

CONTEMPLATIVE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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MOST OF THE articles in this particular *Way Supplement* are written with contemplative monastic religious men and women in mind. That is deliberate. But monasteries and religious houses are by no means the only places in which contemplatives live and contemplation is a daily activity. The Church has a large number and rich variety of true but often unsung contemplatives among laypeople who are leading busy lives as single persons, mothers and wives, husbands and fathers, sick and healthy, younger and especially older, in work or unemployed.

Monastic contemplatives have far greater freedom than most other Christians to create for themselves an external environment and special rhythm of life which they judge to be conducive to contemplation. That belongs to the nature and privilege of an enclosed contemplative life. While this control of the environment and rhythm of life does not in itself create or ensure a contemplative life, it certainly helps to provide an appropriate setting for contemplation. And although such control does not of itself free a person from 'the world' and its many voices, because we carry those around with us, nonetheless it is a valuable help towards being free to meet God in contemplation. God asks the majority of us, however, to make our Christian journeys outside a monastic setting, in 'the world', with all its many and varied attractions, experiences, demands and influences. So if God wants us in some sense to be contemplatives, it is in the world and somehow by means of the world that this comes about.

This is not so unusual a notion today as it was in times when people more commonly saw engagement in the affairs of everyday life without the protection of cloister as an extremely dangerous path constantly under threat from forces which aimed to undermine our very salvation. Ignatius Loyola was one of the people by whom the call to be contemplative in a busy, active life without traditional monastic structures was revived and offered to laypeople as well

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as to apostolic religious. He was himself a layman when the foundations of his spirituality were being laid (it was not until he was about forty-six that he was ordained priest). These words of his can still come as a surprise to many people, implying as they do a very positive evaluation of 'the world' as the context which actually helps people to become contemplative and holy:

Human beings are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord and by this means to attain to salvation. The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings, to help them in attaining the purpose for which they are created (Exx 23).

Readers can be excused for not knowing very much about a man called Jerome Nadal. He does not stride like a giant through the history of spirituality, yet his influence is not at all negligible.¹ Ignatius recognized him as one of the people who understood him best, and so he sent Nadal round Europe to explain the spirituality and Constitutions of the Society of Jesus to the Jesuit communities that had been recently formed. It was Nadal who noted that especially later in his life Ignatius used to contemplate the Trinity in his daily prayer and that 'Father Ignatius enjoyed this kind of prayer by reason of a great privilege and in a most singular manner'. But the next part of the same passage is far more striking and unusual:

. . . and this besides, that in all things, actions and conversations he contemplated the presence of God and experienced the reality of spiritual things, so that he was a contemplative likewise in action (a thing which he used to express by saying: God must be found in everything).²

Ignatius as interpreted by Nadal presents a way of being contemplative in everyday life which has much to offer to Christians today. This relevance for today is my main interest in this article.

Contemplation as a specific activity.

The words 'contemplation' and 'contemplative' carry much ambiguity. Obviously there are differences between the kind of prayer appropriate to those who are just starting out and that of people who have already travelled far along the Christian paths.

Here, however, I am not restricting the meaning of the words to so-called higher forms of prayer. By contemplation, as I shall explain, I mean a particular approach to prayer which is open to beginners as well as to those more experienced in the life of prayer. They can all be seen as engaging in the same kind of activity, though in different ways appropriate to their states and stages of development. I am taking growth in prayer or contemplation to be a continuous process, an organic growth, marked by various phases.

Ignatius himself recognized, of course, that developments take place in people's style of contemplation. In the Exercises he expects, for example, that prayer will simplify and that those who make the Exercises will need progressively less material. The method that he calls 'applying the senses' (Exx 121-126) also implies a development by simplification. Ignatian contemplation is not just for beginners. Experience shows that people in different stages of development in prayer can take it up and integrate it into their own way of praying.

By 'contemplation' Ignatius and the authentic Ignatian tradition understand something fairly definite and distinctive.³ It is very sad that Ignatian contemplation is still wrongly being depicted as a form of meditation that is on the one hand rigid and on the other hand abstract, intellectual and theological, with little or no connection with affectivity and the heart. Ignatius himself used both terms, 'meditation' and 'contemplation', but even 'meditation' in his vocabulary is not an intellectual, speculative exercise (cf, for example, Exx 136-157). He did not have a speculative mind; he was not at home with abstract thought and had little gift for it. His mind worked far more easily with the concrete, with stories, pictures and images. When he presents the Christian mysteries and truths in the *Exercises*, for example, he does so mainly by means of stories and pictures. He asks the one making the Exercises to recall 'the history', 'see the place', look at what the people in the story or picture are doing and listen to what they are saying. His presentation of the Incarnation takes the form of a series of pictures, scenes which form a story (Exx 101-109; 110-117 etc.).

Images, imagination and the feelings they invoke and liberate, then, have a special place in Ignatian contemplation. Though it is implicit rather than stated outright, there is here an underlying theology of images. One of its principles is that images of one kind or another, be they words, pictures, stories, people or events, can

embody and express God. Images mediate God to us, and for Ignatius and the tradition of spirituality that flows from him, contemplation as an activity means attending to God, being present to God, in and through those images. In attending to these images in contemplation we use some or all of our powers and abilities, so that contemplation is, as far as possible, an activity or movement of the whole person. If the images are not physically present to us, memory recalls them. Imagination makes them vivid to us and allows us to work with them creatively, by helping us to be present, for example, to a gospel scene, and in imagination to hold a conversation with people in the story (Exx 109). We explore the stories and images with the mind, respond to them with our feelings, interact with them in imagination, reflect on them in solitude and calm and allow these various processes to influence our choices and commitments (cf Exx 1-2; 111-117). The senses, too, are not to be left out, for the process of contemplation can also mean bringing all our senses to bear on images which mediate God to us, either when they are physically and immediately present to us or by a process of 'applying the senses' to images held in the memory and imagination (Exx 66-71; 121-126).

God is most clearly mediated to us through easily recognized religious images such as biblical writings and stories, accepted religious symbols and rituals and people whose lives obviously speak to us of God. But it is characteristic of Ignatian contemplation to extend the range of images in which God is to be found so as to recognize and contemplate God 'in all things'. This is based upon a particular understanding of created reality by which the whole created world is seen as an image which mediates the presence of God to us in various forms, and as the arena in which God is continuously at work.⁴ If God is also really present and active in the world at every level of being, if the world truly is a sacrament of God, who is Lord of creation and Lord of history, then any reality in the world, person, event or object can become an image of God and a focus of contemplation. So we find images of God in the beauty of the universe itself, in our own communal or personal history and experience, in events, in people's words and actions, in the structures and institutions that we create, in great human achievements and even in suffering, poverty and hardship. It is important to note, however, that this does not imply the naive and unrealistic view that all events or all people's actions and words are immediately and transparently a divine epiphany!

The world is shot through with ambiguity.⁵ Our words and actions, our lives as a whole and the structures and institutions that we create can embody the grace of God; they can also embody the opposite, darkness rather than light. Ignatian contemplation involves learning to discriminate in this mixture and to contemplate the presence and action of God within the ambiguity and conflict (cf Exx 139).

Contemplative: a way of being involved in the world

So far I have been looking at contemplation as a specific activity. Being contemplative, however, in Ignatian terms means more than giving time to the activity of contemplation. It is also a matter of how we engage with life and its concerns, the personal dispositions and attitudes which underlie the activity of contemplation and indeed all the activities in which we are involved. In this context, being 'contemplative in everyday life' describes not so much what occupies our mind or imagination from moment to moment but rather our profounder concerns, attitudes and commitments, which give a particular flavour and direction to our lives as a whole; the things on which our hearts are set (Mt 6,33), and where our real treasure lies (Mt 6,21). These underlying desires and dispositions have an especially vital part to play in being contemplative in the midst of a busy life. The surface of a fast-flowing river is often broken by waves and eddies in which the water seems to rush off in all directions and even contrary to the main flow; while underneath all this 'busyness' there is a constant, steady current which can be felt more strongly below the surface where the river is deepest.

Being 'contemplative in action' in the Ignatian sense has to do with the profounder attitudes with which we approach life and involves both surrender and commitment, two sides of love; commitment through and because of surrender. It is a surrender to God in gratitude and love which arises from the contemplation of what God is doing in and for the world and for us (Exx 230-237). The surrender involves an offering of one's gifts and talents to God to be used for the kingdom (Exx 234). And this is not simply an occasional gesture; the gesture is also a sign of a deeper, constant attitude which colours and guides all our dealings with the varied circumstances of life.

The abiding commitment which goes along with this surrender is one by which we try to give a particular direction to life and

which persists within and gives shape to our particular activities. To be contemplative in daily life, in Ignatius's terms, requires a commitment to 'finding God in all things'. This means both being ready to meet God in the various forms in which everyday life reveals God to us and also, of at least equal importance, a commitment to 'finding and doing the will of God' in daily circumstances. This does not mean, of course, spending one's time in conventionally 'religious' activities, though in practice such a commitment often leads people into a fuller involvement in the Christian community. It implies rather that in all the activities of daily life (looking for a job, running a family household, managing a business) and in all the choices that one makes, the basic, enduring desire is in all these things to try to be responsive to the leading of the Spirit of God (Lk 4,1), and thus in the way that one engages in life to give praise and service to God.

Signs of growth

Most people begin to be contemplative by regularly setting aside even short periods of time for prayer: this may include meditation, vocal prayer, imaginative contemplation, prayerful reading or reflection, according to what is needful or possible. These periods of prayer are the means by which we give our attention to God and a vision of the world in relation to God based on faith is appropriated, explored and deepened, and the contemplative attitudes of surrender and commitment are formed and sustained. And if scripture forms part of the basic material for such prayer and reflection, an outlook in which God is understood to be very fully engaged in the world can be developed, since this pervades the bible from Genesis to Revelation.

In the process of coming to see and contemplate God in all things, of course, people start from different places and travel by different paths. Some are fortunate enough to grow up taking for granted even from earliest childhood that God is a benign, loving, secure, creative presence 'under the world's splendour and wonder'. Becoming contemplative for them is a matter, perhaps, of seeing and appreciating this God more clearly and allowing the trustworthiness of God to be a deep source of strength. Other people have more to do, because the presence and action of God in the world are far less obvious to them; or the God they know is active in the world, but also demanding, perhaps even oppressive and angry, powerful but arbitrary and not at all trustworthy. For

them becoming contemplative often involves more of a struggle with their images of God, and perhaps a long process of learning to find and trust a God who is fully engaged in the world for the good of individuals and of all.

Changes and development in our personal experience of prayer are related very closely to growth in other areas of life. In particular changes in prayer are linked with underlying attitudes of which we are sometimes unaware, so that what we experience in prayer is the expression and barometer of attitudes that are governing the rest of life. One usual sign of growth in a person who is becoming increasingly a contemplative in the midst of an active life is that prayer tends to become simpler. Whereas once contemplation might have involved much active work with images and busy use of the imagination in creating and responding to images, now a simple gaze at an image or a simple listening to a word in memory and imagination can be enough to hold the attention, engage the affections and evoke deeper attitudes. The image or word, whether it is in the imagination or physically, externally present, seems full of significance and attraction. It evokes and confirms underlying attitudes of surrender and commitment to God and God's Kingdom in daily life. We attend to God in that image by looking, hearing, even touching and tasting, rather than by any busier use of the imagination. The image which mediates God at that moment may or may not be a conventionally religious image; any person, object or event is potentially capable of bringing us to God in this way.

Other signs of growth are linked with the interaction of prayer and the rest of life. As people become increasingly contemplative in the midst of activity, what happens in prayer gives both impetus and shape to the rest of life, and particularly to the choices that they make. Their lives begin to change. Growing familiarity with God and awareness of the presence and work of God in the world fuel the desire to collaborate with God in this saving work according to the capacity and circumstances of each. To find concrete ways of fulfilling this desire may mean changes in the shape of one's life. Perhaps more usually, the changes appear most clearly in the quality of a person's responses to events and people who are already part of his/her daily life. Contemplative appropriation of the gospel begins to colour the ways in which we live and to give to our engagement in life a deeper quality of Christ-likeness.⁶

It would be a mistake to think that the understanding of 'contemplative in action' that I have been putting forward makes

setting aside time specifically for prayer redundant. For many people, of course, the demands of family and work make it impossible to find time or a place for solitary contemplative prayer. But being contemplative in daily life is not simply another form of facile 'my work is my prayer', which is sometimes offered as a reason for not feeling the need to give time to contemplation, and can in fact be an excuse for avoiding God rather than an expression of a desire to find God in all things. Being contemplative in the way I have described does not eliminate the desire or the need for times devoted to contemplation alone. The desire for God remains and grows, but some people feel less need for long periods of contemplative prayer in the course of a busy life because engagement in the activities of life is not felt as taking them away from God. Because of the attitudes of surrender and commitment with which we approach them, these activities themselves bring us into communion with God; they are a share of God's own action in the world. Time set aside for contemplation is one way of being contemplative; but a full involvement in a busy life can also be another way, and people who are 'contemplative in action' learn to find God in both these different ways according to what they decide is needful and possible.

Another characteristic of growth in a contemplative approach to everyday life is increasing sensitivity to the presence and action of God in the world, and often in most unlikely circumstances. I choose the word 'sensitivity' carefully. This increasing awareness of God may often begin as a conscious effort to look for signs of God in everyday experience, in the family, at work, in television programmes or in the newspapers along with a constant commitment to find and do the will of God in all things. But the grace of God works within us to develop a sensitivity to the presence of God which is not so much a matter of conscious effort nor a process of logical argument. It becomes more part of a habitual way of seeing the world, rather like the response of a sensitive person to the presence of a friend or of a beautiful object: immediate, felt awareness and appreciation that makes the contemplative person also able to reveal to others the mystery of God in unexpected places.

Along with this there grows a corresponding sensitivity to what stands or acts in opposition to God, and to the pain of others, the pain of the world. Contemplative people leading busy lives seem to develop a sensitivity to injustice, oppression and exploitation,

especially when other people are the victims, and an ability to perceive these evils in places where the common opinion often is that all is well and just. This compassionate sensitivity is not only for those who are near and close but also for those who are unreached, forgotten and far away. And the characteristic response of contemplative people who are growing in this way is a compassion which constantly widens in scope, a heart which learns to exclude fewer and fewer people. Far from leading to a passive acceptance of injustice, oppression and avoidable suffering, this sensitivity gives rise to energetic action for change on behalf of those who groan in captivity and bear the yoke of oppression.

It is somewhat paradoxical, too, that, together with this sensitivity to injustice people who are truly contemplative in the midst of daily life also develop a deepening serenity and inner peace. It is not the peace of ignorance, naivety or crassness. Genuine contemplatives 'in the world' are very much in touch with the reality of the world, and its mixtures of good and evil, joy and sorrow, triumph and tragedy. But they also have certain deep convictions: that God is present and active throughout the world; that in all circumstances God works for the good of each person and of all; that far from being impeded by human weakness and poverty, God expects people to be weak and frail and is happy to work with that. So rather than withdrawing from 'the world' in order to find God or passively accepting the status quo as unfortunate but inevitable, contemplative people work and pray for change: that God's glory and kingdom, present but hidden, may be more clearly seen. And this often busy and passionate work is mysteriously characterized by serenity and peace rather than anger.

Conclusions

Being 'contemplative in action' in the sense in which I have been explaining it has several different elements. It means engaging in the specific activity of contemplation. It also means seeing the created world and all that happens in it as a source of images of God, and using these images as the focus of contemplation. But further than that, being contemplative also involves engaging fully in life 'in the world' on the basis of particular underlying attitudes of surrender to God and commitment to be led by the Spirit of God in the choices and circumstances of everyday life. And that in turn brings about a lasting state of communion with God who is present and active throughout the world.

Being contemplative here, therefore, clearly has a substantially different meaning from that found in some other traditions of Christian spirituality. It is a form of contemplative life that does not presuppose or depend on monastic or other traditional structures of religious life. In its description of the interaction of prayer and the rest of life, it is not quite the same as the *contemplata aliis tradere* tradition, in which apostolic work is the means of teaching others the truths that have been understood and absorbed in solitary contemplation. Nor is it the same as the outlook represented by *The cloud of unknowing*. The author of *The cloud* gives a far less positive evaluation to imagination and images of God. Following a more apophatic tradition, he sees images and thoughts as obstacles rather than helps to contemplation. For him contemplation is a matter of going beyond images and thoughts in order to reach God by love alone. In the Ignatian tradition love is of course vital for being contemplative, but love is stirred and nourished by images which mediate God.

Lay people have commonly been offered more or less adapted monastic models of spirituality and not all have found them helpful. In my view the Ignatian tradition of 'contemplative in action', which I have presented here in more modern dress, does offer a model that can be very fruitful for lay people. Its usefulness resides at least partly in the fact that it offers an integration of prayer and the rest of life which starts from the very reality of the circumstances of life itself and does not try to impose a structure from outside those circumstances. It also helps to validate, from tradition, a way of being contemplative that many lay people are already living, having been led to it by responding faithfully to the Spirit in their own lives. For some it takes courage to adopt such a model precisely because some variation of monastic spirituality has for so long been taken as the norm both for lay people and for apostolic religious.

NOTES

¹ As a young man Nadal was drawn to Ignatius and his companions. It appears that unease about Ignatius's confrontations with the Inquisition and suspected associations with the *alumbrados* led Nadal to take time to go away, think things over and try other possibilities before he finally committed himself later on to the Society of Jesus. The best book on Nadal is still the invaluable *Jeronimo Nadal S.I. (1507-1580): sus obras y doctrinas espirituales* by Miguel Nicolau (Madrid, 1949). Joseph F. Conwell's *Contemplation in action: a study in*

Ignatian prayer (Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington, 1957) has valuable extracts from Nadal's writing on prayer and its integration in life. Nadal's own writings have been published in volume 90 of *Monumenta historica Societatis Iesu* edited by Miguel Nicolau (Rome, 1962).

² Conwell, *op. cit.*, p 25.

³ For a brief, practical introduction to forms of contemplation which make use of the imagination cf *Orientations* vol 1 by John Veltri S.J. (Guelph, Ontario, 1979) pp 25-27.

⁴ I explored some of this territory in a previous article, 'Among the thorns' in *The Way* vol 23, no 4, (October 1983) pp 264-272. There I sketched a theological understanding of God's presence and action in creation, in history and in the lives of individuals. The Contemplation to Attain Divine Love in the *Spiritual Exercises* contains Ignatius's view of God's involvement in the world at every level of being (Exx 230-237).

⁵ Ignatius's Contemplation to Attain Divine Love, which finds the presence of God throughout the world, also presupposes his Meditation on Two Standards (Exx 136-148) in which he implies that the world, our institutions and structures and each person are the scene of a great conflict between the forces of Christ on the one hand and 'the enemy of our human nature' on the other, a conflict from which no one and no aspect of life is excluded.

⁶ Nadal's explanations of how his fellow Jesuits might integrate prayer and work are translated in Conwell, *op. cit.*, pp 69-79. For a modern account of the interaction of prayer and choices in the rest of life see 'When Jesuits pray' by E. Edward Kinerk S.J. in *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, vol XVII, no 5, (November 1985).