

CONTEMPLATION AND LOVE

By Eileen O’Hea CSJ

The prayer of contemplation is an experience of practicing selfless love, a love that brings us beyond our ego-selves to the Other and to all others. We call the love we experience at the level of our egos: *eros*. We call the love we experience at the level of our true self: *agape*.

An example of *agape* love happened to me as I sat beside my mother’s bed a day before she died. An ambulance siren rang through the city streets close to our home. It somehow penetrated the thick coma-like sleep that enveloped my mother. Her eyes opened and dreamily met mine for the first time in many hours. She then looked at me and asked, “Is daddy alright?” “Yes,” I replied, “he’s fine; he’s in the living room.” My mother, assured that the one she loved was safe from harm, slipped back into the sleep she would not awaken from again.

There seems to be something in us that knows, and yet doesn’t want to know, that there is such a thing as an egoless love, a selfless love. Perhaps it is precisely because of this realisation that we begin to resist prayer. We are afraid that this God we name Love will be too demanding, that we will be required to sacrifice too much and consequently lose out on the things we need or want. Often we equate God’s love with the experience of loss and personal diminishment. We do this because many of our experiences of human love have been limited to the love of *eros* and not moved into the love of *agape*. Consequently, they confirmed our experience that love can be painful or diminishing in some way.

The experience of Christian meditation leads us beyond our ego consciousness and its ways of loving, *eros*, and beyond its experiences and fears about love, to a whole other-consciousness: contemplative consciousness. Here we discover ourselves in Divine Love which simultaneously means that we do what love does: we move beyond ourselves in order to be for the Other and others. We do not experience any diminishment in the love of *agape*; rather, we experience greater depths of awareness: loving, being, freedom, identity. Our contemplative practice of Christian meditation gently leads us into the realisation of Divine Love, the love of *agape*. It is an experience free from guilt, free from anxiety, free from fear of any diminishment. It is this experience that leads us to prayer and enables us to say with the Psalmist: *Let morning announce your love for it is you I trust; show me the right way for I offer you myself*. (Psalm 143:8)

Notes produced by Alex Peck (aepeck77@yahoo.com.au); June 8, 2009.

Source: Eileen O’Hea CSJ, “Rain for the Sea: Reflections for a Time of Meditation”, *Meditatio, Talks Series 2009A, (Jan–Mar)*. Internet:

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