

# Contemplative Life Achieves Renewed Attention

By REV.

CHARLES A.E. BRANDT (Yde)

FOLLOWING THE BLACK DEATH and the Hundred Year's War in the fourteenth century the population and the religious life in Europe was decimated. Finally with the Reformation in the sixteenth century prayer came to be compartmentalized, into fixed and rigid categories.

## Post-Reformation opposition to contemplation was the direct opposite of the earlier tradition.

In 1574, Everard Mercurian, Father General of the Jesuits, forbade any form of prayer for the Society of Jesus other than discursive meditation, thinking about God. Many religious congregations founded in the centuries following this period adopted the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. Hence they received the limitations imposed by St. Ignatius' successors.

There were other events that prevented the encouragement of contemplative prayer; such as Quietism and Jansenism. During this period there was the excessive emphasis on private devotions, apparitions and private revelation. Contemplation became more and more suspect and was identified with extraordinary phenomena, it was regarded as miraculous and dangerous. Novices and seminarians were not encouraged to aspire to contemplation. Devout people were up against this negative attitude towards contemplation.

**THIS POST-REFORMATION OPPOSITION** to contemplation was the direct opposite of the earlier tradition. For fifteen centuries the tradition taught that contemplation was the normal evolution of a genuine spiritual life and open

to all Christians. Very simply these historical factors help to explain how the spirituality of the West came to be lost in recent centuries. It was vitally necessary that Vatican II address the problem of spiritual renewal.

Contemplative prayer is receiving renewed attention in our time. One reason for this is that historical and theological studies have rediscovered the teaching

of St. John of the Cross and other masters of the spiritual life. Another is the Post-World War II challenge from the East. Vatican II encourages us to study and appreciate the values that are present in the other great religions of the world.

This summer I visited the women's Benedictine Monastery at Sand Springs, Oklahoma, dedicated to East-West dialogue. The community has been deeply influenced by Dom Bede Griffith, OSB. Completely faithful to the Catholic faith, the community has however adopted certain prayer customs of the East. Again, it is common now in monastic houses that when it comes time for community meditation many of the monks or nuns will retire to a separate prayer room where they will sit together for meditation, practicing centering-prayer.

**IN MANY HOUSES THE** long hours of recitation of the psalms have been abbreviated to allow more time for Christian meditation (contemplation). Rev. Willigis Jaeger, OSB, has been teaching meditation to groups of seculars and religious from all over the US and Canada. They meet regularly in Port-

land, Ore., for an eight-day, nine-hour-a-day contemplative retreat.

Many are aware of the centering prayer teaching emanating from Snowmass through Dom Thomas Keating, OCSO, and from Spencer through Basil Pennington, OCSO. In Canada we have the Montreal Priory founded by Dom John Main, OSB, founded expressly to revitalize and set forth the ancient teaching of Christian Meditation.

To know that Jesus is our way to the Father, that He is the revelation of the Father — this is one thing. To experience the presence of Jesus within us, to experience the power of His Spirit — this is quite another thing.

**IN MEDITATION WE ARE** trying to do something immeasurably more than seeking to think about God, or about His Son, or about the Holy Spirit. We enter into silence. We leave the past and the future behind. We enter into the sacrament of the present moment.

## The very simplicity of meditation is often the greatest problem to would-be meditators.

We seek not just to think about God but to be with Him, to encounter Him through faith as the ground of our being.

John Cassian taught that if we want to pray, to listen, we must become quiet and still by reciting a short verse over and over again. We must enter into the "grand poverty". A thousand years after Cassian, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* recommends the same: "We must pray in the height, depth, length, and breadth of our spirit, not in many words but in a little word."

How do we meditate? In the words of John Main: "Sit down. Sit still and

upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase, 'Maranatha'. Recite it as four syllables of equal length.

**LISTEN TO IT AS** you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything — spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes."

I think we have to come to terms with the basic spiritual being that we are, unless we want to always live on the surface, to live as *de facto* materialists, throwing a little religion in her and there along the line.

The New Testament summons us to live not on the surface but from our own depth of spiritual experience. The very simplicity of meditation is often the

greatest problem to would-be-meditators. But the fruit of meditation can only be tested by starting to meditate: sit, sit still, lower your eyelids, say your holy word, persevere each day.

If you would find your life, you must lose it. Unless the grain of wheat fall into the ground and die it remains alone. But if it dies, it will bring forth much fruit.

*Father Charles Brandt lives in Black Creek, Comox Valley, as a hermit. He is a priest of the Diocese of Victoria.*