

THE 'ORDINARY' CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE AND THE 'LITTLE WAY' OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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I HAVE BEEN REFLECTING for some time now on an inspiring seminar I attended in 2014, describing groundbreaking work at the interface of the arts and public health.¹ The presenter, an ethnomusicologist, human rights activist and professor of music, is engaged, among many other things, in taking the arts to a Peruvian slum and a US prison. His work is focused on the deeply impoverished people of our world, impoverished both materially and spiritually. It is work that transforms people's lives, their sense of self and their feeling of significance and value. It is work that contributes to social justice.

The seminar unsettled me, leading me to wonder what commensurate work I now do, as one who identifies herself as a contemplative, to contribute to alleviating the world's desperate inequities and pain.² While I had in the past sought to relieve the suffering of others, in both formal and informal ways, when these particular activities came to an end so, too, it seemed, did the fulfilment derived from the effort to integrate my contemplative prayer life with loving concern for the suffering of others.³

¹ André de Quadros, 'From American Prisons to Peruvian Shantytowns: Rescuing the Arts from the Realm of the Elite', The Victoria Institute, Melbourne, 21 May 2014.

² Note that *The Way* recently published a paper which nicely situates the historical background for those pursuing contemporary contemplative lives: see Carol McDonough, 'Christian Hermits and Solitaries: Tracing the Antonian Hermit Traditions', *The Way*, 54/1 (January 2015), 76–89.

³ My formal activities comprised working in a private psychological practice and writing theological papers that sought always to address the heart even while being presented in an academic context. In both cases I was aware, however, that these were merely stages on the contemplative journey. My subsequent informal exercise of being a 'cycling missionary' in the Australian countryside seemed best



Hence my present question: how can I live authentically as a contemplative open to God and to the suffering of my neighbour in the comfort of Western suburbia? A number of assumptions are implicit in this question. The first, which I accept, is that we are called to love and to serve others; the second, which I investigate, is that a life that prioritises contemplative prayer in the ordinary circumstances of the ordinary world is a valid one; the third, which I reject, is that we all have to do ‘big’ things to fulfil the call to social justice and loving our neighbour.

I shall begin by considering the emphasis on social justice within the Christian tradition, referring briefly to scripture and then to the work of theologians who have considered the significance for Christian living of the most marginalised in our world. Their call has been to action, including action that challenges the social structures that sustain inequities. Set against this activist engagement is the seemingly incompatible life of the ordinary contemplative living an ordinary life in suburbia. I then propose a rapprochement between the urgent need for all Christians to exercise active compassion in the face of the suffering of others and the genuine limitations of people living ordinary, if prayer-filled, lives in developed-world circumstances. I propose, in ways consistent with the contemplative tradition, that this rapprochement is found in valuing the little ways in which love can be expressed to the needy around us.

to ‘fit’ the foundational contemplative call to love of God and neighbour, as remarkable encounters on the roads and in the caravan parks testified. It was the ending of this period that most exposed me to the self-questioning I explore here.

The Christian Imperative for Social Justice

The theme of social justice is an integral part of the Christian tradition. In the Old Testament it is perhaps summarised most beautifully by Micah, who unequivocally states that the Lord requires us to 'do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). In the New Testament, Jesus is even more forthright when he insists that we will not enter the Kingdom of God unless we have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked and visited the sick or imprisoned (Matthew 25:31–40). Christ commands us to love our neighbour (Mark 12:30–31); and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) shows us that our neighbour appears in all guises. As Christians, indeed as human beings, we are all called to reveal in some way God's love for the poor and the needy, the sick and the wounded. Moreover, relieving our neighbour's pain and the development of our own authentic humanity are intrinsically entwined, for we are to love our neighbour *as ourselves* (Mark 12:31). As Jon Sobrino insists, human beings only come to be fully human by facilitating the liberation of those who suffer oppression and defeat.⁴

The many theologians who have explored how our love of God must have a demonstrable impact on the needs of our neighbour all insist that contemplative or mystical prayer must have a compassionate and merciful expression in prophetic or political or economic action.⁵ Often it is a personal encounter with extremes of suffering that generates such theological reflection. So it was for Johann Baptist Metz and Jon Sobrino, both of whom were confronted by devastating examples of suffering and oppression. For Metz it was the Holocaust; for Sobrino, the appalling poverty in South America. These personal experiences heightened their sensitivity to the world's shocking history of violence and oppression, leading them to insist that we must take greater cognisance of the suffering of innocent victims of oppression and injustice.

Yet, sadly—grievously—so many of us are asleep to their plight. Although scripture calls us in so many places to awake, we are often too complacently comfortable to respond to Christ's call to love others as

⁴ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 1.

⁵ For the list of Edward Schillebeeckx, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Dorothee Soelle, David Tracy, Leonardo Boff, Ignacio Ellacuría, Johann Baptist Metz and Jon Sobrino, see Matthew T. Eggemeier, 'A Mysticism of Open Eyes: Compassion for a Suffering World and the *Askesis* of Contemplative Prayer', *Spiritus*, 12/1 (2012), 43.

ourselves. Given the imperative for all Christians to be alert to the demands of social justice, how can we responsibly follow a call to a relatively simple life which gives priority to prayer? Do we not run the risk of camouflaging an essentially egocentric existence with the label 'contemplative'? Could this not be, rather, merely a 'cop-out', avoiding the 'real' concerns of Christian living?

The 'Ordinary' Contemplative Life: Call or Cop-Out?

Early in his account of life in a Cistercian monastery, Thomas Merton addresses the commonplace, but mistaken, view that the contemplative life is merely a strategy for avoiding the mundane and often burdensome reality of ordinary, everyday life. Forcefully, he asserts,

Let no one justify the monastery as a place from which anguish is utterly absent and in which men 'have no problems'. This is a myth, closely related to the other myth that religion itself disposes of all man's anxieties.⁶

He goes on to indicate something of the nature of the struggles encountered by one pursuing a contemplative life:

Faith itself implies a certain anguish, and it is a way of confronting inner suffering, not a magic formula for making all problems vanish. It is not by extraordinary spiritual adventures or by dramatic and heroic exploits that the monk comes to terms with life. The monastery teaches men to take their own measure and to accept their ordinariness; in a word, it teaches them that truth about themselves which is known as 'humility'.⁷

Another mistaken notion about the contemplative life is that it is self-focused and individualistic. Elsewhere Merton opposes this idea, noting that prayer exposes its practitioner to self-searching and to the 'sham and indignity of the false self that seeks to live for itself alone and to enjoy the "consolation of prayer" for its own sake'.⁸ Those called to such a way of living are responding to a vocation to journey inwards, to encounter the self in the demands of intimate engagement with God. They are responding to an internal imperative which calls them to carve out a contemplative life.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Cistercian Life* (Spencer: Cistercian, 1974), 2–3.

⁷ Merton, *Cistercian Life*, 3.

⁸ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), 25–26.

As Mary Frohlich observes, the authenticity of that imperative will be determined by its outcome, by the extent to which it ultimately issues in a life expressive of God's love.⁹ Onlookers need to be patient as they wait to assess that outcome, always remembering that the contemplative life is a demanding one in which people of prayer are exposed to interior pressures not known by those preoccupied and distracted by more mundane concerns. Whether the contemplative life is lived in a monastery or in the ordinariness outside monastic enclosures, it is not a 'cop-out'. It is a call. There can be 'a sense of divine immediacy, a call to live out of that immediacy and a sense of all things and events as transparencies for divine presence'.¹⁰ Just as the physical reality of the world can be a 'glasshouse, transparent and translucent to God's grace', so too the spiritual reality of the contemplative's life can be experienced as transparent to God's gracious intervention.¹¹

Those within monastic enclosure, or within active communities that prioritise the contemplative life, have the support of a community, a rule of life that gives structure and a socially recognisable label. These things provide an institutional body that supports self-identity. In contrast, people who live as contemplatives 'in the world' often need courage to pursue a pattern of life that is usually at odds with that of those around them. There are numerous factors that lead people to consider that they have a contemplative call when they live in the ordinary circumstances of the world outside an institutional setting. Some point to their contemplative *experience*, others to their contemplative *practices*, yet others to their contemplative *lifestyle*. Some only have an awareness that calling themselves 'contemplatives' is the most coherent way to articulate their self-understanding.¹²

Kathryn Damiano characterizes the experience of living a contemplative life as a solitary person as one of 'relevant irrelevancy'.¹³ Pursuing the contemplative life in the context of marriage creates yet other challenges.¹⁴

⁹ Mary Frohlich, 'A Roman Catholic Theology of Lay Contemplation', in *The Lay Contemplative: Testimonies, Perspectives, Resources*, edited by Virginia Manss and Mary Frohlich (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger, 2000), 50.

¹⁰ Tilden Edwards, 'Foreword', in *The Lay Contemplative*, edited by Manss and Frohlich, v.

¹¹ Johann Roten, 'The Two Halves of the Moon: Marian Anthropological Dimensions in the Common Mission of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar', *Communio*, 16 (Fall, 1989), 443.

¹² Frohlich, 'A Roman Catholic Theology of Lay Contemplation', 45.

¹³ Kathryn Damiano, 'The Call to Life "on the Margins"', in *The Lay Contemplative*, edited by Manss and Frohlich, 25.

¹⁴ See Ann G. Denham, 'God in Flesh and Spirit', in *The Lay Contemplative*, edited by Manss and Frohlich, 33–36.

The contemplative dimension of living in a L'Arche community reveals more of the multifaceted wonder of this way of life: 'From the slow lane, one is encouraged to take another look, to seek out the details, delicacy and even beauty of what we thought was ugly'.¹⁵ Only a heart sensitised to compassion and alert to beauty in the ordinary details of daily living can 'look' in this way. Ann Denham describes her initial misunderstanding of a life devoted to intense prayer, expecting 'some cosy chats with the Lord'. She vividly depicts her actual experience of opening up to the depths within: 'thrust into light and a landscape out of Vincent Van Gogh; a strong visual sense of multilayered reality and a howling fear-storm straight from a dank, black hole'.¹⁶ Denham reveals the fear that often goes with surrendering familiar ego-based strategies for engaging with the world and taking the risk of opening up to a larger self of which the ego is merely a part. Like Thomas Merton, Denham confronted her inner suffering and anguish with faith.

As Mary Frohlich notes, there is such a rich variety in the 'raw material of gifts, opportunities and choices' for contemplative expression that there is no ready way to account for a person's choice of the primary self-identification as 'contemplative'.¹⁷ Whatever leads to this identification, its expression is not world-denying; the spirituality that emerges from the authentic contemplative life lived in the world is still 'for others'.¹⁸ It can take many forms for the ordinary person living an ordinary life in the ordinary circumstances of home and work.

Transforming Prayer and the 'Little Way' of Social Justice

The tendency to think that we are of value only if we do *big* things to help others is everywhere. Those living in developed countries whose lives have kept them insulated from extremes of suffering often find that a subtle guilt is at work, a guilt which undermines the joy of the call to a contemplative life, a guilt which insinuates they are not doing enough to relieve the burden of the less fortunate. The implicit, unconscious assumption is that we only have value if we are seen by others to be making a *big* contribution to a needy world. For those with the gifts and

¹⁵ Robert A. Jonas, 'Daybreak', in *The Lay Contemplative*, edited by Manss and Frohlich, 37.

¹⁶ Denham, 'God in Flesh and Spirit', 33.

¹⁷ Frohlich, 'Roman Catholic Theology of Lay Contemplation', 45.

¹⁸ Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2010).

capacities, and with the power to effect structural change, such actions are indeed just and appropriate. For those less gifted, however, demands of this kind hide the value before God of the little that they are called to do and can do. Even for those more gifted it can take courage to stand up to a community's criticism for valuing the 'little' rather than the 'big' social needs—as Mother Teresa of Calcutta demonstrated when she was criticized for not adequately challenging India's social structures in her focus on the needs of the individual.

For many the journey to self-acceptance for the little they are able to do can be long. Parker Palmer at one time thought that he had to live 'a life like that of Martin Luther King Jr or Rosa Parks or Mahatma Gandhi or Dorothy Day' to fulfil the exigence of 'high purpose'.¹⁹ As St John of the Cross reflects, we can find it a special suffering to find that we do not suffer.²⁰ What can be done to sensitise people to the value of the 'little' needs before them? While there is indeed a genuine risk that the comforts of a Western way of life can blind us to the pain suffered



¹⁹ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 3.

²⁰ St John of the Cross, 'The Ascent of Mt. Carmel', in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, edited by Kieran Kavanagh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS, 1979), 2.26.7.



The Good Samaritan, by the Master of the Good Samaritan, 1537

by the less fortunate, those same comforts, and the often unconscious guilt accompanying them, can also blind us to the value of the ‘little’ ways in which we can lovingly serve those around us.

The problem of sensitising ourselves to the needs of others is, for Metz and Sobrino, a question that reaches to the depths of our relationship with God. It is a question that challenges the nature of our spirituality. Our spirituality is only authentic if we are awake, alert and responsive to the reality of suffering. Yet how are we to awaken? For Metz and Sobrino, and also for Simone Weil, we can find answers to this question in the parable of the Good Samaritan. For them this parable is the ‘foundational biblical narrative’ for an authentic spirituality which is compassionately responsive to the suffering of others.²¹

Metz and Sobrino see the priest and the Levite as so preoccupied with apparently weighty matters of the Law that they passed by the needy person.²² In contrast, they argue that the Samaritan responded with a viscerally felt compassion which motivated him to act. His action entailed

²¹ Eggemeier, ‘Mysticism of Open Eyes’, 49.

²² Eggemeier, ‘Mysticism of Open Eyes’, 49–52.

a kenotic abandonment of egocentric attachments to comfort and security. Yet such an embodied sense of compassion, experienced in a way that impels us action, is unfortunately all too rare. Self-interest and distractions so readily leave us in a complacent slumber which prevents us from seeing the suffering of others.²³ Eggemeier argues that an ascetic practice of contemplative prayer is required to open the eyes of the heart and to develop the accompanying embodied sensitivities to the needs of others.²⁴ He cites the work of Sarah Coakley and Simone Weil as pointing towards ways in which such sensitivity can be developed.

Coakley has written powerfully about the transformative effects of a discipline of contemplative prayer and its capacity to generate a prophetic dynamic of compassionate action.²⁵ Her work with prisoners, for example, revealed that regular periods of silence can transform their experience of self as well as providing a healing, alternative 'space' to the oppressive regime around them. Simone Weil observes that a contemplative discipline was very necessary for the focused attention which enabled the Good Samaritan to perceive the plight of the man by the road. She describes such attention as knowing how to look at a person in a particular way:

This look is first of all an attentive look, when the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being that it is looking at, just as it is, in all its truth. It is only capable of this if it is capable of attention.²⁶

Weil goes on to observe, 'Love for our neighbour, being made of creative attention, is analogous to genius'.²⁷ So it may well be, for without practices to stimulate the abandonment of egocentric attachments we do not naturally drift into self-sacrificial awareness. Another testimony to the transformative value of prayer comes from the theologian Sebastian Moore who insists, 'Prayer is the most radical therapy for our culture'.²⁸

Eggemeier, Coakley, Weil and Moore are just some of the many voices that point to the benefits of silent prayer for making us alert to the need

²³ Eggemeier, 'Mysticism of Open Eyes', 52.

²⁴ Eggemeier, 'Mysticism of Open Eyes', 52–57.

²⁵ See Sarah Coakley, 'Jail Break: Meditation as a Subversive Activity', *The Christian Century*, 121/13 (2004), 18–21; Sarah Coakley, 'Prayer as Crucible: How My Mind Has Changed', *The Christian Century* 128/6 (2011). See also *Religion and the Body*, edited by Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

²⁶ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 63.

²⁷ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 90.

²⁸ Sebastian Moore, 'The Universe at Prayer: What does It Mean to Pray?', in *A Hunger for God: Ten Approaches to Prayer*, edited by William A. Barry and Kerry A. Maloney (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1991), 1.

for compassionate and loving action in the pursuit of justice. There is, moreover, much evidence-based literature to support the understanding shared by these thinkers that meditative practices are needed to effect the neurophysiological changes that enable heightened, embodied, intersubjective sensitivity.²⁹ The question now arises as to the form that action might take in the life circumstances of those of us who are less gifted and empowered to make ‘big’ differences, but nevertheless called by God to make our ‘little’ difference.

An important premise for understanding how we can serve others in our humble and homely circumstances is the insight that love and justice are synonymous. Often the term ‘social justice’ can be intimidating. If, with Simone Weil, we reframe Christ’s call to justice as one of a call to love, then the perceived possibilities for justice and social action multiply under the widened horizon generated by contemplative prayer. Weil insists,

Christ does not call his benefactors loving’ or ‘charitable. He calls them just. The Gospel makes no distinction between the love of our neighbor and justice We have invented the distinction between justice and charity.³⁰

Augustine also challenges the notion that we must travel far to serve our needy neighbour: ‘All people should be loved equally. But you cannot do good to all people equally, so you should take particular thought for those who, as if by lot, happen to be particularly close to you in terms of place, time, or any other circumstances.’³¹ The teaching of Brother Lawrence, Pierre de Caussade and Thérèse of Lisieux, to name just a few in the contemplative tradition, also alerts us to the need to recognise God’s providence and calling in the little opportunities before us.³² Our

²⁹ Cristina Gonzalez-Liencrens, Simone G. Shamay-Tsoory and Martin Martin Brüne, ‘Towards a Neuroscience of Empathy: Ontogeny, Phylogeny, Brain Mechanisms, Context and Psychopathology’, *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 37/8 (2013), 1537–1548; Giorgia Silani and others, ‘Right Supramarginal Gyrus Is Crucial to Overcome Emotional Egocentricity Bias in Social Judgments’, *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 33/39 (2013), 15466–15476. See also Christopher Bergland, ‘The Neuroscience of Empathy’, *Psychology Today* (10 October 2013), available at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201310/the-neuroscience-empathy>, accessed 6 June 2014.

³⁰ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 83.

³¹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, translated by R. P. H. Green (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 1.29.29.

³² See Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, translated by John Beevers (New York: Image, 1966); Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (London: Burns and Oates, 1977); St Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington: ICS, 1976).

needy neighbour is there beside us, perhaps conversing with us, if only we have eyes to see.

It is important to draw actively on faith to experience our lives as channels for God's grace and to understand that others can be touched by love and blessedness as we pursue our contemplative calling. While the greatest of the theological virtues is love (1 Corinthians 13:13), yet without faith we cannot please God and fulfil God's will for our lives (Hebrews 11:6). It is imperative that we have faith that God's grace can flow through us to others in ways that are loving, healing and freeing.

Foundationally I have sought here to encourage those who live a contemplative life in the pursuit of their calling. Recognising that many feel unable validly to contribute in major ways to the pressing needs of the world around them, I have sought to heighten their awareness of the value of the smallest opportunities for bringing good news to the oppressed, for binding up the broken-hearted, for proclaiming liberty to captives and release to the prisoners (Luke 4:18). A haiku nicely expresses this vision:

To see small matters
And to see that small matters
Are not small matters.³³

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³³ This haiku was heard on an ABC programme some years ago. I would appreciate knowing the author.