

Passive (Contemplative) Prayer

‘If only you knew the gift of God’(John 4:10)



‘We are made for love. It is our longing to be in communion that drives our basic desire to know. It drives all our ways of engaging the world. It is our longing for communion with God that drives all our praying. Though this longing is natural, our practical, busy, everyday lives, especially in the extroverted world in which most of us live, can mean that we live largely unaware of it. When we do become aware of it, we can wonder what is happening to us and we are tempted to wonder if it is real. Maybe it is something for saints, but not for us.

‘It is vital that we listen to this yearning, and we may need encouragement to do so. The experience of the Psalmist can help:

‘O Lord, all my longing is known to you; my sighing is not hidden from you’ (Psalm 38:9).

‘As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?’ (Psalm 42:1).

We must trust this longing. Like the deer longing for flowing streams we may not know what direction to take, or we may not have the energy to run. Let us be gentle with ourselves. It is God who has placed the longing in our heart, and, provided we attend to it, we will continue to find ourselves drawn. We do not have to go anywhere to be with God. God is within us. We are simply to say Yes to God as God draws us inwards into our own heart where God longs to be in communion with us. Give in to the longing. Create times of stillness. Learn to 'waste time' in prayer, listening to the murmuring of the longing as it washes over the rocks of uncertainty, doubt, inexperience and novelty.

The experience of the Psalmist can help persuade us that in experiencing this longing we are not alone: 'O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water' (Psalm 63:1). We are encouraged, too, by the words of Jeremiah, which tell us of God's response to our longing: 'When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord' (Jeremiah 29:13).

Teresa tells us that if we wish to grow in prayer we will need the eyes and the heart of an eagle. She assures us beginners that, though great desires for God can mask illusions and pride (we might fancy ourselves as better than others), the answer is to be found in humility and trust, not in the blunting of desire.

She prays: 'No, my God, no; no more trust in anything I can desire for myself. Desire from me what you want to desire, because this is what I want: for all my good is in pleasing you' (17th Soliloquy).

'Before the Spouse belongs to you completely, He makes you desire him vehemently by certain delicate means which you do not understand' (Interior Castle 6.2.1).

‘Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross speak of this prayer as ‘passive’ because, in the words of John of the Cross, ‘pure contemplation lies in receiving’(Living Flame 3.36). They speak of it as ‘contemplation’ because there is nothing for us to do except receive in wonder and submit to the transforming effect of God’s gift of union. Of course, all prayer is a response to God, for it is God who creates us and who holds us in existence. It is God who ‘has poured love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’(Romans 5:5).

In active prayer, inspired by God’s grace, it is we who are determining our response. In passive prayer, the initiative is entirely with God.

‘While you are repeating some vocal prayer, it is possible for the Lord to grant you perfect contemplation ... You are enkindled in love without understanding how. You know that you are rejoicing in the one you love, but you do not know how. You are well aware that this is not a joy that you can attain through understanding. You embrace it without understanding how, but you do understand that it is a blessing you are receiving ... This is perfect contemplation ... In contemplation we can do nothing. God does everything. The work is God’s alone and far transcends human nature’ (Way of Perfection 25).

Passive prayer would seem to be the prayer typical of childhood, for a child can do little except receive. A child must mature, however. We have to learn to own our life and develop our ego. We have to explore creative ways of acting in the world and of relating to the mystery that we call God.

However, there comes a stage in the development of our communion with God when we are called to let go control and allow God to draw us beyond active prayer, at least as an habitual practice. We must learn to yield to God's love.

John of the Cross likens prayer to the playing of a musical instrument (see Spiritual Canticle 38.4). Inspired by God and enabled by God's grace, in active prayer we are, as it were, practising the art of playing the strings of our heart and mind, learning to ponder the mystery of God and enjoy the harmony of experienced communion. In passive prayer we leave it to God to guide our fingers over the strings.

‘When we let go the attempt to control our prayer, we allow a gentle drawing inward’(Interior Castle IV.3.3). Earlier we were trimming our sails to tack with the gentle breeze. Now we experience ourselves being drawn to let go and yield to an attraction that draws us and over which we exercise no control.

The recollection experienced here is not the result of our decision to simplify our method of praying. It is not the fruit of our controlling our breathing or practising a mantra. It is an experience that we are powerless to induce. Both Teresa and John warn us not to attempt to manufacture this quiet for ourselves (see Ascent II.17.7). There is nothing wrong with practising techniques to quieten ourselves down so long as we don’t confuse this with the quiet that is God’s gift, the quiet that comes with passive prayer.

John of the Cross writes: 'You must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God. You must live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel God. All these desires disquiet the soul and distract you from the peaceful quiet and sweet idleness of the contemplation which is being communicated to you' (Dark Night I.10.4).

The drying up of our thoughts and feelings is necessary, for they are not capable of transforming union. At first we will wonder whether the drying up is the result of our infidelity – and it may be. We may know deep down that we are being called to give up some addictive behaviour, or to rearrange our priorities, but we are not yet willing to do so. Half consciously we avoid intimacy in our contact with God because we know that if we do experience it we will have to look away or be faced with our unwillingness to change our lives. The easiest way to put off repentance is to put off prayer.

Up to this point we have been finding joy in considering the truths of our faith, God is now drawing us to experience the gaze of the One for whom our hearts long. If we accept the loss of the joys to which we have grown accustomed, and if we abandon ourselves in trust to the action of Jesus' Spirit in our souls, we will be transformed by the all-consuming love that is God. Like a drop of water we are being drawn into the ocean of God's love and are being absorbed into it.

Accompanying this experience of love, there is joy, as well as a sense of belonging, communion, and peace. This is the love for which we are made and for which we long. We are more aware than before of the fact that the silence, the stillness, the welling up of joy or gratitude or sorrow or pleading, is from God. We are also more aware than before of the fact that there is nothing we can do to obtain it.

This awareness is essential for there could be nothing worse than our taking any credit for the communion that God is now giving us. That is spiritual pride, the most dangerous sin and one that would surely lead to God having to hold back the communion that God was wanting to offer us. God knows how harmful spiritual pride is for us and out of mercy God would have to hold back the grace in which we were taking pride.

We might well be able to concoct our own form of spiritual silence in order to carry on the self-deception, but it would not be true contemplation.

The 'long winters' that we experience at this stage of our prayer journey, long winters in which nothing seems to be happening, help preserve us from spiritual pride for we know from hard experience that contemplation is a gift from God. There really is nothing we can do to acquire it, apart, as has already been stressed, from preparing our souls for it.

We can clear away the undergrowth and we can dig the well, but we cannot create the spring.

We need to listen to Jesus as he tells us that we will find our selves only when we learn to 'lose' our selves (Matthew 16:25), and that we must become like little children if we are to enter into the domain of love into which he is inviting us (Matthew 18:3). There comes a time when we are ready to let go the ego that we have developed and to surrender in love to God. It is when we begin to surrender in this way that we begin to experience intermittent moments of this more profound communion.

If we are willing to remain open to these graced moments when God draws us into divine communion beyond all our thoughts and feelings, and if we resist the temptation to take control of them or to possess them or to attempt to reproduce them by our own efforts or techniques, God's longing to be in communion with us is such that transient experiences of recollection tend to deepen so that the soul finds itself wrapped in quiet prayer.

John of the Cross assures us that the surest sign that this prayer is from God: 'is that we take pleasure in being alone and wait with loving attentiveness upon God, without making any particular meditation, in inward peace and quiet and rest'(Ascent II.13.4).

Teresa calls this the 'Prayer of Quiet'. When we were in control of our prayer we worked for such quiet, now the quiet wells up from the mysterious depths of the soul. We are drawn into an experience of prayer from within.

Earlier we found ways to quieten our imagination, memory and mind. Now, surprised by grace, these same faculties 'are absorbed and are looking as though in wonder at what they see'(The Interior Castle IV.2.6). It is this 'looking as though in wonder' that explains the word 'contemplation'. Now, the only water that is refreshing the garden of the soul 'comes from its own source, which is God'(The Interior Castle IV. 2.4; see IV.2.3).

From the centre of our soul, the fire of God's love radiates out and 'the warmth and the fragrant perfumes spread through the entire soul'(The Interior Castle IV.2.6).

‘In passive prayer our attention is not on insights received, important though these are. Nor is our attention on any accompanying psycho-somatic phenomena that we may experience, however impressive these might be. Our attention is to be on God who brings about the transforming union effected by love. In contemplation we are purified, illumined and united to God in love. We are being transformed into love by the all-consuming love that is God, like a log being transformed into flame by an all-consuming fire.

In contemplation God communicates a secret wisdom that God infuses into the soul through love. Supernatural contemplation is sustained above all by peaceful surrender and humility.

In the words of Teresa: 'The important thing is not to think much, but to love much ... Love does not consist in great delight, but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything' (Interior Castle 4.1.7).

We should be wary of setting strict guidelines for what to do when God grants us the gift of contemplation. God is directing us now, and God's light is lighting our way, however faintly and intermittently. Furthermore, people differ greatly. We should offer ourselves in peaceful and silent surrender to God.

Saint Teresa writes: 'Abandon yourself into the arms of love, and His Majesty will teach you what to do next. Almost your whole work is to realise your unworthiness to receive such great good and to occupy yourself in thanksgiving'(The Interior Castle IV.3.8).

The Spirit that moves us in prayer is the Spirit that Jesus shares with his Father. Through this gift we are being drawn to share Jesus' own prayer-union with God. This communion always comes as a surprise and as a gift of love. We experience it when we yield to the divine attraction drawing us into God. We can long for this communion with God, and we can prepare for it, but there is nothing we can do to bring it about. Only the gift of the Spirit can cause to well up within us the spring of living water promised by Jesus.

When the water is flowing, all striving ceases, words are no longer relevant, and we find ourselves caught up in the silent wonder of communion. Like a drop of water we are being drawn into the ocean of God's love and are being absorbed into it.'

Perfect Communion

- Teresa & John of the Cross speak of this as a ‘spiritual marriage’.

‘This spiritual marriage is incomparably greater than the spiritual espousal, for it is a total transformation in the Beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life.’

(John of the Cross Spiritual Canticle 22.3)

‘The soul always remains with its God in the centre. Let us say that the union is like the joining of two wax candles to such an extent that the flame coming from them is but one, or that the wick, the flame, and the wax are all one. But afterward one candle can be easily separated from the other and there are two candles; the same holds for the wick. In spiritual marriage the union is like what we have when rain falls from the sky into a river. All is water, for the rain that fell from heaven cannot be divided or separated from the water of the river. Or it is like what we have when a little stream enters the sea. There is no means of separating the two. Or, like the bright light entering a room through two different windows. Although the streams of light are separate when entering the room, they become one’(Teresa Interior Castle VII.2.4).

‘The soul shines brightly with the warmth of love ... It is like the air within the flame, enkindled and transformed in the flame, for the flame is nothing but enkindled air. The movements and radiance of the flame are not from the air alone, nor from the fire of which the flame is composed, but from both the air and the fire. It is the fire which causes the air which it has enkindled to produce the movements and the radiance. We can consequently understand how the soul with its faculties is illumined within the radiance of God.

The movements of these divine flames which are flickering and flaring up are not produced only by the soul that is transformed in the flames of the Holy Spirit, nor does the Holy Spirit produce them alone, but they are the work of both the soul and the Holy Spirit ... This activity of the flames is inspired in the soul by the Holy Spirit’(John of the Cross Living Flame 3,9-10).

‘Let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have the strength to serve’(Teresa Interior Castle VII.4.12).

"Contemplative prayer in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us"(St Teresa Life 8.5).

Contemplative prayer seeks him "whom my soul loves"(Song of Songs 1:7). It is Jesus, and in him, the Father. We seek him, because to desire him is always the beginning of love, and we seek him in that pure faith which causes us to be born of him and to live in him.