

Contemplation: Seeing and loving – *Franciscan Prayer* – Ilia Delio, OSF – pp. 127-129

A student once wrote in a paper, “I never thought I could strive for contemplation. I thought contemplation is for special people, and not for the ordinary person like me.” My response to him was, “no person is too ordinary to contemplate God. It is essential to living the Christian life.” The idea that everyone is called to contemplation was entirely new for this student and I am sure for many others as well. We don’t view the Christian life as one of contemplation and we certainly don’t speak of Christian life as a contemplative life or hear it preached this way on Sunday. Yet, if we have been following the path of Franciscan prayer all along, we realize that this path of pray is a contemplative one. The Progression of prayer that leads to contemplation begins with the gaze on the crucified Christ and continues to penetrate the depths of this reality until the one who gazes comes to see the heart of charity hidden in the heart of Christ. We have already described contemplation as a penetrating vision but we must also concede that it is a deepening of love, a continuous action of ongoing transformation, since nothing is more liberating and active than love. This love not only enables one to see more clearly and deeply into the depths of the Spouse, the heart of Christ, but to feel and taste the hidden sweetness of God.

In his first *admonition*, Francis describes contemplation as seeing God in Christ with the eyes of the Spirit. He describes contemplation as the vision of God’s humility. The Father who dwells in “inaccessible light,” he writes, is humbly present in the Son through the love of the Spirit. This is the meaning of Incarnation which we encounter in the Eucharist. God’s humbling movement toward humanity: “Each day he humbles himself as when he came from the royal throne into the Virgin’s womb, each day he himself comes to us, appearing humbly.” Contemplation for Francis and Clare is a penetrating gaze that gets to the heart of reality. It is looking into the depths of things and seeing them in their true relation to God. Bonaventure calls this type of penetrating vision “contuition” whereby one sees concrete reality in itself and in God.

For Clare, contemplation begins with the mirror of the crucified Christ. That is why she advised Agnes to see herself in the mirror each day. It is Clare, I believe, who provides a common path to contemplation because what she advocates is daily prayer before the cross – something every person can do. To accept God in the Crucified is to accept God in our own lives and this means to accept who we are. Clare draws a relationship between contemplation and self-identity. The more we contemplate or dwell on the mystery of Christ by gazing upon the Crucified, the more we discover our own identity. We might say that the cross provides the most honest reflection of ourselves. When we gaze on this mirror of the cross we not only see who God is, self-giving love, but gazing on the God of humble love leads us to reflect on our own lives. So the gaze is self-reflective. The crucified Christ, who is the image of God, is the image in which we are created and thus the basis of our identity. If we gaze long enough, that is, if gazing becomes a way of life then it will lead to a new level of self-knowledge. We will come to a new understanding of ourselves and this understanding will be creative, since it will transform the one who gazes in the mirror of the cross into a reflection of the image itself. That is, the more we contemplate Christ by gazing upon the cross, the more we will come to resemble Christ. This image of God, revealed in the one who gazes on the mirror of the Crucified, will be expressed as a new “birth” of Christ in the believer. To place oneself in the mirror of the cross, therefore, is to expose oneself to the joys and sorrows of being human, the joy of God’s all-embracing love and the sorrow of the Spouse “despised, struck, and scourged.” By dwelling in the mirror of the cross – heart, mind and soul – we are called to “transform our whole being into the image of the Godhead itself.” In this way, we are called to a life of contemplation.

Clare had particular insight with regard to the capacity of the human person to image God. In her fourth letter to Agnes, she draws a relationship between contemplation and the human face. She tells Agnes to “gaze upon that mirror each day....and continually study your face within it, so that you may adorn yourself within and without with beautiful robes.” Although Clare does not define the goal of contemplation explicitly, she describes this goal broadly as conversion through imitation of Christ and interior transformation in order to reflect the face of Christ to the world. She is certain that such transformation can only take place in the mirror of the cross. She speaks of the human face as the sign of transformation because the face discloses the person in a particular way and therefore reflects one’s personal identity or self-expression. The face symbolizes the

person because it both reveals what a person is and yet conceals the inner depth of the person. The idea of the “face” not only connotes uniqueness and distinction, that which makes a person who she or he is, but it connotes form or expression since it is the face that one sees. To study one’s face in the cross means to question the form or shape of one’s life. The face is the epiphany of God. Only by becoming truly human, like the beloved spouse, does one disclose the face of God.

If contemplation is to study one’s face in the mirror of the cross, then contemplation is the way the self achieves its true form as image of God. To study one’s face in the cross is to ask, what am I? What distinguishes me? For Clare, we cannot really answer these questions without looking at our image in the mirror of the cross. The self is not a substance from God, according to Clare, but is created precisely in relationship to God. To come to the knowledge of who we are is to discover the treasure within each of us, the image of God in which we are created and by which we are in relationship with God.

A letter to the Entire Order – Francis of Assisi- The Saint – Prayer: “Let Everyone be Struck....”.

26. Let everyone be struck with fear,
let the whole world tremble,
and let the heavens exult
when Christ, the Son of the living God,
is present on the altar in the hands of a priest!
27. O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity!
O sublime humility!
O humble sublimity!
The Lord of the universe,
God and the Son of God,
so humbles Himself
that for our salvation
He hides Himself
under an ordinary piece of bread!
28. Brothers, look at the humility of God,
and *pour out your hearts before Him! (Ps 62:9)*
Humble yourselves
that you may be exalted by Him! (1Ptr5:6)
29. Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,
that He Who gives Himself totally to you
may receive you totally!

God is Love (Deus Caritas Est) – Pope Benedict XVI – Paragraph 41- Mary’s Prayerfulness

The lives of the saints are not limited to their earthly biographies but also include their being and working in God after death. In the saints one thing becomes clear: those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them. In no one do we see this more clearly than in Mary. The words addressed by the crucified Lord to his disciple—to John and through him to all disciples of Jesus: “Behold, your mother!” (Jn 19:27)—are fulfilled anew in every generation. Mary has truly become the Mother of all believers. Men and women of every time and place have recourse to her motherly kindness and her virginal purity and grace, in all their needs and aspirations, their joys and sorrows, their moments of loneliness and their common endeavours. They constantly experience the gift of her goodness and the unfailing love which she pours out from the depths of her heart. The testimonials of gratitude, offered to her from every continent and culture, are a recognition of that pure love which is not self-seeking but simply benevolent. At the same time, the devotion of the faithful shows an infallible intuition of how such love is possible: it becomes so as a result of the most intimate union with God, through which the soul is totally pervaded by him—a condition which enables those who have drunk from the fountain of God’s love to become in their turn a fountain from which “flow rivers of living water” (Jn

7:38). Mary, Virgin and Mother, shows us what love is and whence it draws its origin and its constantly renewed power. To her we entrust the Church and her mission in the service of love:

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
you have given the world its true light,
Jesus, your Son – the Son of God.
You abandoned yourself completely
to God's call
and thus became a wellspring
of the goodness which flows forth from him.
Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
Teach us to know and love him,
so that we too can become
capable of true love
and be fountains of living water
in the midst of a thirsting world.

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
Selah
that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.

Selah

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!

The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
God has blessed us;
let all the ends of the earth fear him!