

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

*Be silent. Be still.
Alone. Empty before your God.
Say nothing. Ask nothing.
Let your God love you.
That is all.
Quiet. Still Be.*

The Journey HOME to God and one's true self

The most essential 'coming home' is that deep and universal experience we all cherish in the depths of our beings and that is the longing to 'come home' to our true self and to our God. Whenever we touch, ever so lightly, upon that home-centre within us we experience something of the *"infinitely more than we could ever have asked for or imagined."* To begin to feel harmony, balance, peace and joy welling up from deep within our souls is so liberating, so transforming! It is our mystic soul awakening.

As Karl Rahner has said, *"In the coming age we must all become mystics or be nothing at all."*

On our journey to this 'Home-within' we will pass through many stages of faith growth and psychological development. Eventually we all will come to face an experience that stops us. We seem to enter an inner space so unfamiliar and strange at first, that the geography of our soul cannot adapt to its newness. This is the time of the dark night of the senses and the beginning of contemplation.

THRESHOLD CROSSING

This is probably the most important threshold in the spiritual journey and the most challenging of experiences to navigate through. It is a universal experience and while some persons may perceive it and approach it with dread and apprehension, experience teaches us that it is all about Love!

**The darkness of the 'night' and
the light of contemplation are**

like the two arms of God's love embracing us.

While one arm of God is purging us of our false and wounded self, the other arm of God is awakening within us a consciousness of our transforming union with God in pure love.

The dark night and contemplation are God-given twin gifts that bestow upon us depth, freedom and an incredible simplicity and joy. They are the fruits of a deep, authentic and healthy spirituality.

There are many modern-day pilgrims trying to grapple with moving forward in their life journeys. Even though we often stumble and stand perplexed in the face of so much that remains shrouded in mystery and the unknown, we still seek out *'the more'*. Deep down we all embrace the fundamental longing for our true 'Home' in loving union with God.

This THRESHOLD period can span several years or God may accomplish a great deal in a short time. The emptying of 'the false self' will be the suffering of our ego diminishment and at the same time our 'true self' will emerge more and more into consciousness. Co-operate with God with as much receptivity as you can.

With time, patience and perseverance we will be and become the person God created us to be. Yet throughout the intricacies of the process, there will be, along with the pain, a mysterious peace.

There are three signs that indicate a call to contemplative prayer. These signs emerge in the lives of many persons. Know that they are normal and trustworthy guides to authenticate a call to contemplative prayer.

The three DISCERNMENT signs that one is being called to contemplative prayer:

1. The first sign: aridity unable to pray as before

There are many prayer forms we may have experienced up to this time: for example, saying prayers, rosary, devotions, then advancing on to Scripture meditation, using our mind, imagination and feelings, having conversations with God.

Gradually, over time, our prayer becomes simpler – using less words, thoughts, ideas, less feelings – it just starts to grow quieter and take on more of an attitude of loving surrender - possibly using a short mantra. Now the person is entering contemplative prayer.

John of the Cross, a Carmelite mystic of 16th Century Spain describes contemplation as “*silent, imageless and loving communion with God that transcends all discursiveness. It is the secret, peaceful and loving infusion of God which, if the soul allows it to happen, enflames it in the spirit of love.*”

So be gentle with yourself. You will ever so gradually learn to understand the language of silence. It is God, not you, who initiates your soul to contemplation.

The second sign: unable to focus the mind

At this stage in prayer, some speak of having ‘*monkeys in my mind.*’ When the mind is drawn into this aridity and emptiness of thought, all kinds of thoughts and distractions can come bombarding into one’s consciousness.

It is understandable that there will be considerable frustration and confusion with this new way of praying. We can handle these storms by not deliberately fostering or entertaining them. Nor must we fight them off directly either, for that just gives them more attention. While these storms humble us and we see our poverty of spirit, we must simply remain lovingly attentive to God-within.

We can repeat a short mantra to focus the mind on God as all the while the thoughts roam around in our minds. With time and consistent practice we learn to simply allow these thoughts and distractions “**to come and let them go**”. Return to simply keeping our attention and desire upon God.

In contemplation, all effortful focusing is disappearing and awareness starts to assume an open, all-embracing quality. God is luring us deeper into a Presence - living in 'the now moment' with an unfocused openness to all. How can I be sure this effortlessness is prayer? Surrender to God in the 'not knowing!'

The third sign: desire for solitude.

We experience a longing to go frequently into solitude and enjoy quiet loving prayer. The effort to be open, to be receptive, seems to be the only thing the person wants to do now.

Our most loving response to this gift of inflowing contemplation is to receive it with gratitude and peace.

As much as possible, we will be content to remain simply with a loving attentiveness in God, without concern, without effort and without desire to feel anything or experience anything, hear anything or understand anything. The silence and the solitude will sustain us mysteriously as 'enough'.

As we remain in this receptive attitude of being led in love by God along a way we cannot know, we will experience a growing awareness of a confident trust invading our spirit. Thomas Merton wrote in Thoughts in Solitude:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going,
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself...
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you
and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.
And I know that if I do this,
you will lead me by the right road although
I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always...*

SIMULTANEOUSLY there is the other arm of God's embrace working in these three areas causing the "dark night of the senses":

1. Aridity throughout all of one's life.

(Let go the need to know. Live by Faith.)

2. Deep spiritual anxiety.

(Let go the need to control. Live by Hope)

3. Want to withdraw into solitude.

(Let go the craving for pleasure. Live by Love.)

What is contemplative prayer?

Teresa of Avila says it is ... "Behold your Beloved beholding you."

John of the Cross says it is ... "Remain loving one's Beloved."