

# Eídon

A Newsletter on Christian Spirituality for Church Leaders

May 2010

## What Is Contemplation?

Someone recently asked me what contemplation is. Not expecting the question in that moment, I fumbled around a bit and finally blurted out, “Contemplation is like the earth moving, like a veil being pulled aside that you see another Reality beyond normal reality.”

It wasn't a very good answer. In this issue I'd like to attempt a better description of what contemplation is, especially since most of our churches do not discuss it. We rarely talk about contemplation in sermons, Christian education classes, small groups, or informal conversation, and many denominations do not publish much material on contemplation. But I suspect that contemplation happens to ordinary Christians far more often than we generally realize.

One of the more remarkable accounts of contemplation in Christian history comes from Augustine (d. 430). One day while staying in a house in Ostia, looking out an open window to the courtyard below, he and his mother were talking about what eternal life might be like. His story is worth quoting at length because he describes their growing attentiveness to God during the conversation, the “one fleeting instant” of intense contemplation

when time appeared to stand still and they seemed to touch “eternal Wisdom,” and finally their return to ordinary time and space.

As the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God, our thoughts ranged over the whole compass of material things in their various degrees, up to the heavens themselves. . . . At length we came to our own souls and passed beyond them to that place of everlasting plenty . . . [i.e., heaven]. And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then with a sigh . . . we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending . . . (*Confessions*, 9.10, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin).

As Augustine's account suggests, contemplation is pure, focused awareness of God. In the moment when it occurs, we are intensely aware of God. While it can happen nearly anywhere and at any time, it usually occurs in moments of unhurry. Contemplation may be what Jesus was referring to when he said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8,

NRSV). Contemplation is “seeing” or apprehending God. It happens in a moment when our hearts are “pure”—that is, uncluttered with worry, hurry, regret, distraction, multi-tasking, or deceptive gods. When contemplation envelops us, we are no longer trying to control, judge, or analyze. In reverence and wonder, we are viscerally aware of the presence of God.

Of course contemplation may come when we are meditating on scripture, worshiping, or praying. Many people, however, say that the gift of contemplation comes when they are in God's creation. While watching a sunrise or sunset, spying a rainbow, glimpsing a moose in a northern wetland, standing at the base of a giant redwood, or gazing at the Rocky Mountains, they are caught up in a rush of holy awe. It is as if a door swings open and for an instant they perceive the One who is above all and beyond all yet closer than their own breath.

Another common setting for the gift of contemplation is when parents gaze at their children. This is not the “Aw, isn't she cute!” kind of experience, but instead a reverent experience of profound gratitude and love for this child, perhaps coupled with a sense of over-

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A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament

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## What Is Contemplation? (continued)

whelming reverence for the God who created her. Adults can experience this same thing in the context of friendship or marriage.

Because contemplation has an ineffable quality, people have tried to describe it in various ways. John of the Cross (d. 1591) called it simple, loving attention. Others say that in the moment God is like a divine Gazer and we merely return the gaze, thus completing a circuit of gazing—a description that echoes Paul’s language of “seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror” (2 Cor 3:18). In *The Naked Now*, Richard Rohr speaks of it as unhooking from our emotional noise and dropping down to a deeper level of awareness where we stop thinking and collapse into pure consciousness (p. 135). James Finley describes it as resting “in God resting in us. We are at home in God at home in us” (*Christian Meditation*, 17).

We can come to contemplation from either a kataphatic route or an apophatic route. “Kataphatic” and “apophatic” can be confusing terms because they variously refer to theological methods, types of spirituality, paths to God, or modes of prayer.

At present I’m using these terms in the latter sense: the mode of kataphatic prayer uses words and images as proximate means of becoming aware of God, while the mode of apophatic prayer uses neither words nor images. Apophatic prayer approaches God via mystery, the ground of being, the abyss, or the One who cannot be named. Kataphatic

expressions of prayer are far more commonly practiced, but centering prayer—in its gentle attempt to focus one’s intention on God and on nothing else—is one widespread prayer practice that tends to be apophatic. Whether the proximate means of contemplation is kataphatic or apophatic, at the moment of contemplation one’s whole being is attentive to God.

Contemplation is typically brief and intermittent. While sustained experiences of contemplation do sometimes happen, for many of us the experience is quite short—a few minutes, a few seconds, or even just a single second. The moment may even pass before we realize what happened.



Over time, contemplative awareness can become the ordinary way we live our life. We may move in and out of the awareness of God multiple times throughout the day. While washing dishes we might glance out the window and see a leaf stirring in the breeze; our heart leaps in awareness that God is close. In, through, or beyond a friend’s kindness, we may perceive in a flash the hand of

God. Contemplation could happen while kneading bread, eating fresh strawberries, listening to a favorite piece of music, being with a certain person, or walking in a cemetery.

Contemplation changes us at a deep level that likely will be beyond our immediate perception. Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141) has an intriguing metaphor for this change. He says that contemplation turns our souls into liquid which God then pours into a new mold—the mold of divine likeness (*The Mystical Ark of Noah*, 9). This “remolding” will unfold over time and express itself in one or more fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Other people may notice a change in us before we do.

Contemplation is a gift from God. It is not something we can reach out and grasp with our hands whenever we want to, but is instead something

we might receive if our hands are open. We can receive it willingly, but we cannot grab it willfully.

In the history of Christian spirituality, people often regarded contemplation as the pinnacle of prayer. Yet they have also insisted that God gives this gift for the sake of others. Contemplation unites us with God so that we can engage in countercultural mission.