

Foundations for Living Contemplatively in the World

What is being contemplative?

We offer you these reflections so that you can discover what the true being of the contemplative in the world is, what it is based on and how God's call to contemplative life in the world transforms the being. They are taken from the chapters «The foundation of the secular contemplative's being» and «A vocation that transforms» in the book *Foundations for Living Contemplatively in the World*.

The foundation of secular contemplative's being

The contemplative life begins to spring up in the heart of the baptized person by a seduction of God: «You seduced me, Lord, and I let myself be seduced» (Jer 20:7). It is a seduction that moves the person and orients him completely towards God, soaking his entire existence in the tension of God and thus making the spirit of the first commandment a reality: «You shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength» (Dt 6:5).

From this point on, the life of the contemplative could be defined fundamentally as a *permanent search for God, who orients his entire existence towards an encounter with him*.

Your look should be only for God, your desire only for God, your dedication only for God; not wanting to serve but God alone, in peace with God, you will become a cause of peace for others (Saint Symeon the Studite, *Minor Catechesis*).

This seduction of God is the fruit of an encounter with him, which comes our way in life. It is an encounter that is already lived here and now, but as an anticipation and preparation for its fullness, which will take place in eternal life. The contemplative, therefore,

lives in the hope of the future life, as a sentinel who watches, in the middle of the night, for the arrival of the dawn.

The very name of *contemplative* refers to what constitutes the axis of his life, which is *contemplation*. And the first thing to be said about it is that the object of contemplation is not something, but Someone: Jesus Christ. He is, for man, the perfect image of God; and he is, for God, the perfect image of man. In Jesus Christ, the contemplative discovers a God passionate about man in a man passionate about God; and he makes this mystery his own as a profound driving force that illuminates his search for God, while unifying and giving meaning to his whole life. Thus, in this contemplation of the Son of God, the contemplative learns from him to quench the deep thirst for God that consumes and moves him to seek God passionately¹.

Thus, the contemplative enters a process in which Jesus Christ absorbs him in such a way that he seeks only to know and love him and in his heart the name of Jesus is being written in an indelible way. And this name, pronounced, prayed, whispered, becomes the instrument by which the Holy Spirit configures the contemplative, and, at the same time, this Spirit, progressively purifies, liberates, simplifies and unifies him, until he creates in the being and life of the contemplative a harmony that reflects ever more perfectly the divine Model.

The first consequence of *what we have said* is that we cannot manufacture the contemplative life at our whim, but it is a life given by God. As a seduction from God, it is an undeserved gift before which there is no other attitude than receptivity. And this grace cannot be translated into a mediocre existence, but rather into an exceptional one, which is marked by one's contemplative vocation, which is a call from God and not something that we decide arbitrarily, as if it were a hobby or entertainment. It is God who chooses us to be contemplatives. And we can refuse his seduction, but at the very high price of the failure of our own interior life. Therefore, we are not faced with a type of life that we must conquer,

but with a way of being that we must allowed to emerge from within, where God sowed, through baptism, the seed of infinite love.

Because it is precisely in the baptism where the foundation of the being of the contemplative is. The contemplative life -gift and free call from God- is not an addition to the Christian life, which is offered to a privileged few. Actually it has its origin and foundation in the common gift of every Christian, which is the baptismal grace, that made us pass from death to life, incorporated us into Christ, uniting us to his death and resurrection (cf. Rom 6:3-11; Col 2:12), gave us the Holy Spirit (1Cor 12:13), and clothed us with Christ (Gal 3:27).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that the fruit of the first sacrament goes far beyond the forgiveness of sins: Baptism constitutes the gateway to life in the Spirit (no. 1213) and the sharing in the life of the Blessed Trinity (no. 265,1239); it produces a true transformation that makes the baptized a new creature, a partaker of the divine nature, a member of Christ and a temple of the Spirit (no. 1265); it gives us a new being with all the capacities necessary for a full Christian life because it unites us to God through faith, hope, and love (no. 1266); it makes us live under the inspiration of the Spirit (no. 1266); and it allows us to participate in the life of the Risen Lord, becoming imitators of God by conforming our thoughts, words, and actions to the sentiments of Christ, and making us follow his examples (no. 1694). In this way, we are capable of Christian worship and witness through a holy life (no. 1273), and we can give glory to God and aspire to eternal life because in baptism we are mercifully given righteousness (no. 1992). And all this, which constitutes baptismal grace, is a gift that the Christian has forever (nos. 1272-1273).

Recognizing and living the baptismal grace with all its consequences necessarily leads us to holiness and to contemplative life. In this first gift, common to every Christian and totally free, the contemplative life is contained and demanded. This is the fundamental grace which gives the contemplative his true being. This being reveals God's personal call to the contemplative

life and God develops this revealed being with his grace and with our consent and acceptance. Therefore, we could say that the contemplative is not the Christian with a special addition of intimacy with God and union with Christ, but the «full Christian», the one who lives in his plenitude the divine life he has already received. He is someone who has discovered his Christian being a call to radically live the life of Christ and accepts that God performs in him the work of grace, which leads him to be what he is: a new person according to «the new self, created in God's way» (Eph 4:24)

The grace of this fundamental discovery sets the contemplative life in motion in the contemplative's soul and offers him the reason for his being and his life. In the end, everything comes down to something as simple as recognizing the gift of grace received in baptism -which is the new life- accepting the identification with Christ to which that grace leads us, and consenting to God's action in us. Through the Holy Spirit, this action unites us with God and configures us according to the image of his Son.

We can go even further, and discover that the contemplative life is not only the fullness to which every Christian is called and which has been given in germ in baptism; it is also God's plan for all people. And so, the contemplative life responds to the fundamental desire that contains every human heart, regardless of whether one is aware of that desire or whether one has received the gift of baptism. Again, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that God created man «to make him share in his own blessed life» (no. 1) and that «the desire for God is written in the human heart» (no. 27). Therefore, the goal, happiness, and fullness of the human being is «to live in communion with God» (no. 45), participating «by knowledge and love, in God's own life» (no. 356). The contemplative is neither a «special» Christian nor a «strange» person; he is the baptized person who reaches fullness, and also the person who reaches full realization insofar as this is possible in this world.

In the depths of your heart there is a place so intimate that only God dwells there². Even you cannot enter this place if you are not

invited by God himself and do not freely accept the necessary purification to receive the divine light. The contemplative discovers himself inhabited by God, who wished to establish in him his dwelling place, with the loving yearning with which in the past he wished to inhabit the holy city: «Yes, the Lord has chosen Zion, desired it for a dwelling: “This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I desire it”». (Ps 132:13-14). Aware of and captivated by this discovery, the one who has been touched by this grace concentrates all his energies on descending to the depths of his heart. This is the true and most important *pilgrimage* of human being: the journey to the most unfathomable place of his being, where God dwells. This is the treasure in which the contemplative sets his heart (cf. Mt 6:21), the fine pearl by whose acquisition he sells, full of joy, all that he has (cf. Mt 13:44-46).

From the discovery of the divine indwelling in him and his descent to the centre of his heart, the contemplative can live only for God, discovering him in everything and everybody. Every person and every circumstance become for him a gift of God and a living sign of his loving presence. And so, living in this moment and in this world, he projects himself towards eternity and towards heaven. Everything he does is aimed at anticipating the Kingdom of God and to taste already here below something of the life promised for the world to come. The contemplative listened to God, God seduced him and he let himself be seduced by God³; so, he burns with a desire to see God and to enter into a communion of love with him that is ever stronger and never ends. And to achieve this he is ready to do everything possible by accepting the total purification of the heart; because the new life that God offers him cannot be born if not through a radical purification, which is an authentic death to himself.

The contemplative knows that God is the Inaccessible, the Most Holy, and considers himself unable to reach him without dying. So, he wants to die, not to life, but to the old man, to the world and to sin, which impede him to see God, to live him and to soak up him. He knows that he cannot climb up to God because he is

unreachable, but he can welcome him into himself because God has given himself to him; so he can discover God in the depths of his own heart and enter into a relationship of love so deep with him that it transforms his whole life.

From this purification, and from the moment when God is his only goal, the contemplative knows he is a foreigner in this land⁴ and yearns to reach the true homeland, which is heaven: «All these died in faith. They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth, for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land from which they had come, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better homeland, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them» (Heb 11:13-16). The contemplative gets used to live as if he were on the last day of his existence; and in this way he prepares himself for death, dying at every moment to live in a permanent foretaste of heaven⁵.

A vocation that transforms

The grace of the vocation to the contemplative life entails and expresses a profound transformation that God accomplishes in each person. This transformation, given in an initial and germinal way in baptism, is developed and made present through the same grace that sets the contemplative life in motion, which is the grace that identifies us with Christ and offers us the same relationship that he has with the Father.

He destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will (Eph 1:5).

For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified (Rom 8:29-30).

To those who did accept him [the Word] he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name (Jn 1:12).

Through the action of the grace of the call to the contemplative life, this baptismal transformation becomes actual, existential and full, in such a way that it identifies our heart and our feelings with those of the Lord, to the point of giving us «the mind of Christ» (1Cor 2:16) and his very gaze on the Father and on men. This is such a radical transformation that it implies the death of the old man in order to give birth in us, through the action of grace, to the new man⁶, who possesses «the love of God that has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us» (Rom 5:5).

This transformation, which constitutes God's plan for every baptized person, is what the contemplative must live, consciously and fully, to its ultimate consequences. This *essential being*, initially given by God, has to become the *being in action* of the contemplative, conforming all his life and his acts. In this way, the life of God no longer remains sleeping within us, but is revived like a devouring fire that makes us passionately seek identification with Christ, which passes from being a capacity to becoming a permanent need and a reality joyfully lived usually in ordinary life.

As we shall see, this transformation has a very important manifestation for the mission of the contemplative, which consists of being in tune with the will, feelings, and desires of the Lord at all times. From this point on, the contemplative knows when to be silent, when to speak and what to do in every circumstance; not according to learned and assimilated criteria -however good and holy they may be- but as the fruit of *conscious* sharing in the same gaze of the Lord.

Holiness is the necessary consequence of this new life which appears as an unquestionable imperative. This new life manifests itself in a clearly perceptible change in the person. The contemplative experiences the unification and simplification of the whole of life around Christ, structuring it according to the hierarchy of values proper to Christ himself.

The transformation brought about by grace involves a strong impulse to correspond to it in a real way, and is expressed in the search for *unity of life* and a particular *hierarchy of values*. It is clear that this new life is not achieved automatically, because it is not spontaneous to our condition as sinners to live permanently anchored in God, serving him always and in everything. To achieve this, a passionate struggle is needed, which is the fruit of God's grace that urges us to total and absolute surrender to him and is one of the characteristics of holiness. This grace of God and the human effort to correspond to it place us in the supernatural realm as the «place» proper to our life, uprooting us from the natural realm, without, ceasing however to live and act fully inserted in the world. We could say that we must always live with our feet on the ground, but with our heart in heaven.

But to get there we have to keep in mind the constant pressure from the world to seek to be valued primarily for the human qualities and capacities that we have, apart from God. This temptation leads to frustration at not being accepted as Christians and to try to please the world by settling for being useful or nice to others because of our human abilities, capacities or merits. Not that this is a bad thing, but it carries the risk of emphasising human values so much that faith appears to be an addition to them, rather than the key that gives them full meaning and value.

In the midst of the world around us and our own passions, which try to separate us from God, fidelity to grace forces us to live torn by what we could call *passion for God*, which is life consumed in the fire of God's love in the midst of the hostility of the world and our own flesh. This passion is a living reflection of the passion experienced by God himself, and for the contemplative it implies a demand for correspondence to the love received from him. We must not forget that this is not a human-style demand, nor is it a burden or a difficulty. In fact, the things of God can never be a burden, but a gift that frees us from unnecessary burdens and lightens our path. Because if God is love, he is a gift and not a demand; and, therefore, he does not ask anything of us, since,

strictly speaking, he does not need anything from us. If there is a «demand», it is not a divine imperative, but the natural consequence of love. God's unconditional self-giving, which contains his love for us, «demands» a receptivity and a correspondence on our part that makes it possible for divine love to nest in our hearts and create a true communion of life with God. This is what it means, as it appears in the Old Testament, that God is «jealous»⁷ and does not allow himself to be shared at the same level with other values, affections, etc.; something that already appears at the beginning of the Decalogue, placing the divine commandments in their exact context, as an expression of love: «You shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength» (Dt 6:5).

For that reason, the contemplative will not be fully happy if he does not give himself to God in an absolute and unconditional way; which must necessarily lead him to have only one purpose and one concern in life: that God be his only goal and his absolute desire. Jesus himself encourages us to do this when he says: «Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides» (Mt 6:33). This is the truth and the richness that the saints discover and live, and that St. Cyprian, for example, expresses masterfully, inviting us to «prefer nothing before Christ because He preferred nothing before us»⁸; a sentence that St. Benedict will later take up in his *Rule*⁹. This invitation of the Lord to seek «first the kingdom of God» must impel us to undivided gift of ourselves, which is the only one that can adequately correspond to the precious gift that God grants us and that bears the maximum fruit to our life. This is precisely the path of true and full freedom, which gives us freedom before things, before others and before ourselves.

If I achieve this freedom, I will be able to get rid of many meaningless tasks and all those sufferings that result from the division or confusion of values and objectives. By allowing the centre of my being and my life to be God, everything in me will become simpler and more unified. Because, when God is my only

interest and the very centre of my interest, everything serves me primarily to know him and to make him known to others; so that my prayer, my reading, my study, my work, etc., are directed to the goal which polarises my life and are fully harmonised with each other. And then there is no room in my life for anxiety or worry, and I can live in the state of trust and peace that allows me to communicate from the heart with the effectiveness of reaching the heart of the other.

On the contrary, fears, tensions, anxieties and worries express a lack of true spiritual self-giving, simplicity and unity of life. I want to love God, but, to the same extent, I also want to carry out this or that task which seems fundamental to me. I want to follow Jesus Christ, but without giving up human compensation and success. I want to be a saint, but I also seek to enjoy certain advantages of the sinner. I want to be on the side of the Lord, but at the same time I want to be on the side of this or that affection or security. It is not strange then that to live trying to be faithful simultaneously to God and the world becomes a tiring and impossible task.

NOTES

1 Cf. Jn 4:34: «My food is to do the will of the one who sent me»; Lk 12:49-50: «I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!».

2 Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, III,VI,11: «But Thou wert more inward to me than my most inward part; and higher than my highest».

3 «You seduced me, Lord, and I let myself be seduced» (Jer 20:7).

4 Cf. Ex 2:22: «I am a stranger residing in a foreign land»; Ps 119:19: «I am a sojourner in the land»; 1Pt 2:11: «Beloved, I urge you as aliens and sojourners».

5 St. Paul reflects this experience in his teaching: «For as Christ's sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow»

(2Cor 1:5); «Always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body» (2Cor 4:10); «My eager expectation and hope is that I shall not be put to shame in any way, but that with all boldness, now as always, Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me life is Christ, and death is gain» (Phil 1:20-21); «To know him and the power of his resurrection and [the] sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead» (Phil 3:10-11).

6 St. Paul reflects clearly this experience in his teaching: «You have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator» (Col 3:9-10); «Put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth» (Eph 4:24).

7 Cf. Zech 8:2-3: «Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am intensely jealous for Zion, stirred to jealous wrath for her. Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion, and I will dwell within Jerusalem; Jerusalem will be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain»; Dt 4:24: «The Lord, your God, is a consuming fire, a jealous God». Also see Ex 20:5; 34:14; 2Cor 11:2.

8 Saint Cyprian of Carthage, *Treatise on the Lord's Prayer*, XV, CSEL, 3,278.

9 «To prefer nothing to the love of Christ» (Saint Benedict, *Rule*, IV); «no account let them exalt anything above Christ» (Ibid. LXXII).