



## What Is Contemplation?

Since this website Seeking the Face of God is devoted to “the universal call to contemplation”, it is only fair to define what we mean by contemplation. An online search for a definition gives the following answers from the Oxford dictionary, and two online dictionaries:

- *the action of looking thoughtfully at something for a long time.*
- *deep reflective thought*
- *the state of being thought about or planned*
- *a calm, lengthy, intent consideration*

Merriam-Webster changes focus and gives as the primary definition

- *concentration on spiritual things as a form of private devotion*
- Then, as a secondary definition:
- *a state of mystical awareness of God's being*
- Only as a third definition does it give
- *the act of regarding steadily*

We see that there are two main types of contemplation: the religious type, where the object of contemplation is God or another spiritual reality, and a material type of contemplation, where the object contemplated is within our natural human perceptions. Examples of this second object of contemplation would be a beautiful view or scenic object (waterfall, ocean, mountain), thoughts and some abstract consideration (a peaceful memory, goodness, beauty, truth), the arts (paintings, sculptures, music), plants and animals (an aquarium, the circling of a hawk), stars and planets.

Contemplation of these and similar realities are suitable objects for what I will call objective contemplation because the reality contemplated is an object, material or not. This kind of contemplation does not involve a personal relationship. The ability to engage in this kind of objective contemplation is of tremendous value, for it introduces us to the restful encounter with beauty. This consideration could be the basis for several series of articles and podcasts!

However, here at Seeking the Face of God we are considering contemplation as a normal part of the universal call to holiness proclaimed by Vatican II. For this reason, we want to understand how the Catholic Church understands contemplation, so we will use the definition that is given in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The Catechism does use the word “contemplation” very often. A word search finds that the English text of the Catechism speaks of contemplation only a dozen times. It uses the phrase “contemplative prayer” far more often. Still, the Catechism does use the word “contemplation” in a way that gives us a definite idea of what it means in the Church. We find this presented in article 1028:

*Because of his transcendence, God cannot be seen as he is, unless he himself opens up his mystery to man’s immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it. The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory “the beatific vision”.*

This shows us that “contemplation” in Catholic spirituality is a direct perception of God. It is not a consideration of any thought or belief about God. In contemplation, we perceive God Himself.

Article 1028, seems to reserve contemplation for our encounter with God in heaven, and to deny it to anyone who is still living in this world of time and space. This understanding is corrected in article 2715:

*Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. “I look at him and he looks at me”: this is what a certain peasant of Ars in the time of his holy curé used to say while praying before the tabernacle. This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light*

*of his truth and his compassion for all men. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Thus it learns the "interior knowledge of our Lord," the more to love him and follow him.*

By quoting the experience of the peasant of Ars, this makes it clear that contemplation is also meant for believers in this world. Article 163 explains how this comes about:

*Faith makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, the goal of our journey here below. Then we shall see God "face to face," "as he is."<sup>47</sup> So faith is already the beginning of eternal life: (1088) When we contemplate the blessings of faith even now, as if gazing at a reflection in a mirror, it is as if we already possessed the wonderful things which our faith assures us we shall one day enjoy.*

Faith, then enables us to encounter God here on earth just as the blessed do in heaven, though "obscurely, as in a mirror". This is confirmed by the statement of St. John of the Cross when he wrote: "*This obscure loving awareness, which is faith, serves in this life as a means to divine union, as the light of glory serves in the next life as a means to the clear vision of God.*" ("Asc." II, 24,4)

Our subsequent articles and podcasts will go into this more deeply.