satisfied here, the filling we do experience is a distinct pleasure because it's what we were made for. We know complete satisfaction is at hand. Even so, the gnawing hunger for God's full presence remains. We're seated at the table taking the first mouthwatering bite of the exquisite dinner for which we've been starving.

That being said, we must remember that, ultimately, satisfaction is not what we're striving for. We strive for God. That's why we keep going even when we don't feel like it - when our human frailties want us to stop or distractions abound. Rest assured, happiness and the fulfillment of all our desires is going to happen if we're seeking God. But it's not about us. It's about him.

Contemplation is a new relationship between the soul and God. He is being "realized" in us. This "realization" may come and go, especially in the initial stages of contemplation, but we have a new awareness of his presence. We are beginning that passage through his sacred humanity into his divinity. It's not natural. It's supernatural. It's from God.

At this point in our path to God, we're starting to love him for who he is, not for what he can do for us. We've even stopped focusing on virtues or habits, because we're focused on him. We don't have to think about them because the life of virtue is now naturally flowing into us from him. We receive it. We receive him. No longer do we have to move through created things to the Creator. In fact, meditative prayer often becomes drudgery to those who have achieved this stage of spiritual development.

Shortly after she became a postulant in the Order of the Visitation of Mary, Margaret Mary Alacoque, promoter of the Sacred Heart of Jesus devotion, got into trouble. She found it hard to meditate according to the order's rule. No matter how hard the poor girl tried, she couldn't concentrate on the material.⁴¹ Little wonder, she was well into contemplation, receiving visions directly from Our Lord.

Be aware that there are times when to meditate would mean taking our eyes off the real manifestation of Christ. It's climbing back down the ladder, so to speak. Jesus is making himself directly known to us, so turning our vision to created things that merely point to him is pointless. If you find meditation hard because of a desire to simply be with Christ, set it aside and let God work.

Interestingly, many people get a little scared at this point. This kind of "passive" prayer where God is directly acting upon us is uncharted waters. What we're experiencing is amazing, but we're used to a particular path. In meditation it was much easier to see spiritual progress. Growth in virtue could be identified, and we could chart our development, so to speak. But not any longer.

When God gifts a soul with loving, passive prayer in contemplation, he takes over. He seizes the will. He's in control. We're no longer marking our own path toward him. For that reason, it's not unusual for anxiety to set in. Have we become lazy? Are we doing enough? The satisfaction of making our own way (aided by grace, of course) is gone. He's turned on the tractor beam and is drawing us to him. And while we don't exactly know what's happening, we really like it.

Transfigured

Father Leen uses the biblical story of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor to illustrate what happens in this kind of contemplative prayer. During the years of

his earthly ministry, Jesus' inner circle of Peter, James, and John achieved a high degree of intimacy with Our Lord. With him constantly, they were striving to imitate what they saw in his life. This human intimacy they achieved with Christ was, in a sense, their ordinary path of mental prayer, of meditation. But when he took them up the mountain and allowed his divinity to burst through the veil of his sacred humanity, they were "filled with awe" (Mt 17:6) as Jesus "shone like the sun" (Mt 17:2). Added to the light show was the appearance of Moses and Elijah - both of whom had been long dead. And if this weren't enough, they heard the very voice of God.

As a guy with a pretty low, Barry White-ish voice, I've noticed small children unaccustomed to my bass tones quiver in my presence if I get a bit loud. But can you imagine the biggest, baddest, subwooferest voice in the universe speaking to you? No wonder Jesus had to tell them to "rise, and have no fear" (Mt 17:7).

But the fear experienced by the disciples was not one of abject terror. Father Leen says "their fear was the bewilderment that the Human always experiences at contact with the Divine."⁴² Not knowing what to do with himself, Peter blurts out, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah" (Mt 17:4). Poor Pete. In the delirium of their divine encounter he offers to make some tents. Overcome with the experience, Luke tells us, he didn't know what he was saying (9:33).

The three disciples were consumed with a desire to prolong this vision, this glimpse of Divinity. Who could blame them? They had received a prefiguration of the joy of heaven. The veil had been lifted ever so slightly, and they were overwhelmed, engulfed in the dazzling light and love of the Trinity. But, alas, even the disciples had to come back down the mountain and rejoin the rest of the world.

The Tabor experience is a great reminder that even upon reaching the heights of an encounter with God we're still tasked with the duties of this life. Cooking, cleaning, and diaper changing continue - forever, it seems. The difference, and it's a huge one, is that in this stage of union with God we have a sort of constant contentment and happiness because we're drawing ever closer to God. Our soul is constantly smiling, as it were, immersed in the joy of Our Lord. And don't forget that just because you might not experience intense supernatural delight (and least,

not yet!), that doesn't mean you aren't encountering God in a deep way as you mature in the faith. Jesus was just as present with the disciples down in the valley as he was on Tabor. Contemplative prayer isn't an "over and done with" type of thing. It's an outpouring of God into our lives which enables us to live up to Paul's admonition to "pray constantly" (1 Thes 5:17).

Active Contemplation

Integrating the interior and exterior life is one of the hardest things to do. Most of us tend to be Martha, not Mary. Remember that story in the Gospel of Luke? Jesus is chilling out at Martha's place, and she's doing exactly what many of the rest of us would: running here, there, and everywhere trying to make sure everything is taken care of. (Can you imagine hosting the Son of God at your house?) Her sister Mary, on the other hand, is quietly seated at Jesus' feet, hanging on his every word. When Martha complains about how she's the only one working, Jesus gently rebukes her, saying: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk 10:41-42).

I confess I've got a soft spot for Martha. I probably would have piled on: "Yeah! Tell Mary to get to work." But Jesus is telling us first things come first, and he's it. It all starts with him. Yes, he offers us a part to play, but he doesn't need our help. We need his. He is the source of energy for all of our action.

The problem we often run into, especially in ministry situations where zeal is very present, is putting the cart before the horse. We're doers. We hear an idea we like and "bam!" we're on it. "Let's *do* this thing!" That's all well and good ... *if we're already engaged in a deep life of prayer*. Being an apostle doesn't mean just heading out to proclaim the Gospel in the hinterlands (which are really far away). We must first go "inside" and pack our spiritual bags before we can lead others on a journey to God. Living an active life without prayer is like taking an exam without ever studying or attending class. It's not going to end well.

We must remember all of our activity is based on love of God. It's all about leading others to him so he can save them and grant new life. Our activity needs to flow from the surplus of grace in our life. We fill up on Christ, and he overflows from us

into others. That has to be the order, because we can't give what we haven't yet received.

The great Archbishop Fulton Sheen was the cat's meow of evangelization in America back in the middle of the twentieth century. A tireless promoter of the faith, he wrote over seventy books, led celebrities to conversion, and hosted radio and television shows for decades. He was so good he won a couple of Emmys for Most Outstanding Television Personality.

What made Fulton Sheen so great? He was a prayer warrior. He fueled up on Our Lord before spreading the fire of God's love. In fact, he made a decision early on that he would spend an hour a day in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament - in silence.