

## RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN POOR CLARE TRADITION

Methods conducive to religious experience have become something of a commodity these days. Techniques for the purpose of inducing altered states of consciousness are available – for a price. There are strategies for achieving a peaceful resting within oneself as preparation for Christian prayer, too. Yet discernment is needed. Our spiritual energies can become dissipated by formulas directed toward the excitement of new experience rather than toward the bonding of relationship with the living God.

Franciscan contemplative tradition offers directives for a carefully developed prayer-form that provides guidance toward communion with Christ and continued nourishment for a vibrant mystical life. It is a way of praying discovered in the lives of countless Christian saints and has been the particular characteristic of prayer among daughters of Saint Clare of Assisi. Throughout history Poor Clares have exercised a primary role in perpetuating this proven path to authentic religious experience. So much so, that the writings they left can be correctly interpreted and fully appreciated only in the light of Franciscan tradition. At the time when people are searching for God in many directions, sons and daughters of Francis and Clare need to consider their heritage of prayer and review its special structure and its positive effects far surpassing popular techniques.

This study will certainly not be an exhaustive treatment of Franciscan contemplative tradition, but more precisely, a presentation of some aspects of religious experience as it appears in the teachings of our founders. Its development will be traced, first of all, in its origin, the prayer of Saint Francis; secondly, in its expression through Saint Clare's letters; thirdly, in the theology and structure of Saint Bonaventure; and fourthly, in the vehicle of its survival through the centuries – in the Poor Clares' writings; and finally, in contemporary developments.

### **Saint Francis' Contemplation**

The source of our contemplative tradition lies within the four elements that characterized Francis' prayer.

#### **1. Contemplation of the Historical Christ.**

Francis transformed religious sensibility in the direction of devotion to the humanity of Christ. The place he gave to Jesus in his prayer went further than the way opened by those who had preceded him.

Saint Bernard had fostered the idea of keeping the image of Jesus in mind and meditating upon him in the events of his life, but he couldn't conceive of the possibility of union with God through these means. Meditation about Jesus, though absolutely necessary, was seen by him as a carnal relationship; something inferior. The incarnation was considered to have been the result of a transgression, something that was not supposed to have happened, and thus, something that could hardly contain means of divine union.

Francis didn't formulate any particular theory about prayer as Bernard had.<sup>1</sup> Instead, he was so convinced that we can know God only in and through the historical Christ that he attached himself above all else to contemplation of the Incarnate Word. What Francis did was to revive a distinct form of mystical consciousness by parting from the existing norms of spirituality and restoring to the Church the kind of Christ-consciousness rooted in early Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

We read descriptions of Francis' prayer in the writings of Celano (1 Celano, 84), how he would "recall Christ's words through persistent meditation and would bring to mind his deeds through the most penetrating consideration." But Francis even went further than that; he would intuitively enter into Christ's life and experience the power of his presence.

Francis taught the people how to do this, too; the most widely known example is his creation of the Christmas scene at Greccio so that the people might actually experience in some manner the birth of the Christ Child. He had live animals brought into the scene to set the atmosphere, but he didn't employ actual persons to take the places of the Holy Family; it seems he left that to their imaginations. We are told that Francis spoke of the child Jesus as if he were truly lying there in the manger he had prepared, so vivid was the re-enactment of the event. Some people claim they saw Francis take a child into his arms.

The humility of God manifested in the mystery of the Incarnation so occupied Francis' memory that he hardly wanted to think of anything else but this and the

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<sup>1</sup> Notes from a paper by Ewert H. Cousins entitled: "Franciscan Rots of Ignatian meditation." Fordham University, N.Y. 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Notes from: "Francis of Assisi: Christian Mysticism at the Crossroads" by E. H. Cousins, in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford Press, 1984), p. 166.

love displayed in the passion of Jesus. (1 Celano, 84) He would enter into the sufferings of Christ with moans and tears day and night, and he prayed that he might even feel those pains interiorly and physically. His whole being reached out to Jesus, Celano tells us; his whole being thirsted after him. This kind of mysticism represented a different current than the tradition recognized by the Church at that time. With Francis came the beginning of Christ-Mysticism, a tendency that was to become the characteristic form of Western religions.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Francis' Imitation of Jesus.

Besides entering into Christ's life and being with him, Francis also sought in prayer to become like him. Jesus was his "moulding form" as he strove for deeper union with the Father. He focused upon concrete details of Christ's public life and tried to emulate his virtue in every situation so that he might learn to acquire his spirit. In prayer he kept his eyes on him in order to embody his values and be more able to live them out. Everything was done with this in mind. In this prayer he learned all that he passed on to us; that we have to descend into poverty as God descended into our human condition.

## 3. Francis and the Christ of Prophecy

A third characteristic of Francis' prayer was that the Jesus he focused upon was not purely an object of his imagination but also of his faith in divine revelation. Jesus was the One proclaimed by the prophets and "the Lord Most High" extolled by the psalmist. In this affirmation of Christ's dual nature Francis was not limited to carnal relationship, for his Christ was divine.

The all encompassing symbol of Francis' relationship with Jesus is probably his vision of La Verna. The six wings of the Seraph that appeared to him is an image derived from the Prophet Isaiah 6:1-13, but it was perceived by Francis with the image of the Crucified.<sup>4</sup> Francis contemplated the Triune God in the Crucified Christ and this remains the apex of Franciscan contemplation; this was the Christ who embodied the unseen, uncreated Divinity.

## 4. Francis' Desire for God

Fourthly, the impetus behind Francis prayer was his longing for God, and his love for this God he could not see was nurtured by habitual consideration of the mystery of the Cross; the mystery of the kind of love that gives itself as Jesus gave himself. His prayer was the movement of the whole person towards

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 172-173.

something to which he was drawn with the kind of desire that cannot be satisfied until it becomes one thing with the Object of its love. The presence of this depth of desire is an important element in Francis prayer because it is an assurance against the danger of seeking the thrill of prayerful experience instead of God himself.

There is an early informal theology that faithfully adheres to the example and teachings of Francis and presents these four main elements of Francis' prayer from another perspective. This is found in the letters of Saint Clare to Blessed Agnes of Prague.

### **Clare and Franciscan Contemplation**

Clare's writings reflect the mysticism of Francis as found in his particular form of prayer, and they do this in the more detailed manner that writing exacts. Her correspondence with Agnes contains guidance for the life of prayer she expected of her sisters, and thus provides a setting for enlargement upon Francis' doctrine.

#### **1. Saint Clare's Contemplation of Jesus**

If we read Clare's letters alongside the four characteristics found in Francis' prayer, we see, first of all, that although she may not have created an outdoor display as Francis had, Clare had taught her sisters how to make contact with Jesus in prayer.

In the letter Clare wrote to Agnes of Prague in 1235, she prescribed the use of imagination by expressions such as: "As a poor virgin embrace the poor Christ," thereby telling Agnes to make Jesus as real as if she were holding him in her arms. "See and follow the One made worthless for." Clare continued: ". . . see him knocked about. . . fix your gaze upon him. . . see him whipped many times on his whole body. . . see him dying in terrible agony.

The Latin word Clare used for "see" was *intuere* which means to see in an intuitive manner. The use of imagination is implied, the gaze of the spirit and affections towards the object loved until both are one, as in the condition of contemplation. Clare's use of the word "contemplation" also implied both that initial loving gaze and the unitive experience in which it culminates.<sup>5</sup> Clare was

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<sup>5</sup> From the introduction to *Tempi Spirituali*, by Sister Chiara Augusta Iainati, O.S.C. S. Maria degli Angeli, 1970.

telling Agnes to gaze interiorly upon the Crucified until she forgot herself entirely and experienced his love for her. There is further example of this in the letter of 1238 where Clare wrote: "Place your eyes before the mirror of eternity . . ." The eyes signify imagination, the eyes of the spirit, and the mirror of eternity is Christ who teaches us to see the deeper meaning beyond the surfaces of life by the light of his Spirit within us. Clare continues: "Place your spirit in the splendor of glory." Christ is the splendor of glory (Her meaning is spelled out clearly in her last letter). And finally: "Place your heart in the figure of the Divine Substance, (Turn all your affections towards Christ) and by means of contemplation transform yourself totally in to the image of his Divinity. Then you will also experience what is reserved to his friends alone, and you will taste the secret sweetness which God himself has reserved from the beginning to those who love him." (3<sup>rd</sup> letter)

So then, Clare taught that union with God is assured to one who centers all faculties upon Jesus; the imagination, memory, intellect, will, and affections. In mystical literature, to taste implies the feelings; Clare used every part of herself in her relationship with God.

## 2. Clare's Imitation of Christ

The imitation of Christ traced in Francis' prayer is more carefully spelled out by Clare as a safeguard when applying imagination in prayer. Clare told Agnes that by gazing at the mirror, Christ, every day, and studying herself in comparison with him she would clothe herself in the garments of all his virtues, (4<sup>th</sup> letter) and she also told her that this is how she would become like the Father. We are to center our energies upon Jesus, then, in order to behave as he did in the practical details of everyday life. This is the condition that determines our capacity for religious experience and transformation: not solely an intuitive looking upon Jesus in prayer but doing so that we might acquire his spirit and live by it.

In the form of contemplation the earnest effort to become more Christ-like through prayer is the moral element that guard against our settling into the imagination as an escape into sentimentality. The use of imagination is not an easier way – not as Clare taught it – for she stressed the continual striving necessary if one is ever to experience the "fruits of love."

## 3. Clare and the Christ of the Prophets

Clare based her concepts of Christ on sound sources. Throughout her writings there is an artful weaving of the human and divine natures. Notwithstanding the scarcity of her writings, there still remain sufficient references to scriptural sources to demonstrate a contemplation of Jesus established in divine revelation. Just months preceding her death, Clare pointed to the Christ who is Wisdom, and she drew from Wisdom 7:25-26. She described Him as “the brilliance of everlasting light, and the mirror without spot,” citing the mirror image also found in the Book of Wisdom. This is followed by terms taken from 7:18 denoting the times of Wisdom: beginning, end and middle. Clare wrote:

Look at the beginning of this Mirror, the poverty of the One placed in the manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes . . . The King of Angels the Lord of heaven and earth is laid in a manger! . . .and now, in the middle of the Mirror consider the humility, the countless labors and burdens he endured. . . and in the end of the same Mirror, contemplate the unspeakable charity with which he willed to suffer on the tree of the Cross, and to die thereon the most shameful kind of death (Brady, 4<sup>th</sup> letter).

Among other scriptural references in the same letter, Clare quoted the Book of Lamentations 1:12, adding: This Mirror himself, nailed to the wood of the Cross, called passers-by to reflect carefully on these things, (for he said): All you who pass by, look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.”

Christ is God, and what he said, and what he was, especially on the cross, is the most perfect image of God we will ever have. Was it this realization that prompted Clare’s concern that the friars’ teaching remain accessible to her sisters? In Clare’s sound spirituality we have the healthy reminder that contemplative living is doomed without frequent exposure to divine revelations.

#### 4. Clare and the Desire for God

Clare’s prayer was more than devotion, it was communion with her God. Thus, when she wrote of contemplating Jesus hanging on the cross, something that happened centuries previously, she was speaking as one really present to him, just as if it was taking place in her own lifetime. She was with a dying man she loved with real emotion. This was so much more than meditating upon something that no longer existed.

To do all that Clare proposed, to be with Jesus, to feel his pain, to suffer with him and cry with him though we do not see him with bodily eyes, requires the use of intuition in a manner possible only if we are drawn to him by love. There has to be present in all of this the honest caring that nourishes deeper relationship; even on a simply human level. There must have been some dimension of longing on Clare's part to know the man Jesus so that she might grow increasingly more able to know him in his divine nature. This is the kind of desire that can urge us on also, to see in Jesus the path to the "Kingdom of Heaven" Clare tried to describe for us, and the way to "eternal life."

The Child Francis embraced and Clare contemplated in awe was the same Lord they brought to life once again by their own lives. Entrance into the events of Christ's life was meant to arouse energy for the life-giving happenings of every day reality. Clare called us to this when she reiterated Francis' admonition to become Christ's mothers, sisters and spouses through the spirit-filled actions that witness to our absorption of his compassion, patience and suffering-love through contact with him in prayer. It is in this sense that Christ is the Way to oneness with himself and transcendent union with the Father.

These four elements of Francis' prayer are beautifully summarized in four consecutive paragraphs of Clare's last letter to Agnes. First, Clare instructs her concerning imitation of Jesus, then she recalls events in his life. Next, Clare refers to prophecies about Jesus, and finally, encourages Agnes to desire union with God with all her heart. All of these are framed, furthermore, within reference to Christ as Mirror of Wisdom. Could the mind of Bonaventure improve upon Clare's understanding of Franciscan contemplation?

### **Bonaventure's Analysis of Francis' Power**

Six years after Clare passed into the embrace of the "King of Glory," Saint Bonaventure set down his perception of Francis' mysticism according to theological principles, prayerfully studying the journey that had brought him to intimate union with God. He shaped his finding into a method meant to lead a disciple to God as Francis had been led. This form of prayer proved to be effective and has been used and taught by the most advanced spiritual masters and most intellectual of saints and mystics.

Bonaventure prescribed no hard and fast rules but, because the imagination can stimulate sentimentality in regard to Christ's humanness if left unchecked, he specified certain qualifications for prayer as he had observed them in Francis

himself. In the scholastic language of Bonaventure, the contemplation of the mysteries of Christ must include, as it had for Francis, literal moral, analogical and anagogical dimensions. This meant the one praying was to recall the historical event, draw out some moral quality to be learned from it, be mindful of divine revelation of Christ as God, and be prompted by desire for God. <sup>6</sup>

Bonaventure wrote two works that expressly teach this form of contemplation: *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, and *Lignum vitae*. In the first, *The soul's Journey Into God*, he treats of all the forms by which God may be contemplated, ultimately taking the reader to Christ as the highest "door" to mystic union. In the seventh chapter he wrote:

Christ is the way and the door,  
Christ is the ladder and the vehicle,  
Like the mercy seat placed above the arc of God  
and the mystery hidden from eternity.  
Who turns his face fully to the mercy Seat  
and with faith, hope and love,  
devotion, admiration, exultation,  
appreciation, praise and joy,  
behold him hanging upon the cross  
such a one makes the Pasch, that is, the Passover,  
with Christ.  
By the staff of the cross  
He passes over the Red Sea,  
Where he will taste the hidden manna;  
And with Christ he rests in the tomb,  
As if dead to the world,  
But experiencing  
As far as it is possible in this wayfarer's state,  
What was said on the cross  
To the thief who adhered to Christ;  
Today you shall be with me in Paradise. <sup>7</sup>

After using all created things and after explaining all the accepted paths to contemplation, Bonaventure takes us ultimately to Christ, the form of the divinity, as the highest concept through which we are let into Divine Darkness. Christ is seen in relation to the prophecies concerning the Messiah and the manner in which he fulfilled them perfectly. Here also, desire for God is shown

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<sup>6</sup> Notes from a paper by E. H. Cousins.

<sup>7</sup> *Bonaventure*, Classics of Western Spirituality Series. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 111-112.

to be the disposition that empowers us to leave everything else and turn all our affections toward him.

The careful manner in which he did this placed Francis' mysticism within the context of the traditional negative forms of mysticism. Bonaventure agreed with all these that from here on in we can let go of everything, but at the same time he pointed clearly to the necessity of using all material things to bring us to a deeper relationship to the One who made them, and is the Lord of Creation.

This is demonstrated in *The Major Life of Saint Francis*, where Bonaventure showed how all things had led Francis to mystical union, even though the God with whom he enjoyed this union was seen by him as far above all that had led him to it.

Later on, Bonaventure wrote an entire work on the contemplation of Christ: *Lignum Vitae*. He called it *The Tree of Life* because Christ is the Tree of Life. In this book Bonaventure goes into greater detail on the literal and moral dimensions of contemplation, instructing the reader to paint in his mind a scene from the Gospel so that some truth about Christ might be grasped more effectively and thus be brought into the practical dimension of daily life. He focused upon concrete details and then invited the reader to become an actor in the event. For example, in summarizing the scene of Christ's birth in Bonaventure's *Tree of Life*, we find:

1. The historical situation is described. It is the reign of Caesar Augustus at the time of the census. Joseph was taking Mary with him to Bethlehem.
2. The moral lesson is that Christ who was rich became poor as an example for us.
3. The analogical sense is briefly mentioned. The King of peace like a bridegroom from his bridal chamber (cf. 1 Par. 22:9; Ps. 186) came forth from the virginal womb.
4. We are called to take our place with the shepherds and embrace the Child with all the love of our heart,

Bonaventure bids us enter the scene, take the Child into our arms as Francis did, kiss his little feet and sing with the angels: Glory to God in the highest! We are brought to the realization that this is God. We are summoned to look beyond the surface of the historical event to the redemption taking place. All other scenes in

Christ's life are approached in this way. By entering into the event and allowing our feelings to emerge the lesson to be learned is more easily impressed upon our memory and we are more likely to put it into effect in our lives.

With the passing of Francis something had been started which was to strongly influence the development of prayer in the Church. Clare lived and taught this new mysticism. Bonaventure refined and explained it, numberless are those who have come to know God because of it.

### **Poor Clares and the Franciscan Prayer Tradition**

Toward the end of the thirteenth century an unknown Franciscan Friar of Tuscany wrote a book entitled: *Meditationes Vitae Christi [Meditations on the Life of Christ]*. Authorship had been attributed to Saint Bonaventure because of the similarity of its contents to his writings, especially those on the passion. There is little doubt that much in the manuscript had been copied from his work. More recently Ubertino de Casale is considered to have been its author. In some of his proven works he mentioned Sister Cecilia, a Poor Clare of Tuscany, who taught him about the heights of contemplation. This work may well have been composed under her inspiration for it was dedicated to saint Cecilia and was evidently written for Poor Clares. Saint Clare is mentioned and the entire contents are directed toward the life of a community of nuns living in poverty and humility.

These meditations are held to be the genuine fruit of authentic Franciscan sources and are a sound reflection of the spirituality of Saint Francis and the subsequent teachings of Saints Clare and Bonaventure. They draw the reader to make vivid contact with Jesus, re-create his life, imitate him, and desire to love him with ever increasing ardor.

Material has been borrowed quite freely from them. Rudolf of Saxony used sections when he wrote: *The Life of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, a book that radically altered the life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola as he lay recuperating from an injury received in battle. Its influence may be seen in the *Spiritual Exercises* he composed, although early followers explained them as intellectual exercises rather than what Ignatius intended them to be: an experience of Jesus in the Franciscan Tradition.

Little else is known about this large volume of meditations except that it served to sustain the tradition of contemplation handed down to us. Even now it offers insights into the employment of imagination in the prayer of early Friars and

Clares. Publication has not ceased since its first extravagantly illuminated manuscript. There are about two hundred varieties of these in existence with ancient printed copies as well as contemporary editions available in various languages.

Far less known are the pages, and volumes even, written by Poor Clares in the form of journals, spiritual diaries, or instructions to their communities. These contain evidence of loving relationship with Jesus, evidence that they had indeed tasted and experienced what “God has kept from the beginning for those who love him.” (3<sup>rd</sup> letter) In their statements implying that they has seen Jesus or heard him speak, we can recognize something of the extent of their concentration upon him, their desire for union with the Godhead, and the particular form their religious experience assumed. The women who wrote offer testimony of a spiritual life that grew stronger while they strove to be with Jesus, especially in his sufferings and death on the cross.

The earlier sources of Poor Clare spirituality are, of course, the letters, Rule, and Testament of Saint Clare.<sup>8</sup> Apart from these there is only the letter to Clare from her sister Agnes, and the work of Agnes of Harcourt on Isabella of France. There appears to be little more from the thirteenth century, and in the fourteenth there are actually none that we know of. But the ‘springtime of the Franciscan order’ saw a blossoming of writers on the Order of saint Clare. There were a number of them in the fifteenth century, foremost among them being Saint Catherine of Bologna, Saint Eustochia Calafato, and Saint Camilla Battista Varano.

Catherine wrote long conferences for her sisters and many songs and poems. Her contemplation of Christ filled her with an amazement that moved her to exclaim: “Ah, let us contemplate this folly of God.”<sup>9</sup> Another of the outstanding phrases emphasizing the centrality of Christ in her prayer was that “ the greatest happiness is – above all - to be with Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

In her longer works, like *The Seven Arms of the Spiritual Combat*, Catherine advises her readers to adhere to Christ, telling them, in the fourth chapter, that they should always set before the eyes of their understanding the presence of the

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<sup>8</sup> Clare’s writings are examined in *Claire d’Assisi: Ecrits*, by Marie-France Becker, O.S.C., Jean-Francoise Godet, O.F.M., and Thadee Matura, O.F.M. (Paris: Les Editions di Cerf, 1985) This would serve well as the history surrounding the first Poor Clare writings.)

<sup>99</sup> *Ms. Devozione Lodi et alter diverse cose spirituali*, bk. 3, n.1., f. 47 r., in Lainati, II, pp. 927-929.

<sup>10</sup> *Speccio di illuminazione*, in Lainati, Intro. P. 21.

humanity of Jesus, especially in his sufferings, adding that without this everything else we might do is of little help in the spiritual life.

Saint Eustochia wrote a book of contemplation of the passion of Christ, among other works. In Saint Camilla Battista, we find moving passages by one who was present to the interior agony of Jesus more than to his physical sufferings. She takes us more deeply into Christ and is considered a forerunner of devotion to the Sacred Heart. She wrote: "How sweet and delightful are thy works in the soul which affectionately reposes in the heart of the crucified humanity, where the fullness of thy Godhead corporally dwells."<sup>11</sup> And in another place:

Passed the whole time of my prayer in meditation on the passion of Christ and did not wish to think or meditate on anything else: and I used the whole endeavor of my mind to enter into the most bitter sea of the mental suffering of the heart of Jesus...<sup>12</sup>

Camilla assures us that embracing the Crucified is the surest and shortest way and the one requiring the least effort for growing in union with God.

Blessed Julia of Milan, in the sixteenth century, used a literary tool in her writings, expressing her thoughts as if they were Mary's thoughts about Jesus. Mother Caritas Pirkheimer, also in the sixteenth century wrote, among her other works, a book of prayers addressed to Christ.

There were eight writers in the Order of Saint Clare in the seventeenth century, but here the mention of Venerable Clare Isabella Fornari who penned numerous poems on the contemplation of Christ, will suffice.

Saint Veronica Giuliani leads the Clare-writers of the eighteenth century with her volumes on contemplation of Christ, particularly on immersion in his sufferings. In his presence she wrote: "He, with that arm which he removed from the cross, put his arm around my neck, and he brought my mouth to his pierced side...while he imparted to me knowledge of his infinite love...."<sup>13</sup> There is a section on her interior castle among her fourteen books; an example of the richness that has yet to be appreciated in the English language.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Spiritual Life of the Blessed Battista Varani*, from a collection of her revelations written in Italian by Matthew Pascucci (London: The Oratory, 1874), p. 407.

<sup>12</sup> *La Vita Spirituale*, Lainati, II, p. 1037.

<sup>13</sup> Excerpts from the "Bulletin of the Sanctuary of St. Veronica Giuliani." (Citta di Castella, Perugia. Trans. Emmanuel Klump, O.F.M.Conv., p. 3.Typescript.

Saint Mary Magdalen of Martinengo expressed her meditations on the mysteries of Christ. Her consciousness would appeal to us today, for she summed up a lengthy conference delivered to her sisters by saying: "This is the point sisters: Look and imitate."<sup>14</sup>

The nineteenth century overflows with Clares who left some form of writing. Sister Agnes Sorazu offers an explanation of why Franciscans center upon Jesus in his human condition.

After they have followed him in the course of their mortal life, for a relatively long period, and have succeeded in assimilating his virtues... Jesus will lead them into the palace of contemplation of his divine nature, to associate them with his glorious life, and have them gaze in the savory and ineffable pastures of the diving perfections...<sup>15</sup>

All of these excerpts bring us to one that is most pertinent to the topic of religious experience as it is addressed in this paper; that we can be diverted to practices and techniques that are secondary or worse, and deprive ourselves of the help we could have had from the prayer of communion with Christ in his mysteries and risen Presence. This "Theo-centricity in Christ" is the most exact definition of the spirituality of the Order of Saint Clare.<sup>16</sup>

#### Contemporary Developments

The benefits reaped from imaginative prayer are not relegated to the middle ages. Francis' concentration upon Christ, and contemplation of the events of his earthly life have been the subject of special study on the part of Ewert H. Cousins, Professor at Fordham University, who sees in it the "mysticism of the historical event," wherein one recalls an event from the past and enters into it in order to draw out its spiritual energy.<sup>17</sup>

The balance afforded by this method is recognized by the Jesuits who are stressing the place of imagination in the *Spiritual Exercises* composed by their founder, Saint Ignatius of Loyola.<sup>18</sup> Contemporary techniques are being used along with Ignatian contemplation as aids to prayer. In all of this Bonaventure is

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<sup>14</sup> Avvertimenti spirituali ed esortatori, p. 43-45, 61-62. Lainati II, p. 871-873.

<sup>15</sup> "La vita spirituale", Lainati I, p. 150.

<sup>16</sup> Lainati, I, intro.

<sup>17</sup> E. H. Cousins, *Mysticism*.

<sup>18</sup> Mariano Ballestar, S.J., "Teach Us To Pray: Pray With the Imagination," in *Director's Service*, Rome, 1976, p. 139-160-

duly cited as its source, and reference is made to the book that bore his tradition, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. Recent articles still quote from its prologue:

If you wish to gain fruit from this book, you need to let yourself witness the Lord's words and deeds just as if you heard them with your ears and saw them with your eyes...putting any concern or trouble.<sup>19</sup>

“Kything” is being revived today, too, a prayer in which one tries to be with another person in a prayerful manner so as to draw energy from their strengths. This person might be Christ or another holy person, living or deceased, to whom we are attracted, or someone who influenced us, or in whom we see a quality we ourselves are in need of. Imagination is used to make these persons accessible to us.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, psychologists employ this imaginative approach to advantage by utilizing it to arouse the latent inner energies of their clients so that the world can become for them something they can take hold of. For those professional people it is a technique that brings the unseen realities of life to consciousness; for Christians it can be nourishment for the life of the Spirit.

## Conclusion

The Eucharistic sacrifice is a model for the contemplation considered in this study. Two thousand years ago after Jesus shared a final meal with his apostles, we arrange a table with bread and wine and enter into this historical event again and again. We recall the scriptures foretelling the divinity of Jesus. Having entered into this act of remembering and reliving his final expression of love we are energized to imitate his loving sacrifice more than if we merely recalled it to mind.

Our holy founders lived this kind of relationship with Jesus, and have invited us into this same prayerfulness that is the beginning and end of all religious experience.

We transcend our humanness not by setting aside our faculties but by re-directing them toward an experience of the presence, the strengths, and the love of Jesus, so that we might assume something of the proportions of his Spirit. The Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit of God. As we know the first more fully, we will, in that same measure, be prepared to transcend it for a new kind of knowledge of a Reality Whose Presence, strengths, and love can never be imagined.

Sr. Mary Francis Hone, O.S.C.

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<sup>19</sup> *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. Trans. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green. New York: Princeton University Press, 1961, 1977.

<sup>20</sup> *The Enneagram and Prayer*. Barbara Metz, S.N.D. and John Burchill, O. P. Denville: Dimension Books, 1987. 107-110.