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Introduction: Thomas Keating

Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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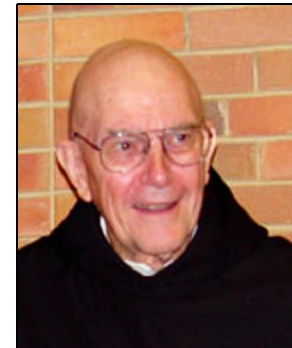
It is not only from the monastic tradition that I'm speaking this evening, but from a deep experience of how contemplative prayer belongs to all the baptized in the Christian tradition. Non-monastics and non-religious are just as capable of all the developments of contemplative prayer that we find in monasteries or religious life—probably more so, because they come to it without a lot of baggage from tradition, some of which needs to be sorted through, and some of which needs to be more focused on the essence of the Christian life, which is, of course, the transformation into Christ.

Let me suggest from the perspective of the contemplative Christian heritage that prayer is the very heart of the journey. Prayer itself, of course, is not just words or gestures or liturgies. The essence of prayer is relationship. The relationship, of course, is primarily with God, but the relationship is also through everyone else, and indeed through all creation, since everything that is must be in relationship to that which Is—the beloved, the being whom we call God in the Christian tradition, and which, to use an expression some Buddhists may be sympathetic with, is the Ultimate Reality.

This evening we are introducing the subject of suffering and transformation. The root of suffering, of our angst, social unrest, and the massive piling up of violence, brutality, and indifference that is so afflicting the world at this time, all emerges, of course, from what might be called the "false self system," what some Buddhist traditions would call the "individual self," or some transpersonal psychologists might call simply the "separate self" sense. This is the radical source of all emotional suffering, out of which probably also emerge most

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Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, has written many books on contemplative prayer, especially *Centering Prayer*, which he is credited with popularizing in the United States. Among these are *Open Mind, Open Heart, The Mystery of Christ*, and *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit*. He lives at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, and serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors of MID.

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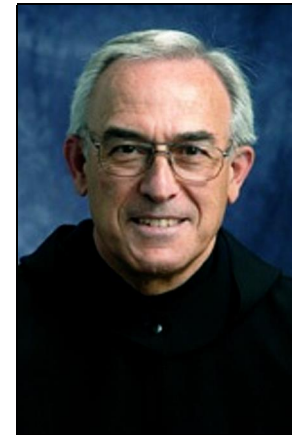
physical illnesses.

The Christian tradition sees relationship with Christ as the most fundamental of all its purposes and directions. In the feast of the Epiphany, there are three calls from God that are fundamental for us, a kind of triptych manifesting the divine intention for the transformation of the human family. The first one occurs in the infancy narratives with the appearance of the Magi, who are symbols of genuine seekers-of-truth for all time. These astrologers came from a great distance and apparently found what they were looking for in the person of this infant in a crib. The fathers of the Church recognized in this incident, and enshrined it in the liturgy, the remote call of every human being to divine union. This is God's initial manifestation to everyone who, by virtue of being born, is called to the incredible transformation into the divine life.

The second picture in the triptych of the feast of the Epiphany is Christ's baptism in the Jordan. At this point, Jesus seems to have entered into the fullness of his mission as identifying with the false self, the root cause of human misery. It is at that moment that he moves into the desert under the influence of the spirit and there experiences the three basic sources of the human condition that are the source of all our emotional difficulties—namely, the three instinctual needs of security, approval and esteem and affection, and power and control. These are, of course, the instincts the infant needs to survive. But we are supposed to move beyond these as centers of our motivation as our human development proceeds through childhood, adolescence, and into adult life. Unfortunately, by about four years of age these instinctual needs begin to fossilize into programs for emotional happiness, in which happiness is translated into the pleasure of instant gratification of one of those three experiences. Along with this, from four to eight years old, these programs are made vastly more complex by our socialization, in which we relate these instinctual needs and our expectations for happiness in them to our relationship with God, ourselves, other people, and the cosmos.

What is significant here in regards to the revelation of the divine intent for transforming us is that the baptism in the Jordan represents a divine engagement. In other words, here is something very deep in the Christian experience—the personal relationship with God. Being itself,

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or whatever is beyond being, has a personal character. It may also have an impersonal aspect to it, too. But it is the love of Christ that emerges from the awareness that this divine person in the Trinity—the Word of God, the Son of God—has let go of the divine privileges, so to speak, and entered into human nature, as Paul says, at the lowest point. The Word does this through suffering the death of the slave and experiencing rejection and even undergoing the psychological experience of hell. Thus, it is in the desert, which is what is celebrated during the time of Lent, that we confront the dark side of our own personality and begin to be awakened to the damage that the immoderate instinctual needs for happiness cause us.

For instance, the desire for security, approval, and control and power has no moderating factor present in early childhood. Given our temperamental personality, we tend to fossilize some of our desires for happiness, and so the false self begins to be formed. The false self might be called the “homemade” self, that is, the self made in our own image rather than in the image of God, in which the Judeo-Christian tradition believes we were originally created. Here we are, at four years of age, with programs for happiness that identify with the symbols in the culture that express security, power, affection, and esteem. When these are frustrated, as they usually are all day long for some people, off go the afflictive emotions: shame, humiliation, grief, sorrow, discouragement, fear. These afflictive emotions can become so painful that we repress some of them into the unconscious where the energy remains and opposes the free flow of natural energies and the energy of grace. Paul calls this stage “the old man.”

The false self is just a contemporary term for that process and contains three issues: Illusion as to what true happiness is, craving to find happiness in the wrong places or concupiscence, and weakness of will, which says that even if you find out where true happiness is you are too weak to do anything about it. This obviously is a rather dim view of human nature, to say the least, but it happens to be the truth, according to Revelation. Hence, the need for redemption is not an issue about getting to heaven at the last minute, but of God’s intent to radically heal us at the very roots of where it began—namely, in the programs for happiness that still manifest themselves in daily life and secretly influence our serious decisions all through life, unless we take the spiritual journey and begin to work on these issues.

Therefore, we might say that the root of suffering is the false self or the individual self or the ego mask, or whatever word you may be familiar with in your research or tradition. It is this focus on desperately trying to gratify these needs, which in people who have been seriously deprived, who have suffered physical or sexual abuse, abandonment or rejection, or who have had various forms of mental or physical disability—in other words, the marginalized of society, the people who don't quite make it—may make themselves manifest. However, all of us have a little and some a great deal of these issues rumbling around inside our unconscious.

The gospel of Jesus Christ addresses the human condition exactly where it is, first by going into the desert and experiencing these primitive temptations in their raw nature and resisting them. (Notice, the three temptations in the desert circulate around those three instinctual needs.) Along with this temptation goes our overidentification with our particular group—whether it's ethnic, family, or national. You don't have to look far around the world today to realize that when this tendency has free rein, and you get a whole bunch of false selves in the same place or in the same ethnic group or nation or religion, there is a terrible mess. Hence, religion with all its idealism, has actually been historically the worst of all organizations as far as violence is concerned.

Now, how religion be the worst given the ideal of peace and unity and everything that we normally hear on Sundays and holy days? What happened? What happened is that so many of those who are Christian have never heard the Gospel at a deep enough level to understand what it means. Look at Rwanda: ninety percent Christian, eighty percent Catholics, and they just tore each other to pieces with their machetes. Had they ever heard of the Gospel? Apparently, it had no effect on them. And I know in some missionary congregations this is a source of deep distress. We only have to think of these pathetic and terrible [sexual abuse] scandals that are emerging in the Roman Catholic clergy and hierarchy right now. What happened? I venture to say these clergy never heard of the false self system; or, if they did, they never listened to how Jesus addresses this deep illness of human nature. He does this in his classical formula about contemplative prayer that you find in Matthew 6:6, in which Jesus says that if you want to

pray—in other words, if you want to relate at a deeper level, if you want the deep knowledge of God, if you want to come to a taste of the experience of God—then enter your inner room, close the door, and pray to your father in secret. And your father, who is in secret, will reward you.

What Jesus is proposing here is an overall formula that we are expected to make practical to some degree for each age. What the proposition means is that if you want to know God you have got to have a practice. You've got to hang out with this God. You've got to be silent and still before God. You have to allow the divine therapist, so to speak, to address the radical ills of human nature—of illusion, concupiscence, and weakness of will. And thus baptism for us Christians is a commitment to death and resurrection. It imitates Christ's passion, death, and resurrection.

What dies in baptism? We manage to survive baptism physically, but baptism is really a commitment to give ourselves over completely. This is not just for religious and monks. Everybody who is baptized has made this commitment to die, to descend into the waters of the great abyss, and to confront the dark side of their personality. The amount of energy that we put into programs for happiness can't possibly work in adult life—although it's not our fault, because we picked it up in the first three years of life. Yet, instead of evaluating what our basic motivation is as we become adults, instead of doing something about our programs, we think up bigger and better ways of doing the same, stupid thing—more ways of getting more security, more approval, more power and control. And so it goes on and on.

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