

**SUSAN MUTO'S PRESENTATION
FOR ESTHER TAN**

NOVEMBER 6, 2024

**FEEDING OUR SPIRITUAL HUNGER
AT THE BANQUET TABLE
OF THE CHURCH'S
GREATEST MASTERS AND MYSTICS**

I

From the Ancient Yet Ever New Teachings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers: Learn to “Quiet Your Head and Hear with Your Heart”

In a world dominated by superficial chatter and uncommitted togetherness, a golden thread of wisdom weaves its way through the desert tradition regarding what Psalm 46:10 reveals to us: “Be still, and know that I am God!” The quest for solitude, to be alone with the Alone, manifests itself in all people seeking to find the meaning of life; it is as natural an instinct as solidarity or reaching out to find communion with like-minded others.

The essential purpose of withdrawing from the world, or, better still, of fleeing the emptiness resulting from a merely worldly existence, is to be as free as possible to live in the “hermitage of our heart” where we long to experience Divine Love, not just intellectually but also intimately and personally.

The pursuit of such a relationship leads us inevitably *from* mere egocentric fulfillment *through* radical detachment *to* humble abandonment to the mystery. Abnegation of “me-centered living” liberates us to quiet our minds and hear God with our hearts. In this state, we feel detached from the allure of instant gratification and passing satisfactions that threaten to replace our reliance on grace.

The desert tradition teaches us to bind ourselves to Gospel truths that are lasting, including inner silence and self-awareness, repentance and self-renunciation for Christ’s sake. The masters of the

desert remind us that “the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever” (1 Jn 2:17).

To quiet our mind and hear with our heart is to heed such counsels as the following:

- Be freed from dissipation and distraction in order to be free to flee to God in silence and simplicity.
- Deepen daily your sense of repentance or compunction of heart.
- Do not become so absorbed in a functionalized world or in the pursuit of fame and gain that you deny the truth that you are a finite person in need of God’s help to be who you are and to do what needs to be done.

While fleeing to a geographical desert may be impossible, we can always change our focus from one of frantic pursuit of status, popularity, and success to the calm demeanor of desert disciples willing to go wherever God leads us. We are always free to be present to the Divine Presence and to grow in compassion for those entrusted to our care.

When Abba Macarius, one of the desert fathers, was asked, “How should we pray?”, he replied, “There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one’s hands and say, ‘Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.’ And if the conflict grows fiercer say, ‘Lord, help!’ He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy” (*Sayings*, 19:111).

II

From the Medieval Masters, Francis and Clare of Assisi: Learn to “Depend on God for Everything”

The seedbed of Franciscan spirituality is to integrate the Christ-centered contemplation of life in all of its created splendor, with service to people of any age or social standing suffering from hunger of body and soul and longing to find the ultimate meaning of life.

Francis did so by giving up worldly signs of security and learning to derive his strength from prayer, reception of the sacraments, and participation in Christ’s sacrifice for our salvation. From kissing a leper to extending his begging bowl, Francis showed reverence and respect for every living creature. He beheld everyone in the light of their membership in the Mystical Body of Christ. He celebrated his companionship with the great cloud of witnesses in heaven as well as with the struggling and redeemed souls on earth. He relied in a special way on the protection of the Blessed Mother and asked for her help to lead his followers to conform to the truth of the Beatitude that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit.

Francis taught that our human nature is a gift given to us by God so that our whole being may be an embodiment of Christ’s infinite love for souls. He lived from his center in Christ and insisted that we do the same. The more we imitate the hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth, the happier we will be. Brothers of all ages were so attracted to his spirituality that they dropped what they were doing and followed him, and so did one special woman.

The table Francis set would have been incomplete had not Clare of Assisi, foundress of the Poor Clares, put into practice the teachings he lived. Clare saw herself as a little plant in the great greenhouse of Francis's mission to rebuild and revitalize the Church. In reality she was both a pillar of strength and a prophetic voice. Despite her poor health, she fulfilled every duty asked of her by her nuns. She showed them that it was possible to be a lover of solitude and a servant of the community at one and the same time. Her reforming efforts have a special place in the history of the Church, contributing as they did to the renewal of the contemplative as well as the apostolic life.

Never would Clare be captivated by the illusory promises of happiness pulsating through the society of her time, nor be disturbed by the clamor connected to worldly power, which passes like a shadow. To her sisters she said: "How many kings and queens of this world let themselves be deceived! For, even though their pride may reach the skies and their heads [pierce] through the clouds, in the end they are as forgotten as a dung-heap!"

Clare epitomizes the Franciscan ideal of faithfulness to Christ in poverty of spirit and purity of heart. Her love for the cloister complemented his zeal for the salvation of souls. Together these two disciples became partners in the mystery of redemption. If Francis was fire, it was Clare who struck the match. If Francis was oil, it was Clare who lit the lamp. She, who had fallen as madly in love with Christ as Francis had, had no choice but to follow him and his command to wash others' feet.

By clinging to Jesus with all her heart, Clare found the confidence she needed to be faithful to her mission and the courage it took to withstand suffering for Christ's sake. She learned to depend on God for everything. As a result, she withheld nothing of herself from the immolating fire that quenches every trace of narcissism.

III

From the Modern Master, Thomas Merton: Learn How to Foster the Integration of Contemplation and Action

A man of prodigious learning as well as a monk and a spiritual master, Thomas Merton struggled to find the balance, on the one hand, between too much work and not enough prayer and, on the other hand, between too much prayer and not enough work. He had to learn the rhythm of going off to a quiet place to meditate and returning to his ministry in an ebb and flow from sanctity to service. That is why he saw the monastery as the place in which by the power of prayer he could be everywhere help was needed.

Each activity, whether he was reading a Christian classic or plowing a field, was seen by him as edifying in the eyes of God, who is the center of everything. Merton helps us to see in a cloister as well as in a grocery store the depth of mystery and meaning we need to behold. He wonders why we persist in living in airtight compartments when we are immersed in an Infinite Love beyond what words can ever capture.

To discover Christ in new and unexpected places, we must submit ourselves unconditionally to God's will, freed from the tempting trap of ego-centricity. Only in this way can we live the paradox that self-emptying is the surest entry way to self-fulfillment.

Realization of our true self begins when our false self faces its inherent vulnerability and dissolves as if it were a bad dream. For Merton this meant that instead of being overly concerned with experiences and techniques of prayer, he had to grow in the grace of seeing things in God as they really are, from the crucifix in the chapel to the furrows in a newly plowed field. In his words: "By giving up what I wanted I ended up by having more than I had ever thought of wanting."

From these ancient, medieval, and modern masters, we learn to undertake the works God entrusts to us. We allow God, through the graces of active contemplation and contemplation-in-action, to use us to offer others the help they need and to give them, whether they know it or not, a taste of the eternity they seek. With Merton, we, too, pray for the grace to see ourselves united in God and all that springs from God. In his words, "This is prayer, and this is glory!" Amen.