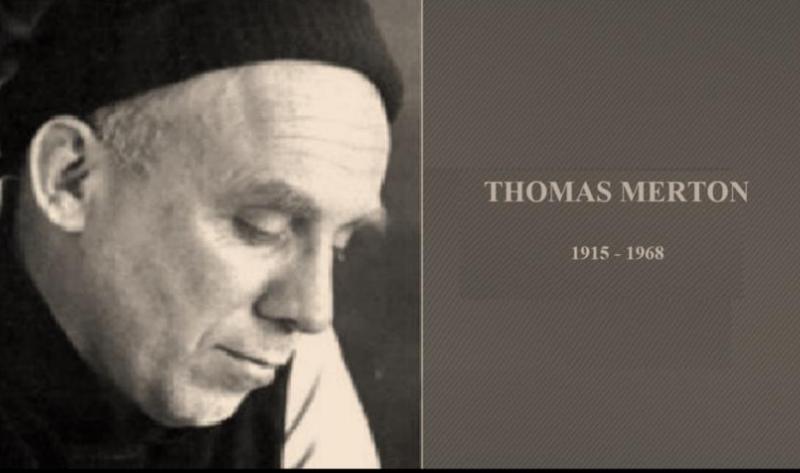


Renovare Devotional Classic for Spiritual
Formation Forums – October 21st 2018



**WAYS OF
MEDITATION**

Renovare Devotional Classic
Sunday 10/21 @ 10 am
Great Hall

Epiphany Seattle
Spiritual Formation Series

Background

Born in Prades, France, Thomas Merton (1915 – 1968) had a trying and painful childhood – his mother died when he was six, and his father (an artist who moved from place to place, often leaving young Thomas unattended) died when he was fifteen. In his teens and early twenties Merton led a prodigal, sensual life in his search for fulfillment.

In his mid-twenties Merton experienced a profound conversion while attending Columbia University, and he joined the Roman Catholic church. At the age of twenty-six he entered Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky where he would live the rest of his life as a Trappist monk.

In 1948 he published *The Seven Storey Mountain*, an autobiography that mirrored the spiritual climate of the times. It quickly became an international best-seller. Merton went on to write many more books that made a significant impact on the face of Western spirituality. Known for his journal writing, meditations, and social critique, Merton continues to influence the spirituality of our times in many ways.

Some criticize his attempts to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western spirituality, but he never surrendered his belief in the importance of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In the same vein, Merton also held a delicate balance between the inner and the outer life – contemplation and action. Because of this he was able to have an influence not only in the Church, but in the secular world as well.

His accidental death in 1968 was a tragic loss, yet Merton continues to inspire countless women and men. The following excerpts come from a little book he wrote for fellow monks, but it contains priceless wisdom for all Christians who long to go deeper in the spiritual life.

Excerpts from *Contemplative Prayer*

1. Magical Methods

In meditation we should not look for a “method” or a “system,” but cultivate an “attitude,” and “outlook”: faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy. All of these finally permeate our being with love in so far as our living faith tells us we are in the presence of God, that we live in Christ, that in

the Spirit of God we “see” God our Father without “seeing.” We know him in “unknowing.” Faith is the bond that unites us to him in the Spirit who gives us light and love.

Some people may doubtless have a spontaneous gift for meditative prayer. This is unusual today. Most people have to learn to meditate. There are *ways* of meditation. But we should not expect to find magical methods, systems which will make all difficulties and obstacles dissolve into thin air.

2. Hardship in Prayer

Meditation is sometimes quite difficult. If we bear with hardship in prayer and wait patiently for the time of grace, we may well discover that meditation and prayer are very joyful experiences. We should not, however, judge the value of our meditation by “how we feel.” A hard and apparently fruitless mediation may in fact be much more valuable than one that is easy, happy, enlightened, and apparently a big success.

There is a “movement” of meditation, expressing the basic “paschal” rhythm of the Christian life, the passage from death to life in Christ. Sometimes prayer, meditation, and contemplation are “death” – a kind of descent into our own nothingness, a recognition of helplessness, frustration, infidelity, confusion, ignorance. Note how common this theme is in the Psalms (see Pss 39, 56).

Any effort and sacrifice should be made in order to enter the kingdom of God. Such sacrifices are amply compensated for by the results even when the results are not clear and evident to us. But effort is necessary, *enlightened, well-directed, and sustained.*

3. Mere Good Will

Right away we confront one of the problems of the life of prayer: that of learning when one’s efforts are enlightened and well-directed and when they spring simply from our confused whims and our immature desires. It would be a mistake to suppose that mere good will is, by itself, a sufficient guarantee that all our efforts will finally attain to a good result. Serious mistakes can be made even with the greatest good will.

Certain temptations and delusions are to be regarded as a normal part of the life of prayer. But when we think we have attained a certain degree of skill in contemplation, we may find ourselves getting all kinds

of strange ideas. We may even cling to them with a fierce dedication, convinced that they are supernatural graces and signs of God’s blessing upon our efforts when, in fact, they simply show that one has gone off the right track and is perhaps in serious danger.

4. Guiding the Beginner

For this reason, humility and docile acceptance of sound advice are very necessary in the life of prayer. Though spiritual direction may not be necessary in the ordinary Christian life, and though a monk may be able to get along to some extent without it (many have to!), it becomes a moral necessity for anyone who is trying to deepen his or her life of prayer.

The spiritual director is someone who is capable of guiding the beginner in the ways of prayer and detecting any sign of misguided zeal and wrong-headed effort. Such a one should be listened to and obeyed, especially when the director cautions against the use of certain methods and practices which he sees to be out of place or harmful in a particular case, or when he declines to accept certain “experiences” as progress.

5. Resisting God

The right use of effort is determined by the indications of God’s will and grace. When one is simply obeying God, a little effort can produce good results.

On the contrary, the stubborn ability to go on resisting God in spite of ever clearer indications of his will is a sign that one is in great spiritual danger. Quite often we are not able to see this in ourselves. This is another reason why a spiritual director may be really necessary.

The work of the spiritual director consists not so much in teaching us a secret and infallible method for attaining to esoteric experiences, but in showing us how to recognize God’s grace and his will, how to be humble and patient, how to develop insight into our own difficulties, and how to remove the main obstacles keeping us from becoming people of prayer.

6. The “Tricks” of the Spiritual Life

These obstacles may have very deep roots in our character, and in fact we may eventually learn that a whole lifetime will barely be sufficient for their removal. For example, many people who have a few natural gifts and a little ingenuity tend to imagine that they can quite easily learn, by their own cleverness, to master

the methods – one might say the “tricks” – of the spiritual life.

The only trouble is that in the spiritual life there are no tricks and no shortcuts. Those who imagine that they can discover spiritual gimmicks and put them to work for themselves usually ignore God’s will and his grace. They are self-confident and even self-complacent. They make up their minds that they are going to attain to this or that and try to write their own ticket in the life of contemplation.

They may even appear to succeed to some extent. But certain systems of spirituality – notable Zen Buddhism – place great stress on a severe, no-nonsense style of direction that makes short work of this kind of confidence. One cannot begin to face the real difficulties of the life of prayer and meditation unless one is first perfectly content to be a beginner and really experience himself as one who knows little or nothing and has a desperate need to learn the bare rudiments. Those who think they “know” from the beginning will never, in fact, come to know anything.

7. Imprisoned in Themselves

People who try to pray and meditate above their proper level, who are too eager to reach what they believe to be “a high degree of prayer,” get away from the truth and from reality. In observing themselves and trying to convince themselves of their advance, they become imprisoned in themselves. Then when they realize that grace has left them, they are caught in their own emptiness and futility and remain helpless. *Acedia* (sloth, or apathy in spirit) follows the enthusiasm of pride and spiritual vanity. A long course in humility and compunction is the remedy!

8. A Brave and Absurd Attempt to Evade Reality

Another obstacle – and perhaps this one is most common – is spiritual inertia, inner confusion, coldness, lack of confidence. This may be the case of those who, after having made a satisfactory beginning, experience the inevitable let-down which comes when the life of mediation gets to be serious.

What at first seemed easy and rewarding suddenly comes to be utterly impossible. The mind will not work. One cannot concentrate on anything. The imagination and the emotions wander away. Sometimes they run wild. At this point, perhaps, in the midst of a prayer that

is dry, desolate, and repugnant, unconscious fantasies may take over. These may be unpleasant and even frightening. More often, one’s inner life simply becomes a desert which lacks all interest whatever.

This may no doubt be explained as a passing trial, but we must face the fact that it is often more serious than that. It may be the result of a wrong start in which a blockage has appeared, dividing the “inner life” from the rest of one’s existence. In this case, supposed “inner life” may actually be nothing but a brave and absurd attempt to evade reality altogether.

9. Firmly Rooted in Life

Under the pretext that what is “within” is in fact real, spiritual, supernatural, etc., one cultivates neglect and contempt for the “external” as worldly, sensual, material, and opposed to grace. This is bad theology and bad asceticism. In fact, it is bad in every respect because instead of accepting reality as it is, we reject it in order to explore some perfect realm of abstract ideas which in fact has no reality at all.

Very often the inertia and repugnance which characterize the so-called “spiritual life” of many Christians could perhaps be cured by a simple respect for the concrete realities of every-day life, for nature, for the body, for one’s work, one’s friends, one’s surroundings, etc.

A false supernaturalism which imagines that “the supernatural” is a kind of realm of abstract essences (as Plato imagined) that is totally apart from and opposed to the concrete world of nature offers no real support to a genuine life of meditation and prayer. Meditation has no point unless it is firmly rooted in life.

Bible Selection: Psalm 39

¹ I said, “I will guard my ways
that I may not sin with my tongue;
I will keep a muzzle on my mouth
as long as the wicked are in my presence.”

² I was silent and still;
I held my peace to no avail;
my distress grew worse,
³ my heart became hot within me.

While I mused, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:

⁴ "LORD, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.

⁵ You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. *Selah*

⁶ Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
they heap up, and do not know who will gather.

⁷ "And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?
My hope is in you.

⁸ Deliver me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the scorn of the fool.

⁹ I am silent; I do not open my mouth,
for it is you who have done it.

¹⁰ Remove your stroke from me;
I am worn down by the blows^[a] of your hand.

¹¹ "You chastise mortals
in punishment for sin,
consuming like a moth what is dear to them;
surely everyone is a mere breath. *Selah*

¹² "Hear my prayer, O LORD,
and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears.
For I am your passing guest,
an alien, like all my forebears.

¹³ Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,
before I depart and am no more."

Extra Credit

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smMQCemaNOU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3da9g5tpDPw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULPINGy2SQU&list=PLaa6tc6a805znFQUB9ZObvUQDfGILFFHG>

Epiphany is a Place of Gathering and Conversation
Epiphany Parish is place where belonging takes precedence,
and relationship is primary – relationships between
individuals and their own innate gifts, among people, and
between people and God

Epiphany Promises You

Belonging over believing

Relationship is primary

Doubt is welcome

Conversion-free zone

No obligations, fees or expectations

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