



**Study guide for
CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER**

Key Terms Related to Contemplative Prayer in Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross

Consolations – a broad term referring to a variety of supernatural experiences with God. Also called “favors.” (What Charismatics might refer to as “encounters”).

Contemplation – “a deep love communion with the triune God. By depth here we mean a knowing loving that we cannot produce but only receive. It is not merely a mentally expressed ‘I love You’. It is a wordless awareness and love that we of ourselves cannot initiate or prolong” (Dubay, *Fire Within*, 57). For John of the Cross, “The communication of God untied to the senses, or the particular, received passively by the spirit in an attitude of faith and love, of general loving attention. Also called mystical theology. May be referred to as infused because the soul receives it passively, just as one receives sunlight by doing no more than opening the shutters. Takes away the satisfaction associated with discursive [i.e., meditative] prayer” (See “Glossary of Terms” in *The Collect Works of St. John of the Cross*, 768.)

Detachment – “The equivalent of poverty of spirit, refers to a freedom from the appetites [i.e., disordered longings/desires] so that the heart may be surrendered entirely to God in the union of faith, hope, and love” John of the Cross equates this to spiritual poverty (See “Glossary of Terms” in *The Collect Works of St. John of the Cross*, 768.)

Faculties of the Soul – The three elements or operations of the human soul which make the soul *human* rather than *animal*. The faculties are: the Intellect, Memory, Will. Each need purification in order to experience union with God. In different degrees of prayer, certain faculties are “suspended,” “absorbed,” or “occupied” in God. Intellect – houses the understanding, rational thinking, reason. Purified by faith. Memory – houses the memories and mental images. Purified by hope. Will – houses the intention, desire, longing. Purified by love.

Locutions - words from God spoken interiorly (not audibly/with physical ears) to the soul; technically a broad term that can include words spoken into our soul from our own intellect or even the devil. One must be on guard and learn to discern where the locution is coming from: God, the soul, or the devil. (See Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 25.11).

- external explicit locution - explicit and heard with sense of hearing
- internal explicit locution - explicit but not heard with bodily ears, although they are understood much more clearly than if heard
- internal but not explicit -just as in heaven one understands without speaking

Meditative prayer – prayer that involves an active participation. It can involve thinking on or gently speaking Scriptures aloud, slowly repeating phrases, speaking gently and lovingly to God

Mental Prayer – For Teresa of Avila, it is “an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us. In order that love be true and the friendship endure, the wills of the friends must be in accord.” (Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 8.5)

Mystical – “An adjective meaning secret or hidden that at times accompanies the words ‘knowledge,’ ‘wisdom,’ and ‘theology.’ Used in this way, it is another term for contemplation” (See “Glossary of Terms” in *The Collect Works of St. John of the Cross*, 772).

Prayer – communion with God, or communication with God. For John of the Cross, it is “requiring a will that is with [God] and a mind set on him. Its aims should be what is more pleasing to God... May be meditative or contemplative. In union, it becomes wholly the exercise of love” (See “Glossary of Terms” in *The Collect Works of St. John of the Cross*, 774).

Prayer of Pain – A deep, interior pain comes that comes from God, not ourselves, as a result of the withdrawal of his presence after a consolation. It produces a painful, yet glorious longing for God. The pain is interior (in the soul), yet it can affect the body, even to the point that the body is paralyzed. The pain is like an arrow is thrust "into the deepest most living recesses of the heart in such a way that the soul doesn't know what has happened or what it wants. It well understands that it wants God... for the love of this Lord it might despise itself; and it would gladly lose its life for him... Yet this pain is so delightful that there is no other pleasure in life that gives greater happiness. The soul would always want, as I said, to be dying of this sickness" (Teresa, *Life*, 29.10)

Prayer of Quiet – involves a recollection of the faculties that produces a greater delight in the presence of God. God has to bring the soul here. (Teresa, *Life*, 14.3). A prayer of “interior quiet and peace” (Teresa, *Spiritual Testimony* 59). A state of prayer which is “quiet, deep and peaceful happiness of the will” (Teresa, *Way of Perfection*). Involves an occupation or absorption of the will with God. The other two faculties (intellect and memory) are still active and prone to distraction. This “quiet” can be felt at different degrees, or for different periods of time, as long as a few days. A person can experience this and still engage in regular daily activities. (See Teresa, *Interior Castle*, IV.3.1)

Prayer of Rapture – also called “elevation/flight of the spirit,” “transport,” “ecstasy,” “trance.” Very similar to the prayer of union except that it lasts longer and is felt more exteriorly. This produces a greater longing for God, a greater detachment from creatures, and a greater desire not to offend God. Imaginary visions can occur here: “the rapture lasts longer and is felt more exteriorly, for your breathing diminishes in such a way that you are unable to speak or open your eyes. Although this diminishing of these bodily powers occurs in union, it takes place in this prayer with greater force”...(Teresa, *Spiritual Testimony* 59).

Prayer of Union – an immersion/absorption/suspension of all three faculties (memory, intellect, and will) in God. This usually only lasts, she says for up to 30 minutes. “the intellect is as though in awe, the will loves more than it understands, but it doesn't understand in a describable way

whether it loves or what it does; there is no memory at all, in my opinion, nor thought; nor even during that time are the senses awake, for they are as though lost, that the soul might be more occupied in what it enjoys” (Teresa, *Spiritual Testimony* 59). Creates a greater praise of God and willingness to “die a thousand deaths” for God. Longings for repentance increase, longing for the heavenly homeland. (See Dubay, *Fire Within*, 96).

Recollection – a drawing in of the faculties (memory, intellect, will) that produces an enjoyment of the presence of God. (Teresa, *Life* 14.2). Thomas Dubay describes it as “an infused and gentle awareness given by God and not produced by human effort. One is, as it were, gathered together in God and desires solitude to be with Him. The senses and external things slowly lose their hold upon the person...the inner person is serenely drawn to be occupied with him.” For Teresa, this is usually the introductory stage of the beginner to experience infused prayer. (Dubay, *Fire Within*, 87. See also Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, IV.3.1 and *Life*, 14.2)

Spiritual Betrothal – “it is a symbolic term for an elevated degree of union that takes place in the illuminative way [i.e., for proficients in prayer]. In it there is a fluctuating between the feeling of God’s nearness, the sweetness of his communication, and the experience both of his absence and of other painful trails of purification by which the sensory part is gradually accommodates to the spirit.” (See “Glossary of Terms” in *The Collect Works of St. John of the Cross*, 775)

Spiritual Marriage – “a symbolic expression with roots in the Bible designating full union with God or transformation in God, the highest state attainable in this life. A mutual, total surrender of love between the soul and God...In frequent actual unions, God communicates his secrets and love to the soul in a direct manner.” (See “Glossary of Terms” in *The Collect Works of St. John of the Cross*, 775).

Union with God – “Supernatural union is the goal of the spiritual journey, a union of likeness brought about through love. In it all the cognitive-affective activity bears a full likeness to God’s activity, or life, with nothing repugnant to it. This complete elevation and transformation of a persons’ activity is wrought by means of the theological virtues [i.e., faith, hope, and love].” (See “Glossary of Terms” in *The Collect Works of St. John of the Cross*, 767.)

Visions, Types of

- ***Corporeal Visions*** – Supernatural visions/images seen with the bodily eyes
- ***Imaginative Visions*** – Supernatural visions/images seen with the eyes of the soul.
- ***Intellectual Visions*** – Supernatural “visions” that are seen neither with the eyes of the body nor the eyes of the soul. An inward “knowing” of a certain truth of the presence of God. An **example was when Teresa “sees”, or to put it better, “senses” Christ beside her.** “I saw nothing with my bodily eyes or with my soul, but it seemed to me that Christ was at my side I saw that it was He, in my opinion, who was speaking to me...It seemed

to me that Jesus Christ was always present at my side; but since this wasn't an imaginative vision, I didn't see any form. yet I felt very clearly that He was always present at my right side and that He was the witness of everything I did. At no time in which I was a little recollected, or not greatly distracted, was I able to ignore that He was present at my side." (Life, 27.2)

Wound of love – a experience where the caverns of the soul are “purged and emptied of all created things”; a painful thirst for God, God sends touches and wounds in to the depths of the soul, giving “profound satisfaction and delight” (John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love* 3. 19-23)

Note: A PDF containing 20 Chapters of Teresa's autobiography as well as Her First Spiritual Testimony can be found on Remanent Radio's YouTube page in the description box of the video on contemplative prayer.

Historical Context for Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross

From The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, demands for reform grew louder. The response was Lateran V (1512–17), which proposed solid improvements. It is unlikely that Pope Leo X would have carried out these reforms, but reform was about to be forced upon him and his successors. As Lateran V ended in 1517, a concerned Augustinian monk and professor of Scripture at the University of Wittenberg posted ninety-five theses for debate. Chief among his points was the illegitimacy of the sale of indulgences, a clear case of the sin of simony, the sale of spiritual goods. Martin Luther (1483–1545) sought to reform the church, sure that the pope would agree. But, instead, Pope Leo X wished only that the pesky monk would be silenced. Luther taught that grace is free and cannot be “earned” by works or merits since Christ on the cross had merited all the grace needed for the justification of sinners. Christ was offered once and for all, said Luther, so that the mass cannot be a sacrifice; no priest can offer Christ again. Christians can only trust in God's promise of justification and respond in gratitude to God by helping their neighbors. Christians are at once sinners and justified by the grace of Christ through which also they share in the priesthood of all believers that allows a layperson to speak of Christ's promise, that is, to apply the gospel to an anxious neighbor. For Luther, spirituality consists in a heartfelt trust in Christ's work “for me” and in generous service to the neighbor. Celibacy, Luther taught, is a work and contrary to the order of God to increase and multiply. Luther himself married a former nun and urged other religious to follow his example. He denounced meditation as a work by which monks think to gain heaven. For prayer, Luther recommended the petitions of the Our Father and the use of the Psalms to ask for help and to express praise and gratitude. (Pg 124-125)

Throughout the sixteenth century, there arose new orders dedicated to the education of clergy and of laity Priests of the new and older orders found themselves busy with spiritual direction as the pious life of the faithful grew more robust and more lay people engaged in meditation and contemplation.... Two of the most important spiritual developments of the sixteenth century began in Spain. The first was the writing of The Spiritual Exercises by Ignatius of Loyola (1490/1–1556) who used them to form the men who would become the Society of Jesus. (Pg 128)

The second spiritual development to arise in Spain was the reform of the mendicant Carmelite order by St Teresa of Avila (1515–82) and St John of the Cross (1542–91). They not only reformed the order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel but also gave to the world spiritual works that still inspire their readers. Both have been declared doctors of the universal church for the extraordinary power and effectiveness of their spiritual writing and direction. Teresa wrote down-to-earth directions for her nuns such as The Way of Perfection and The Interior Castle and an autobiography that describes her far-from-smooth path to a life of union with God. Teresa's mysticism was firmly Christo-centric, eschewing any suggestion that she might seek, or counsel others to seek, a God who transcended either the Trinity or the incarnation. Teresa envisioned the soul as a diamond that is also a castle with seven dwelling places. The soul enters through the door of prayer. Its progress from the recognition of its sinfulness to the spiritual espousals is not linear, but involves returns to the first dwelling place and sudden glimpses of its goal, continual union with God in Christ. Teresa illustrates her directions and exhortations with metaphors drawn from common experience such as watering a garden. The beginner may have to draw water from a well and lug heavy buckets to the garden. A more advanced person may have only to tend an irrigation system, while the experienced gardener may have only to watch God's good rain water the garden for her. Teresa was a practical as well as a wise guide. If a sister claimed visionary experiences, Teresa might suggest that the sister be given a more substantial diet, a warm bath, and extra rest. For Teresa, the test of progress was not visions but a constant, gentle charity toward all and fidelity to a daily life of prayer and work.

John of the Cross was a man of many skills and great insight. He was an artist, an architect, a trained theologian, and extraordinary poet. His works are more difficult to understand than Teresa's, but were also translated and influential beyond Spain and beyond the sixteenth century. His way of all and nothing (*todo y nada*) asks for a strip-ping away of everything to which a person might cling and recognition of one's own nothingness; that is the *nada*. The purpose of such self-emptying is to be filled with God to whom one wishes to belong totally, the *todo*. John's burning poetry and commentaries, strongly influenced by the Song of Songs, are an original synthesis of earlier spiritual traditions. The two Carmelites make clear their passion for God and their paths from beginner to enjoyment of "spiritual marriage" or continual union with God in Christ. Both Spanish mystics were also active, crisscrossing Spain to found new houses of the Discalced (shoeless) Carmelites. Their reform, like the reforms that took place earlier in many of the older orders, consisted of a return to observance of the unmitigated rule of the first European Carmelites. (Pg 129)

Except from Jill Raitt's chapter "European Reformations of Christian Spirituality (1450–1700)" In *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, Ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, MA. Blackwell Pub. 2005)

Biographical Portraits

Biographers have given posterity a detailed description of Teresa de Ahumada. She was medium in height and tended to be more plump than thin. Her unusual face could not be described as either round or aquiline; the skin was white and the cheeks flesh-colored. Her forehead was broad, her eyebrows somewhat thick, their dark brown color having a reddish tinge. Her eyes were black, lively, and round, not very large but well placed and protruding a little. The nose was small; the mouth medium in size and delicately shaped, and her chin was well proportioned. The white teeth sparkled and were equal in size. Three tiny moles, considered highly ornamental in those days, added further grace to her appearance; one below the center of the nose, the second over the left side of her mouth, the third beneath the mouth on the same side. Her hair was a shining black and gently curled...In many ways an extravert, she was cheerful and friendly, a happy conversationalist, whom people found pleasing to hear as well as look at. Besides her talent as a writer, she was also gifted in the use of the needle and in household tasks.

Kieran Kavanaugh, "Introduction: Early Life" *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol 1. 2nd ed. Trans. Kierran Kavanaugh, Otilio Rodriguez, (Washington DC. ICS Pub, 1987) 4

.... regarding the physical appearance of Fray John of the Cross, he was a small man, measuring four feet, eleven inches. Whenever St. Teresa referred to him she seemed almost obliged to use the diminutive. In describing his imprisonment, she writes: "For the whole nine months he was in a small prison where, little as he is, there was not enough room for him to move." He was also thin, but his lean, oval face and his broad forehead, receding into baldness, gave him a venerable appearance. His nose was slightly aquiline, his eyes dark and large. Rounding off this figure of Fray John was his old, rough, brown habit and a white cloak so coarse it seemed made of goat hair.

Kieran Kavanaugh "biographical sketch" *The collected works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, Otilio Rodriguez, (Washington, D.C. ICS Pub 1991) 24

Two Biographical sketches

A. Teresa of Avila

The first 40 years of Teresa's life gave no clue to the rich depth and productivity of the second half of her life. Born Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada in central Spain, she spent her early years with her family, giving herself to the duties of extended family life. At age 21, against her father's wishes, she professed vows as a Carmelite at the Spanish Convent of the Incarnation in Avila.

Still, according to her own account, she waffled spiritually. The convent was known for its leniency, for example, permitting relationships with those outside the convent and allowing worldly possessions within. Teresa, enjoying the convent's indulgences, waned in her devotion. Then a serious, prolonged illness (and partial paralysis from an attempted cure) forced her to three years in relative quiet, during which time she read books on the spiritual life. When she recovered and returned to the convent she resumed what to her later seemed only a half-hearted spirituality. Of these years, she wrote in her *Autobiography*, "I voyaged on this tempestuous sea for almost 20 years with these fallings and risings."

Then one day while walking down a hallway in the convent, her glance fell on a statue of the wounded Christ, and the vision of his constant love throughout her inconstancy pierced her heart. Gently but powerfully, she said Jesus began to break down her defenses and reveal to her the cause of her spiritual exhaustion: her dalliance with the delights of sin.

She immediately broke with her past, undergoing a final conversion. After this, she began experiencing profound mystical raptures, though these soon passed. For the rest of her life, she gave herself completely to her spiritual growth and the renewal of the Carmelite monasteries.

A spiritual legacy

Teresa dreamed of establishing convents where young women could pursue deep lives of deep prayer and devotion. She once wrote, "Whoever has not begun the practice of prayer, I beg for the love of the Lord not to go without so great a good. There is nothing here to fear but only something to desire." Teresa spent days on end traveling the countryside establishing reformed (or "Discalced," meaning "unshod," that is, more simple) Carmelite convents. She convinced John of the Cross to join her in this work.

Her success as an administrator and reformer (she founded 14 monasteries) was due in part to her natural leadership gifts, her tenacity in the face of adversity (especially from older Carmelites who resented her reforms), and a keen sense of humor. Once when praying about her many trials and sufferings, she thought she heard God say, "But this is how I treat my friends." Teresa replied, "No wonder you have so few friends."

Yet it is her gift of spiritual direction, practiced personally with nuns and publicly in her writings, for which she is known today.

She was hesitant to put her insights to paper and had to be ordered by her superiors to do so. Thankfully for later generations, she obeyed: her three works, *Autobiography*, *Way of Perfection*, and *Interior Castle*, contain some of the most profound insights into the spiritual life ever written.

To take one example, considered by many her masterpiece: *Interior Castle* describes the soul as a "castle made entirely of diamond or of a very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms." Some are above, some below, some to the sides, "and in the very center and middle is the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place." Teresa wanted to teach her readers how to enter this castle, that is, how to pray, so that they might commune more intimately with God.

For Teresa, prayer is the source of Christian life and the wellspring of all moral virtues. Prayer is not everything, but without prayer, nothing else is possible. By prayer does the soul enter the Castle, and by prayer does the soul continue the journey. Under this umbrella of prayer, God works, in mysterious, often unpredictable ways, and the soul works strongly. Without the soul's active compliance, God will not move (though human effort cannot do what God alone must do).

From the First Dwelling Place, where the soul begins to pray, to the Seventh Dwelling Place, where the soul, united to God, finds both perfect peace and deepest suffering, the person builds on prayer and the progressive disengagement from the things of this world. But unlike her partner in reform, John of the Cross, 'Teresa's understanding of disengagement is not ascetic. On the contrary, for Teresa true suffering comes from being in the world and serving others. Spiritual progress is measured neither by self-imposed penance nor by the sweetest pleasures of mystical experiences but by growth in constant love for others and an increasing desire within for the will of God.

This love for her sisters and brothers and this union with the will of God compelled Teresa onward in constant efforts. To someone who encouraged her to rest, she once said, 'Rest, indeed! I need no rest; what I need is crosses.'" In her last years, her health suffered, as did her reputation with church authorities, who sought to restrict her influence. On yet another mission of service, her body exhausted, Teresa died reciting verses from the Song of Songs. (Pg. 265-267)

One Hundred and Thirty One Christians everyone should know,
eds. Mark Galli, and Ted Olson
(Nashville, Tenn: Holman Reference, 2000)

B. John of the Cross

Spain's Siglo de Oro was indeed a "golden century," a time remembered for its artists, playwrights, novelists, poets, and names Cervantes, Vega, and Cortez are but three of the most famous. One undersized, narrow-minded friar who spent most of his energy on reforming yet another religious order could easily be overlooked. But today John of the Cross, as he came to be called, is remembered as one of history's most influential spiritual guides.

Taking the harder road

Juan de Yepes, his name at birth, failed at a variety of trades before entering first the local Jesuit school and then the University of Salamanca, where he pursued holy orders. There he met Teresa of Avila, who persuaded him to join her to reform the Carmelite order.

Believing that struggle and suffering, which such reform would likely entail, were necessary for spiritual growth, Juan entered the Carmelite Order in 1568 as Fray Juan de la Cruz, Friar John of the Cross. And a life of the cross it was, as John intended: "Turn not from the easiest, but to the most difficult . . . not to the more, but to the less; not towards what is high and precious, but to what is low and despised; not towards desiring anything, but to desiring nothing."

John allowed himself no respite from suffering, but heaped it upon himself with long fasting and whippings. If that were not enough, he was also severely criticized and ignored when he exhorted his fellow friars to give up their comforts, freedoms, and pleasures.

Imprisonment and creativity

In 1577 church authorities, resentful of John, had him kidnapped, and he was imprisoned for nine months in a windowless six-by-ten-foot cell, with a ceiling so low he couldn't stand up. The stone cell was unheated in winter, unventilated in summer. Malnourished and flogged weekly, John was constantly ill.

Yet it was during this dark time that, by the light of a three-inch hole high in the wall, John wrote his two greatest poems, "Cantico Espiritual" (Spiritual Canticle, 1578) and "Noche Oscura del Alma" (Dark Night of the Soul). These two extraordinary pieces illumined both his own darkness and the mystery of his path, which many people since have followed.

After escaping, John spent eight months recuperating and writing *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, the prose commentaries on his poetry that explained the mystic way.

Ascending to God

For John, the mystic path meant living with an all-consuming desire more fully to know and love God, abandoning everything that did not contribute to that communion. God illuminates the individual who, in consequence, has the desire and power to shed the illusions of this world. These illusions include the messages of the senses, which distort the reality of union with God.

In his poem "Dark Night," John extols the value of extinguishing everything but the desire for God:

One dark night, fired with love's urgent longings - ah, the sheer grace! - I went out unseen, my house being now all stilled.

In darkness, and secure, by the secret ladder, disguise - ah, the sheer grace! - in darkness and concealment, my house being now all stilled.

On that glad night, in secret, for no one saw me,
Nor did I look at anything, with no other light or guide than the one that burned in my heart

This guided me more surely than the light of noon
To where he was awaiting me—him I knew so well—there in a place where no one appeared

O guiding night! O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united the Lover with his beloved, transforming the beloved in her Lover.

Upon my flowering breast, which I kept wholly for him alone,
There he lay sleeping, and | caressing him there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.
When the breeze blew from the turret, as I parted his hair,
It wounded my neck with its gentle hand, suspending all my senses.
I abandoned and forgot myself, laying my face on my Beloved.
All things ceased; I went out from myself, leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.

This first step in knowing God is called purification: the speaker slips away from the silenced house—the passionate flesh. The soul is then readied for the second stage, illumination, a blissful state characterized by a heightened awareness of the presence of God and an enjoyment of his gifts. Nevertheless, as delightful as God's gifts are, they are not God himself, and anything short of the fullness of God is not enough.

To go further on the way requires another purification, one of the spirit; this process is what is called the "Dark Night of the Soul," or the "wounded neck" and "suspended senses." The mystic feels an absolute loss of God, a sense that the sun has been completely obliterated. Desolation and despair are the usual emotions. Yet no matter how long the emptiness continues, the soul clings to God, for this "spiritual crucifixion" is necessary: one must learn to seek God for God's sake, not for the sake of the happiness God brings. Only then can one enjoy perfect union with God.

John spent another decade championing reform before retiring to a small village whose prior disliked John and who treated him shamefully (it seems John chose this particular village deliberately). He finally succumbed to a severe infection in his right foot. (Pg. 268-270)

One Hundred and Thirty One Christians everyone should know,
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The Ministry and Friendship between Teresa of Avila and John of the cross.

In 1567...Fray John was ordained a priest and came to Medina to sing his first Mass. There, in the early part of autumn, the fateful meeting with Madre Teresa de Jesus took place. In the city for the foundation of a second community of nuns who would make profession of the Carmelite life according to the new contemplative style that she had developed in Avila, the determined Madre was now weighing the possibility of extending this mode of life to the friars. Having been told of John's exceptional qualities, she arranged for an interview with him. She was 52 at the time; he was 25. Hearing about his aspirations toward more solitude and prayer and about his thought of transferring to the Carthusians, she pointed out to him that he could find all he was seeking without leaving "Our Lady's order," and with her characteristic zeal and friendliness she spoke to him animatedly of her plan to adapt this new way of life for friars. Fray John listened, he felt inspired, caught the enthusiasm, and beheld a new future opening before him. He promised to join Teresa, but on one condition that he would not have long to wait. Teresa rejoiced over the eagerness of her young recruit and his unwillingness to delay, he who was later to write a treatise on how to reach union with God quickly.

The following year, in August, she set off with a small group from Medina to Valladolid, where she intended to make another foundation; and traveling with them to learn more about this new Carmelite life was Fray John, now finished with his studies.

Teresa's ideal of founding small communities, in contrast to her former monastery of the Incarnation at Avila where as many as 180 nuns lived, had its background in a larger movement of reform that had spread through sixteenth-century Spain. Certain common characteristics marked the spirit of this Spanish reform: the return to one's origins, primitive rules, and founders; a life lived in community with practices of poverty, fasting, silence, and enclosure; and, as the most important part, the life of prayer. People used different terms to designate the new communities that had these traits: reformed, observant, recollect, discalced, hermit, contemplative. The name "discalced" became the popular one in referring to Teresa's nuns and friars because of their practice of wearing sandals rather than shoes.

These efforts at reforming religious life began in the fifteenth century in response to the upheavals in religious life caused by the Black Death. The early attempts carried an anti-intellectual strain, placing emphasis on affectivity, external ceremonies, devotions, and community vocal prayer. But long hours of community vocal prayer day after day became tedious and mechanical. The only noticeable fruit was the desire for something different, more time for interior prayer. As a matter of fact, a new practice called "recollection," whose followers were called "recogidos," developed in many Franciscan houses. This spirituality made union with God through love its most important concern, seeking nourishment in Scripture and classic spiritual works. These latter works by authors such as Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard, and Bonaventure appeared in print at the time from newly established presses.

The Franciscan friar Francisco de Osuna elaborated this spirituality in *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, a book that inspired Teresa and initiated her into the way of interior prayer. Osuna taught that to advance spiritually you must practice recollection in imitation of Jesus Christ, who went alone into the desert to pray secretly. By this recollection, also called mental prayer, Osuna explained, you withdraw from people and noise and enter within yourself.

But the mystical graces God began to give Teresa (despite her waverings and after she persevered for many years through countless struggles to devote two hours to mental prayer each day) taught her more than all her books. Only with Jesus Christ could she enter the inner castle through prayer; there he became increasingly present as she advanced toward the inmost dwelling place. Presence to Christ was what made prayer for Teresa, in the beginning stages, in the middle, and in the highest as well. "Never leave Christ in whom the human and divine are joined, and who is always one's companion," she warned the theologians who began to come to her to learn about contemplation. "He is the one through whom all blessings come. He is always looking at you; can you not turn the eyes of your soul to look at him?"

Her communities, too, had no meaning without Jesus Christ in the center. They were to be small communities; only 12 nuns at first, gathered around Christ as his friends. No class distinctions! These class divisions characterized women's cloisters in those times, ruled by the nobility, as was the case at the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ all were to be equal, Teresa insisted, and the superior the first to take her turn sweeping the floor.

By this time the Madre had written two books of her own: one for her spiritual directors, her *Life*, in which she carefully analyzed all the stages of prayer and explained many of the mystical graces given her by God, bearing testimony that His Majesty never tires of giving; the other for her nuns, *The Way of Perfection*, in which she laid out the kind of life and prayer they were to live together, not only for their own sanctification but for the Church whose troubles distressed her as much as the thought of Christ's own sufferings. For Teresa the sufferings of the Church were the sufferings of Christ.

How much there was, then, for John of St. Matthias to learn from this humble, simple, awesome nun. Teresa, for her part, marveled as she got to know the small friar better. "Though he is small in stature, I believe that he is great in God's eyes," she wrote at the time. John was speaking so knowingly and brilliantly about the wonders of God and the mysteries of the divine goodness that the group began to refer to him as "God's archives."

There were also differences between the Madre and her first friar, and she admits to having become vexed with him at times. She had wanted learned men for her new communities of friars so that they might be good guides not only through experience of the same style of life but through their learning. Having suffered much from the vincible ignorance of her confessors, Teresa was keen to spare her daughters anything similar. John, at the time, tended to stress the limitations of learning. Teresa thought an expert was a person with a degree who knew a lot about something; John didn't seem to think anybody knew much about anything—an expert was someone who knew the mistakes that could be made and how to avoid them. Fearing that austerities and penances might frighten university students away from her new friars, Teresa insisted on a balanced life in which the Christian virtues such as charity, detachment, and humility would receive far more favor than austerities. Austerities in those times were closely associated with sanctity, and John, though recognizing Teresa's claims, leaned toward austerities, which reforming friars also liked to think of as the manly path. Later, in his writings, John too was to treat austerities with a certain skepticism, pointing out how, along with so many other good things, they can end up wrecking the spiritual life. Teresa thought that Christian joy ought to permeate her communities; the nuns took time for recreation together each day, and sang and wrote poetry for one another. There was no reason for them to be somber. "Be affable, agreeable, and pleasing to persons with whom you deal," Teresa warmly counseled, "so that all will love your conversation and desire your manner of living and acting." John needed time to get used to this.

Recitation of the Divine Office was much simpler in Teresa's communities than it had been at the Incarnation. This allowed an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening for mental prayer. Like the early hermits on Mount Carmel, the nuns lived their day mostly in silence and solitude, alone in their cells, engaging in the manual labor of spinning to help support themselves. But Teresa's friars' daily routine would differ because she wanted them to engage in study and preaching and the ministry of the sacraments.

As in her writings, then, during these days from mid-August to October, Teresa energetically fulfilled her role as teacher, although she confessed she felt that Fray John was so good she could have learned more from him than he from her. On finishing his brief "novitiate" under the Madre's guidance, John of St. Matthias left Valladolid with a new Teresian ardor to start work on converting into a monastery the little farmhouse Teresa acquired for her first friars. It was situated in a lonely spot called Duruelo, midway between Avila and Salamanca. By the end of November Fray John had transformed the small house with its porch, main room, alcove, garret, and tiny kitchen into the first monastery for discalced Carmelite friars. On November 28, 1568, with a young deacon and Fray Antonio de Heredia (who had been prior in Medina), in the presence of the provincial, Fray John of St. Matthias embraced the new life, promising to live without mitigation according to the ancient Carmelite Rule. At that time he changed his name to John of the Cross.

The following spring the provincial appointed Fray Antonio prior and Fray John novice master, and in the autumn two novices arrived. The house then became too small, so the community moved to the nearby town of Mancera de Abajo in June 1570. In this year John also traveled to Pastrana to help organize another novitiate, and within a year moved to Alcalá de Henares to set up a house of studies for the new friars near the famous university of Alcalá. He became its first rector, guiding the students in their studies and spiritual development. Right from the beginning, then, John dedicated himself to a task of immediate urgency, spiritual direction. With his Bible, his experience, and his penetrating grasp of

both philosophy and theology, he began to ponder spiritual growth, observing the ways of human beings, discerning the ways of God.

His work now had to expand. Teresa, who had recently been sent by the visitor, Pedro Fernandez, to take up duties as prioress at the Incarnation in Avila, received permission to enlist the help of Fray John of the Cross as confessor and skilled spiritual director for the large number of nuns there. It was a community weighed down with many economic and social problems. Fernandez, a Dominican, was acting as visitor to the Carmelites in Castile by order of Pope Pius V, who entrusted their reform to Dominican friars. Another Dominican, Francisco Vargas, was responsible for the Carmelites in Andalusia. These visitors had ample powers. They could move religious from house to house and province to province, assist superiors in their offices, and depute other superiors from either the Dominicans or the Carmelites. They were entitled to perform all acts necessary for the "visitation, correction, and reform of both head and members of all houses of friars and nuns." A deep mutual respect and easy working relationship developed between the tactful and diplomatic Fernandez and Teresa.

Toward the end of May 1572, John of the Cross arrived in Avila and entered the feminine religious world, a world that was to become his special field of spiritual ministry. This ministry included guiding Teresa herself. From her he received as much as he gave in those years of profound and open conversation, a conversation that once on Trinity Sunday so soared that the two not only went into ecstasy but were seen elevated from the ground.

On November 18, 1572, while John was her director, Teresa unexpectedly received the grace of spiritual marriage. She was now in the seventh and final dwelling place of her spiritual journey; there in the center room of the interior castle she came to know the highest state of intimacy with God.

The experience of those years, when from so privileged a position the confessor could see God's work in Teresa, left more of a trace in John's later writings than one might first suppose. With the exception of the Bible, Teresa provided a source more enlightening than all of the books Fray John had studied. And she herself did not hold back from extolling the gifts of her director, referring to him in a letter as a "divine and heavenly man" and affirming that she had found no spiritual director like him in all Castile. There they were in Avila, Teresa and John; so much alike, so very different, destined in their writings to complement each other.

Except from Kieran Kavanaugh, "Introduction" in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol 1. 2nd ed. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, Otilio Rodriguez, (Washington DC. ICS Pub, 1987) 12-17.

Richard Foster on Contemplative Prayer

Defining the Contemplative prayer

Contemplative prayer is “the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who loves us. It is “an intimate sharing between friends,” to use the words of Teresa of Avila.”¹

Describing contemplative prayer from the inside out.

Below is Richard Foster’s description of the experience of contemplative prayer. Each of these themes describe a discernible movements of the Holy Spirit on the soul as we pray. Foster tries to paint a picture of prayer from the inside out. Yet describing the experience of an interior, almost intangible reality is hard.² Describing the inner aspect of prayer is hard because interior realities are by nature elusive. What happens in contemplative prayer is best explained through describing the way we are affected by the one we meet in prayer.

Consider a bag in the wind. We have all seen the wind takes hold of a plastic bag, lift it off the ground, making it seem to float and dance about in midair. What can be described is the affect of the wind’s movement on the bag as well as how the bag has been changed through it’s interaction with the wind. The same is true of describing prayer from the inside out. The inner aspects of prayer can only be explained by describing the affect of the Holy Spirit’s movement on the soul and the changes in us as a result of encountering him in prayer. The seven points below help us understand the character of contemplative prayer and gives good advice to anyone ready to pray in a contemplative way. Foster Writes:

Love. Through time and experience we sense a delicate but deepening love for God that feels more like a gift than an achievement. In the beginning this love is so quiet and unobtrusive that it is hardly perceptible. John of the Cross calls it a “secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God.” This is a great encouragement to us, for early in our prayer life — try as we might — we are unable to truly love God. This love comes little by little, and at first we experience a great deal of fluctuation in its intensity. High and low, hot and cold. In time, however, our love grows deeper, stronger, more steady.

Peace. At the same time, in slips a peace that cannot be analyzed or dissected — “a peace that passes understanding,” as Paul puts it (Phil. 4:7). This quiet rest, this firmness of life orientation, is not due to the absence of conflict or worry. In fact, it is not an absence at all, but rather a Presence. This peace is interrupted often by a multitude of distractions, especially in the beginning. But no matter — it is still there, and it is still real. And in time its quiet way wins over the chatter and clatter of our noisy hearts.

Delight. Another movement we begin to experience is delight. A very wise woman — one who had been through great hardship in her life — captured the essence of this quality for me when on one occasion she declared, “Fun ahead, saith the Lord!” There is pleasure, friendship, joy — deep joy. And playfulness. God laughs into our soul and our soul laughs back into God. John of the Cross calls it “the sweet and delightful life of love with God ... that delightful and wondrous vision.” But it is not uninterrupted delight. We experience an ebb and flow, an exquisite delight mingled with a painful yearning.

Emptiness. Which brings us to an opposing, almost contradictory movement in the contemplative life: emptiness. At the very moment we are entering a loving delight, we are also pulled into intense longing, yearning, searching — searching and not finding. Well, there is a finding of sorts, but not a complete finding. Perhaps we could call it a dissatisfied satisfaction. John of the Cross calls it “a living thirst ... [the] urgent longing of love.” ...Often the emptiness is a darkness as well. We experience Deus Absconditus, the God who is hidden from us. Dryness too — a Sahara of the heart. Throughout these experiences solitude is our welcome companion, for we are learning to be alone with the Alone. Please understand, this emptiness, this darkness, this dryness is itself prayer. It is a heavenly communion of an ascetic sort. While delight is a feasting, emptiness is a fasting, and both are needed for the growth of the soul.

¹ Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (New York NY: HarperCollins 2001) 48

² Here we have why the writings of Christian mystics can be hard to understand. We must approach such writings from the vantage point of the author’s subjectivity.

Fire. Still another reality we experience as we grow in the contemplative life is fire. Not literal fire, of course, but real fire nonetheless — in some ways more real than literal fire. The initial movement of love now intensifies, becoming a steady, flaming passion. Anything that causes distance or separation from God — disobedience or perhaps mere neglect — is painful in the extreme. So we feel, and even welcome, the purifying fire of God’s love burning out the dross: all stubbornness, all hate, all grasping need for self-promotion. And as the self-sins are burned away, the seeds of universal love blossom and flower.

Wisdom. This leads to a still deeper movement of the Spirit: wisdom. No sterile intellectualism or impersonal awareness, this is a knowing and inflowing of God himself. We are filled with “the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). We know as we are known. We enter that eternal life which is to “know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3b). Prayer turns into the deepening self-communication of the Trinity, a self-communication we are privileged to listen in on and even participate in.

Transformation. Through it all, God gradually and slowly “captures” the inner faculties: first the heart and the will, then the mind, the imagination, and the passions. The result is the transformation of the entire personality into the likeness of Christ. More and more and more we take on his habits, feelings, hopes, faith, and love.³

Four major strengths of contemplative prayer

Richard Foster speaks of The Contemplative Tradition which is deals primarily with practicing Contemplative prayer. Therefor Contemplative Tradition becomes something of an umbrella term that includes contemplative prayer. So, what is said of contemplative Tradition can also be applied to the practice of contemplative prayer. Here are four major strengths of the practice.

1. The first and most fundamental contribution of the Contemplative Tradition is that it constantly fans the flames of our “first love” (Rev. 2:4). Its message is this: “Love God with all your heart ... love God with all your heart ... love God with all your heart. Without heart-love you have nothing.”
2. Second, the Contemplative Tradition forces us beyond merely a cerebral religion. It insists on the insufficiency of intellectual formulation alone...This emphasis is important because of our perennial tendency to keep faith at arm’s length — even from ourselves.
3. The stress upon the centrality of prayer is a third contribution... Contemplatives do not think of prayer as a good thing, or an important thing, but as the essential thing, the primary thing. Theophan the Recluse put it well: “If prayer is right, everything is right.” But the Contemplative Tradition offers more than an insistence upon the pivotal nature of prayer. It also offers a distinctive angle on prayer: a stress upon silence and a call to unceasing prayer.
4. Fourth, more than other approaches to faith the Contemplative Stream emphasizes the solitariness of our life with God. In the language of the old folk spiritual, we must travel this “lonesome valley” alone. “No one else can walk it for me. I have to walk it by myself.” Solitariness does not mean individualism, but it does mean that there are limits to the role of the community. I am responsible for developing a personal history with God. You too. That is not something others can do for us. So, while we always want to affirm the importance of the Christian community, we need to understand that our growth in grace must contain a good dose of solitude. ⁴

³ Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (New York NY. HarperCollins 2001) 49-50

⁴ Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (New York NY. HarperCollins 2001) 51-52

Four Potential pitfalls with contemplative prayer

1. Certainly the most obvious danger encountered ... is the tendency to separate it [prayer] from ordinary life. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that much of our literature in this field is written by monastics....Let's be honest: the desert monastics did not have to concern themselves with diapers or baby-sitters or PTA meetings.... [Yet] we need to be absolutely firm in our insistence that smack in the middle of everyday life is precisely where prayer and intimacy with God need to be developed. True, some may have special callings to intense expressions of contemplative living that are separate and apart, but the vast majority of us build a history with God right in the midst of our families and our places of living and working and among our neighbors and friends. These places comprise the "holy ground" where we are to find God.
2. The second peril is a kind of "consuming asceticism." Asceticism itself simply means "training"; we derive our English word "athlete" from the same root. And we all need to train in the spiritual life. But just as we can find people who are obsessed with exercise, so we can find people suffering from "spiritual gluttony."... In Europe and the British Isles we find examples of the same kind of consuming asceticism, with every practice more fantastic than the one before
.... We avoid a consuming asceticism by clearly understanding the true purpose and right place of ascetical practices. We train in the spiritual life so that we have the ability to live rightly. It is not fasting for fasting's sake, for example, but fasting so that we can learn feasting upon God. The Disciplines of the spiritual life are a means, not an end. The end is "to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever."⁵⁷ The end is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). The end is a wild, hilarious love relationship with God in which we freely live and do the will of God
3. The third peril ... is the tendency to devalue intellectual efforts to articulate our faith. This can sometimes border on (or plunge headlong into) anti-intellectualism. We can see this in the various mysticisms that are divorced from solid theology. And even completely orthodox writers in this Tradition can sometimes inadvertently contribute to this problem in their zeal to stress heart-faith.... It is not hard to understand why this danger emerges. We have all seen the kind of cold, obtuse theology that cannot engage the will or touch the heart. However, in our attempts to correct intellectualism devoid of life, we must not debunk the necessity of right reason and clear thinking. We love God with both the mind and the heart, and these two must ever be inseparable twins for us.
4. The fourth and final peril I want to discuss with you — how I wish it truly was the final peril; these dangers are legion — is the tendency to neglect the importance of the community of faith. Now, this is a checkerboard peril, for many contemplatives are part of intentional communities that show forth some of the most sterling examples of loving, nurturing accountability. But, as we will see more than once, a Tradition's greatest strength has the potential to become a serious weakness...The contemplative stress upon our solitariness before God — a message we desperately need to hear — can lead us, especially in Western cultures, into an individualism that thinks only in terms of "God and me." Certain mystical expressions — especially those tinged with an anti-institutional spirit — are particularly susceptible to this danger. Sometimes it is tied to the anti-intellectualism noted above, which causes people to ignore the rigorous theological work of the past. The result: a doctrinal naivete that frequently leads to an unknowing heterodoxy....
....[We] need the community of faith, the body of Christ. We need other sisters and brothers who love us, support us, and give us their discernment. And we need to be connected to the heavenly community of the past — "the communion of saints." We are empowered by learning their stories, sharing their struggles, gaining strength from their courage, learning from their mistakes, and being instructed by their teaching.⁵

⁵ Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (New York NY. HarperCollins 2001) 53-56

Richard Foster on Contemplative Prayer from Foster's book on prayer

O my divine Master, teach me this mute language which says so many things.

—Jean-Nicholas Grou

Contemplative Prayer immerses us into the silence of God. How desperately we in the modern world need this wordless baptism! We have become, as the early Church father Clement of Alexandria says, like old shoes—all worn out except for the tongue. We live in a wordy world with our sophisticated high-tech telecommunication systems. We now have the dubious distinction of being able to communicate more and say less than any civilization in history.

Isaac of Nineveh, a Syrian monk, once observed, “Those who delight in a multitude of words, even though they say admirable things, are empty within.”¹ We today stand under the rebuke of this observation.

Contemplative Prayer is the one discipline that can free us from our addiction to words. Progress in intimacy with God means progress toward silence. “For God alone my soul waits in silence,” declares the Psalmist (Ps. 62:1). The desert father Ammonas, a disciple of Saint Anthony, writes, “I have shown you the power of silence, how thoroughly it heals and how fully pleasing it is to God.... Know that it is by silence that the saints grew, that it was because of silence that the power of God dwelt in them, because of silence that the mysteries of God were known to them.”² It is this recreating silence to which we are called in Contemplative Prayer.

A Warning and a Precaution

At the outset I need to give a word of warning, a little like the warning labels on medicine bottles. Contemplative Prayer is not for the novice. I do not say this about any other form of prayer. All are welcome, regardless of proficiency or expertise, to enter freely into adoration and meditation and intercession and a host of other approaches to prayer. But contemplation is different. While we are all equally precious in the eyes of God, we are not all equally ready to listen to “God’s speech in his wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all-embracing silence.”³

A baby is given milk rather than steak because steak will do the baby no good. An apprentice electrician is not allowed to do the tasks of a journeyman because he is not ready for those tasks, and for him to undertake them could, in fact, be dangerous.

So it is in the spiritual life. We must learn our multiplication tables before we attempt calculus, so to speak. This is simply a fact of the spiritual realm, and it would be wrong of me not to tell you about it.

C. S. Lewis tells his friend Malcolm how early in his Christian experience he attempted wordless prayer with little success. He writes, “I still think the prayer without words is the best—if one can really achieve it. But I now see that in trying to make it my daily bread I was counting on a greater mental and spiritual strength than I really have. To pray successfully without words one needs to be ‘at the top of one’s form.’”⁴

Lewis is correct. Contemplative Prayer is for those who have exercised their spiritual muscles a bit and know something about the landscape of the spirit. In fact, those who work in the area of spiritual direction always look for signs of a maturing faith before encouraging individuals into Contemplative Prayer. Some of the more common indicators are a continuing hunger for intimacy with God, an ability to forgive others at great personal cost, a living sense that God alone can satisfy the longings of the human heart, a deep satisfaction in prayer, a realistic assessment of personal abilities and shortcomings, a freedom from boasting about spiritual accomplishments, and a demonstrated ability to live out the demands of life patiently and wisely.

It is not that we must be accomplished in these areas. It is that clear progress must be occurring. You may want to ask yourself several questions of examination to help evaluate your own readiness: “Am I becoming less afraid of being known and owned by God?” “Is prayer developing in me as a welcome discipline?” “Is it becoming easier for me to receive constructive criticism?” “Am I learning to move beyond personal offense and freely forgive those who have wronged me?” If, after this small

experience of examen, you sense that you are not yet ready for unmediated communion with God, then feel perfectly free to pass over this chapter. Do not worry; a time will come when there will well up within you both a yearning and a readiness to “read the text of the universe in the original.”⁵

I also want to give a word of precaution. In the silent contemplation of God we are entering deeply into the spiritual realm, and there is such a thing as supernatural guidance that is not divine guidance. While the Bible does not give us a lot of information on the nature of the spiritual world, we do know enough to recognize that there are various orders of spiritual beings, and some of them are definitely not in cooperation with God and his way!

I say these things not to make you fearful but to make you knowledgeable. You need to know that “like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). You also need to know that “the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

We will discuss in considerable detail the spiritual warfare we wage in a later chapter. But for now I want to encourage you to learn and practice prayers of protection. Here is the prayer that Luther used: “Shield us, Lord, with thy right arm. Save us from sin’s dreadful harm.”⁶ My own approach is to preface a time of contemplation by speaking this simple prayer: “By the authority of almighty God I surround myself with the light of Christ, I cover myself with the blood of Christ, and I seal myself with the cross of Christ. All dark and evil spirits must now leave. No influence is allowed to come near to me but that it is first filtered through the light of Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray. Amen.” These, of course, are only suggestions—you are free to pray in whatever way is most comfortable to you.

A Loving Attentiveness to God

What is it, this experience Richard Baxter referred to as “the soul-rapturing exercise of heavenly contemplation”? Thérèse of Lisieux called it “dreaming of heaven.” Nicholas of Cusa called it “the gaze of God.” Madame Guyon called it “the prayer of reality.”

In its most basic and fundamental expression, Contemplative Prayer is a loving attentiveness to God. We are attending to him who loves us, who is near to us, and who draws us to himself.

In Contemplative Prayer talk recedes into the background, and feeling comes to the foreground. Richard Rolle was sitting in chapel one day when he “suddenly felt within me an unwonted and pleasant fire.”⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, that towering religious and political figure of the twelfth century, described his experience of the presence of Jesus this way: “I have felt that He was present; I remember later that He has been with me; I have sometimes even had a presentiment that He would come; but I have never felt His coming or His leaving.”⁸ And John Wesley exclaimed after the famous Moravian meeting at Aldersgate, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”⁹

Note in each case the affective language. This kind of prayer obviously is more an experience of the heart than of the head. But this stress upon the feelings disturbs us. We have been trained throughout our lives to distrust our feelings, and the very idea that we could gain some knowledge of truth and reality by way of the feelings seems ludicrous.

We must not, however, be too quick to judge. In the first place, the witnesses who encourage us in this way are vast and reputable. Second, they are dealing with something far deeper than mere emotions. In using the language of feeling, contemplatives are referring to a deep experienced sense of God—a kind of inner hearing, if you will. They are seeking simply and faithfully to follow the command of Yahweh: “Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live” (Isa. 55:3). It is the entering into this interior communion that contemplatives mean when they speak of feeling.

Besides, our feelings can be disciplined and sanctified by God just as fully as our reason and our imagination can be. Remember, Contemplative Prayer is for seasoned veterans in the life of faith. These are not people who are blown about by every wind of doctrine...or every wind of emotion. These are people who long ago walked away from the world, the flesh, and the devil. These are people who by extensive experience know the difference between the enthusiasm of a temporary spiritual high and a settled conviction given by the Spirit. These are people who by repeated trial and error have learned to distinguish the voice of Christ from that of human manipulators.

Union with God

What is the goal of Contemplative Prayer? To this question the old writers answer with one voice: union with God. Juliana of Norwich declares, "The whole reason why we pray is to be united into the vision and contemplation of him to whom we pray."¹⁰ Bonaventure, a follower of Saint Francis, says that our final goal is "union with God," which is a pure relationship where we see "nothing."¹¹ And Madame Guyon writes, "We come now to the ultimate stage of Christian experience. Divine Union. This cannot be brought about merely by your own experience. Meditation will not bring divine union; neither will love, nor worship, nor your devotion, nor your sacrifice.... Eventually it will take an act of God to make union a reality."¹²

This language reminds us of Jesus' great union statements in the Upper Room discourse: "Abide in me as I abide in you"; "I am the vine, you are the branches"; "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete"; "I ask...that they may all be one; as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (John 15:4, 5, 11; 17:21).

Union with God does not mean the loss of our individuality. Far from causing any loss of identity, union brings about full personhood. We become all that God created us to be. Contemplatives sometimes speak of their union with God by the analogy of a log in a fire: the glowing log is so united with the fire that it is fire, while, at the same time, it remains wood. Others use the comparison of a white-hot iron in a furnace: "Our personalities are transformed, not lost, in the furnace of God's love."¹³

Two Vital Preparations

How do we attain this goal of union with God? While union is entirely a work of God upon the heart, there are two vital preparations from our side of the equation: love of God and purity of heart.

Contemplative Prayer begins in love of God. It is, in fact, the engine that puts the entire enterprise into motion. Put simply, we receive his love for us and love him back in return. "The message of hope the contemplative offers you," writes Thomas Merton, "is not that you need to find your way through the jungle of language and problems that today surround God: but that...God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons."¹⁴

After we have worked our way through all the obscure, nearly unintelligible language of contemplatives who are struggling to describe the indescribable, we are reduced to the simple confession of Walter Hilton: contemplation is "love on fire with devotion."¹⁵

As love has its perfect way, it leads us into purity of heart. When we are perpetually bombarded by the rapturous experience of divine love, it is only natural to want to be like the Beloved. The Psalmist declares, "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully" (Ps. 24:3-4). And Jesus seconds the motion: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt. 5:8).

Impurity is fatal to union with God. The pure and the impure can never be united. For two things to become one, they need similar natures. For example, the impurity of dirt simply cannot be united with the purity of gold. Fire must be introduced in order to burn out the dross and leave the gold pure. So it is with us. "This is why God sends a fire to the earth," writes Madame Guyon, "to destroy all that is impure in you. Nothing can resist the power of that fire. It consumes everything. His Wisdom burns away all the impurities in a man for one purpose: to leave him fit for divine union."¹⁶

In earlier chapters we have explored some of the various pathways that lead to purity of heart, including such things as the disciplines that imitate the life of Christ and "the dark night of the soul." More, I am sure, could be added, but Søren Kierkegaard has brought this issue into its clearest focus with his famous phrase "purity of heart is to will one thing."

And so we do: we will one thing. We relinquish all competing loyalties. We become utterly responsive to the heavenly Monitor. We see only what the Father sees, say only what the Father says, do only what the Father does. We will one thing, which, as Kierkegaard reminds us, is the good, which is God. This is purity of heart.

Learning Recollection

There are three basic steps into Contemplative Prayer, and I find that often people are helped immensely by a simple description of them.

The first has been traditionally called recollection. It means a simple recollecting of ourselves until we are unified or whole. Basil Pennington uses the phrase centering prayer. Sue Monk Kidd calls it the prayer of presence. The old Quakers used the term centering down. They all refer to the same experience. The idea is to let go of all competing distractions until we are truly present where we are.

Here is one approach to recollection. Begin by seating yourself comfortably and then slowly and deliberately let all tension and anxiety drop away. Become aware of God's presence in the room. Perhaps you will want to picture Jesus sitting in the chair across from you, for he is indeed truly present.¹⁷ If frustrations or distractions arise, simply lift them up into the arms of the Father and let him care for them. This is not suppressing our inner turmoil but letting go of it. Suppression implies a pressing down, a keeping in check, whereas in recollection we are giving away, releasing. It is even more than a neutral psychological relaxing. It is an active surrendering, a "self-abandonment to divine providence," to use the language of Jean-Pierre de Caussade.

Precisely because the Lord is present with us, we can relax and let go of everything, for in his presence nothing really matters, nothing is of importance except attending to him. We allow inner distractions and frustrations to melt away before him as snow before the sun. We allow him to calm the storms that rage within by saying, "Peace, be still." We allow his great silence to still our noisy hearts.

I must warn you that this centeredness does not come easily or quickly in the beginning. Most of us live such fractured and fragmented lives that collectedness is foreign to us. The moment we try to be genuinely centered, we become painfully aware of how distracted we really are. Romano Guardini notes, "When we try to compose ourselves, unrest redoubles in intensity, not unlike the manner in which at night, when we try to sleep, cares or desires assail us with a force that they do not possess during the day."

We must not be discouraged at this. We must be prepared to devote the entire time of contemplation to this recollection without any thought for result or reward. We willingly "waste our time" in this manner as a lavish love offering to the Father. God will then take what looks like a foolish waste and use it to bring us further into his loving presence. Perceptively Guardini comments, "If at first we achieve no more than the understanding of how much we lack in inner unity, something will have been gained, for in some way we will have made contact with that center which knows no distraction."¹⁸

The Prayer of Quiet

As we grow accustomed to the unifying grace of recollection, we are ushered into a second step in Contemplative Prayer, what Teresa of Avila calls "the prayer of quiet." We have through recollection put away all obstacles of the heart, all distractions of the mind, all vacillations of the will. Divine graces of love and adoration wash over us like ocean waves. As this is happening, we experience an inward attentiveness to divine motions. At the center of our being we are hushed. The experience is more profound than mere silence or lack of words. There is stillness, to be sure, but it is a listening stillness. We feel more alive, more active, than we ever do when our minds are askew with muchness and manyness. Something deep inside us has been awakened and brought to attention. Our spirit is on tiptoe—alert and listening.

There is an inward steady gaze of the heart sometimes called beholding the Lord. We bask in the warmth of his presence. We sense his nearness and his love. James Borst says, "He is closer to my true self than I am myself. He loves me better than I love myself. He is 'Abba,' Father, to me. I am because HE IS."¹⁹

On the Mount of Transfiguration the word of God came out of the overshadowing cloud, saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Matt. 17:5). And so we listen, really listen. We listen with the mind, the heart, the spirit, the bones and muscles and sinew. We listen with the whole being.

François Fénelon says, "Be silent, and listen to God. Let your heart be in such a state of preparation that his Spirit may impress upon you such virtues as will please him. Let all within you listen to him. This silence of all outward and earthly affection and of human thoughts within us is essential if we are to hear his voice."²⁰ This listening does indeed involve a hushing of all "outward and earthly affection." Saint

John of the Cross used the graphic phrase “my house being now all stilled.” In that single line he helps us see the importance of quieting all physical, emotional, and psychological senses.

As we wait before the Lord, graciously we are given a teachable spirit. I say graciously because without a teachable spirit any word of God that may come to guide us into truth will only serve to harden our hearts. We will resist any and all instruction unless we are docile. But if we are truly willing and obedient, the teaching of the Lord is life and light. The goal, of course, is to bring this stance of listening prayer into the course of everyday experience. This does not come to us immediately. However, over time we experience more and more an inward attentiveness to the Divine Whisper throughout all life’s motions—balancing the checkbook, vacuuming the floor, visiting with neighbors or business associates.

Spiritual Ecstasy

The final step into Contemplative Prayer is spiritual ecstasy. Ecstasy is quite different from the other two steps I have mentioned in that it is not an activity we undertake but a work that God does upon us. Our responsibility here is to have a continuous openness and receptivity for the Spirit to rest upon us. Beyond this, the matter of ecstasy is God’s business and not ours.

No doubt you remember the Apostle Paul’s experience of being caught up into the third heaven, where he heard things that he was not permitted to share (2 Cor. 12:1–5). But you may not be as well acquainted with the lovely experience of Saint Augustine and his mother, Monica, while at the city of Ostia on the Tiber River. Allow me to share it with you.

The two of them were leaning out of a window, looking at a beautifully manicured garden and discussing the goodness of life in the kingdom of God. Augustine writes, “With the mouth of our heart we panted for the heavenly streams of your fountain, the fountain of life.” As they were talking, however, words failed them, and they were raised “higher and step by step passed over all material things, even the heaven itself from which sun and moon and stars shine down upon the earth. And still we went upward, meditating and speaking and looking with wonder at your works, and we came to our own souls, and we went beyond our souls to reach that region of never-failing plenty where Thou feedest Israel forever with the food of truth.”

After describing this unusual experience of spiritual ecstasy, Augustine notes, “We sighed and left captured there the first fruits of our spirits and made our way back to the sound of our voices, where a word has both beginning and end.”²¹

Augustine’s experience, while certainly unusual, is not unique. Listen to this witness of Theodore Brakel, a Dutch Pietist in the seventeenth century: “I was...transported into such a state of joy and my thoughts were so drawn upward that, seeing God with the eyes of my soul, I felt one with him. I felt myself transported into God’s being and at the same time I was so filled with joy, peace, and sweetness, that I cannot express it. With my spirit I was entirely in heaven for two or three days.”²²

Ecstasy is Contemplative Prayer taken to the nth degree. Even the recognized authorities in the contemplative life found it to be a fleeting experience rather than their staple diet. And it may be just a little more than you—or I—would bargain for right now, and that is all right, for this is not really something we do but something God gives—and then only when he knows we are ready. Besides, it could well be that all this lofty talk of contemplation is discouraging to you. Perhaps you feel miles away from such experiences. Rather than attempting to scale the heights of spiritual ecstasy, you are hoping just to make it through the next week.

If that in some measure describes your feelings, do not be disheartened. I had some of those very feelings as I penned this chapter, for I feared I was writing on the edge of un-lived truth. Many times we all fall miserably short of our goal. Often our attempts at listening prayer never seem to get past our frustration over the unwashed dishes in the sink or the chemistry exam tomorrow. But what little we have experienced encourages us, for we have glimpsed the loving heart of God, all full of grace and mercy, welcoming us to the Communion table of the Spirit.

One final note of encouragement about Contemplative Prayer. One of its great values comes when we are at the sunset of life and our rational faculties begin to falter. A time may come when we are no longer able to utter words, but—and here is the glory—we are still able to pray, to pray without words. At the end of life, as at the beginning, we find ourselves, in the words of Gerhard Tersteegen, “looking at God, who is ever present, and letting Him look on us.”²³

My Lord and my God, listening is hard for me. I do not exactly mean hard, for I understand that this is a matter of receiving rather than trying. What I mean is that I am so action oriented, so product driven, that doing is easier for me than being. I need your help if I am to be still and listen. I would like to try. I would like to learn how to sink down into the light of your presence until I can become comfortable in that posture. Help me to try now.

Thank you. —Amen.

Chapter 14. Contemplative Prayer

1. As quoted in Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image, 1971), p. 30.
2. As quoted in Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 42.
3. Catherine de Haecck Doherty, *Poustinia: Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1983), p. 216.
4. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 11.
5. Steere, *Prayer and Worship*, p. 11.
6. As quoted in Donald G. Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 86.
7. Richard Rolle, "The Fire of Love," in Elmer O'Brien, ed., *Varieties of Mystic Experience* (New York: Mentor-Omega, 1964), p.133.
8. Bernard, "Sermon LXXXIII on the Song of Songs," in O'Brien, *Varieties of Mystic Experience*, p. 105.
9. "Journal," in Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley, in A Library of Protestant Thought* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 66.
10. Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, p. 254.
11. As quoted in Swanson, *Uncommon Prayer*, p. 163.
12. Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths*, p. 125.
13. Dalrymple, *Simple Prayer*, pp. 109–10.
14. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 156.
15. Walter Hilton, *The Stairway of Perfection*, trans. M. L. Del Mastro (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image, 1979), p. 71.
16. Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths*, p. 127.
17. There is a division among the great devotional writers over the use of the imagination in contemplation. Some view it as a useful aid; others feel it should be reserved for meditation rather than contemplation; still others believe it should never be used. At times the issue has been tied to the Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth century and following in which many felt that the use of icons was a form of idolatry. William of St. Thierry, a twelfth-century Cistercian monk, for example, believed that praying with images was idolatry because God was found only in the purity of relationship in his image stamped in every human being. Many of the Puritan leaders in the seventeenth century had similar convictions. I have chosen to side with those who see the imagination as a useful aid in *Contemplative Prayer*. This is not a law but a practical help. I do not draw a hard line between meditation (where the imagination is much more widely accepted) and contemplation. Also, while contemplation is usually wordless, it does not necessarily need to be imageless. Indeed, some of the great contemplatives, such as Juliana of Norwich, received profound visions from God during times of contemplation.
18. As quoted in Foster, "Meditative Prayer," p. 14.
19. As quoted in Foster, "Meditative Prayer," p. 20.
20. As quoted in Foster, "Meditative Prayer," pp. 21–22.
21. *The Confessions*, pp. 200–201.
22. As quoted in F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), p. 149.
23. Gerhard Tersteegen, *The Quiet Way* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), p. 23.

Authors Note on the Contemplative Controversy

Some Christians believe that the contemplative prayer is only a baptized version of transcendental meditation. The issue for them is its method (how it is practiced) and goal (why it is practiced). Eastern religious practices encourage emptying of the mind to induce an altered state of consciousness. The method of such a practice is the emptying of the mind and the goal is to produce an altered state of consciousness. Understood in this way such practices would be unbiblical.

Others Christians see the command to “be still and know that I am God” as an invitation to contemplative prayer. They believe ‘being still’ is an important spiritual discipline giving opportunity to detach worldly matters and in the silence focus on God. Through this one is able to draw close to God. They see such prayer as a helpful spiritual practice as long as the practices are performed within biblical norms and avoids eastern influences as stated above.

Many would claim that Protestants have always rejected such “mysticism”. Yet many great Protestant teachers don’t reject mysticism wholesale. For example, Jonathan Edwards called for focused contemplation on the beauty of God as a central tenet of his theology. John Owen argued for a “radically biblical mysticism” and 20th century theologian John Murray desired to see an “intelligent mysticism” in his day. In recent years men like Dallas Willard, Henri Nouwen, and Larry Crabb encourage the practices of silence, solitude and contemplative prayer.

In their research into the issue “Focus on the Family” concluded:

“There is nothing unbiblical or anti-Christian about solitude, silence, and contemplative prayer. Not, at any rate, as they have been practiced within the context of Christian history. As a matter of fact, these disciplines are part of a time-honored tradition. They've been central to the church's spiritual life for centuries.”