

The Uniqueness of Christian Personal Prayer

Every human being is called to experience God. Life with God is a pilgrimage on which we discover what it means to be human. Contemplation and meditation are parts of almost all religious traditions. Yet each tradition, while sharing basic similarities regarding the purpose and practice of contemplative experience, has its unique understanding and disciplines. These differences reflect the diversity of human cultures as well as the limitlessness of God's intercourse with human beings. Although very different and sometimes impossible to reconcile, each tradition can enlighten the others. Authentic experience of God is not the possession of any single religious tradition.

What is unique about Christian contemplative experience? The question must be answered with the understanding that uniqueness does not infer exclusivity. We can live within, be committed to, and desire to share our unique experience of God without insisting that our experience is the only venue for life with God. In fact, our Christian experience can only be enlightened by God's presence in the wisdom and practice of other traditions.

The primary uniqueness of Christian contemplative life is its focus on Jesus of Nazareth and the risen Christ. In Christian experience it is Jesus who manifests and leads us to the Holy One, the reality of God. Therefore, most of our desires to experience God and manifest God's presence in our lives are focused on and led by our contemplation of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as presented in the gospels. Our contemplation and meditation are Christ-centered. Our consciousness of God, of ourselves and our world is fully developed as we seek oneness with God in Christ. Jesus Christ is the window through which we look into the heart of God, where we experience love and are freed and empowered to love our neighbors.

As has been noted already, another unique aspect of Christian contemplative experience is our understanding of *incarnation*. We believe it is natural for God to be manifested in creation and, in our experience, the most real and compelling manifestation of God's presence is in Jesus Christ. At the same time, Jesus himself realized that we, also, are called to be manifestations of God in the world through union with God. Therefore, in contemplation and meditation we desire union with God in the context of our humanness. We do not try to lose our humanity in God or to become God. It is a mystery, just as the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are a mystery. The important thing is to live into the mystery rather than try to explain, contain or control it.

Many people in the West use a variety of contemplative techniques for relaxation, therapy, personal improvement, or just to relax after a hectic day. There is nothing wrong with these practices. But Christian contemplation and meditation have no other goal than simply being with God and letting go of our needs, in trust. We do not always succeed, but that is our desire. We do not deny that "simply being with God" affects our lives in a variety of ways. But ultimately we seek contemplative experience without personal expectations or controls. In this way, Christian contemplative experience is not better than most other practices; it is different.