

NEW SEEDS of CONTEMPLATION - Thomas Merton

To enter into the realm of **CONTEMPLATION** one must in a certain sense *die*: but this death is in fact the entrance into a higher life. 2

Hence, **CONTEMPLATION** is a sudden gift of *awareness*, an awakening to the Real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being. 3

Our **IDEA** of God tells us more about ourselves than about Him. 15

**GOD'S WILL** - *My chief concern* should not be to find pleasure or success, health or life or money or rest or even things like virtue and wisdom - still less their opposites, pain, failure, sickness, death. But in all that happens, *my one desire and my one joy should be to know*: "Here is the thing that God has willed for me. In this His love is found, and in accepting this I can give back His love to Him and give myself with it to Him. For in giving myself I shall find Him and He is life everlasting."

By consenting to His will with joy and doing it with gladness I have His love in my heart, because my will is now the same as His love and I am on the way to becoming what He is, Who is Love. And by accepting all things from Him I receive His joy into my soul, not because things are what they are but because God is Who He is, and His love has willed my joy in them all. 17,18

**GOD'S WILL** - How am I to know the *will of God*? Even where there is no other more explicit claim on my obedience, such as a legitimate command, *the very nature of each situation usually bears written into itself some indication of God's Will*. For whatever is demanded by **Truth**, by **Justice**, by **Mercy**, or by **Love** must surely be taken to be willed by God. *To consent to His will is, then, to consent to be true, or to speak truth, or at least to seek it. To obey Him is to respond to His will expressed in the need of another person, or at least to respect the rights of others.* For the right of another man is the expression of God's love and God's will. In demanding that I respect the rights of another God is not merely asking me to conform to some abstract, arbitrary law: He is enabling me to share, as His son, in His own care for my brother. **No man who ignores the rights and needs of others can hope to walk in the light of contemplation, because his way has turned aside from truth, from compassion and therefore from God.** 18,19

The saint knows that the world and **EVERYTHING MADE BY GOD IS GOOD**, while those who are not saints either think that created things are unholy, or else they don't bother about the question one way or another because they are only interested in themselves.

The eyes of the saint make all beauty holy and the hands of the saint consecrate everything they touch to the glory of God, and *the saint is never offended by anything and judges no man's sin because he does not know sin. He knows the mercy of God. He knows that his own mission on earth is to bring that mercy to all men.* 24,25

The secret of my **IDENTITY** is hidden in the love and mercy of God.

But whatever is in God is really identical with Him, for *His infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him.*

Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence.

Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. *If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.* 35,36

**SALVATION** - It is a pity that the beautiful Christian metaphor "*salvation*" has come to be so hackneyed and therefore so despised. It has been turned into a vapid synonym for "piety" - not even a truly ethical concept. "*Salvation*" is something far beyond ethical propriety. *The word connotes a deep respect for the fundamental metaphysical reality of man.* It reflects God's own infinite concern for man, God's love and care for man's inmost being, God's love for all that is His own in man, His son. It is not only human nature that is "saved" by the divine mercy, but above all the human person. The object of salvation is that which is unique, irreplaceable, incommunicable - that which is myself alone. This true inner self must be drawn up like a jewel from the bottom of the sea, rescued from confusion, from in-distinction, from immersion in the common, the nondescript, the trivial, the sordid, the evanescent.

We must be saved from immersion in the sea of lies and passions which is called "the world." And we must be saved above all from that abyss of confusion and absurdity which is our own worldly self. ***The person must be rescued from the individual. The free son of God must be saved from the conformist slave of fantasy, passion and convention.*** The creative and mysterious inner self must be delivered from the wasteful, hedonistic and destructive ego that seeks only to cover itself with disguises.

To be "lost" is to be left to the arbitrariness and pretenses of the contingent ego, the smoke-self that must inevitably vanish. To be "saved" is to return to one's inviolate and eternal reality and to live in God. 37, 38

**PRAYER** - But give me the strength that *waits* upon You in *silence* and *peace*. Give me humility in which alone is rest, and deliver me from pride which is the heaviest of burdens. *And possess my whole heart and soul with the simplicity of life. Occupy my whole life with the one thought and the one desire of love*, that I may love not for the sake of merit, not for the sake of perfection, not for the sake of virtue, not for the sake of sanctity, *but for You alone*.

**SEEKING GOD** - For there is only one thing that can satisfy love and reward it, and that is You alone. This then is **What it means to Seek God Perfectly**:

- ? to *withdraw* from illusion and pleasure, from worldly anxieties and desires, from the works that God does not want, from a glory that is only human display;
- ? to *keep* my mind *free* from confusion in order that my liberty may be always at the disposal of His will;
- ? to entertain silence in my heart and listen for the voice of God;
- ? to cultivate an intellectual freedom from the images of created things in order to receive the secret contact of God in obscure love;
- ? to love all men as myself;
- ? to rest in humility and to find peace in withdrawal from conflict and competition with other men;
- ? to turn aside from controversy and put away heavy loads of judgment and censorship and criticism and the whole burden of opinions that I have no obligation to carry;
- ? to have a will that is always ready to fold back within itself and draw all the powers of the soul down from its deepest center to rest in silent expectancy for the coming of God, poised in tranquil and effortless concentration upon the point of my dependence on Him;
- ? to gather all that I am, and have all that I can possibly suffer or do or be, and abandon them all to God in the resignation of a perfect love and blind faith and pure trust in God, to do His will.

*And then to wait in peace and emptiness and oblivion of all things.*

*Bonum est praestolari cum silentio salutare Dei.* ("It is good to wait in silence for the salvation of God.")

*If, therefore, I do anything or think anything or say anything or know anything that is not purely for the love of God, it cannot give me peace, or rest, or fulfillment, or joy.* 45,46

I must look for my **IDENTITY**, somehow, *not only in God but in other men*.

I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being. 51

The **SAINTS** are what they are, not because their sanctity makes them admirable to others, but because *the gift of sainthood makes it possible for them to admire everybody else*. It gives them a clarity of compassion that can find good in the most terrible criminals. It delivers them from the burden of judging others, condemning other men. It teaches them to bring the good out of others by compassion, mercy and pardon. *A man becomes a saint not by conviction that he is better than sinners but by the realization that he is one of them, and that all together need the mercy of God!* 57

*To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that **love is the reason for my existence**, for God is love. **LOVE** is my true **IDENTITY**. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name. *If, therefore, I do anything or think anything or say anything or know anything that is not purely for the love of God, it cannot give me peace, or rest, or fulfillment, or joy.* 60,61*

If, then, we want to seek some way of **BEING HOLY**, we must first of all renounce our own way and our own wisdom. We must "empty ourselves" as He did. We must "deny ourselves" and in some sense make ourselves "nothing" in order that we may live not so much in ourselves as in Him. We must live by a power and a light that seem not to be there. We must live by the strength of an apparent emptiness that is always truly empty and yet never fails to support us at every moment.

***This is holiness.***

None of this can be achieved by any effort of my own, by any striving of my own, by any competition with other men. It means leaving all the ways that men can follow or understand.

*I who am without love cannot become love unless Love identifies me with Himself.* But if He sends His own Love, Himself, to act and love in me and in all that I do, then ***I shall be transformed***, I shall discover who I am and shall possess my true identity by loving myself in Him.

And that is what is called **SANCTITY**. 62,63

The **CONTEMPLATIVE** is not isolated in himself, but liberated from his external and egotistic self by humility and purity of heart - therefore there is no longer any serious obstacle to simple and humble love of other men. 66

To **SERVE** the **GOD** of Love *one must be free*, one must face the terrible responsibility of the decision to **love in spite of all unworthiness** whether in oneself or in one's neighbor. 74

The beginning of the **FIGHT** against hatred, the basic Christian answer to hatred, is not the commandment to love, but what must necessarily come before in order to make the commandment bearable and comprehensible. It is a prior commandment, *to believe*. **The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but the faith that one is loved.** The faith that one is loved by God. That faith that one is loved by God although unworthy - or, rather, irrespective of one's worth! 75

**GOD'S WILL** - If you want to know what is meant by "**God's will**" in man's life, this is one way to get a good idea of it. "God's will" is certainly found in anything that is required of us in order that we may be *united with one another in love*. You can call this, if you like, the basic tenet of the Natural Law, which is that we should treat others as we would like them to treat us, that we should not do to another what we would not want another to do to us. In other words, the natural law is simply that we should recognize in every other human being the same nature, the same needs, the same rights, the same destiny as in ourselves. The plainest summary of all the natural law is: to treat other men as if they were men. Not to act as if I alone were a man, and every other human were an animal or a piece of furniture.

Everything that is demanded of me, in order that I may treat every other man effectively as a human being, "is willed for me by God under the natural law." *Whether or not I find the formula satisfactory, it is obvious that I cannot live a truly human life if I consistently disobey this fundamental principle.*

But I cannot treat other men as men unless I have compassion for them. I must have at least enough compassion to realize that when they suffer they feel somewhat as I do when I suffer. *And if for some reason I do not spontaneously feel this kind of sympathy for other, then it is God's will that I do what I can to learn how. I must learn to share with others their joys, their sufferings, their ideas, their needs, their desires.* I must learn to do this not only in the cases of those who are of the same class, the same profession, the same race, the same nation as myself, but when men who suffer belong to other groups, even to groups that are regarded as hostile. If I do this, I obey God. If I refuse to do it, I disobey Him. It is not therefore a matter left open to subjective caprice.

Since this is God's will for every man, and since contemplation is a gift not granted to anyone who does not consent to God's will, *contemplation is out of the question for anyone who does not try to cultivate compassion for other men.*

*For Christianity is not merely a doctrine or a system of beliefs, it is Christ living in us and uniting men to one another in His own Life and unity. "I in them, and Thou, Father, in Me, that they may be made perfect in One... And the glory which Thou hast given me I have given them, that they may be One as we also are One." In hoc cognoscent omnes quia mei estis discipuli, si dilectionem habueritis ad invicem. "In this shall all men know that you are my disciples - if you have love one for another."*

**"HE THAT LOVETH NOT ABIDETH IN DEATH."** 76,77

For it is precisely in the recovery of our **UNION WITH OUR BROTHERS** in Christ that we discover God and know Him, for then His life begins to penetrate our souls and His love possess our faculties and we are able to find out Who He is from the experience of His mercy, liberating us from the *prison of self-concern*. 78

We do not go into the *desert* to escape **PEOPLE** but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good. But this is only a secondary end.

*The one end that includes all others is the love of God.*

However, the **TRUEST SOLITUDE** is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you; it is an *abyss* opening up in the center of your own soul.

And this *abyss* of interior solitude is a hunger that will never be satisfied with any created thing. 80,81

It should be accepted as a most elementary human and moral truth that no man can live a **FULLY SANE & DECENT LIFE** unless he is able to say "**NO**" on occasion to his *natural bodily appetites*. **No man who:** simply eats and drinks whenever he feels like eating and drinking, who smokes whenever he feels the urge to light a cigarette, who gratifies his curiosity and sensuality whenever they are stimulated, *can consider himself a free person*. He has renounced his spiritual freedom and become the servant of bodily impulse. Therefore his mind and his will are not fully his own. They are under the power of his appetites. And through the medium of his appetites, they are under the control of those who gratify his appetites.

In general, it can be said that no contemplative life is possible without ascetic **self-discipline**. One must learn to survive without the habit-forming luxuries which get such a hold on men today. Certainly one must be able to use things without being dominated by an uncontrolled need for them.

*Keep your eyes clean and your ears quiet and your mind serene. Breathe God's air. Work if you can, under His sky.* 85,86

One virtually important aspect of solitude is its intimate dependence on **CHASTITY**. The virtue of chastity is not the complete renunciation of all sex, but simply the right use of sex. This means, according to most of the great religious traditions of the world, the restriction of all sex to married life, and, within the married state, to certain ordinate norms.

Nowhere is self-denial more important than in the area of sex, because this is the most difficult of all natural appetites to control and one whose undisciplined gratification completely blinds the human spirit to all interior light. 87,88

**CHASTITY** is not possible without ascetic self-sacrifice in many other areas. It demands a certain amount of fasting, it requires a very temperate and well-ordered life, modesty, restraint of curiosity, moderation of one's aggressiveness, and many other virtues.

*Perfect chastity establishes one in a state of spiritual solitude, peace, tranquillity, clarity, gentleness and joy in which one is fully disposed for meditation and contemplative prayer.* 88,89

**HURRY** ruins saints as well as artists. They want quick success and they are in such haste to get it that they cannot take time to be true to themselves. And when the madness is upon them they argue that their very haste is a species of integrity. 98,99

In great saints you find that perfect **HUMILITY** and perfect **INTEGRITY** coincide. The two turn out to be practically the same thing. The saint is unlike everybody else precisely because he is humble.

As far as the accidentals of this life are concerned, humility can be quite content with whatever satisfies the general run of men. But that does not mean that the essence of humility consists in being just like everybody else. *Humility consists in being precisely the person you actually are before God.* 99

You will be made to feel that your **HONESTY** is only pride. This is a serious temptation because you can never be sure whether you are being true to your true self or only building up a defense for the false personality that is the creature of your own appetite for esteem.

But the greatest *humility* can be learned from the anguish of keeping your balance in a such a position: of continuing to be yourself without getting tough about it and without asserting your false self against the false selves of other people. 100,101

And in any case, if I can tolerate *their Jesus* then I can **ACCEPT & LOVE THEM**. Or I can at least conceive of doing so. Let not their Jesus be a barrier between us, or they will be a barrier between us and Jesus. 107

But as long as you pretend to live in pure **AUTONOMY**, as your own master, without even a god to rule you, you will inevitably live as the servant of another man or as the alienated member of an organization. Paradoxically it is the acceptance of God that makes you *Free* and delivers you from human tyranny, for when you serve Him you are no longer permitted to alienate your spirit in human servitude. God did not invite the Children of Israel to leave the slavery of Egypt: He *commanded* them to do so. 110

The poet enters into himself in order to be created. The **CONTEMPLATIVE** enters into God in order to be created. 111

**HATE** - So instead of loving what you think is peace, love other men and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are war-makers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed - but hate these things *in yourself*, not in another. 122

A man who has been killed by one enemy is just as dead as one who has been killed by a whole army. If you are friends with one **HABIT** of mortal sin you live in death, even though you may seem to have all the other virtues. 176

Do not be too quick to assume your **ENEMY** is a savage just because he is *your enemy*. **Perhaps** he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or **perhaps** he is afraid of you because he feels that you are afraid of him. And **perhaps** if he believed you were capable of loving him he would no longer be your enemy.

Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is an enemy of God just because he is *your enemy*. **Perhaps** he is your enemy precisely because he can find nothing in you that gives glory to God. **Perhaps** he fears you because he can find nothing in you of God's love and God's kindness and God's patience and mercy and understanding of the weaknesses of men.

Do not be too quick to condemn the man who no longer believes in God, for it is perhaps your own coldness and avarice, your mediocrity and materialism, your sensuality and selfishness that have killed his faith. 177

**CONTEMPLATION** itself is not necessarily a sign of worthiness of sanctity at all. It is a sign of the goodness of God, and it enables us to believe more firmly in His goodness, to trust in Him more, above all to be more faithful in our friendship with Him. All these should normally grow up as the fruits of contemplation. But do not be surprised if contemplation springs out of pure emptiness, in poverty, dereliction and spiritual night. 185

**DISTRACTIONS** - If you have never had any distractions you don't know how to **PRAY**. For the secret of prayer is a hunger for God and for the vision of God, a hunger that lies far deeper than the level of language or affection. And a man whose memory and imagination are persecuting him with a crowd of useless or even evil thoughts and images may sometimes be

forced to pray far better, in the depths of his murdered heart, than one whose mind is swimming with clear concepts and brilliant purposes and easy acts of love.

That is why it is useless to get upset when you cannot shake of distractions. In the first place, you must realize that they are often unavoidable in the life of prayer. The necessity of kneeling and suffering submersion under a tidal wave of wild and inane images is one of the standard trials of the contemplative life. If you think you are obliged to stave these things off by using a book and clutching at its sentences the way a drowning man clutches at straws, you have the privilege of doing so, but if you allow your prayer to degenerate into a period of simple spiritual reading you are losing a great deal of fruit. You would profit much more by patiently resisting distractions and learning something of our own helplessness and incapacity. And if your book merely becomes an anesthetic, far from helping your meditation it has probably ruined it. 221,222

... if you are wise you will not pay any attention to these distracting things: remain in simple attention to God and keep your will peacefully directed to Him in simple desire, while the intermittent shadows of this annoying movie go about in the remote background. If you are aware of them at all it is only to realize that you refuse them. 222

The **MEMORY OF HIS UNFAILING PRESENCE** is the surest anchor for our minds and hearts in the storm of distraction and temptation by which we must be purified. 224

"**BE EMPTY & SEE THAT I AM GOD.**" It is our *emptiness* in the presence of the abyss of His reality, our *silence* in the presence of His infinitely rich silence, our *joy* in the bosom of the serene darkness in which His light holds us absorbed, it is all this that praises Him. It is this that causes love of God and wonder and adoration to swim up into us like tidal waves out of the depths of that peace, and break upon the shores of our consciousness in a vast, hushed surf of inarticulate praise, praise and glory! 231

This is the **GIFT of UNDERSTANDING**: we pass out of ourselves into the joy of *emptiness*, of *nothingness*, in which there are no longer any particular objects of knowledge but only God's truth without limit, without defect, without stain. This clean light, which tastes of Paradise, is beyond all pride, beyond comment, beyond proprietorship, beyond solitude. It is in all, and for all. It is the true light that shines in everyone, in "every man coming into this world." It is the light of Christ, "Who stands in the midst of us and we know Him not." 232

The man who does not permit his **SPIRIT** to be beaten down and upset by dryness and helplessness, but who lets God lead him peacefully through the wilderness, and desires no other support or guidance than that of pure faith and trust in God alone, will be brought to the Promised Land. *He will taste the peace and joy of union with God. He will, without "seeing," have a habitual, comforting, obscure and mysterious awareness of his God, present and acting in all the events of life.*

The man who is not afraid to abandon all his spiritual progress into the hands of God, to put prayer, virtue, merit, grace, and all gifts in the keeping of Him from Whom they all must come, will quickly be led to peace in union with Him. His peace will be all the sweeter because it will be free of every care. 239

Fickleness and Indecision are signs of **SELF-LOVE**.



If you can never make up your mind what God wills for you, but are always veering from one opinion to another, from one practice to another, from one method to another, it may be an *indication* that you are trying to get around God's will and do your own with a quiet conscience.

As soon as God gets you in one monastery you want to be in another.

As soon as you taste one way of prayer, you want to try another. You are always making resolutions and breaking them by counter-resolutions. You ask your confessor and do not remember the answers. Before you finish one book you begin another, and with every book you read you change the whole plan of your interior life.

Soon you will have no interior life at all. Your whole existence will be a patchwork of confused desires and daydreams and velleities in which you do nothing except defeat the work of grace: for all this is an elaborate subconscious device of you nature to resist God, Whose work in your soul demands the sacrifice of all that you desire and delight in, and, indeed, of all that you are.

*So keep still, and let Him do some work.*

*This is what it means to renounce not only pleasures and possessions, but even you own self.* 260,261

The more **OUR FACULTIES** are emptied of their desire and their tension toward created things, and the more they collect themselves into *peace* and *interior silence* and reach into the darkness where God is present to their deepest hunger, the more they feel a pure, burning impatience to be free and rid of all the last obstacles and attachments that still stand between them and the emptiness that will be capable of being filled with God. 264,265

Therefore the best way to prepare ourselves for the possible vocation of sharing **CONTEMPLATION** with other men is not to study how to talk and reason about contemplation, but withdraw ourselves as much as we can from talk and argument and retire into the silence and humility of heart in which God will purify our love of all its human imperfections. Then in His own time He will set our hands to the work He wants us to do, and we will find ourselves doing it without being quite able to realize how we got there, or how it all started. And by that time the work will not absorb us in a way that will disturb our minds. We will be able to keep our tranquillity and our freedom, and above all we will learn to leave the results to God, and not indulge our own vanity by insisting on quick and visible conversions in everyone we talk to. 273

God said: I do not laugh at my **ENEMIES**, because *I wish to make it impossible for anyone to be my enemy*. Therefore I identify myself with my enemy's own secret self. 293