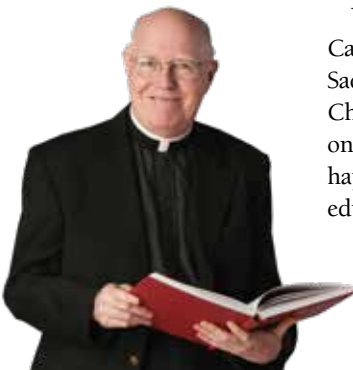


CATHOLIC PRACTICES OF *meditation* AND *contemplative prayer*

DEAR FATHER KERPER: A few years ago, I began studying about prayer. Through my reading, I discovered things like meditation, contemplation and mysticism. I had never heard about these things from priests or my religious education teachers, and so I began exploring. All these things appeal to me and have deepened my relationship with God. Now some Catholic friends have warned me against these practices because of their links with Buddhism and Hinduism. Can a person practice meditation and contemplation and still be Catholic?



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.

Your question arises in the hearts of many younger Catholics who sincerely seek an experience of God. Sad to say, many of these “seekers” drift away from the Church, thinking that “mystical” experiences occur only in Asian religions, never in Catholicism. This happens because most Catholics end their religious education as children and never move beyond the rote memorization of some basic prayers. A vast realm of Catholic spirituality may remain hidden from them. As a result, “seekers” like yourself who search for deeper union with God may suffer disappointment with Catholicism.

This is a double tragedy. First, the Church loses good people like yourself. Second, you

miss out on the Church’s hidden spiritual riches which, in many cases, resemble the practices of Asian religions. This, of course, does not mean that Catholicism and other religions are essentially the same. Not at all. Rather some Christian, Buddhist and Hindu beliefs and practices overlap with one another because all religions have a common origin: the Spirit of God

As Catholics, we firmly believe that God has revealed the essentials of Christian faith in a unique way. But we also admit that God’s Spirit operates freely beyond the visible boundaries of Christianity. As the Lord said to Nicodemus: “The wind [the Spirit] blows where it chooses, and you hear the



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sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” (Jn 3:8)

As such, the Spirit truly penetrates individuals as well as entire cultures and peoples, providing them with some elements of truth and even inspiring them to pray and worship God.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms this by quoting the Fathers of the Vatican Council II:

“All nations form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth, and also because all share a common destiny, namely God.”

Considering humanity’s common origin and destiny, we should not be surprised that different religions develop similar practices, terminology and beliefs. These seemingly “Christian things” within other religions may come from the Spirit as “a preparation for the Gospel and given by him [the Spirit] who enlightens all men that they may have length of life.” (Cf. CCC 844)

Now let’s turn to the three spiritual phenomena that you mentioned: meditation, contemplation and mysticism. All three occur within our faith and in other religions, though with varied meanings and purposes.

“Can a person practice meditation and contemplation and still be Catholic? Yes!”

Father Dubay spent years insisting that all human beings ‘are created for these grandeurs; they are our reason for being.’ He also stressed that these experiences are ‘normal’ and exist among many ordinary Catholics who lack the words to describe them.”

MEDITATION

Meditation has several meanings among Catholics. First, we know it as the act of forming in our imaginations scenes from the Gospels, lives of the saints, and so on. We visualize an event and “pray about it.” This involves applying something of the event to our own lives or even allowing it to suggest prayer for someone else. This happens, for example, when we “meditate” on the Mysteries of the Rosary or the Stations of the Cross.

While “pictorial” meditations have great value, they should gradually move people toward deeper forms of meditative prayer. Two deserve special attention: mental prayer and the prayer of quiet.

The first is conversation with the Lord — friend to friend, child to father, student to teacher, and so on. Just as our conversations build and sustain personal relationships with others, the same applies to the Lord. Imagine a relationship without conversation! Impossible. Many Catholics practice mental prayer perhaps without even knowing the term.

The “prayer of quiet” acts as a transition from standard forms of meditation to contemplation. As the term suggests, this prayer settles a person into prolonged silence. Indeed, on the surface nothing seems to happen. But within the silence God speaks. As various mystics have said, “The first language of God is silence.”

Here some Catholic and Buddhist practices, though not beliefs, overlap. We see Catholicism’s great esteem for Buddhist-like silence through vowed men and



Santa Teresa de Jesús by Alonso del Arco, circa 1700, licensed under CCO

“For prayer is nothing else than being on good terms of friendship with God.” - ST. TERESA OF ÁVILA



“Silence is God’s first language.”

- ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS



“He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”

- ST. ATHANASIUS

women who live in almost complete silence. For Catholics, silence provides the necessary “place” to encounter God; for Buddhists, silence has other worthy purposes.

Please be aware that meditation also has totally secular forms. These may employ religious language and practices, but their ends are therapeutic — relieving stress, lowering blood pressure, improving sleep, and so on.

CONTEMPLATION

Regarding contemplation, we now turn to St. Teresa of Ávila, a very simple Spanish nun who had scant theological education but an ocean of wisdom and correct teaching. She offers two concise definitions. Contemplation, she wrote, “is an intimate sharing between two friends” and “a being alone with the God who loves us.”

Father Thomas Dubay, S.M., a holy and learned expert on St. Teresa, further described contemplation

as “nothing less than a deep love communion with the triune God.” He then added this key point: “Contemplation is dark, that is, without images or concepts of God.” This contemplative “seeing nothing” culminates in *mystical* experience — the *complete union* between the Blessed Trinity and a human person. This seems utterly impossible, and of course it is. However, God can radically *transform* human persons, making them truly “Godlike.”

This possibility of “deification” may seem heretical, even blasphemous, but it deeply pervades the mystical spirituality of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Here is a sampling of ancient theological texts:

From St. Irenaeus: “If the Word was made man, it is so that men may be made gods.”

From St. Symeon the New Theologian: “He who is God by nature converses with those whom he has made gods by grace, as a friend converses with his friends face to face.”

From St. Athanasius, the greatest champion of orthodox faith: “He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”

When speaking of “deification” we always stress that it happens through *adoption*, not by nature. Just as husband and wife “become one flesh,” they remain distinct from one another while also being “one body.” Likewise, human beings raised into a mystical union with God become united but distinct. This unity between God and human beings is the culmination of our existence.

You asked: Can a person practice meditation and contemplation and still be Catholic?

Yes! Father Dubay spent years insisting that all human beings “are created for these grandeurs; they are our reason for being.” He also stressed that these experiences are “normal” and exist among many ordinary Catholics who lack the words to describe them.

Finding these “hidden treasures,” which you have already begun to seek, takes time, effort and openness to the Holy Spirit. ■

TAKE IT FURTHER!

To learn more about meditation and contemplation, please explore these books:

***The Way of Perfection* by St. Teresa of Ávila**

This classic work is simple and direct. St. Teresa, though lacking formal theological education, had a talent for explaining some of the most subtle elements of Christian faith with accuracy and clarity. You can find many editions of this book. I recommend the one published by the Institute for Carmelite Studies, Washington, D.C.

***Fire Within* by Fr. Thomas Dubay, S.M.**

Father Dubay had a deep knowledge of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Ávila. In this book, he wove together the teachings of these two saints with the classical Catholic analysis of spiritual life. This book will tell you everything you need to know about the basics.