

What is Contemplation?

From New Seeds of Contemplation, Thomas Merton (Burns and Oates, 1999)

Contemplation is the highest expression of our intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that source. It knows that source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith. For contemplation is a kind of spiritual vision to which both reason and faith aspire, by their very nature, because without it they must always remain incomplete. Yet contemplation is not vision, because it sees 'without seeing' and knows 'without knowing'. It is more profound depth of faith, knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concepts. It can be suggested by works, by symbols, but in the very moment of trying to indicate what it knows the contemplative mind takes back what it has said and denies what it has affirmed. For in contemplation we know by 'unknowing'. Or, better, we know *beyond* all knowing or 'unknowing'.

Poetry, music and art have something in common with the contemplative experience. But contemplation is beyond aesthetic intuition, beyond art, beyond poetry. Indeed, it is also beyond philosophy, beyond speculative theology. It resumes, transcends and fulfils them all, and yet at the same time it seems, in a certain way, to supersede and to deny them all. Contemplation is always beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self. To enter into the realm of contemplation one must in a certain sense die; but this death is in fact the entrance into a higher life. It is a death for the sake of life, which leaves behind all that we can know or treasure as life, as thought, as experience, as joy, as being.

And so contemplation seems to supersede and to discard every other form of intuition and experience – whether in art, in philosophy, in theology, in liturgy or in ordinary levels of love and of belief. This rejection is of course only apparent. Contemplation is and must be compatible with all these things, for it is their highest fulfilment. But in the actual experience of contemplation all other experiences are momentarily lost. They 'die' to be born again on a higher level of life.

In other words, then, contemplation reaches out to the knowledge and even to the experience of the transcendent and inexpressible God. It knows God by seeming to touch him. Or rather it knows him as if it had been invisibly touched by him....Touched by him who has no hands, but who is pure reality and the source of

all that is real! Hence contemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite being at the roots of our own limited being. An awareness of our contingent reality as received, as a present from God, as a free gift of love. This is the existential contact of which we speak when we use the metaphor of being 'touched by God.'

Contemplation is also the response to a call: a call from him who has no voice, and yet who speaks in everything that is, and who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of his. But we are words that are meant to respond to him, to answer to him to echo him, and even in some way to contain him and signify him. Contemplation is this echo. It is a deep resonance in the inmost centre of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and resounds with the majesty and the mercy of the hidden and living one. He answers himself in us and this answer is divine life, divine creativity, making all things new. We ourselves become his echo and his answer. It is as if in creating us God asked a question, and in awakening us to contemplation he answered the question, so that the contemplative is at the same time question and answer.

The life of contemplation implies two levels of awareness: first, awareness of the question, and second, awareness of the answer. Though these are two distinct and enormously different levels, yet they are in fact an awareness of the same thing. The question is, itself, the answer. And we ourselves are both. But we cannot know this until we have moved into the second kind of awareness. We awaken, not to find an answer absolutely distinct from the question, but to realize that the question is its own answer. And all is summed up in one awareness – not a proposition, but an experience: 'I AM'.

The contemplation of which I speak here is not philosophical. It is not the static awareness of metaphysical essences apprehended as spiritual objects; unchanging and eternal. It is not the contemplation of abstract ideas. It is the religious apprehension of God, through my life in God, or through 'sonship', as the New Testament says. 'For whoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are sons of God...The Spirit himself gives testimony to our own spirit that we are the sons of God.' 'To as many as received him he gave the power to become the sons of God...' And so the contemplation of which I speak is a religious and transcendent gift. It is not something to which we can attain alone, by intellectual effort, by perfecting our natural powers. It is not a kind of self-hypnosis, resulting from concentration on our own inner spiritual being. It is not the fruit of our own efforts. It is the gift of God who, in his mercy, completes the hidden and mysterious work of creation in us by enlightening our minds and hearts, by awakening in us the awareness that we are words spoken in his one Word, and that creating Spirit (*creator spiritus*) dwells in us, and we in him. That we are 'in Christ' and that Christ lives in us. That the natural life in us has been completed, elevated transformed and fulfilled in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Contemplation is the awareness and realization, even in some sense experience of what each Christian obscurely believes; 'It is now no longer I that live but Christ lives in me.'

Hence, contemplation is more than a consideration of abstract truths about God, more even than affective meditation on the things we believe. It is awakening, enlightenment, and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God's creative and dynamic intervention in our daily life. Hence contemplation does not simply 'find' a clear idea of God and confine him within the limits of that idea, and hold him there as a prisoner to whom it can always return. On the contrary, contemplation is carried away by him into his own realm, his own mystery and his own freedom. It is pure and virginal knowledge, poor in concepts, poorer still in reasoning, but able, by its very poverty and purity, to follow the Word 'wherever he may go'.

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Pray for your own Discovery

.....this then is what it means to seek God perfectly: to withdraw from illusion and pleasure, from worldly anxieties and desires, from the works that God does not want, from a glory that is only human display; to keep my mind free from confusion in order that my liberty may be always at the disposal of his will; to entertain silence in my heart and listen for the voice of God; to cultivate an intellectual freedom from the images of created things in order to receive the secret contact of God in obscure love; to love all people as myself; to rest in humility and to find peace in withdrawal from conflict and competition with other men; to turn aside from controversy and put away heavy loads of judgement and censorship and criticism and the whole burden of opinions that I have no obligation to carry; to have a will that is always ready to fold back within itself and draw all the powers of the soul down from its deepest centre to rest in silent expectancy for the coming of God, poised in tranquil and effortless concentration upon the point of my dependence of him; to gather all that I am, and have all that I can possibly suffer or do or be, and abandon them all to God in the resignation of a perfect love and blind faith and pure trust in God, to do his will. And then to wait in peace and emptiness and oblivion of all things.

Bonum est praestolari cum silentio salutare Dei.

It is good to wait in silence for the salvation of God.