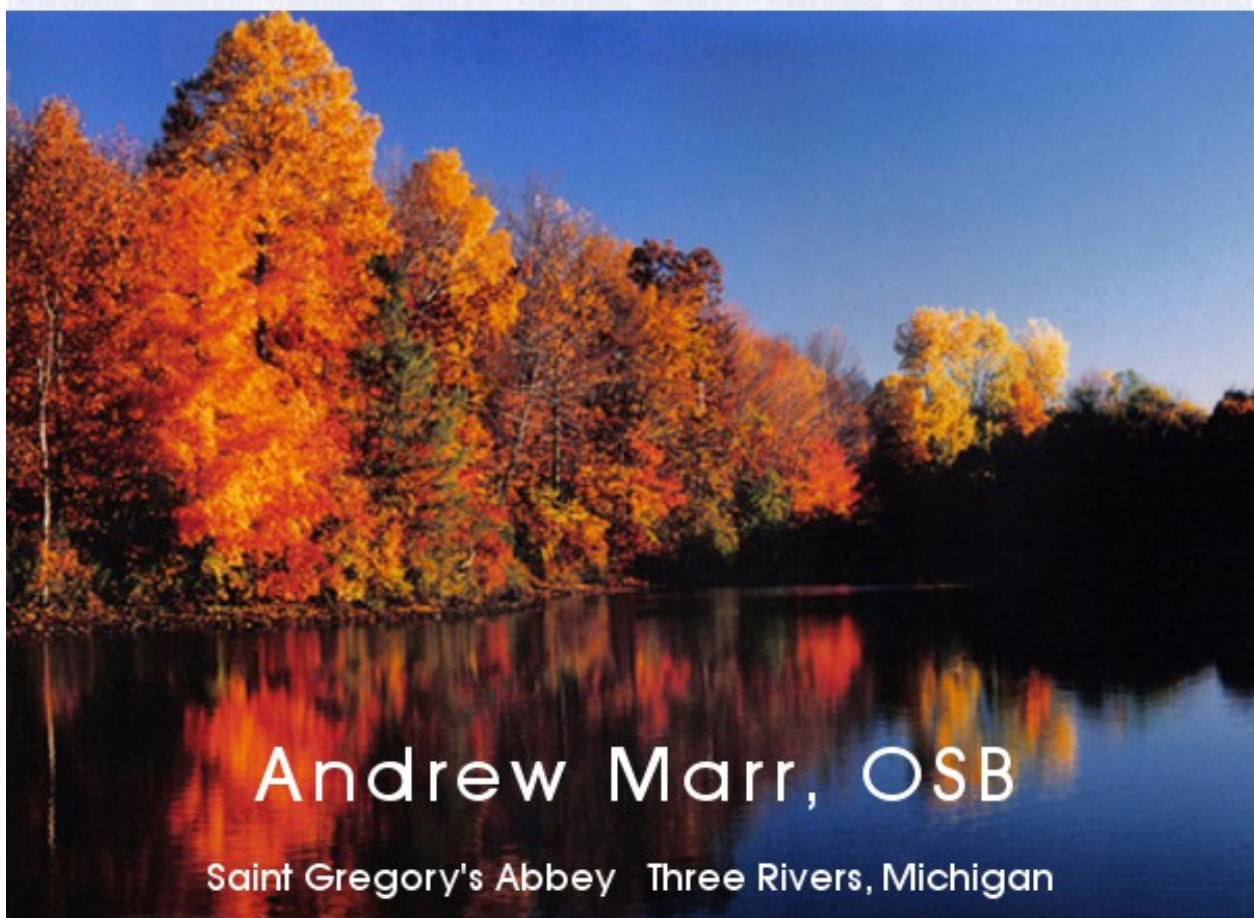


The Indwelling God

Resting in God's Desire



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THE INDWELLING GOD

and

RESTING IN GOD'S DESIRE

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In a short time the world will no longer see me;
but you will see me,
because I live and you will live.
On that day
you will understand that I am in my Father
and you in me and I in you.
Anybody who receives my commandments and keeps them
will be one who loves me;
and anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father,
and I shall love him and show myself to him.
(John14:19-21)

Grace and Willingness

We may believe in God our Creator whose Son took on human flesh for our salvation and sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts, but does this truth touch our lives? We all know that it is not enough to say we believe this truth. We must live it. The bond of love between the three persons of the Trinity and the acts they have done for us will not interest us greatly unless our own hearts burn with Their love. The two disciples of Jesus who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus were absorbed in the stranger's teachings because their hearts burned within them as he explained the scriptures. This burning heart is what contemplative prayer is all about.

Usually God inspires us to live in the Trinity's bond of Love by letting us experience the emptiness at the center of our lives. This emptiness is an inner voice placed within us by our creator so that we may yearn to know God deeply. No amount of riches in money, love, virtue, or human experience can fill this void. Usually, we do not channel our need for God in God's direction until we have tried filling our emptiness with cheaper pursuits. To our continuing frustration, we learn that we get what we pay for. This void impresses upon us the poverty of our humanity. We must accept this poverty before we can receive the riches God would give us. When we allow ourselves to be poor, then the beauties of this life and the friendships we cherish and the joys in our accomplishments can be filled with God's life. Usually we wait until the emptiness really hurts before we consider doing anything about it. Even then, we may reach for any pain-killer we can find instead. God, however, wants much more for us than the alleviation of pain. God desires to share eternal joy with us.

When God reaches out to us to draw us into a deep relationship, God gives us the power to respond. This God-given power is grace. God reaches into the depths of our being to draw us to God. Meanwhile, our inner being echoes God's yearning for us. We

do not turn to God on our own, God turns us to God. Is there no escape? Yes and no. We cannot escape the reality of our nature as God made us. We cannot escape the natural yearning we have for God, but we also have a mysterious gift of freedom that allows us to contradict our nature and the end God desires for us. The only escape route offered us leads us away from God.

If God calls us and effects the movements of the spiritual life within us, it seems to follow that we can do nothing. A school of thought of the seventeenth century known as Quietism made an absolute out of this notion. The Quietists said we should do nothing except wait for God to act in us. They were right except for one thing: we must constantly call on God while we are waiting. If we don't, we have not made the fundamental choice toward God allowed us, and subconscious desires or unbridled emotions take over. We have abdicated our responsibility to use our free will. When we give up trying to exercise the will at all, we end up assuming that every whim of ours is God's will.

Far from being an escape from our humanity, spirituality is a fulfillment of it. If the Holy Spirit fulfills our humanity as well as transcends it, then we can hardly have spirituality without the lumps of humanity which we are. That would be like trying to make a cherry pie without the cherries. We each have a mind, a will, feelings, and a body which we can direct toward God or away from God as we choose, but our spirit is not an immaterial thing floating in us or through us. The spirit is not a human faculty at all. Rather, our spirit is an emptiness that only God can fill. It is like the emptiness of a bowl that has the potentiality of being filled to overflowing, but cannot fill itself. We must pour all of ourselves into this emptiness so that we can receive everything back from God. Both the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *penuma* mean "breath" and "wind." We have both the potential and the need to breathe air, but the air comes from outside ourselves. We don't have any air within us unless we breathe it in. The spirit is not a passive emptiness waiting to be filled any more than our lungs are. The human spirit is a dynamic movement within us that yearns for the quickening which only God's Spirit can give.

Our gift of freedom leaves it to us to make choices between our impulses, our powers of rational discrimination, and the movement of the Holy Spirit within us. God's call accomplishes its purpose for us, and when God's call has gripped us, we find space for the greatest freedom of all. We can say Yes. And having said Yes, we remain free to follow God ever deeper into the love flowing within the Trinity. We also remain free to turn back to ourselves at the drop of a hat. What do we do when we say Yes to God? We make ourselves available to God. We accomplish this task by making a specific act of will, and renewing that act of will time and time again. In his book *Will and Spirit*, Gerald May suggests that we have the fundamental choice between being wilful, where we try to run our own lives, and being *willing*. When we are willing for God to act on us and in us, we have given God the opening God asks for.

Our relationship with God is not unlike our human experience of romance. When two people fall in love, it is not something that either person caused; it just happens. But a romance cannot go anywhere unless both people actively make themselves available to the other. If we make no response to the overtures of the other, the other has no way of knowing we are interested in a personal relationship. How else can God safeguard our freedom than by waiting for us to respond to God? We must make it clear to God that we *do* want God to enfold us with God's Love, cost what it may.

It seems that neither the pull toward God nor the pull away from God is really chosen by us. If our will is free, how is it that we are trapped between these two contradictory acts of will which we don't will? If our greatest desire is to share God's desire, why do we choose anything different from God's desire? In the end, there is no answer to this question. It isn't enough to blame demonic forces for the pull away from God. We experience in ourselves an attraction for our destructive impulses. We are tempted to choose destruction in order to escape giving ourselves up to God even as we yearn for God to deliver us from self-destructing. The contradiction between the two conflicting desires makes no sense; it is totally irrational. But there it is, right at the center of our human experience. We might as well face the fact that sin is irrational, but it is real. Even when we think we have made a choice between one "will" or the other, the conflict continues. We can't escape from God, but neither can we escape from our rebelliousness. No matter how intense the inner conflict, we can make the movement of prayer, even when it does not feel like prayer, even when the rebellious "will" continues to pull us away. Sometimes all we can do is want to want God.

Techniques in Prayer

There are numerous techniques for prayer which help make us available to God. None of these techniques cause prayer, but they pave the way for the Holy Spirit to pray within us. They help us direct our attention to God and wait on God. They are concrete acts of will that demonstrate our willingness to let God enter us and enfold us with Love. These acts of will do not cause God to enter us. When and how God enters us is up to God. God is God's own cause for what God does.

Since the journey of prayer takes us into the darkness and mystery within ourselves, it is important that we focus on Jesus as our guide. Interior prayer is not concerned with achieving an altered state of consciousness for its own sake or discovering a god-like substance within us which we have by right. Our human spirit is a potential for something we lack, not something we have. Rather, the purpose of interior prayer is to become conscious of God's presence within us. It is God we are seeking, not ourselves. If we try to find ourselves outside of God, or if we seek a mind-altering experience for its own sake, we may wander, lost in the depths of our psyche. If we pursue this journey through Christ, we should expect that our minds and hearts will be

altered and the Holy Spirit will enlarge both mind and heart to an ever-deeper vision and love for God and creation.

There are two fundamental methods of focusing our prayer. One is called discursive meditation. This method makes use of either images or thoughts about God. The other method focuses our attention through the use of a short repetitive prayer. In recent years, it has been given the useful term of centering prayer. Here, we eschew the use of images and thoughts from the start. Both discursive meditation and centering prayer have been used in the Christian tradition and history suggests that either can work. Each individual is usually better suited for one method or the other. Therefore it is best not to push one method to the exclusion of the other. Let us not be side-tracked by those who insist that only one way or the other is legitimate. Both have worked for great saints in the past. Both have validity today.

To this day, there are serious arguments over the use of images in prayer and in church decoration. Some argue that Christianity is based on the Incarnation, God made flesh. Therefore contemplation must be incarnational and one must meditate on images. If one prefers a more abstract meditation, that is fine, for Christianity is doctrinal as well. On the other side is the insistence that God is Mystery and all images and ideas fall short of God. If we are going to have contemplation worth its salt, we must enter into a "dark night" where we experience God through unknowing. Prayer is still Christocentric, but in some mysterious way, we are taken inside Jesus where we come to the Father's ineffable presence at the center of our Lord.

Both arguments are right. The spiritual life would be simpler if only one of them were. As it is, no matter which basic direction we choose for contemplative prayer, we must be ready to experience the opposite pole. If we don't, our prayer will be unbalanced. Christianity is based on the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. The image of the human Jesus is the perfect image of God. We are not left in unrelieved darkness as to what God is like. Moreover, when God took on human flesh, God showed us that the material creation is fundamentally good. It follows that our experience in the flesh should be an integral part of our spirituality. Even if we do not make use of images in our prayer, we must still be nourished by the images of the Gospel. Contemplative prayer must be supported by liturgical worship and regular prayerful reading of scripture. The Eastern Orthodox Church stresses the interior spirituality of imageless contemplation based on a short prayer such as the Jesus Prayer, but it balances it with a strong devotion to icons and a very rich liturgy.

On the other hand, God is mystery and we can only hold ourselves back from experiencing God's presence in a deep way if we think we know who God is. If we meditate with the use of images, we must not cling to them. We should be open to the possibility of being carried inside the images where we enter the darkness of God's naked presence. It is not a simple case of graduating from the human nature of Jesus to the

Divine Nature. In prayer, we are with the Person of the Trinity who took on human flesh. The humanity of Jesus assures us that we don't get beyond our humanity. Rather, Jesus shares his divinity with us and so leads us through the depths of our humanity to a glorious fulfillment of our humanity beyond anything we could accomplish for ourselves. Just as Jesus poured himself out of his Divinity to take on human nature, so we pour ourselves out of our human experience to receive a taste of God's divinity. Yet, far from losing ourselves, we have, as Jesus promised we would, found ourselves in God.

We must remember that any means we use in prayer is just that, a means. These techniques, whether with or without images, are means to the end of simply being with God. We do not sit down to pray in order to finish a pre-planned meditation or say so many thousand Jesus Prayers. We pray in order to be with God. When God gives us the experience of God's simplicity, we experience God through unknowing. When God centers our prayer, we have no need to center it ourselves. We must avoid turning prayer into a conjuring act. If we call on the Holy Name of Jesus, Jesus will come of his own free will. But if we think our calling on Jesus *causes* Jesus to come, all we get is fantasy. If we think God owes us gifts of grace because of all the work we do on our knees, we will get the reward we have really earned: the Jesus of our imagination.

Discerning which method is best for each person does not follow a hard and fast rule. Perhaps an intellectually inclined person will be attracted to something like the Jesus Prayer because its simplicity is an antidote to a heavy diet of mental activity. But not necessarily. One of the more reliable criteria is that if we tend to experience some fervor and longing for God spontaneously when we sit down to pray, we are more likely to find of a form of centering prayer helpful. Others may need to focus on an image to stir up some sense of devotion. Each person must do a little experimenting to find out which is best. Chances are, we will have an instinct or hunch as to which to try. We should follow up that hunch in the first round. It shouldn't take long to find out if we are on the right track or not. A word of caution, however: the muddling that most of us have to go through should not degenerate into a perpetual restlessness. We should not expect to enter instant contemplation, and some difficulty along the way should not immediately be construed as meaning that a change is in order. A common dictum among early spiritual teachers is that a tree that is transplanted too often will never take root.

The bodily position we use for prayer is important, but there is room for several options. The essential thing is to place ourselves in a disciplined posture with the back straight. Since we are seeking to make ourselves alert for God's coming to us in prayer, our posture should reinforce this alertness. Any position that fulfills these requirements is fine. We can sit cross-legged in the oriental lotus position, kneel, or sit up in a straight-backed chair. Making ourselves uncomfortable does not usually help us pray better, but making ourselves too comfortable is more conducive to daydreaming than to prayer.

Half an hour is a good length of time for interior prayer. This amount of time allows us to move deeply into prayer but is also long enough for us to experience the tedium of it—a purifying experience. We may be led by the Spirit to pray longer in some instances. If it is not normally possible to spend as much time as half an hour because of other God-given commitments, try to spend at least fifteen minutes at this prayer.

Meditation on Images

The technique of meditating on images achieved its most elaborate articulation during the Counter-Reformation period, particularly in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola and the works of St. Francis de Sales. These two writers developed, to a high degree of complexity, a technique which had been used throughout the Middle Ages. The basic principle of this technique is to involve our rational, imaginative, and feeling faculties in prayer. St. Ignatius systematized this technique to the point of involving all five of the senses in a meditation. When using this technique of prayer, it is important not to let the imagination just float in any direction. In the end, we must give up all our ideas and imaginings. We make a modest beginning in this renunciation by focusing on the images given us by Scripture and the Church.

Some may find it helpful to follow St. Ignatius to the letter, but I recommend recapturing the simplicity of this technique from earlier sources of the tradition. In choosing to use Gospel stories as the subject of our meditations, we imagine the scene in some detail so that we see and smell and feel everything. Such a meditation is not like watching a movie. Meditation is not a spectator sport. We must put ourselves into the scene. After all, we are seeking a deep union of love with God. We never make friends by watching people at a distance. In the story of the miraculous catch of fish, we place ourselves in the boat where we cast out the nets but catch nothing. Jesus comes along and says: Try again. So we do. We experience the shock and surprise of getting a full net, and we know we are not worth as much as a finger of this Man. After imagining the story, we sit with it. We let the shock and the joy of the event sink in. We do not necessarily have to think about what the story means. The story bears its own meaning. When we rest in a Gospel scene or let a parable of Jesus roll around in our minds, we may find it helpful to have a prayer word to help keep us anchored in the subject of our meditation.

A favorite traditional image for meditation is the crucifixion of Jesus. The famous Gospel song “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” captures the point of meditating on this image perfectly. We are at the foot of the cross where we sit with Jesus during his last moments. This is the center of our redemption. There are no haloes. The scene is not pretty. But there is a dignity that causes a glow in our hearts, because we cannot forget who this Crucified One is. Blood and water flow from his side when the soldier thrusts a lance into him. This blood and water is Jesus’ life flowing into us.

On the other hand, we could meditate on something a little more abstract, such as St. Paul's image of taking off the Old Humanity and being clothed with the New Humanity. Here the mind must do a little more thinking, but it is important not to let our prayer time become a mere exercise in thinking. We should relax and play with the idea prayerfully. First, we reflect on how we might put off the old self and then how we might put on the new self. Then we rest in God and open ourselves to the newness Paul says can be ours as an act of divine grace when we allow God to clothe us with God's glory instead of our own. Then, we should attend to this promise and use it as our anchor of attention.

The Lord's Prayer is another great source for meditation. We could easily spend half an hour or more with the short prayer that Jesus himself taught us. What do we mean when we say "hallowed by thy name?" Are we really giving God the glory when something goes well in our lives instead of to ourselves? What are our trespasses? How forgiving are we of others? This prayer can take us through the whole Christian life each day.

Centering Prayer

The other basic method of prayer is the way of simplicity. Here we do not meditate with images or thoughts. Instead, we use a brief repetitive prayer as an anchor of attention. This method has a long history in many world religions with the Buddhist chant "OM Mane Padme Hum" being a well known example. The universal use of this technique suggests that it makes use of a deep reality in the human psyche God has given us. The earliest monastics of the fourth century would take a Psalm verse and repeat it over and over again. One favorite was: "O God make speed to save me, O Lord make haste to help me." Sometime during the fourth or fifth century, if not earlier, these monastics began using an invocation of the Divine Name of Jesus as an anchoring prayer. Various formulas of the Jesus Prayer have been used over the years. The longest version is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a miserable sinner." One may prefer a shortened version such as: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." "Jesus — Mercy" is shorter yet, and one can reduce to prayer to just the Holy Name itself: "Jesus." Each person must discern which version is most helpful for one's own use. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* suggests using as short a prayer word as possible, namely, a word of just one syllable like "God" or "Love." This prayer word should be used as a dart of Love directed at the Cloud of Unknowing. John Main in his fine book *Word into Silence* prefers to use a more abstract prayer word as a safeguard against bringing images into prayer unnecessarily. I am not as worried about images as he is as long as they are centered on God, but since the prayer word does not primarily use images, an abstract word has some value. John Main's favorite is *maranatha* which means: "Come Lord!." Another good one is *metanoia*, the Greek word for repentance used in the New Testament .

When using a repetitive prayer or prayer word, it is important to make a slow, rhythmic use of it without allowing the rhythm to become an end in itself. Being relaxed with our prayer word helps us avoid becoming overwrought in our efforts. From the start, our use of the prayer must be detached from our feelings. The shorter the prayer or prayer word, the more important it is to be relaxed, as a short word has a greater chance of making the prayer too intense. When we use a short prayer word, it is easy to cling to it, and if we do cling to it, we could end up in a state of self-hypnosis. Rather, we should treat the Jesus Prayer, or any prayer word, as a walking stick as we move into the non-place of the Spirit. To shift to another metaphor, the prayer word is an anchor that holds down our prayer while the mind, like a boat, drifts about in circles on the water's surface.

A number of breathing exercises have been tried with the Jesus Prayer. With expert guidance they can be of some help, but without that they can be dangerous. In any case they are not of prime importance. On the other hand, the role of breathing should not be overlooked altogether. We can help our prayer by taking good, relaxed, deep breaths and exhaling slowly in a relaxed rhythm. If the breathing becomes so heavy as to make the prayer too intense, we do well to break the rhythm, relax, and gently begin using the prayer again. We do not have to strain to do the work God intends to do within us.

That's all there is to it. The use of centering prayer is so simple, it is an insult to our intelligence. Surely we aren't doing anywhere near enough work to earn any rewards from God. How hard it is for us to stop being over-achievers! None of the human faculties can get us to God in prayer. All we can do is give them up, and this renunciation is precisely what the prayer word accomplishes for us. We give up our own thoughts and our own ideas. We give up our own imaginings and our own feelings. We pour all of ourselves into the prayer until we are dispossessed of all we thought we were.

Distractions

Our biggest difficulty is distractions. It seems that when Jesus told us we would always have the poor with us, he could just as well have told us we would always have distractions in prayer as well. We should not be too surprised that this is so. Our minds and imaginations have a lifelong habit of working nonstop and are not about to quit all of a sudden when we ask them to. In fact, it is the nature of our minds and imaginations to work the way they do. Their activity, in itself, is not a sign of sinfulness or rebellion against God. Our journey in prayer will also show us that these human faculties have the potential for being seized by the Inconceivable, when the Inconceivable One takes hold of them. There is also a deeper matter here. We are apt to think that in order to be spiritual, we must stop facing the facts of our humanity because the Spirit has nothing to do with our human faculties. Let's think again. Yes, we must give up all of ourselves, but that is not the same thing as killing ourselves. We are putting all of ourselves into the

hands of the Living God who wills that we live, not die, or, better said, the Living God wills that we die in order to live. It is easy to use prayer as an escape from the reality of our humanity, but true prayer brings us face to face with reality. Our distractions in prayer are salutary reminders that we are human and of what our humanity is really like, both the good and the not so good.

Even so, distractions hamper our prayer. No question about it. But we have to handle distractions in the right way. Usually we try ruthlessly ripping out our thoughts as if they were weeds. This approach is counterproductive. The story of the sorcerer's apprentice in Goethe's famous poem can help us here. The apprentice had used a magic spell to activate a broom to bring water into the castle, but then he couldn't stop the broom after it had brought in more than enough water. In his desperation, he chopped the broom in half with a hatchet, with the result that two brooms were bringing in twice as much water. Approaching our distractions with a hatchet tends to give us the same result. We get so involved in our distractions by trying to stifle them that we have no room left for prayer. Perhaps the parable of the wheat and tares can teach us the humbling lesson of being patient with our distractions.

Since our distractions represent aspects of our humanity that most need to be centered on God in prayer, it is important to be gentle with them. Put away the hatchet and pursue peace. There will be times when the distractions are nothing more than idle chatter in the mind. When that is the case, it is not too hard to ignore them. Let the chatter continue, but don't pay any attention to it. We simply return our attention back to God. Some distractions at this level are so pleasant and innocent that we hate to move them aside. We can integrate them into our prayer. For example, if I keep thinking of the new frisky kitten who came our way, I can think of it as God playing with creation and my prayer is redirected to God.

Some distractions are so strong that it is not possible to lay them aside and make them to go away. These distractions are caused by things that have taken a deep root in us. For better or worse, they have become a part of us. Some of these deeper distractions have to do with our sinfulness. We have to accept the fact that, in the interior journey of prayer, we are going to discover deep-seated emotions such as lust and anger. At times there will seem to be no end to the fantasies arising from these feelings. In one way we would like to ignore them because we like to think we are not as subject to these temptations as we really are. But in another way, we are fascinated by our less salutary impulses and are reluctant to see them go. The only way to deal with these distractions is to make them a part of our prayer. We are offering ourselves, remember, and if what we have to offer are these fantasies, then this is what we offer. We must pour these distractions and our helplessness into the Holy Name of Jesus and let God take them. We must give up both these impulses which weigh so heavily on us and the pride that makes us assume we can fix these disorders ourselves. Jesus was not always disturbed by stormy waters, not even when his disciples thought they were in mortal danger. So perhaps we

need not always be as disturbed by inner storms as we think we should be. This is precisely the moment when we should simply come to Jesus who is waiting for us.

Other distractions have to do with more positive sides of our character. We may be inspired with the bright ideas we have been waiting for. It is difficult to give up these thoughts but we must. Again, it is not a case of trying to ignore them or root them out, but rather than clinging to them, we must pour these thoughts, too, into our prayer. Our thoughts are not to be our own thoughts. If we give up the best of our thoughts, we can trust God to give them back to us at the right time. What a wonderful way to test these bright ideas; to see what they are like after we have rested with them in the Heart of Jesus!

Our most intense distractions are caused by worry and anxiety. It is easy to say that we shouldn't fret about our problems while we are at prayer, but sometimes we simply can't help it. Moreover, when the cause of our anxiety involves serious illness or injury to someone we love, it is uncharitable to try to ignore their problems for the sake of an egocentric serenity in prayer. At these times, we should bring those we care about deep into our prayer with God, so that two or three are gathered together with God, instead of just me and God. When we are upset about ourselves or about other people, it usually doesn't work to try and calm ourselves; it is better to let God to do that. When we pour our pain into the Holy Name of Jesus, we cease to be wrapped up in our worries. Thomas Keating suggests that when faced with this kind of severe distraction, we should pray *through* it rather than around it or without it.

Sometimes a severe emotion, caused either by recent events or distant memories, may feel like a huge lump stuck in the middle of the body. It may feel as intractable as a mountain. This lump refuses to move and it blocks everything else we wish to accomplish in prayer. There is no sense in trying to move the unmovable. Painful as it is, there is nothing for it but to pray with this lump, holding it up to God. After all, it is our faith, not our own efforts, that moves mountains. If the inner pain is approachable, it may be helpful to imagine the pain we feel as a hurt child within us who needs to be comforted. We bring the "hurt child" within ourselves into our prayer the same way we bring in another person who is hurt so that God can give us the comfort we cannot give ourselves. If the pain is so great that we feel we cannot touch it or come near it, then don't. Keep it at a distance. In that case, we do better to pray with our anxiety and our reluctance to deal with the pain.

On the other hand, sometimes it is joyful feelings that distract us, such as the ecstasy of falling in love. We may think that such joys are not worthy of prayer where we are seeking a greater good than any earthly love, but let us not reject this human experience too quickly. Earthly love, when we are seeking the other's good as much as our own, is an image of our love relationship with God. Let us share our human joys and loves with God and find out what God will do with them in prayer.

We should avoid becoming so absorbed in ourselves and our problems that we stew in our own juice while praying. We should also avoid taking off on flights of admiration for our great inspirations. We are hardly praying if we are just dreaming about what we are going to write or devising sermons for the benefit of other people. Even so, our prayer should be closely connected with ourselves. If we let our prayer move back and forth between ourselves and our concerns at one pole and then to God at the other, and if we keep bringing ourselves to God, we will gain clarity of what we and the people we care about are like in the light of God's vision. Sometimes that is the best way to see that some things are not as important as we thought, while seemingly insignificant matters are large in the eyes of God.

There is one more type of distraction that is so insidious we may fail to see it as a distraction. It strikes right at the time when we think our prayer is going well. There is nothing wrong with prayer going well, but the hazard is we might take the credit for it. I start to think that *I* am praying so well. Boy! Have *I* come a long way since I started! Once again, the ego has intruded, but with such cunning that I hardly think anything of it. When we catch ourselves thinking in this way, we have reached the point where we must throw ourselves onto the mercy of God. More than at any other time, we should be wary of taking ourselves too seriously. Rather, remember that our Lord said that when we have done everything asked of us, we are still unworthy servants.

Since the more unsavory fantasies may seem to come from the deepest parts of ourselves in the subconscious, it is important to remember that the inner chaos there is not the deepest part of ourselves. The Image of God within us is deeper yet. We must not be misled into thinking that we are as bad as some of our wilder distractions suggest. When we offer the broken pieces of our lives to God, asking God's help and giving thanks to God for what is good in us, we will find that God will lead us through Christ's death into Christ's risen life where God will put our pieces together in ways we could never have imagined. If we should experience inner horror, we can trust God to take us deeper yet, to where our twisted desires and fantasies are transformed into the straightness and radiance of God's Love.

Dryness and Patience

Sooner or later we will encounter dryness. Sometimes dryness goes hand in hand with a heavy load of distractions, and we have to consider the possibility that our sinfulness is setting up a block against God. If that is so, there is nothing for it but to wait patiently for God to move gently through this block so that we can feel comfortable with God again. In the meantime, we must practice what discipline we can against our sinfulness, make restitution when it is called for, and make use of the Sacrament of Penance. But often dryness indicates something deeper than our sinfulness. There will be times when what we experience cannot be considered a feeling at all; it may be a sense of suspended animation. We can't do anything in the way of prayer, but God

doesn't seem to be doing anything either. Again, the only thing for it is to wait. God often works in hiding. Ruth Burrows, a contemporary Carmelite, uses the phrases “light on” and “light off.” Usually God works within us with the light off where we cannot sense what God is doing. This gives us the opportunity to grow in trusting God.

We might like to think that the dryness resulting from a deepening of our journey is more “high class” than dryness caused by lassitude or sinfulness, but it is not wise to jump to conclusions as to which is the case. Dryness can easily be a combination of the two. Regardless of the cause, dryness teaches us the crucial distinction between will and feeling. When we feel cold or numb, we are still *willing* to direct ourselves to God.. It may be that our feelings are active, but they are drawn to our distractions rather than to God. Even then, we can direct the will toward God. In times such as these, there is no need to try to force our feelings to conform with our wills. The Holy Spirit will work on that in God’s own time. The lesson the experience of dryness teaches us is patience.

Lack of patience can be a real stumbling block. We can't help but wish to be in deep union with God as soon as possible. We are used to achieving other goals in life quickly. We can turn lights on and off with the flick of the switch. Why doesn't prayer work like that? I don't have the answer to that question. The only way we can begin to learn why God teaches us prayer through teaching us patience is to learn it. We must trust that God has chosen the best way to bring us to the greatest Good. The hardest thing to realize is that it is precisely when our prayer seems most jumbled, either through distractions, emotional upset, or dryness, that God is accomplishing the most work in us with the lights off. As time goes on, we should have moments when, even in a swirl of distractions, we become dimly aware that God is supporting us by praying within us through these distractions. The two may seem incompatible, and they are, yet they also make up a double reality in the depths of our being. We go away from such a prayer time both humbled with our emptiness and filled with God’s gifts.

But then, unexpectedly, there may come a moment, maybe so brief as to go almost unnoticed, when God *takes* our attention. Then, we are so caught up in God that it is almost a non-experience. I say a non-experience because we are not self-conscious enough to reflect on what is happening. Such an occurrence is like becoming so engrossed in a book that we forget ourselves. This is what God does with us in prayer from time to time. The prayer continues on its own because the Holy Spirit is praying within us. When this happens we may become frightened and think we are losing ourselves, and we are! We are on the threshold of gaining life by losing it. This is the experience of being filled with the Divine Fire of Love. Some may find this experience more frightening than attractive. We are so used to being in control and getting things done on our own terms that it is not easy to give up our self-assertiveness. If we aren't *doing* something, we assume that nothing is getting done. But in prayer, something *is* being accomplished. It's just that we can't articulate what is happening because God is the one doing it. So, when God takes our attention, we should stop trying to pay

attention by our own efforts. If God has really taken our attention, then we won't be dwelling on anything short of God. If God invites us to rest in God, then we should rest.

Stages in Prayer

Many writers on spirituality have delineated various stages to show the differing proportions between human and divine activity. In these schemes, our own efforts predominate in the earlier stages and God's prayer takes over in the higher stages. Some of these classifications are rather complex, others are simple. They offer clarification in the experience of prayer, but these stages should not be taken too seriously, especially in regard to oneself. Trying to decide whether or not we are at level one, level two, or level three is a serious distraction from prayer itself. Still, some awareness of the various levels of prayer alerts us to the different experiences we are likely to have. There will be times when we seem to be doing most of the work, but God is drawing us along, using our thoughts and emotions to bring us closer to God. Then there will be times when we seem to be an equal partner with God. We are still directing the will toward God, but God is also praying within us. This paradoxical state has been called "acquired contemplation" by some writers while others have argued that this category a contradiction in terms. How can God's work of prayer within us be acquired? In terms of logic, we have a real problem, but the experience itself is just as paradoxical as the term. Somehow, the efforts we make and God's work meet. Then there are times beyond this paradoxical stage when God takes over completely and our prayer is a total gift from God.

Kallistos Ware, a leading writer on the Jesus Prayer, offers an attractive set of simple categories as a map of prayer levels: the prayer of the lips, the prayer of the mind, and the prayer of the heart. We can readily see that each stage represents an ever-deepening movement of prayer. At first we are saying the words, or thinking them. As the prayer moves inwards, the intellect becomes conformed to the prayer. Then, the prayer penetrates to the heart. The heart does not refer just to the physical organ; it refers to the depths of the whole person. At this stage of the Jesus Prayer, we may even feel the prayer's presence in the region of the heart. When prayer has reached the heart, it takes on a life of its own.

When stages of prayer are numbered, we get the impression that the only way we will go is up. Our concrete experience, however, is that prayer has its ups and downs. It is important not to assume that the way things went yesterday is what we should expect today. We must remain open to what God wants to do at any given time. God might take over completely one day to encourage us, and then leave us with our own feeble efforts the next. It may be that there are parts of our personality that still need to be integrated into our prayer. This integration will happen at what God deems to be the right time. Besides, our will is probably not given over to God as fully we thought. It is so easy to take back what we have offered God. We must be patient with ourselves. God is still waiting. When we seem to have sunk to a low point, we should not assume that we are

moving backwards. Prayer has a rhythm with its ups and downs. Both periods will be used by God for our good.

Prayer in Daily Life

Our journey of prayer is incomplete unless we bring prayer into the rest of our lives. God makes an impression on us as a seal makes its impression on wax during our times of prayer, and we will carry the gifts God has given us even when we don't know it. Just as we must continually renew our acts of will to choose God during our time of prayer, we must do the same at other times. One method, arising out of the Ignatian style of meditation, is to take one basic thought from a meditation, what St. Francis de Sales calls a "spiritual nosegay," and let that thought accompany us throughout the day. We can also take an image or line of text from our spiritual reading or the Divine Office and carry that throughout the day. For example, Lancelot Andrewes, when commenting on the phrase "the fullness of time" in Galatians, suggested that time can be empty as well as full. We can take such a thought—empty time/full time—and keep asking ourselves if we are allowing God to fill our time, or if we are emptying our time of the content God has given it. Also, we can use our prayer word or some other short prayer whenever we have spare room in our minds as we do our work. Perhaps we can give the radios in our cars and our homes a rest once in a while just so that we can do a little extra praying.

We do not make our journey in prayer alone with God. We need spiritual companionship in several different ways. Liturgical worship is an important balance and support for contemplative prayer. It is worth reflecting that St. Benedict seems to have assumed that devotion to the Divine Office as part of the monastic routine along with study and work should, in itself, inspire and teach contemplative prayer.

When it is at all possible, we should make prayer a shared experience for the whole family. There may be times when this will not be possible since the journey of prayer requires, above all things, willingness. But if spouses can pray together, there will be a bond of unity that will be a support when serious differences arise. When children are included in a brief time of silent prayer, they have the chance to build up an intimate love of God from an early age. These times of prayer are not foolproof ways of solving family problems. In fact, prayer is not a solution to anything at all. Sometimes we are left with the mystery of brokenness. But in prayer, the brokenness is not the same, for God is sharing our pain with us. If nothing else, prayer will leave us with a healing touch that gives us a greater freedom for dealing with our brokenness.

Praying with another person when opportunity allows it can be a help in finding out whether or not our prayer is working. After all, if it is important not to trust in ourselves, then we grow in humility by trusting what others see of us. In this sharing, we can pour ourselves into God through another person or group of persons. At the same

time, we should not be so compulsive about talking about our "experiences" that we put them on a pedestal for all to see. The people we live with, even if they are not well-versed in prayer, can be the first to give us signals as to whether or not we are allowing our prayer to flow out into our actions. The point is, if our prayer is doing the work of the Spirit, other people should find us more, rather than less, generous in the way we live in relation to them.

Our prayer should strengthen, rather than weaken, our concern for the broader community we live in. In fact, prayer will lead us to embrace the whole world in God. I am not saying that we should suddenly become compulsive about solving all the world's social problems, but prayer can strengthen our discernment of what specific actions are realistic and helpful for each of us to perform. In the arena of social witness, depth of contemplative prayer is most important. It is so easy for us to put a Christian facade over an opportunistic political position. We need to search our hearts constantly to see if we are acting out of the compassion of God who identifies with the sick, the imprisoned, and the poor. Such issues are rarely as simple as we would like them to be. There is much pressure today against Christians imposing their faith on others in the social scene, but it is impossible to hold any moral or political position without having some philosophical basis for it, whether we know what it is or not. If we really are granted the freedom to speak up for what we believe to be right, then we are free to have the rational basis for our positions, even if that basis is our faith.

The more our lives are based on prayer, the more our human impulses of love toward others will be transformed by God's impulse of love toward those God has created. We will see more deeply the interconnections of all people in God. Social justice will cease to be an abstract concept. As we emerge daily from the darkness of prayer, we may sometimes catch a glimpse of God's light in a human face.

Resting in God's Desire

Although contemplative prayer has only a couple of brief references in the Rule of Benedict this practice has been an important element in the Benedictine life over the centuries. In our time, many writers, among them John Main and Basil Pennington, have popularized contemplative prayer under the term “centering prayer.” At St. Gregory’s, we set aside a half hour for meditation after Vespers each day to make space for this practice.

In many religious and philosophical traditions such as Vedanta and Buddhism, one primary motivation for this discipline is to withdraw from the entanglement of desire, especially the matrix of desires among people. Buddha likened this matrix to a burning house from which we must escape through the renunciation of all desire.

The death and resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels reveals that the matrix of desire that the Vedanta sages and Buddha found so problematic is the organic process of persecution that culminated in the cross. Here, groups of people who normally hated each other: the Romans, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, united for a brief moment and agreed to put Jesus to death. St. Paul called this organic process of persecuting a victim(s) “the rulers of this age” or the “principalities and powers.” These powers failed to understand God’s wisdom embodied in the crucifixion, otherwise they would “not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8).

When human desire is embroiled in conflict that is resolved only through accusation of others and persecution, then human desire is, indeed, a huge problem. René Girard has demonstrated many times over how the desires of each one of us are entangled with the desires of others. That is, we imitate not only the actions of others, but the *desires* of other people. Girard calls this imitation mimetic desire. Imitating the desires of other people works constructively if it is a matter of encouraging somebody to desire a good book or a fine piece of music. Mimetic desire becomes a problem when we fall into rivalry through our shared desire. In as individualistic a culture such as ours, accepting this reality does not come easily. We often take pride in ownership of our desires, but this very pride is a result of our rivalry with others for ownership of these desires. (“I am the one who wants this toy or this lover, not you!”) Fighting over objects leads to fighting over power and influence, as when Jesus’ disciples fought over who was the greatest.

When we attempt contemplative prayer for any length of time, focusing our attention with images of Gospel stories or a brief repetitive prayer such as the Jesus Prayer, the desires of other people intrude with overwhelming power. Although some of these desires are positive, it is usually the negative, rivalrous desires that have the strongest

effect on us. Some of the desires are those of people important to us at the present time, others of people from our past who still haunt us, while other desires come from our culture as a whole, especially the media-driven culture of marketing. We become preoccupied with these desires of others and tend to work out in our minds how we are going to get the better of our rivals as soon as prayer time is over. But when we become preoccupied with another person or a social group in a rivalrous way, we fall into idolatry, making little gods of our rivals. The desires of the other person has eclipsed the Desire of God.

This is the burning house Buddha warns us about. Daniel gives us a different image: a burning fiery furnace, fueled by the idolatry of the currently reigning empire from which there is no escape. And yet, in the midst of contemplation, we are unharmed by the fire, protected by a fourth person who looks like “a son of man.” The Son of Man, Jesus, steps into the burning matrix of mimetic desire that is ruled by the “principalities and powers.” The Son of Man protects us in the middle of the furnace through infusing God’s desire into us. Rather than pull us out of a burning house, God enters the fiery furnace to transform that furnace through transforming our rivalrous desires. Desire itself is not the problem; we will always have desires and they will imitate the desires of others. The problem is imitating the desires of others in a rivalrous way rather than imitate God’s Desire.

What is God’s Desire? Is God’s desire so different from human desire that the same word cannot work for both? As with all language about God, the answer is yes and no. God is far beyond the entanglements of human mimetic desire, but God’s Desire for all that is mimetic. The mimetic Desire in God is the love between the three Persons of the Trinity. In this matrix of Desire there is no rivalry but rather a desire focused on the good of the other. This divine Desire overflows into a dynamic, ongoing love for everything in creation. This means that Christian contemplation, far from being a solitary act, is profoundly social as it brings us deeply into God’s Desire, a Desire to give all of God’s self to all, even though we have rejected God to the extent of putting Jesus on the cross. Contemplative prayer is a practice that allows us to let go of our entangled desires and allow God’s Desire to move into us.

Many monastic writers have used the term “resting” for contemplative prayer. This account of contemplative prayer doesn’t make the practice seem very restful and oftentimes it isn’t because our entangled desires tend to become all the more active when we try to draw our focus to a space, a still point, outside of this matrix. But if we let go of these desires and fall back on God, then we will experience, at least intermittently, a restfulness that comes from God that allows us to rest in God’s Desire. So rested in contemplation, we are strengthened to meet all people with the focused self-giving Desire God has for all of us.

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