

CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH NEWS

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The Transfiguration, Part I

By Father Thomas Keating

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John, brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then, there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, we will put up three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell face down on the ground terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said, "don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (Matt 17: 1-9)

Jesus' going up the mountain to be transfigured points to the transformation that we receive on the spiritual journey after a time of purification. After enduring the inner desert of purification, God blesses us with transforming experiences. The mount of the Transfiguration in the spiritual sense is not just a place of retreat. It symbolizes the experience of spiritual awakening which is the purpose of the practice of contemplative prayer.

The first clear indication of contemplative prayer is the attraction to solitude. This attraction comes from the refining of our faculties through the dismantling of our emotional programs for happiness and the static that they cause as everyday life keeps frustrating them. In this event the emotional programs of the three apostles have been left on the plain, so to speak, at least temporarily. Their attraction to solitude is symbolized by Jesus leading them up the mountain. It was the first sign of their spiritual awakening.

We begin to access the mystery of God's presence within us through a similar attraction, even though the

particular mountain we are on — the particular retreat or our daily period of prayer — may not bring us any satisfaction whatsoever. Like an irresistible magnet, the attraction for solitude draws us without our knowing where it is coming from or how to get there. We wait patiently upon God day after day in prayer and walk haltingly with stumbling steps in our ordinary occupations. The divine attractiveness compels us to continue our climb even though because of the uneven ground or steep incline, we keep slipping back and have to start the ascent over and over again.

On this holy mountain, Jesus exploded into a presence that overwhelmed the apostles. Every mountain top does not provide this experience, but it is a distinct possibility. The divine presence may reveal itself with various levels of intensity.

Jesus turned into light; even his clothes became saturated with it. A kind of glory suffused itself into their senses both inward and outward. If we perceive the divine presence in some facsimile to this clarity, we are fascinated, absorbed and delighted. Peter's response was to want to stay there forever. The more profound the experience of union, the more one cannot help but wish to prolong it. Peter's idea was to build three tents so that Jesus, the prophets and the apostles (especially himself) could all stay there permanently. He was not interested in returning to the plain even though he had a fishing business down there.

Just as the apostles were beginning to experience the delight of the divine presence in the person of Jesus, a cloud suddenly overshadowed them. The cloud is the symbol of the unknowing which we enter as an habitual state through the regular practice of contemplative prayer. Suddenly a voice from the cloud resounded, saying, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him," that is, "listen to the divine person who is speaking to you. Listen to the divine presence that is incarnate in this human being. Listen to the infinite silence out of which the incarnate Word emerges and to which it returns."

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The voice from the cloud was frightening to them, a warning to us that what is revealed in the silence on the mountain top is a mingling of delight and confusion, of consolation and desolation, of reassurance and awesomeness. After all, the voice is the voice of Ultimate Reality. How does one respond to that?

The response of the three apostles was to flatten themselves on the ground and to be afraid. When the divine communication is strong, or when the voice points to something within ourselves that is hard to face, we too are flattened, disconcerted, confused, not knowing which way to turn. As the apostles lay there, trembling, the voice from the cloud resounding in their inmost being, Jesus came closer and touched them saying, "Don't be afraid."

The touch of Jesus, so often recorded in the gospels, is not a pat on the back. It is a divine communication. In this instance it was the sign of inner healing and symbolized the further development of spiritual attentiveness beyond the attraction to solitude. It imparted a new and more profound awareness of the divine presence.

The touch of Christ is like an interior embrace in which one's fears disappear in an instant. You may have had the experience of being in great distress, bombarded by disturbing thoughts, and overwhelmed by primitive emotions, or by all three at once. The sacred word at such a time is hard to find, or no help at all if you find it. You feel that you cannot continue to pray for another moment! But somehow you say, "Well, I'll wait just one more minute." Or perhaps you can even bring yourself to say "I'll take whatever comes." All of a sudden, out of nowhere, comes the interior touch of Jesus; his loving hand caresses your heart as if to say, "What are you worried about?" There are no spoken words as such. What is communicated is the certitude that God has been there all the time, just hiding; or waiting for us on a different level of our awareness. It was only our habitual level of consciousness from which he had withdrawn in order to invite us to a deeper level of his presence.

Notice that the apostles, after he touched them, "saw no one but Jesus." This observation describes the fruit of the interior touch of the Spirit now that the human hands of Jesus are no longer available. The hands of Jesus have been supplanted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit which lead and move us in varied directions according to the will of the Spirit.

The fruit of the touch of Jesus is to see him in everything that happens. Thus, as the apostles return to the plain, they take with them, not the experience of Jesus' glory which was so consoling, but something even more valuable: the transformation of consciousness that is the result of their experience on the mountain. Through the touch of Jesus they have moved beyond fear and the domination of any emotion and are now able to live life on the plain in union with God. They can live from their inmost center, their true self, from the space to which that touch has brought and established them.

The Transfiguration is not just a vision of glory, an isolated experience of divine consolation, however exalted. Of course such an experience has immense value. But its primary purpose is something greater. It is to empower us to live in the presence of God and to see the radiance of that presence in all events, people, the cosmos, and in ourselves.

On the way down the mountain, Jesus said, "Don't tell anyone about this until the Son of Man has risen from the dead." There would be no point in talking about it because no one on the plain would understand unless they had climbed a similar mountain. But Jesus may also be hinting that even the gift of divine touch is not the end of the journey. There remains the experience of spiritual taste. Taste arises from taking nourishment into our bodies and transforming it into our own flesh and bones. Thus it symbolizes the most intimate experience of God — the presence of God as part of ordinary consciousness.

Since Jesus at this time had not yet risen from the dead, it was not appropriate to reveal the taste of divine wisdom, which is able to see God even in the death of the Son of God on the cross. This is the grace of Pentecost. It was fitting therefore, that Jesus hold in abeyance the experience of spiritual taste until the coming of the Spirit. The awakening of spiritual attentiveness, initiated by the attraction to the solitude of the mountain and developed by the experience of Jesus' touch, was completed by the total assimilation of the apostles into Christ's glorified body through the grace of Pentecost.

Appeal for Funds

Our annual direct mail appeal is underway to raise the funds necessary to continue the work of Contemplative Outreach. There are ever increasing demands for workshops and intensive retreats. In order to meet these requests several projects are underway including development and creation of materials and presenter training workshops. Your continued help is always appreciated!

Contemplative Outreach United in Prayer: Two Telecommunications Conferences

Contemplative Outreach in collaboration with The Catholic Telecommunications Network of America (CTNA) will present - *Contemplative Outreach United in Prayer* - two satellite telecommunication conferences, one on Monday, February 11, 1991 and one on Monday, April 22, 1991 at 8:30 pm to 9:30 pm ET. These programs will be an opportunity for the Contemplative Outreach community around the country to be united for two evenings of prayer and dialogue.

Each evening's event will run approximately two hours and will have five modules: a twenty minute period of Centering Prayer, a live-presentation via the satellite by Fr. Thomas Keating, an opportunity for phone-in questions for Fr. Thomas, group discussion, and a social. The sequence of the modules will differ from place to place according to different time zones.

Participants will pay a \$6 fee for each teleconference. The fee will be divided to cover local, national and broadcasting costs. Our first concern is that no one be turned away for inability to pay therefore scholarships are always available

We have designated regional representatives to coordinate regional area receiving sites. The contact persons are listed below. Your local representative will be sending you further information regarding the particular location of the conference in your area.

If your area is not listed below, perhaps you would be willing to coordinate a local gathering. The groups can vary in size from a small home gathering to a large auditorium size conference setting. If there is a receiving satellite dish near you we will be able to give you the necessary information for you to tune into the broadcast. Please contact the National Office of Contemplative Outreach — 201-838-3384.

This is a special event; it will be the first time the Contemplative Outreach network will gather as an extended community for an evening of prayer and dialogue. Reserve these dates and participate!

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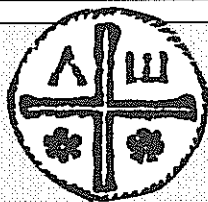
Resources Available

Fr. Keating's Spiritual Journey tapes may be purchased through Contemporary Communications, Attn: *Walt Lawson, 7 Mesa Lane, Colorado Springs, CO 80906 (719) 632-7320*. The contents of the first six tapes include: An Introduction, Attitudes toward God; (1) Prayer as Relating to God; (2) Four Levels of Scriptural Experience; (3) Toward Resting in God; (4) Centering Prayer as Method; and (5) Progress in Centering Prayer. 6 Video Tapes, \$228; 6 Audio Tapes, \$60.

New Centering Prayer Resources Available

"Journey to Contemplation," by Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO; An 8-tape audio-cassette album on all aspects of the centering prayer practice. Listening time is approximately 8 hours. Price: \$35 plus \$2.50 for shipping and handling.

"Introduction to Centering Prayer," (Hispanic translation of part of Fr. Keating's original 3-tape audio-cassette series. Price: \$5.00 each plus \$1.00 for shipping and handling. Make donation checks payable to Contemplative Outreach, 9 William Street, P.O. Box 737, Butler, New Jersey 07405 (201) 838-3384.



Contemplative Outreach National Office

Networking, resources, and workshop presenters are available. Contact: Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler, *Executive Director*, P.O. Box 737, Butler, NJ 07405. (201) 838-3384.

Articles or updates for *Contemplative Outreach News* can be sent to Connie Daniel, *Editor*, Contemplative Outreach News, P.O. Box 1186, Amherst, MA 01004.

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