

Foundations for Living Contemplatively in the World

Am I really contemplative?

Here you can find some criteria to discover if God is calling you to the contemplative life in the world. They are drawn from the chapter “Ten Keys to Discernment” in the book Foundations for Living Contemplatively in the World.

Introduction

- A) Yearning and seeking God
- B) Holy indifference
- C) Prayer
- D) Love to Jesus Christ
- E) Sense of Church
- F) Love to the brethren
- G) Effective love
- H) Vocation to love
- I) A new identity
- J) The response

Introduction

Before considering in detail what contemplative secular life is, we need to know some of its elements that will allow us to make an initial approach to it as a true vocation. At the same time, knowing these elements we will be able to make a discernment of this kind of life.

Therefore, this first chapter is very important for those who strongly experience the inner life call and need to discern whether this call is a God's grace leading them to contemplative secular life. It's addressed especially to those people who recognize in their interior a strong inclination to pray and to give themselves to God, but they do not feel called to the monastic life. Also this chapter can be useful for those called to live their faith in its depth and to live Christian life fully although they have not experienced a special grace that draws them to the interior life.

God's call to the contemplative secular life has some essential elements that we shall analyse. In this way we will have reliable data to know and to discern about this vocation.

A) Yearning and seeking God

Who has been called by God to the contemplative secular life experience an insatiable yearning of God which makes him feel dissatisfied about everything that is not God. He also lives passionately what St. Augustine expressed: «you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you»¹. This experience is the natural consequence of what the Lord says: «You do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world» (Jn 15:19). This, which is common to every Christian, becomes dramatic in the contemplative.

We could define this yearning as a permanent and invincible polarisation towards God which can be lived either in a «positive» way, as an experience of a strong desire for God; or in a «negative» way, as a painful feeling of his absence, which generates a great desire and moves hard to seek him.

As one progresses in the interior life, this yearning remains and grows, although it becomes more calm because it loses the initial worry to find the meaning of the new and disconcerting graces received. It must be made clear that this interior desire that initiates contemplative life will only remain and grow if this call from God is

embraced. Otherwise, the soul may reach a state of desensitization that prevents it from being aware of the call and responding to it.

We must emphasise that the yearning for God as an element of discernment, as something specific to the contemplative life, is a grace that tends to remain always in the soul, even in the midst of sin and temporal infidelity. If it disappears, it is a clear sign of the radical or permanent infidelity of the one who has taken the wrong path.

Special attention should be paid to a certain yearning or longing that arises when the first sensible graces disappear, and which is not so much the yearning for God as the nostalgia for those graces. This longing may lead us to mistakenly think that God has moved away from us because we have lost that feeling of his closeness that we had at another time, but we must be careful with this error because it may impede the generous response that God expects of us. This spiritual situation allows us to make an important discernment, that lies in finding out if we are truly seeking God, and not only the sensitive affections or the apostolic motivation. Above all the search for God, must be the only desire that be the foundation of our life, an active desire that demands responding with all one's heart to a call in which God has put all his heart.

B) Holy indifference

This yearning produces a surprising remoteness and distance from the concerns and values that most people strive for. This longing for God makes one feel strange to men, as Moses depicted vividly in the desert: «I am a stranger residing in a foreign land» (Ex 2:22).

This is not a deliberate and selfish estrangement from the world and from our neighbour, but rather the natural consequence of God's irruption in our life, which makes everything that is not God be relativized. It is a grace by which God strongly urges us to give ourselves for love of neighbour, but without any egocentric need for reward. This is experienced as a joyful freedom from all that is

human, even though, at the same time, one lives with a certain pain. This pain is born from the tension between the need to give ourselves to others and the realization that neither this self-giving nor anything other than God will be able to fill the soul fully.

It is an experience that arises as a reflection of the inner light which transforms the soul and brings about an inner change of gaze and attitudes, leading us to true freedom —that of divine love— which makes us love everyone and everything without being attached to anyone or anything. It is a change that takes place without any effort on our side and that fills us with admiration, joy and peace, clear signs of the authenticity of the transformation carried out by God, although the initial astonishment will disappear as the spiritual process is embraced and advanced.

This transformation is surprising when it is discovered in youth or adulthood. But when it takes place in childhood, the encounter with God, the awareness of his presence and the outpouring of his love become something so natural that the child has no impression of strangeness, because he lacks elements to compare and value his experience. He is so used to it that he thinks it's normal.

When we are aware of the transformation that God has made in our soul, we discover a disconcerting feeling of remoteness and freedom from everything that is not God. Although God's gift is given in a climate of grace and joyful freedom, however, we perceive a surprising distance and dissatisfaction in relation to most of the realities that surround us. This feeling, which apparently lacks meaning, moves the person to analyze what is happening inside him in order to understand it properly. Looking over his life, he can see that perhaps things are not going badly, that he lives an honest, good, Christian life. But if he deepens, he has to recognize, if he is sincere, that he is bound by things and does not have true freedom. He is not really happy. He must also recognize that he lacks love, not a human love that can be easily obtained but that cannot fulfil him. He lacks a much greater love -infinite- that is the only one that can fulfil him completely.

C) Prayer

This vocation arouses in the person called to be contemplative a permanent desire for solitude and prayer, which makes him feel permanently dissatisfied with the time devoted to God, even when his prayer is arid or painful. This desire is one of the fruits of grace which corresponds to the Lord's call «to pray always without becoming weary» (Lk 18:1). It is a yearning that moves to pray and leads us to accept it unconditionally, embracing a way of praying that becomes more and more silent and «passive». At the same time this prayer becomes more essential, because it constitutes the moment in which one feels more oneself, more alive and more true.

D) Love to Jesus Christ

Along with the contemplative vocation, an intense love to Jesus Christ arises from the depths of our heart, which moves us to seek full identification with him, with his mission and with the values he lives. It is a question of a passionate and unconditional love, which goes hand in hand with the discovery of Christ as a person, as a You, as someone alive who is in you and is more real than all that is real. It is a true falling in love with Jesus Christ, which places him at the centre of your life, as Saint Paul expresses: «Whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ» (Phil 3:7-8).

This passionate love seeks Jesus Christ to love him in himself, for what he is, in order to attain the full identification with him. This identification is the foundation and goal of all contemplative life. We must never allow Christ become a means to anything else, however holy or important it may be, since he is an end in himself. Christ must be our ultimate and essential end, in a way that whatever we do is a means to grow in the personal relationship of love with him.

This love for Christ is a *real* love, which goes beyond ideas or simple intentions, even simply good or pious works. It is a love that carries *with it* a strong desire to manifest it in a concrete way by working and suffering for Christ, for love of him. It's a *crucified* love, which recognizes and embraces the cross as a calling and a gift.

The Father invites the Son to redeem the world through absolute love. In the same way our soul hears the calling to share in the cross of his Son. This invitation is not felt as a demand or a burden. It's discovered as a gift, because it's the sign that God is configuring me to Christ and making me able to love and suffer like him. Paraphrasing Saint Paul (cf. Gal 2:20), I discover that it is Christ who lives, prays, loves, suffers and gives himself in me. This is the result of the transformation carried out by God, which produces a real identification with the sentiments of Christ, as expressed in Phil 2:5-8: these words propose the example of Jesus Christ which drives us to embrace the self-emptying, the self-abasement, and the death on the cross as a response of love.

Therefore, we cannot speak of love for Jesus Christ without referring to the cross. The cross understood not as suffering in general or any of its forms, but as the maximum suffering, the one that most puzzles, the one that breaks the soul and seems impossible to overcome. At the same time, it is the suffering that allows us to express the greatest love and to make it, through that love, an instrument of redemption. It's something too great to understand it. For those who haven't lived it, it's a mystery, but those who have met the love of Christ crucified have a clear idea of what the cross is and understand that the response of love to the Crucified must take place precisely in it.

We faced the greatest love that exists: a love that we cannot create or dominate at will, because it is the fruit of an invitation and a gift from God. But that love will grow in us only if we wish to be invited to it. When we experience the invitation to that love, which passes through the cross, we must accept it and love it, in order to be able to ask for it and embrace it. The process of growth in crucified love, which is the foundation of the whole Christian

itinerary, arises and grows since we begin to glimpse the value of the cross until we are able to embrace it.

This is a discovery of Jesus Christ, so extraordinary and passionate, that makes us feel small and unworthy but, at the same time, overflowed and privileged to be the object of God's infinite and redeeming love.

E) Sense of Church

The one who is the object of God's action that impels him to contemplation feels «strange» and probably seems so in the eyes of others. However, he doesn't feel «isolated», quite the opposite: he has a deep sense of belonging to the Church. This feeling is manifested in two ways: Firstly, as a deep love to the Church, the Spouse of Christ, our home, where we live the faith and receive God's grace, and for which it is worth giving your life. And secondly, as a profound feeling of responsibility, which discovers the human limitations of the Church and all who compose it. This sense of responsibility moves us to work with all our strength and all our being so that the Church may be truly holy, as the Lord conceived it.

This experience of responsibility is lived as a painful reality, which expresses and deepens the living of the cross. The transformation by which God identifies us with Christ makes us see with greater clarity and pain the deficiencies of the Church, assuming them as our own and feeling urged to give a response similar to that of the Lord, who gave his life for his loved ones, in spite of their abandonment and betrayals.

F) Love to the brethren

The love to Jesus Christ makes the contemplative be deeply in tune with him as Savior and urges him to participate in Lord's yearning for salvation. Therefore the contemplative also wish to share and console his sufferings caused by sin and evil in the world.

Inseparably linked with this, he experiences to be in tune with humanity as a whole, but especially with those who endure the biggest sufferings or poverties. He feels that all men are his brothers, that he is responsible for them before God, that he is called to effectively console their pains and lead them to salvation.

G) Effective love

The love to the brethren is part of the *essential double solidarity* experienced by the contemplative: he is linked to God and to the brethren. This solidarity leads him to give himself deeply in the service of his neighbour. The contemplative's gift of himself don't seek any kind of activity or help. While recognizing the value of most actions in favour of others, he perceives their limitations in responding effectively to the deepest needs of human beings, and the need arises to find a new and more *effective* way of giving oneself that leads to concrete actions based on the silent and total gift of one's life.

In this sense, the one called to contemplation perceives being specially in tune with Jesus Christ in his hidden life, discovering the luminosity and greatness of the values that he embraced in this long period of his earthly existence, which developed in the midst of anonymity, humility and silence. These values made his life and work an effective instrument for the human salvation. This tuning gives rise to a strong need for humility, self-emptying and the desire to go unnoticed in the eyes of the world.

The contemplative perceives this and effective love is perceived as a pressing need; he intuitively feels it to be essentially related to the cross and its saving power; and leads to a generous disposition to suffer with Christ and with the suffering brother, as the foundation of the true effectiveness of his words and actions.

H) Vocation to love

The strong prompting to love Jesus Christ and others arises from the fact that the contemplative vocation is essentially a *vocation to love*. But we have to take into account at this point how limited and

imperfect our human understanding of love is. Although we may have many beautiful ideas about love, the truth of our love is expressed in our actions, and these often demonstrate that we do not know or do not want to love truly. Thus, for example, we may discover in ourselves the desire for an exclusive love, which says: «you love me truly only if you love others less»; for a possessive love, which says: «if you love me, you must pay close attention to me»; or for a manipulative love, which says: «if you love me, you will do such a thing for me».

From any of these misguided forms of love, destructive feelings and attitudes arise that lead to sadness, jealousy, anger and even violence. In the face of this, it must be said that «love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, love is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury» (1 Cor 13:4-5). We must learn this way of loving, which is the only suitable response to God's invitation: «Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength». (Dt 6:5; cf. Mt 22:37-38). This is precisely the greatest and first of the commandments. The lifestyle of the contemplative must be an explicit sign of the importance of fulfilling the first commandment as the only way to be able to fulfil the second commandment, which «is like the first: You shall love your neighbour as yourself» (Mt 22:39). Because absolute and unconditional love to God is the only driving force that can make possible the true love to the neighbour, which is generous, solicitous and unlimited. And, on the contrary, without this supernatural basis, what we often call «love to neighbour» is nothing more than a mere passing feeling of philanthropy.

I) A new identity

We have seen that what support the contemplative vocation is love, not understood superficially, but as a relationship of deep communion with God and with one's neighbour. This deep communion is the fruit of the new life that results from the

transformation that God has accomplished in the soul. And that transformation creates in the contemplative the same disconcerting feeling, which we alluded to earlier, of being a *strange* in the world.

To better understand how this new identity is recognized we should remember the classic expression «to lose oneself in God», which expresses the fruit of the change that God's love accomplishes in the soul; something similar to what happens to a drop of water that is diluted in a barrel of wine. Some mystics, however, claim that true love to God does not lead to getting lost, but to «finding oneself in God», because not only do we find him and love him, but in him we meet our deepest reality and reach the highest love to ourselves. We discover in us a new and luminous identity, because we discover ourselves looked at by the eternally new gaze of God.

In addition to that, in God not only we discover ourselves, but also, we discover our neighbour, whom we see as a manifestation of God's glory. God shows his beauty and his love through the extraordinary variety of ways in which different human beings are unique and unrepeatable. Because what confers infinite value on each person and makes her unique and totally different is not her particular idiosyncrasy, but God's projection on her. This projection makes her a living reflection of God's love and unites her to all humanity, making her a living community of divine love. And this is precisely the foundation of the universal brotherhood of all men.

J) The response

At this point a very important observation must be made: Whoever discovers all these realities proper to the contemplative vocation must give an honest, real and proportionate response. This divine call implies a grace from God which, by its very nature, requires a willingness to seriously and radically live the discovered vocation, whatever the cost. Only a full and generous response will be proportionate to the grace received. This requires avoiding all calculations and cutbacks in our response. These limitations -that

we easily introduce in our reaction- would significantly limit too our capacity to live in depth the life to which God calls us.

The persevering desire to be consumed by the passion for God that he has placed in the depths of our soul is a clear sign of a contemplative vocation; this requires an effective willingness to remain in a permanent spiritual tension. On the contrary, the need to «rest» from that passion or the desire to control it -so that it does not consume us- makes it impossible that the grace of union with God can take root in the soul.

NOTES

1 St. Augustine, Conf. I, I, I.