

THE CHARACTER OF DOMINICAN CONTEMPLATION

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IN AN AGE which demands action and ever more action the very word contemplation seems antedated and completely out of place. Yet nothing could be farther from the truth; indeed, for Dominicans, contemplation is a guarantee of a bountiful and gloriously successful activity. Without contemplation, the Dominican's active life, no matter how time-entailing and apparently well ordered, is a waste of energy and no true work of a child of Dominic.

Very early in our Dominican infancy, we learn that our life is ordered to contemplation so that we may give the fruits of that contemplation to others—*aliis contemplata tradere*. Just as early in our life we should have learned what those words mean; a religious life in the pattern of this motto is one bound for signal success, while those who live their Dominican lives in ignorance of or disregard for the truth of this potent phrase are doomed to failure. Truly, then, we must learn the need for and power of contemplation in our Dominican life.

Man has a natural tendency to truth and goodness; his mind and heart desire truth and goodness without end or restriction. Contemplation, then, is by no means unnatural to us; on the contrary, it is the perfection of the highest and finest faculties man possesses: the intellect and the will. Contemplation, in the Christian sense, is the union in love and faith with God. Through the supernatural gift of faith our mind is enabled to dwell upon the highest and most sublime Truth, God Himself and the beautiful and ineffable mysteries of those revealed truths He has so freely showered upon us. Our souls go out in complete abandon and unbelievable ardor to an Object Who is Perfect and Complete Goodness, God Himself. Contemplation is union, a union which lifts the imperfect, persevering human up to the heights of divine life and activity whereby he or she is perfected and enabled to live a human life in a divine sort of way.

The ultimate and most perfect union with the perfect Object of knowledge and love comes, of course, with the possession of the Beatific Vision in heaven. But we must travel along the highroad of life before we attain to that priceless treasure. And we do have signs and portents that we are travelling straight and certainly; we are given

powerful foretastes and samples of the rewards to come. These we have in contemplation. We may acquire contemplation; it is also infused.

Acquired contemplation is too little known and recognized, and hence the too-often repeated and false statement that contemplation is for the few chosen souls. In reality, this contemplation is for all. It must also be seen that a truly successful and active life exists only when it is ordered to, and is the overflow from, contemplation. In God's good time, when we are well ordered and fully pliant to the workings of divine grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we will receive earth's highest award: infused contemplation; and we should never consider that this is a rare reward, for it is given freely enough, if we will only do our part.

Our spiritual life, just like our physical development, is a maturing growth to perfection. Unlike that physical development, however, it does not attain perfection and then fall into decay and death; the spiritual life grows in ever increasing perfection, drawing us continually closer to the Font of all perfection, until we are one day perfectly and eternally joined to Him in an everlasting union of love.

Now our maturing in the spiritual life is gauged by our progress in prayer. We must all begin at the beginning, but no one can tell how quickly each individual will race to the heights; that depends upon the dispositions of the individual himself, but more especially upon the Will of God. In the beginning we all strive constantly and perseveringly to overcome the distractions and allurements of the world, the flesh and the devil. Naturally enough, we tend to overcome these attractions by centering ourselves upon the attainment of a knowledge and a consequent love of their Opposite: God Himself. We will know God only by learning of Him, and the easiest way to arrive at some knowledge is through the God-man, Jesus Christ, our Saviour. It is the easiest way, for in Him we see a human just like ourselves; there is flesh and blood, words and deeds, loves and desires, just as in every human being. But of course we see more than just that, for we are not looking at a mere historical figure, nor are we looking at Him or considering Him with only our physical eyes and knowledge; we see and learn of Him through the all-seeing eyes and bright light of Faith. Drawing closer with increasing Faith, our Love, too, is more bright and consuming; we are drawn away from ourselves and the transient things that formerly meant so much. We meditate upon single incidents in the life of Christ and Mary, their characteristics or the dogmas of Faith and concerning them we believe and love the more. Gradually we begin to make acts of strong

faith and abiding love, and we strive more and more constantly to live in and by Christ. These acts are bound to become habits, and we know that habits become like second nature to us, giving to our actions an ease and promptness. Consequently, soon (and truly it is soon, if we generously and perseveringly apply ourselves in the beginning, and rely upon the never ceasing flow of graces so lovingly bestowed upon us) we are habitually thinking thoughts of Christ, God, Our Holy Mother, the Saints, and seeing more and more clearly the depths of our own misery. It is now that we have approached the super highway of acquired contemplation. Continuation along this road will most assuredly give us the greatest gift of all, and in good time, infused contemplation itself.

It is most foolish to think that we can do this by ourselves; that would be a fatal error. We are babes in the spiritual life, and we need constant care and protection. In the very beginning of our travel along the road to perfection we must seek out a spiritual counsellor and guide; he will take us gently along the road. And like babes we may well lean confidently and completely upon his wisdom and the graces he receives to lead us aright. But we have not only the helping hand of this human voice of God, we have God Himself abiding in our very souls. There He dwells, quickening us and suggesting the proper things to do and the ways to go. The Holy Spirit does truly abide within us constantly, and it is His Spirit that helps us progress rapidly and constantly. We may be very sure that we are progressing properly if we are docile to that Holy Spirit, and we can be confident that it is the Spirit of God with Whom we are cooperating and not the impulses of our own weak natures or the devil; and another very positive source and sign of confidence is the recognition of our growing devotion to the Holy Mother of God, Our Mother and Mediatrix. Contemplation, then, gives us stronger and ever increasing faith; and with our increase in faith, our love becomes stronger and all-enveloping.

All that has been said will readily be agreed with, as far as pure contemplation is concerned; but many are apt to say: we are Dominicans, and therefore we have a very active side to our lives as well. How is all this going to help us? In reply it can be said that only when we are on this road will our action begin to bear abundant and good fruit. Our action must be directed towards contemplation, and also must pour fourth from the abundance of divine love that contemplation engenders within us.

First and foremost in the lives of every Dominican is the obligation of saving his or her individual soul. That is the prime reason

for our joining the Order. Each person enters the religious society that is most akin to his liking and temperament. Many enter contemplative orders because this life of seclusion and lack of worldly distractions best fits them; others seek the active life because their talents and natures are best sanctified therein; still others become a part of an institute that combines contemplation and action, and find their salvation more suitably in this fashion. Dominicans, and this most certainly includes Tertiaries, who are of the third group combining contemplation and action, must therefore be contemplatives and they must be active.

The active life is both a means to contemplation and an overflow from the richness of the love that contemplation gives. It is a means, because by it we dispose ourselves to contemplation by ridding ourselves of many of the obstacles that keep us from giving ourselves wholly to God. In the beginning our active life can well help us to practice the moral virtues and to develop a clear recognition that our own feeble efforts are not at all sufficient. We are gently but surely led to a sincere search for, and determination to abandon ourselves to, Him Who alone can make us, and those for whom we work, saints. And then we begin in earnest our life of prayer and progress in spiritual things, which eventually leads to contemplation. Saint Theresa assures us that the time element is amazingly short, for she says that we can reach great heights in six months or a year! (Way of Perfection, ch. 29.) Now when we have acquired this state our active life necessarily becomes what another motto of our Order demands and describes so fittingly: *ex abundantia contemplationis*. Our fears concerning our activity now vanish. We have no more doubts as to whether we are acting aright, for we are instinctively and perfectly operating in the true Dominican manner. We are no longer working, teaching, preaching, or nursing from natural motives, or because of natural talents alone, but rather because our love of God is now so intense and governs our lives so completely that our hearts are filled and we wish to give the fullness of this love to others.

Then we are living in Him as He so earnestly asked us to; for are we not then doing as Christ and Mary did? Did they not love the Father so completely that the fulness of that love gave them to us in lives of perfect example? It was because Christ loved His Father that He came upon earth to teach us that selfsame love and to engender it in us; and that was why He died to redeem us. Mary's tremendous love of God was the reason why she said "Fiat"! And it was this love she had that gave us our Redeemer. Love brought action; and with our increase in the same divine love we too will be most ac-

tive. We will want to bring all men close to the Font of love, but the only way man can reach his fellow man is through word and deed. Hence we will preach and teach the tremendous truths that we have come to live so completely ourselves. And what we have known and learned to love will become equally known and loved by those with whom we have made contact, not only because these divine realities are so good and true, but because our example will give a living lesson of their tremendous worth in individual lives. We want action! We need action; but it must be the right sort of action, otherwise we are wasting our time and talents, and, instead of doing the things to which we have dedicated our lives, we will be dashing ourselves continually but fruitlessly against the unyielding rock of humanity that sees not the truth.

Contemplation is of the utmost necessity; and instead of stunting action, it spurs us on to a more successful action than we could dream was possible. We know that it is good, then; and we have also learned that it is possible for all of us. How, then, do we go about acquiring contemplation? What are the sources of spiritual progress? We mentioned them briefly before and now shall discuss them a bit more fully. First of all we must have docility to the Holy Spirit. He inspires our whole life of contemplation and action. His gifts make the soul docile to His inspirations and motions; and with them the virtues are indeed easy and pleasant habits. To be docile, we must be able to hear that Spirit of Truth and Love. Towards that goal our whole life is ordered; that is why we live as we do. The Dominican life as we know it, with the common life, the Divine Office, silence, study, the vows and all else it entails, gives us every help to recollection, detachment from the world and self, watchfulness over one's heart, mortification of self-will, and judgment. And Tertiaries, living in the midst of the world, also have in their Rule very suitable and sufficient means for arriving at their proper goal.

A second source of progress is the ability to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit. This is most important because there are two other spirits that can well entangle us in an inescapable web should we become ensnared. Our own weak nature and the devil will be present, and we must be able to distinguish their voices from that of the Spirit of Truth. Nature, as a result of original sin, is the enemy of mortification and humiliations; it is always seeking itself. In whatever spiritual life it allows, it seeks self satisfaction; it quits whenever trials appear. Often, under the pretext of apostolic activity, it plunges itself into external works, neglecting the substance of the spiritual life.

It is always recommending caution and the common way. Its great ideal is—mediocrity.

Now the devil starts by arousing pride in order to lead the soul into trouble, discouragement and despair. But unlike our weak nature, the devil may very cleverly encourage mortification, especially excessive exterior mortification; he does absolutely everything in his power to prevent the soul from interior mortification of the imagination, the heart, will and judgment. He is the one who so often inspires scruples about nothing and laxity about things that are really dangerous. He frequently inspires a false humility, or confuses humility with timidity, making it hateful to the soul's pride. He turns charity either into sentimental humanism that is extremely indulgent, a liberalism that thinks itself generous, or a bitter zeal that strikes at evil everywhere but within. And if there is a lack of humility and obedience we have a sure sign that the soul is not guided by the spirit of God, but by nature or the devil.

The True Spirit leads to exterior mortification, guided by prudence and obedience, but places more emphasis on interior mortification. It inspires a deep spirit of faith, revives hope, increases the spirit of charity, gives zeal for the glory of God, forgetfulness of self. "The fruits of the spirit are charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, modesty, continency." *I Gal. 5, 22.*

Lastly, a profound recognition and ever-growing conviction of Mary's wondrous powers as our Mediatrix is a true sign and source of our spiritual progress. Our Mother does not distract us from our progress towards Christ any more than does Our Saviour prevent us from being united to God. She is no obstacle to our union with Christ, but rather her whole influence is to lead men to Christ. When we belittle the thought of mediators we have a clear sign of pride because it is really a lack of humility that makes us neglect those given us by God to offset our own weaknesses.

The cry of the world is for action. Then let us show them such action as these worldlings never thought possible. The challenge is given and the arena is well prepared. We are the underdogs in their eyes, but truth proves that we can and will outdo them completely. If we want proof beforehand, we merely have to look about us. There we find evidence of the results of action devoid of contemplation, and what does it demonstrate? One can see nothing but confusion, misery, unhappiness, hate and despair. Where is the peace and happiness that all the activity of the past few centuries has promised us? Produce, if it is at all possible, the real and lasting progress that science and godless wisdom and pure humanism has guaranteed! There is our

challenge; more, there is our sanctification and happiness, because all of this can and must be ordered aright. We can use all these things, but they must be used in a godly way and toward God. We must learn that godly way and we must arrive at God; and when we do, the fullness of our hearts will convert the world. The world will not be turned upside down; it will be straightened out. It will get all the action it demands and revel in truly joyous action flowing from divine love.