

Living Centered: Putting on the Mind of Christ

*To be full of things is to be empty of God. To be empty of things is to be full of God.
- Meister Eckhart*

Introduction

It is now customary to say something about how one came to give this talk. In Kerwyn's case it was probably revelation in my case evasion and filler. So I too got the year end email followed by - what about a meeting at 5:30am no less! As every Trini knows - the Lord does not sleep; well neither apparently do Sister Paul and Peter! Like Kerwyn I resisted; he seemed to know why he resisted. I just resisted. He seemed to think that victory could be won; I never entertained such foolishness.

Sister Paul tried her best not to have a last minute rush. In that she did not succeed. My talk was mostly re-written in places like the Grantley Adams departure lounge between flights, as I had to be held captive after all. More fulsomely as I will share shortly I have been trying to get the talk to write itself for nine months.

Apparently I am supposed to be talking about Spirituality in the Here and Now: How I translate my Centering into life, love and service. At one level I do not know. Not that I am going about my life in a completely aimless fashion; it is that some things are harder to face and say. At another level it is that I am not so confident that I can explain myself in that way. For one, I find it embarrassing; for another there are other things gnawing at me and I would rather talk about them and ask you to pray for me. But that is to evade too. So at a deeper level I do know and I know with a quiet inner certainty.

Nothing in Mind

I have experienced forgetfulness throughout my whole life. I cannot remember my early life - before I was five going on six. I woke up in the middle of my early childhood. I do not know how I got there and I have never asked. I was about six years old and I am looking down the stairs and I am told the woman at the door is my Mum. But I try to remember her, to bring her image up from the recesses of my young mind before that, and I cannot. But I do remember the family with whom my twin brother and I lived while Mother was in Jamaica nursing my very ill grandmother. How long she was gone I cannot remember. Even now I cannot access the memory that I assume is there. The absence of memory must mean that I forgot and presumably forgot for a reason or reasons that elude me.

Two weeks ago I subjected myself to twenty questions to see how many I would get right. I think I got about 16 out of 20 – sounds good. The only problem was that if you got more than three correct then you confirm the diagnosis of being a workaholic. I am a do-aholic; it is not just work; I just seem to want to add to my burdens. I am on this Committee, that Board and I fly off here and there – at least half of it is not work at all.

Several months ago a friend of mine who has just migrated was trying to counsel me to learn to draw a line in the sand and learn to say no! That, of course, really means no to work but yes to Sister! He is one of several who have said the same thing. I have since that chat tried half heartedly and failed to put that advice into practice. But I **heard** his advice for the first time. The question is why did I hear just then and not before? And why have I not taken the next step and put that resolve into action?

The stress of the life lived out of balance means there is no room in my head. I used to teach at UWI and it was a standing joke among students of mine that I never learnt their names. Leona no longer gets upset that I cannot recall specific moments in our courtship and when I retell the details I generally get the place and the time wrong. I constantly call my three daughters by the name of the other sister even when they are standing right in front of me. My forgetfulness is such that I cannot recall names of people I have met or know reasonably well. I have to learn them over and over again.

This may be why I like the idea that it is okay to forget and it is okay to be reminded. And why I cannot get upset with those who lose their faculties as they get older. I think too that God is constantly telling us not to forget we are loved, in the sense of willing to say and show it every day, and at the same time He wants us to say forget about our sins and transgressions that weigh us down long after we have sought and got forgiveness.

My experience of my deep personal amnesia is not the same with God. I have no experience of not believing in God but like every believer I have experienced crises of faith. In those moments (and they may last months), I realize afterwards, that I have simply forgotten that I am a child of the Universe. In those moments I have trouble remembering and living with the sense of God's love as part of the fabric of my life. This is my ordinary awareness. I am not present to God in me and in you.

At the end of Lord of the Rings – Frodo accepts that the wound inflicted by the Morgul blade will never heal. At times I too think I will never heal from the pain of early life or the self inflicted pain of not saying no!! I would love to say Centering Prayer practice has helped or allowed me to let go of it all. I would love to say that I no longer suppress it which is what I have done for the first forty seven years. You see the

forgetting is just that – self preservation. I am not now free of my history nor do I want to be; I am free to face my history - that's enough. And I am free to choose to have a different history. In my best moments what I do and see are not the same. They look different because they are different in that they matter less. I am less attached to outcomes and less attached to imposing my will upon my world: my desires. In my best moments I feel lighter and freer.

What I had no words for, until my encounter with Centering Prayer, was the experience of an Inner Observer that was not part of the amnesia but part of the remembering. The way I remembered was by seeing myself like a person watching a play. It is the means by which I disengaged - not consciously. This self awareness is how I watched the world through myself. This Inner Observer sense of me is probably how I got here on this journey ... literally how I get here. Many times since Centering I have returned to an inner "I" that I thought I said goodbye to in childhood. The inner me affects whether I let my feelings run away from me, or whether instead I turn away from my feelings, let them run their course without careening pell mell along with them. I connect that inner me with my thoughts and my actions untethered to my reactions. Mind you this is at the best of times.

The Mind of Christ as Heart

Lord I am not worthy to receive you only say the word and I shall be healed. These words from the Mass echo those spoken by the Roman Centurion who comes to Christ to ask Him to heal his servant. The theology of the Cross is that our woundedness is taken up and over by Jesus; our part is simply to enter into that life. That Roman Centurion had the Mind of Christ; the people of Nazareth did not. The Centurion knew or understood deep within himself that all Jesus had to do was give the command and his servant would be healed. We are not in the same place as that

Centurion. We are too often trapped by the spectre of scarcity; our eyes dart to our neighbour's good fortune or we relish the fall of those we think deserve to fall. But the Centurion saw abundance and that grace of abundance spoke his request, not for himself but, for his slave and servant whom he loved. In the language of Shadow he saw gold and goodness in his slave as he saw it in Jesus.

How did the Centurion get there? How do we - Put on the Mind of Christ? This is the same question that Jim Marion addresses in his book of the same title. Marion is clear that the Kingdom of God is within; that the Lord resides in the very heart of all of us. Our trouble is that we seem to have forgotten that. I struggled with his response which seems to confine the in-dwelling Kingdom of God to a matter of consciousness – unitive consciousness - in the scheme of Ken Wilber. While the Wilber/Marion schema does not work for me what does work is that the Kingdom of God is here and now and within. That God is one within and with us and we are one with each other.

For me Putting on the Mind of Christ, is less a mental thing than one of heart. But the sense in which I use heart is not just in terms of Wisdom Teaching as Cynthia Bourgeault explains it. I chose the word 'heart' because of the importance to the contemplative life of not living in the head. So that I want to make it abundantly clear that the Mind of Christ is not what we Westerners call intellect. So Putting on the Mind of Christ is a misnomer because it is really my heart and yours that have already changed by the persistent practice of Centering Prayer or Lectio or any way in which we permit regular encounters with God; just sticking it out and not giving in has changed and will change our hearts. It is much broader and bigger than that. Mind means the whole of you: mind means heart and your heart has mind. To see with the Mind of Christ is to see others and yourself with a different lens, a lens that is drawn to goodness and generosity; that sees gold in dross in every one and everywhere. It is not just the insight into character or situation that comes from intuition, experience, or

training or even from prayer. It is from within each of you and its source is the presence of the Lord in every living person with whom you come into contact.

Throughout his letters to us Paul tells us over and over how to have the Mind of Christ. But we cannot hear his full message yet. It is a matter of trusting ourselves to the Lord. To do that we have to give up our projects and plans and we have to get out of God's way.

Listen to this very well known tele-evangelist Joyce Meyer in her talk **WHERE the Mind Goes, the Man Follows:**

... I am convinced that one of the greatest areas in which we need help is the area of our thinking. No matter how many messages you and I hear about the mind, we can always benefit from hearing another one. I believe that where the mind goes, the man follows.

As we endeavour to line up our thinking with God's Word, right words and right actions will follow. Ephesians 4:22–24 says, Strip yourselves of your former nature and put on the new nature ...

In order to get rid of our old ways and put on the new nature of righteousness and holiness, you and I need to constantly renew our minds with the truth of God's Word. I used to be a very negative person, so it took daily determination for me to reprogram my thinking. But now that it's done, God's positive perspective is almost automatic.

*I challenge you to get into God's Word and see what He says about you and your situations. Think about what you are thinking about on a regular basis. ... My thinking is never going to change. Instead, get into agreement with God. ...*¹

But there are two Scripture passages that Joyce Meyer referred to that add another dimension to the valuable things she has to say but she does not say any more about.

These two Scripture quotations are:

Jesus said in Luke 6:45 *...out of the abundance (overflow) of the heart his mouth speaks.*

And in Proverbs 23:7 the Bible says, *as he [a man] thinks in his heart, so is he...*

And then Joyce Meyer comments, *"In both of these scriptures, the word heart refers to the mind."* But do note that Joyce Meyer is telling everyone that Scripture is about our lives and our situations - those are the moral and allegorical levels of Lectio Divina.

¹ Romans 12:2

- 2 Corinthians 2:11
- 2 Corinthians 10:4,5
- Ephesians 4:22–24, 27
- Philippians 4:8

That takes us back to St. Paul and to what he is really saying about mind and heart. In his letter to the Ephesians 4:17-19 he writes:

*"So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer **live** as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their **thinking**. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their **hearts**. Having lost all **sensitivity**, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*

Cynthia Bourgeault says heart is

"... the capacity to be fully engaged at every level of one's being: alive and simultaneously present to both God and the situation at hand."²

She later calls the heart "...an organ of spiritual perception..."³

Bourgeault's definition has a lot in it. We all think we know the theology of it so too often we skip it. That is part of the problem; at least it's my problem. We grow into adulthood or try to; racing ahead with our lives with very little knowledge of God: Knowledge of God has two senses: we do not know too much about God and we do not know God very well. Not knowing God - too little prayer – means we are less alive to the God within us and others and to the present moment.

² Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening p117

³ The Wisdom Jesus page 35.

It is all there in Bourgeault's words – sharing in the Intimacy of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To use a metaphor that you have to be a certain age to understand - A divine slow dance with non-stop music.

Seeing with the mind of Christ

But where do we find the Mind of Christ? How do we know what it is? How do we perceive as the Centurion did? What speaks to me and, by that phrase, what helps keep me from going over the edge, are the twin practices of *Lectio* and *Centering*. *Lectio* in the Michel de Verteuil tradition is about letting the stories of Scripture speak to our heart and soul and not just our minds. Fr. Keating too, often retells the classic parables in such a way that they can resonate. Cynthia Bourgeault does the same.

The Word of Scripture – for these spiritual masters - shapes the organ of spiritual perception; enables us to see light in the shadows within and without. Too often we are beset with our dark imaginings. *Lectio* is really God recalling and retelling His Story and our stories and *Centering* is forgetting, so that we can do it all over again. When we do not "*get*" the parable we can get frustrated and feel put off. In other words we give up and we should not. One response to this false dead end is to start with our own story – our memory of how we got here.

I cannot listen to the account in Scripture of the Disciples and the Women going to the Tomb to find it empty without reliving a certain memory. In John's account Mary of Magdala sees the stone has been rolled away. Simon Peter and John run to the tomb on hearing this news. John sprints there and gets there before John. John is not brave enough to go in but Peter is. John follows. "*...Till this moment they had failed to understand the teaching of Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.*"

When my friend and professional mentor died in 1998, it was my first experience of grief for a non-family member. Ewart was - an avowed atheist or at least agnostic - and said once that I did not seem to know too much about my faith; it was just convention. Anyway within days of death and funeral a mutual friend told me of a dream that she had had about him. He appeared to her in the dream and said one phrase - more than once with obvious surprise - I am alive!!! The tomb was empty. I could hear Ewart's surprise in my friend's account of her dream. When I first heard the story, it was then I understood that this is not all there is; that there is life after this.

"I am alive."

On 31 January this year I read Luke's Gospel account of Jesus reading in the Synagogue from Isaiah the passage, *"The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me..."* Jesus then tells the people of Nazareth. *"...this text is being fulfilled today even as you listen..."* They are struck by his gracious words and then they remember that he is the son of the carpenter, Joseph, and call upon him to heal and perform miracles. He responds by saying that no prophet is ever accepted in his own country, which gets them vexed. The people of Nazareth were *"enraged ..."* by Jesus' success. Fr. Michel says simply that this is a moment of grace for Nazareth.

One of my lasting moments of grace is the grace of Fr. Michel preaching a sermon on this text. I have no idea what his message was. Like Jesus, I think he is a prophet overlooked in his own country. But his distinctive timbre of voice repeating the phrase - "this text is being fulfilled today even as you listen." Just the sound of his voice uttering these words has never left me.

The passage helps me "... to face the truth about myself." Another grace is acceptance: a reminder that "success" and "failure" are in Kipling's words "two imposters to be treated just the same. . ."

Another is Luke's account of Jesus teaching at the Lake of Gennesaret and Peter and his companions have been fishing all night. Jesus tells Peter, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." Peter replies, "*Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets.*"

So I am reading this just after my first new year early morning session with Sr. Paul and Peter. They are asking me to move from head to heart. I want to say to them – do you not realize how tired I am. I am trying to get out obligations and anyway I am just another sinner. Now be clear what Jesus was asking Peter to fish for - the hearts and souls of men. So here was my command – for me to give up on what I think of as important – to leave my boats of exhaustion and inconvenience - both inner and outer behind and do so happily and cheerfully and to go out into the deep - be not afraid - trust the Lord. Peter was overwhelmed as I was then and now; Jesus asked Peter to trust himself to him; Peter and Paul were asking me to trust myself to the Lord and to Peter and Paul and to you all. In my case trust simply means putting aside the fear of being hurt.

Guava Season in my Mind

For the first time since I started Centering Prayer this year's Lent and Easter were one long hard dry season. I just shrivelled up; I usually get something out of it. I usually feel better but no such consolation this time. I could not understand it; I felt awful and it felt awful. Is this what I get for Centering?

In the Gospel reading for this year's First Sunday of Lent – Luke tells the story of the temptation of Jesus. Fr. Michel de Verteuil says that the real temptation was for Jesus not to trust the Father. As for me I thought I was a grown man – way past all of this. Do I really need all of this. Is not what I do enough? I mean how much more praying can I do? But I can spend as long as I want on my knees; if my cup is not emptied and my heart open, it is all to no avail. So I get to middle adulthood only to undo all the effort of getting here: not self-reliance but trust in the father is needed. Not to worry about everything; the Lord will provide – both to say it and to mean it.

So one question is, what difference has Centering Prayer made to my life. The truth is that in some ways my life is harder: hurts more. I fall in love with my friends and then get hurt - the men as much as the women. The strange thing is that it is getting harder and harder to stay hurt and to stay angry and to stay disappointed. I just cannot pull it off the way I used to.

This sense of an inner dry season abates a little only to return with renewed vengeance. This inner dry season feels as though God is disapproving of my mid forties' preoccupation with career and preferment and control. That is the expected mid life crisis, by which I mean expected for others to go through, but not me. It is not so much a crisis as a sustained sense of being caught in a long anguished night without the certainty of the dawn. I feel that I would not recognize Christ if I saw him; that I would deny him like Peter rubbing his hands near the fire in the high priest's courtyard.

To see with the Lord's Mind letting your mind go dark

One of my children has lost their faith. I am hurt and angry and I have been hurting those around me. What did I do wrong? Have I been so pre-occupied with getting on that I have lost one of my sheep?

Without trying to categorise and say where I am ... I want to tell you one thing very clearly, prayer hurts. Or more accurately, it does not hurt to do it; it allows me to hurt and be hurt. It does not allow you to hurt others – at least not for long. The words that come with all prayer are - I am sorry. Every adult has to face the crises that constitute living and dying; the ordinary grief that comes with loss. All of which might be summed up in that we are not in charge.

Thomas Merton uncompromisingly sets out what meditation requires:

"To learn to meditate then means to gradually get free from habitual hardness of heart, torpor and grossness of mind, due to arrogance and non-acceptance of simple reality or resistance to the concrete demands of God's Will."⁴

Merton tell us that when we meditate we can be deprived of the light and consolation we seek; that our **own** efforts can be impeded. We can feel confused when we are deprived of our satisfactions. Thus our own projects are thwarted and our own wishes, self-esteem, presumption, aggression, are systematically humiliated.⁵ I am not the Shepherd; the Lord is. I am an assistant to the assistant. To "let go" is hard. To let God is hard. But to do so is instantly to see with fresh eyes those who have gone this

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way and survived. It is to know that all must find their way as I am doing, that other paths are not meant for you; they are meant for others. That each of us has to endure a dry season or seasons within and so “.....*face the terrible experience of being apparently without faith in order to really grow in faith.*”

St. John of the Cross makes it plain that there is pain, the pain of the soul being assailed by the Divine Light. Because when this pure light assails the soul, in order to expel its impurity the soul feels itself to be so impure and miserable that it believes God to be against him.⁶ This deep dread and night of purification is for proficient.

Mother Theresa⁷ lived in such a state for many years. She was very advanced - what St John would have called a proficient. Her inner dry season bore many rich and abundant harvests. It was a night of spirit not of sense:

Now Father—since 49 or 50 this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continual longing for God—which gives me that pain deep down in my heart.—Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason.—The place of God in my soul is blank.—There is no God in me.—When the pain of longing is so great—I just long and long for God—and then it is that I feel—He does not want me—He is not there.—Heaven—souls why these are just words—which mean nothing to me.—My very life seems so contradictory. I help souls—to go where?—Why all this? Where is the soul in my very being? God does not want me.—Sometimes—I just hear my own heart cry out—“My God” and nothing else comes.—The torture and pain I can’t explain.—From my childhood I have had a most tender love for Jesus in the

⁶ St. John of the Cross Dark Night of the Soul II V 5 T

⁷ THE PRIVATE WRITINGS OF THE 'SAINT OF CALCUTTA'

Blessed Sacrament—but this too has gone.—I feel nothing before Jesus—and yet I would not miss Holy com. [Communion] for anything.

You see, Father, the contradiction in my life. ... Before I could spend hours before Our Lord—loving Him—talking to Him—and now—not even meditation goes properly—nothing but "My God"—even that sometimes does not come.—Yet deep down somewhere in my heart that longing for God keeps breaking though the darkness. When outside—in the work—or meeting people—there is a presence—of somebody living very close—in very me.—I don't know what this is—but very often even every day—that love in me for God grows more real.—I find myself telling Jesus unconsciously most strange tokens of love.—

Here Mother Theresa had not only taken on the mind of Christ she was participating in his Passion. For us mere mortals the Lord meets us where we are and invites to go as far as we can.

Merton makes it plain that only when the Christian participates to some degree in the dread, the sense of loss, the anguish, the dereliction and the destitution of the Crucified, can he really enter into the Mystery of the Liturgy....⁸ It is when our desires are obscured, our affections arid and constrained and our faculties bereft of their capacity for any interior exercise, God is freeing us from ourselves and taking the work from our hands.

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Prayer transforms our vision of the world and makes us see the world and the men and women in it and their stories – the whole of history in the light of God. That only happens when we and our plans are not in God’s way.

Merton reminds us that real contemplatives will always be rare and few, that does not matter; what does is that the community of faith - all of you - is predominantly contemplative in its teachings, activity and prayer. Then action and contemplation are not in conflict when action is our charity. For this prayer must be deep and powerful and filled with the spirit of contemplation. This is the lesson of Mary and Martha. It is also the lesson of Mother Teresa who devised a rigorous programme of prayer and spiritual development for her sisters. In many of his books Fr. Keating explains that the story of Mary and Martha has been the basis for distinguishing two evangelical lifestyles, the contemplative and the active. I think it is more important that you remember how much Jesus loved this family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus from Bethany.

He explains:

"What Jesus disapproves of in Martha's behavior is not her good works, of which he was about to be the beneficiary, but her motive in doing them. The quality of one's service does not come from the activity itself, but from the purity of one's intention. The single eye of the Gospel is the eye of love, which is the desire to please God in all our actions, whatever these may be. Jesus' defense of Mary, who was sitting at his feet, is not an excuse for lazy folks to avoid the chores. But neither is it a motive for those who are working hard to get annoyed if those engaged in a contemplative lifestyle do not come forth to help them.

The story is a parable about the quality of Christian life, about growing in it, and about the necessity of the contemplative dimension of the Gospel as the means of doing so. When Jesus tells Martha that Mary had chosen the good portion, he is telling Martha that she needs to find a place in her life for this contemplative quality, and that this perspective would make her good actions better. He is also warning Mary that there is something even better than the good portion. This is the union of contemplation and action.

This parable encourages us to seek the integration of action and prayer. This time of contemplative prayer is the place of encounter between the creative vision of union with Christ and its incarnation in daily life. Without this daily confrontation, the contemplative vision can stagnate into a privatized game of perfectionism or succumb to the subtle poison of seeking one's own satisfaction in prayer. On the other hand, without the contemplative vision, daily renewed in contemplative prayer, action can become self-centered and forgetful of God. The contemplative dimension guarantees the union of Martha and Mary.

Mother Teresa worked to the point of exhaustion; she prayed until it hurt. She did not give up or give in. She just reminded herself why she was doing it and who she was doing it for.

Remind your Mind so your Heart can See

Deep calls unto deep. You get reminders along the way - in a song at a funeral, in a sermon, in a story of a stranger's courage, in the face of outrage; in the stories of others whom we have known or in stories that we read or watched on film. God is constantly trying to get us to remember.

Fr. Keating has a couple of sentences in *Mystery of Christ* that the Tuesday group were grappling with recently. The passage focuses on the death of Jesus as the Paschal Mystery unfolds. After contrasting scriptural innocence with rational consciousness, he writes *"...there is a sense in which we have **known** God before."* In other words we already have the mind of Christ, *"This sense comes from the ontological unconscious, which is God **remembering** himself in us, so to speak. We have a deep seated intuition that some indispensable relationship essential for our well being and happiness is missing. The spiritual journey is a way of **remembering** our Source...Easter is the awakening of divine life in us. "Christ is risen" is the cry of all the people of God throughout the centuries who have realized Christ rising in them, not only in the form of emotional enthusiasm, but in the form of unshakeable conviction..."*

The Umpteen Principles of the Prayer of Quiet

*In Contemplative Prayer*⁹ the other Thomas, Merton not Keating, writes a number of helpful things:

1. *Prayer is drawn from Scripture: the Word of God;*¹⁰

⁹ 1973 London

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2. *Invoke the name of Lord in your heart – the very centre of your being: "O lord come to my aid."*
3. *The way of prayer brings you face to face with the false self*
4. *It is prayer of silence;*
5. *The movement in meditation is Paschal;*
6. *Good intentions are not a substitute for spiritual direction and the humility to accept it: we are all and always beginners;*
7. *Meditation is rooted in life, not escape. Life involves discouragement, confusion and helplessness. The response of prayer is faith and hope- Romans 8; 26-27.*
8. *God darkens the mind in order to give a more perfect light: the dark night rectifies our deepest intentions.*
9. *To pass from meditation to contemplation- sheer receptivity with passive, loving attention.*
10. *The purpose of meditation is enabling the surrender of the mind and heart to the supernatural action and presence of God.*
11. *By meditation we come into direct contact with the source of all joy and life and recognize our nothingness and helplessness in God's presence and are not fooled by the mask and fabrication of the false self.*
12. *Meditation daily struggles with paradox.¹¹*
13. *Prayer and sacrifice work together and they are easier to evaluate in others, once aware of this we no longer try to assess ourselves.*
14. *The aim of meditation is to come to know God through the realization that our very being is penetrated with his knowledge and love for us.*
15. *Contemplation is the summit of the Life of Prayer.*

¹¹ St. Paul to 2 Corinthians 6:6-10.

"People are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.
If you are honest, people may cheat you. Be honest anyway.
If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough. Give your best anyway.
For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."
— [Mother Teresa](#)

16. The whole mystery of simple contemplative prayer is a mystery of divine love, personal vocation and of free gift.

17. It is love for love's sake; sharing in the charity of God.

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