

Being Contemplative in the Midst of Action

To be contemplative in the midst of action – *contemplativus in actione* – is often held up as an ideal. We've seen that for Lallemant and his school contemplation is necessary for a fully fruitful apostolate. What is the connection between the two; what is the real link between action and contemplation? Our authors tell us that contemplation brings us closer to God, that contemplation forms us into better instruments of God. All that is true, and more could be said along those lines; but that still does not answer the question, Precisely how are they are linked? The best treatment of the question that I know, and one that I think proposes a precise answer to our question, is to be found in Jean-Joseph Surin's *Spiritual Catechism*. This is a book that we know Fr Colin read and recommended. I'm not, however aware of any traceable influence on Jean-Claude Colin of the particular section of Surin's *Spiritual Catechism* that I'm going to talk about. So I'm not, this time, going to try to show any links or provide parallel texts of Colin. I am assuming, however, that there is some kind of general influence on Colin, that something would have rubbed off; perhaps thorough research may reveal particular parallels but that's not going to be our concern today. Instead I'm going to present Surin's teaching for its own sake because I believe it to be of great value and importance. I can add that his *Spiritual Catechism* was greatly appreciated by Jacques and Raïssa Maritain and played a decisive role in their own Christian and spiritual growth (see R. Maritain, *Les grandes amitiés*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1949, pp. 162-167).

We will go through, step by step, a large section of Surin's book. The precise reference is to Volume I, part III, chapters 3-6. I'll be quoting or summarizing what he says, and I'll add my own comments as we go through. The book is, of course, a catechism and is, therefore, composed as a set of questions and answers all the way through. Each new step of the way is a question, which sometimes can be an objection to what Surin has just been saying, and then an answer to it.

1. Chapter 3: Of the supernatural or extraordinary way

The first question is, ‘What is the supernatural and extraordinary way?’ Surin answers that ‘it is a state in which the soul acts no longer by itself but by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the special assistance of his grace’. This, therefore, corresponds to what I have called the mystical life. By using that term we avoid using ambiguous terms like supernatural way and extraordinary way, which I don’t want to use even though those are the terms that Surin uses. In a sense everything in the Christian life is supernatural; and if we use extraordinary it gets us into all kinds of arguments about what is ordinary. I’ve already said that according to the teaching of Lallemant, and many others too, the mystical life is part of ordinary Christian life. It is a further stage of that life and it is only confusing to call that further stage extraordinary. So I’m going to leave those expressions right out of discussion and use my term, mystical life: the soul acts no longer by itself but by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the special assistance of his grace.

We note there the role of the Holy Spirit, which is very prominent in this part of Surin’s book. This, of course links up directly with the last point which we saw from Lallemant, namely that the whole point of the spiritual life is to enable us in the apostolate, as well as in our own spiritual life, to be fully responsive to the Spirit. By contrast, what Surin calls the ordinary life corresponds to what I call the ascetical life. The Holy Spirit and divine grace are at work there, but they are not normally seen so clearly as they are in the mystical life. Surin makes the point, of course, that we cannot acquire the mystical life; it’s not something that we decide we’re going to have. So there’s no magic formula – I’m not going to suggest to you some set of exercises or even a method of prayer or anything like that by which you will automatically acquire this stage of spiritual growth. Obviously not: it is a gift of God. All we can do is dispose ourselves, put ourselves in a position, as it were, to be able to receive it as God’s gift – a gift that we know God wants to give us.

Surin says that we progress in the way through three states. I’m not going to go into all this in detail, because these states correspond more or less to what St John of the Cross calls the illuminative way, the night of the spirit and the spiritual marriage. So if you’ve read St John of the Cross you will know what Surin has to say. He gives good

advice for people who find themselves in one or other of these states. It's broadly the same advice as that given by all the classic mystical writers. Interestingly enough Surin uses, for example, St Teresa of Avila's famous simile of the silkworm, from the fifth mansion of the *Interior Castle*. Here she compares what's going on in the person with the silk-worm which, up till now, has been leading a perfectly normal silk-worm's life, doing the things that caterpillars do, eating all the mulberry leaves. Then, at a certain moment, the caterpillar weaves or winds a cocoon around itself and 'dies', as it were, inside the cocoon. It doesn't, of course, literally die, but it stops living the caterpillar life; after a while it emerges from the cocoon as a butterfly, a totally new kind of creature with a new kind of life. It can fly, and it can see – neither of which caterpillars can do. So, after the end of one sort of life in which things have been going along quite normally and happily, comes a kind of a death; everything stops. In reality all kinds of important things are happening, but they are completely out of sight. Then, lo and behold, this new life takes off. Teresa of Avila uses that simile to describe what goes on during the development of the mystical life.

Our author also uses John of the Cross's image of the action of fire on green wood. You set fire to a piece of green wood, and at first you get a lot of hissing, spitting and smoke and the piece of wood which might have looked quite nice as a piece of wood becomes quite ugly to look at. And then, at the next stage, the wood itself turns incandescent and becomes fire.

So, far then, Surin is classic, sound, well written but not yet original. I wouldn't be recommending him to you if all he said was what I've summarized so far. He does, however, introduce an original point in his discussion of the passive purifications. This is a classic term in the mystical writers, a stage at which God cleanses the soul of sin much more thoroughly than we have been able to do up till now by our ordinary efforts – contrition and penance. God cleanses the soul of the roots of sin, of hidden faults and of self-love, which remain, of course, very tenacious. Here Surin mentions, without going into detail, some of the experiences of a number of mystics; experiences of great interior suffering and darkness. And then comes this question – remember this is a catechism: 'How is it, then, that there are some saints about whom you never hear tell of such things?' His answer sketches what we might call the *passive purifications of the apostolic*

life. That's my term, not Surin's. Passive purifications of the apostolate are what an active apostle might go through in the course of his or her developing spiritual life that would correspond to some of the things you read about in the mystical writers.

Surin writes: 'Often the place of these sufferings is taken by the great labours undertaken in the service of souls and by other things.' Well, that's rather tantalizing, I find, and I wish he had gone on a little longer and said a bit more. Instead he leaves the subject saying that writers don't know much about these things, which are very secret. But they are, he says, for all that fairly common, as experience shows, and St Ignatius is one who demonstrates this in his own life. He is one saint about whom you don't read of these enormous periods of interior sufferings and darkness. Surin puts him forward as an example of someone who has these purifying experiences but in a different way: it's something to do with the great labours undertaken in the service of souls.

I think we could, without too much difficulty, fill in some of the gaps here to describe what the passive purifications of the apostolic life could be. **Through them God is at work** purifying the soul much more thoroughly than the person has been able to do up till now of all their hidden faults, secret self-love, the deep roots of sin. Surin mentions apostolic labours with all their demands and fatigues, including being at other people's beck and call all the time. We could add also the experience of failure, the experience of adversity, of criticism, even of calumny, perhaps also ill health, scrupulosity; things like that which are 'trials' of the apostolate. Sometimes there may even be an impression of diabolical opposition, which is one of the trials that often have afflicted the great mystics and the great 'apostles' too: the evil one in person seems to be opposing them and causing great difficulties for them of one sort or another. Ultimately the apostle may go through an experience of feeling the insignificance and worthlessness of all that he or she has done. And this I think, could correspond to something that the great mystics describe where, at a certain point in the night of the soul, they see everything that they have been doing up till this time, and all their efforts for God, the holiness of their lives and their virtues as absolutely worthless. It is apparently a quite common experience in the mystical life and I think that something corresponding to this can happen also in the apostolic life.

Take the example of someone who has been working away at some project, or just working faithfully in the Lord's vineyard doing a whole lot of different things. It's not simply that they might fail, although failure may trigger it off. Something deeper happens and the person may have the very strong impression that it's all been worthless; it's meant nothing and it's of absolutely no account at all. This is a deeply purifying experience because we tend to build up our identity on our sense of worth and our sense of achievement. If the rug is pulled out from under our sense of achievement it can cause an extreme shock to our sense of identity. Who are we now? what was it all about anyway? We might have spent thirty years or more in doing something, and without being boastful or vainglorious about it we're quietly proud of our achievement: I've done this and done that, that's me. Who am I? I'm the person who has written these books, or I'm the person who built up this school or parish, or whatever it might be. And then, suddenly, a point comes when we ask: What was all that about anyway? (like St Thomas Aquinas' 'so much straw') That can of course be totally negative; or it can be turned into a positive experience if it leads us to transfer our sense of who we are, from ourselves and our own achievements, to God and our relationship with God. But here too there is purification, as we sense our unworthiness before God. This is the teaching of St John of the Cross, who speaks of it as the purification of the memory.

As I have said, I think that something like this can in fact be a part of the apostle's purification. Such an experience should lead, or can lead, a person to find their meaning and their hope, not in their achievements but in God alone. Whatever their achievements are or have not been, in the end that's not so important or of no importance at all. Finally, like the former silk-worm emerging from its cocoon, the soul enters into a new life which is now perfectly in the hands of God. This is the stage at which the person can undertake and carry out all things for God's glory. And God himself provides the occasions for his service.

So all that, I think, is directly applicable to the apostolate. It is therefore very significant that Surin refers to the *Acts of the Apostles* where the Holy Spirit takes over the apostolate of St Paul and his companions and prevents them doing some things that they were going to do and then tells them to do other things that they were not intending to do. They, for their part, are totally responsive to the movements of the Spirit. In Acts

16:6-10 Paul and company were intending to carry out a mission in several parts of what is now Turkey, Asia Minor, and each time they were prevented. We're not told how, or exactly what it meant to be prevented by the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Jesus. And then comes this direct and very clear message from the Holy Spirit, from God, to go over to Macedonia, to go over to Greece, which they may not have intended to do at all. Maybe they had some long-term goal, which included going to Greece; or maybe, having been prevented from carrying out their mission where they thought they were going, they are now sent to a place where they didn't originally think of going. **I think that could be a paradigm for every Spirit-led apostolate.**

2. Chapter 4: Prayer suitable to the Mystical Life

The fourth chapter is all about the prayer suitable to the mystical life. In answer to the question, 'What is it?' he replies, 'It is contemplation', which he calls 'an ease of dealing with God'. Surin has already discussed contemplation at some length earlier on in the book; at this stage he simply refers back to this. But we need to say more. So here I am now diverting from this part of Surin and summarizing what he's already said earlier in the book.

He generally speaks of contemplation in terms of a 'simple and loving look towards God'. This is a classic description of contemplation. He hasn't invented it. You find it, for example in St Francis de Sales and other writers as well. In those writers it's generally presented as a way of prayer reached after a more or less long practice of discursive meditation, e.g. according to the Ignatian method. At this period of history, everybody was being recommended to start off a regular personal prayer life – it might be at a moment of conversion – by methodical meditation, or methodical mental prayer; to pray according to a method, in other words. This emphasis goes back before St Ignatius, in fact before the Reformation to the late Middle Ages, but St Ignatius' was the method that the Jesuits spread through the use of the *Exercises*. Other writers like St Francis de Sales adapted the Ignatian method, the Sulpicians developed their own variant of it. The idea was to start off with the exercise of the imagination, then of the reasoning powers; then to make acts of will and desire, petition and so on, all according to a method. What

everybody observed was that after a certain time the method doesn't work any more. People, often, at that stage get fed up and give up their mental prayer, whereas John of the Cross and Francis de Sales, Surin and all the rest of them are saying, 'No, at this stage what God is wanting you to do is to simplify your prayer so that instead of having a whole lot of acts of imagination and intellect it becomes simpler and simpler, until you're simply looking towards God, looking at God. Similarly the acts of will become simpler and simpler, so that your prayer consists essentially of a *loving* look towards God.

Today, of course, there are other methods of prayer, or other means of prayer, that are being recommended to people when they start off and so they won't necessarily go through all the stages that are set out by a St John of the Cross. If people are practising *Lectio Divina*, for example, they might arrive at this loving look towards God in a rather different way. The centering prayer of John Main would arrive at it in a different way again, but I can't speak from personal experience of that. And then I think there always have been people who were not much good at methodical prayer and who have arrived quickly and spontaneously at a very simple prayer. But, however, you get there, the loving look towards God is the contemplative prayer that Surin says goes with the introduction into the mystical life.

There was much discussion in the early 20th century about whether **initial** contemplation is active or infused; but it seems to me rather a waste of breath. You can say the beginnings of this prayer are the interchange between active prayer and infused prayer. We simplify our prayer but then it is the Holy Spirit praying within us who is more and more the source of this loving look towards God.

Before returning to Surin I'll make one final remark, which is important in view of what is to follow. Contemplation, the simple loving look towards God, becomes habitual. It becomes habitual in two senses of the word, both in the sense that it becomes one's habitual way of prayer – even though occasionally you may use some other, it's the one you keep coming back to – and it also becomes a habit of mind and heart. In other words you get to the stage, progressively, where you're never far away in thought or affection from God, and the loving look towards God is frequently renewed through glances towards him. That in fact is a word that Surin uses: glances towards God, even in the midst of action.

Surin next discusses three sorts of contemplation, each corresponding to one of the three states of the spiritual life already described. We can go through this fairly quickly.

Corresponding to the illuminative way is a prayer of quiet, a resting in God's presence, without many words or distinct acts.

The night of the spirit is often an experience of powerlessness; corresponding to that is what he calls a prayer of silence. He writes: 'The soul remains fixed and stopped, feeling an operation of the Holy Spirit that penetrates it and attaches it simply to God. This may take a painful form; this silence and powerlessness may be painful and the prayer of silence a painful prayer, purifying the soul or, on the other hand, it may be one that's rather more consoling.'

Then in the final state the soul receives back full freedom of action in a sort of new life. It's the butterfly, now, able to do many things that the caterpillar could not do.

Surin gives some advice to those who experience contemplative prayer. First, to proceed with great simplicity, not bothering about the kind or degree of one's prayer. That's very good advice: not looking back at yourself all the time wondering, 'Am I in the illuminative way? Is this the prayer of quiet?', just letting one's self be guided by God. The next bit of advice is not to interrupt quietude: if we are in this state of simple gazing towards God with a loving look, then not to interrupt that by our own clumsy actions. Not to think, for example, 'Oh, I'm only on point one of the meditation. I'd better stop this and get on to point two.' Or, 'I've still got a whole page of my *Lectio Divina* reading to get through'. Instead, you simply stay there. The third piece of advice, however, is to avoid the other extreme of passivity. In fact Surin keeps making this point: contemplation is an act, though a very simple one, which may be hardly perceptible. So it is not inertia. He clearly wants to defend contemplation against the charge of being a sort of reverie.

The means to prepare one's self for contemplation again are three. (Surin constantly uses a schema of three; I suppose that aided memorization.)

The first means is self-renunciation. Secondly there is the habit of recollection – the English word suggests re-collection, so collecting together again, the opposite of dispersion: instead of letting one's self go all over the place, a habit being *re*-collected. The third means to prepare oneself for contemplation is interior simplification: to let yourself become simpler, have fewer things that you are bothered about. Obviously you have to be bothered about really important things, especially concerning other people, but the simpler your life can be, especially your interior, the better. We could talk a lot about all this, of course. We could ask what interior simplification would mean in terms of one's daydreaming, one's reading, television viewing, use of internet, distractions of various sorts but also even of curiosity, including intellectual curiosity. All sorts of things could come in there.

Next Surin defends contemplative prayer against the charge of being useless compared with a more active prayer and meditation. He says that by submitting to God and by humility, contemplation obtains all things for one's self and for others. He seems to be implying that it can take the place of long complicated prayers of intercession. We don't necessarily have to be thinking all the time of all the people we want to pray for, but in this contemplative state they are all included. And also he says that contemplation gives an infused light that understands many truths. It's the prayer of the saints, he says, as seen in their lives and recommended in their teaching. He quotes St Francis de Sales who says he wants to remain, 'without thought and without acts of understanding or of will in the simple presence of God.' We'll come back to that statement a little bit later.

And then the inevitable question, well, 'What about St Ignatius?', because St Ignatius doesn't seem to be recommending contemplative prayer in the *Exercises* in the sense that we've been talking about. Is he an exception? This is a particularly good question for a Jesuit. And it's the objection that Jesuits have often thrown up to Lallemant, Surin and company: whatever might be true for other people, Ignatius meant them to pray by the active use of imagination, the understanding and the will. Forget about contemplation; you don't find it in Ignatius. Surin replies that Ignatius in the *Exercises* gives a repetition of each meditation, which is to be made through what he calls the 'taste' of the mysteries and virtues, adding the application of the senses, which, says

Surin, is true contemplation. Now, that's precisely the answer that's being given today by contemporary Jesuits who are encouraging contemplative prayer, and who also have to cope with exactly the same objections. They make the same appeal as does Surin to the repetitions and the application of the senses in the Ignatian *Exercises*, which is a form of contemplative prayer. Hans Urs von Balthasar has a similar understanding of contemplation in his book *Prayer*.

For Surin contemplation is the true prayer not only of 'contemplatives' but also of those who have done much for God, active apostles. He has to answer an objection which, of course, is phrased as a question: 'Doesn't contemplation enervate people?' – so that they get used to being in a state of torpor, all their energy drains away and they've got nothing left for the active apostolate. All they want to do is remain inert. Quite the contrary, he says; contemplation gives new strength and motivation in the apostolate and a greater desire to spend themselves for the salvation of their neighbour. That is a direct fruit of contemplation. At the same time, of course, contemplation being also a repose can be a source of rest from labours, which gives you refreshment and renewed strength for the apostolate. Chapter five is advice for those on the way to contemplative prayer. I'm going to skip that, it's all very interesting but he's said it before in a lot more detail.

3. Chapter 6: The Perfection and Excellence of this Way

I want to move on to chapter six which is the climax of his teaching. The title of the chapter is, 'The perfection and excellence of this way'. Surin teaches that this way, the mystical life, has three perfections which are simplicity, strength or energy and truth.

So the first question is, 'In what does the simplicity of this way consist?' He replies, 'It is a single look of understanding and an acquiescence or consent of the will.' We now see that the act of contemplation is in fact two acts fused together. In the 'loving look towards God', the *look* is an act of the understanding; the *loving* aspect of it **can be** analysed as an act of the will, precisely an act of acquiescence or of consent of the will to God: wanting what God wants. This double act then, as we now recognize it to be, is scarcely perceptible. But the soul is not idle – despite the language used above by St Francis de Sales, that he wanted to remain 'without thought and without acts of

understanding or of will in the simple presence of God'. However, writes Surin, 'these acts are so profound and delicate that the soul can draw no satisfaction from saying that it's made such and such an act.' For this simple look, or 'regard' – that word *regard* is French but it comes over into English writers, too, who talk about the prayer of simple regard – does not state distinctly and expressly this or that piece of knowledge. So the simple look towards God is not, for example, a clear or distinct idea about the Trinity, or about the Incarnation, or about Christ's Passion, or what have you. It's not an idea in that sense of the word. And the acquiescence, or consent of the will does not say formally thanksgiving, contrition or offering: it's not consciously an act of thanksgiving, or an act of contrition or an act of offering. But it's all of that in essence, all gathered together, and even in a higher way. At the same time this look and this acquiescence are the source of a very great good.

So the second question, then, is 'In what do the strength and energy of this way consist?' And here is the gem: 'This simple look and acquiescence in God's good pleasure gives a capacity to the soul to do a quantity of things that highly surpass its natural power. The Holy Spirit operates in such people through this look.' That's the point: they are occupied in looking towards God, and the Holy Spirit is operating *through* this look.

The Spirit in this way causes them to have, as in a treasury, the intellectual gifts of the Spirit. These are *wisdom*, which is the knowledge by taste of things that are high and divine; *understanding*, which is the penetration of sovereign principles; *counsel*, which is prudence, discretion and light in guiding souls; the *knowledge* of many things spiritual and sometimes even human. These things are gathered together in a point; so they are all together. You are not distinctly conscious of the wisdom or the understanding, or the counsel or the knowledge; they are all gathered together in a point, just as the look towards God is not distinctly an idea about the Trinity or what have you. And they are comprised in this unique look. So, in looking towards God the soul is receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Our act consists in looking towards God, but at the same time we are receiving the light of the Holy Spirit through the look. Then Surin makes an important point. The soul does not stock or store these things for itself but finds itself provided for at need, when it is necessary to speak, for example, whether to groups

or to individuals. It's beautifully expressed also by St Therese of Lisieux, you might remember, who says she doesn't have a bank account, she just holds out her open hand and finds that what she needs is there. That would be another way of putting what Surin is saying. So the look towards God is a very simple looking in which there is no clear or distinct idea about God. But at the same time the Holy Spirit is infusing, or granting, pouring, if you like, through that look these gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel and knowledge.

Similarly, the simple acquiescence of the heart contains a vigour for all things, a strength, and gives the heart affections and holy impulses. From this come the upsurges of the Spirit of God, the ardours of zeal and the operation of the other gifts of the Holy Spirit: fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord. In general it is a store of lights, affections, talents and faculties, we could say the charismatic gifts, which all flow from the spring of living water. This spring is very pure and simple and is like a single conduit that divides into several channels, which are these various gifts. The person established in this way carries with ease and all together, as it were, a soul filled and provided with all things, which he produces at need. That is the basis for being free of all care as our Lord enjoined on his disciples: Do not think how or what you will speak because the soul is full of this very simple spirit, is burdened with nothing and is provided and furnished with all good things in it.

And then the next question, 'What is this thing which is so simple and pervades the whole soul?' And the answer, 'It is nothing else than the Holy Spirit himself who is only freedom and peace for the soul and in himself fire and light. He is the principle and source of the single look and gentle acquiescence.' Now we realize that the Holy Spirit is not simply on the other side of the look or the acquiescence. 'All along it's been the Spirit who is producing the look and the acquiescence in us. Through them he does all things in the heart and in the spirit of man with very great strength and power. This was why the apostles, though without knowledge of philosophy or other human talents, drew everyone around themselves with great energy. It was said of this marvelous gift that was communicated to them, that "they should wait to be clothed with power from on high", words which show the strength and energy of this grace: power from on high.'

Now my comment on all this: we could say that the double act of contemplation is the *interface* between the human spirit and the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is the source of the simple look towards God and the loving acquiescence in his will, and he uses this loving look to communicate his gifts, and in particular those which will enable apostles to carry out their mission in a way that surpasses their own powers. The Holy Spirit causes us to look lovingly towards God, and this look is the channel through which he pours his Gifts into us.

It obviously follows that the better contemplatives we are, that is the more habitual it is for us to look simply towards God and acquiesce lovingly in His good pleasure, the more effective apostles we will be.

That seems to me to be the best explanation I've ever come across for the nexus, or link, between contemplation and action; how it is that contemplation makes you a better apostle, or what it would mean to be contemplative in action.

You might remember that at the beginning of this chapter there were three perfections of this way and the third one was truth. So, finally, and this is going to be very brief, 'In what does the truth of this way consist?' To quote Surin again: 'Such persons have a vigour in all things. Their words touch and inflame hearts as having themselves the spirit of Jesus Christ.' The truth of this way, then, means truth that makes an impact. And that's because the Spirit of God is communicating himself through their words.

Surin ends with a scattering of remarks, which I'll just bring together in three points. First of all, the special action of the Holy Spirit working through the contemplative act begins to show itself in the illuminative way. Then it may go underground in the night of the spirit; and at that stage it might seem to the person that they are simply impeded, powerless, so nothing much at all of importance seems to be happening (that's of course the cocoon stage; you're in the cocoon and important things are happening but there's not much to show for it). Surin admits that experience of the night of the spirit is variable: some people may be in it and stay there until they emerge like the butterfly at the other end; while others – and this might in fact be the more common experience – move in and

out and then back in, until finally it's over. So in that case there would be perhaps periods of alternation when the action of the Holy Spirit in the apostle is more manifest, or less manifest.

The second point is that all this has nothing at all to do with ecstasies, visions, raptures, etc. from which the soul is to remain detached. (here Surin shows himself to be a good disciple of John of the Cross.)

Thirdly, and this is a very good place to stop, the special guidance of the Holy Spirit does not exempt one from the ordinary way of obedience, taking advice, prudent decision-making, discernment (or, one might add, preparing sermons). And above all things we must prize and cultivate charity, humility and the common virtues.