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## **CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER SESSIONS**

*“DRAW NEAR AND COMMUNICATE IN HOLINESS...”*

In May and June 2019, I offered my church family a few sessions of a “new” kind of Christian prayer practice called Contemplative Prayer. This form of prayer practice is different from our traditional prayers.

Contemplative prayers are prayers with few or no words. In Armenian, we do not use the word *ւղօրք (aghotk)* for this type of prayer practice. We, instead, use the word *խոյնիւն (khogoum)* which means “contemplation” or “thinking thoroughly.” In the English dictionary the definition of “contemplation” is “to look thoughtfully for a long time at.” In the hierarchy of Christian prayer, contemplative prayer is the highest form after vocal prayers and meditation. Meditation helps us to know God, but contemplation helps us to love the person of Jesus Christ as our source of healing, restoration, and salvation. It is the closest spiritual union possible after the ultimate communion with Christ, by receiving His Body and Blood, which is experienced during the Holy *Badarak*.

Meditation is done mostly through our own efforts by focusing on words and images. In contemplation, the work is done mostly by God. To make it clearer, we can use the analogy of a toddler who is trying to climb a staircase to get to his mother upstairs. In the meditation process the toddler reaches his mother mostly by his own efforts. On the other hand, in contemplation, God is doing most of the work. The toddler takes the first step and then lets God do the rest.

The roots of contemplative prayer go as far back as the time of King David. The Psalms 1, 42, and 63 reference invitations of praying in the presence of God. St. Paul the Apostle in his letter to the Ephesians (3:14-21) offers profound expressions of mystical prayer, where he writes about the experience of being elevated in God. The first persecuted Christians during the “red martyrdom” had to look for solitary places and experienced deeper identity and discipleship in Christ. The holy fathers and mothers during the “white martyrdom” preferred life away from society, by becoming the pioneers of those who had to choose the devotional lifestyle that included contemplative prayer. Many individuals entered monasteries to live a life of contemplative prayer, devotion and spiritual reading, especially the practice of the *Lectio Divina* (Divine Reading). The participants were taught to repeat the words of the Bible so that their bodies could enter into the deeper levels of their inner space, as a response to God. The process of reflection, based on the pondering of the sacred texts, was called *meditatio* (meditation). The response, the spontaneous movement of the will to the reflections, was called *oratio* (active prayer). The combination of reflections and acts of will moved to a kind of resting

in God, which generated the word *contemplatio* (Thomas Keating, "Contemplative Prayer in Christian Tradition").

Various traditions and denominational groups practice contemplation as part of their spiritual formation with slightly different approaches and concepts on the entire process of spiritual progress. For the Episcopalians it is a process of deification. The Methodists aim for perfection. The Lutherans – Pietism, for the Holiness Movement it is a call for sanctification. The Eastern Churches believe that it is a process of *theosis* (divinization). Other forms of contemplative prayer are the Centering Prayer and the ancient Jesus Prayer. The Centering Prayer is practiced by focusing on a sacred word (such as "Beloved," "Lord," "Come," and "Jesus") that provides a structure to always return to God's presence. The Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner") is very similar to the Centering Prayer that empowers a long and loving time with the Lord.

One of the intentions of the contemplative and communal prayer sessions is to engage the participants in another spiritually constructive process, namely the Spiritual Conversation. Spiritual Conversation is practiced in groups in order to help each participant discern God's call in their life and how to answer this call. Spiritual Conversation has been present in different ways in the Christian tradition. The main purpose of this form of communal contemplation prayer is to draw near God and to unite the soul more closely with the Lord by experiencing the true presence of Him. It is not only a union with God, but also of the mind, heart, and intellect. It is a submission of the will with the Creator. It is also a helpful tool to experience the unity among people, as Church - the mystical Body of Christ. Through the feelings of peace, joy, happiness, and great delight, the soul desires to will only what God wills and desires. In other words, the fulfillment of God's Commandments becomes realized through the fulfillment of God's Will by the submission of our will to His. The contemplative actions bring us into Christ's presence and adjust us to His Will, which means to be extraordinarily free, happy, and even fulfilled in the midst of the corrupted world.