

Contemplative Prayer

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls contemplative prayer "silent love." The catechism continues, "words in this kind of prayer are not speeches; they are like kindling that feeds the fire of love. In this silence, unbearable to the "outer" man, the Father speaks to us his incarnate Word, who suffered, died, and rose; in this silence the Spirit of adoption enables us to share in the prayer of Jesus." (CCC 2717)

In our first reading from the First Book of Kings, we heard that the Lord spoke to the prophet Elijah not in the wind, earthquake, or fire –all usual manifestations of God almighty- but in a tiny whispering sound that followed all of that. It was at the invitation of that tiny whispering sound that Elijah came out from his place of safety, the cave, to encounter the Lord, who was about to pass by. Perhaps he was experiencing this contemplative prayer, this silent love.

Throughout the history of the church, contemplative prayer has unfortunately been greatly restricted to those who take an official vow of silence- monks and nuns. Within the past few decades, Fr. Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk in the United States who passed away in 2018, has done a lot to try to overcome this assumption and broaden our understanding of contemplative prayer. For him, all Christians should pursue it. All of us need time for silence in our lives. The challenge is that silence can take us out of our comfort zone, something unbearable to the outer man, as the catechism said. In the silence, many of the things we ignore or repress come to light.

In his book *Intimacy with God*, Fr. Keating writes, “the letting go of security is something we have to agree to as a condition of the journey. Without having accepted the trip into the unknown, one is really not a candidate for contemplation because that is what is presupposed.” Letting go of security sounds a lot like our Gospel reading today. In the middle of the night, in the midst of a sea storm, we hear the story of Peter stepping out of the boat in order to walk towards Jesus, who was standing on the water. Even though Peter would falter and start to sink, Jesus was there to reach out and catch him.

Like Peter making the choice to step out of the boat, we too are asked to step out of our safe, little, memorized, vocal prayers into the vast sea of silent contemplative prayer. Not that our normal prayers aren't good; they are! But our normal prayers can be a way of playing it safe. Contemplative prayer is much bolder, daring, and trusting. It leads us into a new place. As Fr. Keating continues, “God has to lead us into a place that involves a complete reversal of our prepackaged values, a complete undoing of all our carefully laid plans, and a lot of letting go of our preconceived ideas.” (138)

Contemplative prayer is the ability to leave the security of the boat and step out into the vast sea of the silent love of God.

Question: How accepting am I of silence?

Contemplative prayer is a lifelong journey. It is a pure gift of grace from God. The most we can do is, like Elijah, hide our face in our cloak and go out to the entrance of the cave and wait for the Lord to pass by.