

Graceful Explorations

Review of

Circling to the Center: One Woman's Encounter with Silent Prayer

By Susan M. Tiberghien

Foreword by M. Basil Pennington, OCSO

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Reviewed by **Barbara Cliff Stoodley**

Susan M. Tiberghien's *Circling to the Center* describes the journey of the author's outer and inner life in a simple, yet profound manner. Illustrating the story with her own photographs and drawings, she invites her reader to share her exploration of the stages of deeper prayer in five chapters, each entitled for the natural image with which the chapter opens: the cinquefoil, the cherry tree, the pear tree, the acorn and the golden flower. Following a photograph and a prose poem about each image, she relates its symbolic relevance to her own experience in the course of the chapter, and concludes with a legend or parable from one of the world's religious traditions. A gracefully written memoir of her own responses to grace, *Circling To The Center* is a result of being called to deeper prayer life, tapping the source within, resting in unknowing and opening up to newness and rebirth.

Ms. Tiberghien is an American from Congregationalist roots, well versed in the Scriptures from her early home life. In attending an Episcopal boarding school, she was exposed to the beauty of Gregorian chant, while the "Our Father" became a kind of mantra for her. She studied English and philosophy in college and came to realize that sometimes there are no answers to life's questions that will satisfy the mind. After accepting a fellowship, she moved to Grenoble, France where she met her husband, Pierre Yves. Her husband's work with the Commission of the Common Market resulted in moving with their children to Belgium, Italy and Switzerland. She and her husband shared a strong desire for deeper spirituality and read *The Seven Storey Mountain* of Thomas Merton, which, in turn, led them to read other Catholic spiritual classics, including John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart and others whose words are quoted, echoed and reflected on in her book. Influenced especially by Pierre's mother Madeleine Tiberghien Toulemonde, who welcomed her into her home the night that Madeleine's daughter Christine died, Susan Tiberghien eventually converted to Catholicism. She was introduced to Raissa Maritain's book *Les Grandes Amitiés* by her mother-in-law, and followed it with a letter to Raissa Maritain with whom she continued to correspond. Eventually, Susan and Pierre met with Raissa and Jacques Maritain in 1958. Her innate inquisitiveness led her to delve as well into the spiritual riches of other traditions, including the works of Black Elk, Lao Tzu, D.T. Suzuki and the *Sefer Ha Zohar*. Ms. Tiberghien, a self-described "loner," but not lonely, explored outside the boundaries of conventional cultural and religious beliefs. Prompted, in particular,

by the thinking of Carl Jung, she wrote her first book, *Looking For Gold: A Year in Jungian Analysis*. Author Tiberghien found her center in her home, usually the dining room. Yet she also found time to seek solitude away from her hectic household responsibilities as a mother of six children. In the face of such personal challenges as an anorexic daughter and an adopted son experiencing difficulties because of adjustments from war-torn Vietnam, she states that she prayed tears. She illustrates her belief that prayer is like a strong hug while attending her beloved mother-in-law suffering from Alzheimer's disease. She similarly cites other burdens as additional occasions of prayer, including times of anger, jealousy, depression, uneasiness of living in a culture different from her birth culture and loneliness because of her husband's absence on foreign business. She frequently draws upon images of nature as well as her life as a mother to exemplify her points. She equates spiritual rebirth with "the dying to oneself that tears open the womb as the child is born. I had suffered this for each one of our children, feeling in my depths that this new life in my womb was too big for both it and me to survive. And then I knew the eruption of new life" (86). As a convert to Catholicism, the author experiences the numinous as sacramental, and describes her sense of the spiritual life as becoming a sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace; she carries herself like a chalice, filled with God's presence. Thus, author Tiberghien moves from belief into action as she desires to see God's world as God sees it. It is this outlook which brings about a sense of meaning which in turn, results in acceptance.

Circling To The Center is quite readable as well as deeply infused with knowledge and lived experience. The listing of over a hundred suggested readings and contemporary studies provide the reader with notable reference sources. Thomas Merton and Meister Eckhart are cited most frequently in the index and it is noteworthy that reading Eckhart's advice to aspiring disciples inspired Susan Tiberghien to write her memoir. The index also includes John C. H. Wu, a Merton associate whom she personally met and who pointed her towards Thomas Merton.

Both author Tiberghien and Thomas Merton used their intuitive nature to continue exploring and writing as a way of praying. Despite their different life styles each craved time for solitude to center themselves. Reading *Circling To The Center*, the biographical similarities to Thomas Merton strike the reader: each lived bucolic childhoods, both favored time alone, each had one sibling, both experienced deaths in their lives at a young age, each became converts to Roman Catholicism and both shared an affinity for religious classics. For example, as Tiberghien notes, the reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins by Thomas Merton occurred at a time when Merton began to investigate becoming Catholic (39). Susan Tiberghien's reading of *The Seven Storey Mountain* would guide her to other spiritual sources, and eventually, to contemplative prayer. For both the entrance into Catholicism was a spiritual evolution invited by the quest for truth in the reading of spiritual classics.

Further examples of spiritual commonality are notable. Ms. Tiberghien and Thomas Merton lived multi-cultural lives touched by the effects of war and each explored spirituality outside their birth cultures. These experiences inevitably led Tiberghien and Merton past the comfort of faith experience and into the aridity of the apophatic way. Resonating with Merton's perspective in *Contemplative Prayer*, "where we stand alone before God in our nothingness . . . completely dependent upon his providential care, in dire need of the gift of his grace, his mercy and the light of faith" (22), Susan Tiberghien describes her own journey toward the unknowable God: "The darkness deepens . . . Nothing is familiar . . . Discouragement engulfs me. I pick myself up. Faith leads me on. It holds me up the hand even in the darkest of nights" (23).

Like Merton, Tiberghien recognizes and articulates that the cultivation and appreciation of art is

important not only for its aesthetic value, but as an expression of spiritual opportunity. Her sketch of a cinquefoil is envisioned as a mandala and the “one-ing” of the soul and its Creator. She describes being one in God the Trinity as “the original and the great one-ing. A one-ing so immense that it is ongoing and unending. God is forever giving birth” (105). She likens this insight to Merton’s statement in *New Seeds of Contemplation* that “in the depths of contemplative prayer there seems to be no division between subject and object. . . . It is not my experience. I become experience [C]ontemplation becomes what it is meant to be, it is no longer something infused by God into a created subject, so much as God living in God” (105).

Like Merton, Tiberghien draws upon her own experience to lead the reader from the circumference of unique circumstances to the common center “our one same center – our one same source [for] all the circles are concentric” (107). I look forward to future books by Ms. Tiberghien that will continue to map out her journey, and ours.