

The Essentials of Christian Contemplation: Trinitarian Hermeneutics and Christological Criteriology*

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This exploratory and introductory essay aims not only to clarify some of the essentials of Christian Contemplation, but above all to propose a privileged vantage point for a legitimate and valid comprehension of the same. It does not pretend to be an exhaustive or complete presentation of the whole Christian tradition of contemplation, but rather it seeks to address the most important aspects and points by proposing “pathways” towards them. Therefore, it will deal with the essentials, i.e., the essence of Christian Contemplation and not with the accidents that become concrete in the numerous forms or schools of Christian Contemplation that have made their appearance in history.¹ Doubtless, there are many move-

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¹ The appearance, growth, development and even decline of such schools or movements of contemplation have only been discussed by the so-called histories of spirituality or mysticism. Such spiritual schools or movements are not the main or principal objects of consideration of Church historians or authors of the histories of the Church. This fact somehow is an affirmation that such schools do not form the mainstream of ecclesiastical historiography. This is a grave epistemological defect of church historiography, given that such schools or movements are linked with the great movements or reforms (such as the Carmelite, Augustinian, Franciscan, and Trinitarian reforms). Church historiography has long been governed by a hermeneutics of power (of powerful, influential and political figures including heretics and schismatics who have challenged the prevailing power structures in

ments and schools within the Christian tradition worth discussing or studying, and each one of them, unquestionably, has its particular merits and peculiar contributions. Unfortunately, it is not possible for us at this time to discuss all these matters in detail. Such an approach would require a specialized procedure.

As mentioned, we will deal with essentials, but neither will we expound on them directly. This will necessarily involve a separate study. We are interested in "pathways." This is what this present reflection is all about: tracing pathways towards the essentials of Christian Contemplation. These pathways are the Trinity and the following of Christ (*Sequela Christi*). But before discussing them as such, it is imperative to contextualize our understanding of Christian Contemplation within the Christian Life of the Spirit or Christian Spirituality.

Therefore, the contextualization of our understanding of Christian Contemplation necessarily implies the following points:

- ⇒ The will to reach the very core of Christian living;
- ⇒ The desire to strengthen not only belief, but also commitment to the confession;
- ⇒ The principle from which all other actions, within the dynamics of Spirituality, necessarily flow.

The Context of Christian Spirituality

This reflection does not intend to provide a clear-cut definition of Christian Contemplation. Instead, it will provide the basis for

the Church) rather than by a spiritual hermeneutics or hermeneutics from the perspective of spirituality and spiritual development which become concrete in issues such as contemplation, prayer, and the like. For excellent historical surveys of Christian Spirituality, see: P. Pourrat, *La spiritualité chrétienne. I: Des origines de l'Église au Moyen Âge. II: Le Moyen Âge. III-IV: Les temps modernes*, Paris; Gabalda, 1917 ff; B. Jiménez Duque & L. Sala Balust (ed.), *Historia de la espiritualidad*, 4 vols. Barcelona: Juan Flors, 1969; J.M. Moliner, *Historia de la espiritualidad*. Burgos; El Monte Carmelo, 1971; A. Royo Marín, *Los grandes maestros de la vida espiritual*, Madrid: B.A.C., 1973; J. Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1985; Several Authors, *La spiritualità cristiana. Storia e testi*, 20 vols. Rome: Studium, 1982; Several Authors, *World Spirituality. An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, 25 vols., New York: Crossroad Publishing Col., 1985 ff.; G. Helewa & E. Ancilli, *La spiritualità cristiana. Fondamenti biblici e sintesi storica*. Rome-Milan: Teresianum-Edizione O.R., 1986.

any attempts to adequately define and legitimately interpret this tradition of contemplation. This is the novelty of our methodology. Such an approach nourishes the hope that we can overcome and even correct some of the principal prejudices, not to mention errors, with regards to our understanding of Christian Contemplation. Henceforth, together we can journey towards a deeper or richer and likewise truly legitimate and sound comprehension and experience of the same.

To do so would mean to place contemplation within its proper hermeneutical context and establish its criteriological basis. This necessary context is Christian Spirituality. From here, our goal is to understand or to comprehend.² This goal demands a two-fold approach, namely: *hermeneutical* (interpretative) and *criteriological* (evaluative).

This proper context, within which Christian Contemplation³ is to be understood and which alone provides a legitimate criterion for evaluation, is, as already stated, nothing less than Christian spirituality or the life of following Christ,⁴ in the way towards the Father, as inspired and guided by His Spirit in the journey towards the Father. In effect, Christian Contemplation must be understood within the spectrum of Christian Spirituality or the life of the spirit, wherein man (as spirit) – and we understood this term not in the sense of an immaterial being but as a dynamic being tending towards a transcendental goal (the union with God) – is lead and strengthened by the Spirit of God. And the key, the criteria of this life of the spirit is Jesus Christ⁵ Himself. It is He who leads us to the Father and who together with the Father pours out upon us

² In the meantime, we will not insist on a philosophical distinction between 'comprehension' and 'understanding', cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., transl. J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 1998.

³ Cf. M. Herráiz, *Espiritualidad y Contemplación*. Madrid: Ediciones SM, 1994.

⁴ G. Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo en el itinerario espiritual de un pueblo*, 6th ed. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1993, 9. Cf. G. Frosini, *Spiritualità e Teologia*. Bologna: EDB, 2000.

⁵ On the centrality of Christ in spirituality, see U-B Fringeli, *Spiritualität ist immer persönlich. Der Weg zu Christus in uns*. Basel: Herder, 2002.

this same Spirit.⁶ This makes possible the strengthening force of the Spirit in different historical and social contexts.⁷

Christian Spirituality provides Christian Contemplation a broad epistemological context (and even a superior plane of understanding and knowing)⁸ within which the latter could be rightly comprehended and understood and likewise provides the contextual basis so that the same (Christian contemplation) may be appreciated, evaluated and expounded on in its inherent broadness and innate richness, given the present day dangers of reductionism, which we will expound on in passing later on. Likewise this contextual basis provides the means, the principles for a hermeneutics (interpretation) and criteriology (evaluation) for Christian Contemplation.

The Mystery of God One and Triune: Point of Departure for a Hermeneutic and Criteriology of Christian Contemplation

In the light of what has already been stated, this introductory exploration and reflection does not only seek to present to you the most important points involved in Christian Contemplation. This reflection, as revealed in its title, seeks to be *hermeneutical*

⁶ Writes Carmelite scholar S. Castro: 'La Teología Espiritual es aquella parte de la Teología que estudia el proyecto del Padre sobre la maduración del cristiano (Iglesia y mundo) en Jesucristo y en el Espíritu, teniendo por base las conclusiones de los demás tratados teológicos. Por ello podemos decir que es la síntesis suprema de los otros tratados; su culmen, su meta y el principio desde donde deben ser leídos.', *Vida y sabiduría del Espíritu*, in: *Revista de Espiritualidad* 39 (1980), 410.

⁷ S. Galilea, «El rostro latinoamericano de la espiritualidad. Las fuentes histórico-sociales de la espiritualidad,» in: *Christus* 529-530 (1979-1980), 69.

⁸ I have given due consideration to the following evaluation of contemplation as superior knowledge within the Christian tradition: 'Nel cristianesimo, la c. [contemplazione] indica in genere una forma superiore di conoscenza per fede: comprensione delle verità contenute nella rivelazione, raggiunta mediante la fede, sotto l'influsso della carità, dal giusto che di tale virtù vive. Atto semplice nella sua emissione funzionale, denso però di contenuto; non esclusivamente speculativo, ma imbevuto di amore e radicato nella vita religiosa dell'individuo: *simplex intuitis veritatis ex caritate consecutus*. Nella religiosità cristiana, la c. ha il suo alveo e la sua normale espressione nell'orazione: forma o grado dell'orazione cristiana, nuovamente caratterizzata dalla semplicità e dalla intensità dell'atto, realizzato in fede e amore, e diretto come atto di culto alla Persona divina.', T. Alvarez-E. Ancilli, "Contemplazione," in: Several Authors, *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*. Vol. I. 2nd ed., Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1990, 617.

and *criteriological*. This means: a) this is designed to provide points for interpreting (hermeneutical) not only Christian contemplation, but also the very dynamics of the spiritual life from the viewpoint of contemplation; and b) it is also designed to provide the standards or norms (criteriological) by which other forms or currents, that pose as Christians, are to be judged and therefore if to be accepted or rejected by a Christian who not only practices contemplation, but lives a contemplative life.

With regards to what has already been stated, I wish to propose this thesis which will serve as a leitmotif all throughout this exposition and exploration: *To be a Christian is to be necessarily a contemplative*. In other words, all Christians are (called to be) contemplatives, although (unfortunately) not all contemplatives are Christians. We cannot deny the attractiveness and universality of the very idea of contemplation. This is evidenced by the presence or existence of diverse contemplative traditions in practically all of the religious traditions of mankind. There are Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Sufis, Sikhs, etc. Contemplation is an essential core concept of these traditions and forms given their aim of reaching out to what we all commonly call the Absolute: The Hindus call this Absolute as *Atman-Brahman*, the Buddhists call it *Nirvana* (or extinction) or *Amithaba Buddha* (depending on the school), the Taoists call it *Tao*, etc.⁹ We Christians are not alone in the contemplative quest, in the quest for what we all commonly label as the "Absolute" in reference to the inferior values or options that we make in our lives.

We commonly identify this Absolute, which is an axiological term (or a term that expresses a value or mode of valuation), with God – which is a *philosophical* term to designate the Supreme Being, a *theological* term to designate the Revealer, who happens to be Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, a *liturgical* term to designate the object of adoration and cult; and a *moral* term to indicate the Supreme parameter of human acts. Aside from this, for us Christians this God is a person, who revealed Himself especially in the person of Jesus Christ and who is poured on us and dwells in us as the Spirit. In other words, the Absolute for us Christians is

⁹ On this regard, and limiting ourselves to the traditions of India and China, I recommend the following succinct presentations: C. Sharma, *Indian Philosophy: A Critical Survey*. New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1962; L. Wu, *Fundamentals of Chinese Philosophy*. Lanham: University Press of America, n.d.

God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This God is a Person. He is one and yet is a loving community of Persons who share the divine life among themselves and are willing to generously and lovingly share this same divine life to man in a *personal* way, taking man to be a person like the three are persons although in a different degree. This is the God whom we search for in Christian Contemplation within the dynamic process and relationality which we conventionally label as Christian spirituality.

God is a Person. He is a Loving God who wants to reach us in Person (that is why The Son of God became man in Jesus Christ), who came as a Person and who accompanies us in our history transforming it into a history of salvation. This God is not unreachable. He is transcendent and yet immanent or is within our history and, therefore, a relational God. Hence, we must live according to the path of reaching this God as decreed by this same God. This path is in effect a path of salvation (or being redeemed from a state of being separated from God or what is commonly designated as the "state of sin") and sanctification (by which we participate in the life of God in union with Him) and is in effect a recreation (by which we regain the pristine purity at Creation of being a child of this same God). This way of living is contemplation. Christian living would be impossible if it were not contemplative in nature. I would even dare add *that the only way for a person to be a Christian is to be a contemplative*. From this premise or thesis statement, it can be logically deduced that Christian spirituality is essentially contemplative. Therefore, there is an urgent need to rediscover the so-called "contemplative dimension" of Christian spirituality or Christian living always with reference to the God of the Christians, who is the God of Jesus Christ, the God whom Jesus Christ revealed to mankind.¹⁰

¹⁰ For a suggestive presentation of the Trinity within the discipline of spirituality, see: P. Ferlay, *Père et Fils dans l'Esprit. Le mystère trinitaire de Dieu*. Paris: Editions du Centurion, 1979. Also: R. Maisonneuve, *Les mystiques chrétiens et leurs visions de Dieu un et trine*. Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2000. On the relational aspects of the Trinity, which we have taken into consideration in the present reflections, see: G. Vandeveld, *Expression de la coherence du Mystere de Dieu et du Salut. La réciprocité dans la 'Théologie' et l'Economie*. Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1993. For a dogmatic base, see: G. Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott. Eine trinitarische Theologie*, 4th ed. Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2001; B. Andrade, *Dios en medio de nosotros. Esbozo de una teología trinitaria kerygmática*. Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario, 1999.

We Christians believe in a Personal God, in a God who deals with man personally in Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus revealed God to be Father, by being the Son and as the Son, together with the Father, sends forth the Spirit to continue the work of the Son of God in the Church, as the continuous mediation or sacrament of the Son through all times, just as the Son is the Sacrament of the Father and is the *ur-sacrament* or primordial sacrament from which the Church and the sacraments spring forth.¹¹

This personal God is the object of our contemplation. This personal God is a call to contemplation, to a personal dealing, relationship. *Christian Contemplation, first and foremost, is personally and lovingly relating with a God who personally and lovingly relates with us as a Father, above all in the person of the Son, and filled and strengthened by His Spirit.*

Christian living or spirituality is necessarily trinitarian in nature and origin. It is necessary to repeat this without ceasing in order to point out what seems to have been a lack in direction in most investigations and researches into the very essence of the same. In other words, Christian Contemplation is trinitarian in point of departure, realization and goal. We are not after some altered state of consciousness, nor do we seek to enter an impersonal and empty void, devoid of humanity, devoid of mediations. We contemplate, that is, we look at God. We contemplate a person, who comes to us and deal with us as a person in Jesus Christ, whose very person and testimony of life provides us with the criteria and model for our Christian living. The God, who sent Jesus Christ to redeem man, continues to deal with us in person in His Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son on the Church on Pentecost. Admittedly, this poses a somewhat formidable challenge for us. Though God is a person, we do not deal with Him in the same manner that we deal with each other.

Despite the fact that is not our intention to make a direct thematical reflection on this most august mystery of the Trinity, we cannot not make mention of it. The Trinity or the Loving Mystery of God in Three Persons is the necessary starting point and terminal of Christian Contemplation. It is the point of departure and

¹¹ On this regard, I find the reflections of K. Rahner unparalleled. See his book: *The Church and the Sacraments*, translated by W.J. O'Hara London: Burns & Oates, 1986.

the aim. It is the foundation stone or the very ground on which Christian Contemplation stands; and the dome or the celestial vault which constitutes the very summit of our lives and efforts, crowning them with supreme meaning, with ultimate truth, with absolute significance. As the object of Christian Contemplation, the Trinity is the interpreting gauge for understanding Christian Contemplation. It is a case of knowing the activity by its object. The end defines the means.¹²

With fellow human beings, our dealings are direct, empirical, circumstantial, even positivistic. From a more philosophical and theological viewpoint, such direct dealings could be labeled as non-mediated or non-sacramental. With God, our dealings are mysterious. We can even say that it is indirect, even though we directly address God Himself in prayer or refer to Him in our thoughts, words and actions. We have to enter the level of mediation or the level of the sacramental. Our relationship with God is indirect, or, better said, 'not immediate'. It always has to be mediated (experiential), sacramental. This is because we do not get an immediate or direct response no matter how much we insist or talk. God is not an empirical reality, that we can touch, feel, hear like we can hear persons around us or things or events in our shared world, excluding the so-called private or solipsistic worlds. When we deal with God, in Christian living and particular during moments of prayer, we are actually immersing ourselves in a realm of mystery. We hurl ourselves trustingly and lovingly towards the Mystery, which is God Himself.

God is not merely a Mystery, but He is Mystery in Himself. He is Mystery not because we cannot understand Him nor because He is abstract or beyond the physical, but because He is immense and transcends all our limitations. God is transcendental and yet is present in our lives, in the immanence of our common history of salvation and search for the Absolute. This is why God is a Mystery. He is definitely beyond us and yet is within us, within the most intimate section of our intimacy, paraphrasing St. Augustine.¹³

¹² Not to be confused with the ethical principle "The end justifies the means." The notion of the end as defining the means is in all actuality a teleological affirmation accepted in classical Christian morals and ethics.

¹³ The exact words of St. Augustine were 'Tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo.' (*Confessiones* III, 6, 11).

When we lovingly and trustingly hurl ourselves into this Mystery, confident because of faith that someone is holding us in His hands and sustaining us while respecting our liberty and the autonomy of this lived world, we are in fact dealing and relating directly with this Mystery, who is God Himself. And for us Christians, God is and will always be Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is unchanging in His unity and in His trinity.

We can infer that this Trinitarian God, who is a God of love, of company and of solidarity (and not an isolated, solitaire and aloof God) is the object of Christian Contemplation. This God of love is a God of sharing. The Christian Godhead is shared in Three Persons.

Perhaps we can paraphrase the well-known cliché or adage "Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are" in the following manner: "Tell me who is the object of your contemplation and I will tell you what kind of contemplation you are living out." For us Christians, our spirituality and contemplation are necessarily trinitarian and, therefore, truly christological.

Love is the proper criteria for Christian Contemplation. The personality and reality of Jesus Christ is condensed in love. The life and example of Christ gives meaning to our notion of love. Christ is the concrete, historical and personal exemplification of the love of God for mankind. To undertake a contemplative lifestyle, for a Christian, is an act of love. Christian spirituality, or the living out of the Christian life in terms of following Christ, our Lord, Savior and Brother, in obedience to the Will of the Father, and in the life of the Spirit, is a response to the call of love.

Christian Contemplation is a call to love, not just to love or to respond, but to immerse ourselves in the very mystery of love. Therefore, love is not a call but a response. Better yet, an initiative. As St. John of the Cross reminds us, "contemplation is science of love (*ciencia de amor*)."¹⁴ "Science" is to be understood here as a mode of certain knowledge within the realm of mystery, within the context of transcendence or going beyond the grasp and limitation of man. And in hearing or listening to this call, we realize that it is

¹⁴ II Noche Oscura 18, 5. See my study: *San Juan de la Cruz: El sentido experiencial del conocimiento de Dios. Claves para un acercamiento filosófico al Santo Doctor*. Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2002, 225-226, 239-241.

not we who really love, but it is God who loved us first even before we came to be, even before we started to love Him. God took the first initiative This is the fullness of the so-called "being hurled into the Mystery", which we have already mentioned. This is the real secret of Christian Spirituality found in the contemplative lifestyle. The contemplative lifestyle enables us to enter into the very core of the Christian life: love. This love, in its innermost mystery, does not consist of us loving God and neighbor, but *rather in allowing ourselves to be loved by God*, according to His Will, according to His terms, according to His Infinite and Boundless Generosity, beyond all human comprehension and grasp, and not according to our egocentric or selfish standards, distorted and manipulative expectations and finite or limited level.

By allowing ourselves to be loved by God, we abandon ourselves to the Mystery. This is in a nutshell the very contemplative attitude of a Christian, expressed in the most intimate union with the Mystery (which in effect is the very mystical core of the Christian lifestyle-since the word "mystical", oftentimes confused with phenomena, is derived from the word "myos" (to close one's eyes or mouth) or the same derivative of the word Μυστήριο.¹⁵

Christian Contemplation, in effect, signifies to abandon ourselves to the Mystery in love by allowing ourselves to be loved by God in His own mysterious ways. Our model is Christ crucified who on the cross cried out: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.'¹⁶ Jesus on the Cross exemplifies the attitude of contemplation. In His failure, humiliation, suffering, passion and death, He hurls Himself into the Mystery of a Loving Father, who seems to have forgotten or abandoned Him, but is actually enveloping Him in this supreme act for man's salvation. The ultimate consequence of a Christian lifestyle, marked by contemplation, is this abandonment in the Hands of the Father, following the example of Christ and enlivened by the Spirit that Jesus Himself offered to the Father. This same Spirit came upon Him at the moment of His

¹⁵ Cf. M. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*. Malden-Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998; J. Martín Velasco, *El fenómeno místico. Estudio comparado*. Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1999.

¹⁶ Lk. 23:46.

baptism to mark Him as the one sent by the Father, and which He pours out upon the Church, in communion with the Father. Jesus, throughout His life of ministry and especially on the cross, allowed Himself to be loved by His Father, who did not spare Him a humiliating and painful death and yet raised Him up on the third day, reaffirming His love for His Son, with whom He was well pleased.¹⁷

The object defines the subject or the protagonist of the act or experience. Christ revealed this object as the Trinity, One God in Three Divine Persons, united in love. The Trinity (as the principle, essence and end of the Christian living) is the hermeneutical vantage point and the criteriological basis (made concrete in love in as much as the Trinity is a community of love) in determining whether the type or form of contemplation we are practicing is truly Christian.¹⁸

Basing ourselves on what we have just expounded, we can infer the following: a) Christian Contemplation is never a solitary act, but a communitarian act because God is a community and the Church lives out this communitarian (trinitarian) life; b) given that it is communitarian, Christian contemplation is a shared life made concrete by sharing, self-giving, self-offering towards the Mystery; c) given that involves self-giving or self-offering towards the Mystery it necessarily involves love, a share or participation in this greater love of God to which we have to abandon ourselves (allow ourselves to be loved); and d) this love necessarily involves the communication of this lifestyle with an aim to initiate others into the same dynamic lifestyle (*mystagogy* or communication of the lived Mystery with the aim of initiating others into this lived Mystery) and to share this love with others.

In other words, Contemplation as a communitarian act, which signifies participation in the trinitarian life of God, is an act of the

¹⁷ See Mt. 3: 17.

¹⁸ "La contemplación cristiana se desarrolla normalmente en un sentido trinitario. Dado que, según las palabras de Juan, Dios Padre, Hijo y Espíritu Santo habita en nosotros, su presencia activa se descubre en la contemplación. Todos "los teólogos insisten con razón en este aspecto original de la contemplación cristiana: la manifestación del misterio trinitario constituye el vértice de la experiencia contemplativa.", Ch. A. Bernard, "Contemplación," in: S. de Fiores & T. Goffi (dir.), *Nuevo Diccionario de Espiritualidad*, 4th corrected edition adapted by A. Guerra, Madrid: Ediciones Paulinas, 1991, 335.

Church, i.e., it is an ecclesial act, that calls us to share this love with others, especially the poor and the needy. Christian Contemplation is not an escapist nor an isolationist act. It should make us immerse ourselves in the love of God and in the love of neighbor, whose essence goes beyond our understanding, our way of experiencing and our way of reciprocating the love of God within the context of loving our neighbor.

Christian Contemplation: From and Beyond Prayer and Institutional Considerations

Contemplation necessarily involves life. It is something vital, therefore life giving. Contemplation is not only something to be practiced. It is above all a lifestyle, involving a viewpoint made concrete by an attitude in life. Its being life giving necessarily translates into a lifestyle that cultivates life, the Christian life founded on the love of God in Three Persons as revealed by Jesus Christ. What we are truly after is a contemplative life, the life of a contemplative taken from the Christian perspective.

To reflect means to mirror oneself, to project oneself or one's image or conception of oneself to the outside world, directed to the other and to return, through this projection, to oneself. To reflect means not just to project, but to be conscious of this projection. This consciousness involves the self as the one making the production. It involves the knowledge that one knows (it is not just knowing something, but knowing that one knows), that one is the starting point and terminal point of a process in which one is totally involved and even committed to.

This is important in being a contemplative, i.e., in being a Christian. In this light, whenever I use the word "Christian" it means I am referring to the "Contemplative Christian," because, as I have said, a Christian is necessarily a contemplative. To speak of a Christian, is to speak of this ideal and the process to attain this ideal. The word "contemplative", in this light, is to be understood as the very goal and the very process to attain this goal by which the Christian or for the person who wishes to follow Christ, live His commandment of love, as a Child of the Father and journeying towards the Father, filled with the Spirit and strengthened

by the same Spirit: who is not just the Third Person of the Trinity, but is the very force, the very power of God.¹⁹

For quite some time now, it has been in vogue to speak of the "Contemplative Christian," without fully understanding not only the implications of such an expression or label but above all its presuppositions. Curiously the term "contemplation" does not appear in Sacred Scriptures. Therefore, we have to look into the so-called "pagan traditions" in order to trace the roots of contemplation, even with regards to the way that we Christians "practice" or live it.

Before going further, it is imperative point out two limiting factors in understanding Christian Contemplation. We designate them as "limiting factors," in the hermeneutical sense, given the fact they have indeed limited and narrowed down the notion of Contemplation, making it an exclusive property of a select few within the Church, thus making contemplation an elitist notion or concept. The result is nothing less than a conceptual and even experiential impoverishment.

The first limiting factor is that in the language of the Church, the word "contemplation" has been applied exclusively to certain institutes of religious life. The Church, through the centuries, has

¹⁹ As a matter of fact, St. Thomas Aquinas affirms that the name "Holy Spirit" is not just a proper name of a Divine Person, but is shared in common by the Trinity: 'Et huius quidem convenientiae ratio sumi potest ex duobus. Primo quidem, ex ipsa communitate eius quod dicitur 'Spiritus Sanctus'. Ut enim Augustinus dicit, XV 'Deo Trin.': 'quia' Spiritus Sanctus 'communis est ambobus, id vocatus ipse proprie quod ambo communiter: nam et Pater est Spiritus, et Filius est Spiritus: et Pater est sanctus, et Filius est sanctus'. – Secundo vero, ex propria significatione. Nam nomen 'spiritus', in rebus corporeis, impulsionem quandam et motionem significare videtur: nam flatum et ventum spiritum nominamus. Est autem proprium amoris, quod moveat et impellat voluntatem amantis in amatum 'Sanctitas' vero illis rebus attribuitur, quae in Deum ordinantur. Quia igitur persona divina procedit per modum amoris quo Deus amatur, convenienter Spiritus Sanctus nominatur.

Ad primum ergo dicendum quod hoc quod dico 'spiritus sanctus', prout sumitur in virtute duarum dictionum, commune est toti Trinitati. Quia nomine 'spiritus' significatur immaterialitas divinae substantiae: spiritus enim corporeus invisibilis est, et parum habet de materia; unde omnibus substantiis immaterialibus et invisibilibus hoc nomen attribuimus. Per hoc vero quod dicitur 'sanctus', significatur puritas divinae bonitatis. – Si autem accipiat hoc quod dico 'Spiritus Sanctus'. In vi unius dictionis, sic ex usu Ecclesiae est accommodatum ad significandam unam trium personarum, scilicet quae procedit per modum amoris, ratione iam dicta', *Summa Theologiae* I q. 36, a. 1, corpus articuli et ad primum.

limited the notion of contemplation and contemplative dimension or lifestyle to the religious, excluding other sectors especially the laity.²⁰ As a countermeasure (or response) to this reality, it is imperative for the Church, starting with the hierarchy, to express great satisfaction given the existence of diverse lay groups and organizations dedicated to the pursuit of Christian Contemplation. Such groups disprove this elitism within the Church and are a living testimony that contemplation is a universal calling within the very same Universal Church.

The second limiting factor is that Christian Contemplation tends to be exclusively understood in terms of prayer or as "Contemplative Prayer."²¹ Christian Contemplation is much broader than prayer. Christian Contemplation is the very context, the very attitude in living out the Christian life, in following the call of Christ in our specific circumstances. Prayer, especially in the sense of what is commonly understood to be "contemplative prayer," is only a part of the broader and richer horizon of Christian living which must necessarily be contemplative in nature thus demanding a contemplative attitude from the Christian. This in turn necessarily begets what we can correctly label as a "contemplative lifestyle."

These two instances, limiting factors, or cases of reducing Christian Contemplation to a type of institutional elitism and to a particular activity in the Church have doubtless impoverished our understanding of Christian Contemplation. It is time that we start recovering its inherent richness and wealth of experience by contextualizing Christian Contemplation, as already stated, within the framework of Christian Spirituality.

²⁰ *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, S.C.R.S.I, La plenaria, January, 1981. An English version of this document can be found in A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II. Vatican II: More Post Conciliar Documents*. (Pasay: Daughters of St. Paul, 1987), 244-259.

²¹ Proof of this is the section on contemplative prayer in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, numbers 2709-2719. The notion of contemplation is subordinated to the discussion on prayer, which forms Chapter III of this groundbreaking document. In the Catechism, there is no mention of Christian spirituality or Christian living. The authors of the Catechism have reduced Christian spirituality and living, of which contemplation is the fundamental attitude, to prayer. This mentality of reducing spirituality and contemplation to prayer has brought about a pietistic and narrow comprehension of the same.

To speak of Christian Spirituality is to refer to the following of Christ by all Christians, by all sectors of the Church wherein differences of charism or ministry are put into the perspective that all gifts come from the same Spirit. Correspondingly, Christian Spirituality provides the framework wherein we can rightly place prayer, especially contemplative prayer, within the very dynamics of the correct attitude in living out such a spirituality. This attitude is incarnated by the contemplative lifestyle. After all, Christian spirituality is a lifestyle²² and "contemplative" is the most appropriate or ideal label for such a lifestyle.

To the first limiting factor, we can respond in the following manner: Christian Contemplation is for all Christians, regardless of state of life. In fact, the following paragraphs addressed directly to contemplative religious are applicable to all believers, to all Christians:

The contemplative dimension is basically a reality of grace, experienced by the believer as God's gift. It enables persons to know the Father (cf. Jn. 14, 8) in the mystery of trinitarian communion (cf. 1 Jn. 1-3) so that they can *savour the depths of God* (1 Cor. 2, 10)...

We describe the contemplative dimension fundamentally as the theological response of faith, hope and charity, by which the believer opens up to the revelation of the living God and to communion with him through Christ in the Holy Spirit. 'The concentration of one's mind and of one's heart on God, which we define as contemplation, becomes the highest and fullest activity of the spirit, the activity which today, also, can and must order the immense pyramid of all human activities' (Paul VI, 7-XII-1965).

As the unifying act of all human movement towards God, the contemplative dimension is expressed by listening to and meditating on the Word of God; by participating in the divine life transmitted to us in the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist; by liturgical and personal prayer; by the constant desire and search for God and for his Will in events and people; by the conscious participation in his salvific mission; by self-

²² Writes G. Gutiérrez: 'La espiritualidad no concierne únicamente a un sector de la existencia cristiana, es un estilo de vida que pone su sello sobre nuestra manera de aceptar el don la filiación, fundamento de la fraternidad, a la que nos convoca el Padre.', *Beber en su propio pozo*, 12.

giving to others for the coming of the Kingdom. There results, in the religious, an attitude of continuous and humble adoration of God's mysterious presence in people, events and things: an attitude which manifests the virtue of piety, an interior fount of peace and a bearer of peace to every sphere of life and apostolate.

All this is achieved in continual purification of heart under the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that we can find God in all things and people and become the 'praise of his glory' (Eph. 1, 6).

The very nature of consecrated life stands out in this way as the profound source which nourishes and unifies every aspect of the lives of religious.²³

Contemplation must not be reduced to prayer. This is our response to the second limiting factor. However, it must be pointed out that prayer is the most favorable ambiance in order to develop, to cultivate, to strengthen contemplation. In other words, prayer is the best means to cultivate a contemplative lifestyle, but prayer does not exhaust the dynamic reality of contemplation.

Christian Contemplation: From Seeing to Being One with the Mystery in Love

To contemplate, basing ourselves on the Greek etymological origins of the word "contemplatio," signifies to "see." Contemplation is vision. It is theory (θεορία). It is a way of seeing things, a way of viewing reality in order to form an intelligent idea of it. Seeing, in this sense and in this level, is not with the eyes, but it is an act that involves the whole being of man.

As Sacred Scripture reminds us: 'No one has ever seen God.'²⁴ This God is the transcendental trinitarian God who remains a mystery to mortal man. No eye, no mortal eye has truly seen God and yet we are called, through contemplation, to "see" God, i.e., we are called to have an authentic, deep, direct, intimate, and total relationship with God. It is an invitation to open our fragile

²³ *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, 1.

²⁴ Jn. 1:18. Cf. J. Lebreton, Contemplation dans la Bible, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Vol. II, 1645-1716.

totality to God's infinity. It is an invitation brought about by an eternal initiative or a loving initiative from eternity.

We all know that having a relationship with God is different with having a relationship with other persons. Much more is involved, because from our mortal (therefore, empirical) standpoint we cannot have a "direct" relationship with God.

Christianity, in this sense, gives us the "solution" to this *aporia* or problem. It is true that no mortal eye has ever seen God, but God has allowed Himself to be "seen", i.e., to be "experienced" directly in Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen, who continues to be present in His Church to whom He gave His Spirit and who accompanies us. He promised us: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."²⁵ This same Jesus is with us, sacramentally, that is, in the form of the Mystery (*sacramentum*-μυστήριον) – a special presence of His very transcendence in the immanence of our history together with its processes towards eschatological fulfillment –, which is His Church and its efficacious means of grace, i.e., the seven sacraments. He is with us in the Church, in our brothers and sisters, who are in need, because He identifies Himself with us, with our struggles along the journey towards the Father. This same Jesus, in the Gospel of John, breathed His Spirit, His very life and that of the Father to us to guarantee his mysterious or sacramental presence calling us to contemplate Him directly, beyond the limits of what is empirical or direct in the positivistic sense.

A "direct" relationship does not mean direct or immediate (non-mediated or non-sacramental) contact in the empirical sense, but rather authentic, loving and intense in a more universal sense going beyond the empirical and reaching down to what is essential, which in the words of Saint Exupéry in his beautiful masterpiece *The Little Prince*, "is invisible to the eyes."²⁶ What is essential is sacramental or mysterious because it transcends, goes beyond the empirical, positivistic limits of our immanence, of our "being here" in this world or in this mortal life within the vast shared cosmos of life.

²⁵ Mt.28:19.

²⁶ "L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux." A. de Saint-Exupéry, *Le petit prince*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1946, 72.

Another etymological explication of the word "contemplation," *con* (together) and *templum* (temple or a special space where one could observe the flight of the birds) indicates to us the privileged standpoint of living contemplatively, i.e., we live with full attention, observing the transcendence, the flight of God in our midst and to follow it directly, going beyond what is direct or visible to the empirical sense and shifting, in a transcending way, towards the essential.

The ancient philosophers believed that contemplation, in this sense, is the search for the ultimate truth identified with the One (ην) or the good (αγαθον). For us Christians, this ultimate truth can only be the Trinitarian God, revealed by Jesus Christ who gives purpose to our existence. This Trinitarian God is the Mystery of Love that permits all kind of love and invites us to a constant life of love.

In effect, contemplation is a life of love. It is a lifestyle of love because we Christians deal directly and lovingly with God who sent us Jesus Christ, so that we can have direct access to Him, the source of all mystery without completely solving, exhausting or unveiling the mystery, but inviting us all to immerse ourselves in the mystery of transcendent love that goes beyond our comprehension and experience.

In view of this, unquestionably there is a prevailing danger of isolating the contemplative life or contemplation as a lifestyle. I have intended in the present reflection to propose contemplation as integrative, as essential of Christian life.

We have just spoken of love, in the trinitarian vein and in the christological vein. This in itself is an indication that the contemplative life is a call to action, to a committed praxis of life.

Frequently, in the language of the Church, we tend to polarize the contemplative and the active. This is a dangerous option. We tend to identify, in this light, the contemplative with the totally passive which is heretical. In the sixteenth century, heretical schools like the *alumbrados* and the *dejados*²⁷ emerged basing themselves on this distorted ideology.

²⁷ Cf. P. Saínz Rodríguez, *Introducción a la historia de la literatura mística en España*, 2nd ed. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1984; A. Huerga, *Historia de los alumbrados*, 4 vols. Madrid: FUE, 1978-1988; M. Andrés, *Los recogidos*. Madrid: FUE, 1976.

The challenge for us contemplative Christians is to make contemplation, our direct relationship with the God whom mortal eye has not seen and yet has been revealed by Jesus Christ, the central praxis of our lives. In effect, this entails that, in everything we do, we must view it from the privileged perspective of our direct and loving relationship with God. Our lives, our action must be directed from this relationship. "Contemplation is fundamentally an opening of oneself to the mystery of Christ, the word of the Father, who announces to us what He Himself [directly] heard from the Father (cf. Jn 15, 15), which for our understanding we have received the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 14, 26; 15, 26; 16, 7-15)."²⁸

Contemplation does not mean ceasing to do, but it is doing by ceasing with what is not essential. This is what Jesus meant when he praised Mary before the fussing Martha as having chosen the best part of Christian living (Lc. 10, 42). It was not that Jesus was against activity *per se*, but Mary, who listened at the feet of Jesus, showed what was essential and, in fact, she made a choice. This poignant gospel episode is a paradoxical moment that teaches us a great lesson which we can summarize in the following terms: He who sits at the feet of the Master and who has a direct relationship with Him views everything, including the work of serving the Master, from this light. Those who fuss about serving the Master, without sitting at His feet, do not have this privileged standpoint and therefore, lose sight of what is essential.

The word "contemplation" does not appear in the Bible. This instance in the life of Jesus, in the home of his bosom friends Lazarus (whom he raised from the death) and his sisters, wherein Jesus called Mary's option as "the better part" is the most authoritative definition of Christian Contemplation. Choosing the better part means never losing sight of what is essential. It is seeing not with the eyes of the body, but with the eyes of the heart. It is seeing the invisible and essential, as the fox told the Little Prince during that significant conversation about taming someone. By contemplation, we "tame" God. God is no longer just one of the options of life. He becomes the "only option." The option from which all other

²⁸ A. Bandera, *Oración cristológica*. Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban, 1990, 147. Translation mine.

choices are to be made in life. It is as the fox said "creating links, creating a relationship" that lasts, that makes the other person unique and loved in a singular and unrepeatable way.²⁹ In effect, contemplation means a true and deep friendship. Friendship involves making the other necessary in one's life. It is happiness in the presence of the other. This is what Christian Contemplation is all about with regards to man's relationship with God.³⁰

Therefore, contemplation is living out the essentials in every situation. To be contemplative is to be committed with the world. Only in the world, can we have a direct relationship and experience of God. Within the world, our Christian lives are lived out and developed.

Contemplation, in this sense, offers us a privileged viewpoint. It is truly a *templum*, a place to see the flight of things, the flight of events of life, with all its accidentals, in the light of spirituality.

²⁹ Here are the exact words of the fox addressed to the Little Prince on creating relationships or links (liens): "Tu n'es encore pour moi qu'un petit garçon tout semblable à cent mille petits garçons. Et je n'ai pas besoin de toi. Et tu n'as pas besoin de moi non plus. Je ne suis pour toi qu'un renard semblable à cent mille renards. Mais, si tu m'apprivoises, nous aurons besoin l'un de l'autre. Tu seras pour moi unique au monde. Je serai pour toi unique au monde...", *Le petit prince*, 68.

³⁰ On this regard, I find the following words on encounter appropriate for our reflections: "Now, encounter occurs at a deeper level. I permit the other person to see something of myself, of my inner being, something I do not reveal by my facial expression or which I do not have on the tip of my tongue. Encounter presupposes trust. I do not confide in a second-rate person. We possess a protective mechanism that shields us from the precipitous giving of confidence. Before I really open up, some previous steps have to be taken. If I then notice that I can have confidence, I let the other person share at least partially in my life and my concerns. And he does the same. That is what we find attractive in such an encounter. This may happen in the hectic pace of everyday life or at work, but preferably during a vacation or when one has time or must take it, for example, while in a waiting room or on a plane or train.

Such an encounter may beget the desire to see the other person again. One is happy if he is waiting at the bus stop the next day, if one comes across him on a park bench or if one may accompany him on the way home. Encounter seeks repetition, a closer approach, and one confides more readily and more profoundly in the other person. The encounter grows into a relationship, a friendship, and occasionally love also results – the highest form of encounter, namely, the desire to learn to know and appreciate one another, to accept and belong to one another, to exist for and with one another." B. Doppelfeld, *They Encountered Jesus*. Vol I, trans. G. Roettger. Makati: St. Paul Publications, 1989, 7-8.

From here, we can soar to the invisible essential in its transcendence.

Spirituality, in this sense, is “the attentive God-seeking endeavor which so orders time and space that there arises a reserved area in which God’s impassioned involvement with his creation can be tasted. This endeavor is aimed at the acquisition of a pure and deeply loving knowledge of God. That being the case, however, a certain tension between one’s ordinary conduct and a contemplative lifestyle is programmatically present from the beginning.”³¹ □

³¹ K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods.*, trans. J. Vriend. Louvain: Peters, 2002.