

A CONTEMPLATIVE PATH FOR ALL

Philip McParland

THERE ARE MANY pathways to God. Among them is the contemplative path, which has attracted men and women from the earliest Christian times. In the popular mind it tends to be associated with cloistered monks and nuns, and hermits. This suggests that one needs to be living in a particular kind of environment to be a contemplative. In reality nothing could be further from the truth. The contemplative path is a spiritual path that can be lived by anyone in any situation or context. I would like to offer a brief description of the contemplative path showing how it can be accessible and available to all. This description I simply call the four 'R's.

Receive

The first 'R' is *Receive*. Our fundamental stance before God is one of receptivity. All that is essential in our spiritual lives comes from God. Let us begin with God's presence. We do not create God's presence in our lives. God's presence in our lives is given. In God we live and move and have our being. As Gerard Manley Hopkins so aptly put it, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God'. Without God's presence we would cease to exist. God's presence is a loving presence, a creative presence, a sustaining presence. At every moment of every day God is loving us, creating us, sustaining us.

Similarly, we do not create a relationship with God. The relationship God has with us, with each of us, is given. It is a natural consequence of God's presence in our lives. God's presence creates relationship because God is relationship. To be God is to be in relationship. This is what we mean when we say that God is Trinity. Whether we are aware of it or not God is in relationship with us. Spirituality is our discovery of this relationship. It is our acceptance that we have received the gift of being in relationship with the divine presence.

And then there is unconditional love. We do not make God love us. God's love for us is free, unmerited, gratuitous. It is pure gift. The Christian life is not about winning God's approval and God's favour. It



The Annunciation, by Andrea del Sarto, 1528

is not about making ourselves acceptable to God. Our efforts, our good deeds do not make God love us. God's love for us is given. It is a fact. This is why the contemplative path is about accepting the unconditional love of God. Henri Nouwen said: 'Our life is a short opportunity to say "yes" to God's love. Our death a full coming home to that love.'¹ Saying 'yes' to unconditional love is the contemplative way.

The essential movement or flow of our spiritual lives is from God to us, not from us to God. The spiritual life is not an ascending movement, but a descending one. This is why a contemplative prays with open and empty hands. It is why Mary is a great model of the contemplative way. Mary at the annunciation was truly receptive. She welcomed the angel, allowed the Holy Spirit to take possession of her and received the gift of Jesus.

The foundation of the contemplative path is an acceptance that all is grace, all is gift, all is given. This acceptance creates a disposition towards receptivity which is reflected in the way we live our lives.

Recognise

The second 'R' of the contemplative path is *Recognise*. Those who wish to live the contemplative way seek to develop their capacity to recognise the presence of God in all that is real.

The Ignatian tradition invites us to find God in all things. This invitation is based on the belief that God's presence is revealed in and

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Here and Now* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 171.

through the totality of our human lives. We cannot limit God's presence to the 'religious bits': to what happens in church, to times of prayer, to the celebration of the sacraments. God's presence is manifested in our encounters with other people, in our relationships, in the inner stirring of our hearts, in art and music and nature, in our times of leisure, in our pain and struggles, in the events of our daily lives. All these things and more are sources of God's revelations. They are the window that looks inward to God. The human life of every person is the holy ground, the sacred place where God is met and known.

For most people, recognising the ways in which God is present in their lives does not come naturally. Tuning into God's presence is in fact an art, a discipline that needs to be cultivated. Among the things that can help us to grow in contemplative awareness let me mention three.

1. *Take time to stand and stare.* Most people today are too busy to *stand*. Perhaps this is because they get their value from their work. A lot of the time we are in overdrive, under pressure to *do*, to achieve, to produce. It seems that we are not allowed to *be* any more. We have, perhaps, lost the art of play. Play is not only for children. It is for adults too. Play is a non-productive activity. It allows us to be and to rejoice in the act of being. By taking time to stand we are free to *stare*. Staring is a particular way of seeing, of looking at reality. To stare is not to analyze or define reality. It is to enter into communion with reality. In the words of William McNamara it is to take 'a long loving look at the real'.² To be willing to do this opens us to the reality of God and allows us to glimpse the God of reality.
2. *Pay greater attention to what is happening around you and within you.* There is an old Portuguese proverb that says, 'When God wants to hide something he places it right in front of our eyes'. Often God is staring us in the face and we do not see him! Elizabeth Browning puts this well when she says,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes
The rest sit round, and pluck blackberries.³

² William McNamara, *Wild and Robust: The Adventure of Christian Humanism* (Cambridge, Ma: Cowley, 2006), 120.

³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, in *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* (London: Penguin, 1995), 232.

Perhaps we do not recognise God because we do not expect to find God in the ordinary things of life. But the truth is, 'Earth's crammed with heaven / And every common bush afire with God'. Believing God is in the ordinary is one thing, being attentive to the ordinary is another. Unless we are really paying attention to what is happening in our lives we are unlikely to notice the divine presence. The practice of mindfulness, widespread today, is one way of paying attention to what is happening in our lives. This can help us to develop our capacity to recognise the presence of God in all that is real.

3. *Practise the examen or review of awareness.* The examen is a form of prayer that comes from the Ignatian tradition. It involves spending about ten minutes before bedtime looking back over the day in the light of the question: where was God in my life today? Gently surveying the day with this question in mind helps us to notice the way God is working in our lives and to realise how we can in fact find God in all things. It also increases our sensitivity to the movements, often subtle, of the Holy Spirit.

Rely

Mention of the Holy Spirit brings me to the third 'R': *Rely*. The contemplative path is a path of reliance. Contemplatives know their dependence on God. They accept their own weaknesses and powerlessness to save themselves. With St Paul they glorify 'him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine' (Ephesians 3:21). Contemplatives rely on a power that is not their own: the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the gift given to us from above to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Let me suggest what this means in practice.

The Holy Spirit is our helper. We cannot live the Christian life through our own power and strength alone. Jesus knew that what he was asking us to do was humanly impossible. He knew we would need divine help. This is why he and his Father gave us the gift of their Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our energizer, the one who empowers us to live like Jesus in our daily lives. The Holy Spirit is also the one who helps us to pray.

The Holy Spirit enlightens us. Many of the traditional prayers we say to the Holy Spirit focus on inspiration, understanding and enlightenment. This is because we associate the Holy Spirit with the gifts of wisdom and discernment. We naturally turn to the Holy Spirit when we need to be

inspired and when we have important decisions to make. When it comes to guidance and to the ability to see the hand of God at work in our lives we are dependent on the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit transforms us. We are invited to become like Jesus. Our destiny is to share in the very life of God. The problem is that we all have hurts, biases and selfish tendencies within us that need to be healed and purified. This healing and purification is the work of the Holy Spirit. One of the symbols we use to describe the action of the Holy Spirit is fire. Fire both refines and burns. The flame of the Holy Spirit within us is a refining fire. It burns away the evil in our hearts so that we can become like Jesus.

The Holy Spirit unites us, and is often referred to as the bond of love. This is a beautiful description: in the same way that a child is the bond of love between a husband and wife so the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son in the life of God. The Holy Spirit is also the bond of love between Jesus and us, and indeed between the members of the Christian community. The Holy Spirit is the one who links us up, who makes us into a family, who is the source of unity between us. This is why we say that the Church was born as a community on the first Pentecost. There is a divine energy flowing between us, holding us together, allowing us to affect one another even when we are physically separated. This divine energy is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the bond of love

This is the reality of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This is what the Holy Spirit wants to do for us and can do for us. The fact is that the more we draw on the power of the Holy Spirit and allow this Spirit to take possession of us the more effective and fruitful our Christian lives and activity will be. This is why the great contemplative saints were energetic and dynamic people. They depended upon a power that was not their own. The contemplative path is a path of reliance.

Respond

The fourth and final 'R' of the contemplative path is *Respond*. The contemplative way may be a God-centred path but it is not all passivity. It involves action—practical action. Anchored in God it finds expression in the service of others.

If service is the call of the Christian, it is certainly the call of the contemplative path. To ignore the needs of others is not the contemplative

way. We see this reflected down through the centuries in the lives of those who chose the contemplative path. In the Middle Ages, Meister Eckhart insisted that the goal of the spiritual life is love:

If a man were in an ecstasy, as Saint Paul was, and knew that some sick man needed him to give him a bit of soup, I should think it far better if you would abandon your ecstasy out of love and show greater love in caring for the other in his need.⁴

For the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite reformer Teresa of Ávila, prayer and service were like twin sisters; you cannot have one without the other. And, closer to our own time, we have the experience of Thomas Merton. In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he describes a mystical insight he had into the oneness of humanity. Looking at a bustling crowd in the centre of Louisville's shopping district, he realises that the mystery of God is surrounding us at all times.

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.⁵

For Merton love meant seeing people, of all faiths and none, as children of the one God and our brothers and sisters. It is significant that he died while attending a conference on interfaith dialogue.

Contemplatives respond to life out of their experience of God's presence, love and power. This experience leads them to become involved in the lives of others in a compassionate way. Without this compassionate involvement any kind of contemplative way of life is diminished, perhaps even inauthentic. We see the contemplative path expressed wonderfully in the life of Jesus. He was a man of prayer and of action. He spent time alone in silence, but he also responded in so many loving ways to needs of the people he encountered. For Jesus the contemplative path was a God-centred path that led to practical service. 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36). Allow yourself to experience the

⁴ Meister Eckhart, 'Counsels on Discernment', in *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, translated by Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist, 1981), 258.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image, 1989), 156–157.

compassion of the Father and then share the compassion you have received with others. This is what he did and it is why he is the model of the contemplative path.

The contemplative path, then, has four elements. It is open to God's transforming love. It seeks to find God in all things. It depends on the help of God's Spirit to live and pray and act. And it finds expression in compassionate involvement in the lives of others. These four elements can be summed up in the four 'R's: Receive, Recognise, Rely, Respond. They are surely a contemplative path that is accessible to all.

Philip McParland provides a ministry called Soul Space, details of which can be found on his website, www.philipmcparland.com. He recently published a book called *There is Another Way* (Soul Space, 2015) which addresses the experience of dissatisfaction caused by our contemporary culture and the need for an alternative way of life that satisfies the deeper desires in the human heart.