



Margaret R. Brennan, IHM

# Light Burdens, Heavy Blessings

Challenges of Church and Culture  
in the Post Vatican II Era

*Essays in Honor of*  
*Margaret R. Brennan, IHM*

Edited by  
Mary Heather MacKinnon, SSND,  
Moni McIntyre, Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM



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# The Desire for God *and the* Transformative Power of Contemplation

Constance FitzGerald, OCD





## INTRODUCTION

All around us today we see a passion to touch the roots of contemplation or mysticism in our history as a people, to hear a muted desire that has existed often only as a subterranean force and to bring it above ground into the public forum in order to understand its power for transformation in our post-modern world.<sup>1</sup> Even if it is unrecognized and therefore uninterpreted, the desire for God is apparent everywhere in so many different forms. If we are able to reclaim this muted desire that runs through our history and make available centuries of contemplative tradition, Carmelite in this case, the dominant paradigms of this tradition may offer some guidance to our nation, North America, the Western world, called as it is by history and so-called "development" to a contemplative time, challenged to mature beyond being first, beyond being the Center of the world. I often feel that only if we are prepared for transformation by contemplation<sup>2</sup> and thereby given a new kind of consciousness and imagination will humanity and the earth, with its various eco-systems, survive.

What the Carmelite contemplative tradition reveals is women and men searching for God, desiring God together. Contemplation cannot be understood except within the context of desire, that is, divine desire coming to meet human desire and igniting in human hearts an

<sup>1</sup> The ideas in this essay were first presented in the keynote address at *Carmel 200: Contemplation and the Rediscovery of the American Soul*, held at Loyola College, Baltimore, August 12-18, 1990, to celebrate the bicentennial of Baltimore Carmel and Carmel in the U.S. This symposium was seen as an enterprise of imagination. It sought to retrieve the personal, relational, and social past of the desire for God, particularly in the 800 year old Carmelite tradition, in order to bring the too often marginalized mystical tradition into conversation with our present reality as North Americans and write a new "text" indicative of the future horizons of contemplation.

<sup>2</sup> Contemplation has various meanings. In the Carmelite tradition it is understood as a love experience which is also a deep knowing. Hence, John of the

unquenchable desire. Those we today call mystics have always upheld the primacy of desire. Their writings are suffused with desire. They know we are propelled by our insatiable desire and keep trying to tell us religion is a message of desire and a hope of its fulfillment. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross in their classic works tell the story of human desire and delineate how it grows, is educated and purified, and finally, transformed within the life journey itself. Together, woman and man bear witness to the agony and ecstasy of burning desire. This is why after four centuries their writings still educate us to contemplation.

If the contemplative voice is ever really heard again in theology and the official Church, as it was before the importance given to religious experience gradually separated the patristic theology as found in the monasteries from the theology of the schools, then the primacy of rationality will, according to Brazilian theologian, Maria Clara Bingemer, have to yield a place to "the impulse [passion] of desire that dwells at the deepest level of existence..." Bingemer accents the place desire must have:

Theology, which seeks to be reflection and talk about God... cannot but be moved and permeated throughout its whole extent by the flame of desire. At a particular point in its theological articulation, reason, science and systematic rigor have their role..., but they can never suffocate the greater desire, never tame the divine pathos, which, from all eternity, has broken silence and become a loving and calling word, kindling in its turn in the hearts of humankind an irresistible and insatiable desire... Born of desire, theology exists as theology only if it is upheld and supported by desire, in the direction of the desire that is its goal and its horizon.

Bingemer maintains, furthermore, that the future of women doing theology is inseparably linked with desire:

A woman finds it unthinkable to divide her own being into watertight compartments and treat theological work as a purely rational activity. Moved by desire, a totalizing force, she does theology

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Cross speaks of a secret, loving knowledge or the loving inflow of God or dark contemplation or dark night. When John says the dark night is an inflow of God, this inflow is very precisely in terms of secret Wisdom, who is Jesus Christ.

with her body, her heart and hands, as much as with her head, and the ripe fruit she begins to make available is the result of slow and patient pondering of experiences lived deeply and intensely [in dialogue with the tradition]... When we talk about desire we are talking about human beings at their deepest level, in their deepest and ultimate truth, in their vital force, and therefore in their most authentic and legitimate aspirations. We are talking about what makes our bodies quiver and tremble with pleasure, about our noble and threatened vulnerability, our greatness, which depends on our fragility...<sup>3</sup>

Bingemer concludes by suggesting that the challenge to women doing theology today is to restore the primacy of desire within theological discourse,<sup>4</sup> and her challenge suggests a threefold intersection of contemporary feminist theology, the effort to reclaim and reinterpret the mystics, and the experience of the desire for God that pervades this country often unbidden and unseen.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Clara Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro ed., *The Future of Liberation Theology, Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 478-79.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Brennan is an example of a woman theologian who has understood this challenge in her life and scholarship. In 1969, she entered the world of contemplative nuns by attending the Seminar for Contemplative Sisters held at Woodstock, Maryland, the former theologate of the Jesuits of the Maryland Province. At that time, as leader of her congregation, she was beginning the House of Prayer movement and came with deep appreciation for the life of prayer and the mystical tradition. She supported the fledgling efforts of the Association of Contemplative Sisters founded at Woodstock and continued as President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious to assist Contemplative Communities in both finding their voice in the Church and renewing their way of life. This was not a comfortable position to assume since, at that time, the Congregation for Religious was discouraging apostolic religious from assisting contemplatives even though the latter had no corporate channel of communication with the Holy See. Outstanding among and typical of her many interventions on their behalf was the address given to the Canon Law Society of America on October 7, 1975. It was fitting that she should close the *Carmel 200* symposium with a presentation entitled "Contemplation Finding Its Prophetic Voice in the Cultural Context of North America." When the history of these years is fully told, Margaret Brennan's contribution to the



## WHERE HAVE YOU HIDDEN MY BELOVED?

In 1984 an article appeared interpreting John of the Cross' teaching on desire and dark night in relation to contemporary experience.<sup>5</sup> This present essay reflects further on the societal aspect of the Dark Night because I sense that our consciousness has changed and as persons and as a nation we are in a different place than we were in the early eighties.

For one thing, *signs of death* seem even more pronounced than they were then, while *signs of new life*, new vision, and a new voice, unavailable then, are apparent now. Let us look at the situation in which we live. It is ironic that at the close of a millennium of unprecedented change and "development" which has brought us into the far depths of the heavens as well as into the inner spaces of the atom, we have such a vivid consciousness of mortality and death, and above all, the death of God.

While I hesitate to use words reminiscent of such a short-lived theology, still they express a vivid reality. In a very deep way as a people we are alone. One of the results of the Enlightenment and of the incredible achievements of science and technology is that we are alone in the world. Our own power, accomplishments, and sophistication have made us feel we are on our own. For us, success is not necessarily the blessing of God, nor are years of drought or disaster the anger or displeasure of a god. Unlike ancient or simpler civilizations, or even earlier generations, we are not sure for what we can turn to God. Good weather? The success of a meeting? Healing in illness? The miracle of a cancer cure? The protection and liberation of the oppressed? Safety for our children? Direction in life? An end to violence and drugs? Peace in the world?

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renewal of Contemplative Life in the U.S. and the retrieval of the Christian mystical tradition will not be small.

<sup>5</sup> See Constance FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," in *Living With Apocalypse*, ed. Tilden Edwards (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984). This is presently available with a companion essay, which develops the Dark Night further, "The Transformative Influence of Wisdom in John of the Cross," in *Women's Spirituality*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1996). A more extensive study, "Transformation in Wisdom: the Subversive Character and Educative Power of Sophia in Contemplation," will appear in a collection of articles written by the members of the Carmelite Forum to be published by the Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC.

God died in the concentration camps and the totalitarian dictatorships of this century, God was silenced in the Enlightenment and, according to Edward Schillebeeckx, with the disappearance of God, at least in the Western portion of the world, the individual person as a human subject also disappeared. God is dead, and as a consequence so is the human race.<sup>6</sup> The evidence that we have lost our humanity is all around us in organized terror, torture, ethnic cleansing or genocide, political murder, starvation on a mass scale, homelessness, increasing neglect/marginalization of the poor, and exclusion of the immigrant.

We see signs of death in racial hatred, escalating violence and abuse of women and children, in suicide machines and abortion, in drug addiction and drug sales, in the often lonely suffering of AIDS victims and the escalation of cancer deaths. We see signs of death in an alienation between women and men which shows itself in sexism, divorce, abandonment and rape on the societal level, and in the Roman Church in the absence of more and more women from the Eucharist, on the one hand, and in the inflexible and uncomprehending position of many Church leaders, on the other. The alienation women feel today and their struggle for equality and mutuality is just a part, a deep part, of the much broader alienation of the human species from the rest of the earth community.

When God is dead, not only is the human subject dead, but the cosmos itself is dead as either a subject or an object of respect. When humanity set itself up as an alternative to God, the human subject began to die and with it reverence for creation. Vaclav Havel, in addressing the situation of the world prior to the failure of communism in Eastern Europe, believes it was due not to East-West tensions, but to the spiritual condition of modern civilization. His devotion as a playwright to the theater of the absurd springs, in fact, from his concern for meaning, inasmuch as the theater of the absurd throws us into the question of meaning by manifesting its absence. He explains:

As soon as man [sic] began considering himself the source of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, the world began to lose its human dimension, and man began to lose control of it.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See "Introduction to the International Congress for Theology" in *On the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Concilium (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Disturbing the Peace, Conversations with Karel Hvizdaia*, Knopf, 1990.

We see the destructive effects of modernity's "flight from the world" all around us. Numerous species become extinct every day; the rain forests are being destroyed along with the ozone layer that shields us from the rays of the sun. The air, the water, and the land are polluted. We recognize today the real possibility of the death of *the earth as we know it*. We have failed for a long time to understand our own place in the earth community and the absolutely essential connections between ourselves as the human species and all other species of life. In consequence, for the first time in the history of the cosmos, we face the possibility of the death of humanity as a species and the death of the earth as our home.

"Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me to my moaning?" cries John of the Cross in the first lines of his beautiful, classic poem, *The Spiritual Canticle*. While this is the mystic's cry sounding through the ages, *it is our cry, the muted cry of our nation*. This is the cry of desire known by every person who has ever earnestly sought God. The desire for God is everywhere crying out! The miracle is that the contemplative cry of the people, of the whole earth community, is no longer silent and invisible, but rather prophetic and revolutionary. It rings through the universe and we must "not lose the thread of desire that from the depths of a disfigured world, groans with unspeakable groans to proclaim the birth of the new creation."<sup>8</sup>

Today the whole world cries out with the desire of the mystics, "Where have you hidden and left me to my moaning?" We hear on the one hand, the abandoned, the poor, the homeless, the dying, the elderly, the oppressed, the tortured, the martyred, the refugees, the rejected, the starving, the marginalized, and the abused, and on the other hand, we hear our nation, our people, the pleasure-sated and consumer-burdened, the addicts, those wracked by doubt, those disillusioned by government, those committed to justice and equality. All cry out. Even the scarred earth itself cries out and rages against its devastation. Creation groans with its desire and its dream.

All this has become a great cry of desire for life, freedom, and resurrection, a cry to the God of life who brings liberation out of every type of death, a cry for a new vision, a contemplative vision. This cry reaches beyond the collective of the dying communist systems and equally beyond the possessive individualism of capitalism. It is a cry for

recognition of the connectedness of everything in the cosmos, and consequently, a desire for contemplation and transformation, even though this is unnoticed for what it is by most people. The contemplatives realize it from one side; the theologians, led initially, perhaps, by some of the liberation theologians, realize it from another side, and both stand at a common meeting point trying to understand and articulate the time.

This universal cry, undermining the familiar dichotomy between contemplation and action, experience and theology, is what makes contemplation different today. The cry is within us. My own personal cry is overcome by, engulfed in, the cry of the earth, and it is within me. The desire for God becomes sheer passion when joined to the cry of the world. Religious people formerly approached God by turning aside from the world to some degree, but today we come with the world inside us; we are motivated in a very direct way by the earth, the people, the poor, the women and children. The relationship, or better the identification, is profound and it is experienced by many people.

We come, therefore, for the purification of the world, the transformation of human consciousness and human desire, and the completion of the image of Christ. We come as a last resort, in a sense, because we Americans have lost faith and hope in human power and human reason. We are driven to interiority, to contemplation, to the desire for the experience of God's love by the poor and oppressed, by, in fact, the image of God scarred in the world and on the face of the earth. We cannot continue to manage the world humanity has created with the skills, the minds, the wills, the memories or the imaginative paradigms we have. And it is the poor, the suffering earth, the pleasure sated that drive us in prayer toward contemplation, toward an understanding of our darkness and the need for the presence of contemplative vision, wisdom and love in the world, that is, to God's vision. Responsibility for the world, not just for individual well-being, moves us to contemplation.

This is the new "text" and this is the contemplative experience today. It rings with the ageless cry of the mystic to the Beloved:

Where have you hidden?...

Reveal your presence!...

Extinguish these miseries...

Who has the power to heal me? (SC 1, 6, 10, 11)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bingemer, 479.

<sup>9</sup> Most references to John of the Cross are inserted in the text. A=Ascent of

No gentle nor consoling cry is this as we sometimes imagine when we read John of the Cross' words of yearning and envision him swept away by a love far beyond our reach. Neither does this kind of yearning come at the beginning of the journey, but to those experienced and seasoned by life, often to those who have been generous and creative in using the resources available to them. For John, the mystic's cry of desire is not a disembodied experience, but always has a real life context in which there is a profound relationship between interiority and everyday existence.

### REFASHIONING OUR VISION AND REFASHIONING THE WORLD

This explains why the mystics' painful cry for God in dark contemplation suggests a way of understanding our experience as North Americans. It offers some guidance for our future and some way of redirecting the movement of human desire toward God and refashioning our vision. Today we experience darkness in two distinct though related ways, like two sides of the same coin, that is, in our indissoluble connection or solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and in our own personal and societal failures.

First, the poor and the marginalized are our darkness, the darkness of humanity which is back-lighted for us today. In "the poor" our violence is unveiled, to use Gil Bailie's dramatic words. We know God's presence precisely because we see so clearly and so painfully the battered people and the scarred earth, an image of the Crucified One who is through time and space the darkness of humanity. In fact, in the poor people and the poor earth we recognize the way the image of Christ has been defaced by human desire.

Second, all around us the failures and limitations of our technological world and our philosophy are illuminated. We have rejoiced in the countless wonders of our technological age, in the magnificent exploration of the universe, the incredible life-saving medical discoveries, and the whole evolution of computers and cyberspace, but we seriously question our national ethos of unlimited development. We are proud of the

Mount Carmel, DN=Dark Night, SC=Spiritual Canticle, LF=Living Flame of Love. Quotations are from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991).

American desire to be free and self-reliant, to reach every frontier, to protect individual rights and provide opportunity for individual advancement, but more and more of us are confused today by our excessive, possessive individualism. Women particularly realize the destructive limitations of the autonomous self and the loss to society when the value of connection and relationship is muted and marginalized for the sake of pleasure, power, advancement, and success. We are burdened by our national pride that must be first at any cost. We recognize the exploitative, oppressive, selfish nature of many of our national social policies and our international relationships. We see the results of our need for comfort and pleasure in a consumer mentality that believes we have a disproportionate right to the world's wealth and resources regardless of the deprivation and mortal affliction it brings to poor, "undeveloped?" peoples, and notwithstanding the destruction of our mortally endangered earth and its eco-systems. Thus, as David Tracy asserts:

The embrace of modern science, technology and industrialism... has helped to render present time for many an empty time—bereft of memory, free of hope, powerless to resist. The consumerism of our age is a relentless attack on the soul of every individual and every tradition.<sup>10</sup>

We experience desire gone awry and the failure of our national vision. As Robert Ornstein and Paul Erlich, authors of *New World, New Mind* explain, we cannot continue to manage the world humanity has created with the skills, the minds, the imaginative paradigms, the historical memories, or lack thereof, bequeathed to us by modernity.<sup>11</sup>

We feel *some* affinity, therefore, for the contemplative experience described by John of the Cross:

At this stage persons suffer from sharp trials [and darkness] in the intellect, severe dryness and distress in the will, and from the burdensome knowledge of their own miseries in the memory, for their spiritual eye gives them a very clear picture of themselves (LF 1.20).

<sup>10</sup> "On Naming the Present" in *On the Threshold of The Third Millennium* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 62.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich, *New World, New Mind, Moving Toward Conscious Evolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1989).

Our faith in the god of reason, progress, and finally technology, has left us without transcendence, without meaning, and without hope. The gods of modernity are dying, and with them our hope. In fact, one suspects some relationship between the experience of the mortality of humanity as a species and our society's pursuit of immediate pleasure, stimulation (drugs, sex, food) and unparalleled comfort with no thought for the effects on future generations. What kind of unconscious hopelessness drives those who do not even care about, much less provide for, the next generation or future generations?

John of the Cross' writings suggest that the clarity of our self-knowledge is in itself the embrace of the God we have silenced. Furthermore, opening ourselves to the dead-endedness and limitation of our national creativity unleashes a thirst for God that we will only feel when we come face to face with the deficiency of our present knowledge and the failure of all we have trusted as a people. When our history and tradition, that is, all we remember and count on for our self-understanding, are not sufficient to guarantee our future as a people and as a species, we need to recognize this emptiness as a yearning for God which is only possible when hope in our own abilities fails us. Is it conceivable for us to understand the breakdown of love, mutuality, and fidelity, the disappointment of human desire on so many levels, as a hunger for God that we will only sense profoundly when human desire is thwarted and betrayed? Inbedded within the experience of loss of meaning and imagination abides the possibility of wisdom and new vision; buried within the painful feeling of being abandoned and on our own lies the seed of a mutuality and fulfillment already in process.

In one way, it trivializes the writings of the mystics to suggest our national darkness has any relationship to John of the Cross' contemplative night, but in another way, looking at our national psyche within John's framework allows us to believe, to hope and to continue to desire. The challenge is to understand what is happening in order not to turn away from the faint light of contemplative wisdom and love that is showing us to ourselves.

Now with the light and heat of the divine fire, [the soul] sees and feels those weaknesses and miseries which previously resided within it hidden and unfelt, just as the dampness of the log of wood was unknown until the fire applied to it made it sweat and smoke and

sputter. And this is what the flame does to the imperfect soul (LF I.22).

It is not gentle but afflictive... Neither is the flame refreshing and peaceful but it is consuming and contentious, making a person faint and suffer with self-knowledge (LF I.19).

This is actually a hopeful time, when theological faith, hope and love, *the gifts of God*, are being accessed. We are forced, as it were, to accept the alternative vision of faith, hope and love, and so pass over into the perspective of God. The question is this: can we receive the darkness of this *empty time and barren space*, personally and collectively, as the love and care of God in our lives desiring to purify our desire as persons and our national dream as a people? Can we hear God calling us to a more contemplative time when we will be able to see and appreciate a new vision, hear within ourselves a new voice, experience a new faith and love capable of creating new paradigms for living as a part of all life on earth and in the universe? We are challenged by the dead-endedness around us to mature to a different level of existence. The call for openness to God is radical!

### THE NEED FOR A QUANTUM LEAP

Ornstein and Erhlich believe that our species cannot evolve quickly enough biologically or even culturally to do this naturally. The human mind is failing to comprehend the world it has created.

Human inventiveness has created problems because human judgment and humanity's ability to deal with the consequences of its creations lags behind its ability to create. There is now a mismatch between the human mind and the world people inhabit. The mismatch interferes with the relationships of human beings with each other and with their environment [and with all other species on the earth]... The serious and dangerous mismatch is this: civilization is threatened by changes taking place over decades, but changes occurring over decades are too slow for us to perceive readily... At the same time, the changes are much too rapid to allow the biological or cultural evolutionary processes to adapt people to them. We are out of joint with the times, our times.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ornstein and Ehrlich, 10-11. I am completely dependent on their thought in the following paragraph.



Biologically we are still programmed for instant response and instant remedies. These are some of the default positions lodged in the human mind which Ornstein and Ehrlich say cannot be transformed or refashioned completely and certainly cannot be genuinely changed in our lifetime. Although we are evolving, our mental machinery will not change biologically in time to help us solve our problems. We cannot wait for the necessary tens of thousands of years until natural selection does its job in order to solve problems such as runaway population growth, the collapse of ecological systems and the approach of thermonuclear Armageddon. We must therefore find ways of replacing our old minds with new ones by means other than the evolutionary process. Ornstein and Ehrlich suggest a new kind of education, namely, the creation of a process of conscious evolution. They insist we need to be literate in completely new disciplines.

I would like to suggest contemplative interiority as one of these "disciplines" and education for contemplation as essential to the new kind of education required, and I suggest it with profound seriousness to educators on every level. We do, indeed, need new minds, as well as new intuitions, new wills, and passionate new desires, since many of our highest achievements, Ornstein and Ehrlich explain, represent only a refinement of the old mind, not a new kind of perception.

Reflection on the sphere of the mind, according to Thomas Berry, the self-styled geologist, is imperative because the other powers of the earth seem now to have given over to the "mindsphere" the major share of steering the course of earth development. The earth that directed itself instinctively in its former phases seems now to be entering a phase of conscious decision through its human expression. This is the ultimate daring venture for the earth, Berry claims, this confiding its destiny to human decision, the bestowal upon the human community of the power of life and death over its basic systems.<sup>13</sup>

When Vaclav Havel some years ago addressed a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress, he, too, called for "a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness." He proposed that the salvation of the human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in human meekness

<sup>13</sup> See Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 19. Berry enumerates five major components of the earth's functioning: the geosphere, the hydrosphere, the atmosphere, the biosphere and the mindsphere.

and human responsibility. This belief in the importance of the transformation of individual consciousness for global change, reinforced by Havel's very life, is supported also in *Megatrends 2000*.

It is the individual who changes himself or herself first before attempting to change society. Individuals today can leverage change far more effectively than most institutions.... movements (peace, environment, etc.) were built one consciousness at a time by an individual persuaded of the possibility of a new reality.<sup>14</sup>

Is the time of national darkness and national truth (dark contemplation or dark night), evidenced by the breakdown of structures and the awareness of national limitation by many, truly a portent of the kind of global revolution or transformation called for by Vaclav Havel, a call coming out of his own long dark night under Communism?

John of the Cross, in his commentary on the *Spiritual Canticle* poem, written while he himself was in prison, speaks of the time of union with God after the searing purifications of the Dark Night when the person takes on the mind of God, the desire of God, the will of God, and the memory of God, in other words, a radically different perspective. Most of us think of such fundamental change as next to impossible in this life. I would like, however, to suggest it as a viable option for the human community, one imbedded in and promised by our Christian tradition, one we cannot continue to undermine, make light of, excuse ourselves from or marginalize. We cannot afford to bypass contemplation, interiority, and desire for God, as though they were esoteric experiences for the lazy or unbalanced elite, but not for us who value above all else reason, sanity, and the ability to control our own destinies. Certainly without contemplative prayer and the transformation it really can effect, the deepest dimension of the human person and of humanity itself lies forever dormant and beyond our reach. But even more, without it the true evolutionary possibilities completely dependent on the inbuilt purpose and aspirations of the human soul are beyond us. I deeply believe this is the era of contemplation—Thomas Berry calls it the "mindsphere"—and the stakes are very high.

We need to understand and to speak, therefore, of the unleashed power, influence and freedom of contemplative love and wisdom, of

<sup>14</sup> John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990).

their ability to pass beyond the limits by which both person and humanity are confined, the boundaries within which human consciousness, desire, culture, evolution and religion are now enclosed. Contemplation can bring within the realm of possibility the purified imagination able to create not only a global economy and *world* community that make a human life more possible for the poor, oppressed and marginalized of the world, but even the paradigm shifts and transformations required to invent a new kind of *earth* community where we reinhabit the earth in a truly human manner.

John of the Cross seems to imply that if we are to continue to grow and if the desire which constitutes our being is to reach fulfillment, the time will come when God's light will invade our lives and show us everything we have avoided seeing. Then will be manifest the confinement of our carefully constructed meanings, the limitations of our life projects, the fragility of the support systems or infrastructure on which we depend, the boundaries through which we shall never break, the dreams that will never reach fulfillment, the darkness in our own heart. Initially, this is a very dark time but it is also a contemplative experience when God's loving light embraces us with a power that is staggering both in its seeming destructiveness and in its potential for new vision, deeper love, radical transformation. The irony of the situation is that we experience this light as darkness, the nearness of God as unreachable and frightening transcendence, as no experience, in fact. The light is so excessive that we are blinded, we see and believe "nothing."

But this time of dark contemplation is, as has been indicated, an omen of radical revolution. For *the poor and oppressed* it indicates the process of liberation taking place as they become conscious of the desire so long repressed within themselves, let it emerge, release it as a cry of pain, and yet feel it at the same time to be energy for the struggle toward new life. For *North Americans* it marks a call by history and "development" to a contemplative or wisdom moment, a time of interiority, prayer and *waiting upon God* in a precisely theological faith and hope, that is, in a radical righting of the relationship with God and with one another. This means the cry indicates a time of painful knowledge and deep purification of national desire and resolve. It promises, however, the possibility of true liberation and transformation, a whole new view of what it means to be the *human* species on the planet earth.

All this is meant to show that the mystical tradition interpreted for

today throws some light not only on our inner lives, but even on our life as a nation and on humanity in its present stage of development. We always speak as if the mystics' experience of God is the end of the life process, almost beyond our reach. I suspect their experience may be a beginning for us. The mystics not only give us paradigms from the past that enable us to interpret our present experience, but they also provide the materials to create new paradigms that unlock a way into the future and unveil the horizons to which contemplation, or the love-embrace of God's spirit, throws us open and makes us available as a people.

### SIGNS OF NEW LIFE, TRANSFORMATION AND A COSMIC VISION

In the midst of the signs of death, there are already signs of new life and new vision not accessible ten or fifteen years ago. We see them in the revolutions in the Philippines and Eastern Europe, unfulfilled or tragic as these seem at times, in the Havels and the Chinese students of Tinneman Square who have suffered the long dark night of the human spirit, in the energy of the poor who suffer the dark night of hunger, deprivation and abandonment and yet gather together in the basic ecclesial communities in faith and in hope, in the official dissolution of a policy of apartheid and the peaceful change to majority government in South Africa, in Oscar Romero, the Maryknoll Women, the Jesuits and their women companions, the Trappists of Algeria, a bishop like Frank Murphy, and so many unnamed others who rise up in death within the people with the promise of victory for the oppressed in a voice stronger than anything they had in life.

We see signs of new vision in the passing of dictatorships, in the repudiation of communism and the claiming of freedom, precarious as this freedom has proved itself to be. We see signs in the fragile movement toward peace in Northern Ireland, in the decision for unity in Germany, in the fragile collaborative efforts between Russia and the United States, in the faltering peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, in the consciousness of the West when faced with the starving refugees of Africa, and in the effort to solve international disputes by diplomacy. We see signs in the strength and respectability of the feminist movement in theology and life, in the commitment to justice and equality, and in communities who live together in harmony, genuine love and fidelity thereby bearing witness to peace and mutuality in a world

where so many live isolated, lonely, disconnected and uncommitted. We see signs of life and vision in the dedication to financial, economic and social responsibility against staggering odds, in the dialogue among world religions, and in the growing awareness of the condition of the earth. Lastly, we perceive signs of hope in theology's recognition of the ill effects of having ignored as integral to the Christian faith the mystical dimension, and the confinement of contemplation to an airtight compartment of the Church's life for centuries. We see signs of life in human awareness and life-giving service on so many levels.

The price for this new insight and compassionate love, however, seems to be darkness, suffering and even death. Our gods have to die before we reach for the God who is beyond all our human images and projections and who waits over the brink of the known in the darkness. The signs of new life appearing among us are somehow the other side of an emptiness that paradoxically is not only bringing us closer to God but also purifying our desire and imagination and moving them toward transcendence of what has been.

John of the Cross holds out to us the promise of union with a God beyond all our inadequate images and finite gods, a union on the other side of this dark and empty time. In fact, the dark emptiness is already the beginning of this communion. The same light and love that cause the painful self-knowledge and empty questioning effect the transformation. Love will, if we accept it, answer the world's cry of desire and overtake our lives with tender communion, mutuality and an entirely different perspective which we of ourselves cannot produce by sheer determination and reason. The time of this Dark Night is in the end a hermeneutic of not only our immature or long-lost images of God but also of the Enlightenment's autonomous self!

In the very last stanza of *The Living Flame of Love*, John of the Cross sings of this transformation as *the awakening of God*:

How gently and tenderly  
*You wake in my heart*  
 Where in secret you dwell alone  
 And in your sweet breathing,  
 Filled with good and glory  
 How tenderly you swell my heart with love (LF III).

This awakening of God within the human heart is, of course, *human*

awakening, but because such a radical conversion of perspective and affectivity is engendered by the silent tenderness and inspiration of love, it is experienced as God's waking up and breathing love from the very core of a person to every thought, emotion, desire, action. When God "moves" in this way, John explains, everything in the universe is experienced as connected and moving together in harmony. All things disclose the beauty of their being and the root of their life. In consequence, every form of life is known and valued in and through God, the ground, source and center of not only the human but of everything in the universe (SC 15.25, 36.6, 39.11). The contemplative, therefore, sings without apology:

My Beloved, the Mountains  
 and lonely wooded valleys  
 strange islands  
 and resounding rivers  
 the whistling of love-stirring breezes

the tranquil night  
 at the time of the rising dawn,  
 silent music,  
 sounding solitude,  
 the supper that refreshes, and deepens love (SC st 14-15).

Now everything becomes the Beloved one and, therefore, part of the human person who is united with God and who now experiences herself as one species connected to every other form of life on the earth (SC poem st. 14 and 14.4-9, 24.6). This identity with the entire cosmic order within the contemplative and the discovery of the earth as a *living* organism are the foundations for an intimate and compassionate human presence to the earth and to one another as humans. It opens up the capacity for listening to what the earth is telling us. John writes of an immense, powerful voice which sounds in the soul, the voice of all the wonder of God heard in the voice of creation (SC 39.8-9, LF IV.10-11).

The soul becomes aware of Wisdom's wonderful harmony and sequence in the variety of her creatures and works. Each of them is endowed with a certain likeness to God and in its own way gives voice to what God is in it. So creatures will be for the soul a harmonious symphony of sublime music surpassing all concerts and melodies in the world (SC 14/15.25).

The contemplative person stands, as it were, with the Creator of the Universe who awaits us in the future and calls us to completion by the desire, the dream, implanted not only within human *being*, but also within the earth and all its species as an organic whole.

If we Americans admit to an experience of God at all, we usually experience God through earthly realities, through the beauty of creation and the wonder of human love. A child, for example, is able to believe in God's love when she has been loved by her mother. The desire for God grows and develops imperceptibly in the ordinary experiences of life. This is the way it is meant to be. But in the contemplative experience of God "awakening" and filling human desire, the whole of created reality, the whole cosmic organism, is experienced as a part of Infinite Being. One's basic perspective changes. One "has God's view of things" (LF I.32). The contemplative truly knows and sees everyone, everything, the whole earth, from the divine perspective and with the love of God and, therefore, with the desire of God for the world (LF 4.2-5).

John writes at length in many places of this transformation of all the powers of the person. The mind no longer understands with the vigor of its own natural light, but with the divine light. This is, in effect, the transformation of the mind through a new kind of knowledge, Holy Wisdom. The human capacity to love is changed because the mystic is so transformed by the unitive experience of God's love that she actually loves with the very love God has for us. Even the memory is changed in this union by the sure hope of a beckoning Future. John says the mind is God's mind, the will is God's will, the memory is God's memory and the person's delight and desire is God's delight and desire (LF II.34). All the powers and energies of the person move in love (SC 28.2-3, 8).

What is particularly significant is that for the contemplative person the old way of knowing and loving is gone. The process of transformation and conversion is really an irreversible evolution which amounts to a very radical re-education and transformation of consciousness and human desire that cannot be controlled by short-sighted human governments or fearful Church authorities (SC 26.13-17). This is the reason contemplation is so subversive and why, prior to the re-emergence of both popular and theological interest in it in the latter part of this century, it was so decisively muted for nearly three hundred years following the condemnation of quietism, as Joseph Chinnici so persuasively

explains.<sup>15</sup> As long as contemplative transformation is looked upon solely as independent access to the divine, it will continue to be considered threatening rather than enlightening to the status quo. If, however, Ornstein and Erhlich are correct in suggesting the need for not just the refinement of the old mind, but rather for a quantum leap in which our old minds are replaced by new ones, then contemplation assumes an importance religion, government, educators and leaders in the Churches have long denied it.

## CONCLUSION

One wonders if there is a way in our extremely complex, sophisticated culture that education for contemplation, understood as a process of intentional consciousness evolution, can ever be seen by our struggling, violence-racked society as a "new discipline" in which it is imperative that our people be literate. What if there were "schools" of contemplation or interiority all over the country, in business, in medicine, in education, in government? What if from pre-school to university *the art* of quiet reflection and listening, *the art* of prayer, *the art* of accessing the depth dimension of being human, without which we will never be fully human, were taught, nurtured and esteemed as central to all education? What if this manner of valuing the contemplative side of experience and development were seen as a response to and understanding of the darkness and fragmentation which afflict us as a nation? What if, in other words, the desire for God crying out among us were truly heard as we enter the twenty-first century?

I am suggesting that the call to contemplation be seen as integral to human self-understanding and as an absolute imperative of American education. Most suppose it is impossible for many people to become contemplative, as if this were an esoteric experience reserved for the few, a luxury for those who have leisure to be with God or simply consumer products for a bored elite. But in the Carmelite tradition, the prayer that leads to the divine embrace of contemplative communion and transformation is not an obscure discipline, nor a complicated exercise, but a relationship developed day by day through fidelity to a presence that per-

<sup>15</sup> "The Politics of Mysticism: Church, State and the Carmelite Tradition," was presented in 1990 at *Carmel 200* in Baltimore.



vades every facet of our lives and whose image can be found etched in the length and breadth of the world.

The call is before us in both signs of death and signs of new life. We are summoned to recognize the shape of the desire for God asserting itself among us with more and more urgency. As North Americans we are greatly to be pitied if we cannot grasp our post-modern, post-enlightenment experience as an invitation to reliance on the God who truly is the mystery and energy pervading all things and who dwells darkly and secretly, as Karl Rahner writes, "in [the] nameless and pathless expanse of our consciousness" exposing to us the false visions of the present which afflict us while slowly revealing visions of hope for our future.