

Communion or union



The early Church fathers had no shadow of a doubt that union with the Divine is possible for all: *“God is the life of all free beings. He is the salvation of all, of believers and unbelievers, of the just or the unjust, of the pious or the impious, of those freed from passions or those caught up in them, of monks or those living in the world, of the educated and the illiterate, of the healthy and the sick, of the young and the old.”* (Gregory of Nyssa)

The reason for this is to be found in their theology. The Greek philosophers, in particular Plato, were the first to formulate the idea of our having something essential in common with the Divine. They called it the *‘nous’*, pure intuitive intelligence as distinct from rational intelligence. The early Church Father, Clement of Alexandria, saw the correspondence between the concept of *‘nous’* and the one expressed in *Genesis* of us being created in the *‘image of God’*. The *‘image’* was for him comparable to the *‘nous’*. Following him Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers, Evagrius and even later Meister Eckhart all saw this *‘image of God’* as proof of our original and essential unity with God. The reason why we can touch and be touched therefore by this ultimate transpersonal reality is because there is something within us that is similar to this reality. Having something like the Divine within us allows us to know the Divine, as the prevalent idea in early thought was that only *‘like*

can know like'. Our everyday experience also confirms that. Only when we have something substantial in common with another person can we truly relate to them, can we be one in mind and soul.

The same conviction we also find in Jesus' words: *'The Kingdom of God is within you and among you.'* (Luke 17:21) St Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians: *'Do you not know that your body is a shrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit?'* (1Cor 6:19). Meditation helps us to actually experience this reality, this living force as Christ within us, energising, healing, transforming and leading us to greater awareness, wholeness and compassion.

Similarity has always been accepted within Christianity – the soul as a mirror of God – but total identity has often been disputed. Yet we hear in the *'Gospel of Thomas'*: *'Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that person.'* In the *'Gospel of John'* we find Jesus' beautiful prayer of unity: *'that they may be one, as we are one: I in them and Thou in me, may they be perfectly one.'* (John 17:21) Constantly, mystics who experienced this identity and spoke about it were viewed with suspicion. Meister Eckhart talked about the birth of the 'Word' in the soul, by which he meant the realisation of the consciousness of Christ within us, which is our link with the Divine: *"Similarly I have often said that there is something in the soul that is closely related to God that it is one with him and not just united."* St Teresa of Avila talked in the *'Interior Castle'* about the seventh dwelling place of the spiritual marriage as a permanent state of union beyond rapture, a total oneness.

Yet it is communion rather than union we are talking about in Christianity. It is not seen as a total merging, but *"there is no doubt that the individual loses all sense of separation from the One and experiences a total unity, but that does not mean that the individual no longer exists. Just as every element in nature is a unique reflection of the one Reality, so every human being is a unique centre of consciousness in the universal consciousness."* (Bede Griffiths *'The Marriage of East and West'*)

Apart from the above, another essential preparation for deep silent prayer is interior purification, aiming at what the Desert Fathers and Mothers called *'purity of heart'*. For Cassian, as for his teacher Evagrius, spiritual practice very much involves the purification of *'evil thoughts'* or as they also put it *'cleansing the emotions'*. By this they meant purifying one's ego-centric desires, the disordered emotions caused by the wounded ego. Evagrius' advice to his disciples is to redirect, educate and transfigure these desires through *awareness*, so that they would no longer be at the mercy of disproportioned emotions, which clouded their perception of reality and prevented them from seeing the Divine. Thomas Merton explains: *'What the fathers sought most of all was their own true self in Christ. And in order to do this, they had to reject completely the false, formal self fabricated under social compulsion in the 'world.'* Meditation is the key: it leads us to insights how our woundedness manifests itself in our compulsive needs: our greed, our envy, our desire for esteem, power and control. Meditation is our most important weapon, as it attracts the Holy Spirit, who *'takes compassion on our weakness, and though we are impure he often comes to visit us. If he should find our spirit praying to him out of love for*

the truth he then descends upon it and dispels the whole army of thoughts and reasoning that besets it. (Evagrius) Prayer/meditation therefore naturally leads to transformation and healing of the wounded ego.

The teaching of the Desert Fathers and Mothers was soundly based on Scripture. Jesus stresses that it is our thoughts, our 'evil' thoughts that stop us for living in the Presence of God: *'Wicked thoughts...all proceed from the heart; and these are the things that defile a man.'* He stresses that it is interior purification that is needed: *'Clean the inside of the cup first; then the outside will be clean also.'* At the same time we are told that when we do persevere, *'the door will be opened.'* (Matt 7:8) We will become aware of the divine Presence in our heart.

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