



MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE

Introduction: 'Contemplative Seeing'

Elizabeth Davis rsm (Newfoundland)

“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things” (Ps 119:18). We now begin the fourth and final segment of Mercy Global Presence – *Integration*. We have completed the segments on “global,” “mercy,” and “presence.” Now we seek to find the integration that brings us back to “Mercy Global Presence.” We set out on this journey to shape new words, new images, new language, new theology, and new spirituality to enable us to find the energy we need to be Sisters of Mercy and people of mercy in our world so “**in need of God’s compassion and Mercy**” as the MIA *Vision Statement* says. We could never have imagined how rich, how deep, and how moving this journey would be!

In seeking to find integration over the next four months, we will reflect on *contemplative seeing*, a *compassionate heart*, *mercy*, and *creating circles of mercy and a culture of mercy*. Just as this work has been an organic process unfolding in unimaginably creative ways, so, too, our integration cannot be an analytical exercise. Rather it is a *metissage*, a braiding of differences and new patterns, a gathering of the threads of our lived experience resplendent in all the colours and textures of Earth to create a new weaving of mercy.

As the journey unfolds, I invite you to let an image of braiding and weaving, of connection and integration find you. It may be an image from Earth (a stone, a crystal, the Northern or Southern lights), a sound (a chime, a birdsong, a baby’s laugh), a colour (purple, teal), a shape (a spiral, a circle, a polyhedron), or a word (listen, come, love). The image may find you today or in four months’ time, but it will find you if you are open, listening and hearing.

In May 2021, in the week following Pentecost Sunday, we will meet once more in three regional gatherings to reflect further on integration in our continued global conversations, cherishing the diversity and wisdoms among us. Please come to this gathering in your region and share your voice with your global sisters and brothers. *Mercy eNews* and the *mercyworld* website will have more detail about these regional gatherings over the coming months.

Contemplative Seeing

Let us begin our first theme in this four-month segment on “Integration”: *contemplative seeing*. We will experience together the rich and diverse voices and images of the participants in this month’s theme. If we were to create a word cloud to describe contemplation, it would include the words *seeing*, *eyes*, *heart*, *stillness*, *silence*, *presence*, *listening*, *openness*. Paradoxically, we will be using many words in this reflection to speak about that which really involves few words!

The word “contemplation” comes from the Latin “cum” (“with”) and “templum” (“sacred space”), thus “with a sacred space.” The sacred space of contemplation is that of the heart – my heart within the heart of Earth within the heart of the cosmos within the heart of God – truly a most sacred space. Contemplation is a personal act, it is a communal act, and it is a global act. Most of us would have been initially formed in contemplation as a personal act. Today, we know that we frequently meet in communal contemplation within a community of persons sharing the sacred space and the sacred time. Many of us have had that sacred experience in small family or community gatherings as well as in Chapters of religious congregations or church gatherings. More recent still in our awareness of global contemplation. During this past year, we lived global

contemplation in our regional gatherings as well as in that most precious participation in “Living Cosmic Advent Wreath.”

Over the next four months, I will use the parable of the Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke (Lk 10:27-35) to image our four themes – *contemplative seeing, a compassionate heart, mercying, and creating circles of mercy and a culture of mercy* – all reflected through this teaching of Jesus.

Let us now begin to centre ourselves for our first theme – *contemplative seeing* – as we hear the words from the Good Samaritan parable, “Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity” (Lk 10:31-33). Note the phrase, “when he saw him, he passed by on the other side” (Greek *καὶ ἰδὼν ἀντιπαρῆλθεν*), repeated twice, and the parallel phrase, “when he saw him, he was moved with pity” (Greek *καὶ ἰδὼν ἐσπλαγχνίσθη*). Three men were travelling by, and each one saw the beaten person. Only one of the three men saw that person through contemplative eyes.

Seeing

Contemplation is first and foremost seeing, truly seeing, taking “a long loving look at the real.” It means truly seeing everyone and everything around us. William McNamara told us, “The contemplative or mystic looks at each one and everyone, at each thing and everything, from the simple to the sublime, in the same loving way: with the desire to be broken open by the ineffable truth, vulnerability, and inner mystery of what they see and to respond fully to it.” Richard Rohr adds, “Spirituality is about seeing—seeing things in their wholeness, which can only be done through the lens of our own wholeness. . . Only when we live and see through God can ‘everything belong.’”

Seeing is different from looking. The American author, Annie Dillard, says that, “The secret of seeing is...the pearl of great price...[and] although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought...although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise.” We hear in Thomas Merton’s words, “Stop looking and begin seeing. Looking means you already have something in mind for your eyes to find. But seeing is being open and receptive to what comes to the eye; your vision total and non-targeted.”

Seeing with the Eyes of God

Many spiritual writers have gone further and have spoken about contemplation as seeing with the eyes of God. Seven hundred years ago, Meister Eckhart expressed it so simply and so profoundly, “The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God’s eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love.” Another German theologian, Dorothee Sölle, says, “Contemplation sees things as God sees them and leads to an active resistance to evil.”

Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart

The Episcopalian priest, Cynthia Bourgeault, uses the beautiful phrase, “contemplative heart seeing.” She says, “Contemplation is luminous seeing, seeing with the eye of the heart.” She frequently quotes the refrain from a collection of spiritual writings from the Eastern Orthodox Church called the *Philokalia*, “Put the mind in the heart.... Put the mind in the heart.... Stand before the Lord with the mind in the heart.”

We hear God's promise in Ezekiel 36, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." Jesus teaches us in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8).

And in the work of the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, we hear, "'One sees clearly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye.'

Presence in the sound of sheer silence

In 1 Kings 19, after his encounter with and victory over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel and in fear of reprisals by Queen Jezebel, Elijah has a deeply contemplative experience. God has directed him to go out and stand on the mountain of Horeb for the Lord is going to pass by. The usual indications of God's presence – the great wind, the earthquake, and the fire – come, but God is not present in them. Then after the fire comes "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19:12). When Elijah hears this, he covers his face and goes out to meet God" (1 Kgs 19:13).

That same call to listen, not to the loud voice, but to the silent voice is echoed in Job 12:7-9, "But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?" The psalmist agrees, "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Ps 46:10). In a passage from Isaiah, especially dear to Sisters of Mercy since it was used to describe their founder, Catherine McAuley, by her contemporary Sisters, we read, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught" (Is 50:4).

This openness to listen is openness to presence, another essential element of contemplative seeing. Thomas Keating osco, the American monk who taught us the contemplative way of praying through centering prayer, said, "Where silence meets presence, there we have contemplation." Again, we quote Cynthia Bourgeault who says, "'In essence, contemplative prayer is simply a wordless, trusting opening of self to the divine presence.'" The American poet, Mary Rose O'Reilly, says that contemplation has to do with "being awake, being there, being present, listening, creating a space for learning and for developing an inner life by your very attention to the moment."

An often-used definition of contemplation is "loving presence to what is." Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, the 17th century Carmelite friar, called it "the loving gaze that finds God everywhere." In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul explains who God is to the Athenians and all those gathered in the Areopagus, "In God we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Contemplation in Action

Seeing, eyes, heart, stillness, silence, presence, listening, openness – all lead us to creating a sacred space where response emerges. Meister Eckhart states that, "What we have gathered in contemplation we give out in love." This presence to God in whom "we live and love and have our being" means, in Gerald May's words, "immediate open presence in the world, directly perceiving and lovingly responding to things as they really are. . . . In this sense, contemplation is an all-embracing quality of presence, including not only our own inner experience but also directly perceiving and responding to the situation and needs of the world around us. Rather than trying to balance contemplation and action, it is more accurate to see contemplation in action,

undergirding and embracing everything.” Constance FitzGerald ocd speaks about contemplation in action when she says, “contemplation is not a validation of things as they are...but a constant questioning and restlessness that waits for and believes in the coming of a transformed vision of God... a new and integrating spirituality capable of creating a new politics and generating new social structures.”

Conclusion

Thankfully, contemplation is not for the perfect! There is a simple anonymous story which is told like this. *A boy went to church with his mother on a sunny Sunday morning. He was enthusiastic about the many colourful glass figures that the sun traced through the stained glass windows onto the floor and he excitedly asked his mother what this and that meant. She whispered that this was such and such a saint, and that was another. Some time afterward, in religion class, the teacher asked if anybody knew what a saint was. The excited boy, raising his hand, said “I do. A saint is someone that the light shines through!”* **The broken pieces of coloured glass that from the stained-glass windows are essential if the light is to shine through.**

For all of us contemplatives in action who are formed from so many pieces of broken glass, the Canadian Jewish poet and singer, Leonard Cohen, describes well what that means for us in a powerful verse from his song *Anthem*:

Ring out the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

A Reminder

Remember, in the days and months to come, as you continue to reflect on this last set of themes for *Mercy Global Presence*, braiding and weaving all into one, let your image find you!