

In the history of the church, silence and listening have been central to receiving the fullness of God's Word and experiencing the complete forgiveness that he extends to us. He is forever calling to us; we need to learn how to listen and hear.

Although the church's teachings on prayer have varied over time and geography, there are two great, unbroken traditions of prayer that can be traced back to the earliest days of the church. Jesus' teachings on prayer have been articulated and formalized in somewhat different ways by these two traditions, but their goal is essentially the same. The contemplative tradition that evolved in the monastic orders of the Catholic church in the West is concerned with receiving God's Word in the sanctuary of the heart; while the spiritual practices first described by the Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox church focus on developing interior silence as the essential prerequisite for hearing the Voice of God. The one emphasizes contemplation on the Word as a means to communion with God, while the other cultivates purifying silence in which faith spontaneously reveals the presence of the Word.

There are of course many other forms of prayer, each with its own distinctive form and purpose. There are prayers of petition and of thanksgiving, mourning and rejoicing, intercession and deliverance. There are prayers spoken in public and prayers spoken in private, formal liturgical prayers and spontaneous prayers of the heart. There are prayers that we articulate through the spoken word and those that we can only offer in wordless yearning. Through all these varied forms of prayer, God works within us according to the varied inclinations of heart and mind that have been given to us by culture and personal disposition. Calling to us from his infinite and eternal abode beyond the reach of space and time, he speaks his Word of invitation, to bring us back into the Kingdom which has been ours since before the world began.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Contemplative prayer became distinguished from other forms of prayer with the rise of monasticism in the West. As monastic practices were codified in medieval times, the variety of experiences in prayer were organized into four basic categories, which were integrated into a practice called *lectio divina*, or "divine reading," that is still taught in various forms in the church today. The intent of *lectio divina* is to bring us into the most intimate possible relationship with God through encountering him in his revealed Word.

To have an authentic encounter with God, who is infinite, our awareness must be lifted out of the finite boundaries of our personal experience. In *lectio divina*, the first step of this process is *lectio*, the slow and attentive reading of a brief selection of scripture; here our awareness is gently turned toward God by the written Word of God. The words we read or hear are sacraments, for they represent what lies beyond them in the Mind of Christ. They are verbal signs of the eternal Word that God is ever speaking in the depths of our being. By listening with devotion to words of scripture, our awareness is drawn towards the eternal Father who rests beyond the changing perceptions of our senses and the fickle judgments of our intellect. Our awareness is enlivened and its focus is turned towards the Author of all truth.

The next stage, *meditatio*, involves exploring the meaning of what we have just read or heard and thinking about its relevance to our personal concerns. Scripture represents itself as a record of historical facts from distant times and places, but these facts of history can be

seen as God's way of revealing eternal truth to his time-bound creatures. God uses *chronos*, the succession of moments in time, to reveal to us *kairos*, the timeless moment "as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be" in which he is eternally present. Reflecting upon the relation of our individual experiences to the universal truths contained in scripture helps us to perceive our connectedness with God. The light of our faith allows us to read "between the lines", (*inter-legere*) and perceive in a deep and very real way (*intelligere*) the relevance of his Word to our concerns. In this phase, we begin to ascend from our fixation on the specifics of our own historical lives as separate, mortal creatures towards an awareness of our eternal life of oneness with God in Christ.

As we see the relevance of God's Word to our individual life, we move quite naturally from *meditatio* into *oratorio*: we speak to God of our concerns. This "speaking from the heart" can range from the spontaneous expression of love, gratitude, and adoration to the sharing of our longings, worries, pains, and fears. Having shared whatever is in our heart with God, we fall silent, trusting that our Heavenly Father has heard our prayers and will, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, take care of our concerns. We have heard the words of scripture, thought about them, and offered to God the words of our hearts; now we wait to receive from God his Word.

We have been lifted from our self-centered world into a God-centered world. Our thoughts comes to rest, we enter into silence, and now the Voice of God leads us on into God himself. Oratorio gives way to *contemplatio*, "the simple intuition of the truth," in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas. In modern times, the word "contemplation" has come to mean thinking about something while "meditation" is most commonly used to refer to a method of quieting the mind. In medieval times, these meanings were reversed. The Truth beyond every truth calls us on; and in *contemplatio* the mind is drawn into the perfect silence that is the only prayer we can utter as we rest fulfilled in the presence of God. Resting before him, the fears that cause us to feel separate are gently melted by his love, and we are given the inward awareness that he and we are one. There is no sense of seeking, only having found; no sense of lonely grasping, only the radiance of his Being; no sense of change of any kind, only peace eternal. No thought is there to disturb the perfect serenity of our oneness with God in the unity of his Holy Spirit.

The experience of contemplative union has been described by saints and contemplatives throughout the history of the church. Thomas Merton, a twentieth century American monk of the Cistercian order, writes, "Contemplation is the coalescence of life, knowledge, freedom, and love in a supremely simple intuition of the unity of all love, freedom, truth and life in their source, which is God. . . ." ¹ Following Aquinas, Merton uses the term "intuition" to refer to an experience that is quite distinct from the everyday experiences of understanding a new concept, gaining a fresh insight, or embracing a new belief. It is an inner knowing in which the "object" of knowledge is not perceived as something separate from the knower. Contemplation is thus not an intellectual experience—it is an experience of pure being. He describes it as ". . . the sudden intuitive penetration of what really IS. It is the unexpected leap of the spirit of man into the existential luminosity of Reality Itself, not merely by the metaphysical intuition of being, but by the transcendent fulfillment of an existential communion with Him who IS. . . ." ² This experience is not within the realm of ideas; it is not *thinking about* God. "This Reality, the Freedom, is not a concept, not a thing, not an object, not even

an object of knowledge: it is the Living God, the Holy One, the One to Whom we dare to utter a Name only because He has revealed a Name to us. The pure summit of our own actuality is the threshold of His Sanctuary, and He is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.”³

Because it is beyond the grasp of the intellect, this experience can be hard to comprehend unless one has had it. Merton’s words point beyond mere ideas to an intangible but supremely real *experience* of the transcendent source of our existence. Here is how he differentiates this experience from mere intellectual understanding or conviction:

The reality of God is known to us in contemplation in an entirely new way. When we apprehend God through the medium of concepts, we see him as an object separate from ourselves, as a being from whom we are alienated, even though we believe that He loves us and that we love Him. In contemplation this division disappears, for contemplation goes beyond concepts and apprehends God not as a separate object but as the Reality within our own reality, the Being within our being, the life of our life. . . . The experience of contemplation is the experience of God’s life and presence within ourselves not as object but as the transcendent source of our own subjectivity. Contemplation is a mystery in which God reveals Himself to us as the very center of our own most intimate self—*intimior intimo meo* as St. Augustine said. When the realization of His presence bursts upon us, our own self disappears in Him as we pass mystically through the Red Sea of separation to lose ourselves (and thus find our true selves) in Him.

Contemplation is the highest and most paradoxical form of self-realization, attained by apparent self-annihilation.⁴

In the total intimacy of this encounter, there is no distinction between oneself and God. Outside the experience, in the realm of understanding, one honors the metaphysical distinction between the self and God, but in the moment of contemplative union we discover a “new,” authentic self in God. *In God we discover our true self.* Merton says, “Unless we discover this deep self which is hidden with Christ in God, we will never really know ourselves as persons. Nor will we know God. For it is by the door of this deep self that we enter into the spiritual knowledge of God. (And indeed, if we seek our true selves it is not in order to contemplate ourselves, but to pass beyond ourselves and find Him.)”⁵

Because this is an experience of passing beyond the limitations of selfhood into the unlimited freedom of God, Merton calls it “transcendent experience,” which he describes as “. . . an experience of. . . self-transcending and also at the same time an experience of the “Transcendent” or the “Absolute” or “God” not so much as object but Subject.”⁶ He goes on to say:

The Absolute Ground of Being . . . is realized so to speak “from within” — realized from within “Himself” and from within “myself,” — though “myself” is now lost and “found” “in Him.” These metaphorical expressions all point to the problem we have in mind: the problem of a self that is “no-self,” that is by no means an “alienated self” but, on the contrary, a transcendent Self which, to clarify it in Christian terms, is metaphysically distinct from the Self of God and yet perfectly identified with that Self by love and freedom, so that there appears to be but one Self. Experience of this is what we call “transcendent experience” or the illumination of wisdom. . . . To attain this experience is to penetrate the reality of all that is, to grasp the meaning of one’s own existence, to find one’s true place in the scheme of things, to relate perfectly to all that is in a relation of identity and love. . . .⁷

In traditional Christian theology, it is vitally important not to confuse the “fallen” self with God. The alienated self born from Adam and Eve’s “original sin” can never become God; believing it to be so is considered to be a delusion and a heresy. Merton addresses this concern by saying:

[It] . . . is evident that the identity or the person which is the subject of this transcendent consciousness is not the ego as isolated and contingent, but the person as “found” and “actualized” in union with Christ. In other words. . . never purely and simply the mere empirical ego—still less the neurotic and narcissistic self—but the “person” who is identified with Christ, one with Christ, “I live now not I but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

In the Christian tradition, then, we find this personal transcendence referred to as “having the mind of Christ” or knowing and seeing “in the Spirit of Christ”. . . . This Spirit, Who “fathoms everything, even the abyss of God” and “understands the thought of God” as man understands his own heart, is “given us” in Christ as a transcendent superconsciousness of God and of “the Father” (see I Cor 2, Rom 8, etc.).

More specifically, all transcendent experience is for the Christian a participation in “the mind of Christ” —“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. . . who emptied himself. . . obedient unto death. . . . Therefore God raised him and conferred upon him a name above all names.”(Phil 2:5-10.) This dynamic of emptying and of transcendence accurately defines the transformation of the Christian consciousness in Christ. It is a kenotic transformation, an emptying of all the contents of the ego-consciousness to become a void in which the light of God or the glory of God, the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being and Love are manifested. ⁸

Merton’s descriptions of transcendental consciousness are some of the most accessible ever written in the history of the church, yet he is hardly alone in describing them. Richard of St. Victor (1123 - 1173), St. John of Ruysbroeck (1293 - 1381), St. Theresa of Avila (1515 - 1582), St. John of the Cross (1542 - 1591) , and William Law (1686 - 1761), among many others, also wrote about the experience of transcending. One of the more poetic descriptions was penned by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a twentieth century French Jesuit priest and paleontologist. He describes the contemplative experience of unmediated contact with Him from whom our life proceeds in these words:

We must try to penetrate our most secret self, and examine our being from all sides. . . . And so, for the first time in my life perhaps (although I am supposed to meditate every day!), I took the lamp and, leaving the zone of everyday occupations and relationships where everything seems clear, I went down into my inmost self, to the deep abyss whence I feel dimly that my power of action emanates. But as I moved further and further away from the conventional certainties by which social life is superficially illuminated, I became aware that I was losing contact with myself. At each step of the descent a new person was disclosed within me of whose name I was no longer sure, and who no longer obeyed me. And when I had to stop my exploration because the path faded from beneath my steps, I found a bottomless abyss at my feet, and out of it came—arising I know not from where—the current which I dare to call my life. ⁹