

PATHS TO CONTEMPLATION

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PATHS TO CONTEMPLATION

(The title suggested by the Commission for the Silver Jubilee was: *MISSION IN ASIA TODAY FOR THE COMBONI MISSIONARIES IS CONTEMPLATION AND PROCLAMATION OF GOD'S WORD*. The reflection was supposed to be about our experience in Asia, sharing what we have learned, our contribution in this area, some challenges for the future with some questions to guide the reflection and sharing at personal and community level and moreover some suggestions of articles and books for personal reading. As it came out, **my reflection is limited to contemplation** and it is a sharing of my experience and research. Hoping that it may give the confreres some food for thought).

**“THERE IS NOTHING MORE POWERFUL ON EARTH THAN PURITY AND PRAYER”
(TEILLARD DE CHARDIN)**

**“HUMAN BEINGS HAVE A NOBLE TASK: THAT OF PRAYER AND LOVE. TO PRAY
AND TO LOVE: THAT IS THEIR HAPPINESS ON EARTH” (THE CURATE OF ARS)**

**“WE ARE PUT ON EARTH FOR A LITTLE WHILE, THAT WE MAY LEARN TO BEAR
THE BEAMS OF LOVE” (WILLIAM BLAKE)**

**“EVERY PERSON IS ALONE IN THE HEART OF THE EARTH, PIERCED BY A RAY
OF THE SUN, AND IT IS QUICKLY EVENING” (SALVATORE QUASIMODO)**

Contemplation: A Journey to Holiness

Our starting point is *Matthew* 4:12-5:16, the passage of the beginning of Jesus' public life. It describes the Galilean ministry and it is exemplary for our outlook as missionaries. In the beginning, it is Jesus who is the light of the World, but in the end, Jesus states solemnly that it is us who must be the salt of the earth and the light of the world: "You are the light of the world. A city built on the hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seen your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in Heaven" (*Matthew* 5:16). We will be the light if we are alive with enthusiasm and generosity, with self-forgetfulness and love, in one word, if we are saints. "The true missionary is the saint" writes Pope John Paul II in his letter *Redemptoris Missio* (90, 91).

You must be contemplative

The pope continues: "The missionary must be a 'contemplative in action'. He finds answer to problems in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer. My contact with the representatives of the non-Christian spiritual tradition, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God, and must be able to

say with the Apostles: "that which we have looked upon ... concerning the word of life ... we proclaim also to you (1 John 1: 1-3)".

Contemplation is experience. It is therefore something truly personal ("L' esperienza e' una candela che fa' luce solamente a chi la porta"/Experience is a candle that enlightens only the one who carries it); study can help, advice, example can foster contemplation, but only experience can make contemplatives of us. The commitment to experience contemplation is a long life commitment and, at the same time, a gift. We must struggle to become contemplative as if it depended only on us, we must expect it in faith because we know that eventually it is a gift from God. We must be contemplative: i.e. firmly and deeply rooted in the supreme and absolute reality that God is, if we want to persevere in the long journey of faith and life as missionaries and especially if we want to take refuge in God vis-a-vis sometimes insoluble problems and terrible and upsetting happenings.

The inexhaustible mystery of God

In his sermon on the Beatitudes (*Cf. the patristic readings in the Breviary for Thursday and Friday of XII week in the Ordinary Time of the Year*), St Gregory of Nissa reflects on the apparently contradictory message about God that we have in Scripture: on the one hand, we have the sentence in the Gospel of John: "Nobody has ever seen God" (*John* 1: 18; cf. also *1 John* 4: 12); on the other hand, we have the Beatitude: "Happy the pure in heart, they shall see God" (*Matthew* 5:8). His teaching is very suggestive and still very relevant and fresh.

The mystery of God can be compared to a limitless horizon. The more we go up the more the horizon expands and the more we try to approach its borders the more they go far from us. The same is of the mystery of God: the more we enter into its knowledge the more we experience that it is inexhaustible.

Only the pure of heart can see God: the simple, those with a limpid heart, who are able to accept to sail towards a horizon that never ends, they taste its beauty because they do not expect to be able to touch God with their finger! If God is in front of us as a limitless horizon, our life appears as a continuous journey towards God.

God in the Heart of Man

God is not a utopia but a promise that gives thrust to our hope. To hope is not a passive waiting but a commitment in trust towards a certainty that we already, albeit only partially, possess. Even the purity of heart, as any other Christian virtue, is never a totally reached perfection. The commitment of hope consists in the progressive search for a possible holiness which at any rate remains always a promise: if you think you

have got it, you lose the purity of heart and you can no longer see God.

You will deceive yourself like the man in the Song of Songs who wanted to purchase love: "Were a man offer all the wealth of his house to buy love, contempt is all he would purchase" (*Song* 8: 7). God may be found in the heart of man. Purity of heart gives us the possibility of seeing God in a deep and true, even if partial, way that can be seen as an anticipation of the beatific vision. For it consists not in knowing some truths about God, but in having God within oneself.

It isn't yet an immediate knowledge and possession (that will only be in heaven), but if we purify our heart, we will be able to contemplate the divine image in the beauty of our own soul. The intimacy that originates between God and us, when we search for Him in sincerity, is so great that it enables us to contemplate within ourselves the true image of God and to relish in it as a present reality (St. Gregory of Nissa).

I. Christian Prayer Facing the East

(I have always been fascinated by the spiritual tradition of the East, even before coming to live and work as a missionary in the Far East. What follows is the fruit of my readings and reflections on the concept of prayer and contemplation that we find in the great eastern tradition and what they can contribute to our search for contemplation).

A considerable number of modern people are practicing meditation and find themselves drawn into deeper states of consciousness that are ordinarily called mystical. Beginning with the repetition of a mantra, or awareness of the breathing, or the savoring of a phrase from sacred Scripture, they feel drawn, beyond thinking and reasoning, to a consciousness wherein they rest silently in the presence of the Great Mystery that envelops the whole universe.

As a mass movement it started in the sixties. The sixties are a decade of change: Vatican II, the students' revolution, the Beatles. At that time the great meditation movement which subsequently spread to the whole western world was in its early phase. Transcendental meditation and yoga and Zen were already in vogue. Unfortunately, the success of yoga and meditation in the consumer societies, is an ambiguous one; it may only mean that they have been assimilated to the prevailing commercialism and have lost their depth and original religious meaning.

In a more serious development, however, Christians were asking if it was possible for them to avail of the riches of oriental spirituality while remaining committed to Christ and to the Gospel. The research and the experimentation of those years have now passed in the mainstream and the novelties are taken from granted, but it is all the same

interesting and formative to explore the articulations of that discovery. The Catholic world that was committed to a serious dialogue with the East by means of giants like Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton, produced also those who acted as guides in the journey of prayer: John Main, Anthony De Mello and William Johnston.

Forerunners of an Encounter

John Main is a clear example of cross fertilization between the religious traditions of the East and the West. It was his encounter with an Indian monk which inspired him in his personal quest for contemplative meditation and eventually made of him a master of a form of meditation that is the fruit of the integration between the eastern influence and the rediscovered western tradition.

The bridge was the calm, continuous repetition of a single word or phrase throughout the time of meditation as a way of bringing our chronically distracted human mind to attention in God and developing poverty of spirit. He wrote: "In contemplative prayer we seek to become the person we are called to be, not by thinking of God but by being with God. Simply to be with God is to be drawn into being the person God calls us to be".

He taught people to pray from a theology of the indwelling Spirit and the inner Christ which opens a new possibility for prayer in our era of secularism. He illustrates the intimate connection between scripture and the prayer of the heart. The universal call to holiness invites a personal contemplative practice in daily life. John Main saw that the modern search for deeper interiority required a simple contemplative discipline that could be practiced daily. From this developed the worldwide community of meditators, the network of Christian Meditation Centers and the weekly meditation groups which practice his recommended discipline of two daily half hours of meditation.

In **Anthony de Mello**, the best currents of the East and the West flow naturally together. As a native of India, he was culturally equipped to understand the followers of Oriental religions. As a Jesuit, his own spirituality was formed largely by the Spiritual Exercises as well as by theological and psychological studies which he pursued for many years in Europe and the United States. His little book: "*Sadhana, a way to God (Christian exercises in eastern form)*", published in 1978, was a breakthrough when it came out and still remains a classic of modern spirituality.

In it, the author aims to teach interested readers how to pray, through a series of practices drawn from the Church's tradition, St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, oriental techniques stemming from sources such as yoga or Zen Buddhism, and modern

psychology. To it, de Mello added books of short stories representing the wisdom of the East in the fragment. They made him immensely popular.

The Mysticism of Silence

In his later works he develops his theory of contemplation as awareness. The concept of Christian revelation makes him recall the sentence of Lao-tse: "Silence is the great revelation". He knows that we are accustomed to think of the Scripture as the revelation of God. And so it is. But he wants us to discover the revelation that silence brings.

He writes: "In exercising an awareness of our bodily sensations, we are already communicating with God", a communication that he explained in these terms. "Many mystics tell us that, in addition to the mind and heart with which we ordinarily communicate with God, we are, all of us, endowed with a mystical mind and mystical heart, a faculty which makes it possible for us to know God directly, to grasp and intuit him in his very being, though in a dark manner.

But this intuition, without images or form, is that of a void: "What do I gaze into when I gaze silently at God? I gaze at a blank." And thus one arrives at "the seemingly disconcerting conclusion that concentration on your breathing or your body sensations is very good contemplation in the strict sense of the word". Interior enlightenment is the true revelation: "When you have knowledge you use a torch to show the way. When you are enlightened you become a torch". This mysticism of stillness and silence recalls the parallel experience of "the dark night" of Saint John of the Cross.

Anthony de Mello however did not realize that he was been carried away by his enthusiasm of learning from the East to the point of overlooking the revelation of God in Christianity. This is why, after his premature death, the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith published a letter which put in evidence the dangers of de Mello's position.

Well aware of these dangers was instead the other Jesuit, **William Johnston**, who spent most of his life in Japan and, as a scholar of spirituality, was better equipped for this demanding task. He is the author of a book: "*Christian Zen (A Way of Meditation)*", published in 1971, which is also a classic. His enthusiasm for the dialogue with Zen Buddhism became a long life commitment. He writes: "Christians might not only avail of the riches of oriental meditation but they should become leaders in a movement of which Christ would be the center – a meditation movement which would humbly learn from Zen. I have told Japanese Christians- and I believe it is true- that they have an important role to play in the development of Christianity. Their vocation is to renew meditation within the Church (because of their Zen tradition) and interpret it to the

West".

The best example of the truth of this vision is the life experience of a Japanese Dominican priest, Fr. Shigeto Oshida who died in November 2003 at Takamori. He was a convert from Buddhism and a Zen practitioner when he met Christ in the witness of a German friend, during the war. Fr. Oshida was used to share his spiritual journey: how following the noble silence of Zen he had easily believed in the Man who died on the cross proclaiming universal forgiveness. "Forgiveness is silence within silence" explains Fr. Oshida, "To keep silence is to enter the womb of God. Christ is in the heart of Zen". Fr. Oshida's death has been the best illustration of the Christian potentialities of Zen mysticism.

In the convent of Takamori, in the last days of his life, he spent long time contemplating the way autumn dresses the surrounding hills in colors. Looking at the leaves falling gently on the ground, he uttered the words that will remain on his lips until the last breath: "God is marvelous! Amen, Amen!" His face in death was radiant with beauty and peace.

II. Learning from the East

We will analyze the contributions of the East to the western concept of prayer and meditation, guided by William Johnston. Asian meditation is holistic. It stresses the role of the body and teaches us how to sit, how to breathe, how to eat, how to fast, how to sleep, how to watch and how to relax.

Praying with the Body

Balancing Body and Soul: this is the tradition and the teaching of Yoga. Yoga has been experiencing a resurgence, thanks to media images. Yet media images of sophisticated bodily postures send false messages that yoga is an alternative to weights lifting and aerobics and merely a fitness fad. Western mentality tends to take the **asanas** (yoga postures) out of context from a lifestyle that values the balance of body and soul.

Yet Yoga is not equivalent to exercise. Its basic premise has to be upheld. The premise is that we are a whole and spiritual being. The body is only a part of our wholeness. Yet the spirit or soul manifests itself through the body. **Asan** is a Sanskrit word for "seat." To take one's seat means to enter into a state of rest. This involves moving towards a resting position and controlling your breath. The yoga postures are meant to facilitate meditation.

Inner Stillness

Consider the words of Jesus: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on" (*Matthew 6:25*).

When one sits down to meditate, the first thing is to let go of one's anxieties. And that may include reasoning and thinking together with preoccupation and planning and all the rest. One must let them go. And this is not easy. For, as we all know, the human mind is restless. It looks to the future with fear or anticipation; it looks to the past with nostalgia or with guilt. Seldom does it remain in the here and now.

Yet Jesus tells us clearly to drop anxiety about the future in order to remain in the present. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day" (*Matthew 6:34*). In all the great cultures life is symbolized by breath. It is precisely in experiencing your breath that you experience your life. So just sit quietly with your back straight and become aware of your breathing. As time goes on, the breathing of its own accord becomes deep and abdominal.

The Sino-Japanese tradition has always taught that life and energy well up from the *tanden*, the point which lies about an inch below the navel-which is expressively called the "ocean of energy". And *tanden* breathing is basic not only to meditation but also to judo, fencing, archery, calligraphy, flower-arrangement and the tea-ceremony. One does not attain awareness of breathing overnight. It takes time.

But if one perseveres one gradually comes to realize that this breath is not only the life that fills the body from head to toe. It is more. It is a sharing in the breath of the universe: a cosmic force which penetrates all things. As for Hebrews, they believed that their breath was the breath of God (*ruah*) whose presence gave them life. For Christians the breath, like the wind, symbolizes the Holy Spirit who fills all things with his love, giving wisdom and joy and peace.

Receiving the Love of God

William Johnston writes: "While breathing, you can recite the words: "Come, Holy Spirit", asking to be filled with the breath of the Spirit. And you can let go of anxieties as the conviction of being loved grows and deepens and becomes an unshakable source of strength.

Let me repeat that I am not saying that one should reason and think about faith. Only that one should sit silently, receiving the love of God into the depths of one's being. The principal thing is to receive and to keep receiving the immense love which is being

offered. Perhaps we could say that the basis of Christian meditation is the act of being loved. The Song of Songs speaks of opening the door to the Beloved. And Jesus says: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him" (*Revelation 3:20*).

III. Christian Prayer is always An Encounter with a Personal God

At this point, the roads of the wisdom of the East (Yoga and Zen) and Christian prayer have already parted. The starting point can be similar if not the same, but then, in the course of the journey, the roads diverge. **Christian mysticism is always Christ centered.** The metaphors of darkness, desert, abyss, silence, unknowing used by Christian mystics differ from those non-Christian. Thus it is a "dazzling" darkness, a "fertile" desert, a "love-filled" abyss, a "Word-resonant" silence, a "knowing" unknowing.

For them it is only in the crucified Christ, where the opposites of Word and silence, Life and death coincide, that there is loving access to the Father who dwells in unapproachable light. For the Christian, moreover, love of God and love of neighbor are simultaneous actions. This explains the extraordinary development of the works of charity in Christianity as the fruit of prayer and contemplation.

"Christian prayer is always determined by the structure of the Christian faith, in which the very truth of God and creature shines forth. For this reason, it is defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God. The essential element of authentic Christian prayer is the meeting of two freedoms, the infinite freedom of God with the finite freedom of man (*Christian Meditation*, letter of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, 1989).

"For me, then - writes W. Johnston - the greatest practical difference between Zen and Christian contemplation is that, whereas Zen regards thoughts and feelings and aspirations of love for God as illusion, I regard these sentiments as-yes, imperfect and inadequate to express the reality, but nevertheless as true and valid and valuable religious experiences. From Zen I can, and will continue to, learn many things. But I am convinced that it is not the same as the Christian contemplation to which I feel called".

Paul Williams, a Buddhist who found his way back to Christianity, writes: "Buddhism is all about the mind. Mental states are essentially subjective. The great glory of Buddhism is its relevance to the immediate situation of suffering. And suffering springs (naturally) from the mind. The Christian religion instead is all about God and the salvific actions of God through Christ.

Buddhism is working on oneself. For if Buddhism is all about the mind it has to be the mind of someone. And that someone is oneself. But God is not a mental state. Christians who would seek common ground with Buddhists in meditation and "mystical experiences" should be careful that they are not throwing out the Holy Baby with the bathwater.

As for me, in the last analysis, I realized I could not avoid a choice. Did I want to focus on myself for all eternity, or did I want to love the Living God?"

In the Womb of God

"The state of mind that exists when you sit in the right posture is itself enlightenment": this is what the Zen masters teach. In other words, oriental breathing and posture should not be regarded only as warming-up exercises, preparation for the real thing. What we can learn from the East is not just preparatory devices but the art of prayer itself.

For the Orient can teach us to pray with our breathing, to pray with our body, to pray with our whole being. After all, God created the whole person, not just the mind; and he should be adored by the whole person, not just by the mind. Yet another result of this training is that one comes to experience the great wisdom of the body. One whose mind is attuned to his body finds that the body tells him when to eat and when to fast, when to sleep and when to watch, when to work or when to meditate.

Then one proceeds to Enlightenment according to one's own tradition. And yet we believe that "every genuine prayer is done in the Holy Spirit" (*John Paul II*) and in the womb of God is the meeting place of all the saints. The same Spirit is at work in the heart of all men and women, and in the scriptures and traditions of all authentic religions. Now we realize that each religion has its unique message. We learn from one another. Indeed, as we enter more into the third millennium we at last realize that we need one another.

IV. Basic concepts about Contemplation

(After revisiting the basic concepts of prayer, I will point out different paths to contemplation according to the Christian tradition and my personal experience. We should not consider contemplation as something too high and outside our reach. We may discover in us contemplative attitudes that can develop into prayer, become prayer. We can always long and struggle for our intimacy with God... The journey into contemplation will never be completed in this world).

We must distinguish *essential* prayer from *actual* prayer. **Essential** prayer is the attitude or disposition of the mind and of the heart by which we recognize that our life is in God's hands: vital dependence on God. This is the virtue of religion and it is at the same time a point of departure and an unending point of arrival. Karl Rahner defines it as "*Loving acceptance of God's loving will in our life*".

Actual prayer is the formal dedication of our time to the practice of praying. It is the ordinary means for nourishing the essential prayer. The actual prayer is traditionally divided in *Vocal Prayer* (the prayer of the lips), *Mental Prayer* (the prayer of the mind or meditation; and *Contemplative prayer* (the prayer of the heart and will which reaches out to God's presence).

Contemplation is also called: prayer of simplicity, prayer of quiet. It is also described as the **awareness of the presence of God** known and loved at the center of reality and of one's being. When you seek this awareness and find it in faith, you have *acquired* contemplation. When God gives you this awareness in real experience, you have *infused* contemplation.

Contemplation can be:

- **Natural** contemplation: *to see the universal in the detail.*

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour" (*William Blake*).

This is the source of the arts, *poetry*, music, the figurative arts. This is also experienced in *friendship* and love. Beauty gives lightness, breath and inspiration to our being. Love is our being: we are created for beauty and love. They are the fruits of the two ways to God, the ground of our being, to be added to the five philosophical ways: **Via Pulchritudinis** (The Way of Beauty) and **Via Amoris** (The Way of Love). This natural contemplation can prepare for contemplative prayer or become itself contemplative prayer.

- **Ignatian** contemplation: *to stand inside the mysteries of Christ' life by means of our imagination so much as to apply our senses to them.*
- **Contemplation as a long, loving look at God who is there...** This covers every form of involvement of our heart whether during formal prayer (can be during a vocal prayer like the Liturgy of the Hours or the Rosary or as point of arrival of *Lectio Divina*, etc.), or during any other activity or moment, since "true prayer often happens outside formal prayer" (*Gasparino*). This is by way of affirmation (*Kataphatic*): finding God in all things.
- **Contemplation** as standing in front of God in naked faith (negation: *Apophatic*).

V. Paths to Contemplation

(1) Contemplation and self-acceptance

“Then, one of the scribes came up... and asked him: “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered: “The first is, ‘Hear, o Israel: the Lord, our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”. (Mark 12:28-31).

In his answer to the scribe who is questioning him, Jesus takes up elements already present in the Old Testament: the first commandment of the Decalogue that we encounter in *Deuteronomy 6:5* and the connection between the love of neighbor and the love of self in *Leviticus 19:18*.

Which is therefore the novelty in Jesus’ answer? I would like to underline two elements that I think meaningful in Jesus’ words. The first is the clarity with which Jesus identifies the heart of the law: the absolute love towards God. The second element in Jesus’ answer is to unite the absolute love for God with the love of neighbor and of self, in such a deep way that it not possible to separate one from the others. We find here the three fundamental relational dimensions of the human person: to God, to others and to self.

The love towards God where heart, mind and strength (at present, we would say will) join, is our answer to his gratuitous and unconditional love. Such a love makes possible to love neighbor and self in a true way. In this sense, the love of neighbor and of self, more than being second in the sense of secondary, is a necessary consequence of the first. The love of God becomes visible in the love of neighbor and of self. *“Anyone who says, ‘I love God’, and hates his brother, is a liar, since a man who doesn’t love his brother that he can see cannot love God, whom he has never seen” (1 John 4:20).*

The center of the whole Christian message is the commandment of love: we were born to love. This is the sense of our life: to answer the love God has towards us. What can however happen when we don’t love ourselves? Psychology has its specific contribution: it is possible to have a relationship of respect and reciprocity with other people only when we accept ourselves, respect ourselves, and basically love ourselves. Not only, but the absence of self-acceptance and self-esteem, especially when unconscious, can represent an obstacle to recognize and accept God’s love for each one of us.

To live in conflict with ourselves because of our lack of self-acceptance and self-esteem, especially when we are not aware of it, is often the cause of our attitudes of aggression, domination, egoism, refusal and manipulation of other people, jealousy, search for power and pleasure, of perceiving other people as a threat.

This situation in the life of the adult person is accompanied by the difficulty of loving and receiving love, of living free relationships in the sense that the individual can be himself/herself, allowing the other to be himself/herself, relationships that are of reciprocity and alterity.

Low self-esteem is not in itself an obstacle in our relationship with the Lord. Our wounded humanity can and should be the privileged place for experiencing God's love and mercy, because his love doesn't depend on our own qualities or virtues and not even on our psychological maturity. God loves us because we are his children.

We need a spirituality that not only would not eliminate our humanity, something impossible to accomplish, but that would integrate it in its aspects of vulnerability and weakness in order to make of it the meeting place with our Lord, because: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness...For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Corinthians 12: 9.10).

(2) Finding God in all thing (*The Ignatian way of becoming contemplative*)

At the end of his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius invites us to the contemplation to gain divine love, which is a call to grow in contemplating God present in all things. It is a vision of God's immanent and loving presence in all realities so that we may always live "planted in love and built on love".

These are the degrees of God's presence and our response in St. Ignatius' teaching. God is love. He is movement of self-communication. His creative and self-communicating action is expressed in several levels of self-giving or being present to us whom He loves.

- First, God wishes to be present to us in the created gifts that he gives us. God is in his gifts. Therefore, let us not take life for granted; let us not take anything for granted...Let our response be gratitude and thanksgiving. The fruit of this gratefulness is joy and humility: nobody can grateful and unhappy at the same time.
- Moreover, God wishes to be even more present to us by being inside each gift. God's own presence in each gift is revealed by the fact that the creature's limited perfections reflect God's infinite perfection and flow from the goodness of God. "God saw that everything was good" (*Gen 1*). The response is reverence. Let us not rape the world! Let us have the attitude which was proper of St. Francis of

Assisi (“Brother Sun, Sister Moon”) who felt and expressed the sense of belonging to the same family with all the creatures...Ecological sensitivity and spirituality... Respect for creation. Let our vow of poverty be expressed in this way: to want less and to thank more.

- God wishes still more to be present in us in his self-giving love. He is working constantly in each moment and in each creature to make us happy, to make us partake in the blessedness of his plan of salvation. “My Father goes on working and so do I” (*John 5:17*). Response: let us work ourselves and serve his holy will in all that we do. Praise, reverence and service to God constitute a continuous gift of ourselves in loving surrender back to God who gives himself so completely to us at all times. This is where love becomes contemplation.

Contemplation is therefore a state of being present to God in self-giving so that our whole being is constantly offering itself in love as a pleasing sacrifice to him. “In fact he is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and exist” (*Acts 17:28*).

(3) Contemplation and Consecration (*as Affirmation*)

The starting point is God’s love. Contemplation is receiving God’s love and answering in love. The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Bible and in the liturgy in the perfect model of the contemplative attitude. **The Immaculate Conception** is a celebration of the gratuitous initiative of the love of God (1 John 4:10). Mary’s life starts with the outpouring of this love which heals: Thinking of you I created you, loving you I make you lovable” (Saint Augustine). It is a celebration of life.

Mary comes into the world not only blessed with the gift of life, but because of the special gift of life which is at the same time preservation, salvation by Christ’s grace from all wounds of sin. The gift of this life is a blessing for all. In Mary, we see prefigured the destiny of us all in the blessing which originates in God’s universal will of salvation, redemption and sanctification (Original Blessing). This openness to the revelation of God’s love in Mary, must become the contemplation and relishing of God’s love for me. “If your experience of God is not an experience of joy, you have no right to be a missionary”.

That life is a gift and a blessing is the most important perception of true prayer and contemplation. It is a prayer-stance which is wonderment, surprise, joy, tenderness, not as sentimentality or corniness, but love which becomes experience of communion, experience of compassion.

Life is not a joke. A call to love is a call to suffer: to “love until it hurts” (Mother Teresa). Consecration is the obedience of Jesus to the Father’s will who wants him to save us by means of/through sacrificial love. Consecration for us is the response in full awareness to God’s love understood and accepted; it is self-giving (*Ecstasy*=to go out of oneself). This is also real worship, what pleases God more than anything else. It is *Salvation*: the way we are saved by God’s love revealed in Jesus, our Sacrificed and Risen Lord.

- “For their sake I consecrate myself” (*John 17:19*)
- “You gave me a body to do your will” (*Hebrews 10:5-7*)
- “Offer your bodies as spiritual sacrifice, your worship pleasing to God” (*Romans 12:1*)

By giving back to God the life which we have perceived as a gift, joy and blessing, we are consecrated i.e. we are grafted, joined, united to Jesus, to his sacrificial death and his glorious resurrection. This is true first of all of our baptismal consecration, and then of our Religious Profession. Through the Vows of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience we radically give back to God in love our life so that because of him it may be a gift, blessing and joy for other people, especially the little ones, the poor and most abandoned.

As the beautiful life of Mary, received by the love of the Father and saved, preserved by the merits of the Son’s Paschal Mystery, is **immaculate** in view of the ministry of Divine Motherhood, in the same way **our consecration, which is the conscience of our belonging to God as his exclusive possession, seals our heart and life for the service of the missions.**

- “Set me as a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm” (*Song of Songs 8:6*).
- “May the knowledge of belonging to God himself in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world and Spouse of the Church, seal your hearts, all your thoughts, words and deeds, with the sign of the biblical spouse...May the knowledge of belonging to Christ open your hearts, thoughts and deeds, with the key of the mystery of Redemption, to all the sufferings, needs and hopes of individuals and of the world” (John Paul II, *Redemptionis Donum*, 1985).

Through our consecration we aim at **virginity of the heart**: love repaid with love, gratuity with radicality. It will give us an experience of communion: a love received, appreciated, longed for, searched for, cherished, enjoyed, believed, possessed, reciprocated. “Put me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm”. **Consecration will become contemplation when our love becomes tenderness**: sensitivity, youthfulness,

vulnerability, affection, benevolence, care, compassion, devotion, humanness, kindness, empathy, tenderheartedness, warmth: Not simply a human quality but a spiritual quality: gift of the Spirit, born of faith.

(4) Contemplation and compassion (*as Negation*)

But tenderness is also fruit of compassion, virginity of the heart is also silence, loneliness and standing alone in faith. It is the cross: experiencing our vulnerability and bearing it in faith; seeing our fragility and relying on the strength of God. Persevering in the moment of silence and apparent absence of the Omnipresent. This happens especially in 3 instances:

1. *When we become aware that what we have given up in our consecration will no longer be there, will never be there: a person, a house, a career... It will never be there. Our poverty will be always with us. The consistence of renunciation; the unending poverty; the long loneliness: a feeling that is particularly true for us missionaries, because of our provisionality. The sense of our powerlessness.*

If we accept it in the Lord, if we surrender in pure faith, this will generate peace, tolerance, wisdom, tenderness. This will be contemplation. “Don’t bother me, I carry in my body the wounds of Jesus, the Lord” (*Galatians 6:17*). God alone is enough. “Nada te turbe... Solo Dios Basta” (Saint Teresa of Avila).

2. *When we break down, we fall, we experience rebellion, fragility, the weight of evil, sin. But grace is given to sinners. God carries us in his arms. He can make us new. There is a true virginity of heart in accepting forgiveness and being new again. Tenderness of heart wipes away despondency, despair, withdrawing within ourselves, anger, rejection, regret...*

3. *When we experience loneliness, the silence of God and the apparent inutility of our efforts... The mystery of Jesus’ burial. The mystique of John the Baptist: “He must grow greater, I have to grow smaller. The bride belongs to the bridegroom” (*John 3:29-30*). Tenderness is now experienced as love and compassion. Mary at the tomb, holding Christ’s dead body, the Pietà. It is the experience of failure, of unrequited love, of terminal sickness. To stand in front of God in naked faith is contemplation.*

(5) The Bridegroom’s chest/bosom/breast

Jesus is the bridegroom of the soul. This is why throughout the history of Christian spirituality the Saints have focused their attention on the Blessed Humanity of Jesus. In the Bible, the Risen Christ teaches the Apostles to understand him as the hinge/hub/center of the Holy Scriptures. The preaching/mission comes as result of the experience

of Jesus. This experience is meant to become our experience under the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The most wonderful example in the Gospels is that of the encounter/relationship of Jesus with Peter. Another beautiful example in the New Testament is that of Saint Paul. He did not know Jesus during Jesus' time on earth, but he was changed and transformed by his encounter with the Risen Christ in the grace of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus' story and mystery became his story and the depth of the mystery of his personality: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (*Galatians 2:20*. Cf. *Philippians 3:7-16*).

The penetration and the understanding about the Blessed Humanity of Jesus is something which goes beyond the sensible/superficial/exterior experience of the person of Jesus. Jesus himself introduces the Apostles to it. The deep consciousness of Jesus as Savior/Mediator by love is transmitted to the Apostles by the sign of the washing of the feet (*John 13:1-17*). The deepest statement of the need of this personal encounter with Jesus as point of arrival has its perfect expression in the sentence: "Abide with me/make your home in me" (*John 15*).

Throughout the centuries, this is the witness of the Saints: The Blessed Humanity of Jesus is the place where God meets with Humanity; the sacrament of our salvation; the model of our perfection and therefore it should be the object of our love and contemplation. The last expression of it is the image of the Divine Mercy that we find nowadays in almost all our churches. I like the beautiful figure of Jesus in his appealing humanity and the red and white rays that come from his chest.

The chest of the Bridegroom brings us back to the devotion to the Sacred Heart so central in the missionary spirituality of Saint Daniel Comboni. He was the heir of a long tradition. In centuries gone, on various occasions, the Fathers of the Church had referred to the open side of the Crucified from which blood and water flowed, seeing in this the origin of the sacraments, and by that very fact, the birth of the Church.

"The Bridegroom's chest gives joy to her spouse", Saint Bernard tells us. The chest/bosom/breast signifies love and tenderness. It is the feminine, maternal side of God revealed in Jesus. The theme of the open side of the Crucified was introduced into this context. With his lance, the soldier opened the ineffable riches of glory and revealed the heart, the cleft in the rock where humanity finds its refuge. For the mystical writer, Saint Gertrude the Great, the transfixed Heart is the Ark of the Godhead, the place

where the divine treasures are kept, and by that very fact, the place where we experience the secrets of God.

Saint Daniel Comboni saw the heart of Jesus beating out of compassion for the terrible condition of the Africans, the poorest and most abandoned of the earth, and was overwhelmed by this love. The Bridegroom's chest is not only the place of interiority, the refuge of the soul, but also the engine of mission, now as before.

(6) Contemplation and Friendship

“I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father” (John 15:15).

To experience Jesus' friendship is contemplation. To see Jesus in the face of our friends is contemplation. To experience joy in wholesome friendship is contemplation. It is a common experience to contemplate God in a natural phenomenon like a beautiful sunrise or the awesome view of the ocean. But it is as much striking and inspiring to contemplate the goodness of God in the lovely face of a friend. Jesus said: “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers it is to me that you do”: this can be true when we give a glass of cool water to a person who is thirsty, but even more when we experience the presence of Jesus in the person of a wholesome friend. True friendship is a gift of God and a friend's affection is the greatest treasure in life.

VI. Questions for personal reflection

1. Where do I experience beauty in my life?
2. Do I enjoy friendship in the context of my relationship with God?
3. Do I remember with gratitude the moments when I have experienced God, Jesus, my missionary vocation in a sensible, emotional way?
4. Am I concerned with the trials of the Church in the world, with the suffering of the poor or am I usually wrapped up in my own problems? Am I able to listen to other people with empathy and patience?
5. Do I usually enjoy peace of mind or am I restless, unsatisfied?
6. Do I panic when I have nothing to do or do I turn naturally to God in prayer, to study and reflection?
7. Does the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, fill my heart? Do I find joy in preaching? Which are the Saints who have touched my heart and with whom I identify?
8. Do I give enough time to my personal prayer?

9. How do I experience my devotion to the Sacred Heart?
10. Do I live out my friendships in Jesus' light?
11. How can I describe my personal spirituality?

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

Concluding Prayer:

Lord, teach me how to pray - to be still with you, letting your calm and peace flood my being. And teach me, Lord, stillness of heart in my day-to-day encounters with life. Teach me that way of being in which I meet and encounter life with an outward vitality and a stillness and peace in my heart that come from the trust that you are with me. I ask you this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Dulcis in fundo:

(I like to quote the following poem by Gerald Manly Hopkins that is very inspirational for a contemplative stance according to the Ignatian spirituality of finding God in all things and Christ in all peoples):

As kingfishers catch fire, dragon flies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deal out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves - goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;
 Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –

Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.

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