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Contemplative Prayer by Thomas Merton

What is the purpose of meditation in the sense of the "prayer of the heart"?

In the "prayer of the heart" we seek first of all the deepest ground of our identity in God. We do not reason about dogmas of faith, or the "mysteries". We seek rather to gain a direct grasp, a personal experience of the deepest truths of life and faith, finding ourselves in God's truth. Inner certainty depends on purification. The dark night rectifies our deepest intentions. In the silence of this "night of faith" we return to simplicity and sincerity of heart. We learn recollection which consists in listening for God's will, in direct and simple attention to reality. Recollection is awareness of the unconditional. Prayer then means yearning for the simple presence of God, for a personal understanding of his word, for knowledge of his will and for the capacity to hear and obey him. It is thus something much more than uttering petitions for good things external to our own deepest concerns.

Our desire and our prayer should be summed up in St. Augustine's words: *Noverin te, noverim me*. We wish to gain a true evaluation of ourselves and of the world so as to understand the meaning of our life as children of God redeemed from sin and death. We wish to gain a true loving knowledge of God, our Father and Redeemer. We wish to lose ourselves in his love and rest in him. We wish to hear his word and respond to it with our whole being. We wish to know his merciful will and submit to it in its totality. These are the aims and goals of *meditatio* and *oratio*. This preparation for prayer can be prolonged by the slow, "*sapiential*" and loving recitation of a favorite psalm, dwelling on the deep sense of the words for us here and now.

In the language of the monastic fathers, all prayer, reading and meditation, and all the activities of the monastic life are aimed at purity of heart, an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by him. It means the renunciation of all deluded images of ourselves, all exaggerated estimates of our own capacities, in order to obey God's will as it comes to us in the difficult demands of life in its exacting truth. Purity of heart is then correlative to a new spiritual identity - the "self" as recognized in the context of realities willed by God - Purity of heart is the enlightened awareness of the new man, as opposed to the complex and perhaps rather disreputable fantasies of the "old man."

Meditation is then ordered to this new insight, this direct knowledge of the self in its higher aspect.

What am I? I am myself a word spoken by God. Can God speak a word that does not have any meaning?

Yet am I sure that the meaning of my life is the meaning God intends for it?

Does God impose a meaning on my life from the outside, through event, custom, routine, law, system, impact with others in society? Or am I called to create from within, with him, with his grace, a meaning which reflects his truth and makes me his "word" spoken freely in my personal situation? My true identity lies hidden in God's call to my freedom and my response to him. This means I must use my freedom in order to love, with full responsibility and authenticity, not merely receiving a form imposed on me by external forces, or forming my own life according to an approved social pattern, but directing my love to the personal reality of my brother, and embracing God's will in its naked, often unpenetrable mystery. I cannot discover my "meaning" if I try to evade the dread which comes from first experiencing my meaninglessness;

By meditation I penetrate the inmost ground of my life, seek the full understanding of God's will for me, of God's mercy to me, of my absolute dependence upon him. But this penetration must be authentic. It must be something genuinely lived by me. This, in turn, depends on the authenticity of my whole concept of my life, and of my purposes. But my life and aims tend to be

artificial, inauthentic, as long as I am simply trying to adjust my actions to certain exterior norms of conduct that will enable me to play an approved part in the society in which I live. After all, this amounts to little more than learning a role. Sometimes methods and programs of meditation are aimed simply at this: learning to play a religious role. The idea of the "imitation" of Christ and of the saints can degenerate into mere impersonation, if it remains only exterior.

It is not enough for meditation to investigate the cosmic order and situate me in this order. Meditation is something more than gaining command of a *Weltanschauung* (a philosophical view of the cosmos and of life). Even though such a meditation seems to bring about resignation to God's will as manifested in the cosmic order or in history, it is not deeply Christian. In fact, such a meditation may be out of contact with the deepest truths of Christianity. It consists in learning a few rational formulas, explanations, which enable one to remain resigned and indifferent in the great crises of life, and thus, unfortunately, it may make evasion possible where a direct confrontation of our nothingness is demanded. Instead of a stoical acceptance of "providential" degrees and events, and other manifestations of "law" in the cosmos, we should let ourselves be brought naked and defenseless into the center of that dread where we stand alone before God in our nothingness, without explanation, without theories, completely dependent upon his providential care, in dire need of the gift of his grace, his mercy, and the light of faith.

We must approach our meditation realizing that "grace", "mercy" and "faith" are not permanent inalienable possessions which we gain by our efforts and retain as though by right, provided that we behave ourselves. They are constantly renewed gifts. The life of grace in our hearts is renewed from moment to moment, directly and personally by God in his love for us. Hence the "grace of meditation" (in the sense of "prayer of the heart") is also a special gift. It should never be taken for granted. Though we can say it is a "habit" which is in some sense permanently present to us, when we have received it, yet it is never something which we can claim as though by right and use in a completely autonomous and self-determining manner according to our own good pleasure, without regard for God's will – though we can make an autonomous use of our natural gifts. The gift of prayer is inseparable from another grace: that of humility, which makes us realize that the very depths of our being and life are meaningful and real only insofar as they are oriented toward God as their source and their end.

When we seem to possess and use our being and natural faculties in a completely autonomous manner, as if our individual ego were the pure source and end of our own acts, then we are in illusion and our acts, however spontaneous they may seem to be, lack spiritual meaning and authenticity.

Consequently: first of all our meditation should begin with the realization of our nothingness and helplessness in the presence of God. This need not be a mournful or discouraging experience. On the contrary, it can be deeply tranquil and joyful since it brings us in direct contact with the source of all joy and all life. But one reason why our meditation never gets started is perhaps that we never make this real, serious return to the center of our own nothingness before God. Hence we never enter into the deepest reality of our relationship with him.

In other words we meditate merely "in the mind," in the imagination or at best in the desires, considering religious truths from a detached objective point of view. We do not begin by seeking to "find our heart", that is to sink into an awareness of the ground of our identity before God and in God. "Finding our heart" and recovering this awareness of our inmost identity implies the recognition that our external everyday self is to a great extent a mask and a fabrication. It is not our true self. It is not easy to find. It is hidden in obscurity and "nothingness" at the center where we are in direct dependence on God.

But since the reality of all Christian meditation depends on this recognition, our attempt to meditate without it is in fact self-contradictory. It is like trying to walk without feet.

Another consequence: even the capacity to recognize our condition before God is in itself a grace. We cannot always attain it at will. To learn meditation does not, therefore, mean learning an artificial technique for infallible producing "compunction" and the "sense of our nothingness"

whenever we please. On the contrary this would be the result of violence and would be inauthentic. Meditation implies the capacity to receive this grace whenever God wishes to grant it to us, and therefore, a permanent disposition to humility, attention to reality, receptivity, pliability. To learn to meditate then means to gradually get free from habitual hardness of heart, torpor and grossness of mind, due to arrogance and non-acceptance of simple reality, or resistance to the concrete demands of God's will.

If, in fact, our hearts remain apparently indifferent and cold, and we find it morally impossible to "begin meditating in this way, then we should at least realize that this coldness is itself a sign of our need and of our helplessness. We should take it accordingly as a motive for prayer. We might also reflect that perhaps without meaning to we have fallen into a spirit of routine, and are not able to see how to recover our spontaneity without God's grace, for which we must wait patiently, but with earnest desire. This waiting itself will be for us a school of humility.

From *Contemplative Prayer*
Thomas Merton