

# **“BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL”**

by Donald Georgen, O.P.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Mt 5:3-10)

The theme of our gathering concerns itself with a just and compassionate world. We are to be compassionate as God is compassionate, according to the Gospel of Luke (6:36), but compassion, compassionate action, empathy are grounded in wisdom, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which for Thomas Aquinas is the gift most intertwined with charity or love (caritas). Wisdom itself is the fruit of contemplation or contemplative living. Thus I will look at compassion, wisdom and contemplation in the Dominican, Christian and Buddhist traditions.

## ***The Quality of Mercy Is Not Strained***

As we all learned in secondary school, even if we did not fully understand:

The quality of mercy is not strained;  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown;  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings:  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute of God himself...  
(Portia in "The Merchant of Venice," Act 4, Scene 1)

### **Compassion in the Dominican Tradition**

Although we may not immediately think in those terms, compassion or mercy is a significant value in Dominican life. Recall the example given by Dominic's mother Jane as she fed the poor in the village of Caleruega, sometimes to the distress of her husband, particularly when there was no wine left in the cellar upon his return from a journey; not to mention Dominic's following in her footsteps when he sold his parchments during a famine in Palencia to feed the hungry lest he become learned through those dead skins while the living could not survive; or his all night disputation with an innkeeper out of concern for the salvation of souls, manifest in his prayer: What, O God, will become of sinners?

Thomas Aquinas quotes St. Augustine's definition of mercy as heartfelt sympathy for another's distress impelling us to help them if we can (City of God 9/5); goes on to trace

the etymological roots of the word *miser cordia* which denotes having a heart for another's unhappiness (*miserum cor*); and speaks about this as a kind of grief over another's distress. One grieves for another's distress as one looks upon it as one's own (Summa Theologiae II/II, q 30).

Opinions have varied in the history of mystical theology over whether it is love or truth, caritas or veritas, will or intellect, that reigns supreme in our quest for God. Meister Eckhart viewed neither as supreme. He preached:

Now the question is: Wherein does blessedness lie most of all? Some masters have said it lies in knowing, some say that it lies in loving: others say it lies in knowing and loving, and they say better. But we say it lies neither in knowing nor in loving: for there is something in the soul from which both knowledge and love flow....<sup>1</sup>

Of course, for Eckhart, this was always the ground of the soul and the birth of the Word in the ground. But what other name might one give this ground from within which our passion for God, for truth, for justice, for beauty originates? In another sermon Eckhart named it mercy.

Whatever God works, the first breaking forth is mercy, not in the sense of his forgiving someone their sin or of one person's showing compassion for another person. Rather, the master's meaning is that the highest work which God performs is mercy. A master says that the work of mercy is so closely related to God (granted that truth, abundance, and goodness name God) that one [such name] names him better than the others. The highest work of God is mercy....

---

<sup>1</sup> M. O'C. Walshe, Sermons and Treatises (London: Watkins, 1979), vol. II, 272 (Sermon 87) ; also contained in Meister Eckhart, The Essential Sermons, ed. Bernard McGinn (NY: Paulist): 199-203 (Sermon 52).

Love takes God just as he is good. If the name goodness were removed from God, love would be at a loss what to do. Love takes God with a coat on, with a garment on. The intellect does not do this. The intellect takes God as he is known in it, but it can never encompass him in the sea of his unfathomableness. I maintain that above these two, knowledge and love, is mercy.<sup>2</sup>

This is not far removed from Catherine of Siena's experience of God.

O immeasurable love!

O gentle love!

.....

I know that mercy is your hallmark,

and no matter where I turn

I find nothing but your mercy.<sup>3</sup>

And in her Dialogue: "O mercy! My heart is engulfed with the thought of you! For wherever I turn my thoughts I find nothing but mercy!"<sup>4</sup>

One might most highlight, however, the deeply active compassion in the life and teachings of Bartolomé de las Casas in the sixteenth century. His almost single handed defense of the indigenous in the Americas, while nourishing his compatriots in Salamanca and challenging the king's laws, may be the best example of that compassion that is cognitive, grounded in Las Casas's continued study; affective, emerging out of a

---

<sup>2</sup> Meister Eckhart, Preacher and Teacher, ed. Bernard McGinn (NY: Paulist): 253-254 (Sermon 7); also contained in M.O'C. Walshe, II, 188-89 (Sermon 72). Also see Bernard McGinn, The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart, (NY: Crossroad, 2001): 152-53.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine of Siena, The Prayers, trans. Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (New York: Paulist, 1983), no. 9, p. 69, also p. 72 of same prayer.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine of Siena, The Dialogue, trans. Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (New York: Paulist, 1980), ch. 30, p. 72.

genuine conversion on experiencing their plight; as well as volitional in that his frequent returns to his native Spain were specifically to plead their cause before popes, kings and theologians.

### **Compassion in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition**

What we find manifest in the life of Dominic and those who followed after him, of course, was simply that which is central to the Judeo-Christian tradition. At the core of the New Testament is the witness of Jesus himself, whom some have spoken of as the compassion of God incarnate.<sup>5</sup> The Incarnation, a paradigmatic kenotic event (“He so emptied himself,” Phil 2:6-11) is but a revelation or extension of the divine self-emptying for the sake of creation (Davies xx, 233). The hypostatic union is a kenotic, compassionate event (Davies 272-3), a freely chosen self-limitation for our sake,<sup>6</sup> which God undertook as a compassionate act out of empathy for God’s people.

Jesus’ preaching, teachings, healings are almost all revelatory of God as compassion: To what shall we compare God? God is like a compassionate mother or forgiving father. To the leper who asked to be healed, Jesus says “Of course” (Mt 8:3). Not to dismiss Jesus’ anger and straightforward speech, which are also manifestations of compassion and not a diminishing of it, Jesus reaches out to the poor, the outcast, those without status in society. It is perhaps his most reliably documented quality. “Blessed are you poor,” Luke’s Jesus instructs (Lk 6:20).

---

<sup>5</sup> Davies, A Theology of Comapassion (Grand Rapids,MI: Eerdmans, 2003): xx, 233.

<sup>6</sup> See Donald Goergen, The Power of Love (Chicago: Thomas More, 1979): 214-233.

In his life and teaching, however, Jesus does not radically depart from the traditions in the Hebrew Scriptures although he does place love of neighbor on a level equal to that of love of God. The great Exodus text in the Hebrew Bible in which God is revealed to Moses, God is revealed not only as “The One Who Is,” but also as the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, the God who heard the cry of the people and delivered them from bondage, and thus understood by Isaiah not only TO BE, but to be WITH US, Immanu-el (Is 7:14). God is a compassionate, generous, and faithful God. God assures us of her unfailing benevolence. The Hebrew word hesed speaks to this continuity in the tradition, of God’s unfailing benevolence and loving kindness. The God of all compassion is the God of the Hebrew Bible, the Koran, and of Jesus Christ. As God is, so we are to be (Lk 6:36).

Oliver Davies, in exploring a theology of compassion, writes: “In compassion the self experiences the other ... as another who suffers and whose sufferings...become the cause of our action *as if they were our own.*” (xix) In Martha Nussbaum’s analysis,<sup>7</sup> compassion combines cognitive, affective, and volitional elements. We recognize another’s distress (cognition), we feel it and are moved by it (affectivity), and we seek to remedy it (volition). The person is not compassionate who understands a person’s suffering and is affected by it but chooses not to act on their behalf; the lack of volition identifies this as lacking a will to alleviate suffering.

---

<sup>7</sup> Martha Nussbaum, “Compassion: the Basic Social Emotion,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13.1, Winter, 1996, 27-58.

## Compassion in the Buddhist Tradition

Although in Christian traditions we see our compassionate God made visible in the compassionate Christ, an equally powerful image of compassion is that of the Buddha whose teachings have inspired and enlightened many throughout the world. What can we learn from this compassionate Buddha, from Avalokiteshvara, the personification of the compassion of all the buddhas, and his later incarnations?

Sogyal Rinpoche, in his Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, teaches that true compassion overflows from and only flows from egolessness, itself a consequence of mindfulness. In other words, ego, in its spiritual and unredeemed sense, rather than in its more psychological and analytic sense, that is to say our false selves or false consciousness, sometimes referred to as self-cherishing,<sup>8</sup> is the primary obstacle to hearts full of compassion. Chökyi Dragpa, in his commentary on Gyalse Togme's Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva, comments: "The root of all negative emotions is ego-clinging, and if one is able to reverse ego-clinging, one will be capable of gaining the peaceful cessation of suffering...." (Uniting Wisdom and Compassion, 67). This is accomplished through the practice of the three trainings: discipline, knowledge, and meditation (Ibid, 38, 67) or what in another context is morality, wisdom, and meditative concentration, the latter two being analogous to what Dominicans have traditionally called study and prayer, or what we might speak of as discursive intellect and the mind beyond all thought. We will say more of this later, but here simply emphasize that true compassion does not simply come from a sympathetic heart. It is not only a question of feeling. Loving

---

<sup>8</sup> See Uniting Wisdom and Compassion, Illuminating the Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004):16.

kindness is grounded in mental and supramental structures of consciousness. For the Buddhist, there is no compassion without wisdom, and no wisdom without compassion, not too dissimilar to Thomas Aquinas' teaching that there is no *caritas* apart from the Spirit's gift of *sapientia*, and vice-versa. Wisdom and love are so intertwined that we cannot realize one without the other.

In Tibetan traditions, the ideal of self-offering is manifest in that of the bodhisattva – one who strives for enlightenment not for his or her own sake but for the sake of all sentient beings, for the sake of the other. Even Jesus' ideal of love of enemies does not surpass that of the bodhisattva. At the heart of all Buddhist teaching is the doctrine of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, to which everything can be reduced. The five basic precepts on which a Buddhist way of life is predicated can all be reduced to the practice of non-harming, whether that be not taking what is not offered, since theft is a form of violence, or not using our sexual energies inappropriately, lest they harm others, or false speech as a form of violence, as well as the taking of beverages that do violence to the mind. True compassion is ultimately the letting go of violence in any form, and not only exteriorly but first of all interiorly, for thoughts are the seeds of behavior. Blessed are the pure of heart. Geshe Nambarwa states, "Without having trained the inner mind, your kindhearted intentions cannot remain stable" (ibid, 40). There is compassion when one is focusing on a particular sentient being who is tormented by any kind of suffering and one wishes that that being may be free from suffering. Great compassion is the path of the Great Vehicle. Langri Tangpa said, "Since in the Great Vehicle there is nothing else to do except benefit sentient beings, your armor of altruism should not be weak" (ibid, 172). It is the great

benevolent intention, the intention to benefit others, loving kindness, that is the ideal of the bodhisattva. Regardless of whether or not one is able to benefit others directly or not, one must never let the intention to do so degenerate (ibid, 171).

### ***Be Wise as Serpents (Mt 10:16)***

We now pass to two legs from which true compassion flows, whether we look at it from within Dominican spirituality, or from a wider Judeo-Christian perspective, or in Buddhist traditions: the two legs of wisdom and meditation, or study and contemplation.

### **Wisdom in the Hellenistic Christian Tradition**

The origins of a Christian understanding of wisdom can be traced back to roots in the ancient Near East, to Babylonian, Egyptian, and particularly Israelite and Judean wisdom. Hellenistic Jewish wisdom, such as we find in the Book of Wisdom, already elevated wisdom to a quasi-divine status.

For she is a breath of the power of God,  
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;  
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.

For she is a reflection of eternal light,  
a spotless mirror of the working of God,  
and an image of his goodness.

Although she is but one, she can do all things,  
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;  
in every generation she passes into holy souls

and makes them friends of God and prophets. (Wis 7:25-27)

It did not take long for this intellectual tradition to be put at the service of the gospel. By the third century, in spite of protests that Athens had nothing to do with Jerusalem, the contrary proved to be true, and if not Athens, certainly Alexandria.

Names like Clement of Alexandria and Origen manifest a Christian love of wisdom from wherever it comes. St. Justin saw seeds of the one true Word in the philosophies of the Greeks. Clement considered the sages of India, including the Buddha, in the same way. Christ was the Teacher par excellence, whether in the Gospel of Matthew or the writings of Clement. Jewish rabbis, particularly in the school of Akiba, had already considered study as a form of worship,<sup>9</sup> and so did Christian thinkers down to and including Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He completed his essay entitled “Research, Work, and Worship” towards the end of March, 1955, shortly before he died.

Philosophy as it emerged among the Greeks acknowledged the virtue of rationality, but it was never simply a search for abstract truth but rather for a fitting way of life. Right living implied the search for wisdom and the search for wisdom implied a disciplined way of life. Among the Pythagoreans, one could not separate their religion from their philosophy or vice versa. Such a distinction would not have made sense. A novice in the Pythagorean schools spent his first five years in silence: such was the importance of true learning. And the same could be said of Plato: his was a religious as much as a philosophical spirit. It remained simply for the medievals to provide an intricate synthesis

---

<sup>9</sup> See Benedict Viviano, OP, Study as Worship: Aboth and the New Testament (Leiden: Brill. 1978).

of reason with faith, or science with religion. What God had joined together, no one must put asunder.

For Aquinas, little needs be said about his love of study and the Dominican tradition from which he came. Which, for Aquinas, was the more important, the gift of wisdom or the virtue of charity? As much ink as has been spilled on the question of veritas vs. caritas, intellect vs. will, it was not so simple an issue for Aquinas. Clearly, already in the tradition and in the Scriptures, the gift of wisdom is the gift par excellence, the summation that includes all the others. Socrates in his search for truth was taken to the oracle at Delphi, which instructed him properly, “Wise is Sophocles, wiser yet is Euripides, but wisest of all of these is Socrates.” Aquinas was no fool when it came to appreciation of wisdom. But Aquinas also knew that charity (love, agape) was the supreme virtue. No less an authority than St. Paul witnessed to this: “and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13: 13). And so which is it, charity or wisdom? The gifts of the Spirit for Aquinas perfect the virtues, each gift perfecting and completing and helping us to live out a particular virtue. So the gifts are the highest. But there can be nothing higher than charity or love.

Although conceptually distinct, Aquinas was quite aware, that wisdom and charity mutually perfect each other. There is no wisdom that does not love. Can one be wise and not loving? Such would make of wisdom pure folly. That would make wisdom deficient. On the other hand, can there be true love that is not wise? The heart has its secrets, as Pascal would have it, that the head does not know. But that is not quite the depth of

integration we find in Aquinas for whom there can be no ultimate parting of the ways between head and heart as much as some would like to do so. Who of us would want a heartless head, or a headless heart? In the end the gift of wisdom and the virtue of love are one co-mingled way of striving for the Good of which Plato had already been so fond. Wisdom, learning, truth, study all became sacred words in Christian vocabularies.

### **Wisdom in the Dominican Tradition**

In speaking about Thomas Aquinas, we have already come to the Dominican intellectual tradition and its emphasis on learning and study about which books have been written.

We hardly need to be reminded how Dominic wanted his friars to study and have access to education, how dispensations were allowed for such purpose, how he desired his friars to be located in university settings; how he himself was a serious student of the Scriptures, how Albert the Great, the Universal Doctor, introduced natural science or natural philosophy within the parameters of a Dominican curriculum, how Thomas's openness to the suspect philosophy of Aristotle allowed him to develop a theology that could undermine Manicheism once and for all, how an elaborate system of study was set up whereby every convent with its lector was a house of study as well as their being studia generalia for more advanced work, and how these traditions have continued to the present time.

Paul Murray, a contemporary Dominican scholar and poet, has spoken extensively of this tradition of learning in his article on study in the Dominican Tradition which he entitled “Eat the Book,” referring to the text from Ezekiel 3:1.<sup>10</sup> He wrote:

Study was considered so important in Dominican formation that, in the earliest legislation of the Order, local superiors were given authority to dispense the brethren from anything that might interrupt their studies.<sup>11</sup> Even the novices, though naturally encouraged to give time to prayer, were also expected to be “earnest...in their study, always reading or thinking about something by day or by night...striving to retain as much as they can in their minds.”<sup>12</sup> That distinctly Dominican suggestion – to be always “thinking about something” – finds an echo, centuries later, in the advice the famous preacher, Fr. Vincent McNabb, gave to the young Dominicans of the English Province. “Think of anything”, he would say to them, “but for God’s sake think!”<sup>13</sup>

## **Wisdom in the Buddhist Tradition**

As Confucius supposedly taught, “The one who knows not and knows that he knows not, is wise, follow him. The one who knows not and knows not that he knows not is a fool. Avoid him.” Wisdom is sacred in all spiritual traditions. Frequently when we think of Buddhism, we think either of the compassionate Buddha or of some form of Buddhist

---

<sup>10</sup> Paul Murray, OP *The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality* (Burns and Oates, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Prologue, “The Early Dominican Constitutions,” in *Early Dominicans* (NY: Paulist, 1982): 457.

<sup>12</sup> “The Early Dominican Constitutions,” 13, in *Early Dominicans*, p.466.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in “Anniversary Sermon for Fr Vincent McNabb” by Hilary J. Carpenter, O.P., in *A Vincent McNabb Anthology: Selections from the Writings of Vincent McNabb O.P.*, ed., F.E. Nugent (London 1955) p.ix.

meditation. We often fail to appreciate or recognize the role of learning, of Buddhist dialectics, of the demanding study of the Dharma. We don't as readily think of a rational, discursive kind of wisdom, a suprarational wisdom, yes, but not what we think of as an intellectual life. It depends, however on the Buddhist tradition to which we turn. In Buddhist traditions, wisdom and compassion are so interconnected that they are often spoken in the same breath. Wisdom is both compassionate and contemplative, but nevertheless an intellectual endeavor as well.

In Gyalse Togme's Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva, "it is the practice of bodhisattvas to train in knowledge" (146) Naljorpa Chenpo said:

Lords, in order to accomplish enlightenment we must study as many books as a female yak can carry on its back. If we only study the amount that can rest on the palms of our hands, we will not reach anywhere. (148)

And Puchungwa said:

Open up the books and put them on your pillow since it is our job to study. Even if we do not manage to read them, it will still be praiseworthy. What is the point of saying that you practice the Dharma if you don't know it. (148)

In Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment,<sup>14</sup> there are three practices in particular, three higher trainings, for the one who is attempting to generate bodhichitta, which we can roughly call: morality (discipline, moral conduct, Vinaya), wisdom (knowledge, penetrating the sutras, Buddhist psychology and metaphysics), and contemplation ( or

---

<sup>14</sup> Geshe Sonam Rinchen, Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment (Snow Lion Publications).

non-conceptual meditation). Morality is ultimately the struggle to live a compassionate life, a life grounded in ahimsa or non-violence, to which all the basic moral precepts and the eightfold path can be reduced. Contemplation, to which we will turn shortly, is more characterized by expressions like calm abiding or meditative stabilization. Wisdom flows from both non-conceptual meditative practice and critical analysis. Let Atisha speak for himself.

Just as wisdom does not see  
An inherent nature in phenomena,  
Having analyzed wisdom itself by reasoning  
Non-conceptually meditate on that. (38/53-54)

Thus wisdom flows both from analytical reason and from non-conceptual meditation, or what we may more often call contemplation. Although all these paths, means, lead to wisdom, wisdom more often implies the conceptual, analytical pursuit, which is to be surpassed for sure, just as eventually contemplation takes us to higher realms, and we find ourselves in the grips of what we could not conceptually grasp. Atisha again:

When the practitioner has gained calm abiding,  
Higher perception will also be gained,  
But without practice of the perfection of wisdom  
The obstructions will not come to an end.  
Thus, to eliminate all obstructions  
To liberation and omniscience,  
The practitioner shall continually cultivate  
The perfection of wisdom with skillful means. (37/41-43)

The cultivation of intelligence is required to get to the root of ignorance, to the truth of things. Aquinas might say the intellectual virtues form a foundation for living the moral and spiritual life or are certainly a foundation for what will eventually be infused contemplation.

### ***Contemplari, et Contemplata Aliis Tradere***

*(Aquinas, ST, II-II, q 188, a 7)*

### **Contemplation in the Christian Mystical Tradition**

We have already spoken of two legs of the Dharma in the Buddhist tradition. Those same two legs are given abundant testimony in the Christian tradition as well: not only study and research, intellectual inquiry, but also a humble and contemplative stance in the midst of silence before Mystery. It is well expressed by Dionysius:

Theological tradition has a dual aspect, the ineffable and the mysterious on the one hand, the open and more evident on the other. The one resorts to symbolism and involves initiation. The other is philosophic and employs the method of demonstration.... The one uses persuasion and imposed the truthfulness of what is asserted. The other acts and, by means of a mystery which cannot be taught, it puts souls firmly in the presence of God.<sup>15</sup>

It is this dual aspect that ought not be forgotten. The East is perhaps better known, or more frequently associated, with the contemplative. The East has plumbed the depths of meditation. We all have much to learn from them. But the significance of the mystical

---

<sup>15</sup> See Bernard McGinn, The Foundations of Mysticism, Origins to the Fifth Century (Crossroad, 1994): 173.

traditions in the Christian West can hardly be overestimated. Greek philosophy was a child of mystery cults. The marriage of Greek thought and Christian faith became the great medieval synthesis, a challenge not more daunting than that of the marriage of East and West that we all face today. Both reason and faith are the core of the Catholic Tradition, about which both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have expressed concerns. But faith is not simply dogma; it is the life-giving influx of the divine into our human lives. It reaches its completion in the mystical union beyond words. Whether we go back as far as Plotinus and Augustine or ahead to the mystics of our own day, the history of Christian mysticism belies the impression that theology is simply rational alone. As Evagrius Ponticus made so clear from the vantage point of the Christian East, “If you are a theologian, you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian” (McGinn, 150). We need not belabor the point given the evidence for it, other than to suggest that prayer, particularly contemplative prayer, may not be so widely practiced as Christian spirituality would suggest that it ought to be. But perhaps the times are changing. Each of us is called to be a mystic – for the sake of others. Mysticism is not an I/Thou with an unknowable God. Mysticism is the core of life in Christ. It takes a mystic to love the world which God so loved that She sent her Only Begotten Son, not to condemn us as the Gospel of John says, but to save us (3:16-20).

### **Contemplation in the Buddhist Tradition**

Not much more needs to be said about contemplation in the Buddhist traditions, or I should say what we call contemplation. I have already spoken about higher perception, calm abiding, meditative stabilization. Maybe a few more words from Atisha to help make the point that this leg is a sine qua non on the path to enlightenment:

Just as a bird with undeveloped  
Wings cannot fly in the sky,  
Those without the power of higher perception  
Cannot work for the good of living beings. (36/35)  
Without the attainment of calm abiding,  
Higher perception will not occur.  
Therefore make repeated effort  
To accomplish calm abiding.  
While the conditions for calm abiding  
Are incomplete, meditative stabilization  
Will not be accomplished, even if one meditates  
Strenuously for thousands of years. (36/38-39)

True wisdom, in other words, is an overflow of both intellectual work and contemplative practice. In The Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva, this pillar is referred to as one-pointed meditative concentration, meditative equipoise, blissful abiding, clear seeing, meditative absorption, and mindfulness (142-5). Gyalse Togme again: “Practice a meditative absorption free of the attributes of conceptuality” (145).

### **Contemplation in the Dominican Tradition**

Is it strange to ask the question of Dominicans, their associates and co-workers, whether they are true contemplatives? It ought not be, although many may think so, or many would have thought so just a decade ago. Such was a misunderstanding of contemplation as well as a misplaced emphasis in what being Dominican is.

First, without again being able to go into detail, one of the mottos of the Order since at least the thirteenth century has been, “contemplata aliis tradere,” ( to share or hand on to others that which we contemplate.) We have placed many eggs in the basket of the handing on, our emphasis on our preaching mission and identity, but according to this motto, if we are not contemplating, what are we handing on? We are first of all contemplatives – but contemplatives with a mission to the world – the proclamation of the gospel. We are active contemplatives for sure, but nevertheless contemplative to the core.

Marie-Dominique Chenu, the French Dominican who may well have influenced Dominican theology in the twentieth century more than any other, an expert on St. Thomas and yet at one time having been silenced by the Holy Office, who contributed the expression “signs of the times,” to the Second Vatican Council, who early had been a spiritual guide for the priest-worker movement in France as well as for Congar and Schillebeeckx, Chenu wrote his doctoral dissertation on contemplation, whose director was none other than Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange. For Chenu, as well as for Preachers in general, Dominican spirituality is both incarnational and contemplative. For Dominicans, contemplation itself is incarnational.

Also in the twentieth century, in Asia, in Japan, another Dominican was giving manifestation to the contemplative wing of our life, Shigeto Oshida. Buddhist by birth, he was throughout his life a Zen practitioner as well as an ordained Catholic Dominican priest. His zendo or ashram in the Japanese Himalayas, in view of Mt Fuji, was not a

Western style monastery but an Eastern center of meditation. For him Zen was a way of entering into the mystery of God.

We can so easily forget that Dominic himself, Catherine, Eckhart, Tauler, Albert, Aquinas, Catherine d’Ricci, Rose of Lima, were all contemplatives. Dominic’s wisdom handed on to his friars was that they were to talk only with God or about God. Catherine was instructed to walk on two feet or fly on two wings. Eckhart has become perhaps the Christian mystic par excellence and yet it would be difficult to verify a more active life. Dominican contemplation for sure is not non-intellectual nor non-apostolic, but to understand contemplation in contrast to those values is to misunderstand contemplation.

A Dominican does not by pass the intellectual life but passes through it. I like to say, we find ourselves in the grips of what we thought we could grasp. Our intellectual lives force us into contemplative wonder and silence. For Eckhart, it was Martha not Mary who was the more mature Christian. To define contemplation over against the active life is like defining pregnancy over against giving birth, as if one’s purpose in life could be to give birth without becoming pregnant, or one could become pregnant without seeing its *raison d’etre* in giving birth to new life. Dominican contemplation is active, intelligent, and communal – but yet remains contemplative, that is grounded in God, in silence, in inner work and the interior life.

## ***Education as a Social Ministry***

My hope is that we are beginning to see connections among caritas, sapientia, and contemplatio, or compassion, learning, and prayer. There cannot be one without the others. In the Buddhist traditions, compassion flows from egolessness, which itself follows upon the practice of mindfulness, but the two legs of mindfulness are meditation and inquiry. Dominicans would say something similar with different words. Sapientia or wisdom and contemplatio or prayer are the two legs for living a life of charity. No veritas, the fruit of contemplation and study, no caritas, and no caritas, no veritas. One does not yet know the truth, the Truth that Loves. But this just states in a particular way the Christian intellectual tradition that emphasized both faith and reason going back as far as Clement of Alexandria, and even before to the wisdom traditions in the Hebrew Scriptures.

To move to ever higher and higher levels of consciousness means standing on the feet, or the minds, or the consciousness of those who have gone before. This is what led Teilhard de Chardin to see education itself as a social ministry, as a mechanism of social evolution, as nothing less than a form of biological evolution. Education is essential to evolution, and certainly to the evolution of consciousness, which for Teilhard is what evolution ultimately is. He writes, “It is primarily through education that the process of

biological heredity, which from the beginning has caused the world to rise to higher zones of consciousness, is furthered in a reflective form and in its social dimensions.” And “To ensure the psychic continuity, at every phase, of this vast development embracing myriads of elements strewn throughout the immensity of time, there is a single mechanism – education.” In fact for Teilhard, “it is through the medium of education that there ensues, directly and indirectly, the gradual incorporation of the World in the Word Incarnate.”<sup>16</sup> Education is not only an agent, mechanism, for the evolution of consciousness, but also the continuation of the Incarnation itself. Education not only has the capacity, but the obligation, to be deeply contemplative, assiduously learned, and socially transformative through compassionate praxis. The educator must be socially responsible, that is to say compassionate; professionally responsible, which is to say learned; and personally accountable before God, in other words contemplative. All education, especially higher education, is about higher things: the moral life, the intellectual virtues, and contemplative living.

Blessed indeed are the merciful, the meek, the pure of heart, for both God and the earth offer themselves to them.

---

<sup>16</sup> (Teilhard de Chardin, “Social Heredity and Progress, Notes on the Humanist-Christian Value of Education,” in The Future of Man, quotes from pp 34-35.)