

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

“Preaching must proceed from the fullness of contemplation” – St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas taught that every act is evaluated based on its ultimate goal or its end. The worthier the end, the worthier the act that leads to it. The goal of all Christians is union with God. Since God is the direct "end" of contemplative prayer, we can say it is superior to active works since the "end" or goal of that act is God Himself. Active works take the second place since the end of the work is not God Himself, even though it may be for God or for the good of another. The *first* commandment is to love God with all our heart, mind and soul. The *second* is to love our neighbor as our self. Preaching follows the same format. First we contemplate God and seek union with Him. The second act is to share the fruits of that union with others.

Contemplative prayer is the foundation of the Dominican vocation.

Contemplative prayer, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church outlines by quoting mystic St. Teresa of Ávila, is ‘nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.’ Contemplative prayer seeks Him ‘whom my soul loves.’ It is Jesus, and in Him, the Father. We seek Him, because to desire Jesus is always the beginning of love, and we seek him in that pure faith which causes us to be born of him and to live in him (CCC 2709).

Contemplative prayer is “the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer” (CCC 2713). It is union with God in the depths of our souls, where he purifies our vision so that we can pierce reality:

“Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. "I look at him and he looks at me": this is what a certain peasant of Ars in the time of his holy curé used to say while praying before the tabernacle. This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Thus it learns the "interior knowledge of our Lord," the more to love him and follow him”.

If prayer is a relationship with Jesus, then the three main forms of prayer are different ways of living out that relationship: vocal prayer is the act of speaking with him out loud, meditative prayer is thinking about him as a friend whom you wish to know better, and contemplative prayer is like sitting with him, delighting in his presence without the need for words.

St. Teresa of Avila compared contemplative prayer to filling a bucket of water: it can be accomplished either by filling it from a well which takes much effort, or by simply allowing the bucket to rest at the source of the water, so that it flows in effortlessly.

The condition proper to contemplative prayer is humility – the willingness to allow God to show us the truth about ourselves and to pour himself into our hearts. It can be described as being “worked on” by the action of God’s love coming to meet us as we bring ourselves to him in an attitude of receptivity. In the depths of our being, God is able to reshape a person to his image, bringing him to the fullness of his human nature.

Contemplative prayer requires our willingness to put aside all distractions and lay ourselves down at the foot of the Cross. “Contemplative prayer is hearing the Word of God. Far from being passive, such attentiveness is the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child. It participates in the ‘Yes’ of the Son become servant and the fiat of God’s lowly handmaid” (CCC 2716).

Some methods of contemplation deviate from the Christian understanding and promote a practice of moving toward a mental state void of all thought – even thoughts of God – and entering into pure consciousness where the contention is that man himself becomes god. Among these methods are considered centering prayer, which became very popular among Christians in the late 20th century. Such methods are completely opposed to Christian teaching, and the Church has taken pains to distance itself from them. One of the Church’s most recent clarifications on this topic can be found in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation. St. John Paul II also cautioned “against some methods of prayer which are not inspired by the gospel and which in practice tend to set Christ aside in preference for a mental void which makes no sense in Christianity. Any method of prayer is valid insofar as it is inspired by Christ and leads to Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (cf. John 14:6)” (Homilia Abulæ habita in honorem Sanctæ Teresiæ: AAS 75 (1983) 256-257).

For those who feel they do not know how to pray, contemplation may seem unreachable or they may doubt that they are called to it. It is also often thought that one must be well-schooled in the way of meditative prayer before one is ready to approach contemplative prayer. As the Catechism takes pains to assure, “[o]ne cannot always meditate, but one can always enter into inner prayer, independently of the conditions of health, work, or emotional state. The heart is the place of this quest and encounter, in poverty and in faith” (CCC 2710).

Ref.: Summa, Catechism of the Catholic Church, Interior Castle by St. Teresa of Avila, Aleteia Catholic News (Anna Krestyn)