



# Contemplative Hands

Part 1

## THE BEAUTIFUL WORK OF HUMBLE LOVE



The birth and shaping of the religious life in the West is linked to the figure of a *man of God* from ancient Rome: Benedict of Norcia. In him, the Church

manifests a spiritual synthesis that, in gathering together the “essence of an era,” of a culture that had by that time run its course, already presaged new times by means of the grafting of the Gospel onto Western lands.

Benedict’s fundamental intuition is that being human consists in having a heart that has been humbled through listening to Jesus and keeping one’s gaze fixed passionately on him. From that burning nucleus of a “singleminded” (*monachus*) heart emerges a new person—one who takes action, who bears within him/herself the “climate” characteristic of the martyrs: the beautiful work of humble love. The act of humble love is the foundation of the dynamism of a common life and home, civilization and culture. The rereading of Benedict’s spiritual insight reached the point of condensing it into the extremely summarized phrase *ora et labora* (*pray and work*)—a kind of mantra that has come to identify Benedict and his spiritual tradition—that is to say, a style of contempla-

tion in which total listening to God results in a radiant gaze and hard-working hands that plunge deep into the earth to make the desert bloom.

In the spiritual style matured in a Benedictine monastic environment, the contemplative aspect that is a part of every human being took on the typical features that, down the centuries, spread the Gospel not only in the West but throughout the universal Church. In fact, it led to the definition of “contemplation” in a genuinely Christian sense, placing it alongside the foundation of faith: *Caro cardo salutis* (*the flesh is the hinge of salvation*). Contemplation cannot be separated from “touching with one’s hands” (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1), listening, seeing, savoring, smelling. And this prayer of adoration radiates out, blossoming into good works.

The Christian contemplation experience in Benedictine monastic declension is marked by a view of “the flesh” as something malleable. Monastic life fosters a freedom that laboriously matures in “earthy” conditions because it is a place that, in the name of Jesus, fosters bonds that are trustworthy, fraternal and hospitable. In such a spiritual environment, contemplation challenges and rises above pure intellectual vision and gnosticism and becomes a knowledge of spiritual truths. Through the “nudity of the flesh,” contemplation overturns its many definitions and, in the dark abyss of

the flesh, opens a person to the transcendence of listening.

In Christian contemplation, listening is the fundamental experience that leads to vision. Listening to the written Word gives rise to wisdom and to the relish of contemplating the achievement of impossible deeds. Listening reawakens all a person's spiritual faculties to a new way of sensing, namely: "in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). Isn't it true that Mary of Nazareth, after listening to the Word, saw, savored and sang about impossible things? Contemplation is a kind of listening that immediately gives rise to acts of love.

### CONTEMPLATION: "SEEING BEYOND"

Benedict saw two fundamental and inseparable points of light in the "seeing beyond" that constitutes contemplation (defined literally as: to delineate the space of heaven in which to grasp divine auspices for the future). These two points of light are *prayer* and *work*. *Prayer*: immersion in the horizon of listening to God, who speaks to us—a celebration of the divine mysteries. *Work*: plunging one's hands into the earth and its rhythms, and into relationships that interweave with one another.

To put it another way: it is necessary to humbly listen to every voice because, for the person of God who has been trained to read the Holy Scriptures, "no language is meaningless" (cf. 1 Co. 14:10). And, in close dependence on listening, it is necessary to humbly "take care of God's work" in creation and through human interactions from generation to generation. A humble person is one who, thirsting for God, welcomes him in everyone and everything and responds to him with grateful love. A humble person is a contemplative person.

The ancient view of the human being tended to place *homo cogitans* (*thinking man*)(or *homo orans—praying man*) in opposition to *homo faber* (*working man*)—a contrast that cast a negative light on "exterior" activity. From this perspective of the "dominion" of thinking/praying over activity, work was seen as pure toil—a person's servile subjection to entrepreneurial needs or desires. Apart from the Christian view, it was not seen as an act in which a person seeks the truth about him/herself and strives to adore God (the Gospel understanding of work): "Do this and live" (Lk.

10:37), which is also how work is perceived in the symbolic context of the monastic life.

Augustine—and to an even greater extent Gregory the Great, and with him a whole line of subsequent spiritual thinkers—questioned the relationship between contemplation and action in terms that tended to place the two in conflict (it is enough to recall the Prologue of Augustine's *Dialogues*). Benedict, instead, intuitively grasped things from a new perspective, revealed precisely by the unexpected explosion of the Gospel: a horizon opened by the theological intentionality of action, namely, that nothing is more precious than Christ and the need to manifest him in one's every attitude, action and daily suffering.

In reality, the Benedictine Rule passed into history as the inspirer of a new and dynamic balance between the meditative and practical dimensions of the human soul. Benedict himself had inherited this spiritual wisdom from the Fathers of the desert. If we want to cite them in order of precedence, the first on the list would be Anthony the Hermit. Tormented by the thought that his life was useless, Anthony wept copiously and asked God how he could be saved. According to the story, all of a sudden "someone like himself" (perhaps an angel) appeared to him. (It is important to underscore here the two aspects of this apparition: the fact that it was both similar to Anthony and at the same time different from him.) The apparition prayed, then stopped to weave a mat. Then it once more immersed itself in prayer. It repeated this pattern throughout the day, moving back and forth from prayer to work, the two vital moments alternating in a rhythm that gave a new harmony to life. *Do this and you will be saved*: this was the teaching of the apparition "that was like himself."

This may have been the wellspring of the lifestyle proposed by Benedict, the man of God, but today the question can be raised: how can the monastic principle be adapted to our modern cultural context, with its strong trend toward individualism, and even more to the post-modern context?

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