

## 02. Contemplation – What is it?



Van Gogh Starry sky over the Rhone 1888



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## Mystery

1. Experience - puzzling (can't fully understand)  
Inquiry - assemble the data and solve the 'mystery'.
2. Experience - sense of an attraction, a Presence  
can't fully understand, but experience insight, enlightenment.  
Our heart is engaged as we are drawn into communion.  
We do not seek to solve anything, but are drawn  
to yield to the attraction.

## 1. Aesthetic contemplation:



The delight we have when we are experiencing beauty and are drawn into communion with what is beautiful.

This can lead to deeper contemplation when we yield to the One who we sense is mysteriously present in the beauty we experience.

‘Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God’s eternal power and divinity, have become visible, recognised through the things God has made’(Romans 1:20).

## 2. Intellectual contemplation:

The delight we experience through insight.

This, too, can lead to deeper contemplation as we come to appreciate that the truth we have discovered is a partial revelation of a more mysterious truth in which it participates.

Here, again, we are being drawn into communion with the mysterious One in whom everything participates.

### 3. Theological contemplation:

The delight we experience in accepting in trust the truths of faith and enjoying what they reveal to us of the God whom we are seeking, and whom we sense is drawing us into communion.



#### 4. Supernatural or infused contemplation



That special graced delight we experience in God Himself, beyond whatever reflections of God we may find in creation, and beyond the categories of theology.

God is experienced, though not as an object. It is a faith-experience (be-lieving) in which we experience God as subject, for we experience ourselves as being one in a communion of love with the source of our being.



‘If only you knew the gift of God ...

If you drink of the water that I will give you will thirst for nothing else. The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’(John 4:10, 14).



Recalling Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman ('The water that I give you will become for you a spring of water, welling up to eternal life', John 4:14), John of the Cross in Stanza 12 of the Spiritual Canticle, compares faith to a spring, and goes on:

'If only, on your silvered-over face,  
you would suddenly form the eyes I so long for,  
which I bear sketched deep within my heart'(SC, 12)

John is aware of the importance of theological contemplation, and so of the silver-plating of dogma.

The formulas which express in words  
the truths revealed by God are not empty;  
they clothe the substance  
of divine truth itself which is revealed in them.

In commenting on these lines, John states that 'it seems that the Beloved is now always looking at the one he loves'(SC 12.5).

Later in Stanza 32 he writes: 'When you looked at me, your eyes imprinted in me your grace, so ardently did you love me.'

## Contemplation / Contemplative Prayer

‘Contemplation is nothing but a hidden, peaceful, loving inflow of God. If it is given room, it will inflame the spirit with love’(Night I.10.6)

‘Pure contemplation lies in receiving’(Flame 3.36).

‘Contemplation: prayer where I am no longer a tourist, where sense has shifted to spirit – where plenty of insights and aspirations have given way to a less picturesque, more total form of togetherness with God’(Iain Matthew page 56).

## Contemplation / Contemplative Prayer

‘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.*

‘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*’(Flame 3.35).

John of the Cross likens prayer to the playing of a musical instrument (see Spiritual Canticle 38.4). Inspired by God and enabled by God's grace, in active prayer we are, as it were, practising the art of playing the strings of our heart and mind, learning to ponder the mystery of God and enjoy the harmony of experienced communion. In passive prayer we leave it to God to guide our fingers over the strings.

Teresa : Way of Perfection, 25

‘While you are repeating some vocal prayer, it is possible for the Lord to grant you perfect contemplation ... You are enkindled in love without understanding how. You know that you are rejoicing in the one you love, but you do not know how. You are well aware that this is not a joy that you can attain through understanding. You embrace it without understanding how, but you do understand that it is a blessing you are receiving ... This is perfect contemplation ... In contemplation we can do nothing. God does everything. The work is God’s alone and far transcends human nature.’

When we let go the attempt to control our prayer, we allow a ‘gentle drawing inward’ (Interior Castle IV.3.3). Earlier we were trimming our sails to tack with the gentle breeze. Now we experience ourselves being drawn to let go and yield to an attraction that draws us and over which we exercise no control.

The recollection experienced here is not the result of our decision to simplify our method of praying. It is not the fruit of our controlling our breathing or practising a mantra. It is an experience that we are powerless to induce. Both Teresa and John warn us not to attempt to manufacture this quiet for ourselves (see Ascent II.17.7). There is nothing wrong with practising techniques to quieten ourselves down so long as we don’t confuse this with the quiet that is God’s gift, the quiet that comes with passive prayer.

- (i) We are held in being by God so that we can experience contemplative prayer
- (ii) God wants everyone to experience this loving communion
- (iii) It is not something we can initiate, or learn, or achieve, or control. It is a grace. We can only welcome and receive it.

‘It amazes me to see what goes on nowadays. Anyone who does twopence worth of meditation, if they reach a certain quietness and are aware of a train of inner words, baptises it all as coming from God, and thinks that’s how it is. They say “God said to me”; “I got this answer from God”; and it isn’t that at all’(Ascent II.29.4).



## I. God is always beyond.

God sustains everything, but is not grasped by anything .

God remains absolute mystery.

## 2. Yet we need to encounter God!

Together these account for most of the deviations in human living – trying to fill the need with something else, or trivialising God so that I can grasp God’(Iain Matthew page 97).

## Blessed Marie-Eugène OCD 'I want to see God' page 463



‘Out of the darkness of the mystery there arises, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a confused light, an I-know-not-what, that makes one find peace and sweetness in the mystery, that holds faith there or brings it back, freeing it from the discursive operations of the intellect and causing it to find rest and support in this light beyond all distinct lights.’

In contemplation our attention is not on any insights which we may receive, important though these can be.

God, who is uniting himself to us in love, wants our whole attention.

In contemplation we are being transformed into love by the all-consuming love which is God.

Accompanying this experience of love, there is joy,  
as well as a sense of belonging, communion, and peace.  
This is the love for which we are made and for which we long.  
The communion in love which we experience is experienced as gift.

We are quite aware of the fact that the silence, the stillness,  
the welling up of joy or gratitude or sorrow or pleading,  
is not something that we are organising.  
It wells up unexpectedly and our hearts know that it is from God.

Contemplation can come to any person at any time,  
for God invites everyone to the intimate communion  
for which we are created.

In these graced moments  
everything is experienced as a sacrament of the divine;  
everything is 'charged with the grandeur of God'(G.M. Hopkins).

In these graced moments we experience  
a new kind of presence in which we are not alone  
but are embraced by the One  
who gives harmony to the music of creation  
and 'in whom all things hold together'(Colossians 1:17).

Our mind rests in the True that is given,  
the True that is beyond the truths  
which we discover through the efforts of reason and logic  
to which we are committed.

Our will rests in the Good that is given,  
the Good who is beyond any efforts we are making  
to live a consistently moral life.

Our feelings rest in the Beautiful that is given,  
the Beautiful that is beyond anything  
that we might appreciate by our own efforts.

We can receive these graced moments  
in the measure that we are willing to let go control  
and entrust ourselves wholly to God.

Whereas before we experienced ourselves seeking and striving,  
now we experience ourselves welcoming.

This communion is offered to everyone who is willing  
to make space for love and surrender to it.

It is important to remember that we can experience contemplation in the midst of activity as well as in the stillness of prayer,

for whenever we are doing God's will we are open to his gift of Himself in this way. Our focus in this retreat, however, is on contemplative prayer rather than contemplative action.



If we are willing to remain open to these graced moments  
when God draws us to himself  
beyond all our thoughts and feelings,  
and if we resist the temptation  
to take control of them  
or to possess them  
or to attempt to reproduce them  
by our own efforts or techniques,

God's longing to be in communion with us is such  
that transient experiences of recollection tend to deepen  
so that the soul finds itself wrapped in quiet prayer.

There is a simple form of pre-contemplative prayer that is within our power to practise.

In this prayer we hold ourselves quietly in the presence of God: a prayer of simple regard.

In some ways contemplative prayer is similar.

The essential difference is that in contemplative prayer we can only receive as a gift and welcome the communion with God that God offers us.

We can desire contemplative prayer and prepare for it,  
but we cannot bring it about.

‘Any attempt to create a contemplative attitude  
will lead to frustration or, worse, to self-delusion.’

(Gerald May *The Awakened Heart*, page 194).

When we were in control of our prayer we worked for such quiet, now the quiet wells up from the mysterious depths of the soul. We are drawn into an experience of prayer from within.

In pre-contemplative prayer we found ways of quietening down our imagination, memory and mind. Now, surprised by grace, these same faculties 'are absorbed and are looking as though in wonder at what they see'(Teresa, *The Interior Castle* IV.2.6).

Now, the water that is refreshing the garden of the soul  
'comes from its own source, which is God'(*The Interior Castle* IV.2.4).

Thinking of God as being in the centre of the soul  
radiating out the fire of his love, Teresa states:  
'the warmth and the fragrant perfumes  
spread through the entire soul'(*The Interior Castle* IV.2.6).

Now, the touch of God leaves us dissatisfied  
with any other pleasure.

Our souls long for the communion experienced  
in the silence and stillness granted us by God.

Now, our prayer is no longer guided by our previous experience or any efforts of our mind or will.

We are conscious of ourselves being moved and inspired.

We are conscious of surrendering ourselves in love.

God is leading us on the way of love.

‘Contemplative prayer is allowing the Source of love to bring us toward the place which is our home’(May, page 195).

We do not want to give the impression that now all is light and love.

We are the recipients of a wonderful grace of communion, but we are not yet in heaven.

In contemplative prayer we are in the presence of the sacred mystery which we call 'God'.

We are, therefore, in touch with the One who is at the heart of, and yet beyond, everything.

Being transcendent, God cannot be contained or controlled.

Being immanent, God opens us up to the real world: our own real world in all its grace and disgrace.

Contemplative prayer, therefore, opens us  
to ‘the joys and hopes’  
but also to ‘the griefs and anxieties  
of the people of our time,  
especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way.’

(Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World*, n.1).

It opens us ‘to the suffering and brokenness of the world  
as much as to its joys and beauty’(May, page 193).

We should not expect it to be otherwise,  
for prayer engages us with the ultimately Real.



It is in contemplative prayer that God is transforming our souls so that, like Saint Paul, we will be able to say:

‘I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me’(Galatians 2:20).

Our mind is being transformed into the mind of Christ.

Our heart is becoming his heart.

It is his communion of love

which we are being invited to experience.

Like a log in a fire this will require a profound purification,

with much blackening and hissing

till our whole being is transformed into fire

by the all-consuming fire of God’s love.

Letting go our ego can be painful.

Contemplative Prayer is a gift.

We can't produce it. But we can long for it.

‘When you search for me, you will find me;  
if you seek me with all your heart,  
I will let you find me, says Yahweh’(Jeremiah 29:13).

‘O Lord, all my longing is known to you;  
my sighing is not hidden from you’(Psalm 38:9) .

‘My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?’(Psalm 42:2)

Nothing can prepare our soul for the gift of contemplative prayer,  
nothing can lead us to ‘behold the face of God’ better  
than contemplation of Jesus.