



Contemplative Hands

Part Two

SPIRITUAL UNITY

At the basis of the balance pursued by the monastic style of life lies the principle that the human being is a spiritual unity, that is to say, the fundamental perception that the human being cannot be reduced to thought as opposed to action. The dynamic unity of the two dimensions is understood as both a fact and a duty.

A fact: action shapes the heart and enriches history. The heart gives direction to action and purifies it of the laziness and idolatries of the ego. *A duty:* human action, which is structurally incomplete and symbolic in value, finds its completion in prayer. As can be seen in the last hour of Jesus, human action reaches fulfillment by placing oneself in the much bigger hands of God the Father.

That experience harks back to the unifying function of a basic human feeling that St. Benedict understood as the foundation of the contemplative life and the soul of continual prayer: the *feeling of the presence of God*, prior to any distinction between exterior act and contemplative thought. It is the basis of a type of listening that generates life.

ORA ET LABORA

From the perspective of the Gospel, the feeling of the presence of God (or “the fear of God”) is the horizon in which *ora et labora* germinates. “Leaving self behind” in an act of love is in itself a response of faith that draws God gratuitously to the person (cf. Mt. 25:31-46; Lk. 10:28-37; Jn. 13:1-15). Well then, in St.

Benedict and his perception of the importance of action, the determining factor, even though barely sketched out, is his grasp of the “ecstasy of action.” Pope Paul VI, the “monastic Pope,” intuitively understood this and in one of his unpublished writings on *ora et labora* said:

What remains to be studied is an interesting point concerning the “ecstasy of action.” If charity is the first commandment and love of neighbor the second, it would be hard to exceed or err by devoting oneself to an activity wholly dedicated to the charitable service of the glory of God and the well-being of one’s neighbor. Absolute dedication restores to the soul the unity that exterior activity could cause it to lose.

This figure of the spiritual person is reinforced with the stamp of the experience of Jesus, who incarnates the potential energy of the radical reshaping of the unity of the human spirit: Jesus, the Son: the man of prayer who also worked. In fact, in prayer one lives the experience of *irradiation*, which is confirmed in the story of Benedict recounted by Pope Gregory. A loving dialogue with the Lord—letting ourselves be loved by the One to whom we have surrendered and entrusted ourselves—calls forth from the heart an uncontainable expansion and irradiation of love that leads us to live our daily routine as a natural continuation of prayer, almost as if, were we to remain isolated in prayer, we would implode. In this sense, action and contemplation are not alternatives, nor are they in opposition to each other. The above-cited treatise of Paul VI continues:

Our daily life is the “place” in which prayer expands both our gaze and our hands to touch every situation, loved by God, which we receive from Jesus, his Son, who in his turn receives everything from the Father. Prayer is not a mental operation. It is a fact of the heart, and the heart, if we consider its physiological aspect (the foundation of the symbol) is the organ that makes our blood circulate: it does not keep the blood it receives for itself but spreads it throughout the body. When we notice that prayer is in conflict, in tension, with our daily activities, it means we have not understood it properly and are not living it.

Prayer is a conversation with God that urges us, as a consequence innate to it, to act in the world. It gives meaning to our activity and reveals how precious it is. Daily life is the place in which the full nature of our filial relationship to God is revealed. Jesus lived in continual prayerful union with the Father but, according to the Gospel, it was only occasionally that he withdrew into precious, concentrated moments of solitary prayer. The Gospels show him living and acting in the midst of the people. In his Rule, St. Benedict, who formulated the term *ora et labora*, says that prayer should be “brief and pure.”

THE “STYLE” OF CONTEMPLATION

Contemplation is therefore a style more than it is a dimension opposed to action in the sense that it is the form of every thought, rendering it practical, and the form of every action, rendering it symbolic. It is complete attention in the sense intended by Simone Weil when she said: “[Prayer] is a gaze that is first of all attentive—a gaze by means of which the soul empties itself completely of self so as to welcome into it the Being it is contemplating.” A gaze that admires with amazement and a Gaze that lovingly questions the admirer—the two are inseparable.

But contemplation is also a “style” of action—not that of “bite and flee,” nor of quantity. Instead, it bends protectively over those who count for nothing (cf. 1 Co. 1:28), so as to accompany, raise up, generate and regenerate them.

The ecclesial community and human society in which St. Benedict lived were in many ways similar to those of today’s world. War and the threat of war were giving rise to civil protests and uncertainties about the future, throwing people into turmoil and anguish to the point that they believed life no longer had any meaning. Meanwhile, in the Church, an arduous and prolonged controversy was underway



concerning the divinity of the Son of God and his genuine humanity.

Considering this state of affairs attentively, St. Benedict asked the living tradition of the Church to enlighten him as to which way to follow. He concluded his search with the decision to establish an alternative style of life summarized in the binomial “pray and work,” which can be considered the paradigm of the Christian style of life.

Thus the adjective “contemplative” radically redefines the noun to which it is applied: the vocation to bless God at every moment, in both prayer and work.

I would like to recount here a story from the wisdom literature of Israel, which says that when God was about to create the world the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet formed a circle around him and each one pleaded: “Use me to create the world!” Hoping to be the one chosen, each letter reminded God that it was the first letter of one of his names or of one of his more important gifts. But God in his turn reminded each of them that they also began words that were bad or sinful. And thus the various letters of the alphabet were eliminated, one by one. Finally, he approached the letter B, which begged: “Lord of the world, use me, I beg you, in such a way that all the inhabitants of the earth will use me to praise you: ‘Blessed be the name of the Lord, now and forever!’” The Lord accepted the plea of the letter B, which is why the first word of the Hebrew Bible begins with that letter: “*Bereshit*... In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

This fictional tale reveals a truth that is anything but fictional: the fact that all creation and all human beings find their meaning in blessing God and thanking him at all times, and that through their daily actions they participate in the creative act of grace. This is to adore God in spirit and truth.

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