Opinion
Guest Voices



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In the wake of a very energetic and consuming midterm election season, and with the rise of anxiety around the manifold threats and promises of artificial intelligence, I have found myself longing for a break, a pause, a renewal. I know I am not alone in this desire, because I also witness this yearning among my students, colleagues and friends. And I also sense this hunger for wholeness virtually everywhere I travel, including this week during speaker presentations and audience discussions at the World Institute for Science, Religion and Culture conference auspiciously titled "Love, Conflict, and an Unfolding Universe."

Founded by Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio about a decade ago, WISR seeks to promote dialogue among science, religion and culture within an evolutionary context, which recognizes that all three of these ostensibly disparate loci are interconnected and need ongoing renewal and development.

In addition to a keynote presentation on the theology of incarnation, the WISR team invited me to lead a workshop on the renowned Trappist monk, spiritual writer and social critic Thomas Merton's understanding of and teachings on contemplation.

After major presentations on hefty topics drawing on the cosmological vision of the French Jesuit and paleontologist Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, and evolutionary biology and technology, participants had the opportunity to attend a 90-minute workshop of their choice midway through the conference. My workshop was intended to be a change of pace, to be sure.

As I prepared for this session, I found myself returning to some of the basics and recalling how essential the pioneering vision and prophetic writing of Merton was in introducing contemporary Christians and other spiritual seekers to practices of contemplation and meditation. Long viewed by everyday Catholics as something reserved for "professional religious" (think monks and nuns in monasteries), contemplation was understood in Merton's time as either something set apart for Christian monastics or seen as an esoteric practice of various "Eastern Traditions" (think Buddhism and Hinduism, for example).

Merton debunked this misguided yet widely held assumption.

Merton published *New Seeds of Contemplation* in 1962. Widely recognized today as a spiritual classic, this book is emblematic of Merton's foundational place within the

contemporary renewal of Christian meditation. It also reflects the invitation to ordinary "people in the pews" specifically to develop their own prayer lives and embrace contemplative practice. *New Seeds* is the significantly revised and expanded edition of his 1949 landmark book *Seeds of Contemplation*, which served as the clarion call to all people that contemplation was as much something for them as it was for the religious elite.

Unlike the pious and devotional literature that was commonplace for lay Catholics before Vatican II, which emphasized rote prayers, novenas and daily mass, Merton's invitation was to develop a new way of seeing the world, ourselves and God. In New Seeds he writes:

> [C]ontemplation is more than a consideration of abstract truths about God, more even than affective meditation on the things we believe. It is awakening, enlightenment and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God's creative and dynamic intervention in our daily life.

Merton challenged his readers not to shy away from pausing, setting aside time to attend to the presence of God always already drawing near to us. Recognizing that most people in the mid-20th century would be unaccustomed to this way of thinking and praying, he said, "the only way to get rid of misconceptions about contemplation is to experience it."

This is something that I wholeheartedly believe. I think more people ought to experience contemplative practices such as centering prayer. It was popularized by the Trappist Fr. Thomas Keating after he was inspired by Merton and the young adults he encountered in the 1960s who hungered for something in their own tradition. Subsequently, this form of contemplation within the Christian tradition has been promoted by the nonprofit organization Contemplative Outreach, which has local chapters around the world of people who practice centering prayer together.

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Also inspired by Merton and the growing number of Christians seeking wisdom about contemplation, the Benedictine monk Fr. John Main founded the World Community for Christian Meditation. Today, the WCCM hosts events around the world, including at its centers in London and at its international retreat center in Bonnevaux, France,

and is led by the Benedictine monk Fr. Laurence Freeman.

Both these organizations strive to make Christian contemplative practices accessible to contemporary spiritual seekers. There are in-person gatherings as well as live virtual meditation sessions that anybody can join. And despite the stereotype that meditation is something one must do alone, the tradition of Christian meditation and centering prayer has always emphasized community.

At a time when we are pulled in every direction by the attention economy, it is incredibly difficult to focus our minds or attune our hearts to the presence of the divine in our lives. It is now, perhaps more than ever, that we can benefit from drawing on the wisdom that centuries of mystics and spiritual teachers have handed on and that guides like Merton, Keating, Main and Cynthia Bourgeault, among others, make accessible for us in our present day.

Rather than approach Christian contemplation with an agenda or as a means to some predetermined benefit (it is certainly not reducible to a "self-help" or "wellness routine" strategy), Merton encourages us to practice letting go of our need to distract ourselves, indulge every fleeting thought or external distraction, and be present to the God who is always already drawing near to us and calls us into deeper relationship.

According to Merton, the drive or desire for this deepening relationship with God is a universal dimension of the human person. He wrote:

> There is in us an instinct for newness, for renewal, for a liberation of creative power. We seek to awaken in ourselves a force which really changes our lives from within. And yet this same instinct tells us that this change is a recovery of that which is deepest, most original, most personal in ourselves. To be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves!

This is the turn from what Merton calls the "false self," that which is anything other than who we are in God's eyes and who we are called to become. The way we come to know our unique and unrepeatable "true self" better is through contemplation because, as Merton explained, "the secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God."

I believe that we need to embrace contemplative practices today because we live in an era of action and distraction, and the technocratic paradigm that reigns supreme today further complicates our vision of reality. So, rather than look to social media, AI chatbots or any other algorithmically driven catalyst of false selves, let us look to God here and now in the silence within. Let us turn away from the flashing lights and the scrolling timelines of our phones and tablets in order to take a daring step toward rediscovery of God through contemplation and open ourselves up to discovering who we truly are in the process.