

CONTEMPLATION

"Contemplation is essentially a listening in silence." We prepare for contemplation by the "attuning of the inmost heart to the voice of God." Our role is "simple to consent, to listen." --one becomes "absorbed in what is said to it, and is not aware of itself as existing outside of what is spoken to it."

Merton wrote: "Christ...came on earth to form contemplatives." He said: "Mysticism embraces the whole interior experience of a soul immersed in the Absolute."

Merton wished "to let people know, in what I write, that the contemplative life is quite easy and accessible and does not require extraordinary or strange efforts, just the normal generosity required to strive for sanctity."

Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of the Source [of life]. It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith... we know by 'unknowing.' Or, better, we know beyond all knowing or 'unknowing'."

He wrote: "In actual fact, true contemplation is inseparable from life and from the dynamism of life-which includes work, creation, production, fruitfulness, and above all love. Contemplation is not to be thought of as a separate department of life, cut off from all man's other interests and superseding them. It is the very fullness of a fully integrated life."

His most poetic description of contemplation is this: "Contemplation is a country whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by traveling but by standing still." "...the contemplative is permitted to see the truth not so much by seeing it as by being absorbed into it..."

"The situation of the soul in contemplation is something like the situation of Adam and Eve in Paradise. Everything is yours, but on one infinitely important condition: that it is all given... No individual enters Paradise, only the integrity of the Person." Be empty and see that I am God."

On his final Asian pilgrimage, he wrote a circular letter to his friends in which he described life's journey for us all: "Our real journey in life is interior; it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts."

Merton once asked: "What do we think the contemplative life is? How do we conceive it? As a life of withdrawal, tranquility, retirement, silence? Do we keep ourselves from action and change in order to learn techniques for entering into a kind of static present reality which is there and which we have to learn how to penetrate? Do you hunt for this key, find it, then unlock the door and enter? Well, that is a valid image from a certain point of view, but it isn't the old image. The contemplative life isn't something objective that is 'there' and to which, after fumbling around, you finally gain access. The contemplative life is a dimension of our subjective existence. Discovering the contemplative life is a new self-discovery. One might say that it is the flowering of a deeper identity on an entirely different plane from a mere

psychological discovery, a paradoxical new identity that is found only in loss of self. To find one's self by losing one's self; that is part of 'contemplation.'

Contemplation engages us in the journey from the false toward the True Self. It cannot be a function of the external self. "We must remember that the superficial 'I' is not our real self. It is our 'individuality' and our 'empirical self' but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God... It is at best the vesture, the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown 'self' whom most of us never discover until we are dead. 'Hell' can be described as a perpetual alienation from our true being, our true self, which is in God... Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this 'I' is really 'not I' and the awakening of the unknown 'I' that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself... In such a world the true 'I' remains both inarticulate and invisible, because it has altogether too much to say - not one word of which is about itself."

"Contemplation immolates our entire self to God." "The first foundation of contemplation is to see you are nothing." We lose ourselves in the One who loves us. We are "in some way transformed into him, so that we know him as he knows himself." He is knowing within us. "God and the soul seem to have but one single 'I'. They are (by divine grace) as though one single person."

For Merton, then, contemplation is an experience of inner unity in love - being deeply aware of our being part of all that is, connected, at one with all creation through compassion. It is not that we discover a new unity. No, we discover an older unity. "My dear brothers," Merton said, "we are already one, but we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are." It is the intuitive awakening of one's whole life existentially and consciously to the presence of God, in communion with Him, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. In the conscious awareness of this relationship of love, the false self is annihilated, or better said, the ego is purified as it merges into, is transformed by the True Self. "We do not see God in contemplation - we know Him by love: for He is pure Love and when we taste the experience of loving God for His own sake alone, we know by experience Who and what He is."

Contemplation - living life in communion with God who is All in All - is not learned but received as "a religious and transcendent gift." As Merton taught: "No one teaches contemplation except God who gives it. The best you can do is to write something or say something that will serve as an occasion for someone else to realize what God wants of him." "For contemplation cannot be taught. It cannot even be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized... there is really no adequate psychology of contemplation." "But contemplation can never be the object of calculated ambition. It is not something we plan to obtain with our practical reason, but the living water of the spirit that we thirst for, like a hunted deer thirsting after a river in the wilderness."

"It is not we who choose to awaken ourselves, but God Who chooses to awaken us." Contemplation is, he wrote, "a response to a call: a call from Him who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of

His... We ourselves become His echo and His answer. It is as if in creating us God asked a question, and in awakening us to contemplation He answered the question, so that the contemplative is at the same time, question and answer." "The life of contemplation implies two levels of awareness: first, awareness of the question, and second, awareness of the answer... We awaken, not to find an answer absolutely distinct from the question, but to realize that the question is its own answer. And all is summed up in one awareness - not a proposition, but an experience: 'I Am.'"

From all that has been said about contemplation, it should be clear that "The beginning of contemplation is faith. If there is something essentially sick about your conception of faith you will never be a contemplative... Above all, faith is the opening of an inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of Divine light."

It is the beginning of communion... faith gives a dimension of simplicity and depth to all our apprehensions and to all our experiences. What is this dimension of depth? It is the incorporation of the unknown and of the unconscious into our daily life. Faith brings together the known and the unknown so that they overlap: or rather, so that we are aware of their overlapping... When we accept only what we can consciously rationalize, our life is actually reduced to the most pitiful limitations... Faith incorporates the unknown into our everyday life in a living, dynamic and actual manner.

Faith is not just conformity, it is life... Until a man yields himself to God in the consent of total belief, he must inevitably remain a stranger to himself, an exile from himself, because he is excluded from the most meaningful depths of his own being... The darkness of faith bears fruit in the light of wisdom."

In 1967, Pope Paul VI asked Merton to write about the contemplative life for an international Synod of Bishops in Rome. This is what he offered: "The contemplative life has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that if you dare to penetrate your own silence and dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart, and risk the sharing of all that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you and with you, then you will truly recover the light and capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and He are in truth One Spirit."

"Contemplation is the awareness and realization, even in some sense experience, of what each Christian obscurely believes: 'It is now no longer I that live but Christ lives in me.'" Our lives are hidden with Christ in God. "The whole essence of contemplative prayer is that the division between subject and object disappears."

Further, Merton says: "There is the whole 'contemplative mystique'; a standard which other people have set up for you. They call you a contemplative or a hermit, and then they demand that you conform to the image they have in mind. But the real contemplative standard is to have no standard, to be just yourself. That's what God is asking of us, to be ourselves. If you are ready to say, 'I'm going to do my own thing, it doesn't matter what kind of press I get,' if you are really going to be yourself, you are not going to fit anybody

else's mystique." To put it most directly, Contemplation is, in Merton's words, "an awakening to the Real within all that is real."

Try to make all your activity bear fruit in the same emptiness and silence and detachment you have found in contemplation... For the saint preaches sermons by the way he walks and the way he stands and the way he sits down and the way he picks things up and holds them in his hand.

But "Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from conflict, from anguish or from doubt. On the contrary, the deep, inexpressible certitude of the contemplative experience awakens a tragic anguish and opens many question in the depths of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding... The worst of it is that even apparently holy conceptions are consumed along with all the rest. It is a terrible breaking and burning of idols, a purification of the sanctuary, so that no graven thing may occupy that place that God has commanded to be left empty: the center, the existential altar which simply 'is'."

"All truly contemplative souls have this in common: not that they gather exclusively in the desert, or that they shut themselves up in reclusion, but that where He is, there they are. And how do they find Him? By technique? There is no technique for finding Him. They find Him by His will. And His will, bringing them grace within and arranging their lives exteriorly, carries them infallible to the precise place in which they can find Him. Even there they do not know how they have got there, or what they are really doing. As soon as a man is fully disposed to be alone with God, he is alone with God no matter where he may be... At that moment he sees that though he seems to be in the middle of his journey, he has already arrived at the end. For the life of grace on earth is the beginning of the life of glory. Although he is a traveller in time, he has opened his eyes, for a moment, in eternity."