

Searching for God

Contemplative Prayer in the Dominican Tradition

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Let me begin, if I may, by recalling a scene from a film I saw many years ago. The main protagonist in the film imagined, for some reason, that he was God. At one point in the film, as I remember it, he goes to visit a psychiatrist, and we see him lying stretched out comfortably on the couch. The psychiatrist asks him: “When did you first imagine – I mean, *realize* – that you were God?” And he replies: “Well, I’ll tell you, Doctor, I was saying my prayers one day, and it suddenly dawned on me – I was talking to myself!”

The humour is sharp and telling. It makes us laugh – that’s for sure – but it also makes us think. What is it exactly that is happening when we pray, when we search for God in prayer? Do we find, perhaps, and almost from the beginning, that the God we meet surprises us? If we keep faith with the call to contemplation, do our thoughts and feelings undergo a radical change in the process? Is it a painful or a joyful change? Can we expect, when we pray, to have a sustained sense of God’s presence? Or can we expect to undergo the experience of the “dark night”? Will God, at some point, seem to disappear altogether? Is

contemplative prayer, therefore, something utterly demanding or is it something as easy as breathing?

The theme of the search for God in prayer is explored in a particularly illuminating way in a sermon composed by the 14th century German Dominican mystic and preacher, Blessed Johannes Tauler. Tauler introduces his theme while reflecting on a passage from St Luke's Gospel, a chapter which contains three of the most celebrated parables of Jesus: namely, the good shepherd, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. "[T]oday's Gospel," Tauler declares, "tells of a woman who has lost a coin, and lit a lantern and searched for it." The woman, in her great anxiety, Tauler informs us, "turns her house upside down, searching for the coin." But what, we might ask, does this "searching" mean in the context of the spiritual life? First of all it refers, according to Tauler, to the two most ordinary ways in which people seek God: an "active" way, which entails the external performance of certain religious practices and good works, and a "passive" way which entails a beginning journey into the innermost self. Tauler writes: "We must allow ourselves to sink into our ground, into the innermost depth, and seek the Lord there, as He instructed us when He said: 'The Kingdom of God is within you.'"

Already, by itself, this brief presentation by Tauler of what "searching" means in the spiritual life might seem to offer a reasonably complete summary of what we can expect to take place in that life. But, in fact, the most important observation Tauler wants to make about this "searching" has still to be made. Up to this point, in his sermon, we

have heard, for the most part, about *our* searching for God. But Tauler now goes on to speak about another more important “searching.” Earlier he had noted that it is Eternal Wisdom itself which has “lit the lantern.” And now he says: “As soon as we enter our house to search for God there, God in His turn searches for us, and the house is turned upside down. He acts just the way we do when we search for something: throwing aside one thing after another, until we find what we are looking for.” All of a sudden, then, we discover that the object of our search for God, and of our search for wisdom, is not some kind of passive, divine truth, something which we are able to assess and possess with our own minds, and at our own pace, but is rather something literally *uncontrollable*, a mystery of love our minds can hardly begin to grasp, an urgency of attention to our most basic human needs and wants, a divine compassion and care for that very aspect of our lives which seems most hopeless and most lost.

Dominican contemplative prayer tends to focus on the nature of God as it is revealed in prayer, and on what we might call the *objective* mystery of grace rather than on the interesting but more *subjective* states and stages of psycho-spiritual experience. This form of Christian contemplation is first and last a delighted, grateful reaction in faith to the mystery of God’s love revealed in Christ. One particularly fine example of this kind of prayer can be found in the writings of Catherine of Siena, the Dominican saint and mystic of the 14th century. On one occasion, when she was at prayer, being stunned by the thought of God’s passionate, loving search for those

who have run away from God, and are the most weak, most lost, and most in need of mercy, Catherine exclaimed:

“O eternal Father!...O eternal wisdom...O eternal mercy! O hope and refuge of sinners!...O mad Lover! Are you indeed in need of your creature? It seems to me you are for you behave as if you could not live without her...Why then are you so mad? Because you have fallen in love with what you have made! You are pleased and delighted over her within yourself, as if you were drunk for her salvation. She runs away from you and you go looking for her. She strays and you draw closer to her. You clothed yourself in our humanity and nearer than that you could not have come.

Catherine’s thoughts and feelings, in this passage, seem literally to catch fire with sheer wonder. Rapt in the contemplation of God’s love, she is, we can say, borrowing a phrase from the poet Mary Oliver, “a bride married to amazement.” But the mysticism of Catherine, it must be said, is never that of a mere psychological enthusiasm. However profound her ecstasy, as here, she never allows herself to forget the needs of others around her and, in particular, the needs of the lost and afflicted. Her mysticism is one of service to the world and of service to the church. The love of God which Catherine experienced in prayer – that tireless, searching love – shaped to an extraordinary degree the way she herself related to those among her contemporaries whom she

could see were, in some way, hopelessly lost or afflicted. In this context, one letter in particular is worthy of attention. It was sent by Catherine to an exuberant, hot-blooded young nobleman living in Siena called Francesco Malevolti. At the time of their first meeting, Francesco, according to his own account, was “living lasciviously and unrestrainedly in the wretched delights of the world and the flesh,” behaving, he tells us, “as though I were never to die, recklessly pursuing my inordinate lusts with all my power.” A single meeting with Catherine, however, changed the focus of his life entirely: Francesco was converted and became both a friend and disciple of the young visionary. But his good intentions, though sincere, were not strong enough to help him overcome, once and for all, his addictive behaviour. On one significant occasion, when Catherine had gone away from Siena for an extended period, Francesco fell back into his old ways. As a result, feeling both bewildered and ashamed, he did everything he could to avoid meeting Catherine face to face on her return. But Catherine, prompted no doubt by the knowledge she had gained in contemplative prayer about the love of God, and how that love pursues us even when we try to avoid its pressure and its demand, never ceased asking about her friend, and never stopped searching for him. To Francesco she wrote, at this time, a quite unforgettable letter, the force of which draws much of its strength and vividness and pathos from the way it repeats images from two of the parables of Jesus from chapter 15 of Luke’s Gospel, the good shepherd and the prodigal son:

Dearest and more than dearest son in Christ...it seems to me that the devil has you so well hidden that he will not let you be found. I, your wretched mother, go round searching for you, and sending for you, and I would like to lift you up onto the shoulders of the grief and compassion which I feel for your soul...So open the eye of your mind, dearest son, look up from the darkness. Acknowledge your guilt, not with confusion of mind but with self-knowledge and hope in God's goodness...You have squandered the substance of grace your heavenly Father gave you, so do what the prodigal son did who had spent all his substance in loose living. When he began to be in want, he acknowledged his fault and ran to his father for mercy. Let you, now, do the same for you are impoverished and in want and your soul is dying of hunger...Don't let the devil deceive you by either fear or shame...Come, come, dearest son. Well may I call you dear, for you have cost me many tears and much sweat and care.

Who could resist such an appeal? Francesco went immediately to meet Catherine, though not, he tells us, without great fear and shame. "But she, like the kindest and sweetest mother, received me with a joyful countenance, giving the greatest comfort to my weakness. And a few days afterwards, when I went to her again, and one of the virgin's women companions said to her, in a rather querulous manner, that I had little stability, she said with a smile: 'Never mind, my sisters...I shall put such a yoke [meaning a marriage yoke] about his neck that he will

never be able to get out of it'. Since at this time I had both wife and children, the sisters, and I with them, laughed at these words, and we made merry, nor did any of us then think any more about them.”

Happily, then, the story of Francesco ended well. In fact, it reads almost like an enacted parable: the lost friend restored like the lost coin, like the lost sheep, like the lost son. Catherine’s compassion and joy at the return of Francesco, and the way her words provoked immediate laughter among her friends, have their source in something far more profound than a mere happy and sympathetic disposition or temperament. What wells up to the surface, on this occasion, and provokes such great delight, is a joy which springs, first and last, from the saving knowledge of God’s nature and purpose, a knowledge which she had gained, over many years, from the practice of dedicated prayer and contemplation. What we are witnessing, then, in the story of Catherine and Francesco, is not simply an example of an engaging medieval friendship. No – in the marvellous energy of Catherine, as she responds to Francesco’s need and vulnerability, what we are witnessing is nothing less than a contemplative in action.

That near-compulsion to pass on to others things we ourselves have contemplated is or should be a notable characteristic of every Dominican. Already, we can say, it is something wonderful to be able, in prayer, to contemplate the goodness, beauty and truth of God. But it is a thing even more wonderful, as St Thomas Aquinas reminds us in the *Summa*, first to contemplate, and then to

pass on to others the things which we have received in contemplation. If someone were to ask us today what is it exactly that we receive in contemplative prayer, perhaps the first word to announce itself would be that tiny, beautiful word which constitutes the motto of the Dominican Order itself, the word *Veritas* or Truth. But there is another word which claims almost equal attention, especially if we are informed about the actual experience of Dominican preachers at prayer over the centuries. It is the word *joy*. “Sometimes,” we read of St Dominic, “it seemed from the very way he looked [when he was kneeling at prayer] that he had penetrated heaven in his mind, and then he would suddenly appear radiant with joy.” Elsewhere we are told that “his face was always radiant” and that “by his cheerfulness he easily won the love of everyone.”

I cannot quote these lines here, in the presence, this afternoon, of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, without remarking on the manifest joy, the cheerfulness, which so often lights up his face and indeed, at times, illumines his every expression, and this in spite of the enormous difficulties and trials which he has to endure – a “cheerfulness” which, we can be sure, springs from his own life-long dedication to the practice of meditation.

But such “cheerfulness” has not always been taken as a sign of holiness in our different religious traditions. In the Middle Ages, for example, a certain Mechtild of Magdeburg, considered laughing not only frivolous but sinful. What changed her mind on the subject was a vision she received on the feast of St Dominic. In the vision,

according to her own account, it was explained to her by the Lord – and the phrase is memorable – that “whenever Dominic laughed, he did so with the true delight of the Holy Spirit.” No less memorable, I would say, is the knowledge about joy and about God which the Dominican mystic, Meister Eckhart, acquired in contemplation. One has the impression, on occasion, that he could hardly wait to pass on to others the things which he himself was in the process of discovering. In one of his sermons, for example, he exclaims: “Now I shall say what I never said before. God enjoys himself. His own enjoyment is such that it includes his enjoyment of all creatures.” And again, in another place, Eckhart even goes so far as to speak of laughter at the very heart of the Trinity: “the Father laughs at the Son and the Son at the Father, and the laughing brings forth pleasure, and the pleasure brings forth joy, and the joy brings forth love.”

Exuberant happiness, ease of spirit, cheerfulness, joy – these are some of the words and phrases which come to mind when we think about contemplative prayer in the Dominican tradition. We are not surprised, therefore, to discover in a Dominican homily of the 13th century, a particular preacher making bold to declare, “Prayer is such an easy job!” That statement was repeated, as it happens, and almost word for word, seven centuries later here in England, in a talk given by a Dominican of this Province. So what, then, are we to conclude? Is it really the case that contemplative prayer is something as easy and natural as breathing? Does it make no great or terrible demands on

us? And is there, therefore, no such thing, for example, as a Dominican “dark night”?

The dark night! That’s certainly not a phrase we are inclined nowadays to associate with the robust and joyous Dominican way. It would seem, in fact, to point to a path of contemplation, to a way of life, far more introvert and intense – and far more *tense* – than the ordinary spiritual way of most of the Dominicans we know. What comes to mind when we think about Dominican wisdom or Dominican preaching is not an absorbing, spiritual abyss of darkness – not the “dark night” – but rather a certain light of understanding, an urgent yet serene knowledge of the Word, a radiance of truth. Nevertheless, no matter how accurate that observation may be in general terms, there is, as Johannes Tauler notes in his homily, another aspect of prayer and contemplation which cannot be ignored, namely the fact that, as soon as we hand ourselves over to the movement or energy of divine grace, we discover to our surprise that a new and radical searching of our minds and hearts begins to take place. And this marks an event of grace that is at once subversive of many, if not indeed *all*, of our old ways of thinking and feeling. As Tauler explains in his homily: “As soon as we enter our house to search for God there, God in His turn searches for us, and the house is turned upside down.”

Our “house,” our nature itself, at this stage, no matter how profoundly it finds itself challenged by the impact of grace, is not of course destroyed in the process but rather, as Aquinas reminds us in his work, simply *perfected*.

Nevertheless, the actual experience of the “perfecting” of our nature, liberating though it is in the end, and obviously for our good, is also of necessity painful at times.

According to St Thomas, although our minds are wonderfully illumined by the new life of grace, we also find ourselves, paradoxically, “in a certain darkness of ignorance” and in a state even of “confusion” with regard to knowledge of God. Attempting to say something about God, our speech, he explains, is at times like that of “someone who stutters.” Towards the end of his life, as no doubt you are well aware, even the brilliant “stuttering” of Aquinas came to an end. Not, of course, because he had no more to say but because the mystery he had experienced in contemplation exceeded all human words, all human concepts. Speaking afterwards to his friend, Brother Reginald, who could scarcely believe that Master Thomas was really going to abandon his great theological work, the saint declared: “Everything I have written now seems as so much straw in comparison with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.”

It was undoubtedly a measure of the contemplative strength of Aquinas that he could allow his own inner “house” to be so profoundly shaken at the end. That image of the house I have taken, of course, from Tauler, and deliberately so. For I find that what Tauler tells us, in his sermon, about contemplative prayer acquires, in the light of Thomas’ experience, a new authority and a new resonance. Tauler writes: “If God seeks us and turns this house upside down, all the modes and manners which have enabled us in the past to form a rational concept of Him must be

abandoned...Everything must be reversed so radically as if we had never had any concept of God at all.”

One of the most profound challenges which confronts the believer today has to do with the *thoughts* we have about God, their real or their illusory nature. As you know well, Sigmund Freud in his book, *The Future of an Illusion*, dismissed religion as little more than a projection of infantile fears and hopes and desires. The “god” invented by believers was not, he argued, what they imagined – some kind of divine, wondrous truth or presence – but rather a mere fiction, a tragic illusion conjured out of human need. What I find impressive in the writings of Johannes Tauler and of his confrère, Meister Eckhart, is that both of these men, precisely because of their experience in contemplative prayer, were fully aware of the danger noted here by Dr Freud. Eckhart, for example, again and again in his talks and writings, sought to discourage his contemporaries from engaging in infantile and illusory forms of religious practice and belief. “Some people,” he noted, “want to see God with their own eyes, just as they see a cow; and they want to love God just as they love a cow...[for her] milk and cheese”! And, in another place, he declared: “A man ought not to have a God who is just a product of his thought, nor should he be satisfied with that, because if the thought vanished, God too would vanish.” More striking still, right in the middle of a sermon on one occasion, we find him exclaiming out loud, and no doubt to the astonishment of his hearers: “I pray God that he may rid me of God!” What Eckhart means here is, of course, rid me of the God who is merely the product of my own limited

way of thinking, the invention of my own rather fanciful imagination, because that God simply does not exist.

So transcendent and ineffable is the mystery of God, it exceeds not only the grasp of ordinary human intelligence but also the grasp of human feeling. As a result, in the practice of prayer and meditation, it happens very often that there is, on the believer's part, a sudden, bewildering loss of any felt sense of devotion towards God. This difficulty in prayer is addressed by Eckhart in a rather striking passage in which all the emphasis is placed not on our feelings of devotion towards God but rather on the mysteriously urgent and loving approach of God towards us:

It is written in the Revelation that our Lord told people: "I stand at the door and knock and wait. If any man let me in, I will sup with him."...He stands there, lingering, waiting for us to be ready and open the door and let him in...He waits more urgently than you for the door to be opened. You are a thousand times more necessary to him than he is to you...Still you may ask: "How can this be? I do not sense his presence." But look! To sense his presence is not within your power, but his. When it suits him, he shows himself; and he conceals himself when he wants to.

Sometimes, when attending Mass or the Eucharist, believers find that their hearts are in no way quickened by the mystery enacted before them. They wonder if this is

not, perhaps, a sign they should hold back from receiving the Eucharist. But Meister Eckhart, taking up the question, has this to say: “Whoever would gladly receive the Body of our Lord ought not to wait until he discovered certain emotions or sensations within himself, or until his inwardness and devotion are great, but he ought to make sure he has the proper will and intention. You should not attach such importance to what you feel; rather, consider important what you love and what you intend.” This teaching is as wise as it is encouraging. But, at this point in his homily, Eckhart allows us to hear, once again, the voice of an unhappy, unconvinced disciple: “Alas, sir, how empty and cold and inert I am, and that is why I dare not go to the Lord.” To this, Eckhart replies: “[A]ll the more reason for you to go to your God: for it is in him that you will be warmed and kindled, and in him you will be made holy.”

Clearly Eckhart is not suggesting that we can never expect, in the life of prayer, to have some sense of God’s presence. But that gift of the felt presence of God – Eckhart calls it “inwardness and devotion and jubilation” – although, at a certain stage, it serves very well to draw us nearer to God, is “not always the best [gift].” In fact, Eckhart says explicitly that “those who have more of it are not always the best men.” And he goes on to say, in the same sermon: “sometimes a man must abandon this kind of jubilation because of a better kind of love.” The love Eckhart has in mind here is, of course, that devoted attention to the needs of the neighbor which, on occasion, may require the sacrifice of one’s own inner feelings of spiritual repose or of quiet ecstasy in God, a point made explicit later in the

sermon. There, we read: “That a man ought sometimes out of love to forgo such sensations, Saint Paul in his love admonishes us when he says: ‘I have wished that I might be separated from Christ for the love of my brothers.’”

In the end, what is of supreme importance for Eckhart, the Dominican, is not the ecstasy of a sustained psycho-spiritual enthusiasm but rather the plain, Gospel ecstasy of committed service to the neighbor. Active, devoted charity, therefore, not mere feelings or mere sensations of devotion, is what, in Eckhart’s opinion, most distinguishes the Christian disciple. In the same sermon, with words happily salted with the bright wisdom of the Gospel, Eckhart declares: “If a man were in an ecstasy, as St Paul was, and knew that some sick man needed him to give him a bit of soup, I should think it far better if you would abandon your ecstasy out of love and show greater love in caring for the other in his need.”

The robust, confident note which Eckhart strikes here connects him at once with the spirituality of the very first Dominicans. That original Dominican spirituality was distinguished by a Gospel directness and simplicity. The life of prayer and contemplation was something which was regarded as open to everyone. Whether it took the form of straightforward vocal prayer or that of a more meditative and calm form of contemplation, it was always understood as a way of being, a life in the Spirit, to which everyone was invited. But why, then, does there appear to be such a marked difference between the 13th century Dominican statement, “prayer is such an easy job,” and a number of

the 14th century statements regarding difficulties in prayer which I have quoted earlier from the two Rhineland preachers, Eckhart and Tauler?

First of all, I think we can say that, in that age of anxiety, which was the 14th century, the cross-thread, the counter-thread, of a more introverted spirituality had an enormous impact on the original weave and pattern of early Dominican spirituality. But that, in itself, was not something necessarily tragic or unfortunate. Almost from the beginning of the Order's life we have discovered that, whatever form the new challenge takes, whether it is that of the perceived threat of Aristoteleanism in the 13th century, or that of a deeply disturbed society and church in the 14th, it is precisely by "thread and cross-thread" that the authentic pattern of Dominican spirituality is woven in every generation.

With regard to prayer and contemplation, I have no doubt that the path of the preacher is most clearly and most memorably indicated in the lives and writings of the very first Dominicans – those, that is, of the 13th century. That said, however, in an age like our own, marked by a crisis of the spirit not unlike that of the 14th century, I find exemplary the way Eckhart and Tauler responded to the needs of their contemporaries. Owing to the depth of their own faith-experience, they were able to offer enormous encouragement to those men and women who had arrived at a stage when they no longer enjoyed any sense of God's presence, and who were bewildered by the seeming absence of God in their lives. With regard to this matter, I

have no doubt that many of our own contemporaries – many of *ourselves* – are in at least as much need of enlightenment and encouragement. And so, together with teachers and preachers such as Dominic and Catherine and Thomas, our two Rhineland brothers, Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, can help us, I believe, to experience in our own lives today, in our own practice of prayer and meditation, the mystery of the lost son returned home, and the lost sheep and the lost coin happily restored.