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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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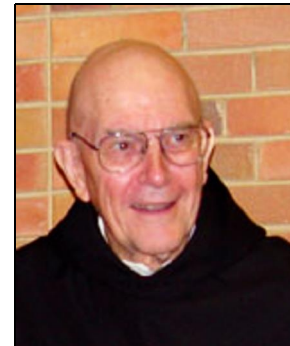
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The other great religions have the same insight into this basic illness of the human condition that is rooted in this false self, and any form of therapy that does not eventually confront this issue will only produce further disease. The greatest of all the tricks of the false self is the addictive process. It is a way of occupying and preoccupying ourselves so much with our programs or the symbols of our programs in the culture of security, control, power, and approval, that we never have to feel the pain. Yet, it is feeling the pain that heals emotional diseases, not acting it out, repressing it into the unconscious, or (another favorite way) creating a compensatory way of doing so.

The third panel of the triptych represents the final invitation of God to those who have been engaged. The engagement consists of trying to dismantle the emotional programs for happiness and becoming disattached from our roles. This is what the Gospel means with those harsh sayings that unless you hate your relatives, property, friends, and your own life, too [Luke 14:26]—your inmost being—you cannot be my [Jesus'] disciple. Or, again, if your eye scandalizes you, cut it out [Matthew 5:30]. Well, I can't do that! It would be contrary to moral theology. But what Jesus means is if your emotional program for happiness, your desire to control as many people or get as much security as you can is as dear to you as your leg or hand, you should cut that off, because you can't go into the kingdom of God with that motivation.

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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.

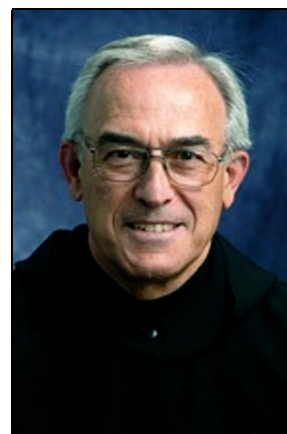
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The Kingdom of God is not a geopolitical place. It is Christ's consciousness of the father as a personal experience, and it is the communication of that that is the heart of the Christian tradition and not necessarily doctrinal and dogmatic statements, as valuable as these are. Without the experience of God, you don't have the tradition, you just have words and concepts. It is the living Christ that is passed on from generation to generation. This is the heart of the renewal of the contemplative tradition in our times—using a method of meditation and incorporating it into our tradition in order to work to free ourselves from the fascination of the unconscious motivation that psychology has contributed to our knowledge of the spiritual life.

In the last triptych, the scene is the wedding feast of Cana in Galilee, where Jesus transforms water into wine. In the minds of the Church Fathers, the water represents human nature that is to be changed—not into something better, but something chemically brand new. In other words, God's plan for us is not just to make us better human beings, but to make us divine. In the Orthodox liturgy, this is emphasized in a way that we've somewhat lost touch with in the Roman tradition, and it needs to be greatly recovered.

Suffering that is useless needs to be gotten rid of. Buddhists, I believe, have the name dukkha for this kind of suffering. Dukkha is the melodrama that circulates around those centers of energy that become predominant in our early life and are reinforced every time something in daily life occurs. The "I" or the ego becomes the center of the universe around which our faculties and our experience circulate like planets around the sun. Anything entering into our gravitational field is judged not on the basis of its reality, but on how it suits our need for more power, approval, affection, or security. This is the human condition as Jesus addresses it in the Gospel. At the same time, in the divine therapy that Jesus offers as a cure for this illness, the question emerges of where the room that we are meant to enter is. The room is not the psychological level of our reflection. It is rather the cultivation of the spiritual level of our being, the level of intuition, and the spiritual will. This cultivation turns us toward the center of our being, where the divine presence, according to our Christian faith, is waiting for us, has waited for us, and is always available twenty-four hours a day our

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whole life long. It is this divine indwelling that is the very root and fundamental principle of the whole of the Christian spiritual journey—the presence of God intensifying through love until it penetrates the whole of our life at every level. This is what the spiritual marriage is. It is the transformation of our motivation from the false self to the values of the Gospel and to faith, hope, and charity.

The next question is, What goes on in the inner room, if you agree to go there? This is the divine therapy. Its first work is to affirm our basic goodness as creatures made in the image of God. This suggests that, along with our psychological unconscious, which is the place where we repress emotionally unbearable trauma and so on, the ontological unconscious is equally if not more important. This is the level of being that is the divine indwelling itself, the presence in us of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Divine Trinity, the source of all that is. This creative presence is always in us and in everybody else, and it indicates how impossible it is for God ever to be absent from us. If God should become absent, we would turn into a grease spot, because there is no other reason to be here. As St. Thomas Aquinas says, “God is existence, and hence must be present in anything that exists.” So, if you exist then it must be that God always dwells within you at a deep level, and is trying by every possible means to awaken us to that presence. It is that presence that is transforming, divinizing, liberating, and healing our wounds from early life.

Jesus, in the three stages of his Passion, clarifies for Christians just what suffering and transformation mean, and what our relation is to them. There is the same symbolism in the Paschal vigil, where there is the cross, the symbol of suffering, and the Paschal candle, the symbol of inner resurrection, together at the same time. Every bit of inner freedom from the false self is a death and resurrection, preparing us for the bigger deaths and resurrections that occur as the spiritual journey advances. In the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus not only took our whole human condition on himself—and this may be of interest to those familiar with the bodhisattva ideal—but the cup that Jesus asked to be spared consisted of all the emotional pain that is the result of sin or the human condition (going against our conscience). In that cup are the feelings of shame, guilt, fear, or gratification (with its

self-elation or self-exultation that occurs when you succeed in getting something that you want on the level of those three instinctual needs). In that cup is everything you ever felt about God that was painful, everything you ever felt about your own conduct or yourself—the humiliation, the grief, the anger. This is precisely what Jesus took upon himself. As Paul said, “He who did not know sin became sin for our sakes”—whereby at the deepest level, God, in taking one person to himself, takes everybody completely into himself.

The second stage of the process of Jesus’ identifying totally with our sinfulness or the human condition, our angst or suffering, is on the cross, where he goes a step further. Jesus cries out, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” [Matthew 27:46]—that is, the son of your bosom, the one who knows you through and through, who loves you, the one in whom you dwell. God lives not in himself, the Father, but in the Son. So in Christ dying on the cross, we have got to say God died, too.

There is no suffering that is not in God. There is no rational explanation for innocent suffering, but there is a fact that all suffering in some mysterious way is present in God. When Christ died, this is especially clear in Orthodox liturgy, he descended into hell—not so much as a place, but as a state of consciousness.

You probably know people who are living in hell right now—alive in institutions and jails, in mental difficulties or in a terrible sense of scrupulosity. Perhaps you’ve been there yourself at times. Christ loses his own divine identity to some degree on the cross, where his sense of being the Son of God seems to have been obscured. This is a symbol of our own passage where, having entered into the process of purification, we have to face letting go of ourselves as a fixed point of reference and allowing God to make us whatever we are in his view. Jesus is dead and is absolutely powerless to raise himself from the dead, who has become, as theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar puts it in his analysis, the silent word, who has touched the very bottom of human suffering. As one mystic has said, “Christ has so taken the lowest place, that no one can ever take it from him.”

What does that mean for us? What is the significance of that in our struggle with suffering? It means that at the moment you feel the purification of the unconscious has reached a point where there is no longer an identity of your own that you feel attached to, where you are immersed in the painful emotions of the dark nights, when you hit bottom, when all your ideas of the Church, of Jesus Christ, of God, are shattered—it is there that your redemption begins in the fullest sense of the word. It is in that emptiness and open place that one identifies with Christ as he has first identified with us, with all the hellishness involved in that.

At the same time, the process of unloading the unconscious and purifying the attachments to programs for happiness that can't work is being increased by the collective unconscious—what we've inherited from our ancestors, or the human family, or some kind of spatial reservoir of memories that exist somewhere in the universe, like tape recordings of everybody's life with their particular sufferings. In this way, we can see that our sufferings are not just ours. Sometimes, what we are suffering for our own purification is also available, identified with, or replacing the sufferings that others have to go through, or haven't had time to go through because they died too soon or haven't been born yet. In other words, this unity of the human family is what might be called the cosmic unconscious. This is unconscious to us because we haven't awakened to the wisdom or the perception of life that Jesus is trying to communicate to us. It is that perception that precedes death itself, or every little death—not as a disaster, but as a door into inner resurrection.

Finally, perhaps there is a deeper reality than even that: that suffering, especially vicarious suffering or suffering that is shared in the vast reservoir or ocean of human suffering stored somewhere in the universe, is itself the resurrection. This is suggested in the Gospel of John, where Jesus reigns from the cross. In other words, the diversity and unity of God in the crucifixion have become unified, so that the very moment of Christ's death, the symbol of the cross, is the symbol of the death of the individual self, and the very pain that accompanies it is now perceived to be the inner resurrection itself. Everything that happens is God. God is in all, as Paul says, and Christ is everything in

everyone. Thus, as we look at suffering and transformation from a Christian perspective, the resurrection and the passion are so closely united that pain is joy, and joy is pain; God is beyond both and God is in both; and love is all.

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