



Seeking the Face of God: The Vocation of Contemplatives

On November 21st, the feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, the Church honors in a special way the men and women religious who have dedicated their lives to the contemplative vocation. In a radical response to the Gospel and the call of God, they have devoted themselves to a life of prayer "hidden with Christ in God" (cf. Col. 3:3). This choice of vocational path can be baffling to today's contemporary culture. The religious life and, in particular, the contemplative life are "counter-cultural" in many ways, but at the heart of this following of Christ is God's choice and God's call. "It is not you who have chosen me, but I who have chosen you," Jesus tells us (cf. Jn. 15:16). Herein lies the mystery of vocation. All that we can do is to respond in love to His invitation.

In his latest document on women's contemplative life, Pope Francis describes the vocation of the contemplative as "seeking the Face of God," as a quest and life-long journey of seeking in prayer and contemplation. But this life apart in solitude and hidden prayer is not a flight from reality or a selfish search for one's own holiness. Rather, it is a "setting apart" for God, for the Church, for the salvation of souls. Contemplatives are consecrated for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, waging the spiritual battles that we face in our own times and interceding on behalf of the people of God. Pope Francis compared the prayer of the contemplative to Moses in the book of Exodus who decided the fate of his people by prayer; "he ensured victory over the enemy as long as he kept his arms raised to ask for the Lord's help (cf. 17:11)." "It strikes me," Pope Francis continued, "that this is a most eloquent image of the power and

efficacy of your own prayer on behalf of all humanity and the Church, especially of the vulnerable and those in need." He concluded that "the fate of humanity is decided by the prayerful hearts and uplifted hands of contemplative

There is a long standing history of men and women who have followed the call of Christ as contemplatives: Carmelites, Benedictines, Poor Claires, Trappists and Trappistines, Cistercians, Redemptorists... and many more. Today these communities encircle the world by their silent, prayerful witness. Although they live a life "apart" they are still very much a part of our Church and our world. The great St. Thérèse of Lisieux discovered the essence of the contemplative vocation as being "love in the heart of our mother, the Church." She wrote, "I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was burning with love. I understood that it was love alone that made the Church's members act, that if love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood" (Story of a Soul, pg. 194).

Each of us have received a mission entrusted to us by God. It is a precious gift to be received and responded to in love. The greatest gift that we can offer is the gift of our "yes", the gift of ourselves. As we honor the vocation of contemplatives this coming week, let us pray for those being called to follow Christ on this path. Let us entrust them to Mary, the summa contemplatrix, whose life was centered in God and for whom God was the unum necessarium (cf. Jk. 10:42).