



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

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Session 15: What is Contemplation?

Introduction: Fr. Thomas explains that meditation and contemplation have distinct meanings in different religions. He further distinguishes between acquired contemplation and infused contemplation. He compares Centering Prayer and the 12-Step Programs as different paths that lead to transformation.

Perhaps the first point to make in the pluralistic world that we live in in the West is that meditation and contemplation have two distinct meanings in different religions. Meditation actually in the Eastern religions means substantially what we have called in the West by the term of contemplation. When the Eastern folks say meditation Westerners think of discursive meditation, which involves the rational faculties and the whole apparatus of thinking, visioning, imagining and expressing our reactions to our thoughts and feelings and concepts. So, there is also a distinction between contemplation in the very broad sense of that word and infused contemplation, which is a term that became an honor in the St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila, the great 15th century Carmelite exponents of the Christian mystical tradition.

So, a new term was coined at the beginning of this century, roughly, called acquired contemplation, and that simply means very limited efforts, but still true efforts on our part, to access or prepare ourselves or increase our sensitivity for the gift of infused contemplation. I say gift because at least in recent tradition, contemplation in the Christian sense is primarily an act of receptivity, of listening, of receiving, of waiting, and the emphasis on the action is on the side of the Holy Spirit or God communicating or disclosing himself to us through the experience of varying degrees of contemplation or absorption in the divine presence, or at least experiencing the divine presence. And that experience, as we said yesterday, can become more and more profound, absorbing, encompassing, and transforming, and indeed that is the purpose of Centering Prayer which is totally in the service of transformation.

There is also a distinction to be made between devotion and transformation. Devotion is like going to church on Sundays, saying your daily prayers, or grace at meals and reading

spiritual books, contributing to your religious organization or charity, or it can be doing good works with the motive of pleasing God. And this is wonderful, and this is necessary preparation for deeper levels of relationship, but relationship always means progress. If it's not going forward it's stalled, and it could be open to regressive symptoms. So, hence the need to be faithful to a practice that sustains the relationship you have and opens us to deeper relationships.

Acquired contemplation, then, is what we do in order to maintain our attentiveness to the divine presence and to sustain the purity of our intention to spend the time of Centering Prayer in the presence of God and to consent to his presence and action. You'll notice if you've done this a while that there might be three phases, you might say, to our attitudinal change as this prayer begins to take root in us. And once there's a certain base of silence, relative silence always, in Centering Prayer, it's not perfect unless God completely suspends the faculties, which is rare. Silence is the seed bed of divine love. Divine love can also be increased through acts of love and service—the works of mercy, service of others—also increases divine love, provided if we do this with good will and a good intention. The false self makes itself at home in even our religious practices, spiritual practices, and prayer practices. It does not drop dead upon request, and hence the need of a practice to undermine its intricate network of defense mechanisms is crucial.

So, you might say that in Centering Prayer we're doing the least amount of activity we can do to remain alert and awake and to maintain our intention so that it doesn't become vague and dreamy and fuzzy, or we don't slip into a kind of passivity that might be called total inaction. Listening is not inaction. It's a very definite activity, but without any effort. What do you do when you listen to a great symphony? Nothing else, you just listen. So, what's really happening in Centering Prayer, if you're doing this, is our very gentle listening attitude or attentiveness sustained spontaneously by returning ever so gently to the sacred word, almost as if the sacred word says itself, which it will do after a long period of time, it works itself into the subconscious, you might say, and says itself.

At the same time that we are doing this very gentle kind of listening, enough to keep us awake and to keep our will alive so that it doesn't sink into a kind of drowsiness, the divine action is conceived as coming from the Holy Spirit and these two activities are moving towards each other as practice lengthens and includes and eventually they get mixed up in what might be called a no-man's, or a no-woman's land in which sometimes the Spirit's activity is predominant and sometimes the very gentle approach or at least opening to God is predominant. And this can occur in the same prayer.

As infused contemplation becomes a habit, it replaces all our activities except maybe on a bad day, which occur, or in certain periods of great trial like the night of sense and the night of spirit, or in some very heavy period of unloading of the unconscious where you can't really do anything except put up with it, and that's hard work. So, infused contemplation then, is what God does in us, in response to our entering the private room, the inner room, closing the door, and opening ourselves to the Father who is in secret.

Those of you who are advancing in this practice the secrecy of this is unbelievable. We can't imagine not thinking of ourselves. We can't imagine not watching what we're doing, even in prayer. And this is the last gasp, you might say, of the false self, and it's the last thought to let go of. And it's not really in our power to do more than expose ourselves to the grace that enables God to do this for us. That, it seems, should not be a surprise to those in AA because you're expecting God to do everything anyway if you're pursuing the steps correctly.

And so the mysterious confluence of energies here is that, in Centering Prayer we're doing the same basic practice as in Alcoholics Anonymous—as in the 12-step program—not with quite the same words, but the Centering Prayer brings us to the same place as the first three steps does. We realize, more and more, that our lives are unmanageable, even if you don't have some dramatic addiction going on. The advantage of Centering Prayer is that it brings you to the same place without the inconveniences of alcoholism, rehabs, and expenses of psychiatrists. Not that Centering Prayer may not reveal in time certain problems from the early days which were repressed, and these may need psychiatric help. For instance, not a few people through Centering Prayer over time recovered memories of early childhood abuse, physical or sexual. And they really needed to find this out, and it was very painful. And it only dawned on them slowly and then they realized they needed psychological help to work through that pain. Well, this is an enormous gift because to carry that on an unconscious level is going to interfere with our ordinary relationships with other people, especially a good sexual relationship becomes very difficult if one has been subjected to sexual abuse. So, anything that was hidden in the unconscious will gradually emerge in the Centering Prayer practice, and one realizes then, through a different path, that one needs help from the higher power; that you can't do it of yourself.