

The Carmelite Tradition and Centering Prayer Christian Meditation

Introduction:

In this paper I propose to interface the Carmelite tradition on contemplative prayer and two popular forms of contemplative practice called centering prayer and “Christian Meditation.” We are asking how these widely used, current practices fit into that tradition. Do the new forms agree or disagree with past thinking? What does the Carmelite tradition have to say *pro* and *con* about them?

We have a double question: what can Carmelites learn from these new movements and what can centering prayer and Christian Meditation learn from our tradition? These forms are new, though their proponents maintain that they are simply the contemplative tradition of the Church in contemporary dress. How should Carmelites regard them? Are they in continuity with the past and to what extent do they represent something new? These are the questions of this paper.

An Historical Vignette

Let me begin with a little history that sets the stage for our inquiry. One of the first generations of Discalced Carmelite writers, José de J.-M Quiroga (1562-1628) set down the method of mental prayer taught by St John of the Cross. It consisted of three steps: 1) the representation of some mysteries; 2) pondering them; and 3) experiencing the fruit of the process in “an attentive and loving quietude toward God,” “a peaceful, loving and calm quiet of faith,” or a “simple attention to God.”¹ The method was contemplative, because it led into passing moments of contemplation; these moments became longer and longer and soon dominated the prayer.

The moments coalesced into the habit or state of contemplation, as taught by St John of the Cross in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* [2.14.2.]. Thus the habit of contemplation was built up, according to the adage: sow an act and you reap a habit. This result was called acquired contemplation, a contemplative experience of God that by definition could be achieved by ordinary grace and human industry.

Contemplation was thus deemed accessible to any sincere seeker. According to Quiroga, John of the Cross expected his novices to reach at least this state of initial contemplation by the end of the one-year novitiate, an opinion shared by Thomas of Jesus (1564-1627) and others. (Arraj, 64-65).

This thumb-nail history recalls a time very much like our own, a time of great enthusiasm and optimism about reaching contemplation. The concept of an “acquired contemplation” democratized contemplation and made it available to all. John himself spoke explicitly only about the gift of special, infused contemplation, a mystical gift which presumably was not available to everybody. This transitional, acquired contemplation was there for the taking according to the early Discalced teachers, who claimed John of the Cross as warranty for this opinion.

In this paper we accept both kinds of contemplation as valid outcomes of contemplative practice.² We believe that acquired contemplation is the same reality as initial infused contemplation; only the naming and theological explanation are different. The legitimacy of acquired contemplation was defended as recently as the 1940’s by the eminent Discalced Carmelite, Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen.³

Contemplative Prayer Today

We cite this history as a backdrop for the topic of this paper. Today thousands of devout Christians are pondering the mystery of God's presence in daily contemplative prayer. They sit silently before an ikon or the tabernacle and if asked, they would describe their prayer as simple, loving attention beyond words or images. "I look at him and he looks at me." They ponder in very simple attention as John of the Cross' second step directs and they experience a sense of loving presence as in the third step of John of the Cross' method of meditation. The third step in fact is the point of the prayer, its beginning and end. The ability to stay in this posture of attention to God is assumed, and no clear distinction is drawn between the discrete acts and the state of contemplation that is developed.

The ancients postulated a long and consistent effort at daily meditation to reach the state of acquired contemplation — one year was thought sufficient but also necessary among the Carmelites cited above. This view would be considered optimistic by older religious and clergy who were trained to expect progression in mental prayer that saw contemplation as a far-off goal. Now we are being taught to practice directly and immediately a quiet, gentle resting in God that is itself considered to be contemplation and to lead to ever higher degrees of contemplation.

The contemplation that is the outcome of these contemplative acts is seldom defined. The contemporary methods consist in the very acts that were seen as the fruit of the representation and the pondering in John of the Cross' meditation. The contemplation in these contemplative acts is seldom defined. It is left generic in nature, having lost its specificity. In modern writing contemplation describes almost any mental prayer that is silent and wordless, from quiet resting in the divine presence to infused contemplation. Infused contemplation remains as a special mystical gift, admittedly rare and

extraordinary in the spiritual life. But contemplation as such is for everyone to practice in these new methods.

What are these methods? We single out centering prayer, taught by Contemplative Outreach under the leadership of Thomas Keating, and Christian Meditation as developed by John Main and promoted by the World Community for Christian Meditation under the leadership of Laurence Freeman. These two methods of simple, non-discursive, loving attention to God are chosen for study out of a plethora of non-discursive ways of praying, because they are widely known and practiced in North America today. They are lumped together, because they are similar in approach. They have the same roots in the western mystical tradition, and while they have significant differences, they are more alike than different and they offer name recognition for each other

Lectio Divina

Let me introduce these prayers in the context of *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* is the ancient, monastic formula for appropriating the biblical text and for leading the practitioner into the experience of contemplation. A biblical text is read, pondered, prayed over, and finally experienced. The first three acts of *lectio divina* — reading, meditating, praying — culminate in the fourth act of tasting or touching the reality in the text. The fourth act is called contemplation; it is more receptive than the first three, though the whole *lectio divina* in the monastic tradition is a contemplative exercise.

Thomas Keating often presents centering prayer as a way to restore this contemplative dimension of *lectio divina*. For too long the prayer has been too heady and rationalistic; the first three discursive acts have received almost exclusive attention and the final act is neglected. He would correct that imbalance by promoting the fourth act on

its own as the way to renew the contemplative character of *lectio divina*. The Trappists designed a prayer form that begins and ends with the fourth act. This centering prayer is to be practiced methodically and regularly twice a day as the keystone of one's prayer life. Centering prayer does not replace *lectio*, nor is it a new form of *lectio divina*. It is an exercise to sharpen one's contemplative awareness, a way to renew all four acts by raising the contemplative character of a person's life. Christian Meditation has a similar purpose

John Main considers his discipline of meditating to be the traditional, Christian meditation of the past. He is simply renewing the meditative or contemplative practice of the past, and both of these are the same one practice. He calls his prayer "contemplation, contemplative prayer, and meditative practice," all three terms being synonyms of meditation.⁴ John Main's meditation, in his view, is mainline Christian practice from the past, and it is practiced in the rosary or litanies, in the "Jesus prayer" and in the short ejaculatory phrases as taught by John Cassian and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Christian Meditation for him stands on its own as the meditation of the Christian tradition over against the rational, discursive methods of the counter-reformation; it is receptive and non-discursive by definition.

These two methods of prayer represent one answer to the yearning for the experience of God in our time. Centering prayer came out of the sixties and seventies, when many people, youth especially, were turning to Eastern religions and transcendental meditation for spiritual experience and enlightenment. Older spiritually awakened Christians were likewise experiencing a hunger for God and for a deeper prayer life. Both young and old were concerned with the practical question of how to pray contemplatively. They were looking for methods like those available in the Eastern religions.

The architects of these new prayer forms learned from the East, but they based their teaching on the ancient, western mystical tradition. The Trappists at Spencer, Mass developed centering prayer largely from *The Cloud of Unknowing*. John Main discovered Christian Meditation in John Cassian. As a layman he had learned the original lines of his approach from an Eastern swami, but he found his way of meditating in John Cassian and *The Cloud*. John Main made the teaching of contemplative prayer to lay people the life-work of his latter years.

The new styles of contemplative prayer go right to the heart of prayer, seeking experience and contact with the living God in loving faith and quiet presence. The new methods are "spiritual exercises," designed to raise up the whole spiritual life as aerobics or a workout in the gym tone up the physical body. The practice takes place twice daily, for twenty minutes to a half hour, and the two periods are the anchors and the catalysts of the rest of the prayer life of the participant. These two periods represent a conversion, a new commitment that is to be the heart and soul of a new prayer life. The two periods are to be faithfully carried out as the first order of one's prayer life each day. The rest of one's spiritual life is energized from here. The contemplative union fostered in centering prayer or Christian Meditation brings a contemplative dimension to the celebration of liturgy, to bible reading and the practice of *lectio divina*, to vocal prayer, to community life and ministry.

The new methods are not magic. They are providential discoveries of our time, gifts of God that are there for the taking and promising intimacy with God. They are active prayer, but the activity is simple and receptive. One sits before the Lord, and the hoped for outcome is the in breaking of God "from the other side," the divine touch that is God's response to the human efforts, which themselves are antecedently inspired by God.

The contemplation or experience of God is not necessarily verifiable psychologically. The divine visit is validated by the fruits of the Spirit. The person strives to be open and welcoming, to be empty and poor in spirit, and these attitudes are invitations to a deeper divine presence. Whatever the empirical experience in the human consciousness the contemplative activity is bringing about transformation in the depths of the person, and this conversion will show itself in the person's life.

The whole person - body, soul, and spirit — is engaged in the prayer. The body is brought into the process via posture, breathing, relaxation, and the use of a holy word or mantra. The psychological functions of thinking, feeling, willing and loving are definitely in play in muted, simple ways. The main task of the one praying is non-discursive attention by use of the mantra throughout the prayer in Christian Meditation or attending and consenting to the presence of God within and using the sacred word as needed in centering prayer. The one praying is knocking ever so gently at the door of the Spirit deep within, awaiting further action from the indwelling God.

The Carmelite Tradition

We are now ready to look at the Carmelite tradition for its evaluation of these two new methods of prayer. The sources we shall examine are *The Rule of St. Albert*, *The Institution of the First Monks*, the writings of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, and the Touraine reform. I shall identify each of these sources as we address them.

We begin our inquiry with the earliest document of the Carmelite Order, *The Rule of St. Albert*, composed between 1206 and 1214. It was originally a letter from the patriarch of Jerusalem that presented a "formula vitae" or life pattern for the hermits; it was revised into a full-fledged rule by Innocent IV in 1247. This latter is the "primitive rule" in Teresa of

Avila's understanding and the ideal to which she recalled the Order.

The *Rule* describes a life rather than particular practices of prayer. This is brought out by the Dutch artist Arie Trum in the beautiful symbol designed to express the rule entitled "No Image Satisfies." The entire text of the rule is written out in cruciform with a golden circle in the center. The *Rule* leads one into the circle. The circle is empty and it is the place of encounter with God. This empty space represents "purity of heart," which is the condition for full "allegiance to Jesus Christ." (*Rule*, prologue) Emptiness and fullness are the core of the Carmelite rule.

The *Rule* itself is eminently Scriptural, being a collage of explicit and implicit citations. The word of God forms the Carmelite and it is mediated through the liturgy (daily Mass), the psalms (originally read privately, later in the Divine Office), public bible reading at meetings and in the refectory, and above all through *lectio divina* prescribed in the famous chapter VII (n.10 in the new listing): "Let all remain in their cells, or near them, meditating day and night on the law of the Lord and keeping vigil in prayer, unless occupied with other lawful duties." This is the defining chapter of the *Rule*, though the communitarian aspects emphasized in studies today are likewise foundational. The community is the place where personal transformation takes place and ministry originates.

What is the meaning of "meditating" and "keeping vigil in prayer" in this primary text of the *Rule*? The model will be the monastic practice of the time, which came from the Desert Fathers and Mothers through John Cassian and the ancient rules of Pachomius, Basil, and the Master. The monastic practice of the time included many forms of praying, such as Our Father's, the psalms, the Jesus prayer, as well as different ways of reflecting on the word of God. One special way of meditating or pondering the

word of God was repeating phrases of Scripture, often aloud. Cassian develops this method and suggests the words, “God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me”.⁵ This use of a mantra fits the prayer of the heart, which is Thomas Merton’s characterization of meditation in the Desert tradition.⁶ This prayer was not intellectual analysis or active use of the imagination. Prayer of the heart consisted in entering deeply into one’s self to seek purity of heart, i.e., utter detachment and surrender to the indwelling God. The way to the heart was the word of God. Biblical phrases were repeated and pondered as in the Jesus prayer, which is a perfect example of the method followed. The goal was both transformation and continuous, loving conversation with God according to the exhortation of chapter XIV (now nn.18-19), which says: “May you possess the sword of the spirit, which is God’s word, abundantly in your mouth and in your hearts. Just so whatever you do, let it be done in the Lord’s word.”

This way of meditation was the “hagah” tradition of the Old Testament, which consisted in reciting passages from Sacred Scripture aloud from memory and repeating short phrases of the psalms to root the thought in the mind and heart.⁷ The continuous repetition was called “murmuring.” Kees Waaijman describes the practice in an Old Testament context:

One ‘murmured’ the Torah, ‘ruminating’ it until the text had completely become one’s own, and began to ‘sigh from within’ as the cooing of a dove. One made the Torah his own bodily, emotionally, cognitively, memorizing it so that he ultimately became one with Torah⁸

The whole person was involved — the voice, the imagination, the feelings, the mind and heart — and the whole person was to be “clothed” with the word of God. A new person emerged.

The method of meditating, therefore, was not objectified thinking, but pondering the word of God in one’s heart, with one’s whole

interior being in non-discursive attention. Even the mouth and the tongue participated, so that the pondering was physical as well as interior. This was one reason for placing the solitary cells at a distance from each other in order not to disturb the neighbors by noisy prayer.⁹ The end in view, however, was both public praise and the transformation of the person, letting the word of God penetrate one’s very being for a new, personal identity after the Scriptural model.

How close all this is to the mantra of John Main and to a lesser extent to the sacred word of Thomas Keating. The Carmelite is called to the prayer of the heart, a prayer thoroughly contemplative in method and goal. The prayer is holistic as well, involving body and soul. John Main’s “selfless attention” and Thomas Keating’s “consent” to the divine presence are expressed in the ancient practice. All these forms are ways into the golden circle of Arie Trum, where self-emptying makes room for the living God.

The Institution of the First Monks

The same perspectives of the *Rule* are found in the second document under inquiry, *The Institution of the First Monks*, a treatise on Carmelite life written by Philip Ribot in Catalonia in 1370 A.D. The work is a symbolic history of Elijah that is to function as a spiritual directory for the Carmelites who were now living in new circumstances in Europe away from Mount Carmel. Originally the book purported to be history, then it was interpreted to be a record of myths and legends, and today it is regarded as symbolic history, a serious effort to interpret Carmelite life through the life of Elijah. The mystical character of the Order is affirmed in the strongest terms with the same perspectives on emptiness and fullness found in the golden circle of Arie Trum.

The key passage is a commentary on the command to Elijah to “go eastward and hide in the brook Carith,” where he would

“drink of the torrent.” (I Kings 17:2-4). The spiritual or mystical interpretation of these words is as follows:

These words to Elijah...reveal the twofold aim of religious life and the path

God wants us to follow to perfection:

- 1) ‘To offer to God a heart holy and pure from all stain of sin’.
 - * this is attained by our efforts, with the help of God’s grace;
 - * signified in the words ‘hide in Carith’, i.e. in perfect love.
- 2) ‘To taste in our hearts and experience in our minds, not only after death but even in this life, something of the power of the divine presence and the bliss of eternal glory;’.
 - *this is a pure gift of God;
 - *signified in the words ‘ you shall drink of the torrent’,¹⁰

In an unpublished paper delivered at a study week at the Washington Theological Union in September, 1996, Hein Blommestijn used John Cassian to analyze this passage and to show that the twofold purpose is one movement of the Spirit with a proximate objective (*skopos*) and an ultimate goal (*telos*). The *skopos* is to present to God a pure heart; the *telos* to experience God. Like the farmer’s planting and cultivating his field with a view to the harvest, the work of purification is done in view of the experience of God. The first step occurs when one leaves one’s own center and enters the empty circle; there God meets the person in a mystical encounter. The work is all God’s. I enter the center and I become a new person, the result of what God is doing in me. The self-emptying and the encounter continue progressively throughout life. They are one movement with two stages, not first a life of asceticism and then another of mysticism. “Before Elijah could take a single step,” the *Institution* says, “God had already set him in motion.” (Chandler, 5)

The theology of Christian Meditation parallels this perspective of Philip Ribot. The mantra is an exercise in self-emptying. The mantra is the prayer, as Main repeats, and it is an exercise in selfless attention, the experience

of poverty before God. At the same time it is an invitation for God to come and this is the contemplation hoped for in the practice. John Cassian extends the role of the mantra beyond formal prayer into continuous prayer. It will effect purification and union, he says:

Never cease to recite it in whatever task or service or journey you find yourself... This heartfelt thought will prove to be a formula of salvation for you. Not only will it protect you against all devilish attack, but it will purify you from the stain of all earthly sin and will lead you on to the contemplation of the unseen and the heavenly and to that fiery urgency of prayer which is indescribable and which is experienced by very few.¹¹

Centering prayer too has the same tasks of purification and union. Early on its practice reveals and confronts the false self, the wounded believer who is the victim of false emotional patterns of happiness that stand in opposition to the call of grace. These false systems are largely unconscious; centering prayer uncovers them, helps one recognize them as one’s own, then effects their release, much as in the teaching of St John of the Cross about the dark night of the senses. The emphasis on receptive consent in centering prayer hastens the unloading of the unconscious, to use Keating’s phrase, and therefore addresses the work of purification with more intensity.¹² In both Christian Meditation and centering prayer the organic connection between self-emptying and fullness, kenosis and pleroma, is basic to the practice.

St Teresa of Avila

While Teresa had a prayer life before and after she entered Carmel in 1535, she confesses that she did not know how to go about praying until 1538, when she discovered Francis of Osuna’s *Third Spiritual Alphabet*. (BL. 4.7) There she learned in a new way the fact of the divine Indwelling and prayer as contact with the living God. “We need no wings to go in search of him,” she wrote, “but

have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon him present within us.” (WP. 28.2)

Temperamentally Teresa could not search in discursive prayer, nor could she control her restless imagination and memory. Methodical meditation was an impossibility for her. She writes for people like herself, “for souls and minds so scattered that they are like wild horses no one can stop.” (WP. 19.2) Prayer for her was presence, loving presence, a fact she learned from Osuna as the heart of recollection. Recollection was gathering up one’s soul, “collecting all one’s faculties together and entering within itself to be with its Lord.” (WP.28.4) Thus one moves within beyond the confining world of creatures into the sacred space of God.

Active recollection is the person’s own doing. Once recollected one fruitfully practices vocal prayer like the Our Father. Recollection and vocal prayer were Teresa’s mainstay. With gaze fixed on Christ she prayed the Our Father; this double practice was her recommendation for everyone and an easy way to the prayer of quiet. (WP.28.4)¹³

Teresa also practiced and taught a silent prayer of recollection that is remarkably like centering prayer¹⁴. In this prayer the recall of an image from the Passion functioned in the same way as the sacred word. First, Teresa strove to be present to Christ. She used many stratagems to help her find this recollection, such as a book at hand like a Linus blanket to be utilized as needed, inviting favorite saints like Mary Magdalen and the Samaritan woman to accompany her, holy cards, nature scenes. But her main strategy and the very goal of the prayer was “representing Christ interiorly.” (BL.4.7; WP.28.4)

This phrase is peculiarly Teresian. It does not mean imagining Christ – Teresa had little skill in this area. It means realizing that Christ is present now in her soul. This is a real presence of the living Christ. He is there; “your Spouse never takes his eyes off you.”

(WP.26.3) She does not see him; but he is there as if in the darkness, and he can be apprehended the way a blind person recognizes another person in the room. Representing Christ for Teresa means tuning into that real presence.

But, you say, does not Teresa counsel imagining Christ in some mystery of the Passion? Yes, she recommends recalling Christ suffering in Gethsemani or at the pillar when awareness and attention are fading. These recalls are accessories, images to reinvigorate a fading loving attention. They are only means to heighten the sense of presence. They are images to be superimposed on on the reality of the Christ within, to put a face on the faceless Christ. This recall of a gospel scene is the equivalent of the sacred word in centering prayer. It is used as needed to re-focus. The essence of the prayer is attending to the real Christ within; the imaging is totally secondary.

This method soon brought Teresa into mystical experiences of quiet and union. Notice how she connects these graces with the practice of “representing Christ:”

It used to happen, when I represented Christ within me in order to place myself in His presence, or even while reading, that a feeling of the presence of God would come over me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was in me or I totally immersed in Him. This did not occur after the manner of a vision. I believe they call the experience “mystical theology.” (BL. 10.1)

Her full entry into the mystical state came after the long struggle of 18 to 20 years. It took that long to integrate her whole being in God. Throughout this period as well as afterwards her basic strategy at prayer was the prayer of active recollection twice daily for an hour each time. This was a foundation stone of her reform. Today in the contemplative movements there are two briefer periods of similar prayer with the same goal of personal reform and renewal. The different specifications address different life situations

and cultural conditions and are tailored accordingly.

St John of the Cross

John of the Cross has no equivalent of active recollection in his synthesis. He has only two large categories of ways of relating to God, which he calls meditation and contemplation. These two forms describe self-directed activity (meditation) or pure receptivity before God (contemplation). They are adequately distinct from one another. Meditation utilizes our faculties and human potential to come to know and love God, always under grace, and contemplation is infused light and love that are the pure gift of God. Contemplation in both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross is always infused contemplation. John calls meditation a natural operation, contemplation a supernatural one; this terminology is peculiar to Teresa, John, and others of the time.

We saw in the first part of this paper that early followers of John developed a theory of “acquired contemplation” and appealed to his authority for the teaching. For some interpreters acquired contemplation is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. For others the self-directed achievement of a quiet, loving, restful presence to God beyond words and images is a real possibility. Acquired contemplation does not go beyond beginning contemplation, the experience described by John as “loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises (at least discursive, those in which one progresses from point to point)...” (A.2.13.4). This “general, loving awareness” lacks the specific difference that defines infused contemplation, namely, the mystical union of felt experience of God. Acquired contemplation is “ordinary” contemplation in contrast to the extraordinary contemplation of the higher states. It is one possible outcome of active contemplative practice.

Centering prayer and Christian Meditation are definitely active contemplative practice. The loving attention which they espouse comes from one’s own initiative and deliberate choice and is different from the passive loving attention in the presence of infused contemplation, which John describes as the awareness of “a person who opens his eyes with loving attention.” (F.3.33) This latter is pure receptivity, “doing nothing” in the strongest definition of that phrase. Active contemplative practice is doing something and this is why this practice belongs to meditation in John’s schema.

John of the Cross may not speak as directly and volubly to budding contemplatives as does Teresa, but his teaching goes to the essentials. He knows exactly what practitioners of centering prayer and Christian Meditation must do to reach the transforming union. He spells out in detail what *The Rule of St Albert* and *The Institution of the First Monks* laid out in global terms about self-emptying and encountering God. The basis for this common understanding about growth in prayer is the Paschal Mystery, the life principle of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Death and resurrection are achieved in the contemplative through the practice of faith. Faith is the only proximate means of union with God, says John of the Cross, and this principle applies to the whole journey. Why is this so? Because faith screens out all that is not of God in our lives and welcomes God in all God’s truth and beauty. Our Blessed Lady is the perfect example of this principle. She is the woman of faith, who listens and carries out the word of God. She is like a window without spot, so that the sunlight totally dominates it; it is impossible to tell where the sunlight ends and the window begins. In Mary’s case all her choices come from faith; she waits on the word of God and follows it completely. There are no other choices in her life. Thus God dominates her

life; God and her soul (herself) are “one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul” (A.2.5.7.). This is the ultimate goal of all contemplative prayer and the way is the deepening and expansion of the life of faith.

Touraine Reform

The Touraine Reform is the glory of the Ancient Observance of the Carmelite Order. The reform began in the French province of Touraine in 1608 under the leadership of Philip Thibault; (1572-1638); it spread through the lowlands and eventually affected the whole Order. The most famous spiritual leader in the reform was the blind brother, John of St Samson, who has been called the French John of the Cross. The old Order lives by the spirit of Touraine more than any other influence.

Like the Teresian forerunner Touraine was not just *aggiornamento* or updating monastic discipline. It was a return to the primitive spirit of the Order, which Kilian Healy describes as, “a life that was primarily (but not exclusively) contemplative wherein the spirit of solitude, silence and prayer reign supreme.”¹⁵ To this end the reform produced a significant body of spiritual literature, one element of which were four volumes of directories for novices. The fourth volume, whose Latin short title is *Methodus orandi*, treats discursive meditation, affective prayer, the prayer of simple regard (equated with acquired contemplation) as forms of active prayer that dispose the subject for infused contemplation. This is traditional teaching. What is a special contribution is the practice of aspirative prayer or aspirations. This topic receives extended consideration because it is seen as the way to fulfill Chapter VII of the *Rule* and to carry out the very purpose of the Order, which is actual, continuous, loving conversation with God.

Aspirative prayer is a step beyond ejaculations; it is more unctuous, more

affective, and more “mystical” insofar as it is connected with the breathing of the Holy Spirit within the person. Aspirations are not thoughts or phrases, but “darts out of the flaming fire of love,” so that “the most simple affection is worth more than all the thoughts that are written in books.”¹⁶ Aspiratory prayer uses the word as the carrier of tremendous love: “all the affections of the heart are in the one word.”¹⁷ This practice is an expression of the deep conviction of Touraine that contemplative is synonymous with loving, and that the contemplative life is simply a life of deep love of God.

The *Methodus* considers aspiratory prayer an advanced way of praying that builds on previous meditation and affective prayer and looks toward divine union; it is part of the illuminative way. While the practice is not original with the Carmelites, since it comes out of the spirituality of introversion found in Augustine and popular in the lowlands and France at the time, it was adopted by Touraine as germane to the Order’s spirit. John of Saint Samson became its outstanding proponent.

What does aspiratory prayer have to say to centering prayer and Christian Meditation? It signals the primordial role of love in all contemplative prayer. This devotion can enrich the two contemplative forms of prayer by keeping them focused on this quality.

Like everything associated with contemplation in the 17th century aspiratory prayer was presented as a higher form of prayer. Were centering prayer or Christian Meditation to have existed at that time, they would have been restricted to advanced souls. In our day there is no restriction. The two forms are available to all. We are less regimented in relating forms and stages of prayer. In Touraine as in the rest of the Catholic world at the time the four acts of *lectio divina* had become stages of prayer rather than parts of an organic whole. There were four degrees: vocal prayer, meditation,

affective prayer and contemplation. The latter three were correlated with the three stages of spiritual development, namely, the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways. Practitioners were locked into the prayer form that belonged to their state. The words of one great master of the period, Louis Lallemant, were typical: "Everyone should remain faithful to the prayer proper to the degree or state of his [sic] spiritual life."¹⁸

Contemporary thinking breaks out of these hard and fast categories. No doubt some previous experience in mental prayer is helpful for contemplative practice, but it is not deemed essential. This is something new in Catholic thinking. Even the first theorist on *lectio divina*, Guiges II, thought that the four acts were so interconnected that they were always to be performed in sequence, so that "it would be a rare exception or a miracle to gain contemplation without prayer."¹⁹ A different attitude prevails today. Aspirative prayer belongs to the same category as centering prayer and Christian Meditation; in our day it can claim a place with them as a method open to everyone and as a quality inherent in all contemplative prayer.

Conclusion

We come now to the end of our inquiry and draw the following conclusions:

1. The new forms of centering prayer and Christian Meditation relate positively to the Carmelite tradition. Christian Meditation is like a mirror of Chapter VII of the *Rule* and an application of the perspectives of *The Institution of the First Monks*. Centering prayer is like a variant of the active recollection of St Teresa of Avila. The Carmelite tradition has great affinity with these new forms of contemplative prayer.

2. Carmelite prayer is contemplative through and through. Even the method of

mental prayer attributed to John of the Cross by Quiroga is probably closer to the new forms than to the highly rational discursive meditation or even the active imagination of our times, since the pondering (step two) was ordered to the quiet resting in God (step three).

3. The basic assumption of all Carmelite prayer is found in the twofold goal of the Order set down by Philip Ribot, namely, purity of heart and experience of the divine presence. The monastic prayer of the heart was designed to achieve this double goal; it is the prayer of Chapter VII of the *Rule*. Centering prayer and Christian Meditation are forms of that prayer of the heart.

4. The Carmelite tradition emphasizes the fact that the word of God is the way to God. A recent document from the two Fathers General of the Carmelite Order puts it well: "the Word of God in Scripture becomes the Word of God in us to be joined to the Word of God in life."²⁰ Both contemporary methods engage the word of God truly, not in discursive fashion, but concentrated in single words or phrases.

5. The teaching of Touraine on aspirative prayer deserves further study in order to align it with the two forms, either as another contemplative form or a quality of all these methods. Aspirative prayer has special affinity with centering prayer.

In summary our investigation indicates that centering prayer and Christian Meditation are friendly developments, not only in the monastic but also the Carmelite tradition. They are new things and old drawn out of the storehouse of the riches of the western mystical tradition. (Mt 13:52)

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- ¹ The phrases in quotation marks are taken from Quiroga as quoted in James Arraj, *From John of the Cross to Us* (Chiloquin, OR: Inner Growth Books, 1999)103-104. In this book James Arraj reopens the inquiry into acquired contemplation from the viewpoint of St John of the Cross and Carmelites. He believes the concept is a misinterpretation of John of the Cross (e.g. re Thomas of Jesus, pages 78-79). The error is a serious one in his opinion, because it caused the Quietist errors of the 17th century and the low esteem and malaise about mysticism in the 18th and 19th centuries. [Subsequent references to this book as well as to other sources cited in this paper will be indicated by author and page within the text.]
- ² The tangled controversy about acquired contemplation is largely laid to rest today in favor of a broad description of the experience of contemplation. This irenic interpretation is offered in my recent article, "Contemporary Prayer Forms – Are they Contemplation?" in *Review for Religious* 57(1998)77-87.
- ³ *St. John of the Cross, Doctor of Divine Love, with Acquired Contemplation*, the latter a translation of a 1938 Latin text (Cork: Mercier, 1946).
- ⁴ 4, *Talks on Meditation* (Montreal, 1979)10.
- ⁵ *Conferences of John Cassian* 10.19 (tr Colum Luibheid, New York: Paulist, 1985) 185-186. Simon Tugwell points out that Guigo II, one of the earliest architects of *lectio divina*, equated "meditating" with "repeating" the word. See his **Ways of Imperfection** (Springfield: Templegate, 1985)94-95. Later he points out that the word "meditate" actually means "repeat." p.105.
- ⁶ See William H. Shannon, **Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey** (Cincinnati: St Anthony, 2000) 188-205. Merton's "meditation" is the contemplative prayer described in these pages.
- ⁷ Keith J. Egan, "Contemplative Meditation: a Challenge to the Tradition," an essay to appear in *Spirituality for Ministry*, II (ed. Robert J Wicks, New York: Paulist, 2000)
- ⁸ In **Albert's Way** (ed. Michael Mulhall, O.Carm., Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1989)89.
- ⁹ Kaes Waaijman, O.Carm., **The Mystical Space of Carmel** (Amsterdam:Peeters,1999) [in ms. Page 58, citing Decem Libri 8.4]
- ¹⁰ Philip Ribot, O.Carm., **Institution of the First Monks**,1.2, as quoted by Paul Chandler,O.Carm.in **A Workbook** on this document (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1992)7.
- ¹¹ **Conferences**, 10.14.
- ¹² Cynthia Bourgeault, "From Woundedness to Union," *Review for Religious* 58(Mar-Apr, 1999) 158-167.
- ¹³ Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, "Introduction" to Teresa of Avila, **The Interior Castle** New York: Paulist, 1979)12-15,
- ¹⁴ Teresa describes active recollection in **WP**. 28-29; **IC** 4.3 and 6.7. I have analysed Teresa's personal experience of this prayer in **BL** in "Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer," **Carmelite Studies III** (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1984) 203-209. This description parallels Thomas Alvarez, OCD in his beautiful exposition in **Living with God, St Teresa's Concept of Prayer** (Dublin: Carmelite Centre of Spirituality, n.d.) 12-18.
- ¹⁵ **Methods of Prayer in the Directory of the Carmelite Reform of Touraine** (Rome:Institutum Carmelitanum, 1956)16.
- ¹⁶ *Methodus*, cited in Healy, 63.
- ¹⁷ John Brenninger, O.Carm., **The Carmelite Directory of the Spiritual Life** (tr.Leo J. Walter, O.Carm., Chicago: Carmelite Press, 1951)471. This manual has an excellent treatment of aspirative prayer, as does Venard Poslusney, O.Carm.,**Prayer, Aspiration, and Contemplation** (Asbury, N.J., 1994).
- ¹⁸ Cited in Paul Philippe, O.P. "Mental Prayer in the Catholic Tradition," in **Mental Prayer and Modern Life, a Symposium** (tr.Francis C. Lehner, New York: Kennedy, 1950)3.
- ¹⁹ **Scala claustralium**, cited in Philippe, 23.
- ²⁰ "Passing through the Holy Door", Circular Letter of the OCD-OCarm General Superiors at the beginning of the Third Millenium (Rome, 1999)12.