

## The Charismatic Renewal and Forms of Contemplation

Contemplation is not tied into time frames. Teresa of Avila laments that she struggled for “almost twenty years” to become a real contemplative (*Life* 4:3). Even this number was relative. She is grateful that what took others forty-seven or thirty-seven years was accomplished in her in twenty-seven (i.e., from 1538, when she began the “practice of prayer,” to 1565, the time of her writing) (*Life* 10: 9). Later in the same book she is amazed at the light rung progress of her friend and advisor, Fr. Garcia de Toledo, O. P., to whom she addressed *The Book of Her Life*, once she began to pray for him. “Often,” she writes, “the contemplation the Lord doesn’t give to one in twenty years He gives to another in one” (*Life* 34: 11). The moral is that contemplation cannot be programmed or predicted, though it obviously helps to have a friend like Teresa praying for you.

And yet “time and services are important” (*ibid.*); they ready a person for the gift which God gives to those disposed. After some effort through discursive meditation at first conversion, which is the transfer of the center of consciousness and desire from sensible to spiritual goods, the beginnings of second conversion are likely. St. John of the Cross makes this observation:

God begins to wean the soul, as they say, and place it in the state of contemplation. This occurs in some persons after a very short time, especially with religious, for in denying the things of the world more quickly, they accommodate their senses and appetites to God... (*Living Flame* 3:32).

This does not happen to “all those who purposely exercise themselves in the way of the spirit, nor even half,” he says in another place. “Why? He knows best” (*Dark Night 1, 9:9*). One explanation is that they are not

disposed. John’s own opinion seems categoric:

When the soul frees itself of all things and attains to emptiness and dispossession concerning them, which is equivalent to what it can do of itself, it is impossible that God fail to do His part by communicating Himself to it, at least silently and secretly (*Living Flame* 3:46).

Such too seems to be the opinion of theologians and spiritual writers today after the first half of the century of dispute on the normalcy of contemplation. God gives the gift of contemplation to those disposed. Fifteen years of history are not a sufficient reason in itself to expect or explain the emergence of contemplation across the country in the Charismatic Renewal today. But this fact reminds us of the universal call to contemplation and the excellence of this gift as the crown of a prayer life.

I would like to divide my observations on the subject of the Charismatic Renewal and contemplation into three unequal parts: (1) the identification of contemplation; (2) two forms of contemplative prayer, the imageless and the imaged, interpreted on the background of what I call “encounter” spirituality and “integration” spirituality; (3) the dispositions for contemplation.

### The Identification of Contemplation

Contemplation is no stranger in the Charismatic Renewal. The movement originated and continues to grow through a contemplative experience, namely, the baptism in the Spirit. There are multiple variations in this experience, but all of them are marked by a touch of the Lord, a sense of his love or his presence. My own experience of the baptism was quiet but effective. In the presence of the few brothers and sisters who

prayed over me, I felt the immense love of the Lord for me. No fireworks, nothing sensational, but a consoling experience. I have often thought that this was the grace of contemplation which Teresa calls “spiritual delight” or *gustos*, the experiencing of God’s love (*Interior Castle*, “IV Mansions” 2:2-4).

This is pure gift, a true grace of infused contemplation given in a transient fashion. It comes and goes, Teresa tells us, in the lives of people—perhaps at Mass, at a prayer meeting, on the street, in deep mental prayer. It is the prayer of quiet in Teresa’s terminology, the “IV Mansions” or “Dwelling Places” of the *Interior Castle*. The grace of the baptism could be something less or something more. It could be sensible consolations (which Teresa calls *contentos* and contrasts with *gustos*) (“IV Mansions” 2:1,3) or it could be union. Sensible consolations are human responses to a good perceived, dependent on ourselves as much as on God; union is the sense of presence, of identification with God or Christ (“I live now, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20)). This is the grace of the “V Mansions.” Only *gustos* and union are graces of (infused) contemplation in the strict sense; sensible consolations are contemplative in thrust but not contemplation.

Many charismatics have walked like Elijah in the strength of that original experience for forty days and forty nights. Others have experienced further mystical growth, manifested by deeper presence to God, more radical (“rooted”) assimilation to the mind and heart of Christ, greater wisdom and understanding, more pervasive charity. Contemplation is the loving knowledge and commitment to God within all these attitudes. When it dominates lives, the persons are contemplatives or mystics.

I have no doubt but that there are many contemplatives in the Renewal today, and that they may well be among the most active members of the prayer group or community. Others have perhaps moved out of active

participation in search of a more quiet prayer life, more savored intimacy, better circumstances for extended contemplation. I presume to place myself in the latter category. I was happy to see that Father Robert Wild, author of the excellent “Enthusiasm in the Spirit”, has written in the March–April 1982 issue of *Review for Religious* that people like myself are not necessarily “copouts.”<sup>1</sup> They could be marching to a different drummer under the direction of the same Spirit who drew them into the Charismatic Renewal, and they are being led now, in hope or in fact, into wordless contemplation. In his opinion this is an upward movement, a growth event. Experiencing God in pure faith with a minimum of mediation from the sensible order is “genuine mysticism,” according to Karl Rahner, whom he cites, and it is a step beyond “mysticism in ordinary dress,” which is “for the masses” and occurs with human support systems. In the context of “religious enthusiasm” the outer dress is words and emotions, e.g., glossolalia and other phenomena.<sup>2</sup>

How accurate is this evaluation? Is growth in personal prayer always in this one direction? Or is there such a thing as contemplative prayer in the strict sense that uses the imagination, the emotions and affectivity, and the many-sided richness of the human person in society, contemplation that is more incarnational?

## Two Forms of Contemplation

On a lower than mystical plane there are clearly two ways to God, one which uses this world and the other which tries as much as it can to bypass it. Neither form is all pure. God is the center of all spirituality, and he is not of this world, and therefore we must transcend the world to reach him. At the same time we are spirits-in-the-world, embodied spirits, and we will attain God only with our bodies and psyches. The two spiritualities represent thrusts and are variously called

incarnationalism and eschatologism, elevation and introversion, the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*, kataphatic and apophatic contemplation.<sup>3</sup> More recently some new designations have been appended: creation-centered spirituality versus redemption spirituality (Fox), imaged or imageless prayer (P. Novak),<sup>4</sup> meditation or contemplation (Kelsey).<sup>5</sup> I would like to add one more dyad: integration or encounter spirituality. I do not mean to equate all these categories but to let the rich terminology evoke a sense of the difference between the two approaches to God.

American spirituality clearly opts for the first term over the second. Charismatic teachings have generally followed this pattern. We are more at home with the concrete, the imaginative, with human feelings, people, song and dance, social activity and community than we are with abstractions, otherworldliness, putdowns of the body or the human generally. This may be because the Charismatic Renewal has been dealing largely with beginnings, and beginnings in every spiritual system rightly start with the outside of things. I do not think there is any doubt that while the Catholic tradition acknowledges the goodness of the human as the way to God, it gives the primacy, along with all world religions to direct, immediate union with God, beyond our limited images, thoughts and feelings about him. By definition union with God is beyond us, super-natural; it is sheer gift. Equally accepted in Christianity is the conviction that this inner, ineffable, mysterious union with God is necessary for the perfect healing and transformation of the human composite; without this experience there is no great sanctity, only a new legalism. This is not to say that the individual must recognize and call by name the dark nights that come from contemplation and purify the person for perfect integration. One can be an anonymous contemplative. The inner union can do its work "secretly and silently" and

allow the human being to repossess all creation the way God possesses it, appreciating it, loving it, using it in God.

The mystical union I have just sketchily described is the centerpiece of encounter spirituality. Encounter searches for and finds God in the inner journey, the journey within that paradoxically attains God in his otherness. Probably because of Greek philosophy, the process has been conceived in terms of progressive spiritualization; the searcher experiences less and less dependence on matter, even on the phantasm, on discursive activity, and normal functioning of the psychic structure. Withdrawal, silence, solitude, abnegation foster the quietude most conducive to the in-breaking of the transcendent God. And strangely enough this very union with God in his otherness is the way to human integration, to "bringing all things into one in Christ" (Eph 1: 10). The journey within is the journey into reality: human reality, social and economic and political reality, terrestrial and celestial reality. Through mystical union "all things are yours and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (I Cor 3:22-23).

Today, however, this very concept of integration is the starting point for the spirituality of many people. People are desperately interested in being human, authentically themselves, in touch with their bodies, their sexuality and affectivity, their interdependence on one another, the social and economic dimensions of their lives. They are looking for wholeness, because they feel instinctively that this is holiness. Anything less is compulsiveness, game playing, "control" in a pietistic mode when true spirituality which is living from God's strength means freedom, love, peace, autonomy, and all the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). We have little use, and rightly so, for the saint who is a hellion to live with. Pietistic drivel is more and more suspect, as are all dichotomous thinking, phoniness, magic, and

any measure to cut short the process nature of human growth. Contemporary Christians all over the world are working from an anthropological theology (“Theology is anthropology is Christology”) and from a good grasp of depth psychology and social analysis that give the lie to many a pseudo-virtue and force the search for the truth and the good beyond the present to ever-deeper levels.

None of these goods is the private domain of integration spirituality, but all of them are the main concern of this way. The viewpoint makes the spiritual journey more complex. It makes it necessary to deal with nitty-gritty details, with each element of our existence on its own merit. We cannot simply toss off personality and character in favor of an instant sanctity which does not deal with our falsity, selfishness, and unreasonableness. We need to be real. Prayer becomes the effort to bring more of ourselves before God for healing. This means the struggle to experience ourselves as we really are, in our warts and blemishes and in our transcendent grandeur as children of God. We are fragmented, but able to be healed, and the way to healing is to experience and own our brokenness. Such experiencing of our hurts and infirmities is facilitated by the image; so also is our best side effectively communicated as well. The image concretizes our feelings and mediates the faith reality to us. It ministers to integration.

Today we have many forms of imaged contemplative prayer: story and fantasy, dance and symbolic action and a hundred other devices to bring together our fragmented selves. Abstract, rationalistic meditation is out; guided imagery is in. Imageless centering prayer in the Pennington mode is also an excellent method, but it is not the only form of centering prayer and may not suit the individual person.

On the level of active prayer, i.e., in prayer in which I take the initiative and direct

the action, imaged and imageless contemplative prayer function as equals. Teresa of Avila’s experience is telling on this count.<sup>6</sup> Her milieu made her partial to the *via negativa*, to “*no pensar nada*” (“not thinking anything”) of Francisco de Osuna and Bernardino de Laredo (*Life* 4:7; 23:12). But she learned from experience that the *via negativa* was primarily affective, not effective, even in prayer, and that she was to use image and affect as if not using them rather than rejecting them out of hand. She needed to use her imagination and feelings to undergird and maintain a person-to-person contact with the Lord. So she practiced simple, affective prayer from the early years of her journey and to the very end, even in the mystical years. For one short period of time, from 1554 to 1556, she strayed from this path and later regretted bitterly the failure to bring the man Jesus into her prayer (*Life* 22:1-4). She was put back on the track by some youthful Jesuit confessors, and from that point on she constantly reverted to this kind of simple reflection, usually on a Gospel theme of the passion or something from nature, whenever the Spirit was not touching her heart in passive prayer.

The pearl of great price at prayer is presence to the Lord, contact, loving attention, union. This measure of prayer has nothing to fear from the image or the affectivity. On the contrary it is fostered by both factors. Who has not experienced the power of a great liturgy or prayer meeting with its music, words, movement, sacred place, banners, incense and vestments? The outward signs are the occasion, the catalyst, the instrument which evokes inner meaning and powerful emotion. These latter factors create a seed-bed for the action of the living Christ, who touches hearts immediately at such graced moments as he did the heart of Lydia on the river banks of Philippi at Paul’s preaching (Acts 16:14). This is the same Lord who communicated by an inner word as he spoke outwardly with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, so that

they said afterward: “Were not our hearts burning inside us as he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32). It may be difficult to defend these incidents theologically as moments of infused contemplation but they certainly are contemplative graces.

The Charismatic Renewal, therefore, need not declare war on all that has made it an instrument of conversion and renewal in favor of imagelessness at prayer. Some persons will be led in the dark apophatic way and find the mantric centering prayer of Pennington, Keating, and others attractive and efficacious. Others will gravitate toward scriptural prayer, such as contemplation of the Gospels in the Ignatian mode, which is not just reflection but identifying with one of the characters and allowing the story to be one’s own story and speak to oneself. This is but one form of many in guided imagery that has wide appeal today. The Carmelite tradition emphasizes immediate contact with the Lord in spousal union, without, however, underestimating the importance of the image and affect; the Ignatian way leads to meta-discursive meditative prayer, which in this context means finding God both beyond but in the imaginations and reasonings of meditation, finding him really, but in the piecemeal, refracted light of particular insights and particular actions that show his operative will working in human life.

Meta-discursive prayer is a helpful concept to synthesize the tradition. For John of the Cross it would be identified with contemplation pure and simple; but then it would not be discursive at all (*Ascent* 2, 12:3-8). In typical black-white fashion John maintains that you are either using your imagination and reason and are discoursing in prayer or you are contemplating; there is no middle term. One hastens the day, therefore, when one will be “very annihilated in one’s natural operations, unhampered, idle, quiet, peaceful, and serene, according to the mode of

God” (*Living Flame* 3:34). For Teresa of Avila meta-discursive can be gray. She could never meditate discursively herself, but she could utilize the image and allow it to mobilize and express her rich affectivity in the service of prayer. In Ignatian theory meta-discursive prayer is allowing the pedestrian workings of our minds and hearts to be the occasion when God touches them in a direct fashion, even with the grace of mystical consolation.<sup>7</sup> Ignatius’ term for Teresa’s *gustos* is “consolation without previous cause” (*Spiritual Exercises*, n. 330). The image or thought do not cause the movement of love; they only occasion the passive grace.

Spiritual directors, then, need to be careful not to be doctrinaire. No form of contemplative prayer or contemplation should be excluded *a priori*. We need to be open to the classical form of apophatic, imageless, conceptless prayer of John of the Cross as well as to kataphatic contemplation, even noisy, community-oriented prayer forms in the setting of the Charismatic Renewal. The task of spiritual directors is not to prevent the Holy Spirit by imposing methods, but to help create dispositions that will open minds and hearts and invite the invasion of God. Methods are useful, but they need to be adapted to individuals; the more important dispositions pertain to the heart.

### **The Dispositions for Contemplation**

Detachment is the key disposition for contemplation. Whatever the name—biblical faith, evangelical poverty of spirit, Ignatian indifference, or the modern yearning for authentic freedom of spirit—it is the way of the spiritual masters. The detachment is basically affective, a matter of the heart, of a yes to God that is more and more inclusive. Effective detachment means material separation and actual giving up of things; this enters in as the reality check for affective detachment. Thus there will always be a place for solitude and silence, for periods of quiet

time and space, for foregoing reckless and thoughtless self-indulgence by mortification, and for the ascetical struggle to achieve our freedom. The essential attitude is holding things gently in an open palm, ready to give them up or to change, if need be, and putting oneself at the disposition of God. This ideal is not completely achieved until the spiritual marriage or the “VII Mansions” of the *Interior Castle*. Detachment, poverty of spirit, indifference are negative concepts, but they enclose the eminently positive value of God. “How blest are the poor in spirit: the reign of God is theirs” (Mt 5:3). For John of the Cross there is only a hairbreadth distinction between poverty of spirit and contemplation.

Detachment is “letting go” of what is not of God and “letting God” dictate our life. It measures spiritual growth from the beginning to the culmination of *kenosis* (self-emptying) and *pleroma* (fullness). Jesus is the perfect contemplative, because he experienced utter *kenosis* (Phil 2:6-8) and absolute *pleroma* (Phil 2:911; Col. 1: 19; 2:9).

These two conditions suggest different objectives and tasks at various points along the fine of spiritual growth. At lower levels they go by more humble terms than exalted religious language. At the body level, for example, they are relaxation and alertness, both and not just one or the other, necessary bodily conditions for contemplation. Relax deeply enough and attend profoundly enough and, given the divine Self-disclosure in faith, you will be a contemplative. On a psychic or inner level the two conditions might be translated as healing and quiet respectively; we are no longer driven by addictions and compulsions when we are healed of the past; we are dwelling in the unity and peace of a loving heart. We approach the fullness of these attitudes when we are completely in touch with ourselves and in touch with God. Psychology is a help here, but the deepest truth on both counts is spiritual and is revealed only by the experience of our whole selves and God in faith.

We can orchestrate a whole program of contemplative development around these two negative and positive poles of “letting go” and “letting God.” For detachment, for example, we need to simplify our lives, cutting down on the things and the involvements in our lives. Over-extension is a sign of not being in touch with our own truth. Our truth can regard our un-freedoms that steal time and energy in self-defense away from the service of love of God, neighbor and self, or the truth about ourselves can pertain to our freedom, which depends and thrives on the experience of ourselves that we call self-knowledge and humility. We are free only where we have experienced and owned ourselves. So we must pay attention to what our bodies are saying to us in terms of stress and tension, to what our psyches are saying in terms of mental health, especially in the area of self-esteem and interest in others. If we accept ourselves in a detached, objective way, we will be less defensive and more open to God, who comes to us in prayer and community.

This openness to God, or God-centeredness, is the second, positive pole. While it has to do with the way we relate to God, it is best measured by how we relate to one another (Teresa of Avila, “V Mansions” 3:8-9). However strange this sounds, the most important training for contemplation is growing in the love of our neighbor. The love of God and the love of others are one same love; what feeds one feeds the other.

Contemplation happens when in our love of God and neighbor we shift from a controlling, managing, manipulating love to a receiving love, to surrender, to allowing ourselves to be loved by God and others. This is revelation of New Testament love (Rom 5:8-9; 1 Jn 4: 10). The contemplative shift occurs when we experience a deep sense of being beloved of God; this experience in turn depends on being loved for oneself on a human level. In that atmosphere our love of

God takes shape in a new mode. We wait, attend, listen, and are taught by God. We stop struggling to take hold of God and let him take hold of us. We let God be God. In this way we

will be living out in fullness the first principle of the Charismatic Renewal, namely, the recognition that “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

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- <sup>1</sup> “The Post-Charismatic Phenomenon: A Theological Interpretation,” in *Review for Religious* 41 (1982) 257-265.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 260, citing K. Rahner, “Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace,” in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 16 (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 35-51; see 3-47 for Rahner theology.
- <sup>3</sup> Harvey D. Egan, S.J., “Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticisms,” in *Theological Studies* 39 (1978) 339-426. I have written on this topic myself, like the man with one sermon, as far back as 1962 in “The Role of Creatures in the Spiritual Life,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 17 (1962) 207-234 and again in “Asceticism in Modern Life,” *Concilium* 10 (1966) 100-108.
- <sup>4</sup> Philip Novak, “Spiritual Discipline and Psychological Dream-Work, Some Distinctions,” in *Studia Mystica* 2 (1979) 47-58.
- <sup>5</sup> Morton Kelsey, **The Other Side of Silence** (New York: Paulist, 1976) 129.
- <sup>6</sup> Ernest E. Larkin, O.Carm., “St. Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer,” a long paper which at this writing is yet to be delivered at a symposium in honor of the fourth centenary of St. Teresa's death and to be published subsequently in *Carmelite Studies*, Vol. 3 (Washington, D.C., Institute of Carmelite Studies). The paper expands the concept of centering prayer to include both dark faith and guided imagery and locates St. Teresa of Avila as a practitioner of a combination of the two forms.
- <sup>7</sup> See R.L. Schmitt, S.J., “The Christ Experience and Relationship Fostered in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola,” in *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 6 (1974) 218 (citing DeGuibert and Futrell) and 242-244 for apposite.