

The Spiritual Guide

Which disentangles the soul and leads it by the interior way to perfect contemplation and the rich treasure of interior peace

By Miguel de Molinos

To the Reader

There is nothing more difficult than to please everyone, or easier or more common than to criticize new publications. Every book that is published, without exception, is vulnerable on both counts, even though it enjoys every possible patronage. What will become of this little book without patronage, whose subject matter is mysticism and therefore hard to assimilate, and which is commonly subjected to criticism and acrimony? If you don't understand it, dear reader, don't criticize it on account of this.

Ordinary people will read and hear about these spiritual matters, but will not succeed in understanding them. If you condemn it, then you condemn yourself to the company of all those educated people to whom, as St Dionysius said, God doesn't communicate this wisdom as he does to the simple and uneducated, even though they're commonly held to be ignorant. Mystical knowledge is nothing to do with intelligence, but rather with experience: it's not created, but absorbed, not studied, but received, and so, therefore, it's very safe and effective, of great help, and enormous benefit.

Mystical knowledge is not acquired through hearing about it or by continually reading books but through the generous infusion of the divine spirit, whose grace is communicated with delightful intimacy to the simple and uneducated (Matt. 11).

There are some educated people who have never read about these matters and some spiritual people who so far haven't had any experience of them, and so for one reason or another they condemn them – the former out of ignorance, and the latter through lack of experience. It's a fact that anyone who has had no experience of this intimacy won't be able to pronounce on these mysterious secrets, but on the contrary will be appalled as many usually are when they hear

about the miracles God's love works in the soul and see no evidence of this gentleness in themselves. Who will set a limit to God's goodness? God doesn't call the strongest on merit, but the weakest and most wretched, so that his infinite mercy may shine the more.

This knowledge is not theoretical, but practical, where experience has an overwhelming advantage over the most informed and astute speculation, and because those learned people who are purely scholastic don't have the experience, they condemn it. For this reason St Teresa advised her spiritual father to deal with spiritual matters only with spiritual persons: "Because if they know only one way, or they've stopped in the middle, they won't succeed."

It will be evident those who condemn the teaching in this book are not experienced in this practical and mystical knowledge, and have not read St Dionysius, St Augustine, St Gregory, St Bernard, St Thomas, St Bonaventure, and many other saints and doctors approved by the Church, who endorse, propound and teach as experts the doctrine of this book.

You should bear in mind that this teaching is not intended for everyone, but only those whose senses and passions are well disciplined, and who are already practised and proficient in prayer, and called by God to the interior way. It is these people that this book wishes to guide and encourage by removing for them the obstacles that block the way to perfect contemplation.

I have tried to make the style of this book devout, uncluttered, and beneficial, and without any display of eloquence or theological subtlety. I have simply tried to teach the naked truth, humbly, simply and clearly. It's not surprising that new books on spirituality are published every day, because God always has new knowledge to impart and people always have need of instruction. And not everything has been said or written, and so there will always be a need to write until the end of time. The light that God communicated to his Church through the Angelic Doctor, St Thomas, was wholly laudable; but when he was about to die, he himself said that God had communicated so much light to him at that time that what he had written up till then was worthless. And so God has – and always will have – new light to communicate, without this infinite knowledge ever being exhausted.

The many and substantial problems on the interior way should not deter you, because what is of great value obviously demands a lot. Take heart, for not only will the people mentioned here succeed, but so will many others through inner strength and with divine grace. It was never my intention to deal with contemplation or to defend it, like all those very erudite people who have published whole books full of sound reasoning and teachings of the saints and holy scripture to

confute the opinion of those who have condemned contemplation and still do through not having experienced it or even understood it at the intellectual level. Long years of experience (with the many people who have relied on my inadequacy to show them the interior way to which they have been called) have taught me the great need there is to remove for them the obstacles, wilful inclinations, emotions and attachments that completely block their way and the road to perfect contemplation.

The whole of this practical book is directed to this primary objective, because it's not sufficient to assert the validity of the interior way of contemplation against those who contradict it, if you don't remove the obstacles that block the way to the spiritual ascent of those who are called and confident. To this end I have availed myself more of what God in his infinite goodness has inspired in me and taught me than the instruction I have derived from reading books.

Sometimes, though not often, I quote some practical and experienced authority, so that it will be apparent that the teaching in this book is not strange or unusual. This, then, has been my first objective – not to guarantee the interior way, but to remove obstacles from it. My second objective has been to instruct directors so that they don't hinder the way of those called by these hidden paths to interior peace and supreme happiness. May God grant in his infinite mercy that what is so earnestly desired has succeeded. I am aware that many, through inexperience, will criticize what is taught here, but I trust to God that some of those he has called to this knowledge will benefit, for if they do so I will consider my time well spent. This has been my only wish, and if God, who never changes, accepts and makes use of this sincere desire, I shall be content, even though harshly criticized.

Introduction

First Preface

On the two ways of approaching God: the first by meditation and discursive thinking; the second by pure faith and contemplation

(1) There are two ways to approach God, one by reasoning and discursive thinking, the other through pure faith, indistinct, general and intuitive awareness. The first is called meditation; the second interior recollection or acquired contemplation. The first is the way of beginners, the second of proficients. The first is based on information from the senses, the second is detached, pure and interior.

(2) When we are already accustomed to reflect on the mysteries with the help of the imagination and mental images, and to move from one object of attention to another, and from one thought to the next (though with little satisfaction from either), and thence to God himself, then God usually takes us by the hand if indeed he hasn't already called us and introduced us to the way of pure faith. If not, then God will cause us to disregard the intellect with all its thoughts and reflections, and to make progress by withdrawing us from our normal condition that is material and sense-orientated, to a state where by a simple and obscure awareness in faith we may aspire on the wings of love to our bridegroom, with no need now to love him on the prompting of the understanding, or information derived from it, for love arrived at in this way is short-lived and very dependent on external stimuli, which resemble drops of water that fall intermittently and spasmodically.

(3) The less we are dependent on external stimuli and the more we rely on God alone and his hidden teaching through the medium of pure faith, then the firmer, stronger and more durable our love will be. When we have acquired the knowledge that meditation and mental images can provide, if God then moves us on from this state by denying us the ability to think discursively, and leaves us in divine darkness to travel the straight road of pure faith, then we should let ourselves be led and not want to love meagerly and briefly, which is all that meditation allows.

We should accept that everything the world can offer, and the most sophisticated concepts of erudite men, are all useless. The beauty and goodness of our beloved infinitely surpass all our knowledge, showing us that the things of this world are truly inadequate to instruct us and to bring us to the true knowledge of God.

(4) We should grow in God's love, then, leaving all thought behind. Let us love God as God is in himself, and not as we picture God to be. And if he can't know God as God is in himself, let us love God without knowing him under the veil of obscure faith, just like a child who has never seen its father but completely believes what has been said about him and loves him as if it had in fact seen him.

(5) Those deprived of discursive thinking should not strain themselves or strive for clearer and more distinct knowledge. On the contrary, they should remain quiet, firm and steadfast, without the support of information from the senses. In this way they are poor in spirit and free from the demands of their natural appetites, thus allowing God to work within them, although they may seem to be alone, dry as they are and enveloped in darkness. All this might appear to them as idleness but is so only in relation to the activity of their senses, and not as regards God, who actively imparts true knowledge to them. In brief, the higher the spirit ascends, the more it becomes detached from the senses. Many people have arrived at this door, and still do, but there are few who have moved on, and still don't, because they lack an experienced guide. And those who have one, and have had one in the past, still fail because they don't totally submit to him.

(6) It may be objected that the will cannot love if the understanding cannot form clear and distinct ideas, for it's an accepted principle that one can love only what one knows. To this I would say that although the understanding does not operate by making distinctions, that is, by thinking discursively and employing images and concepts, nevertheless, it is aware and understands through dark, general and intuitive faith – an understanding that, although dark, indistinct and general, because it's supernatural, is actually a clearer and more perfect cognition of God that can be arrived at in this life, for all mental images based on sense data are immeasurably remote from God.

(7) We think more highly of God knowing that he is beyond our comprehension and that he transcends all understanding, than we do by conceiving him according to some image or thing of beauty, which is to understand him in our own crude manner (Mystical Theology 1,2). And so greater love and esteem for God flow from this indistinct, obscure and negative method of cognition than any other method that

is precise and based on the senses, as the former is more proximate to God and abstracted from all particularities. The more this knowledge depends on the created world, the further removed from God it is.

Second Preface

In what way meditation is different to contemplation

(8) St John Damascene, together with other saints, says that prayer is “an ascent or elevation of the mind to God.” God is above all his creatures and you can’t see God or communicate with him unless you transcend all of them. This loving colloquy that the soul enjoys with God, which is prayer, is divided into meditation and contemplation.

(9) When the mind ponders the mysteries of our holy faith in order to comprehend its truths, by analyzing particular details and assessing the circumstances to move the affections of the will, then this mental reasoning with its pious affection is more properly called meditation.

(10) When you already understand these truths – whether through the habit you acquired by reasoning or because God has given you particular light – and you’re fully aware of them, gazing upon them simply, quietly, calmly and silently, with no further need for thought or reasoning or any other proof to convince you, and when your will loves these truths, wondering at them and delighting in them, then strictly speaking this is called the prayer of faith, or of quiet, interior recollection or contemplation.

(11) This is what St Thomas, with all the other mystical teachers, calls “a simple, gentle and quiet gaze on the eternal truth, without reasoning or reflection.” But if you ponder and delight in God’s presence in his creation, and especially in Christ’s humanity as the most perfect of this creation, then this is not true contemplation, as St Thomas says. The reason for this is that the above are all means to know God as he is in himself, and although Christ’s humanity is the most holy and perfect means to approach God and the chief instrument of our salvation and the channel through which we receive every blessing we could hope for, nevertheless, the humanity is not the Highest Good, which rather consists in seeing God. But as Christ is who he is more through his divine nature than his humanity (because his divinity is inseparable from his humanity) then those who think of God and continually gaze upon him by the same token always think of Christ and contemplate him. This is especially true of contemplatives, whose faith is more sincere, pure and practised.

(12) Whenever the end is reached, then the means cease, and when

the ship arrives in the harbour, then the voyage is over. And so those who have tired themselves with meditation and have attained to the quiet, calm tranquillity of contemplation, must then curtail their thinking and rest quietly with a loving attention and gaze on God. In this way we contemplate and love God, and gently set aside all those images that come to us, thus pacifying our understanding in the presence of God. And so our memory will be recollected and fixed entirely on God, content with a general and intuitive awareness of him in faith, with our will completely devoted to loving him, thereby deriving the maximum spiritual nourishment.

(13) St Dionysius says: “As for you, dear Timothy, in your mystical contemplation forsake the senses and the workings of the intellect; reject all intelligible things deriving from the senses as well as all else that is, and is not, so that in an inexpressible way you may raise yourself to God who transcends all knowledge and creation.”

(14) And so it is necessary to reject all created things, and everything that comes to us through the senses that is intelligible and belongs to the emotions – in short, everything that is, and is not – and surrender ourselves entirely to God who will restore to us everything we have given up, and in addition give us the strength and power to love him more ardently, a love that will sustain us in this holy and blissful silence, which is worth more than all the activities of the mind put together.

St Thomas says: “What the understanding can know about God in this life is very little, but what the will can love counts for a great deal.”

(15) When you attain this state you must withdraw totally within yourself, to your innermost centre, where you will find God’s image. In this way you will practise loving attention to God, in silence and obliviousness of all things; you will exercise the will in perfect resignation, listening to God and communing with him alone, as if there were just the two of you in the whole world.

(16) With good reason the saints say that in meditation you’re actively engaged to your advantage, whereas in contemplation you’re passive, calm, peaceful and enraptured, and to far greater advantage. Meditation sows and contemplation reaps; meditation seeks and contemplation finds; meditation chews the food, contemplation savours it and is nourished by it.

(17) All this was said by the mystic Bernard in commenting on the words of Our Lord: “Seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you. Reading offers solid food to the mouth, meditation chews it, prayer brings out the flavour, and contemplation is the true sweetness that gladdens and refreshes the heart.” All of the above explains meditation and contemplation and the difference between them.

Third Preface

An explanation of the difference between acquired and active contemplation and infused and passive contemplation, and the signs by which you will know when God wishes you to move on from meditation to contemplation

18) There are also two ways of contemplation, one imperfect, active and acquired, the other infused and passive. The active way (which we have been speaking about until now) is the one we can attain by our own efforts, assisted by divine grace. It consists in withdrawing the faculties and senses and in preparing ourselves for whatever God sends us.

(19) St Bernard recommends this active contemplation when he comments on the words “I will hearken what the Lord God will say concerning me” (Ps.84:8). v.8). He comments as follows: “Mary chose the better part; although perhaps the humble lot of Martha is of no less merit in the sight of God, yet Mary’s choice is praised. Thus the lot of Mary is certainly to be chosen (for our part), but if the lot of Mary is to be visited upon us, it is to be borne with patience.”

(20) St Thomas also recommends this acquired contemplation, with the following words: “The more closely a person unites his soul or that of another to God, so much the more acceptable is the sacrifice to God; and therefore it is more acceptable to God that a person apply his soul and that of others to contemplation than to action.” This is a very clear statement to silence those critics who condemn acquired contemplation.

(21) The more closely we approach God, or endeavour to ensure that we and others may attain God, then the more acceptable this is to God. St Thomas concludes from this that contemplation rather than activity is more pleasing and acceptable to God. And neither can it be said that the saint is talking here of infused contemplation, because it’s not in our power to apply ourselves to infused contemplation, but only to acquired.

(22) Although it’s said that with God’s help we can apply ourselves to acquired contemplation, nevertheless, we should not take it upon ourselves to move from the state of meditation to acquired contemplation without the advice of an experienced director who will know for sure if we’re called to this interior way by God. But if a director is not available, we might know the right time through a book

that deals with these matters that has been sent by divine providence to show what has been happening in our interior life without our being aware of it. But even though we might be encouraged by information from a book to leave meditation for the quiet of contemplation, we shall always have an earnest wish for better instruction.

(23) And so that you may be better informed on this point, I want to give the signs by which to recognize this vocation to contemplation. The first and most important sign is the inability to meditate, and if a person does meditate it will be with obvious anxiety and fatigue, providing this condition doesn't arise from some physical indisposition, some natural disinclination, from a mood of depression, or dryness due to lack of preparation.

(24) You will know that it's none of these problems, but rather a genuine calling, when you spend a day, a month, or many months unable to think discursively in prayer. St Teresa puts it this way: "God guides us to contemplation, and then our mind becomes very inhibited in meditating on the Passion of Christ, because meditation is all to do with seeking God, and when we find God and are accustomed to seek him again by the operation of the will, we're not inclined to tire ourselves by further reasoning."

(25) The second sign is that although we're unable to find satisfaction in devotion based on the senses, we seek solitude and avoid conversation. The third sign is that the reading of books on spirituality becomes tedious to us because they don't address themselves to the interior gentleness we now experience, although we may not realize this. The fourth sign is that although we can no longer reason, nevertheless we're very determined to persevere in prayer. And the fifth sign is that we shall now have acquired a deeper understanding of ourselves together with great uncertainty about our own worth so that we then detest our shortcomings and have a higher regard for God.

(26) The other contemplation is perfect and infused, and is described in the following way by St Teresa: "God speaks to us and suspends our understanding, interrupting our thoughts and robbing us of the power of speech so that although we want to speak, we can't, except with great difficulty. We're aware that the heavenly teacher, without recourse to words, is instructing us by suspending our faculties, for if we use them we would do ourselves more harm than good. We're now in a state of bliss without knowing why. We burn with love with no idea how we love and although we delight in what we love we don't know the origin of this joy. We understand well enough that this bliss is not what the mind can come to desire. Yet the will embraces

this delight, without knowing how. And although we're incapable of understanding anything, yet we perceive that this bliss cannot be earned by any kind of effort whatsoever. It is a gift of the Lord of heaven and earth, who in short gives by his own power, to whom he pleases, and as he pleases. It is God alone who does it all, for his activity transcends our own nature" (Road to Perfection, ch. 25). It follows from these words of St Teresa that this perfect contemplation is infused, and that God gives it freely to whomever he pleases.

Fourth Preface

The main concern of this book is to
encourage you to root out self-will
to attain interior peace

(27) The way to interior peace consists in adapting ourselves in all things to God's will: "In all things we should submit our will to the divine will, for this is the peace of our will, that it be conformed in all things to the divine will" (Hugo Cardinalis, Psalm 13). Those who want everything their own way are oblivious of this ("The way of peace they have not known": Psalm 13), and neither do they want to travel this way, and so they lead bitter and empty lives, forever anxious and upset, for they fail to find the road to peace, which consists of total conformity to God's will.

(28) This conformity is the gentle yoke that leads us to the realm of interior peace and interior serenity. You will deduce from this that the rebellion of our own will is the principal cause of our anxiety and because we don't submit to the divine will we suffer so much distress and unease. Oh blessed souls! If we could only surrender ourselves to God's will in everything he ordains, what tranquillity we would enjoy, what peace and interior serenity we would feel, what supreme happiness and intimations of bliss we would experience! This, then, is to be the main concern of this book. May God grant me his divine light to reveal the hidden paths of this interior way and the supreme happiness of perfect peace.