

THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

Thomas Philippe, O.P.

Translated from the French by
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Edited by
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THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

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FOREWORD FROM THE FIRST EDITION
BY HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

The first time I met Père Thomas Philippe, O.P, was during the celebration of the Eucharist in the l'Arche community in the French village of Trosly-Breuil. It was in the fall of 1983. Père Thomas was the celebrant; I was the concelebrant.

I remember this first encounter very vividly. It was an encounter in prayer. He was very present to me, to the many handicapped persons and their assistants who surrounded him and, most of all, to God. He was a man on fire, the fire of God's Spirit. The way he pressed his eyes closed while praying silently, the intensity of the high pitched voice with which he said the prayers, read the Gospel, and proclaimed God's Word, the trembling hands stretched out over the bread and wine, the intimate way in which he gave communion to all who walked up to the altar. . .were all expressions of a man whose whole being had been transformed by the fire of God's love.

As I stood beside him behind the large rock that was the altar of the Trosly-Breuil chapel, I sensed that I was in the presence of a man in whom immense suffering and immense joy had become one. I knew that people from all over France, very simple and very sophisticated people, very poor and very wealthy people, young and old people, came to visit and listen

to him. From early in the morning to late at night, there were people sitting in the small waiting room in front of his hermitagelike living space. I knew that this old priest, in his eighties, hard of hearing, slow in walking, unable to celebrate without a tall chair to support him, and fragile in health, was an immense source of faith, hope, and love for countless men and women who experienced deep inner darkness. I knew Père Philippe was as much a starets as any Western monk has ever been. What Father Zosina had been for Dostoevski in nineteenth-century Rome, Père Thomas was for many in twentieth-century France.

During 1983 and 1984, I had often celebrated the Eucharist with Père Thomas, but never felt a desire to spend much personal time with him. When I saw the many visitors waiting to see him, I realized that he would be there for me when I truly needed him. In fact, I was somewhat hesitant to go to him. His *sermons*, his prayerful presence during the common worship, and his friendly greetings had given me enough spiritual nourishment, and I felt that I would be wasting his time by asking him questions in sharing my problems.

But all of this changed when two years later, in the fall of 1986, I began to experience a deeper anguish than I had ever experienced before. The anguish had appeared in the context of my life with the mentally handicapped in the l'Arche community in Toronto. It was during that time that I was invited to come back to Trosly to make a retreat guided by Père Thomas, together with the other priests of l'Arche. I went and poured out my anguished heart to the old priest. And right then and there he became for me the most tangible manifestation of God's compassion I had ever experienced. It seemed that the depth of my inner pain had called forth from him the depth of God's compassion. He had important things to say, some of the things I had heard before in his sermons; he

had good advice to offer, some of it I had heard from others too; he was generous with his time, a generosity that I had experienced before. What was new was not his generosity, his advice and insight, but his luminous presence. It seemed that healing came not from what he said, but directly from his own heart. It seemed that the fire of God's Spirit, the healing warmth of God's love, the softening touch of God's hands, were there for me. As I let my agony and anguish become visible to him, he became my father, my mother, my brother, my sister, my lover, my God. While being with him, I knew what true consolation was. I sensed that none of my pain was alien to him, and none of my tears unfamiliar to him.

Père Thomas usually speaks much and explains much, but in the presence of my struggle he was silent, though with a silence so full of love that I did not want to leave him. He made me sit very close to him and, after a period of few words, he invited me to pray with him. He put his head against my shoulder and entered into a deep silence. An outsider might think he had fallen asleep, but I knew and felt that he was bringing the healing Spirit of God right into the brokenness of my heart. After fifteen minutes of silence, he looked up at me and asked, "Are you feeling any better?" I said "Yes," not because my anguish was gone, but because somehow Père Thomas had through himself connected my anguish with the anguish of Jesus, and made me aware that I would be able to live through it. When I left him, he said, "if you wake up in the middle of the night and your anguish overwhelms you, think of me." He did not say, "Think of God" or "Think of Jesus." He said "Think of me." He said it with such gentleness and compassion, so free from any self-preoccupation or self-importance, that I realized that he offered himself as the safe way to the healing presence of Jesus. Père Thomas Philippe knew more, much more, about suffering than I did, and he had

lived it through in faith. That was the source of his authority; it was also the source of his compassion.

After this profound experience, I realized that it is rather unimportant to know much about Père Thomas's personal past. I had heard that he had been a professor of theology in Paris, that he had started an ecumenical community, Eau Vive, that he had suffered many forms of misunderstanding and rejection, that he had lived for many years in Trosly-Breuil and had started there to care for the elderly and the mentally handi-apped. I had also heard that he was the spiritual father of Jean Vanier and had been his main inspiration in starting L'Arche. But these are only a few of the many events that shaped his life. Now it seems that personal history is more a barrier than the way to a deeper understanding of this holy priest. Meeting him is meeting a man so full of the Spirit of God that facts and figures are only distractions. He has become a living flame of God's love. There is no need to be important, no desire to be acclaimed, no clinging to a "curriculum vitae," no holding on to trophies of the past. They all seem to be only shadows that prevent the light of God's love, from shining brightly. In his old age, he became what he most wanted to be, a man transparent to the presence of God.

Although Père Thomas Philippe has influenced many people in a very radical way, Jean Vanier among them, he has remained quite unknown outside France. His books, most of them transcriptions of his taped retreats and sermons, seldom found their way beyond the borders of his own country. It is, therefore, a unique event that Father O'Connor has made this theological retreat about the contemplative life available in the English language. Father O'Connor knows Père Thomas in ways few others do. For many years he has come to Trosly and listened to Père Thomas and let his heart be touched by him. This translation is thus the work of a true disciple, a man who knows and loves his master and wants no more than that his

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master will touch the hearts of many as deeply as he touched his own.

Jean Vanier met Père Thomas in 1947, Father Ed O'Connor came to know him in 1948, and only in 1983 did I encounter him. Our lives, different as they are, have been deeply influenced by this holy priest. I even dare to say that Jean, Ed, and I cannot speak about our spiritual journey without acknowledging the crucial role Père Thomas played in it. I hope pray that this text will give the reader a glimpse of the man we know and love.

FOREWORD FROM THE FIRST EDITION

BY JEAN VANIER

I met Father Thomas Philippe for the first time in 1947. He was a friend of my father, who was then the Canadian ambassador to France. However, I only really got to know him in 1950, when I resigned from the Royal Canadian Navy. Not knowing quite what Jesus wanted of me, I felt it would be good to spend a year in a place of prayer and study, a place where I could prepare myself to follow Jesus more closely.

And so it was that I went to Eau Vive, a community near Paris, founded by Father Thomas soon after the end of the war. There people from many countries came to learn to pray, to study philosophy and theology, and to live a community life—and all this in a spirit of poverty. The community did not have much money, so each person had to work hard to keep the place going. The rather austere life of Eau Vive was not difficult for me; life in the navy had been quite hard. But there was something new here it was a place of meeting with Jesus.

I would assist each day at the Mass of Father Thomas. I followed his classes in theology at the nearby Dominican house of studies. I would listen to the spiritual talks he gave to us in the community. I also would often chauffeur him when he gave talks and sometimes retreats in various contemplative convents or monasteries. It was while listening to him that I received my first graces of prayer. It was as if Jesus was transforming my heart and leading me into a new and deeper freedom. This gift transforms us, liberates us from fear, and from guilt and sin; it makes us children of the Father and friends, brothers and

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sisters of Jesus. Prayer is receiving in one's heart the heart of Jesus: Jesus teaching us how he loves the Father and how he loves every person, particularly the littlest and the weakest. "As the Father loves me, so I love you, and my commandment is that you love one another as I love you."

I trust and hope that this retreat of Father Thomas will help many as it helped me; and that it will lead many into the paths of prayer where we can remain and rest in his love, and thus bear much fruit, for the glory of the Father.

EDITOR'S PREFACE FROM THE FIRST EDITION

The contemplative life received little attention in this country before Thomas Merton. Through his work, it came very much into vogue; but this has often led to its being confused with other things. Poetic contemplation, worthy though it be in its own domain, ought not to be taken for that divine contemplation, *contemplatio infusa*, from which the contemplative life is named. Moments of stillness and reflection are indispensable for the maintenance of a "life worth living," but are not to be equated with the prayer of quiet. Profound intuitions, exquisite sensitivity, and tender compassion are among the most precious human realities, but when a compulsively psychologizing culture identifies them with contemplation, it is a gross counterfeit.

The present work is one of the purest and most authentic statements I know of the classic doctrine on the contemplative life. It comes out of a rich and ancient tradition that takes its chief insights from great mystics such as Teresa and John, Catherine of Siena, Francis de Sales, and others all the way back to Cassian and Dionysius, and right on down to some of the still-hidden mystics of our own day. Its articulation comes largely from the Thomistic school, not only as represented by Garrigou-Lagrange (under whom Father Philippe studied and with whom he taught for a while at the Angelicum), but also from Pierre-Thomas Dehau, O. P.,¹ and through him from a long, well-tested French Dominican tradition that has forged a fine, sensitive idiom for the elusive realities of the interior life.

This tradition, which has hardly penetrated the English-speaking world, has almost disappeared today even in France. Nevertheless, for those who have ears to hear, it is still

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luminous and liberating. And Father Philippe, who knows by personal experience whereof he speaks, adds a touch of concrete realism and unexpected originality to what could otherwise become trite maxims.

Reading this work will not be without difficulty. The author at times takes for granted axioms that surprise us, and assumes, without explanation, positions we may be reluctant to grant. A few truly old-fashioned notions compound the difficulty, but hardly affect the substance of the doctrine.

Not all that Father Philippe says is suitable for everyone. He writes for contemplatives; if some of his views are not applicable to persons of an active psychology (thus especially chapter 13), this is to be expected. He writes also in the perspective of graces that have not been given even to all contemplatives; however, they deserve to be respected even when they are not shared.

This work was originally conceived as a retreat and preached in French to a Dominican community. Careful notes taken by a retreatant served as the basis of the present translation, which was made originally by Carmine Buonaiuto and revised by myself. I was impressed by the completeness and precision of the notes. Nevertheless, being only notes on an unwritten discourse, they often consist of laconic phrases rather than complete sentences (particularly at the end of each conference, where the speaker was winding up with an exhortation). They needed therefore to be edited before being published, and Father Philippe generously authorized me to do this.

The editorial work has been very modest. I have suppressed a few sentences or phrases, either because their meaning was not fully clear, or occasionally because, for one reason or another, they no longer seemed appropriate. Those of any significance have been indicated in notes. In order to prevent the universality of the message from being obscured, specific references to the Dominicans have been replaced by

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more general references to “contemplatives” whenever what was said was of general application. (But when something proper to the Dominicans was at issue, the specific reference was retained.) Occasionally, the order of sentences or paragraphs has been altered. This too is pointed out in the notes. A few changes in language were made, but only when they seemed clearly in accord with the author’s intent. All the notes are my work, except for note I of chapter 9, as is there explained.

My overriding concern has been to present faithfully the thought of a holy man whom I venerate as perhaps the finest interpreter of Christian spirituality in modern times. Nowhere have I interjected any independent ideas of my own. Nevertheless, because of the delicate nature of editing the work of someone unable to review what has been done, I take responsibility for the text as it now stands.

Two works by Father Philippe have already appeared in English (The Fire of Contemplation, translated by Sister Verda Clare Doran, CSC, Alba House, 1981; Mystical Rose, Our Sunday Visitor Publications, 1993). The introduction to them gives some biographical background, which need not be repeated here. Of the three, the present work is the most basic and systematic, and would serve as the best introduction to the others.

I am particularly grateful for the self-effacing helpfulness of Carmine Buonaiuto who did the hardest part of the translation, and then allowed me to rework it in the way that seemed best. He is an exemplar of many of the qualities proposed in this book.

Likewise I owe abundant thanks to Mrs. Cheryl Reed, Mrs. Nancy Kegler, Mrs. Nila Gerhold, and Mrs. Shirley Vogel of the Faculty Steno Pool at Notre Dame, who typed the manuscript. Their patience with the many revisions through which it passed was edifying.

Edward D. O’Connor, C.S.C.

CHAPTER ONE

Retreat: A Mystery of Purification, Illumination, and Union

THE SPIRIT OF THIS RETREAT

A retreat is said to be a “spiritual exercise.” This is especially true of a retreat for contemplatives, for whom it should be a moment of particularly intense spiritual life. The spirit that ought to animate this exercise is the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit. If a retreat is to be fruitful, it must be essentially the work of the Holy Spirit. Hence we should approach the retreat with very great humility as something that is beyond us; it will be vain if the Holy Spirit does not intervene.

The intervention of the Holy Spirit is likewise necessary in order for the word of the preacher to be really the word of God. What we are about to experience together is a mystery. All preaching is a mystery, somewhat analogous to the sacraments. Our Lord willed to communicate his life through these two means of the sacraments and preaching; thus, when commissioning the apostles, he told them, “Go, teach all nations, and baptize them. . .

For a convent of contemplatives, the retreat is the greatest moment of the year as far as preaching is concerned—Our Lord’s great sermon to the community, a time of very intense common life in which the preacher lives the mystery of preaching together with his listeners. It is a moment when we will be living a unique aspect of the mystery of the communion of saints.

Of itself the contemplative life calls for solitude. If it also requires community life, this is because of the need to practice virtue. But in itself the contemplative life is something hidden; its secret life is realized in the innermost depths of our souls.

The particular value of a retreat lies in the fact that in it the contemplative life becomes a common life. The preacher, borne by his hearers, expresses and exteriorizes what is hidden in the depths of their souls. Thus occurs a mysterious communal sharing of personal treasures, as all bring to the retreat their own special graces. They should come likewise with their deepest needs, so that the preacher might be drawn out, as it were, by them. Apostles will be led by the Holy Spirit to give to those whose thirst is greater much more than they themselves had prepared; and to others much more than they were ready to ask for, thus causing them to profit too.

We should come to the retreat, then, with great simplicity and magnanimity as well as faith in this mystery. We are awaiting the word of the Lord.

Like the sacraments, preaching is situated on the plane of the theological virtues. That is why it is a mystery. The profit we derive from it will consequently be proportionate to the depth of our faith, hope, and love.

Let us entrust this mystery to the Blessed Virgin Mary, that she may envelop us with her prayer and enlighten us. This was her role among the Apostles in the Cenacle where the mystery of preaching began.

The mystery of preaching is at one and the same time a mystery of purification, illumination, and unity. In real life, the Holy Spirit does not separate these three functions; but we have to make distinctions in order better to analyze the mystery.

Purification

Purification means first of all gaining a more intense awareness of our vocation. It is not a matter of recalling the

thoughts we may have had at the time we took the habit or made our profession. At the beginning of our religious life, we had an imprecise and very human conception of our vocation. But as we live the contemplative life, we acquire a deeper and deeper understanding of it (albeit more obscure, for it is a mystery).

Hence every year we need to renew our personal awareness of our vocation. Not by a perfunctory reminder, but by suspending our secondary activities in order to allow the more essential ones—those bound up with the very essence of the contemplative life—to expand fully. In other words, we ought to become more fully aware of the end that God wills for us and of the means by which God wills us to attain this end. That is to say, we should realize the special love that God and Jesus have for us.

In light of this end we will be able to discern those human things from which we must become detached in order to fulfill this vocation and attain this end. We must be very faithful in respect to these detachments. Sometimes God gives us a mere presentiment of them, and we have only prudential judgments to go by, not certitude. We must go forward then in faith. We should ask for counsel but then courageously undertake the detachments that appear necessary. Later on we will see better.

Let us note in passing that those who are devoted to the spiritual life experience the same states of soul and the same trials as those who are in the process of conversion, only on a different level. For the latter the last moments before conversion are often the darkest. Only after the step is taken does the light come, and they feel “at home.” The contemplative experiences the very same thing on the spiritual plane. There is a mysterious affinity between the contemplative and the sinner. Hence an apostle needs to have an intense contemplative life in order to understand the psychology of sinners and searchers so that he can help them.

Let us, therefore, ask God to show us the obstacles that hinder us from discerning our true vocation. May he detach us and purify us so that we may be able to see and realize—in other words, to love. The retreat is the great examination of conscience of the year, but we should make it in a contemplative manner. A very contemplative way to make it is to go before Our Lord in an attitude of humility and ask him to purify us himself. Then he will be the one who makes this examination in us.

But it should be the examination of conscience of a free child, before the face of God. It is a very good thing to feel the demands that God makes upon us. Pride is what stands in the way of God's giving himself to us, and God has to enlighten us to see this obstacle. Likewise, it must be God and the Blessed Virgin who "reproach" us. Nothing could be more crucifying, yet nothing is sweeter. May they lay bare our involuntary faults. For, as St. Thomas teaches, there are involuntary sins, and they wound the heart of Our Lord. (We can see this better if we recall that in friendship the hurt is not lessened when the one who hurt us says, "I wasn't paying attention!" This is precisely what wounds! One who does not pay attention is hardly a friend!)

We should never seek to justify ourselves; for the Holy Spirit is a very sensitive friend. We should ask the Spirit for light and be very grateful when we begin to receive it.

Illumination

Illumination is already beginning to occur in purification, but it has a further aspect. In making us more deeply aware of our goal, the Holy Spirit also gives us a very pure and elevated vision of the grandeur of our vocation and ideal. To see clearly, one must look at the mountaintops.

From the practical point of view of living out our ideal, this work of illumination is all the more important because the ideal we strive for is what gives our life its value. We will be

judged by our intentions. But there is a great temptation to lower our ideal so that it will not stand in judgment over us. That is the sin against the light. To sin against the Holy Spirit is to lower one's ideal, to renounce it, to allege that we are not made for that, that there are other things to do, and so forth. Thus, we close ourselves off, and the Holy Spirit can no longer intervene in our lives. This does not usually come about by a single harsh action, but little by little, without our noticing it. This is what we must reexamine during a retreat.

The Work of Union

Our Lord is present. We are not here merely to absorb something for later on; we must live our contemplative life to the full during the retreat. The retreat is above all a work of charity. We must listen to Jesus in a spirit of prayer, as Mary did at Bethany.

Our chief effort should be to try to realize this mystery of charity and unity with God and with one another. Let us together form a collective contemplative entity. It is a special grace of God that makes, not just some individual souls, but the community itself, rise to the level of contemplative life, be contemplative, and raise its members to the contemplative life. This is the grace we must ask for.

Retreat