

## **Action & Contemplation From St. Francis to Richard Rohr**

We may know the story of Francis wondering whether he should lead a life of contemplation, or of active ministry. His inclination was to the contemplative way, spending hours alone in prayer. He was also drawn to preaching the gospel of his Lord Jesus, and to caring for the most marginalized members of society at that time – the lepers, the poor and sick. So he found it hard to make the decision, and sent one of the Brothers to Clare, asking her to pray over what he should do, and to advise him. The answer that she sent back was that he should preach in the world, and this he joyfully accepted. He still needed the times of retreat and prayer as this underpinned all that he did.

Some of us have heard Richard Rohr OFM speak, following in the footsteps of Francis. He is often in this country lecturing and reaches more people through his books, CDs etc. His headquarters in Albuquerque, New Mexico is called the ‘Center for Action and Contemplation’, and he explains this title in his book ‘Simplicity’. Action is put deliberately first as *‘we learn and are healed by committing ourselves.’* The most important form of contemplative prayer for them is a kind of prayer of centering’. For half an hour at the beginning of each day they sit in silence, simply letting go of their ego *‘so God can take over.’* Action takes place then in immediate contact with the poor and oppressed, homeless, and refugees.

The keeping silence is in line with the teachings of Benedictines John Main and Laurence Freeman, when the focus is on one word *‘Maranatha’*, *‘Come Lord Jesus’*, the repeating of which discourages thoughts. This is my daily discipline. It means waiting in humility and simplicity, listening to God, but not expecting anything. As in T.S. Eliot’s ‘East Coker’: *‘there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought;  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.’*

Rohr spent a year in contemplation, and a month in the hermitage of Thomas Merton, who was his model. In this time he had no books, radio or TV so as not to take in any more information and ideas. He found that much joy and pain came to the surface, and that *‘there is another way of knowing reality besides the cerebral. We are moving toward a more integral understanding of knowing, and that is what contemplation seeks. It will not be perceived, however, as information as much as groundedness, peace, inner clarity, assurance and even an unexplainable enthusiasm.’* Thus contemplation feels like a kind of knowing that the saints call *‘unknowing’* or (Rohr) *‘a long, loving look at what really is.’*

During an address in Norwich Cathedral in January 2008 Rohr told us that as much as 98% of our time is spent in thought, which prevents us from being with God. He gave us a brief meditation with a time of silence:

- *Be still, and know that I am God.*
- *Be still and know that I am.*
- *Be still and know.*
- *Be still.*
- *Be.*

Contemplation is a journey into emptiness. Action and Contemplation could be thought of as being a 'chicken and egg' situation. Which comes first, and how active is 'Action'? Rohr says that first we have to act. Like for Francis, there has to be a leap of faith, involving risk. First you agree to give yourself, and then you (the whole person) will understand it. Being with the lepers taught Francis a great deal. He was afraid of them, but was inspired to embrace them. *'If a certain set of people scare you then you have to enter into solidarity with them. We have to learn to view reality from their standpoint. That's why Jesus says we have to love our enemies. It's the only way to grasp the whole picture – to love the other side of our soul.'*

There are so many writers on meditation and contemplation: St. Teresa of Avila, in 'The Interior Castle', must be one of the best-known exponents. The theme is the progress of the soul into Contemplation, and the imagery is a journey: the first mansion is Humility, the second is Prayer, the third is Meditation and Exemplary Life. The fourth is the Prayer of Quiet. The fifth is the Spiritual Betrothal. The sixth is the Night of the Spirit. The seventh is the Spiritual Marriage, where there is stress on active service *'which is the very pinnacle of the mystical life.'* She said *'We should desire and engage in prayer not for our enjoyment but for the sake of acquiring this strength which fits us for service.'* St. Teresa says of the prayer of quiet that it is not necessary to know much but to love much.

Another thinker on this subject is the Jesuit, William Johnston. He describes *'In Zen an attempt to trace the meditational journey is made in the famous Oxherding pictures which depict man in search of the ox – the sacred animal of the East, symbolizing the true self. Successive sketches show man lost in illusion until he gets a glimpse of the footprints of the ox; then of the ox itself. Next he tames the ox and rides it home. Then the ox disappears, leaving the man alone'*. But the drama reaches its climax with the eighth picture where not only the ox but also the man disappears and nothing remains. Not a thing IS. This is represented by the famous symbol of nothingness in the form of a circle. In twelfth-century China, however, other pictures were added, so that the series ended with *'the enlightened old man returning to the market-place to save all sentient beings.'* Johnston feels that we should not take this *'return to the market-place'* in a too literal way. Since contemplation is activity – the highest form of activity – it is in itself a return to the market-place and a building of the earth.

In Zen, Johnston discusses two distinct states relating to the breathing in meditation. One is 'I am breathing'.

The next is: 'The universe is breathing.'

This is an excellent example of the loss of self, which is our aim in contemplative prayer. St. John of the Cross also deals with breathing and awakening. At the end of his little poem 'The Living Flame' he does not say *'I am enlightened'*, or *'I awaken'* because this 'I' is gone. Rather he says that *'the Word awakens in me'*. This has something in common with the universe awakening and breathing; except that the Word inspires his love, and this is the love of the Son for the Father. John of the Cross tell us that one act of pure love achieves more than all the exterior works in the world. So contemplation and action may not be opposed. One will often return to the market-place while remaining on one's meditation chair. The return need not be a further step; it is part of the very activity of meditation.' What do we make of this?

Michael Ramsey, in his 'Be Still and Know' writes: '*Contemplation is a prayer in which brain and imagination and the knowledge and enjoyment of God's creatures fade away in a passivity, in which the depth of the soul is disclosed, and the love of God is poured into it. It is the prayer of wanting, receiving and loving – always preceded by what is called the Dark Night of the Soul.*' He quotes the anonymous 'Cloud of Unknowing':

*'For at the first time when thou dost this work thou findest but a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing, thou knowest not what, saving that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God. This darkness and cloud is, however thou dost, between thee and thy God, and telleth thee that thou mayest neither see him clearly by light of understanding, nor feel him in sweetness of love in thine affection. Therefore shape thee to abide in this darkness as long as thou mayest, evermore crying after him that thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt feel him or see him... it behoveth always to be in this cloud and in this darkness. Smite upon that thick cloud with a sharp dart of longing love.'* (Chapter 3).

Michael Ramsey also says that the '*validity of contemplation is often tested by the pursuit of the life of faith*'. So here we have action again in the 'pursuit'.

And, returning to Franciscan thought, an SSF Brother from Australia copied out this prayer for me, written by Paul Alfred Reeves, W.C.C Assembly, Canberra, in 1991.

*'Father God, grant me to be silent before you that I may hear you;*

*At rest in you that you may work in me,*

*Open to you that you may enter*

*Empty before you that you may fill me.*

*Let me be still and know you are my God.*

*Come, Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation. Amen.'*

A useful way to start the day?

At the opening of Rohr's book on 'Simplicity: The Freedom of letting go' he quotes from T.S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding':

*'Not known, because not looked for*

*But heard, half-heard, in the stillness*

*Between two waves of the sea.*

*Quick now, here, now, always –*

*A condition of complete simplicity*

*(Costing not less than everything).'*

Francis might have agreed with '*costing not less than everything.*'

Rohr believes '*that there is a divine therapy both for the individual and for the Church; it is the radical contemplative stance*', the return to simplicity that comes '*from much good looking and good listening.*' '*The Christian life must be a constant journey back and forth between the radical way inward and the radical way outward.*'

He shows us that '*Contemplation is a way to hear with the Spirit and not with the head.*' He maintains too that the effect of it is authentic action: if we stick with the exercise regularly then we will come to the inner place of compassion.

Nell Slocock, September 2008. 1740 words.

Sources: 'Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go.' Richard Rohr. Crossroad Books.

'Be Still and Know'. Michael Ramsey. Collins: Fount paperbacks.

'Silent Music: The Science of Meditation'. William Johnston. Fount Paperbacks.