

## ***What is contemplation?***

Excerpted and adapted from the book of the same name by Thomas Merton (1950)

“There are so many Christians who do not appreciate the magnificent dignity of their vocation to sanctity, to the knowledge, love, and service of God. There are so many Christians who do not realize what possibilities God has placed in the life of Christian perfection—what possibilities for joy in the knowledge and love of Him. There are so many Christians who have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and of the power of that Love to do them good, and to bring them happiness.

“Why do we think of the gift of contemplation, infused contemplation, mystical prayer, as something essentially strange and esoteric, reserved for a small class of almost unnatural beings and prohibited to everyone else? It is perhaps because we have forgotten that contemplation is the work of the Holy Spirit, acting on our souls through His gifts of wisdom and understanding with special intensity, to increase and perfect our love for Him. These gifts are part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity. They are all given in baptism, and if they are given it is presumably because God wants them to be developed. Their development will always remain the free gift of God and it is true that His Providence sees fit to develop them less in some saints than in others. But it is also true that God often measures His gifts by our desire to receive them, and by our cooperation with His grace—the Holy Spirit will not waste any of His gifts on people who have little or no interest in them.

“Infused contemplation is a powerful means of sanctification. It is the work of love, and nothing is more effective in increasing our love for God. In fact, infused contemplation is intimately connected with the pure and perfect love of God which is God’s greatest gift to the soul. It is deep and intimate knowledge of God by a union of love—a union in which we learn things about Him that those who have not received such a gift will never discover until they enter heaven.

“Therefore, if anyone should ask, ‘Who may desire this gift and pray for it,’ the obvious answer is: *everybody*. “But there is only one condition. If you desire intimate union with God you must be willing to pay the price for it. The price is small enough. In fact, it is not even a price at all: it only seems to be so with us. We find it difficult to give up our desire for things that can never satisfy us in order to purchase the One Good in Whom is all our joy—and in Whom, moreover, we get back everything we have renounced besides!”

### **The Promises of Christ**

At the last supper, in the discourse as reported by John, Christ promised to his disciples, and to us through them:

- “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (14:15-17)
- “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything.” (14:26)
- “Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” (14:21)
- *This knowledge and love is essentially the same as eternal life:* “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (17:3)
- *Is it any wonder that this love and knowledge should open up infinite depths of joy and peace in the contemplative soul?* “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (15:11).
- *The joy of the contemplative life is consummated in perfect union:* “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (17:22-23)

## Types of contemplation

*Active contemplation* – Loving attention to God. One uses reason and beauty to focus an affective gaze on God. It demands thought and action and acts of will. It teaches obedience and humility. It makes us attentive to God's presence and his desires. It shows us how to trust God and abandon ourselves more and more to him. It introduces us to the joys of the spiritual life.

*Infused contemplation* – In the strict sense of the word, **contemplation is a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused by Him into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experimental contact with Him.** It is

- An intuition born of pure love
- A gift that absolutely transcends the natural capacities of the soul and that no one can acquire by any effort of their own. But God gives it in proportion as it is emptied from affections for everything outside of Himself
- God manifesting himself, according to the promise of Christ, to those who love Him

## A ray of darkness

- Contemplation is the light of God acting on the soul, but do not think it will always bring lightness and freedom and joy. Every soul is weakened and blinded by attachment to created things. Consequently, the light of God causes *pain*: the pain of the loss of false ideas of God, the pain of seeing God's holiness and in contrast our own sinfulness, the pain of a merciless attack on our own self-love
- Infused contemplation sooner or later brings a terrible interior revolution. Gone is the sweetness of prayer. Meditation becomes impossible, even hateful. The mind cannot think. The will seems unable to love. The interior life is filled with darkness and dryness and pain. The soul is tempted to think that the spiritual life has come to an end. This is a crucial point in the life of prayer. It is here that souls often turn back. The soul does not want to *believe* without *seeing*. It does not want to give up control and walk in blind trust. The cross has proved to be a scandal and the soul can go no further. These people may remain faithful but turn away from the inner path, immersing themselves in work to avoid the pain

## The test

Dryness in meditation, helplessness in the struggle for virtue are no sure indications by themselves that contemplation has begun:

- Does the soul find peace in abandoning itself to God's will? Is it content to rest in pure faith and blind hope? Does the attempt to meditate rob it of peace?
- Does the soul discover in this darkness a deep recollection and peace, even though distractions may continue to afflict it against its desire?
- Is there no desire to escape this aridity, but rather a growing conviction that joy and peace and fulfillment are only to be found somewhere in this lonely night?

## What to do

- It is very important to have competent guidance. Otherwise it is almost impossible to avoid errors and obstacles
- The most important thing of all is to get some realization of what God is doing in your soul. Learn the tremendous value of this obscure and crucifying light of faith which darkens and empties your mind and leads you to the threshold of experimental contact with the living God
- In order to cooperate with this work of Grace, you must not seek the things that God's immense light is trying to drive out of you. Do not lament or resist the loss of clear rational concepts. Do not be alarmed by the loss of sweetness and consolation. Do not stir yourself up to useless interior activities. Live in as much simplicity and peace and quiet and solitude as you can. Do not go out of your way to get involved in activities and labors. Do the tasks appointed to you as perfectly as you can, with disinterested love and great peace. Dwell in the silence of your own soul and rest there in the simple and simplifying light which God is infusing into you
- Do not aspire to spectacular experiences. Do not try to measure your own advancement. With Teresa of Avila, think about God, and let God worry about you.