

## MN Contemplative 2021 Fall Retreat by Fr. Vincent Pizzuto

### *Slatted Fences*

Some time ago I recall walking along a mountain road with a steep incline to one side, and to the other an extended slatted fence that stood some eight feet high. The wooden slats were rather wide but with only a few millimeters of space in

between each of them. By any estimation the fence appeared a solid obstacle. In an effort to discover what lay on the other side, I shifted my focus from the slats to the thin spaces between them, and as I continued to walk past the fence I was suddenly able to see well beyond it, out onto a landscape that was immeasurably more expansive than the mountain road on which I was walking. I wondered how many had traveled this way before and never

known the vastness of the landscape that lay beside them all along. The fence at once concealed and revealed, simply depending on my perception.

The Scriptures are much like that fence. What they conceal or reveal depends largely on shifts in our perception or where we place our focus. Ultimately, however, our sacred texts stand only at the perimeter of something that extends far beyond them. If we cannot peer beyond that perimeter we may “look and look but never perceive, listen and listen but never hear” (Matt 13:13-16). For the contemplative the words of Scripture, like the slats of the fence, serve both as delineators and as pointers. They delineate a uniquely Christian shape to the interior landscape of the heart. Yet, we must be attentive to the thin spaces, pregnant with meaning, that open up between them. Without those spaces— those imperceptible silences— the words would become confused and difficult to tell apart.



And this is of great importance as we embark on what we might call a contemplative reading of the gospels. The fence—that is, the literary and historical context of a gospel—shapes the contour of the interior landscape but is not itself the destination. The image of the Magi whom we encounter in the opening pages of the New Testament may serve as a guiding metaphor. These archetypal pilgrims set out, much as we do now, on a sacred quest in search of an

epiphany. And as with all pilgrims, we must walk simultaneously in two directions: the exterior and the interior. Two directions that are but one in Christ. For, in Christ there is no spiritual apart from the material, no movement toward God that is not at once a movement toward others. Contemplatives are not content to examine the gospels with the critical distance of an outsider but ruminate from deep within their hearts where that same star of the Magi might guide them to an inner epiphany of Christ. Thus, the gospels we read, the fence through which we peer, the pilgrimage on which we embark, ultimately lead not to a place but to a person.

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Here we touch upon the uniqueness of Christianity among the world's monotheistic religions. At its center is neither a holy place, nor a sacred book, nor a revered symbol, but an embodied person, a human heart—that of Jesus of Nazareth whose Spirit indwells and pervades all and in whom all things are reconciled and unified (Col 1:20). As we will see, in Christ

all perceptions of our separation from God and others are exposed as illusory. The name the gospels give to the historical realization of this unity is the “kingdom of God,” best understood not so much as a location or future promise but as a present reality constituted by a new vision of human relationships rooted in the ministry, and more so the person, of Jesus himself. The kingdom is thus both an interior reality (Matt 5:3) and a historically tangible one (Matt 25:31-46). This union of the spiritual and the tangible reflects a uniquely Christian mysticism rooted in the incarnation.

+ *Contemplating Christ*, 3-7 Fr. Vincent Pizzuto, PhD.

## THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

Now that very same day, two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup>and they were talking together about all that had happened. <sup>15</sup>And it happened that as they were talking together and discussing it, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side; <sup>16</sup>but their eyes were

prevented from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>He said to them, 'What are all these things that you are discussing as you walk along?' They stopped, their faces downcast.

Then one of them, called Cleopas, answered him, 'You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days.'

<sup>19</sup>He asked, 'What things?' They answered, 'All about Jesus of Nazareth, who showed himself a prophet powerful in action and speech before God and the whole people; <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and our leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death, and had him crucified.

<sup>21</sup>Our own hope had been

that he would be the one to set Israel free. And this is not all: two whole days have now gone by since it all happened; <sup>22</sup>and some women from our group have astounded us: they went to the tomb in the early morning, <sup>23</sup>and when they could not find the body, they came back to tell us they had seen a vision of angels who declared he was alive. <sup>24</sup>Some of our friends went to the tomb and found everything exactly as the women had reported, but of him they saw nothing.'

<sup>25</sup>Then he said to them, 'You foolish men! So slow to believe all that the prophets have said!

<sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer before entering into his glory?' <sup>27</sup>Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself.

<sup>28</sup>When they drew near to the village to which they were going, he made as if to go on; <sup>29</sup>but they pressed him to stay with them saying, 'It is nearly evening, and the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup>Now while he was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them. <sup>31</sup>And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; but he had vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>Then they said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?'

<sup>33</sup>They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem. There they found

the Eleven assembled together with their companions, <sup>34</sup>who said to

them, 'The Lord has indeed risen and has appeared to Simon.' <sup>35</sup>Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognized him at the breaking of bread.

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### EMMAUS WALK

#### THE SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

Taking its name from Luke's narrative of the disciples who encounter Christ on the Road to Emmaus (24:13-35), this activity is designed to encourage personal and shared reflection on how Christ is present to you on your walk of faith. The opening and close of Luke's gospel convey two stories that share a common theme: namely, that one's personal experience or revelation of Christ makes sense of a deeper level when shared with another or with community. In other words, we can often discern God's presence and action in our own lives when we listen to how God is working in the lives of those around us. The first time we encounter this in Luke is in the opening chapter (1:39-56) in which Luke parallels the miracle of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist, and Mary's

pregnancy with Jesus. Upon meeting both women realize that God's plan for them is interconnected with a larger movement of God in the world to bring about the Kingdom. They spend three months together, no doubt, reflecting on what all this could mean. In Luke's gospel this is the only time that John and Jesus will ever meet, as Luke tells us John was already locked away in prison before Jesus is baptized (cf. Lk 3:19-22). Luke does not tell us who baptized Jesus, only that "he was baptized."

Another significant time when Luke introduces this same dynamic is at the close of his gospel when Cleopas and "another disciple" encounter Christ on the Road to Emmaus. The narrative ends with the two disciples sharing the feelings and intuitions they had during their sojourn with Jesus. "Were not our hearts burning within us," they ask, "as he spoke with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?"

Both of these stories open us to the realization that our personal experience of Christ is not diminished but expanded, filled out, indeed *clarified* in light of what God is doing in the life of a fellow disciple. And this is the aim of this shared contemplative activity. To meditate on how Christ is working in you and present to you, as we listen to how Christ is active and present in another. As you are paired with a partner from the retreat follow the questions below to guide you in your personal and shared reflections. If you are together physically, you might ideally go for a long walk together or find a quiet place to talk. If you are online, you may talk together in a private 'breakout' room in Zoom.

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### THE WALK

Begin with a period of silence together, either walking or sitting comfortably. Allow this silence to replace the normal small-talk that we normally engage in. Allow a deeper connection to begin to emerge through a silent trusting in your intentions to be present, to listen, to honor one another.

One of you may be time keeper of this first “sit.” You can end simply with “*Amen*” to signal the end of the silent meditation. Now, remain in silence as each of you begins to write or reflect on any of the following questions that most prompts a heart response in you:

How do I encounter Christ in my life? In what or whom do I experience the Divine?

How do I recognize Christ? What feelings, thoughts, convictions, experiences signal I am in the presence of God?

Consider one poignant moment in your life when you were deeply moved or transformed by a numinous experience, a felt sense of God’s presence or action in your life. Recall the details, how you felt, what led up to it, how you were changed afterwards, and so on.

When both have had a chance to reflect on the above questions inwardly, take time to listen to one another with open hearts, without judgment or critique. Listen *contemplatively* to your partner’s experience: allowing space for the other to be as honest and vulnerable as possible with you. This is “thin time” or *Kairos Time* (that is, *Sacred Time*). Each of you is entrusting the other with deeply personal experiences. Give each other space to share as openly as possible.

After the first person has shared, take a few minutes of silence once again to reflect on the following:

**SPEAKER:** How did it feel to be ‘heard’ and ‘listened to’? Did you gain any new insights or perspectives on your experience in the very process of “speaking yourself into clarity”?

**LISTENER:** At any point in the story you heard, did your own heart burn with recognition, affirmation, or a sense shared ‘knowing’ as you listened to how God is at work in your Emmaus partner?

Once you have had a chance to write or reflect on these questions. Switch roles. Open up space for the other person to speak of their encounter. Then, as before, take time to write and reflect on how each of you felt afterward.

Finally, bring your walk to a close either by spending several minutes together walking or sitting in silence, or offer aloud a prayer for the

other to bless them on their journey through life with Christ.