

An Introduction to Contemplative Prayer

Karen Schroeder -- 2025-01-23

This summary made extensive use of Karen's excellent notes, for which we are most grateful!

INTRODUCTION: TASTE welcomed our very own Karen Schroeder as she introduced us to the beauty and challenge of contemplative prayer. St. John of the Cross, Carmelite Doctor of the Church tells us "Contemplation is nothing else but a secret, peaceful, and loving infusion of God, which, if admitted, will set the soul on fire with the spirit of love." It is said to be the highest form of personal prayer, and can lead us to union with God in this life. We cannot earn it, nor can we achieve it. So, how can we get there?

VOCAL PRAYER: The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) tells us that "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God." (CCC 2559). There are many different types of prayer – prayers of blessing, adoration, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise. The first prayers we learn are vocal prayers such as the Sign of the Cross, the Our Father, the Hail Mary. Then we learn the Rosary, and learn the prayers of the Mass. Vocal prayer is the "initial form of contemplative prayer" (CCC 2704).

MENTAL PRAYER: Mental prayer has two levels, meditation and contemplation. "Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire" (CCC 2708). Meditation is also known as the Prayer of Recollection. We begin by finding a quiet place, and a comfortable position. We close our eyes and quiet our minds. We choose something to meditate on, whether a passage from the daily scripture readings, a mystery of the Rosary, a reading from the current Liturgical season. We remember always that we are in God's presence. All of us meditate. Our meditation can take the form of imagining ourselves in a Biblical scene, creating a mental video, or simply pondering on a particular event. Lectio Divina can be an aid to mental prayer. It might comfort us to know that St. Teresa of Avila had great difficulty meditating, and never went to prayer without the scriptures for 18 years. And yet she is known as one of the giants of contemplative prayer.

FROM MEDITATION TO CONTEMPLATION: We all want to know the answer to the question of how to get from meditation to contemplation. The answer is we cannot do it on our own. Contemplation requires divine intervention. From St. John of the Cross' definition above, it involves "a loving infusion of God," it is a gift. Sometimes, in the beginning we may not even be aware that we are receiving this grace. We can prepare ourselves for it, we can pray for it. God wants to give it to us, and it is available to everyone. St. Teresa of Avila, in her book The Interior Castle, describes the process of contemplation as entering a castle complex of concentric circles/spheres, with the center representing the center of the soul where God dwells. St. John of the Cross views the process more as a journey, as in climbing up a mountain in his book Ascent of Mount Carmel. Karen was given a different visual from her spiritual director, something that looks like a cross between a ladder and an hourglass. She gave us all a copy and it can be found [HERE](#). She had us number the levels from bottom to top, with the two triangles at the center representing level 4 together. The seven levels correspond to the seven "mansions" or dwelling places of Teresa's Interior Castle. The ladder takes us up a series of steps leading to the seventh mansion at the top where there is union with God.

THE SEVEN LEVELS/MANSIONS:

Level 1 - "**Fear of the Lord**" — We begin at level one, the entrance to the castle. This is where we set aside habitual sin, and begin to pray. We go to Mass on Sunday and we go to confession regularly. We receive all the sacraments as prescribed by the church. Prayer at this level consists of the foundational vocal prayers mentioned above.

Level 2 - "**Piety**" — At this second level/mansion, we are desiring and developing a regular prayer life. We participate in Adoration, holy hours, prayer groups, rosary groups. We go to TASTE! Thomas Merton tells us to advance in prayer we must TAKE THE TIME. At this point, if not before, we begin to meditate. Karen told us that every religious order of seculars asks members to meditate for ½ hour every day. Carmelite brothers, priests and sisters do 2 hours of mental prayer every day.

Level 3 - "**Knowledge**" — This knowledge comprises knowledge of ourselves and of God. During the first three mansions, we may have consolations, feelings of attraction to prayer. These are not proofs of holiness or success in prayer. In fact, if they happen, we should confide them only to our spiritual directors or confessors.

Level 4 - “**Fortitude**” — At this level, we may experience a change in prayer. Things that we used to enjoy, no longer fill us. Our prayer life feels dry and empty. Where we used to look forward to our dedicated prayer time, now we cannot wait for it to be over. First we must make sure that the change we experience is not due to any exterior events, like a change in schedule, illness, life stresses. In this mansion, God sometimes looks down, and sees we are regular and devoted to prayer, and He turns up the light He is pouring into our souls. God is changing His blessings upon our senses to blessings upon our spirits. This leaves the senses dry and empty. St. Teresa describes prayer as an “intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time to be alone with Him who we know loves us.” This is the beginning of contemplation, when we sit with God in loving attention. This purification of the senses may feel like a time of dryness, darkness, and abandonment, but it is the opposite of what is happening. Because the focus is on the soul, rather than the senses, purifying the senses keeps us from looking for sensory consolations, seeking the gift rather than the giver.

Level 5 – “**Counsel**” — In this mansion, we experience a more peaceful prayer life, with simple, loving attention on the Lord. St. John says we can spend many years at this level. St. Teresa talks about the relationship with God in prayer in terms of courtship. St. Teresa likens this 5th mansion to courting, the 6th to betrothal, and the 7th to spiritual marriage.

Level 6 – “**Understanding**” — This mansion can be another period of dry purification, where we begin in humility to better understand ourselves and our faults, including their roots. We need to rely on God’s light and on His grace.

Level 7 – “**Wisdom**” — This is what St. Teresa describes as spiritual, peaceful marriage. Karen recommended reading St. Teresa’s The Interior Castle (Study Edition, ICS publications) for more details, especially on the last mansions. Note, the words associated with the 7 levels correspond to the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit.

DISTRACTIONS: Karen offered some suggestions for what we can do when distractions enter into our prayer life. First, sometimes what we think are distractions are actually thoughts that we need to bring to prayer. We can take them directly to God, and ask for guidance. We should not expect words. God often suggests quietly, peacefully, without words. We may feel better just for having shared our troubles with Him. When we have repetitive thoughts, gently reign them in. If we re-frame our distractions as dryness, we may understand that they are about purification, and this may help us to dismiss them. We can always offer up our struggles with distraction, and gain some merit in the eyes of God.

CONCLUSION: For 28 years, Karen has been a lay member of the Carmelites, a contemplative order. The founders St. Teresa and St. John both say we should not share our inner lives with others, including what mansion we may be inhabiting. Such sharing can cause unfair and inappropriate comparisons. God has His own way of being with each of us, He has a unique program for each of us.

When we are starting meditation, a regular time helps keep us on track. We gradually learn to block out surrounding distractions, but need to start in silence so we can practice recollection where we are drawing into God’s presence. We need to have fortitude in the 4th mansion – The darkness of the 4th mansion is a high grace. First, we blame ourselves for the darkness – what did we do wrong? What can we do to fix this? We need to remember this high grace is the next step to get to the next mansion. We need to get through the 4th and 6th mansions for purification. God will not give us more than we can handle, more than we wish to handle.

It can be important for us to know what mansion we are praying in, so we know how to pray. There are ways we can prepare ourselves for contemplation. One such way is asceticism, the active night of the senses and the active night of the spirit. We make some sacrifices, signaling to God we are willing to give up in order to get what He is offering. A good place to begin with these little sacrifices is level 4, where contemplation begins. God knows what He is doing with us. For some, changes will occur incrementally, for others all at once. What works for one may not work for another. We cannot jump start this process, to try to do level 4 and early 5th level activities of just sitting with the Lord. God has to purify us first. We should stay with meditation until we cannot – that is when it is time to switch to quiet sitting with the Lord. We should not push before God is ready to give.

Book recommendations:

The Interior Castle Study Edition, St. Teresa of Avila, ICS Publications

Collected Works, St. John of the Cross, ICS Publications

If enough people are interested, Karen can get us these books at a 40% discount. Let her know!