

Consider the Lilies: The Practice of Christian Meditation

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Upper St. Claire, PA
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Flickering Mind

*Denise Levertov (from *The Stream and the Sapphire*)*

Lord, not you,
it is I who am absent.
At first
belief was a joy I kept in secret,
stealing alone
into sacred places:
a quick glance, and away-and back,
circling.
I have long since uttered your name
but now
I elude your presence.
I stop
to think about you, and my mind
at once
like a minnow darts away,
darts
into the shadows, into gleams that fret
unceasing over
the river's purling and passing.
Not for one second
will my self hold still, but wanders
anywhere,
everywhere it can turn. Not you,
it is I am absent.
You are the stream, the fish, the light,
the pulsing shadow,
you the unchanging presence, in whom all
moves and changes.
how can I focus my flickering, perceive
at the fountain's heart
the sapphire I know is there?

Varieties of Meditation

Discursive Meditation

Rabbi Ben Bag-Bag of Torah: “Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it. Pore over it, and wax gray and old over it. Stir not from it for you can have no better rule than it.”

Ignatian/Imaginative Contemplation

Some Moments along the Way

Jesus

Luke 4:1-13

Luke 12:22-31

Paul

Philippians 4:4-9

Desert Monasticism

Evagrius Ponticus—345-399

John Cassian—360-435, *Conferences*, Conference 10

You were quite right to make the comparison between training in continuous prayer and the teaching of children who at first do not know the alphabet, do not recognize letters, and are unable to write with a sure and firm hand. Models are put before them, carefully drawn in wax. By continually studying them, by practicing every day to reproduce them, they learn at last to write.

The same happens with contemplation. You need a model and you keep it constantly before your eyes. You learn either to turn it in a salutary way over and over in your spirit or else, as you use it and meditate upon it, you lift yourself upward to the most sublime sights.

And what follows now is the model to teach you, the prayer formula for which you are searching. Every monk who wants to think continuously about God should get accustomed to meditating endlessly on it and to banishing all other thoughts for its sake. But he will not hold onto it unless he breaks free from all bodily concerns and cares.

This is something which has been handed on to us by some of the oldest of the Fathers and it is something which we hand on to only a very small number of souls eager to know it:

To keep the thought of God always in your mind you must cling totally to this formula for piety: 'Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue' (Ps 69:2).

Eastern Orthodoxy

Prayer of the Heart

Hesychia

Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner"

[The prayer of the heart is] something not merely said by the lips, not merely thought by the mind, but offered spontaneously by the whole of one's being—lips, intellect, emotions, will, and body. The prayer fills the entire consciousness, and no longer has to be forced out, but says itself. Such prayer of the heart cannot be attained simply through our own efforts, but is a gift conferred by the grace of God. (Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*)

Teresa of Avila—1515-1582

A Theology for Christian Meditation/Contemplative Practice

Augustine of Hippo—354-430, *Confessions*

Mart Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*

Union with God is not something we acquire by a technique but the grounding truth of our lives that engenders the very search for God. Because God is the ground of our being, the relationship between creature and Creator is such that, by sheer grace,

separation is not possible. God does not know how to be absent. The fact that most of us experience throughout most of our lives a sense of absence or distance from God is the great illusion that we are caught up in; it is the human condition. The sense of separation from God is real, but the meeting of stillness reveals that this perceived separation does not have the last word. This illusion of separation is generated by the mind and is sustained by the riveting of our attention to the interior soap opera, the constant chatter of the cocktail party going on in our heads. For most of us this is what normal is, and we are good at coming up with ways of coping with this perceived separation (our consumer driven-entertainment culture takes care of much of it). ...

The grace of salvation, the grace of Christian wholeness, that flowers in silence, dispels this illusion of separation. For when the mind is brought to stillness, and all our strategies of acquisition have dropped, a deeper truth present itself; we are and have always been one with God and we are all on in God. (Laird, 15-16).