

CONTEMPLATIVES AND THE CRISIS OF FAITH

Message by a Group of Contemplatives to
the Synod of Bishops of 1967



Charterhouse of the Transfiguration
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*All illustrations have been added by the editors of this booklet.
For a list of illustrations see the end of the booklet.*

CONTEMPLATIVES AND THE CRISIS OF FAITH



INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOKLET

In 1967, on the initiative of Saint Pope Paul VI, a group of contemplatives sent a message to the Synod of Bishops* under the title “Contemplatives and the Crisis of Faith.” This message appeared in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* II (1976), pp. 296-273. With the kind permission of the editor of the magazine, Br. Lawrence Morey, we present this message in the present number of our Carthusian Booklets Series.

The Pope invited Thomas Merton and Dom André Louf, O.C.S.O., then abbot of the abbey of Mont-des-Cats, in France, to submit a draft of the message.† The Holy Father opted for the draft of Dom André Louf and added some personal remarks.‡ The text was then finalized at the Abbey of Frattocchie, near Castelgandolfo by a small group that included Dom André Louf and Dom Jean-Baptiste Porion, Procurator General of the Carthusian Order at that time.§

* The Synod of Bishops came into existence in 1965 with a decree of Pope Paul VI. He convened the first Synod of Bishops in September 1967. The agenda comprised among others “major problems and dangers to the faith.” It was in this context that the Message of the Contemplatives was addressed to the Synod.

† Dom André Louf, was born in 1929 at Louvain in Belgium. In 1947 he entered the Cistercian Abbey of Mont-des-Cats in the diocese of Lille in Northern France. From 1963 to 1997, when he resigned, he was abbot of this monastery. After his retirement he moved into a hermitage in Southern France. July 12, 2010 Dom André passed away in the infirmary of Mont-des-Cats Abbey.

‡ Merton’s draft appeared in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* IV (1969) 1, pp. 90-94, under the title “As Man to Man.”

§ The Procurator General represents our Order at the Holy See and usually lives in or near Rome. Dom Jean-Baptiste Porion was born in 1899 in Northern France. In 1924 he entered the Charterhouse of La Valsainte in Switzerland, where he made solemn profession in 1929. He was the Procurator General of our Order from 1946 to 1981, and passed away at La Valsainte in 1987. Dom Jean-Baptiste is the author of a popular book of spirituality, entitled “The Prayer of Love and Silence,” Gracewing Publishing, 2006.

The final redaction of the message was approved by the Pope and Bishop Charrière of Fribourg, Lausanne and Geneva, in Switzerland was asked to read it at the Synod in the presence of the Pope. Bishop Charrière had been chosen for this because of the numerous contemplatives in his diocese (Carthusians, Trappists, Carmelites and Poor Clares).

After the Synod the message was published in *L'Osservatore Romano*. In a review in the same paper, Fr. Enrico de Rovasenda, O.P., pointed out that the core of the message is made up of “a powerful statement of faith and trust in grace; it is an act of hope for all, a solemn presentation of the vocation of all to intimate contemplation...”

The participation of Dom Jean-Baptiste Porion makes the message particularly interesting for us Carthusians. It is moreover well-timed to publish this message now that October 15 this year we celebrated the canonization of Saint Pope Paul VI.

For a correct understanding of the message it is necessary to keep several things in mind.

First, the message does not say that monks and mystics are atheists, nor that atheists are models of faith. It carefully suggests that “the contemplative can (...) understand how the temptation to atheism which is confronting many Christians (...) bears a certain analogy with the ‘nights’ of the mystics”; and that “the paths of the desert may well have something in common with the temptation to atheism.”

This already contains a second point: The message is addressed to those who are confronted with the “temptation to atheism,” and not to full-blown atheists.

Finally, what have contemplatives to offer to those who are tempted to atheism? The message makes it clear that a certain experience of the absence of God is normal and even necessary in the journey of faith. God is transcendent: “He lies infinitely beyond our grasp.” Our images of Him are imperfect and have to be purified continually. This is precisely what the desert experience effects in us. However, the message also emphasizes that this painful experience is not the end of the journey. Indeed, the authors join “those who are struggling to keep or find faith in Jesus Christ.” Nonetheless, they assure us that “all Christians are called to taste God,” and that the entire contemplative tradition bears witness to the truth that “at the very

heart of our misery, the marvels of God’s mercy reveal themselves”; and “that God does allow the attentive and purified soul to reach Him beyond the realm of words and ideas.”

Today, fifty years after the message, the “temptation to atheism” has only increased. May this message, written by some fine contemplatives of the last century, and approved by “a great Pope of modernity,”* help us to pass through the “night of patience” and enter ever more deeply into the mystery of God’s Trinitarian love! †



* Pope Francis on Pope Paul VI, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, August 10, 2018, n. 32-33, p. 12.

CONTEMPLATIVES AND THE CRISIS OF FAITH

While the Synod of Bishops is meeting in Rome, we, a group of contemplative monks, feel ourselves closely united with our bishops in their pastoral cares. We are thinking especially of the difficulties which many Christians are experiencing at the present time concerning their faith—difficulties which even go so far as to lead them to call into question the possibility of attaining to knowledge of the transcendent God Who has revealed Himself to men.

In this situation, it seems to us that our way of life puts us in a position where we can address a few simple words to all. Since we do not want to make our silence and solitude an excuse for failing to render what may be a service to our brothers, especially to those who are struggling to keep or to find faith in Jesus Christ, we are addressing ourselves in a spirit of sonship to you who are the witnesses to that faith, and the guides and masters of souls, so that you can judge in what measure our message might be useful to the People of God in the world of today.

Our personal qualifications for offering such a testimony are poor indeed. But it is more in the name of the way of life that we lead, rather than in our own names, that we dare to speak.

On the one hand, the cloistered contemplative life is simply the Christian life, but the Christian life lived in conditions which favor the “experience” of God. It could be described as a sort of specialization in relationship with God which puts us in a position to offer a testimony to this aspect of things.



On the other hand, while the contemplative withdraws from the world, this does not mean that he deserts either it or his fellowmen. He remains wholly rooted in the earth on which he is born, whose riches he has inherited, whose cares and aspirations he has tried to make his own. He withdraws from it in order to place himself more intensely at the divine source from which the forces that drive the world onwards

originate, and to understand in this light the great designs of mankind. For it is in the desert that the soul most often receives its deepest inspirations. It was in the desert that God fashioned His People. It was to the desert He brought His People back after their sin, in order to “allure her, and speak to her heart” (Hos 2:16). It was in the desert, too, that the Lord Jesus, after He had overcome the devil, displayed all His power and foreshadowed the victory of His Passover.

And in every generation, surely, the People of God has to pass through a similar experience in order to renew itself and to be “born again.” The contemplative, whose vocation leads him to withdraw into this spiritual



desert, feels that he is living at the very heart of the Church. His experience does not seem to him to be esoteric, but, on the contrary, typical of all Christian experience. He can recognize his own situation in the trials and temptations which many of his fellow-Christians are undergoing. He can understand their sufferings and discern the meaning of them. He knows all the bitterness and anguish of the dark night of the soul: “My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?” (Ps 22:1; see Mt 27:46). But he knows, too, from the story of Christ, that God is the conqueror of sin and death.

The world of today is sorely tempted to fall into atheism—into the denial of this God Who cannot be grasped on its own level, and is not accessible to its instruments and calculations. Some Christians, even, moved by the desire to share the condition of their fellow-men in the fullest possible way, are yielding to this outlook when they proclaim the need for a certain measure of unbelief as a necessary basis for any fully human sincerity. According to some of them, it is just not possible to reach a God Who is, by definition, transcendent—“wholly other.” To be a Christian, it is enough, they say, to devote oneself generously to the service of mankind.

We are not insensitive to everything that is attractive in such a standpoint, although it leads to absurd results. The contemplative Christian, too, is aware of that fundamental datum, so firmly anchored in mystical tradition, that God Who has revealed Himself to us in His

The Lord said: "You cannot see My Face; for man shall not see Me and live" (Ex 33:20).

...nevertheless, God does allow the attentive and purified soul to reach Him beyond the realm of words and ideas.

Word, has revealed Himself as "unknown," inasmuch as He is inaccessible to our concepts in this life (see Ex 33:20). He lies infinitely beyond our grasp, for He is beyond all being. Familiar with a God Who is "absent," and, as it were, "non-existent" as far as the natural world is concerned, the contemplative is, perhaps, better placed than most to understand the attitude of those who are no longer satisfied by a mystery whose presentation is reduced to the level of things. But he knows very well, nevertheless, that God does allow the attentive and purified soul to reach Him beyond the realm of words and ideas.

In the same way, the contemplative can more readily understand how the temptation to atheism which is confronting many Christians at the present time can affect their faith in a way which may, in the long run, be salutary. For this is a trial which bears a certain analogy with the "nights" of the mystics. The desert strips our hearts bare. It strips us of our pretensions and alibis; it strips us, too, of our imperfect images of God. It reduces us to what is essential and forces us to see the truth about ourselves, leaving us no way of escape. Now this can be a very beneficial thing for our faith, for it is here, at the very heart of our misery, that the marvels of God's mercy reveal themselves. Grace, that extraordinary power from God, works at the very heart of our dullness and inertia, for "His power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).



It is precisely here that the sympathy and understanding of the contemplative make him want to offer a word of comfort and hope. For his experience is not a negative thing, even though it leads him along the paths of the desert with which the temptation to atheism may well have something in common. The absence of the transcendent God is also, paradoxically, His immanent presence, though it may well be that recollection, silence and a certain measure of withdrawal from the agitation of life are necessary for perceiving this. But all Christians are called to taste God, and we want to proclaim this fact in order to put them on their guard against a certain lassitude and pessimism which might tend to create for them conditions which, from this point of view, are less favorable than our own.



Our Lord was tempted in the desert; but He overcame the tempter. Our faith constantly needs to be purified and disentangled from the false images and ideas which we tend to mix with it. But the night of faith emerges into the unshakable assurance placed in our hearts by God Whose will it has been to test us.



The cloistered life in itself bears witness to the reality of this victory. It still attracts hundreds of men and women in our own day. But what meaning would it have if grace did not provide the remedy for our blindness, and if it were not true that the Father, “after having spoken in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, has spoken to us through the Son?” (Heb 1:1-2). For “if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all” (1 Cor 15:19).

The truth is that this experience is indescribable. But, fundamentally, it is that which Paul, John and the other Apostles proclaimed as



being the experience of every Christian; and it is by using the same expressions as they used that we can best speak about it. We are dealing here with a gift of the Spirit which is, as it were, a guarantee of our inheritance (see Eph 1:14). We are dealing here with a gift of that Spirit through Whom love has been poured into our hearts (see

Rom 5:5), the Spirit Who knows what is of God, because He searches everything, even the depths of God (see 1 Cor 2:10), the Spirit Whose anointing teaches us all things, so that we have no need for anyone else to teach us (see 1 Jn 2:27), the Spirit Who unceasingly bears witness to our spirit that we are truly sons of God (see Rom 8:16).

It is in this same Spirit that we have come to understand how true it is that Christ died for our sins and rose again for our justification (see Rom 4:25), and that in Him we have access through faith to the Father and are restored to our dignity as sons of God (see Rom 5:2; Heb 10:19).



The mystical knowledge of the Christian is not only an obscure knowledge of the invisible God. It is also an experience of God—a personal, loving encounter with the One Who has revealed Himself to

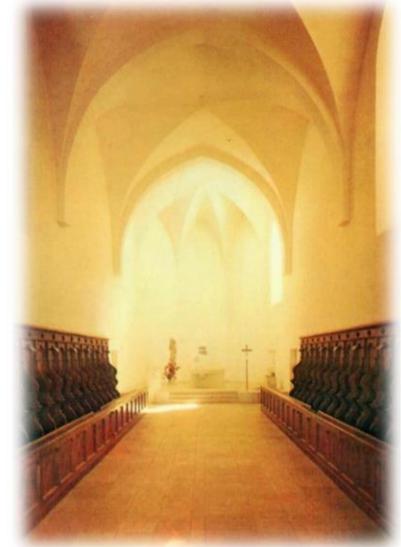
us and saved us, in order to make us sharers in the dialogue of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. For it is surely in the Trinity of Persons that God appears to us most clearly as the “wholly other,” and, at the same time, as closer to us than any being.

This, then, is the good fortune which we have felt it our duty to declare to our Shepherds upon whom the trials of the faith bear most heavily at the present time. We ask them for their blessing, and we remain constantly united with them in prayer. In communion with the whole Church, we unite ourselves to the sufferings of the world, carrying on before God a silent dialogue even with those of our brothers who keep themselves apart from us.

Our message can only end on a note of thanksgiving. For that is the feeling which will always predominate in the hearts of those who have experienced the loving-kindness of God. The Christian, that pardoned sinner whom God’s mercy has qualified beyond all expectation to share in the inheritance of the saints in light (see Col 1:12), can only stand before God endlessly proclaiming a hymn of thanksgiving: “He is good, for His love endures forever” (Ps 136:1).

It is our wish to offer our own testimony to this sense of wonder and thankfulness, while inviting our brothers everywhere to share them with us in hope, and in this way to develop the precious seeds of contemplation implanted in their hearts.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Front cover: Near the Charterhouse of La Valsainte, Switzerland.

Page 5: Saint Pope Paul VI with contemplatives.

6: Charterhouse of La Valsainte, Switzerland.

9, top: *Saint Bruno Praying to Our Lady in the Desert of Chartreuse*, by Tomé de Leu, 1606; **bottom:** Charterhouse of Serra San Bruno, Italy.

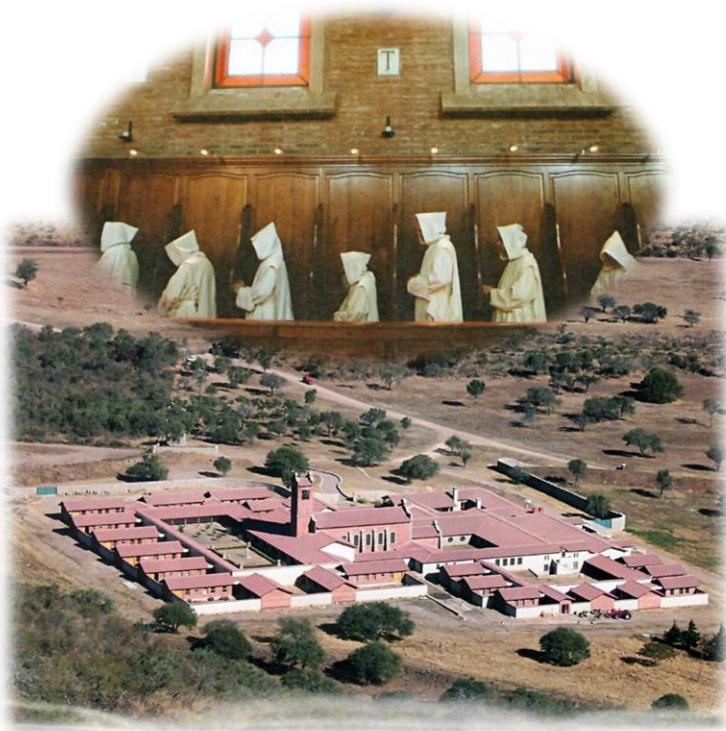
10, bottom: *Pieta*, Cistercian Abbey of Mont-des-Cats, France.

11: Charterhouse of La Valsainte, Switzerland.

12: Charterhouse of San José, Argentina.

15: Charterhouse of La Valsainte, Switzerland.

Back cover: Idem.



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CARTHUSIAN EMBLEM

— 13TH CENTURY —

A GLOBE SURMOUNTED BY THE CROSS
WITH SEVEN STARS SYMBOLIZING SAINT BRUNO
AND HIS FIRST FOLLOWERS

THE LATIN MOTTO RUNS AS FOLLOWS
“*STAT CRUX DUM VOLVITUR ORBIS*”
WHICH MEANS

“*THE CROSS STANDS FIRM, WHILE THE WORLD TURNS*”

