

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ACTIVE AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE IN THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY

Leclercq quotes a thought-provoking question from Thomas Merton in ascertaining the relationship between action and contemplation: “Should not the contemplative life be seen in terms of *event* and *encounter* rather than simply as ‘viewing’ and ‘tasting’ of essential love: Is love an *object* or is it a *happening*?”¹

If, of necessity, a person devotes themselves exclusively to contemplation, and on the other hand, there is an intensely active personality, then they can still co-exist. However, “on each side there must be a mutual understanding and an attitude of welcome, solidarity, and help so that every person in both categories can become authentically himself or herself in his or her own right”.²

Leclercq states that there seems to be consensus that a contemplative stance is compatible with rapid and efficient mental and spiritual activity – contemplation is not synonymous with slowness.³

A contemplative attitude is not incompatible with action, with creative work, and with dedicated love.⁴ In fact, traditionally, the ideas of prayer, meditation and contemplation have been associated with a deepening of one’s personal life and this expansion of the capacity to understand and serve others.⁵

Finally, Leclercq again draws on Merton to show the following interrelationship between contemplation and action: “If contemplative love is a response to *someone* who is supremely free and whose ‘thoughts are not our thoughts, whose ways are not our ways’, then we cannot really pin Him down to purely predictable relationships. We have to be ‘open’ in the sense that we are ready and available in all possible situations, including those of human encounter and exchange”.⁶

¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 133; quoted in Jean Leclercq, “Action and Contemplation: Two Ways Toward the Ultimate Reality”, in *Spirituality in Ecumenic Perspective*, ed. E. G. Hinson (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 79.

² Leclercq, “Action and Contemplation”, 79.

³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 157f.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.