

## Third Stage: The Unitive Way

### From Meditation to Contemplation

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#### A. Introduction

We continue our series on the three stages of spiritual life and today we focus on the last stage, the Unitive Way.

The first stage is *the Way of Purgation*. This refers to *relinquishing our false self* with its habits and behaviors that harm us and other, which distorts the image of God.

The second stage is *the Way of Illumination*. This refers to *realizing our true self* with its Christ-like habits and behaviors, which restores the image of God.

The third stage is *the Way of Unification*. This refers to *experiencing mystical union with God* in contemplative prayer and *oneness with the divine will* in daily life.

Today, I would like to outline the types of prayer that correlate with the stages of spiritual life. Then talk about how a person moves from meditation to contemplation understood as a unitive experience with God as one goal of the Christian life.

#### B. Types of Prayer

What is prayer?

St. Augustine said, "Prayer is lifting the mind and the heart to God."<sup>1</sup>

Philip St. Romain says, "Anytime one consciously turns the mind and heart to God, there is prayer."<sup>2</sup> Prayers do not have to be "said" or "spoken". Some prayers are non-verbal or non-discursive. Moreover, prayer can be a way of life by constantly being mindful of God.

Christian prayer is relational. This distinguished it "from other types of meditation practices where the object seems to be the attainment of higher states of consciousness. We address ourselves to God."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Or it is attributed to Augustine. See Phil St. Romain. <http://shalomplace.com/res/prayer.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Phil St. Romain. <http://shalomplace.com/res/prayer.html>.

Spiritual masters often delineate nine types or grades of prayer correspond to the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Purgative Way

### a. Vocal Prayer (Teresa's First Mansion)

Vocal prayer uses words to express our hearts and minds to God. We do this in private or in groups. This can be spontaneous words to God or formal prayers like the Lord's Prayer.

This is active prayer. It requires human energy and ordinary grace.

### b. Meditation or Mental Prayer (Teresa's Second Mansion)

Meditation or mental prayer is discursive prayer; that is, it is prayer where we use our mind to ponder or think about a sacred story or text. This type of meditation is usually practiced in silence and can go for 20-30 minutes. There are many methods of meditation or mental prayer.

This is active prayer; that is, it requires human effort and ordinary grace.

### c. Affective Prayer (Teresa's Third Mansion)

"Affective prayer brings meditation from the level of the head to that of the heart."<sup>5</sup> Usually meditation gradually yields to affective prayer. In affective prayer, emotions and will dominates over the intellect.

This is active prayer; that is, it requires human effort and ordinary grace.

### d. Prayer of Simplicity<sup>6</sup> (Teresa's Fourth Mansion)

The prayer of simplicity is "a simple, loving gaze upon some divine object, whether on God himself or one of his perfections, on Christ or one of his mysteries, or on some other Christian truth."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Phil St. Romain. <http://shalomplace.com/res/prayer.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "These nine grades of prayer generally correspond to the purgative (grades one to four), illuminative (grades five and six), and unitive (grades seven through nine) ways." Dennis J. Billy's "Introduction" to Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria, 2007) 16. See Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1980) 316-57.

<sup>5</sup> Billy, "Introduction" to Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* (2007) 13.

<sup>6</sup> Also known as the prayer of "acquired recollection," "simple regard," or "simple gaze".

<sup>7</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 327.

Both mind and heart are unified into a simple loving attention to God. This is resting or simply being in God's presence non-discursively; a lot like centering prayer.<sup>8</sup>

The person is still the primary agent involved in this type of prayer, but it is bridge between discursive (ascetical prayer) and non-discursive (mystical prayer), which requires God's initiative and infused grace.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Illuminative Way

### a. Infused Contemplation (Teresa's Fifth Mansion)

Infused contemplation "marks the beginning of mystical prayer. Here the person receives an intimate, experiential knowledge of God."<sup>10</sup>

To say that it is infused means that this experience of God comes from God and not the person. It is a pure gift from God. The person does nothing but sit in the divine presence.

With infused contemplation, the mind is illuminated with an experiential knowledge of God that is intuitive, not discursive. One does not control this knowledge (like an object), but surrenders to this knowledge (Subject) like the way one might surrender to something of great beauty, like a sunset.<sup>11</sup>

### b. Prayer of Quiet (Teresa's Fifth Mansion)

The prayer of quiet is mystical prayer. It takes the person into an even deeper experience of God. Whereas infused contemplation primarily affects the intellect, the prayer of quiet affects the will.

"One is aware of being embraced by God, even though it might be hard to describe how one knows this."<sup>12</sup> The person's will seems to be totally captivated or absorbed in God.<sup>13</sup>

The person simply receives this gift from God and experiences an interior quiet and peace.<sup>14</sup> The person experiences happiness and feels like there is nothing lacking. This may last for a few moments or long periods of time.

## 3. Unitive Way

<sup>8</sup> Email from Phil St. Romain dated Nov. 12, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 327.

<sup>10</sup> Billy, "Introduction" to Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* (2007) 13.

<sup>11</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 330.

<sup>12</sup> Phil St. Romain. <http://shalomplace.com/res/prayer.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 337.

<sup>14</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 338.

### a. Prayer of Union (Teresa's Fifth Mansion)

The prayer of union is mystical prayer in which all the internal faculties (thought, will, imagination, and memory) are captivated and entirely occupied with God.

"One is simply content to rest quietly in the loving presence of God, obscure though it might be. This rest may last from a few seconds to minutes, but its effect is refreshment and peace. There is no loss of conscious awareness."<sup>15</sup>

"Without begin entirely captivated, the external senses become almost helpless and inoperative. The soul experiences divine reality with such intensity that it could easily fall into ecstasy."<sup>16</sup> This could last for hours.

The prayer of union unites the soul with God and is "the last grade of mystical prayer, although it admits of degrees of intensity." The next two grades of prayer—prayer of conforming union and prayer of transforming union—are simply higher intensifications of the prayer of union.<sup>17</sup>

### b. Prayer of Conforming Union<sup>18</sup> (Teresa's Sixth Mansion)

The prayer of conforming union is an extension of the prayer of union. In this grade of prayer, internal and external senses are "so absorbed in God that he or she finds it exceedingly difficult to become involved in external activity."<sup>19</sup>

"The energies awakened by contemplation overwhelm the conscious faculties to the extent that one becomes unconscious for a period of time. This is not sleep in the usual sense." It may last for second or minutes. "Upon returning to consciousness, one has a sense of having missed a period of time, but not knowing how long."<sup>20</sup>

### c. Prayer of Transforming Union<sup>21</sup> (Teresa's Seventh Mansion)

The prayer of transforming union is a further extension of the prayer of union. This grade of prayer "is nothing less than a transformation into God."<sup>22</sup> St. John of the Cross describes this as "transformed into God by love."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Phil St. Romain. <http://shalomplace.com/res/prayer.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 341.

<sup>17</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 344.

<sup>18</sup> Also known as "Spiritual Betrothal" or "Ecstatic Union"; see St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*.

<sup>19</sup> Billy, "Introduction" to Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* (2007) 16.

<sup>20</sup> Phil St. Romain. <http://shalomplace.com/res/prayer.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Also known as "Spiritual Marriage"; see St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*.

<sup>22</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 351.

<sup>23</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 351.

Although the distinction between God and the person remains, “the soul’s subjective experience is such that a complete identification with the divine love has taken place.”<sup>24</sup>

St. John of the Cross wrote: “The soul becomes brilliant and transformed in God, and God communicates to the soul his supernatural being to such an extent that the soul appears to be God and to have all that God has.”<sup>25</sup>

## C. Union with God

One way to describe the goal of the Christian life is union with God.

### 1. Christ’s union with God

Christ’s oneness with God is the model. The early church fathers thought that the union between God and the human being, Jesus Christ, meant that the gulf between God and humans had been bridged. Thus all humanity had the potential for experiencing union with God. Athanasius wrote: “God became man so that man might become God.”

**John 1:14.** And the [Eternal] Word became flesh [humanity] and lived among us...

**John 10:30.** The Father and I are one.

**John 14:11.** Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

**John 17:21** that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, *art* in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me.

**John 17:21.** ἵνα πάντες ἕν ὦσιν, καθὼς σύ, πάτερ, ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ ἐγὼ ἐν σοί, ἵνα καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἡμῖν ὦσιν, ἵνα ὁ κόσμος πιστεύῃ ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας.

### 2. Humanity’s unity with God

**John 17:22.** The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.

**John 17:22.** καὶ ἐγὼ τὴν δόξαν ἣν δέδωκάς μοι δέδωκα αὐτοῖς, ἵνα ὦσιν ἕν καθὼς ἡμεῖς ἕν·

**John 14:21** They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

**John 14:21.** ὁ ἔχων τὰς ἐντολάς μου καὶ τηρῶν αὐτάς ἐκεῖνός ἐστιν ὁ ἀγαπῶν με· ὁ δὲ ἀγαπῶν με ἀγαπηθήσεται ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς μου, καὶ ἐγὼ ἀγαπήσω αὐτὸν καὶ ἐμφανίσω αὐτῷ ἐμαυτόν.

<sup>24</sup> Billy, “Introduction” to Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle* (2007) 16.

<sup>25</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chap. 5 as quoted by Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (1980) 352.

**Romans 8:16.** It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

**Romans 8:16.** αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα συμμαρτυρεῖ τῷ πνεύματι ἡμῶν ὅτι ἐσμέν τέκνα θεοῦ.

This is called “the internal testimony of the Spirit.” It is a divine witness to our inmost self, our own spirit. This is “contemplation” in the broad sense of the term.<sup>26</sup>

Merton says that it is the duty of the contemplative to conform to the inner promptings of the Spirit of God within.<sup>27</sup>

The question is: How do we enter into this special union with God?

## D. From Meditation to Contemplation

### 1. Meditation: An Ancient Tradition

The Hebrew Bible says much about living in the presence of God. Psalm 1 says: “Happy are those ... whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on this law they meditate day and night” (Psa. 1:1-2).

In the Book of Joshua, we also hear the command to meditate: “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it” (Josh. 1:8)

The Hebrew word for “meditation” is *hagah* (הָגָה). The word *hagah* is variously translated *to meditate, moan, growl, utter, mutter, and speak*. For Jews, *hagah* was saying aloud the word of God so that the law or word became fully present to the one who recited that word. Saying the word aloud connect body and spirit.

Today, Jews from all over the world go to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. They you will see them with one hand on the wall, one hand holding scripture, and their body rocking back-and-forth as they recite or meditate (*hagah*) on the word.

When the Hebrew word *hagah* was translated into Greek (LXX), the Greek word was *meletaō* (μελετάω) which is variously translated *to meditate, practice, and cultivate*. In the Greek mind, to meditate was similar to practicing and cultivating.

When the Bible was translated into Latin, they used the word *meditatio*, which was a word that described the practice of an actor memorizing lines.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience* (New York: HarperOne, 2004) 43.

<sup>27</sup> Merton, *The Inner Experience* (2004) 45.

Meditation became a very widely used term in the western church through the use of the Latin Vulgate. Meditation—the recitation of scripture—became a central activity in monasticism.

## 2. Early Monasticism

During the late third and early fourth centuries, many Christians went out into the deserts of Egypt to find God. These were the **desert monks**. In the late third century, John Cassian admired the desert monks, joined them for about 20 years, and wrote about their lives.

What shaped their lives most was what he called, “the prayer of fire known to so few,” which involved the practice of meditation with the hope that the monk might receive the gift of contemplation.<sup>28</sup>

Monks claimed that the goal of their way of life was to see God, a metaphor for contemplation.

For the desert monks, meditation included memorization and recitation of sacred texts. “Abba Ammoses said, ‘...we went to see Abba Achilles. We *heard* him meditating on this saying, “Do not fear, Jacob, to go down into Egypt” (Gen. 46:3).’”<sup>29</sup>

In the west, during the fourth century, the **Rule of Saint Benedict** described the daily life of monks as public prayer, manual labor, and Lectio Divina—Sacred Reading and Meditation.

In the twelfth century, a Carthusian monk, named, **Guigo II** wrote a small book called *The Ladder of the Monks* where he described a ladder reaching from earth to heaven with the four rungs: *lectio* (reading), *meditation* (reflection), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation)—Lectio Divina—a method that the monks used to move from meditation to contemplation.

## E. Lectio Divina

See handout.

## F. Reflections

Discussion.

<sup>28</sup> John Cassian, *Conferences* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 111, 117 cited by Lawrence S. Cunningham and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1996) 89.

<sup>29</sup> Cunningham and Egan, *Christian Spirituality* (1996) 89.