

# The Way of Franciscan Contemplation

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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 led 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].”<sup>1</sup> She articulated a method for Franciscan contemplation!

As I meditated 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!*”<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup> We must become so united with our Lord that it transforms our whole life. We become Christ to others.

In other words, it is not enough just to spend time in contemplative prayer and not have it affect what we do with the rest of our lives. To “love” is a verb, which makes prayer a decision. However, the prayer itself is not the end. We decide to love by spending time in prayer, but it is how prayer transforms us which is important. As it transforms us, it leads to action, so the easiest way to tell if we are on the right path is to look for the fruits of it in our apostolic life. Do our actions reflect God or are they left wanting? Does our prayer affect what we do?

We might not know how God does this transformation in us, but rest assured that He does. We spend time in prayer in unity with the Crucified Lord because we desire it and when we are transformed into the likeness of the Crucified, then we carry Him to others. We become the image of the Godhead to others. This is what makes us Franciscan contemplatives. *This is Franciscan prayer.*

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<sup>1</sup> St. Clare of Assisi, “Second Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague.” in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*. Trans. Armstrong & Brady. New York: Paulist Press, 1982, 20.

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<sup>2</sup> St. Clare of Assisi, “Third Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague.” In *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*. Trans. Armstrong and Brady. New York: Paulist Press, 1982, 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Ilia Delio OSF, *Clare of Assisi: A Heart Full of Love*. Cincinnati Ohio, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007 p. 69.