

## Compassionate contemplation

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### Contemplation

Webster's first definition of « contemplate » reads: to view or consider with continued attention. For the purposes of this reflection contemplation can be taken as the act of simply looking at, listening to and being-with something.

Contemplation is therefore primarily an act of self-forgetfulness — interest in something other than ourselves. It is not a distracted but a steady interest: not a controlled interest, seeing only what we « want » to see, but an open-minded interest.

Responses that are elicited by this kind of contemplation are not experienced in the first instance as willed acts. For example, when one looks at the beloved, the response of love arises because of the beloved, not because one has decided to love.

### Compassionate contemplation

These two words are used to indicate a specific kind of contemplative ministry and the response evoked from those who give themselves to it. The following examples may serve to clarify the significance of this.

- Matthew 9:36 When he *saw* the crowds (contemplative attitude) he had *compassion* for them (response evoked).
- Luke 10:33 When he *saw* him he had *compassion*.
- Luke 15:20 His father *saw* him and had *compassion*.
- Luke 7:13 When the Lord *saw* her, he had *compassion* on her.
- John 11:33 When Jesus *saw* her weeping ... he was *deeply moved in spirit* and troubled ... (and) *wept*.
- John 19:37 They shall *look on* him whom they have pierced and they shall *mourn* for him (Zech 12, 10-13, 1).

Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Documents of Renewal, no. 3: « *Looking on* him who was pierced on the cross we see *the new heart God has given us* ».

In each of these texts the object of contemplation that leads to the awakening of compassion and mourning — the poor, the sick-lepers, for instance, who were really the « crowds » of the Gospel are the uneducated people, the day-labourers and landless tenants, the weaker and more vulnerable members of society « who do not know the law » (Jn. 7, 49), the totally « useless », the poorest of the poor, the sick-lepers, for instance, who were really the most wretched of the wretched because of the rigorous restrictions of Leviticus 13, 45-46.

The text from Luke 10 is about the man whom I am to make my neighbour — a victim of his fellowman's violent injustice. In order to make him my neighbour I am to « see » him as Yahweh « saw » the affliction of the people suffering injustice in Egypt (Exodus 3, 7) and as Moses « saw » what a hard life they were having (Exodus 2, 11) — so that the voiceless « cry » of his plight moves me to compassion. Luke 15 is speaking about seeing a man who, like Jacob who crossed his brother Esau, is

himself entirely responsible for the unfortunate circumstances in which he finds himself. Luke 7 speaks of a woman who has lost the two significant men in her life, a life now overshadowed by their death. Here we see the inconsolable grief into which the death of loved ones can lead every one of us. John 11 is the same story. The text from John 19, 37, and the Documents of Renewal of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, demand a refusal of every flight from the crucifying reality of the human world: look at what we do to ourselves and one another until it breaks your head and your heart and — beyond despair, unbelief and every other escapist tendency — you find yourself moved by God's response to us who crucify one another: sorrow (mourning) for sin, hungering and thirsting for justice, compassionate solidarity.

My experience is this: that this « new heart » of compassion — which is the love of God for this crucifying world poured out into our hearts — has been and is awoken within me primarily and directly by a contemplative contact with the poor of the earth. I need this kind of contact with this kind of person in order to become and remain a man whose heart is true to God and to fellow man.

A religious major superior wrote recently to his confreres: « If I do not believe that I am going to learn from the people I deal with and that they are going to change me for the better as much or even more than I shall change them, I should desist from activity and pray for enlightenment ». Luke 6, 38 says « Give to others and God will give to you: you will receive a full measure, a generous helping, poured into your hands — all that you can hold ». There is a specific kind of « giving » to others implied in the words « looking on him who was pierced on the cross » — a still, silent and contemplative sharing in and entering into the sorrow and pain of another before there is any attempt to act, to do anything about it: a sharing in the experience of the powerlessness of the poor.

We « receive » the gift of the Spirit in abundance through this kind of « giving ». By sharing the lot of the powerless rather than seeking to escape by trying to rescue them, the divine care, the response of God's Spirit in us to this crucifying world, will come to flood our consciousness — a spirit of sorrow (mourning) for sin and of hungering and thirsting for justice; a spirit of love for this world.

Trappist abbot André Louf calls this gift of God the « superabundance of the heart ». « Our heart is already in a state of prayer », he says, « All the time, in fact, the Spirit is calling within us and he prays, Abba-Father, with supplications and sighs that cannot be put into words but never for an instance cease within our hearts (Rom. 8, 15; Gal. 4, 6). This state of prayer within us is something we always carry about, like a hidden treasure of which we are not consciously aware or hardly so. Somewhere our heart is going full-pelt, but we do not feel it. We are deaf to our praying heart, love's savour escapes us ... For our heart, our true heart, is asleep; and it has to be woken up, gradually — through the course of a whole life-time »<sup>2</sup>.

In my experience this « praying heart » (« the new heart God has given us »), the living presence of God's great love and longing for this world in us, has been and is awoken primarily and directly by contact with the powerless poor. As Helder Camara claims, « their cries are the voice of God — the unvoiced demands of those who have no voice and no hope », shattering our complacency, keeping alive in us God's sensitivity to injustice and suffering in this world<sup>3</sup>.

These people are the Word of God to us. The Word of God touches our hearts, it wounds, it needles, it pierces, it cleaves our heart open. It jolts our heart awake. Our « hearts of stone » are broken (Joel 2, 12) and we are given a « heart of flesh » instead (Ezek. 36, 25-27) by contact with the powerless poor. Through the sacrament of contemplative encounter with them we are given

our true selves, « the hidden man of the heart » (2 Pet. 3, 4).

« Always, wherever we may be ... » (2 Cor. 4, 10).

In a Sue Ryder Home in England in 1969 I lived with some people who came out of World War II without a country and irreparably maimed in body and mind. They were the first « poor » whoever touched me: people who knew the sense of futility, incapacity and helplessness — beyond self-help and our help. It was the first time I'd heard the « cry of the oppressed »: the cry of impossibility. One man wanted to be put to sleep with an injection. One woman walked out one night to die in the cold. One man refused to bath or shower — his fear mixed up with incoherent memories of police.

The story is told by Elie Wiesel that in Kovel, where the Nazis had assembled all the Jews in the synagogue before butchering them, an inscription was found on the wall: « O earth, do not cover my blood and let my cry have no resting place ». That « cry » was in the minds and bodies of those people. I touched them and was touched by them — washed them, fed them, walked with them — physically. And found that contact to be the beginning of a healing for me — a deliverance from my prejudices, and an escape from my apathy, self-pity, self-absorption and cynicism; an awakening of an awareness that had deep within it a sense of urgency that « justice » be done.

For the last few years I have been involved in spiritual direction and retreat work. The people I remember most of all are those who find themselves — in this crucifying world — drained of the desire to live, feeling unable to help themselves and beyond the help of others. Originally they could love life. But now, on the other side of betrayal, failure and compromise they find they cannot anymore — the desire to escape from life and its pain becomes a compulsion: « We were so utterly crushed that we despaired of life itself » (2 Cor. 1, 8). They turn to God,

and to the priest, in this escape: « Lord, save us we are sinking ». These people disturb me. I'd prefer them to leave me alone. I can do nothing for them — not because I am not a professional counsellor, but because what they want, sanctuary, no one can give them. They remind me all too vividly of the pain and suffering of life I wish to escape from myself. They remind me of the fear of death which constantly threatens my freedom to embrace life wholeheartedly. They remind me of the constant temptation to a view of life as a palace of illusions where death ultimately has the last word.

They remind me of the man who, when faced with such people, asked without fear, « What do you want? » (Jn. 1, 38). Here was a man who went out of his way to be touched by such people — the ones who are alive to the painful reality that they want what they cannot. The ones who remind us they, we, all of us, want what we cannot. Here was a man who didn't collaborate in our combined endeavour to escape from it. Rather he went out of his way to awaken it even more. He was a man who filled his followers with awe when he rebuked them for their escapism and demanded that they be converted from fear and self-pity to faith — that rather than seek for sanctuary in « God », they face the crucifying reality of human life until, beyond all escapist strategies — self-pity, self-righteousness, cynicism, bitterness, anger, resentment, apathy, despair — their heart breaks and true sorrow (mourning) for sin and longing for justice which come from God alone, flows within them as a spirit of peace with and love for this world.

In 1977 I was exposed for the first time to the wordless cry of the plight of the aborigines. It was like the situation of a person immersed in the words of the prophet (Isaiah I, 11-17) — « one of being exposed to a ceaseless shattering of indifference ». What is really at stake is not people's hunger for more food, money, health or education, but their hunger for life, for freedom and culture. Thomas Cullinan says that « he saw that the profoundest

form of under-development and of oppression is the moral state of men who have sapped out of them any desire to shape their own history. They have no inner ability to call life their own, they have been treated for so long as the object of other men's decisions, that they have lost the spiritual ability to say, « I matter, I will stand up and shape things ». He saw that this was the ultimate injustice of men against men, and could only be met by what the Latin American thinkers and theologians meant by liberation <sup>4</sup>.

The situation questioned me in the following way (not necessarily connected with the way the situation questions others who live in the midst of it): What happens to a man who « sees » and « hears » this wordless cry for liberation in the moral apathy of this people? What heart-felt response is called forth from within him by the poverty that leaves them with no response in themselves other than to wait for someone else to solve their problems and bring solutions? It is not so uncommon for us to find ourselves with people like this. The book of Exodus not only proclaims man as summoned by the Lord God to the painful business of being free, but it also describes in some detail the immense reluctance of people to be liberated. They had to be practically dragged out of Egypt by the hand of Yahweh. The heart-felt response to this is to « deal gently » with them because he himself « has suffered and been tempted » to escape from the burden of freedom (Hebrews 4, 14-15). The book also describes what response is drawn out of Moses who, by the gift of God, desires above all else the liberation of this reluctant people; in his creative effort to encourage the people to inner freedom and to forge new social structures that supported and directed its just exercise, Moses eventually cried out in anguish, and in the Spirit, « I am not able ... » (Num 11, 4-15). In the face of their habitual reluctance to take part in their liberation and to prefer to settle back into the well-known structured comfort of letting someone else run their lives for them, the tempta-

tion for Moses was to settle for something less than liberation, something less than the summons (the Word) and the desire (the Will) of God. (cf. Mt. 4, 1-11). When Moses was tempted to feel sorry for himself, God would say: stand up, son of man, I want to talk to you. And he would invite him again to share His desire for and commitment to nothing less than liberation — not to settle for helping these people but to share in their oppression and go with them on the painful journey to inner freedom. Moses and every follower of God since is called to « be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God » (Heb. 2, 17), sorrowing for sin, hungering and thirsting for justice, unconditionally prepared to take another's suffering upon himself for the sake of liberating the other from fear of suffering and death, and for creative living in this world.

Blessed are those who mourn.

We must not grow accustomed to injustice. The thought at the basis of my use of the word is this: « True love discovers that it is unjust that our neighbour should suffer. Only authentic love can feel that everything our neighbour suffers is an intolerable injustice ». And God is love. God is never indifferent to injustice, he can never be resigned to it, never unmoved by it. To enter into God's response in us to injustice it is necessary to pass over from the standpoint of one who stands apart and resents being treated unjustly, judging himself innocent — « I thank you God I am not as the rest of men ». It is necessary to listen to those things which sensitize us to the pattern of injustice in which we live and move and have our bread while others go hungry — the injustice of which we are all victims and perpetrators. It doesn't matter if the injustice is of the enormity of the Holocaust or the ordinariness of our everyday routine insensitivity: God's response in us to it is mourning: the Spirit of God in us is always hurt anew by injustice, suffering and death (all of which have their origin in sin).

It is not a matter of course to be moved by another's suffering. Everyone has had the experience of seeing without being moved — walking by on the other side. To be still moved each time anew by suffering is a gift of God's mourning and comforting spirit — it is a blessing.

The presence of a suffering person blesses the community with this gift of divine care. The word « care » Henri Nouwens tells us, finds its roots in the Gothic: *kara* which means lament. This is the human experience that lies behind the word<sup>5</sup>.

In early Christian literature this care springing from within was signified by the word *splanchna*, which means the inner organs of the body, the bowels. *Splanchna* means the whole human personality, in so far as it is profoundly moved and affected. In St Paul, the same word means the ability of man to be moved by love, or simply man as someone who loves. The latin word *miseri-cordia* uses the image of the heart (*cor*) to indicate the quality of care. In this image a caring person is one who has a « tender heart » for the misfortune, misery and distress of others. According to this image, the caring person opens his heart, the innermost center of his personality, to the misery and suffering of another, and is so consistent in this attitude that it becomes a permanent disposition<sup>6</sup>.

It seems to me that we are called to ask for and accept the gift of sympathy with the feeling of God for those who suffer in any way. « Many distrust any manifestation of feelings in prayer and ministry. They believe it imperfect to grant the feelings any place in the spiritual life. They make dryness or difficulty in praying and ministry into a trial to be borne with courage, when it would be more helpful to look for the causes and remedy the situation. It is not up to man to arouse these feelings at will. They are the work of grace. But at least in the abandonment and dryness he feels, he can always cry out: How long will you hide your face from us, Lord? Do

not abandon us to the hardness of our hearts. Deliver me from hidden evil! »<sup>7</sup>.

Paul prays that this tender-hearted love may grow in us, and he sees its fruit as knowing how to respond to people as God wishes: « This is my prayer for you: that your love increase and abound in deep knowledge and perception, so that you may judge correctly what really matters » (Ph. 1, 9-10).

We tend to look on caring as doing something, as condescension — an attitude of the strong toward the weak, of the powerful toward the powerless, of the have's toward the have not's. The inner heart of care is awoken when someone who is suffering comes to us, and we are powerless and unable to help. To care is to be moved to enter into his suffering rather than to try to cure it. This is a work of mercy that demands far more of us than feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty. It demands that we share the helplessness of someone who is suffering. There is the story of the young woman standing « among the tombs » (cf. Mark 5, 5) who was gently and persistently asked, « Woman, why are you weeping? » Here was a man who was unafraid of entering into another's pain; a man who was able to be still and silent in the face of being able to do nothing for another person in inconsolable grief (Jn. 20, 15). He could allow the helplessness of another person fill his soul, let his life be darkened by the darkness of another's pain (Isaiah 53, 14), enter into that secret meeting place of God and man that this world calls the folly of having no « power ». Only this freedom of the sons of God — freedom from the fear of death, suffering and powerlessness, and of what they might do to us — can bring « comfort » to those who live in the land and shadow of death.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice.

Shakespeare's words can serve as a stimulus to begin to awaken the longing heart within us:  
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate,

That time will come and take my love away.  
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose  
But weep to have that which it fears to lose (Sonnet 64).

In secret our heart is constantly « experiencing the pain of transitoriness, the fact that the beloved object is taken away, that living beauty is always in a state of passing, that death is the neighbour of the beautiful. But in stark opposition to that is the desire for the eternal, for the infinite, for the absolute. This longing for the absolute is joined to the profound consciousness that it cannot be attained ... resulting in a restlessness that cannot be stilled ... like a fluid that permeates everything, like a simultaneous bitterness and sweetness that is mixed into everything. Basically it is a yearning for love. This deep longing affects not only part of our being, but proceeds from its centre, it doesn't restrict itself to particular relationships and times, but pervades the whole »<sup>8</sup>.

St. Augustine's spirituality of the heart focused on the same experience: « In one of the psalms someone says to God, « I shall be filled when your glory is manifested ». He will show us his face and we shall be filled, he will be sufficient for us. Until this happens ... we are exiles from him, until then we hunger and thirst for justice, and long with a passion beyond words for the beauty of the form of God »<sup>9</sup>.

There is a privatized spirituality, which considers man as related to God, essentially in some inner spiritual life and not in the totality of his human, social existence. This « passion beyond words » of the praying and longing heart within us will be domesticated into escapist sentimentality if it is read from within that spirituality. It must be read from the standpoint of one who finds an answer to the question, « Who am I? » not by introspection but by contemplatively listening to the weaker and more vulnerable of his human brothers. Certainly that is the only way a man can find his way to his own heart.

To begin to get an inkling of the « passion beyond

words » within our heart we need to « make ourselves the neighbour of absolutely every person ... whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign labourer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience »<sup>10</sup>. We need to let the entire world become for us a « global village », or as Barbara Ward puts it, a « psychological neighbourhood », — and it's a neighbourhood in which one-third of the people share four-fifths of the wealth, while two-thirds share one-fifth of the wealth. We need to take steps to make ourselves aware and informed « about the serious injustices that oppress and abuse men and women, about the gross inequalities between nations and between individuals, about the irresponsible squandering of the resources of the world to the probable prejudice of future generations, and about the socio-economic structures in our society which favour the continuance of these evils »<sup>11</sup>.

Listening to « them » over there, over seas, we find a painful answer to the question about « us »: It is enough that they show us what we have made of them for us to realise what we have made of ourselves. « We discover the amazing extent to which our Western world is geared to its own success, to gratify its own needs; and that the destitute world is held destitute, not by their failure to work and catch up, but by our taken-for-granted living standards and economic growth. It is the very economic and social structures that we operate which work profound injustice against the destitute, and we are all involved in such structures whether we like it or not »<sup>12</sup>.

This man is hearing the Word of God today. « God is the continuing inner call within our lives toward authentic solutions ... But we are not capable of always attaining the good, the whole, the integral. So God is the unrest in us that does not allow us to be tranquil and content, that keeps prodding us toward the better course that remains ahead of us. It is in this unrest, in this anxious desire to

arrive at authentic solutions that we gradually come to know the God in whom we believe. As a Spanish poet put it: « I know you, Lord, when I feel all the desire and yearning that surpasses me. The void of my discontent contains the broad dimensions of your immensity »<sup>13</sup>.

This Word of God — our global neighbour in need — jolts our heart awake, and we discover at first hand that « the whole created universe groans in all its parts as if in the pangs of childbirth. Not only so, but all of us who possess the first fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait to be sons and for our bodies to be set free » (Rom. 8, 19-23). And this « hope does not deceive because (already) the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us » (Rom. 5, 5). Already the « flame of desire » that our earth will be recast has been kindled in our contemplative encounter with our neighbour and our crucifying selves. Already we have been healed of our tendency to grow old and accustomed to and cynical about injustice. Already a hunger and thirst for justice on earth in the image of Isaiah 11, 6-9 has been awoken within our hearts. This hunger and thirst — and the call to conversion within it — is God-within-us. This desire in its all-encompassing length and breadth and height and depth comes from God to fill all the dimensions of our existence. God's desire in us is put into words by Jesus: « May they all be one; as thou Father art in me and I in thee, so also may they be one in us ». The articulation of the « ultimate concern » in the hearts of those who are followers of Jesus and his Father are these: « Dear Father, Thy kingdom come ». To awaken this prayer we need to be in contact with our poor neighbour and then have the question put to us: « What do you want? » (Jn. 1, 38). Teilhard suggests that our heart's radical answer to this question is the prayer of Christ in our hearts, the eucharistic prayer: « Lord ... in the very depths of this earth you have implanted an irresistible desire, which makes us cry out, believer and unbeliever alike: Lord, make us one! »<sup>14</sup>.

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. WILLIAM A. BARRY s.j., « The Contemplative Attitude in Spiritual Direction », in *Review for Religious* 35 (1976) 820-828.
- <sup>2</sup> ANDRE LOUF, *Teach Us To Pray*, Darton Longman and Todd, London 1974, p. 40.
- <sup>3</sup> HELDER CAMARA, *The Desert Is Fertile*, Sheed and Ward, London 1974, p. 26.
- <sup>4</sup> THOMAS CULLINAN, *If The Eye Be Sound*, St. Paul, Slough 1975, p. 10.
- <sup>5</sup> HENRI NOUYEN, *Out of Solitude*, Ave Maria, Notre Dame 1974, p. 34.
- <sup>6</sup> LADISLAS BOROS, *God Is With Us, Search*, London 1973, p. 50-51.
- <sup>7</sup> The whole subject is well treated in J. Laplace's excellent little book *Prayer According to the Scriptures*, Cenacle. No date.
- <sup>8</sup> ROMANO GUARDINI, *The Focus of Freedom*, Helicon, Baltimore 1966, p. 81.
- <sup>10</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 62.
- <sup>11</sup> Marist Brothers' XVIIIth General Chapter: Poverty and Justice Document.
- <sup>12</sup> THOMAS CULLINAN, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
- <sup>13</sup> J. L. SEGUNDO, *Our Idea of God*, Orbis, New York 1974, p. 182.
- <sup>14</sup> PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, *Hymn of the Universe*, Fontana, New York, 1970, p. 20.