

**Mónika Krasznay:**  
**THE PLACE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF MYSTICAL REFLECTION AND  
CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IN CHRISTIAN LIFE AND IN TODAY'S PASTORAL-  
THERAPEUTIC PRACTISE**

- **Theological, religion related psychological and pastoral-psychological aspects** -

**1. Contemplation is a gift of grace but requires human efforts and preparations. This direct preparation is contemplative prayer itself.** People cannot achieve or induce the state of contemplation by themselves. It is purely a divine gift of grace which can come from natural or supernatural sources. The former was called by the Catholic dogmatics (in the doctrine of Grace) and spiritual tradition acquired contemplation, the latter contemplation and grace which is „poured into us”. The former is the more common and generic way. One gradually arrives to the union with God (via unitiva) during the course of spiritual development, through acquiring and practising virtues, through self-purging (via purgativa), through simplicity achieved in all areas of life and through the orientation of physical-spiritual-mental energies on God (via illuminativa). In extraordinary, exceptional cases occur, when God speaks to someone directly, purifies the heart, lightens the mind and grants the Grace of unity and direct encounter with Him, through the state of contemplation. (as far as this directness is possible in our earthly life) However in terms of our practise, we can only examine the natural way. In this road during the overcome of ascetic practices, contemplative prayer is the „gate” which can provide the most direct access to contemplation.

**2. Contemplative prayer is more than a technique and method but these also have an important role in it.** Prayer as a human act (actus humanus) can naturally have ways, methods and techniques which relate to physical, mental and spiritual spheres too. These methods are always assistive devices on the way leading to the goal, not the goal itself. These are not only play an important role in the practise of contemplative prayer but in all other types of prayer too, as we explained in detail during the historical outlook of religion. A special importance can be attributed here to posture and to the position of hands, which are not only the matter of Christian prayer. As we can talk about narrower and wider preparations, so can we too make a distinction about methods. Indirect methods are for example the organisation of external conditions (especially important for beginners to create silence outside in order to help with the inner silence) and the meal (it is advisable to fast before prayer). We have presented the significance of posture but more so the breathing, heartbeat

and eye fixation during the discussion of contemplative prayer. We emphasised that these are tools and even the spiritual masters' opinions are not unanimous regarding the importance of these. According to our thesis these can help but we shouldn't stick rigidly to any kind of formula. These exercises are especially important for beginners. Those people, in whom prayers have already been automated or more so pervades their entire life, everyday actions and thoughts, they are able to contemplate under all conditions.

**3. The Christian practise and theory, i.e. ascetic and mystical practices and life cannot be separated.** Ascetics and mysticism, practise and theory can all be distinguished in the practice of all major religions. The practises of faith, maturity of faith and their deepening happens gradually, passing through a fairly well-defined path, the elements of which are inherently the same in different religions. According to a standard classification the main stages of this journey are, purification, illumination and union. Everyone must go through these stages, except in extraordinary cases where a unique advancement happens by grace. The stages of purification and enlightenment, i.e. the first two stages of spiritual life belong to ascetic; since it has a strong emphasis on one's efforts to acquire virtues, good deeds, repentance, cleansing from sin and on the growing pursuit of love (unconditional and general). The union, which part of theory, that is mysticism, already a mere gift of grace. As contemplative prayer methodologically very similar to meditation in the ordinary sense or known from the practise of psychology, people have a tendency to confuse these. The latter, however, is not a prayer in itself, these meditation practices are not identical to contemplative prayer the way we have shown it in our dissertation. Contemplative prayer can not be separated from other elements of the practice of religion. Without one's effort to improve it would be a mere technique, which can be good (can have psychologically positive effects) but not a prayer. As regards to contemplation this is undoubtedly true: we can only talk about transcending or consummation of the level of ascetics but not its avoidance, at the end of which these „tools” became unnecessary. The practise of contemplative prayer does not only presuppose the ascetic way but also helps to transcend that.

**4. Contemplative prayer can be practised by „secular” people not only by monks living in remote solitary but it is not suitable for everyone: it depends among others on the mental constitution, on the progress of faith, on spiritual maturity and last but not least, whether or not one makes it their own.** Even today, the notion is often associated to the practise of contemplation and contemplative prayer, that this is only suitable for monks in remote solitary and otherwise it belongs to the mystical world of outdated and extinct eras. People in modern Western societies, who lead an accelerated, consumer-oriented life receive it with disbelief and consider it almost unimaginable the possibility of regular retreat and creating tranquility in their everyday life. In our thesis, however, we showed that this is indeed possible but demands efforts and surrender. It requires the re-interpretation of those definitions which are rooted in or typical to the (Christian) monastic ascetics and those marking the pursuit of perfection, more precisely, their „translation” into everyday, secular lifestyles. Indeed, it is not easy to break away from the requirements of the fast-paced world and ensure one hour of silence, but it is possible. In the case of contemplative prayer, which is done by chanting (repeating a selected word or short sentence) even the inevitable daily events, such as standing in queues and getting stuck in traffic can be turned into a time of prayer. In our thesis we have presented today’s best-known modern meditation centers and retreat programs, where they have fully developed and made it widely applicable the methods of contemplative prayer, which makes contemplation accessible to non-religious and non-Christian people too. In these centers or retreats, contemplative prayer is carried out in groups –despite the fact that this is an individual prayer- which provides help and support to both seekers and advanced contemplators.

As regards to the conversion of ascetic efforts: for example, surrender, attachment, release of dependence, the pursuit of independence, kenosis, obedience, perseverance etc.. are existing concepts for both married or single people living in today’s world. We can and we should strive to achieve these –not only because of general psycho-hygiene- but in a different way than monks do. After all the „requirements” of Christian life are generally valid and apply to everyone, we don’t profess the so called principle of „double standard” but everyone should adjust these to their own life status. The virtue of chastity for example bears a quite different meaning to a monk, a married man or to a stock broker. Similarly do, surrender and improper adherence, etc.. One of the most important task is, keeping our passions under control and channelling its energies towards the divine, can be achieved by both groups in different ways.

However, it is not certain that contemplative prayer is a viable path for everyone. One reason for this may be the spiritual physique. We know that different people have different

physique, so they prefer prayer types which fit their temper. Another factor is the development of faith. Contemplative prayer is not higher than any other prayer types, but there is no doubt it assumes certain spiritual maturity and achieving certain stages in the development of faith. If, for example, we take Flower's classification as a basis, it is obvious that the undifferentiated faith of infancy, the intuitive-projective faith of early childhood or the mythical-literal faith of the small school children are not suitable for inner prayer exercise. However, the synthetic-conventional faith of early adolescence is much more suitable for this, even though the faith of the adolescent is mostly conformist, yet contains elements of self-identity, which are the preconditions of opinion and independent thinking and can be a breeding ground for contemplative approach (characterised by inner freedom) The interest in contemplative prayer and its regular practise, however, most often noticeable at the following groups: Young adults (individual-reflective faith) mid-life stage, (connecting-deepening faith) and by matured personalities (general - universal faith), which is not necessarily linked to age groups.

**5. The contemplative prayer's effects on consciousness call forth a deep, inner transformation. In fact, in some regards can be therapeutic, preventative or even healing for the physical-mental health.** We've arrived to our most important thesis: to investigate the effects of contemplative prayer on humans. In our essay, we have explained in detail, what kind of changes the practise of contemplative prayer may bring about in one's worldview, attitude and in their relationship to self and towards God. One practises first of all the plain presence with this type of prayer. God is the eternal Now, Who is the absolute presence, Who can be grasped in the present moment. One cannot live only in the present, wandering constantly in the past and the future with his thoughts, cannot break away from the plane of time and what is more his present moment has a time extension and that is time span. As far as it is possible, this prayer tightens this moment of time, hereby making people exempt from the no longer and not yet existing false reality, from the often imagined (already over) or recalled troubles because what you have is real only. Here and now. Namely, practising the presence may heal too.

The other peculiarity of contemplative prayer is the realisation of the difference between the false self and the real self. The false self, I mean the ego (the transpersonal psychology calls it the spiritual self) is considered to be the product of social, religious, cultural etc. conditionings, with whom one mistakenly identifies himself. We have here the unconscious self and one's instincts, in where everything is sinking what society and due to this the ego

„does not allow, what exists and works the same way but on a deeper level. (This, however, is not wholly wrong and not only the repository of destructive powers but the source of vitality and energy.) All of man's problems (for example the fears, negative feelings, destructive life models and response manners, etc.) stem from the fact that it identifies itself with the ego (egocentrism), since the ego is never capable to live in the present, the eternal now: it lives constantly in the past or in the future. Likewise, it is not capable of happiness either. However, the more and the deeper somebody practices contemplative prayer, the clearer he will see that this identification is false. He will see that his self is rooted in a much deeper and a more true reality, ultimately in the divine since every man in was created in God's image and likeness. The ceasing of identifying with the ego is the state of pure existence and pure love. This is called today Enlightenment. The fact that one can fully give himself up to the present and to the living God, and to make himself independent of his swirling thoughts, requires surrender, perseverance and humility and this is the road (Christian) leading to kenosis and surrender. This could result in a behaviour, whereby one can release their wrong affections, in possessive mitigation and in Christian freedom and independence, the aim of which is reliance on God to the fullest. Meanwhile, his worldview becomes increasingly more uniform, will be more and more aware that all is one, his view and conduct are simplified. The false dualism dissolves, the paradoxes become apparent and acceptable. (the desire to finding solution and to dissolution at all costs eases off) The Latin equivalent of religion (re-ligio- to connect, link) shows, that all worship and religious practices should serve interconnection and the vision of unity. The seemingly endless diversity of the sacred and profane dissolves in this sense.

All of these changes in attitudes and consciousness forming effects are naturally and inevitably result in changes in one's relations to self and others and in his social and community activities. As with all prayer, contemplative prayer and prayer method have health promoting, preventive and curative effects, Mint minden imádságnak, furthermore it has a considerable role in developing inner attitude and coping strategies necessary for life's difficulties. However, it helps healthy lifestyle mostly when it does not targets this but directly aims at it. The „target” in this case could be „reached” if people do not want to achieve anything but to release it. Thus, for example,relaxation is not the purpose of contemplative prayer but only its by-product. We cannot functionalise and degrade prayer and praying into a set of techniques but it obviously has aspects like these, and they can be described and examined. (Pastoral psychology not only in relation to religious practise and curative effects of prayers but generally as a principle declare that the religious practise ab ovo not a medicine or medical therapy. Indeed, communities practising contemplative prayer list certain psychic

abnormalities, disturbances and illnesses as an exclusive reason before applying for so-called spiritual retreats.) Based on this, we we may talk about the therapeutic and analytic effects of contemplative prayer. Under therapeutic effects in this case, more narrowly we mean in reference to physical-mental health. From this viewpoint we can describe the well-known psychic-physiological effects of meditation and relaxation.

Spirituality can heal. Mysticism and contemplation are parts of spirituality. Healing here means a „root canal”, that is a treatment of the problems with a dimension, an approach to which psychology (because it is an anthropocentric science by its nature) does not have access to. Under analytical aspects we mean primarily, the profound self-knowledge, the diacrisis (*dictinctio spirituum*) which is so important in the spiritual struggles, that is the ability of differentiation of the thoughts (or its refinement), the mood and through this the acquisition of constructive handling of emotions that affect quality of life (therapeutic distancing) and self reflection.

Silence provides the breeding ground for the therapeutic and analytical function of the contemplative prayer. Silence itself is therapeutic. According to the Eastern Christian (Orthodox) theologians through *hesuchia* (silence) the intellect (energy) is united with the heart (essence) and come in for a partial or more complete knowledge of God, and so restored to the original state of grace before the Fall. *Hesuchia* can be defined, as thoughts or as a science related to heart and senses, which will help people conquer passions and therefore creating a communion with God. According to theologians of the east, health means the differentiation of the thoughts, transformation of the energies of passion and directing it towards the divine, the Enlightenment of the intellect and finally divinisation, which is the gift of mercy. The most appropriate tool for people on this road is the ceaseless Jesus prayer (contemplativ prayer).

**6. The improper practise of contemplative prayer (which is mostly based on the misconstruction of prayer) has its dangers. It will make people too autonomous and turning inwards. It can also lead to the excessive relativisation of laws and socio-religious norms, in extreme cases it can result in their deinal too.** We have made a bigger emphasis in this thesis on the refutation of those criticisms and fears (legitimate or unsubstantiated) regarding contemplative prayer and way of life, because these concerns appear realistic and logical to the sceptical and to those less familiar with these type of prayer. We took these expressed doubts and possible criticisms seriously and responded to them from the most objective perspective possible by respecting their argumentations and feelings. However, as all kinds of prayer and prayer habit and method or all forms of worship have false manners, so does the practise of contemplative prayer and these can be dangerous.

Although we welcome the process how there is a growing demand for the practise of inner prayer, and how the fictional walls increasingly collapse between the very similar contemplative practises and practisers of the single religions concerned, and increasngly more and more people try to acquire this type of prayer, at the same time the danger is rooted in this process, to be more exact in the „commercialisation” of contemplative practices. We did not manage to emphasise it enough that in any religion involved, inner prayer is practised under strict supervision and the leadership of an initiated master of spiritual life, who knows the difference between the unknown things arising on the new roads of contemplative lifestyle, the good one and the bad one, the useful one and useless one and the ones to be kept and the ones to be rejected (possesses the chrisma of differentiation). Humility and obedience, resignation (surrender) and kenosis are the most important attitudes and virtues that accompany and support this road. Only an inch separates freedom and libertinism, inner freedom and autonomy, distancing from problems and neutralism, insensitivity, skipping of laws and exceeding the laws (they both result in lawlessness), but there is a huge difference between these two. On the other hand it cannot be made into a bare (meditation, relaxation) practise. Asceticisim and mysticism, practise and theory are closely linked in all religions. Contemplative prayer cannot be separated from its spiritual context in which it is rooted. A simple meditation-relaxation exercise (which are used in psychotherapy) can have its serious dangers if carried our under the leadership of an inadequate specialist. This kind of danger (what affects the psyche) can arise during the contemplative prayer.

It may be the source of additional danger, if we misinterpret this prayer and for example confuse it with it unexplained phenomenas which are considered mystical, such as trance, exctasy, levitation and other extrasensory perceptions (ESP). We went into details about the

clarification of these. Unfortunately, even today many people identify mysticism with the supernatural, PSI (parapsychological phenomenon, any of several types of events that cannot be accounted for by natural law or knowledge apparently acquired by other than usual sensory abilities.) phenomenon. Such an accompanying phenomena have been observed and recorded in single, very rare cases, but it is not prayer if someone wants to strive for these during the time devoted to prayer. In fact, the spiritual masters warn everybody against aiming for these abilities the most resolutely.

The neglect of the ascetical way, leaving the spiritual leader who is helping us during the travel to the depths of our being, not only have the dangers mentioned above (including psychological injuries), but the autonomy, excessive introversion, which can make us asocial (if only temporary, then of course it is a phenomenon) and in complete denial and disregard of moral laws and standards and also gives us such an indifferent attitude, which mainly a threat to our social relations.