

# spiritual life

*A Journal of Contemporary Spirituality*

Volume 49 Number 4 • Winter 2003

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Washington Province of  
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**Publisher's Note****Subscriptions Available:**

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*Our cover photo shows a winter scene along the  
banks of Lake Superior in Minnesota. The beauty of  
nature is clearly seen in this rocky and icy shoreline.  
(Cleo Photography)*

**spiritual life** (ISSN 0038-7630) is a Catholic Quarterly published in Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. © 2003 by the Washington Province of Disalced Carmelite Friars, Inc. Subscription rates: USA, 1 year \$18, 2 years \$32. All foreign subscriptions, including Canada, 1 year \$22, 2 years \$39. Single copies, domestic \$4.75, foreign \$5.75. Periodical postage paid at Washington, DC. Postmaster, send address change to **spiritual life**, 2131 Lincoln Road, NE, Washington, DC 20002-1199.

# Letters to the Editor

**Spiritual Life** is a great resource for those seeking intimacy with God. Thank you for this wonderful work. Susan Zuger's article, "A Theology of Grace in Teresa's Interior Castle," is another example to thank God for this great work [that] you and the wonderful people of God use to lead us into His union. The clarity of this article helped me toward His union. Thank you and God bless you.

*P.M., Illinois*

Your "Letters" page of the Fall 2003 issue contains two requests for help for **Spiritual Life** subscriptions. I am prepared to send you a check for \$54.00 for three gift subscriptions to be used for requests like these, whether from prisoners or others, provided my donation will remain anonymous. I have some idea of how busy you must be editing such a consistently fine publication. Would you be able to find time to concern yourself with this matter or perhaps refer it to the appropriate person? Congratulations on the [CPA] awards listed on page 161 of [the Fall 2003] issue.

*J.A.*

**Editor's Note:** *I am most grateful to the many readers of **Spiritual Life** who recently donated money to us so that we can give subscriptions to prisoners and others who cannot afford to pay for their own subscriptions. All of you are fulfilling Jesus' request to aid those who are in prison and who are poor.*

*Br. Edward O'Donnell, OCD*

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Barry Burrus, MDiv, MATH

# Dynamics of Christian Solitude: Thomas Merton As Guide

**C**HRISTIAN SOLITUDE IS SPENDING TIME alone with God. It has great value. Many Christians today avoid physical solitude and isolation from others. There are, however, some valuable dynamics that occur as a man or woman makes the conscious decision to spend time alone with God. This article will explore three key dynamics of Christian solitude: *unity*, *compassion*, and *perspective*. To help explain these dynamics of Christian solitude, we will use examples from the life and writings of Thomas Merton.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968) is perhaps the most famous monk and spiritual writer of the twentieth century. As a young Cistercian (“Trappist”) monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in central Kentucky, he increasingly felt the need for Christian solitude. After much difficulty and testing for twenty-four years—during which he was given permission for increasing periods of solitude—he eventually lived as a hermit near his monastery. Merton’s experience of Christian solitude demonstrates this paradoxical truth: The journey into greater

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and greater solitude increasingly unites the heart and soul of the Christian solitary to all peoples, especially those who are poor and most in need.

How can this be? This paradox of solitude-leading-to-unity with others may perhaps be explained by the solitary's experience of *compassion*, especially the compassionate love of God. Thomas Merton's

*Compassion is,  
perhaps, the main  
dynamic in the life  
of the Christian  
solitary*

life journey is marked by increasing compassion. Compassion is, perhaps, the main dynamic in the life of the Christian solitary. In the context of this compassion, the solitary's *unity* with others is nourished and grows. Thus, unity and compassion are two of the dynamics of Christian solitude. A third dynamic is *perspective*. Drawing apart from others and

spending time alone with God allow one to develop perspective on his or her life and God's plan for it. These, then, are three key dynamics of Christian solitude. Using Merton as a resource, let us examine each of these dynamics.

### Unity

In a key passage from an essay that he considered one of the best things he had ever written on "solitude," Merton expresses well the paradox of the Christian solitary's union with people while being physically remote from them:

The true solitary is not one who simply withdraws from society. Mere withdrawal, regression, leads to a sick solitude, without meaning and without fruit. The solitary of whom I speak is called not to leave society but to transcend it: not to withdraw from the fellowship with other men but to renounce the appearance, the myth of union in diversion in order to attain to union on a higher and more spiritual level—the mystical level of the Body of Christ. He renounces that union with his immediate neighbors which is apparently achieved through the medium of the aspirations, fictions and conventions prevalent in his social group. But in doing so he attains to the basic, invisible, mysterious unity which

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makes all men “One Man” in Christ’s Church beyond and in spite of natural social groups which, by their special myths and slogans, keep a man in a state of division.

The solitary, then, has a mysterious and apparently absurd vocation to supernatural unity. He seeks a spiritual and simple oneness in himself which, when it is found, paradoxically becomes the oneness of all men—a oneness beyond separation, conflict and schism. For it is only when each man is one that mankind will once again become “One.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Merton explains that Christian solitude actually helps one attain real unity with others on a higher and mystical level. It should be clearly understood, too, that this is a real union, not one that is just esoteric and ethereal, but one that led Merton, in fact, to reach out to others in real dialogue and action. And this union with others is much more likely to be on issues and concerns that are most important and crucial to humanity. Merton says, “The true solitary does not renounce anything that is basic and human about his relationship to other men. He is deeply united to them—all the more deeply because he is no longer entranced by marginal concerns.”<sup>2</sup>

Finally, this dynamic of solitude that leads to unity on a deep level with others is a sympathetic and loving union with the “solitude” of others:

Even though he may be physically alone the solitary remains united to others and lives in profound solidarity with them, but on a deeper and mystical level. They may think that he is one with them in the vain interests and preoccupations of a superficial social existence. He realizes that he is one with them in the peril and anguish of their common solitude: not the solitude of the individual only, but the radical and essential *solitude of man*—a solitude which was assumed by Christ and which, in Christ, becomes mysteriously identified with the solitude of God.

The solitary is one who is aware of solitude in himself as a basic and inevitable human reality, not just as something which affects him as an isolated individual. Hence his solitude is the foundation of a deep, pure and gentle sympathy with all other men, whether or not they are capable of realizing the tragedy of their plight. More—it is the open doorway by which he enters into the mystery of God, and brings others into that mystery by the power of his love and his humility.<sup>3</sup>

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Merton experienced this sympathetic union in love with others in a dramatic way early in his monastic life. In 1948, he left the monastery for the first time in seven years and traveled to Louisville, Kentucky, to serve as an interpreter for a visiting French superior of his monastic order. He wrote about that experience later:

We drove into town with Senator Dawson, a neighbor of the monastery, and all the while I wondered how I would react at meeting once again, face to face, the wicked world. I met the world and I found it no longer so wicked after all. Perhaps the things I had resented about the world when I left it were defects of my own that I had projected upon it. Now, on the contrary, I found that everything stirred me with a deep and mute sense of compassion. Perhaps some of the people we saw going about the streets were hard and tough—with the naive, animalistic toughness of the Middle West—but I did not stop to observe it because I seem to have lost an eye for merely exterior detail and to have discovered, instead, a deep sense of respect and love and pity for the souls that such details never fully reveal. I went through the city, realizing for the first time in my life how good are all the people in the world and how much value they have in the sight of God.<sup>4</sup>

Although at that time Merton had not yet experienced longer periods of physical solitude, his silent life in a Trappist monastery (i.e., monks who live as “solitaries in community”), coupled with some brief periods of physical solitude during those years, allowed him to experience these important dynamics of solitude: unity with and compassion for others. Let us now explore compassion a little more.

### Compassion

First, it might be good to ask: What is compassion? We may say that compassion is the “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it.”<sup>5</sup> It is this compassion that develops in the life of Christian solitude.

That Thomas Merton experienced compassion and considered it a very important dynamic in the life of solitude is obvious from a passage written in his personal journal in 1951, almost ten years after he entered the monastery. (By this point in his life, Merton had received permission from his monastic superiors to experience times

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of physical solitude apart from his community.) Merton wrote intimately and personally to a personalized compassion: “I die of love for you, Compassion: I take you for my Lady, as Francis married poverty I marry you, the Queen of hermits and the Mother of the poor.”<sup>6</sup>

To understand the depth of Merton’s expression, it is helpful to know that St. Francis of Assisi, one of the most famous and popular saints in history, had received a special grace from the Holy Spirit to live a life characterized by material poverty, even to the extent of speaking as being “wedded” to “Lady Poverty.” In a similar way, Thomas Merton desired to receive and manifest the special grace of compassion in his life. We also see here that Merton not only intensely desired compassion in solitude, but also that he considered it the “Queen” of those called to solitude and that he linked compassion especially to the poor. Clearly, compassion was one of the key dynamics that Merton experienced as he sought more solitude.

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How did Merton explain this experience of compassion in solitude? We can examine several passages from his writings over the years to better understand this dynamic. First, a person is called to Christian solitude to seek God alone and to experience the compassionate, merciful love of God in Christ. In an early 1953 entry into his personal journal, Merton wrote, “If I have needed solitude, it is because I have always so much needed the mercy of Christ and needed His humility and His charity. How can I give love unless I have much more than I ever had?”<sup>7</sup>

In another passage from his writings, Merton was even more explicit about the solitary’s experience of the compassionate love of God:

The life of Christian solitude is before all else a life of love, a life of *special* love. And love is never abstract. It centers on a concrete, existential good, a value that is perceived and experienced as

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coming directly from the ground and source of all good—God’s love for man in Christ. The solitary life of the Christian hermit is not simply a life in which one thinks about the good, but a life of total response to it, complete surrender to it, based on a personal and existential awareness that one is called into solitude by a special act of God’s merciful love. It is a way of saying: “I have known and experienced the goodness of God to me in such a way that I have no alternative but this total response, this gift of myself to a life alone with God in the forest. And this witness is at the same time the purest act of love for other men, my gift to them, my contribution to their joy in the good news of Jesus Christ, and to their awareness that the Kingdom of Christ is in their midst.”<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note in this passage that Merton not only wrote about the solitary’s loving relationship with God but also about his or her relationship of love for other people. Merton expressed this love for others (in this case, his monastic brothers) flowing from solitude in this way: “It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them. It is pure affection, and filled with reverence for the solitude of others.”<sup>9</sup> From Merton’s early experiences of solitude and interaction with his brother monks for whom he was Master of Scholastics, we have this beautiful passage on the “dynamic of solitude” that is compassion:

What is my new desert? The name of it is *compassion*. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. It is the only desert that shall truly flourish like the lily. It shall become a pool, it shall bud forth and blossom and rejoice with joy. It is in the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things. There are no bounds to contain the inhabitants of this solitude in which I live alone, as isolated as the Host on the altar, the food for all men, belonging to all and belonging to none, for God is with me, and He sits in the ruins of my heart, preaching His Gospel to the poor.<sup>10</sup>

Merton’s experience of solitude led him to a compassionate outreach far beyond the walls and woods of his monastery and his monastic brethren. It was a solitude without bounds for the world’s inhabitants, and it gave him a compassionate unity with all peoples.

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### Perspective

A third dynamic of solitude occurs when one withdraws from the ordinariness of life and physical community with others: perspective. As the Christian solitary “leaves the world” and enters the time and space of “God alone,” he or she begins to view the world, its situations, others, and one’s self with new perspective. Merton wrote about his experience of this dynamic:

Coming to the monastery has been for me exactly the right kind of withdrawal. It has given me perspective. It has taught me how to live. And now I owe everyone else in the world a share in that life. My first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as a member of the human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself. And my first human act is the recognition of how much I owe everybody else.<sup>11</sup>

Merton was even clearer about this when he wrote this note in his journal about the importance of perspective as a dynamic of solitude: “The big reasons for solitude: the true perspectives—leaving the ‘world’—even the monastic world with its business, vanities, superficiality.”<sup>12</sup> And again, in a later journal entry, he wrote, “Honestly, [my solitude] is a search for perspective—and for commitment.”<sup>13</sup>

*Without solitude  
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is and can be no  
maturity*

Solitude allows one to “see” better; to get a different and, hopefully, truer picture of “what is really going on.” In the experience of God’s mercy and compassion, the solitary begins to see things from God’s perspective. Then, given this new perspective, the solitary is able to reach out in compassion and commitment to people in a better and truer way.

Perspective as a dynamic of solitude was reenforced in Merton’s life in 1963 when he began spending more time in his new “hermitage.” He wrote in his journal: “This experience of solitude is important and most valuable. How badly I have been needing *whole days*, and days *in succession* out here. At last I am getting a decent

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perspective again, and there is no question that my desire for solitude has been basically right, and not a delusion.”<sup>14</sup> Gaining this perspective in solitude not only continually helped Merton renew his vocation and life but also brought graces of renewal to others. Merton wrote:

Some men will seek clarity in isolation and silence, not because they think they know better than the rest, but because they want to see life in a different perspective. They want to withdraw from the babel of confusion in order to listen more patiently to the voice of their conscience and to the Holy Spirit. And by their prayers and their fidelity they will invisibly renew the life of the whole Church.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

We examined how Christian solitude can produce the dynamics of unity, compassion, and perspective. We used examples from Thomas Merton’s life and writings to explore these dynamics of solitude. The question may be asked: Is this something that is applicable to all people and not just to those called to the special vocation of the Christian solitary? I believe the answer is clearly, “Yes!” Even if we can only manage brief periods of planned solitude away from our normal pace of life—or what I call “snippets of solitude”—we should still be able to experience some greater measure of unity, compassion, and perspective. These dynamics of Christian solitude are so greatly needed in our lives and in the life of the Church today.

Merton wrote: “Without solitude of some sort there is and can be no maturity. Unless one becomes empty and alone, he cannot give himself in love because he does not possess the deep self which is the only gift worthy of love.”<sup>16</sup> Some amount of solitude is needed for each one of us so that, possessing this deep love coming from the heart of God, we may reach out to others with the unity, compassion, and perspective that flow as dynamics of Christian solitude.

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**Barry Burrus, MDiv, MATH**, is a freelance writer and tutor living near Benton, Arkansas. He has written several volumes of Christian educational materials and writes monthly Scripture meditations for a Catholic magazine. He and his family are Cistercian (Trappist) Associates of Assumption Abbey near Ava, Missouri.

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## Dynamics of Christian Solitude

### NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, "Notes on a Philosophy of Solitude," *Disputed Questions* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1960; First Harvest edition, 1985), pp. 181–182.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 188–189.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1953; First Harvest edition, 1981), pp. 91–92.
5. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary ([www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary](http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary)).
6. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 334.
7. Thomas Merton, *A Search For Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life—Journals*, vol. 3, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 28.
8. Thomas Merton, "Christian Solitude," *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 249–250.
9. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 268.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 322–323.
12. Merton, *A Search For Solitude*, p. 350.
13. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years — Journals*, vol. 4, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 8.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 328–329.
15. Merton, "Notes on a Philosophy of Solitude," *Disputed Questions*, p. 193.
16. *Ibid.* p. 206.

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*Julie A. Collins*

# Where Heaven Touched Earth

**W**Henever I travel, I always feel much more secure if I can get advice beforehand from a friend who has visited the same region. This is partly because I am “directionally challenged” and anything that will help me get around more easily in a strange city is reassuring. This also minimizes the “I am wasting valuable time” feeling that washes over me when I get lost on the subway and take two hours to find the Metropolitan and not the expected twenty minutes. So before my trip to Spain, I sat down with a Jesuit friend to chat about my upcoming visits to St. Teresa’s hometown, Avila, and St. Ignatius’s castle in the Basque country. After some practical advice, he said to me:

Promise you will pray for me in two places. In the Monastery of the Incarnation there is the stairway where Teresa of Avila said she saw a small boy who asked her, “Who are you?” “Teresa of Jesus,” she told him. She then returned the question: “And who are you?” The Child answered, “I am Jesus of Teresa.”<sup>1</sup> And then, in Loyola Castle they have restored Ignatius’ bedroom where he recovered from his wounds and first began to pray. Remember me there. I think both places are where heaven touched earth.

“Where heaven touched earth.” I have been thinking about this phrase for several days, and as I gaze in stunned gratitude out my

## Where Heaven Touched Earth

retreat center window onto the dome of the Basilica of St. Ignatius Loyola, which towers over the village of Azpeitia, the words continue to reverberate. What does that mean, “Where heaven touched earth”? Why, how does this happen? Why are Avila, Loyola, Lourdes, Assisi, Iona, and Jerusalem, places of spiritual power? Why do we gravitate toward them, century after century, age after age? What makes them sacred, priceless? As believers, they are not just museum pieces, not just places of memory like Monticello or Gettysburg or Versailles. In each of these sacred places, we pilgrims come because we feel that where God *has* been, God still *is*. We travel to these places for healing, forgiveness, and strength. We come to these places because we believe, frankly, that where God transformed one human life, God can do the same for me.

### Sacred Places

Now at a certain level this can seem almost pagan in its theology, right up there with the animist’s worship of the sacred waterfall or mountain. Intellectually, I know that God can be as powerfully present to me in my condo in Rockville, Maryland, as he can in the room where the wounded Ignatius read, prayed, and said his world-changing “Yes.” God is, of course, everywhere and, more importantly, God is endlessly gracious and eager to hear me. And so traveling three-thousand miles is not a requirement for my own conversion.

Clearly, then, travel or pilgrimage is not a necessary condition for God to love me and change my life. God places no such conditions on divine mercy. But sacred places can have a tremendous impact *on me* because they put flesh and blood and bone around God’s embrace, since God is ever respectful of my freedom, always waiting to be invited. Sometimes the depth of God’s touch is dependent on what I can allow, what I can believe. Before we can believe, often we have to imagine, and what we can imagine for ourselves often begins with analogy, often begins with another person’s experience. Thus, the lives of the saints and the life of Jesus are of incalculable value. As I meditate on the life of Jesus, as I study the lives of the saints, I can begin to wonder (as, in fact, St. Ignatius did during his recovery from the now-famous cannonball), “Could this be me? Could I do what

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these great men and women did? Is it possible that God could pursue me the same way?"

Just as importantly, when we visit the homes of the saints, we touch their humanity and, in a sense, their ordinariness. At the Monastery of the Incarnation you can see Teresa's well-worn sandal and remember the hundreds of miles she traveled, establishing her reformed monasteries all over Spain. In Ignatius's restored rooms in Rome, visitors can see where the Saint spent the last fifteen years of his life. You can sit and pray in the room where he died. In one of his outer rooms, the curators have placed a bronze copy of his death mask on a pedestal, which puts Ignatius' face at his actual height.

When I visited the room, there were two young Latin American Jesuits who were having a good time getting their pictures taken next to it. After they left, I tentatively stepped up to the death mask and burst out laughing when I realized that Ignatius was just slightly taller than my own stately 5' 2" frame. A towering mystic he may have been, but my favorite knight from Loyola was not Lancelot tall.

In Avila there is a painting of St. Teresa, completed during her sixty-second year. From all eyewitness accounts, Teresa was a stunning woman until the day she died. Actually, even after she died. She is one our "incorruptibles" and was disinterred several years after her death—still fragrant, peaceful, and lovely. Anyway, when the ever-honest Teresa was shown this portrait, she turned to the artist and said, "God forgive you, Fray Juan. You have made me look like a bleary-eyed old hag!" Any woman who has ever kept her thumb over her driver's license picture while handing it to a sales clerk can certainly identify.

### The Challenge

The stories and artifacts of our saintly friends reassure us with their humanity and their humor, but they also challenge us. The more we get to know them as human beings, the less excuses we find for ourselves. If I place my heroes and heroines on pedestals, if I keep them neatly distant like Greek demigods and goddesses, then they have little to say to my life. If I focus only on their visions and their

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miracles, then they hardly touch my own mundane existence. They live in a spiritual stratosphere that is beyond me.

A plaster pantheon does the saints a disservice and offers me a Christianity that is shot full of excuses. Pilgrimage can expose them. When I think of heaven touching earth in these holy places, I must ask the question “Why?” and then follow that quickly with “How?” What is, after all, the difference between my condo in Rockville and the castle at Loyola (besides a couple of thousand square feet)? As I sat in St. Teresa’s Square, gazing

on the gorgeous, golden brown walls of Avila, I kept thinking about the nature of spiritual genius. What was it about people like Teresa and Ignatius that made them, no, *still* makes them, like lightening rods through which divine, life-changing power radiates? I thought about

*God is clearly telling  
you and me that  
sanctity is as natural  
a human potential as  
breathing*

the millions of people over the last five centuries who have been influenced, shaped, or practically created by the experience of this man and this woman. Ignatius and Teresa said “Yes” and world has not been the same. Why is that? And what does it say to you and me? Are the saints, which we so rightly revere, in the same category as other geniuses? Just like having a facility for words or music or numbers, are there unique mystical gifts that make these holy men and women the spiritual equivalent of a Mozart or an Einstein?

It would be easier, frankly, if this were so. Again, you and I would be off the hook. (I have long since accepted my mathematical limitations and quite cheerfully take out my wallet-size chart that helps me to calculate the waiter’s tip at the end of a meal. I feel not the slightest inclination to strive to greater mathematical heights.) But if we take a good long look at the Communion of Saints, we see such a startling variety of ages, professions, classes, aptitudes, and spiritual experiences. God is clearly telling you and me that sanctity is as natural a human potential as breathing. Yes, it’s true. Like breathing, anyone can do it.

## Julie A. Collins

### Potential for Sanctity

What, then, is the key? What unlocks this potential hidden in everyone of us? Of course, at the simplest and most mysterious level, there is grace. God's love, God's life coursing through us is always what initiates spiritual greatness. But I think that one of the most elemental gifts that grace gives us is the ability, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to recognize our own genius, our own "daemon" as Rollo May describes it. In *Love and Will*, May invites us to engage the classical idea that each of us has a "genii," a "daemon" that can drive our creativity and thus our life. Or, to echo Karl Rahner, each of us is a "little logos," each of us has some word to say to the world that we were *created* to say. Each human life is of inestimable value, not only because God's passionate love desired us into being but also because there is an inherent purpose for which each of us came to be. This need not be thought of as simply a job, a duty, or a feat to be performed. No, to be "logos" is to be inherently meaningful at the core of our existence. Because I am, I have meaning. But meaning, like love, does not simply exist—meaning does. So, like each of the saints, my life has a meaning from which mission springs. God is not only calling me to be, but God is also calling me to share in the transformation of the world. God is calling me to do.

So what does this have to do with genius? Surely everyone is not called on to discover the cure for cancer or write a Pulitzer-Prize-winning play? Ignatius would say that if we want to discover the purpose of our lives, the mission for which we were created, we have to consult our desires. When we consider our usual ascetical understanding, this consulting of my desires can seem quite dangerous. What if I have the wrong desires? Whatever happened to "take up your cross and follow me?" Isn't holiness found in self-denial, in not doing what I want?

For Ignatius, the cross is not the call, but the cross is hidden in every call. By definition, when I say "Yes" to one path in life, I say "No" to others—others that are also good, holy, and may honestly appeal to me. Fidelity to a call always entails some suffering, but we are not called to suffer for God and for our brothers and sisters as

## Where Heaven Touched Earth

though suffering were the primary good. Sanctity is not found in choosing the hardest, most unappealing path for my life. Rather, through the aid of the Spirit, I am called to uncover my deepest, authentic desires. I am called to examine what makes me truly happy, truly satisfied—what allows me to be completely my “self” and not the fantasy that my ego, my sinfulness, or my culture’s expectations create for me. To discover our deepest authentic desires, Ignatius would ask us, “Who are you when you look into the face of the God who created you?” As George Schemel, SJ, has so often said, what is your “name of grace?” What does God call you?

*Who are you when  
you look into the  
face of the God  
who created you?*

Gifted with that knowledge, we can then have some clue not only *what* God calls us (what is my deepest identity) but also *to what* God calls us. Given my gifts, given my holiest desires, what can I offer to the world? What word have I been created to say?

This wisdom, this self-knowledge is at the root of a spiritual genius. The saints’ greatness was not predicated on mystical graces as rare as Mozart’s ear for melody. The saints knew who they were, who they really were, and they had the courage, the audacity to believe that God could take their gifts, however incipient they seemed, and change the world.

### Open to God’s Will

For the “umpteenth” time, I recently watched the movie *Amadeus*. It is, of course, the story of Mozart’s life, but just as much, it is the story of Vienna’s court, of Salieri. Salieri, you will remember, is absolutely consumed with envy over Mozart’s genius. No matter what Salieri composes, he can never approach what this often-supercilious “Wolfie” creates, sometimes in the most offhanded way. Salieri is tortured because he knows that next to Mozart’s art his melodies are trite, facile, and forgettable.

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From this envy springs terrible evil. Salieri ultimately destroys the genius he worships—and himself. This tale and examples like it make it clear to us that there is an essential element to the discovery of our spiritual genius and to its fulfillment. We have to be willing to say, over and over again in our lives, “Thy will be done.” We have to begin with the conviction that what we are and what we have is the stuff of spiritual greatness. This willingness to bow before a will that is more loving, more mysterious, and more powerful than our own is what allows even my poor offering—my one “talent” as the evangelists would say—to blossom into greatness. For, ultimately, my sanctity is not about me but about God. Saints like Teresa and Ignatius each have their own natural gifts, but they shine like the stars of the firmament because they are transparent to God’s will. They bow before it joyfully, freely, and daily. This self-obliteration, this “Take, Lord, receive,” and the willingness to be attracted, consumed, and transformed by Love, allow sanctity to take root.

Greatness, genius, is not about my talents or my aptitude as much as it is about my willingness to believe, with St. Paul, that God can do more for us than “we can ask or imagine” and that “he who has begun this good work in us shall bring it to completion.” The overwhelming reality of Loyola or Avila, or even Nazareth, is that heaven touches earth whenever and wherever human beings say “Yes.” Heaven touches earth because we have a God whose humility is beyond anything we can fathom. We have a God who is crazy in love with humankind and will go anywhere, use anyone, to reach us. And, in Jesus, God’s identification with us is total:

“Who are you?”, asked the small boy. “Teresa of Jesus,” she answered. And looking at him she returned, “Who are you?” “I am Jesus of Teresa.”

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*Jan Wiezorek*

# **Journeying through Desire and Darkness to Peace**

**P**EACE IN OUR WORLD nearly always appears distant. Today, the United States faces threats of attack. Violence has entered the sanctity of our Church, where abuse of minors among the clergy is a painful wound. In this environment, God's forgiveness stands alone as a beacon of hope and peace. Perhaps that is why humanity needs a theology of reconciliation, a pathway to peace.

While the wounded ones among us will never fully recover from their personal lives of trauma from violence and abuse, they can, through faith, know that God is always working to strengthen them as "new creations" in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). God calls victims and those who minister to them to pick up the shards of now-broken lives. We do so by forgiving others for wrongs they have done to us. We state the truth about the abusive event and bury the lies of perpetrators. We halt the "little deaths" and reductions of human dignity that abuse creates.

Perhaps our greatest hope is confidence that once we have overcome pain and suffering—as best we can—we can begin to live life

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anew. With God's help, that pain no longer has the same hold on us, for we live in the new state of God's love.

*Reconciliation*—the work of God that creates peace—and *contemplation*—a prayerful focus on God—are two important actions that assist Christians in gaining a new perspective beyond abuse and violence. Both actions help heal our wounds, even as we continue to live with them. Reconciliation and contemplation both enable us to turn to God as we cry out in the dark. They assist us in learning how to respond to God's gift of love. Reconciliation and contemplation enable us to enjoy a lasting peace with God, with others, and with ourselves. Within reconciliation and contemplation, Christians find desire, darkness, suffering, listening, waiting, forgiving, transformation, and peace.

### Desire and Darkness

Thomas Merton (1915–1968) offers practical advice for Christians who seek God through contemplation. Ultimately, this journey of contemplation and darkness leads to peace and joy, a path Merton took in his writings. All Christians who contemplate God suffer their own crosses and enter into God's peace by means of journeying along this path. It is the same walk Jesus took.

Jesus shows Christians his contemplative desire to follow the Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Take this cup away from me, but not what I will, but what you will" (Mk 14:36). Jesus enters the "dark night" on the cross and utters, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34). But upon his resurrection, he greets his followers with the words, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:19). This savior walks from contemplative desire into darkness and beyond to a peace he shares with all believers.

Christians, and all who are victims, want to take the suffering of pain and move beyond such darkness into the peace of God's presence. Contemplative desire, darkness, and peace are united in their journey through a love that God gives all of us. Yet, even as Christians attempt this journey, they sense there is no road map through the landscape of desire, darkness, and peace. Merton thought as

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much. Through trust and faith, however, we Christians experience God even when our wounds prevent us from imaging God: “Faith is the bond that unites us to him in the Spirit who gives us light and love.”<sup>1</sup> We journey confidently, therefore, as God’s light focuses on the true self.

Every Christian’s *true self*—the reality of self—commits to following God’s will. The true self knows that the happiness of true peace comes only from God’s direction. When we desire what God desires for us, we move toward peace, wounds and all. Merton says, “Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God.”<sup>2</sup>

How crucial it is for victims and all believers to take Merton’s contemplative invitation to heart. The abused have had the true self pulled out from underneath them. No matter how they have envisioned their lives, all that has changed in the act of violence against them. Victims need to see that they are created and continue to exist in God’s complete image. No matter the abuse, they are filled with grace and love. By asking God for help to overcome pain, God allows them to see self as true and good, not as damaged goods.

### **The Point of Nothingness**

For Merton, God’s grace exists in contemplative prayer. Contemplation enables us to focus on God, from whom we receive our identity: “Contemplation unites our mind and will with God in a supreme act of love.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps we unite ourselves with God best by placing before God all of our prayerful sorrow and emptiness. By beginning our relationship with God at that level, at the point of nothingness, we can allow God to fill us up with God’s own peaceful love. This spiritual salve heals wounds of sorrow within us. What a relief it must be for victims to give this sorrow to God, even if spiritual healing seems slow in coming.

Merton believed that by placing ourselves in the presence of God, we can begin to focus less on our pain and more on our attentiveness to God. As contemplation continues, we may experience a helplessness that calls out to God even more: This “darkness and anguish of

helpless desire is the true fulfillment of meditation.”<sup>4</sup> Merton said this because he saw that in contemplation God continues to transform us into a healed state of peace, even though we may not recognize it.

Within this state of helplessness, Christians may have few images of God. In fact, just as suffering takes us beyond a comfortable existence, so too does God take us beyond comfortable thoughts and images of our God. As our true self desires God all the more and wants God to direct our lives, we continue to reach out in love and faith to our God. Such a reach through darkness brings us closer to God.

Of course, the absence of images and thoughts of our God is apophatic (negative, imageless) prayer. Such darkness may be a time of fear and dread for Christians. Likewise, some victims may believe it echoes the initial pain of their abuse. Does God wish that one who has suffered so much through violence should now suffer more through apophatic meditation? Merton did not believe so. He insisted that God works harder in apophatic prayer to purge the false self and bring the true self to prominence. Here, all earthly desires and impurities are driven out. No longer can we even focus on our images of God. In such darkness, God extinguishes any remaining light and cleanses us in preparation for the introduction of God’s immensity of love and peace.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, such spiritual light may be absent in contemplation simply because there is no need for it. When Christians are in the presence of God, “Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall give them light” (Rv 22:5). There exists longing within such darkness, and longing may be painful. But the victim does not experience the same violent pain of abuse. The difference between the longing of desire and that of physical pain is one that victims cannot help but notice. By noticing it, they may be noticing God as well.

*Contemplation  
and action become  
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## **Journeying through Desire and Darkness to Peace**

Eventually, what was a dreadful absence of God becomes for the victim and all Christians a channel of intense attention to God. Perhaps this intensity is a commingling of desire, darkness, and peace.

### **Creating a Whole**

On one hand, the contemplative Christian desires God's peace. On the other, that peace is a call to share it with others. So, contemplation and action work together to manifest peace within the individual, who extends it to others just as Christ did. Contemplation and action become two parts that create a whole person in Christ. As Christians ponder God privately, they also embrace social action publicly and share God's love and peace with others.<sup>6</sup>

*Listening* is another decisive action Christians can take to overcome pain and enter the peace of reconciliation. John Lederach likens listening to spiritual discipline, prayer, and desiring God.<sup>7</sup> Listening becomes spiritual discipline because the listener does so out of love for another. Listening says, "I care about you." Within prayerful listening, Christians hear God's words to them. Often, these divinely inspired thoughts come to us in conversations with others, including those who suffer just as Christ suffered. Listening also suggests a desire for God's love. Biblically speaking, the sheep listen to the voice of the shepherd (Jn 10:3), to the voice of God.

*Waiting* is an additional aspect of action. Recall that when Jesus touched the hand of Peter's mother-in-law, "the fever left her, and she rose and waited on him" (Mt 8:15). As a form of service, waiting suggests carrying out the wishes of another according to their bidding. Waiting is serving others in the time, place, and manner they see fit. With respect to reconciliation, waiting is not passive but active. The minister of reconciliation waits with victim, abuser, or both to hear the true story of suffering, see the wounds of pain, listen for the offering of forgiveness and apology, and imagine together a new future filled with peace and hope.

Waiting is also a present expression of a future hope. We wait with those who are sorrowful, share their sadness, and witness the beginnings of their ability to forgive. As we wait with them, God acts

in them and they realize in time the need to forgive as a means to end their torment. As ministers of reconciliation, this is a future worth waiting for. For victims, waiting is a time of healing. It is a necessary break with the painful past and a precursor of a future peace.

### **Identity Beyond Suffering**

Within contemplative listening and waiting, Christians may find a new identity beyond their suffering. Merton views this identity as an intriguing image of God's stamp on us as Christians. Using the symbolism of hot wax, Merton says God imprints our souls. In contemplative prayer, God's will forms us like the wax seal on an envelope.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, God shapes our God-centered identity, destiny, and desire.

No doubt victims who suffer need God to give them a new identity. Perhaps they need a new destiny beyond their shame and a focal point for their desire beyond hatred. If victims can accept God's seal of love, then their identity, destiny, and desire will also be a reservoir of God's outpouring of love, which they share to lessen the pain of others.

Before victims can see their new identity, they frequently remain within a four-way paradox of suffering, as Donna Schaper describes it: victims may (1) believe their suffering will never end, (2) blame themselves for their own victimization, (3) become numb from so much suffering, and (4) fear their abuse may happen again.<sup>9</sup>

Victims in the midst of suffering wonder whether their pain will ever stop. They may try prayer and activities to keep themselves from focusing on pain, but their grief may remain unabated. At this stage in their healing, they may feel they have not yet healed at all. Obstacles prevent them from living fully. Yet, some victims flow as living water around their painful obstructions and nourish themselves and everyone they encounter, much like the water that flowed from the Temple (Ez 47) or the rivers of living water within all believers (Jn 7:38).

Contemplation may assist victims as they allow God's love, not suffering, to dominate them. In such cases, contemplation can help

## Journeying through Desire and Darkness to Peace

victims “reframe” the abuse. Through contemplative reframing, victims come to acknowledge that neither they nor God are responsible for the abusive event. Reframing enables victims to expand the story of pain and envision it in a broader context, one that often helps them to forgive. Reframing may also enable them to see the abuser as one who needs healing. Similarly, “letting go” is another way to uncover a broader context that leads to peace. According to Paul Coleman, letting go is the tool that enables victims of violence to see how pain can lead to something better.<sup>10</sup>

For example, a mother whose son is killed by a drunk driver could, over time and with God’s help, begin ever so gently to let go of her constant pain. In forgiving the offender, she could join Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), present her story to other mothers, and simultaneously honor the memory of her son through her public speaking and charitable work.

*True joy and peace,  
Jung says, come not  
from escape but from  
the embrace of opposites*

Her efforts could help to ensure that another mother will never suffer in the same way she did: “To overcome the suffering caused by violence, one must not give into the lie and one must find some larger, redeeming narrative to restore truth.”<sup>11</sup>

In the situation of this victim, perhaps her new vocation to pursue a grand mission and fight for tough drunk-driving legislation is the larger picture through which she can find meaning for the violence she suffered. She has now become part of a visionary and purposeful story. This mother is a “new creation.” Her pain now embraces a peace she extends to others.

*Numbness* from suffering is also common among victims. Owing to such paralysis, some victims desire to shut themselves off from others. But contemplation invites the victim to be charitable to others. Through contemplation, victims also can reach beyond fear and learn to love and trust again: “True joy and peace, Jung says, come

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not from escape but from the embrace of opposites, of the dark and the light residing in each one of us.”<sup>12</sup> When contemplation enables victims to see their true selves—after encountering the shadow of their false, victimized selves—they may break through the paradox of suffering and achieve peace through God’s work in their lives.

*Imagination:* If victims can use their imaginations, they may be able to free themselves from the fear that their experience of violence may recur. Merton believed imagination was a gift of the Spirit that enhances contemplation. Such a gift must also aid victims in rejecting their fear. Imagination doesn’t fill the void; it *is* the void. God’s spirit is imagination. With God’s help, imagination enables us to see life free from constant fear.

Imagination also is evident in forgiveness. Imagination is the mental window through which we see a future beyond pain. We can forgive because imagination allows us to envision a better way of living by forgiving. Unfortunately, some of the abused fail to rely on imagination to propel them forward. In such cases, “Remembering the story only in [a negative] way robs it of its good news, of its power to reveal deeper truths.”<sup>13</sup>

Those who lack imagination may believe it is the evildoer’s responsibility to apologize to the wronged individual. But the story of forgiveness works the other way around. God gives the offended party the strength to forgive the offender, as a sign of love. Briefly, that “foolish” action of forgiveness is a theology of peace. Rahner says:

Love is really something more like the element of madness, of the improbable, of that which does not pay, that through which we continue to be the ones who do the paying and in which we let ourselves be exploited. Love is, therefore, something too in which we are bold enough to make experiments.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, in cooperating with God, we take a noble step forward and forgive. In doing so, victims learn how true and lasting God’s peace can be. Letting go is that bold experiment, an element of madness that enables us to channel our energies away from worry and toward the real truth of God’s peaceful covenant (Is 54:10).

# Journeying through Desire and Darkness to Peace

## A Sign of Peace

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:9). This Beatitude sends all Christians on a mission of peace. As peacemakers, Jesus charges us to make peace and live inside that peace as part of everyday existence. But peace extends further. It truly accompanies peacemakers on their mission. Jesus said as much in the words “Peace be with you.”

As we have seen, the journey toward peace is dark. One may be tempted to ask: How does a mother live in peace after the loss of her firstborn son to a motorcycle accident? She prays for peace from pain and suffering. Still, at Easter, the most joyous time in the Christian Church, she can only suffer. The Church celebrates a risen Christ, but she sits in the sorrow of no risen son.

Those who endure such suffering, come, perhaps, to accept desire, darkness, and peace in a single breath. Could it be that desire, darkness, and peace live within them simultaneously? Conceivably, these three elements converge on us Christians as grace from the cross, as unconditional love. It is God who gives the abused the desire to seek and share love. God gives the victim the gift of darkness to heighten desire and, oddly enough, to show the way to God. God gives the abused peace within and beyond pain. As we offer desire, darkness, and peace back to God, these elements meet on the cross.

The journey through desire and darkness to peace is a profound mystery that inspires us to understand the true self, contemplate God and act on that love, empty the self, listen and wait, let go, and forgive and accept peace. Living peacefully can be a challenge for victims of violence and abuse. However, the Christian hallmark is confidence that God’s mercy will “shine on those who sit in darkness and death’s shadow, to guide our feet into the path of peace” (Lk 1:79).

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*Antoine Thérèse Lawlor, IHM*

## **“I Simply Love Him!”: A Reflection on the Prayer Of St. Thérèse of Lisieux**

**T**HE MOST RECENTLY NAMED Doctor of the Universal Church has gifted us with a fresh expression of Gospel truths that appeals to me for the reason that her profound teaching comes through simple words and metaphors.

Surely, the overarching cause for the doctoral acclaim of St. Thérèse of Lisieux is her “Little Way of Spiritual Childhood.” Prior to Mission Sunday in 1997 and most notably after that date, we find a plethora of commentaries in books and articles that research and augment her words and metaphors on the Little Way. The reality of the divine Parent—all-providing, merciful, compassionate, underscored by Thérèse—has fueled many contemporary Christians on their spiritual journey. Devotees of Thérèse continue to publish even more literature on this teaching today. Thus, I will leave that doctrine to these commentators.

Instead, this article will speak to three short remarks on prayer taken from the words of Thérèse. I have found these texts to be both awesome in meaning and insightful for a direction in my own spiritual growth. The first is her impromptu definition of prayer, and the

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other two are short phrases—“Everything is a grace” and “I don’t say anything, I simply love Him.” Both lend themselves to a mantra-like quality, useful to my prayer.

### Definition of Prayer

We read Thérèse’s definition of prayer in her *Story of a Soul*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed these phrases were chosen as an official definition, Thérèse’s words appearing at the beginning of the “fourth pillar” in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. So many of the saints have written profound discourses on the meaning and methods of prayer, and yet the one that succinctly captured the vastness of the believing Church’s prayer experience is Thérèse’s unintended contribution. This definition bears no resemblance at all to those so classically defined in terms of spiritual theology. In fact, it seems that no application of logic, no intellectual development, no scholastic reasoning is found here. Thérèse’s definition is artistic, musical, and almost poetic. She appeals directly to our affective nature with these words:

For me, prayer is a surge of the heart, a simple glance heavenward. It is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trials as well as joys. It is something great, supernatural which dilates the soul and unites me to Jesus. (*Story of a Soul*, p. 242)

Because of these insights, it appears as though Thérèse was schooled in the wisdom of the early Eastern Fathers of the Church. Her “knowing,” however, is the fruit of her search for God and her response to God’s initiation within her heart. This is not primarily an intellectual or rational process nor is an academic degree required of Thérèse as she speaks these words. Indeed, the newest Doctor was, for all practical purposes, homeschooled. She spent a minimal time in institutions of elementary education and had no formal secondary schooling.

What is the image of God that permeated Thérèse’s heart? Surely it was a filial one. Although she had little experience with the Hebrew Scriptures, the *hesed* or “loving kindness” of God resonated within her. Thérèse heard the word of God deeply.

So for her, the adjective “good” more often than not appears before “God, Father, Jesus, and Lord” in her prayer and in her writings.

## “I Simply Love Him!” – Thérèse of Lisieux

She had such an attraction to the little virtues of goodness, kindness, gentleness, and patience that she prized these for her own spiritual journey.

The Carmelite Doctor teaches those of us who are right-brained—she was an artist with her own brush—a method that appeals. She teaches the left-brained learner to think with the heart, “out of the box,” so to speak. Her way of prayer flows from her childhood experiences of intimacy with God. Thérèse knows God as her most beloved relationship and thus she prays. For Thérèse, prayer does not require any words; it has its own unique brand of energy. This intimate relationship, forged prior to her First Communion, shows that love is the one thing necessary—the very bond of perfection that St. Paul proclaimed and that St. Francis de Sales reiterated in his letters of spiritual direction to Philothea and to Jane de Chantal.

*Cultivation of this  
intimacy with God is  
her total occupation*

For Thérèse, this dynamic love relationship is the essence of spiritual growth. Cultivation of this intimacy with God is her total occupation and, as her words attest, they invite our imitation. Is it possible that this is the reason why Thérèse was so loved by so many people, even within a short time after her autobiography was published?

Her definition of prayer invites us toward a personal commitment to a life punctuated by prayer. A contemporary Christian might image the concept of “surge,” which Thérèse used to define prayer, as simply an electrical charge or the pulse felt during an elevated blood pressure. The simple glance or “surge” is intentional but takes little effort on one’s part. Those among us who have tasted a sorrow, a bitter defeat, a debilitating illness, or simply the frustrations of everyday life are able to see the power of prayer. As we discern through good times and difficult moments, we depend on the vehicle of prayer to locate God in that time and find the strength we need to move on.

Those of us who are still on the spiritual journey ought to heed Thérèse’s words. She would have us take to heart this concept: love

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first, then talk (or reflect) later. Her affective nature takes precedence in her definition of prayer and so the heart leads.

### Two Short Phrases

#### *Everything Is a Grace*

The second phrase that challenges me as mantra-like—“everything is a grace”—is the hallmark of a life that is spiritually experienced. As I move ever so quickly through the “middle years,” I catch myself using this phrase spontaneously as new events loom large on my horizon. During the last year of her life—Thérèse was twenty-four years of age—the ravages of pulmonary tuberculosis grasped her body. Her spirit was wracked with the darkest of nights in her trial of faith. These four words deepened with each new day.

Ever since her first holy communion, the Eucharist had been Thérèse’s greatest joy, a treasury of grace for her. Now she could barely swallow, and so the reception of the Bread of Life became impossible. When asked about this deprivation, Thérèse responded, “Everything is a grace.” Although she desired to receive the Eucharist frequently, she understood that God has no physical limits. God is uncontainable. Her deep faith called her to find God in every moment and to act with that deep faith. She clung tenaciously to God and, thus, all of life and beyond became grace for her.

This mantra has a transforming quality about it. It demands that we see life through the lens of Divine Providence. We cannot dismiss the trauma of contemporary world events or simplistically explain them, but we can approach all of life with a deep reverence for God’s presence within and among us. “Everything is a grace” becomes a faith response, a prayer word, an attitude of the heart.

#### *I Say Nothing to Him, I Simply Love Him*

Thérèse moved beyond affective knowledge in her prayer into the realm of mystery. For those of us who take her words seriously, Thérèse portrays the “freedom of the children of God” in a fashion that defies our wildest imagination. One night, shortly before she died, the infirmarian came upon Thérèse at prayer and asked her,

## “I Simply Love Him!” – Thérèse of Lisieux

“What do you say to Jesus?” She responded, “I say nothing to Him, I simply love Him.” This remark came as an answer to someone who was inquiring about her method of prayer. Obviously, Thérèse had no need of a method. Isn’t this the ultimate goal of all prayer?

Three years ago, as I sat beside the shrine where Thérèse lay in the chapel of the Lisieux Carmel, I invited her to teach me. Of all the pilgrim places to visit in that town in Normandy, I remained there for as long as I could. The Doctor has such experience to share with anyone who hungers for God. The beauty of her *Story of a Soul* is that Thérèse allows us to sit beside her, to seek heart knowledge that will dilate the soul, and to observe her love, which is her prayer.

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### NOTES

1. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clarke, OCD, 3rd edition (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996).

## Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites

**Secular Carmelites** are laypersons and clerics called to intimacy with Christ through contemplative prayer, participation in the liturgical life of the Church, and a zealous fulfillment of the Beatitudes according to the spirit of the Teresian Carmel.

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*Peter Feldmeier, PhD*

# The Centering Prayer Movement and the Christian Contemplative Tradition

BOUGHT TO BE A POSTER CHILD for the centering prayer movement. Twenty years ago, while I was a college student, a priest at the Newman Center held a number of sessions on prayer. The final session involved a discussion of centering prayer, a movement that had been initiated just a few years earlier by several Trappists of St. Joseph's monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts. We read a reflection by Henri Nouwen, and we learned both the underlying principles of centering prayer and how to practice it.

I practiced centering prayer for half an hour, usually twice daily, for the next several years. I also went to Mass often during the week and reflected with my Bible regularly. Later I discovered that this was exactly what Frs. Pennington, Keating, and Meninger were recommending: pray this form twice a day and also practice other prayer forms.

Though I did not seem to experience much from my centering prayer practice for the first couple of years, it made sense and so I

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continued. Several years later I believe I began to experience contemplative fruits of the practice and continue to do so. Thus one would think that I would be a crusader for the centering prayer movement, but I am a bit more ambivalent about it.

Much has been written about the centering prayer movement, and it appears to be flourishing. In fact, between 1988 and 1999, Keating's Contemplative Outreach organization grew dramatically in both official chapters and formal prayer groups.<sup>1</sup> An alternative version of what is essentially the same practice comes from the work of John Main, OSB, and those organizations following his initiatives, The John Main Society and The World Community for Christian Meditation. It is not my intention to describe centering prayer and its modern tradition in detail, but perhaps a quick word on the movement would do.

### The Centering Prayer Movement

In the mid 1970s, following Vatican II's spirit of renewal, Frs. Keating, Pennington, and Meninger became convinced that the contemplative tradition was not the sole propriety of monastics, but that it was a gift to the whole Church. They began what has become a highly successful program to train Christians living an *active life* in the simple practice of placing themselves in the presence of God. Centering prayer was offered to anyone and everyone who desired greater intimacy with God. It is a prayer posture that opens one's heart to God without words, images, or expectations. One lovingly and solicitously presents oneself before God and trusts that God will reveal himself in his own way and time. When daydreaming or other discursive thoughts inevitably intrude, one simply returns attention before God with a holy word, a gesture of the soul's intention to be present before God.<sup>2</sup>

The proponents of the centering prayer movement have never tried to characterize this practice as the expression of contemplation as such—that infused gift from God. Rather, it is a cultivation of the soul for that gift.<sup>3</sup> In addition, they regularly recommend that this be only a part of one's prayer life, which should include discursive or

meditative prayer. Thus one might have some balance in one's spiritual practice.

John Main's method follows this essentially with the exception of using a holy word as a mantra throughout one's prayer. Main had spiritual training in India and was presumably influenced by Hindu mantric practice in meditation. While these two practices are not exactly the same, and I will distinguish them later, I will refer to them collectively as the centering prayer movement.

In surveying the authors cited as foundational for the centering prayer movement, one finds some of the greatest minds and souls of the Christian interior tradition. These include the likes of Evagrius, Cassian, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thérèse of Lisieux, Guigo II, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Thomas Merton.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, I will examine these above-cited classical authors to see how accurately they are pre-

*God desires to  
transform us  
in his very  
divine life*

sented and whether their teachings coincide with the centering prayer movement as it understands itself. I will also add other classical authors who have written along the same vein. Second, I will evaluate the movement, given its objectives vis-à-vis the tradition on which it is based. It is my belief that the classical tradition is often glossed

over and that the requisites, which the tradition insists upon as preceding contemplative prayer, are not taken seriously. I do not intend to disparage the movement but to raise the bar of discussion with concerns that I have never encountered yet think are important.

We might ask, who could argue with centering prayer? One could look at the philosophy of the movement in terms of problem and solution. The problem with much of our spiritual life is that, unbeknown to our consciousness, we are bound up in projections of God and objectifications of ourselves. We seek God to feed and support the conventional ego, what Merton calls the *false self*, and our relationship with God is all too often bound up in trying to control our

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religious experience.<sup>5</sup> Christian theology knows God to be Holy Mystery, and we know that God ultimately desires not simply slightly more moral, slightly more generous versions of ourselves. Rather, God desires to transform us in his very divine life. Ironically, this Wholly Other is, as Augustine says, closer to us than we are to ourselves.<sup>6</sup> So seeking intimacy with God has everything to do with opening ourselves to his mysterious indwelling.

Thus, centering prayer can be a wonderful solution. It opens the heart up for possibilities of union with this already present God. We let go of the chatter that characterizes most our waking life, we let go of control, and we place ourselves before God with mind and heart quiet and solicitous.

In addition, the centering prayer movement encourages other forms of prayer, such as *lectio divina*, daily Mass, and so on, so that we can grow in mental prayer as well as this venerable contemplative posture. These other practices keep practitioners grounded more broadly in prayer and the Church's spiritual life. Thus, centering prayer is offered to anyone and everyone who desires this kind of prayer life. Again, who could argue with this? Even if infused contemplation does not arise in the soul, can one not still recommend such a practice of loving availability to God? And who would dare challenge some of the greatest saints and contemplatives in the Christian tradition, all of whom appear to support such a practice?

The questions that have hounded me for some time are, first, has anyone actually looked at these authors to see if they really say what they are claimed to support? Second, even if they recommend contemplation, is it really for anyone who comes to a centering prayer workshop? And third, are there dangers, according to the texts cited by the movement, that make us hesitant to recommend such a practice wholesale?

### Witness from the East

Evagrius Ponticus is an important voice of the Eastern desert experience, the Church's initial monastic expression. His synthesis on prayer and its development has been widely influential in Eastern

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Orthodoxy. He is also cited as a foundational source for centering prayer. The five Evagrian texts on prayer follow a progressive development in spiritual maturity as well as prayer.<sup>7</sup> They are the *Praktikos*, *Gnosticos*, *Kephalaia Gnostica*, *Chapters on Prayer*, and *Letter to Melania*. With each text a different level of spiritual progress is described and analyzed. One finds at each level different virtues to cultivate, ways of interpreting spiritual experiences and temptations, what to look out for at each given level, and so on. Not only are these texts designed to be applied progressively, but Evagrius believed that one should not even have access to them before one is prepared.<sup>8</sup>

Is this progressive and preparatory process unique in Eastern Orthodoxy? Hardly. Looking through the *Philokalia*, Orthodoxy's classical collection of spiritual texts, we find that this necessary progression is standard.<sup>9</sup> Here, for example, are found eight stages of prayer or, in another place, eight states of the spiritual life. Only the last of these stages or states is that of contemplation.<sup>10</sup>

One could ask what could be wrong with a little contemplation, especially if one were working on the virtues and other forms of prayer? According to the *Philokalia*, there are three problems. The first problem is that it simply wouldn't work. It is simply beyond the reach of one not deeply grounded in the interior life.<sup>11</sup> The second problem is that it could be spiritually dangerous:

Divine contemplation, which only those established in a high degree of perfection can safely approach, while it is not good for those who are still immature.<sup>12</sup>

And, finally, there is a concern reported that one could even be seduced into believing that one is experiencing the grace of infused contemplation, when in fact it may come from other natural or contra-natural sources.<sup>13</sup>

We see the same concerns from John Climacus's *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. While not necessarily strictly linear, we find that it is only in the last steps of the ladder where one is purified enough to engage in contemplation. The twenty-sixth step of the ladder is critical because it describes the ability to discern spirits, that is, that

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spiritual capacity to distinguish the true good from the apparent good, and grace from its counterfeits.

We could ask, do the classic texts of orthodoxy recommend this prayer to novices or is this a practice for more developed contemplatives? The witness of Eastern Orthodoxy is virtually unanimous in restricting it to those who are mature and developed, and who are under the tutelage of a spiritual master. We read from St. Gregory Palamas: “[It’s] misuse can inflict grave damage on a person’s physical and mental health,” and

Some people, unaware of the harm which will result, counsel anybody they happen to meet to practice this discipline alone, so that their intellect may grow accustomed to being mindful of God and may come to love it. But this is not possible. ... [Those who do so] will never make any progress during their whole lives.<sup>14</sup>

### Witness from the West

#### *John Cassian*

As mentioned above, John Cassian has been noted as a source for centering prayer, particularly his ninth and tenth conferences on prayer. I find this to be a curious resource for the centering prayer movement. Here we find four types of prayer: the prayer of repentance, the prayer of renunciation, the prayer of intercession, and finally the prayer of thanksgiving. Does this represent infused contemplation? Prayer can become so:

Yet sometimes the mind...can conceive all these kinds of prayer in a single action.... It consists of a powerful and wordless pouring forth of prayer to God, which the Spirit with groanings that cannot be uttered, sends up though not conscious of its content.<sup>15</sup>

This prayer is not for novices, for he also writes that “We shall be utterly unable to attain to the more sublime types of prayer...if our mind has not been slowly and gradually brought forward through the series of those intercessions.”<sup>16</sup> The prayer of repentance is for beginners; that of renunciation is for those who seek to mortify every act and earthly relation and to serve God with the whole heart; that of intercession is for those growing in compassion for other

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monks; and the fourth type is for those who have already “torn out of their hearts the sins which pricked their conscience and are at last free from fear of falling again.” It is these souls that can be recollected and “rapt away into that spark-like prayer which no mortal can understand or describe.”<sup>17</sup>

In his tenth conference, Cassian continues to describe divine intimacy in prayer. He begins with the warning, “Every mind is up-built and formed in its prayer according to the degree of its purity.” His description, which follows, of knowing Jesus in the humility of his incarnate life, his glorified life, and his eschatological life appears to follow levels of spiritual maturity. It is only when God becomes “every love, every desire, every effort, every undertaking, every thought” that we come to know contemplative union with God in prayer.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Cloud of Unknowing*

This takes us to the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and his complementary text, *The Epistle of Privy Counsel*. Pennington, Meninger, and Main ground their teaching in *The Cloud* as their foundational text.<sup>19</sup> Pennington says that the author of *The Cloud* passes his spiritual message on to those who are in the active life, and that, following *The Cloud*, we learn that this contemplative prayer is a type of prayer for anyone who truly seeks God.<sup>20</sup> *The Cloud* actually says the opposite. The opening chapter of *The Cloud* states that on earth there are three kinds of lives: the common (active life), the special (monastic life), and solitary (eremitical life). Since the reader of *The Cloud* has been drawn into the hermit’s life, he is now ready to “take your first loving steps to the life of perfection.”<sup>21</sup>

The recommendations of the centering prayer movement follow *The Cloud* clearly. Here one places oneself before God lovingly and receptively. One lets go of one’s thoughts, placing them in the *cloud of forgetting*, and awaits the gift of infused contemplation. Like the recommendations of the centering prayer movement, the author of *The Cloud* reminds his reader not to seek consolations, special experiences, or any other forms of spiritual gratification, per se.<sup>22</sup> Rather,

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we wait lovingly on God. In a similar way, we also find a short holy word that realigns our mind and heart to God. This is the teaching of centering prayer.

Yet *The Cloud* says that this kind of prayer is not for everyone:

No man or woman can hope to achieve contemplation without the foundation of many such delightful meditations on his own wretchedness, and the Lord's Passion, and the kindness of God, and his great goodness and worth.<sup>23</sup>

There is a painful realization that the contemplative life is hard and demands great care, lest one fall from its heights.<sup>24</sup>

*The Cloud* offers signs to see if one is being led into the practice. Without these spiritual indicators, *The Cloud* clearly tells the reader not to practice this form of prayer. These signs begin with the requisite spiritual preparation of a virtuous life and a preliminary "cleansing [of] their conscience."<sup>25</sup> Then the author says that one must intuit within one's soul "a secret little love fixed on the cloud of unknowing."<sup>26</sup> Finally:

And here is one of the surest and most important signs a soul may have to know whether or not it is called to contemplation: When after a delay of this sort and a long inability to contemplate, it has come back suddenly, as it does, quite independently of him, he has a burning desire and a deeper passion for contemplation than ever before.<sup>27</sup>

In his *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, the same author is even clearer in his hesitancy to broadly recommend centering prayer. Practitioners must have the coarseness of their moral and spiritual lives cleaned, and they must know in their inmost heart that they are guided there by the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup> He also insists that the desire for contemplation must be felt as an overpowering force, dominating every part of one's psyche during every activity.<sup>29</sup> Without such clear signs, one is surely not called to this practice.<sup>30</sup>

### *St. John of the Cross*

St. John of the Cross also teaches that the movement from beginner to proficient, that is, from a Christian who is zealous for a life of faith and engaged in mental prayer to one who has come to infused

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contemplation, is a transition that has necessary signs. They are described in both *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and *The Dark Night*.<sup>31</sup> Here we find that one's normal spiritual exercises and meditational life have dried up and are no longer feeding the soul. Thus God is initiating the soul into another kind of relationship, i.e., one of infused contemplation. But lest this be confused with melancholy or the normal dryness that periodically affects prayer, the soul also becomes utterly and painfully solicitous to God, even as it is frustrated in not finding satisfaction in prayer as it had before. One soon finds God's interior presence speaking regularly and lovingly.<sup>32</sup> What is clear is that unless all of these signs come together, one is instructed not to take on the posture of contemplative prayer.<sup>33</sup>

### *St. Teresa of Avila*

Perhaps St. Teresa of Avila is less demanding. Earnest Larkin has suggested that centering prayer is the kind of transitional prayer posture recommended by her. It amounts to what she calls *active recollection*, described in *The Way of Perfection*. This recollection is, he argues, the transition between the third and fourth mansions in *The Interior Castle*.<sup>34</sup> I agree with Larkin. Teresa's fourth mansion is what St. John would describe as a proficient who has entered the way of contemplation. What is strikingly missing in using Teresa as a source is that her treatment of the interior life is also progressive. One just doesn't jump into an advanced state right away.<sup>35</sup> Like her confrere St. John, she also teaches that one should not leave the meditational life too soon or it will clearly cause one to regress and not advance.<sup>36</sup>

### *Others*

In every classical author I have read, I have found this same advice: that the spiritual life is progressive and, while not utterly linear, one cannot jump steps. We see it in St. Bernard's treatment on the Song of Songs, where each step of spiritual progress represents different levels of our knowledge of and relationship to Christ. We see it in Catherine of Siena's discussion of the levels of spiritual tears as they relate to the soul's interior progress. We see it in Hugh of Balma's requirement of necessary spiritual purifications and an

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advanced meditational life before contemplation. We see it in Jan Rusbroeck's *Ladder of Spiritual Love*, where moral and spiritual purifications, as well as an active meditational life, precede contemplative practice. We see it in Walter Hilton's active and passive stages of prayer.<sup>37</sup> In short, we see seemingly everywhere this necessary development from a meditational and devotional life, committed to the virtues, to a contemplative life where the soul is drawn by God's initiative. I do not believe that the tradition can be interpreted in any other way.

### What to Make of This?

At the beginning of this article I asked a simple question: Who could argue with the centering prayer movement? It is characterized by the soul's practice of simply placing oneself before God, lovingly and attentively. In addition, the centering prayer movement also commends us to practice other forms of prayer so that we grow broadly in our interior lives and continue to come to know God's presence in his creation, in his word, in his sacraments, and so on. Even if one did not receive the gift of infused contemplation, would not this practice help anyone to grow in faith? Maybe the cautions of the tradition are overstated.

Maybe they are. The experience of the centering prayer movement suggests that, while practitioners might be jump-starting a contemplative expression early, in fact many have experienced the graces of infused contemplation. It would be common on a centering prayer retreat to be told that contemplation may only come after several years of practice. We lovingly wait for God speak to us in his own good time. I once asked one of the above-mentioned leaders whether or not the movement was finessing the tradition a bit. He agreed, but his response was interesting: "Nothing succeeds like success."

The centering prayer movement does claim success, and I believe rightly so. People in the active life, who would otherwise be missing a profound possibility for contemplative intimacy, are finding it in centering prayer. This, in my mind, is the most compelling argument in favor of the movement. It appears to have succeeded. Along with those advancing the centering prayer movement, I too believe that

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the gifts of contemplation should never be thought to be restricted to the monastery. Merton in fact believed that contemplation is a baptismal gift for everyone.<sup>38</sup> Surely we should also concede that those who involve themselves in centering prayer tend to be those who already have been practicing meditational prayer.

It could be that, while the movement has been selective and even inaccurate about what the sources actually say, it is faithful to the goal of a contemplative expression found in these sources. It could also be that, since these sources are so heavily monastic, their exhortations to caution should be taken with a grain of salt. They were not addressing a lay, active life, and thus their presentations of interior progress can be interpreted less strictly. I would think, however, that the burden would be on us as to why we can be dismissive to such universal caution.

### *Illuminism*

At any rate, I still question whether there is a problem in the movement, a problem that all these classical witnesses knew. While Merton wrote about contemplation as a baptismal gift, he also wrote:

There is a danger of *illuminism* and false mysticism when those who are easily swayed by fancy and emotion take too seriously the vivid impulses they experience in prayer, and imagine the voice of their own exalted feeling is really the voice of God.<sup>39</sup>

While Merton is often cited as an inspiration for the centering prayer movement, I find him representing the tradition, insisting on caution:

At the beginning of the life of prayer it would be a manifest error to seek this simple and obscure unification of our faculties in God by simply abandoning all efforts to think, to reason, or to meditate discursively.... In the beginning of the life of prayer, the more definite and concrete we are in our meditations the better off we will be.<sup>40</sup>

St. John of the Cross describes beginners who practice contemplation before initiated by God's grace as "tearing down rather than building up" the soul.<sup>41</sup>

Why did St. John of the Cross teach that one must first practice devotional prayer and the life of meditation before one advances to

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contemplation, and only by God's initiative? Why does the rest of the tradition seem to support this? I believe Merton sums it up: *illuminationism*. I have had experience with centering prayer retreats and gatherings and have spoken to many who have practiced it even for a number of years. In my mind, there doesn't appear to be a distinction for many between the natural peace from settling one's mind and heart and the infused grace of God. Isn't it possible to believe one is having a contemplative experience when in fact one is simply taking an emotional and mental rest? The danger is so great that John Main recommends rigorously maintaining the mantra so as not to fall into a sleepy state.<sup>42</sup>

*It is this Christ  
whose intimate  
graces one then  
can recognize in  
contemplation*

The standard practice of devotions and meditation lend something crucial to our discussion. From them one learns not only about the Christ with whom one desires intimacy and the mysteries of faith one is meditating on, but most importantly one comes to know Christ himself. It is this Christ whose intimate graces one then can recognize in contemplation. Without a deep intimacy with God already established in meditational prayer, how would one recognize his very subtle presence in contemplation? I have a couple of spiritual directees who for months have been discerning with me whether they are called to a more contemplative posture in prayer. It is a painstaking process of discernment.

This may explain why the centering prayer movement appears to say little about the dynamics of the passive nights of the senses and spirit, at least in the dramatic way St. John describes them. As the tradition witnesses to the contemplative life, it is a path both awful and beautiful. As described by the tradition, it is a life of intense interior purification, and the loving infused contemplation sought after ought to become increasingly a *wound of love*, painful to the soul even as it heals. Further, the love of God received in contemplation can be so overwhelming to the soul that one feels oneself ready to break. Such descriptions are common in the tradition.

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### *Paschal death and resurrection*

What one finds in the centering prayer movement seems a bit banal by comparison. It will be described as a psychic healing and greater spiritual awareness, or in terms of greater inner peace.<sup>43</sup> I believe that these are in fact fruits of the practice. But these fruits do not represent the essence of contemplation or distinguish it from other healthy spiritual forms of prayer (or even from a yoga class). That essence is surely an interior *paschal* death and resurrection, that awful agenda of God recreating us into the divine image.

Contemplation is nothing short of the process of divinization. Yes, as Keating has said, the *false self* must be confronted so that the truest self can emerge.<sup>44</sup> But this false self is not just a psychologically needy, egotistical, or a controlling self. Nor is the renewed true self simply a healthy version of one's psyche. The paradox of the Christian mystery is that we really do *die* in a certain sense.<sup>45</sup>

Joseph Sandman has described centering prayer as essentially that which Thomas Merton spoke of as his own. This is from Merton's letter to Abdul Aziz: "[My prayer is] centered entirely on the presence of God and His will and love."<sup>46</sup> But Merton also described it in this famous letter as *fana*, a Sufi term that translates "annihilation." Until we hear more of this as the fruit of the centering prayer movement, is it possible that we are producing too many contemplative dilettantes who are not really contemplatives at all? Of course this sounds highly judgmental, but I offer it as a serious concern based on the very texts cited as support for the movement. The very idea of a centering prayer period lasting only twenty minutes makes me wonder all the more about this concern for dilettantism.

### **Last Word**

Recently Pennington has published a fine book on *lectio divina*.<sup>47</sup> In his introduction, he relates that many in the centering prayer movement are actually asking to learn this practice. This may be the next stage for the movement. This practice of coming to know Christ through scriptural meditation moves from *lectio*, the reading or recitation of the word of God, to *meditatio*, the chewing on the word and

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letting God speak to one through his word, to *oratio*, a response of the soul to God's speaking, to, finally, *contemplatio*, whereby the intimacy we have found with God via his word draws the soul to simply be with him. It could be noted that one doesn't necessarily or even often move to *contemplatio*. Rather, this occurs if the divine presence takes the initiative. I believe that this is the safest course to follow.<sup>48</sup>

It may be that the centering prayer movement is facilitating what Merton says is our baptismal right. And I believe that there are bone fide contemplatives out there who are so because they were rightly invited into a type of prayer heretofore wrongly restricted to monastics. It could also be, however, that there are many centering prayer practitioners who may think that they are contemplatives, but who have quite possibly slowed their spiritual growth striving for what their hearts and spirits were not yet ready for.

*It may be that the centering prayer movement is facilitating what Merton says is our baptismal right*

Humans are developmental creatures. Physically, we walk before we run. Mentally, we grow in ever-greater abilities to abstract, to engage symbol and mystery, and even possibly paradox. In the spiritual life the tradition is filled with the same advice: we purify, we learn, we meditate, and we grow in love, service, and humility. Perhaps, and certainly in God's own time, some or even many will be invited into a contemplative expression. Until that time, I'm ambivalent about recommending "taking the kingdom by force" (Mt 11:12).

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## NOTES

1. Joseph Sandman, "Centering Prayer: A Treasure for the Soul," *America* (Sept 9, 2000), pp. 12–14.
2. A fine description of the practice can be found in many places, but I recommend Thomas Keating's *Open Mind, Open Heart* (Rockport, Mass.: Element, 1986).
3. The boldest claim would be that it is a *first step* on the ladder of contemplation. See Keating's *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 5.
4. See, for example, Basil Pennington's *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Practice*; Carl Arico's *A Taste of Silence*; and Thomas Keating's *Intimacy with God*.
5. See also Keating's *The Better Part* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 107.
6. St. Augustine, *Confessions* (3.11).
7. I am relying here on the work of Jeremy Driscoll, OSB: *Spiritual Progress: Studies in the Spirituality of Late Antiquity and Early Monasticism* (*Studia Anselmiana*, vol. 115, 1994).
8. Evagrius's *Ad Monachos* describes the whole path, beginning with asceticism and only ending with possibilities of contemplative union with God. Cf. Driscoll, *passim*, and Irene Hausherr, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*, trans. Hufstader (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1982), p. 72.
9. *Philokalia*, trans. and ed. Palmer, et al. (London: Faber & Faber, Vol. 1, 1979; Vol. 2, 1981; Vol. 3, 1984; Vol. 4 1995).
10. *Ibid.*, 3, pp. 108–143.
11. *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 63, 222, 125, 157, 219, 360, 107.
12. *Ibid.*, 4, p. 369.
13. *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 262–263; 4, p. 240.
14. *Ibid.*, 4, pp. 65; 268–269.
15. John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), pp. 345–346.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 339.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 374–376
19. Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, pp. 34–37; "Centering Prayer—Prayer of Quiet," *Finding Grace in the Center* (Still River, Mass.: St. Bede, 1978), p. 8ff; William Meninger, *The Loving Search for God* (New York: Continuum, 1996); John Main, *Word into Silence* (New York: Paulist, 1980), pp. 10–12; and Thomas Keating, "Cultivating Centering Prayer," *Finding Grace in the Center*, p. 23. Keating will also rely on St. John of the Cross. Cf. *Intimacy with God*, p. 45.
20. Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, pp. 19, 90.
21. *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. and with intro. by Clifton Wolters (Penguin: London, 1961), p. 59.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 122–123.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 71–72.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–80; 84–85.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 188. (*Epistle of Privy Counsel*).
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 192–193.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
31. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.13.2–4, and *The Dark Night*, 1.9.2–8.
32. *The Dark Night* 2.1.1.
33. *The Ascent* 2.13.5.
34. Earnest Larkin, "Today's Contemplative Prayer Forms: Are They Contemplative?" *Review for Religious* (Jan–Feb, 1998), pp. 83–84. This appears to be what Pennington argues in "Centering Prayer—Prayer of Quiet," *Finding Grace at the Center*, p. 3–4.
35. Interestingly Thomas Keating aligns this practice with the fourth mansion. Cf. *Intimacy with God*, p. 45.
36. Cf. *Interior Castle* 4.3 and *Life*, 12.1
37. Cf. St. Bernard's Sermon 3 on the Song of Songs; Catherine's *The Dialogue*; Hugh's *The Roads to Zion*; Ruysbroeck's *The Seven Steps of the Ladder of Spiritual Love*, and Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*.
38. Thomas Merton, *What is Contemplation?* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1950), pp. 7–12.
39. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1960), p. 67.
40. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, pp. 92–93.
41. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3.2.1.
42. John Main, *Word in Silence* (New York: Paulist, 1980), p. 56. See also *The Heart of Creation* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 12.
43. Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (chapters seven and nine) and Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, pp. 116–119. Pennington also describes an increase in love, kindness, gentleness, patience, joy, and peace. Cf. "Centering Prayer—Prayer of Quiet," *Finding Grace at the Center*, p. 20.
44. Thomas Keating, *The Better Part* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 107.
45. To be fair to Main, he does describe a union in love with God. But even this is more of a fulfillment of what is already innately true than a paschal experience.
46. Joseph Sandman, pp. 12–14.
47. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).
48. Keating is confusing here. While stating that the practice of Centering Prayer is not a part of *lectio divina*, he also suggests that each phase of *lectio* can be taken on its own, and that one can begin with *contemplatio*, and this is what Centering Prayer is all about. See *Intimacy with God*, pp. 119–124. Keating also states that Gregory the Great identified contemplation as a fruit of reflecting on the Word of God in Scriptures. Cf. "Contemplative Prayer in the Christian Tradition: An Historical Perspective," *Finding Grace at the Center*, p. 36. What I am recommending is that *lectio divina* remain organically whole, and that one only inclines to *contemplatio* as a conclusion.

# Reviews

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**Prayer: A Practical Guide.** By Rev. Martin Pable. Foreword by Alice Camille. ACTA Publications (*Assisting Christians To Act*): 4848 N. Clark Street, Chicago, Ill. 60640, 2002. Pp. 96. Paper. \$9.95.

**How To Pray: A Practical Guide.** By David Torkington. Foreword by Sr. Wendy Beckett. Alba House: *The Society of St. Paul*, 2187 Victory Boulevard, Staten Island, N. Y. 10314-6603, 2003. Pp. 92. Paper. \$4.95.

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Sometimes one's prayer life seems to go stale, like an old loaf of bread. Prayer time is filled with boredom or unsatisfying feelings. I may be tired of praying the same old way, the way I prayed ever since I was a child. Or, perhaps I have had a rich, fruitful prayer life for years but suddenly find myself frustrated or confused about my spiritual life.

Causes for a lackluster prayer life vary. It could be that I'm just feeling a little lazy lately and need to redouble my effort. Perhaps I was never taught much about different prayer forms and the time is ripe to learn. If I have been faithful to prayer for some time, this strange turn of events might actually be an invitation from God to a deeper way of praying.

*Prayer: A Practical Guide* offers a solid overview of various methods of prayer. In chapter 1, Fr. Martin Pable, a Capuchin priest, reminds us that prayer is not limited to reciting words. Prayer is primarily about *relationship*, our relationship with God. Like a treasured friendship or a happy marriage, one's relationship with God involves communication and spending quality time together. Prayer involves getting to know the Lord better and being willing to reveal my deeper side to him. Gradually, the things that are important

to God become important to me as well. Because of these relationship dynamics, one can define prayer as "any act whereby we consciously attend to the presence of God within us or around us" (p. 9).

After laying this foundation, Pable delves into various ways to pray. He shows how to use traditional prayers like the Lord's Prayer, the rosary, or psalms for praying in a more meditative fashion. The chapter on "conversational prayer" gives ideas about how to pray using your own words, whether it be to petition God, thank God, or pray through the experiences of the day.

The classic method of praying with Scriptures, *lectio divina* ("holy reading"), is covered in chapter four. Tips are given for praying with others in small groups and how to enrich one's prayer life through the Eucharistic celebration even when the choir is singing off-pitch or the homily is uninspiring.

The chapter on meditation and contemplation provides a good introduction for readers unfamiliar with these prayer forms. Pable describes meditation as "a way of prayer in which we focus on some divine truth or mystery" (p. 51–52). Using our ability to think and imagine, we spend time reflecting on a particular phrase of Scripture or an event in the life of Christ. In the process of meditating, we enter into the mystery in such a way that feelings of praise, wonder, or gratitude may surface. Perhaps our meditation will prompt us to choose a particular course of action, such as asking someone for forgiveness. While using Scripture for our starting point is good, some people also begin with a wonder of nature (such as a falling leaf), a personal experience, or a book of guided meditations.

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Contemplation, on the other hand, involves less thinking or reflecting than meditation. Pable observes that most of us have experienced “contemplative moments.” For example, it may happen that when presented with an awesome sunset or a soft, innocent newborn baby, “We become aware—suddenly or gradually—that we are in the presence of some Being, some Mystery far greater than ourselves” (p. 56). We find ourselves experiencing a sense of oneness or wonder. This is a “contemplative moment.”

Contemplative prayer is a way of praying very simply, sometimes with a single word such as “Jesus” or “Spirit,” or sometimes without any words at all. It is a quiet, interior “gazing” upon the God we love. Chapter six deals with how to pray for healing. All of us have a need for healing of some sort. The author describes attitudes we need for genuine healing to take place: faith that God desires to give us wholeness, gratefulness for what God has already done for us, and open receptivity to whatever God may give us in the future. Forgiving those who have hurt us is also part of the process.

Pable also undertakes the challenge that praying for healing doesn’t always “work”: “In spite of our fervent and persistent prayers, the cancer spreads; we do lose our job; our child does get in trouble; our marriage crumbles; our loved ones die” (p. 70). He tackles this spiritual difficulty using Dan Crosby’s distinction between “being cured” and “being healed.” Sometimes God answers our prayers by removing the problem, such as curing a person of cancer. Other times God regenerates the person in a different sense. The illness remains but grace heals the inner person, bringing about greater wholeness and spiritual transformation.

Grounded in everyday experience and easy to read, *Prayer: A Practical Guide* is a good book for anyone looking to expand his or her prayer life beyond the beginnings. With its overview of prayer basics, discussion questions, and prayer activities, I recommend this book not only for personal enrichment but also for use in RCIA, small faith communities, or parish prayer groups.

David Torkington’s book, *How to Pray: A Practical Guide*, also provides practical tips on prayer. In forty short, two-page reflections, the author reflects on a wide array of topics related to prayer and methods of praying. The chapter headings hint at the variety: “The School for Love,” “Pray, Don’t Babble,” “Reconciliation,” “Mystical Union,” “The Beginning of Contemplation,” “The Morning Offering,” “True Humility,” “Waiting on God,” “The Sacred Heart,” and “The Impossible Made Possible”—just a few of the topics covered.

Each chapter begins with a quote that is, in itself, worth pondering. The chapter entitled “Perfect Love” begins with a quote from William of St. Thierry: “You’ll never love someone unless you know them, but you’ll never really know them unless you love them” (p. 27). After presenting many different methods of praying, Torkington reminds us that not all forms of prayer are for everyone at a given time, quoting Dom John Chapman: “Pray as you can, not as you can’t” (p. 49). Sometimes we just fling ourselves heavenward: “A naked intention directed to God and Himself alone is wholly sufficient,” explains the writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (p. 69). Teilhard de Chardin describes how prayer may propel us beyond ourselves: “To adore means to lose oneself in the unfathomable, to plunge

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into the inexhaustible, to find peace in the incorruptible, to be absorbed into the immeasurable, and to give one's deepest to that whose depth has no end" (p. 13).

Torkington's section called "Parousia" caught my eye as something particularly different from other books on prayer. As the author explains, *parousia* is the ancient word that means "coming," particularly in the sense of a king's arrival. *Parousia* is used to refer to at least three comings of Christ. First, Christ came in history about two thousand years ago. Christ will come again at the end of time. In between these two comings is Christ's "continual coming in mystery" to us. When we pray, we are attending to this continual coming of Christ. Torkington uses the word *parousia* as a "memory jog" to remind us of eight essential ingredients of prayer. Each letter of the word *parousia* stands for one of these eight essential ingredients: *P*rofession, *A*doration, *R*econciliation, *O*ffering, *U*nion, *S*ilence, *I*ntercession, and *A*ction. The author offers further reflections on each of these themes.

Like Pable's book, Torkington's also explains various methods of prayer. We can pray in our own words or use the words someone else has written. We can also use

the time-honored practice of *lectio divina* (Scripture-based meditation).

Traditional devotions, such as the rosary and devotion to the Sacred Heart, can be used in a fresh manner. Meditation and contemplation—and the difference between the two—are also discussed. Readers can also try the Desert Fathers' method of using a single prayer sentence to foster growth toward "unceasing prayer."

Entwined among these methods are many other tips about praying. So much is packed into this little book that one might think at first that the two-page topics are haphazard or unorganized, but this is not the case. In reality, the author has carefully woven together many threads, forming a rich tapestry that leads the reader, step by step, from the beginnings of prayer to meditation, from meditation to contemplative beginnings, purification of heart, and the hope for deeper and deeper union with God.

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The Staff of *Spiritual Life* Wishes You  
A Blessed Christmas  
and  
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## Reviews

**Letters to St. Francis de Sales : Mostly on Prayer.** By John Francis Fink. Alba House: The Society of St. Paul, 2187 Victory Boulevard, Staten Island, N.Y. 10314-6603, 2003. Pp. 146. Paper 9.95.

*Letters to St. Francis de Sales: Mostly on Prayer* is the witness of a committed believer who has taken seriously the admonition of St. Paul to pray always. This is a man who has learned how to prioritize prayer in the context of his life as author, lecturer, publisher, editor, and family man. He uses a unique style, patterning his book on C.S. Lewis's *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. Fink writes his letters to St. Francis de Sales. He offers his reactions to de Sales's instructions on prayer along with his own thoughts, opinions, and foibles. He chooses de Sales because Francis de Sales wrote for the laity and believed that everyone is called to sanctity, not just priests and religious. Also, he is one of John Francis Fink's patron saints.

The book is conversational in style and is an easy read. It covers such topics as vocal prayer, mediation, contemplation, liturgical prayer, confession and communion, Scripture, prayers to Mary and the saints, when to pray, difficulties in prayer, and finding a balanced life.

Fink focuses on the Part 2 of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales. At times he focuses on the words of de Sales and his own efforts to interiorize the direction of this great doctor of the Church. For example, in the chapter on meditation, he carefully reviews the steps recommended by de Sales: place yourself in the presence of God, acknowledge your own unworthiness and ask for God's help, use your imagination to place yourself in the context of the mystery on which you

wish to meditate, dwell on one or more consideration that raise your affections to God, make some practical resolutions, and conclude with acts of thanksgiving, offering and supplication. Fink speaks of his personal experience in using de Sales's method. He emphasizes the importance of resolutions if mediation is going to result in spiritual growth, especially in the correction of our faults. While this is a critical step in the process, Fink concedes that he finds this step difficult and the correction of faults a slow process.

Again, in the letter on when to pray, Fink follows the guidance of de Sales and speaks of how he integrates prayer into the fabric of his day. He starts his day with the morning offering. After his morning prayers, he prepares his day by anticipating what opportunities will come his way to serve God during the day. Also, he anticipates what temptations might come his way, recognizing the need for God's assistance if he is to do good and avoid evil. He speaks of the importance of ejaculatory prayer throughout the day. For example, he says a quick "Come Holy Spirit" before answering the phone, asking God's help to respond well to the caller. Finally, he stresses the importance of an examination of conscience at the end of the day.

At other times, he expounds at length on something de Sales mentions only in passing, such as vocal prayer, contemplation, and the rosary. For example, in his reflections on the Hail Mary and the Rosary, Fink stresses the context of this prayer, drawn from the biblical accounts of the Annunciation and Visitation. He makes special note of the importance of meditating on the mysteries of the Rosary, with the Hail Mary as the background mantra to mediation on the

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specific mystery under consideration. He offers practical advice that comes both from his extensive reading and his lived experience. In dealing with distractions in prayer, he advises us that when we become aware of the distractions, we should gently return to the focal point of our prayer. Much of his advice is simple yet profound and helpful.

Fink flavors his letters with wisdom he has collected along the way from writers such as Benedict, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Siena, Thérèse of Lisieux, John of the Cross, Thomas Moore, C.S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, and Henri Nouwen. He frequently quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Throughout, Fink considers the difference between the twenty-first century and the seventeenth century, which was the context of de Sales's ministry. He deals with both the cultural and the theological difference. For example, he reflects on the privatization of spirituality, the emphasis on individualism in American culture, and the changing role of women in our society. He examines such theological questions as the regular reception of communion, which was a disputed issue in the time of de Sales, and the more positive attitude toward sexuality reflected in the theology of conjugal sanctity flowing from the Second Vatican Council.

Occasionally, there could be more Francis de Sales and less Fink. In the chapter on "Discerning God's Will," he of-

fers little of de Sales's thought on the topic. He could have easily included de Sales's chapter in the *Introduction to the Devout Life* on "How We Should Receive Inspiration," which deals with how we are to respond to God's inspirations and how we are to know the authenticity of our inspirations. Still, on the whole, he does a good job sharing the thinking of de Sales and his understanding of de Sales's thought and its importance for our time.

This little book is worth reading. The author is a living witness to the power and importance of prayer in the lives of believers. His words are thoughtful and encouraging.

Fink states that he hopes the book will encourage readers to read the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. I think readers might well begin by reading Part Two of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and then read Fink's response in *Letters to St. Francis de Sales*.

*Letters to St. Francis de Sales: Mostly on Prayer* gives clear witness to the fact that the *Introduction to the Devout Life* remains a timeless spiritual classic and a valuable resource to every Christian who wishes to develop a deeper and closer relationship with God.

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## Reviews

**Carmel and Mary: Theology and History of a Devotion.** Edited by John F. Welch, OCarm. *The Carmelite Institute, 1600 Webster Street, NE, Washington, DC 20017-3145, 2002. Pp. 180. Paper \$15.*

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John F. Welch, OCarm, presents the nine talks given at “A Symposium Celebrating and Reflecting on the Relationship between Carmel and Mary,” held in Reno, Nevada, in October of 1998.

The first talk was given by Mary E. Hines and is entitled “Mary at the Millennium.” It presents us with the present state of the theology of Mary. An account is given of the development in approaches to Mary following the teachings of Vatican II and includes an account of some contemporary movements in Marian theology. Vatican II’s shift from a privilege-centered view of Mary to a view that stresses Mary’s oneness with us rather than her distance from us, is seen as a most significant contribution to contemporary Marian studies. The reasons for the decline in both Marian studies and devotions following the Council are clearly stated. The renewal in Marian theology that began in the mid-eighties is presented, as well as the reasons that prompted it. The very real and positive contributions of feminist theologies to a renewed and relevant image and approach to Mary are stated clearly.

Not only do feminist theologians make a positive contribution to a renewed theology of Mary, but they also help us to understand how some of the past presentations of Marian doctrine and devotions could, and did, evoke a negative response on the part of the faithful. The concluding section of the talk discusses Mary and popular devotions, stressing the need to retain some of the popular devotions that

were abandoned after Vatican II. Both revitalized devotions, as well as any new popular Marian devotions that are introduced, are to be fully in accord with Pope Paul VI’s masterful document on the renewal of Marian devotion, *Marialis Cultus*.

Christopher O’Donnell, OCarm, presented two talks during the Symposium. His first talk is entitled “The Formative Years in Carmelite Marian Devotion, 1247–1324.” The Order’s defense of its title, “The Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel,” as well as the fact that the small chapel built in the midst of their cells was dedicated to Mary, show that from the very early years of the Order’s existence, its relationship to Mary was clearly in evidence. The earliest Carmelite constitutional and liturgical documents show how the friars celebrated Mary’s many feast days through the Eucharist and processions in her honor. Then, as today in Carmel, Saturday is considered as a special Marian day. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, prayers in honor of Mary were part of the daily celebration of the Divine Office. All of these Marian practices were but the external signs that give expression to a deep inner Marian spirituality. Carmelites make their religious profession to “God and to the Blessed Virgin.” From the very origins of the Carmelite Order, Mary is present in every aspect of the daily life of a Carmelite.

A second talk, entitled “Core Marian Themes in the Carmelite Order,” treats of Carmel’s understanding of Mary as Patroness, Mother, Sister, and as Most Pure Virgin. While the use of these titles with regard to Mary is not exclusive to Carmel, the manner in which the titles are used and understood by Carmel is clearly

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distinctive to the Order. While all the elements that make up the Carmelite Marian heritage can be found in other Marian religious families, Carmelites should experience these elements as distinctive of their Order. The Carmelite experience of the presence of Mary is unique.

Carmelites must not only preserve their Marian heritage, but they are also called to enhance this tradition. Carmel's Marian heritage is not a static tradition but a living tradition that must be preserved and enriched by each succeeding generation.

In his talk entitled, "The Medieval Flowering," Eamon Carroll, OCarm, discusses three very significant topics: the so-called Marian legends of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Carmelites and the Immaculate Conception, and the Marian teachings of Arnold Bostius. While the legends treated in the first topic are not to be considered as historical documents, they do give evidence to the fact of the Marian spirit and piety of their authors. They did, in fact, exert a positive influence in fostering deep devotion to Mary and an intense awareness of the power of her intercession, as well as the obligation of all of us to live a life in imitation of Mary.

In regard to the Immaculate Conception, we are shown how the Carmelites came to the defense of a doctrine that at first they did not defend. What is most significant in regards to the third topic, the Marian teachings of Arnold Bostius, is that these teachings show us how Mary permeates every dimension of the Carmelite life.

Redemptus Maria Valabek, OCarm's talk is entitled "Blessed Titus Brandsma

and Our Lady." In it he presents us with an introduction to Blessed Titus's view of Mary as the model of communion with God in the order of grace. Mary is seen as one who reached the summit of the mystical life, and, yet at the same time, Mary is seen living the ordinary everyday life that we must all live.

Just as Mary clothed Jesus, she clothes all Carmelites. The scapular of Carmel is a sign of dedication to the service of Mary, and the white mantle is seen as a sign of Mary's motherly protection. Carmelites,

like Mary, are called to give birth to Jesus in our world—Carmelites are called to be God-bearers. In reading this talk of Father Valabek, one cannot fail to grasp the close similarity of Blessed Titus's

Marian spirit to that of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux.

Jerome Lantry, OCD, in his talk on "Mary and Thérèse," gives an account of Thérèse's close union with Mary, both before and after her entrance into Carmel. As Thérèse is about to begin to write the story of her life, she asks Mary to guide her hand, for Thérèse was fully aware of how great an influence Mary had in her life. Shortly before her death, in the beautiful poem "Why I Love You, Mary," Thérèse speaks of the close personal relationship she experiences with Mary, the Mother of Jesus. We are told that "Mary's trials and sanctity were being transmitted to Thérèse and shared by her." Thérèse's experience at the Shrine of Our Lady of Victories in Paris fully assured her that it was Mary who had brought about her miraculous cure. From that moment on, Thérèse never doubted Mary's special presence and protection. Thérèse makes Mary known to us, and it

### *Carmel's Marian heritage is a living tradition*

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is always the Mary of the Gospels that we come to know. Thérèse is famous for her teachings on Merciful Love as well as her Oblation to Merciful Love. We are told that it was Thérèse's special relationship with Mary, the Mother of Mercy, that was the source of her insights concerning Merciful Love. All Carmelites are called to live in close companionship with Mary and to live with unlimited confidence in God's Mercy.

In an excellent talk on "Edith Stein and Mary's Spiritual Maternity: St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross's Appraisal of Mary as the Model for the Modern Woman," Dianne M. Traflet, following the recommendation of Pope John Paul II, views Mary through the eyes of Edith Stein. In reality, Stein's life mirrored that of Mary. In showing how this came about, Traflet focuses on Stein's understanding of Mary's spiritual Maternity. For Stein, Mary is the ultimate model for contemporary women, and, in every situation, it is Mary's maternal attitude that is emphasized. The motherhood that is stressed by Stein is exercised not just in the home but in all aspects of public life. Women are called to follow the maternal example of Mary in each and every situation in life.

Mary's maternal role in the work of redemption continues today, and all Christians are called to collaborate with Mary in this work. The examples of several women who had inspired and influenced Stein by imaging Mary and the Church in the role of mother are discussed. It was especially at her own mother's death that Stein seems to have come to a full appreciation of the maternal role of Mary and of all women. Not only did Stein possess a deep understanding of the maternal role of women, she

lived out her daily life in total conformity with that understanding. Stein helps all Carmelites come to a deeper appreciation of the fact that to be true to Carmel's Marian calling, it is Mary's maternal love and concern that must inspire and guide every dimension of the Carmelite life.

In the talk entitled "The Virgin Mary in the Medieval Carmelite Liturgy," James J. Boyce, OCarm, shows how Carmel's awareness of its relationship to Mary is enshrined in Carmel's liturgy, poetry, music, and art. A brief examination of some fourteenth century Carmelite liturgical documents gives evidence of Carmel's constant desire to express its gratitude to Mary in its celebration of the Marian feast days. Our attention is drawn to the fact that Carmel has always viewed Mary as being responsible for Carmel's receiving Papal recognition as a legitimate religious order. This event was depicted by the Sienese artist Pietro Lorenzetti as part of the Carmelite altarpiece for their church in Siena in 1329.

Several Marian feast days celebrated in Carmel are examined in detail. Each in its own way portrays the Order's deep consciousness that its very existence and entire identity is intimately related to Mary. Carmelites see themselves as "Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel." It is as such that they find in Mary the inspiration for the creativity and the enthusiasm they express in the poems, prayers, music, and art that enhance their celebrations of Mary's feast days.

The final talk is that given by David S. Blanchard, OCarm, and is entitled "The Carmelite Scapular: Symbol and Sign of God's Covenant." The presenter, an an-

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thropologist, a missionary, and a Carmelite, looks upon the scapular as a symbol of the covenant between God and mankind. This covenant has been modeled by Mary and given to us in her scapular promise. Our living tradition as Carmelites is our best aid in coming to an authentic understanding of the scapular and all that it symbolizes. It is our privilege and our duty to promote a genuine Carmelite understanding and appreciation of the scapular.

By means of a delightful explanation, we are shown how symbols acquire their meaning. To truly appreciate a symbol, we must have an awareness of the context from which it originates and derives its significance. To appreciate the scapular of Carmel as a symbol, it must be seen as part of a context containing Carmelite symbols, each contributing to the meaning and significance of the other symbols.

The scapular is a religious symbol that derives its power from faith. Like other religious symbols, it helps us to open our minds and hearts to God. Religious symbols do not constitute our faith nor do they

have meaning apart from that faith. A religious symbol, such as the scapular, must never be separated from the religious context that gives it meaning. Carmelite religious symbols, especially the scapular, must never be separated from their Carmelite religious context.

Each of the nine talks given at the Symposium contributes to a deeper awareness of the distinctively Carmelite Marian character, which from its very origins has distinguished the Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel. Carmel's Marian heritage is intimately united with Carmel's very identity. These nine talks not only assist Carmelites in acquiring a deeper appreciation of that heritage, they also assist and inspire Carmelites to renew and enhance the treasures that are already in their possession.

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## Carmelite Resources

**Carmelite Seminar:** The 16th Annual Summer Seminar on Carmelite Spirituality by the Carmelite Forum will take place on June 20–26, 2004 at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Ind. The theme will be "Meditation and Contemplation: Carmel's Response in These Uncertain Times." For a brochure, contact: Center for Spirituality, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN 46556. Tel: 574-284-4636. E-mail: manuszak@saintmarys.edu.

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All books listed in the Reviews and Notices sections can be obtained from Seminary Co-op Bookstore: (800) 777-1456.

# Notices

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**Savoring God: Praying With All Our Senses.** By Kathleen Finley. *Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 2003. Pp. 160. Paper. \$12.95.*

This book presents a different way of praying. Usually when we pray, we try to shut out the world and focus on the interior life. This book invites us instead to be with God through the very tangible, specific objects of our everyday life. We're invited to take another look—as well as another listen, taste, touch, and smell—at what is right before us and to see God there. A rock, a shoe, a pen—all offer an opportunity for entering into prayer and experiencing God's presence. The author leads us through a variety of prayer exercises to help use objects in nature as well as personal everyday objects as touchstones for prayer. Each exercise includes five parts: an opening prayer, a guided meditation, some related Scripture passages, a reflection, and a closing section on how to put our prayer into action. Finley's book offers a unique and imaginative way to pray.

**A Healing Walk with St. Ignatius: Discovering God's Presence in Different Times.** By Lyn Holley Doucet. *Chicago, Ill.: Loyola Press, 2002. Pp. 230. Paper. \$13.95.*

Life can hurt us in many ways—through loss, anxiety, or troubled relationships. Yet, as St. Ignatius revealed through his life and work, we have within us many spiritual resources for healing. Spiritual director and retreat leader Lyn Holley Doucet offers forty real-life stories of spiritual, emotional, and physical healing. They involve ordinary people overcoming

their pasts, living through illness or divorce, forgiving others or themselves, and receiving the good news of God's overwhelming love for them in every situation. These stories of personal transformation will benefit everyone aspiring to make the same healing journey, and they will bring new life to the spiritual principles that St. Ignatius put into words centuries ago.

**The Rosary: Chain of Hope.** Fr. Benedict Groeschel, CFR. *San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003. Pp. 168. Paper. \$12.95.*

In late 2002, Pope John Paul II captured the attention of the Catholic world, reminding us of the importance and power of the Rosary with the apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*. It was also then that he introduced five new mysteries of the Rosary, the Luminous Mysteries. Finally, he proclaimed the following twelve months the Year of the Rosary and strongly encouraged the faithful to renew their devotion to this ancient prayer. Fr. Benedict Groeschel follows the Pope's lead by presenting this new look at the meaning, history, and all the mysteries of the Rosary, focusing on the theme of hope. Speaking from his vast personal experience as a priest, psychologist, author, and spiritual advisor, as well as from the grand traditions of the Church, Fr. Groeschel takes us on a spiritual journey that will move the reader to greater depths of faith and prayer. *The Rosary: Chain of Hope* offers us an opportunity to step back for a few minutes from the noise and din of life. In our busy modern life, with its distractions and discouragements, the Rosary can be a

## Notices

wonderful means of prayer and an easy way to come into contact with the presence of God, Our Lady, and the saints. It is an especially good technique for growing in deeper understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The mysteries of the Rosary now take us through the whole Gospel, into the mysteries of eternal life.

**Getting to Know the Bible.** By Rev. Melvin L. Farrell, SS. Chicago, Ill.: Acta Publications, 2003. Pp. 112. Paper. \$6.95.

For many years this overview of the Bible, originally written by Sulpician Father Melvin Farrell, has provided countless readers with a solid overview of the basics of the Old and New Testaments. This completely new edition, revised by well-known biblical commentator Joseph McHugh, offers all the information of the original as well as numerous new insights of its own in a style and language accessible to all readers. A classic definition of the Bible is the word of God in the words of human beings. Thus the Scriptures are both divinely inspired and humanly composed, and both aspects are essential. *Getting to Know the Bible* leads readers through all the major books of the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation, explaining the importance and meaning of each book of the Scriptures. The authors carefully explain the relationship of each part to the whole, while maintaining the historical context of the different books and offering readers insights into some of the motivations behind the writers of the Bible. Relying on historical perspective and literary forms rather than a more fundamentalist approach, *Getting to Know the Bible*

gives the Catholic perspective on Sacred Scripture. This celebrated summary of the Bible is ideal for individual or group study.

**The Prayerful Life: Seeking God in All Things.** By Deborah Smith Douglas. Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse Publishing, 2003. Pp. 116. Paper. \$13.95

Nothing is more remarkable than an ordinary life, quietly transformed by prayer. This is the life that Deborah Smith Douglas chronicles—and invites readers into—in this lovely collection of essays and poems. Drawing from events as simple as breakfast with a five-year-old and waiting in line at the post office, Douglas shows how a loving relationship with God can be nurtured in small ways every day: “Without my ever really intending it,” she writes, “my own life—as a wife and mother, daughter and friend—has taught me to see God hidden in the ordinary, to watch for God under the surface of things as a fisherman watches for fish.” Woven into each of these pieces, along with reflections on the author’s experiences, are suggestions for readers who want to watch for God in their own ordinary and unique lives.

**Come, Creator Spirit: Meditations on the Veni Creator.** By Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFMCap. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003. Pp. 403. Paper. \$19.95.

Ever since its composition in the ninth century, the use of the *Veni Creator* in the liturgy of Pentecost and in Christian assemblies has been constant, as one continuous, solemn invocation of the Paraclete. With its wealth of insights and thought-provoking

## Notices

images, this hymn is like a magnificent fresco of the Holy Spirit at work in salvation history and in the life of the Church. Following the structure of the ancient hymn, Father Cantalamessa gives us a meditation for each verse and builds a complete treatise—a theological and spiritual Summa—on the Holy Spirit, drawn from Scripture, the Church Fathers, the liturgy, and from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions. Its language, however, is far removed from theological discourse but inspired by symbol, image and song, by poetry and liturgy, by prophecy and living models of holiness.

**Walking One Another Home: Moments of Grace and Possibility in the Midst of Alzheimer's.** By Rita Bresnahan. Liguori, Mo.: Liguori Press, 2003. Pp. 156. Hardcover. \$19.95.

“The mystery of it all: that each one of us, each day, gets to choose the meaning we place on the events of our lives, gets to choose how to perceive them, how to translate them into our own healing. As I look back, I realize that my mother’s illness touched me in most unfathomable ways, calling me to an awareness of the sacred that will abide with me all of my days. How deeply I have been changed by this pilgrimage!” The author’s visits with her mother in a Midwest nursing home took on spiritual and emotional meaning in the lives of both women. Their pilgrimage together challenges the stereotypes about Alzheimer’s and deftly shifts the emphasis away from fear and horror to love and possibility. This book is about loving, about intentional and spirited ways of living in difficult times.

—Regis Jordan, OCD

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(Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

SPIRITUAL LIFE (ISSN 0038-7630): Published quarterly by the Washington Province of Discalced Carmelite Friars, Inc. (a non-profit, non-stock corporation), 2131 Lincoln Road, NE, Washington, DC 20002-1199. Annual subscription rate: \$18 (U.S.A.). Location of Office of Publication, Editorial, and Business Offices: 2131 Lincoln Road, NE, Washington, DC 20002-1199.

<b>Extent and Nature of Circulation</b>	<b>Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months</b>	<b>Actual No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date</b>
Total No. Copies Printed	11,725	11,000
Paid and or Requested Circulation		
1. Sales Through Dealers, etc.	None	None
2. Mail Subscription	8,805	9,112
Total Paid Circulation	8,805	9,112
Free Distribution	123	126
Total Distribution	8,805	8,986
Copies Not Distributed	2,797	2,014
Total	11,725	11,000
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