



# LIGHT INTO FIRE: VERIFYING THE EXPERIENCE

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FOR AQUINAS *CONTEMPLATION* IS A SILENT PERCEPTION OF REALITY. IT INVOLVES THE *INTELLECTUS*, KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT IS PRESENT THROUGH SIMPLE INTUITION, INSIGHT OR VISION, REVEALED AS A GIFT RATHER THAN GRASPED BY THE *RATIO* OF DISCURSIVE ABSTRACT THINKING (CF. LK 4.20; ISA 61.1–4).<sup>1</sup> Meditation is more often associated with *ratio* than *intellectus*, but not exclusively. For John Main OSB the Latin roots of the word meditation, ‘*stare-in-medio*’, to abide in the middle or being in the centre, links it to the *intellectus* of contemplation in Aquinas’ sense. It involves going beyond even good, holy thoughts about God generated by the mind, by repeating a prayer word or formula to still the *ratio*. *Contemplatio* is a resting in God rather than thinking about him. The person who knows by intuition has already found what the thinker is seeking; they behold what they seek face to face. ‘I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother’ (Ps 131:2). We cannot know God by thought alone, but only through love, as the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* expressed it.<sup>2</sup>

This way of contemplation is a universal phenomenon. It is like a mining exercise, mining deep into our hearts to uncover the great treasure within.<sup>3</sup> God wants to replace our heart of stone with a heart of flesh (cf. Ezek 36.26). Life is a continuous dying into new life. Perhaps that is why children are so much better at it. We have to allow a space within ourselves to receive the transforming power of the prayer of Christ in us, where he brings new life out of death, where dying becomes the way to new life.

This was something the disciples initially failed to grasp. After Jesus’ crucifixion the disciples scattered in fear. Death on a cross did not fit with their image of the Messiah. However, one person remained, Mary Magdalene. She sought the Lord ‘more than watchmen wait for the morning’ (Ps 130.6). When Jesus speaks Mary’s name the veil covering her sight is lifted. Recognition brings the realisation that she is known and loved. Jesus has risen. All her sins are forgiven. There is no need to touch Jesus. She can rest in his presence and behold him face to face in the silent perception of reality, received as a gift not grasped as a possession. Gratitude becomes the heart of prayer.

In prayer, Jesus says ‘go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen’ (Mt 6.6). Our Father will reward us in this secret place and we are not to use many words because he knows what we need before we ask him (Mt 6.6–7).

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This is the prayer of the heart; it takes place 'in' not 'on', camera. Origen said the primary object of prayer is to 'become like God'.<sup>4</sup> St John said we do this because 'we shall see him as he really is' (1 Jn 3.2). The inner work of attention is like focusing a camera. The light from the object entering the camera brings with it an image of its source. In contemplation we open our hearts to receive the light of Christ and so become like him (cf. Mt 5.8).

This process is strikingly brought out in the conversion of Paul. He thought he was doing God's will, but was in fact persecuting Christ. The removal of the ego's veil of ignorance was dramatic. The light of Christ blinded Paul for three days and sent him inwards. The light dazzled and blessed Paul because it took him beyond the power of human reason alone (cf. Rom 11.34) and initiated the journey to inner transformation (cf. Rom 12.1–2). The image of Christ within was revealed and Paul discovered his true self: 'I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.' (Gal 2.20). He was inwardly illumined (cf. Eph 1.17–19) and received baptism, the sacrament of illumination, which Paul himself would later describe as a dying with Christ in order to rise with him to walk in the newness of life (cf. Rom 6.4).

The inner light of the true-self is 'self-evident' but never becomes an object of perception; John Main likened it to a candle in our hearts. If we are busy from the demands of the ego, constantly rushing from one thing to another, the flame is always on the point of going out. But when we sit ready, in the silence and stillness of contemplation, not thinking in terms of success, just being in the presence of God, the one who is, then the flame begins to burn steadily and brightly (cf. Ex 3.1–6; Lk 12.35). In contemplation we seek access to the source that sustains life in its fullness.

Perhaps the story of Mary and Martha is the one that most readily comes to mind. (Lk 10.38–42). Mary is attentive to the Lord's presence; she listens to him as she sits at his feet. Remember how Adam and Eve hid from the presence of God, in the trees of the garden, when they heard the 'sound of the LORD God walking in the garden' (Gen 3.8). The word 'person' can be interpreted literally to mean through (*per*) sound (*son*), so they are hiding from their true selves that resonate with God's presence. We are to live differentiated, personal yet integrated lives, in harmony with God as from the beginning, not

undifferentiated, impersonal, disintegrated lives fed by the demands of the ego. Lack of cohesion within oneself and with others only leads to alienation and anxious worry. Martha turns to Jesus; sensing that healing comes through him. Jesus simply leads her to her true self by pointing to Mary. Being in the same home together, they show us the two aspects of every person, which have to be integrated for a healthy life. This integrated consciousness and the gratitude at the heart of prayer is pure gift (cf. Jn 19.26–27). All we have to do is dispose ourselves to receive it, the free gift of God is 'eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 6.23). If this seems like annihilation, God's love overcomes all fear if we can 'Be still and know that I am God' (Ps 46.10).

Contemplation as abiding in the Lord's presence leads to healing and peace (cf. Ps 73.21–28). In Luke's account of the man with the withered right hand, Jesus commands him to 'Get up and stand in front of everyone' (Lk 6.8). A withered right hand comes from the forgetfulness of Jerusalem (cf. Ps 137.5), the city of peace where God dwells with his people. If we destroy this temple, Jesus said, he will rebuild it in three days, for it is now the heart, the core of every person.

Contemplation is linked then to the Eucharistic anamnesis, a remembrance that makes present. Unlike ordinary food, the Eucharistic food changes us, if we are open to receive the gift in faith. We are no longer consumers but the consumed; it does not destroy but makes us more like Christ himself. It is a sacrifice in that it makes us holy (*sacre* = holy; *facere* = to make), only God is holy, the source of all holiness, and so, strictly speaking, only God can sacrifice as Abraham discovered (cf. Gen 22.6–14). Our part in the sacrifice is receptive attention rather than active intention.

Sometimes 'attentive care' is needed, rather than 'intensive care', to make us whole. Painting was once described in terms of remembering a beautiful melody. You remember snatches of it and know the melody is within you, but you have somehow to find your way back to it.<sup>5</sup> Prayer as attentive wakefulness is like experiencing what is before us as if for the first time. It is a kind of love that through sight or hearing understands the meaning of the experience, the gift given is now received.

At the Transfiguration the disciples had the experience but were to remain silent because they still questioned what rising from the dead could

#### NOTES

1. Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 1998), chapter 9.
2. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in the latter half of the fourteenth century.
3. John Main, *Door to Silence* (London: Canterbury Press, 2006), p. 55.
4. Origen, *On Prayer*, quoted by Fr Laurence Freeman, 'The Contemplative Teacher', in Ernie Christie, *Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children* (Oro Valley, AZ: Medio Media/, Mulgrave: John Garratt Publishing, 2008), p. 7.
5. Mary O'Hara, *Celebration of Love* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1985), p. 71.
6. TS Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages', in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 26.
7. Pope John Paul II, *Psalms and Canticles: Meditations and Catechesis on the Psalms and Canticles of Evening Prayer* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2006), p. 234.
8. Pope Benedict XVI, *The Blessing of Christmas* (Ft Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 2007), pp. 90–2.
9. TS Eliot, 'East Coker', in *Four Quartets*, p. 20.
10. John Main, *The Heart of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1988), p. 75.
11. Pope Benedict XVI, *Lent, the journey to Easter Joy: More Words of Encouragement* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2009), p. 56.
12. Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici: Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1989), n. 31.
13. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium: Starting afresh from Christ* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2002), n. 33.
14. Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, *The Love of Christ Towards Migrants* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2004), n. 37.

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► mean (cf. Mk 9.10). Understanding came with the resurrection appearances. They restored the experience, so the disciples could then tell the world.<sup>6</sup>

Mary did not 'intend' to become the mother of God. She was chosen and initially confused, but persevered in a faithful, 'attentive' listening to the message of the angel and thus began to understand. Confusion gave way to praise as Mary magnified the Lord in prayer (cf. Lk 1.46–55).

In his commentary on the Magnificat St Ambrose said, 'If, according to the flesh the Mother of Christ is one alone, according to the faith all souls bring forth Christ: indeed, each one intimately welcomes the Word of God.' So each of us is called to the dwelling place of the Lord in our hearts, attentive to that presence we bring him forth in our own time. Through attentive listening we become like Mary the embodiment of the Church's memory.<sup>7</sup> Our inner senses are developed as God fills our hearts with his presence. Silence becomes the space where Christ is born (cf. Wisdom 18:14–15).<sup>8</sup>

The Greek word for 'open the heart' is *choreo*, from which we get our word choreographer. The light of human reason choreographed the steps of the Wise Men; those of the Prodigal Son his own immature desires, his ego. Both were walking in darkness but were halted in their tracks at a manger. The star guiding the Wise Men halted at the place of Jesus' birth. Astronomers call the place where a star appears to halt as its station (*station*), a place to stand and wait, where religious assemble to process to the place of worship. At the manger they experience the greater light of God's presence. It is a homecoming. They pay him homage. At the place where the heart belongs, they can leave their treasures. Placing Jesus in a manger indicates he is real food for our journey. He now choreographs their steps (cf. 1 Jn 1.5–7).

The Prodigal Son is on alien soil. He came to a different manger, a trough where pigs fed. Here there was no suitable food. His hunger brought him to his senses and he realised his true identity as the son of his father. He must return to the father who is now choreographing his steps. The complaint of the older son is answered with a simple 'everything I have is yours' (Lk 15.31). The father does not force his gifts upon us. He waits for us to experience our need and open our hearts to receive what is ours from the beginning, in gratitude.

Meditation is one of many forms of prayer. Together they are sometimes likened to the spokes of a wheel leading us from the circumference to Christ at the centre. This hub is one meaning of the word navel. Our word navel comes from the same root, reminding us of the umbilical cord connecting us to our mother who gives birth to us. If we are at the circumference as the wheel moves, our lives are a series of ups and downs. These are gradually smoothed out as we approach the still centre. 'Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low' (Lk 3.5). The wheel moves but we are with Christ at the still centre, time is both cyclical or seasonal and linear or historical. We must be 'still and still moving, into another intensity; for a further union, a deeper communion'.<sup>9</sup>

After the resurrection, the disciples understand that in Jesus' Ascension he is going to the Father who is in every heart. Jesus is physically absent but spiritually present as the centre of all centres.<sup>10</sup> Current scientific theory tells us that space is finite but unbounded, like the surface of a sphere. No point has any more claim to be the centre than any other; the centre is nowhere. Alternatively, every point has an equal claim to be the centre; the centre is everywhere. God is nowhere, the *via negative* of his utter transcendence, or God is everywhere, the *via positive* of his indwelling presence in every heart. After the Ascension, Jesus' presence fills creation as a fragrance fills a room.

The fire of the Holy Spirit descending upon the disciples at Pentecost indicates that Jesus' sacrifice is acceptable to the Father. Early Christians liked to light the paschal fire directly from the sun by using a crystal, indicating that it was pure gift and that the light of revelation is changed into fire.<sup>11</sup> The wheel becomes more like the nimbus of a halo; a word that comes from the Greek word for threshing floor. To thrash things out to get to the truth is a process of getting to the rhyme of things. To that *poietes* which makes all things new. Being one with the light of Christ at the centre, the direction of our journey reverses; we are now able to radiate that light, the glory of God. We understand our communion with Christ as a missionary communion.<sup>12</sup> Mission, primarily, is radiating the glory of God.<sup>13</sup> ■