

## EDITORIAL

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**MARTHA IS STRESSED. SHE HAS TO GET ORGANISED. PEOPLE ARE RELYING ON HER. BUT THERE'S TOO MUCH TO DO IN THE TIME AVAILABLE.** She is rushing around trying to entertain her visitors and keep up with the demands of life, but it's all too much. She is overwhelmed and cannot cope. You can sense the frustration as she walks into the room and tells Jesus what to do: 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' (Lk 10.40)

Mary, by contrast, is quietly sitting at Jesus' feet, listening. She's not distracted by all that is going on around her. Instead, she's paying attention to Jesus' words. She's learning to see life in a new way.

In our hectic lifestyles we too, like Martha, often try to do too much. These days everything and everyone is under pressure to go faster.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, we skim the surface and fail to make real connections with ourselves, others and the world around us. To put it another way, we are distracted by all we have to do and fail to pay attention. Our relationships are thus damaged. Laurence Freeman describes attention as 'the essential quality of all human relationships. If you love someone, you pay attention to them and you love what you pay attention to ... To learn to pay attention is really to learn to be fully human.'<sup>2</sup>

Learning to contemplate is learning the art of paying attention. Thomas Merton describes contemplation as the 'highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.'<sup>3</sup> It is a journey of inner transformation and redemption; a process that allows us to see ourselves as we truly are. In so doing, hopefully, we learn to live better, healthier lives.

One of the characteristics of modern Western civilisation is a deep spiritual hunger. The amount of space bookshops devote to mystical themes and depth psychologies is evidence that increasing numbers of people are searching for a deeper inner spiritual life. Increasing numbers of Westerners are turning East to satisfy their hunger and overlooking the Christian tradition. No doubt, this is in large part due to the religio-cultural shift away from traditional institutionalised religion. A lack of awareness of the Christian mystical tradition may also be a factor as it

is largely lost as an option within the mainstream life of the Church.

In our opening essay, Canon Melvyn Matthews passionately argues that it is essential we recover the mystical tradition for this generation if the Church's life is to flourish. In a consumerist culture, we too often settle for a rather comfortable, reductionist view of God. We fail to recognise his terrifying beauty. He is the wholly other one, who is the source of all our being. We need to retrieve a spiritual life of great depth and begin to see the immense reality of God. In this way, we can be set free from the consumerist mentality, which 'gives God the opportunity to speak a saving and liberating word to the culture we inhabit'.

Canon Matthews offers a timely reminder that we need to balance theology and spirituality. It is a theme taken up by David Spriggs in our second piece. Contemplation is, of course, an ancient and universal spiritual tradition that is found in all the major religions. Its benefits for well-being are widely recognised. But what is it that makes Christian contemplation distinct? What are the key aspects if our contemplation is to have an essentially Christian dimension? Drawing on Scripture, David reminds us that Christian contemplation should have a Christological focus. At its heart is the glory of God, revealed supremely in Jesus Christ. That is not to dismiss the created world but to realise we see it through the primary filter of our contemplation, Jesus Christ. Christian contemplation is never just passive in the sense of resting in God; it also involves change, the transformation of sinners and their distorted perceptions. This transformation has a Christ-like shape.

Malcolm Glaze outlines the scriptural basis for the practice of contemplation. He shows that Scripture teaches we have to allow a space within ourselves to receive the transforming power of God, to abide in Christ's presence and allow his light to shine in our hearts. '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.' We radiate the glory of Christ. That, primarily, is our mission.

The practice of praying meditatively with the Bible, *lectio divina*, is an ancient form of prayer that has come to the forefront again in recent years. Thomas Keating outlines the differences between the two classical forms of this practice – the more ancient monastic form and the scholastic form, which was developed

## NOTES

1. See Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slow* (London: Orion, 2004).
2. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb9-usvEKUU&feature=Playlist&p=62EF2A0FA63F8CD0&index=4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb9-usvEKUU&feature=Playlist&p=62EF2A0FA63F8CD0&index=4)
3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 1.
4. Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of the Christian Faith* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 58.

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▶ during the Medieval period. Both have their own integrity and uniqueness, but the monastic form is more suited to contemplative prayer because its lack of structure allows room for spontaneous moves of the Spirit.

The increasing ecological crisis is evidence that all too often we forget what is happening in the natural world. We do not often pay attention to the natural rhythms of life in the seasons. Drawing on ancient Celtic pagan-Christian traditions, Tess Ward argues that ‘the natural world is a visible reminder that we are made, loved and sustained by God, and that our changes, like those of the seasons, are held in a divine flow and rhythm.’

Paying more attention to the pattern of creation – life – death – rebirth/life – helps our inner spiritual journey because we become more aware of the present moment, of God’s presence in the everyday things of life and we can only be overwhelmed with gratitude for his/her constant provision.

In a short personal reflection, Richard Rohr reminds us that we need to take time and look again at ourselves and others. All too often, we look at ourselves and others in ‘critical, demanding and negative’ ways. Like Martha, we must learn to refocus our inner selves and allow the ego to be stripped away. Like Mary, we must learn to look at life from the place of an intimate relationship with the gracious and compassionate God.

In our final, article, Tessa Holland explores the story, theology and community life of Contemplative Fire. This emerging movement consists of a number of small Christian contemplative communities ‘at the edge’. As part of the emergent Church, Contemplative Fire responds to the spiritual needs of those drawn to contemplation-in-action. It seeks to provide opportunities at many levels for personal and group work to enable people from all walks of life to enter deeply into the understanding and teaching of Jesus and the Christian mystics.

These essays highlight the relevance of the Christian contemplative tradition for today’s culture. Like Martha we need to learn to step back from the busyness of life and get our priorities right. We all need to learn to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to him, just as Mary did. As Richard Foster says, ‘Every one of us is called to be a contemplative – not in the sense of a particular vocation ... but in the sense of a holy habit of contemplative love that leads us forth in partnership with God into creative and redeeming work.’<sup>4</sup> 