

# SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR A CONTEMPLATIVE

By JOHN GOVAN

A CONTEMPLATIVE is a person, man or woman, religious, cleric or lay, who engages in and desires nothing but a prayer style and prayer activity which is based upon an already established intimate and personal relationship with God. This person is easily recognized as different from others because his or her prayer is usually a time spent with God which has many moments of accepted silence. There is little or no use of scripture because only God himself is their interest.

Grace builds upon an existing nature and contemplative prayer is the prayer of a person with a definite past. In this article, which is an attempt at developing the contemplative profile and thus having some understanding of this past, contemplative will mean precisely a contemplative-in-action, that is, a contemplative who lives in a non-monastic environment. The hope is that this knowledge will facilitate spiritual direction for people of this sort.

Since grace builds on nature, the director is primarily directing the person and only in a secondary sense dealing with the immediate prayer experience. The knowledge and understanding of a contemplative is analogously similar to the appreciation of a painting. In viewing art, one's attention needs to shift from the foreground to the background in a continuous movement. This interplay of different perspectives enables one to grasp intuitively the meaning of the whole painting. Any failure to consider the significance of a piece leads to confusion and misunderstanding.

In contemplative prayer, the background consists in the previous history of the person's journey to God and includes all lived experiences. It brings one's attention to where the person is coming from in the past, what the person is immediately desiring in the present and what the person is hoping for in the future. The foreground is made up of the immediate prayer and life experiences which together constitute the concrete situation. With both foreground and background being considered, any suggested direction for future growth will be based on an existing foundation and will avoid the pitfall of being meaningless direction which has no

resonance in the person's history.

What, then, is included in the story of the contemplative? The relationship with God has been developed through experiences both in prayer and in life which are somewhat synonymous with the possible experiences of the Second, Third, and Fourth Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius. This means that the person already has an apostolic zeal and a burning desire to be under the Standard of Christ.<sup>1</sup> The contemplative is already willing to be with Christ in suffering if this is needed to further the building of the Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Such a person is already living with the hope of the resurrection and thus transforms the meaning of any difficulties encountered because of apostolic activity or because of life itself.<sup>3</sup>

These experiences should be assumed as within them and as the basis for their desire for a more complete appropriation of the essence of the *Contemplatio ad amorem* which is seen as a gradual obtaining of a vision which enables one to find God in all things, to consider oneself as a receiver of only blessings and to become one who is always grateful.<sup>4</sup> And this desire for the development of a vision in which only God is seen as important is precisely what the spiritual director needs to promote. But a realization of this end can only be achieved if there is a growing detachment from all created things, be they material or spiritual, and a total emptying of self so that 'our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created'.<sup>5</sup> The individual needs to be encouraged and led along a journey of self-emptying so that the goal of seeing only God is reached.

With non-contemplative people for whom the basis of the contemplative's experiences of God is missing, the question that is frequently raised when new life situations occur is 'why?' These people have three experiences of spiritual consciousness and these are caused by spiritual consolation, spiritual desolation or the sustaining power of God. The director uses these states as touchstones for proper discernment, so it is very necessary to consider what they look like in the flesh.

Spiritual consolation is known as a gift that only God can give. It produces an optimism, a vitality, a zest for life and an outward movement that allows one to embrace everything and everyone in acts of self-forgetting love. But this type of consolation needs to be broken down into two specific experiences. There is 'easy' consolation in which everything seems joyful, pleasant, in harmony with one's authentic being and without any kind of fear. It leads

to spontaneity of action. And there also is 'hard' consolation in the experience of sorrow for sins, repentance, a deep knowledge of the suffering of Christ or of another and the occurrence of hope in the midst of stress.

Spiritual desolation, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. It is the experience of a destructive and de-energizing force which creates a pessimism, a loss of hope, an absence of faith, an inability to love, a feeling of despair, a sense of meaninglessness, a restlessness with everything and a desire to be alone.

The third possibility is the action of God against desolation and this is always present as the sustaining power of God. Ignatius repeatedly affirms that God's grace is always sufficient. 'He or she can resist with the help of God, which always remains, though one may not clearly perceive it.'<sup>6</sup>

For the contemplative, however, the question raised when new realities are encountered is 'what does this mean?' in terms of my growth. The same spiritual touchstones are themselves transformed and now become two. Both are related to movement and can only be understood by reference to the direction of the individual. If one is moving towards God in an 'easy' or 'hard' way, then spiritual consolation is present. And if one is moving away from God, then desolation is evident. Direction and movement become the only significant factors.

Spiritual consolation for a contemplative involves a recognition that whatever is being experienced is capable of and perhaps necessary for leading one to a greater union with God. It is a recognition which enables the person to consider everyone and everything as God's gift. It produces an inner peace which leads to a passive acceptance of all realities in creation which are considered 'just' and an active response to the realities which are seen as 'unjust' and opposed to God's plan for creation. In all instances, however, there is an optimistic stance and a loving response. The only bad thing in itself is sin, and even this reality of the human situation can become good if it creates a movement towards God.

The ordinary understanding of 'easy' and 'hard' consolation still applies for a contemplative, but there is now a slight difference. The contemplative experience is either of the presence of God or of his absence. Both experiences, however, create an intensification of the desire for God. When the presence is felt, there is 'easy' consolation and a harmony between inner and outer peace results.

But when the experience is of the absence of God, there is a 'hard' consolation in which there is an outer turmoil with an inner peace which comes solely from a remembrance of God's presence.

It is sometimes very difficult to determine which type of consolation is being experienced, but I believe there is a possible way of recognizing it. The significance of the events in the mind of the person indicates consolation or desolation but, if there is consolation, the order in which the person expresses his or her experience is very important. For example, if the person is beaming with enthusiasm and talks about how everything leads to God and then reveals the present difficulties as an afterthought, I would be inclined to believe the person is experiencing 'easy' consolation. But if the person begins with the hardships of the present situation and then adds the fact that he or she is still content, then I think 'hard' consolation is in evidence.

Spiritual desolation is also somewhat different for a contemplative, but it still is the exact opposite of spiritual consolation. Now, however, it involves the absence of any positive recognition which considers the situation as an opportunity for growth. It produces the loss of any relationship with God and even of a felt desire for his presence. The movement is away from him and a total negativity and despair result.

The spiritual journey is unique for each and every person. But there are some traditional categories which place this distinction between 'easy' and 'hard' consolation within some known paths. There are the kataphatic and the apophatic traditions.<sup>7</sup> Both are ways in which God leads, God transforms and God brings about a self-emptying. The kataphatic way empties by experiences which seem easy and pleasant. It is a way in which the indwelling presence of God is the predominant awareness and a sense of God as Other is developed.

The apophatic way, on the other hand, brings one through experiences of the absence of God. This leads to feelings of darkness, dryness and aridity. It brings one a heightened awareness of abandonment, of the cross and of the pain that God's seeming absence brings. I believe the initial consciousness in this tradition is of God as Other and a sense of the indwelling presence is fashioned.

As director, a knowledge of the person's history enables one to understand in which tradition a person lies. Then one directs in such a way that the person does not become exclusive in his/her

understanding of God and does not stop the self-emptying process. Both a recognition of the indwelling presence of God and an affirmation that God is Other are simultaneously held by one who has been emptied by God. A denial of either description is definitely a sign of falsehood and an indication of a need for further growth.

Thus far I have been describing some basic and well known spiritual movements in order to facilitate an understanding of the person's journey, but now I want to shift the focus in order to concentrate on the contemplative nature and give the director a means of grasping the meaning of those same movements. When the director combines an understanding of the religious experiences with an appreciation of the contemplative's desire, then he or she is in a position to become an active participant in spiritual direction.

The contemplative has a faith-vision, a comfortableness with mystery, a relationship with God and a desire to be emptied by God so that a greater union with him becomes a possibility. But this desire means a surrender of self and a willingness to let God lead. And the director's role becomes that of making certain that all the components of the contemplative's profile are simultaneously present throughout the process of purification. If any part is missing, the director has the duty of bringing it to the person's attention, of helping the person determine the reason for its absence and of encouraging the individual to continue seeking to be self-emptying by God.

'God alone can give consolation to the soul without any previous cause'.<sup>8</sup> This is the only type of consolation which a contemplative is seeking. Any other experience of consolation in which there is a cause other than God is to be immediately recognized and discarded as unimportant. The director helps this recognition and provides encouragement and support.

A director is listening for any sign or indication of some loss of this faith-vision, some uncomfortableness with mystery, some tinge of independence which removes the person from a childlike trust in God, the presence of a resistance to or an impatience with the type or pace of the emptying being done by God and some weakening of the desire to be united to God. How to recognize these signs is exactly what I will be trying to illustrate as I continue.

But before I move into this, I need to mention the ways in which the director should respond. The presence of one of these signs reveals both that an emptying by God is taking place within a certain part of the person's psyche and that this area will be the

scene of further emptying. The director then helps the contemplative in two ways. First, there is a need to bring this particular experience to the attention of the person in such a way that its significance is grasped in terms of the previously expressed desire to be self-emptied. Secondly, there is the need to provide encouragement and support for a continued effort in this direction.

The journey to God always begins with oneself, moves through Christ in some way and ultimately leads to the Trinity. There is no starting point other than the nature and existence that belong to me. There is no way to the Father except through the Son. Christ is not only the source of all grace, but he is the means through which one has to pass for a union with God and he himself is the model par excellence for imitation. Imitation of Christ is the only way of growing into the fulness of our own humanity and becoming integrated and in total harmony with God.

Jesus is fully human and fully divine. All Christians are explicitly called to become parts of the body of Christ by imitating his human nature in the acts they do. For the non-contemplative, this call to follow Christ in acts remains somewhat on the level of law. The 'ought' or 'should' mentality is still dominant as this person attempts to obey his commandments and teachings. But the contemplative-in-action is one who has already taken the commandments and teachings of Christ into his or her very heart so that there is a spontaneous following of him because of love.

This imitation of Christ which is act-orientated leaves the contemplatives somewhat dissatisfied. Their longing and desire is to follow the Lord more closely and thus be more fully incorporated into him. But such a longing cannot be fulfilled by acts alone. There is indication that this person is called by God into a more complete union which can only be achieved by an imitation of Christ in his very being, that is, in his human nature and in his divine. The director's role at this juncture is extremely important.

The transition into a contemplative style of prayer is a positive response to a preceding dissatisfaction with a mere doing of God's will within a certain apostolate. A director needs to recognize such a frustration as a possible call from the Lord to begin in earnest a seeking of an imitation of Christ in being. There is only one way this can happen and it means a total surrender by the individual to God's lead. It places the person in the position of one who is no longer in control and chooses to be emptied by God in whatever way God desires. Many people reach this point in their spiritual

journey but refuse to make the final surrender because of fear or lack of proper direction.

The contemplative-in-action is one who has chosen to imitate Christ in his or her own human nature but remains imitating Christ in acts. The process of being emptied in being enhances one's work for the Lord and in no way diminishes it. As one directs such a contemplative, it is very important to make sure that this is happening.

An imitation of Christ in being has two parts. There is the imitation of Christ's human nature and there is a further imitation of Christ in his divinity. This first part opens one up to an emptying which produces an acceptance of one's creaturehood, an acceptance of one's concrete situation whether it be personal or social, an acceptance of all other people and an acceptance of oneself as a child of God. Such acceptance is one of the 'givens' in one's existence. It is a passive acceptance but not a stoical acceptance, for there always is the element of hope that is based on the real and present situation of one's life. It includes an optimistic and positive response.

The second type of emptying which embraces the desire to imitate Christ in his divine nature produces a purification and freeing from all things which have been brought into one's identity by oneself, for example, memories, understandings or loves. Both parts of one's identity need to be completely emptied by the Lord before a union with God is possible.

Let us first begin by examining some particulars of the emptying of any attachments one might have to the 'givens' of one's existence. Now there are many sources for understanding human nature, but a source which is common to all of us is that of our own experience. From my own reflections, I have become aware that our humanity gives us a dynamic and ever-changing identity, an ever-changing social environment and ever-changing flow of grace. Being aware of such a dynamism and being aware of the contemplative's faith-vision, let us consider the factors of one's human existence. Then, as director, constantly be asking ourselves if the person is swimming upstream against the reality or downstream and with the reality.

Only faith allows one to swim downstream, to be comfortable with the paradoxical mystery and to be in harmony with God's desire. If the person is swimming upstream, that is, entangled with an element which appears below under the column of 'My

desire' or of 'My reality', he or she is no longer operating with a faith-vision. This person is using human reason alone and encountering problems to be solved rather than mysteries to be entered.

### Paradox

God's desire for me = My desire	&	My reality
Growth	Stability	Change
Freedom	Total Freedom	Unfree
Life	Immortality	Death
Love	To be loved by others and by self	Rejected by others and even by self
		Sin

A faith-vision makes a person comfortable with the dynamic nature of the human reality and accepting of the incompleteness that will be part of the human experience until a person rests in God. A contemplative, then, tends to be stable in change, free to be unfree, possessing life eternal even though one's future includes physical death and is not excessively disturbed by the experience of rejection because he or she is rooted in God's love. In other words, this person is quite content with being humanly perfect and is not seeking an immediate divine perfection. Such human perfection is very dynamic and includes many failings, many weaknesses and all kinds of fluctuations.

The loss of a faith-vision is easily recognized by the presence of an upstream swim and an inability to be comfortable with the paradoxes of human existence. This is not to be considered a negative happening, but rather a sign of God's emptying activity and an indication of a need for further emptying in this area. Repetition of such losses can bring one to a radical acceptance of one's powerlessness, one's weakness and one's true identity as sinner. Not only does this process lead to a deeper recognition of the giftedness of faith, the identity of oneself as sinner and the faithfulness of a loving God, but it leads to a constant stance of a child of God who is always dependent. God becomes the leader in one's pilgrimage.

This realization of oneself as sinner comes in two experiences. The inability to be constantly in faith can lead one to an appropriation of one's sharing in original sin and the need for outside help from God, and the awareness of actual sins in one's past and present can lead to an awareness of oneself as a possible sinner whom Christ came to save. Both of these experiences enable one



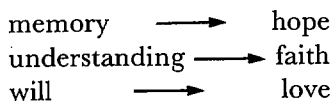
to become a 'comfortable' sinner who trusts fully in God's love and faithfulness but does not deny the fact that one's identity is that of sinner.

Jesus is like us in all things but sin. This means that his human nature is such that there is a constant integration within him so that he can always accept the totality of his being and whatever is given to him by this world without losing the harmony between his desire and God's desire. For us, however, an imitation of Christ will include the reality of sin and lead to an integration of the incompleteness that is part of the human person so that there is an acceptance of the 'givens' of one's existence. This will include all persons, all things, the world that is ours and the constant state of sinfulness. Such a freeing from the untruth which prevents us from being set free from the slavery of self-love is absolutely necessary for one to be in harmony with God's desire.

Once this type of emptying is accomplished, there remains the second and most difficult part of the purifying process. Jesus in his divine nature is free from everything that is produced by his human nature and is solely motivated in his actions by a love for the Father. This love somehow transforms and transcends his human nature, but does not abolish it. An imitation of Christ in his divinity empties us from any attachments to our own products so that we too are motivated solely by a love for God. Only God is seen as absolute and everything but God seems to lose its importance.

John of the Cross and Ignatius of Loyola were masters of this emptying process. What John of the Cross was for the contemplative in the monastic situation, Ignatius was for the contemplative-in-action. Both were seeking a total response to God, a total self-emptying and a total surrender of self. But they presented us with different ways, even though both used the faculty psychology of that time in order to explain the nature of total self-emptying.

John of the Cross writes about an emptying of the three powers of the soul which correspond to the three theological virtues.<sup>9</sup> I will use his terminology but a modern understanding in order to describe the nature of this process. It looks like this:



The emptying of memory is an emptying of hope. One's identity consists of one's entire story, that is, one's blessed history, one's sin history, one's entire life. An emptying leaves the person always ready to be surprised, always building upon the past but not clinging to it and always living in such a way that only God's faithfulness can be presumed upon. In other words, one does not rely upon previous faith, hope or love responses but is daily relying upon the Lord.

The experiences which empty one's understanding bring one to the deep realization that faith is 'not knowing'. This appropriation leaves a person open to mystery and fully appreciating the relativity of all human intellectual activity. It enables the person to be comfortably dependent upon God and no longer rely simply on his/her own efforts.

The purification of will in the faculty psychology meant an emptying of both the intellectual will and the affective will. In our day, it might perhaps be better to describe this power as one which includes desires, emotions and all forms of love. Its purification is a conversion from a desiring of the affective experiences contained in the consolation of God to loving only the God of consolation. One's love for God becomes a love for the God who is and is no longer related in any way to the consequences. It is both a recognition that God loves unconditionally and a desire to love God unconditionally.

I have said earlier that the contemplative is one who only seeks God and every other thing that is not God is to be recognized as such and then put aside as unimportant. When a person is in this stage of emptying, the director's role is precisely to help the person identify the attachment and return to God.

For the contemplative-in-action, Ignatius is the master. What is the total self-surrender that he invites one to make? Consider his prayer which is contained in the Exercises:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will . . .

Give me thy love and thy grace, for this is sufficient for me.<sup>10</sup>

Ignatius includes the three powers of the soul which I have already commented upon, but he adds the key offering for the contemplative-in-action. This is one's liberty or one's freedom. And by liberty, one means all that belongs to the existential subject or dynamic person. This means the fulness of one's humanity and

the entirety of one's concrete situation. It means the totality of one's past, the reality of one's present and the hope one has for the future. The contemplative, then, is one who in emptiness can give to the Lord one's very being.

But this notion of liberty is important in another way. Not only do I give my freedom to the Lord, but I acknowledge his freedom too. I want only what he wants. I surrender myself to his lead and simply wait and accept whatever he chooses. Paradoxically, I let God possess me, and in this way, I possess him.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, trans. Puhl, (Loyola University Press, Chicago, 1951), n 147.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, nn 91-98.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, n 221.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, nn 230-237.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, n 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, n 320.

<sup>7</sup> Shannon, William: *Thomas Merton's dark path* (Penguin Books, 1982), pp 9-11.

<sup>8</sup> Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises* n 330.

<sup>9</sup> See John of the Cross, *Dark night of the soul*.

<sup>10</sup> Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises* n 234.