

Two Basic Types of Personal Prayer: The Disciplines of Christian Contemplation and Meditation

The earliest Christians discovered many ways to seek God's company. In the Christian tradition there are two general patterns that guide each person's seeking: contemplation and meditation.

Contemplation constitutes an *apophatic* or emptying pattern of personal prayer. It acknowledges that God is known primarily through a yielding of self and dependence on God. The apophatic way is a more inward way of "unknowing", waiting and vulnerability.

Meditation is known as a *kataphatic* way, affirming that God may be experienced in created things through the use of the mind and all the senses. It is a more outward path.

The spirituality of most people is a combination of the journey inward and the journey outward. Both paths enable a person to experience an intimacy with God that is the source of compassionate engagement with the needs of the world. Contemplation and meditation are not competitors with the activities of daily life. Both forms help us become aware of the mystical dimension of God's presence. Contemplation embraces the transcendence or "otherness" of God and meditation focuses on the immanence or "closeness" of God. Both are necessary to balance our experiences of God, even though most people feel more at home in one or the other. Some dimensions of each discipline are present in the other. Different people will be attracted to contemplation or meditation for a variety of reasons such as personality type, a need for either a flexible or more rigid discipline, artistic ability, love of thinking, desire for quiet and many others. A person should experience both contemplation and meditation for a reasonable period of time and discern which is best for them.

Contemplation

*“Lord,
you are
at the center of all things:*

*the spindle on which
the spinning wheel sings.”*

Catherine Charnley

Contemplation may be described as a form of prayer without specific intent. It is a grace-filled, silent awareness of the mystery of God and an emptying of the mind's activity that leads a person to experience intimacy with God. This intimacy is the source of a change of consciousness that leads to love of God and neighbor. Contemplation places aside conscious control of thoughts, images, intent, words, and activity. An anonymous English mystic described this process as entering a "cloud of unknowing" wherein we appear "naked of intent" before God.¹ Through this silent and selfless listening we let go of control of what we think God is like and learn to desire God as God is. We let go, also, of our need for God as the source of nurture, protection, healing and wisdom for ourselves and for others. In contemplation we do not lose our individuality, but seek to be "naked" before God

¹ See *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling*, newly edited, with an introduction by William Johnston (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1973)

so that we may see ourselves as we truly are, through God's eyes, and desire to unite our will with what God desires for us and for the world. This is not a renunciation of ourselves or of the world. In our nakedness and emptiness we experience an intimacy that transcends words and images.

At first I found it difficult to let go of control. I wanted results in the form of tangible experience of God, solutions to problems, or wisdom to guide my spiritual growth. I was reluctant to enter into the mystery of God's presence. I experienced a touch of fear. I was not sure I liked "mystery!" I preferred God on "my terms." Over the years I learned that the mystery of God's essence is not something intentionally hidden or withheld from me. It is the aspect of God that transcends the boundaries of my human experience. Rather than a dense thicket that keeps me away from God, it leads me beyond time and space to a place of awe, wonder, and love. The mystery I experience in contemplative prayer is a threshold where time/space meets eternity. Like Moses, I must take off my shoes. The silence of my nakedness before God is a burning bush that is never consumed.

Contemplation is a form of prayer in which nothing is expected from us or by us. Often this makes it a difficult form of prayer in our 21st century culture where utilitarian goals and results are dominant values. The blessing at the end of the Episcopal Eucharist begins, "The peace of God which passes all understanding..." This reality is the heart of contemplative prayer, yet it runs counter to the intellect. It **cannot be** accommodated within the mind's **rational** categories. The discipline of contemplation is part of our pilgrimage **toward becoming** authentically human. It will help us transcend words, symbols and creeds so that we will *experience* truth. Contemplative prayer is a window to see and be seen by a dimension of divine reality that is always present, but hidden by the limitations of rational and physical experience. It is like a full eclipse of the sun. The sun's energy, literally our source of life, is so powerful we cannot look at its full intensity or experience its radiation all at once. The inability of our eyes to absorb such radiation without permanent damage withholds the sun's full visual nature and we miss seeing its beauty with the naked eye. But every two years the combination of the earth's rotation and orbit and the moon's orbit places the moon directly in front of our view of the sun. During a full solar eclipse the moon's presence enables us to see the sun's amazing corona. Like flames in a fireplace, colorful streaks of coronal gas shoot from the surface. Electrified hydrogen dashes into space at the speed of light. This symphony of light and movement is usually hidden from us by the sun's immense radiation. For seven minutes, every two years, it is possible to experience what remains, literally, a blinding mystery.

Meditation

Meditation is **any form** of prayer in which a person's senses and understanding are used intentionally in a variety of ways to focus on God's intimate presence within us and all around us. It differs from contemplation in that it **uses** our intentions and selected images, texts, experiences, work, artistic creation, recreation and interaction with the created world to discern God's presence and desires for ourselves and for the world. While contemplation seeks God through the temporary elimination of these aspects of our lives, meditation seeks God **in them**. Meditation manifests God's presence in the ordinary and finite aspects of daily life in order to bear witness to their spiritual dimension. It begins with God's intimate presence in life and looks for transcendent meaning and experience. Contemplation and meditation are not contradictory or exclusive disciplines. Their presence within the Christian tradition of mysticism is a bold statement about what God is like.

The desert father, Evagrius, learned in his prayer that God's uncreated energies of love are always present and operating in all creatures and events. These divine energies are available to human beings because God created us to share God's inner life through God's creative and self-

giving love.² Meditation opens us to discern the *inner presence and energies of God in the ordinary things of life*. Each word of Scripture, every flower, work of art, living creature, or heavenly body has a part in God's desires for the life of the world. In meditation we begin to comprehend God's wisdom and purpose within the object of our meditation and are united to God's purpose and energy in it. This enables us to discern and respond to the truth we experience in meditation and share that truth and loving presence through the way we live. In meditation we learn about and experience God within created things because their inner dimension shares the energies of the God who made them. I know this is true every time I look through the eyepiece of my telescope, photograph a wild flower with my digital camera and download the image to my computer screen, or read and reflect on a passage from the Bible.

Traditional examples of meditation are *lectio divina* (divine reading), a method of using the Bible or another sacred text for meditation; *daily examen*, a method for meditation on each day of life; using icons or works of art as objects of meditation; sacred dance; body prayer; writing; poetry; journaling; and many other forms of creative expression.

² I am grateful to Father George Maloney, S.J. for this insight. For more detail see George A. Maloney, S.J. *Pilgrimage of the Heart*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983) pages 20-21 & 57-58