

Hypostatic Union

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[*The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*](#)

By Thomas Merton

Chapter 4: Christian Contemplation

P 37 – 49

Note: This excerpt is a portion of Chapter 4. Description of this book in Amazon: *This is Thomas Merton's last book, in which he draws on both Eastern and Western traditions to explore the topic of contemplation/meditation in depth.*

1. Contemplation and Theology

Most non-Christians, and probably also many Protestant Christians, probably suppose that the intense preoccupation of the early Church Fathers with the technical details of the dogma of the Incarnation was a matter of arbitrary and subjective willfulness, and that it had little objective importance. But, as a matter of fact, the intricacies of Christology and of the dogma of the hypostatic union were by no means a mere authoritarian web devised to capture the minds and to keep in subjection the wills of the faithful, as rationalism glibly used to declare. Both the theologian and the ordinary believer, in the Patristic age, realized the importance of the correct theological formulation of the mystery of the Incarnation, because dogmatic error would in fact imply disastrous practical consequences in the spiritual life of each individual Christian.

One of the main reasons why St. Athanasius so stubbornly defended the divinity of Christ against the [Arians](#), who at one time outnumbered the orthodox Christians by a vast majority, was that he saw that if Christ were not God, then it followed that the Christian hope for union with God in and through Christ was a delusion. Everything, as St. Paul himself had declared equivalently, depended on faith in Christ as the true Son of God, the Word Incarnate. “For if Christ be not risen again then our preaching is vain, and your faith also is vain. Yea and also we are found false witnesses of God, because we have given testimony against God” (1 Corinthians 15:14–15).

It may perhaps not be clear at first sight what this belief in the Resurrection might have to do with contemplation. But in fact the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, the New Adam, completely restored human nature to its spiritual condition and made possible the divinization of every man coming into the world. This meant that in each one of us the inner self was now able to be awakened and transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit, and this awakening would not only enable us to discover our true identity “in Christ,” but would also make the living and Risen Savior present in us. Hence the importance of the Divinity of

Christ—for it is as God-Man that He is risen from the dead and as God-Man that He is capable of living and acting in us all by His Spirit, so that in Him we are not only our true personal selves, but are also one Mystical Person, one Christ. And thus each one of us is endowed with the creative liberty of the Son of God. Each one of us, in some sense, is able to be completely transformed into the likeness of Christ, to become, as He is, divinely human, and thus to share His spiritual authority and charismatic power in the world.

It is significant that, among the minority of Christians who stood with Athanasius, the contemplative Desert Fathers formed a solid and unyielding phalanx of believers in the divinity of the Second Person and the Incarnation of the Word. For they believed, with all the orthodox Fathers, what St. Athanasius succinctly declared in the formula, *borrowed from St. Irenaeus*: “God became man in order that man might become God.”

If the “Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost,” this was not merely in order to reestablish man in a favorable juridical position with regard to God: it was to elevate, change, and transform man into God, in order that God might be revealed in Man, and that all men might become One Son of God in Christ. The New Testament texts in which this mystery is stated are unequivocal, and yet they have been to a very great extent ignored not only by the faithful, but also by theologians.

The Greek and Latin Fathers never made this mistake! For them, the mystery of the hypostatic union, or the union of the divine and human natures in the One Person of the Word, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, was not only a truth of the greatest, most revolutionary, and most existential actuality, but it was the central truth of all being and all history. It was the key which alone could unlock the meaning of everything else and reveal the inner and spiritual significance of man, of his actions as an individual and in society, of history, of the world, and of the whole cosmos.

If in Christ the assumed human nature, which is in every respect literally and perfectly human, belongs to the Person of the Word of God, then everything human in Christ is by that very fact divine. His thoughts, actions, and His very existence are the works and existence of a divine Person. In Him, we see a Man in every respect identical with ourselves as far as His nature is concerned, thinking and feeling and acting according to our nature, and yet at the very same time living on a completely transcendent and divine level of consciousness and of being. For His consciousness and His being are the consciousness and being of God Himself. Of course, the Living Christ, now enthroned at the right hand of the Father in eternity (according to the metaphorical language of the Scriptures), is indeed in a state of being which to us is beyond all capacity to express or to imagine, and yet in this state of being He is also truly and literally human as well as divine, and there is no cleavage between His divine and human natures. Nor was there even the slightest split between the humanity and the divinity of Christ in that other historical state of being in which He lived on this earth. Though

the two natures were not confused in any way, they were still completely one in Him, as completely as our own body and soul are one in us.

The very first step to a correct understanding of the Christian theology of contemplation is to grasp clearly the unity of God and man in Christ, which of course presupposes the equally crucial unity of man in himself. For the soul and body are not divided against one another as good and evil principles; and our salvation by no means consists of a rejection of the body in order to liberate the soul from the dominance of an evil material principle. On the contrary, our body is as much ourselves as the soul, and neither one without the other can claim to exist purely in its own right, as a true personal being. It was the same also in Christ, in Whom the life, being, and actions of His Body were just as much His own, and just as much divine, as the thoughts and aspiration of His soul. So when Christ walked down the roads of Galilee, it was not an illusory man or even a real man acting as a temporary “front” for a Divine Agent: the Man Himself Who walked there was God.

In the words of St. Maximus the Confessor:

The superessential Word, clothing Himself at the time of His ineffable conception with all that is in our nature, possessed nothing human that was not at the same time divine. . . . The knowledge of these things is indemonstrable, being beyond understanding and perceptible only to the faith of those who honor the mystery of Christ in the sincerity of their heart. (*Ambigua, Patrologia Graeca*, 91.1053)

And again:

The mystery of the Incarnation of the Word contains in itself all the meaning of the enigmas and symbols of Scripture, all the significance of visible and intelligible creatures. He who knows the mystery of the Cross and the Sepulchre knows the reason (logos) of all things. He who is initiated into the hidden meaning of the resurrection, knows the end for which, from the beginning, God created all things. (*Centuriae Gnosticae, Patrologia Graeca*, 90.1108)

The fact that since the Incarnation God and Man have become inseparable in the One Person of Jesus Christ means that the “supernatural order” has not just been somehow imposed from without upon created nature, but that nature itself has, in man, become transformed and supernaturalized so that in everyone in whom Christ lives and acts, by the Holy Spirit, there is no longer any further division between nature and supernature. The man who lives and acts according to the grace of Christ dwelling in him acts in that case as another Christ, as a son of God, and thus he prolongs in his own life the effects and the miracle of the Incarnation.

In the words of St. Maximus:

“God desires at all times to make Himself man in those who are worthy”
(*Quaestiones ad Thalassium, Patrologia Graeca* 90.321).

But this, for the Greek Fathers, clearly means a higher and nobler level of life than we ordinarily lead. It means a life purified, liberated by the action of the Holy Spirit, a life enlightened by supernatural contemplation. Of course, Christ has taken possession of our souls and bodies, and we are already divinized, in the roots of our being, by Baptism. But this divine life remains hidden and dormant within us unless it is more fully developed by a life of asceticism and charity and, on a higher level, of contemplation. We not only passively receive in us the grace of Christ, but we actively renew in our own life the self-emptying and self-transformation by which God became man. Just as the Word “emptied Himself” of His divine and transcendent nobility in order to “descend” to the level of man, so we must empty ourselves of what is human in the ignoble sense of the word, which really means less than human, in order that we may become God. This does not mean the sacrifice or destruction of anything that really belongs to our human nature as it was assumed by Christ, but it means the complete, radical cutting off of everything in us that was *not* assumed by Him because it was not capable of being divinized. And what is this? It is everything that is focused on our exterior and self-centered passion as self-assertion, greed, lust; as the desire for the survival and perpetuation of our illusory and superficial self, to the detriment of our interior and true self. But our inner man is “renewed in Christ” to become the “new man.”

As St. Paul says:

Though our outward man is corrupted, our inward man is renewed from day to day . . . while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. (2 Corinthians 4:16, 18)

Strip yourselves of the old man, with his deeds and put on the new, him who *is renewed unto knowledge* according to the image of Him that created him.
(Colossians 3:9, 10)

That God would grant you . . . to be strengthened by His Spirit with might unto the inward man, that Christ may dwell by faith in your hearts: that being rooted and founded in charity you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, to know also the charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge that you may be filled unto all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16–19)

These texts already give us a full and profound picture of the idea of contemplation that fills the New Testament everywhere, though the term is never mentioned in this particular sense. It is a question of the inward man springing to life at the spiritual contact of God, in faith. This contact brings one face-to-face with a reality that is “unseen,” first of all, and yet, paradoxically, this “seeing” of the “unseen” brings about an ever deepening renewal of life which is “according to knowledge,” that is to say, according to a genuine experience of Christ, caused by our likeness, or “sonship,” by the gift of the divine Spirit Who makes Christ “dwell in our hearts” or in our inmost selves. The result of this indwelling of Christ and of the Holy Spirit is the overflowing fullness of new life, of charity, divine love, and a spiritual comprehension of the mystery of God’s life within us in all its dimensions, through the experience of Christ’s love for us “which surpasses all understanding.”

Later in the book we shall return to these fundamental ideas about Christian contemplation as an experiential contact with God, in and through Christ, beyond all knowledge, in the darkness of the mystery of divine charity, in “unknowing.” At the moment it is sufficient to say categorically that this contemplation is a deep participation in the Christ-life, a spiritual sharing in the union of God and Man which is the hypostatic union. This is the whole meaning of the doctrine of divine sonship, of our being sons of God in Christ and having the Spirit of Christ.

For whoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For you have not received the spirit of bondage again in fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption of sons whereby we cry Abba, Father. For the Spirit Himself giveth testimony to our spirit that we are the sons of God. (Romans 8:14–16)

This “testimony of the Spirit” to our inmost self (our own spirit) is in a very broad sense what we call “contemplation” in the Christian context.

2. *Contemplation and the Gospels*

Let us now briefly and succinctly examine some of the most important Gospel texts related to our subject. First of all, Jesus declared unequivocally that He and the Father were one, and that he was the Son of God in the strictest and most literal sense of the word. For this He was put to death.

I and the Father are One. . . . I am the Son of *God*. . . . If I do not the works of my Father believe me not. But if I do, though you will not believe me, believe the works: that you may know and believe that the Father is in me and I am in the Father. (John 10:30, 36–38)

I am the light of the world: he that followeth me walketh not in darkness but shall have the light of life. . . . I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me. . . . You are of this world, I am not of this world. . . . I am the beginning who also speak unto you. . . . He that sent me is true, and the things I hear from Him, these same I speak in the world. . . . I do nothing of myself, but as the Father hath taught me, these things I speak. And He that sent me is with me, and he hath not left me alone: for I do always the things that please Him. . . . From God I proceeded and came: for I came not of myself, but He sent me. . . . If any man keep my word he shall not see death forever. . . . If I glorify myself my glory is nothing. It is my Father that glorifieth me, of whom you say that He is your God. And you have not known Him, but I know Him. . . . I do know Him, and do keep His word. Abraham your Father rejoiced that he might see my day: he saw it and was glad. . . . Amen, amen I say to you, before Abraham was made, I am. (John 8)

Have I been so long a time with you and have you not known me? . . . He that seeth me seeth the Father also. . . . I am the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh to the Father but by me. . . . Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I speak to you, I speak not of myself. But the Father who abideth in me, He doth the works. (John 14)

These texts are clear enough. And there is no question about the way they have been interpreted by twenty centuries of Christian tradition. Christian contemplation is based on faith in this mystery. If Christ came into the world as the Son of God, and if the Father was present in Him: if Christ has left the world and gone to the Father, how do we “see” Him, or bridge the gap that remains between us and the transcendental remoteness of His mystery in heaven? The answer is that the Word, in the Father, is not only transcendently removed at an infinite distance above us, but also and at the same time He is immanent in our world, first of all by nature as the Creator of the world, but then in a special dynamic and mystical presence as the Savior, Redeemer, and Lover of the world. The point is, then, to know how we enter into contact with this special presence of the Lord in His cosmos and in our hearts. If in St. John’s terms we have to become the sons of God, and in order to become the sons of God we have to receive Christ, then how do we receive Christ?

The answer is, by *faith*: and this means not simply by an intellectual assent to certain authoritative dogmatic propositions, but, more than that, by *the commitment of our whole self and of our whole life to the reality of the presence of Christ in the world*. This act of total surrender is not simply a fantastic intellectual and mystical gamble; it is something much more serious: it is an act of love for this unseen Person Who, in the very gift of love by which we surrender ourselves to His reality, also makes Himself present to us. The union of our mind, spirit, and life with the Word present within us is effected by the Holy Spirit.

All this is clear in Christ's discourse at the Last Supper, His spiritual testament. First, a distinction is made between the physical presence of the Lord with which the disciples had become familiar during the period when He lived among them on earth and the new more intimate invisible presence which would be His when He had died on the Cross, risen from the dead, and established His Kingdom.

But I tell you the truth, it is expedient for you that I go: for if I go not the Paraclete will not come to you: but if I go I will send Him to you. . . . When He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will teach you all truth. . . . He shall glorify me because he shall receive of mine and shall show it to you. (John 16:7, 13, 14)

These words need to be completed by an explanation from the First Epistle of St. John: at the same time, we just remember what was said above by St. Paul about the Holy Spirit making Christ present to the Christian soul.

St. John says:

You have the unction from the Holy One and know all things. . . . Let the unction which you have received from Him abide in you. And you have no need that any man teach you; but as His unction teaches you of all things, and is truth and no lie. And as it hath taught you, abide in Him. (1 John 2:20, 27)

It is evident, then, that the Holy Spirit is given to us as a true and literal gift of God: *Donum Dei altissimi*. He is truly, as St. Thomas says, our possession, which means to say He becomes, as it were, our own spirit, speaking within our own being. It is He that becomes, as it were, our spiritual and divine self, and by virtue of His presence and inspirations we are and we act as other Christs. By Him and through Him we are transformed in Christ. It is clear from the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament that the Holy Spirit is truly meant to be given to us as a personal principle of love and activity in the supernatural order, transforming us in Christ. The life of contemplation is, then, not simply a life of human technique and discipline; it is the life of the Holy Spirit in our inmost souls. The whole duty of the contemplative is to abandon what is base and trivial in his own life, and do all he can to conform himself to the secret and obscure promptings of the Spirit of God. This of course requires a constant discipline of humility, obedience, self-distrust, prudence, and above all faith.

St. Paul earnestly wanted all his Corinthian converts to receive the Holy Spirit and be guided by Him. He tells them in no uncertain words:

We speak the wisdom of God in mystery, a wisdom which is hidden, which God ordained before the world, unto our glory. ... To us God hath revealed (hidden things) by His Spirit, for the Spirit searcheth all things, even the deep things of

God. For what man knoweth the things of a man but the spirit of a man that is in him? So the things also that are of God no man knoweth, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received the spirit not of this world, but the Spirit that is of God; that we may know the things that are given us from God. (1 Corinthians 2:7, 10-12)

This is an important witness to the New Testament idea of what we call contemplation of God. Just as a man knows himself by the testimony of his own inmost self, his own spirit, so God reveals Himself in the love of His Spirit. And this Spirit of God, dwelling in us, given to us, to be as it were our own Spirit, enables us to know and experience, in a mysterious manner, the reality and presence of the divine mercy in ourselves. So the Holy Spirit is intimately united to our own inmost self, and His presence in us makes our "I" the "I" of Christ and of God.

This is the Holy Spirit Whom Christ Himself promised to His disciples and to us at the Last Supper. Too often these texts are merely taken in a broad impersonal sense: the Holy Spirit was given to the Apostles, and hence to the Church. This means that the Holy Spirit protects the Church, and especially the successor of the Apostles, from dogmatic and moral error. That is true. But it is also much more important to realize that the Holy Spirit is given to each member of the Church to guide him in the truth, to lead him to his supernatural destination, and to open his eyes to the mystery of God's presence and action in his own life.

In the discourse at the Last Supper, the Savior Who was about to die on the Cross returned insistently to the theme of His departure from His disciples in His physical and material presence, in order to live in them mystically and spiritually by His Holy Spirit. But this is not to be understood as the mere substitution of metaphor for reality. Christ was not to be present in His members merely as a memory, as a model, as a good example. Nor would He merely guide and control them from afar, through angels. It is true that the Divine Nature infinitely transcends all that is natural, but in Christ the gap between God and man has been bridged by the Incarnation, and in us the gap is bridged by the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit. Christ is really present in us, more present than if He were standing before us visible to our bodily eyes. For we have become "other Christs."

By virtue of this hidden presence of the Spirit in our inmost self, we need only to deliver ourselves from preoccupation with our external, selfish, and illusory self in order to find God within us. And the Lord has explicitly said that this discovery, a sublime gift of His grace, normally implies some form of spiritual experience.

Christ says he will send us:

The Spirit of Truth whom the world cannot receive because it seeth Him not, nor knoweth Him: *but you shall know Him*; because He shall abide with you and he in you. (John 14:17)

The Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, *will teach you all things.*
(John 14:26)

Through that Spirit the Father and the Son will both reveal themselves to us, and we will know and love them:

He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father: and *I will love him and will manifest myself to him...My Father will love him and we will come to him and make our abode with him.* (John 14:21, 23)

But such knowledge and love, infused into our hearts by the God of love manifesting Himself to us, is essentially the same beatitude as the blessed enjoy in heaven. "For this is eternal life: That they may know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

Eternal life is the receiving of the Lord sent by the Father, and of the Holy Spirit Who unites us to the Father in the Word. Eternal life is centered in these divine "sendings" or missions. Contemplation is the conscious, experiential awareness of the mission of the Son and of the Spirit, a reception of the Word Who is sent to us not only as life but also as light. But the full knowledge of the Word "sent" to us and "received" in us is subjective rather than objective. We know Him as the "other," as the divine "Thou" to Whom we turn the whole being of our spirit, and yet He is "in us" and is intimately united to our own inmost "I" so that He is more truly our self than we are.

Is it any wonder that this intimate knowledge of the Holy Trinity and of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, should open up infinite depths of joy and freedom to the contemplative Christian soul?

These things I have spoken to you *that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be filled.* (John 15:11)

Peace I leave with you, *my peace I give to you. Not as the world giveth do I give unto you ...* (John 14:27)

The joy of the contemplative is consummated in perfect union:

The glory which Thou hast given to me I have given them; that they may be one as we also are one: I in them and Thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one. (John 17:22-23)

The seeds of this sublime life are planted in every Christian soul at Baptism. But seeds must grow and develop before you reap the harvest. There are thousands of Christians walking about

the face of the earth bearing in their bodies the infinite God of Whom they know practically nothing. They are themselves sons of God and are not aware of their identity. Instead of seeking to know themselves and their true dignity, they struggle miserably to impersonate the alienated characters whose "greatness" rests on violence, craftiness, lust, and greed.

The seeds of contemplation and sanctity, planted in those souls, merely lie dormant. They do not germinate. They do not grow. In other words, sanctifying grace occupies the substance of their souls, but never flows out to inflame and irrigate and take possession of their faculties, their intellect and will. The presence of God never becomes an intimate reality. God does not manifest Himself to these souls because they do not seek Him with any real desire.

They are men divided between God and the world. They are at home only in their exterior self. They never seek what is deeper within them. They allow God to maintain His rights over the substance of their souls, but their thoughts and desires do not belong to Him. They belong to illusion, to passion, and to external things. Consequently, as far as their knowledge of God is concerned, these Christians are in the same condition as men without God. For them, too, the Spirit of Truth cannot fully be received "because they see Him not, nor know Him." For them too it must be said: "The sensual man perceiveth not these things that are of the Spirit of God: for it is foolishness to him and he cannot understand" (1 Corinthians 2:14.12)

In His discourse at the Last Supper Jesus promised the Holy Ghost, with His contemplative gifts. But the promise was accompanied by a denial. The Holy Ghost would be given to those who would receive Him. To those who would not receive Him, He would be denied.

St. Thomas Aquinas, commenting on the words of St. John's Gospel (chap. 14), explains the difference between the two. Contemplation will be denied to a man in proportion as he belongs to "the world." The expression "the world" signifies those who love the transient and unimportant things of this world. They cannot receive the Holy Spirit Who is the Love of God. As St. John of the Cross says: "Two contraries cannot coexist at the same time in the same subject." You cannot serve God and Mammon.

If a man wants to prepare himself to receive the Holy Ghost and His Love, he must withdraw his desires from all the ambitious, the external satisfactions and the temporal interests this world has to offer, for spiritual things cannot be appreciated or understood by the mind that is occupied with superficial and merely external satisfactions. *Spiritualia videri non possunt nisi quis vacet a terrenis.*

The Angelic Doctor explains that the Holy Ghost does not manifest Himself to worldly men because they do not desire to know Him. They are content to occupy their minds with trivial things. But desire is the most important thing in the contemplative life. Without desire we will never receive the great gifts of God. *Dona spiritualia non accipiuntur nisi desiderata.* St. Thomas adds: *nec desiderantur nisi aliquantulum cognita.* There could be no desire where there is not at least a little knowledge. We cannot desire union with God unless we know that such a union exists and have at least some idea of what it is.

But the alienated man, and the Christian who is entirely concerned with external activities and temporal interests, not only does not desire contemplation, but he even makes himself incapable of knowing what it is. The only way to find out anything about the joys of contemplation is by *experience*. We must taste and see that the Lord is sweet. *Gustate et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus.*

St. Thomas says that worldly men have lost that sense of taste for spiritual things. "As the tongue of a sick man cannot taste good things ... so the soul infected with the corruption of the world has no taste for the joys of heaven."