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Contemplative Prayer: An Experience of the Heart

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In a most unusual setting, at the British Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, I stumbled upon a copy of Henri Nouwen's book, *The Way of the Heart*.¹ In reading this short but profound eighty-page work, seeds of thought were sown to sprout later. The mystery behind his words, "in unceasing prayer we descend with the mind into the heart",² enticed me.

Learning to Meditate – A Heart Experience

I had to wait another three years before the mystery in Nouwen's statement began to open up at another unlikely place – the "Star of the Sea" Catholic parish located close to Moreton Bay in Queensland, Australia. Here I was introduced to the practice of contemplative prayer, also referred to as Christian meditation.

Contemplative prayer teaches me about what Aboriginal peoples understand as *dadirri*, meaning "deep inner spring" – a phrase referring to the "heart".³ There is a deep spring within me – I can call on it, and it calls to me (if I am receptive).⁴ Ungunmerr elaborates on the spirit of *dadirri* as involving inner, deep listening *and* quiet, still, silent awareness, with no need for words.⁵ There are parallels here with contemplation⁶ or meditation.

In like manner, contemplative prayer involves stillness of my body and spirit.⁷ In that stillness and silence, I open my heart to the indwelling presence of Christ.⁸ I enter into the presence of the Spirit who dwells in my inner heart in love.⁹ The journey of contemplative prayer, then, is a journey to the heart of God¹⁰ – such prayer entails both a path of faith¹¹ and praying in faith.¹²

In Touch with the Heart of Christian Mystery – the Indwelling Christ

Ungunmerr writes that the deep spring within a person is the very spirit of God.¹³ This parallels Jesus' words about "streams of living water" flowing from within a person, by which "he meant the Spirit" (Jn 7:38-39).¹⁴

Similarly, in contemplative prayer I seek to be open to the personal and powerful presence of Christ in my heart.¹⁵ Through this heart experience, I may catch a glimpse of the meaning behind the words of mystery: "Christ in [me], the hope of glory" (Col 1:27) and how "Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith" (Eph 3:17).¹⁶

I recognize that heart spirituality indeed touches the central depth of the Christ mystery.¹⁷ To symbolise his understanding of the mystery of Christ-in-us, Francis de Sales chose the symbol of the pierced heart.¹⁸ Lescrauwaet sees Christ's wounded heart as representing the crucified, risen, and Spirit-giving Saviour of the world.¹⁹ In sum, Christ's heart was broken, he became a living heart again (now and for ever), and he became himself a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15:45). Therefore, his heart is the source of life for my heart.²⁰

Additionally, a significant aspect of recognizing Christ and divine love within my heart through contemplative prayer is as follows:

Christ Jesus is truly human and truly divine. As truly human, his heart is the point of unity for all human hearts. As the heart for all hearts he acts to become the saviour and liberator of all hearts. Christ is also truly divine. His heart carries the fire of charity springing up from the Trinity.²¹

Finally, as a result of contemplative prayer, I believe that my human heart is the place where the Spirit of the crucified and risen Lord inspires my acts of faith, hope, and love.²²

However, for me to be aware of what the Spirit expresses in my heart,²³ I need to continue the daily spiritual discipline of meditation in which I open my heart in silence and stillness to the indwelling presence of Christ²⁴ and so be in tune with the heart of Christ.

A Life-Changing Impact in My Spiritual Journey

In describing the significance of *dadirri* for the spiritual journey, Ungunmerr writes that:

The contemplative way of *dadirri* spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us feel whole again.²⁵

Likewise, the heart experience of contemplative prayer is also a life-changing practice. Christ's Spirit that I am invited to discover in my heart through meditation is the power source that enriches every part of my life.²⁶ It is the Spirit of life and the Spirit of love.²⁷ In fact, through the Spirit of love that dwells in my heart, I am called to maturity as a human being²⁸ – to become human in the fullest sense. My coming to the *fullness of being* is the *fullness of God himself*, as the apostle Paul expounds in Ephesians 3:14-19.²⁹ In other words, God's being is within me.³⁰ God is presence, and is present deep within my being, in my heart.³¹

Furthermore, the significance of contemplative prayer experience is as follows. To begin with, Jesus has sent his Spirit to dwell in my heart.³² His Spirit is open in love to God the Father.³³ Consequently, when I am open in love to the Spirit of Jesus, I am transported into the love of the Father too, with him and through him.³⁴ Accordingly, my human consciousness is summoned to an infinite expansion, an infinite development as I leave the narrowness of my own ego behind, and enter into the mystery of God.³⁵ Fallon concurs by stating that it is “a journey into a ‘beyond’ that is limitless.”³⁶

Concluding Thoughts . . .

In this heart experience of contemplative prayer, I have found myself following Ranson's "Cycle of Spirituality", involving the four phases of attending, inquiring, interpreting, and acting.³⁷ A spiritual moment had first occurred in *attending* to Nouwen's *The Way of the Heart*. The contents captured my interest. I then wanted to discover and learn more – clearly I had entered an *inquiring* mode. I read and reread parts of the book, desiring to apply what I had learnt. It was later at the local parish, when invited to participate in a Christian meditation group, that I was ready for *interpreting* my private experiences of contemplative prayer. In the context of a group, I gained depth and meaning for what I had experienced, as well as direction.³⁸ Today, I am on the threshold of the final stage of *acting*. I have come to appreciate the transforming power of contemplative prayer and am willing to support community programmes, such as those introducing Christian meditation in school settings.

In closing, the value of Ranson's "Cycle of Spirituality", I believe, is that it helps a person to discern what parts of their religious experience are of God and which are not.³⁹ In my experience of contemplative prayer, the inquiring and interpreting activities have led me to discern that the Gifts of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23), together with accumulated Christian wisdom over the centuries regarding prayer, are indeed present.⁴⁰

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Endnotes

- ¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981).
- ² *Ibid.*, v.
- ³ Frank Fletcher, “Introducing Heart Spirituality”, *Compass* 38:4 (Summer 2004): 21.
- ⁴ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, “Dadirri”, in *Dadirri – The Spring Within: The Spiritual Art of the Aboriginal People from Australia’s Daly River Region*, ed. Eileen Farrelly (Darwin: Terry Knight & Associates, 2003), vii-ix.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Peter Ng, ed., *The Hunger and Depth for Meaning: Learning to Meditate with John Main* (Singapore: Medio Media, 2007), 41.
- ⁸ Paul T. Harris, *Frequently Asked Questions about Christian Meditation: The Path of Contemplative Prayer*, with an introduction by Madeleine Simon (Toronto: Novalis, 2001), 32.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ¹⁰ Michael Fallon, *Yielding to Love: Learning to Follow our Yearning for Deeper Communion with God* (Strathfield: St. Pauls, 2005), 32.
- ¹¹ Harris, *Frequently Asked Questions about Christian Meditation*, 32.
- ¹² Ng, *The Hunger and Depth for Meaning*, 44.
- ¹³ Ungunmerr, “Dadirri”, vii-ix.
- ¹⁴ Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), 2045.
- ¹⁵ Ng, *The Hunger and Depth for Meaning*, 44. Ng further explains that the mantra – the word or phrase that may be repeated in some forms of meditation – is like a sacrament, the outward sign of a person’s faith in Christ’s presence.
- ¹⁶ *NIV Study Bible*, 2298, 2275.
- ¹⁷ Fletcher, “Introducing Heart Spirituality”, 20.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ J. Lescrauwaet, “Christ’s Wounded Heart: Symbol of God-With-Us”, in *A New Heart for a New World: An Exploration of the Desires of God’s Heart*, ed. B. Gallagher (Homebush: St. Pauls, 1986), 230.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Frank Fletcher, “Heart, Spirituality and the Lay Vocation”, *Compass* 38:1 (Autumn 2004): 3-11. Fletcher further adds: “In the spirituality of the heart we remember that Jesus embraced from his heart all the anxieties, the uncertainties and the evil of human life. With him we are gifted to embrace them also. So, we walk; we take step after step in the darkness, against the fears. There is a darkness which is fearsome mystery – but also in the darkness there is the mystery of His love. It is that mystery that enables us to walk. His heart draws us onward.”
- ²² Lescrauwaet, “Christ’s Wounded Heart”, 232.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Harris, *Frequently Asked Questions about Christian Meditation*, 32.
- ²⁵ Ungunmerr, “Dadirri”, vii-ix.
- ²⁶ Ng, *The Hunger and Depth for Meaning*, 26-27.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ²⁹ *The New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). Ephesians 3:14-19 states: “With this in mind, then, I kneel in prayer to the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, that out of the treasures of his glory he may grant you strength and power through his Spirit in your inner being, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love. With deep roots and firm foundations, may you be strong to grasp, with all God’s people, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may you attain to *fullness of being, the fullness of God himself* [emphasis mine].”
- ³⁰ Ng, *The Hunger and Depth for Meaning*, 31.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ³² Ng, *The Hunger and Depth for Meaning*, 68.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 26, 68.
- ³⁶ Fallon, *Yielding to Love*, 32. Fallon adds: “It is a personal journey, and it is essentially mysterious.”

³⁷ David Ranson, “Spirituality: What Is That?”, in *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today* (Sydney: St Pauls, 2000), 15-33.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁹ W. A. Barry, “The Religious Dimension of Experience”, *Human Development* 7:2 (Summer 1986): 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*