

Chapter Five

CONTEMPLATION

There is a popular saying that circulates at least once in every family with a glow of joy because it usually involves a significant change in the person. It is said that "she (or he) fell in love." It's an interesting saying, because to fall is to lose the ground of our security and enter the unknown. According to science, we fall because of gravity. When we lose balance, we are pulled by something bigger than ourselves. To "fall in love" is to lose your balance, so to speak. It is being pulled into the unknown by a force or gravity that pushes us to leave behind our security and surrender ourselves to the arms of another. Something greater than ourselves pulls us beyond ourselves to another. This call is the gravity of love.

Contemplation for Clare begins with *falling in love*. It is to be grasped by the power of God's love in the crucified Christ and to surrender ourselves to that love. It is not some kind of abstract spiritual union with God that ends on a note of spiritual bliss, but a real personal encounter with the God of love in Jesus Christ. Looking at Christ crucified causes us to lose our balance and be attached to the divine embrace of love. Clare describes contemplation in the same context as personal transformation. It indicates that we cannot behold God unless we are on the path of transformation. We behold God as we are transformed into God, or, we might say, "we are conformed as we are transformed" into God. In her third letter to Agnes, she writes:

Put your mind before the mirror of eternity! Put your soul *in the glow of glory*! Place your heart *in the figure of the* divine substance! And *transform* your whole being into the *image of Divinity itself through contemplation*.

Although the word contemplation literally means "one in mind with," for Clare the mind cannot be separated from the soul or heart. Contemplation, therefore, is of the mind, soul, and heart and is a deepening of love through transformation in the beloved. Transformation is the basis of contemplation because only when mind, soul, and heart are open to the experience of God, touched by the grace of divine love, is it possible to begin to contemplate God. This change does not occur in isolation, but in the encounter with God, because God comes to us in the Son of Christ. Contemplation, therefore, is relational. It is the encounter with God as God appears to us in the common flesh of our humanity and in creation. It is the fruit of the poor who contemplate the crucified and poor Christ and who sees in this poverty the brightness of divine splendor. Contemplation is not a matter of self-reflection, nor does it require an escape from the world. It is not a privilege of the cloistered monk or nun, nor does it require certain characteristics. It is not a

genetic predisposition or an esoteric experience. Contemplation means the ability to look at weak humanity and see God's presence there, and to unite with what one sees.

Christianity is a sacramental religion, an outward sign of invisible grace. God is revealed to us, and yet God is hidden in the humble signs of our creation. We often try to rationalize God and seek God in the brackets of our minds. However, the kind of contemplation that Clare proposes is from the heart, it is seeing God in ordinary reality. Francis used the word *contemplate* to describe the hidden presence of God in the humanity of Christ. In his first Admonition on the Body of Christ, he wrote:

[T]he saw only His flesh [through his bodily vision], but they believed Him to be God as they beheld Him with their spiritual eyes, ... as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, we see and firmly believe that they are His holiest, most living, truest Body and Blood.

For Francis, contemplation means seeing God in Christ with the eyes of the spirit or seeing the divine in the human being through spiritual vision. For Francis, it is the humanity of Christ that allows him to see God with the "eyes of the spirit." God's humility is such that God hides Himself under a common piece of bread, common humanity, common creation. "Look," he says, "the humility of God!" For Francis and Clara, contemplation is not an intellectual exercise; It is a depth of vision, a penetrating gaze that gets to the heart of reality. We can say that the depth of something does not indicate that "behind" the phenomenon something else is waiting to appear, but that the very appearance of the phenomenon – as a form of being – reveals a depth. Contemplation is a way of seeing the depth of something that leads to union with what one sees. It decentralizes by taking us out of ourselves and into the other through vision, it is "horizontally ecstatic." By seeing, we enter into the mystery and unite with what we see.

To contemplate, one must first be able to look, not to look at something or only to see with the physical eye, but to penetrate with the heart what is normally not seen by the eye. The eye of the heart must be opened by grace, illumined by knowledge, and strengthened by love. For Clare, the eye of the heart learns to see correctly in the mirror of the cross. Here, she indicates, one learns to contemplate by finding the truth of who we are in relation to God's incarnate Word and incarnating that Word in our own lives. She tells Agnes to "love totally the One Who gave Himself totally for [her] love." The progression of prayer that leads to contemplation begins with looking at Christ crucified and continues to penetrate into the depths of this reality until the shores of the cross, poverty and humility give way to the heart of charity, which is hidden in the suffering heart of Christ. The movement toward contemplation is from the outside in. It begins with the gaze of the beloved on the cross, which leads to the internalization of the Spirit that unites us to Christ. We are drawn into the mystery of God hidden in Christ. For Clare, the path to contemplation is linked to the experience of intense suffering, an experience of having to die. She tells Agnes that she must "die with him on the cross of tribulation." In a sense, we need to experience a purification

and purging of all that is not of God in order to live fully God-centered. God becomes the dwelling place or cocoon where the old person dies and a new person emerges, just as the worm in the cocoon is transformed into the butterfly. Once a soul is dead to itself and its attachments, it breaks out of the cocoon transformed. When one has been intensely purified, the Beloved is experienced as the one:

Whose affection awakens, Whose contemplation refreshes, Whose goodness is satisfied, Whose joy is restored.

We no longer live by our own strength, but by the Spirit of Christ working in us. For Clare, contemplation is entering a new place of refuge, the dwelling place of God's love.

As a deepening of love, contemplation is a continuous action, a continuous transformation, since nothing is more liberating and active than love. This love not only allows someone like Agnes to see more clearly and deeply the depths of the Spouse's love for her, but also to feel and taste the hidden sweetness of God. The contemplative not only sees the depth of things, but the very vision leads to a kind of "love felt," to compassion. Contemplation awakens the senses and leads them to an openness to God. We see differently, hear differently, taste new levels of new things, and touch God's presence in what others perceive as secular reality. The contemplative realizes that there is nothing profane for those who know how to see, for the whole world is charged with the greatness of God.

Clare understands that this new level of the senses, this deep and penetrating vision of sacred reality, cannot occur without transformation in the beloved, and transformation cannot occur without continually looking into the mirror of the cross. His idea of contemplation is neither intellectual nor speculative, but is a dwelling in love. The one who contemplates God is the one whose heart is centered on God. But to get to that place of centered, to that loving heart that dwells in God, we must look into the mirror of the cross and see there the joys and sorrows of being human, the joy of God's all-encompassing love, and the sorrow of seeing one's spouse "despised, wounded, and scourged." Clare indicates that we must place our whole being—heart, mind, and soul—in the mirror of the cross and "*transform* [our] whole being *into the image* of Divinity itself." This indwelling in God, by which we are transformed into the image of God, means that we remain with God, especially in times of suffering, so that faithfulness to God (just as God is faithful to us) leads to immense desire and deeper and deeper love.

Francis of Assisi was a contemplative. "In all the poor," Bonaventure wrote, "the poorest Christian also saw before him a picture of Christ." The story of Greccio, where Francis celebrated the birth of Jesus, indicates that Francis saw more than a mere child in a nativity scene, since, according to the sources, he did not put a child in the fool when reenacting the Christmas scene. Instead, he had an altar built over the manger and celebrated a Mass, evoking the charm of the Incarnation. With his heart ablaze with love and his eyes filled with tears, he considered God's

overflowing goodness poured out to us in the birth of Jesus and the beauty of creation. The birth of Jesus was not an event of the past for Francis, but a living reality of God's permanent presence in creation. God is not an abstract concept, but a living reality of love, and it is this love that Francis discovered at the heart of the Incarnation. In Bonaventure's view, those who know Christ know this love, and those who know this love know each element of creation as the expression of this love. What Francis came to realize in the people he met and in the things of creation is that each person or thing expresses the love of God and, as such, expresses Christ, for Christ is the love of God made visible in creation. In this way, Francis' contemplative heart touched the contemplative heart of God through the heart of Christ. The whole of creation became for him a living icon of Christ, as Bonaventura wrote:

Aroused by all to divine love, he rejoiced in all the works of the Lord's bands, and by their delightful demonstration he rose to the reason and cause that gave life to his life. In beautiful things he continued his own Beauty, and through the footprints imprinted on things, he followed his Beloved everywhere, making for himself a ladder by which he could climb to hold him, which is absolutely desirable.

The power of the contemplative vision for Francis was at the same time a desire for God. His contemplation of creation was not just a passive vision, but a deep, penetrating look into the truth of the other. His continual desire for God led him to realize that each creature is uniquely loved by God. He embraced every God-centered creature as if he embraced Christ Himself, for in fact each one spoke to him of Christ's presence. In this way, God's gift of God's goodness was made visible in the disfigured flesh of the leper and in the little things of creation. Everything led Francis to embrace his beloved, Christ, because everything expressed the Word of God in some way.

Francis' mode of contemplation is encapsulated in Clare's directive to Agnes: "Look into that mirror every day... [and] contemplate the ineffable charity that led Him to suffer in the wood of the Cross." Contemplation is not an end in itself for Clare, but a path of union that must ultimately lead to action, because to see God is to love God, and to love is to act. It's a demanding kind of vision because if we truly see God's truth hidden in the frail flesh, how can we turn away? Are we not impelled to reach out and touch this God we so desire? Thus, she says to Agnes: "Let yourself be inflamed more strongly by the fervor of charity." Contemplation, inflamed by love, is the basis of costly discipleship. For if we truly see the depths of God revealed in people or creatures that might otherwise be discarded, rejected, or annihilated, then we must act. We are to do what we say we are lovers of God. Clare realizes that such an action is not superficial; on the contrary, it takes all that we are to unite with God in a weak, fragile, and suffering humanity. We can be rejected, imprisoned, excluded from the community, ostracized by the church, but if we really see it, we must truly love. For Clare (as well as for Francis and Bonaventura), this love is the way of the crucified Christ.

While contemplation leads to a new place of refuge in God, it also leads to being a Suffering Servant, someone willing to lay down one's life for the sake of another. Contemplation can never be private, intellectual, or purely spiritual, for it is a matter of vision. It is not only that we see the good and the beautiful, avoiding the ugly or the despicable. In fact, we see the ugly and the contemptible as beautiful because God's love dwells precisely in weakness. Beauty appears in what is otherwise despised. Contemplation pushes us to see things clearly and truthfully—for what they are, not for what we expect them to be. The Gospels are full of visionary sayings: "[i]f your eye is sick, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Matthew 6:23). "But blessed be your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matthew 13:16). That is why Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they did not see the goodness of God in their midst. "If you were blind, you would not have sinned. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (John 9:41). The person who contemplates God is one whose heart is turned to God, for the path to contemplation removes the hardness of heart that blinds us in our search for truth, beauty, and goodness.

Although the traditional monastic path of contemplation leads to rest in God, Clare held that contemplation leads to action. Transformation and union with God does not mean retirement from the ministry, but new ways of being in the world. The more we are united to God, the more we come to act like God—not the God we imagine to be above us surrounded by angelic choirs of angels—but the God on the cross, the God who revealed himself to us in the crucified Christ. After Francis of Assisi received the stigmata, he did not retire into solitary retirement, but returned to the ministry of lepers, burning with the desire to bring the compassionate love of Christ to those in need. Both Clare and Francis show us that those who seek to contemplate God must learn to contemplate the beloved crucified Spouse, which means coming to dwell in the mystery of suffering and love. Whoever seeks union with God must become a servant of love.

While the cross is central to Clare's spirituality, hers is not a spirituality of sin and guilt, but rather one of freedom and transformation. The cross is the mirror of truth, where we come to see ourselves in our capacity to love and in our breaking. An honest acceptance of who we are, with our strengths and weaknesses, is liberating, in Clare's view. Dwelling in the mirror of Christ crucified brings us to this place of inner freedom, a freedom that is born of the joy of the Spirit and union with the Spouse. Clare advises Agnes to study her face in the mirror every day so that she can be adorned with beautiful robes inside and out, transforming into union with the one she loves. To be adorned within and without is to "put on Christ" or "to represent Christ", that is, transformation is imitation.

The relationship between the mirror and self-identity, which Clare describes in her fourth letter, corresponds to the method of contemplating the Crucified One that she describes in her second letter. A consistent look at the crucified Spouse ultimately leads to imitation, for when we cling to the crucified Spouse with all our hearts, we become an image of that Spouse in our own lives. Clare tells us that the transformation or imitation of Christ cannot occur without self-identity

or acceptance of ourselves in relation to God and neighbor. The more we allow ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit of love, the more we become ourselves, and the more we become ourselves, the more we resemble God. Each of us was created in a unique way to express God's love in the world and to show God's face to the world. The integral relationship between self-identity and the imitation of Christ through contemplation is a path of transformation by which love brings to the surface the image in which we were created, an image that is made beautiful by the cross of suffering and love.

Clare's spiritual path is a spiral that goes to the depth of the human person's capacity for God and the capacity of God's love for the human person. While Clare leaves only a few traces of insight to walk this path, Francis tells us more clearly that contemplation is the work of the Holy Spirit. Drawing on the Gospel of John, he writes, "The Father dwells *in unapproachable light*, and God *is spirit*, and *no one has seen God at any time*. Therefore he cannot be seen except in the Spirit, for *it is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer*" (John 4:24; John 1:18). The key to contemplation is the Spirit of the Lord. We need the Spirit of the Lord, who unites us to Christ 18 to see the depths of things. This is also Clare's idea. Openness to the Spirit means a dynamic relationship with God. In her second letter to Agnes, she writes:

[M]ay you move on with safety, joy and speed, in the pursuit of that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you.

If we are united to Christ, we have the Spirit of Christ, and so we imitate Christ by the very expression of our "face"—the person God created us to be. It is the Spirit who conforms us to Christ and allows us to see the depths of God hidden in creation, "for the Spirit seeks all things, even the depths of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10). The link between contemplation and transformation for Clare means that as we come to a deeper truth of ourselves in relation to God, we are filled with the Spirit of God. It is the Spirit who allows us to see with the heart and contemplate the other with a penetrating gaze. In light of this relationship, Clare writes:

Therefore, that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross, exhorted those who passed by to consider, saying: "All you who pass by the way, look and see if there is any suffering like mine!"

It is difficult to see the suffering of another person if we have not accepted our own suffering. We cannot clearly see the truth of another if we have not first clearly seen the truth of ourselves. The relationship between "seeing" and "becoming" is governed by truth and love. Honest acceptance of oneself and the true capacity to love shape what we become. Just as we see the sufferings of Christ, so we must love: "From this moment on, then, O Queen of our heavenly King, let thyself be inflamed more strongly by the fervor of charity." What Clare suggests is that contemplation is not a preliminary step to transformation or imitation, but rather that we must strive to be transformed into Christ in order to contemplate the truth (the depths) of Christ. Contemplation

deepens as we continue to be transformed into Christ as we come to the truth of who we are in God.

The path to contemplation, therefore, begins with the acceptance of God's love in Christ, followed by a continual gaze at the truth of that love, which must lead to the growth of self-identity in relation to God. Only those who are poor can look long enough to become inwardly free to be united to Christ. The gift of the Spirit is the fruit of poverty, which makes us interiorly free and open to accept the embrace of God's love in the embrace of the crucified Christ. The freedom that arises from poverty is not independence or autonomy, but the freedom of the Spirit that not only unites us to Christ, but allows us to look into the heart of Christ. If we "put on Christ" in our own life and see Christ's suffering in our own life, we can then see Christ in another and ultimately love like Christ. Contemplating God's crucified love propels us to take on the form of crucified love in our own lives.

Clare's mode of contemplation is central to her relationship with God. It is not the goal, but the means of union and transformation. Without contemplation, transformation is not possible, and without transformation, the Body of Christ cannot grow. She therefore asks Agnes (and us) to dwell in the love of the crucified Christ, to center our hearts on a God who is not afraid to love what is weak and fragile and to imitate that love. Seeing, loving, and becoming what we love is the fruit of contemplation that can only be realized when we accept the poverty of being human and, in that poverty, we accept the call to union with God. The words of the Book of Lamentations that Clare uses are the words of the contemplative heart: *"All of you who pass by the way, / look and see if there is any suffering / like my suffering."* Do we really see Christ's suffering, or do we just walk by and let Christ continue hanging on a cross?

Recently, a Protestant minister enrolled in one of my courses on Franciscan spirituality. We spent a great deal of time discussing the mysticism of Clare's mirror and the implications of her mysticism for the Christian life. Clare's spirituality made a deep impression on this young man. He told me that near the end of the semester, around Thanksgiving, his mother came to visit him. He hadn't spoken to her in several years and apparently had a distant relationship with her. However, as he reflected on the mirror of Clare's cross, he began to see his mother in a new light. Instead of seeing a woman who abandoned and abused him, he saw in her the figure of the crucified Christ, and what he saw impelled him to act with compassion. Before Clare, he said he would have quickly ushered his mother onto the next bus on the way to a long journey. But after reflecting on Clare and the mirror of the cross, he recognized the presence of the Crucified One not only in his mother, but also within himself. While he saw his mother crucified by weakness and frailty, he saw himself crucified by the demons of his past, preventing him from loving her. So, instead of pushing her outside, he took her to buy new clothes, took her back to the assisted care home, saw that the room was decorated and clean, and that proper care would be warranted for her. Through the extended figure of the crucified Christ, love was restored between mother and

child, because the child was able to contemplate the hidden presence of God in his mother and transcend his own limitations in his desire to love.

The Path to God Through the Contemplative Vision for Clare takes seriously the absurd love of God visible in the scandal of the cross. What we in our time consider absurd—frailty, weakness, suffering, and death—Clare, like many mystics of her time, understood as the guaranteed path to divine love. The key to discovering this love hidden in the field of the human heart is contemplation. For Clare, as for Francis, contemplation means looking at the earth while seeing the things from heaven.²³ It means seeing things for what they really are, even in their weakness and fragility, and not for what we project onto them or want them to be. His path of contemplation drives us to ask: What do we see as we travel the Earth? What are we looking for when we walk around the world? Clare reminds us that contemplation is the vision of a heart centered on Christ. Unless we can see God hidden in the fragility of our created world and love the God we see, our blindness remains and the world persists in darkness. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we foolishly ask, "Have you not heard? Didn't you see it?" Never realizing all the time that Christ is among us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How is contemplation part of your daily view of the world?
2. Does the cross play a central role in your desire for contemplation?
3. How do you understand the relationship between contemplation and transformation?
4. In What Ways Do You Cultivate a Life of Contemplation