

Thomas Merton

(1915-1968)

Thomas Merton has perhaps done more than any other twentieth-century figure to make the life of prayer widely known and understood. He was born in Europe and attended Cambridge University in England and Columbia University in New York City. During his college years he was deeply attracted to Christian belief and became a Roman Catholic (1938) and later a Cistercian (Trappist) monk (1941). His spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, written after he had embraced a life of monastic silence, became a best-seller.

As a monk (and later a priest) in the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Merton continued to write extensively on the spiritual life, social justice issues, war and peace. He also wrote poetry and fiction. His interest in contemplation led him to investigate prayer forms in Eastern religion. Zen masters from Asia regarded him as the preeminent authority on their kind of prayer in the United States. Toward the end of his life he suffered some physical and emotional crises; he was hospitalized, he considered leaving the monastery. It was widely rumored that he would not return to the Trappists after his 1968 journey to Asia (during which he died of an accident). All this speculation, however, has not dimmed Merton's reputation as a gifted teacher and practitioner of prayer.

Do not be concerned, as you read the following selection on contemplation, about arriving at precise definitions of "meditation" and "contemplation." Recognize that different teachers and writers define these terms in different ways. Our concern here is not to study prayer, but to practice it. And Merton's main hope is to make the gift of contemplation more accessible to all of us. Notice how he emphasizes the normal, natural quality of contemplative prayer.

WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?

The Gift of Contemplation

There are so many Christians who do not appreciate the magnificent dignity of their vocation to sanctity, to the knowledge, love and service of God. There are so many Christians who do not realize what possibilities God has placed in the life of Christian perfection—what possibilities for joy in the knowledge and love of Him.

There are so many Christians who have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and of the power of that Love to do them good, to bring them happiness.

Why do we think of the gift of contemplation, infused contemplation, mystical prayer, as something essentially strange and esoteric reserved for a small class of almost unnatural beings and prohibited to everyone else? It is perhaps because we have forgotten that contemplation is the work of the Holy Ghost acting on our souls through His gifts of Wisdom and Understanding with special intensity to increase and perfect our love for Him. These gifts are part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity. They are given to all in Baptism, and if they are given it is presumably because God wants them to be developed. Their development will always remain the free gift of God and it is true that His wise Providence sees fit to develop them less in some saints than in others. But it is also true that God often measures His gifts by our desire to receive them, and by our cooperation with His grace, and the Holy Spirit will not waste any of His gifts on people who have little or no interest in them.

Contemplation increases our love for God

It would be a great mistake to think that mystical contemplation necessarily brings with it a whole litany of weird phenomena—ecstasies, raptures, stigmata and so on. These belong to quite a different order of things. They are “charismatic” gifts, *gratiae gratis datae*, and they are not directly ordered to the sanctification of the one who receives them. Infused contemplation, on the contrary, is a powerful means of sanctification. It is the work of love and nothing is more effective in increasing our love for God. In fact, infused contemplation is intimately connected with the pure and perfect love of God which is God’s greatest gift to the soul. It is deep and intimate knowledge of God by a union of love—a union in which we learn things about Him that those who have not received such a gift will never discover until they enter heaven.

Therefore, if anyone should ask, “Who may desire this gift and pray for it?” the answer is obvious: *everybody*.

One condition

But there is only one condition. If you desire intimate union with God you must be willing to pay the price for it. The price is small enough. In fact, it is not even a price at all: it only seems to be so with us. We find it difficult to give up our desire for things that can never satisfy us in order to purchase the One Good in Whom is all our joy—and in Whom, moreover, we get back everything else that we have renounced besides!

The fact remains that contemplation will not be given to those who willfully remain at a distance from God, who confine their interior life to a few routine exercises of piety and a few external acts of worship and service performed as a matter of duty. Such people are careful to avoid sin. They respect God as a Master. But their heart does not belong to Him. They are not really interested in Him, except in order to insure themselves against losing heaven and going to hell. In actual practice, their minds and hearts are taken up with their own ambitions and troubles and comforts and pleasures and all their worldly interests and anxieties and fears. God is only invited to enter this charmed circle to smooth out difficulties and to dispense rewards.

BIBLE SELECTION

Psalms 1:1-6

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following can be used for discussion within a small group, or used for journal reflections by individuals:

1. What obstacles may be standing in my way with regard to contemplative prayer?
2. What stereotypes—about God, myself, or prayer—might I need to work on?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

The following exercises can be done by individuals, shared between spiritual friends, or used in the context of a small group. Choose one or more of the following:

1. Choose a biblical text with rich content for contemplation. Psalm 23 or Psalm 138 may do well. Read it over peacefully and reflectively until a short phrase invites you deeper into prayer. Once you have “passed in” or “passed over” through the text, relinquish the words and enter into wordless (or nearly wordless) prayer. Be sure you have allowed enough time for this exercise. Often, when we pray in a contemplative manner, we cannot let go of words all at once. They continue to trail behind us as we gradually enter into the peace and silence of contemplation. Be easy with this process. Don’t push it, but let it happen, as a gift of grace.
2. Consider using a visual focal point for contemplative prayer. A painting of the face of Jesus may serve in this way. If you choose a painting with many different objects or people depicted (such as a painting of the Last Supper), you may wish to begin with the whole scene and then slowly narrow your concentration to a single detail. An exquisite object, such as a rosebud (being a sign also of God’s grandeur) may also serve as an entry point to contemplation.
3. Schedule a series of visits or an extended time in a place you find conducive to contemplation, such as a chapel, a garden, or a park.
4. Consider a group experience of contemplative prayer, in which a number of people go to a place and set aside time for contemplation on a regular basis.

REFLECTIONS

In discussing contemplation Thomas Merton reaches us in the most simple way possible, namely, by calling us to the love of God. He speaks directly to our condition when he says, "so many Christians . . . have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and of the power of that Love to do them good, to bring them happiness." In saying this he is teaching us that at its core contemplation is simply and profoundly falling in love with God over and over and over again.

In contemplation we are coming to dearthy love and constantly delight in the "heavenly Father" who has been made real to us in Jesus Christ. We "see"—see with the eyes of the heart—that God is out to do us good always. We see, truly see, that there is no limit, no "catch" to God's goodness toward us.

Merton wisely reminds us that this perfecting love is not necessarily tied to what he calls "weird phenomena—ecstasies, raptures, stigmata and so on." Rather the transforming vision of divine Love and of our responding love is a gift of the Holy Spirit that comes by means of "Wisdom and Understanding." In saying this he is following the lead of Thomas Aquinas who writes, "Love follows knowledge." In other words, love is the response of our heart, aroused in our will, by means of our mind's enthralling vision of the goodness of God. That is all. That is contemplation.

RICHARD J. FOSTER

GOING DEEPER

THOMAS MERTON, *What Is Contemplation?* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1950). This brief book is an excellent introduction to contemplative prayer for everyone.

THOMAS MERTON, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999). Often, when people engage in contemplative prayer, others may say that they have given up on social concerns. In this book, Merton addresses that issue squarely.

THOMAS MERTON, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948). Readers of many generations have been moved by Merton's account of his postcollegiate coming to Christian faith.

Thomas More

(1478-1535)

Thomas More is a remarkable figure. The son of an accomplished lawyer, he attended Oxford University but left, probably under pressure from his father, to take up legal studies in London. His legal and governmental accomplishments were considerable. He was also one of the English humanists, a friend of Erasmus, and a prominent literary figure. He was a prolific writer. His most famous work, *Utopia*, is widely read today.

More was also well known for his religious devotion and his commitment to spiritual life. Even at the height of his career, More faithfully set aside one day a week for meditation and prayer.

From 1518, when he was appointed a royal counselor, he was active in the government of Henry VIII. He received many high honors: under-treasurer, knight-hood, high steward of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

When Henry VIII wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon, More told him, after careful study, that he could not support his case. Later, he refused to support Henry when the king took on the title of Head of the Church. This led to his imprisonment, trial, and execution. He went to his death with great composure, even joking with his executioner.

One of More's personal traits was playfulness. He enjoyed life, often taking part in celebrations, improvising roles for himself when plays were being performed at court. But More did not assign any cosmic importance to such diversions. His heart was all for God.

Notice how More's meditation focuses on God and asks to be free of worldly constraints and attitudes. His meditation has added meaning when we understand how much he was involved in secular activities over his whole life span. Pay attention also to the words of comfort in this reading: "Gladly to be thinking of God" is only one of these, but there are many others.

A GODLY MEDITATION

Give me thy grace, good Lord,
To set the world at nought,
To set my mind fast upon thee.
And not to hang upon the blast of men's mouths.
To be content to be solitary,
Not to long for worldly company,
Little and little utterly to cast off the world,
And rid my mind of all the business thereof.
Not to long to hear of any worldly things,
But that the hearing of worldly phantasies may be to me displeasing.
Gladly to be thinking of God,
Piteously to call for his help,
To lean unto the comfort of God,
Busily to labour to love him.
To know mine own vileness [vileness] and wretchedness,
To humble and meek myself under the mighty hand of God,
To bewail my sins passed [past],
For the purging of them, patiently to suffer adversity.
Gladly to bear my purgatory here,
To be joyful of tribulations,
To walk the narrow way that leadeth to life.
To bear the cross with Christ,
To have the last thing in remembrance,
To have ever afore mine eye my death that is ever at hand,
To make death no stranger to me,
To foresee and consider the everlasting fire of hell,
To pray for pardon before the judge come.
To have continually in mind the passion that
Christ suffered for me,
For his benefits unceasingly to give him thanks.
To buy the time again that I before have lost.
To abstain from vain confabulations,
To eschew light foolish mirth and gladness,
Recreations not necessary to cut off.
Of worldly substance, friends, liberty, life and all, to set the loss at right nought,
for the winning of Christ.

To think my most enemies my best friends,
 For the brethren of Joseph could never have done him so much good with their
 love and favour as they did him with their malice and hatred.
 These minds are more to be desired of every man, than all the treasure
 of all the princes and kings, Christian and heathen, were it gathered and laid
 together all upon one heap.

BIBLE SELECTION

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Thus says the LORD:
 Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
 and make mere flesh their strength,
 whose hearts turn away from the LORD.
 They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
 and shall not see when relief comes.
 They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
 in an uninhabited salt land.
 Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
 whose trust is the LORD.
 They shall be like a tree planted by water,
 sending out its roots by the stream.
 It shall not fear when heat comes,
 and its leaves shall stay green;
 in the year of drought, it is not anxious,
 and it does not cease to bear fruit.
 The heart is devious above all else;
 it is perverse—
 who can understand it?
 I the LORD test the mind
 and search the heart,
 to give to all according to their ways,
 according to the fruit of their doings.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following can be used for discussion within a small group, or used for journal reflections by individuals:

1. How can I be more single-hearted in my attachment to God?
2. What lessons can I learn from Thomas More's attitude and his meditation?
3. What are some obstacles to meditation for people in secular careers?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

The following exercises can be done by individuals, shared between spiritual friends, or used in the context of a small group. Choose one or more of the following:

1. Identify another figure whose story is well known to you who is reminiscent of Thomas More. Joan of Arc, John Hus, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer might be good examples. Reflect on the ways that good people are often rejected and persecuted. Hold the mystery of this in your heart and pray through it, without attempting to understand or explain.
2. Try setting aside an entire day for meditation and prayer.

REFLECTIONS

This selection by Thomas More simply does me in. The breadth of it exhausts me. One line maybe I can enter into a little, but even then some single sentences contain a lifetime: "To think my most enemies my best friends." However, the prayer is not just one sentence, but sentence piled upon sentence, covering, as it seems, all thought, word, and deed. It is too much to take in, too much to expect, too much to hope for—in myself or in anyone else.

But then I realize that More is not telling me many things but only one thing. And what is that one thing? Simply to love God. When I see this it all becomes clear. Then I can read each line as another aspect of the call to love. And so, once again, I am struck by the unity of all these writers on contemplative prayer. They all keep calling us back to our first love. Their message, it seems, keeps tune to the beat of our heart . . . love God . . . love God . . . love God . . . love God.

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