



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

71: What Contemplation is Not



Mother Teresa (Saint Teresa of Calcutta)

"The essence of contemplative prayer is not the way of external or internal phenomena, but the way of pure faith. This is the narrow door that leads to life (Matthew 7:14)."

-Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love*

"Not all of us can do great things.
But we can do small things with great love."
- Mother Teresa

It may give you a sense of relief to know that most of those who commit themselves to a lifestyle of contemplation and to the cultivation of interior spiritual awareness have never experienced the inflow of divine grace according to the pattern laid out by St. Teresa of Avila and other mystics, which is sometimes called "exuberant mysticism." You may have asked yourself if you really are on the contemplative path if you haven't experienced exuberant mysticism – or anything at all! Mother Teresa, who claimed to have shared the cross of Christ through long years of interior darkness, is a shining example of a modern-day mystic who experienced a path quite different from that laid out by St. Teresa.

Commitment to the spiritual journey and fidelity to the practice of Centering Prayer hastens the dismantling of the false-self system, freeing up the energy it takes to maintain it. Divine energy rushes in to take its place. A few of us will experience divine energy in the way of exuberant mysticism through charismatic gifts, psychic gifts or phenomena, and other felt experiences. Most of us are led by what John of the Cross calls the "hidden staircase." We quietly go through the night of sense realizing that what previously filled our existential hunger for God no longer works; that only God can fill that hunger. The divine energy penetrates our being at every moment so that we manifest who we are by how we live our daily lives. It may be others who notice divine energy manifesting in our lives before we notice. We, like Mother Teresa, exemplify what Jesus said in Matthew 7:16, *By their fruits you will know them.*

Fr. Thomas encourages us in today's video by referring to the essence of contemplative prayer as pure faith, and that it is secret, even from the one who is growing or developing. In *Invitation to Love* Fr. Thomas says, "This brings us to the remarkable insight of John of the Cross that contemplative prayer is fundamentally a ray of darkness. Again and again, he identifies pure faith as the proximate means of union with God. Hence, any experience of the Divine that we may enjoy is not God, but our interpretation of God, or the radiance of God's action in us. Pure faith transcends every human experience and accesses God just as God is. If a ray of light passed through a perfect vacuum, John of the Cross writes, we would have no knowledge of it, because in a perfect vacuum there are no dust particles to reflect the physical energy as light. When we accept it as it is, the divine light is constantly beaming into our whole being – body, soul and spirit. Even the spiritual senses do not access the immense purity and power of the divine energy in its essence."

... for we walk by faith, not by sight.

2 Corinthians 5:7

A Meditation

Now Thomas...one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."
- John 20:24-29

To Practice

- View the video excerpt "The Essence of Contemplative Prayer" which is about 20 minutes in length.
- Fr. Thomas emphasizes the essence of contemplative prayer is pure faith. Reflect on the Scripture reading from John 20. What does it say to you about pure faith? What are your struggles in daily life when it comes to pure faith?

Resources for Further Study:

You may wish to read Chapter 20 "The Essence of Centering Prayer," and 21 "A Pure Faith" from *Invitation to Love*, Chapter 19 in older editions.

Notes and Reflections: