



# Theology Corner

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*Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation*

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## “What is Contemplative Prayer?”

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The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that there are three expressions of prayer: Vocal Prayer, Meditative Prayer, and Contemplative Prayer (CCC, 2700-2719). I find that a lot of people these days neglect this last expression, namely, of prayerful contemplation. What is interesting, is that all of the spiritual masters of our faith (St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, et al.) place contemplative prayer right at the top of the priority list when it comes to deepening our prayer life on our journey to holiness. Why? Because it actually makes us share in the mystery of Christ. Through contemplative prayer, we actually achieve real union with the Trinity – conforming us to the likeness of God.

Contemplative prayer, according to St. Teresa of Avila is “an intimate sharing between friends.” In other words, it is like a covenant that God establishes in our hearts that just needs to be acknowledged and attended to. St. John of the Cross calls contemplation a “silent love.” It entails a soul that is quiet and consenting. Since this prayer is silent, we can see how it is different from vocal prayer which entails speaking either out loud or in our minds. It is also distinct from meditation because when we meditate, we are on a quest to understand spiritual truths. Notice that both vocal prayer and meditation are primarily *active* prayers, while contemplation is primarily *passive*. It is active in the sense that we are seeking our God, but it is primarily passive because through silent prayer, we open our hearts and minds to God’s presence and allow the Holy Spirit to transform us from within. It helps to envision the Holy Spirit within us as a fire of love. In the spiritual life, we are meant to seek out this fire so that all of our being is aflame with the love of God. This is where true happiness lies, and this is the goal of all human persons as we are all created for the attainment of the most perfect love in union with God himself in heaven.

As the Catechism tells us, contemplative prayer is meant to feed this fire of love in our soul just like kindling feeds a fire and sets it further aflame. (CCC 2717). The fruits of contemplation present to us an unintelligible peace. We are not meant to fully understand this, as this is literally the presence of God himself. God in himself is not something that we can fully understand until the beatific vision. It is also important to note that contemplation does not immediately transform your life from the moment that you make this prayerful expression. It is something gradual. That is why we must form a habit of prayer and spend time in silence with the Lord. How do we do this? This could be as simple as gazing at the face of Christ on a crucifix (another reason why having a sacred space in your home is beneficial!), spending some quiet time in the church in the presence of Christ in the tabernacle (the church is open anytime the parish office is open!), or even just sitting/driving in your car in silence and listening for God’s voice in your heart.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are supernatural (God is the main operator, so to speak), and it is for this reason that we must be receptive to these gifts and not attempt to attain all of these gifts by our own power. As with all gifts in the order of grace, they are given by God who operates in us. Yet any gift can be accepted or rejected. The continual acceptance of these gifts can only come by way of an open heart and mind, receptive of this movement by God from within our soul. It is a common misconception that the contemplative life is restricted to cloistered monks and nuns, but this couldn’t be farther from the truth! Remember, we are all called to a deep union with God. All the baptized have the fire of the Holy Spirit within us, waiting to be set aflame. The stronger this fire burns within, the more we are transformed, and one’s whole behavioral pattern will begin to shift as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at work in one’s center. May we all grow in contemplation this Lenten season, so that the fire of charity within our soul may be set ablaze as we prepare for Easter. Amen.