

Contemplative Prayer: Antidote for an Ailing Generation

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The tragedy of modern man is that his creativity, his spirituality and his contemplative independence are inexorably throttled by a super-ego that has sold itself without compromise to technology.¹

In an age characterized by shallowness and superficiality, nothing would be more redeeming for a society infected by a pervasive self-centered secular spirit than a return to its inner depths, to the collective 'true self' of a generation on the brink of losing its soul. 'Western man' is in chains, enslaved by its own unfettered passions and desires as happiness and personal fulfillment continue to be sought by the wrong means. Jung found that mental crises in adult life frequently stem from a pervading sense of meaninglessness which inhibits fullness of life and is, therefore, equivalent to illness. A path to our 'center' is held out to us, called 'contemplative prayer', of which every great spiritual path has its practices.

The goal of contemplative prayer is not union with God, as one might presume, but purification, or as Thomas Keating teaches, the unloading of the unconscious, about which more will be said. Anyone who hoists sail and sets out on the contemplative journey and anticipates that gentle breezes and calm seas will take him or her to the 'other shore' is in for a rude awakening. In so believing, they will either end up shipwrecked on the jagged shoals lying hidden beneath them in the sea of the unconscious or else prayer will become a lifeless routine and they will wind up trying to return to the 'fleshpots of Egypt' with its lights and toasty warm feelings.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience* (unpublished manuscript), ch. 14. (*The Inner Experience*, edited by William H. Shannon, is to be published in 2003.)

Meditation is often quite difficult. If we wait patiently for the time of grace, we may well discover that meditation is a joyful experience. However, we should not judge the value of our meditation by 'how we feel'. A hard and apparently fruitless meditation may be much more valuable than one that is easy, happy, enlightened and apparently a 'big success'.²

Eastern Orthodoxy speaks of the spiritual journey as warfare. Most of the 'battles' take place 'at sea', within the vast psychic sea of the unconscious, while some engagements are 'on land', where we meet life in its everyday concreteness. Wherever the battles are fought, be it with the demons of our dark shadow side or the tempting siren wails and illusory allurements of the world, the war will be lost without an unrelenting discipline of prayer to keep us rooted in reality. Carl Jung describes the plight of the person without an experiential sense of the sacred:

The individual who is not anchored in God can offer no resistance on his own resources to the physical and moral blandishments of the world. For this we need the evidence of an inner transcendent experience which alone can protect us from the otherwise inevitable submersion in the mass.³

Today, there is a merciless, all-out assault on the senses by a plethora of media, which numbs and hardens the heart of humankind. The West has lost the sense of the sacred and the numinous. Only a transformation of consciousness can rescue us from spiritual annihilation. The faithful practice of Centering Prayer – or other contemplative prayer forms – not only keeps our ship afloat and on course, but also eventually gifts us with a mysterious encounter with an unknowable and invisible God, known in 'unknowing', in 'luminous obscurity', the deepest experience of which is *theoria*, or contemplation.

Before this gift is freely bestowed, the inner ground of our being must be prepared, first excavated of the 'junk of a lifetime' that has been discarded there which blocks the free purifying flow of the Holy Spirit. Then, the soul that was once an unsuspected 'gehenna' of cast-off refuse clogging our spiritual arteries, God gradually purifies; thus making the soul, as Socrates depicts, a garden – a garden of good soil that can embrace and nurture the seeds of contemplation.

The Ancient Prayer of Recollection

Centering Prayer is not new, nor is the John Main mantra method, or the Jesus Prayer. Once, during a retreat, a woman asked me – with some-

2. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1990), p. 34.

3. Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (Boston: Atlantic-Little Brown Press, 1958), p. 24.

thing of a concerned look—is Centering Prayer ‘New Age’? ‘No, I replied, ‘it’s Old Age’. Contemplative prayer is traceable to the earliest centuries of Christianity. Silent, imageless prayer is referred to by several of the Ante-Nicene Church Fathers. As John Cassian reveals, the fourth-century fathers and mothers of the desert were practitioners of silent, imageless prayer, which they called ‘pure prayer’.

Some years ago Basil Pennington told me that, while the methodology of Centering Prayer is rooted in ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’, it was Thomas Merton’s posthumous ‘Climate of Monastic Prayer’ (later titled ‘Contemplative Prayer’) that was the proximate catalyst behind the formation of the Centering Prayer movement, where Merton speaks of ‘centering’ and a ‘return to the heart’.

The Desert Father, Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399), who was John Cassian’s master—who in turn is a foundational source for the Rule of St Benedict—often refers to this ‘pure prayer’:

When you are praying do not fancy the Divinity like some image formed within yourself. Free from all images, draw near the immaterial Being and you will attain to understanding. Stand guard over your spirit, keeping it free of concepts at the time of prayer.⁴

Contemplative prayer was known to St Teresa of Avila as the prayer of recollection, which she learned from the writings of Francisco de Osuna, a Friar of the Order of St Francis. His *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* is an expansive treatise on prayer, first published in Toledo in 1527. After almost three years as a young Carmelite, Teresa took seriously ill. On her way to the town of Becedas, she stopped to recover at the home of her uncle, Don Pedro, where he gave her a copy of the book. This treatise on prayer would change her life. Teresa states that she took this book for her master.

Osuna wrote that the way to love God is by entering within the heart with complete recollection, and *rise above the heart* to God (echoes of Dionysius). Prefiguring St John of the Cross, Osuna taught that the three powers of the soul must cease to operate. The understanding is to be blind, the will deaf to creatures, and the memory dumb, in order ‘for the Lord alone to dwell there’. This is done by entering within ourselves and cleansing the ‘fountain of the heart’. Osuna proposed the ‘via negativa’, the way of unknowing. Teresa writes that this prayer of recollection is the swiftest road to God:

4. Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos: Chapters on Prayer* (trans. John Eudes Bamberger; Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1980), p. 66.

This kind of prayer has many advantages. It is called recollection because by its means the soul collects together all the faculties and enters within itself to be with God. The Divine Master thus comes more speedily than He otherwise would to teach it and to grant it the prayer of quiet.⁵

St Teresa describes the acquired prayer of recollection, a prayer in which the intellectual activity is simplified but not suppressed. This prayer which, with the help of grace, we can acquire by entering within ourselves, disposes us for the gift of contemplation, following St John of the Cross: 'As the soul makes progress in rejecting forms and sensible images, God gives it union'.⁶

Prayer of the Heart

Centering Prayer, and other forms of authentic contemplative prayer, is often described as 'prayer of the heart' – a designation taken from Hesychast spirituality of the Eastern Orthodox Church, relating specifically to the practice of the Jesus Prayer. In his book *Contemplative Prayer*, Merton writes: 'The classic form of Meditation is repetitive invocation of the name of Jesus in the heart, emptied of all images'.⁷

Meditation involves the whole person and proceeds from the center of man's being, his heart, renewed in the Holy Spirit, totally submissive to the grace of Christ. Prayer begins not so much with 'considerations' as with a 'return to the heart', finding one's deepest center, awakening the profound depths of our being in the presence of God.⁸

The extensive teachings of the Hesychast Fathers on the Jesus Prayer is summarized by one of their greatest teachers, the nineteenth-century Russian saint, Theophane the Recluse:

The principal thing is to stand with the mind in the heart before God, and go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night. Behave as you wish as long as you learn to stand before God with the mind in the heart, for in this lies the essence of the matter. Inner prayer means standing with the mind in the heart before God, either simply living in His presence or expressing supplications, thanksgiving and praise.⁹

5. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980), p. 141.

6. John of the Cross, *Ascent to Mt Carmel, Book III*, in *idem, The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (trans. Kieran Kavanaugh; Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1973), p. 214.

7. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 83.

8. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 30.

9. Theophane the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 17.

Tradition tells us that the name of Jesus, repeated by itself or with a few words, goes back to the first Christian century.

The Biblical Concept of the Heart

What is meant by the 'heart', so entwined with contemplative prayer? Merton writes: 'in the language of the monastic fathers, all prayer, meditation, reading and all activities of the monastic life are aimed at purity of heart, an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God'.¹⁰

Merton writes that 'The concept of 'the heart' refers to the deepest psychological ground of one's personality, the inner sanctuary where self-awareness goes beyond analytical reflection and opens out into metaphysical and theological confrontation with the Abyss of the unknown yet present – one who is 'more intimate to us than we are to ourselves'.¹¹

St. Macarius the Great (sixth century) gives us a holistic theology of the 'heart' when he writes:

Divine grace writes on the tables of the heart the laws of the Spirit and the heavenly mysteries. The heart directs and governs all the organs of the body. And when grace pastures the heart it rules over all the members and the thoughts. For there, in the heart, the mind resides as well as all the thoughts of the soul and all its hopes. This is how grace penetrates throughout the parts of the body.¹²

The Kingdom of God is within our hearts.

A Tough Discipline

Contemplative prayer is not contemplation but is, as Thomas Keating teaches, the first rung on the ladder of contemplation, gradually deepening our relationship with God and making us one spirit with him. The practice of contemplative prayer, undertaken for two periods each day, is a tough discipline, a discipline that requires two gifts of the Holy Spirit: faith and fortitude. The daily commitment of two 20- or, preferably, 30-minute periods a day is, in itself, a demanding discipline, aside from the 'rough waters and heavy seas' we must navigate during the journey. As we sow, so shall we reap.

In order for the seeds of contemplation to break open and flower, a certain amount of silence and solitude is required, over and above our

10. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 30.

11. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 33.

12. Macarius the Great, *Pseudo Macarius: The Fifty Homilies* (trans. George A. Maloney; New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 221.

two periods of meditation. Silence and solitude is the climate in which contemplation is nourished and flourishes. Depending upon the demands of our job and family obligations many of us may have to wait until later in life for the flowering of contemplation, when opportunity for greater solitude becomes available. After the scaffolding of the spiritual edifice has been erected by our prayer, in God's good time, the 'living stones of contemplation' will be set in place.

Faith and fortitude – energized by a love that will not be turned away – sustains and strengthens us so that, having set our hands to the plough, we have the 'grit' not to look back. This is the narrow way that leads to life (narrower than first we think) and few are they who find it. Many, once having found it, depart the path when aridity and darkness now enshroud them in the desert night of the first of the passive purifications:

The prospect of this wilderness is something that appalls most people that they refuse to enter upon its burning sands and travel among its rocks. They cannot believe that contemplation and sanctity are to be found in a desolation where there is no food and no shelter and no refreshment for their imagination and intellect and the desires of their nature.¹³

This is the first crisis in prayer, a development calling for enlightened spiritual counsel and direction. Thus, Thomas Keating believes that of all those who take up the practice of Centering Prayer – or other forms of contemplative prayer – no more than 15 or 20% stay the course.

The spiritual masters agree that the development of certain interior dispositions is required to prepare us for the mystical life: a spirit of simplicity, modesty of behavior, deep humility, perseverance in prayer, fervent charity, the practice of *lectio divina* (including solid spiritual reading), purity of heart forged by the acceptance of purifying trials sent to us, and, most important, developing a spirit of recollection. The grace of the Night of the Sense is usually bestowed quickly on those who are habitually recollected.

Those experienced in the practice of meditation, including those of a non-Christian path, confirm the resolve it takes to be faithful in rough and sometimes turbulent seas, not just in 'good sailing weather'.

Meditation is not easy. It takes time and it takes energy. It also takes grit, determination and discipline. It requires a host of personal qualities that we normally regard as unpleasant and like to avoid whenever possible. So why bother? Because we are human.¹⁴

13. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 235.

14. Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, 'Why Meditate?', *Shambala Sun* (September 2002), p. 58.

Thomas Keating asserts that those who maintain the discipline of Centering Prayer twice a day will be *transformed!* Contemplative prayer is transformative because God's *grace* is transformative. The living waters of grace come to us over the aqueduct of prayer. This is beautifully described by Teresa of Avila, the greatest teacher of prayer in the Christian tradition:

Those who know how to enter the heaven of their soul, and not go where their distractions would lead them, can be certain they are following a most excellent way, for they will travel far in a short time, and will not fail to drink from the fount of contemplation.¹⁵

St Jane de Chantal, guided by her spiritual father, St Francis de Sales, speaks in almost the same language:

Shut yourselves within this little heaven of the heart and not allow yourselves to be distracted by the things of sense, and be certain you will not fail to drink the water of the divine cistern.¹⁶

As do all masters of the spiritual life, St Teresa teaches that dogged perseverance is the key to reach the end of our journey, and says so with unmistakable force and insistence:

Everything depends on having a great and most resolute determination never to halt until they reach their journey's end, happen what may, whatever are the consequences, cost what it will...whether the earth itself goes to pieces beneath their feet.¹⁷

Unloading of the Unconscious

It is unthinkable for Evagrius and the Desert Fathers that one can aspire to be united with God in pure prayer without first cleansing one's heart. These 'spiritual athletes' well understood the meaning and promise of the sixth beatitude: 'Happy are the pure of heart, for they shall see God'. To the degree our hearts become pure will we 'see God' in the 'luminous obscurity' of contemplation. This 'cleaning of the lens' was central in the lives and teachings of the Desert and Hesychast Fathers. They understood that the sixth Beatitude refers to *this* life, not just the life hereafter.

Of the contributions that Thomas Keating brings to the teachings on contemplative prayer, the insights and discoveries of modern-depth psychology are significant. His writings on the unloading of the

15. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, p. 142.

16. Jane de Chantal, *St Chantal on Prayer* (Boston, MA: Daughters of St Paul Press, 1968), pp. 17-18.

17. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, pp. 117-18.

unconscious derive from some of these discoveries. It is possible in this article to offer only a few brief excerpts from this teaching:

Empirical evidence seems to be growing that the consequences of traumatic emotional experiences from early childhood are stored in our bodies and nervous systems in the form of tension, anxiety and various defense mechanisms. The emotional junk in our unconscious emerges during prayer in the form of thoughts that have a certain urgency, energy and emotional charge to them.

As the deep peace flowing from contemplative prayer releases our emotional blocks, insights into the dark side of our personality emerge and multiply. If in your psyche there are obstacles to opening yourself to God, divine love begins to show you what these are. If you let go of them, you will gradually unfold in the presence of God and enjoy His Presence. The inner dynamism of contemplative prayer leads naturally to the transformation of your whole personality, leading to a structural change of consciousness.

When we commit ourselves to the spiritual journey, the first thing the Spirit does is start removing the emotional junk inside us. As long as we have obstacles in us, some of which we are not even aware, He cannot fill us to capacity. One means by which He does this is by means of the passive purification initiated by the dynamic of contemplative prayer. The purpose of contemplative prayer is not to experience peace, but to evacuate the unconscious obstacles to the permanent abiding state of union with God.

Not contemplative prayer but the contemplate *state* is the purpose of our practice; not experiences, however exotic or reassuring, but the permanent and abiding awareness of God that comes through the mysterious restructuring of consciousness. When all the obstacles are emptied out, the light of God's presence will illumine our spirit all the time, even when we are immersed in activity. Instead of being overwhelmed by externals, the true Self, now in union with God, will dominate them.¹⁸

Unless we comprehend the psychological dynamics that Thomas Keating sets forth, we may well drift into dangerous waters. We will begin to think these unsettling and unwelcome thoughts are the devil (as indeed some have!), rather than our own demons, and flee the narrow road that leads to life. Understanding these dynamics will bring us through the storms to safe harbor, be they somewhat violent or, in most cases, more temperate in nature where we are not traumatized by their eruptions. This 'cleansing of the heart' is precisely the aim and function of the passive nights, which accomplish, if we consent, the final purification of our hearts, the final triumph of God's grace.

18. Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1992), excerpts from pp. 93-107. See also *idem, Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 92-103.

The Road of Mary

'Contemplation is a gift of true devotion to the Mother of God'.¹⁹ This summarizes the teaching of the eminent mystical theologian of the past century, the French Dominican Reginald Garrigou-LaGrange, who taught mystical theology for over 30 years at the Angelicum in Rome.

The Church has declared Mary the Mediatrix of all Grace, graces in general and in particular. While every Christian should have devotion to the mother of Jesus, Fr LaGrange speaks of a profound devotion by which we consecrate our entire lives to Jesus through Mary, offering through her, our prayers, merits and actions, as proposed by St Louis de Montfort in his *Treatise on True Devotion to Mary*. As Jesus is our Mediator and Redeemer, and leads us to the Father, so Mary leads us to Jesus, and, for those consecrated to her, to experiential union with him in contemplation.

Quoting St. de Montfort, Fr LaGrange writes:

[T]he Road of Mary is easier and sweeter and nevertheless more meritorious, and consequently more perfect. One can reach divine union by other roads, but it will be by many more crosses, with many more difficulties which we must conquer with greater difficulty. We shall have to pass through dark nights (the passive purifications), combats, strange agonies, steep mountains, sharp thorns and frightful deserts. But by the way of Mary, the passage is more sweet and tranquil. This good Mother takes up her position so near her faithful servants to enlighten them in darkness, illumine them in their doubts, sustain them in their struggles and difficulties so that, in reality, this virginal road is a road of roses and honey compared to other roads.²⁰

Evidence of this appears in the lives of St Ephrem, the glory of the Syriac Eastern Church, St Bernard, St Bonaventure, St Bernadine of Sienna, St Francis de Sales, St Francis. In a vision, St Francis saw his sons trying to reach the Lord by a red ladder that was very steep. After climbing a few rungs, they would fall back. Our Lord then showed Francis another ladder, white and much less steep, at whose summit appeared the Blessed Virgin. Jesus said to Francis: 'Tell your sons to come to me by the ladder of my Mother'.

By virtue of our consecration, all our prayers and merits are magnified when offered to Jesus by his mother, which she joins to her own. Would not the gift or petition of a commoner offered to a king be esteemed

19. Reginald Garrigou-LaGrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1937), p. 386.

20. Garrigou-LaGrange, *Christian Perfection*, p. 387.

more highly if presented to him by the kind offices of the Queen Mother? This is not to infer we should not pray directly to Jesus. That would be an absurd distortion of the teaching. We should know, however, that all prayer to Jesus 'from her consecrated ones' passes through the heart of Mary. At the conclusion of a recent retreat, after giving a summary of the rigors of the contemplative path, a woman innocuously asked: 'But isn't there a shortcut?!' I experienced a certain delight when I was able to answer, 'Yes. The road of Mary!'

Variations of the Passive Nights

My Father is the Vinedresser. Every branch that bears fruit He prunes, to make it bear even more fruit (Jn 15.1-2).

During a recent retreat for a community of nuns, a young nun approached me to say that she had been reading the writings of St John of the Cross on the dark night of the senses. She remarked: 'I don't think I want to go through that!' I replied that she wouldn't have to — at least, not to the degree and intensity that St John describes. Often overlooked by many spiritual writers are the moderating words of St John himself:

Not many people undergo so strong a purification, but only those whom God wishes to elevate to the highest degree of union. For God prepares each one by a purification in accordance with the degree to which He wishes to raise a person, and according to that person's impurity and imperfection.²¹

The doctrine of St John is given in its full amplitude, as he himself experienced the dark nights. Not so for most of us, particularly for those who St John refers to as the 'weak ones':

Those who are weak are kept for a long time in this night, and these God purges very gently and with slight temptations. Habitually, too, God gives refreshments of sense so that they do not become faint and fall away, so that only after a time do they attain purity of perfection in this life.²²

Some spiritual writers have over-emphasized the negative aspects of the passive nights, rather than balancing their commentaries with the positive aspects of his teaching, the inflow of divine love and grace that gives birth to contemplation and experiential union with God. This being said, the nights must nonetheless be severe if they are to do God's work of radical purification. God will not crush us.

21. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame*, in *idem*, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, p. 589.

22. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, in *idem*, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, p. 329.

Those engaged in the active apostolate—whether religious or lay people—will not experience the nights with the same intensity as those in a cloistered community or someone living a largely eremetical life in which there is much solitude. The activities and duties of an active apostolate will absorb and largely distract from the rigors of the purifying nights. Fortunately, our hearts do not have to be perfectly purified in order to receive the gift of contemplation. This gratuitous gift of God is infused into our hearts during the first of the passive nights, the Night of the Senses, which corresponds to the Fourth Mansion of St Teresa's 'Interior Castle'. This initial infusion—which normally 'sneaks' into our inner being unnoticed at first—brings with it an almost continual delicate remembrance and presence of God, experienced in dryness, darkness and aridity, a purification that disentangles us from attachment to sensible tastes and hidden self-love.

Increasingly, the words of St Paul are being actualized: 'Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution so that you can put on the new self that has been created in God's way' (Eph. 4.23-24). We undergo a 'lens change', an interior 'recalibration', if you will, and find that our thoughts 'are on heavenly things, not on the things that are of the earth' (Col. 3.2-3).

In *The Inner Experience* Merton writes of the 'ordinariness' of contemplation:

Contemplation is not only real, but I insist on its simplicity, sobriety, humility and its integration in normal Christian life. Contemplation should not be exaggerated, distorted or made to seem great. It is a life by which everything else in us moves and lives, communicating a new life to the intelligence where it lives, so that it becomes a living awareness of itself. This awareness is not so much something that we have but as something that we are. It is a new and indefinable quality of our living being.²³

In capital letters Merton typed:

CONTEMPLATION IS A SUPERNATURAL LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD, SIMPLE AND OBSCURE, INFUSED BY HIM INTO THE SUMMIT OF THE SOUL, GIVING IT A DIRECT AND EXPERIENTIAL CONTACT WITH HIM.²⁴

The Second Water

If we have been faithful to our contemplative prayer practice twice a day—and applied the graces received to our daily lives—there will come

23. Merton, *The Inner Experience*, ch. 12.

24. Merton, *The Inner Experience*, ch. 6.

a time, perhaps in a few or perhaps after many years, when our prayer will change from acquired recollection and evolve into supernatural or mystical prayer. Such prayer should not be considered extraordinary, but rather a normal stage of growth as St Teresa teaches. Thomas Merton writes:

Why do we think of infused contemplation and mystical prayer as something essentially strange and esoteric, reserved for a small class of almost unnatural beings and prohibited to everyone else? If anyone should ask 'who may desire and pray for this gift', the answer is obvious: everybody.²⁵

The Prayer of Quiet characterizes the Fourth Mansion of St Teresa, the second degree of prayer or 'the second water', which she calls 'true contemplation'. Instead of laboriously drawing water from a well by means of buckets, in the Prayer of Quiet the person drinks directly from the divine source, a deepening of our prayer which brings about great peace, quiet and delight during which God acts while we are made virtually totally passive. We are, so to speak, 'frozen in our tracks' and dare not even move. Yet we are meant to do a little work—such as whispering the name of Jesus, from time to time, or 'Father'.

In the Fourth Mansion Teresa distinguishes between two kinds of infused prayer: initial supernatural recollection and the more intense Prayer of Quiet, which almost always follows. During the former a person receives (infused) a gentle awareness of God while the senses gradually begin to lose their hold, and the desire to be alone with God manifests itself.

The Prayer of Quiet, which usually follows, is sometimes called the 'prayer of absorption'. Here the will is captured by God so that it can love nothing but the Divine Master. The intellect and imagination, however, are still free and continue to 'flit around' like so many moths. Teresa's advice is to pay no more attention to these distractions than to a madman and never chase after them to try to bring them into captivity with the will. Such intellectual activity will cause all to be lost.

Teresa believed that only those who are virtually completely detached from the world receive this grace. Thus it would be extremely rare for a person to be gifted with the Prayer of Quiet without having passed through the Night of the Senses, where the gift of knowledge predominates. This infused gift of the Holy Spirit leaves one with a penetrating insight into the emptiness and 'nothingness' of the things of the world, gifting us with a new-found freedom of detachment. This night frees us

25. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1981), p. 7.

of all things, leaving one free of things even though we possess them.

The Prayer of Quiet is experienced in differing degrees and at different times and comes upon one suddenly and unexpectedly. God may give this prayer at the time of our meditation or at any time of the day when we are recollected, sometimes sustaining it for a long while, even for one or two days. When engaged in activities, one has the feeling of being in 'two worlds' at the same time, and one seems to be outside oneself. If the absorption is deep, the prayer arises in our deepest inmost self, causing the soul (heart) to dilate, permeating the inner and exterior person with an ineffable joy.

If the absorption is not so deep, this prayer can be dry and arid, while the will secretly expands in love. During such arid prayer we should not allow ourselves to become anxious or afflicted, but remain still while paying no attention to feelings of aridity or to the other faculties. Teresa tells us that in this state the virtues grow incomparably more than previously.

For Teresa, it is the beginning of all blessings and one, in gratitude and humility, we should greatly esteem. Although the experience may lead one to believe that the summit of the spiritual journey has been reached, there are still many miles to go, including the 'cleansing lye' of the Night of the Spirit, the final triumph of God's mercy and grace.

In summary, society's illness is its compulsive determination to erect a 'dreamhouse of happiness' on shifting sands, the architect and builder of which is the false, superficial, exterior self. Acting solely in a purely rational, human way, without the graced, unifying experience of contemplation, the seven deadly sins are secretly gnawing away at the foundation. Inevitably, one day, the prophetic words of Christ are realized: 'What a ruin that house became!' (Lk. 6.49).

One may think one is doing great things for God if one gets into parochial work or teaching, but the seven capital sins – the result of our false emotional programs for happiness – are there in concrete form.²⁶

When we set aside our own prayer agenda of thoughts, words and images in 'true prayer', we free the Holy Spirit to pray in us, as Paul assures us (Rom. 8.26-28). The Spirit, our Advocate, becomes our prayer, pleading for us with 'sighs too deep for words...according to the mind of God', who alone sees our deepest wounds and gaping fissures. The curative, healing powers of the Divine Therapist gradually effects a deep inner purification. Our inner eye, once diseased, undergoes a cleansing process and is made lightsome.

26. Thomas Keating, *Vision Statement to Contemplative Outreach, Ltd* (privately distributed).

The lamp of your body is the eye. When your eye is sound, your whole body too is filled with light. See to it then that the light within you is not darkness. If your whole body is filled with light, and no trace of darkness, it will be entirely light (Lk. 11.34-36).