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The Contemplative Gift in the Life of the Church

by

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A pastoral synthesis project presented to the

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Introduction

This paper offers an exploration of how contemplative prayer needs to be increasingly included in the spirituality of leaders within the Catholic Church, both ordained and lay ministers and all members of the Mystical Body. When contemplative prayer is missing, leadership can be out of sync with God's will and God's ways. Church life can be enhanced through leaders and all members increasingly availing themselves to the contemplative gift. Contemplative life should include the ongoing integration of one's imperfect humanity being brought into union with God through continually undergoing the Paschal Mystery in contemplative ways. Contemplative prayer allows God to change members' hearts from pursuing their own will to being more aligned with God's will and ways for the Church.

Sandra Schneiders describes spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives,” which leaves room for both secular and Christian definitions.¹ In other words, spirituality is “holistic”² and draws one out of oneself in relation to a higher goal. In the contemplative life, God can bring about the ultimate value of being One with Him, through contemplative prayer. After his own experience of contemplative prayer, John of the Cross shares how his own understanding and will were brought into union with God as he was receptive to Divine Love:

My understanding went forth from itself, turning from the human and natural to the Divine; for, when it is united with God by means of this purgation, its understanding no longer comes through its natural light and vigor, but through the Divine Wisdom wherewith it has become united. And my will went forth from itself, becoming Divine; for being united

¹ Sandra Marie Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (2003): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2003.0040>.

² *Ibid.*

with Divine love, it no longer loves with its natural strength after a lowly manner, but with the strength and purity from the Holy Spirit.³

The inhibitions of Church leaders and other members make it difficult for them to be in union with God and the Father's will for the Church. One cause of these inhibitions is that all people are born with imperfect unity in God's family, sometimes referred to as original sin. It is through Jesus and His Church, that unity can be restored which is "Jesus' deepest desire, for which he gave his life...that 'all may be one' as he and God are one (Jn 17:20-21)."⁴ Religion is the ideal social institution that passes down "traditions and their spiritualities" but it paradoxically also inhibits the flourishing of its mission through its flawed leaders.⁵ A deepening of contemplative spirituality in all members of the Mystical Body could help bring forth the Church's mission.

In "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," Karl Rahner emphasizes that God loved us first (1 Jn 4:10, 19), so when we love our neighbor, God's love is acting through us (Jn 15:12).⁶ We need to receive God's Love first so that our works are an outpouring of the Love that we receive. Then our actions will be inspired by true Love. When we step out to love another, believing that God could Love through us, we are moving in trust.⁷

³ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959), Book 2 Chapter IV, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.electra.lmu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2008360&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁴ Schneiders, "Religion vs. Spirituality," 178.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶ Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," in *Theological Investigations: Concerning Vatican Council II*, vol. VI (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1964), 233.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

Case Component

The primacy of receiving God's Love before serving others was modeled in my experience of coordinating the ministry, "Stillness in the Streets." Church leaders and young adults of varying faith journeys, some Catholic and some not, would gather in Hollywood. First, we would avail ourselves to the gift of contemplative prayer in silence as a group to allow God's Love to transform our selfish motives for doing ministry and the areas in our hearts and lives where we felt homeless. Next, we would combine donated items into bags to share with our unhoused brothers and sisters. Then, we would go out on Hollywood Boulevard in small groups to be with, listen to, and encounter our friends in the streets while offering them some items. At the end of the night, we would regroup to share our encounters.

Often, we would discover that we were all poor and had something to receive from those we were serving, mainly Christ Himself. Church leaders who came to participate admitted that historically they had often approached ministry with the unhoused as a matter of distributing the greatest number of items instead of being present to the people. Through availing ourselves to the gift of contemplative prayer, God was able to adjust our calculating motives and complicated human cultures. A share of the Paschal Mystery moving within our hearts during contemplative prayer lends toward facilitating humility, respectful encounters, and compassionate listening occurring within our interactions with the unhoused.

Factors of this Pastoral Problem:

Spiritual Life without availing oneself to the Contemplative Gift?

Most leaders and other members will admit to having a spiritual life or a spirituality that often does not include availing oneself to the contemplative gift. The case component of "Stillness in the Streets" shows how this understanding of the spiritual life has led ministers to

focus on the number of goods being distributed without being present to the people. A factor in this pastoral problem is the misunderstanding of how spirituality relates to religion.⁸ Schneiders argues that spirituality should include: “A personal lived reality which has both active and passive dimensions,” “an ongoing and coherent approach to life as a consciously pursued and ongoing enterprise,” “an effort to bring all of life together in an integrated synthesis of ongoing growth and development,” and a moving towards an “ultimate value.”⁹ Spirituality among leaders and other members sometimes is missing a contemplative dimension, receptive to God who is Love, working in their hearts. When leaders and other members regard contemplative prayer as unnecessary to spirituality, religion, and administration, this may result in pursuing their own agendas within the Church. The culture of the Church could then regrettably tend towards mere productivity, measurable results, and circumvention of the mystery of God at work in themselves and in others.

The Limitations of Human Cultures in the Church

Contributing factors to this problem are the complicated human cultures that need to be brought up into God’s culture. Clifford Geertz defines culture as a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life.”¹⁰ Geertz sees culture as the playground in which people relate and find meaning. Culture operates in human life sometimes without our knowledge or awareness because it is received from other people, through the families we are raised in and the

⁸ Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality,” 163.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁰ Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel: an Inculturation Handbook for Pastoral Workers* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Pub., 2001), 28.

communities we are a part of. Inculturation, or the blossoming of the Gospel from within human cultures shows that God is at work within people. Culture is a good part of life, and it also has some limitations. It is the status quo for Church leaders to operate from within the limitations of their own cultures within their pre-set roles. For example, leaders may overly-identify with their status in Church roles when relating with others in service. This is sometimes referred to as “paternalism” or to offer assistance to “those who are in some way underprivileged, but—even unconsciously—make sure that the ‘superior/inferior’ relationship is not altered.”¹¹

When leaders lose sight of the Presence of God in themselves and in others, they are merely operating from their limited human cultures. Leaders are called to be mindful of “intercultural competence”¹² and to engage in “mutual invitation”¹³ with people who are within and outside of the Church. They should refrain from cultural bullying with people in the Church and from attempting to “colonize the other”¹⁴ when interacting with people outside the Church.

However, we are invited to receive God’s culture deeply, through Christ, in the Church, which transcends all human cultures. Through this restful receptivity, we are enabled to engage with all people in meaningful ways through the universal culture of God’s inner life. Gerald A. Arbuckle presents culture through the image of a fish being in water. Culture is the water that the fish is living and being in. The fish is mostly unaware of the water that it is in.¹⁵ While we may be fish in water in our natural humanity, if we rest deeply while availing ourselves to the

¹¹ Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 18.

¹² Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, ed., *Building Intercultural Competence for Catholic Colleges and Universities: A Training Manual* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, 2018), 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

¹⁵ Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel*, 1.

presence of God, we can allow our motives to be adjusted by God's own inner Life, and the water is changed. Anyone can do this with ease, as Cynthia Bourgeault says, it is "like a duck to water."¹⁶

Human cultures need to be permeated by God's own culture. The inner life of the Holy Trinity can expand the capacity of our human cultures to become truly universal. It is through being receptive to the contemplative gift of prayer, rooted in the Eucharist, that our motives can be adjusted from the ways that hinder our humanity and ability to relate with people from other cultures and God to fuller participation in God's culture. Contemplative sensibilities help us to be able to notice the inherent goodness in others, keeping us humble, and avoiding imposing our own agendas on others.

Proselytism

Contemplative spirituality checks proselytizing within the Church. Pope Francis offers insight into how the Church can acknowledge how Christ is already present in people and cultivate transformation. Christians should first acknowledge Christ in others by "encouraging, fostering and reinforcing a richness which already exists."¹⁷ This way of relating opens up the space for a mutual encounter in Christ instead of dominance. From this humble and loving place of encounter, people from the Church and those outside can embark together in sharing in the spiritual life of Jesus by "sparking new processes for evangelizing cultures."¹⁸ Sterility or lack of an integrated spiritual life within leaders and other members of the Church is evident when the

¹⁶ Cynthia Bourgeault, "Centering Prayer as Radical Consent," in *The Diversity of Centering Prayer*, ed. Gustave Reininger (New York, NY: Continuum, 1999), 46.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2013), 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Church functions merely as an institution and when her approach with people outside of the Church is rooted in proselytism.

The Aspect of Pride as Self-Referentialism

The contemplative gift draws out the spirit of humility in Church leaders and other members. When two or more people in the Church engage in this prayer, transformation occurs within the milieu of the dynamic of pride. Pride as “self-referentialism,” that is defined by Pope Francis in the encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, is when people in the Church over-identify with their “social group” and “organize themselves in a way that prevents any foreign presence that might threaten their identity.”¹⁹ This approach to participating in the mission of the Church does not bear fruit that will last (Jn 15:5).

Members of the Mystical Body abiding in Christ can allow their way of relating to be transformed. The Second Vatican Council proposed that the Church “reset the way missionary work was to be carried out: not with the morbid urgency of saving souls, but with the joyful motive of sharing the unsearchable riches of Christ, done in ways that model Jesus’ practice of openness, listening, gentleness, and vulnerability.”²⁰ In this way, Church leadership, the faithful, and people outside of the Church are honored and can be transformed in appropriate ways that are mutually encouraging for all. There is no room for shaming or belittling in Jesus’ model. When leaders engage the faithful and people outside the Church, they can base their missionary plans on the contemplative Trinitarian spirituality of Jesus, who remained in “unquestioned

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2020), #102.

²⁰ Claire E. Wolfeich and Stephen Bevans, “Missiology as Practical Theology: Understanding and Embodying Mission as Trinitarian Practice,” in *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2014), 259.

dependency on and intimacy with God-Abba,²¹ and in the incarnational extension in the Holy Family.

When this contemplative union with the Trinity is not the base for mission, then people do not encounter the Love of Christ in the Church. This may manifest itself when leaders are “anxious and worried about many things” (Lk 10:41),²² or choose to control, shame, or abuse the little ones whom the Lord is calling to Himself and His bride, the Church. Leaders receive the fruits of the Paschal Mystery and, through faith, hope and love, participate in the redemptive Love of Christ flowing from their hearts to share with others both inside and outside of the Church.

Through “humility and poverty,”²³ leaders can experience the spiritual if they remain open to communication with God while they encounter limitations in themselves, in their lives, or in others, as illustrated in Karl Rahner’s work.²⁴ Members of the Mystical Body need to allow for their brokenness to be received in Christ (Is 53:4-5), who willingly gave His heart away on the Cross that we might receive the brokenness of others. In his theology on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Rahner shows how Christ “risked the adventure of a human heart, until, pierced by the sin of the world, it had flowed out, until it had suffered to the end on the Cross the uselessness and powerlessness of His love and had become thereby the eternal heart of the world.”²⁵ The abyss of

²¹ Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 52.

²² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Books of the Bible: NABRE,” USCCB, 2019, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible>.

²³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), #2713.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, “Reflections on the Experience of Grace,” in *Theological Investigations: The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, vol. III (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1967), 87-8.

²⁵ Karl Rahner, “Behold This Heart!': Preliminaries to a Theology of Devotion to the Sacred Heart,” in *Theological Investigations: The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, vol. III (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1967), 330.

His enfleshed Divine Love beckons us into the fruitful union of His Heart in the hopelessness of our darkness.

In the following sections of this paper, I will suggest that the distorted expression of religion reduced from Trinitarian spirituality provides some context for this pastoral problem. Then, in the theological component, I will offer the contemplative life of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as a model of Church with reference to devotion, communion, the Trinity, and the Paschal Mystery. Lastly, in the plan component, I will propose examples in the Church, including faith formation development, theology classrooms, and liturgies where this approach could be a way of abiding for members of the Mystical Body. As Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). This paper does not attempt to exhaust the possible examples in which this approach may occur but recommends that these examples could become stations of entry in divinization through union with God:

Through these, he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature, after escaping from the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire. (2 Pt 1:4)

Context of the Pastoral Problem

In the life of the Church, the symptom of pride as self-referentialism evidenced in proselytism and paternalism are indicators of the pastoral problem that members of the Mystical Body are pursuing their wills and ways, evading receptivity to the contemplative gift. Sarah Schneiders suggests that this problem has occurred within the context of the contemporary culture in the U.S., which often views spirituality and religion as opposites.²⁶ Similarly, the spirit

²⁶ Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality,” 164.

and the body are sometimes seen as contradictions to each other. This mindset is operative within members in the Church when the contemplative gift is lacking in their spiritual life and ministerial practices. “It can require uncommon faith and integrity to find in the Christian tradition the resources for a genuine Catholic spirituality by participating in the life of an institution that is often a very poor vehicle of that tradition.”²⁷ However, because of the Incarnation, contemplative prayer and devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus can offer a doorway for Church leaders and other members to continually participate in the Paschal Mystery, allowing the life of the Trinity to integrate their spiritual and physical lives for the sake of the Church.

Jesus guides the complicated human wills of members of the Mystical Body so that they may be as one with the Father’s will as they undergo the Paschal Mystery. Rahner explains that when we speak of someone’s heart, we refer to that person’s “union of body and spirit.”²⁸ To be in someone’s heart is to share in the innermost depth of that person’s being. Therefore, when we speak of Jesus’ heart, we refer to the union of his two natures, human and Divine. His heart is who He is.

Through receptivity to the contemplative gift, members of the Mystical Body can abide in His heart, which is in union with the Trinity, Mary, Joseph, and all people. This union is brought about by the Incarnation and His heart, broken for all in the Paschal Mystery. Rahner states that the central mystery to Holy Week and the liturgical year is the “mystery of the Lord’s heart, torn open and pouring out its life-blood. It is the most profound of all the mysteries of the Passion, in

²⁷ Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality,” 172.

²⁸ Rahner, “Behold This Heart!,” 326.

fact, the source of them all.”²⁹ His life is shared through his broken Heart. This Heart provides a theological lens to further explore this pastoral problem.

Theology Component:

The Contemplative Life of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

From Devotion to Theology

In “The Flowing Light of the Godhead,” Mechthild of Magdeburg poetically describes movements of Divine Love within a soul. As the soul enters the court, the “Lord, with great love, shows her the Divine Heart. This heart glows like red gold in a great fire. God lays the soul bare in his glowing heart.”³⁰ The soul exclaims, “I am engulfed in the deep union with the glorious Trinity. I am given a brief period of repose so that I may long with deep longing for him. I wish to sing the praises of this Lord, but I cannot. If this Lord would be loved above all things, I would even be willing to be sent to hell!”³¹

Virgilio Elizondo, Pope Francis, Karl Rahner, and John of the Cross suggest that devotion can lead to theological exploration. Elizondo shows how devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe made reconciliation and evangelization possible. In 1531, Mary invited human cultures to be as one with God’s culture: “The cultural clash of sixteenth-century Spain and Mexico was resolved and reconciled in the brown Lady of Guadalupe.”³² Her contemplative way of bringing reconciliation in Christ to a complicated situation was by being available to the people in love, rather than “military conquest, colonization, [or] religious imposition.”³³ When

²⁹ Rahner, “Behold This Heart!,” 321.

³⁰ Mechthild of Magdeburg, in *Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings*, ed. Shawn Madigan (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), #4, <http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/culture/women/biogs.html>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10.

she asked Juan Diego to have a temple built, she expressed that it was so “she could ‘communicate all her love, compassion, help, and defense to all the inhabitants of [that] land.’”³⁴ She won them over to a shared communion with one another in Christ through their affections for her. Guadalupe also modeled evangelization rooted in the Trinity as an alternative to proselytism:

To be effective, evangelization, as we learn from the Guadalupe dynamics, must be beautiful, conversational, respectful, empowering and compassionate. It is through the healing of the wounds of the heart that one is rehabilitated. This type of evangelization allows persons, especially those put down by society, to discover that they are fully human; it allows them to discover the good and beautiful within themselves that society has denied.³⁵

Pope Francis echoes this position that there is a “Marian ‘style’ to the Church’s work of evangelization.”³⁶ In other words, devotion to Mary can guide Church leaders and other members into God’s ways of ministry which spring forth from knowing the “revolutionary nature of love and tenderness.”³⁷

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is an entry point into an exploration of contemplative union with God because devotion relates to the affections. John of the Cross shares that the affections are a part of the will. It is difficult for a person to choose to let their will be set off course. The faculties of the soul, the intellect, memory, and will, oftentimes prevent this from happening. When one feels devotion, God can come underneath the will, entering

³⁴ Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 12.

³⁵ Virgilio P. Elizondo, “Our Lady of Guadalupe: A New World Image of the Trinity,” *Marian Studies* 51, no. 6 (2000): 10, https://doi.org/https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol51/iss1/6.

³⁶ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2013), 140.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

undercover via the affections and disarming resistance to Divine Love. The will can then be moved as it is caught up in passion, forgetting about the freedom necessary to resist:

these passions and affections subdue the will, and therefore it is said that, if the soul conceives passion with a certain affection, the will conceives passion; and this is indeed so, for in this manner the will is taken captive and loses its liberty, according as the impetus and power of its passion carry it away. And therefore we can say that this enkindling of love is in the will—that is, it enkindles the desire of the will; and thus, as we say, this is called passion of love rather than the free work of the will. For it is not necessary to this end that the will should be so completely purged with respect to the passions, since these very passions help it feel impassioned love.”³⁸

As the affections passively receive Divinity, through devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the will is left vincible to Love. This sweet spot of passively receiving Divinity can occur through devotion. This furthers the process of allowing the Lord to purify and rework these faculties, the intellect, memory, and will, to become more available for their enkindling, which sets the soul up for potential union with God.

My thesis is that the common spiritual life of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph is a model of Church and contemplative prayer in which all people can participate. I will start this theological component with the Holy Trinity, through the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as a model for the Church, by constructing a contemplative theology as “faith seeking adoration.”³⁹ I will use Rahner’s theology to show how devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus differs from other devotions in that it is to Jesus Himself, who is Love (1 Jn 4:8). Rahner’s work will explain that Christ’s universal Love is especially manifested in the passion and death of

³⁸ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959), Book 2, Ch. XIII, Art. 3, <https://search-ebscohost-com.electra.lmu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2008360&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

³⁹ Gerald O’Collins, “Theological Styles and Methods,” in *Rethinking Fundamental Theology toward a New Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 326.

Jesus. This contemplative theology will offer Jesus as the bridge between the Trinity and the Holy Family and, therefore between God and us. Then, I will look at the work of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz to show how God's family is Trinitarian and beyond the nuclear family. I will add that the Holy Family models for us how to share in God's family with others. Then I will explore how this model of Church founded in the Trinity encourages an openness within people for transformative contemplative union and moving in God's ways through undergoing the Paschal Mystery. Finally, God can also work through members of the Mystical Body participating in counseling, therapy, and support groups.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus
I. Christ's Universal Love

Earlier in this paper, Schneiders' initial definition of spirituality was broad enough to include both secular and Christian perspectives, which offers a way of seeing how God is already working within all people. Now we will look at her definition of Christian spirituality:

the life of faith, hope, and love within the community of the Church through which we put on the mind of Christ by participating sacramentally and existentially in his paschal mystery. The desired life-integration is personal transformation in Christ which implies participation in the transformation of the world in justice for all creatures.⁴⁰

With faith, hope, and love, the faculties of the soul, the intellect, memory, and will can increasingly dispose a Church leader or other member to undergo the passion and death of Jesus, potentially being drawn more deeply into union with the Trinity. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is a way for one's spirituality to be more receptive to the contemplative gift and docile to transformation in Christ in the Church.

⁴⁰ Schneiders, "Religion vs. Spirituality," 168.

Teilhard de Chardin experienced the integration of human culture and God's culture within himself through devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus:

Teilhard's love for the world and his yearning for the Absolute came together. The Sacred Heart synthesized his 'pagan' side and his 'Christian' side by personalizing the world, centering the world in the heart of Christ. At the same time, God was 'universalized,' because God's love could be understood as radiating everywhere from the human heart of Jesus.⁴¹

In other words, Jesus can bring into communion secular and Christian tendencies through His Heart which communicates universal love.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is devotion to the person of Jesus Christ, as is shared by Karl Rahner,⁴² and Jesus is the "union" of human and Divine natures, as in the Council of Chalcedon.⁴³ This devotion can draw a soul to be open to an encounter with Jesus Christ, who continually invites all people into His spiritual life. Angela Franz Franks explains this next step of Jesus' invitation in her work "Trinitarian Analogia Entis in Hans Urs Von Balthasar." Franks explains that "if the hypostatic union is the form of the relation of God and creature (Christ-as-analogy), and also the form of the revelation of the Trinity, then the hypostatic union provides an "entry" for the creature into the Trinitarian relations."⁴⁴ When a soul is receptive to an encounter with the Heart of Jesus, this can lead to communion with the Father and the Spirit.

Rahner explains that faith is involved when a person honors the Sacred Heart. It "essentially involves an equal sharing in the accomplishment of this redemptive love and in its

⁴¹ Robert Faricy, "The Heart of Christ in the Spirituality of Teilhard De Chardin," *Gregorianum* 69, no. 2 (1988): 263, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23578056>.

⁴² Rahner, "Behold This Heart!," 336-7.

⁴³ John P. Galvin, "Jesus Christ," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 269-70.

⁴⁴ Angela Franz Franks, "Trinitarian Analogia Entis in Hans Urs Von Balthasar," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 62, no. 4 (1998): 542, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1998.0002>.

fate in the world: reparation....as a participation in the fate of Christ in faith, is thereby ‘in Christ Jesus’ participation in the fate of his Mystical Body for the salvation and blessing of this whole body.’⁴⁵ Through faith, we can be open to receiving the fruits of the Paschal Mystery and be available to this redemptive love flowing from Christ’s heart through our hearts into the world.

Rahner’s theology is centered on God, who is eternal Love. This Divine Love is longed for by all and, even more so, Jesus longs to encounter hearts open to Him. “The inmost core of personal reality is love and that love is in fact the inmost reality, this is experienced by man only in coming to know the heart of the Lord.”⁴⁶ Divine Love offered through His Heart to anyone open to faith, hope, and love.

We are given life through Jesus’ suffering and death. He comes to know us more deeply when we let ourselves be known by Him, in our suffering, as we become one with him on the cross. “Only a lover is able to pronounce the word ‘heart’ with understanding, and only one who is lovingly united to the crucified Lord knows what is meant when the ‘Heart of Jesus’ is spoken of.”⁴⁷ On the cross, He asks us for our broken hearts and gives His pierced heart to us, which is the center of the Mystical Body of the Church. His Heart is for the Church and the world. Jesus offers everyone an encounter with His universal Love through His Incarnation, Passion, and Death. Divinity and humanity are united in the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus was united with the hearts of Mary and Joseph through the Holy Spirit. His Passion and Death only deepened the communion of their hearts. John Henry Newman speaks of the mutual sympathy and comfort shared between Jesus and Mary during the

⁴⁵ Rahner, “Behold This Heart!,” 345.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 327.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 321.

Passion as revealing their “eternal intercommunion of hearts.” Sympathy is another way of speaking of the “ineffable mutual love of the Divine Trinity.” Sympathy in the “familial love of Mary, Jesus, and Joseph” is seen as a “temporal reverberation of the Triune sympathy,” or “a shadow of the Heavenly Trinity on earth.”⁴⁸ Each person in the Holy Family could be said to have been receptive to the contemplative gift, further enabling them to undergo the Paschal Mystery together, making their hearts as one.

II. Union of the Holy Trinity and the Holy Family

Jesus is the bridge between the Holy Trinity and the Holy Family and, therefore, also between God and us. The Incarnation took place within the Holy Family. Likewise, we are invited to allow God to be revealed in us, with others. His Sacred Heart could be seen as a way that the life of the Trinity was shared with Mary, Joseph, and all people. Von Balthasar’s theology further explores this mystery:

The person of Christ provides accessibility to the Trinity, because the "theological persons cannot be defined in isolation from their dramatic action," especially the final revelation of the Cross as showing forth the kenotic love of the Trinitarian Persons.⁴⁹

Devotion to the Sacred Heart can lead a person to encounter Jesus, who by the Holy Spirit is united with the Father, Mary, Joseph, and all people. Jesus shares this Trinitarian communion with everyone, revealing the Father’s heart because Jesus and the Father are one (Jn 17:22). Jesus’ Sacred Heart continues to be in union with the hearts of Mary and Joseph, especially on the Cross. The Church was born when the Sacred Heart of the Holy Family was pierced.

⁴⁸ Donald G. Graham, “Blessed Newman's Sacred Heart Theology and ‘The Intercommunion of Hearts,’” *The Downside Review* 129, no. 457 (2011): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001258061112945703>.

⁴⁹ Franks, “Trinitarian Analogia Entis in Hans Urs Von Balthasar,” 546-7.

Jesus shows us that humility is essential to being in communion with any person, divine or human. Humility is necessary within the Trinity. He is the “humble one who has been made patient and kind by his submission to God.... Though He is the equal of God, He empties Himself to the extent of dying on the cross for our redemption (Phil 2:6; Mk 10:45; Is 53).”⁵⁰ In the life of the Trinity, any subordinate activity is chosen with Divine humility. Jesus has such a deep faith in the Father that He can choose to give Himself in love fully. The will of the Father is initiated through His gaze of adoration of His Son, who responds by receiving the Father’s will. The Holy Family is inseparable from the Paschal Mystery. A person can be drawn into God’s Trinitarian family life in Christ’s assent to the Father, as described in Von Balthasar’s theology:

The creature is oriented to God, as the Fount of Being, not with a vague, ‘objectless ... disposition’ but ‘rather [with] a deliberate attunement of self to the accord existing between Christ and his mandate from the Father, in the context of salvation-history's assent, which the Holy Spirit is in Christ and effects in him.’ Man allows himself to be caught up in the inner-Trinitarian life when he is formed in the form of Christ's accord with the Father.⁵¹

The Holy Family as a Symbol of the Church: Beyond the Nuclear Family

Being a part of God’s Family is similar to being a disciple. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus explains that discipleship involves having an awareness of the limitations of a human family, or “hating” them, along with carrying one’s cross every day (Lk 14:26-7). The Holy Family offers a glimpse into God’s ways of relating with one another so as not to reduce the Divine Life to one human household, and to share continually in the Paschal Mystery. This models how Church leaders and other members can facilitate space for the Holy Spirit in Church life.

⁵⁰ Xavier Léon-Dufour, ed., “Humility,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2nd ed. (Frederick, MD: The World Among Us, 1988), 248.

⁵¹ Franks, “Trinitarian Analogia Entis in Hans Urs Von Balthasar,” 541.

God's family is Trinitarian and beyond the nuclear family. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz observes that the value of family life is not limited to its expression in the nuclear family. She offers the family life of God as more than capable of meeting our human needs for healthy community and relationships. "The sense of *familia* that we have in mind when we talk about God's family, the kin-dom, is one in which a true sense of home exists, a sense of belonging and the safety to be and become fully oneself."⁵² Every person needs to belong, be accepted, loved, enjoyed, and be given a community to give them space to be who they are in Christ. We are at home when we share in God's family life with others. Home is where the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph is.

Isasi-Diaz helps connect the Trinity as the source of communion shared through the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Holy Family while ensuring that we do not limit this communion to only being expressed in marriage. All families are a part of God's family, who is the source of the love they share. We are all invited to be children of God. "*The familia Dei* seems to be the most reasonable account to explain intelligibly the 'fellowship' within the divine Trinity in John as well as the 'lived experiences' of the divine Trinity in the lives of the children of God."⁵³ As children of God, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph's lives together were a sharing in God's family. We are all welcome to come to their home for Christmas.

This model of Church helps to show that all people are welcome to share in God's Love and life. The Divine Love at the center of the Church is an all-inclusive Love that incorporates

⁵² Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Christ in Mujerista Theology," in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 164, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472550163.ch-009>.

⁵³ Dirk Van der Merwe, "Divine Fellowship in the Gospel of John: A Trinitarian Spirituality," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, October 30, 2019, 11, <https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i.5375>.

those within and outside the Church. In the family of God, there is a space for all people. *Nostra Aetate* states that “Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation.”⁵⁴ Rahner’s theology explores that Divine Love is not limited to the Church, but that it is inherently ecclesial:

But the fact that God’s salvific work is offered in principle to all people, and that in principle it effects the salvation of every person if it is accepted in obedience to one’s moral conscience, this does not exclude the fact that the full and historically actualized Christianity of God’s self-communication is an ecclesial Christianity.⁵⁵

Church leaders and other members are availing themselves to be in union with the Father’s will and ways as they facilitate space for the Holy Spirit to be acknowledged and listened to within people. This kind of Church life could be seen as being in union with the Sacred Heart of the Holy Family.

The Holy Family is a model of Church because it is rooted in the Trinity. Michael Fahey describes that the origin of the Church’s mission and missionary activity is the Holy Trinity.⁵⁶ In *Lumen Gentium*, the Trinity is the foundation of the Church.⁵⁷ The Trinitarian communion of the Holy Family gifts them with the capacity to go beyond the nuclear family.

Jesus helped to rework the idea of family that Mary and Joseph seemed to be operating from when they found him in the temple. A theological understanding of “house” emphasizes that even though Jesus “lived at Nazareth in the home of His parents, at the age of twelve He

⁵⁴ Second Vatican Council, “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions: *Nostra Aetate*,” Vatican, 1965, 4, <https://www.vatican.va/>.

⁵⁵ Karl Rahner and William V. Dych, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2005), 342-3.

⁵⁶ Michael A. Fahey, “Church,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspective*, ed. Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 360.

⁵⁷ Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*,” Vatican, 1964, 4, <http://www.vatican.va/>.

stated that He was concerned with the affairs of His Father (Lk 2:49) whose house is the temple (Jn 2:16)” and Jesus would “build another, His Church (Mt 16:18)”⁵⁸ The word “house” refers to more than just a physical space.

Mary and Joseph were invited to be receptive to the gift of God’s Trinitarian Love, which extended beyond their human household. “God was not satisfied with giving man a natural family and a material dwelling...after dwelling in the heart of Israel in the temple, God sent His only Son to build men a spiritual abode, a home, made of living stones open to all men.”⁵⁹ In the temple, Jesus was in union with the Father’s will and ways. Mary and Joseph had been “anxiously” seeking Jesus. They did not understand why he had been in the temple. “And he said to them, ‘How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’” (Lk 2:48-49). Here, Jesus guides them “on how their parental role must be subordinate to the will of his divine Father.”⁶⁰ This example points out that moving in the ways of God’s family life is an ongoing process of sharing in the mystery of the present moment, which can be a source of encouragement for Church leaders and other members.

Elizondo gives another example of a Trinitarian model of family life in the Church. He illustrates how Guadalupe invited Diego to ask the bishop to build a temple. In this case, Mary was the mother, the bishop was the father, and Diego was the son. Their hearts were as one by the Holy Spirit. They modeled the Trinity because together, they were facilitating a space for

⁵⁸ Xavier Léon-Dufour, ed., “House,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2nd ed. (Frederick, MD: The World Among Us, 1988), 246.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁶⁰ Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, Notes on Luke, in *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Revised Standard Version*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1999), 111.

God's family on earth through the construction of a temple. This temple was to be a place for God's Love, a home open to all people.⁶¹

The Holy Family is a great model of Church because each person was continually undergoing transformation to be more aligned with the ways of God. Another example of this is when Joseph "decided to divorce [Mary] quietly" (Mt 1:19), but soon after, "the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream," assuring him of the Divine origin of Mary's conception (Mt 1:20). Pope Francis explains that "even through Joseph's fears, God's will, his history, and his plan were at work. Joseph, then, teaches us that faith in God includes believing that he can work even through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses."⁶²

Members of the Mystical Body can offer a place of rest in a home where the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph dwell, through becoming more available for the contemplative gift of union with the Trinity. In Von Balthasar's theology, the gift of grace can assist Church life in being a space for sharing in God's family:

A positive response to grace brings the Christian into the sphere of Christ's activity, so that Christ becomes not only [the] goal of life but the archetype as well. This sharing in Christ's mission occurs in the Church, as Christ's body, which points to the role that ecclesiology plays in our discussion of analogy: the Church is the 'space' in which the Christian can actively share in Christ's personal mission.⁶³

⁶¹ Elizondo, "Our Lady of Guadalupe: A New World Image of the Trinity," 50-1.

⁶² Pope Francis, "Apostolic Letter: *Patris Corde* of the Holy Father Francis on the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church," Vatican.va, 2020, 4, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html.

⁶³ Franks, "Trinitarian Analogia Entis in Hans Urs Von Balthasar," 557-8.

The Contemplative Gift and The Paschal Mystery

This model of Church founded in the Trinity encourages an openness within people for transformative contemplative union and moving in God's ways through undergoing the Paschal Mystery. Church leaders are invited to 'being,' letting it be done to them like Mary (Lk 1:38).

Rahner offers a description of this mystery of 'being' with God's grace:

[The] bottomless depth of our existence as experienced by us is the bottomless depth of God communicating himself to us, the dawning of his approaching infinity which no longer has any set paths, which is tasted like a nothing because it is infinity.⁶⁴

When Church leaders encounter the Cross in their lives, they can remain open to receiving God's Love, to the mystery of communication with God as deep calling unto deep (Ps 42:8). Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus can lead to the purification and enkindling of the faculties of their soul, which allow for faith, hope, and love to bring about the possibility of an encounter with Jesus' Love. This is made possible by the Incarnation and Paschal Mystery. This may feel like nothing or even be uncomfortable, but with grace, the invitation is to rest in the mystery of Trinitarian communion and to simply 'be.'

The contemplative gift could be seen as drawing a leader more deeply into union with the ways of God. Earlier in the paper, Elizondo and Pope Francis offered Mary as a model for a particular style of ministry. Church leaders and other members can continually undergo the Paschal Mystery while being receptive to Divine Love, availing themselves to be brought further into this Marian way of being. In the example of Juan Diego, we see the way Mary was able to guide him and consequently the bishop to be more in sync with God's will and ways.

⁶⁴ Rahner, "Reflections on the Experience of Grace," 89.

Our Lady of Guadalupe had visited Diego and asked him to return the next day so she could give him a sign for the bishop to know that she was asking for a temple to be built on Tepeyac hill. The next day, Diego resolved to “bypass the Lady and go for a priest to hear his [sick] uncle’s confession.”⁶⁵ She sought Diego out and gently guided him into trusting God a little bit more, as she explained that she would take care of his uncle and provide the flowers as a sign to the bishop. She let Diego know that his uncle would heal and to proceed with giving the bishop the flowers. Diego’s uncle was healed, and the miraculous image of Guadalupe appeared on his tilma, which guided the Bishop, a Church leader, to trust God a little bit more and to build a temple. This Marian way of relating with people offers an example for Church leaders to follow.

Next, we can peer into the mystery of what might occur when a person is receptive to being drawn more deeply into union with God. Douglas Christie speaks about the mystery of encountering the Divine in his work “The Night Office: Loss, Darkness, and the Practice of Solidarity.” Christie suggests that within this encounter:

darkness and light mingle, where silence and speech dance together, where stillness enables us to apprehend and stand within radical mystery. It invites and perhaps even helps create in us a posture of humility: a willingness to listen, receive, and respond to all that is unfolding before us. But it also brings with it great risk, inviting a relinquishment of self so profound it is in fact a kind of death.⁶⁶

In other words, this contemplative gift is beyond the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown. As members of the Mystical Body are receptive to the gift of Christ and the union

⁶⁵ Elizondo, “Our Lady of Guadalupe: A New World Image of the Trinity,” 46.

⁶⁶ Douglas Christie, “The Night Office: Loss, Darkness, and the Practice of Solidarity,” *Anglican Theological Review* 99, no. 2 (2017), 224, <https://www.proquest.com/religion/results/ACC3A698DBCC4B5FPQ/1?accountid=7418>.

He shares with the Father, the Holy Spirit, Mary, and Joseph, the words of St. Paul may continue to have more meaning within them. “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me, insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me” (Gal 2:19-20). In this contemplative gift, continually receiving Divine Love goes hand in hand with undergoing the Paschal Mystery.

At the beginning of this theological reflection, Mechthild gave a glimpse into the experience of the soul encountering Divine Love, which led to the senseless exclamation of the soul being “willing to be sent to hell!”⁶⁷ This is sometimes referred to as the place where Jesus’ death led him to go on Holy Saturday. Only Divine Love would dare to enter the depths of Hell. When Church leaders and other members are receptive to Trinitarian communion, they can be continually invited to undergo more deeply the same passion and death of Jesus. In the agony in the garden, Jesus’ ongoing prayer enabled him to be receptive to the grace to undergo the crucifixion:

The perfect adherence of Jesus to the divine will does not suppress but rather makes intelligible the painful acceptance that, according to the Synoptics, is to be seen in the passion. In Gethsemani, Jesus sees successively ‘what I will’ and ‘what you will’ seemingly opposed (Mk 14:36). His insistent prayer to the His Father, ‘Not my will but yours be done!’ dissolves the conflict (Lk 22:42).⁶⁸

Where does this contemplative gift lead? In the Office of Readings, “From an ancient homily on Holy Saturday,” this descent into hell is described as follows:

Something strange is happening — there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness.... God has died in the flesh and Hell trembles with fear. He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, He

⁶⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg, in *Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets*, #4.

⁶⁸ Léon-Dufour, ed., “Will of God,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 655.

who is both God and the Son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the Cross, the weapon that had won him the victory.... Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I in you; together we form one person and cannot be separated.⁶⁹

Members of the Mystical Body that avail themselves to the contemplative gift can be drawn more deeply in the mystery of being with God's grace, as devotion to the Sacred Heart of the Holy Family and the Holy Trinity invites them into the stillness of the unknown. Church life would benefit from leaders and other members, who, by faith, hope, and love, continually allow their capacity to deepen for sharing in Christ's willingness to descend into hell.

In the example of *The Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa speaks to the mystery of remaining open to union with God. "The desired union is never fully achieved but remains an insatiable desire for God's infinity. Such is the meaning of God's denial of Moses' request that he be allowed to see the divine visage. Moses is filled with what he desires by having his desires unfulfilled."⁷⁰ This withdrawal of God from Moses is similar to that of Mary Magdalene amid her longing for holy intimacy with Jesus at the Resurrection. There is a deeper gift of God hidden in the perplexing space between them. Christie identifies this "climate" as being "marked by the insecurity and vulnerability that characterizes 'the movement of perpetual departure.'"⁷¹ If Church leaders and other members allow themselves not to become disheartened at times when God seemingly denies their longing for His embrace, then Church life might enter more deeply

⁶⁹ "From an Ancient Homily on Holy Saturday," Holy Saturday - Office of Readings, 2010, <http://www.liturgies.net/Liturgies/Catholic/loh/lent/holysaturdayor.htm>.

⁷⁰ William Franke, ed., "Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, Book II, 162-166; *On Virginity* 46. 360C-364A; *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Sermon 7, 44.724D-732D.," in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, Classic Formulations, vol. 1 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 141-2.

⁷¹ Christie, "The Night Office", 218.

into union with Him, the Trinity, the Holy Family, and all of humanity and creation. The invitation is made to all members of the Mystical Body to enter His hiding place. It is a Divine game of hide and seek.

God may also work through the Church leaders and other members participating in counseling, therapy, and support groups. These opportunities can allow for God to cultivate humility and a deeper receptivity to the contemplative gift in people. The desert mother Amma Theodora defined humility as “honest, self-accepting, and loving self-knowledge and self-awareness of ourselves as fully human, created and gifted by God, balanced with a keen awareness of God’s grace and awesome presence in our life.”⁷² God can invite a person to sessions and groups as an option for being made more available to receive the contemplative gift. Amma Theodora also described the dynamics of a spiritual leader guiding others in the spiritual life. She suggests that self-knowledge can assist a leader with being in a “healthy relationship with power” and with others.⁷³ All life experiences, even the most difficult, can “deepen our dedication to the inner journey and facilitate our transformation into the image of Christ.”⁷⁴ During these therapy groups or sessions, in humility, Church leaders and other members can glimpse how God is already active in the experiences of others’ lives, both Christian and non-Christian alike.

⁷² Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 68.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

Conclusion of Theology Component

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus provides a key for God to enter the soul through the affections, where the purification and enkindling of the intellect, memory, and will can be deepened. Receptivity to the gift of contemplative prayer can continually occur through faith, hope, and love. Members of the Mystical Body who increasingly avail themselves to the contemplative gift can undergo this transformative process and allow for the Catholic Church to be a space to support others in this contemplative life. The Holy Spirit is already operative in the people's hearts wherever they are in their spirituality, secular or Christian.

The Holy Family is a model of Church and contemplative prayer in which all people can participate. The hearts of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are as one, and their unity is continually deepened by sharing in the Paschal Mystery. The Trinitarian love of God is the center of their common spiritual life, expressed in mutual, humble, and fruitful ways of being together and relating with others. This model of Church founded in the Trinity encourages an openness within people for transformative contemplative union through undergoing the Paschal Mystery.

Contemplative prayer allows God to change the hearts of Church leaders and other members from pursuing their own will to facilitating Church life that can be more aligned with God's will and God's ways. Christ's love is universal, and through grace and humility, Church leaders and other members can be available to notice this Divine Love at work within themselves and within all people. In the last section, I will offer three examples in the life of the Church where receptivity to the contemplative gift might occur within all members; these examples could become stations of entry in divinization through union with God (2 Pt 1:4).

**Plan Component:
Receptivity to the Contemplative Gift
in Faith Formation, Theology Classrooms, & Liturgies**

Jesus needs more room in the Church to bring about the fruitfulness of His inner life with Mary and Joseph, rooted in the Holy Trinity. Faith formation gatherings, theology classrooms, and liturgies are the examples that we can look to as settings in the Church for cultivating spaces for greater receptivity to the contemplative gift. Members of the Mystical Body interested in this happening in their parish or school need to: (1) Take care to allow God to cultivate their own contemplative practice; (2) Be willing to undergo the Paschal Mystery with other members. (3) Embody in his or her own person the values they encourage in the community. In the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,” the Paschal Mystery permeates personal and communal prayer and all moments of life:

The spiritual life, however, is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy. The Christian is indeed called to pray with his brethren, but he must also enter into his chamber to pray to the Father, in secret [Mt 6:6]; yet more, according to the teaching of the Apostle, he should pray without ceasing [1 Thes 5:17]. We learn from the same Apostle that we must always bear about in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodily frame [2 Cor 4:10-11]. This is why we ask the Lord in the sacrifice of the Mass that, ‘receiving the offering of the spiritual victim,’ he may fashion us for himself ‘as an eternal gift.’⁷⁵

While it is commendable when a catechist, teacher, or Mass celebrant champions this way of being and lives it out, it is effective, enduring, and beneficial for more people when Church leaders adopt this way for their communities. Individuals make up the Body of Christ,

⁷⁵ Second Vatican Council, “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,” *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2021, #12
https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html#_ftn31.

but the head needs to lead the body in God's will and ways, too, undergoing the Paschal Mystery continually as one.

Church Leaders

It is necessary for leaders in the Catholic Church to uphold this approach in parishes and schools, which can leave space for God to be encountered within oneself and within one another. This approach could include concrete steps leaders could take to allow God to work in and through them, the catechists, teachers, clergy, students, and community members. A first step could be to set agreed-upon parameters for the lens in which leaders view, observe, and evaluate their catechists, teachers, or clergy amid their interactions with people in faith formation development, classrooms, or liturgies. This lens needs to allow for the reception of the contemplative gift by noticing when mutuality, compassionate listening, and encouraging the Divine from within people is occurring instead of merely looking for perfection in the delivery or memorization of information or in following rubrics.

Catechists and Theology Teachers

Within faith formation gatherings and in theology classrooms, there needs to be an intentional shift from merely delivering content to encouraging experiences with God. In the book *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*, Professor Fran Grace shares her journey of approaching teaching first as a “*content-based (third-person)*” approach that emphasized information. ... [then to a] *context-based (second-person)* teaching that involved interactive dialogue and community engagement... [and finally to] *contemplative (first-person)* learning methods that cultivate interior awareness, creative epiphanies, and

compassionate understanding.”⁷⁶ When this shift occurs, and contemplative learning is the environment in which people are gathered, there is the possibility of receiving more deeply the contemplative gift of God in any form of engagement. Some examples include discussions, sharing stories, student-led activities, rap, reflection, writing, art, dance, song, reading, and silent prayer. The contemplative gift could be shared among all people gathered using these activities. The specifics of what happens are not as important as the ways they occur.

Another step would be for catechists and teachers to welcome flexibility in implementing lesson planning, curriculums, objectives, and goals. This could extend to schedules for days of retreat as well. This flexibility can assist in leaving room for God to move in ways that have not been accounted for and simultaneously derailing pre-set conditions to control a scenario riding on a track of perfectionism and people-pleasing. Humor can help alleviate tension brought about by fear, control, and anxiety, leaving room for the Holy Spirit to move. Incorporating already developed information such as textbooks and digital content is fine. It is reasonable to use calendars and various means of organization. Most important to this approach is that the content and organization are implemented in contemplative ways.

A contemplative spirit in faith formation development or theology classrooms could be cultivated when there is: (1) Mutual trust among participants or students with their catechists or teachers, allowing everyone to be their genuine selves before God-in-each-other. (2) Catechists or teachers welcome uncomfortable silence and resting with their participants and students in this stillness. (3) The catechist or teacher does not over-identify with the status of their role as leader and shares leadership with the participants or students through the ways they engage. There is

⁷⁶ Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 49, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.electra.lmu.edu/lib/lmu/detail.action?docID=3407067>.

space to breathe. (4) Conversations become personal and even messy—learning content becomes living the content.

Thomas Merton conveyed that genuine learning occurs when a monk or student would avail themselves with more attentiveness and receptivity to the presence of God within. Learning was not:

simply a celestial score of theoretic ideas to which the Magistri and Doctores held the key, but the inner self of the student who, in discovering the ground of his own personality as it opened out into the center of all created being, found in himself the light and wisdom of his Creator, a light and wisdom in which everything comprehensible could be comprehended and what was not comprehensible could nevertheless be grasped in the darkness of contemplation by a direct and existential contact.⁷⁷

Though a teacher or superior may impart some holy thoughts, the incomprehensible God gives wisdom to the student and monk from within, and one can say with Merton that, “The ‘spark’ which is my true self is the flash of the Absolute recognizing itself in me.”⁷⁸ The student and teacher are learning together. Neither can take credit or claim to be working hard to ensure effective learning occurs in this space where contemplative learning is happening because it is God within and among them who is at work.

Liturgy

I experienced a liturgy at a parish retreat that allowed the contemplative gift to be received more deeply. We were living the content of the liturgy. Initially, I felt misunderstood, out of place, and wondered if I was supposed to be there. Then the clergy and retreat leaders in union with the participants, decided that we would celebrate Mass outdoors at night under the stars. While God did not directly answer all my concerns about being there, He invited each of us

⁷⁷ Thomas Merton, “Learning to Live,” in *Love and Living* (London: Sheldon, 1979), 9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

into holy intimacy with one another, the Holy Family, and the Trinity, which melted all my fears and uncertainties in Divine Love. This experience of Mass revealed a much deeper meaning to the phrase “holy communion.” We were each activated from within by God, not just spectators at the Mass. The “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” emphasizes the need for all people to participate with their whole being:

But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain [2 Cor 6:1]. Pastors of souls must therefore realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration; it is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects.⁷⁹

During the Mass, we were allowing ourselves to be enriched. It seemed as if time had slowed down and all that mattered was the present moment. We were sitting in a semi-circle facing the altar. This made it easy to be attentive to one another’s body movements, words, sighs, and tears. God finally had room to show up at the retreat, and I didn’t want to be anywhere else in the world. Each word from the celebrant and each person who spoke during the Mass felt so special. It was as if we were at the Last Supper and resting as one on the breast of the Lord together around the table.

The consecration of the host was done so slowly and gently; it was as if Christ Himself were saying the words to each one of us individually. It was the same with the chalice. Moment by moment, we took turns reaching for our sleeves or tissues as we were overcome with emotion at the intimacy of the Lord. During the “Lamb of God,” I felt like I was before the Lord with nothing in between us. I felt this same way with myself and the other people, and with them and

⁷⁹ Second Vatican Council, “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” #11.

the Lord. It was pure intimacy, personally between each person and the Eucharist, and all of us together in holy communion. This is where I began to cry the most.

I felt the hurt of each moment of sadness and loneliness in my life being touched by Christ and His tenderness overflowing from within me. I was angry that I had to feel all those moments of darkness and that it seemed like an eternity since I had felt Him. I was frustrated because I knew that He was the only one that could love me that deeply and bring me into communion with others so sweetly. I was reminded that I have nowhere else to go. I must simply wait on Him to reveal His Love. While I was feeling all of this, I was receiving more deeply the grace to let go of my frustrations and simply receive His invitation to share in Holy Communion.

It felt like we had already been receiving communion before we ate and drank the body and blood of Jesus. I wasn't sure if I could handle any more Love. But the Lord continued to be gentle, and we each received and shared more deeply in Holy Communion. This Mass unfolded the trust among each of us gathered and with God. I was able to participate in the retreat with an increased awareness of trust which seemed to be missing when it first began.

Conclusion

Sarah Coakley underscores that the practice of contemplative prayer is God's action or "God's practice *in* humans— a more unimpeded or conscious form of that distinctive human receptivity to grace that has sustained the process all along and that is itself a divine gift."⁸⁰ This union with God can be more deeply received in trust when Church leaders and other members in parishes and schools cultivate spaces for encounter; stations of entry in divinization through union with God (2 Pt 1:4).

⁸⁰ Sarah Coakley, "Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 93.

Church leaders should be teaming up with other members, including those coordinating faith formation development, theology classrooms, and liturgies. Together through faith, hope, and love, they might undergo the Paschal Mystery, continually availing themselves more to being attentive to the presence of God within themselves and in each person who comes to the door, called by God to be love in the Church and in the world.

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