

Very Human, Very Divine (IX): Sharing in God's Way of Looking

Some virtues that can help us to be a contemplative soul in the midst of our ordinary daily activities. A new article in the series on the virtues.

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Many philosophers, scientists and artists have defined contemplation as the art of observing the world attentively and lovingly. Discovering the riches of truth and beauty in everything that exists, even where we don't expect it; giving up our desire to control everything in order to appreciate what we have close at hand, especially small things. But why can contemplation sometimes seem so complicated, if it is simply a matter of observing the world with care and love? We are eager to learn how to be contemplatives since, while all created realities deserve our contemplation, even more so does its Creator, whose infinite beauty is reflected in the marvels around us.

We have been created by God for contemplation. This capacity will come to completion only in the next life, when we will see the Creator face to face and, in Him, understand

clearly and rejoice in all creatures. But as Saint Josemaría reminds us, we are called even now, at every moment, every day, to “see God in all earthly things: in people, in events, in big things and in what seems small to us, in what pleases us and in what we regard as painful.”^[1] We want to turn everything in our life into praise, thanksgiving, reparation and petition. Our contemplation of God doesn’t take place despite the daily hustle and bustle, but precisely through it, finding Him in everything around us.

Saint Thomas Aquinas defined contemplation as a “simple intuition of truth that stems from love.”^[2] It is a way of looking at reality that doesn’t depend on learning or skills. It is available to everyone, at all times, because it stems from the love God gives us to guide our way of looking. All the saints, so different one from the other, both learned and

unlearned, involved in such a great variety of tasks, have seen this closeness to the Creator grow in their own lives. Therefore perhaps the first thing we should keep in mind is what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us: that contemplation is a gift.^[3] It is not something we can achieve with our will-power alone, by dint of plans or strategies. Rather we need to open ourselves to God's gift, and prepare ourselves to receive it. And this entails cultivating certain virtues that prepare the terrain.

Courage to open the door

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock,” says the Lord. “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (*Rev 3: 20*). A side chapel in Keble College at Oxford University has a famous painting entitled “The Light of the World” that portrays this scene from the

Apocalypse. Jesus is dressed as a king, with a lantern bringing light to the house, while He gently knocks at the door. On the ground in front of the door weeds have grown up because the door has been shut for so long.

In order to grant us the gift of a contemplative life, our Lord asks us to open the door of our heart each day. The reaction of Adam and Eve, our first parents, after the loss of their innocence, was just the opposite. They hid themselves and “shut the door” on God in order to avoid his gaze. And all their descendants retain this tendency. This can involve an unfounded fear of what He may ask of us, fear of feeling dependent, uncertainty at losing short-term control of our lives. Or perhaps we simply prefer a comfortable inertia that distances us from spiritual goods, in order to

avoid the effort involved in preparing to receive God's gift.

“The scene at Bethlehem is repeated, in some way, every day. Perhaps — not with our lips but with our deeds — we have said: *non est locus in diversorio*, there is no inn for you in my heart. Oh Lord, forgive me!”^[4]

Besides other obstacles that at times can seem more important to us (the lack of time, dryness, dispersion, or our own unworthiness), this strange suspicion of God is often a weed that needs to be uprooted in order to open the door of our heart, and thus be able to share in our Creator's way of looking.

Humility and detachment in order to be contemplatives

“Contemplative prayer ... is a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty.”^[5] This involves, first of all, the difficult task of calmly accepting the truth about

ourselves and others. We cannot prepare ourselves to receive the gift of observing the world as God does if we continually put on masks, or if we invent them for others or deform reality with our own imaginary creations. The language of Jesus is always simple and deep. He looks at things as they are, always with mercy, while we ourselves so often become complicated and superficial, judging those around us with pride.

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’” (*Jn 4:10*), Jesus tells the Samaritan woman. And He asked the Apostle Philip: “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me?” (*Jn 14:9*). Humility leads us to acknowledge how little we know about our Lord and his way of reigning in the world. “After fifty years I am still like a babbling child: beginning and beginning again,”^[6] — Saint Josemaría said in his prayer,

shortly before going to heaven. By overcoming our tendency to seek to dominate everyone with the scant light of our own criteria, God will be able to reveal to us what is hidden from the wise and learned (cf. *Mt 11:25*).

Moreover, to be contemplatives we have to use earthly goods in such a way that they help us to adhere to eternal goods, and not the other way around. A heart detached from material goods is open to spiritual realities; it is quick to take flight towards God, to receive the gifts of grace. Jesus, Creator and Lord of the world, lived detached from material goods in a humble village. He was cold in winter, hot in summer, had few material possessions and took good care of them. In short, we need to strive to ensure that the longing in our heart that only God merits isn't placed in earthly goods.

While a spirit of poverty fosters contemplation, the reverse is also true, since they feed one another. “When we contemplate,” Pope Francis said, “we discover in others and in nature something much greater than their usefulness ... As many spiritual masters have taught, the heavens, the earth, the sea, and every creature possess this iconic capacity, this mystical capacity to bring us back to the Creator and to communion with creation ... Those who contemplate in this way experience wonder not only at what they see, but also because they feel they are an integral part of this beauty; and they also feel called to guard it and to protect it.”^[7] Faced with the grasping attitude of wanting everything for oneself, we need to cultivate an attitude of wonder and care: that is how God looks on the world, lovingly contemplating his creation.

Seeking the “*blessed solitude*” needed to pray

The sea is home to many wonders not visible from the shore: corals, plants, fish, in an infinite variety of shapes and colors; in its depths are shells, pearls, and even sunken treasures. In trying to gain access to these marvels, divers wear a belt with lead weights to counteract the body's tendency to rise to the surface. Similarly, we all need “inner weight” in order to dive deep into the sea of the contemplation of God, seeking protection against superficiality and distractions.

In order to contemplate the invisible nature of God, Saint Gregory the Great said that the first step is to learn how to be recollected.^[8] The Gospels show us Jesus as frequently praying in a quiet and secluded place. If the Son of God felt the need to be alone with his Father, how

much more we will need this. We have to lose the fear that silence may produce in us, and seek “that blessed solitude which you so much need to keep your interior life going.”^[9]

In the 16th century, a Spanish married couple asked Saint Peter of Alcantara to teach them how to pray. Among his recommendations, the Castilian mystic said that “if the time for prayer is short, it is all spent in calming the imagination and quieting the heart. And when one’s heart is finally at rest, prayer ends just when it is most needed.”^[10]

Hence it is always good to carry out our practices of piety without haste, allotting enough time so as not to arrive with “our senses awake and our soul asleep.”^[11]

A diet in order to savor daily life

Technology offers us quick access to an unlimited amount of information and almost instantaneous

communication. We know very well that these advantages, when we fail to be watchful, can easily become a bad companion for our dialogue with God. If our senses become attuned only to these rapid stimuli, when we need to undertake another task demanding more repose and attention, we could easily fall into dispersion. We could fall into the need for almost constant stimuli to produce interest and excitement, and fail to appreciate the richness of ordinary reality around us, fleeing almost unconsciously from it. This attitude can also affect others. As Saint Faustina Kowalska said, “less recollected souls want others to be like them, for they are a constant source of remorse to them.”^[12]

To better prepare ourselves for prayer, a healthy “digital diet” can be helpful: deciding to do without electronic devices during certain times of the day; learning to

contemplate serenely the beauty of a landscape or a work of art; reading a good book attentively... These activities require a certain effort of concentration from our imagination and mind. But in return they offer the reward of seeing more deeply into the world around us; they refine our way of looking in order to be able to receive, as a gift, an ever deeper sharing in God's way of looking.

But we shouldn't allow ourselves to become discouraged along the way. What pleases God most about our times of prayer is our good will to accompany Him, our simple presence and company, like a small child with its parents. By fostering this filial attitude, we will find the strength needed to not become restless when our prayer seems to be marked by silence and solitude. No resource we use for our prayer can replace the sincere desire to draw

close to God as a friend, the free decision to tell Him “I love you,” which no one else can say in our place.

^[1] Saint Josemaría, Meditation, 25 December 1973.

^[2] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 180, a. 3; a. 6.

^[3] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2713.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, quoted in Salvador Bernal, *Apuntes sobre la vida del Fundador del Opus Dei*, Rialp, Madrid 1980, p. 359.

^[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2713.

^[6] Saint Josemaría, quoted in Salvador Bernal, p. 357.

^[7] Francis, Audience, 16 September 2020.

^[8] Cf. Saint Gregory the Great,
Homilies on Ezekiel, II, 5,9.

^[9] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 304.

^[10] Saint Peter of Alcantara, *Treatise on Prayer and Meditation*, XII, 6

^[11] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 368.

^[12] Saint Faustina Kowalska, *Diary*, no. 147.

Pablo Edo

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