THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE HUMAN PERSON THROUGH CONTEMPLATION: AN ANALYSIS OF JOHN CASSIAN'S *CONFERENCES*

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the desert mothers' and fathers' view of contemplation as a journey toward theosis, or communion with God. To accomplish this, "contemplation" is analyzed within the fifth century document, *The Conferences of John Cassian*¸ where John Cassian, the document's author, has conversation with various desert abbas on the monastic life. The argument presented within this thesis is that ascetic practices of renunciation and purification serve as a catalyst for the contemplative life where the contemplator comes face-to-face with God. In the process of experiencing purity of heart, the contemplator transforms into the likeness of God. Also needed in the process of transformation is the cultivation of silence, for it is within silence the contemplator recognizes God's nearness. The conclusion of this thesis ties together the themes of theological anthropology, renunciation, purity of heart, and contemplation in the story of Martha and Mary Luke 10:38-42. Mary, an exemplar to the abbas in the *Conferences,* personifies transformation by contemplation through her choosing "the one thing necessary."

Dedicated to the Campus Ministry GA cohort of 2019-2021. I could not have done this without all of you.

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INTRODUCTION

I had never heard of John Cassian before pursuing the beginning of this thesis. Maybe I ran across his name once or twice in class, but he never stood out to me as significant. However, what I learned through this research is how important John Cassian is, especially for the beginnings of monasticism in the 4th and 5th centuries. As this thesis discusses, Cassian was a traveler and a bridge. He was traveler on a journey to heaven, and a bridge between the East and the West. Cassian the Traveler and Cassian the bridge birthed *The Conferences of John Cassian*, which is the central document of this thesis. The *Conferences* are a collection of dialogues and sayings between Cassian and several Egyptian desert fathers. Within this document, the fathers instructed Cassian, and Cassian's friend Germanus, on monastic living. One constant theme throughout the document which the desert abbas instructed Cassian toward is contemplation.

In this thesis, I argue that contemplative prayer transforms us into the likeness of God, because through contemplation we come face-to-face with God and are in communion with him. I use John Cassian's *Conferences* and analyze how Cassian wrote of contemplative prayer, how he and the desert abbas understood contemplation in early monasticism, and how contemplation served a theological anthropology focused on theosis. In conjunction with the *Conferences*, other sources which I rely heavily on are Olivier Clément's *Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* and *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology*, both which help me provide a foundational understanding of theological anthropology and contemplation in the life of the desert abbas. On Cassian's life and work, Columba Stewart's *Cassian the Monk* was an important and helpful resource which I use regularly throughout this thesis.

In Chapter 1, I propose that the purpose of human life is theosis, and contemplation assists us in encountering God because we are unable to enter the fullness of God's communion until after death. Chapter 2 focuses on how the ascetic practices of the desert cultivated the desert mothers' and fathers' purity of heart, which is an essential characteristic of contemplation. In Chapter 3, I analyze the *Conferences* and the nuanced ways the desert abbas reference and use "contemplation" throughout the document. Chapter 4 examines the role of silence in contemplative prayer and its pivotal place in the journey of cultivating contemplation. Finally, Chapter 5 ties together the themes of theological anthropology, ascetic practices, contemplation, and silence to create an experience of theosis. I end this thesis looking to Mary of Bethany in Luke 10:38-42 as an exemplar of these themes and who was a model of the contemplative life for the desert abbas in Cassian's *Conferences*.

While Cassian's *Conferences* is the central source for my argument, there is much unknown about Cassian. He introduces many of the abbas with whom he spoke, and we even get to hear from Germanus. However, Cassian remains in the background of his own work, and I like to think that he embraced contemplative prayer when listening to the many stories and instructions from the abbas. One of my hopes with this thesis is bringing awareness to Cassian's importance in the Christian faith tradition as many have not heard his name before, yet he is an important figure at the roots of our faith. My final hope is that the reader takes an interest in contemplative prayer practice, or at least is inspired to learn a little more about it. I believe that contemplative prayer is a place where God is waiting to meet and talk to us, but we must be ready and willing to meet with him. However, contemplation is not a practice that is resting on our shoulders alone, for we

always work alongside God's grace. Perhaps we can model John Cassian and be travelers and voyagers in our journey of life, searching and hoping to reach that destination where we can embrace God fully and dwell with him in communion.

CHAPTER 1

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

Part 1: The Purpose of Human Life

Introduction: What does it mean to be human?

How does an understanding of what it means to be human affect the way we live our life? How we answer this question reveals the different nuances of what it means to be human and the purpose of human life. An answer that resonates deeply with many people is happiness, as it is a universal desire. Everyone wants to experience happiness, and this desire guides our daily decisions. When we are happy, we feel good, and this is a feeling we wish to retain at a constant equilibrium. However, if happiness is the purpose of human life, what does it mean for someone who is not happy? Is "happiness" really the experience that is driving our lives?

There is no one concrete answer to these questions, and each answer we articulate only leads to more questions. Perhaps the notion that happiness is the purpose of human life is not the correct answer. Then what does it mean to be human? From where does the satisfaction and fulfillment of human life come? While these are abstract and complicated questions, maybe the question "what does it mean to be human?" is not the only one to ask when approaching a theological anthropology for understanding the purpose of human life. Instead, maybe another question that we can ask in conjunction with "What does it mean to be human?" is "*How* are we to be human?" Asking both questions together allows us to think of the means we use to achieve whatever our purpose. The "what" informs us of who we are and what our purpose is, and the "how" relays what we

are to do to fulfill the purpose of the "what." The understanding of what it means to be human affects the actions associated with how we are to be human.

The question "what does it mean to be human?" and "how are we to be human?" is impossible to fully answer, as dwelling in mystery is part of the human experience. To understand the human person in our entirety and fullness is to reduce the human person. Oliver Clément, the author of *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology,* writes

> "When we ask of something, 'What is *it?*' we are seeking to learn about its nature. The question, being an abstract idea, is neutral. The person, however, goes beyond all questions. It cannot be defined, it cannot be captured by conceptual thought … the person is irreducible."[1]

The human person, like God, is a mystery, and it is often better left undiscovered than to define. Even if we explicitly describe a definition of what it means to be human to the true nature of the human person, there is much more we do not understand. There is beauty in the mystery of what it means to be human just as there is beauty in the unknown mystery of God. To fully understand the mysteries of the human experience, we distort the beauty that lies in the unknown. Just as the beauty of constellations in the night sky becomes unrecognizable when the sun rises, the same happens with human beings when we try to understand and define human nature: we lose the ability to see the wonder and awe in the unknown that surrounds us. However, while the meaning of the human experience remains a mystery, this does not mean we cannot dwell in some truth. We find truth in who we are in our lived experiences, as well as the lived experience of those before us through stories and traditions. Traditions handed down through humanity offer

[1] Olivier Clément, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology*, trans. Jeremy Hummerstone (New City Press, 2000), 30.

not only wisdom for how to live a good life, but also direction and guidance for human life and how we are to live.

The Christian faith tradition offers wisdom and guidance on how to live a good life in the story of creation in Genesis, and the story of the Incarnation in the Gospels. The story of creation and God's Incarnation reveals that the purpose of human life, the meaning of human nature and human createdness, is dwelling with God.[2] The Christian church has a rich faith through tradition and Scripture that carries on this story of God creating humankind and dwelling with us. These stories show humanity not necessarily the answer to what it means to be human, but how to be human is to dwell in communion with God. The answer to what it means to be human remains a mystery, but there is purpose amidst the mystery, and this is the truth found in the understanding that the purpose of human life is to dwell in communion with God.

Theological Anthropology: Created, Separated, and Incarnated

The stories of creation and the Incarnation teaches us that God wants us to dwell with him in heavenly communion, for as his creation "the glory of God is revealed at the very root of things, for the roots of the creature are essentially heavenly."[3] All of creation reflects God, and nothing reflects God more than the human person. As a good creation, humanity not only reflected God but was created in his image and likeness.[4] God created humankind bearing his own image and likeness, a unique responsibility, task, and a gift among God's creatures. "The opening chapter of Genesis asserts that human beings are

[2] Clément, *On Human Being*, 108.
[3] Clément, *On Human Being*, 108-109.
[4] Genesis 1:26-27

created in 'the image of God' and manifest God's presence in both our finite human existence and in a mysterious, ineffable sacredness. Genesis sets the scene by showing how we, like God, reflect transcendence and immanence in a dynamic tension."[5] Created in God's image and likeness illustrates the important place that humankind holds in creation and demonstrates the connection that humans have with God the Creator.

However, as Christian tradition tells us, the story of creation and the incredible responsibility of humankind contains a catastrophe. The catastrophe is commonly referred to as "the fall" of humanity, or the part of the story in Genesis where Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree.[6] The disobedience of humanity is the consequential action that separates humanity from God, and the consequences of the fall cloud our ability to see God's image and likeness in ourselves, as humankind can no longer see how all created things reflect the glory of God.[7] Instead, loss, death, and decay are what humanity sees in our world's creation. When speaking of the fall as a catastrophe, Clément writes, "So it is that humankind can no longer see the world as it is, upheld by God in his glory, for the creation does not impose itself on us any more than the Creator. Instead, we see the universe in the likeness of our decay, coloured by our covetousness and disgust, and thus we tarnish it, harden it and break it in pieces."[8] Through the fall, humankind forgets that being human is dwelling in communion with God, and instead of living in communion, humanity now lives in a life of death. Our broken communion with God leaves us with a lost sense of humanness.

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[5] David G. R. Keller, "Reading Living Water: The Integral Place of Contemplative Prayer in Christian Transformation," *Sewanee Theological Review* 50, no. 3 (2007): 416.
[6] Genesis chapter 3.
[7] Clément, *On Human Being*, 112.
[8] Clément, *On Human Being,* 112.

The fall not only ruined how we see the world, but it also causes an ache deep within our human experience, and this ache is the longing to reunite ourselves with our Creator. Reuniting ourselves to God is what we desire, but often we forget that God creates us for dwelling in communion with him. The catastrophe of the fall continues through human history as the ache for communion with God is never satisfied and has traditionally led to the pursuit of human passions and desires. Throughout the Church's history, many writings have been published, most notably the early desert fathers and mothers, addressing the predicament that the pursuit of passions creates, because pursuing them does not fulfill the ultimate desire of humanity. The ache cannot be satisfied in our earthly life because of our broken communion with God, and due to the predicament of yearning to reunite with God but pursuing the fulfillment of human passions, humanity oftentimes misses the mark of our proposed purpose of human life.

Although humanity feels a sense of separation from God because of the catastrophe of the fall, God has not abandoned us. Throughout human history, traditions and stories of God's promise to continue dwelling with humankind endure through the covenants God makes with his people. Another such inspiring tradition is the story of God dwelling once again with humankind in the person of Jesus Christ. As the Incarnate Word of God, Christ is the mediator that enables humanity to dwell in communion with God's divine nature.[9] The life of Jesus teaches humanity how to once again be human. The Incarnation reveals that humanity can dwell in communion with God despite our fallen nature. We learn from Christ by following his teachings and mimicking his examples to make ourselves his mirrors until we learn what it means to be God's children

[9] Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, trans. Theodore Berkeley, O.C.S.O., and Jeremy Hummerstone, Second edition. (New City Press, 2013), 66.

and that we are a creation made in the image and likeness of the divine. The reorientation of our life to be the mirror of Jesus' example and God's image and likeness serves as a reminder that the purpose of human life is communion with God and reflecting this communion in ourselves.

The gift of the Incarnation represents a beautiful mystery to humankind and is a paradox of learning how to be human from someone divine. Jesus shows and reminds us how to walk with God.[10] The Incarnate Word is divine nature joining with human nature on earth, yet always looking toward heaven. With Jesus becoming a mediator for humankind, we regain the sense of unity with God which we lost in the fall.

As we work toward reuniting with God, Christ is our example and mediator between human and divine nature. Looking at the life of Christ, we learn how dwelling in communion with God transforms both ourselves, the world, and the people around us, as "Jesus wants to bring us into a greater experience of God and a greater experience who we are in relationship with God."[11] In God's love through the Incarnation, we learn how and what it means to love and reciprocate this love in the world, for humanity needs to receive God's love to love in return.[12] The transformation that we undergo from God's love enables us to change into people of communion with each other and God and bridges the divisions and separations that are experienced because of the fall.[13] Jesus is the one who teaches us that the purpose of human life is dwelling in communion with

[10] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 37.
[11] James Danaher, "Contemplative Prayer & the 21st Century," *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1046 (2012): 453.
[12] Elizabeth Groppe, "Catherine Mowry LaCugna's Contribution to Trinitarian Theology," *Theological Studies* 63, no. 4 (2002): 750.
[13] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 10.

God despite separation and that we are still able to reflect and live the image and likeness of God with which we are created.

Dwelling in communion with God is not a new concept. The idea of dwelling in communion with God is quite ancient. The early desert fathers and mothers understood the ability to transform into people of communion and live a life following Jesus' example. The desert fathers and mothers' understanding of transformation changed how they understood the meaning of what it means to live a good life. The early Christian church is a rich tradition with figures who continually worked to imitate Christ, and this imitation led many into the desert to experience a complete immersion of his example. For the desert Christians, the desire to enter the vast and dry land came from following Christ, whether this arose from a desire to take to heart "sell all that you have and follow me," or like Jesus to confront one's demons.[14] Christ's example and the wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers teach us that we must undergo transformation to dwell in communion with God.

Interior Freedom: Metanoia of the Heart

Learning how to be human means looking to Jesus, the Incarnate Word, as an example of what it means to love and live in communion with God. While we receive God's love and the gift of his grace, it is up to the human will, the human choice, to love him in return. How we respond to the call to love is unique to everyone. Not everyone needs to live in the desert for twenty years like the desert mothers and fathers, and God

[14] Matthew 4:1-11, 19:21

does not ask this of everyone. God does not force our love, but it is up to us what we decide to do with God's love and grace.

Nevertheless, if we decide to return God's love with the help of his grace, we recognize that God satisfies the deep ache within us. Christ has reunified humankind with God through his passion, death, and resurrection, and the Paschal mystery enables humanity to approach a new understanding of what it means to be made in God's image and likeness. Through the knowledge we gain from Christ, we realize that communion with God is the purpose of human life and is what we desire from our lives. The more we allow God to meet this desire, the more this desire of ours deepens, though not in an unsatisfactory way as it does with the passions.[15] As this desire deepens, we will seek ways in which we can continue our communion with God, and through seeking, we learn how to be human through the example of Jesus. God's grace aids us in our search for communion, and we use his grace to continue the work of loving and dwelling in communion with God.

Our pursuit to dwell in communion with God involves God's grace, without which communion with God is impossible. Receiving and working with God's grace involves an act of the human will, an action of walking toward God himself. Clément reflects on this notion and highlights the important work humanity must do in conjunction with Christ's work: "Before there can be communion there must first be restoration of balance, inner calm, self-control, the ruling of our natural desires. If we are to love our neighbour we must first love God and his spiritual discipline. Christ can give

[15] Clément, *On Human Being*, 52. Clément uses the phrase "The more God gives himself to me and fills me with his presence, and the more I find him to be new and inexhaustible, the more I am drawn towards him like the bride in the Song of Songs." Clément is speaking of eternity with God which begins on earth after forgoing our human ways and earthly desires.

himself for our food, the Bread of Life, only because he is completely one with the Father."[16] The action of walking toward God is called "metanoia," which is defined as "a watershed change of mind, heart, perspective, and life."[17] Metanoia is repentance and acknowledgment that there is a separation between God and humanity and that we are unable to bridge this gap on our own accord, and nothing in our lives will replace where God once dwelled. Metanoia does not bridge the gap, that is purely the work of the Incarnation, but metanoia is our cooperation with God's grace and a response to our desire to abide in communion with God.

Unfortunately, we sometimes use this desire for God and try and fulfill it elsewhere, meeting dissatisfaction (what early Christians refer to as the passions, or our attachments), as only God satisfies our desires. This cycle of longing, seeking fulfillment, and never being content continues until humanity reconciles with God. Metanoia is a realization that humanity longs for communion with God, and that we lost communion through the fall, and the life that we truly long for is not satisfied on earth.[18] Experiencing metanoia, or experiencing that "watershed" change of mind, heart, perspective, and life means to walk away from following the passions and instead choose to follow Christ.

The choice of whether to follow Christ is like choosing "sacramental depth" or a life that lacks richness.[19] To prevent a life that is stagnant, stale, and lifeless, humankind must experience a metanoia. While we desire a life that is rich and full of depth, deciding to walk away from our passions and attachments is difficult. We are a world bent on

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[16] Clément, *On Human Being*, 50.
[17] Paul M. Blowers, *Moral Formation and the Virtuous Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 13.
[18] See Clément *On Human Being*, Chapter 1: Anthropology: An Approach by Way of Repentance, for an understanding on how humans separated themselves from God, and therefore desire to reunite with him. Clément explains how our desire to reunite with God leads human beings to fulfilling the desires of our passions and leave us unsatisfied, but how this ultimately leads humanity to repentance.
[19] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism,* 127.

instant gratification and desire security, safety, and comfort, which are the promises our attachments grant us. Again, metanoia is difficult and the opposite of instant gratification, however, Clément calls metanoia "the renunciation of despair" and is a necessary act for human beings to enter the full embrace of God.[20] The metanoia that we experience must also become a renouncement from our attachment to other people, as we must learn to be alone with God and have that be enough to fill us. Clément writes of this renouncement of others as a necessary component to learn communion with God, and dwell in solitude with him:

> Solitude is a vital discipline both for me and the other person; we must know how to leave each other alone … So not only is solitude necessary for prayer, but prayer for true solitude. We all have to learn to detach ourselves … but the saint will in the end bear within [themselves], even at the heart of the crowd, *utter silence,* the silence of true solitude.[21]

In this solitude and metanoia, we experience true prayer.

Experiencing a metanoia allows us to experience God more deeply in prayer. Without metanoia, some attachments hold the human person back from encountering the fullness of God. In the example of the desert fathers and mothers, we see the example of human beings turning away from a life of security and comfort to embrace God. Through the example of the ascetics, we recognize how they remained open to God's ability to enter their essence in a loving embrace, and how that practice enabled true interior freedom in the desert fathers and mothers. The newfound interior freedom enabled the desert fathers and mothers to "follow [their] deep instinct to ascend towards God."[22] The deep instinct of which Clément writes has been with humanity since our very creation, as

[20] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism,* 16.
[21] Clément, *On Human Being*, 55-56.
[22] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism,* 130, 132.

we are created to give glory to God and be in unity and communion with our Creator, and it is that same instinct that allows humanity to look toward the heavens and experience, as much as it is possible on earth, the communion with God that is the deep desire of the human being.

Contemplation

The desert fathers and mothers from the Church's early tradition embraced a metanoia and renounced everything to live in the desert to dwell in the presence of God. These men and women engaged in the practice of contemplation during their time in the desert. The goal of the practice of contemplation is communion with God.[23] Not only is communion with God the goal of contemplation, but it is also the goal of human life. Through contemplation, we join God the Creator in a loving embrace that enables humanity to see we need that nothing else on earth, but we find everything within God. The understanding that contemplation connects humankind in communion with God allows us to realize the importance and need for contemplation in our lives.

In the experience of contemplation, we realize that it is God whom we desire and who satisfies us in a world of instant gratification and constant want and longing. The desert fathers and mothers realized the value of contemplation in the spiritual life and renounced the life they knew to journey into the desert to avoid any distractions from their contemplation. "The desert monks were not despisers of culture. What they fled with the greatest fear was not the external world, but the world they carried inside

[23] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism,* 213.

themselves—an ego-centeredness needing constant approval."[24] The desert Christians did not run into the desert because they hated the world, but they hated the selfishness they found within themselves and their desire for instant gratification and the comfort brought by their attachments. In the desert, the mothers and fathers confronted God stripped of everything, however, in the experience of giving up everything and encountering God they realized they desired nothing else.

Experiencing God like the desert fathers and mothers does not require that we run to the desert and live there for forty years to experience deep communion with God. An encounter with God as powerful as a desert experience can happen through prayer, specifically through contemplative prayer. Contemplation is the place where human nature can dwell in silence and solitude with divine nature. In other words, contemplative prayer is the place where we embrace God without holding back, and where God embraces us fully in return. Communion with God does not require desert hermitage; we experience it wherever and whenever we allow ourselves to recognize God embracing us.

Part 2: Contemplation as a Proposed Means to Theosis

What is Contemplation?

Contemplation has many definitions, and there is not a definition that is more correct than another. To be sure, contemplation is still distinct from meditation, though the two can be related. Meditation is more concrete, usually having an image, phrase, or Scripture passage on which to focus and ruminate in the mind. However, contemplation has a deeper meaning, as contemplation is a way of dwelling in the presence of the

[24] Belden C. Lane, "Desert Catechesis: The Landscape and Theology of Early Christian Monasticism," *Angelicin Theological* Review 75, no. 3 (1993): 299.

Trinity and being in communion with God. “In the context of Christianity, contemplation is often viewed as a type of meditation; but it can differ from meditation in that meditation often focuses on images or stories…whereas contemplation tends to be a self-emptying form of prayer, devoid of images and leading to union with the Divine.”[25] Contemplation is different from meditation in that the purpose is to exist in a deep connected awareness of God’s presence; contemplation is an experience beyond the thoughts and feelings experienced in meditation. However, contemplation is not empty, it is full of silence. Metanoia prepares a person for the experience of encountering God in silent contemplation, as it empties us of our attachments and passions and leaves room in our hearts for the presence of God.

Before contemplation transforms us, we must experience transformation through metanoia and interior freedom. The transformation from metanoia is an immediate and subtle change of heart, something we experience before death. The transformation of the human person through contemplation is much more subtle. Metanoia is an essential step to take to partake in the transformation of contemplation, as it prepares us for contemplation and changes the way we live and interact with others. “In response to Jesus’s call for personal transformation, contemplative prayer is a grace-filled attentiveness to God that initiates and sustains a change of consciousness, leading to deepening love of God and neighbor.”[26] To emphasize the interpretation of contemplation by David Keller, co-founder of Oasis of Wisdom, contemplation is a “grace-filled attentiveness” that leads to a deepening of love of God and others. The “deepening of love” is the transformative aspect of contemplation, as the loss of love was the greatest

[25] Karen L. Howard, “Taizé, Contemplative Prayer and the Holy Spirit.” *The Way* 56, no. 1 (2017): 72.
[26] Keller, “Reading Living Water,” 412.

harm to humankind from the fall and the greatest wound to God. Nevertheless, our capacity for love deepens through contemplation, and we gain deeper connection to God who is the end of our deepest wants and longings.

The ancient desert fathers and mothers understood the concept of emptying the self as being attentive to God without distractions, and they also understood the necessity of metanoia leading to a larger transformation through contemplation. The desert fathers and mothers saw Jesus as the perfect example of this transformation. In an article on contemplative prayer and Christian transformation, David Keller asks the question "What does transformed human life look like?" and states that many Christians during the patristic period looked to the figure of Jesus as an exemplar of what it meant for human life to be transformed by God through contemplation.[27] Jesus was completely human and completely God, yet as a human being, Jesus showed us how to dwell in communion with God, even in our humanness. The desert fathers and mothers took to heart this desire to follow Jesus' example of dwelling in communion with God, which led many Christians to the desert experience of renouncement and purification. The desert experience taught the desert fathers and mothers what it means to be human.

Another definition of contemplation is an act that "is expressed most clearly in a capacity for loving, with a love that is creative because it is an activity shared with the incarnate and crucified God."[28] In other words, contemplation is the space we create where we allow ourselves to return the gaze of God, and through grace are attentive to God's divine presence. Returning the gaze of God and dwelling in grace-filled attentiveness is important for understanding the role contemplation has regarding the

[27] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 413.
[28] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 11.

transformation of the human person. In the space of contemplation, we give our heart, mind, and soul entirely to God through our attentiveness and our stillness. The imagery of our whole being dwelling with God in a space we create through contemplation strikes a resemblance to reverence in a temple or holy space. The word "contemplation" shares the root word "temple." What happens in contemplation, in the space of the temple, is highlighted by Origen, who defines contemplation as "knowing God and being known by God."[29] According to Origen, those who contemplate are in union with God, and "by contemplation, one becomes divinized."[30] Another word for divinization is "deification" or "theosis," a Greek word similar to the Greek word for contemplation, "theoria."[31] Theosis is the process of human transformation by contemplation, and it is a result of actively sharing love with God Incarnate.

Contemplation allows us to reflect God's image and likeness through the transformation we experience in metanoia. Theosis enables us to take part in the likeness of God through restoring and reordering the original purpose for which human beings were created, which is to bring glory to God and to be in communion with God.[32] "The human vocation is to mature from 'image' to 'likeness,' to *participate in and embody* the divine nature."[33] Through contemplation, we become "like" God, as humankind was at the beginning of creation.

Contemplation is an attentive practice to create space for the human person to dwell with God. The transformation of the human person that arises from this practice

[29] Howard, "Taizé, Contemplative Prayer and the Holy Spirit," 74.
[30] Howard, "Taizé, Contemplative Prayer and the Holy Spirit," 74.
[31] As there are many different words to describe the process of transformation through contemplation, for the purpose of this thesis I will focus on "theosis" as the word choice for transformation.
[32] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 91.
[33] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 416-417.

occurs through the silence and stillness of contemplation, and we face our Creator in this silence. Contemplation always leads to silence.[34] In silence we encounter the presence of the Trinity, and contemplation transforms us by this Trinitarian awareness, and by the reorienting of our worldview to see how everything, including us, is yearning and desiring for communion with God the Creator. Contemplation is transformative because in silence God reminds us of his image and likeness, and that being human is to live out this image and likeness in our daily actions and prayer. In this contemplative silence and solitude, we find communion, and God reminds us of how close he is to humanity and ensures us that he is never out of reach.[35]

The practice of contemplation is not complicated, but there is difficulty with this prayer. The irony of contemplative prayer lies in its ability to require little of us, but we simply make it complicated. All that contemplation requires is that we show up and are attentive to God. Keller writes a powerful analogy about the impact of paying attention during contemplative prayer, and it begins with his ministry in the Yukon River Valley of Alaska:

> The primary means of travel were dog sleds and small, open boats with outboard engines. A village elder, who had been a riverboat captain, taught me to “read" the water to avoid snags and to stay in the main current. “Pay attention to what you see. Don’t just skim the surface. Shortcuts are not always the best way.” Contemplative prayer is like that. It is reading the “living water” of life. It keeps us from just skimming the surface and guides us along the main current.[36]

God guides us along the main current if we are attentive as we show up in contemplative practice. How are we supposed to recognize God if we are distracted and unable to notice the movements around us? Prayer is not simply a recitation of words while the mind

[34] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 208-209.
[35] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 75, 181.
[36] Keller, “Reading Living Water,” 422.

wanders but involves every ounce of the human person to notice God. Oliver Clément writes that "there is a correspondence between the depths of the heart and the heights of heaven" when one prays.[37] The more we give of our heart during contemplative prayer, the more we notice God's presence and embrace. God's embrace does not necessarily reciprocate how much love we give, but the love we give allows us to notice the love of God that is already present.

When giving of our whole selves during contemplative prayer, we must do so with humility. The contemplative seeks to free God from an understanding that is human and instead sit in the presence and mystery of God. God's shroud of mystery makes it impossible to predispose any human understanding about the divine, as "the contemplative simply seeks to be present to God, without supposing an interpretation as part of that experience."[38] We must not try to give reason to who or what God is, but simply sit still and take in the God that loves us, and this is how we are to be human and approach contemplative prayer: simple humility.

Contemplation is not for a select group of individuals, or whoever can achieve and experience metanoia and interior freedom. While God created all humans in his image and likeness, there still exists separation among people and an elitist division. As all human beings reflect God's image and likeness, we cannot exclude anyone from this narrative. Contemplation is not excluded to a single faith tradition, but it is important to recognize Jesus' role in contemplation, as he is the mediator between us and God. In late antiquity, transformation occurred to those who journeyed into the desert to experience extreme asceticism. The transformative experience that the desert fathers and mothers

[37] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 182.
[38] Danaher, "Contemplative Prayer & the 21st Century," 449.

encountered, of which contemplation played a vital role, "was understood as a *normal* process. It was not intended for an elite minority. It was proclaimed as the inheritance of all human beings."[39] Contemplation is not for a selection of individuals; it is for all human beings. Contemplation is available for everyone.

Why is contemplation needed for theosis?

With an understanding of contemplation as a form of self-emptying, why is this practice needed for theosis? The answer to this question is that contemplation teaches us how to be human, in that by emptying ourselves, Christ lives fully in us. Through contemplation, we are exercising our interior freedom and allow God to teach us to see the world, both the beautiful and the ugly. "By emptying ourselves we take the risk of seeing ourselves, the world, and the Holy One through God's eyes."[40] We can see the original beauty of the world, and the fallen state of humanity distorts our beauty. The transformation of contemplation enables us to see and exist in the world as God created it. Contemplation is a transformative practice that allows a human person to enter the richness of a spiritual life where we learn how to be human, where God reminds us he created us in his image.

Theosis needs contemplation because it reminds humanity of who we are, human persons created in the image and likeness of God. If God created us in his likeness, our human vocation is union with God, an act that humanizes us. In David Keller's article "Reading Living Water," he articulates the idea that our human vocation is becoming more human, which Keller gained from the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Interpreting

[39] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 413.
[40] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 412.

Bonhoeffer on this topic, David Keller writes that "human beings are created in the image of God and [this means] that our vocation is to become fully and authentically human. Our calling is to manifest the image of God in the way we live."[41] Keller understood Bonhoeffer as claiming that the meaning of what it meant to be human was to "discover who we already are."[42] To become authentically human is to realize that we are created in the image and likeness of God, and that we live in a fallen state of humanity. Contemplation is the process that enables us to see this reality and helps us understand our vocation to become authentically human.

The person transformed through contemplation enables the reflection of God's image to pervade into the world. In the Christian tradition, the Church traditionally thought the sacraments to be an outward sign of God's grace and the reflection of heaven in the world. While this is a beautiful image of God's grace transforming the world around us, a similar process happens during contemplation. More precisely, contemplation serves as the inward sign of transformation in the human person.[43] We see a glimpse of the world as God created it, which means we are seeing the world reflect the beauty of God.

We need contemplation because in the space we create with God, he teaches us how to be human again. In the contemplative space, "we experience unconditional love and listen to God's desires for ourselves and for the world."[44] Imitating Jesus and dwelling with God, who is the Word Incarnate and our meditator between human and divine nature, we make it possible to listen to God's desires for us. Contemplation's goal

[41] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 411.
[42] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 411.
[43] Clément, *Human Being*, 116-117.
[44] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 412.

is uniting us with God and teaching us once again what it means to be human. Practicing contemplation in its fullness is never separating from God as we recognize the divine all around us.[45] Theosis is true communion with God, where human and divine natures dwell together in silence and solitude and is where "the human vocation is to mature from 'image' to 'likeness'" of God.[46]

Theosis is communion with God through the divinization of the human person and becoming one with God through this type of unity is becoming the prayer of contemplation itself. Clément writes about becoming prayer by articulating, "Through ascetic *praxis* … and then through perception of the mystery of creatures and things, prayer becomes a state. A person does not pray anymore in the sense of a voluntary action that is often difficult, [we *are*] prayer."[47] Becoming the prayer of contemplation in communion with God is being in communion with the God who is Triune. Part of communion with God is living in the unity of the Trinity.[48] Unity in the Trinity is important because "The human being … realizes that there is no other place than God. [We make our] abode in the unity of the Father and the Son, a unity that is the actual site of the Holy Spirit."[49] Unity with the Trinity occurs as humankind was created to experience this communion unlike any other member of creation. However, we do not understand unity with the Trinity as humans becoming God through theosis, as a true understanding of theosis is reflective in becoming what we truly are: authentically human. Through theosis, "we share God's nature, while remaining God's creatures."[50]

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[45] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 229.
[46] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 416.
[47] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 210.
[48] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 210-211.
[49] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 210.
[50] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 417.

However, the fall of humanity diminishes the original innocence humanity obtained but the Incarnation repairs it. Contemplation is the temple where humanity shares in God's nature because of the Word Incarnate.

Contemplation, through God's grace, supports communion of the Trinity. Within the Trinity, the human person learns how to love and be human through the example of Christ, God Incarnate. Through Christ, we partake in the communion of the Trinity through a higher form of prayer which is the contemplation of God.[51] Christ is the perfect fulfillment of both human and divine nature, and through this example, we learn again what it means to be human and how to pray the prayer of contemplation that unites us to God.

Through contemplation and communion with the Trinity, we can experience a foretaste of what the human person can experience after death. In this relationship with the Trinity, we learn how to be human. "In God alone is there full correspondence between personhood and being … In human persons in contrast, personhood and relationality are imperfectly realized."[52] Humankind has lost an understanding of what it means to be human because of the fall and has to learn how to once again be human. God becoming human through the Incarnation teaches humanity both the need for God and how to dwell with God in unity and communion. Without this, our lives are not meaningless, but they are lacking a deep richness of purpose and longing that comes through embracing God in love.

Our humanness restricts our ability to relate to God. As creatures created in the image and likeness of God, we bear a reflection of the divine, but it is not something we

[51] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 207.
[52] Groppe, "Trinitarian Theology," 750.

can completely claim on our own accord or understand. Humanity in communion with God and the Trinity is beyond our human understanding.[53] However, our human nature limits our ability to understand everything about divine nature, so God expects us not to understand everything about him, which is very human for us. While we cannot know everything about our Creator, we are still able to dwell in communion and accept God's loving embrace.

Conclusion

The goal of human life is reflecting divine life by dwelling with God in communion.[54] Prayer as contemplation transforms the nature of a human being as we become the living embodiment of prayer. We bring contemplation into our very being, and it becomes part of every aspect of our human life.[55] Through the practice of contemplation, God orients humanity toward heaven, as we remember we are creatures created to bear the image and likeness of God. Without the prayer of contemplation, the practice of true prayer, humanity stumbles around life trying to grasp the meaning and purpose of life that we cannot find. We discover the purpose of human life through the Incarnation, where in dwelling with God, teaches us how to be human.

No Church Father cultivated the understanding of human life as dwelling in communion with God through contemplation more than John Cassian in his *Conferences*. In this document written by Cassian, his readers explore the practice and meaning of the transformation of the human person through contemplation through his various

[53] Groppe, "Trinitarian Theology," 750.
[54] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 76.
[55] Clément, *On Human Being*, 66.

encounters with desert fathers, whom he calls *abbas,* and how they encounter and experience God in the desert. In the next chapter of this thesis, we turn to the origin of the *Conferences* and life in the monastic desert and attempt an understanding of how God transforms human beings through an encounter of him in contemplative prayer, which has roots back to the beginning of monasticism.

CHAPTER 2

RENUNCIATION AND PURITY OF HEART AS A PRELUDE TO CONTEMPLATION

Introduction

John Cassian is somewhat of a mystery. What scholars know about his life are guesses at worst and careful calculations at best. For example, one scholar writes, "we know relatively little about Cassian's life: for instance, his dates of birth and death are reasonable approximations, but approximations only, and the places of his birth and death are subjects of scholarly controversy."[56] While much of Cassian's life is a mysterious debate, we certainly know the impact of John Cassian's writings, most notably the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*. These famous works from Cassian involve conversations with various desert fathers about the monastic life. "[The *Institutes* and *Conferences*] became normative accounts of the Desert Fathers, particularly as Westerners found themselves separated from Egypt by political, and eventually, theological circumstances."[57] While little is known about Cassian, his legacy stands firm in the Christian tradition.

In this chapter, an introduction to John Cassian and his document the *Conferences* provide a framework for understanding two essential pieces of Cassian's theology of contemplation: renunciation and purity of heart. Renunciation begins the contemplative journey, where the monk's ascetic practices foster purity of heart and he transforms into

[56] A. M. C. Casiday, *Tradition and Theology in St. John Cassian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.
[57] Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 1.

the embodiment of Christian love. Embodying love, the monk creates an interior environment within himself to encounter communion with God. Practicing purity of heart is the monk's immediate goal, one he cultivates through his entire life until death. After death, he steps into what the desert abbas called the ultimate goal: communion with God in the Kingdom of heaven. Cassian's life and writings impact the development of monasticism, most notably his writings on how renunciation and purity of heart have a transformative impact on the human person by leading to contemplation.

Who is John Cassian?

To understand Cassian's impact on monasticism, it is important to understand Cassian's place of birth and where he lived at the beginning of his life. His place of birth remains a debate, but the most secure theory is that he is from what is modern-day Romania. During his childhood, he received a classical education, which is a probable reason Cassian was bilingual in both Greek and Latin, a skill that serves him greatly later in life when he begins writing.[58] Scholars also consider Cassian's bilingualism as a "bridge" between the Eastern and Western world.[59] Columba Stewart, who is the author of the book *Cassian the Monk,* gives an account of Cassian's life which argues that Cassian first entered monasticism near the end of the 4th century in Bethlehem along with his ever-constant companion Germanus.[60] However, Cassian and Germanus's stay in

[58] Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6. Stewart's account of Cassian's life and works is a great resource for biographical information on Cassian, also see Casiday's introduction in *Tradition and Theology in St. John Cassian*.
[59] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 3.
[60] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 6. According to Stewart, Germanus is a constant presence in Cassian's *Conferences* as a speaker and the abbas reference him various times throughout the *Conferences*.

Bethlehem was short-lived, as the two soon left for Egypt, where they dwelled for some time deeply entrenched in Egypt's monasticism.[61]

Eventually, Cassian found his way over to the West. There he remained for some time in Constantinople and Rome where he gained ecclesial authority under John Chrysostom.[62] However, Gaul is where Cassian's monastic theology and spirituality flourished, and his mission there provided "the best foundation for the emerging monasticism."[63] Cassian founded many monasteries in Gaul and influenced them with Eastern monasticism, which included writing the *Institutes* and the *Conferences.* Stewart believes Cassian died in Marseilles, located in southern Gaul, but not before Cassian influenced Marseilles' monastic life with his wisdom from the East.[64] While there is not much certainty about Cassian's life, the stories of his life and legacy remain alive in modern-day theology and spirituality, especially in his *Conferences*. In the *Conferences,* Cassian articulates a spirituality of contemplation rooted in renunciation and purity of heart that encourages a rich faith of uniting oneself with God.

Introduction to the Conferences of John Cassian

Scholars, such as Owen Chadwick, author of a study on Cassian called *John Cassian,* believe the publication of *The Conferences of John Cassian* occurred around 425 C. E. after Cassian settled into Gaul and established various monasteries.[65] Chadwick thinks of the *Conferences* as a guide for Cassian's monks in Gaul to gain exposure to the

[61] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 7-12.
[62] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 13.
[63] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 4.
[64] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 24.
[65] Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian,* Second Edition. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 19.

monastic spirituality that Cassian encountered in Egypt.[66] The Conferences also act as a type of sequel to Cassian's *Institutes*.[67] The whole document includes twenty-four *Conferences,* written by Cassian, in which he and Germanus dialogue with various desert abbas. Chadwick describes the *Conferences* by writing that Cassian "supposedly gives summaries, or reports, of discussions or discourses at which he was present."[68] According to Niki Clements, author of *Sites of the Ascetic Self: John Cassian and Christian Ethical Formation,* Cassian's *Conferences* contain various themes, but what they all have in common is the goal to reunite the monk with God in heaven.[69] As written by Cassian himself in his dialogue with Abba Moses,

> All the arts and sciences, said he, have some goal or mark; an end or aim of their own … And our profession too has its own goal and end, for which we undergo all sorts of toils not merely without weariness but actually with delight … And when he insisted on eliciting an opinion from us on this question, we replied that we endured all this for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.[70]

Like other professions, monk's way of life also had an end goal, but it was a goal not experienced until after death. Before then, they "endured" through renunciation and purification, hoping to keep their gazes fixed on their heavenly end. Cassian interweaves the themes of renunciation and purification through his writing and dialogue with the abbas, but he does not limit other themes within his *Conferences.* The monks practiced renunciation and purification, which helped intensify their focus on uniting with God in

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[66] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 3.
[67] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 37. In Columba Stewart's *Cassian the Monk,* he describes both the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* as phases of a whole, of which the latter follows the former.
[68] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 14-15.
[69] See Niki K. Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self: John Cassian and Christian Ethical Formation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 54, for Clements themes of Cassian's *Conferences.*
[70] John Cassian, "The Conferences of John Cassian," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church,* trans. Edgar C.S. Gibson (New York: The Order of Saint Benedict, 1894), *Conference* 1, chapter 2-3. In future notes, Cassian's *Conferences* will be abbreviated to, for example, *Conf.* 1.2-3 in place of "*Conference* 1, chapter 2-3."

the Kingdom of heaven without earthly distractions. When Cassian and Germanus replied to Abba Moses that the goal of their renunciations was the kingdom of heaven, Abba Moses replies, "Good, you have spoken cleverly of the (ultimate) end. But what should be our (immediate) goal or mark … The end of our profession indeed, as I said, is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven: but the immediate aim or goal, is purity of heart, without which no one can gain that end."[71] The end goal for the monk is the Kingdom of heaven, but before then the monk seeks purity of heart. Purity of heart is a necessary action to experience the ultimate end. The reason, as explicated below, is because purity of heart is contemplation's catalyst.

Cassian ties contemplation unequivocally to the way he lived and understood monasticism. Many scholars highlight the role of contemplation in Cassian's work, Casiday in particular writes that "*contemplatio* was for Cassian the summation of Christian virtue in its organic, embodied totality: it is the love of God, uniting the Christian to God and fellow Christian."[72] What this means for Cassian is that contemplation is the embodiment of Christian love.[73] The foundational theology in Cassian's *Conferences* is that contemplation is the embodiment of Christian love, uniting Christians to one another and God. Columba Stewart articulates the foundational theology of contemplation in Cassian's *Conferences*, based on *Conference* 1. Stewart gives his readers these five points regarding the importance of the idea of contemplation as Cassian's foundational theology:

1) Practical works of asceticism and of service are an essential part of the Christian life, but they are provisional, necessary now because of the sinful reality of human existence. Their necessity ends with death.

[71] *Conf.* 1.4
[72] Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 64-65.
[73] Clément, *On Human Being*, 64.

2) Contemplation is part of both the present life and the life beyond death because its object (Christ) and its basis (love) are enduring.
3) The "beatitude" of the saints in heaven consists of their "contemplation" of God (i.e., the "beatific vision").
4) Contemplation in this life can anticipate and participate in that heavenly contemplation.
5) Although constant contemplation is impossible "while still in the flesh," every effort must nonetheless be made to maintain a contemplative focus.[74]

The above points are powerful statements articulated by Stewart. Contemplation is a reality present in both our human life and our heavenly one, whereas actions (associated with "works of asceticism and of service") are only present in our human life due to the consequences of the fall. By the word "beatitude" and "beatific vision" Stewart writes that Cassian's goal was communion with God, thus contemplation is an "eschatological orientation" that points one toward beatitude in heaven.[75] The final two points are a reference to the fallen state of humanity but have in mind the hope of heaven. The importance of contemplation is vital to monasticism based on the five points articulated above, and the themes of these remain through the whole document of the *Conferences*.

The *Conferences* guide the monks into a richer experience of spirituality through contemplation where renunciation and purification aid them on their journey. While "guide" is a fitting word for Cassian's work, a word that fits better yet is "map." The *Conferences* are maps drawn by Cassian the traveler. The concept of the *Conferences* as maps and Cassian as a traveler is beautifully articulated by Columba Stewart. Stewart writes, "the *Conferences* are perhaps best seen as maps of the spiritual life … a collection of pilgrim's maps: everything on them is oriented to a destination. In these maps one sees

[74] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 47-48. Stewart argues that Cassian is placing contemplation as the foundation for the *Conferences*, as opposed to action.
[75] See Stewart's *Cassian the Monk*, pages 55-57 for more information on Cassian's beatific eschatological orientation and its connection to contemplation.

Cassian, that great traveler, charting various ways to travel across the temporal and spiritual vastness between earth and heaven."[76] Cassian is not only a traveler, but a bridge. He is the bridge bringing the monastic wisdom of the East into the West; he is the bridge that carries the wisdom of the desert abbas to fledgling monks.[77] Cassian the traveler embarked on a journey in the space between heaven and earth, and he drew his map, the *Conferences,* to assist and guide others along with him. When writing the *Conferences,* Cassian was thinking of his monks at Gaul, however, his maps continued guiding others on their journey even after Cassian's had come to an end. The *Conferences* are maps we can use today, as our destination remains the same. The map of the *Conferences* orients us, as they did Cassian's monks, to the destination of heaven, where there is full union with God.

The *Conferences* guide fellow monks and readers using the practices and wisdom of the desert abbas. Chadwick outlines their wisdom in these three steps to unite with God in heaven: first renounce the world; second, purify the heart; and third, allow contemplation to begin.[78] The practice of renunciation and purification aid the contemplative practice because it allows the soul to focus only on God without becoming distracted by the world. Cassian clarifies that renunciation and purification are good things, but he cautions his readers on the danger of seeking purity of heart without seeking the final goal and destination. Cassian hopes that his readers practice renunciation and purification in humility and out of love of God only. Chadwick interprets Cassian's *Conferences* as seeking communion with God and writes that

[76] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 40-41.
[77] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 3.
[78] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 93.

"beyond the fear of judgement or hope of reward the soul comes to a higher motive, the love of goodness or virtue itself. The Christian is seeking to be united with God. God never acts from fear or from hope. He wills goodness because it is good."[79] To will goodness because it is good is what Cassian wants his monks to understand; the love of God is reason enough to practice renunciation and purification, for if they are acting out of love for God then they shall see God.

Renunciation in the Desert

Owen Chadwick declares that "renunciation was the beginning,"[80] implying that renunciation was the start of the monks' journey toward theosis, the communion of the human person with God. For the desert Christians, renunciation includes a life in the desert, quite literally renouncing the world they know for the sake of pursuing God. Chadwick outlines Cassian's thinking regarding his *Conferences* as follows: "After the monk has renounced the world, the first stage on his journey is to fight crude sins and conquer [them]. Once he has conquered he attains a state where virtue is a habit; and this state is that where the true life of the contemplative can begin."[81] When Chadwick mentions the "crude sins" he is referring to Cassian'sthe *Institutes* where we find a list of sins the monks worked against, which Chadwick states is the influence of Evagrius Ponticus, Cassian's mentor. These sins include gluttony, fornication, covetousness, avarice, anger, melancholy, acedia, boredom, vanity, and pride. Chadwick states that

[79] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 101.
[80] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 82.
[81] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 93. This outline that Chadwick provides is based on his assumption that the *Conferences* are a sequel to the *Institutes.* Chadwick believes that the two works intertwine, however, Cassian wrote the *Institutes* for monks involved in the active life of virtue, and he wrote the *Conferences* for the virtuous contemplative life.

working against these sins summarized a monk's "active life."[82] These names are the sins of what the early Church traditionally thought of as the passions of the flesh.

Oliver Clément defines the passions as "those suggestions or impulses that emerge from the subconscious and soon become obsessive. In the ascetic sense, remember, the 'passions' are blockages, usurpations, deviations that destroy the human being's basic desire [communion with God]."[83] While the passions are deviations to the monk's basic desire, they did not need to fear or be anxious about them, as the passions were an opportunity for virtue. Experiencing the passions of the flesh, while the monks worked against them, are not unwelcome. In fact, experiencing and facing the passions is good. Chadwick writes that experiencing the passions encourage, in this context, a monk to work with his instincts and passions to grow in virtue for the reign of God. He writes, "In human nature exists a beneficent tension, the war between flesh and spirit. The flesh desires comfort, the spirit reaches upward … At the other extreme the spirit, unless anchored by bodily weakness, would soon pass into pride or fanaticism … The carnal instincts are good." [84] The passions are not unwanted or a nuisance to avoid. Instead, encountering them aids a monk's growth in virtue. If a monk decides that communion with God in heaven is his life's purpose, the monk changes and centers his life around this purpose. Recall from chapter 1 of this thesis that metanoia is the monk's life reorientation. Metanoia, then, keeps the passions in check and reminds the monk of their end goal and purpose. Renunciation and metanoia both work together toward purity of heart.

[82] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 94.
[83] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism,* 167.
[84] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 94.

Owen Chadwick was correct in describing renunciation as the beginning of the monk's journey. Committing to live in the desert surely changes and challenges the meaning of living a human life. An interesting note is *why* so many people fled into the desert. Graham Gould, the author of *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community,* argues a few reasons. These include 1) movement of protest against the state of the Church; 2) a return to values of the apostolic Church; 3) ascetic reaction of the time, and 4) a response to various social and political needs.[85] While all these reasons have their historical place and theological reasoning, the reason that is the focus of this thesis is the ascetic reaction. James Goehring, author of *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert,* writes that another reason many fled into the desert was in search of a solitary life with God. "In joining together the powers of Christianity and Rome, [Eusebius] [86] presented Christianity as the new philosophy which demanded among its elite practitioners an ascetic life."[87] Goehring's understanding of the flight into the desert was the result of the newfound union between the Church with the Roman Empire, and therefore the Church assumed the philosophical practices into their Christian philosophy. However, no matter what the "origin" of monasticism is, Goehring concludes that monasticism has its roots purely in divine inspiration.

> The monastic sources themselves almost universally agree in placing the origins of monasticism in divine inspiration. Antony and Simeon responded to hearing the gospel, and Pachomius was given a vision. While one may choose to discredit the supernatural nature of this explanation, it shares with the evidence the sense of asceticism as bursting forth simultaneously in myriad places.[88]

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[85] Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 2-3.
[86] Goehring argues that Eusebius offers an origin to monasticism based on his writings, specifically *Ecclesiastical History,* which ties in themes of the gospel message with the practice of asceticism.
[87] James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 17.
[88] Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert,* 35.

Whatever the reason for flocking to the desert, the ascetic transformation and experience is clearly based on the writings of many of these desert fathers and mothers that shared their knowledge of the desert with the world.

Whatever reason the desert fathers and mothers have for leaving society to dwell in the desert, their act of renunciation is a "withdrawal" from society. David Keller articulates this idea in his work on contemplation. Keller writes that the desert "forms a fundamental aspect of transformation: *withdrawal* … There is a definite sense of 'leaving' or withdrawing from the dominance of conventional life, even for short periods, to find a venue for the slow process of transformation."[89] The withdrawal to the desert and the renunciation of conventional society transformed the monk. The asceticism of withdrawal and renunciation was transformative because "Early Christian ascetics assumed that humans were transformable: the human person could be improved by ascetic practice … early Christian ascetics usually claimed that soul and body were tightly connected, that the actions and movements of one had a direct effect upon the other."[90] Reorienting the passions toward heaven assisted the monk's whole being to turn toward heaven, and this transformative act, with God's grace, opened the monk to the love of God. Cassian was also convinced of the transformation of the monk, and Peter Brown in *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* writes that Cassian believed in this transformation, too.

> [Cassian] was convinced that the very depths of the person could shift. Not fully available to his consciousness, the forces within him nevertheless lay within the power of the free will to master, in vigilant collaboration with the grace of God.

[89] David G. R. Keller, "Reading Living Water," 422-423.
[90] Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self,* 14.

> The inner world of the monk could be transformed … into the primal fire of Christ's embrace. A *fullness of peace* would flood into the heart of the monk.[91]

Cassian not only believes in the transformation of renunciation, but he writes frequently of it in his *Conferences.*

In *Conference* 3 Cassian writes of three kinds of renunciations in conversation with Abba Paphnutius. Cassian articulates them as follows: first, renunciation of material objects and other belongings; second, a renunciation of the passions which formerly filled the soul; and third, a renunciation from the world itself, for God created human beings for heaven.[92] Abba Paphnutius instructs the monks to practice these renunciations, for they will build on one another and help the monk see God. Also, the monk begins to see the world as it truly is: temporal. The world, even in its grandeur, beauty, and greatness, is not meant to last forever. The world's temporary nature is why Cassian encourages the monks, when they reach the final step of renunciation, to detach themselves from worldly things and set the heart on what is invisible, which is God. Cassian understood that communion with God is the greatest longing and purpose of the human being and wanted his monks to keep this goal in sight.

Setting sight on what is invisible sounds like a paradox, but for Cassian's monks this meant being in the world but not of it. The monk, renouncing his belongs, his passions, and the world, becomes pure in heart for "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."[93] If purity of heart is the end goal of the monk, or at least the immediate

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[91] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 422-423.
[92] Cassian relates his three renunciations with three Old Testament books: Proverbs (the first renunciation), Ecclesiastes (the second renunciation), and the Song of Songs (the third renunciation). See *Conference* 3, chapter 6.
[93] Matthew 5:8

goal, then renunciation is the means. Renunciation is the way toward purity of heart and eventually contemplation.

Purity of Heart

Abba Moses, in his wisdom of the desert life, advises Cassian and Germanus that the goal of the monk is union with God. Moses speaks clearly with the two younger monks about this end and its importance; however, he stresses arriving at theosis takes work. The abba knows the difficulties and challenges the monks encounter while on the path of theosis, but he never discourages them or leads them astray. Instead, Moses instructs them on moving forward and following the direction of theosis. The most important instruction that Moses offers Cassian and his friend is purity of heart, which is the goal of the monk before death and an essential step toward union with God. An integral part of the journey, purity of heart transforms the monk into an embodiment of God's love.

Commenting on Cassian's conversation with Abba Moses, Clements identifies Abba Moses encouraging the young monks to follow "prayer practices" that orients them to theosis. "Moses helps stage how habituation in prayer practices enables an orientation of the whole ascetic and trains one's attention on an ultimate good."[94] The prayer practices, according to Clements, is manual labor, scriptural meditation, and dietary practices which uproots the passions of the monk.[95] These practices cultivated purity of heart, and purity of heart cultivates contemplation. "Cassian's double imperative involves both the ultimate objective of reaching the 'Kingdom of God' and the proximate

[94] Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self,* 109.
[95] See Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self,* 95-102.

objective needed to successfully pursue it," meaning that reaching the Kingdom of God requires purity of heart.[96] The "double imperative" Clements refers to is the two goals of the monk—communion with God and purity of heart. For the monks, the Kingdom of God seems like a faraway, long-term goal or experience, but purity of heart was a is a closer, short-term goal that the desert Christians could work on achieving.[97]

The monks receive an important caution concerning purity of heart. While purity of heart is their immediate goal, they should not confuse it with the ultimate goal for the danger it may cloud their pursuits toward union with God. Stewart describes purity of heart as the place where ascetic practices and contemplation meets.[98] Again, purity of heart is the immediate goal, whereas union with God is the ultimate goal, and purity of heart helps one to move toward union with God. "[Cassian] sets a standard of purity of heart that seems impossibly lofty. Before probing his teaching about human perfectibility, however, one needs to understand why purity of heart is not an end in itself: the point really is to see God, an endeavor that begins in contemplation."[99]

If the ability to see God begins in contemplation, what does purity of heart mean, and how does it support contemplation? Columba Stewart comments and clarifies the context of purity of heart in Cassian's time. "By Cassian's time 'purity of heart' had already become a privileged term that Christian and monastic writers used to describe moral and spiritual integrity."[100] Purity draws its roots from Old Testament traditions and Platonic philosophy, where purity means "clarity of purpose, freedom from distractions

[96] Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self,* 109.
[97] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 41.
[98] Stewart's *Cassian the Monk,* 47.
[99] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 47.
[100] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 42.

or needless disturbance."[101] Purity of heart was a state that a person experienced through disciplining the worldly passions, and the most disciplined way of doing so was to reside in the desert. However, in Cassian's theology in conversation with the desert abbas, and his influence under Evagrius, purity of heart is Christian love.[102] If the monks cultivate purity of heart, they cultivate love and eternal communion with God. "For Cassian," Stewart writes, "love is the very definition of eternal life with God."[103] If the monk nurtures love he need not despair a sense of separation from God, for where there is purity of heart there is love, and where love is God dwells also.

Columba Stewart describes three parts of purity of heart within Cassian's theology. They are 1) ascetical purification, 2) theological equation of purity of heart with love, and 3) liberation from sin and tranquility of heart.[104] Regarding ascetical purification, this was the discipline of life in the desert that resulted from renunciation and withdrawal from society. "Time and disciplined effort are required to restrain the human mind's natural attraction to the stimuli that come at us from all directions."[105] Ascetical purification removes distractions that kept one from God, and this disciplined practice purifies the monk. The second aspect of purity of heart, the equation of purity of heart with love, is a reminder that purification is not the goal of life itself. Stewart writes, "Cassian's equation of purity of heart with love is part of his strategy to forestall misunderstandings about the proper place of ascetical discipline or works of ministry in monastic life. Ascetical deprivations help to purify the heart, but they are not themselves

[101] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 42.
[102] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 44.
[103] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 44.
[104] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 43-44.
[105] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 44.

the goal."[106] Asceticism is the disciplined practice of reorienting one's life toward God through the growth of virtue. The final aspect of purification is liberation and tranquility. On this final aspect of purity of heart, Stewart writes "purity of heart means freedom from domination by sin and the possession of a deep inner peace."[107] Stewart believes this ideal of purity of heart comes from Cassian's *Institutes,* for Cassian writes that the monk must become one with the cross of Christ.

> And as he who is fastened to the wood of the cross no longer considers things present, nor thinks about his likings, nor is perplexed by anxiety and care for the morrow, nor disturbed by any desire of possession, nor inflamed by any pride or strife or rivalry, grieves not at present injuries, remembers not past ones, and while he is still breathing in the body considers that he is dead to all earthly things, sending the thoughts of his heart on before to that place whither he doubts not that he is shortly to come: so we also, when crucified by the fear of the Lord ought to be dead indeed to all these things … having the eye of our minds fixed there whither we hope at each moment that we are soon to pass.[108]

These themes carry over to Cassian's *Conferences* as well. When dialoguing with Abba Isaac, Cassian wrote down the wisdom this abba shared on prayer: "The aim of every monk and the perfection of his heart tends to continual and unbroken perseverance in prayer, and, as far as it is allowed to human frailty, strives to acquire an immovable tranquility of mind and a perpetual purity."[109] Reaching this final stage of purity of heart, the monk becomes free of earthly attachments; he no longer cares for them. This liberation frees the monk to unite himself to Christ through his ascetic practices. The

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[106] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 44.
[107] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 45.
[108] John Cassian, "The Twelve Books of John Cassian on the Institutes of the Coenobia, and the Remedies for the Eight Principal Faults," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church,* trans. Edgar C.S. Gibson. Second Series, vol. 11 (New York: The Order of Saint Benedict, 1894), Book 4, chapter 35.
[109] *Conf.* 9.2

union with Christ, then, cultivates a contemplative life where the monk connects their purity of heart and their contemplation.[110]

Owen Chadwick describes how the asceticism of renunciation and withdrawal deepen the heart's ability to love God, which resonates with Stewart's idea of purity of heart being the place where contemplation and asceticism meet. Chadwick writes about these practices of renunciation, and how "The heart learns to love God as the mind learns to apprehend him. The mind's vision deepens love; and the love of God, made deeper by serving him better, clears the sight of him."[111] Purity of heart teaches humanity how to love God because in renouncement we can see how temporal the world is, but also how good the world is. In a sense, purity of heart is the state of human beings becoming fully alive.[112] When the passions no longer pull us down, and we discover a sense of purpose and direction we remember that God created us in his image and likeness. Remembering this about ourselves frees us to love God. For Cassian, the notion of purity of heart was rooted in the beatitude "blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Purity of the heart was a necessary step to experience theosis, as "seeing" God is contemplation and enabled through purification of the heart.[113] "Contemplation is purity of heart in action, the present mode of the vision of God promised to the pure of heart. Contemplation is the ground between the present 'goal' and the heavenly 'end,' and it is always centered on Christ."[114]

[110] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 47.
[111] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 84.
[112] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 42.
[113] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 43.
[114] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 47.

Purity of heart leads to contemplation, and in doing so is the center of Cassian's monastic theology. "Purity of heart is the centerpiece of Cassian's monastic theology, the term he uses to describe monastic perfection … purity of heart embraces Cassian's many other metaphors of perfection."[115] One of the other metaphors of perfection is contemplation. Through renunciation, human beings, as the image of God, become more "like" God, and purification leads us to love. Love, then, strengthens contemplation, and contemplation creates the space for theosis. "The effects of contemplation are mentioned occasionally … it brings union with God, by union of wills though not in essence. The soul comes to the image of and likeness of God, it feeds on the beauty and knowledge of God, it receives the indwelling Christ, it is filled by the Holy Spirit."[116] Love, frequently referred to as purity of heart, is the transformative part of the journey towards theosis. Without love, we are not able to enter contemplation and into that holy temple where God dwells. "For we do not doubt that those lofty heights of love, by which, as you have hitherto explained, we mount to the image and likeness of God, cannot possibly exist without perfect purity."[117] Purity of heart is love, and that love enables contemplation.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced John Cassian, the bridge between Eastern and Western worlds and the traveler who navigates the sea of life. Scholars paint Cassian as a guide who curated the *Conferences* as his maps to guide his monks on life's stormy seas. The destination of his maps is the Kingdom of God, where communion with God fulfills the

[115] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 42.
[116] Chadwick, *John Cassian,* 107.
[117] *Conf.* 11.14

purpose of the monks' life. Cassian paints the dialogues with the Egyptian desert abbas in his *Conferences* and encourages his monks in the west to follow these voices and guides Cassian gives them. Navigating to their destination the passions confront the monks, but the ascetic practice of renunciation propels them forward on their journey instead of hindering them. Eventually, renunciation purifies the monks and they become the embodiment of Christian love. Through embodying purity of heart, the monks cultivate a contemplative state of life where they experience an encounter of communion with God through their transformation.

CHAPTER 3

"CONTEMPLATION" IN JOHN CASSIAN'S *CONFERENCES*

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, we have discussed the purpose of human life being theosis, which is a word meaning union with God. We are unable to experience full communion with God on earth, but contemplative prayer acts as a gateway to our divine communion before death. To experience contemplative prayer, practices such as renunciation and purity of heart aid us in this communion so that we focus solely on God without distraction. Renunciation leads to purity of heart, and purity of heart leads to an authentic encounter with God. The encounter is "authentic" because we are fully alive. Abba Moses spoke of two goals of human life: the immediate goal, purity of heart, and the ultimate goal, theosis. Renunciation helps us to achieve the immediate goal, and in turn, the immediate goal helps us reach the ultimate goal. Though full communion with God is a far-off distant reality, our practice of purity of heart enables the ability to recognize the nearness of God who is already present with us. What we lack is the ability to recognize God's nearness. Renunciation and purity of heart clean the clouded lenses that prevent us from seeing God and instead allow us to see God's nearness, at least to the extent that our lenses allow.

Even with the practice ohuf renunciation and purity of heart, however, our communion with God is not automatic. Again, communion with God in its entirety is not possible before death. What is possible is the glimpse of this communion. Nevertheless, experiencing a glimpse requires that we learn how to pray. Learning to pray teaches us

how to live a life of prayer, and in living a life of prayer we enter an intimate connection with God. Learning how to pray readies us for a transformative experience of contemplative prayer, and while contemplation is a type of prayer, not every prayer is contemplative. Contemplation is "true" prayer because it is the prayer that transforms us into the likeness of God. This chapter explores this transformation through the acts of remembrance, mediation, and contemplation. This chapter also examines the role of Scriptural meditation as a way to pray unceasingly, and how this aids contemplative practices. Contemplation, as understood by John Cassian, is spiritual knowledge gained from the ascetic life and enhanced through scriptural meditation and purity of heart. While there are various meanings to the word "contemplation" in Cassian's work, it is a vital theme that Cassian highlights throughout the *Conferences.* Cassian's understanding of contemplation, which he learned from the desert abbas, enabled the desert Christians to become prayer through which they became "like" God.

The Use of "Contemplation" in Cassian's Conferences

In Cassian's *Conferences*, the use of the words "contemplation" and "contemplate" relies on his understanding of monastic ascetic practices and interpretation of scripture. Ascetic practices include any activity of the monk to discipline the body for growth in the virtues. Renunciation is the most notable form of asceticism. Marilyn Dunn, the author of *The Emergence of Monasticism*, writes on renunciation as an ascetic ideal and an activity which follows the pursuit of virtue. She says, "Cassian tries very hard to show that an ascetic life which depends on the idea of spiritual progress also acknowledges the need for divine grace. In his view of the monastic life this cooperation

of grace, which strikes a spark of good in the human heart, combines with the individual effort to move towards virtue."[118] The work of ascetic practices in conjunction with divine grace clarifies that it was never the monk alone who grew in virtue, but it always involves the workings of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God. When Dunn writes of the "spark of good in the human heart" she describes purity of heart, or the movement of love created and recognized through ascetic practices. Purity of heart renders a space within the human heart for the Holy Spirit to dwell, and cultivates a ground where virtue grows. Cassian juxtaposes contemplation with progress toward virtue in Conference 9: "Yet we ought by advancing in life and attaining to virtue to aim rather at those kinds of prayer which are poured forth either from the contemplation of the good things to come or from fervour of love … [which] arise for the acquirement of some virtue."[119] For the desert abbas Cassian spoke with, "advancing in life" and "attaining to virtue" develops through renunciation and whose goal is the acquirement of different forms of prayer.[120] The attainment of these prayers are from the "contemplation of good things" or the "fervour of love." Cassian equates love and purity of heart as one in the same, and the "contemplation of good things" is another understanding of contemplative prayer. The connection between purity of heart, or love, and contemplative prayer is rooted in ascetic practices.

The fruit of ascetic practices, then, is growth in virtuous habits. "Virtues are habituated dispositions and also character traits of the virtuous person."[121] In other words,

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[118] Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), 76.
[119] *Conf.* 9.16.
[120] In this Conference, Cassian is speaking with Abba Isaac on four different types of prayer: Supplications, prayers (vows), intercessions, and thanksgivings. Cassian notes in dialogue with Abba Isaac that these prayers arise from "contemplation of the good things."
[121] Blowers, *Moral Formation and the Virtuous Life*, 137.

virtues are actions the desert Christians perform and are rooted in their ascetic practices. The early Christians hoped these repeated virtuous decisions no longer become a choice but a habit. Virtues are any decision that works against the passions. In *Conference* 5, Cassian converses with Abba Serapion about combating the vices (or the passions of the body), and the abba says: "Wherefore in order to overcome accidie, you must first get the better of dejection: in order to get rid of dejection, anger must first be expelled …" and the abba continues until the monk expels all vices.[122] Expelling them requires virtue.

Pursuing virtue through ascetic practices is an active discipline, and growth in active discipline correlates to growth in virtue. In turn, the contemplative discipline correlates with growth in knowledge. The association of growth in knowledge and contemplative discipline is explicit in the *Conferences* and knowledge ties to the way Cassian writes about contemplation. Dunn notes the way Cassian distinguishes growth in the active life of the monk and the contemplative life. She writes,

> In *Conference Fourteen* [Cassian] uses the Greek terms *praktike* and *theoretike*, closely related to Evagrius' idea of the *praktikos* and *gnostikos*, but now in relation to biblical study and contemplation. Elsewhere, he renders *praktike* as *actualis disciplina* (active discipline) or *actualis vita* (active life) or *actualis conversatio* (active way of life). He uses *theoretike* several times, but generally prefers the Latin term *contemplatio* or, in *Conference Fourteen* when dealing with study of the Bible, 'spiritual knowledge'. [123]

"Praktike" and "theoretike," which translates to a variation of "action" and "knowledge," both impact Cassian's understanding and use of the word contemplation and contemplate in the *Conferences.* Cassian uses *praktike* for referencing the active life of the monk, which includes ascetic practices, or anything associated with the pursuit of virtue, then he uses various words for referencing the "contemplative" life of the monk, such as

[122] *Conf.* 5.10
[123] Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 77.

theoretike, *contemplatio*, and "spiritual knowledge." These different words, all which have a connection to contemplation, show Cassian's knowledge of both Greek and Latin and his ability to bring an understanding of monasticism from the East to the West. Also, the different words imply nuances for how Cassian's readers understood contemplation. For example, *contemplatio* translates to "contemplation," and, noted above, *theoretike* translates to "knowledge." Both meanings relate to the contemplation of God, but they show the different ways Cassian approached the subject.

The distinction Cassian makes between the active life and the contemplative life is intentional. The two have separate roles that come together intimately, but Cassian makes clear his preference for contemplation because it is the ultimate goal of the monk. To revisit Columba Stewart's interpretation of the *Conferences*, Cassian believes purity of heart (the immediate goal of the monk) is contemplation in action. Contemplation in action is the bridge between our purity of heart (seeing God on earth) and dwelling with God in heaven.[124] Stewart states that the center of Cassian's theology is contemplation because of the connection to communion with God. While works of asceticism are good, we only practice them because of the fall. On the other hand, both our earthly and heavenly life involve contemplation, and contemplation in our earthly life prepares us for our heavenly one.[125] Contemplation is the bridge that connects our life to our life after death, theosis, when we commune fully with God.

Contemplation is the core of the *Conferences*, and it is no surprise that the word "contemplation" or "contemplate" appears in various discussions with the desert abbas. The variations of the word contemplation occur in the *Conferences* a total of 58 times,

[124] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 47.
[125] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 47-48.

which includes references of contemplation with words such as *theoria* and *contemplatio.* Other words Cassian uses when referencing contemplation include words which imply contemplation such as "regard" and "gaze," or any word relating to "sight/insight."[126] Cassian references "spiritual knowledge" in the body of text 21 times. The theme of contemplation does not appear in every Conference, but it makes a strong appearance in the Preface of the *Conferences* with Abba Moses, especially when clarifying the purpose of human life. Contemplation remains an overarching theme of the *Conferences* because of its connection to theosis. The Conference with Abba Moses provides the framework for the rest of the *Conferences.* Even when other desert abbas do not explicitly mention contemplation, its presence remains as the *Conferences* guide the notion that the purpose of the monastic life and human life is communion with God.

Cassian's understanding of "knowledge" ties explicitly to the way he uses the varying words to reference the contemplative life. Stewart points towards Cassian's school of thought, inherited from Evagrius, which was Alexandrian and Platonic.[127] In this school of thought, contemplation and knowledge are two sides to the same coin. The contemplative life indicates the presence of knowledge and wisdom, and knowledge and wisdom paves a path toward contemplation, because for Cassian "the ultimate stage of contemplation is 'feeding on the beauty and knowledge of God alone [referencing *Conference* 1].'"[128] To highlight the relationship between contemplation and knowledge further, Stewart articulates that knowledge "characterizes the process of contemplation, just as contemplation is a dynamic way of describing purity of heart."[129] Purity of heart

[126] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 48.
[127] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 48.
[128] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 48.
[129] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 48.

enhances true contemplation, and contemplative prayer's epitome is knowledge, or "spiritual knowledge," as that is the term used in the *Conferences.* The *Conferences* weave together many pieces to a puzzle in an intricate way that connects the moving parts to reveal a final illustration of what it meant for the monks to be human. For the monks, being human is growing in the spiritual life until they were face-to-face with God. Until that moment, purity of heart and contemplation is what their life centered around.

Scriptural Meditation and Unceasing Prayer

Cassian's writing expresses the dynamic tension between the active life and the contemplative life. Within his writing, biblical interpretation and meditative prayer convey the tension between the two. In Conference 14, Cassian "explains that the 'discipline and profession' of the Christian life consists of a twofold knowledge, practical and contemplative."[130] Practical knowledge involves active practices, such as renunciation and purification, as asceticism enhances the active life. Contemplative knowledge "follows the acquisition of the practical," and relates to a spiritual knowledge of biblical texts.[131] Scriptural meditation is an active practice along with other practices of asceticism, but it also enhances contemplative knowledge within the life of the monk.

Meditation upon Scripture directly influences monastic prayer life. Through the practice of Scriptural meditation, the monk prays without ceasing. According to Stewart, Cassian's "technique of unceasing prayer is the climax of his program of monastic instruction. It is also a kind of valediction, leaving the reader with a practice that will

[130] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 51.
[131] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 51.

accompany him throughout his monastic life … as opportunity for mystical prayer."[132] Continual meditation on Scripture brings the monk to unceasing prayer, and this prayer draws the monk into contemplation. "Through such continuous feeding on Scripture, the monk receives 'all the feelings of the psalms, and begins to sing them not as if they were composed by the prophet, but as if written by himself, as his own prayer, drawn from deep compunction of heart.'"[133] Through "continuous feeding on Scripture" the monk, or the reader or hearer of Scripture, becomes the prayer themselves. This personal experience between the monk and God allowed him to pray continually.

For the desert mothers and fathers, praying without ceasing and meditation upon Scripture is not possible without the ascetic life. The practices of renunciation and purity of heart is vital before Scriptural meditation. For instance, recall from the previous chapter how the monks did not experience purity of heart until they renounced the passions. Once the desert fathers and mothers practiced renunciation and attained purity of heart, the height of Christian love, then they could see God. Another fruit of purity of heart is also contemplation. Cassian pairs "spiritual knowledge" (again, another form of contemplation) with Scriptural meditation. Niki Clements writes that the wisdom of Scripture is only available to the monk once they underwent purity of heart.[134] Purity of heart is important to practice before Scriptural meditation because purity of heart is the fruit of discipline gained from renouncement. A monk, disciplined in ascetic practices, uses the same practice of discipline for Scriptural meditation. The discipline needed for

[132] Columba Stewart, "The Use of Biblical Texts in Prayer and the Formation of Early Monastic Culture," *The American Benedictine Review* 62 no. 2 (2011): 195-196.
[133] Stewart, "The Use of Biblical Texts," 197.
[134] Niki Clements, "The Asceticism of Interpretation: John Cassian, Hermeneutical *Askesis*, and Religious Ethics," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason in Christian Ethics: Normative Dimensions,* ed. Bharat Ranganathan and Derek A. Woodard-Lehman (Springer International Publishing, 2019), 68.

practicing purity of heart is the same for that of Scriptural meditation, and the practice of purity of heart allows the monk to experience meditation deeper. Renunciation was the beginning of meditation on Scripture, for without this practice the monk would not have the discipline needed for meditation.[135] While the monk's meditation on Scripture is a disciplined practice, it was also a gift from God, for "although the illumination of the Spirit was a gift, that gift required preparation. The heart had to be examined, purified, and rendered receptive to the searching light of grace."[136] Ascetic practices, all leading to purity of heart, readied the monk for meditative prayer on Scripture. The heart, now held back by no attachments, could freely receive the wisdom of Scripture. "This internalization of texts, especially the psalms and similar biblical writings, was the fundamental and defining monastic practice, even more radical and distinctive than more obvious ascetic practices such as celibacy and fasting."[137] Scriptural meditation leads to mystical prayer, which is why Stewart calls it a "radical" practice more so than renunciation. In other words, it leads to contemplative prayer, a prayer without words or images, but simply the presence of God himself.

The connection between Scripture and "mystical" prayer was something Cassian and Germanus were trying to understand, and which they soon discovered was a way of life. In Conference 14, Cassian and Germanus sought Abba Nesteros for guidance on understanding Scripture better, but "Instead of offering methodologies for textual study, as one might expect, Abba Nesteros recommended a way of life."[138] The answer Abba

[135] Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 82.
[136] Rebecca H. Weaver, "Access to Scripture: Experiencing the Text," *Interpretation (Richmond)* 52 no. 4 (1998): 367.
[137] Stewart, "The Use of Biblical Texts in Prayer and the Formation of Early Monastic Culture," 189.
[138] Weaver, "Access to Scripture," 368.

Nesteros granted Cassian and Germanus on approaching Scripture revolved around the way they were living, as this impacted their Scriptural meditation. Regarding the abba's answer to Cassian and Germanus, "the knowledge that Cassian and Germanus sought consisted of two parts: the active or practical and the contemplative or theoretical. Practical knowledge, according to the system Nesteros presented, was the foundation for theoretical knowledge. It consisted of practices designed to bring about the complete reformation of the heart."[139] In summary, to undertake Scripture required the active and practical life, ascetic practices including renunciation and purification, which then gave way to contemplative or theoretical knowledge. In the work of Cassian's *Conferences* Scriptural meditation worked with asceticism and was inseparable from contemplation.[140]

Cassian believed Scriptural interpretation required disciplined experience, because "At the beginning of the *Conferences,* Cassian had defined contemplation as 'continuous prayer' … 'gazing upon God,' and 'feasting on the beauty and knowledge of God alone."[141] However, this understanding of contemplation grows throughout the *Conferences* from Cassian's various meetings with the desert abbas. "By the time he wrote the first conference of Nesteros, he had redefined contemplation as the study and understanding of scripture, and relocated it within a communal context."[142] Rebecca Weaver states that the monk's teaching and serving within the monastic community is associated with this latter understanding of contemplation. While a monk's service within a monastic community is important and has its place within the monk's role, this seems

[139] Weaver, "Access to Scripture," 369.
[140] Clements, "The Asceticism of Interpretation," 79.
[141] Weaver, "Access to Scripture," 375.
[142] Weaver, "Access to Scripture," 375. Weaver writes that Cassian's thinking develops as he writes the *Conferences,* and it is worth noting the time in which Cassian wrote this document, which Marilyn Dunn believes is between 420-430 C.E. See Dunn's *The Emergence of Monasticism* page 73.

more as a fruit of contemplation rather than a new framework of understanding this practice. If Scriptural meditation encourages the monk to perform services within his community, then this is another practice of the monks' that aid in unceasing prayer.

Contemplation as Unceasing and True Prayer

Unceasing prayer is a state of true prayer because the monk becomes prayer itself. Understanding the act of becoming prayer helps us recognize contemplation as a truly transformative experience that leads to theosis. From the preface in the *Conferences,* contemplation is highlighted as a type of goal for the dessert abbas and ammas: "Wherein just as I had anchored in the harbour of Silence, a wide sea opens out before me … and the contemplation of God, to which those inestimable [Anchorites] ever devoted themselves, more sublime than ordinary practical life."[143] The Anchorite's life was one dedicated to solitude and silence, the suitable environment for contemplative life. What the Anchorite and Coenobium shared was their renunciations and loosened ties from the world, all given up for the pursuit of a holier life, and Cassian remembers this when writing about contemplation and puts these desert abbas and ammas in their appropriate context when considering their contemplative life.

> Next let him bear in mind the character of the country in which they dwelt, how they lived in a vast desert, and were cut off from intercourse with all their fellow-men, and thus were able to have their minds enlightened, and to contemplate, and utter those things which perhaps will seem impossibilities to the uninitiated and uninstructed, because of their way of life and the commonplace character of their habits.[144]

[143] *Conf.* preface.
[144] *Conf.* preface.

Becoming the prayer of contemplation is the goal of the monastic life. For the desert abbas and ammas, contemplation is not possible without the active life because it provides a path to this goal. Scriptural meditation paves the path to an increase of "knowledge," amongst other practices of the desert monks. Cassian saw the contemplative life as greater importance than the active, as contemplation is the center of his theology in the *Conferences.* Through unceasing prayer, the monk becomes prayer himself. This leads to contemplation, and contemplation leads to communion with God.

Olivier Clément in *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* focuses on becoming prayer by looking at the writings of the desert fathers and mothers and how they described prayer and what it means to pray. Clément writes about prayer intending to become "true prayer," which is an experience of contemplation. Clément defines true prayer as "Any increase in the depth of existence, any perception of mystery in the presence of love or of beauty or of death, leads to prayer … Prayer does not seek to draw God towards us … Its purpose is to bring us close enough to him for dialogue, and to make us aware of his nearness."[145] To emphasize, true prayer is acknowledging the mystery of love, beauty, or death. True prayer is beyond acknowledging; true prayer is holding reverential respect for these mysteries. Beyond love, beauty, and death, these mysteries also include the mystery of the human person and the mystery of God. Finally, true prayer does not bring God to us. True prayer brings us closer to the awareness of God to talk with him in his imminence and nearness.

Contemplation of Mysteries in Conferences 6 and 14

[145] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism,* 181.

In Cassian's *Conferences*, two Conferences mention the contemplation of mysteries. The first Conference which mentions contemplation in relationship to mystery is Conference 6, in which Cassian is conversing with Abba Theodore. Abba Theodore is dialoguing with Cassian and Germanus about the Saints and their pursuit for the perfection of virtue. Abba Theodore says, "when with an overflowing heart [the Saint] not only longs most intensely for the future but actually sees it more clearly, when he is more effectually fed on spiritual contemplations … [they are] so inflamed with fervent of spirit as to pass with the utmost readiness of soul to things invisible and eternal."[146] Contemplating the depth of the heavenly mysteries, a depth with an "overflowing heart" and an "inflamed" fervent spirit, leads to a greater understanding of the invisible and eternal. Greater understanding arises from contemplative "knowledge," which is rooted in the active life of asceticism and is the wisdom of the acknowledgment that while these are unknowable mysteries contemplative prayer recognizes them and amplifies the depth of their beauty. Contemplating on them is an experience of drawing near to God, and the active and ascetic life intensifies this experience.

Conference 14 is the second Conference which mentions meditation on mysteries, which, as already noted, discusses the twofold aspects of monastic life: the active and the contemplative. Abba Nesteros is informing Cassian on the pursuit of spiritual knowledge and informs Cassian that while knowledge of certain aspects of life are pursued on earth, like the arts and sciences, they have little meaning beyond this life.[147] However, the pursuit of spiritual knowledge "tends to the contemplation of the secrets of invisible

[146] *Conf.* 6.10
[147] *Conf.* 14.1

mysteries," and this pursuit depends on "a fixed order and scheme."[148] Abba Nesteros continues to describe the scheme as the knowledge that is first, "practical, which is brought about by an improvement of morals and purification," and secondly, "the contemplation of things Divine and the knowledge of most sacred thoughts."[149] According to Abba Nesteros, spiritual knowledge, the business of contemplation on "spiritual mysteries," depends on purification (purity of heart) and contemplation. Through Conference 6 and 14, Cassian highlights the role of contemplation on spiritual mysteries as an acknowledgment of the increase in "depth in existence" and the "perception of mystery in the presence of love," while grounded in ascetic practices.

Considering the contemplation of mysteries grounded in the active life renders "contemplation" in the *Conferences* as having two meanings: a practical use and a theological use. In an article on the connection of Cassian's contemplation and community life, Philip Rousseau states that the first use of "contemplation" in the *Conferences* is concerning the improvement of character through cleansing and purification, and the second is the contemplation of the sacred.[150] Rousseau thinks that Cassian favors the latter, however, it is impossible to always contemplate on God, and writes that those who practice contemplation "will turn at times from contemplation to more practical necessities. More important, they agree that such inability to concentrate on the vision of God is in some sense natural."[151] In Conference 23, Abba Theonas frequently mentions contemplation and he "incorporates the whole experience of

[148] *Conf.* 14.1
[149] *Conf.* 14.1
[150] Philip Rousseau, "Cassian, Contemplation and the Coenobitic Life." *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History,* 26 no. 2 (1975): 113-114.
[151] Rousseau, "Coenobitic Life," 115.

contemplation, and its difficulties, within the general economy of human salvation, of fall and redemption."[152] Rousseau calls Theonas's approach to contemplation "primarily theological," whereas Germanus, with whom Theonas is in conversation, disagrees and responds to Abba Theonas with an "ascetic and psychological approach" to unceasing prayer.[153] However, regarding contemplation as a theological approach, Rousseau writes that "Theonas regards the contemplation of God as the Christian's ultimate goal," whereas Germanus's ascetic approach is "the fruit of conversion, the term of an ascetic endeavor: dependent on God's grace."[154] Rousseau interprets this conflict between the ascetic and theological ideal of contemplation as a tension between the inner world and the external world of a human. "When [Cassian] discusses prayer in the context of a relation between interior and exterior, he presents it very rarely as an inward-looking process. The closeness of God that prayer effects is not interpreted as a withdrawal … it is more an ascent of the spirit."[155]

Dynamics Between the Active and Contemplative Life

Rousseau highlights the differences between the ascetic and theological ideal because he finds this tension within Cassian's work. "In the opening sections of the *Conferences,* the abbot Moses emphasizes the importance of contemplation, and in exalted terms, speaking of the ascetic's progress towards a state of ever greater simplicity, the vision of God."[156] Contemplation is the vision of God, however, while the

[152] Rousseau, "Coenobitic Life," 115.
[153] Rousseau, "Coenobitic Life," 115.
[154] Rousseau, "Coenobitic Life," 116.
[155] Rousseau, "Coenobitic Life," 122.
[156] Rousseau, "Coenobitic Life," 116.

contemplative practice is performed by the monks, "There is an admission, therefore, that contemplation will acquire full meaning and become more than a possible ideal only after death." A complete experience of contemplation is not possible for the desert Christians, only a brief caress of the experience. For those who pursued the active life over the contemplative life, contemplation was difficult to experience, which is why Cassian prefers the anchoritic over coenobitism (though, Rousseau does argue that Cassian was a cenobite himself). Due to the discrepancy between the active and contemplative life, "Contemplation, in this sense, therefore, has been forced out of the ascetic's immediate experience, and has become an image of paradise, the rewarding vision of God that follows upon a life of virtue. It is seen, in other words, in theological terms, as the ultimate goal that gives a Christian life its meaning and its sense of purpose."[157] Contemplation, as being with God in paradise, is the goal of monasticism. Here, contemplation and union with God are the same. Essentially, Rousseau states that contemplation has more than a single meaning in the *Conferences.*[158]

Becoming Prayer: Remembrance, Meditation, Contemplation

Considering the theological and practical use of contemplation, we can return to Clément's work of describing contemplation as true prayer. True prayer is an increase of depth in the existence of the spiritual mysteries, remembering that increasing our awareness of the sacred mysteries of life is contemplation itself, as shown and described by Cassian through conversations with Abbas Nesteros and Theodore. According to Clément, Cassian's description of prayer is an encounter where "We are praying in our

[157] Rousseau, "Coenobitic Life," 116.
[158] Rousseau, "Coenobitic Life," 117.

inner room when we withdraw our heart completely from the clamour of our thoughts and preoccupations, and in a kind of secret dialogue, as between intimate friends, we lay bare our desires before the Lord."[159] When describing how to pray, Clément states that the first step is one of remembrance—it is remembering that we are beloved children of God. "The fundamental part of meditation that can pierce the heart suddenly … consists in recollecting that God exists and that he loves us."[160] Before contemplation begins, we must remember that we are God's children, and we must recall that God creates us in his image and likeness. Ascetic practices do help us remember this, as asceticism involves intentionally rooting out habits and ideas that further cloud our connection to God.

After the invitation of remembrance, Clément remarks on the importance of the psalms, as these are the scriptures that many monks ruminate on day and night. "Psalmody gives its rhythm to the life of a monk … the psalms ought to be our own; they ought to enter into and illuminate our most tragic experiences; they ought to be our cry to God over all the contradictions of our destiny, our violence, our despair, our fervour."[161] True prayer involves Scripture, and we have already examined Scriptural meditation's intimate connection to contemplation and spiritual knowledge. For the monk, living out Scriptural meditation impacts life within the desert. Christopher Kelly, author of *Cassian's Conferences: Scriptural Interpretation and the Monastic Ideal*, writes that "for Cassian, the reading of scripture is not a simple exercise of the eyes and mind but a complete, experiential immersion into a text that provides meaning and example."[162]

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[159] Cassian, *Conference* 9; Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 185.
[160] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 199.
[161] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 200.
[162] Christopher J. Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences: Scriptural Interpretation and the Monastic Ideal* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 101.

What Kelly implies is that these stories are not just stories of biblical narratives, but that those who engage with the text become one with Scripture. The stories in Scripture become about the monks. They find themselves within the narrative. What follows this immersion is a change in how the monk lived and is an active change following remembrance of God's love for us.

Following meditation on Scripture, particularly the Psalms, Clément writes that this then leads to contemplative prayer. Scriptural meditation opens the door for contemplative prayer because through meditation the soul learns intimacy with God, which follows the movement of our inner being which the love of God exposes. "When a phrase or a word in a psalm, or in personal prayer, takes hold of our soul or makes the heart exult, we should stop and go deep into this 'intuition of God.' We should cease to multiply words, and find rather the silence in the heart of the word, the Spirit at rest in the word."[163] Meditation is a prayer full of words and images; it is colorful and moving. On the other hand, contemplation is silent and still. The movement of contemplation is different than that of meditation, but one is a doorway to the other. Contemplation is, as Clément states, the deep "intuition of God" where the multiplication of words ceases, and we leave the soul with silence. However, the silence is not empty, but full of sound.

Falling into contemplation, this "intuition of God," Clément states that the next step to becoming prayer is invoking the name of Jesus and entering his presence. Invoking the name of Jesus is deeply meaningful, and Clément explains it like this:

> The name [of Jesus] does not contain the presence … but it summons it. The presence of Christ is thus the presence of the Trinity … Since human beings are in the image of God … the presence is already in them, in their "heart," … But this presence in the heart is unconscious; to call upon it is to make it gradually more perceptible by uniting heart and intellect … The Holy Spirit, the Breath of God, is

[163] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 201.

> linked to the Word from all eternity. Therefore, when a person's intellect and breathing utter the name of the Incarnate Word—Jesus—they are united with the Holy Spirit, and the person breathes and thinks in the Spirit.[164]

Invoking the name of Jesus summons the presence of the Trinity. To clarify, God is already present, and there is nothing we can do to influence how near God is to us. However, what is in our power is when we bring ourselves forth into the presence of God. As Clément says, the Trinitarian presence, God's presence, is already in us. We are just not conscious of the Trinitarian life within us. Through an ascetic life, we slowly become more aware of God's presence, and then through remembrance, meditation, and invocation, we awaken to contemplation to God's presence and become united to the Trinity. Breathing and thinking in the Spirit is dwelling in the intuition of God, and this comes from the intimacy of contemplation. God's nearness is no longer unconscious to us.

The union with the Spirit following contemplation and invoking the name of Jesus leads to an intense experience with the Trinity, and we find ourselves in the intimate but powerful presence of God. "Beyond all language and beyond the motion of prayer itself, the soul experiences what Cassian calls the 'prayer of fire,' fulfilment in the abyss of light and love of the Trinitarian life."[165] Prayer of fire is the intense experience of contemplation and is when we, as the image of God, become *like* God. "The early Mediterranean Christian communities of faith viewed this human journey as a movement from bearing the image of God in our nature to *manifesting* the 'likeness' of God through

[164] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 204. Clément says more about the role of silence in contemplation and prayer in *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, but we will come back to this point in chapter 4.
[165] Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 207.

our manner of life."[166] We become fully ourselves. Prayer of fire, the prayer of contemplation, is so consuming that it ignites the image of God within us.

Conclusion

Monastic life's goal is communion with God, which requires a second and more immediate goal, purity of heart. Through pursuing virtue, the monks controlled vices, or the passions, through ascetic practices such as renunciation. Ascetic practices are an active discipline, which John Cassian considers a part of the active life of the monk. When writing about the active life or active discipline, Cassian often used the Greek word *praktike*. All practices associated with the active life fade after death as the monk no longer needs them. Before death, however, the active life prepares the monk for contemplative life.

Cassian references the contemplative life, or contemplation, in the *Conferences* using *theoretike*, *contemplatio, theoria,* and "spiritual knowledge," and uses regard, gaze, sight or insight to imply contemplation. The way Cassian uses contemplation ties it to "knowledge" about God and closeness to the Creator and describes it as seeing God. The ability to see God and recognize his nearness is purity of heart, the fruit of the active life. Here, we see the relationship and continuum between the active life, purity of heart, and the contemplative life.

Another part of the continuum of the active and contemplative life is scriptural meditation. For the monk, meditation on Scripture is a vital practice that aides in contemplation, but he must first examine his life if he wishes to approach scripture.

[166] David G. R. Keller, "Reading Living Water," 416.

While mediation on Scripture itself is an active practice, it also aides in the journey into contemplative practices. To see God within Scripture, the monk must acquire purity of heart.

The monk's meditation on Scripture allows him to pray unceasingly. For the monk, praying without ceasing is becoming the prayer himself as he enters and contemplates the depths and mysteries of God. This is true prayer. True prayer is an act of remembrance, meditation, and contemplation, and becoming prayer allows the monk to partake in the Trinity in which there is deep intimacy with God. Deep intimacy with God, called the "prayer of fire," is a contemplative experience in which the monk comes into the likeness of God. Chapter 5 explores this idea in more depth.

This chapter examined many moving but important parts of contemplation in John Cassian's *Conferences* and how his readers, the monks of the 4th century, interpreted contemplation. However, there is another vital piece of this puzzle that further propels the monk into contemplation. That final piece is silence, the subject of the next chapter. There, we encounter silence as an all-encompassing experience of God which creates space for all of humanity to enter the contemplative life.

CHAPTER 4

LEARNING TO EMBRACE SILENCE

Introduction

If we are to talk about the transformation of the human person through contemplation, there is no way to have this dialogue without discussing the importance of silence. Silence is both a challenge and a gift. When I was young, around elementary age, I was sitting in Mass with my family. During one of the reflective and quiet times in Mass, I asked my mom why everyone was so quiet, to which she replied, "They are listening to God." As a child, this really intrigued me. I, too, wanted to hear God. So, I sat in silence, but I remember hearing nothing. The frustrating silence elicited loud protests from me, as I complained to Mom that I heard nothing. The memory of silence and not hearing God's voice stayed with me, and I always remembered sitting in silence as something both frustrating and not worth my time.

Silence is difficult, both in practice and in what it reveals about us. What this experience of silence reveals to me how impatient I was as a child, and my expectations to "hear God's voice" when I sat in silence. I expected God to speak to me in a loud and articulate voice, and when I did not hear this after ten seconds, I became frustrated. Sometimes I am still like this as an adult. I expect God to speak to me the way I want him to, yet I am unwilling to sit still and listen.

If we want to experience contemplation as true prayer, we must learn how to sit in silence. As John Cassian states in the *Conferences*, we must anchor in the harbor of

Silence if we are to devote ourselves to the contemplation of God.[167] Silence is the bridge between contemplation and our ability to recognize our union with God. If we work towards contemplation and yet not allow ourselves to encounter silence, we will never experience true prayer. In the book *Into the Silent Land*, Martin Laird describes silence as a requirement for contemplation because through contemplation we are "[allowing] something to take place."[168] Laird is describing allowing contemplation to take place within us because we are familiar with the presence of silence. Once we learn the true meaning of silence and the importance of practicing this skill, we realize that union with God is something that is already present inside of us.

Silence: Discovering the Holy Temple Inside of Us

Contemplation is a sacred space, like a holy temple, that exists inside of us and is a place of inner prayer. Entering this place of holiness requires silence—both external and internal. Silence means that we need to find a place of stillness around us but also within us to encounter contemplation. The temple of contemplation is difficult to find and approach because our world is full of noise, and it was even a challenge for the desert fathers and mothers to find as well, even though they had the solitude of the desert to experience silence. However, we must practice the skill of silence if we desire to enter the space of contemplation. Contemplation without silence is like wanting a plant to grow without watering it; something vital is missing that nourishes the growth. From the example of the desert fathers and mothers, we know that practices of renunciation and purity of heart aided in the journey to contemplation, and from Cassian's *Conferences*

[167] *Conf.* preface.
[168] Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

there are different ways of understanding what "contemplation" means and how someone experiences it. Silence is another practice that aides in understanding this prayer, and it may be the most important one. Through the practice of silence and entering our inner temple, we can experience contemplation as coming before God and sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Quieting ourselves and sitting before the feet of Jesus is challenging.[169] We need guidance and a gentle entry way to enter the space of the "temple." A helpful practice is mediation. Former Trappist monk Frank X. Tuoti describes the soul as a garden that we must properly nurtured to allow the seeds of contemplation to grow.[170] To do this, Tuoti suggests prayer that focuses on the name of Jesus or another repeated word or image to clear the mind and cultivate the garden of our soul to enter the space of union with God. Tuoti claims that this practice is rooted in the early traditions of the Church Fathers and Mothers and connects this practice to "silent, imageless prayer" and what the Church Fathers and Mothers called "pure prayer," which is another way of describing contemplation.[171] While coming into the silent place of our inner temple is challenging, we learn from the early desert Christians the benefits of meditative prayers to cultivate a practice of silence, and eventually contemplation.

Experiencing silence requires finding time and space to cultivate this meditative prayer practice. In *Into the Silent Land,* Martin Laird dedicates a chapter to the cultivation of stillness through practices of posture, breath, and using a prayer word. Laird notes two important factors of silence, or "contemplative practice" as he calls it, which include

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[169] Luke 10:38-39
[170] Frank X. Tuoti, "Contemplative Prayer: Antidote for an Ailing Generation," *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality and Social Concerns* 16 (2003): 28.
[171] Tuoti, "Contemplative Prayer," 29.

stillness and breathing, indicating that the body's posture must be one of attentive, intentional stillness. He writes that "the stillness of the body facilitates the stilling of the discursive mind," meaning that if we allow our bodies to slow down and find stillness our minds will follow.[172] Regarding the body's posture during this time, Laird draws on the wisdom of many Church and desert fathers, including Evagrius Ponticus, who was the mentor to John Cassian. Many of these figures produced various works on bodily stillness, breath, and silence. "Though not especially well developed, there is an ancient Christian awareness that physical stillness facilitates interior stillness … Evagrius is aware that the simple act of sitting still is an effective aid in the practice of vigilance and in keeping the attention from being stolen by thoughts."[173] Being still is the first challenge that arises when practicing stillness, often because we are bombarded with distracting thoughts, whether they be about what to have for dinner, and argument had with a friend, or even how you would rather be anywhere else. Laird's uses imagery of a mountain to depict what we experience during this time: "The marvelous world of thoughts, sensation, emotions, and inspiration, the spectacular world of creation around us, are all patterns of stunning weather on the holy mountain of God. But we are not the weather. We are the mountain."[174] He illustrates us as the mountain and our "thoughts" as the weather that occurs around the mountain. Once we find our grounding, or finding that physical stillness, we make better discernment between what is the mountain and what is the weather. While Laird continues to provide very specific instructions on where and how to sit when finding physical stillness, the most important aspect of this practice to

[172] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 32.
[173] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 33.
[174] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 16.

highlight is awareness. Awareness means acknowledging what is distracting in our environment and whether or not we are pulling our attention away from God to focus on those distractions.[175] When it comes to awareness, we have a lot to learn from our bodies when we become still, which Laird calls the "reservoir of wisdom" and claims "The body is a great reservoir of wisdom. Something as simple as bodily stillness and breathing make a contribution of untold value to discovering the unfathomable silence deep within us."[176]

Before we attend to the body's posture, breath, or the practice of the prayer word, however, we need to withdraw and find solitude. We need to cultivate an attitude of listening if we want to learn the awareness of silence within us. "Listening, regardless of what one's 'desert' is, forms a fundamental aspect of transformation: *withdrawal.*"[177] Few of us do not have the ability of becoming a hermit and living in the desert, we can find different ways of understanding what it means to "withdraw." The desert fathers and mothers lived in the desert hoping for transformation and spiritual solitude, and their withdrawal was a place of encountering God, but also the demonic. "The ancient Christian monks thought of solitude as a kind of paradise, a place where the full mystery of God became manifest. But they also knew it as a place of the demonic, where the terrors lurking deep within us could be unleashed with a nearly uncontrollable power and fury."[178] Withdrawing into solitude is a reckoning both of demons and with God.

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[175] An important note to mention is that finding stillness, and even quietness, is difficult and challenging. The difficulty and challenge of 21st century life demands all our time, attention, and energy through either work, school, family life, and much more. While finding 30 minutes or an hour to find physical stillness and silence seems unreasonable and unlikely, contemplation does not require it. Thirty to 60 seconds suffice just as well as an hour if the bodily attention and awareness are present.
[176] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 45.
[177] David G. R. Keller, "Reading Living Water," 422.
[178] Douglas Burton-Christie, "The Work of Loneliness: Solitude, Emptiness, and Compassion." *Anglican Theological Review* 88 no. 1 (2006): 26.

However, these demons are often our own selves.[179] Withdrawal is a time of authentic honesty with ourselves and is often hard to encounter but facing ourselves is an essential part of experiencing silence. Laird addresses this issue, claiming three facts to remember when entering silent contemplation. These include remembering that we are not our thoughts and acknowledging they exist and have their place, but now is not the time for dwelling on them.[180] While this time of contemplative silence may be an unsettling experience at first, we learn to trust in the presence of Christ that is within and around us. Continuing this practice sometimes cultivates experiences of peace and clarity. This experience of consolation is from contemplative practice which "nurtures interior silence, teaches us the art of letting go, and helps us experience our struggles with greater clarity and balance."[181] Without granting ourselves mercy, how do we learn to receive mercy from God? "Without an honest reckoning with the desolation of solitude, with the real sense of abandonment that so often colors this experience, we risk losing who and what God can become for the one who ventures into this lonely place."[182] Withdrawing into solitude makes us aware of the silence that exists within ourselves, even when our surroundings may be noisy and chaotic. Withdrawal refreshes us and we obtain a new perspective when we emerge back into our normal day-to-day routine. "The desert discipline of solitude gives the monk an altogether new center from which to view the world. He or she is no longer centered *out there* in the endless expectations of others, but

[179] Burton-Christie, "The Work of Loneliness," 33.
[180] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 93.
[181] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 5.
[182] Burton-Christie, "The Work of Loneliness," 26.

inside the hidden desert of the heart, in the presence of God found in the silence of one's cell."[183]

When we withdraw ourselves into a place of solitude, whether it be a quiet room, or even a closing of the eyes, we can find stillness and enter a place of prayer. Use of a "prayer word" enhances the cultivation of practicing of bodily stillness and attentiveness. To help silence our mind, mediation with a prayer word or phrase helps train our minds not to focus on the thoughts that tug at our attention. Laird mentions that the most well-known phrase used by monks was the phrase "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me."[184] The prayer word has great importance when learning to sit in contemplative silence. Whispering and praying a prayer word or phrase is cultivating a practice of meditation, and through meditation we become more comfortable with sitting in silence.

The distracting weather occurring on the mountain ceases through meditating on a prayer word and aids us in our contemplation, and helps in finding the place within us where God dwells. Practicing the prayer word is important because we have difficulty being motionless, and without stillness we cannot experience silence. "We must first grow still. This is precisely where we meet the struggle of the human condition: we cannot be still. Even if the body can be still, the mind keeps racing like a runway train. Our bodies may be the place of prayer, but our minds are usually not where our bodies are."[185] Traditions using the prayer word is a popular practice and entryway to prayerful meditation and stillness, and this practice arose from the belief that using the prayer word was following the example of Jesus during his forty days in the desert. "It was observed

[183] Belden C. Lane, "Desert Catechesis," 307.
[184] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 35.
[185] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 49-50.

that when Jesus encountered Satan he refused to be drawn into conversation with Satan, choosing to quote Scripture rather than engage in conversation."[186] Laird illustrates this theme by clarifying that it is okay when thoughts bombard us in prayer, because the point of having the prayer word is something to fall back on. "As the early contemplatives worked the example of Jesus into their own desert psychology, they realized the importance of not getting caught up in interior dialogues; for this gives way to the obsessive thinking that spells the ruin of inner peace."[187] The purpose of the prayer word is training the mind to encounter stillness and not to race after thoughts that come from every direction. "It is important to notice that it isn't a question of having no thoughts … So, give [the mind] something to do: let it quietly repeat a short phrase … keep the attention from chasing thoughts."[188]

The prayer word can help remind us that we are not the weather, but the mountain, as we continue a practice of silence. Beginning the practice of using a prayer word is as easy as it sounds. Laird recommends that "at the time of prayer let go of all other concerns, recollect yourself, and begin to repeat silently the prayer word. Whenever you become aware that your attention has been stolen, gently return your attention to the prayer word. Thus begins a journey to the depth of the present moment that can never be fully fathomed."[189] Whatever the depth of the present moment uncovers, there is a beautiful peace in slowing down the body and mind to simply sit and "be." While thoughts may race and tug and pull at our attention, we always have the prayer word to

[186] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 50.
[187] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 50.
[188] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 51.
[189] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 52-53.

guide us back to the present moment and ground us. The word is one of our choosing and is the beginning of practicing stillness and entering silence.

The last phase of practicing bodily stillness is uniting the prayer word with the breath. Laird writes that using our breath is a way to experience deep intimacy with God and helps "dispel the illusion of separation from God" that oftentimes leaves us in a place of desolation.[190] Laird recommends taking a few deep breaths after adjusting the body's posture for prayer to help ground yourself in the present moment. Taking a couple of deep breaths to ground the body is a great way to begin utilizing the breath with prayer. However, utilizing the breath with the prayer word is certainly beautiful. "Combine the prayer word with your breathing. If it is a single word, either on the inhale or the exhale … If the prayer word is a phrase, such as the Jesus prayer, recite half the phrase on the inhale and half on the exhale. The important thing is that the prayer word and the breath become one."[191] Laird describes the unity of the breath and prayer word becoming one as an "anchor in the present moment, a place of refuge and engaged vigilance."[192] What a beautiful way to find stillness!

Silence: Recognizing God Within Us

While it is sometimes helpful to have a word, image, or even a scripture passage to meditate upon when we enter silence, it is much more about *how* we are present in silence rather than *what* we are doing. Our presence in prayer is more important than the words we bring when we arrive, which is why many scholars place great emphasis in

[190] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 37.
[191] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 43. Laird parallels the use of breath in prayer with Scripture in Genesis 2:7.
[192] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 43.

contemplative prayer over meditative prayer (although both are valuable and important). "To pray without words is to put the proper emphasis on *being* rather than *doing* … In this expanding awareness, one finds *spiritual rest* in an unspeakable, unthinkable communion … In this resting, one *experiences* God in an intimacy where words become superfluous."[193] Words are not what carries the weight during silent prayer. Our presence does. The hope is showing up and entering the space of prayer and finding contemplation, the "temple" within us, and coming before God.

Once we have found our inner silence where we can simply *be* in the presence of God, the practice of silence withdraws us to a place of inner peace and quiet. We discover a temple where God dwells. "Contemplative prayer is an integral venue for withdrawal. Its various disciplines (such as centering prayer, imageless contemplation, *lectio divina*, walking meditation, etc.) take us away from and 'silence' our customary daily patterns of thinking."[194] We learn how to silence our surroundings (no matter how noisy they may be) and rest in God's presence and are not worried about actively "doing" something. In this space of inner quiet we find within ourselves the place where we come before God, and this is where contemplation begins and where we find communion with God.

Using a prayer word to meditate and enter silence sometimes fades away. There may be times we will not need this type of meditation to reach our inner temple and come before God. However, that is more rare than common. The meditative prayer word stays with us through our journey; sometimes we will need it, and other times we will not. Either way, the prayer word is always available for our use. Once we have cultivated time

[193] Justin Langille, "There is Nothing Between God and You: Awakening to the Wisdom of Contemplative Silence," *Sewanee Theological Review* 50 no. 3 (2007): 382.
[194] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 423.

and space to "grow" the garden of our soul it equips us to find our place of silence, and we experience the joy of praying without words and images and find rest before God. "Those committed to a contemplative practice know that the experience of praying without words awakens them to an intimacy so complete that images, thoughts, emotions, and words just get in the way."[195] We always have our prayer word or practices of meditation to provide a foundation of our silence, but ultimately, they are only temporary.

Sitting in the silence of our temple allows us a chance to experience a raw vulnerability before God. "Praying without words is not something I do for God; it is rather doing *nothing* in the service of *love* … it is a way of resting, dwelling, abiding, making one's home, and remaining in Christ."[196] Silence allows us to enter the presence of God with all that we are and an opportunity to rest with no expectations or performances. Not only does silence give us an opportunity for rest, but it also gives us a chance to have a relational communion with Christ, as resting in silent contemplation we come to know God. Through this experience of contemplative silence, we are not trying to force an outcome of some sorts, but rather it is an experience that "disposes us to allow something to take place."[197] This "something" is growth in our relationship with God. Contemplation is not a technique that comes with a "how-to" manual as it is much more of a skill that needs continual practice or an experience, we need to find within ourselves. *Into the Silent Land* by Martin Laird notes that contemplation does indeed require the skill of silence, and if we want to experience contemplation, we must dispose ourselves to silence, especially if we believe contemplation as a way to have communion with God.

[195] Langille, "There is Nothing Between God and You," 381.
[196] Langille, "There is Nothing Between God and You," 382.
[197] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 3.

Dwelling with God in contemplative silence in our inner temple allows us to know Christ more deeply as we let go of our own ego. As "one enters into deepening trust and intimacy with Christ there is less and less need for self-concern or self-reflection. Contemplation is a gift freely given, as one ceases putting anything between God and oneself."[198]

Finding our inner temple and learning how to sit in silence is a great adventure on our journey towards contemplation, but it is not the goal of the spiritual life. Remarking on the life of the desert abbas and ammas (particularly in this case Abba Arsenius), David Keller writes that "Although contemplative prayer was an integral part of [Arsenius's] new life, it was not its goal. Contemplative experience was a channel for living water that nourished the seeds that formed and sustained the life that flowed from communion of his soul with the fullness and will of God."[199] When we allow ourselves this silence with God, the practice is transformative as we come to know God as someone who is always with us.

Silence enables us to recognize that we are, and never were, separated from God. Laird articulates this argument in *Into the Silent Land,* and he says that the fall never separated us from God, and that separation is an illusion which dissipates when we learn stillness and silence. Laird writes, "Union with God is not something that needs to be acquired but realized … when the mind comes into its own stillness and enters the silent land, the sense of separation goes."[200] We need to acknowledge the union with God

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[198] Langille, "There is Nothing Between God and You," 381.
[199] David G. R. Keller, "Reading Living Water," 424.
[200] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 10. Laird writes our union with God already exists because God made us in our image and likeness, referring to Genesis 1:26. Then, Laird references Psalm 27:8, "Of you my heart has spoken, 'seek His face,'" and Psalm 62:1,6, "For God alone my soul in silence waits." Laird draws a connection between these Scriptures and the realization that union with God is our reality and separation from God is not.

already existing in our lives. We do not need to gain our union with God, but realize we already have it.

Separation with God was never our reality and is simply never possible. "Union with God is not something we acquire by a technique but the grounding truth that engenders the very search for God. Because God is the ground of our being … separation is not possible."[201] If we believe in a theological anthropology that states the purpose of our existence is communion with God, then we cannot exist without it. We do not strive for union with God, we have it, but because of the fall we have a distorted sense of separation. The fall clouded the lenses we use to see God around us and in us. However, the feeling of separation is valid and something we live with. Laird writes about the reality of separation from God being false, but the feeling of the separation to be an accurate part of our reality. He writes, "the sense of separation from God is real, but the meeting of stillness reveals that this perceived separation does not have the last word."[202] Even though we have a sense of separation, there is hope. There is hope in God Incarnate, and there is hope is our reckoning of God dwelling with us.

We already have union with God, but we lack the ability to recognize this presence. Our inability to recognize God with us is our reality, while separation from God is not. Our inability to recognize God's nearness and presence is why silence is important or finding that "inner temple" of contemplation within ourselves. Silence, however, is rather difficult to attain. We live in a world of constant noise and busyness, and the effort to find stillness and silence seems like too much. Even more, there is challenge in quieting our own minds of the noise that is within ourselves.

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[201] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 15.
[202] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 15.

Remembering, however, that we are the mountain and not the noise that surrounds us is why learning the skill of silence is important. We need to learn silence because our life and world is full of noise. Laird recognizes the need for us to learn silence because our minds are full of noise, and it is not until we silence this noise, or learn to be silent within the noise, that we recognize our union with God. There is a story in Laird's book that illustrates how noise distracts us from God's nearness. One day, Laird was going for a walk outside and encountered a neighbor walking his dog. The dog kept running in small, tight circles. Curious about this behavior, Laird asked the man what the dog was doing. The man replied that before the dog's adoption, he had spent most of his life in a crate and ran in tight circles to get exercise. Even though the dog now has space outside to run, it still prefers to run in small circles because that is how the dog knows to get exercise.[203] Laird says our minds are like that: locked in a cage that we ourselves create and are unaware of the space that exists around us and within us. "The mind's obsessive running in tight circles generates and sustains the anguish that forms the mental cage in which we live much of our lives—or what we take to be our lives…it makes us believe we are separate from God."[204] While separation from God may be a lie, we condition ourselves to believe this as true when we do not allow ourselves to notice that we are the mountain and not the weather.

Understanding silence, however, impacts how we experience it. Silence "is certainly more than the mere absence of physical sound. More important to realize, however, is that this ineffable reality that the word 'silence' points to is not something we

[203] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,*19-20.
[204] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 20.

need to acquire … It is pointing to something that is already with us."[205] Laird understands silence as something that means beyond the cessation of noise, and rather it is a noticing of the silence that exists within us. When we begin the journey of recognizing and seeking silence, we become more aware of God's nearness as well. Silence and God's presence coexist with one another, and if we seek one, we often find the other.

When we begin our journey of silence, we start to recognize God's presence within us. When we allow our minds to find stillness and silence, we recognize something deeper that lies within ourselves and something that we discover upon experience the joy and peace of silence. Laird illustrates this point with another story. This story is about a dancer who dances beautifully to all eyes except her own, because in her own eyes all she sees are the ways in which she was off-beat or did not perform as well as she had hoped. Laird remarks how she experienced great anxiety about her performance, and even started to dislike her life's work. Her mother planted these anxious thoughts with past criticism on her daughter's performance and appearance, and the thoughts stayed with the dancer throughout her career.[206] However, upon finding stillness through long walks she discovered the inner silence that "was deeper than her pain and anxiety and that when the chaos of the mind was quieted, the sense of anguish gave way to a sense of divine presence."[207] This type of transformation from silence is rare, as it involves not only looking deeper into our own selves, but beyond ourselves. "It is one thing to be attracted to silence; it is another to appreciate that silence points to

[205] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 24.
[206] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 21.
[207] Laird, *Into the Silent Land,* 23.

something beyond oneself. For that reason the more profound significance of silence is not so easily understood or embraced."[208] We need to look beyond ourselves if we are to recognize God within us.

Realizing God is already present with and in us changes how we approach contemplation. In "Reading Living Water" David Keller writes that contemplation has three primary roles in human transformation: listening to God, experiencing God and being formed by his presence, and manifesting God's presence in our desires, words, and behaviors.[209] If we allow contemplation to transform us, we need to make room for silence, as silence is where contemplation is cultivated and where we find that "inner temple" of quiet within ourselves. We *need* silence. If the purpose of our life is to reach theosis, or full communion with God, then our life is an ongoing journey of transformation through the spiritual practices of not only renunciation and purity of heart, but also silence. All these practices aid us in contemplation.

Silence is recognizing God's presence within us. Finding a practice of silence to recognize God's presence is difficult, but it is not necessary to run off into the desert to experience silence and solitude. We find silence wherever we are, as God is always with us and around us. "Contemplative prayer is not so much my finding God, but more my allowing God to find *me*."[210] Discovering that we are the mountain and not the weather of our lives is one step of awareness of God's nearness. At the heart of silence is love. The heart of silence is a gentle and tender entering the embrace of the presence of God, whether the silence lasts for thirty minutes or thirty seconds. "The wisdom of the ancient

[208] Langille, "There is Nothing Between God and You," 374.
[209] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 421.
[210] Langille, "There is Nothing Between God and You," 378.

desert reminds us to remain faithful in our relationship with the Living Christ without seeking union prematurely. Paradoxically, we often miss the essence of prayer: to pray is to *be* in love. Life begins to change from that center when divine love is deeply welcomed."[211] Transformation is rooted in silent stillness where we realize that God dwells with us and remains with us always. Our heavenly communion with God, theosis, will not occur in these silent moments, but we recognize a union that precedes our heavenly one. The love of God that surrounds us becomes recognizable when we quiet ourselves enough to the awareness of God's presence and listen to it.

Conclusion

When it comes to John Cassian, what does he say about solitude? There are debates whether Cassian preferred the coenobitic life or the life of the anchorites. Steven Driver, author of *John Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture*, writes about Cassian's role and views in both the community life of the cenobite and the solitary life of the anchorite. Driver makes clear that Cassian thought of the anchorite and cenobite as separate callings, however, both have a different experience when it comes to silence. "There was little doubt that each was a separate vocation and that each possessed its own perfection … One might, or perhaps even should, begin monastic life in the company of others, but perfection of such a life lay in complete withdrawal from human interaction. Only in isolation could one worship God without distraction and pray without ceasing"[212] Driver states the dangers of the solitary life, as they are often motivated by

[211] Langille, "There is Nothing Between God and You," 381.
[212] Steven Driver, *John Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 91.

vain and selfish reasons to become "holier." "Cassian does not offer an unqualified praise of the solitary life. Nor does he recommend evolution from one vocation to the other without reservation. In fact, *anchoresis* very often presents more dangers than rewards and there are more impure than pure motives for withdrawing from community."[213] However, no matter the state in life one inhabits, there is value in encountering silence and finding that place of holiness within us where God dwells. Learning to sit in silence is painful, and sometimes boring, but we cannot deny the great value silence has. Laird encourages his readers to bring all our thoughts and feelings into the face of silence and says that "Like most distracting thoughts, it will not survive the direct meeting of a steady, silent gaze."[214] There is peace and consolation when we encounter that holy temple inside of us and learn to sit at the feet of Jesus, and we let silence see God dwelling among us.

[213] Driver, *John Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture*, 91-92.
[214] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 86.

CHAPTER 5

EXPERIENCING THEOSIS AND LUKE 10:38-42

Introduction

The previous four chapters of this thesis explored different themes such as the purpose of human life, asceticism and purity of heart, contemplation, and silence. While each theme contains its own depth and connection to God, they all tie together into the theme of theosis, which is an important concept concerning the desert fathers and mothers and their approach to contemplation. This chapter seeks to bring together the themes of the last chapters to show how they all come together and promote an experience of theosis. The origins of theosis are examined, as well as how it is connected to contemplation in the *Conferences*. While the word "theosis" does not appear within the *Conferences*, through the abbas' discussion of communion with God we can infer its presence. The monks reach theosis, communion with God, and experienced it through contemplation on heavenly and divine things. As an exemplar of contemplation, the abbas looked to Mary of Bethany in Luke 10:38-42, an story within Scripture and the *Conferences* which highlight the importance of contemplation for dwelling with God. The story of Martha and Mary of Bethany personify what this thesis discussed, which is utilizing the active life to attain purity of heart, in which the pure of heart are able to sit at the Lord's feet in silence and enter contemplative prayer and commune with God and experience theosis before death.

Part 1: Theosis, Deification, and Contemplation

Introduction to an Understanding of Theosis

The contemporary understanding of theosis is different from the desert fathers and mothers understanding of the concept of communion with God. A modern understanding of theosis distances itself from the idea of becoming godly, or like God.[215] On the other hand, the early Church and the desert mothers and fathers strived for coming into the likeness of God. While we think deification from the early church and deification from today are different, the desert fathers and mothers certainly influenced how we understand theosis. "Our whole Christian life, every single aspect of it, is involved in our eschatologically becoming one with God, that is, in our ongoing process of divinization."[216] Fr. Gerard Austin in an article on theosis and its relationship to eschatology notes three stages of contemporary theosis which are based on Thomas Aquinas and influences our modern understanding of theosis. He states that the three stages of theosis are 1) baptism, 2) a eucharistic life and actions, and 3) death.[217] While these points have relevance to any understanding of theosis, this is not exactly how the desert fathers and mothers would articulate their experience. Namely because early Christians understood ideas such as baptism and Eucharist differently than they are today, and there were differences between the development of Eastern and Western ideas of theosis. However, what all concepts of theosis have in common is death, for that much has not changed throughout the centuries. From Cassian's *Conferences*, the ultimate goal of the human person is union with God. While Cassian does not explicitly use the term "theosis," we infer its definition within the *Conferences* from the way the abbas discuss

[215] Paul M. Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature: Deification and Communion* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 3.
[216] Gerard Austin, "Theosis and Eschatology," *Liturgical Ministry* 19 (Winter 2010): 5.
[217] Austin, "Theosis and Eschatology," 4-5.

the purpose of human life with him. Understanding how the desert mothers and fathers interpret deification aids our understanding of theosis as dwelling with God in contemplation and being one with him.

While the contemporary and ancient understanding of deification differ, the one constant that remains present through both is death. Theosis is not possible until after death, at least not in its fullness. However, glimpses of deification are possible. "Divinization gives us a glimpse of the glory that is to come, but it is only a glimpse."[218] Experiences of theosis are possible, but again, the fullness of theosis is not. The frustration that theosis cannot be fully experienced until after death leaves a notion of either indifference or despair. If deification cannot be fully experienced, then why bother orienting our lives toward this? We should bother because of the sense of separation from God. To return to the themes from the previous chapter, separation from God is a false concept that many people believe. While separation from God is false, the feeling remains. Theosis is a place where we do not feel the separation deeply, if at all. "[Theosis] can become a present reality for those who are willing to tread the path, and so it is not exclusively an after-death experience. With Theosis death is transcended. St. Paul alludes to this when he says, 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.'"[219] Martin Laird quotes this same passage from Paul, describing the movement from God's image to likeness, where our identities dwell in Christ, and recognize Christ within us.[220] If we allow ourselves to recognize it, Christ dwells with us. If we become the prayer of

[218] Austin, "Theosis and Eschatology," 7.
[219] Archimandrite George, *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life* (Holy Monastery of Saint Gregorios, 2006), 13.
[220] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 67.

contemplation, we make a permanent home for Christ in our hearts. Theosis is not a far-off distant reality because we can dwell with God here, right now.

Becoming the Likeness of God

According to the early Christian Church, theosis is the fullness of the likeness of God within us. The fall of humanity left us with a sense of separation and a cloudy vision of God, especially our ability to see the likeness of God within ourselves.vi Theosis, however, restores God's likeness within us. "Having been endowed 'in His image' [human beings are] called upon to be completed 'in His likeness.' This is Theosis. The Creator, God by nature, calls [human beings] to become a god by grace."[221] What does it mean to "become a god by grace"? Archimandrite George, Abbot of St. Gregorios Monastery, writes that becoming a god by grace is something that Scripture and the Church Fathers never hid from people, and that it is "very daring for us even to say or think that our life's purpose is to become gods by Grace."[222] However, while the thought of "becoming god" may elicit some sort of gut-jerking response, it probably does not mean what we assume it does.

The main issue and critique of theosis is that deification makes human beings God, or even like a god.[223] While these are serious critiques, a firm understanding of deification sheds light and understanding on how the notion of becoming like God or a god simply is not possible for human beings. We do not become God; we resonate with the likeness of him through our communion with the divine. Communion is not

[221] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 21.
[222] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 21.
[223] The terms "theosis" and "deification" are used interchangeably here in this context, as their definitions are similar in that they both are a word for union with God.

something to shy away from or avoid, rather, it is something to run to and constantly direct our life toward. Communion with God is our life's purpose, both before and after death, as it is the fabric of our human existence and the meaning of our life. Dwelling with God, theosis, is where human beings are "united with God, not in an external or a sentimental manner but ontologically, in a real way."[224] Our union with God is not something that takes place emotionally or mentally, or something outside of ourselves. Theosis is something that takes place deep within us inside that temple of contemplation where we embrace God. Embracing God is not heretical or something to avoid. Theosis is a vital discussion for the Church. "The study of theosis seems inward and introverted, something which deals with the interior realm of the individual and her soul … something which is intensely personal and framed by the promise of the future."[225] Union with God is both personal and communal, occurring in the present and in the future, and the purpose of our life.

We do not become a god in the sense that we are equal to God or that our essence and God's essence are one-and-the-same. Instead, it is the restoration of God's likeness with which God created us. At least, this is what the desert mothers and fathers thought. To recall from Chapter 3, the early Church called the journey of theosis "manifesting the likeness of God" within ourselves," as "It is here on earth, within our bodily existence, that we experience and are made whole by divine love."[226] While full communion with God does not occur on earth, this does not mean we do not experience any type of

[224] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 22.
[225] Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature*, 2.
[226] David G. R. Keller, "Reading Living Water," 416.

communion with God, and while we do not become God, we do become like him because God created us in his image and likeness.

Origin of Theosis

From where did the concept of theosis originate? The context and framework for theosis Cassian inherited was the Greek philosophy of Plato, which is the school of thought Cassian inherited from Evagrius and Origen. "The identification of divinity with immortality in the ancient world is key to understanding the development of Christian deification."[227] Understanding the Platonic philosophy is helpful in comprehending how Cassian may have understood theosis in the fourth century. Looking at the philosophy behind "immortality" and "divinity" aids in understanding how through theosis we grow in likeness to God.

In ancient philosophy, there was no difference between immortality and godliness, as people saw all the gods as immortal, and all immortal beings as gods.[228] Understanding how Christianity adopted the correlation between immortality and godliness in later centuries is important for understanding how people strived toward a virtuous and holy state of living. Plato upheld a philosophy of human imitation and participation of immortal beings, where humans could become "like the gods." "Imitation is understood in terms of the practice of the virtues and is an ethical approach. Participation suggests an outcome which is more 'realistic' and has ontological implications."[229] Essentially, Plato thought human beings were corrupt and evil, and it

[227] Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature,* 13-14.
[228] Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature,* 13.
[229] Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature,* 18. Ancient philosophy thought that people achieved "apotheosis" in one of four ways: educational, ethical, mystical, or ritual. The educational pursuit was an achievement of enlightenment from academic philosophy, whereas people achieved the culmination of virtuous practices

was only through becoming like the gods that humanity was saved. Humans imitate the godlike characteristics, the virtues, and in doing so participate in the life of the gods. "Plato suggests that salvation is possible through assimilation to God … in other words, developing godlike characteristics. Imitation and participation are offered as solutions to the problems of evil and of the corruption of human nature."[230] The virtues precede Christianity. Plato encourages a philosophy where human beings grow to obtain godlike characteristics, and when adopted by Christianity these "godlike characteristics" become the virtues.2

To achieve full imitation and participation with God, Plato teaches that we also need to acquire knowledge.

> In summary it is in the acquisition of knowledge that the human subject becomes like god … 'Knowing' in Plato's writings is understood in terms of contemplation, another feature of the later understandings of deification. Plato argues that God contemplates and that the human subject is a contemplator. Contemplation is understood to bring knowledge of God, and likeness to God, and indeed enables the contemplator to become like God.[231]

Recall that certain translations of "contemplation" Cassian uses in the *Conferences* translates to some variation of the word "knowledge." For example, translations of contemplation found in the *Conferences* are *theoretike, contemplatio,* and spiritual knowledge. Plato articulates a philosophy that expresses the need for contemplation should human beings desire God's likeness and union with the Creator. Platonic philosophy is important to consider. However, Platonism is one part of the picture for understanding the origin of theosis. The second piece is Scripture. The desert mothers

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and habits through the ethical pursuit. People achieved the mystical approach through the practice of contemplation, and lastly, people achieve apotheosis through ritual path by magical and liturgical practices. See *Partaking in Divine Nature* page 13.

[230] Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature,* 19.

[231] Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature,* 21.

and fathers read or heard Scripture in a Platonic culture, and under this influence, desert Christians attuned to the themes of contemplation and deification that they encountered Scripture. Therefore, Platonic philosophy influences how they read Scripture, and Scripture influenced how they understood Platonism. Specifically, Paul Collin's notes Paul's themes Chistification in Romans 6:3-5 and adoption in Ephesians 1:5 as two of many cornerstone Scripture passages which influence the desert mothers' and fathers' notion of deification.[232] The desert Christians read these Scripture as a notion of deification. John Cassian maintains this Greek thought inherited from his predecessors and encourages his readers of the *Conferences* to gain spiritual knowledge. Therefore, without contemplation we lack a direct pathway to our union with God.

Experiencing Theosis

Despite theosis being a beautiful image and experience, not everyone claims deification as the purpose of their life. While this is a true experience for many people, life remains unsatisfactory until we recognize, accept, and follow Christ back to God. "In the end, [contemporary people find] no rest until [they find] that 'something else,' the highest thing; the thing which actually exists in [their] life which is truly beautiful and creative."[233] In other words, we constantly search for something that fully satisfies this longing existing within us, and we will not stop until the feeling ceases. However, we need to name that our desire is God, and that the root of our unsatisfaction is from the fall, where the feeling of separation from God arises. Plato's discussion of imitation and participation tries to address and solve this problem through pursuing godliness, though

[232] Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature,* 42-45.
[233] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 23.

he uses terms such as human evil and corruptibility. However, as Christians we believe that the purpose of our life is theosis and dwelling with God after death, so until then, life will at times feel empty and unsatisfying. However, there is satisfaction in pursuing virtue and finding purity of heart and rest in silence.

How do we pursue theosis? Theosis is a gift only from God. To receive this gift, we need to ready ourselves and then ask for it. We become ready through growth in virtue and virtuous habits. "The holy Fathers certainly say that within the Church we can attain Theosis. But at the same time, they say Theosis is a gift from God, it is not something we can attain on our own."[234] According to Archimandrite George of St. Gregorios Monastery, the first qualification for theosis is the virtue of humility. He says, "Simply to acknowledge that Theosis is the purpose of our life demands humility, because without humility, how will you acknowledge that the purpose of your life is outside yourself; that it is in God?"[235] The center of our lives is God, not ourselves, but acknowledging this takes both courage and humility. We need to remove ourselves from the center stage and instead place God in the center. Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis examined various spiritual practices, such as metanoia and renunciation, as an essential part of walking towards contemplation. The need for humility resonates with the practice of metanoia and renunciation that was an essential aspect of faith for the desert fathers and mothers. Metanoia, a "watershed" change of heart, changed the direction of life which the early Christians were walking. Then, renunciation helped shed the things in their life that were unnecessary and distracted the desert mothers and fathers from God. Both metanoia and renunciation require humility. Metanoia requires humility to admit the

[234] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 47.
[235] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 47-48.

words “I was wrong,” and then change behavior and actions and follow God and depend on his grace. “In order to find himself continuously on the path of Theosis, he needs to depend on the Grace of God.”[236]

The second qualification for theosis is asceticism. “Once we have humility, in order to become cleansed from the passions we start our asceticism by applying the holy commandments of Christ, beginning our daily struggle in Christ with repentance and much patience.”[237] Asceticism was vital because it was the “praxis,” or the practice of virtues, on the spiritual journey.[238] Praxis is the active and action-oriented practice of faith as it was the active work against the passions, and is the first stage of theosis. Asceticism, rooted in humility, allows us to remove the passions and strive toward virtue. However, what does it mean to remove the passions? The passions are the things which stand in the way of love while we are working to cultivate love.[239] “Strong emotions which accompany love, lead to love, or even are an expression of love are not passions.”[240] According to the desert mothers and fathers, “As a word, ‘passion’ carries a negative meaning most of the time because for them a passion has as its chief characteristics the perversion of vision and the destruction of love.”[241] The passions are described as “obsessive emotions, attitudes, desires” that destroy the cultivation of love.[242] Progressing in theosis requires that we root out the passions because our lives are no longer about ourselves. “It is these passions that blind us in our dealings with

[236] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 49.
[237] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 50.
[238] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 50.
[239] Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 57.
[240] Bondi, *To Love as God Loves,* 58.
[241] Bondi, *To Love as God Loves,* 58.
[242] Bondi, *To Love as God Loves,* 57.

ourselves, each other, and the world."[243] Entering the full love of God requires that we root out what stands in the way of love.

As discussed in chapter 2, the various spiritual practices the desert fathers and mothers lived was to work towards purity in heart, or to acquire the virtue of love. "All the virtues are aspects of the one great virtue, the virtue of love."[244] Archimandrite George's describes praxis as leading to the attainment of love, which resembles Cassian's use of "contemplation" in his *Conferences*. Remember that one of the translations for contemplation in Cassian's work is the word *theoretike*, which means knowledge. Knowledge, or contemplation, comes from the active or practical life. Therefore, attainment of virtue cultivates knowledge, as the contemplative life follows the active life. Cassian makes a distinction between the active and contemplative life and equates the contemplative life with purity of heart obtained from the active life.

The last qualification for theosis is contemplation on the "Holy Mysteries and prayer." This final step is when through humility, the ascetic practices work together to recognize the presence of Christ's love in our hearts. "Through asceticism and prayer, the heart is cleansed of the passions, the spark of Divine Grace is rekindled, and the faithful Christian feels Christ in his heart; the centre of his existence."[245] Exemplifying this step, Archimandrite George encourages the use of this mental prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."[246] This prayer, or the "Jesus Prayer," was discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis, emphasizing the need for silence to enhance the experience of contemplation. In silence we encounter God and his holy mysteries through

[243] Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*, 57.
[244] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 51.
[245] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 53.
[246] Archimandrite George, *Theosis*, 53.

contemplation. “Concentrating our nous, we immerse it in our heart, and then pay attention to make sure it is not busy there with other things and ideas, good or bad; that it is busy only with God.”[247] The use and practice of the Jesus Prayer leads to the experience of contemplation. “God is not an idea … but a Person with Whom we come into living and personal Communion. It is something we live, and Somebody from Whom we receive experience.”[248] The “Holy Mysteries and Prayer” put into motion the first stage of theosis, praxis, and progresses the spiritual journey from praxis to theoria. Theoria is the second stage of theosis. Theoria, which this thesis discussed in chapter 3 as a word which translates to contemplation, is the part of theosis that follows practice. “Theoria means vision. Theoria of God means a vision of God.”[249] Contemplation, a translation of the word theoria, translates to an experience of theosis.[250] Without contemplation there is no experience of theosis before death. Contemplation is a bridge that connects us to communion with God after death.

Before death, however, we feel a sense of separation from God. Through contemplation we foster and nurture communion with the Creator in this life which lessens the feeling of disconnection with the Divine. Contemplation is a great gift. Although contemplation is a gift, we need to prepare ourselves to receive through humility, purity of heart, and silence. Preparation for theoria allows us to experience deeper fruits of contemplation.

> Theosis mirrors in us the trinitarian life of God through communion with God, who permeates every aspect of our lives. It is a dynamic movement within us of

[247] Archimandrite George, *Theosis,* 54. Archimandrite George defines “Nous” as the eye of the heart, or the mind, and the part of humanity that can detect God’s nearness, but the fall shattered this part of humanity. Page 82. See Arch. George’s definition of “nous” on pages 81-82.
[248] Archimandrite George, *Theosis,* 54-55.
[249] Archimandrite George, *Theosis,* 58.
[250] Archimandrite George, *Theosis,* 58.

> God's transcendence and immanence. In this movement, an incarnation of love, the Spirit of God lures and binds us in *mutual* love. God remains, in essence, totally ineffable, yet the Spirit, by the movement of grace, imparts God's nature and energy to us. The Christ, the Logos, becomes present in us.[251]

Partaking in the Trinitarian experience is a gift of theosis and nurtured by contemplation. We dwell with God in all that he is.

How do we know when we are experiencing contemplation? Is this prayer too high of an ideal for us to grasp? The answer to the second question is "no," because all people are included in the participation of contemplation and communion with God. Experiencing contemplative prayer practice does not require dwelling in the desert as a monk. The answer to the first question is a bit more complicated as this depends on the person. Contemplation is an intimate union between God and the contemplator, so the contemplator probably knows when they are in a contemplative state. However, it is frustrating not knowing what contemplation "looks" or "feels" like because everyone experiences contemplation differently. However, there is a story from Scripture that Cassian and the desert abbas used when talking about contemplation. The story of Martha and Mary of Bethany exemplifies what it means to experience theosis through contemplation following acts of recognizing life's purpose and cultivating purity of heart.

Part 2: Contemplation in the Story of Mary and Martha of Bethany

The story of Mary and Martha of Bethany found in Luke 10:38-42 is infamous for Jesus' rebuke of Martha and his praise for Mary. While this story is only a few verses in length, it contains great weight and meaning for the significance of the spiritual life. Or at least that is what the desert mothers and fathers thought. This passage is well-known in

[251] Keller, "Reading Living Water," 418.

Cassian's *Conferences,* and two desert abbas talk about this story with Cassian. The *Conferences* reference this story from Luke's gospel twice, and both mentions are significant and highlight the importance of this story in terms of its relationship to monastic life. "It is significant that Martha and Mary are the first biblical figures mentioned in the *Conferences* proper. Cassian's first *Conference* presents the themes and concepts that will dominate his work, and these two women embody everything that he considers essential to authentic monastic life."[252] What is it these two women embody that is essential to monastic life? In the case of Martha, she embodies the practical or active life of the monk, and Mary embodies the contemplative.[253] The active life consists of works of service or ascetic practices, which Martha expresses through her hospitality and whose work is essential to the monk. Mary personifies the contemplative life which requires purity of heart and is the immediate goal of the monk.

Evagrius and Origen influence Cassian's interpretation of the story of Martha and Mary in Luke's gospel. Understanding how Evagrius and Origen interpreted this story provides a foundation of understanding Cassian's interpretation. In the case of Origen, he "briefly interprets the two women in a series of 'progressions.' Initially, Martha represents the active life and Mary the contemplative. The implicit assumptions here are that Jesus favored Mary's role over her sister's … and therefore the contemplative life is superior to the active."[254] Origen states that while Martha received Jesus physically into her home, Mary received him spiritually into her heart, and this was more valuable to Jesus.[255] Evagrius, of a monastic background, "interpreted the Martha and Mary story as

[252] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences,* 24-25.
[253] See *Conference* 1, chapter 8.
[254] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, 23.
[255] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, 24.

a warning about the dangers of excessive concern for hospitality in the monastic endeavor … Although Cassian is aware of such observations, the story of Martha and Mary in the *Conferences* acts a s foreshadowing and distillation of his monastic vision."[256] Again, Martha's work is good and needed, but what Cassian is expressing in his *Conferences* is the importance of contemplation because that leads to theosis.

Remember that for Cassian, monasticism prepared the monk for union with God in heaven.[257] "Exegesis of Mary and her sister Martha often interprets the sisters as representatives of contrasting lifestyles. In Cassian's understanding they remain part of a unified identity, separated only by spiritual maturity."[258] Mary and Martha represent both components of the monastic life: active and contemplative. Yet, one of the sisters shows more advanced spiritual work then the other. "The one person who best exemplifies the ideal monk, is Mary of Bethany whose interactions with Jesus are briefly documented in only two gospels."[259] Jesus praises Mary's actions because she chooses the "one thing necessary," and desert mothers and fathers uphold this because that "one thing necessary" is also what they want. The monks upheld the example of Mary because she personifies activity that is preparing her for the ultimate goal (communion with God), signifying she has already achieved the immediate goal (purity of heart). If Mary of Bethany is the exemplar of monastic life, then how exactly does she exemplify this?

In the first *Conference*, the abba Moses is encouraging Cassian and Germanus to cling to heavenly things, while also explaining the two purposes of monastic life. "This then should be our main effort: and this steadfast purpose of heart we should constantly

[256] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, 24.
[257] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, x; *Conf.* 1.4
[258] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, x.
[259] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, 23.

aspire after; viz., that the soul may ever cleave to God and to heavenly things."[260] Abba Moses is informing Cassian and Germanus how to pursue both goals. He encourages them to cling to God alone and mentions the story of Martha and Mary to show them why this act is so important. By Moses's mentioning of the story of Martha and Mary, he is providing them a chief example of clinging to heavenly things being an important task for the monk, for:

> when Martha was performing a service that was certainly a sacred one, since she was ministering to the Lord and His disciples, and Mary being intent only on spiritual instruction was clinging close to the feet of Jesus … she is shown by the Lord to have chosen the better part, and the one which should not be taken away from her.[261]

While the tasks Martha performed were important and necessary (who else was going to feed Jesus and his whole crew?), the virtues and hospitality is not the most important task at the end of the day. Even though Martha was irritated, Mary received praise from Jesus for choosing the "one thing necessary," which is contemplation. Sitting at the Lord's feet fed Mary's contemplation. "In *Conference* I Cassian establishes Mary of Bethany as the prime example of the ideal monk. In contrast to her sister Martha, who is still at work cultivating virtue, Mary has learned how to be still in the presence of the divine."[262] Striving toward virtue is part of the active life, which again is what Martha represents. Mary is actively contemplating, meaning she has purity of heart through her virtuous practices.

Abba Moses mentions Mary's contemplation as the utmost important task, even more so than pursuit of virtue as a primary task. He says:

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[260] *Conf.* 1.8
[261] *Conf.* 1.8
[262] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences,* 79.

> You see then that the Lord makes the chief good consist in meditation, i.e., in divine contemplation: whence we see that all other virtues should be put in the second place, even though we admit that they are necessary, and useful, and excellent, because they are all performed for the sake of this one thing.[263]

For the monks, and for us, contemplation is the primary task and the cultivation of virtue second, because we cultivate virtues for the sake of contemplation. Then, in *Conference* 23 abba Theonas mentions the story of Mary and Martha. When speaking of the "one thing" that which Jesus praises in Mary of Bethany, abba Theonas says, "Contemplation then, i.e., meditation on God, is the one thing, the value of which all the merits of our righteous acts, all our claims at virtue, come short of."[264] Abba Theonas continues this chapter of the Conference saying there is nothing greater than God alone, and contemplation on God is all that we need in life. Everything else is secondary and useless, and this is the path Mary chose.

Mary's praise and good work on choosing the "one thing necessary" does not imply that Martha's actions and decisions were in vain. Quite the opposite, for Martha was pursuing virtue and striving for the "one thing necessary." Cassian's work praises Martha for her gift of hospitality toward Jesus. "Although Mary has to be seen as the protagonist because Jesus calls attention to her, Cassian is careful to note three times that Martha's actions were absolutely praiseworthy … Yet, Cassian cannot ignore that Jesus clearly favors Mary's response to his presence over Martha's."[265] Again, Martha's work was good, it is only that Mary's was better and was what Jesus preferred. Martha's good work is encouragement for the continual work towards the contemplative life. "Within

[263] *Conf.* 1.8
[264] *Conf.* 23.3
[265] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, 25.

his framework, the examples of the two women emphasize the key notions of *caritas* (love), *puritas cordis* (purity of heart), and *theoria* (contemplation)."[266]

Columba Stewart takes a deeper look at what Cassian says about this story in Luke's gospel and states that the story of Martha and Mary in Cassian's work are to teach his readers three things: 1) there is a division between the active and contemplative life, 2) a continuum of contemplation exists and consists of things visible and invisible, and 3) that there is an important relationship between action and contemplation.[267] Regarding the first point, Cassian is implying that the active life must come before contemplation because it "preceded and enabled contemplation."[268] The active life revolved around growth in virtue which would hopefully achieve purity of heart. The second point on the continuum of contemplation shows that contemplation is not something that just happens, but there are always opportunities to grow deeper in contemplation, there are always new ways of sitting in silent and imageless prayer at the Lord's feet. Concerning the relationship between the active life and the contemplative, "Cassian is not championing one way of life over another," but is showing how the two lives work together.[269] Again, they work together because one enhances and leads to contemplation, but Stewart points out that Cassian is aware that the active life fades after death, whereas contemplation stays.

For Cassian, Mary's contemplation on "one thing" is the achievement of purity of heart. This triumph allows Mary to sit in silence at the feet of Jesus and simply listen, learn, and dialogue with him. Like Origen's interpretation of this story, Cassian sees

[266] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, 18.
[267] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 49.
[268] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk,* 50.
[269] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, 26.

Mary as a contemplator sitting in the presence of God.[270] "In 'clinging to Jesus' feet' Mary has chosen the one thing necessary, which Cassian identifies as *theoria*, or divine contemplation."[271] This is what contemplation can look like today. Someone does not have to be Mary of Bethany, or a desert monk, to sit at the feet of Jesus. "Purity of heart means clarified and sharpened contemplative insight, the way in this life to anticipate the end of the 'reign of God.'"[272] Practitioners of contemplation attain purity of heart through the active life and ascetic practices. In doing so, we eventually enter the contemplative life, that space of spiritual knowledge. Spiritual knowledge will remain with us through this life and after death, as we cling continually to heavenly and divine things.

Conclusion

Let us cling to heavenly things. This is the hope we gain from the story of Mary and Martha, and it is also the encouragement of Cassian's desert abbas. Every day we will experience the active life and have opportunity to practice asceticism to grow in virtue so that we, too, may become pure in heart. Through the active life, we encounter opportunity to experience the contemplative life, but this seems more daunting and daring then the active life ever will. However, the daring task of the contemplative life leads us to the "one thing necessary:" contemplation on the divine. The daunting task of contemplation is one of great reward, and that reward is a glimpse of theosis before death. Theosis, which is a developing concept that has history reaching as far back as

[270] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 49.
[271] Kelly, *Cassian's Conferences*, 25-26.
[272] Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 49.

Plato, is one of God's many great gifts as he continues to find ways to commune with and dwell among us.

CONCLUSION

As I write the conclusion to this thesis, I hear the waves of the Atlantic crashing onto the beach at Cape May Point, New Jersey. The stars are bright overhead, and I am noticing how different they look compared to Ohio. I can smell the salt in the air, and beside the roaring of the water the night is quiet. The scenery tempts me to quit working this late at night and instead sit back and listen to the waves and encompassing silence. The sound of the water, the sea-salt air, and the night sky dotted with stars makes me wonder what scenery the desert mothers and fathers experienced in the desert. What sounds could they hear? How bright were the stars, and did they stay up late to see them? I wonder if their environment aided them in contemplative prayer, and if they realized the beauty in the sound of the silence around them.

My hope for this thesis was diving into contemplative prayer practice and trying to grasp how contemplation aids us in our journey toward communion with God. As I discovered in Chapter 1, humanity falls short of what God intended for us to do as his creatures, and the "fall" created a sense of separation from God. In Chapter 4, I explored this separation and discovered that the fall did not separate us from God, but only created the feeling that we are apart from our Creator. We can never separate from God, for he always dwells with us and among us. However, we need silence and solitude to remind ourselves of this truth.

In Chapter 1, I also wrote about how the purpose of our life is to dwell with God. To do this we need contemplation, which teaches us how to be human again through transforming us into the likeness of God. We forget that we are God's creatures created in his image and likeness. Looking to the desert mothers and fathers for inspiration and

modeling their way of living, we remind ourselves who we are and how we often forget that God created us in unique likeness to him.

Chapter 2 discussed how the desert transformed the mothers and fathers through renunciation and purity of heart. Through living in the desert, the ascetics encountered a harsh reality as they faced their own mortality. If we thought about our own mortality more and meditated on how little life we have on earth, that would transform the way we live—hopefully. However, through purity of heart the desert mothers and fathers cultivated a practice of contemplation where they could see God. Contemplation takes much work on our end to work toward, but it is also all in the work of God's grace. When it comes to contemplation, we are human and have human limits, but through contemplation God reminds us that he created us for communion with him.

Communion with God is a dynamic puzzle composed of pieces of the active and contemplative life. One piece is not more important than the other, but theosis requires both to see the full picture. However, while both pieces are essential, the contemplative life is greater because this is where we sit at the feet of Jesus and face God, like Mary of Bethany. Chapter 5 discussed Mary as the model for the contemplative life and Martha the model for the active life. The abba's in John Cassian's *Conferences* praised Mary's contemplation and saw her as someone who achieved the immediate goal of life, which is purity of heart. Purity of heart is what life in the desert was about—it was a renouncement from the world which stripped the desert Christians from everything except God; it was a catalyst for contemplation.

Chapter 3 examined how contemplation is the central theology for the *Conferences*, and that through contemplation Christians grow into the likeness of God.

For the desert fathers and mothers, experiencing contemplation meant reorienting their way of life so that they become contemplation. “Becoming” contemplation means living a life oriented toward growth in virtue, which requires pursuing the active life and following practices such as renunciation and Scriptural meditation. The active life prepares us for the contemplative life, where we find ourselves in silence and recognize God’s presence around us. Contemplation transforms us because this prayer creates a space for us to recognize God’s presence and we face his love for us.

The idea of this thesis originates from a summer class I took in the summer of 2020 called *Introduction to Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care.* During one of the intense two-week classes, Fr. Jim Schimelpfening, our instructor, mentioned how the purpose of human life is being in communion with God (theosis), and that contemplation aids our experience of this communion and acts as place to experience God. The idea of contemplation stuck with me personally as a Catholic, but also ministerially as a Campus Minister. Contemplation is somewhat a trend in contemporary spirituality, so as a minister it is important for me to understand various spiritual practices so that I can better guide my students. My takeaway from my research is that we undervalue and underestimate contemplative prayer, but it was important and personal to the desert abbas with whom John Cassian spoke. Contemplation is a sacred space for us to come face-to-face with God, and that is both a difficult, terrifying, and vulnerable experience for us. However, those fears dissipate once we recognize God already embraces us in his presence.

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