

BECOMING BUTTERFLIES

Review of

Frank X. Tuoti

Why Not Be a Mystic?

Introduction by George A. Maloney, SJ

New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995

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Reviewed by **Erlinda G. Paguio**

Meister Eckhart writes that the soul is like a vessel that never becomes full because it continues to grow as it is filled. The more the soul desires God, the more it receives, and the more it grows. Frank Tuoti presents a bold invitation to desire the mystical/contemplative life in his book, *Why Not Be a Mystic?* He categorically states that “we must become mystics” because it is a personal response to an inner call that God Himself makes.

The title of the book may either attract or repel readers, but Tuoti is most concerned that they take his invitation seriously. He firmly believes in developing an intimate relationship with God in contemplative prayer. He writes from his own experience as a former Trappist at the Abbey of Gethsemani where he was influenced by Thomas Merton, and as a layman whose career was in television management in New York and Arizona. He describes himself as someone who has sometimes crashed and burned in the combat of living a contemplative vocation in a tough and intimidating world. For this reason some readers may identify with him.

His aim in writing his book is to recast in contemporary and existential language what he has learned about contemplation from various spiritual writers. He writes for people who have not yet realized the beauty and greatness of their Christian vocation, and for those who have begun to pray, but have not yet entered into the depths of contemplative prayer. These readers must not read his book hurriedly to find out how they may enter into it. Tuoti himself says that his book is not a course in “Contemplation 101.”

In trying to make comprehensible a difficult subject, Tuoti uses some striking analogies. When he writes about the prayer of quiet, or what he terms as “wordless prayer,” he compares the silencing of the faculties to a manager’s art of firing employees. The memory and imagination are handed a “pink slip” and told that their services are no longer needed. When the activities of those faculties continue to engage and distract the soul, they seem to present to the mind a “theater of the absurd,” flashing in the mind’s screen “coming attractions, cartoons, newsreels and short features.” The penetrating and discriminating power of contemplation is compared to a pin spot following a stage performer, which in this analogy is the ego or false self asserting itself. “Alert and awakened by the lamp of the spirit, the deep inner self is now capable of detecting this ‘actor’ who seeks to upstage it and assume the starring role.” The author strongly emphasizes giving the Lord “prime time” and not “spare time.” “Prime time” for him is the time when we are most alert and “with it.”

He notes that contemplation is a gift, “held in our name to a divine ‘layaway plan,’ awaiting presentation of our ‘claim check’ which is our decision to seek it.” He writes of the arduous process involved in developing a habit for contemplative prayer: “There are no microwave Christians. We must simmer on life’s

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stove for a long time and ‘cook slowly’ so that we will be ‘well done’ as we come to the end of our earthly spiritual journey.”

Part of the author’s style is to introduce and conclude each chapter with a quotation from Scriptures or from the writings of different spiritual writers. The book abounds in quotations which are in themselves useful materials for meditation. They may appear disruptive to those readers who are eager to arrive immediately at a unified sense of what becoming a mystic or a contemplative is all about.

There are more than thirty-five quotations from Thomas Merton alone, and several others from St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, Carl Jung, Meister Eckhart, etc. There is a list of important spiritual works which helped the author himself, but he omits a bibliographic citation of the books he used in quoting Meister Eckhart. Which translation did he use in this quotation? “For a man to become fruitful, he must become a woman! That is the noblest word that can be addressed to the soul.” The author explains that “Eckhart is obviously not recommending a sex change but an interior transformation of the heart and mind . . .” The word commonly used in translation is a “virgin” to denote the purity of heart that one must have for Christ to be born in the soul.

Is the author’s use of the word “birthing” an attempt to be inclusive in his language? Note for example, “The birthing of the Son in us is the greatest joy of the Father”; “To be silent and receptive before God is . . . to experience the loving knowledge of God in our hearts, the birthing and dilation of the Son . . .”; “This ‘pasturing of the heart’ radiates throughout our entire being birthing a habitual consciousness of the indwelling God who gently, continuously ‘haunts us’”; “Ancient tradition offers several contemplative prayer practices that lead to the birthing of a contemplative spirituality . . .” This reviewer would have simply used “the birth of” or “giving birth to . . .”

As Tuoti takes the reader through certain aspects of the contemplative/mystical experience, he asserts that this gift is available to all persons who sincerely desire God. To be a mystic is to experience God in a gifted intuition charged with a gentle and penetrating, though obscure knowledge of God. The chapters on the dark night of the soul and the prayer of quiet are drawn from the writings of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. They are well written and so much easier to understand than the sources themselves.

The book contains a short introduction by George A. Maloney, SJ, the author’s long time friend and staretz. The epilogue is taken from Merton’s “Message of the Contemplative to the World” [sic].* The appendix has several selected passages from the New Testament inviting all to union with Christ. A whole chapter is devoted to what seems to be a version of the maxims and counsels of St. John of the Cross. Tuoti, however, uses Merton’s unpublished manuscript on *The Inner Experience*.* The author says this is the first time it is being published in the form of counsels and cautions.

The book concludes with an allusion to Chuang Tzu’s dream of being a butterfly, and his reflection on whether it was the butterfly who dreamed it was Chuang Tzu. Although he quotes a passage from St. Teresa of Avila, Tuoti fails to present a full account of the Carmelite’s imaginative use of the silkworm and the butterfly in *The Interior Castle*. St. Teresa writes that when the soul is in the prayer of quiet, when it ceases to be discursive in its prayer, and when it has become truly dead to the world and transformed in Christ, a white butterfly comes out of the cocoon which the silkworm built for its dying place. St. Teresa compares the soul to this butterfly.

Frank Tuoti invites all his readers to become butterflies and be like other souls who have renewed the Church.

* EDITOR’S NOTE. This citation is in error in the book and the review. Merton’s essay was titled “Message of Contemplatives to the Modern World” in typescript, mimeograph, and published version.

Tuoti used one of the many photocopies of the typescript of *The Inner Experience* in preparing his book. *The Inner Experience*, however, was published in serial form in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* and is available in reprint.