

9. March 2024

LENTEN ITINERARY  
Day 25: "On contemplation (I)"

Throughout our Lenten journey, I have mentioned contemplative prayer several times. Even if not everyone gets to experience the various levels of contemplation, it is good to at least know what this form of prayer is all about. In addressing this topic, I will keep in mind that most people who listen to these meditations do not live in a monastery, fully immersed in a contemplative life. I hope that some aspects of this meditation on contemplation will be helpful in making our life and prayer even more receptive to God's presence.

As we look at the lives of some of the saints, we see that contemplation gave rise to many works, which in no way affected it. Rather, the works were permeated by contemplation. Let us think, for example, of St. Teresa of Avila, who was a contemplative soul par excellence, but who, with God's strength, also carried out many external activities.

If we take Jesus Himself as an example, we see that there were always times when He withdrew to pray alone (cf. Lk 5:26). Before He began His public ministry, He spent forty days in the desert, in prayer and fasting (cf. Mt 4:1-2).

The best way to find guidance is to take Jesus Himself as an example, and then apply what is possible for us according to our own life situation. In fact, also the life of the Lord involved intense activities, and was not a merely withdrawn and contemplative lifestyle. Moreover, we can also look to the example of other people, in whom the Lord's life was reflected in various ways and whose outward activities emanated a deep inner life. We will find enough saints who walked such a path....

Before going into what contemplation explicitly is, it is worth looking at meditation. In fact, contemplation is usually preceded by a long period of meditative prayer, which in turn is preceded by various forms of vocal or liturgical prayer. This means that it is possible to prepare the ground for contemplation, which could also be described as a "plunging into God" or a "direct influence of God on the soul". In this process, the soul experiences God more and more.

St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), an important spiritual author and founder, distinguished between meditation and contemplation. He compared meditation to bees flying around collecting nectar; contemplation, on the other hand, to the delight of honey in the comb. Meditation would involve effort, while contemplation would be easy and joyful.

Contemplation is an intense experience of God's presence; in other words, it is God Himself who directly takes the reins of our life, and, through the Holy Spirit, the life of grace unfolds.

In contemplation, one becomes more and more an interior person, who is not so much defined by what he or she does or performs outwardly, but focuses on awakening and cultivating love for God in a heart-to-heart relationship. The inner person does not so much act out of his or her own strength; rather, he or she follows the motions and guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that, as St. Francis de Sales rightly said, life becomes easier and more joyful.

Although ultimately it is God Himself who, in His Wisdom, grants contemplation according to His good pleasure and we cannot attain it by our own efforts, there are various preparatory stages that "pave the way", which relate to everything that is part of the path of following the Lord, the concrete way of holiness.

If we faithfully follow the way of prayer, the Lord can grant us to experience the first stages of contemplation, giving us a taste of the delights of this form of prayer. To put it in the terminology of St. Francis de Sales, who would not like to enjoy honey, after having laboriously gathered the nectar?

From today's meditation, let us retain the following: contemplative prayer is a gift from God. We cannot attain it on our own, but we can prepare the ground so that the Lord can grant it to us.

Tomorrow we will continue with some more aspects of contemplation.

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Meditation on the reading of the day: <http://en.elijamission.net/2021/03/13/>

Meditation on the Gospel of the day: <http://en.elijamission.net/2019/03/30/>