

Difficulties encountered in the early stages of contemplation

The first difficulty which we encounter in the early stages of contemplation comes from its intermittent nature. Though we are beginning to learn to yield control of our prayer to the mysterious initiative of God, we are entering into what is for us uncharted waters. Acquired habits of prayer continue to assert themselves. In the words of Father Marie-Eugène, love has not yet reduced reason to folly or completely submitted it to the light and rapture of the Holy Spirit. The effect of this is that one minute we are engaged in our accustomed prayer, the next minute we experience prayer welling up from the mysterious depths of our soul; then this dries up as suddenly as it appeared, and we are back to our accustomed prayer, reflecting on a scene from the Gospels, or repeating a mantra as we stay with the rhythm of our breathing, or simply holding ourselves in God's presence as we express our longing, our wonder, our gratitude, our sorrow or our pleading. To the extent that we find it difficult to let go control of our prayer we can find the experience of contemplation somewhat disturbing. This is especially so when we are not helped to understand the dynamics of what is going on in our prayer.

The main source of concern is in regard to distractions. Up to this point, we have tried to keep a rein on distractions by attempting to control our imagination, our memory and our thoughts, training them to focus where our heart is: on God, on the mysteries of faith, on Jesus. This vigilance and discipline is a good thing, for it has been in response to God's grace. But it is still something which *we* are doing. Now, in the periods of contemplation, God is weaning us off our need to be in control. He is drawing us beyond ourselves into the mysterious communion where he takes over control, and where we allow God to take us where he wills, trusting that it is into the centre of his divine embrace. We experience losing control over not only our prayer but also our imagination, memory and thoughts.

Sometimes our imagination, memory and mind experience an overflow of peace from the communion into which God is drawing us. Sometimes these are left behind to free-wheel. At these times we will be acutely conscious of our inability to control the images and thoughts that intrude on our prayer. This will seem to be a fault and to detract from our prayer and this can cause a certain unease and suffering. Grieving for what we have known previously we are tempted to leave contemplation and resume control over what is going on in our consciousness.

We have to learn to ignore the movements of our imagination, memory and mind, and to stay with the drawing of grace. To leave the communion of love which we are experiencing as gift and to chase after our distracted mind would be to leave contemplation and take over the controls again as though we were the ones determining the quality and kind of our prayer. Teresa's advice is that we not follow the mind in its distractions, but 'stay at the breast' drinking in the love that God is offering (see *The Way of Perfection*, 31.8-9):

'The soul can be completely joined with God in the dwelling places very close to the centre, while the mind is on the outskirts' (*The Interior Castle* IV.1.9).

'Leave the intellect go and surrender yourself into the arms of God' (IV.3.8; also IV.1.11).

It is here that the intermittent nature of our contemplative experience causes us problems, for, when the moments of contemplation cease, we have to return to our earlier vigilance and discipline and the methods of dealing with distractions which we learned in our pre-contemplative prayer. This means that one moment we are exercising control over our imagination, memory and thoughts in order to focus our attention on what God is doing in our soul; then, when God takes over and draws us into the depths of our soul, we are to ignore the surface wanderings of our sense faculties; then, when the moments of contemplation cease, we are return to our earlier vigilance and discipline.

Often, while in contemplation, the distractions seem more obvious to us than the gift of communion. John of the Cross asks us to observe what happens when a ray of light passes through a room. If there is nothing to block the light, we do not see it. When there is dust in the air we are able to see the beam of light because of the dust which obstructs it. Distractions are like the dust. They are real, but John's advice is that we see them as revealing the light and keep our attention on the light coming from God which is bathing our soul. It is impossible for our imagination, memory and understanding to follow the soul into the mysterious depths of communion, for God is beyond all our images and thoughts. Having nothing to hold them focused they tend to free-wheel. They can disturb our communion only if we leave it to attend to them. We have to learn to continue to entrust ourselves to God's love. Whatever might be happening to the waves on the surface as they are whipped up by the storm, we are to stay in the depths of the ocean, allowing the current to take us to the heart of God

It is not only distractions that are a problem. We are sinful, and so our experience of contemplation exposes our need for purification. The light is also a fire, and it purifies whatever resists it. This purification is experienced as suffering. John of the Cross likens it to a damp log in a fire. There is much sputtering and blackening till the log has become coals, transformed entirely into fire. However, because contemplative communion is, before all else, an experience of love, the bewilderment and the pain of purification are ordinarily pervaded with a sense of being loved.

If we are to experience deeper and deeper communion with God, we have to be weaned from a devotion that relies on feelings. John of the Cross describes the shift in focus that comes with the gift of contemplation:

'Many spiritual persons, after having exercised themselves in approaching God through images, forms, and meditations suitable for beginners, err greatly if they do not determine, dare, or know how to detach themselves from these sense methods. For God then wishes to lead them to more spiritual, interior, and invisible graces by removing the gratification derived from discursive meditation. They even attempt to hold on to these methods, desiring to travel the road of consideration and meditation, using images as before. They believe such procedure is a permanent requirement. They strive hard to meditate, but draw out little satisfaction, or none at all; rather their lot becomes dryness, fatigue and restlessness of soul. This dryness grows as their striving through meditation for that former sweetness, now unobtainable, increases. We will no longer taste that food for the senses but rather enjoy another food, more delicate, interior and spiritual. We will not acquire this spiritual nourishment through the work of the imagination, but by pacifying the soul, by leaving it to its more spiritual quiet and repose' (*Ascent II*, 12:6).

'For a better understanding of this beginner's stage, it should be known that the practice of beginners is to meditate and make acts and discursive reflection with the imagination. Those in this state should be given matter for meditation and discursive reflection, and they should by themselves make interior acts and profit in spiritual things from the delight and satisfaction of the senses. For by being fed with the relish of spiritual things, the appetite is torn away from sensual things and weakened in regard to the things of the world. But when the appetite has been fed somewhat, and has become in a certain fashion accustomed to spiritual things, and has acquired some fortitude and constancy, God begins to wean the soul and place it in a state of contemplation. Some quickly accommodate their senses and appetites to God and, in their activity, pass on to the spirit which God works in them. This happens when the soul's discursive acts and meditations cease, as well as its initial sense satisfaction and fervour, and it is unable to practice discursive meditation as before, or find any support for the senses. The sensory part is left in dryness because its riches are transferred to the spirit, which does not pertain to the senses' (*Living Flame*, 3,32).

John's advice as to how we are to react to the gift of contemplation is clear:

'Pay no attention to discursive meditation, since this is not the time for it. We should allow the soul to remain in rest and quietude, even though it may seem very obvious that we are doing nothing and wasting time, and even though we think this disinclination to think about anything is due to our laxity. Through patience and perseverance in prayer, we will be doing a great deal without any activity on our part. All that is required here is freedom of soul, that we liberate ourselves from the impediment and fatigue of ideas and thoughts and care not about thinking and meditating. We must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel him' (*Dark Night* , I.10.4).

'Keep watch and persevere in prayer without doing anything. Preserve your soul free and unhindered by any knowledge or thought, but in peace without worrying what you should be thinking about. It is enough to remain in a quiet and loving attention to God and to discard all anxiety, activity and any undue desire to sense and taste God' (*Dark Night* , I.10.6).

Eugene Boylan in his *Difficulties in Mental Prayer* writes:

'Once our Lord has turned our hearts to himself, he begins to purify our love and our devotion. Sooner or later he begins to withdraw a devotion experienced in our senses, and our prayer runs "dry". We tend to become sullen and resentful; but if we are generous and try to cooperate with his grace, we shall soon see that what he wants from us is complete and generous submission to his will. That is all that matters, and we must learn to find all our satisfaction in doing that. That calls for courage; it calls for faith; it calls for grace. It is as expedient for us that he go away as it was for the apostles [John 16:7]; otherwise we should continue to live by our senses rather than by generous faith. Now, the senses cannot unite us to God in any full meaning of the word; it is in faith that our Lord espouses us to himself, and until we have learned to live by faith, we are but novices in the spiritual life, no matter to what heights of felt devotion we have risen. The natural blunting of sense reaction that comes from familiarity with and repetition of the same experience – the unconscious realisation, if one may so speak, of the inadequacy of any feeling or emotion to satisfy the deeper needs of our soul – these, added to the workings of God's purifications, bring us to a new phase of the spiritual life, where prayer becomes a matter of great difficulty. Although it is usually in the later stages of the spiritual ascent that this state is found in long and constant duration – for it may last many years – yet it often occurs much earlier for shorter periods, and it is only when we have estimated it at its proper worth that we can form any true scale of values of prayer. For such a state, in spite of its apparent sterility and worthlessness, leads to a prayer of tremendous value, one most pleasing to God, and most productive of great virtue and rapid advance for ourselves. It is a state in which one has to love and pray by faith, and for that reason the term "prayer of faith" is used here to denote this type of prayer' (pages 99-100).

At this difficult stage of prayer we should be wary of setting strict guidelines. God is directing us now, and his light is lighting our way, however faintly and intermittently. Furthermore, people differ greatly. The key is to offer ourselves in peaceful and silent surrender to God who is offering himself to us in contemplation. Listen to Teresa and John of the Cross:

'Abandon yourself into the arms of love, and His Majesty will teach you what to do next. Almost your whole work is to realise your unworthiness to receive such great good and to occupy yourself in thanksgiving' (*The Interior Castle*, IV, 3).

‘We should proceed only with a loving attention to God, without making specific acts. We should conduct ourselves passively without efforts of our own, but with a simple, loving awareness, as with eyes open in loving attention’(Living Flame 3.33).

John adds that we must be careful not to be attached even to this loving attentiveness. We go to prayer to be with God. Our hearts must learn to be attached to God, not to our experience of God:

‘When it happens that we are conscious of being placed in solitude and in the state of listening, we should even forget the practice of loving attentiveness, so as to remain free for what the Lord then desires of us. We should make use of that loving attentiveness only when we do not feel ourselves placed in this solitude, or inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening’(Living Flame 3.35).

Outside prayer we should respond faithfully to God’s inspiration, inviting us to asceticism. Teresa advises us:

Guard very carefully against placing yourself in the occasion of offending God.’
(*Interior Castle* IV.3.10).

Listen, too, to the advice given by Father Marie-Eugène OCD:

‘At the beginning of the spiritual life, when the soul is still at the stage of discursive meditation, it is fidelity to prayer that is of the utmost importance. When the soul has become contemplative, it is asceticism which must take the lead’(page 125).

‘Obedience is the virtue that characterises this period’(page 148).

Teresa writes:

‘To ascend to the dwelling places which we desire, the important thing is not to think much but to love much, to do that which best stirs us to love ... Love does not consist in experiencing great delight but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything’(The Interior Castle IV.1.7).

Teresa also advises those in this state to be particularly careful to be humble and detached (see *The Interior Castle* IV.2.10), to persevere in receiving, and to be courageous (IV.3.9).

We should prepare for prayer but be ready to receive this ‘gentle drawing inward’ should God grant it to us. Father Marie-Eugène (pages 86-88) has this advice:

‘Proximate preparation must be made for prayer by some reading or by the choice of a precise subject. This is the first duty of the soul during this period ... Select something quite simple: a text of Scripture, a striking thought, some attitude of our Lord, a word that will shed light upon and recollect the faculties, calm the soul and keep it occupied until it pleases the Master to elevate it to higher regions ... When this preparation does not succeed in providing sustenance for the faculties nor in recollecting them, it is still a guarantee against the temptation of idleness, and services as a sign that the soul is in contemplative dryness’.

We should persevere in active prayer until contemplation begins and return to it when contemplation ends. This is an area for quite subtle discernment (see John of the Cross, *Ascent* II, 17.7). Teresa warns us not to use techniques to stop the mind, thinking we can induce this infused recollection:

‘We should let our faculties perform their task until God appoints them to another, greater one’(The Interior Castle IV.3.6; see also IV.3.4).

‘What I say we must not do is to presume or think that we can suspend the activity of our faculties ourselves’(Life, 12.5).

Father Marie-Eugène agrees:

‘Without hiding our legitimate desires for close union with God, we should submit ourselves to the humble labour of our faculties [our imagination, memory, understanding and will] until God stoops down to raise us to loving passive attention’(page 84).

When God does take us into silence, we must be careful not to fill up the gap too readily with prepared reflections. The key seems to be to keep the heart awake and attentive and directed towards God. We long for communion with him. When contemplation is offered we surrender in peace and silence, and when it is not we do not lapse into distracted emptiness. It is useful to think of different levels in the soul. While the depths of the soul are held in silence and peace by God, the surface may be quite active. As we might attend to an intimate conversation while the noise of traffic roars around us, we can hold our soul in contemplation, even though the mind and imagination may be very active on other matters. Do not leave contemplation to attend to or resist what are irrelevant distractions.

It is necessary to bear with the disappointments which we encounter in the early stages of our experience of contemplative prayer. If we do not we will not advance along the way of perfection. John of the Cross writes:

‘So few attain this high state of perfect union with God, not because God wishes it so; He would rather want all to be perfect, but he finds few that will endure so lofty and sublime a work. God tries them in little things and finds them so weak that they immediately flee from work, unwilling to be subject to the least discomfort and mortification. And so, not finding them strong and faithful in small matters in which he favoured them by beginning to hew and polish them, he realises that they will be much less strong in greater trials. He proceeds no further in purifying them. They were in need of greater constancy and courage than they showed’(*Living Flame* 2.27).

Finally, let us not forget Teresa’s continual warning to stay close to Jesus lest we get lost in an abstract kind of ‘prayer’ which may have the appearance of contemplation. We cannot reach the goal of divine communion by abandoning the One who is the way to it (see *Life* 22.9 and 27.10). He will guide us as we surrender to God and allow God to draw us into communion with him.