

Some Thoughts on Contemplative Prayer

Deacon Douglas McManaman

Catholic Teachers Guild Retreat Talk, 2024. Part II

The first thing I cover during Confirmation class is the first story of creation. I'm sure I've read it well over 100 times. As you know, God creates through the utterance of his word: God said: "Let there be light, and there was light, ...God said: Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, to separate one body of water from the other....God said: Let the water under the sky be gathered into a single basin, so that the dry land may appear....God said: Let the earth bring forth vegetation:...God said: Let there be lights in the dome of the sky...

Just as our spoken and written words point to the interior word in the mind, so too the things God brought into being point to the Word that is with God and is God (Jn 1, 1). Everything is words; reality, including the motion of history, is language, and it sings the praises of God. And material creation has to move in time, receding into the past and stretching forth towards the future, and it has to be rich in diversity, and the reason for this is that God is without limits, and a single period of time and a limited selection of creatures cannot give adequate praise to God. In short, creation is prayer.

It is man who has stopped praying—at least a portion of humanity. In the book of Genesis, we read that Enoch was a descendent of Seth, and Enoch walked with God, and the Israelites are his descendants, and we are sons of Abraham. And so, humanity is divided into two: those who walk with God and those who do not, or those who pray and those who do not. Creation that is below man has not stopped praying, nor has creation above him stopped praying, at least not entirely. Only a portion of humanity and the fallen angels have stopped.

But I've always said that the purpose of this life is to learn how to pray. To learn how to be a child, to depend on God, to live in faith, and to pray always. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul says: "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks".

How does one do that? How do we pray without ceasing? We can understand how we can pray before Mass, or pray before meals, or pray before we go to bed, but how does one pray without ceasing? There is a great spiritual classic, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, written by an unknown 19th century Russian peasant who wrestles with that very question. The work focuses on the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner". Those in the Eastern rite pray this prayer using a prayer rope, which is like a rosary, but it has 200 knots, some have 300 knots, etc. Obviously, one cannot be constantly saying that prayer when we are talking to someone, or in a meeting, or working on some project. So how does this work? I think the answer to this question is that the purpose behind this constant repetition of that prayer is to create a habit in the soul, a disposition. The best comparison I can make is to compare it with someone with a musical disposition. People who are musically inclined always have a song playing in the back of their minds, perhaps a song

they've heard on the radio, or a song they're working on, if they are musicians. Sometimes it can be pretty annoying. If I listen to a song on YouTube late at night, the song plays in my sleep and when I wake up in the morning. And the song plays throughout the following day, not at the forefront of my mind, but at the back. I worry about this sometimes. I just hope the volume does not get any louder, because it is difficult to shut it off. What's interesting, however, is that there are two areas of the mind: the front and the back. When I am doing something else, like reading a book or cooking something, there is almost always a song playing in the background. Similarly, to pray without ceasing is to be always praying in the background. We could say in the back of one's mind, but it is more a movement of the heart, so perhaps it is best to say that the heart is singing, or the heart is praying in a region of the soul that is "at the back", so to speak.

A disposition to prayer has been developed as a result of the constant repetition of this prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. But the same thing occurs with those who pray the rosary very often. What happens is that eventually the actual words are no longer necessary. The very meaning that the words express, the movement of the heart that the words give expression to, have become a habit imprinted in the subconscious of the soul or spirit, and so although the mind may be preoccupied with a particular matter, such as paying a phone bill or shopping or taking an important phone call, the soul is praying without words in the background, like a candle that burns constantly. I think that's when we have begun to pray without ceasing. We begin with words, but in time we go beyond words.

There are of course different kinds of prayer: the prayer of petition, prayer of intercession, prayer of thanksgiving, prayer of praise, and prayer of adoration. The highest kind of prayer that each one of us is called to achieve is the prayer of adoration. In the words of Father Gerald Vann, this is the "prayer of wonder: the still, wordless gaze of Adoration, which is proper to the lover. You are not talking, not busy, not worried or agitated; you're not asking for anything: you are quiet, you are just being with, and there is love and wonder in your heart."

This prayer is much more difficult than we might tend to believe. It is about placing oneself in the presence of God, in silence, focusing all our attention on God, who is Light from Light, but this light is without limits; it exceeds the limited power of our intellect, and so it is experienced by us as darkness. It's difficult to remain focused on God alone in this darkness, because what will soon happen is that we will become distracted by all kinds of limited thoughts, and our attention will be pulled this way and that way, without our being aware of it. Once we become aware of it, though, we just have to return to God, refocus our attention on him, dwelling in his presence, in the presence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You see, we have God's undivided attention at every instant of our lives, but he does not have our undivided attention, not even for a few minutes. But this is the goal of adoration, to give him our undivided attention in return. Dan Rather asked Mother Teresa: "What do you say when you pray?"

She said "nothing, I just listen."

"Then what does God say to you?"

She said: “Nothing, he just listens”.

That is the highest kind of prayer, but it sounds much easier than it is in reality to maintain this. Within a minute, the mind will be drawn away again, distracted by thoughts. And this is where short prayers are so important and helpful, like the Jesus prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”, or a short phrase from the psalms, like “God come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me”, or “Into your hands I commend my spirit”. These short phrases help us to return to that interior dwelling place within. But with constant practice, one is soon able to dwell in silence, in the presence of God within, for a long time without distraction.

The one thing that I found very difficult to put up with as a teacher were students who were not paying attention, who were drifting off or had their heads down on the desk. It would always bother me, even though the rest of the class was with me. I gave a talk once to a Catholic staff at a private school, and there was one teacher at the back who was on his phone the whole time, a male teacher. I really had to concentrate and work hard at trying to ignore it, because I could feel myself getting angry. It was so hard not to focus on that teacher or the distracted student. And yet, when I pray before the Blessed Sacrament, when I do a holy hour or two, I am aware of how distracted I become. I’m well focused on the presence of God, and I stay there, but very soon my mind is off somewhere, and I have to bring it back again. I’m like that distracted student.

Now, we know this: God the Father utters His Word, His eternal Logos, and this Word is spoken eternally. His Word is always addressed to you individually, undividedly. What is this Word saying to you? I believe it was St. Catherine who said it: God loves each one of us as if there is only one of us. Moreover, we have God’s undivided attention at every instant of our lives. There is not a moment that goes by in which God is not giving us His undivided attention, as if we are the only being that exists. He is never distracted, unlike us. *It’s as though God Himself is engaged in a Eucharistic adoration in adoring each one of us, as if there is only one of us.* But how can we be the Eucharist that he adores? That’s the question. I think we might be able to explain it this way: the Word became flesh. What does the Father see when he beholds each one of us? I would say the Father beholds the Incarnate Son, who has united himself to every man when he joined a human nature. We have his undivided attention, but he does not have ours, but the prayer of adoration, contemplative prayer, aims at achieving just that: uninterrupted contemplation and adoration. And the more we engage in this, the easier it gets.

Now, something you can do to develop the prayer of contemplation/adoration or centering prayer, is the following. Consider FaceTime. When you are on Facetime and talking to someone, who are you really talking to? You facetime your mother. Who are you seeing in that Facetime and who are you talking to? That’s an epistemological question. The answer is: You are seeing your mother, and you are talking to her, and she to you. You can’t touch her physically, but you can communicate with her as directly as you would be if she two feet in front of you. So, in terms of Eucharistic adoration, if you have a Smart TV or an iPad, just go to a livestream Perpetual Adoration on YouTube, such as the Tyburn convent in London, England, or St. Benedict’s in Melbourne. I started doing that during the pandemic, when the Churches were closed. What is the difference between that and an actual in

Church adoration? It's not as if the Second Person of the Trinity is subject to distance and time. He isn't. So now it is possible to have Eucharistic adoration in the home.

This is also a kind of prayer that brings tremendous healing to the subconscious. Many of the thoughts that come to the surface during this time are often unhealed memories that have been stored in the subconscious, and learning to leave them behind in a Cloud of Forgetting (an expression used by the unknown author of the Cloud of Unknowing) brings about profound healing and peace. So much of our day to day lives is driven by these unhealed memories in the unconscious mind, which is why there is typically a great deal of turmoil in the lives of the faithful. Also, there is such a thing as the mortification of the imagination and the mortification of the memory: "avoiding that interior monologue in which fantasy runs wild...a restraining check on that tendency of ours to go over and over some little happening in the course of which we have come off badly", in the words of Father Francis Fernandez. Many people today suffer from anxiety, and anxiety has been linked to an overactive imagination. We also know that conspiratorial ideation is rooted in anxiety. So, the mortification of the imagination can go a long way in reducing anxiety, and if anxiety is the root of conspiratorial ideation, the prayer of adoration which involves the mortification of the imagination and the memory, can help in this regard as well.

Now, although the intellect is helpless in this kind of prayer—since God is experienced by the intellect as pure darkness, as something it cannot grasp—, the heart is able to reach God directly and immediately. The heart can love the unutterable mystery of God and expand accordingly. And it is here, at this level, where our knowledge of God grows mysteriously. It is an affective knowledge of God, a knowledge that proceeds from love.

To be able to dwell in the presence of God, focused entirely on God, with all thoughts put behind us, and the heart stretching out to God, touching God directly, open to his touches, gives us the capacity to live more fully in the present moment and to experience the fullness of creation, its genuine meaning. God is in the present moment, because God is Being Itself, and the past has no being, the future has no being, only the present has being. It is in *kairos* time, when we are in time, that we are in the present, but the demands of *chronos* time can keep us from really being in the present.

One of the greatest mystics in the history of the Church, Jan of Ruysbroeck, writes:

Here comes Jesus, and sees the man, and shows to him, in the light of faith, that He is according to His Godhead immeasurable and incomprehensible and inaccessible and abysmal, transcending every created light and every finite conception. And this is the highest knowledge of God which any man may have in the active life: that he should confess in this light of faith that God is incomprehensible and unknowable. And in this light Christ says to man's desire: Make haste and come down, for to-day I must abide at thy house. This hasty descent, to which he is summoned by God, is nothing else than a descent through desire and

through love into the abyss of the Godhead, which no intelligence can reach in the created light. *But where intelligence remains without, desire and love go in.* When the soul is thus stretched towards God, by intention and by love, above everything that it can understand, then it rests and dwells in God, and God in it. When the soul climbs with desire above the multiplicity of creatures, and above the works of the senses, and above the light of nature, then it meets Christ in the light of faith, and becomes enlightened, and confesses that God is unknowable and incomprehensible. *When it stretches itself with longing towards this incomprehensible God,* then it meets Christ, and is filled with His gifts. And when it loves and rests above all gifts, and above itself, and above all creatures, then it dwells in God, and God dwells in it. This is the way in which we shall meet Christ on the summit of the active life. When you have laid the foundation of righteousness, charity, and humility; and have established on it a dwelling-place, that is, those virtues which have been named heretofore; *and have met Christ through faith, by intention and by love;* then you dwell in God and God dwells in you, and you possess the true active life.

This is so important. What does the intellect encounter in prayer? It encounters the unutterable mystery, which it experiences as darkness. It cannot comprehend or grasp this dark mystery as He is in Himself. But the heart can love that divine mystery in Himself, and there is no limit for the heart. It can expand indefinitely, through grace of course. And then there follows an affective knowledge, a knowledge of God through this union of love.

Our relationship with our students is similar, that is, it exhibits a similar relationship between knowledge and love; for each person we encounter is a mystery, infinitely knowable. There is so much about our students that is beyond our knowledge. *But we can love them more than we can know them.* And this is possible because each person is an unutterable mystery, created in the image and likeness of God.

And to love them is to take a genuine interest in them, and to give them an opportunity to reveal themselves to us. Allow me to go back to the transfiguration. I mentioned that the translation of Peter's words: "It is good for us to be here", does not quite express the richness of what Peter actually said. At the very least, it should say: "It is beautiful to be here". But since the word is *kalon*, he is talking about the experience of being surrounded by the moral beauty of the two great saints who represent the saints of the Old Testament, and Christ himself, who is God, who is beauty itself. Peter, James, and John do not want this experience to end. They want it to endure indefinitely. And that's what it is like to be in the presence of that kind of spiritual beauty. That's what heaven is going to be like. You and I will be surrounded by saints who are going to be profoundly interested in you. Now, in this world, that is not the case. People aren't interested. They just want to get on with their lives, they have no time for you. They are interested in you if they see that you are in some way useful to them, if there is something in it for them. Otherwise, they are not too interested.

But in heaven, things will be otherwise. Everyone will see you from God's point of view, and their love is made perfect in heaven, so just as God loves each one of you as if there is only one of you, the saints in heaven who see God as He is in himself will pay particular attention to you, and will be deeply interested in you, in knowing you, because in knowing you, they are enlarged and enriched.

I was doing a communion service recently for a local nursing home and there were about twenty or so seniors in the room; the average age was about 85 or thereabouts. Think of the experiences of each of these individuals, 85 or 90 years of experience that I don't have. So, in that room was the accumulated experience of 1,700 years. But if only one person there was able to mentally transfer his or her life experience into me, so that I know this person not just superficially, but deeply, how much more potential wisdom I'd have—since experience is a necessary condition for wisdom. That's just one. Imagine all twenty. And one of our greatest desires, if not our greatest desire, is to be understood. We want to reveal ourselves to others and have others freely choose to listen to us, to receive that self-disclosure.

And in heaven, each saint will see each one of us as someone for whom Christ died, and he died for me because he loves me as though I am the only one that exists. As I said more than once, we have God's undivided attention at every instant of our existence. Now, it's not possible for us to give our undivided attention to many things or many people at the same time; we're limited, finite, but God is unlimited in power, so he can give me his undivided attention unceasingly, and give that to you at the same time, without in any way diminishing the attention he gives to me. What he sees in you, the saints will see in you too, and they will delight in it and desire that you reveal yourself to them. And you in turn will be interested in each person there, and he or she will reveal the entire meaning of their existence to you. And that is going to take much more than a lifetime to achieve. It will take eons and eons. And there is a Greek word for this used in the New Testament: *aiomios*, which means ages of ages—it is often mistranslated as eternal, but it really means ages of ages. Imagine how wonderful that is going to be. It is horrible to be in the presence of people who are indifferent to you, who couldn't care less if you were to drop dead the next day. But in heaven, you are loved by everyone as if you are the only creature that matters, and you will be filled with that kind of love as well. Peter, James, and John felt that on the mountain: Peter says: it is *kalon* (morally beautiful) to be here, to be surrounded by moral nobility, perfect holiness. Let us make three tents, three tabernacles so that this experience can remain.

There are two types of people in this world: those who believe that this life is a preparation for eternal life, and those who believe that this life is all there is, and that everything we do is only a preparation for life in this world. We see this in the two school systems we have: for the public system, education is a preparation for life in this world; for us, education is a preparation for death, insofar as death has been swallowed up in the victory of Christ, and so is a means to eternal life, everlasting life.

I've seen a lot of people in the hospital these past few months, people who have lost their mobility, who have had to spend months and months in a hospital bed, and most of them died after a long period in the hospital or nursing home. I know this for certain: for those who do not have an interior life, who have not cultivated the habit of prayer throughout their lives, these final years or even months are often very painful, very unpleasant, which is why euthanasia is becoming increasingly popular. But those who have a rich interior life, those who have used their lives to prepare for eternal life by learning to pray without ceasing, by learning to contemplate, to spend time with God, giving him our undivided attention for long periods of time, their final months or years, perhaps in a hospital bed or nursing home, are not unbearable, and visiting these people is often a joy, because they are so joyful and thankful. And the wonderful thing about them is that they are not asking to be euthanized. One woman I was visiting in the hospital, who has been an active member of our parish since 1957, before I was born, an active member of the CWL, she was such a delight to visit, but one day she was rather distressed. The MAID team came by to give her the option of checking out early. She was genuinely distressed. In her high pitched voice, she told them: "I'll go when I go". The wonderful thing about these people who have a prayer life is that instead of their deaths becoming a final act of rebellion, an act of murder, their deaths become a final prayer, a final offering to God in thanksgiving for all they've received throughout their lives

So, to sum up, the more we pray in the prayer of silent adoration, the more we will be able to see, in the world of time and multiplicity and matter, the divine element that is hidden behind everything that is, the divine Word that uttered all this into existence in the first place, and sustains it in existence, the divine Word that everything in the world praises and points to. The world becomes more beautiful. Everyday life becomes more beautiful. We won't have to escape to Florida every winter, because we will see the beauty in the winter, the beauty in the cold and chill that praises the Lord, as we read in the book of Daniel: "Frost and chill, praise and exalt him forever." We will begin to see in the present what we will inevitably see later on looking back. And life becomes less anxious.