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Professor of Historical Theology

University of Portland

Author of *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine’s Early  
Figurative Exegesis*

# Contemplating Christ

*The Gospels and the Interior Life*

Vincent Pizzuto



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To  
Forrest  
*who loves to fetch sticks*

“My dog is better than I am,  
because he loves and does not judge.”  
~ Abba Xanthios, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*



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# Introduction

The incarnation has made mystics of us all. What if we read the gospels as if that were true? This book is an attempt to do just that.

As an Episcopal priest and college professor, I have made a pastoral commitment to share insights from the Christian intellectual tradition with the broader church and society, especially from my own passionate interest in biblical studies and contemplative spirituality. Despite an abundance of accessible literature in both, most people in our churches today remain completely unaware of the modern methods of interpretation that inform our understanding of the Scriptures, and have no idea that there is an ancient and integral contemplative tradition within Christianity. As a result, whether teaching or preaching from the tradition, I am often confronted with the same question, “Why have we never heard this before?” Mixed with excitement and regret, questions like this betray a hunger for a more thoughtful interpretation of the BIBLE and a deeper intimacy with the beauty of Christian faith.

In response, I simply point to what is most beautiful and central to Christian faith: *the incarnate Christ*. In doing so, it is my hope that those who seek to live a contemplative life in the world today will be given a deeper appreciation of the Scriptures and the distinctive heritage of the Christian mystical tradition. Too many are still unaware of the treasure trove of resources available to them. Centuries of witnesses, beginning with Scripture itself, up through the present day, convey the spiritual wisdom of those who have given their lives over to contemplating Christ in a commitment to meditative prayer, ASCETICISM, and a radical fidelity to love.

Much of the popular literature that has surfaced in the areas of Scripture and spirituality over the past several decades is insightful, though at times oversimplified, no doubt in order to be made more accessible to a lay readership. I am attempting to walk something of a thin line in this presentation of the same. On the one hand, I wish to minimize as far as possible the depth of insight that is inevitably lost when a long and complex tradition is too readily simplified for the sake of accessibility. On the other hand, I have written this book not primarily for the academic community but for the broader Christian church, and more specifically for those who long, even vaguely, for a more sustained commitment to a kind of contemplative interiority for which there is so little support or even awareness in many of our churches today. Perhaps something of the reader's spiritual life may be rekindled (or dare I hope, set ablaze!) not by this book, but by the beauty of the Christian contemplative life that they discover through it.

However, if we are to read biblical texts with a view to the interior life, writing to a broad readership presents a unique challenge. There is a vast amount of scholarship in both disciplines to which I cannot presume all will have had equal exposure. I have attempted to address this in two distinct ways in order to increase the reader's theological understanding of biblical interpretation and CONTEMPLATION in service of deepening their meditative practices.

First, in anticipation of certain theological terms with which some readers may not be familiar, all words appearing in SMALL CAPITALS can be found in the appended glossary so as to advance the reader's basic comprehension of the primary themes. Becoming familiar with new concepts will help to connect the reader to a world that otherwise remains distant and off-putting.

Second, my citations will be kept to a minimum and appear at the end of the book rather than at the bottom of every page. Most of these are simply references to my sources, with only a few that serve as explanatory comments. This should leave the more casual reader unencumbered with details that may be of less interest,

while those who wish to explore further resources will find them readily accessible.

The purpose of this book, then, is threefold. First, to explore central themes of the contemplative life for modern Christians through the lens of New Testament readings—most especially the gospels. Second, to reflect on what is unique to Christian MYSTICISM, particularly as this comes to expression in the interrelated doctrines of INCARNATION and DIVINIZATION. Third, to offer a variety of ways in which these aspects of the contemplative life might become actualized, or more so “embodied” in each of us through contemplative practice.

To that end, the first chapter provides an overview of the theology of DEIFICATION by exploring the relationship between the Scriptures and Christian mysticism. Deification is an ancient Christian doctrine that affirms the belief that through the incarnation, through which God took on human nature, so too humanity has been made “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). I will explore the most prominent scriptural passages that support this doctrine and its implications for the Christian contemplative life.

Building upon the theology of deification, chapter 2 will reflect on the incarnation as the divine response to the human condition of alienation as portrayed in the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve (Gen 2–3). We will look at the real-world consequences of humanity’s mythical “exile from paradise” and how the various aspects of the Eden myth inform a Christian understanding of the human EGO, the human struggle with insatiable longing, and the near-universal fear of mortality. In exploring the interplay between myth and history, I will explain how the incarnate Christ, whose presence permeates the cosmos, shifts the dynamic of the interior life for the Christian contemplative. The spiritual life can no longer be understood as humanity in search of God, but God in search of humanity.

Chapter 3 turns to the INFANCY NARRATIVES of Matthew and Luke, as well as the prologue of John, to reflect on the incarnation

as the historical moment in which God interrupts humanity's perceived exile in an inconceivable offer of divine-human intimacy. An extended interpretation of Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) will offer parallels with the Eden myth, now read through the lens of the incarnation. Understood now, not only as a past moment but an interior reality in the heart of the contemplative, the incarnation marks an end to our exile from Eden not because we have found our way back, but because God has united divinity with humanity in our deification.

Having established this union with God as a *fait accompli* through the incarnation, the fourth chapter is devoted to our struggle with our inner "demons" that prevent us from living fully into the reality of our deification. The chapter reasserts the necessity of the ascetical life for Christian contemplatives while redefining the role, purpose, and practice of asceticism for the modern church. Drawing from the rich history of ascetical practice in Christianity, I will redefine modern approaches to asceticism as a commitment to the "love of the beautiful." A love of beauty, however, not as the world defines it, but as the Gospel reveals it, especially as symbolized most starkly in the cross.

The final chapter weaves together the threads of the previous themes in an exploration of "contemplative discipleship" as the embodiment of prayer. For contemplatives living in society the relationship between prayerful solitude and active engagement in the world is explored through Meister Eckhart's interpretation of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42. Here the theme of deification is extended to his unavoidable conclusion: discipleship is not about us serving Christ but Christ serving others in us. The interior movement of becoming an authentic disciple is a movement by which oppressive boundaries between oneself and others are transgressed and ultimately dropped, until one drops the greatest obstacle of all: the perception of separation from others. As deified members of Christ's body, or "other Christs" in the world, discipleship is patterned on the paschal mystery by which we all must take up our cross and die to self so that Christ might rise in us.

This work has been a long time in the making and I am happy to bring it to completion, or at least to that point where I might offer it to those who would be inclined to spend some time with it. Yet, I am well aware that what I have written here will remain static even as my intellectual interests and spiritual life continue to evolve. In some ways, I both hope and dread that ten or twenty years from now I will look back upon this work with some sense of embarrassment—much as an adult blushes when reading his or her childhood journal.

But whatever brings me to that future place of greater intellectual and spiritual maturity, it will not be without the responses of those who read this book. Indeed, I am poignantly aware that this work should end more properly with a question mark than a period. It is intended to be more inquisitive than authoritative, to invite questions rather than propose once-for-all answers. It is but one voice—and a small one at that—in a much broader conversation. But at its heart is a sincere, and—if I might admit—a loving attempt to share with you the beauty and joy I have come to know in my brief lifetime of contemplating Christ.

## Chapter Five

# Becoming Prayer

## *Discipleship and the Interior Life*

*I believe that the cross will not be satisfied until that point when it has destroyed in you everything that is not the will of God.*

—Paul Claudel, *The Satin Slipper*

“You can read all the cookbooks in the world,” an old monk once told me, “but until you feel the heat of the oven, you will never bake a loaf of bread!” No book about the contemplative life can ever replace the heat of the oven. As the Desert Mothers and Fathers famously taught, “Go into your cell and your cell will teach you everything.” The cell is the place where one learns to pray or, rather, where one becomes an apprentice of the Spirit who prays through us:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom 8:26-27)

The contemplative life is a school of love by which the Spirit intercedes in us with sighs too deep for words. It is a life radically oriented toward God who is radically oriented toward us. To cultivate silence and solitude, prayer and asceticism is to cultivate the love of God in one's heart. This is the mind of the Spirit and the will of God: that we come to know ourselves as other Christs in the world. This is what it means to live into our deification. And in this school of love the cell is of central importance. In the foreword to her translation of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Benedicta Ward observes:

The aim of the monk's lives was not asceticism, but God, and the way to God was charity. . . . The monks went without sleep because they were watching for the Lord; they did not speak because they were listening to God; they fasted because they were fed by the word of God. It was the end that mattered, the ascetic practices were only a means. The cell was of central importance in their asceticism. . . . The point was that unless a man could find God in this one place, his cell, he would not find him by going somewhere else. But they had no illusions about what it meant to stay in the cell: it meant to stay there in mind as well as in body. To stay there in body, but to think about the outside world, was already to have left it.<sup>1</sup>

To stay in the cell with both mind and body is to feel the heat of the oven. But what does that mean for contemplatives living in the world? As Ward observes, the cell is more than just a physical location; it is a spiritual state. To find a cell—a place of prayerful solitude into which one can advance at regular intervals—is a great gift for those who wish to embrace the contemplative life: a room (or the corner of a room!) with a door that can be closed, a park bench, a patch of grass under a favorite tree, a solitary pew in the back of a cavernous church where one can get lost in an otherwise bustling city. Wherever your cell might be—find it and go there. Go there often. And once you are there, remain there even when you feel the heat of the oven—the dryness, the boredom, the

distraction, the display of memories good and painful, the waves of feelings, questions, and emotions. And yes, the demons.

The location of the cell does not matter. It is only a doorway to the spiritual cell you carry in the little space of your own heart. And if your circumstances do not permit you a stable place to return, there is nothing to prevent you from entering the interior cell of your heart even in the midst of daily life. St. Francis de Sales instructed,

Always remember . . . to retire at various times into the solitude of your own heart even while outwardly engaged in discussions or transactions with others. This mental solitude cannot be violated by the many people who surround you since they are not standing around your heart but only around your body. Your heart remains alone in the presence of God.<sup>2</sup>

St. Francis of Assisi, among the most beloved contemplatives of the church, did not himself live in a monastery but famously declared, “The world is my cloister, my body is my cell, and my soul is the hermit within!”<sup>3</sup> The expansive sense of the world as one’s cell—the arena of divine encounter—assumes that true solitude need not be sought out but is something we carry with us, in our own bodies, even as we engage the world around us. For Christians living in mainstream society, the relationship between solitary prayer and socially engaged action is central to our understanding of contemplative discipleship.<sup>4</sup> This is because contemplative discipleship is not merely the result, or outcome, or flowering of a life of prayer but is its very embodiment. It is not simply that meditation gives rise to action or occurs alongside it but that prayer and action mutually interpenetrate one another. We might speak at once of prayerful action and action shot through with prayer. The disciples whom Jesus taught to enter daily solitude and pray in secret (Matt 6:6) were the same disciples sent out into the world two by two (Mark 6:7).

Through the cultivation of interior silence, Christ transforms us into salt of the Earth and light of the world (Matt 5:13, 14). In

his darkest hour he implores the apostles, “Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand before the Son of man” (Luke 21:36). In Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians he writes, “Always be joyful; pray without ceasing; and for all things give thanks; this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus” (5:16-18). And again, in Colossians 4:2, “Be persevering in your prayers and be thankful as you stay awake to pray.” The life of a Christian is a life of incessant prayer, joyfulness, and wakefulness; a wakefulness that cultivates interior serenity and gratitude even in the midst of one’s going out into the world.

Thus, the vocation to “pray without ceasing” is not an appeal to say prayers without ceasing but rather to *embody* prayer in all we do. It is less about saying grace and more about eating *gracefully*, eating *thankfully*. It is less about what one experiences in the solitude of meditation than it is about how solitary prayer expands into one’s entire life, one’s whole existence: much like the ripple effect of dropping a stone into a pond. Our actions radiate outward from the ground of our being. This is the action that arises not from the thoughts and judgments of our mind but from the silence of compassion that we embody. We do not go forth from our solitude to serve the world but serve the world by including those around us in its circumference. This intersection between prayerful solitude and a compassionate engagement in the world is something we might call “contemplative discipleship” and is the theme of this chapter.

## Contemplative Discipleship

The church cannot be reduced to a social program. It is first and foremost a spiritual entity: the *incarnatio continua*, or “continuing incarnation.” Thus, for the church to be an effective agent of transformation in the world, its members must first be transformed in Christ. Contemplative discipleship is the fruit of contemplative discipline: an interior awakening to Christ in all. The Christ who dwells within, and of whom I am an extension, is the same Christ I serve in all. The two cannot be separated. Contemplative discipleship

is the fruit of prayer, action born of interior stillness, speech born of silence. To forget this is to conflate Christian discipleship with social activism.

However, the relationship between contemplation and active ministry has been open to a broad spectrum of interpretations throughout the history of the church. Traditionally, members of monastic orders discouraged active engagement in the world because it was seen as a distraction to a life devoted to incessant prayer and interior transformation. MENDICANT orders, like Franciscans and Carmelites, have sought ways to synthesize contemplation and active ministry around their communal life. The establishment of oblates and Third Order movements were designed to assist the laity in adopting the rule or charism of their monastic counterparts as best they could while living in the world. These various approaches to the contemplative life—monastic, mendicant, and oblate—have been perceived somewhat hierarchically, often privileging the monastic vocation over others. This tendency is reflected in much of Christian spiritual literature because it has been written largely within monastic circles.

However, as hierarchical distinctions between religious orders and the laity have given way to a renewed emphasis on the universal call to holiness (1 Thess 3:13; 5:23), it is incumbent to ask anew what it means for modern Christians to commit to a life of prayer that is not merely an adapted or diluted form of monasticism. Raising such questions should not engender a sense of competition among the many authentic contemplative vocations in the church; nor should one insinuate there are sharp distinctions between them when in fact they are distinguished only by different accents or emphases.

In an earlier age, before one was expected to be a hermit to be a contemplative, the Christian summons to prayer was more clearly universal in its scope. The writings of the early church fathers abound with instructions on the life of prayer ordered to the daily rhythm of creation—sunrise, midday, sunset, midnight.

Prayer is not merely a discursive activity of the mind. We pray, too, with the body: standing, kneeling, lying prostrate, facing east,

enfolding oneself in the sign of the cross. As in death, we lie down at night with Christ who was laid in the tomb. Before dawn we rise in prayer, signing ourselves again in praise of the living Christ whose resurrection light fills the darkness. At the break of day, we awaken to pray facing east where the sun rises as surely as the Son rose from the tomb. In the bright light of midday, we pause to remember the darkest hour of Christ's crucifixion. Days and seasons, springtime and winter, sowing and harvest, the rhythms and cycles of the cosmos betray an intimate link between creation and redemption. All of nature is a theophany of divine presence, a doxology of praise, a cosmic liturgy to which the Christian is called to the fullness of participation.

All time is sanctified and all creation permeated with the paschal mystery of Christ's dying and rising, inviting Christians to pattern their entire lives in wakeful vigilance with Christ. So, the concluding antiphon of Night Prayer:

Protect us Lord as we stay awake;  
watch over us as we sleep,  
that awake we may keep watch with Christ,  
and asleep rest in his peace. (*The Liturgy of the Hours*)

Many have suggested contemplative prayer is not a prayer of speaking but a prayer of listening. Yet, this does not go far enough. Contemplative prayer is a prayer of *being*. This is why the practice of meditation is almost universally associated with deep breathing. Our breath most immediately binds us to life. Contemplative prayer opens us to the fullness of life, the fullness of being. It is not something I do in addition to my daily activities as much as it is a way of doing everything else that I do. Meister Eckhart insists that for all who truly possess God, the work they do in the world is more genuinely God's work than their own:

Now if a man truly has God with him, God is with him everywhere, in the street or among people just as much as in church

or in the desert or in a cell. If he possesses God truly and solely, such a man cannot be disturbed by anybody. Why? He has only God, thinks only of God, and all things are for him nothing but God. Such a man bears God in all his works and everywhere, and all that man's works are wrought purely by God—for he who causes the work is more genuinely and truly the owner of the work than he who performs it.<sup>5</sup>

To see Christ in all is to see Christ not only in all people but so too in all times, in all places, and in all things. As Merton observed, every moment contains a fertile seed that has the potential to give life.<sup>6</sup> A regular commitment to solitary prayer and asceticism tills the soil of our hearts to better prepare us to receive the life-giving seeds of the Spirit. But tilled soil is no guarantee of a good crop, and a singular seed generously sown may unexpectedly flourish in a field left fallow. In the same manner, prayer and asceticism cannot be reduced to a method or technique that will guarantee a desired outcome or enlightened state. As Origen of Alexandria summarized eloquently,

[One] prays unceasingly who combines prayer with necessary duties and duties with prayer. Only in this way can we find it practicable to fulfill the commitment to pray always. It consists in regarding the whole of Christian existence as a single great prayer. What we are accustomed to call prayer is only a part of it.<sup>7</sup>

## **On the Jesus Prayer**

The part of prayer we frequently mistake for the whole of it is often called “meditation” or “active contemplation.” As we will see below, Meister Eckhart says that the only way of prayer is the “wayless way.” Moreover, if it is true that all of Christian existence is “a single great prayer,” then to present a so-called method of prayer runs the risk of falsely conveying the idea that prayer is an independent category of the spiritual life rather than a manner of being that pervades all we do. Yet, if we are to understand what it

means to stay in the cell in “mind as well as body,” as Benedicta Ward observed, we must know what to do with the mind while the body is resting in the solitude of the cell. Recall Ward’s assessment: “To stay [in the cell] in body, but to think about the outside world, [is] already to have left it.” In other words, if silence and solitude are necessary ingredients for baking the bread of prayer, what do you do with those essential ingredients once you have them? Or rather, what does God do with them in you? It is one thing for St. Francis to urge us to retire into the solitude of our hearts, “even while outwardly engaged in discussions or transactions with others,” but what does that look like interiorly? Moreover, for contemplatives living in society, how does the prayer of interior silence come to expression communally?

There are numerous books on prayer—both ancient and modern—that explore these questions thoroughly.<sup>8</sup> Without attempting to summarize or evaluate them here, I will simply introduce the way of prayer that I have embraced for over thirty years. If you find yourself drawn to it, adopt it; if not, find a way that most moves you to love.

The *Invocation of the Name* or, more simply, the *Jesus Prayer*, is a prayer that can be traced back to the New Testament (Luke 18:10-14) with more explicit references dating to the early seventh century. The form of the prayer is brief: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Yet as long as the name “Jesus” is invoked, the prayer may be reduced to any portion of this phrase, as, for example, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy,” or simply “Jesus.” When praying the Jesus Prayer, one simply calls upon the name “Jesus” repeatedly in the heart. It may be whispered on the lips or invoked interiorly in silence. The prayer is not prayed as if to call Christ from a distant place. It is prayed to the indwelling Christ of whose body we are extensions. It is prayed to Jesus, intimately present, and thus should be prayed quietly, whispered softly as if to our beloved, not forced or strained.

As thoughts, emotions, and memories arise you will find yourself distracted or you may realize at some point you have dropped the

repetition of the name. Do not become anxious or frustrated. Simply return to the invocation of the name. Distraction is not a sign of failure. It is simply the mind doing what it has evolved to do: to think, evaluate, imagine, observe. Give thanks for a healthy mind and gently allow the name of Jesus to rise up again in your heart. Some find it helpful to associate the recitation of the name with their breathing. This can help ground your prayer in the silence of your body rather than in the chattiness of your mind. That is to say, allowing the prayer to ride upon your breath helps to ground you in the present moment by keeping you conscious of your body—uniting both body and mind in the cell of your heart.

Inasmuch as Jesus is the Word of God, the Holy Spirit is the breath of God. As we pray the name of Jesus we too breathe the Spirit, echoing the very love of God in whom Word and Spirit are spoken from all Eternity. Thus, the association of your prayer with your breath is a participation in the life of the triune God within you, and should thus instill a sense of peace and interior recollection. As you pray, you need not strain your breathing in any way. Breathe naturally, and if it feels right, repeat the name slowly and gently with each breath.

Consider finding regular times in a given day or week to set aside all other activity and simply pray the Jesus Prayer: ideally, twenty minutes a day twice a day. Work up to this slowly and make accommodations as your life circumstances demand lest you become weary. When you grow tired, stop. You can return to it at any time, even—and especially—in the midst of activity and engagement in the world, whether walking or driving, running errands or conversing with a friend. When you sense judgment arising in you toward anyone, allow the name of Jesus to rise up instead, gradually purifying your heart and mind of negativity, prejudice, and criticism. At times the prayer, “Lord Jesus, have mercy on me” may become “Lord Jesus have mercy on *us*” and “. . . have mercy on *them*” invoking the name of Jesus upon all beings and upon all situations. As you lie down to sleep, return to the prayer so that your heart might continue to ruminate on the name even as you sleep (“I slept,

but my heart was awake” [Cant. 5:2]). When you arise, let the name of Jesus be the first word to cross your lips.

When invoking the name, you need not attempt to conjure an image of Jesus but simply rest in his presence without any need for imaginative projections, thoughts, or concepts. With time and attention, you will find that the prayer begins to pray itself within you. With every breath you will find the name breathing you. Over time the prayer begins to cultivate a pervasive intuition of the divine presence because to invoke Jesus, the Christ, is to invoke the Trinity. As St. Basil the Great observed, “The invocation of Christ is the confession of the whole, since it is clear that God is the one anointing, the Son is the one anointed, and the Spirit is the anointing, as we have learned from Peter in Acts: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit (10:38).’”<sup>9</sup> Thus, to invoke the name of Jesus is to call upon the triunity of God’s holy presence.

The Jesuit theologian Walter Burghardt famously described contemplation as “a long, loving look at the real.”<sup>10</sup> I might add, for the Christian contemplative that long, loving look is accompanied by a dark intuition that the *Real* is gazing back. Not gazing back from the outside in, but from the depths of one’s own interiority. The Real—*Ultimate Truth*—is not an abstract concept but an embodied person (John 18:37-38). To invoke the name of Jesus in all times and places is to enter the cell of one’s heart and remain there even in the midst of daily life. The interior cell becomes that sanctuary whereby we come to gaze lovingly on our Beloved and know that our Beloved is gazing back.

The fourth-century Prosper of Aquitaine, a protégé of St. Augustine, introduced the now-famous theological axiom, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which loosely translates, “the way of prayer is the way of belief.” In other words, the way we pray reflects what we believe about God. This is particularly evident in the church’s liturgy but is no less true of the individual. The Jesus Prayer is a response to the vocation to “pray always” (1 Thess 5:17) because it reflects a commitment to a life of interior solitude even in the

midst of community. It is not a prayer we “say” or a meditation we “do.” It is rather, a prayer of *becoming*. That is, of becoming another Christ in the world. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*.

Christian contemplative prayer can never ultimately be divorced from the liturgy or the sacramental life of the church because the interior cell and the communal sanctuary are deeply intertwined. Even the Desert Mothers and Fathers emerged weekly from their solitude to join the *synaxis* or “ingathering” for the celebration of the liturgy. Then as now, the sacraments celebrate and realize the hidden mystery of our deification and bring us into deeper connection with those who celebrate what it means to be Christ’s body. Like a continual heartbeat of the church, the liturgy is the place where the blood cells, dispersed throughout the body, are joined together in the chamber of the heart where they are rejuvenated and given new life-breath before being sent out again to vivify the whole Body of Christ. It is here that the hidden mystery of our deepest identity as “other Christs” is celebrated and fully realized. This, most especially in the sacrament of baptism—which unites us corporally with Christ, and the Eucharist—which is first and foremost the sacrament of deification.<sup>11</sup> So, Augustine insists, the church is before all else the Body of Christ:

If, therefore, you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the apostle telling the faithful, “but you are the body of Christ and its members” (1 Cor 12:27). So if you who are the body of Christ and its members, it is your own mystery that has been placed on the Lord’s table; what you are receiving is your own mystery. You say *Amen* to what you are, and when you say that, you affirm what you are. You hear, “the body of Christ,” and you reply, “Amen!” Be a member of the body of Christ in order to make that *Amen* true.<sup>12</sup>

It is in the great “Amen!” of the liturgy that the Jesus Prayer, and indeed the entire contemplative life, is summed up and celebrated. It is where we publically profess our identity as other Christs, even as Christ’s presence in the Eucharist makes it so. In

the great eucharistic acclamation, the meaning of contemplative discipleship is brought into sharp relief. We do not serve Christ by serving one another, rather, we serve Christ *in* one another. It is one act of service, not two. Put otherwise, the command to love God and neighbor is not a summons to possess two loves but one: as other Christs in the world, we love God in loving our neighbor (1 John 4:20-21). It is within community that our discipleship is both nourished and tested. If we fail to reverence Christ in one another we cannot authentically reverence his sacramental Presence on the altar: "Whatsoever you do to the least of my sisters and brothers you do unto me" (Matt 25:40). Likewise, solitude with Christ in the interior cell of one's heart is fulfilled in solidarity with the same Christ present to us in the poor, the oppressed, the suffering, the alienated. It is Christ "who is all in all" (Col 3:11) whom we encounter in solitude, sacrament, and society. Thus, whether we reverence Christ in silence, in community, or in service we affirm our own mystery as members of Christ's body. Let us then, with Augustine, make our "*Amen!*" true.

### **The Contemplative Vocation: To Become Another Christ**

As the contemplative mind begins to shift from thinking about God to being in God, so too is there an evolution from praying to Christ as an object of devotion to living in the Spirit as members of Christ's body. Christ is no longer an object of analytical thinking, imaginative projection, or external devotion outside and beyond ourselves, but the very subject of our subjectivity, the heart of our heart, and the soul of our soul. If Jesus remains no more than an external, historical figure whom we attempt in some way to emulate, or whose teachings we seek to apply to our lives, our objectification of him inevitably becomes a barrier to our internal transformation. Instead, there must be an internal shift from analytical thinking to a simple contemplative resting in God beyond the use of words, discursive thought, or imagination. As I have observed throughout this book, Christ's mediatorial role between

humanity and divinity is rooted in his person—*his Body*—of which we are members. Herein lies the distinction between *saying* prayers and *becoming* prayer.

An externalized Christianity limited to the application of Christ's words and teachings to one's life has not really embraced the scandal of the incarnation—the Word-made-*flesh*. Christ remains but a historical figure or spiritual teacher whose ideas we may admire and seek to emulate but whose living, indwelling presence we never really come to know. This reduction of Jesus to a historical figure apart from his indwelling presence was the basis of Aldous Huxley's argument that Christianity could never produce an authentic mysticism. He wrote,

Contemplation of persons and their qualities entails a great deal of analytical thinking and an incessant use of the imagination. But analytical thinking and imagination are precisely the things which prevent the soul from attaining enlightenment. On this point all the great mystical writers, Christian and Oriental [*sic*], are unanimous and emphatic. Consequently, the would-be mystic who chooses as the object of his love and contemplation, not the Godhead, but a person and personal qualities, thereby directs insurmountable barriers between himself and the higher states of union.<sup>13</sup>

Analytical thinking and the “insurmountable barrier” it creates for a Christian mysticism of union with the divine is overcome once we intuitively grasp Christ's teaching on the vine and branches (John 15:5) or Paul's theology of Christ's Body (Rom 12:4-5). But as members of Christ's Body and extensions of his presence in the world, the question is, where does the vine end and the branch begin? Where are the boundaries of Christ's body? And where are the boundaries between you and me? As we will see, contemplative discipleship sees continuity where the analytical mind sees division. Contemplative discipleship embodies unity where the analytical mind perceives separation. In his response to Huxley, William Johnston describes this contemplative shift as one in

which Christian mystics “will speak of the life of Christ growing within them to such an extent that they can say it is not I that sees: Christ sees through my eyes; He listens through my ears; He speaks through my lips; He blesses with my hands; He loves through my heart. Christian mysticism is not a looking at Christ and an imitation of Him, but a transformation into Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

This “transformation into Christ” is the theological basis for understanding a contemplative vocation in the world. The term “vocation” is derived from the Latin *vocare*, which means “to call.” To follow one’s vocation is to respond to the universal call to holiness, which is the call to love. How we best love in the world will depend on our particular set of skills, passions, shortcomings, and so on. By way of analogy, we are like prisms, each refracting the pure light of Christ in the world through our uniqueness and particularities. Some refract red, some green, some blue or violet. The source of the light is One, but the manner in which it is refracted is virtually infinite.

The discernment of one’s vocation compels us to consider the manner in which we uniquely refract the light of Christ in the world. And this requires genuine humility; that is, the ability to see the truth and admit it. This is not the kind of false humility of self-deprecation that so many have mistaken for virtue. Rather, to be truly humble requires one to admit of their gifts and strengths, their particular charism, as well as an honest assessment of one’s limitations. It requires one to discern the unique manner in which they refract the light of Christ in the world or which member of the body they manifest. If you have a particular talent and find therein your passion, you have an ethical responsibility to admit it and place that gift in service of the broader community. “No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light” (Luke 8:16).

Thus, if in my uniqueness I refract the light of Christ as the color red, I must strive to be the brightest red I can be. If I refract green, I am to be the most vibrant green I can be, and if blue, then

the deepest blue possible. Like Paul's theology of many members comprising one body, the paradox lies in this: I best reflect the light of Christ not by adopting some image of Christ "out there" but by becoming more authentically who I already am. If I am violet, I cannot pretend to be orange or, if orange, I cannot pretend to be yellow.

Christianity has too often advocated a false sense of humility, which functioned like an inner audio-loop incessantly reminding us how unworthy we were—how "worthless," in fact. As a result, many of us have been content to remain a dull red, a pale green, a faded blue. Each of us is far more vibrant and beautiful than that, as any faithful reading of the gospel makes clear. And until we see it for ourselves, we continue to cheat the world out of the Christ-light we have been created to radiate. To be humble requires we become our most authentic selves rather than attempt to be someone we are not, even if that someone is Jesus of Nazareth. The Christian vocation is not to mimic Christ but rather to allow Christ to recapitulate in each of us what he did in his public ministry, that is, to mediate the very presence and love of God in the world as only we are uniquely able.

Ultimately the contemplative disciple arrives at a kind of active-passivity, in which being and acting in the world become extensions of one another. We die to self, that Christ might rise in us. The contemplative disciple does not seek to apply Christ's teachings to their life but to actively surrender their whole self that Christ might see, listen, speak, bless, and love through them, to use Johnston's imagery. This is why the Church understands the communion of saints as mediating or magnifying Christ in the world rather than competing with him in some way. Saints are exemplary mediators and magnifiers of Christ's light in the world—shining examples of the fruits of deification. They do not replace Christ any more than a hand or foot replaces the body of which it is a part, or a rainbow replaces the light that is its very source. This is why Paul can say in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Colossians:

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