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In his 2018 Apostolic Exhortation “On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World,” Pope Francis states that “holiness consists in a habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed in prayer and adoration.” The saints “find an exclusive concern with this world to be narrow and stifling, and, amid their own concerns and commitments, they long for God, losing themselves in praise and contemplation of the Lord.” The pope adds: “I do not believe in holiness without prayer, even though that prayer need not be lengthy or invoke intense emotions” (n 147). Francis encourages us to develop the habit of “prayerful silence,” not as an escape from the world, but as a time of “solitary converse” with the Lord, when we recall our many blessings, offer petitions for others, and discern our own distinctive path to holiness (n 149-154). Prayerful engagement with the Scriptures and participation in the Eucharist strengthens and guides our efforts to sanctify our everyday lives (n 156-157).

On the other hand, Francis warns us: “It is not healthy to love silence while fleeing interactions with others, to want peace and quiet while avoiding activity, to seek prayer while disdaining service.” We are called to a more integrated spirituality, “to be contemplatives even in the midst of action and to grow in holiness by responsibly and generously carrying out our proper mission” (n 26). Maintaining this posture is especially difficult in today’s world with its heavy demands, superficial pleasures and “endless array of consumer goods.” We may “fail to realize the need to stop this rat race and to recover the personal space needed to carry on a heartfelt dialogue with God” (n 29). To counter this temptation, “we need a spirit of holiness capable of filling both our solitude and our service, our personal life and our evangelizing efforts, so that every moment can be an expression of self-sacrificing love in the Lord’s eyes. In this way, every minute of our lives can be a step along the path to growth in holiness” (n 31). Following the advice of Pope Francis, we can grow spiritually by maintaining “contemplation in action,” by balancing prayer and everyday activities, by creating a synergistic interaction between interior reflection and external activity and by integrating love of God and love of neighbor.

In order to get a more concrete sense of contemplation in action, let us explore the life and thought of the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold (1905-1961). Dag was born into a prestigious family, the youngest son of the man who served as Prime Minister of Sweden from 1914 to 1917. He grew up in Uppsala and earned a law degree from Uppsala University in 1930 and, in 1936, a doctorate in economics from Stockholm University. His career as a public servant and government official included chairing the Swedish delegation to the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 1952. A year later, he was elected as Secretary-General of the United Nations. He threw himself into his new position, meeting world leaders and establishing personal relationships with his staff and leaders in the various U.N. departments. He got very involved in creating a meditation room, a Room of Silence, on the first floor in the U.N. headquarters in New York, where people of all faiths could spend time in silent prayer. He travelled extensively, including a visit to China to negotiate the release of 11 U.S. pilots captured during the Korean War. Much of his energy was spent trying to improve relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

He played a major role in achieving a peaceful resolution of the Suez Canal crisis of 1956 and 1957, when Egyptian President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, prompting English, French and Israeli troops to invade the Canal Zone. In a risky and innovative move, Hammarskjold got the General Assembly to establish and employ, for the first time, a United Nations Emergency Force to maintain a cease fire agreement in the Canal Zone. From July, 1960, when the Congo achieved independence from Belgium, until his death on September 18, 1961, when his plane mysteriously crashed on his way to negotiate a cease fire in that troubled country, Hammarskjold was totally immersed in halting the Congolese civil war and in preventing it from escalating into an armed confrontation between the Soviet Union and Western Allies.

Dag Hammarskjold was indeed a man of action. As the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, he worked long hours, often with little sleep, engaging in shuttle diplomacy, managing his large U.N. staff, meeting with world leaders, attending conferences, giving speeches, entertaining diplomats, corresponding with a large group of friends and colleagues, dealing with the press and making formal reports to the Security Council and the General Assembly. President Eisenhower once praised him as a man with remarkable “physical stamina” who works all day long “intelligently and devotedly” with only a few hours sleep. In his personal interactions with others, he had an amazing ability to be totally present, to read body language and to discern emotional nuance. In times of crisis, he maintained a calm demeanor, a clear sense of purpose and an openness to creative solutions. President John Kennedy spoke for many when he called Hammarskjold the “greatest statesman of our century.”

While Hammarskjold’s public service was widely reported and appreciated by many, his deep spiritual life was largely unrecognized. He did give significant clues in some of his public statements, especially a November 1953 presentation on Edward R. Murrow’s radio program, *This I Believe.* In his prepared statement, he affirmed his adult appropriation, with intellectual honesty, of the beliefs he received as a youth; the virtue of selfless, courageous public service from his father and from his mother’s side, the radical Gospel teaching to treat others as equal children of God. He raised up Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), the theologian and missionary physician to equatorial Africa, as a prime example of a Gospel-based life of service to those in need.

For directions on how to live a life of active social service, Hammarskjold turned to the great medieval mystics, who insisted that self-surrender is the way to self-realization and who, strengthened by inner grace, said “yes” to all the demands and duties of life, whatever the personal cost. He ended his statement of belief by insisting that what the mystics discovered about “the laws of inner life and of action” remain relevant for the modern world.

After Hammarskjold’s tragic death in 1961, his diary, which was later published under the title *Markings*, was discovered in his house in New York along with a letter to a friend giving permission to publish it and describing it “as a sort of white book concerning my negotiations with myself and with God.” In the journal, he described his entries as “signposts” which he hoped would be of interest, but only if what he wrote “has an honesty without trace of vanity or self-regard.”

When the English version of *Markings*, with a somewhat critical Foreward by the poet W.H. Auden, first appeared in 1964, it immediately became a bestseller and generated thoughtful reviews in many publications, including the *New York Times,* that lauded Hammarskjold as a “revered statesman” and a man of “quite extraordinary inner life.” In his Foreward, Auden captured the abiding significance of *Markings* as a unique account of the effort of a professional person “to unite in one life the *via* *activa* and the *via contemplativa,* the spiritual life of prayerful reflection and the active life of public service.

Throughout *Markings*, Hammarskjold speaks openly and honestly about his great cross in life, an abiding sense of loneliness, a deep anguish that he considered almost inevitable given his personality and his vocational choice not to get married. So intense was the sense of aloneness that he periodically considered suicide. At times, he said, “it seems so much more difficult to live than to die.” In his darkest moments, he prayed that his loneliness would spur him to find something to live for and a cause great enough to die for. Ultimately, it was his faith in God that enabled him to overcome his suicidal thoughts and to transform his loneliness into a life of service.

He was relentless in his effort to face the dark side of his inner life: pride, vanity, self-importance, the desire for fame, the need to impress others, envy, work as an escape, and all inner self-deception. He reminded himself to “gaze steadfastly” at these destructive tendencies until he plumbed their depths. He wanted to understand “Original Sin,” the “dark counter-center of evil in our nature” that distorts our thinking and action. He reminds himself not to brood over his “pettiness with masochistic self-disgust,” but to be mindful of it as a “threat to my integrity of action.”

In dealing with his personal demons, Hammarskjold drew on the biblical tradition familiar to him from his Swedish Lutheran background.  *Markings*, for example, has many short quotes from the Book of Psalms which offer guidance and comfort: “Give not yourselves unto vanity” (62:10); and “I will lay me down in peace, and take my rest: for it is thou, Lord, only that makes me dwell in safety” (4:9). His journal has an extended Gospel-based reflection on Christ as an “adamant young man,” who washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper and who faced death “without self-pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny“ he had chosen. Several times, he reflected on Christ’s agony in Gethsemane, when his friends fell asleep and God was silent. Jesus could relate to outcasts because his humanity was “rich and deep enough” to make contact with their common humanity. Although Dag emphasized Christ’s humanity, he was also able to address him as “Thou,” the Son of God, who remains with the human family and walks with us on our journey.

*Markings* is full of prayers composed or adapted by Hammarskjold. Reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer, he wrote “Hallowed by Thy name not mine, Thy Kingdom come, not mine, Thy will be done, not mine.” Some of his prayers addressed God in explicit trinitarian terms: “Before Thee Father, in righteousness and humility, With Thee Brother, in faith and courage, In Thee, Spirit, in stillness.” He had a clear sense of his total dependency on the God who wants us to be freely responsible for our lives. The great statesman who said “Not I, but God in me!” also wrote: “God desires our independence – which we attain when, ceasing to strive for it ourselves, we fall back into God.” As this brief survey indicates, much of Hammarskjold’s spirituality reflects a solid biblical grounding in his Lutheran heritage. There was, however, another side to his inner life which, as he himself indicated in his personal creed, drew inspiration from the medieval mystics.

Scholars debate whether Hammarskjold was himself a mystic, but this entry in his journal clearly reflects the typical mystical sense of undifferentiated unity. “In a dream I walked with God through the deep places of creation, past walls that receded and gates that opened, through hall after hall of silence, darkness and refreshment – the dwelling place of souls acquainted with light and warmth – until around me, was an infinity into which all flowed together and lived anew.” Among the Catholic mystics, Dag’s favorite author was Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), the German Dominican theologian, who taught at the University of Paris, served as a Dominican provincial, preached widely, and wrote extensively. In his preaching, he emphasized detachment and self-emptying as well as the human capacity to receive God’s “overabundant love.” Eckhart stands as a prime historical example of a contemplative in action, a busy Christian leader and scholar fueled by an extremely rich inner life.

Hammarskjold directly quoted Eckhart at least nine times in *Markings,* with many other indirect allusions to his thought. An entry on Christmas Eve, 1956, has this statement from Eckhart: A man who keeps God in view ”Does not seek rest, for he is not troubled by any unrest….He must acquire an inner solitude, no matter where or with whom he may be: he must learn to pierce the veil of things and comprehend God within them.” The next day, on Christmas, he again quoted the Dominican theologian who recommended detachment from all outward things: “You must have an exalted mind and a burning heart in which, nevertheless, reign silence and stillness.”

Dag resonated with major themes of Eckhart and the mystical tradition. The true God is incomprehensible beyond all reasoning and imagining. The one God is the inexhaustible Source of our inner energy and the Goal of our deepest longings. Self-forgetfulness is the key to the self-fulfillment God wills for us. We are totally dependent on God in serving as instruments of the divine will. There is an essential unity of all created reality held together by God’s loving embrace. Solitude and silence are crucial to spiritual growth and effective efforts to spread God’s kingdom. As did Eckhart, Hammarskjold developed a spirituality that fruitfully combined a deep interior life with a demanding life of action.

The Secretary-General, however, did have his own unique way of appropriating and living the mystical tradition. In a journal entry on Whitsunday, 1961, he made the revealing confession: “I don’t know Who -or what – put the question, I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.” Although the historical dynamics of his vocational response remain obscure, the significant point is that he found meaning in his life of self-surrender by making an affirmative response to a transcendent reality. In other words, suggested by other entries, his yes to God’s call enabled him to carry his personal crosses and to live a productive life of generous public service. In another significant entry, he expressed his fundamental acceptance of his evolving life: “For all that has been, Thank you. For all that is to come, Yes!”

The Secretary-General clearly understood the spiritual significance of his extremely demanding leadership position: “In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.” At the same time, he knew intuitively that cultivating his spiritual life was crucial to sanctifying his public life. Experience taught him the great challenges of maintaining a vital inner life, expressed in his statement: “The longest journey is inward.” The rewards are great, however, for finding “the point of rest at the center of our being” where “a tree becomes a mystery, a cloud a revelation, each man a cosmos of whose riches we can only catch a glimpse.” This same center point enabled him to stay calm in the midst of international crises, to function effectively on little sleep, and to make prudent decisions on behalf of justice and peace.

In his masterful 2016 biography, *Hammarskjold: A Life*, scholar Roger Lipsey does an excellent job of exploring the synergistic relationship between Hammarskjold’s inner life and his dedicated public service. Lipsey detects a general methodology that he developed over the course of his adult life, “a practice of self-observation,” or “ conscious self-scrutiny,” that enabled him to achieve a deeper self-knowledge and to mobilize his talents to make a difference in the world. Dag himself put it this way: “The more faithfully you listen to the voice inside you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside.” Such intense listening requires silence or “stillness,” a term borrowed from Eckhart, which is absolutely necessary for an authentic life of service to others. When an interviewer inquired about the main qualities of an international leader, Hammarskjold mentioned a “heightened awareness combined with an inner quiet,” along with a humility that respects the perspectives of others.

Lipsey points out that in the early 1950s, Hammarskjold began using the term “the unheard of “ to point to the transcendent dimension present in everyday life. It is through a ”life of sacrifice,” and personal “surrender,” that one can break down the illusory walls that divide us from the transcendent and perform public service that fosters peace in the world.

Hammarskjold wrote of both dedication to his public life: “one with your task, while in your duty of the moment,” and his awareness of the dynamics of his inner life: “We all have within us a center of stillness surrounded by silence.” Attention to this center point is crucial because God’s “orders are given in secret.” He relied on “intuitive rediscovery,” an awareness of the divine presence, that guided his decisions on international relations as well as his ongoing process of self-exploration. As a believing Christian, he was grateful for God’s initiative, “for being allowed to listen, to observe, to understand.” It was the same faith perspective that energized and guided his challenging vocation as Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Challenging Auden’s charge that Hammarskjold lacked “originality of insight,“ Roger Lipsey noted his distinctive appropriation of medieval mysticism. “He had integrated depth of inner life with mastery of political processes. He had done so as a man of the modern West, a Christian and humanist open to the world’s political wisdom and spirituality. This was his astonishing achievement and contribution”(p. 608). In a 1953 radio address, with a message for all of us seeking to integrate our inner and outer lives, the Secretary-General insisted “Our work for peace must begin within the private world of each one of us. To build for man a world without fear, we must be without fear. To build a world of justice, we must be just. And how can we fight for liberty if we are not free in our own minds? How can we ask others to sacrifice if we are not ready to do so? Some might consider this to be just another expression of noble principles, too far from the harsh realities of political life…I disagree….”

In a journal entry just months before his death, Dag Hammarskjold addressed a prayer to “Thou Whom I do not comprehend but Who hast dedicated me to my fate.” This prayer of a great statesman and a true contemplative in action invites us to share in his quest for an integrated spirituality. “Give us a pure heart that we may see Thee, a humble heart that we may hear Thee, a heart of love that we may serve Thee, a heart of faith that we may live Thee.”

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