

**The gift of contemplative spirituality is the capacity
to live ordinary life with extraordinary grace**

I would like to tell you a little bit about how I came to Centering Prayer. And in the course of so doing I will share my understanding of Cardinal Newman's notion of converging probabilities. As you know Cardinal Newman went through a dramatic conversion to the Catholic faith from the Anglican Church and eventually became a cardinal. Among his writings is his explanation of coming to that moment of faith and he likens it to falling in love. Cardinal Newman uses the idea of converging probabilities as the combination of the various signs that occur in one's life that comes from God that are invitations as it were to take a particular step an invitation to love, an invitation to truth. Much of the same can be said about my own far less dramatic interest in centering prayer and it comes through various people who I have come across in my life. These include Sister Paul, Father James Brett whom I met at Fatima College, the writings of Thomas Merton, Cistercian Monk, and my friend Andre des Vignes. I felt an immediate attraction to the idea of reflected prayer. This might seem unusual for someone who is as chronically frenetic as I am but it probably marks a deeper need.

In a recent article in answer to the question what can we do Fr. Keating wrote:

"Be reconciled with everyone, forgive in advance those who fight against us. Act in principle out of the reality of the oneness of the human family and all creation. The specific way in which to serve depends on one's own talents, the call of grace, and the recognition of the immense complexity, as well as the interconnectedness and interdependence, of the developing global society. Issues of justice and peace need the input, collaboration, and cooperation of experts in many areas of human interaction if the emerging global society is to meet the world's immediate and ongoing needs."

Fr. Keating in his book *The Mystery of Christ* explains that the story of Mary and Martha has been the basis for distinguishing two evangelical lifestyles, the contemplative and the active. The Martha Mary motif is central to the early chapters of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Father Keating returns to the passages that tell the story of Mary and Martha over and over again in his writing. It is

important that you remember how much Jesus loved this family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus from Bethany.

He explains:

"What Jesus disapproves of in Martha's behavior is not her good works, of which he was about to be the beneficiary, but her motive in doing them. The quality of one's service does not come from the activity itself, but from the purity of one's intention. The single eye of the Gospel is the eye of love, which is the desire to please God in all our actions, whatever these may be. Jesus' defense of Mary, who was sitting at his feet, is not an excuse for lazy folks to avoid the chores. But neither is it a motive for those who are working hard to get annoyed if those engaged in a contemplative lifestyle do not come forth to help them.

The story is a parable about the quality of Christian life, about growing in it, and about the necessity of the contemplative dimension of the Gospel as the means of doing so. When Jesus tells Martha that Mary had chosen the good portion, he is telling Martha that she needs to find a place in her life for this contemplative quality, and that this perspective would make her good actions better. He is also warning Mary that there is something even better than the good portion. This is the union of contemplation and action.

*Purity of intention developed through contemplation brings to action the quality of love. **Without contemplative prayer, action easily becomes mechanical, routine, draining, and may lead to burnout. At the very least, it fails to perceive the goldmine that ordinary life contains. Daily life is practice number-one for a Christian, but it can cease to be a practice without the discipline of contemplative prayer. The contemplative dimension of the Gospel perceives in***

daily life the treasures of holiness hidden in the most trivial and mundane events.

Jesus' statement is a call both to Mary and Martha, not just to Martha. Martha's activity was good, Mary's was better, but neither was good enough. Both needed to move into the union and harmony of the two, which is the contemplative dimension of the gospel. Through contemplative prayer we come under the influence of the Spirit both in prayer and action. Then action is truly prayer. Prayer is relationship, and hence capable of almost infinite growth. Relationship can go on growing forever, especially relationship with the infinite God. Prayer is the relationship in which purity of heart, reached through the unloading of the unconscious and the dismantling of the false-self system, opens us to the will of God in everything and enables us to respond out of divine love to the events of everyday life."

*Jesus said to Martha, "You are agitated and upset by many things." "Agitated" is the key word; it means that she was attached to her activity, or possibly to Mary's inactivity. She was serving the Lord **to please herself**, not with purity of heart, which seeks to please God and to do what divine love would do in each situation. Her agitation pointed to the fact that one of her emotional programs for happiness had been frustrated. There was nothing wrong with her activity, but to be agitated or upset indicated that she was under the influence of the false-self and withdrawn from the purity of divine inspiration.*

This parable encourages us to seek the integration of action and prayer. This time of contemplative prayer is the place of encounter between the creative vision of union with Christ and its incarnation in daily life. Without this daily confrontation, the contemplative vision can stagnate into a privatized game of perfectionism or succumb to the subtle poison of seeking one's own satisfaction in prayer. On the other hand, without the

contemplative vision, daily renewed in contemplative prayer, action can become self-centered and forgetful of God. The contemplative dimension guarantees the union of Martha and Mary.

What do I mean by the ordinary life? What I mean is precisely what a late friend used to call conventional – day to day mundane Christian or Hindu or Muslim observance and the ordinary lives that we lead, our friends, our family, our jobs, our projects that we pursue dutifully. Ordinary life then is the lives we all lead on the outside – our jobs, responsibilities, projects, anxieties, shifting friendships and alliances. What is extraordinary is that God should have any truck with us. That he has time for Mother Theresa's Sisters, for cloistered nuns, founders of radical Christian communities who have surrendered material goods to live a communal life in accordance with the gospel we understand, but not accountants, housewives, teachers, school principals, lawyers and judges, in other words that infuriating self-satisfied, self-congratulatory self-appointed and incestuous middle class.

More than that often our ordinary lives are filled and dominated by our thoughts, feelings, rationalizations, judgments and nose in air - I much better than them condemnations. We think and often say it about foolish politicians, errant relatives, sinning neighbours and acquaintances, vagrants, children who attend Junior Secondary schools, gang members, and Muslim coup leaders. We are constantly judging and condemning them cocksure that we could do a better job, never quite sure what we are here for. We are sure that if we got involved and were able to convey a sense of what is required things would improve in the country and in the world. That's us.

The problem is that our lives are lived – perhaps I should say acted out -really without a desire for God. They are lives without a passion for developing a deep and profound relationship with God. What we live are lives without a burning need to answer the Call. We hear that Call

whenever we say – there is more to life than this or that, money, position, affection, esteem or security. The Call we receive as children of the Creator is a call to a deeper relationship with God and that is the something more. This call shows how inadequate and ordinary we really are - that there is nothing special about our lives, except our ability to respond to that call. The longing for God is what has been awakened in us and it is up to us to nourish that longing. Equally those lives that we lead are not redeemed by charity work, attending Mosque or Temple or Mass or Saturday service however dutiful. That is not enough – it is enough for ordinariness but God's call and it is consistent and the more we respond, the more insistent is that call is to relationship with God first. "Seek first the Kingdom and all the rest will fall in line. Give God His due and God will give back to you."

How do we do this? Only when our hearts are burning with love, when we allow God's love to touch us, mould us, convert us and ultimately transform us and we can only do that by living the contemplative life amidst and in spite of our ordinary day to day existence. So that if when we respond to disasters like Ivan we are not yet living the gospel in our hearts. Or to put it another way our true selves are not yet discovered by us and are still known only to God. When we discover our true selves then we reflect the image of God in which each one of us is created and we bring our unique individuality to partake in the divine life.

The contemplative life, as was said in the gospel of Luke and read at Mass about 9 nine Sundays ago about Mary and Martha, is the best part and shall never be taken away. The foundation text of our practice of centering prayer is The Cloud of Unknowing. A few months I read a borrowed copy. I was surprised by its accessibility and I wish to draw on what I read to share my understanding of how the practice of centering prayer can enable us to live our ordinary lives with extraordinary grace. By the way the author of the Cloud of the Unknowing is uncompromising in his intent. He writes in The Foreword: "...you are not to read..., write..., or speak of (the Book) unless you believe that he is a person to follow Christ perfectly. I have in

mind a person who, over and above the good works of the active life, has resolved to follow Christ (as far as humanly possible with God's grace) into the inmost depths of contemplation." The author ends the book as he begins with an admonition- this book is not for everyone - not everyone is called to contemplation.

For the moment I want to go back to that passage and link something about my limited understanding of the contemplative dimension and what I have said about our ordinary middle class lives and our willingness to have them transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says to Martha after she complains about her sister "... you worry and fret about so many things and yet few are needed and indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part.

The author of the Cloud of Unknowing explains to a young hopeful says that are three ways of Life in the Holy Church. The first is the stage of the good and upright Christian life in which love is predominantly active in the corporal works of mercy. In the second a person begins to meditate on spiritual truths regarding his own sinfulness, the Passion and the joys of eternity: here the active and the contemplative begin to converge in a spiritual kingship like Mary and Martha. In the third stage a person enters the dark cloud of unknowing where in secret and alone he centres all of his love on God. The contemplative life begins on earth but continues without end into eternity. In eternity there will be no need for works of mercy as there is now. In heaven it will no longer be fitting to mourn for our sins or Christ's passion. If grace calls you then reach out for it – it will never be taken away from you. This is the best part. The contemplative life begins on earth but continues without end into eternity. This is because the contemplative life shall never be taken away.

I want to read an account¹ of the Tiberine Martyrs written by one of their fellow monks:

¹ Veilleux, Armand *Spiritus, a Journal of Christian Spirituality 1* (2001) no. 2 pp 205-216

God is love (I John 4:8). God is communion. Salvation is sharing in the intimate life of communion between the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. Christ is the faithful witness (o mártus o pistós; Apoc. 1,5), the martyr par excellence, the primordial sacrament of salvation, because he is the visible manifestation on earth of the Father's salvific design for the whole of human race. The Church in its turn is the sacrament of Christ, because it also is the visible manifestation of this same reality among men of the same faith, the same hope and the same love.

In 1993, when the electoral process was halted and the country plunged into a spiral of violence from which it has not yet succeeded in freeing itself, foreigners were called upon by the Islamist groups to leave the country under pain of death. Like many others, the Tibhirine monks had to ask themselves, must we remain or must we depart? They chose to remain. On December 14 of that year, when twelve Croatian Christians working at Tamesguida (four kilometers from the monastery) had their throats cut, the problem was posed in a more immediate way; and it was made even more immediate following a visit by an armed commando to the monastery on Christmas night. After a long discernment in prayer, the monks opted to remain in Algeria.

Why would they do this? In Europe, some people were saying they understood that missionaries should remain to continue their apostolate, but not the monks, who, at any rate, could lead their life of prayer anywhere. That was to misunderstand their life completely. The contemplative life is not lived in the abstract. It is always incarnated, rooted in a concrete place and cultural context. The Tibhirine monks in no way wanted to be martyrs; they were not visionaries. If they opted to remain, it was for them a duty of fidelity, and that was true on many levels.

The brothers understood that the local population was itself caught in a vise between two opposing violent forces (that of the government and of the rebels), and that it had no choice of fleeing. For the monks to flee, therefore, would have shown a lack of solidarity with those whom they had shared life with in the time of peace. After the martyrdom of Henry and Paul-Helen, Christopher had written in his journal, "One cannot forget and depart without betraying something which remains a grace of proximity, friendship and truth" (May 29, 1995). The monks considered their presence as an affirmation of the right to be different (in a fundamentalistic context that wanted everyone to be alike), a right they claimed for the people around them as well as for themselves. Mohammed, the monastery watchman, had said to Christopher, "You, you still have a little door by which to depart. For us there is no road, no door." And Moussa, one of the co-workers, had said to Christian, "If you depart, you deprive us of your hope, and you take away from us our hope too." It would not have been Christian for them to depart, and so they stayed.

None of them desired martyrdom. They loved life and feared death. But they had consciously and explicitly accepted death if that was what God willed. In a circular letter of November 21, 1995, they had written, "The brutal death of one of us, or of all of us at once would only be a consequence of this choice of life following Christ."

"Lord, grant us the grace to die without hatred in our hearts." The inspiration of this beautiful prayer had been taken up in Christian's Testament, a well-known document that will doubtless remain one of the finest pages of Christian literature in the twentieth century. This text expresses not only Christian's sentiments but also those of all brothers. In fact, beginning with a first version drawn up December 1, 1993, it was finished January 1, 1994. Between these two dates, Christian worked it over and refined it with the participation of the whole community.

The last paragraph of Christian's Testament is well known; it is here that Christian gives the title of friend to the man cutting his throat: "And you also, the friend of my last minute, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you also I wish this THANK YOU, this 'A-Dieu', for in God's face I see yours. And let it be given to us to find ourselves there, two happy thieves in paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of both of us."

I shared this passage not to say that we are called to martyrdom but as a reminder that the contemplative dimension is a profound Call to the death of the false self.

What about practical advice and how does that help us with our ordinary lives. Basically the author of The Cloud of Unknowing advises that you are to examine your own conscience and if the devotion of fixing your love upon the The Cloud of the unknowing is what draws your conscience- there must be a holy desire - then it is a sign that God is calling you to perform this work. Lift up your heart to the Lord. God alone can fill the hunger and longing of our Spirit. A naked desire for God is enough and to gather that desire all you need is choose a one syllable word and fix it your mind so that it will remain there come what may. More importantly during this time of contemplation we are asked to abandon all beneath the cloud of forgetting. Our minds must be uncluttered. It is counterproductive to engage any thought however good subtle or clever. Thoughts cannot comprehend God. Thoughts simply take us away from God. We cannot know God with our heads but only with our hearts- we can only fully grasp God, not through knowledge but through love. It is this cloud of unknowing that lies between us and God.

The author says that contemplative prayer is God's gift, wholly gratuitous. No one can earn it. It ought not to be practised until after he has purified his conscience. So that in contemplative life we must forget anything but God. The author advises that we should not care for consolations for the essence of the highest perfection is a good will. Thus there is hope for us all and it is

this: God in his wisdom determines the course and character of each one's contemplative journey according to the talents and gifts he has given him. Some reach contemplation only after long and arduous spiritual toil and others are so spiritually intimate with God in prayer that that they seem to possess this and experience the perfection of this work almost as they like. Most importantly we are not to waste time with comparisons.

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