Contemplative prayer branches out from Catholicism to all Christianity

by Michael Miller

Contemplating contemplative prayer can make one cry out for mercy.

The term has consistent connotations among Roman Catholics, who are mainly responsible for the practice's revival in recent years. In that tradition, it's a mystical method of prayer aimed at bringing one closer to God, a practice that is accessible to lay people as well as monastics.

BUILDING INTIMACY - Donna Nelson spends a moment in contemplative prayer at Holy Family Convent. She is one of the members of a prayer group that meets on Saturday mornings. A sign on the door asks those wishing to join the contemplative prayer group at Holy Family Convent in Peoria, Ill., to 'please enter quietly.' CNS Photo by Ron Johnson. PRAYER MEETING - An open Bible and small candle sit on a table in the middle of participants in a contemplative prayer group at Holy Family Convent. CNS Photo by Ron Johnson. Protestants, though, interpret it in a range of ways. It can be anything from conversational prayer to quiet time to "resting" to the same understanding that Catholics have about it.

One common fact across definitions is that it's becoming more popular.

Holy Family Catholic Church and St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Peoria, Ill., have regular contemplative prayer groups at which leaders will help participants hone their skills at getting into the right frame of mind to practice the discipline. Evangelical churches have offered classes on the topic. The Peoria Prayer Center, a six-month-old evangelical ministry, also offers it as one way to engage local Christians in its prayer projects.

While contemplative prayer has been taught over centuries by Catholic mystics like St. Bernard, St. Teresa of Avila and Thomas Merton, its most recent revival came through people like the Rev. Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk, and the Rev. Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest who died in 1996.

Its spread to non-Catholic corners has been spurred by Protestant thinkers like Richard Foster, a Quaker teacher; the Rev. Rick Warren of "Purpose-Driven" fame; and Brennan Manning, a former Catholic priest popular among evangelicals.

"This is really a very old Christian form of prayer which does not use words or active intellectual meditation," said Sister Marianne Burkhard, who leads a class in contemplative prayer at Holy Family Catholic Parish. "It is what is often called the 'receptive form of prayer' which cultivates stillness and interior silence."

The head of the Catholic Diocese of Peoria's tribunal isn't surprised that Protestant interest in contemplative prayer has grown.

"It's really a Christian prayer," she said. "It was developed mostly before the Reformation and it's based on Scripture. You can practice this from whatever denomination you come from. (Protestants) have found that this spirituality coming from the old Catholic tradition or even the newer one is very compatible with their own expression of their own denominational faith."

Rod Drury of the Peoria Prayer Center also said that as an evangelical, he has no problem with utilizing a Catholic practice.

"As I understand history, we all were Catholic at one time," Drury said. "I think the early church does not just belong to them but to all of the Christian faith, the good and the bad."

Burkhard defined contemplative prayer as "the growing and deepening knowledge of God."

"At some point, you realize you're starting to understand faith better or that you get insight into your life or the difficulties of your life, so that contemplation is often something that works slowly in you. At some point, you realize, 'Oh my goodness, I have really learned a lot and see things differently.'"

Contemplative prayer is usually preceded by centering prayer, Burkhard said, a period typically lasting 20 minutes during which the person praying clears away active thinking.

"You try to get away from all your thoughts and emotions and perceptions and images that float constantly through our minds," Burkhard said. "The teaching is that you choose a word which is called the 'sacred word,' which can be something like 'Jesus,' 'Mary,' 'Let go,' 'Listening,' anything that is simple and signifies my intention to be present to God."

The person praying then silently says that word in order to "let these other thoughts go," the sister said.

The spread of contemplative prayer beyond monastery walls, Burkhard said, was one of the desires of Keating when he popularized the practice. Besides lay people of a variety of traditions, the practice has been taught to and used by prisoners and recovering alcoholics.

"I think in a time like ours that is getting ever more hectic, people have a tremendous need for this kind of finding a place interiorly where they can be quiet and find some peace," Burkhard said.

Kent Smith, spiritual formation director for Northwoods Community Church in Peoria, has taught contemplative prayer to Christians trying to become more intimate with God.

"I believe that contemplative prayer focuses upon growing in our intimacy with God as I reflect upon him and his work in my life," Smith said.

Christian believers should naturally have a longing to improve their relationship with the creator, he said.

"We see prayer not so much as getting things from God as it is walking with him and getting to know him," Smith said. Like any good relationship, there should be mutual understanding, respect and love, he said.

The classes aid new Christians who are just starting their prayer life, Smith said. Teachings include freeing oneself from distractions, as well as prayer theory and theology of prayer. Much of that comes from what Jesus taught about prayer, Smith said

The Peoria Prayer Center's Drury offers contemplative prayer as one way to help Christians develop their prayer life. The prayer center sets up shop at a church for a month at a time, Drury said, using core prayer groups, prayer stations and request boards. Drury also offers teachings on prayer topics.

For him, contemplative prayer is "infused with the presence and reality of the Lord."

"It can be done with the use of words, but it's more of a resting," Drury said.

"We have to validate that being in the Lord's presence and enjoying him, just sitting in his presence, abiding in him, encountering the emotions of God, that all of that is biblically founded," Drury said. "We just start walking them through the process (of) praying Scriptures."

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