Contemplative Prayer: A Spiritual Practice

Reflecting on Ignatian, Celtic, Quaker, and Maronite Prayer Traditions

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Contemplative Prayer: A Spiritual Practice

In the Midst of Contemplative Prayer

God shows up with a leaf blower,
talking in quiet Spanish
to the lawn crew that manicures
the beds outside our chapel.

Inside, we all look up
like prairie dogs,
then burrow down
deeper as the blowers
scream and roar.
The reading for today
is Mark 6. After feeding
the five thousand, Christ
"made his disciples
get in the boat." That night
He reappeared in the storm,
walking across the water.
They saw Him
and were terrified.
The wind died down.

After prayer we walk in silence
through the parking lot.
The crew has left.
His wandering disciples
couldn't understand
the food He gave.
Indeed, "their hearts
were hardened."
In our separate cars,
we check the schedule,
engines idling. Same time
next week. Thoughts
tumble and swirl,
the less, the more.

Soon enough
we'll all be gone,
lines and empty spaces,
the sounds of traffic
far away.[1]

There is a fear, so reports tell us, that we may be one catastrophic space storm away from our power grid collapsing. Interactions between the "Earth's magnetic field and the conductivity of the Earth's crust" could "send electrical currents surging along power lines, melting transformers and triggering blackouts," upending our compasses, descending us into chaos.[2] And, so, we look to the sky, without the slightest sense of the spiritual disorientation already so well ensconced in our lives. The technology all around us has already our sense of truth north off path; electrical storms around us reacting to the conductivity in our inner beings: "the eye is not satisfied

[1] Cole, "In the Midst of Contemplative Prayer."
[2] Deatrick, "Space Storms Could Crash Upper Midwest's Power Grid."

with the Internet; nor is the ear filled by the mobile phone. The human mind and heart want more than knowledge. We all long for wisdom and love. For this we were born and for this we came into the world."[3]

On the other side of the dilemma, as Richard Cole's poem intimates, at moments when those who are acutely aware of their disorientation return to prayer, they likely misinterpret God's presence around them in the Other as unwelcomed distraction to "the real work" of prayer: "humanity is searching for the lost coin of prayer. Where will we find it?"[4] Clearly, there must be a way to hold both in tension.

Whether we realized it or not, my spiritual practice group sought to answer that question, and I believe came up with a compelling answer. Contemplative prayer, in its many forms in the streams of Christian tradition (and the specific forms we took up), take us out of a certain sense of time bound by efficiency and compartmentalization, and God's expansive love eternal. Our time shared in contemplation both brought us closer to our inner self – the Holy Spirit within – as well as to the selves of one another, and a sense of the Divine in even the mundane felt more palpable.

This paper will outline the experiences our group had exploring Ignatian, Celtic, Quaker, and Marionite Catholic prayer styles, as well as speaking more personally about the month I spent intentionally engaging in Ignatian spiritual exercises. It will also trace the major steps of contemplative prayer through the monastic traditions starting in the third century. Finally, it will explore implications to the use of contemplative prayer.

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[3] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, 5.
[4] Ibid.

Defining Contemplative Prayer

There are many definitions of contemplative prayer tradition that attempt to draw a line between *kataphatic* and *apophatic* prayer, the latter being the realm of contemplative prayer. However, in practice, this seems to be an unnecessary distinction as "*kataphatic* and *apophatic* refer to different techniques for evoking faith experiences and occur on different levels of human consciousness… What really counts is whether one encounters the Lord in a prayer experience — not that the prayer is *apophatic* or *kataphatic*!"[5] What is perhaps more germane, and certainly what came from the month of sharing together, is to connect Jean Gerson's definition of mystical theology, "experimental knowledge of God through the embrace of unitive love," through the experience of prayer.[6] By experimental knowledge, Gerson means knowledge "that is different from abstract. Experimental knowledge of God can be compared to feeling or touching; and experimental knowledge of God can only be obtained through love."[7] Whether it was the more *kataphatic* Ignatian and Celtic prayer, or the *apophatic* Quaker and Marionite prayer, each invited each member of the group to meet God in a place different that the place where we sat to *love* as a place.

Contemplative Prayer in Biblical Context

To write about all of prayer in a Biblical context would likely take many more than the allotted pages for this paper: even just considering prayer within the Gospels provides a significant basis in which to explore contemplative prayer.

[5] McLeod, "Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer?"
[6] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, 19.
[7] Ibid., 20.

The word in the Synoptics to describe the act of prayer is προσεύχομαι. A compound verb, of προσ- (a preposition that when in compound, expresses connection and engagement with something) and εύχομαι (to pray), the word is the most common word in the whole New Testament to describe prayer, and indicates a sense of moving towards God in petition. The word also applies to anyone who might engage in prayer – Jesus uses the word in the Sermon on the Mount, in the discourse on prayer in Matthew 6, to describe what Paul and Silas did in prison in Acts 16, and as part of the salutations in Philippians and Colossians. However, it also acts as a unique marker to understand how Jesus prayed.

Thirteen times cognates of προσεύχομαι are used to describe Jesus praying.[8] Without variation, there are two themes that arise in looking at the thirteen uses of the verb. First, Mark emphasizes strongly when Jesus prays, it is always within the act or having already withdrawn himself and at most with his disciples. Jesus more often than not prays alone. Secondly, and more emphasized by Luke, when Jesus does pray, it is often related to significant moments related to his vocation. Before or after preaching, after performing miracles, and in moments like the Transfiguration or in the garden, Jesus' response in prayer connects regularly with what he is called to do.

While it is not possible to always know what precisely Jesus is saying in these prayers, it is possible to see how Jesus' actions are exemplar for contemplative prayer. In the first paragraph of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius indicates that the goal is to have "every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking

[8] Matthew 14:23, 26:36, 26:39; Mark 1:35, 6:46, 14:32, 14:35, 14:39; Luke 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 9:28, 22:44

and finding the will of God."[9] When Jesus removes himself to pray, he is demonstrating the importance of clearing space to be open for God and the experimental knowledge of love. Interestingly, when the Synoptics do provide insight into Jesus' contemplative prayer, this is precisely what is occurring: Jesus is discerning God's will openly, ridding himself of attachments, to the point of saying that even if the cup cannot pass from him, God's will be done; God's love of humanity continues from Good Friday to Pascha. Moreover, this is not just a prayer solely of request, but "above all by referring to prayer to God in the comprehensive sense, and never to requests of daily life."[10]

In the gospel of John, the word προσεύχομαι is noticeably absent. Given John's high Christology, this makes sense, as Jesus "stands in an enduring and intimate relationship to the 'Father' and does not need – in contrast to the Synoptic Gospels – any regular or pious pattern of prayer… His prayers to the Father mediate this oneness with God."[11] If the Synoptics provide insight on the human need of contemplative prayer, John provides a sense of its holy outcome when perfected – no longer just praying, but speaking to God, residing in the "embrace of unitive love," and mediating the grace of God amongst all people.

Contemplative Prayer in Historical Context

While contemplative prayer has enjoyed a long tradition within Christianity, its status as a spiritual practice has waxed and waned, especially as a result of the Enlightenment. Similar to the

[9] Toner, "Discernment in the Spiritual Exercises," 70.
[10] Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. 4433.
[11] Ibid.

Biblical history, the historical context of contemplative prayer is extensive, but a few particular historical points are important for the four traditions in which we engaged.[12]

The initial roots of contemplative prayer can be traced back to some of the earliest known Monastics, known colloquially as The Desert Fathers, most famously including Paul and St. Anthony the Great in the early third century CE.[13] The Desert Fathers fled to the deserts of Egypt, in part as a counter-response to the perceived lax behaviors of other Christians at the end of the Roman persecution by Constantine. They "wrote about maintaining the continual remembrance of God by using the discipline of frequent repetition of short prayers… the brevity of these prayers allowed the monks to engage in their day-to-day activities while keeping God constantly in mind and therefore present throughout the day."[14] Many of the other aspects of their through-the-day prayer have similarities to the practices our group utilized, and while "there was no real emphasis on apophatic or imageless prayer" per se, they included "interior stillness, compunction and fleeing one's obsessive thoughts."[15]

In the centuries following, an emphasis began to be placed on imageless prayers, drawing from both the Cappadocian Fathers (in the late third century CE) and Neo-Platonism developed by Plotinus (mid-second century CE), Proclus (mid-to-late fourth century CE), and integrated into the Christian *Apophatic* theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite in the fifth and sixth centuries CE. This type of prayer was not the same as praying throughout the day, but instead

[12] Again, for the benefit of clarity, this paper will focus on the historical context in the Christian tradition only, with some attention paid to the Orthodox tradition, as the Marionites straddle a line between the Roman Rite and the Orthodox church.
[13] González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1, The Early Church to the Reformation*, 161.
[14] Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer*, 31–32.
[15] Ibid., 32.

"deliberately shutting the eyes to all external things… while the eyes of the body were closed, the inner eye was open and was searching for wisdom."[16] Instead of trying to understand God through imagery or in the development of the mind, Pseudo-Dionysius argues one must enter into a "divine silence, darkness, and unknowing."[17] Ultimately, this early time of contemplative prayer emphasized the withdrawal as the ideal: Clement, Origen, and Augustine note the lives of Mary Magdalen and Martha, "Mary the repentant sinner who sits silently, lovingly and mystically at the feet of Jesus, is singled out as the model of Christian perfection while busy Martha is something of a second-class citizen."[18]

It is from this era that two of our four prayer practices found their start. Saint Maron, an early fourth century Syriac Christian monk, is the patron saint of the Maronite Catholic church. The prayer that we used had a highly "hesychastic" simplicity to it:

> It begins with invoking God by intoning "I have entered your house, O God and have worshiped before your throne O King of Heaven, forgive all my sins. O King of Heaven forgive all our sins. Pray for me to the Lord. May God accept your offering and have mercy on us through your prayer." They begin to sing, "Glory be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit now and forever." all Eastern Maronite prayers begin with calling to mind one's sins. Chanting, "Lord have mercy."
>
> Then chanting begins, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah
> Have mercy on us O Lord
> Have mercy on us O Lord[19]

Clearly, its use of limited and repetitious phrasing is meant to move the one praying into a centered space.

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[16] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, 16.
[17] Corrigan and Harrington, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite."
[18] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, 25.
[19] Ghandforoush, "Maronite Prayer Tradition and History."

The development of Celtic Christianity, while having its roots in the work of John Cassian (360-435 CE), took shape more specifically in the fifth and sixth centuries CE, as the church moved away from the early Patristic period. In this time, the prayers recited at daily offices had "an earthiness, a sense of community with each other as well as with creation, and a sense of the immanence of God (especially with regard to God's protection)."[20] This sense of the contemplative as not only a withdrawal, but also as a reengagement with society as a critical became a significant shift in contemplative prayer traditions through the late early period through the Medieval perriods. While certainly there are significant exceptions like Julian of Norwich, who maintain a hermetic life, the many orders founded within the Medieval period emphasized "the mixed life. This is the overflow of mysticism: sharing the fruits of contemplation with others… this mixed life was chosen by Jesus Christ – who taught and preached and healed and lived and active life."[21]

Ignatius of Loyola, whose Jesuit order was founded during the late Medieval period, embodies this fusion particularly well. It's in Ignatius and the *Spiritual Exercises* where "he challenged the notion that profound mystical experience could be found only in the silence of a monastic cell or in a hut in the desert. No. One could experience God deeply and joyfully in the anguishing contradictions, persecutions and humiliations which necessarily accompany an active life devoted to the apostolate."[22] For Ignatius, the act of experiencing God in contemplative prayer was never meant to be done alone, but always with a spiritual director as a guide within the practice. He emphasized more than just a darkness or emptiness, but instead encouraged

[20] Evers, "Celtic Monasticism: Earth, Spirit, and Fire."
[21] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, 25.
[22] Ibid.

directees to have the mind's eye engage the text as those one was actually there – to see the eyes of Christ, to hear his words spoken, smell the air. By engaging wholly in the text, one not only seeks meet God in a similar fashion to the centered prayers, but also that the one in prayer may gain appreciation in his or her own life – the face of the baby Christ born amongst animals in a manger may be recognized in the child who lacks proper food and clothing.

George Fox and the Quaker tradition, the fourth contemplative prayer style we explored, comes at unique time of transition. As a contemporary of John Locke, Fox and the Quakers began right at the start the Enlightenment, and carries with it some of the marks of the significant move towards personal freedom and rule of self. For Fox, each individual could have a relationship with Jesus Christ, therefore anyone could have something significant to say in a meeting, and as a result, in silent Quaker meetings "there is no appointed minister to start or conduct the meeting. Everyone present shares the responsibility of ministry and worship."[23] There is a sense that God will meet them through what Fox termed "'openings', meaning revelations… it has been the experience of Quakers over the centuries that 'openings' will occur in the mind [and] that 'a way will open.'"[24]

However, as the Enlightenment continued to sweep throughout Europe and America, the desire for knowledge eclipsed the desire for mystery. Kant's doubt of the understanding the *noumenon* stands in opposition to the open, blank unknown that many of the mystics had emphasized throughout their writings. What good is the unknowable darkness when we cannot even understand it: "a fundamental point of the *Critique [of Pure Reason]* is to deny that we ever have knowledge of things through pure reason alone, but only by applying the categories to pure or

[23] Wier, "Quaker Prayer Practice."
[24] Ibid.

empirical data structured by the forms of intuition."[25] To "meet" God in a space, or to be embraced in a unitive love required an ability to describe it, to process it by means of empiricism. Progressively, contemplative prayer becomes psycho-somatic reactions, changes in heart rate, and synapses. As Positivism continued to take hold, the unknowable yet 'experimental' world of the contemplative decreased – it is telling, for instance, that none of the prayer practices our group developed after the 18th Century.

Yet, as humanity has moved through part of the 21st Century, it is becoming ever clearer that while there remains significant value in empiricism, the view that Positivism is the sole arbiter of knowledge has begun to wane. We all recognize that there is life beyond the description of it, and a result, there has been a resurgence of interest in contemplative prayer. Thomas Merton, a Mid-Twentieth Century Trappist and mystic noted that "the tragedy of modern man is that his creativity, his spirituality and his contemplative independence are inexorably throttled by a super-ego that has sold itself without compromise to technology."[26] It seems that as we have done more to create, and more to learn about what is created, we have given ourselves wholly into our own creations, yet have felt an emptiness – our own reflections in our creations being poor balm to our souls.

Engagement and Refinement: Different, Yet So Much the Same

In writing about the varying ways people may approach mysticism, and by extension contemplative prayer, Johnston notes that it "may manifest itself in diverse ways according to temperament, education, and culture… it would be disastrous to force everyone in to certain

[25] Kant et al., *Critique of Pure Reason*, 13.
[26] Tuoti, "Contemplative Prayer," 27.

patterns… there is an infinite variety of ways and mysticism may express itself in the most unusual and surprising manner."[27] Indeed, if the definition of contemplative prayer is about the "embrace of unitive love," then the means of contemplation are not as important. However, even in the midst of the differences between each, there were certain familiar aspects to each that helped to easily identify the four prayer traditions as contemplative, be they *kataphatic* or *apophatic*.

I chose to spend a month performing different aspects of Ignatian Spirituality, adapting them from my experiences in working at a campus minister at Gannon University, a Catholic school in Erie, Pennsylvania, and working with students and staff in Busy Person's Retreats, a modernized and shortened way to work through the *Spiritual Exercises*. In the morning, I would spend about 20 minutes walking through each day in the book *Moment by Moment: A Retreat in Everyday Life* by Sr. Carol Ann Smith, SHCJ, a book based of the four weeks in the *Spiritual Exercises*, taking the place of a spiritual director.[28] Each day, the book would indicate a desire – what I would hope to attain by my time, and referenced portions of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Then there would be excepts of suggested Scripture related to the desire for the day. I would choose one based on the movements of the Spirit, and would pray into them as instructed by Ignatius: what were my feelings as I prayed? How did I visualize the characters in the passage? What was around me in the image that caught my attention? Often, I would read the passage multiple times and reflect silently. After a period of time had passed, I reflected on a series of questions posed by the book, often centered around how I can take my reflection and apply it to my life, or how I can be more aware of God's presence outside of my time in reflection. Finally, I would end in prayer.

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[27] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, 31.
[28] This is formally called "the 19th annotation." An online version may be found at http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/cmo-retreat.html

Throughout my day, I would make sure to be acutely aware of situations that occurred with others throughout the day, and how I responded to them. How did I interact with others? With myself?

At the end of each day, I performed the Examen as outlined by Ignatius. The Examen prayer has five steps: "praying for God's light on your experience; praying in gratitude for God's gifts; praying about your response to God's action as experienced through the people and events of the day; praying for God's forgiveness; praying about people and events which will be part of your life in the next day."[29] I would attempt to be more aware of how the morning's contemplations and images reoccurred in the day. In my time of quiet, I was able to meet God in the faces of the Scripture. When I prayed through Luke 5:1-11 as part of the 16th day of the exercise, I could see the looks on the soon-to-be disciples faces as they witnessed Jesus. I felt my own fears of what just happened, awestruck by the power in one person. I then looked at Jesus. He gave an "all-knowing grin," as if to remind me that yes, I am Jesus the Christ. I am a miracle performer, a savior. As Jesus encouraged the disciples to not be afraid, he calmed me, too. During the day, I felt how that knowledge changed my step. In my Examen that night, I found myself ever more thankful to know a God who works with our nets and gives us chances to be frightfully full. I also knew of moments when the nets were empty, but God was still present (that day especially had felt like an empty net day). God was not just in the liminal horizon from the morning, but was in my life as well! Over the course of the month, I found that I became far more careful in the day between the two prayers to observe what was happening; the horizons between what was the God-space and the human-space became more porous, my contrived frameworks deconstructed. This knowledge was

[29] Smith and Merz, *Moment by Moment*, 12–13.

an affirmation of the Ignatian ideal of the contemplative overflow. My time in prayer wasn't something walled off, but instead a way to frame all the world I live in that day.

For all four of the times we gathered as a group to pray in our varying traditions, this theme resonated. No matter if the prayers were more *kataphatic* (the Ignatian and Celtic) or *apophatic* (the Maronite and Quaker), they all resulted in the same thing – an ability for each of us to see meet God more clearly for a moment so that we can see God more clearly once we were done. However, I found that the more *apophatic* traditions encouraged me to slow down even more. I had realized that in my first couple weeks, I had been so eager in my own self-practice to move immediately into imagery, that I did not spend as much time appreciating the "negative" descriptions of God. As a result, in the second half of the month, I spent more time in silence and meditation, utilizing the "centre down" approach of Quaker prayer in order to move "from the head to the heart… in complete trust for the Spirit [to] lead and prompt."[30]

Looking Forward: Growing by Slowing

God is not just in the prayer, the quiet moments. God and the "embrace of unitive love" is in the daybreak smile of my youngest daughter as I help her out of her crib. In the plodding movements of the long-residing tortoise in the stream between the duplexes and McMillian. In the anxiety-infused conversations between peers about the current cultural moments. In the perceived good and bad moments, God is there, inviting each of us to meet God, to touch and be touched.

God is speaking Spanish quietly amid the drone of the leaf blower.

[30] Wier, "Quaker Prayer Practice."

What the experience of different contemplative prayer movements amongst my classmates made me realize is that the only way to see those moments is (to borrow Lathrop's term of worship) "clear the stream" of our lives in moments of deep, contemplative prayer. It is in those moments that we can give up as much of our own freedom and agency and simply trust that God will meet us. It's in those moments that our compasses become recalibrated amidst the disorientation of technology and all of the business of life. To grow, it seems, we need to slow down. This did not only have a resonance with me, but with the entire group, as the four of us have already committed to picking up the same meeting time together next year as we enter our final year in Seminary. Sixty minutes each week helped each of us feel a new connection with one another and with the world around us. We felt embraced. And if there is one feeling worth slowing down for, would it not be embrace of pure, not-quite-describable love from God

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