

Contemplative Prayer, The Enneagram and Spiritual Growth

by

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**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

Introduction

People relate to each other in quite different ways. The way we show love and feel loved is a result of who we are deep inside. For example, some people's energy might draw them towards people, while others feel drawn away. Some connect with others by doing things together. Others might prefer to sit together and simply listen to music and not talk at all. The way we see ourselves and what we believe about ourselves has an influence on our relationships as well. It seems only natural that this might be true for our relationship with God and hence for our prayer also. If we gain a deeper self-knowledge and find ways of prayer that suit our personality, spiritual growth and hence a deeper relationship with God might be the result. This might then lead us toward wholeness and fullness of life. In this essay I would like to look at the different personality types through the lens of the Enneagram and then suggest different ways of contemplative prayer that might be helpful for the different types. Because this is not an essay about the Enneagram as such, the writings of Rohr and Heuertz might be helpful for understanding this typology (see references). The relationship of the topic to spiritual direction is quite obvious. Therefore, the segment about the practice of spiritual direction is relatively short. To begin with I am going to explain contemplative prayer and the prayer postures 'Solitude, Silence and Stillness'. Then I will look at the impact of the Enneagram and personality and show ways of prayer that are helpful for the different types.

What Is Contemplative Prayer?

There are many definitions of prayer, and many authors have written books about the subject of prayer. In this essay, when talking about prayer, I am referring to the Prayer of Contemplation. Margaret Silf talks about prayer being the expression of the desire to be in right relationship with God. (Silf 2004) When interpreting a painting that shows a small sailboat where the sailor is not seen, Sister Wendy Beckett relates the boat to prayer and the pray-er to the unseen sailor. The pray-er has launched on the sea of faith and it is he/she who is silently inside the boat. The movement is coming from God. She goes on to say: "What matters is to stay at rest in the boat, down below sight level, while the wind, that is the Holy Spirit bears us over the still waters to where the Father waits for us" (Beckett 2006, p. 6) Metz and Burchill state: "Prayer is presence to the presence of God" (Metz and Burchill 1987, p. 37)

Suzanne Zuercher (OSB) gives an image for contemplative prayer which is that of someone holding a bird (which represents our reality) in his/her hand. It needs to be held with some degree of firmness, otherwise it will fly away. In the same way, listening is essential for contemplation. Without listening one would just be daydreaming. If the focus on the reality that the moment presents is too intense the force and strain will kill the awareness as surely as the bird will die when held too firmly. (Zuercher 2008)

In contemplative prayer, God is doing the praying and the pray-er is like the sailor in the boat - alone, silent and still. Solitude, Silence and Stillness are the postures that might help engage with this kind of prayer because the aim is to be able to listen intensely, and to be completely present to God. Metz and Burchill call it the three ways of coming to the centre. (Metz and Burchill 1987)

Solitude, Silence and Stillness

The feeling of being alone makes many people uncomfortable and is said, for some, to lead to depression, anxiety and even suicide. However, being alone before God is different. In being alone before God one can experience God's loving presence in a very deep way. In Solitude we learn to be present to our self, to God and to one another. We experience healing of our neediness and pain and find authentic connection to our self, God and others. (Heuertz 2017)

In her article about Solitude, Silence and Stillness, Phileena Heuertz suggests: "Practicing silence helps us develop the ability to listen and discern God's voice and leading". (Heuertz P. 'Solitude, Silence & Stillness')

Through practicing Stillness, we learn to let go of our need to control and to be busy constantly and it may cause us to re-evaluate our drive. (Heuertz 2017) Through practicing Solitude, Silence and Stillness spiritual growth is being promoted.

Self-knowledge is another important agent for spiritual growth. Sheila Prichard argues that if one wants to know oneself more deeply in the light of God's love, then Silence is one of the ways to let this happen. (Prichard 2004). She also says that all famous writers on prayer say that one doesn't go far in knowing God without self-knowledge. (Prichard 2004) The Enneagram can be a very helpful tool to gain a deeper self-knowledge. It complements the disciplines of Solitude, Silence and Stillness and hence the Prayer of Contemplation. Another reason why the Enneagram might be helpful is that, as in human relationships, different personalities relate differently to each other. This is true for our relationship with God too. Because we are all different, one style of prayer might be more compatible with our personality than another. Metz and Burchill say that the Enneagram points out our preferred energies and hence facilitates the finding of prayer styles that suit our personality best. (Metz & Burchill 1987)

What is the Enneagram?

The Enneagram is basically a model of the human psyche which is understood as a typology of nine interconnected personality types. According to Heuertz "it (the Enneagram) illustrates the nine ways we get lost, but also the nine ways we can come home to our True Self". (Heuertz 2017)

The nine personality types described in the Enneagram are grouped into three centres, called energy centres. Types 8, 9 and 1 are called the **Gut Centre**. Types 2, 3 and 4 represent the **Heart Centre** and types 5, 6 and 7 make up the **Head Centre**.

Characteristics of Gut Centre Types

People of the Gut Centre react instinctively and are often concerned with power and justice. They tend to blame themselves if things go wrong which enhances their fear of being irredeemably flawed and they suppress their unbearable feeling of self-doubt and hence their frustration turns into anger, either blatantly or secretly.

Characteristics of the Heart Centre Types

People who make up this centre are relational. They want to express themselves, and their energy moves toward others. Self-image is very important to them and they experience themselves in the reactions of others. They find self-worth through comparison with others and are constantly showing their devotion to others whom they try to please. They have a distinct sense of responsibility and are constantly active. They tend to repress their aggression while displaying a façade of kindness.

Characteristics of Head Centre Types

The Head Centre types are the thinkers and seek input from the outside. Their energy draws them away from people. They act only after thinking and hence they feel stupid in emergencies. Their anxiety is often exaggerated. They hide their true feelings behind a façade of objectivity and un-involvement. They come across as clear and clever but inwardly they often feel isolated. They try to master their environment in order to preserve themselves. (Rohr 2001; Heuertz 2017)

The books by Richard Rohr and Christopher Heuertz are very helpful in understanding the characteristics of the different types (see references).

When studying the Enneagram, we might better understand how and why we react in certain ways in certain situations. (Rohr calls this our natural compulsions). In order to grow spiritually and emotionally, and to experience freedom and healing, we need to “act against” those natural compulsions. (Rohr 2001) Henri Nouwen has identified three lies of identity – one for each intelligence centre: **I am what I have** (Head Centre), **I am what I do** (Gut Centre) and **I am what others think I am** (Heart Centre). (Heuertz 2017). We can unconsciously build a significant part of our self-image on these lies. Of course, there are other things too that can influence our sense of who we are which are not addressed in this paper. Acting against our natural compulsions can be interpreted as unmasking those lies and not acting according to them. According to Rohr, our identity lies primarily in our relationship with God who loves us

unconditionally. We do not need to “protect, define or defend” it. (Rohr 2001, p. 27) The Enneagram can help us let go of the need to defend the self-image, that we have created. He says: “It is precisely our gifts that become fatal to us” (p. 27) because “Every gift we get excessively fixated on paradoxically becomes our sin.” E.g. The gift of caring for others (the gift of type Two) becomes fatal if this person builds her identity on it and defines herself by it – “I am what others think of me, and I have to work hard so that everybody sees how caring I am, because only then, they will love me.”

The Enneagram and Contemplative Prayer

Richard Rohr states that the Jesuits have used this tool for their practice of spiritual direction. It is used in “the reading of souls” to help people rediscover who they are in God. He continues: “When used in conjunction with a regular practice of contemplative prayer, the Enneagram can be powerfully transformative.” (Rohr 2016) He also suggests that the Enneagram offers “Practical and specific paths to spiritual formation that are unique to each type”. (Rohr 2001, p. 165)

Through contemplative prayer and practicing ‘Solitude, Silence and Stillness’ we might become more aware, where or when we are still living according to the lies Nouwen talked about. This will then help us to see more clearly who we are in God, which can be interpreted as spiritual growth. It is necessary to understand that it is a lie to believe that I am what I have (Head Centre), what I do (Gut Centre) or what others think or say about me (Heart Centre). The Enneagram can be a very helpful tool to recognize this. According to Metz and Burchill, prayer is an invitation to stand in God’s light, which helps us to see ourselves, others and the world like God does. They say that we might be able to see the things that were hidden before (which are the lies we believe about ourselves) as they compare it with a flash of lightening that lights up a darkened landscape. (Metz & Burchill, 1987)

Engaging in the different prayer postures assigned to each centre might help to become aware and let go of those untruths and compulsions and lead the way to wholeness and spiritual growth.

Prayer Postures assigned to the different Types and Centres

Heart Centred Prayer

Metz and Burchill state that prayer begins when the person becomes truly aware of his/her inner world. (Metz and Burchill 1987). The energy of the heart types, however, draws them to the outer world because of their constant need for approval of others and their addiction to affection and because of their fear of not being loved, seen or understood. (Heuertz 2017) For

this reason, the posture of 'Solitude' is assigned to this centre. Solitude helps people in this triad to lessen the power of the fears of not being loved, seen or understood and hence the addiction to affection and esteem in this centre. (Heuertz, 2017). This is in line with Metz and Burchill when they say that the invitation in prayer for people in this triad is to move "within", to get in touch with their own feelings and experiences without experiencing them through the lens of others. In meditation they need to self-express and to focus on their own angers, worries, joys and fears. Dwelling on spontaneously arising images in conjunction with the healing love of God is often very helpful for persons in this centre. It is beneficial for them to follow their distractions concerning relationships, future and their feelings, because they can lead them to their centre. "The way of unrestraint and spontaneity is key to heart-centred prayer." (Metz & Burchill 1987, p. 68) Practicing Ignatian imagination-meditation is also recommended for people in this centre, because imagining oneself in the story can help bring forth one's true feelings. (Metz & Burchill 1987)

Head Centred Prayer

In Silence, the Head types can become aware that they have enough and that what they have does not define them. They can start to relax from their anxiety around security and survival. Fives can let go of their constant worry about finding solutions, Sixes might be able to let go of their "exaggerated striving for security" (Rohr 2001, p. 134) and Sevens might learn to quieten their compulsion to constantly plan for the future which prevents them from enjoying the present moment. (Heuertz 2007) According to Metz & Burchill, genuine focused meditation is crucial for persons in this center. Focusing on a symbol, like a cross, candle or icon, or drawing one's own mandala can be very helpful. This way the "dispersed self... is collected in the act of gazing" which is an attempt to become one with the external object by seeking to interiorize it or to project one's experience onto it. Praying with a symbol is a "dwelling upon one's own deepest identity mirrored in the symbol that is entered into." (Metz & Burchill 1987, p. 54) Then personal subjectivity tends to fall into quiet peace. This is the reason why gazing helps to find the personal center. It helps to prevent Fives, Sixes and Sevens from going with all the ideas and thoughts that demand attention and remaining uncentered, but instead give one's attention to God only. Auditory repetition of a sacred word or short phrase and giving attention to its meaning can also be helpful. Taizé chants are recommended for this triad as well. The Jesus Prayer can be a source of genuine Silence. Focusing on one word or line of scripture that gets one's attention can help to let go of one's ego's thoughts about God and hence stay centered in God's truth. (Metz & Burchill 1987)

Gut Centered Prayer

For the Gut types 'Stillness' and letting go, coming into God's presence and just sitting, might be an agent to slow down, to accept that they are not what they do and hence help to let go of the compulsion of being in control and having power. For Eights, Stillness is giving consent to "stop

and be present” (Heuertz 2007, p. 203) For Nines engaging Stillness might help to “be intentional about their inner calm ... but to be attentive to the gift of stillness as a discipline” (Heuertz, 2007, p. 204) For type One, Stillness provides the gift of allowing to pause and “to take a break” from their “inner frustrations and resentment” (Heuertz, 2007, p. 204) Through minimizing the use of words, images and thoughts the prayer of Stillness helps to bring one’s inner and outer world together. Because this is the most difficult way of praying, it might be helpful to use one thought or image which will remove other thoughts or images. It is recommended to repeat a chosen word to keep the mind from wandering. If using an image, one could look lovingly on an image of Jesus and return to it whenever distraction occurs. (Metz & Burchill 1987) It is about surrendering the illusion or lie that “the ego is all powerful and can be its own security” (p. 79). According to Metz & Burchill, “through this surrender we grow closer to God” (p.79). One reason for this might be that detachment helps to unmask the lies that tell us they can fulfil our deep desire for holiness and happiness. (Metz & Burchill 1987)

In practicing ‘Solitude, Silence and Stillness,’ God is able to steer our boat into becoming aware of His unconditional love and acceptance of us, while gently unmasking our compulsions and the lies we think we cannot live without.

Relevance to the practice of Spiritual Direction

People often seek spiritual direction because of their desire to improve their prayer life and grow in their relationship with God. For this reason, it is helpful, if not essential, that directors are aware of the processes that happen within our different personalities, and also how the different personality types experience various ways of prayer. When we know those processes and are aware of our directees’ Enneagram Type, we might be able to help them dismantle the lies they believe about themselves and be able to offer help more effectively. If we are familiar with the prayer postures of ‘Solitude Silence and Stillness’ and how they relate to the different types, we have a most helpful tool for our directees to find new ways of praying that might enrich their experience of prayer and lead to spiritual growth and to a deeper relationship with God.

However, as Spiritual Directors we need to be aware that this is only one tool out of many. We need to keep in mind that even though it might be helpful for one person it might not be for another. Like in medicine, there are different treatments for different patients. In spiritual direction we need to be aware that our directees have different backgrounds, needs and desires and hence the tools we use cannot be “one size fits all.”

Conclusion

Contemplative prayer is about listening to God and becoming aware of who we are in God. The Enneagram can help us see our woundedness and how we are trying to cover it up to protect ourselves. If we come into God's presence and show him those wounds, he can comfort us and show us the way to wholeness. 'Solitude, Silence and Stillness' are the postures that can take us into His presence and engage in this kind of prayer. Because the personalities of people are very different, the ways they come to prayer are also different. In looking at the three energy centres of the Enneagram I have shown different ways of engaging with prayer that might be helpful for each triad. For the Heart Centre the suggested method of meditation is Solitude, which leads them "inward" – away from people in order to connect with their own feelings. For the Head Centre the recommended ways lead them "outside themselves" to find their personal centre. Silence is the prayer posture that will be helpful here. For the Gut Centre types, it might be helpful to let go and become still, in order to connect with themselves and God. I also explained practical ways that might help engage with those postures more easily. Being familiar with the Enneagram and how the different ways of praying complement the different personality types can be very helpful in assisting directees with their prayer life and also sometimes with their personal problems.

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