THE DOCTRINE ON CONTEMPLATION OF ST. GREGORY THE GREAT

AS FOUND IN

THREE OF HIS SERMONS ON EZEKIEL

BY

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OUR LADY OF

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INTRODUCTION

At the close of his sermons on Ezekiel, St. Gregory grieves thus to his flock, "Let no one upbraid me . . . . if after this sermon I retire because, as you are all aware, our tribulations have increased." He then enumerates some of the woes which oppress him:

On all sides we are surrounded with swords, on every hand we fear the impending danger of death. Some return to us, their hands lopped off; others are taken captive, still others are said to be slain. Now am I forced to be silent because my soul is weary of my life (Job x, 1).

How like the sorrows of Pius XII were those of the fatherly-hearted Gregory. Daily news of the barbarous butchery of his spiritual children comes to the former as it did to the latter. This search into the contemplative writings of St. Gregory, the last of the


2. Ibid. . . . . undique gladiis circumfusi sumus, undique imminens mortis periculum timemus. Alii, detruncatis ad nos manibus redeunt, alii capti, ab expositione retinere, quia taedet animam meam vitae meae (Job x, 1).
Church Fathers, was made to discover what he taught in his sermons to the populace about higher prayer. The urgency of this study seems apparent now when humanity is again faced with the choice between God and chaos. The atomic age, like the age of barbaric invasions, must be one of morality or one of total destruction.

After presenting generally accepted ideas on mysticism and a chapter showing his own preparation for higher prayer, St. Gregory's doctrine on contemplation is set forth. This research has been restricted to three of the twenty-two homilies which he delivered on Ezekiel: the third of the first book and the second and fifth of the second book. This doctrine of prayer was given to a group of Christians such as one would find on any Sunday in our parish churches today. It is noteworthy that in these sermons Gregory presented the same lofty teaching to his parishioners as he gave to the monks and clergy in his *Morals on the Book of Job*.

A secondary purpose of this research was to discover in how far the later writers, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Teresa of Avila, were in conformity with St. Gregory's mystical doctrine. A third objective was to learn to what extent Gregory continued and developed the Benedictine tradition of liturgical prayer.
A BIOGRAPHY OF GREGORY THE GREAT

Gregory I, surnamed "the Great," pope and doctor of the Church, was born at Rome of patrician parents about the year 540 A.D. His father, Gordianus, a senator, belonged to the ancient family of the Anici. His mother's name was Silvia. Gregory's parents seem to have been wealthy as well as religious. There is mention of Gregory's brother and of his father's three sisters, two of whom (Tharsilla and Emiliana) are saints. The patriarch of Western monachism, Benedict of Nursia, was likewise of the noble Anici family.

Young Gregory loved study, and his father seems to have given him every opportunity for mental development that ruined Rome then offered. Marks of former glory gave evidence to the thoughtful boy of the fleetness of time, the vanity of riches that pass, the brevity of temporal life, and the insecurity of earthly power. Gregory's preoccupation with this idea caused

1. Ibid. 75:41.

Dudden to remark that this young Roman was stricken "from his birth with the malady of the Middle Ages." ¹

That Gregory at an early age desired to enter the ranks of the clergy is attested to by his earliest biographer, Paul the Deacon. Gregory's father preferred a worldly career for his son and the young patrician successfully studied law.

As prefect of Rome, Gregory won the respect and love of the whole populace. Then at the height of his career, the old longing to serve God more directly led him away from the politics of that decaying city. After the death of Gordianus, young Gregory sold his estates in Italy and Sicily, converted his palace at Rome into the monastery of St. Andrew, and entered there upon the life of a monk.

That Gregory's attraction for contemplation caused the three years of his obscurity to speed quickly is proved by his letters and other writings. In these works he mourns the forced exchange of the heavenly joys of Mary for the mundane cares of Martha. ² In 578 Pope Benedict I appointed Gregory to the office of

1. Ibid. Vol. I, p. 15
Seventh Deacon or Archdeacon of Rome. The next pontiff, Pelagius IV, sent Gregory as apocrisarius to Constantinople. He spent six years in that office.

Returning to Rome, Gregory was elected abbot of his monastery, St. Andrew. Although holding that office, Abbot Gregory obtained the reluctant permission of Pelagius to set out with a small group of monks to convert England. The vigorous protest of the Roman populace caused the Pope to recall them before the little band had crossed the Alps.¹

Pope Pelagius died February 8, 591. About the time of his death Gregory organized a series of penitential acts among the people to obtain the help of God against a plague then raging in the city. Popular favor immediately fixed upon him, and he was chosen to succeed to the chair of Peter. When his attempt to fly from this honor was foiled, the newly elected Pope was forced to accept the crushing and unwanted burden of supreme spiritual administration, September 3, 590.

As Pope, Gregory was both spiritual and temporal provider for his flock. He obtained food for the populace, headed off the incursions of the barbarian and half-civilized tribes, and was in constant negotiation

with the jealous city-kings, and the obstinate, short-sighted Emperor at Constantinople. By his correspondence the Pope brought relief to the oppressed in all Italy and Sicily. With the thought that it is God, not man, to whom a final accounting must be made, Gregory chastized the ignorant, selfish, and slothful clergy and the magistrates, high and low. Wherever heresy or slow-dying paganism manifested itself, Gregory wrote letters of reform to those in authority and sent his ambassadors to correct the erring faithful.

Gregory's letters went out from one end of Christendom to the other: to Maurice, emperor of Constantinople, to Queen Brunichild among the Franks in Gaul, to the bishops of Africa, Asia Minor, and all parts of the then known world into which Christianity had gone forth. He lent his influence wherever a problem of the rights of the Church or the needs of the people required it.

Gregory died March 12, 604, at the age of 64. In one of the most critical periods of her history, he had ruled the Roman Church with unusual prudence for thirteen years. His body is buried in St. Peter's under the altar of St. Andrew.

The stabilization of the power of the papacy was
Gregory's greatest work. Besides this remarkable and lasting achievement, he is remembered for his successful combatting of heresy, the sending of missionaries to England, and for his writings. Outstanding among these are an extensive correspondence, homilies given to the people, instructions to his monks, his *Dialogues*, a multiplicity of legends and wonder stories of a spiritual nature—together with the life of St. Benedict, and the *Pastoral Rule*, an instruction book for bishops. This latter work is generally conceded to be his best.
CHAPTER I

WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION

In this thesis the term contemplation is confined to the various stages of supernatural or infused contemplation. Following the exposition of the stages of contemplation as organized by Garrigou-LaGrange\(^1\) from St. Teresa, we may say that there are four such steps, within which the variety of experience depends upon the individual soul. St. Teresa is chosen as spokesman because she has written well on the subject, has experienced the highest states of prayer, and she was, moreover, a disciple of St. Gregory.\(^2\) What St. Teresa has to say of contemplation is essentially the teaching of all the mystical doctors.

The growth from stage to stage of greater contemplation is marked by its progress to the different faculties of the soul which God, in a certain order,


enthralls or causes to cease from their activity for a time. The author of Christian Perfection and Contemplation in describing these states says:

First of all the will is seized and held, then the intellect and the imagination; finally in ecstasy, the exercise of the exterior senses is suspended. St. Teresa knows, however, that the suspension of the imagination and of the senses is only a concomitant and accidental phenomenon, sign of a greater intensity of knowledge and love of God, since it generally ceases in the most perfect mystical state, the transforming union.1

There are then, four distinct stages of contemplation: the prayer of quiet; the simple union, partial or complete ecstasy, and the transforming union.

The Prayer of Quiet: Garrigou-LaGrange says that in the prayer of quiet the will alone is made captive by the mysterious light received which manifests to it the goodness of God present in it . . . . like the gushing forth of the living water which Jesus spoke of to the Samaritan woman.2 The understanding, memory, and imagination are not captivated by the divine action and sometimes they act as auxiliaries and at other times as a hindrance.

The Simple Union. The imagination and memory

2. Ibid., p. 250.
are seized captive by God as well as the will. Distrac-
tions usually cease. This state lasts but for a short time — not more than half an hour. "In simple union God's action is strong enough to absorb completely the activity of the interior faculties of the soul; all this activity is directed toward Him and no longer goes astray."\textsuperscript{1} Sometimes the simple union is incomplete, as in the prayer of quiet. The intellect and imagination war against the will. They should be completely disregarded.\textsuperscript{2}

\textbf{Partial or Complete Ecstasy}. This state is also called the prelude to the transforming union. Here "union with God is so perfect that it suspends the operation of the exterior senses: all the activity of the soul is ravished toward God and consequently ceases to function in regard to the exterior world."\textsuperscript{3} This state is not an essential part of contemplation as such and ceases in its highest degree.

\textbf{The Transforming Union}. The last stage which St. Teresa calls the seventh mansion is the transforming

\begin{itemize}
  \item 1. \textit{Ibid.}, p. 251.
  \item 2. \textit{Ibid.}, p. 252.
  \item 3. \textit{Ibid.}, p. 255.
\end{itemize}
union. A final and most painful purification of the spirit or of the will is the beginning of this state. Ecstasies have usually ceased. "Under the influence of this grace the soul cannot doubt that the Divine Persons are present in it; it is, besides, practically never deprived of their company."¹ That most eminent mystical doctor, St. John of the Cross, says, "Contemplation is naught else than a secret and loving infusion from God, which, if permitted, enkindles the soul with a spirit of love."²

WHAT CONTEMPLATION IS NOT

Contemplation is not visions, ecstasies, locutions, extraordinary happenings of any kind, nor is it revelations. These effects may accompany contemplation, but they are usually not found in the highest mystic state, the transforming union.

Contemplation is not given suddenly, but after due preparation. It is not a transport in which reason is suspended, and it is a meritorious act. To know

1. Ibid., p. 257.
that one is in the state of grace, or to feel the presence of God is not necessary. Contemplation is not a gratis datum for the sanctification of others; it does not require infused ideas such as the angels have; it does not require an immediate perception of God which would make us know Him as He is.¹

In conclusion, two quotations from Christian Perfection and Contemplation are in place. "All mystics tell us that they perceive, not God Himself, as He is, but the effect of His action on their souls especially in the sweetness of love which He causes them to experience."² And finally:

. . . . infused contemplation is above reasoning in the obscurity of faith, a simple, loving knowledge of God, which cannot be obtained by our personal activity aided by Grace, but rather demands a manifest, special illumination and inspiration of the Holy Ghost.³

2. Ibid., p. 270.
3. Ibid., p. 272.
CHAPTER II

ST. GREGORY AS A BENEDICTINE MYSTIC

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the training by which Gregory moulded his own life to perfection so that what he wrote of contemplation may be better understood. The aims and general characteristics of the Benedictine life are therefore set forth, after which is shown Gregory's achievement of Benedict's twelve degrees of humility as his preparation for his soul's perfection and his life of prayer.

A mystic is one who practices contemplation. It follows that a Benedictine mystic is one who practices contemplation in living the rule of St. Benedict. The aim of this rule is to lead souls to perfection, hence essentially the practice of it conduces to contemplation. All ascetical writers agree that the higher states of perfection are accompanied by a corresponding state of mystical prayer. But the Benedictine life is a way of life which prepares the soul for full union with God. It is intended to help its
followers to become worthy to stand in the presence of God, for it is a "school of perfection" as its founder writes.

The particular characteristics of Benedictine mysticism result from their application to the development of a life of prayer within a monastery in which the rule emphasizes the virtues of obedience and humility together with liturgical life in common. In this rule, consequently, St. Benedict decrees that "nothing be preferred to the work of God." The monk's main endeavor is to pay his service of praise, not as an isolated individual with leisure for the introspective type of spirituality, alone in his cell, but as a part of a family rendering its service in the oratory.

So insistent is Benedict on this service of praise that the work of the monastery is looked upon as a continuation of the same life of prayer. Even the monastery tools which the monks use for cultivating the soil are to be regarded in the same spirit of careful reverence which one would bestow upon the sacred

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2. Ibid., xliii, 5, p. 82. "Ergo nihil Operi Dei praeponatur."
vessels of the altar. The Benedictine motto, "Ora et labora," indicates the two different phases of the same life of praise. In his chapter on humility, Benedict sets down in characteristic Roman orderliness the preparation for a life of perfect union with God.

He traces twelve degrees of humility. These degrees follow the monk from his entrance into the religious family until he reaches the state of love of God "which being perfect, casteth out fear." He concludes the chapter by saying, "May the Lord be pleased to manifest all this by His Holy Spirit in his laborer now cleansed from vice and sin."

Following in Benedict's footsteps, Gregory devoted the whole of Hom. II, Book II, in his sermons on Ezekiel to a discussion of the two lives of prayer and work. He moreover insists that the virtue of humility is essential to those who aspire to contemplation. Not all twelve degrees of humility can be traced

1. Ibid., vii, p. 29.
2. Ibid., vii, p. 29.
3. Ibid., vii, p. 40. "... quae perfecta foris mittit timorem."
4. Ibid., vii, 10-12, p. 41. Quae Dominus iam in operarium suum mundum a vitiiis et peccatis Spiritu Sancto dignabitur demonstrare.
in his life and writings with equal clearness because his official duties and papal office brought him out of his monastic setting. But his application of monastic simplicity to these positions which admit of pomp and circumstance, is strong proof that he lived this preparation for higher prayer.

As a boy Gregory seemed to have had a natural inclination toward study and serious reflection. His first biographer, Paul the deacon, says: "He, even in youth, was devoted to God and would sigh with all his heart for the country of celestial life."¹ This wish for God and life everlasting is indicated by Benedict in the first degree of humility.²

In deference to his father's wishes, Gregory abandoned for a time the pursuit of his desire to become a monk, displaying by this action that he had the second degree of humility which is briefly, "when a man loveth not his own will."³ This second degree is also indicative of a blameless life as all spiritual writers agree that self-will is the essence of


3. Ibid., vii, 91, p. 34.
sin. Gregory's biographies and the esteem in which his life has always been held by the Church are evidence of his uprightness.

"The third degree of humility is that for the love of God a man subject himself to a superior in all things."¹ Gregory possessed this degree, for, embracing the monastic life he was always an obedient monk, even when he was commanded by his superiors to leave his beloved retirement and to engage in the worldly business of Seventh Deacon of Rome and the work of apocrisarius at the court of Emperor Maurice in Constantinople. Gregory simply obeyed, although to his friend, St. Leander, he could not but mourn the loss of his chosen obscurity.²

"The fourth degree of humility is that if hard and distasteful things are commanded . . . . he accept them with patience and an even temper."³ That Gregory fulfilled this degree is shown by his acceptance of the demanding duties aforementioned. He was under no

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¹ Ibid., vii, 99, p. 34. "Tertius humilitatis gradus est, ut quis pro Dei amore omni obedientia se subdat maiori."


³ Butler, op. cit., vii, 104, p. 35. "Quartus gradus humilitatis est, si in ipsa obedientia duris et contrariis rebus, . . . . tacite conscientia patientiam amplectatur."
delusion as to the responsibility of these burdens, and he used every legitimate means to escape them. After he had undertaken them, although he still longed for his monastic retreat, he performed his work conscientiously and expertly.

As the fifth degree of humility, that of manifestation of secret faults to one’s superior\(^1\) tends toward what is commonly called confession, it does not lend itself readily to the discovery of first-hand evidence. We may conclude, however, that Gregory attained promptly to this degree because he never wearies of blaming himself and of putting himself last. For example, at the end of the *Moralia* he reviews his motive ending with these words:

Thus along the way the motive of human praise creeps upon our intention which, in the beginning was upright in God’s sight, and seizing upon it, this less perfect motive subtly joining itself to our former good intention . . . .

The holy Doctor reveals by this remark the deepest distrust of himself and the absence of any desire to be esteemed by others.


In the sixth degree of humility the monk is "content with the meanest and worst of everything." There is plentiful evidence of this degree in Gregory's life. Paul the deacon says: "... everything which he owned he distributed to pious works so that, being needy, he might follow Christ who was made poor for our sakes." The same biographer tells us that:

... he who formerly was accustomed to go about the city in princely, silken robes glittering with jewels, after his entrance into the monastery, garbed in a coarse habit, would, as a poor man among the poor, minister to their needs.

During his stay as papal nuncio at the court of Maurice, Gregory might have surrounded himself with worldly appointments of oriental splendor, but instead, he led a monastic life together with a group of monks whom he had brought with him from St. Andrew's in Rome.

"The seventh degree of humility is when, not only with his tongue he declareth but also in his

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1. Butler, op. cit., vii, 148, p. 37... si omni vilitate vel extremitate contentus sit ... .


3. Ibid., P. L. 75:43. Et qui ante serico contextu ac gemmis micantibus solitus erat per urbem procedere trabeatus, post vili contectus tegmine, ministrabat pauper ipse pauperibus.

4. Ibid., P. L. 75:33.
The inmost soul believeth that he is the lowest and vilest of men.¹ The attainment of this degree in Gregory is best seen in his letters. Writing to Athanasius of Antioch he says:

Because you call me the mouth of the Lord . . . . I confess you have brought my self-esteem into the greatest doubt. For when I consider what I am, I detect no sign of this good in myself. When I consider who you are, I do not think that you could speak falsely. Although I desire to believe what you say, my infirmity contradicts me. When I wish to argue what you say in my praise, your sanctity refutes me. But I beseech you, holy man, that although what you say is not true, it may become a reality because you say it.²

The holy Pope addresses these lines to a priest whose name is remembered merely because the humble Saint deigned to address him:

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¹ Butler, op. cit., vii, 156, p. 37. Septimus humilitatis gradus est, si omnibus se inferiorem et viliorem non solum sua lingua pronuntiet, sed etiam intimo cordis credat affectu . . . .

As a matter of fact I know that you live well and I know that I am burdened with many sins. But although you are a sinner, you are much better than I because you bear only your own sins whilst I carry both my own and the sins of those who are entrusted to me.

St. Benedict says that the monk who has reached the eighth degree of humility follows the example of his elders and the common rule of the monastery in all things. Gregory was not singular in his conduct for Paul the Deacon says of the future pope when alluding to his entrance into the monastery: "... where he began his conversion with such zeal for perfection that even in the very beginning he could be counted in the number of the perfect." A monk starting out on a path of self-appointed work, prayer, and mortification, without consideration for the example of older religious, and with no regard for the customs of the place, would soon be known, not as a perfect monk, but rather as a very irregular one.

Further proof that Gregory had acquired this eighth


degree may be found in the fact that he delighted in the life led in common.¹

Gregory's love of retirement is strong evidence of his having successfully reached the ninth degree of humility which is that a monk keep silence until he is asked to speak.² His political position and the fact that his life is known mainly from what he said, not from his ability to keep silence, make it rather difficult to measure Gregory's attainment of this degree. Yet his intense desire for contemplative prayer, the achievement of which is reached only by self-denial and self-effacement, implies the keeping of this ninth degree. His complaint to St. Leander³ and to Peter the deacon quoted at the end of this chapter are further proof of Gregory's devotion to monastic silence.

That Gregory had achieved the tenth and eleventh degrees of humility: quiet, grave, and humble conversation without light and giddy laughter,⁴ is deducible from the tone of his correspondence. A cheerful and

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1. Ibid., P.L., 75:43.
genial tone in all his works indicates that, although he was serious, Gregory was neither harsh nor morose. Although many other instances might be offered, the story of his encounter with the English slave boys for sale in the Roman market reveals this kindliness characteristic of the great Pope.

While walking in the forum one day, Gregory saw some boys about to be sold. He admired their graceful forms and fair faces, approached them, and inquired regarding their religion, their nation, and their king. Their master replied that they were Angles, their king was Alla, their province Dieria, and that they were pagans. The good Pope grieved that they who indeed resembled the angels should still be serving the prince of darkness. So their province was Dieria: he would snatch them de ira, from the wrath to come. And their king was Alla: then allelujah would re-echo in their land.

His letters show that when it was necessary for him, in virtue of his office as pope, to reprimand the scandalous conduct or to advise men and women in high places, his admonitions always reminded the offender of the account he must give to God for all his deeds. Gregory's advice and warnings were administered with the
utmost tact such as one might expect from a courteous ambassador. This is all the more remarkable as his life as pope was a constant torture on account of physical illness, threats from barbarian invaders, and the jealousy and ambition of both ecclesiastical and civil men in power.

The twelfth degree of humility shows the monk to be not only humble of heart but so reformed in mind that his whole exterior bespeaks the compunction of his heart. ¹ All Gregory's writings are full of this trait. The following example in a letter to Innocent, prefect of Africa, may be cited. The Pope commands that functionary's desire for his book of Job because he displays by this request an appetite for spiritual food. Gregory concludes the letter with these self-effacing words:

But if you wish to be regaled by delicious viands read even the most insignificant works of your countryman Augustine and do not seek our bran in preference to his choice wheat. ²

In a letter to one Rusticana, a noble lady, after a courteous acknowledgement of her kindness, the


good Pope upbraids her for referring to herself as "ancilla" saying, "Since I by my episcopal duties am made the servant of all, by what reason do you style yourself handmaid to me?"\(^1\)

The words of Paul the deacon seem a fitting conclusion to this discussion of Gregory's monastic preparation for contemplation and the subsequent preaching of it. Bewailing the loss of his chosen retirement, Gregory was accustomed to exclaim to his deacon Peter:

> How unhappy is my soul stricken with its wound of worldly employment when she remembers what, for a while, she did in the monastery! Indeed all created things were beneath her! How much she surpassed all transient affairs: because she had become accustomed to think only on heavenly things; because, although still in the flesh, she would already pass over the bar of the flesh by contemplation; because even death, which is a punishment for almost everyone, was desired as an entrance to life and the reward of its labor.\(^2\)

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1. Ibid., 77:1153, Lib. xi, Ep. 44. Ego enim qui per episcopatus onera servus sum omnium factus, qua ratione se illa mihi ancillam dicit . . . . .

2. Ibid., 75:43. Infelix quippe animus meus occupationis suae pulsatus vulnere, meminit quals aliquid in monasterio fuit, quomodo ei faventia cuncta super erant; quantum rebus quae volvuntur eminebat; quod nulla nisi coelestia cogitare consueverat; quod etiam retentus corpore, ipsa jam carnis clausura contemplatione transibat, quod mortem quoque, quae pene cunctis poena est, videlicet ut ingressum vitae et laboris sui praemium amabat . . . . .
Thus Gregory, whose compendium of prayer is the sacred writings and who insists that humility is the groundwork of contemplation, was trained in the school of perfection which his illustrious relative had founded less than a century before. Called forth from his monastic quietude, he was to bring to the multitudes assurance that they, as well as those called to the monastic and the clerical life, were summoned to contemplative prayer. In the pages that follow, many traces of Gregory's training may be seen. It is remarkable to the searchers into his works that at no time does he directly refer to the rule under which he lived. But this is not to be wondered at, for the system of quoting other writers was not customary in his day. The Scriptures only seem to have been quoted. What other writers said in meditating on them appears to have been common property.

N.B. In the interest of brevity only one, or at most two quotations have been selected as evidence of Gregory's attainment to the perfection of each degree of humility.
CHAPTER III

ST. GREGORY’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE IDEAS OF CONTEMPLATION
IN THREE OF HIS SERMONS ON EZEKIEL

The richest sources of information on contemplation found in Gregory’s sermons on Ezekiel are contained in the third homily of the first book, and the second and fifth of the second book; hence this thesis is confined to these three sermons.

The two books of homilies on Ezekiel contain twelve and ten sermons respectively. They were spoken to the faithful after Gregory was made pope, and have as their subject various meditations which he made on the life of grace. Although he follows as a starting point the words of Ezekiel taking up verse by verse the obscure remarks of the prophet, Gregory quotes liberally from other works of sacred Scripture which he was very familiar. This knowledge, it may be inferred, was an outgrowth of the monastic training he had received, which provided leisure of several hours daily for the reading of spiritual works chief among these being the sacred Scriptures.
The most notable element of Gregory's style is his strongly developed analytic method. This mode of approach is nowhere more apparent than in his meditative works of which these sermons are a part. Gregory follows an obvious pattern in his meditations: first he quotes a verse from sacred Scripture as for example the passage describing the hands beneath the wings of the four living creatures. He looks at the picture presented and sees in it the two lives, the active and the contemplative, for, he decides, the hands represent the good works of charity and the wings the flight of the soul to eternal Truth. Page after page reveals the thoughts he draws from material images which he interprets in terms of intellectual and spiritual relationships. To prove his inferences the learned Doctor frequently quotes holy Scripture. He also borrows from the writings of the Fathers and but seldom if ever acknowledges these, not because he is unwilling to do so but because no system of quoting other authors at that time seems to have been worked out. This accounts also, in part at least, for his failure to mention St. Benedict as the source of many of his ideas.

Gregory is theological rather than psychological in his attitude toward mysticism; that is, he pays
more attention to God and unchanging reality than to the reactions of the human soul. A peculiarity of Gregory's own is his systematic way of drawing symbolic meaning from numbers. At first startling in its simplicity, it quickly becomes wearisome. But in whatever symbolism Gregory establishes an idea, he is always consistent.

Gregory is methodic and scientific rather than intuitive and interpretative. He infrequently appeals to the emotions. His ideas are set forth by a summary followed by continuous restatement. The effect thus obtained suggests the widening ripples coasting out upon one another after a drop of water has fallen into a placid pool.

In the presentation of his observations about contemplation, Gregory offered the same pabulum alike to the uneducated as to sophisticated Romans in his audiences that each might take what was to his liking or to his lights. Gregory's world was one of turmoil and change. Ruined Rome and the slow-dying remains of paganism were about him. The impoverished soils produced plague-ridden peoples whose chief work in life was to fight off hunger and barbarian hordes. From the time he entered into public life Gregory was called on to supply corn to this miserable multitude and to nego-
tiate with many jealous, petty rulers amid the swords of the Lombards. It is no wonder then that he stresses one main theme: The Light of the World will save His flock for eternal life. As spiritual Father, he wished to guide his children to the contemplation of their Creator that they might learn the way out of the strife of this world to everlasting rest.

Fascinated by the mysterious visions of eternal glory seen by Ezekiel at the river Chobar, Gregory uses these writings as a starting point of meditation. From the fruit of his cogitations he sets up the modi of reaching God and eternal happiness.

Gregory’s objective comments on contemplation have a parallel in his objective and detached style which shows some of the formalism of his rhetorical training. His writings also show that his practice as an advocate made him skilled in the use of argumentation and exposition.

Homily III, Book I, is the first of Gregory’s sermons devoted to contemplation. It is entirely given to the exposition of the merits of a life of good works and of contemplation. What Gregory has to offer here and in subsequent sermons will be examined in the order in which he presents it. A summary of his doctrine
as it appears in that homily is appended to each analysis.

Referring to the wings of the mysterious animals seen by Ezekiel, Gregory says: "And so the face pertains to faith and the wings to contemplation." He then explains: "Indeed, by contemplation, because we are borne above ourselves, we are as if lifted into the air."

Gregory indicates further on how the active life precedes and prepares the way for contemplation:

The lives of holy preachers are indeed two, the active and the contemplative; but the active precedes the contemplative in point of time, because one tends from good works to contemplation. Contemplation, on the other hand, is of more merit than the active life because while the active labors in the work now at hand in this present life, the contemplative indeed tastes the repose which is to come by a very intimate experience.

At this point the holy Doctor uses the example of Martha and Mary to prove that, although the active

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and contemplative lives are both good, contemplation is the better. He concludes his discussion with these remarks:

... the active life is less meritorious than the contemplative. ... For, although we do some good in the active life, we fly to heavenly desire by contemplation.¹

Gregory continues the comparison of these two lives. He uses as an allegory the law of Moses concerning the purchase of a Hebrew as a slave, the duration of his servitude, and his dismissal. Upon the points set forth in this law, Gregory builds up his idea of the preparation for, and entrance into, the contemplative through the active life. This symbolism of servitude and freedom is realized, says Gregory, because the active life is a duty, the contemplative is out of love.²

Continuing his exposition by means of a parable, he says:

For who, knowing God, enters into His kingdom unless first he labors well? Without contemplation therefore they can enter the heavenly

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¹ Ibid., 76:809. ... activa minor est merito quam contemplativa. ... Nam et si per activam boni aliquid agimus, ad coeleste tamen desiderium per contemplativam voluntam.

² Ibid., 76:809. ... Una nobis in necessitate est, altera in voluntate.
fatherland who do not neglect good deeds. Without the active life, however, they cannot enter heaven. The one, therefore is necessary, the other from choice. ¹

The law Moses gave for the purchase of a Hebrew slave is as follows: When an Israelite purchases a fellow Hebrew as a slave, he may keep him in bondage for six years. In the seventh the slave may go free. The man who has been in service is likewise to be given the clothing which he possessed when he entered bondage. If the slave brought a wife with him, she goes free with her husband. If he married a maid bestowed upon him by his lord, she and their children belong to the master; the slave is obliged to leave them if he would go free. If the freed man wish, he may remain in the service of his master with his wife and their children after due ceremonies of submission.²

Gregory uses this law as an allegory to compare more closely the active life with contemplation:

Hebrew is interpreted as "passing." And the Hebrew slave is bought when anyone by his

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¹. Ibid., 76:809. Quis enim cognoscens Deum ad ejus regnum ingreditur, nisi prius bene operetur? Sine contemplativa ergo vita intrare possunt ad coelestem patriam qui bona quae possunt operari, non neglegunt; sine activa autem intrare non possunt. Illa ergo in necessitate, haec in voluntate est.

². Ibid., 76:809-810.
resolve, passing from worldly pursuits enters the service of Almighty God. For he seeks to serve God who learns to pass over this world mentally.

... But the Hebrew slave, bought, is bound to serve six years that he may depart free in the seventh. Now what unless the perfection of the active life is designated by the sixth number, and what if not contemplation by the seventh? He serves six years and in the seventh goes forth free who from the active life which he has exemplified as perfectly as possible passes to the freedom of the contemplative.

Contemplation is, moreover, a gift of God's gracious love, for in doing good works the soul has acted from duty and has earned no such reward.

And it should be noted that he goes forth free gratuitously because they who, after they have done all that they could, say that they are useless servants (Luke, xvii, 10). For, without doubt they led the active life as a duty so the contemplative will be theirs as a grace.

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1. Ibid., 76:810. Hebraeus enim transiens interpretatur. Et servus Hebraeus emitur quando uniusquisque qui jam ab hoc saeculo mente transit servitio omnipotentis Domini subditur. Ille etenim vero Deo servire appetit, qui ab hoc saeculo mente transire dicerit ... Servus vero Hebraeus emptus sex annis servire praecipitur, ita ut in septimo liber exeat gratis. Quid enim per senarium numerum nisi activae vitae perfectio designatur? Quid per septenarium nisi contemplativa exprimitur? Sex ergo annis servit, et septimo egreditur liber, qui per activam vitam quam perfecte exhibuerit ad contemplativae vitae libertatem transit.

2. Ibid., 76:810. Et notandum quod gratis liber egreditur, quia ii qui postquam omnia fecerint dicunt se inutiles servos (Luc. xvii, 10), eis pro-cul dubio sicut ipsa activa fuit ex munere, ita erit ex gratia etiam contemplativa.
Some should surely learn early to combine the contemplative with the active life, if they learn to perfect their active works. Gregory himself accomplished this swift ascent to contemplation because before he strove to scale St. Benedict’s ladder of humility, he was a pursuer of good works. St. Gregory says:

There are some who, before they joined the service of Almighty God in holy conversation already loved to do good, and there are others, who, after they come to God’s service learn to do good works. He who before he came to the service of God was zealous to do good, is the Hebrew slave who was bought with his wife. And generally such as he can pass over to the contemplative life and at the same time not desert the active . . . . . . For his wife goes forth to freedom with him when he who arrives at contemplation does not relinquish afterwards the performance of good works which he can do for others.¹

As the Hebrew slave may choose to stay in servitude with his wife and children if he love them and his master, so the soul engaged in good works may

¹ *Ibid.* 76:810. *Et sunt nonnulli qui priusquam omnipotentis Dei servitio in sancta conversazione socientur, jam bona operari diligunt. Sunt vero alii qui bona opera postquam ad servitium omnipotentis Dei venerint, discunt. Qui ergo operationem bonum et priusquam ad Dei servitium venerit habere studuit, Hebraeus servus cum uxore emptus est. *Et plerumque is qui talis est potest ad contemplativam vitam transire, et tamen activam non deserare . . . . . . Cum eo enim ad libertatem et uxor egreditur, quando is qui ad contemplationem pervenit etiam foris actionem boni operis qui prodesse possit aliis non reliquit.*
choose to continue in them, not passing on to contemplation. In order that he may remain faithful, Gregory offers certain directions to the soul who does not advance, onward to the freedom of contemplation: an inclination toward the teachings of the ancient fathers, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, and a remembrance of "the day of tremendous judgment." He will be a slave in this world," says the holy Doctor, "that he may be free in the world to come."

Reflecting on the condition of temporal decay from which every creature suffers, he continues:

Now verily not only the active life is in subjection but even the contemplative, by which we are ravished above ourselves, does not as yet obtain perfect freedom of mind, but imitates it because that inner quiet is seen in an obscure manner. However the very narrowness of contemplation in whatever amount it may be given is exceedingly more sublime and broader than the active life for it attains to a certain liberty of mind in which it considers not temporal but eternal reality.

1. Ibid., 76:811-812. Qui erit servus in saeculum, ut esse post saeculum liber posset.

2. Ibid., 76:811-812. Nunc vero non solum activa vita in servitute est, sed ipsa quoque contemplatio, qua super nos rapimus, libertatem mentis adhuc perfecte non obtinet sed imitatur, quia illa quies intima in aenigmatică videtur. Ipsa tamen in quantalibet sit contemplationis angustia, activa vita jam valde est latior atque sublimior, quae ad quamdam mentis libertatem transit, temporalia non cogitans, sed aeterna.

In summarizing it will be seen that this homily offers the following ideas: the active life precedes the contemplative; for anyone reaching the use of reason, the active life is essential to salvation. Although good and necessary, the active life is inferior to the contemplative.

Souls drawn to contemplation may refuse it in preference to the active life. Contemplation may be combined with the active life of good works. Contemplation is a flight to heavenly desires and a very real foretaste of eternal rest. Gregory refers to contemplation as an "inner quiet."

Contemplation is a free gift whereas action is necessary.

In contemplation, because we are borne above ourselves, we are as if lifted into the air.
Homily II, Book II, contains another important section of Gregory's exposition of his doctrine of contemplation. In the beginning of this sermon he discusses the first state or mental attitude of the contemplative, that is the compunction which arises from humility together with the consciousness of guilt in the presence of the all-holy majesty and purity of God. The influence of Gregory's training as shown in Chapter II becomes evident in his teaching in this place, for, exemplifying this humility in himself he says, "Whatever therefore of the prophet's teachings I understood less is of my blindness; if I shall have been able to understand anything at all, it is out of the divine reward of your veneration."¹

The holy Pope then gives his congregation a detailed description of this mental state of compunctive love:

Often, by the grace of Almighty God, certain expressions of His eloquence are better understood when the word of God is read in private, and the soul, conscious of her faults, while she realizes what she hears, strikes herself with a javelin of sorrow and transfixes herself with a sword of compunction, so that she is free to do nothing but

¹. Ibid., 76:949. Quidquid ergo in hoc propheta minus intellexero, meae caecitatis est; si quid vero intelligere apte potuero, ex divino munere vestrae venerationis est.
weep, and by the flowing of her tears to wash away her stains.

Again Gregory drives home the lesson of humility, saying that a contemplative soul must be humble and must expect humiliations:

... as often as the prophet is led to spiritual visions he is called the son of man ... because by this appellation he is always reminded of what he is on account of his infirmity lest he should be exalted by the greatness of his contemplation.

Gregory now returns to the symbolism of the cubit and the span. His explanation seems repetitious, but such a method of presentation may be helpful in giving a clear picture of the succeeding ideas. If one look through a chink (rima) as Gregory suggests, the intent must be narrowed to concentrate the eye of the mind to exclude all exterior things so that the vision beyond the crevice may appear in the full flood of celestial light. Although we may perfect our active

1. Ibid., 76:949. Saepe autem per omnipotentis Domini gratiam in ejus eloquio quaedam intelliguntur melius cum sermo Dei secretius legitur, atque animus, culparum suarum conscius, dum recognoscit quod audierit, doloris se jaculo percubit, et compunctionis gladio transfigit, ut nihil et nisi flere libeat, et fluentis fletuum maculas lavare.

2. Ibid., 76:949. . . . propheta, quoties ad videnda spiritualia ducitur, filius hominis appelatur . . . . quia hac appellatione memoratur semper quid est ex infirmitate, ne extollatur de contemplationis magnitudine.
life in this world, only a little achievement is possible in contemplation which is perfected in the life to come:

But the span, which is said to be over and above the six cubits, is part of the seventh, of course, then, is designated by six cubits, the contemplative by a span; for we perfect the one by work but while we strive to perfect the other also we are scarcely able to achieve even a little. ¹

Laying all parables aside, Gregory tells in clear bold words what it is to be a contemplative:

Truly the contemplative life is to retain the love of God above all with the whole mind, but to rest from exterior action, to remain in the sole desire of the Creator so that the soul is now free to do nothing but despising all care she burns to see the face of her Creator; thus she knows what it is to bear the weight of corruptible flesh with its sorrow, and to seek with all her heart to be among the hymn-singing choirs of angels, to mingle with the heavenly citizens, to rejoice on account of eternal reality in the pure sight of God. ²

¹ Ibid. 76:953. Palmus vero, qui super sex cubitos non esse dicitur, jam de septimo est, sed tamen cubitus non est. Activa ergo vita signatur per sex cubitos, contemplativa per palmum, quia illam opere perficiamus, de ista vero etiam cum contendimus, vix parum aliquid attingere valemus.

² Ibid. 76:953. Contemplativa vero vita est charitatem quidem Dei proximi tota mente retinere, sed ab exterioire actione quiescere, soli desiderio conditoris inhaerere, ut nihil jam agere libeat, sed, calcatis curis omnibus, ad videndam faciem sui Creatoris animas inardescat; ita ut jam noverit carnis corruptibilis pondus cum moerore portare, totisqua desideriis appeterre illis hymnidicis angelorum choris interesse, amiseri coelastibus civibus, de aeterna in conspectu Dei incorruptione gaudere.
To prove the excellence of the contemplative over the active life, Gregory refers anew to Martha and Mary as exemplars of the two forms of serving God. His remarks at this time have a peculiar strength for he sounds the keynote of the superiority of the contemplative life, namely its eternal quality:

Why the part of Mary is best may be perceived since it is said: "which shall not be taken away from her."

. . . . The active life is taken away with this present world, but the contemplative, begun here, will be perfected in the celestial fatherland, because the fire of love which begins to burn here, when the soul will have seen Him whom she loves, that fire will burn the more in the love of Him.  

The contemplative life, however much the soul may strive to perfect it, is not complete in this life. Something, nonetheless, of a very real beginning of the vision of everlasting beatitude is achieved:

. . . . because however much the soul may burn with love, by however much strength she stretches herself unto God in her thought, she not yet sees perfectly what she loves, but still she begins to see what she loves.

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1. Ibid., 76:954. Quare autem pars Mariae sit optima, subinfertur cum dicitur: Quae non auferetur ab ea. . . . Cum prae senti ergo saeculo vita au feretur activa, contemplativa autem hic incipitur, ut in coelesti patria perficitur, quia amoris ignis qui hic ardere inchoat, cum ipsum quem amat viderit, in amore ipsius amplius ignis cet. Contemplativa ergo vita minime auferetur, quia subtracta presentis saeculi luce perficitum.

2. Ibid., 76:953. . . . quia quantolibet amore animus ardeat, quantalibet virtute se in Deum cogitatione tetendit, non jam quod amat perfecte videt, sed adhuc inchoat videre quod amat . . . .
Using the history of Jacob's wives, Lia and Rachel, as a parable, Gregory explains further the mystery of the two lives. The active life is one of toil, that of contemplation rest in the desire of God.

Lia is interpreted laborious, but Rachel, a sheep, or the beginning seen. The active life is laborious because it sweats in toil; but the contemplative sighs only to see the Beginning Who says, "I am the Beginning, Who speak to you." (John viii, 25).

Souls who love God seek this rest in Him, but first they must pass the night of this present life in good works that they may earn the desired vision of the Beginning.

Holy Jacob had desired Rachel, but in the night he received Lia because perhaps, all who are converted to the Lord, desire the contemplative life and seek the rest of the eternal country; but first it is necessary that in the night of this present life he do the good works which he can, that he sweat in toil, that is, he takes Lia so that afterwards he may rest in the embrace of Rachel, "seeing the Beginning."  

1. Ibid., 76:954. Lia quippe interpretatur laboriosa, Rachel vero ovis, vel visum principium. Activa autem vita laboriosa est, quia desudat in operis; contemplativa vero simplex ad solum videndum principium anhelat, videlicet ipsum qui ait: "Ego principium, propter quod et loquor vobis." (John, viii, 25).

2. Ibid., 76:953. Beatus autem Jacob Rachel quidem concuperat, sed in nocte accepit Liam, quia videlicet omnis qui ad Dominum convertitur, contemplativam vitam desiderat, quietam aeternae patriae appetit; sed prius necesse est ut in nocte vitae præsentia operetur bona quae potest, desudet in labore, id est Liam accipiat, ut post ad videndum principium in Rachel amplexibus requiescat.
Contemplation, although it is to be desired and prized above the active life, still does not show the tangible results which the active produces.

Now Rachel was clear-eyed, but barren, while Lia was sore-eyed, but fruitful; Rachel beautiful and sterile, because the contemplative life in the soul is lovely, still, since it seeks to rest in silence it does not produce children from preaching.¹

Gregory again emphasizes that the active life precedes the contemplative. The soul inflamed by contemplation, returning to the active life, lives more perfectly. On the other hand, participation in good works leads the soul to contemplation with its joys of quiet. The laborious active life should not be completely deserted.²

But it should be understood that the right order of living is that it tend from action to contemplation, so generally it is more useful for a soul to return from contemplation to activity, so that by the affections with which contemplation inflames the mind, the action of good works may be achieved more perfectly.²

¹ Ibid., 76:952. Erat autem Rachel videns, sed sterilis; Lia vero lippa, sed fecunda; Rachel pulchra et infecunda, quia contemplativa vita speciosa in animo est, sed dum quiescere in silentio appetit filios non generat ex pradicatione.


² Ibid., 76:954. Sed sciendum est quia sicut bonus ordo vivendi est ut ab activa in contemplativam tendatur, ita plerumque utiliter a contemplativa animus ad activam reflecitur, ut per hoc quod contemplativa mentem accenderit, perfectius activa teneatur.
Leaving the comparison of the two lives for a direct discussion of contemplation itself, Gregory meditates on Jacob's contest with the angel seeing in it an example of the struggle of the soul to reach God in higher prayer:

There is in the contemplative life a great struggle of the mind when it raises itself to heavenly things, when it directs the soul to spiritual affairs, when it braces itself to pass over all that is seen corporally, when it narrows itself that it may be enlarged. And sometimes indeed it conquers and rises above the opposing darkness of its blindness so that it attains somewhat to the unlimited Light by stealth and sparingly; but none the less it constantly is returned to itself, beaten back, and from that Light to which it panting penetrated, it returned sighing to the darkness of its blindness.¹

The angel represents the Lord, and Jacob the soul in contemplation. The very experience of a more direct apprehension of its Creator causes the soul to swoon and by the very sweetness of that which it sought to lose what it has tasted.

For the angel symbolizes the Lord, and Jacob, who struggled with the angel represents the soul of

¹ Ibid., 76:955. "Est autem in contemplativa vita magna mentis contentio, cum sese ad coelestia erigit, cum in rebus spiritualibus animum tendit, cum transgredi nititur omne quod corporaliter videtur, cum sese angustat ut dilatetur. Et aliquando quidem vincit, et reluctantes tenebras suae caecitatis exsuperat, ut de incircumscripto lumine quiddam furtim et tenuiter attingat; sed tamen ad semetipsam protinus reverberata reversitetur, atque ab ea luce, ad quam respirando transit, ad suae caecitatis tenebras suspirando reedit."
any perfect man raised to contemplation. Which soul, when it strives to contemplate God, as if involved in a contest of wrestling sometimes overcomes Him because it tastes something of the limitless Light. Sometimes though, it is overcome because tasting, it faints away. Just as the angel’s touch withered Jacob’s leg, the touch of Almighty God in contemplation burns up fleshly concupiscence and worldly desires in the soul and causes the love of God to be her only support. But it should be noted that the same conquered angel touched a nerve in Jacob’s thigh and immediately he made it grow feeble and from that time Jacob limped because perhaps Almighty God, since He is now known through the will and intelligence, burns up the desire of the flesh in us. And we who before, as if being supported on two feet, seemed both to seek God and to cling to the world, after perceiving the sweetness of God, have only one sound foot, and the other limps, as it is necessary that the love of the world enfeebled, the love of God grow strong in us.

1. Ibid., 76:955. Designat ergo angelus Dominum, et Jacob qui cum angelo contendit uniscujusque perfecti viri et in contemplatione positi animum exprimit. Quae videlicet anima cum contemplandi Deum nititur velut in quodam certamine posita, modo quasi exsuperat, quia intelligendo et sentendo de incircumscripto lumine aliquid degustat; modo vero succumbit, quia et degustando iterum deficit.

2. Ibid., 76:955. Sed notandum quod idem victus angelus nervum femoris Jacob tetigit, eumque marcescere statim fecit, atque ab eo tempore Jacob uno claudicavit pede, quia silicet omnipotens Deus cum jam per desiderium et intellectum cognoscitur, ommem in nobis voluptatem carnis arefacit. Et qui prius quasi duobus pedibus innitentes, et Deum videbamur quaerere, et saeculum tenere, post agnitionem sauitatis Dei unus in nobis pes sanus remanet, atque alius claudicat, quia necesse est ut, debilitato amore saeculi, solus convalescat in nobis amor Dei.
When the strength of supernatural love increases in the soul, the love of God grows vigorously, the love of the world is weakened, says St. Gregory, for in this the soul is like to a lame man who depends on his one good member and carries the useless one raised from the ground.

If then, we lay hold of the angel, we limp on one foot because, while the strength of interior love increases in us, the strength of the flesh is, without doubt, weakened. One who limps on one foot, is supported on the sound foot which he has, since he who now has destroyed the desire of worldly things in himself, sustains himself on the one foot of the love of God with his whole strength. And he stands on that foot because the foot of the love of the world which he had been accustomed to place on the ground, he now carries raised from the earth. And therefore, if we would return to our parents, that is, to the spiritual fathers, let us lay hold of the angel on the road so that we may apprehend God.

This is one of the few places where the author of these sermons shows strong feeling or appears to reveal something of his personal experience. This passage has a touch of poetry about it. His theme is the charm

1. Ibid., 76:955. Si ergo tenemus angelum, uno pede, quia dum crescit in nobis fortitudo amoris intimi infirmatur procul dubio fortitudo carnis. Omnis quippe qui uno pede claudicat soli illi pedi innititur quem sanum habet, quia cui desiderium terrenum jam a refactum fuerit, in solo pede amoris Dei tota virtute se sustinet. Et in ipso stat, quia pedem amoris saeculi quem ponere in terra consueverat, jam a terra suspensum portat. Et nos ergo si ad parentes proprios, id est ad spiritales patres redimus, teneamus in via angelum, ut suavitate intima apprehendamus Deum.
of contemplation and its uplifting effect upon the soul.

Exceedingly sweet is the charm of contemplation which ravishes the soul above herself, opens heavenly things and shows that earthly joys ought to be despised; it uncovers spiritual knowledge to the eyes of the mind, and hides the carnal.¹

The holy Doctor is careful to explain that it is not God Who is seen in Himself, but something beneath Him, which serves to refresh the soul still in the flesh.

But regarding these things it should be understood that as long as we live in this mortal flesh, no one progresses so much in the virtue of contemplation that he fixes the eyes of his mind on the ray of limitless Light Itself. For Almighty God is not now seen in His brightness, but something is observed beneath Him, whence refreshed by it he may proceed and afterwards arrive at the glory of the vision of God.²

The throne of God is in intelligent creatures, angelic and human, and we are His temples in whose minds He is pleased to dwell, says Gregory. The holy Doctor asserts further that God is not seen in contemplative

¹. Ibid., 76:955. Contemplativae etenim vitae amabilis valde dulcedo est, quae super semetipsam animam rapit, coelestia aperit, terrena autem debere esse contemptui ostendit, et spiritalia mentis oculis patet, corporalia abscondit.

². Ibid., 76:956. Sed inter haec sciendum est quia quandiu in hac mortali carne vivitur, nullus ita in contemplationis virtute proficit, ut in ipso jam incircumspecto luminis radio mentis oculos infiget. Neque enim omnipotens Deus jam in sua claritate conspicitur, sed quiddam sub illa speculatur anima, unde refota proficiat, et post ad visionis ejus gloriam pertingat.
prayer but the soul is satisfied as it somehow experiences Him and tastes interior quiet and peace.

But those things which were under Him filled the temple because whatever is seen in this way, still is not He but is under Him. Thus Jacob saw an angel and said that he had seen the Lord (Genes. xxxii, 36) because when we glimpse His ministers it is already a remarkable circumstance because we are lifted above ourselves. It should be noted though that it is said: "they filled the temple" because, although an angel appears, still the vision satisfies the desire of the frail mind; since it is as yet incapable of greater things it is ravished by the lesser. Those things which are beneath Him fill the temple because, as was said, when the mind progresses in contemplation not yet what God is but that which is below Him is contemplated. In that contemplation the taste of interior quiet is reached.1

In contemplation the noise of earthly sense impressions ceases and the soul is at rest, but only "as it were for half an hour," Gregory explains, because in this life contemplation is fleeting and imperfect.

1. Ibid., 76:956. Sed ea quae sub eo erant implebant templum, quia quidquid de illo modo conspicitur, adhuc non est ipsae, sed sub ipso est. Sic Jacob angelum vidit, et vidisse se Dominum fatetur (Genes. xxxii, 36), quia cum ministeria ejus conspicimus, jam multum est quod super nosmetipsos levamur. Notandum est quod dicitur: Implebant templum, quoniam et si angelus apparat, infirmae tamen mentis desiderio satisfacit, ut si adhuc majus non potest, jam tamen minus quod videt admiretur. Ea ergo quae sub eo sunt implet templum, quia sicut dictum est, et cum mens in contemplatione profecerit, non jam quod ipse est, sed id quod sub ipso est contemplatur. In qua videlicet contemplatione jam quietus internae gustus contigitur.
When the quiet of the contemplative life is lived in the mind, a silence is made in heaven because the noise of earthly activity is stilled in the thoughts so that the soul may apply its ear to the secret things within. But because this quiet of the mind cannot be perfect in this life, silence is not said to be made for even a complete half-hour, but as if for half an hour; so that since it is said "as if," because as soon as the soul begins to lift herself and to bathe in the light of interior quiet, the noise of thoughts having quickly returned it is muddled and confused, it is blinded. For this reason the contemplative life which is called half an hour in the Apocalypse, Ezekiel the prophet calls not a cubit but a span.1

Gregory concludes this homily with a meditation on breadth and height, the love of neighbor being signified by the one and the longing for God by the other.

1. Ibid., 76:956. Cum ergo quies contemplativae vitae agitur in mente, silentium fit in coelo, quia terrrenorum actuum strepitus quietat a cogitatione, ut ad secretum intimum aurem animus apponat. Sed quia haec quies mentis esse in hac vita perfecta non potest, nequaquam hora integra factum in coelo silentium dicitur, sed quia media hora, ut neque ipsa media hora plene sentiatur, cum praemititur quasi, quia mox ut se animus sublevare coeperit, et quietis intimae lumine perfundi, redeunte citius cogitationum strepitu, de semetipso confunditur, et confusus caecatur.
The following is a summary of the ideas on contemplation which Gregory offers in Homily II, Book II.

1. Compunction is a prelude to a deeper understanding of the word of God, hence a preparation for contemplation.

2. Humility is essential to contemplation, and the contemplative must expect humiliations.

3. Very little contemplation is achieved and that by very great effort.

4. The contemplative life is defined and compared with the life of action.

5. The contemplative life is superior to the active life, because while the active life ceases with death, contemplation is only then perfected—hence is eternal.

6. Contemplation is a very real beginning of the vision of God.

7. The active life must precede and accompany the contemplative life. Each must supplement the other.

8. The mind struggles very hard in trying to attain to union with God in contemplation.

9. The attainment of God in contemplation is so overwhelming that the soul faints and fails in the very tasting of its Creator.

10. The fruit of contemplation is a great resurgence
of love for the Eternal and a withering of the love for temporal and fleeting things.

11. Contemplation is progress although resting from the busy labors of this life.

12. God is not seen in the experience of contemplation, but something beneath Him which satisfies the soul for the time.

13. Contemplation in this life lasts only for a short while, even less than half an hour.

14. Contemplation is not a reward which can be merited, but is a grace which is freely bestowed by God.
In the fifth homily of Book II, Gregory achieves his most intellectual analysis of contemplative prayer. In this sermon he notices that the upper wedding chamber described by the prophet is measured by a reed and that the lower apartment has only six cubits length. Recalling the symbolism previously devised for these units of measure, the holy Doctor arrives immediately at his customary starting point: a discourse on the active and contemplative lives. Speaking of the members of holy Mother Church, he says:

But if wedding chambers are the senses and the thoughts of the faithful, in which chaste souls are united to their Creator in love, and if by six cubits a perfect work is expressed but by a span the beginning of contemplation, we ought to behold in this the members of the holy Catholic Church and more quickly we find that although in her some of the wedding chambers are measured by one reed, others are measured by six cubits only.

The holy preacher next explains that some of the faithful attain the perfection both of the active life and of contemplation. His analysis of the reed and the six cubits of the prophet follows:

1. Ibid., 76:984. Sed si thalami sunt sensus atque cogitationes fidelium, in quibus castae animae conditori suo in amore junguntur, et per sex cubitos perfecta operatio, per palum vero inchoatio contemplationis exprimitur, sanctae universalis Ecclesiae debemus membra conspicere, et citius invenimus quia sunt in ea thalami uno calamo, et sunt alii sex tantummodo cubitis mensurati.
For some of the faithful so love Almighty God in her that they are both perfect in work and rapt in contemplation. These have truly a reed in measurement because they possess both the six cubits of action and the span of contemplation. Others truly love God and perform good works, but they are not aware of His magnificence contemplated by a more subtle understanding. They love but they are ignorant of what it is to explore the joys of His radiance.¹

Gregory interprets hinc and inde which refer to the measure of the thalami as "before and after." He says that they symbolize the Jewish nation which preceded the Redeemer and the gentile nations which followed Him. The holy Doctor justifies this solution saying, "because indeed, in the love of our Maker and Redeemer, faithful souls came together from the Jewish people and the gentiles."²

After a long analogical discussion of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, Gregory reduces the architecture of the temple described by


². Ibid., 76:985. . . . quia videlicet in amore auctoris ac Redemptoris nostri fideles animae et ex Judaico populo et ex gentilitate convenerunt.
Ezekiel, to a system of symbols. He refers again to the wedding chambers as the hearts of God's lovers in both the old and the new dispensation.

For He whom our predecessors among the Jewish people believed about to come and loved, we love and believe to have come, and we are inflamed with the desire of Him that we may contemplate Him face to face. Wherefore, on this side and on that are His wedding chambers because the hearts of lovers embrace faith in Him from the former ages and from the last. 1

Gregory interprets the roofs over the wedding chamber and the door to mean that both certain parts of the sacred Scripture are obscure although all was written for us, and that the fervor of love is in obscurity.

But the wedding chamber had a roof because the mind of a lover is concealed, and the fervor of love is in hiddenness. The door, too, has a roof because the whole of Scripture indeed was written for us but not all is understood by us. 2

Here again Gregory impresses his hearers with the importance of humility in the soul's approach to Almighty God. By humility more profit is gained in

1. Ibid., 76:986. Quam enim priores nostri ex Judiaco populo crediderunt atque amaverunt venturum, hunc nos et venisse credimus et amamus, ejusque desiderio accendimur, ut eum facie ad faciem contemplemur.

2. Ibid., 76:986. Sed habet thalamus tectum, quia operta est mens amantium, et adhuc fervor amoris in occulto est. Habet quoque et porta tectum, quia Scriptura tota quidem propter nos scripta est, sed non tota intelligitur a nobis.
Some things in the sacred Scriptures are closed in order that while we do not penetrate them, recognizing the infirmity of our blindness, we may progress much more toward humility than understanding.  

Good works index our mastery of the sacred Word, for Gregory says, "What you have learned from sacred Scripture, and how much you silently love your neighbor, you show in the breadth of your good works." He forcefully repeats that we do not know good unless we do good.

And so the width of twenty-five cubits lies between the wedding chamber and the door because, between charity and knowledge a good work is the witness.

The holy Doctor emphatically continues: "Which, if perchance it be lacking, it is very certain that you neither have known God nor love your neighbor; that is, you have neither the door of sacred eloquence, nor the

1. Ibid., 76:986. Nonnulla autem ita in ea clausa sunt, ut dum ea non intelligimus, agnoscentes infirma nostrae caecitatis, ad humilitatem magis quam intelligentiam proficiamus.

2. Ibid., 76:988. Nam quid jam de Scriptura sacra didiceris et quantum proximum tacitus ames, in latitudine boni operis ostendis.

3. Ibid., 76:988. Pateat itaque viginti et quinque cubitis latitudo inter thalamum et portam, quia inter charitatem et scientiam testis est bona operatio.
wedding chamber of love.¹

For the third time Gregory speaks of the roofs of the wedding chamber and the door. Ripple has followed ripple widening out to the final placid satisfaction of the speaker in whose mind the analogy is now complete and clear. To him those roofs represent the obscurity of certain parts of the sacred Scriptures. By these parts which it is impossible to understand our humility is tested. Whatever is not understood should be humbly venerated, not proudly criticized.²

Another test for our love for our neighbor is as follows: "And so a good work speaks our love towards our neighbor better than speech for in the good deed itself our neighbor may see that he is loved."³

God, however, counts not how much we are able to do but how much we wish to do, as Gregory expresses the idea: "Since we are not able to do as much as we wish, the hidden things of our love satisfy Almighty

¹ *Ibid.*, 76:988. *Quae si fortasse defuerit, profecto certum est nec cognovisse te Deum, nec diligere proximum; id est nec portam sacri eloquii, nec amoris thalamum habere.*


The thought which makes itself felt at this part of the sermon is that the active life is love of neighbor, the contemplative, love of God. Works determine the degree of a person's love for neighbor, while sacred Writ and faith are symbolic of his love for God. Holy writings are the immediate source of our knowledge of God and hence the beginning of our love for Him. Love of neighbor is a preparation for the enjoyment and love of God. Although these ideas are nowhere directly expressed, they appear to have been the matrix of the thought of the holy Doctor as well as of his auditors.

With tireless conviction, Gregory urges his hearers again to the performance of good works which ought never to be omitted no matter to what state of perfection they may have arrived.

And so from the roof of the wedding chamber to the roof of the door is a great width because from the grace by which we begin to love God, up to that longing which opens the door of the celestial kingdom to us, we ought to enlarge

1. Ibid., 76:988. Et cum tantum non possumus quantus volumus operari, omnipotenti Deo occultae amoris nostri sufficiant.

ourselves in the powerful action of good works.\(^1\)

Explaining the words of the prophet, "And a door was opposite to a door," Gregory remarks that while still in this life we approach by faith to the door of the vision of God.

For a door is opposite to a door when, by a direct route from an outer entrance one arrives at an interior door. Our faith is the first door in cognition of Almighty God, but the second is sight to which we arrive in walking by faith. In this life even we enter this door so that we may be led through the other in the life to come. A door is therefore opposite to the door because through the entrance of faith the door to the vision of God is opened.\(^2\)

In order to approach God, the soul first studies itself so that of itself it may form a kind of ladder, \textit{gradus}, by which it may mount up to Him:

For often we wish to meditate on the invisible nature of God but we have not the power; and the soul, wearied by the difficulties themselves, returns to herself and makes steps of ascent from her own nature, that, if she have the

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strength, she may first consider her own being, and then investigate as far as she can, that Nature which is above her.¹

Gregory has now reached the center of the problem of interior prayer to which good works and humble faith are the prelude. He stands in the middle space before the "door opposite to a door" and strives to instruct his hearers how they may enter. The mind must first be freed from carnal images before it can rise to the contemplation of Him who is pure spirit.

But if our mind be distracted in carnal images it will in no wise be equal either to the pondering of its own nature or that of the soul, because led through so many thoughts, as if through as many obstacles, it is blinded.²

Next Gregory gives the steps whereby a soul rises to contemplation. First it withdraws within itself; next it inspects this recollection; and then by an eager effort darts forth in the contemplation

¹ Ibl., 76:989. Nam saepe volumus omnipotentis Dei naturam invisibilem considerare, sed nequam valemus; atque ipsis difficultatibus fatigata anima ad semitipsam radit, sibique de seipsa gradus ascensionis facit, ut primum semetipsam, si valet, consideret, et tune illam naturam quae super ipsam est, in quantum potuerit, investiget.

² Ibl., 76:989. Sed mens nostra si in carinalibus imaginibus fuerit sparsa, nequam vel se vel animae naturam considerare sufficit, quia per quot cogitationes ducitur, quasi per tot obstacula cascatur.
of her Creator. This is the one place in which Gregory attempts a psychological analysis of the soul in higher prayer.

The first step therefore is that she collect herself within herself; the second that she should see of what quality her recollection is; third, that she should rise above herself and subject her attention to the contemplation of the invisible Creator.¹

The first step towards the contemplation of God, that is recollection, is attained only when the aspirant after higher prayer has learned to dismiss exterior images both earthly and heavenly.

But the soul will not at all recollect herself within herself unless she will have learned to restrain from the eyes of the mind the phantasms of earthly and celestial forms, to repel and to trample upon whatever arises from sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste.²

Like annoying birds which damage the farmer's grain, he who would exalt his prayer must learn to drive away "with the hand of discretion" all carnal thoughts:

1. Ibid., 76:989. Primum ergo gradus est ut se ad se colligat, secundus ut videat qualis est collecta, tertius ut super semetipsam surget, ac se contemplationi auctoris invisibilis intendo subjiciat.

2. Ibid., 76:989. Sed se ad se nullatenus colligit, nisi prius didicerit terrenarum atque celes- tium imaginum phantasmata ab oculis mentis compescere, quidquid de visu, quidquid de auditu, quidquid de odoratu, quidquid de tactu et gustu corporeo cogitationi ejus occurrerit, respugne atque calcare.
For when the mind thinks it is as if it revolves some sort of corporal images within it. Therefore, all these should be driven away by the hand of discretion, in as much as the soul considers herself such as she is, created below God but above the body, that by a more lofty existence she may vivify the lesser faculties which she controls.¹

The soul, though not divided into parts, controls all the senses, and, while her attention is distracted among sensible impressions, she may not enter the mystic door of contemplation. At the same time, because the soul is possessed of this wonderful unity, we have in us the ability of contemplation.

From a consideration of her own inner nature the soul is instructed in the approach to the contemplation of the infinite majesty of God.

When therefore, the soul thinks upon herself without the material representations of things, she already has entered within the first door. But from this door she is drawn toward another so that she may contemplate something of the nature of Almighty God. And as the soul is the life of the body of flesh, God, who vivifies all things is the life of souls. If therefore created life is of such nobility that it cannot be comprehended, who is able to fathom how immense is the majesty of

¹. Ibid., 76:990. Nam haec quando cogitat, quasi quasdam umbras corporum introrsus versat. Abtis, quatenus talem se anima considerat, qualis sub Deo super corpus creato est, ut a superiore vivificata, vivificet inferius quod administrat.
vivifying Life?\(^1\)

The meditation of the soul on its own eternal life causes it to realize something of the immensity of God. This is the beginning of contemplation.

But to observe and to distinguish this carefully is itself already to enter somewhat because the soul gathers from its own reckoning what it perceives regarding the uncircumscribed Spirit who rules those things incomprehensibly which He incomprehensibly created.\(^2\)

The soul's knowledge of her own littleness and humble existence, added to her realization of her ability to surpass all material things by her intellect, lead her to a desire to attain to that which is inexhaustible: the intellect of her Maker.

When therefore the soul, lifted up to herself, realizes her own littleness, and because she knows her understanding transcends all things material, she stretches herself toward the

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1. Ibid., 76:990. *Cum ergo seipsam sine imaginibus corporis cogitat anima, jam primum ostium intravit. Sed ab hoc ostio ad aliud tenditur, ut de natura Dei omnipotentis aliquid contempletur. Anima itaque in corpore vita est carnis, Deus vero qui vivificat omnia vita est animarum. Si igitur tanta est magnitudinis, ut comprehendit non possit vita vivificata, quis intellectu comprehendere valeat quantae majestatis sit vita vivificans?*

2. Ibid., 76:990. *Sed hoc ipsum considerare atque discernere jam est aliquidus intrare, quia ex sua aestimatione anima colligit quid de incircumscripto spiritu sentiat, qui ea incomprehensibiliter regit quae incomprehensibiliter creavit.*
intellect of her Maker, what already is this if not that she beholds the door opposite the door.¹

Comparing the difficulty of meditating on our own finite nature with the consideration of God's limitless Nature, the last of the Fathers tries to explain the toil inherent in striving after the purely spiritual experience of contemplation.

... because however much she will have concentrated her attention, the soul is not adequate to fathom herself perfectly, by how much more is she not inadequate to penetrate the immensity of Him who could make a soul?²

The labor of consideration in contemplation is somehow to see within the inner door of the eternal knowledge and love of God, although it is not yet given in this life to enter within.

But while striving and stretching we yearn now to catch sight of something of the invisible nature, we are wearied, beaten back, repelled; and if we are still unable to penetrate secret things, now, however, we do see the interior door from the outer door. For the labor of consideration is itself the door, because it shows something of that which is within, although we

1. *Ibid.*, 76:991. *Cum ergo elevata ad seipsam anima suum modulum intelligit, et quia corporalia omnia transcendat agnoscit, atque ab intellectu suo se ad auctoris intellectum tendit, quid jam haec nisi ostium quod est contra ostium aspicit.*

2. *Ibid.*, 76:991. *... quia quantumlibet intenderit, semetipsam anima perfecte non sufficit penetrare, quanto magis illius magnitudinem qui potuit et animam condere?*
do not yet have the power to enter it.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 76:991. Sed cum conantes atque tendentes quiddam jam de invisibili natura conspicere cupimus, lassamur, reverberamur, repellimur; et si interiora penetrare non possimus, tamen jam ab exteriore ostio interius ostium videmus. Ipse enim considerationis labor ostium est. Quia ostendit aliquid ex eo quod intus est, etsi adhuc ingrediendi potestas non est.}

Gregory sums up his analysis of the door, the atrium, and the place described as fifty cubits broad in the following interpretation:

Faith therefore may be understood in the door which conducts to the understanding, charity in the atrium, which enlarges the mind in love; hope, in the place which is described as fifty cubits, because it leads the soul by desires and longing into the secret joys of quiet. Concerning which quiet, although as yet we do not distinguish the Light of Truth, however we do see something through the chinks of the understanding.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 76:995. Habeatur ergo fides in porta quae introducit ad intelligentiam, charitas in atrio, quae mentem dilatat in amorem; spes in loco qui quinquaginta describitur cubitis, quia per desideria atque suspiria introducit animum ad secreta guadia quietis, De qua quiete etsi adhuc, sicut est, veritatis lumen non cernimus, jam tamen per rimas intelligentiae aliquid videmus.}

Meditating on the Prophet's words, \textit{"And in the wedding chambers there were slanting windows,"} Gregory compares these to the way in which the mind of the contemplative receives the higher knowledge of God.
oblique windows is narrow, but the interior which receives the light is broad, because, although the minds of contemplatives may see something of the true light sparingly, they are expanded within themselves to a vast size. Indeed they are scarcely able to take in a very few of the things which they see.¹

The mind of the contemplative is exceedingly enlarged by contemplation. Just as a ray of light coming through a chink in a wall illumines the whole room in a greater or lesser degree, so the mind in contemplation receives enlightenment upon itself. Greater still is the illumination as the soul perceives the limitless Light, for it is as if one looked through a chink from a darkened room into the blaze of the outer day. ²

Exceedingly scanty indeed is that which the contemplatives see of eternity, but the fold of their minds is extended in the increase of fervor of love; and from thence they become spacious within themselves whence they let in the light of truth to their souls as if through narrow places. ¹²

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¹ Ibid., 76:995. In fenestris obliquis pars illa per quam lumen intrat angusta est, sed pars interior quae lumen suscepti lata, quia mentes contemplantium quamvis aliquid tenuiter de vero lumine videant vide licet et ipsa quae conspiciunt capere pauca vix possunt.

² Ibid., 76:995. Exiguum quippe valde est quod de aeternitate contemplantes vident, sed ex ipso exiguo laxatur sinus mentium in augmentum fervoris et amoris; et inde apud se amplefiunt, unde ad se veritatis lumen quasi per angustias admittunt.

* Ibid., 77:198d.
All are called to contemplation, still, only he who will withdraw from corporeal and exterior things so as to use them in moderation will find the "chinks of the intellect" through which the Light invisible may somehow be experienced.

For the slanting windows were in the wedding chambers, and they were on their fronts which were constructed within the door on all sides round about, because he who guards his heart interiorly also receives the light of contemplation. For they who consider exterior things are ignorant of those things which relate to the eternal Light gleaming through the chink of contemplation.¹

The uncircumscribed Light is not understood by sense images but rather they hinder the apprehension of It.

For the infusion of incorporeal Light is not at all seized by figments of corporeal things, for whilst visible things alone are thought upon, the Light invisible is not admitted to the mind.²

Once more Gregory urges the all-important

¹. Ibid., 76:995. Erant enim in thalamis, erant et in frontibus eorum, quae intra portam undique per circuitum fuerant constructa, quia qui cor intus habet ipse quoque lumen contemplationis suscepit. Nam qui adhuc exteriora immoderatius cogitant, quae sint de aeterno lumine rimae contemplationis ignorant.

². Ibid., 76:995. Neque enim cum corporearum rerum imaginibus illa infusion incorporeae lucis capit tur, quia dum sola visibilia cogitantur, lumen invisi ble ad mentem non admissitur.
virtue of humility, saying that the contemplative should take care to guard himself in this for God's gift of experiencing the Creator experimentally is given to and maintained only by the humble. The following quotation is strongly flavored with the spirit of St. Benedict, part of which would stand as a paraphrase of the Rule.

But whoever now inclines to the light of contemplation ought greatly to take care that he guard his mind always in humility, never exalting himself regarding the grace which is infused, and he should consider of what nature the oblique windows are which represent the minds of the contemplatives. For light enters by slanting windows, and a thief does not because those who are truly observers always sink down the perception in humility, and the knowledge of contemplation enters their minds but the flight of soaring pride does not enter. The windows are likewise both open and protected because grace is open in their minds by which they are replenished, and on the other hand, they do not permit the adversary to enter them through pride. 1

The grace of contemplation is given neither

1. Ibid., 76:995. Sed quisquis jam lumini contemplationis intendit, curare magnopere debet, ut mentem semper in humilitate custodiat, numquam se de gratia qua infunditur extollat, et ipsas quae mentes contemplantium signant quales sint obliquae fenestrae consideret. Per obliquas etenim fenestras lumen intrat, et fur non intrat, quod hi qui vere speculatores sunt semper in humilitate deprimunt, atque ad eorum mentes intelligentia contemplationis intrat, sed jactantia elationis non intrat. Et patent itaque fenestrae, et munitae sunt, quia et aperta est in mentibus eorum gratia qua replentur, et tamen ad se adversarium ingredi per superbiam non permittunt.
according to rank nor occupation. He who is lowly and
of little worth in his own eyes may be the recipient
of it. Persons in any state of life, those in high
places as well as those withdrawn from society may
receive it. Since this grace may be given to all, no
one may pride himself that it is his special property
or that he had earned it.

If then there is no calling of the faithful from
which the grace of contemplation can be excluded,
whoever possesses his heart interiorly can also
be enlightened by the light of contemplation
because within the door on all sides round about
slanting windows are constructed so that no one
may pride himself on this grace as of a singul-
arity.

Once more speaking of contemplation as a gift
St. Gregory stresses humility.

Let no one suppose that he has something of his
own regarding the true light, because in what he
thinks he has a special right, often another is
more rich who thinks he possesses no good in
himself.

1. Ibid., 76:996.

2. Ibid., 76:996. Si ergo nullum est fidel-
ium officium, a quo possit gratia contemplationis ex-
cludi, quisquis cor intus habet, illustrari etiam
lumine contemplationis potest, quia intra portam undi-
que per circuitum fenestrae obliquae constructae sunt,
ut nemo ex hac gratia quasi de singularitate glorietur.

3. Ibid., 76:996. Nullus se donum veri lumi-
nis aestimet habere privatum, quia in eo quod se habere
praecipuum putat, saepe alter est ditior, quem habere
apud se boni aliquid non putabat.
This sermon makes it clear the very great emphasis Gregory placed upon humility in the acquisition of the grace of contemplation. The following summary concludes this section of this investigation.

Summary of Homily V, Book II

1. There have been contemplatives in every age, both under the old and the new dispensation.
2. The contemplative's mind is withdrawn and guarded from occasions of distracting care.
3. Love of neighbor is shown by good works which are a preparation for contemplation.
4. We approach contemplation by faith.
5. A consideration of our own nature leads us to a deeper consideration and understanding of the divine Nature.
6. The soul finds toiling upward to God a great labor.
7. The mind must be freed from carnal images before it can rise to spiritual contemplation.
8. If the soul is distracted in creatures, it cannot attain to the Creator who is essentially one.
9. The steps of contemplation are recollection, introspection, and contemplation of God.
10. If the soul cannot penetrate her own nature
perfectly, how can she expect perfectly to understand the Author of her nature?

11. The soul which struggles to contemplate God has already gained something of contemplation because the labor of consideration is itself to see something of Eternal Verity, although still weighted by the flesh, the soul cannot do so perfectly.

12. The contemplative does not see God, but in some way experiences Him.

13. The minds of contemplatives are exceedingly enlarged by contemplation.

14. Only those who use temporal things in moderation will find the way to contemplation.

15. God is not mystically experienced through sense images, rather they retard and destroy true contemplation.

16. Humility is essential to the reception of the gift of contemplation.

17. Anyone who prepares himself for it may receive the grace of contemplation.

18. No one may look upon contemplation as his own special property; it is a free gift of God, who bestows it upon whomever He chooses.
CHAPTER IV

ST. GREGORY'S DOCTRINE AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

The chief tenets of Gregory's doctrine on contemplation revealed in three of his sermons on Ezekiel, are set forth in the preceding chapter. The holy Doctor has taught so clearly, completely, and usefully that for centuries he has stood as one of the chief authorities on mystic prayer. In this chapter a brief comparison of St. Gregory's teachings with those of the later doctors on this subject will be followed by a few remarks concerning the great Pontiff's contribution to the Benedictine tradition of liturgical prayer.

All spiritual writers agree that there are in contemplative prayer three main states: the prayer of quiet together with simple union and the transforming union. Ecstasy is included as a state by some, and is placed between the two last stages mentioned above.

1. Saudreau, op. cit., p. 82.
Of the contemplative life, Gregory says:

Truly the contemplative life is to retain the love of God above all with the whole mind, but to rest from exterior action, to remain in the sole desire of the Creator so that the soul is now free to do nothing, but despising all care, she burns to see the face of her Creator; thus she knows what it is to bear the weight of corruptible flesh with its sorrow, and to seek with all her heart to be among the hymn-singing choirs of angels, to mingle with the heavenly citizens, to rejoice on account of eternal reality in the pure sight of God.

In these few words the holy Doctor marks off the three stages corresponding to the three states of contemplative prayer. The first state, "To retain the love of God above all with the whole mind, to rest from exterior action," is followed by the enthrallment of simple action: "To remain in the sole desire of the Creator so that now, free to do nothing, but despising all solicitude the soul burns to see the face of her Creator." St. Gregory reveals the last stage, transforming union, in these brief phrases:

Now the soul realizes what it is to bear the weight of the flesh with its sorrow, and to seek with all her heart to be among the hymn-singing choirs of angels, to mingle with the heavenly citizens, to rejoice in the pure sight of God.

Thus in a few, orderly words Gregory has traced the soul's progress in higher prayer.

A detailed summary of his references to the various states of contemplation as found in these sermons is now submitted. No less than ten times St. Gregory refers to contemplation as "quiet." \(^1\)

Gregory says of contemplation that it is a flight to heavenly desire, \(^2\) and also "a certain supernatural freedom," \(^3\) as well as a supernatural ravishment of the soul to heavenly desire. \(^4\) According to the interpretation of modern mystical writers these expressions indicate the state of ecstasy.

Since Gregory makes no sharp distinction between the simple and the transforming union, the following quotations may be thought to refer in a greater or lesser degree to both stages: "To remain in the sole desire of the Creator." \(^5\) "... to burn to see the face of the Creator." \(^6\) An attaining to the unlimited Light. \(^7\) An exertion of the soul upon God. \(^8\) A tasting of something of the limitless Light by understanding and feeling. \(^9\) An apprehension of God by the

\(^1\) Ibid., 76:811, 812, 953, 956, 995.
\(^2\) Ibid., 76:809.
\(^3\) Ibid., 76:955.
\(^4\) Ibid., 76:811, 955.
\(^5\) Ibid., 76:954.
\(^6\) Ibid., 76:936.
\(^7\) Ibid., 76:955.
\(^8\) Ibid., 76:955.
\(^9\) Ibid., 76:955.
interior understanding.\textsuperscript{1} An experimental knowledge of God.\textsuperscript{2} An opening to the vision of God by faith.\textsuperscript{3}

Contemplation is not, according to St. Gregory, the unveiled vision of God as seen in eternity;\textsuperscript{4} and it is not a privilege on which the soul has a peculiar claim, but a free gift of the bountiful goodness of God which the soul is at liberty to accept or to reject.\textsuperscript{5} The experience of contemplation is short: not more than half an hour.\textsuperscript{6}

That contemplation may and should be desired as the fullness of Christian life, Gregory takes for granted because he preached the sermons on Ezekiel to an unselected group. He teaches that the soul which prepares itself for contemplation will receive it.\textsuperscript{7}

It is readily seen from this comparison of Gregory's doctrine with that of generally conceded opinions of all mystical writers that he is in perfect accord with that which they developed through the succeeding ages. All students of mysticism agree that

\begin{itemize}
  \item [1.] \textit{Ibid.}, 76:955.
  \item [2.] \textit{Ibid.}, 76:989.
  \item [3.] \textit{Ibid.}, 76:989.
  \item [4.] \textit{Ibid.}, 76:956.
  \item [5.] \textit{Ibid.}, 76:810.
  \item [6.] \textit{Ibid.}, 76:956.
  \item [7.] \textit{Ibid.}, 76:995.
\end{itemize}
Gregory's writings profoundly influenced the works of contemplative literature of succeeding ages. This is particularly true in the case of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Teresa of Avila. With St. Gregory, St. Thomas looks upon those as being perfect who have forsaken all that can interfere with the progress of the soul to its Creator. Saudreau says, "St. Thomas desires also, with St. Gregory, whom he quotes . . . . that prelates and those in high places . . . . should excel in the life of contemplation."

St. Thomas, speaking of those things seen in contemplation, says that God is seen only as in a mirror while St. Gregory states that it is "not God but those things beneath Him" which are seen. Both hold that contemplation in this life is a beginning of the life of eternal blessedness. St. Thomas likewise says, "St. Gregory, therefore, proves the contemplative life to consist in the love of God, for when the soul is inflamed with this love it aspires to the contemplation

2. Ibid., p. 155.
3. Ibid., p. 156.
of the divine beauty, and the joy which results is the outcome of that fervent love which has attained to its desired object."  

Like St. Gregory, St. Thomas never classed contemplation among the extraordinary graces for the sanctification of others such as performing miracles. In fact, the whole fabric of St. Thomas' teaching on mysticism is built upon St. Gregory's doctrine. St. Thomas' approach to contemplation is that of a theologian preparing proofs for the guidance of other theologians while that of St. Gregory is the approach of a pastor to his flock. His viewpoint is likewise theological.

That St. Teresa was familiar with the works of St. Gregory on contemplation is shown by the fact that there is a copy of his works annotated in her own hand at the convent of the Incarnation at Avila where she lived and worked. St. Gregory speaks in the Moralia of the castle of contemplation and at least one author discusses this circumstance in reference to the sources

1. Ibid., p. 157.
2. Ibid., p. 157.
3. Ibid., p. 83.
of *The Interior Castle*, the Spanish mystic's great work on contemplative prayer.  

Since the first chapter of this work was based on St. Teresa's division of prayer, and since it has been shown that Gregory conforms to the standard there set up, it remains only to show in what these two great saints differed in their teaching. The chief divergence in their work is in their viewpoints. Gregory's approach was theological, Teresa's psychological.  

St. Teresa's psychological treatment of the subject results at least in part from the fact that her rule provided time for prayer alone in the cell. This leisure was not a part of the life of Gregory however much he desired and sought after it. He, busy with affairs of government or offices of trust assigned to him, had time for reflection only during the hours of the Divine Office or those designated by the rule to holy reading. One might say that Gregory's mysticism was liturgical and theological since it had that particularly Benedictine quality which might be termed "in-the-choirness," while

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2. Ibid., pp.119-122, 131, 132.

Teresa's introspective mysticism might be termed "in-the-cellness."

St. Teresa's contribution to contemplative writing resulted in the clearing up of much of the vagueness in what had hitherto been written about mystical experience and prayer.¹

It is impressive how much alike, in spite of dissimilarites of time and circumstances are Gregory's teachings and those of the later mystics. "The truth is that Gregory and the early doctors on contemplation expressed the fundamentals. The later writers then quoted from them and elaborated their teachings.

One of the lesser results of this research shows the contribution which Gregory made to the continuance and development of the Benedictine tradition of liturgical prayer. Before relating Gregory's life and work to that of the followers of Benedict, it was thought best to set forth the chief characteristics of the Benedictine way of life.

The Divine Office, next to the Mass, is the chief prayer of the Church. The importance of this form of worship to the Benedictine can scarcely be

¹ Stolz, op. cit., pp.119-122.
overemphasized. It is one of his dearest prerogatives as it is his most effective tool for seeking God, since contemplation is built on the sacramental and therefore the liturgical life. 1 Benedict enjoins his sons to "let nothing be preferred to the work of God." 2 He devotes seventeen chapters to the legislation of the Divine Office; this comprises almost one-fourth of the entire work. The first test which he applies to a novice is "whether he seek God," but the second is "whether he is eager for the work of God." 3

In the Divine Office, which is composed of the sacred Scriptures and the writings of the fathers and doctors of the Church, the soul finds its richest expression of sentiments, the pondering of which will lead her to the higher states of prayer. 4

St. Gregory was aware of this for he says:

For our Saviour, riding an ass goes toward Jerusalem when, guiding the soul of any one of the faithful . . . . . He leads her to the vision of interior peace . . . . . He rides a beast of

1. Ibid., pp. 237-238.
2. Butler, op. cit., xliii, 5, p. 82.
3. Ibid., lvi, 14, p. 106.
burden also when He presides over Holy Church universally and inflames her with the desire of supernal peace. Some cut down branches from the trees and strew them in the way because they choose from their eloquence, learned expressions of truth and the opinions of the fathers, and these they cast down in the way of God coming by humble preaching into the soul of the hearer. We, though unworthy, also do this as well as we may. For when we take the opinions of the fathers in the work of exhortation, we fell the branches of the trees that we may strew these in the way of Almighty God.

Another characteristic of the Benedictine mode of life is to diffuse itself in its environment. This trait results from the vow of stability, unknown until the time of Benedict, which binds the monk to a certain monastery in a definite locality for life. He thus becomes a part of the district in which he dwells. It is this vow of stability which gives the peculiar mark of permanence to abbeys. And just as a tree grows and


becomes a part of its environment so that other creatures come to depend on and be protected by it, in the same manner the monastery extends its influence in the neighborhood in which it is situated.

Whenever the foundation of a monastery was made, the monks brought with them the arts of civilization and their mode of prayer. They taught the people to cultivate their fields and likewise instructed them in the beauties of the liturgy. Thus it came about that, during the Middle Ages, the prayer of Christ to His Father in the Divine Office was truly the prayer of His mystical body, the Church, so widespread did the use of this mode of worship become.

By furthering the Benedictine tradition of public prayer, Gregory was likewise making available the means for others to rise to God. In this he advanced the contemplative tradition. Gregory was not content to become a monk and to endow several monasteries. He was likewise concerned about their maintenance. As supreme pontiff, when he realized the danger suffered by the monks at the hands of unscrupulous men both of the clergy and the laity, he made laws to protect the religious and their property,¹ thus assuring their

¹. Snow, op. cit., pp.187-189
peace and prosperous establishment.
Whenever necessity seemed to warrant it, Gregory was quick to offer alms and other assistance to the impoverished monasteries. The discipline of these houses for both men and women was of much concern to him as his correspondence shows.

Gregory helped by his protection and foresight in securing the contemplative tradition in his own lifetime, and in providing for its future growth and survival. The influence of the encouraging impulse given by the great Pope remains today and has reached also to our own country, for, indirectly it was from the English monastery which he established through St. Augustine of Canterbury that the first American foundations were made.

Great as was his work in the establishment and maintaining of monasteries, it is more especially by his writings that Gregory’s influence endures. Practically all of what he wrote, apart from his letters as

1. Ibid., p. 201, pp. 204-207.
2. Ibid., p. 190-204, p. 209.
Pope, consists of sermons and discourses, the result of meditations upon the sacred Scriptures. It is especially in these works that the great Pontiff is bound up with the Benedictine tradition of liturgical prayer. He wrote the most authentic life of St. Benedict including as it does the establishment of his order and its household traditions. From his various works, selections from the following are contained in the monastic breviary: Homilies on the gospels; Morals on the Book of Job; the Book of Kings; Homilies on Ezekiel; Dialogues. These selections total sixty-eight in all, and the amount of material used in this way is surpassed only by what is chosen from St. Augustine. As the monks today chant the Divine Office, they pluck from Gregory's works "branches to cast in the way of the oncoming Lord."

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing pages it may be concluded that in the sermons on Ezekiel, particularly in the three chosen for close study, there is contained a complete doctrine of contemplation. There is likewise progress toward a more clear and finished teaching from one homily to the next.

The outstanding tenets of Gregory's instruction on mystic prayer are: To reach contemplation the soul must first purify itself from sins and faults; she must be a doer of good works at all times; earthly and carnal thoughts and desires must be rejected; she must seek God with intense love and devotion. If the soul does these things, the experience of contemplation will not be denied her. Contemplation is not for a chosen few but for all. God is not seen in contemplation but some representation which satisfies the soul still in this life, because the fullness of the beatific vision is reserved for eternity.

At all times humility is essential to the contemplative. Gregory constantly insists upon this point,
for contemplation is a free gift of Almighty God which cannot be merited.

The three main states of contemplation, quiet, simple union, and complete union, may be understood from his writings, but Gregory does not clearly distinguish these.

In rising to contemplation the soul recollects itself, inspects its recollection, and then advances to mystic prayer. The contemplative act is brief but exceedingly profitable to the soul which is greatly and unspeakably enlarged in itself so that it understands and knows what it could learn in no other way. Contemplation is attained with great pain and although it is of short duration, the joy and profit of its experience is worth all the effort which it costs. Active good works prepare the soul for contemplation, and to them it should return when contemplation is past.

Gregory's doctrine is held and enlarged upon by the later mystics, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Teresa of Avila. St. Gregory's approach differs from St. Teresa's mainly in that her exposition is psychological while His is theological. She analyzed her experience to direct others.

St. Gregory advanced the Benedictine tradition
of liturgical prayer by living the life of a monk, by founding monasteries, and by protecting and helping them. In this way he made available to everyone, in the liturgy practiced by the monks, the means of progress in prayer. Gregory's writings, selections of which are still in use in the Divine Office, were likewise a potent force in making Europe liturgically vocal.
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