



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

By Thomas Keating

Session 11: Unloading of the Unconscious

Introduction: The deep rest we experience in Centering Prayer uncovers from the unconscious not only what troubles or upsets us in our interior life, but also what interferes in our relationships with others in community. Fr. Thomas offers us two points that assist us in consenting to the divine therapy, what can cause us unease in daily life. The first is self-acceptance—honestly accepting who we are without our defenses and projections. The second is reminding ourselves of our basic goodness.

The Spirit of God is at work not only inside of our prayer period but also working with our relationships. I've often noticed that in the monastic community, but I've noticed it also in our Contemplative Outreach communities, especially certain intensive workshops where there's a lot of inter-reaction such as the formation workshops that train people how to present it to others in the way that we've found seems to be most effective under normal conditions. And the fascinating thing that we discovered is that just as the unconscious is gradually brought to our attention through the process of deep rest in Centering Prayer, so in community, and especially in intense community interactions, the false self and its activity sometimes springs into view with surprising intensity. In other words, people unload in communities, too, outside. It may be because of the unloading they've done inside.

But I remember one formation workshop we did where there was a psychiatrist present, and he was trying to figure out the dynamics. There were two staff members that would alternate in going from one group to another, so everybody had a chance to see the candidates for presenter-ship, so to speak. And he noticed a lot of emotional turmoil going on, and he couldn't figure out what this was about. And it finally dawned on him on the last day that members of each group, which were stable, would react differently to the two new staff persons who came in, depending on their relationships with their parents. In other words, they would be working out some of the dynamics of their infantile program in this situation. So, and that was a light for me to realize that sometimes in community circumstances, especially community of well-intentioned people, who were gathered together for charitable purposes or for deepening of their spiritual life, are going to

experience some very primitive emotions in relating, and they feel antipathies and jealousies and hurt feelings, or they just don't like the new staff members because they identified with the other ones. An interesting dynamic and it alerts us to the fact that once you start the spiritual journey, the messages are coming at us all day through a number of circumstances, both passively in prayer and actively in our interactions and relationships with other people and we need to learn how to recognize our own dynamics and that perhaps we haven't come to terms with certain parental difficulties we had that we're working out inappropriately on other people. And so, there's a surprising amount of childishness that works.

I remember when I was abbot, which is a father figure in a monastery, even though I was a young abbot, people would come to me with an enormous amount of anger. Now, they had reason to be annoyed. But they were angry at me, I could see, not because of what I had done, but because there was some other dynamic there and I could see that they were working out unfinished issues, as they say, with their father. You would say well this is a little inappropriate for grown men who are committed to the spiritual journey by vows but the false self pays no attention to circumstances or prestige items and so on, it just has to be confronted wherever it is even if it's in the most sacrosanct circle.

And this has made me feel that perhaps the most important activity for daily life to bring the effects of prayer into daily life, surprisingly maybe, is to practice self-acceptance. Self-acceptance. Especially because on the journey, the Spirit is bringing to our attention all the things about ourselves we don't want to accept. And so, it's a therapy, it's a learning process, in how to acknowledge honestly who we are in our total nakedness outside and inside because that is the person that God can deal with best. Not the one who's with certain defensiveness and projections on other people. We don't accept the dark side or the shadow side of our personality—project it on others so we can despise it there instead of in ourselves. All those dynamics are going to come up as the spiritual journey evolves and to our great benefit, and it's precisely the Centering Prayer practice—the non-conceptual prayer—that takes the manhole, you might say, off the unconscious and allows for lowering our emotional defenses through trust and peace, to let us see the raw dynamics of the unconscious and a lot of issues that we've never really resolved.

And so, this makes us feel uneasy, sometimes guilty, and so it's extremely important to remind ourselves often of our basic goodness. We're made in the image of God, that which there could not be a greater good. So, no matter what happens, no matter what we find ourselves to be now, no matter in what problem we're in, we always start from this basic principle, which for Christians should be an article of faith, that God has given me this basic goodness that he's trying to uncover and reveal to me and through me to reveal his infinite tenderness to the whole of the human family without exception. So, God loves everybody. Everybody is brother and sister. And he even loves our enemies, much to our distress. So, we have to do so, too, in order to be fully who we are at the deepest level as an image and as a likeness of God.

The Fathers of the Church had an intriguing distinction between that term. The image of God is the image of the divine trinity in the human soul, which is ineradicable. The image of

God is the basic goodness, the creative goodness that God has given to each unique person, which is inalienable and irreplaceable and can never be effaced. And so, this basic goodness is a fundamental teaching of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and we must believe it, it's an article of faith if you belong to either one of those religious persuasions.

The likeness, according to this teaching of the Fathers, was lost in the garden through disobedience. And so, we find ourselves in the land of unlikeness. One of the Cistercian fathers describes this teaching as, we live in a land of unlikeness. I described it as living in the woods, as finding ourselves in the woods. So, it's coming out of the woods is coming out of the unlikeness which is inappropriate to the image of God, which does not flow from the image of God that is rather being developed by a homemade self that is responding to the fragile emotional experiences of early childhood without the reassurance of the image. In other words, the image is not experienced. What is experienced is the unlikeness. Hence the spiritual journey is the journey from unlikeness to likeness so that we can experience who we really are, which is the image of God.

It's the likeness that we lost in the persons of Adam and Eve or which we never had. We may never have evolved, that is Ken Wilbur's insight, is that Eden is something we never were coming to, have never reached yet. So, it really doesn't matter whether you think in terms of the human condition as a fall or as an evolutionary process that hasn't been completed yet. The net result is we experience ourselves in tough shape.

And so, in the Christian religion, the cross is a symbol of the human condition, and the man on the cross is a symbol of God in desperate straits taking that whole condition into himself. Notice the cross is a rejection of the man on the cross, which is really the symbol of us, by heaven and by earth. We can't return to the blissful ignorance of the beast because we've evolved into self-consciousness. We can't go forward into higher states of consciousness under our own power because we haven't the slightest idea where to begin in that project. And so, we desperately need infinite happiness. We don't know where to find it, and the lack of consciousness which would at least be better than feeling miserable is not available to us anymore because we've evolved from the higher mammals into this poignant situation in which we're literally crucified as far as our psychological faculties are concerned, between heaven and earth; powerless to go in either direction.

So, we need to accept our basic goodness because this is the springboard, the thrust, the energy that can lead us out into resurrection, into inner resurrection, that is to say, into freedom, into the fullness of what it means not only to be an image of God, but a likeness of God. We can have the image of God without enjoying it, so we try through the spiritual journey to have the likeness of God that enables us to perceive what that image is and to enjoy it on various levels of delight, or, as the case may be, in vicarious suffering or an idea in Christianity that's similar to the bodhisattva idea in Buddhism, which is exemplified in some of the mystics. In other words, when we enter into inner resurrection or the transforming union, life is what God wants it to be now, there's no interest in self to try to organize it or manipulate it or plan it, we just receive what we're supposed to do and do what we're inspired to do, and that could be intense ministry, a life of solitude, it could be

vicarious suffering, and sometimes it's all three rolled into one. It can be whatever God wants, but it's of enormous value both for oneself and for the whole human family.

St. Therese of Lisieux who was recently named a Doctor of the Church is one of the persons, perhaps the chief one, who was used by God to renew the Christian mystical tradition in our times. She died about the end of the 19th century, was canonized about 1923 or 5 and just last year or the year before was made a Doctor of the Church. There are only three women in that category, and now she is one of them. But she renewed in her own life, which was very short, only 24 years, the simplicity of the Gospel and this idea of trusting God with boundless confidence. As she said in one place, "Even if I had on my conscious every conceivable crime, I would lose none of my confidence. My heart breaking with love, I would throw myself into the arms of God and I know that I would be well received." This captures the essence, I think, of Christianity.

On the other side of the picture, she also has this saying, which is especially effective and I recommend it as a concrete way of expressing self-acceptance in daily life which is often so full of the sense of failure or wanting to do it differently or wanting to make amends and all those things, and I think which has resonance is also in the 6th or 7th step, maybe the 8th step, I forget. In any case, she says, notice: "I feel great joy when I see myself imperfect. And even more so, when I feel that way, when I feel that I'm imperfect." So, you can see that someone who is not only content with their failures, but is pleased, feels joy, has fairly completely laid the false self with its pretensions to complete rest with a tombstone on top of it.

And so, as we go through the day, there will be moments when we wish we hadn't said this word, when we wish we hadn't done that thing, when we wish we hadn't spoken sharply, when we shouted at the children, when we didn't smile at somebody who, when we avoided somebody else, all those little expressions of the emotional program of security, just doesn't want to get involved in difficulties—all those things, if when we notice them and accept them and be glad to feel so imperfect because it doesn't in the least harm our basic goodness. The only thing it harms is the pretensions of the false self.

The heart of the false self is spiritual pride, what Karen Horney called the idealized image that we gradually develop from early childhood into more and more fantastically complex demands on life leading to needs which, if they're unfulfilled, cause all kinds of emotional pain. And finally to "shoulds," that is to say, demands on society that they treat us in a way that makes us feel secure, approved, or in control. Thus, perhaps the heart of the practice for daily life, we will have the opportunity to talk about this a little more in the light of the recommendations of the big book and of the 12 steps itself, and of your own experience.

But obviously, from what I've tried to share in regard to the human condition, the chief problem is the emotional programs for happiness and overidentification with a group in which we have belief systems that we impose on reality, and that's what gets us into trouble when these are not acknowledged or accepted by the events of daily life and other people.