When I was new to the spiritual life, I always admired the contemplatives. Oh, to spend that much time with the Lord seemed like heaven on earth! To be a St. Theresa, the Little Flower with her “little way” or the mighty St. Theresa of Avila with her Interior Castles! I didn’t much understand it, but I sure wanted it!

So I started on my journey, which eventually lead me to St. Francis. To me, St. Francis was a very charismatic fellow; who was filled with joy and love for God. He seemed a mystic but because his writings were scant, I had difficulty identifying a contemplative dimension for Franciscan Spirituality.

Franciscans, I thought were more of an active order. We saw God in nature, in each other and that was our “contemplative” side. Sure, prayer was the foundation of our ministry but my contemplative prayer followed a more Teresian, lectio divina or Centering Prayer style. However, no matter what I did, it was “borrowed” from other spiritualities and did not have a Franciscan feel.

Then I found out about St. Clare! She wrote: “gaze upon [Him], consider [Him], contemplate [Him] as you desire to imitate [Him].”

As I mediated on St. Clare’s words, I could really identify with them. I found a similarity with the steps in classic Lectio Divina: “Lectio” (to hear the Word of God), “Meditatio” (to reflect upon the Word), “Oratio” (the Word touches the heart), and “Contemplatio” (to rest in God).

St. Clare’s “Gaze upon [Him] touched a chord with me, since I am a visual person. I could gaze upon Christ the crucified on the Cross, as I was hearing his words in scripture (lectio). “Consider Him” was similar to “meditatio” or reflecting on his word from the Lectio Divina. Of course, to “Contemplate Him” meant to rest in Him (again, contemplatio in Lectio Divina). However, Clare did not end at the same point where classic Lectio Divina ended. She considered imitating Him as the final goal for contemplation. That was a change from what I had always understood in contemplative prayer. I thought unity with God by resting in Him was the ultimate! On the other hand, St. Clare insists that unity is not enough! She insists on imitating Him as the last step in contemplative prayer. We need to put this unity with God into the real world. But how do we get there?

St. Clare answers this question in her third letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague when she says: “Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation!”

St. Clare understands that this contemplation of God is transforming. God transforms us into the image of Himself! Somehow (and we surely do not understand it and we might not even be aware of it when it occurs), God unites Himself with us so intimately that we become lesser and He becomes greater. As Sister Ilia Delio so succinctly states: “Dwelling in love can change us. The gaze on the crucified Christ leads to the image of the crucified Christ becoming the form of one’s life.”
