

The Coming Of Consolation

How God Gets Through to Us

by

William P. Sampson, S.J.

Thirtieth-Anniversary Limited Edition Edited by
Mary Moreschi Dixon and Toby Terrar

With a foreword by
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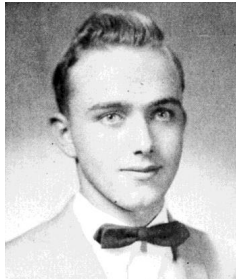
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Design of cover figure: from V. Gilbert Beers and Ronald Beers, *Bible Stories to Live By* (San Bernardino, Calif.: Here's Live Publishers, Inc., 1983), p. 143 (Lk. 10:25-37) Through His love, God brings consolation to enemies: Jew and Samaritan.

Dedication and Acknowledgments

We dedicate this publication to the late John V. Moreschi (1932-2014) who attended Jesuit schools (Boston College High School and Boston College) and lived out his life in the spirit to which *The Coming of Consolation* gives witness. We also acknowledge those who helped in the production of this second edition, including our proofreader, Rev. Rory T. Conley, as well as Kristin Austin (Maryland Province Jesuits), Joseph Durepos (Loyola Press), Robert Ellsberg (Orbis Books), Patrick Largess, Mark Leahy, Dan Mangan, the late Rev. Joseph McCloskey, S.J., David M. and the late Rev. James P.M. Walsh, S.J. (1938-2015).

In addition we give thanks for the encouragement we have received from the parish book clubs, study groups, directors of religious education and catechists who have been using the “Rev. William P. Sampson, S.J. Memorial Webpage” (<http://www.angelfire.com/un/crp/>). Since CWPublishers (<http://www.angelfire.com/un/cwp/>) was established in 2012, there have been about 1,000 downloads of the scanned digital copies of Fr. Sampson’s freely available published writings and biography.



John V. Moreschi in 1950.

FOREWORD

Father Sampson has written a truly Christian classic; St. John of the Cross or St. Teresa of Avila he is not, nor intends to be. But he has formulated a series of interlocking insights into the teachings of God as expounded in the Scriptures and verified in everyday life that will make the reader pause—and upon occasion, even gasp.

By way of example, he skewers the oft-proclaimed notion that one doesn't have to like everybody—just love everybody . . . as though affectionless love, to use his term, is a satisfactory ideal. His insistence that one of the primary requisites of every good praying is Faith (trust) in God is a recurring theme.

For whom is the book intended? For anyone, surely, who is interested in spiritual growth: it will serve well as spiritual reading, as a preparation for a weekend or week's retreat; it would serve admirably as a textbook for a group of retreatants. It is surely not for the Christian who is content with minimal Christianity; for while its demands are formidable, its rewards are even more formidable.

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Figure 1: Fr. William P. Sampson, SJ (in 2000). Picture from William P. Sampson, *The Earliest Church* (ed. Rev. James P. M. Walsh, SJ, New Academia Publishing, Washington, D.C. 2016).

INTRODUCTION

There is a moment in the Gospel when Jesus is criticized because he does not have his disciples fast (*Luke* 5:33-39). The disciples of the Pharisees and the disciples of John fasted frequently, but the disciples of Jesus ate and drank freely. Jesus himself ate and drank freely, and people said of him, “This one is a glutton and drunkard” (*Mt.* 11:19). Despite the loss to his reputation, Jesus persisted in his way; and he tried to explain why he did not fast. Fasting was like an old wineskin. It was useful for holding old wine. But what Jesus had was new wine. It would burst the old skins.

There are ways of imagining God and our approach to Him that can be expressed by fasting. But what Jesus was introducing was a radically different path. It required a new set of ascetical practices. To use the old set would not work. The radical differences would be lost, and the core of his teaching would be missed.

Jesus was aware that his coming was the moment for a radical break with ordinary ways of thinking. In him, an invasion of the human was taking place. The Christ-event was such a fundamental shift at the deepest level of reality that every aspect of spirituality was affected. A new source of consolation had become available to us through Christ. It made the old ways useless. Just as the invention of the automobile began a series of changes that touched every part of our lives—the harness business collapsed, the oil business exploded—so, too, with the coming of Jesus our

way of approaching God was radically altered.

It was like watching Columbus sail west. Centuries of doing things one way were at stake. West to the Indies—it was very strange!

In our days we saw a new source of energy discovered. There was found to be incredible energy present inside the atom. We glimpsed a new energy source. How to get at it? It would not be like drilling for oil, or mining for coal. Radically different ways were needed, and the energy suppliers had to learn a new vocabulary.

A cosmic event occurred in Jesus. A new source of energy had been found, and a radical shift in our spirituality could alone tap that new source. It's all rather hard to grasp. It is not surprising that we keep returning to the old ways, The old wineskins. What Jesus preached is hard to believe—in a way, incredible. We are never at home with it. It's always news when we hear it. Nietzsche tells us:

Lightning and thunder need time,
 the light of the stars needs time,
 deeds need time,
 even after they are done,
 to be seen and heard.
 This deed
 [the killing of God in men's hearts]
 is as yet further from them than the farthest star—
 and yet they have done it.¹

So, too, the implications of Jesus' radical preaching keep slipping away from us. In every age we are led down false paths. Such paths even become popular, and they appear to be breakthroughs. Because they fit our instinctive ways of approaching God, their inconsistency with the Gospel is not at first perceived. Fortunately, we are living in a period of deeper commitment to Gospel reading. We must rely on this larger immersion in Scripture to lead us to the paths Jesus pointed out. Our advances in spirituality are never

advances beyond the New Testament, but are advances toward the New Testament. It has yet to be heard in its fullness. A text is suddenly seen to mean much more than we had ever realized. Jesus is there before us drawing us toward him.

What I shall try to do is to get at Jesus' answer to the question: where is God coming from? What is He up to? What is His way of behaving toward us? What is He trying to do? The better I know this, the more able I will be to unite myself with Him. He has gone to great lengths to reveal His desires and His aims. His hiddenness does not consist in His keeping Himself secret—not at all. He is hidden from us because we are such static-filled receivers. He is too much light for our darkness.

Nor is it so much a darkness in our more theoretical efforts. It is, rather, a practical inability to choose in accord with what we "know" by faith. In our practical imagination there reigns enthroned a false god whom we find easier to believe in. In His presence we are not so insistently pressed to forgive the unforgivable from the bottom of our hearts. With this god we can be anxious without taking it as a sign of unfaith, and we can peripheralize the plight of the poor with some cans of food. God is not so hidden that we cannot recognize how unlike this false god is. His will is never so veiled that we cannot get at what he wants here and now. He is not dumb, and He prides Himself on His ability to speak, in contrast with the idols. His will is always available to us. What would He gain by keeping it concealed?

What is it that He wills as I stand in His presence? God comes to me with a story behind Him. He chose to create me; I am His—even more than I am mine! So He looks at me as my possessor.

I remember a student years ago in a high school where I was teaching. The headmaster told me that each morning the boy would put his head in the office and ask, "How is my school doing today?" He let the school know it belonged to him. God is like that. His gaze is of one who knows that I belong to Him. I

am being looked at by the eyes of my creator.

He has had such hopes for me. He invites me to see what He had in mind when He first made me. It is an image of me that never leaves Him. It is an image of the person that I could be. I could be so much happier than I am now. That is where God's focus is fixed—the much deeper joy that could be a part of my days and nights. He sees me as I am, and He loves me. But He also sees me as I could be, and in His love for me He yearns for that day when I will enter into that much deeper joy. He can bring that about in my life. He wants to. He is set on it.

I am not yet that person He made me to become. So much deeper is the joy He had in mind. The “me” He intended would be so much more filled with faith in Him, and so much more sensitive to the needs of my brothers and sisters than I now am.

God is present to us with His will quite well known. His love has been revealed to us at great cost. His love presses upon us a future of greater joy, faith, and love. It is here that our spiritual life is always beginning.

The new energy which Jesus makes available to us comes along a very specific path, a path he has marked out for us. Down this path toward us comes his energizing gifts, his consolation. When we place ourselves in the presence of a God whose preoccupation is the person we could be, we are standing in the path.

Imagine an enemy gazing at us. What would he be hoping for us? Maybe that we be elsewhere, transferred to some distant place, out of his sight. Imagine a mother looking at her son, and the hopes she feels, the good things she wishes will be his future. Cicero said somewhere that there was only one person in the world who he wished would surpass him in every way, and that was his son. Cicero was not noted for his willingness to take second place, but he loved the boy. So God loves us, and desires for us a much richer reality than is ours.

Our willingness to be aware of that, to let this element in God's personality pass slowly before us, and take up its home in our

consciousness, this presence of God in us, is the path He comes along. This is the beginning of Christian asceticism. It is not like fasting at all. It is not even part of the same world-view as fasting. But it is a discipline, and it leads to being fed on the new wine. It is the path along which the new energy comes.



First Row: R. Lamb, G. Bocobo, A. James, P. Fuqua, Father Sampson, S.J., W. Full, C. Sparacino, J. Shalney. *Second Row:* M. O'Bryant, J. Heisley, P. Allman, G. Abell, M. Derivan, G. Donahue. *Third Row:* R. Hillyard, T. Lugenbeel, J. Hastings (Vice-Pres.), F. Guilino, V. DiFabio, J. Marchetti, P. Farley, T. Terrar. *Fourth Row:* P. Knight, P. Mangan, W. Durkin, B. O'Callaghan (Sec.), D. McDonough, C. Franke. *Fifth Row:* D. Monahan, D. Poole, L. Rubino, M. Stanton, E. Biglin, W. May (Pres.), M. Sheridan, W. Roache, G. Peratino, T. Smith. Absent: T. Wilmer (Treas.).

Figure 2: Fr. Sampson as high school teacher. He notes that one of his students would go by the head master's office each day and ask, "How is my school doing today?" He let the school know that it belonged to him. Fr. Sampson concludes, "God is like that. His gaze is one who knows that I belong to Him. I am being looked at by the eyes of my creator." This way of imaging God that Jesus taught was a new source of consolation that made the old ways useless. Figure from Anonymous, "Class 4-B group picture," *Aetonian Yearbook* (Washington, DC: Gonzaga High School, 1963), p. 55.

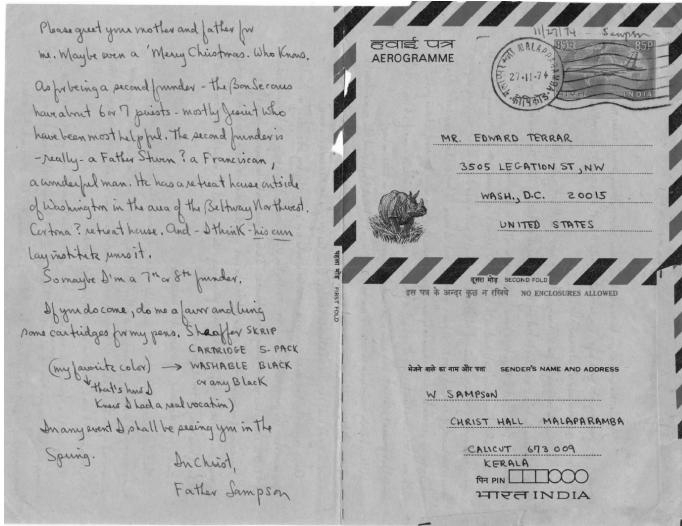


Figure 3: One of Fr. Sampson's letters from Kerala India in November 1974. He was helping spread "remarkably good news" to those such as Shivadas, as discussed on the opposite page. The letter is in the possession of the editors.

CHAPTER ONE

WHO CAN BELIEVE SUCH PROMISES?

Shivadas is a Hindu in a small village in India. He is low-caste. He must get off the path when he sees a man of a higher caste coming. His religion assures him that his humble station is due to previous existences, and he is now paying off his spiritual debts. His hopes are directed to his next incarnation, when he will be higher in caste—provided he accepts his present existence. His son is also in his father's caste. He, too, must get off the path when he sees a member of a higher caste coming. When they go to worship, Shivadas cannot bring his son into the temple. No. About two blocks away, there is set up a small altar, and a low-caste priest will say the prayers.

One day a cousin visits at Shivadas' hut. This cousin has been converted to Christianity. After a long conversation, he leaves. As Shivadas goes through his day, he is drawn to wonder: what if my cousin is right, and the facts about my life here on earth are very different. What if God wants to adopt me as His son—me and my boy. What if He wants to invite me into the temple, even into the sanctuary, the holy place.

What if Shivadas were to enter into a full faith in the Gospel message. Notice the change that would take place in his self-image. He would see himself as co-heir with Jesus, and all

things would be his. He would see himself sitting at his God's table, eating his God's very flesh, and drinking his God's very blood, being breathed into by God himself who would pour His Spirit on Shivadas. Christ's history would become his own. All his guilt would be washed away by Jesus' dying. His self-image would be filled with a dignity surpassing even the highest caste.

What is the inner experience that would accompany such a conviction about himself? Obviously, great joy. His new assurance about himself would fill him with happiness as he entered into a relationship of great intimacy with his creator, a father-son friendship where the father wants to share all he has with his son.

Shivadas would be experiencing the God Jesus reveals to us touching his life. And it would be remarkably Good News. And this is the fashion that God's touching *always* takes in our consciousness. He comes to us as remarkably Good News. Whether we are beginners or mystics, God's coming to us is always news, and always unexpectedly Good News. This is not just the way He comes to unbelievers, or to sinners. No, it is the way He comes into any human life, no matter how far advanced that person may already be.

Notice the nature of this touching of our heart: it is a promise. God makes us a promise. The promise is about our life. He promises us that our life could be far richer than it is. As this is true of Shivadas, so is this true of the saints themselves. God's coming draws them into their future, and focuses their attention on what their life could be like.

It is a glance, a momentary vision of a life we could be living, a vision which haunts Him until it be realized. For He loves us not only as we are, but especially as we will become through His gifts, His self-giving. The first moving of God in us at any moment is His sharing with us this image that hovers before Him night and day. Our growth with God always begins as a union—perhaps brief, fleeting—of imaginations, ours opening up to His and being informed by that incredible future He has decided

to realize in us.

He whispers to us a promise. That promise is the foundation of all His activity within us. Into each of our lives are constantly coming bearers of Good News. These take many forms, and they are frequently ignored. But they are there, doing His will, the seeds of His actions within us, seeds that can flower endlessly in our lives.

What are some of the common forms this takes in everyday life? The creed at the liturgy may come alive, and become words meant for me. "God of God." And I am co-heir with Christ. So it's me I am talking about, and suddenly my speaking becomes a hearing. A text from the first reading perhaps, "Put on the armor of God." It becomes words spoken, not just in my ear by the lector, but spoken to me from a richer reality than the world I live in. I become conscious that there is for my defense against pain and evil a divine armor, an armor I do not deserve which I can joyfully clothe myself with.

It might take the form of a daydream: "What if I am being filled with God's very Spirit!" "What if God does love me as His own child!" "What if my burden really is an easy one!" "What if I were to find out that God Himself is totally committed to me!" They draw me into the future, into a state where my faith would be much more assured. They invite me to a living faith, the experience the saints had, the me that could be made real, the me-filled-with-faith whose image hovers before God night and day until it is effected.

Sometimes an action provokes it: at the Eucharist, the drinking His blood. "What if this is His very blood, and I now knew that in peaceful assurance." An image of myself, my head being held in God's hands as He pours into my mouth this most precious medicine!

It can also be a person. "What if God loves me even more than my mother does, my father, my friend."

In each of them, God is entering my consciousness, filling me with a promise of what He already sees with such desire. He

seeds my imagination just as Jesus went about as a sower of images, speaking only in parables. Unlike the philosophers who engaged the minds of their contemporaries, Jesus was working the field of the imagination, offering to his hearers a promise of unexpected Good News. The news was about an event that had taken place far off in the heart of reality. A decision had been made in this strange world, a decision that he was revealing to us. In truth, he was, in his very person, the decision, the event.

He does not argue with his hearers. He presents a possibility: "What if God has made a choice and into that choice He has plunged Himself completely, holding back not a drop of His Godhead, and that choice has landed on you, to befriend you, to adopt you as co-heir to His beloved Son."

Jesus offered to their imagination an image of a king, willful and determined, obstinate in getting his way despite all other wills: "I want my banquet hall full!"

In the Gospels Jesus imagines Yahweh in various human roles: a fisherman, a judge, a friendly neighbor. He compares Yahweh's action in us to a seed, a pearl, a treasure in the field. That treasure in the field enlarges the finder's vision of himself. It invites him to focus on a future of joy far greater than he has ever imagined possible. That is how a promise works. We are brought to live in the future.

In certain cases to live in the future is to become unreal. But this is not always so. It depends. A medical student who day-dreams during class about a surgical triumph he will someday effect is actually getting farther from that day every moment he wastes. But it would be a strange medical student whose day-dreams about his life as a doctor did not motivate him to study and to apply himself, and to survive the failures he would meet during his student days. The future-daydreams Christ draws us into free us to live today more fully. They reveal to us, along with a future which will come about some day, a future which is actually happening now, but at a level hidden from us. In other words, this future-orientation actually leads us deeper into our present reality,

and frees us to live more realistically today, more in touch with the real, as the lives of saints demonstrate.

There is another oddity about a promise. Charlie is at a boarding school. His parents call him two weeks before Christmas: they will not be able to bring him home for Christmas. He will have to stay at the school with all his friends gone, with only one or two foreign students and four or five odd teachers remaining. Charlie's day becomes very painful. Class is awful, boring. His friends are so nasty. Everything irritates him. The day drags on. Life seems meaningless. Studying is impossible. He daydreams the hours.

On Wednesday, Charlie is called out of class to the phone: a change of plans—they are coming; they will arrive Friday after class. As Charlie leave the phone booth, nothing has happened yet, in a sense. He still has his classes, and tomorrow is a full day, maybe a few tests. But his experience is already transformed. He does not wait for Friday afternoon to be happy. He is filled with joy. The classes are fine. His friends are so friendly. He likes the teachers. Studying is easy now. He is caught up in an image of Christmas that fills him with anticipation. He may not be nearly this happy when the day actually comes.

It's an odd element in promises: the joy they bring occurs now, even though it is all anticipation, a focus on the future. The treasure in the field is not yet in the safe, nor being spent. The finder covers it up and leaves it in the field, and then goes his way joyfully. And he makes some decisions that would ordinarily be very painful, but his joy transforms his experience. He sells his home. He sells everything he's got, the valuables he has gathered over the years. He separates himself from what was once his fondest possessions, and he does it gladly.

He is not like the rich young man who saw in Jesus' invitation a depressing future, a future without the things he held dear. The finder is more like Zacchaeus. Jesus' invitation holds out an unexpected promise of salvation. That a prophet should dine at his table. Zacchaeus starts to experience great joy. He has

tripped over the treasure in the field, and it has begun to work within him. "I will give away . . ." That is the heart of Zacchaeus that Yahweh saw when He was forming him in his mother's womb: a Zacchaeus filled with humiliation and joy, and emerging from the grip of self-centeredness. Jesus ate with many, but not everyone heard the promise of God in it. Not everyone heard himself called into a future filled with promise. Not everyone experienced the joy, and the freedom to be real, that Zacchaeus felt.

A promise, then, begins to take effect even without any deliverance on it. We don't defer our joy until the promise becomes fleshed out. The promise itself transforms present experience long before we see any actualization of it. To be effective, a promise does not need to be delivered on, but it does require the presence of faith.

If I do not believe the promise, it will have no effect at all. If Charlie has heard his parents make this very same promise before (last Christmas and the one before that), and can recall the awful phone call the morning they were to come and take him (another change of plans), then he will not experience any great change of mood. He will persist in an image of Christmas day that destroys his joy.

Since God is always first coming to us as a promise, and since a promise has an effect only on one who believes it, it is easy to see the central role of faith in the gospel pattern. It is also easy to see how good a test of our faith is our joy. Joy is not put off for the believer. He enters into it now because of the assurance he experiences.

When the suggestion comes to me: "What if I really am the co-heir of Jesus!" this will have no effect upon me unless I believe it. Otherwise the words are dead letters, understood perhaps, but without true-life . . . words about which I may be able to speak and think at length, even in ways filled with a certain insight. But only when the hearer opens up to the promise contained within, and believes, only then do the words come to life

within him and germinate into joy. There are many times in life when we hear or read about "treasures in fields," but we don't get up because we know better. Such stories are common: a new soap, a car, a lot in Arizona, a miracle stock. We have a contemptuous name for such schemes: get-rich-quick. We have a wisdom: "In this life you get what you pay for"; "you don't get something for nothing." This wisdom can flow over into our hearing of Jesus. He can be easily disbelieved.

What would a full faith be like? If God were to realize His dream in me now, what would my life be like now? If I actually did believe what Jesus promises, what would my life be like?

What would be the inner experience of a person fully convinced that God is determined to share Himself with him? God makes Jesus our justice, our sanctification, our redemption, our wisdom. We have in our literature incidents where people are taken up into events beyond their expectations. So here, the seed that is at work is this reality: Jesus is my wisdom. A wisdom is a contact with all that has meaning, and through his grace, through his Spirit poured into me, I can come to know that Jesus' wisdom is mine, that his justice is mine. It is like a fellow who is given a credit card by a wealthy friend, and told: "Make me happy by using it." He no longer reaches for his cash; he gives up counting his dollars. He develops a new instinct. As he leaves home, he doesn't check to see if he has his money with him, but has only to see whether he has the card. He stops relying on his own justice, his own wealth. When someone says, "You don't have the cash for that car you're wanting to buy," he is not depressed. He doesn't start promising to himself and others that he really does have the cash. This old instinct is gone. In its place, a freedom. "However shallow my credit may be, I have the Lord's, His whole house is backing me; I can draw on Him."

As a person enters fully into the awareness of Christ as God's gift to him, Christ as God's desire for him, he will fill with joy and assurance, and he will develop an instinctive and effective

response to the threat of depression that accompanies any weakness he may encounter within.

One of the central promises is the power to believe. God sees us, in His imagination, growing into a trusting of Him that approaches the trust that Jesus had in Him. This power to trust He desires to impart to us. It is described as a spiritual transformation in our inmost thoughts, feelings, and purposes. We are invaded by a new knowledge of God and a filial love for Him. In this gift God shares with us His divine consciousness; the secrets of His own consciousness are shared with us. It is an intimacy between us that is easy not to believe.

Yahweh is conscious of His own trustworthiness. He knows the full extent of His commitment to fulfill His promises. Sometimes when we promise, we are quite aware that our determination to fulfill is weak. "Let's get together right after the vacation." At other times, we are fully committed; and if someone doubts this, we go to great lengths pleading for trust, trying to get him to see how certain is our determination. "Listen, you can be sure of me on this. If I don't come through, you can write me off forever." And it can be very frustrating when the other person wavers, and is perhaps depressed at what he sees will probably be a failure to deliver. God has this problem with us. We live relatively depressed lives because we find it impossible to take God at His word. But He has a path through this: faith. He can reveal to our inner consciousness His own inner consciousness of His trustworthiness. Jesus experienced this—a certitude about Yahweh's commitment to him. "Do you really believe that if I asked the Father He would not send twelve legions of angels to deliver me?" He knew Yahweh too well to entertain any doubts.

That is the experience He offers to us, an inability to doubt Yahweh's friendship. What is the experience of one who believes so fully? A deep, irremovable joy. In that joy I could now be living, for it has been His will and intense determination to place me there.

Another central area of God's concern for us is a power to love that He desires to fill us with. Many religious are entering into experimental communities. They seek to be surrounded by those who share more closely their common ideals, to be surrounded by people with whom they can interact spontaneously, to be surrounded by likely friends. It is Yahweh's will also that we be surrounded by those we love. To accomplish this, He offers us a most precious gift, a clothing meant for His Son, now to be wrapped around us, the gift of love. It is a power to love others as Christ loves us. It is an energy source for loving which is the same energy source for His own loving. He opens a tap to His own love-energy, the Spirit, and the Spirit becomes available to us. Just as the Spirit filled Jesus with Yahweh's own compassion toward His needy brothers and sisters, so He wants to transform us, raise our sensitivity toward the needs of others.

With the coming of love, a person's life is transformed. The attention shifts outwards, toward others. There comes a certain indifference to the self because the joy of serving one we love in his need takes us out of ourselves.

You meet a woman who was in your class in elementary school thirty years ago. She looks shabby. Her hair is not done, and the clothes are old. Her teeth are not taken care of. Her husband died seven years ago. She mentions a daughter in school. You invite her to lunch, but she has two jobs; and she's on the go all the time. It's sad. It's even somewhat embarrassing. But, as you talk, you notice she's a happy person. It's unexpected.

Later, you mention it to a mutual friend, and she tells you, "She dotes on that daughter of hers. She even gave her a car. A lovely girl, and the mother buys her everything she needs. She dresses her so beautifully."

With the coming of love there comes a very meaningful activity into our lives. We come more easily into contact with the needs of people we love. The entry into action is spontaneous. To see a friend who has a real need that I can fill is to move into an action that is filled with meaning for me. Moments

filled with happiness accompany such service.

In a vision to Julian of Norwich, Jesus said: It is a joy, a bliss, and an endless liking to me that ever I suffered passion for thee. And if I could suffer more, I would suffer more.²

This same experience is what God intends for me, and what He is bringing about in me through His gift of love. It is an image of me intensely joyous and involved, in humble unself-conscious service in the midst of people I love. I would be reluctant to resent, incapable of refusing to forgive. He will not rest as long as this dream of His is not realized.

In these two gifts—faith and love—we have the core areas of God's activity within us. He is wanting to put in our hearts a desire and a taste for this enlarged living. First, He plants it in our imaginations as a possibility. He seeds us with the promises.

In the liturgy this seeding of the imagination reaches a peak. In addition to the word of God which we hear, we are also confronted with symbolic actions. We drink; we eat. The drinking is of blood, God's blood; the eating, His flesh. Both are symbols of the invasion of our hearts by God's freely given Spirit. We all drink of the same Spirit. It is God's very Spirit that is being offered to us. The imagery also stresses that the Spirit is coming to us as gift, without any purchasing of ours. The Lord fills our mouth with His blood at great cost to Himself. Our part is to drink a liquid sweet to our taste.

It raises questions within our imagination. What if God Himself has such love for me that His very Spirit is not being held back from me? What if this is God's very blood, God's very flesh? What is it like for a human being to know that he is on such intimate terms with his God? It is an image, a promise which, if believed, fills with joy. The liturgy is God's planting His promises in our imagination just as Jesus worked to open his hearers to God's promises by means of parables. Even more, the liturgy, for the believer, is not just a promise of a future event, but is a present encounter with God in deep intimacy. It is a promise of the life we are being drawn toward and, in the case of

the believer, it is an actual encounter with God now. The thrust of the liturgy is one that impels the willing imagination into the risen life. God invites the partaker to let himself be drawn into images where he sees himself already tasting the resurrection, sitting at table with his risen Lord, filled with consolation at the triumph of Christ.

In the images of the risen life we are heading toward, God's seeding reaches its highest point. To fill us with a realization of the future glory that is approaching us is God's goal in all this work on our imaginations. Such a vision will fill our life with intense meaning, just as the vision of nothingness-after-death drove all meaning out of the life of Camus' "stranger." He compared it to a hot, dry desert breeze that was blowing toward him from out of his future, and leveling everything in its path. So, too, the images of the risen life will have the opposite effect, enlarging our present life by the great anticipatory joy that flows into us, freeing us to live fully in a present now open to endless meaningfulness.

At any moment of our day-to-day lives, God is present primarily as one who promises. The promises urge us to consider possible intensities of joy, love, and faith far beyond our imaginings, or our merits. God is sharing His own imaginings with us. He is wanting to unite our wills in one intent: that someday I will be seated at the wedding supper of the Lamb. First of all, He must open our imaginations wide, and fill them with His. His first working on us is always this enlarging of our imagination. Everything that occurs in the dialogue between the human person and his God flows from this opening work of God. The rest of our relationship is determined by what happens in us when God plants those seeds in our imagination. This beginning in the imagination is never finished. In each of us—saint or sinner—God is at work there in the imagination, raising us to larger possibilities of life. This is God always present, always beginning.

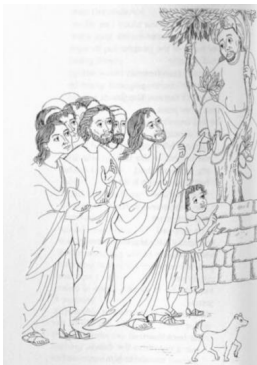


Figure 4: Zacchaeus in the tree received an unexpected promise of salvation. It began to work within him. "I will give away . . .": (Lk. 19: 1-10). Fr. Sampson notes:

That is the heart of Zacchaeus that Yahweh saw when He was forming him in his mother's womb: a Zacchaeus filled with humiliation and joy, and emerging from the grip of self-centeredness. Jesus ate with many, but not everyone heard the promise of God in it. Not everyone heard himself called into a future filled with promise. Not everyone experienced the joy, and the freedom to be real, that Zacchaeus felt. (*COC*, pp. 5-6).

Figure from Michael Kennedy, SJ, *Eyes on Jesus: A Guide for Contemplation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), p. 170.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DISSATISFACTION OF GOD; THE DESIRES OF GOD

God desires to introduce me to a person I do not know: a "myself" with a much deeper faith than the faith I now have, a "myself" far more sensitive to other people than I am; and far happier.

I defend myself against this image. I spend much of my psychic energy in guaranteeing that I see myself in a positive light. I must see myself okay, no matter what the facts may be. This is a universal temptation, and it leads to inertia. The promises are uttered within me precisely to shake this inertia. It is this sense of "all's well" that most frustrates God's actions within me. I make God into a support for my self-esteem, into an approval of my status-quo. Not that I see it this way, no. I seem aware of the need to grow. But it's all on the surface. God's call to grow touches only surface spots. I see no need for radical conversion. After all, basically, "I'm doing okay."

Into that mood God is struggling to enter. "You could be really believing, and it would be worlds apart from what you are now. You could be so much more sensitive to others."

So it happens that the promises of God produce in me, whenever they take root, a sadness, a sadness at being so far from living in the same world as these images. The promises light up my darkness. As the light comes, we see resentments and anger where

there could be affection, great anxiety where there could be assurance. This leads to what St. Bernard calls a salutary sadness. A gap begins to open between where I am and where I could be. I begin to feel dissatisfaction with where I am. My sense of spiritual well-being begins to crumble. It is very unpleasant. I lose my standing before the Lord. It doesn't feel good, at all.

It is only natural that we should seek to avoid this saddening, this dissatisfaction. Since it is the automatic result of coming to believe the promises, our defense against the sadness takes the form of a defense against the promises. If believing the promises has this negative effect, I use nonbelief to keep myself from experiencing it. This nonbelieving takes a variety of forms, but it is, fundamentally, a refusal to believe the promises. I cannot afford to hear God speak His promise because it will depress me. My sense of self-esteem will be shattered. From being reasonably satisfied, I will become dissatisfied. I will feel a certain desire not to be where I am. Being me will lose some of the glow.

I am tempted to see myself as already the new creation. I picture myself as having already put on the Lord Jesus, with just a few improvements to work on. Not so the saints! They see themselves as fundamentally apart from where they could be, as insensitive and not really believing, not really willing to hand their lives over to anybody. It is not the saints who see themselves as loving people, as a—for the most part—finished work of God. No. They expose themselves to God's word. "What if, at best, I am an unprofitable servant!" "What if I have stayed on the surface of faith, and have feared to enter in, on the surface of love. Where it is largely words—words that deceive me, delude me, and conceal the truth from me." "What if I am really in a state of self-satisfaction, inertia, paralysis."

To encounter God, at any moment in my life, is always to encounter one who makes promises, who calls my attention to the future, to what I could be, and who by doing this, fills me with dissatisfaction. It arouses in my heart a complaint. I see with sadness my own poverty, dullness, and imperfection. By getting

me to taste the sweetness of His dreams for me, the sweetness of what my life could be, I experience the staleness of what it is.

"How sad that I commit myself to the Gospel so half heartedly!" "The person God had in mind when He chose to create me: how unaware I am of it all, how reluctant I am to become that new me."

Now this is not just God's way of dealing with beginners, so that there comes a stage in spiritual growth where dissatisfaction disappears. Just the reverse is true. As we draw nearer to God and to that being-clothed with-Jesus that He created us for, our dissatisfaction grows. We become more and more free to look at ourselves honestly and to see the vast areas of unfaith, insensitivity, and unhappiness within us: we become more and more willing to hear God's promises. We see ever more clearly what true faith is, and how far we are from it, what true love is and how feeble is its grasp on us. And we see with greater astonishment God's desire to fill our vacuum with Jesus' faith and His love. The determination that God has, His total absorption in bringing about this transformation in our inner life—that comes to occupy all our attention.

The two combine: the unlikelihood, as I look at myself honestly, that I will ever come to believe and love other than superficially, and the bold determination of God's will act to transform me into Jesus, to fill my heart with a confidence in the Father like to Jesus' own, and a sensitivity to my brothers and sister like to Jesus' own.

These two are the focus of the spiritual consciousness of the believer. The believer lets God make him aware of how powerfully he is obstructing "the great things God wishes to accomplish in him" (St. Ignatius to Francis Borgia).³

God shares with me *His* dissatisfaction. By enabling me to share what He sees about me—where I am and where I could be—God gets me to enter into a share of His dissatisfaction. If I persist in a false self-image, I leave God all alone as He focuses on me. I may even pray, and feel a sense of God's presence. Still God is

alone, His will blocked out. I may be going to prayer in order to strengthen my sense of self, my sense of spiritual well-being, rather than to come into touch with the living God. My prayer may be very consoling, even though I never let Him speak. The consolation comes not from Him, but from a sense of well-being.

God can be seen and felt as a silent, reassuring presence, rather than as He really is—a word, a person determined to transform me, quite dissatisfied with the little I allow Him to do, quite set on brining into my life a far larger share of faith and love.

If, then I experience dissatisfaction with my spiritual state, that is a spirit, a mood whose origin is the Lord.

Along with this dissatisfaction with where I am, the promise of the Lord will fill me with desire to be where I could be. Once I taste what the experience of the believer is actually like, I desire to be there. God's promising is our letting Him project into our imagination what I could be like, and it acts as a pre-taste; it fills us with a longing to be there. The shallows we dwell in are revealed in their true colors. I desire to be faith-filled, at least once before I die. I wish that love would at last have its way in me.

Perhaps this takes the form of moments when such a life is glimpsed as really possible, an ejaculatory-type prayer. More often than not I am in the grip of the need to be "realistic," and I see any such imagining of myself as a Gospel believer as a pure fancy. Not only is it seen as impossible, but it can bring to mind past experiences in which I was swept up, and I recall the pain of returning to reality.

But those momentary glimpses, when for a few seconds we reach out to what God has in mind for us—these moments are from the Lord. It is His promise acting within us as a seed, stirring the soil, getting things moving. "Put on the Lord Jesus!" What

if that is where He is leading me: toward being loving as Jesus was ... toward a deep-rooted, unshakable trust in the Father such as Jesus had . . . toward an inability to doubt. What if the Father sees that as *my* life, as my real future, a future quite realistic because of His loving determination that it be so.

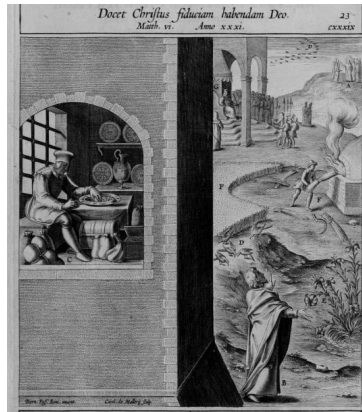


Figure 5: Fr. Sampson prayed, “I desire to be faith-filled, at least once before I die. I wish that love would at last have its way in me” (COC, pp. 16-17). Illustrated is Mt. 6:25-34), Jesus teaching “you men of little faith.” Figure from Geronimo Nadal, SJ, “Christ teaches on having faith in God,” *The Illustrated Spiritual Exercises* (Scranton, Pa.: University of Scranton Press, [1593] 2001), p. 23; originally published as *Evangelicae historiae imagines, ex ordine euangeliorum, quae toto anno in missae sacrificio recitantur, in ordinem temporis vitae Christi digestae* [Images from the gospels used in the sacrifice of the mass during the year sequenced according to the chronology of events in the life of Christ]; online at <http://www.faculty.fairfield.edu/jmac/nadal/nadalintro.htm>. Nadal was among the first in the sixteenth century to use the new technique of “perspective drawings” to more realistically depict the bible.

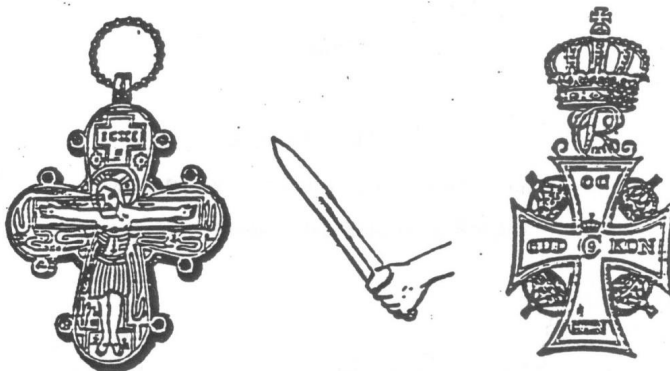


Figure 6: Fr. Sampson writes on the opposite page, “God clothes us in His armor, in His Beloved, in faith and in love until we become like Him.” As depicted above, the despair of Jesus’ crucifixion is my armor of faith and love. Figure from Terry Sullivan, *The Church of the Empire versus the Christian Church of North Africa: 312–430 AD* (Denver: RCP, 2012), front cover (left to right the Dagmar crucifix, a Roman sword from Trajan’s column and the ‘God and King’ cross of the Dannebrog Knights).

CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF DESPAIR IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The desire I feel, the dissatisfaction I feel as I honestly face the vast gap between where I am and where I could be—these are divine. They are a share in God’s experience as He gazes at me.

It is like a mother gazing at her crawling infant. Just as she already sees the child walking, and wills the child to walk, and acts to bring that walking into the present, and interests the child more and more in that future, and consoles the child and encourages it to move toward walking, so, too, God deals with us. He wants us to grow, and He struggles to get us to share His vision and His task. His Spirit moves within us, drawing us toward the new way of living, clothing that new way of living with a reality, raising us up from the feeling of inevitable frustration. He enables us to focus on it by enabling us to believe in it as real.

When we imagine something most attractive that we do not have, we experience desire. So it is with God. He imagines us faith-filled and deeply sensitive to others’ needs, and He is filled with desire. This desire is the foundation of His way of dealing with us. Just as Jonathan clothed David with his own royal clothing until David got to look like Jonathan (1 *Sam* 18:2-4), so, too, God clothes us in His armor, in His Beloved, in faith and in love, until we become Him.

Since, once we let God's promises come alive, it leads to dissatisfaction, we try not to let those promises get a start. At the same moment when we are lifted by a sight of a possible new way of living, we move away from it: "Let's be realistic."

The self gathers its defenses around it. We minimize the value of the promises. "All that really means is . . ." and we end up with some image of ourselves just a bit more loving than we are, a quite believable future. The Desert Fathers identified this mood as diabolical. Partially because the mood, or attitude, is so powerful, it seemed to them more than human. "He does not really have that in mind for me." This enables us to ignore His word in the name of common sense. "I am no saint." Under a cloak of humility, we turn away from God's word; we take his promise with a grain of salt. We push Him and His will to transform us—which can seem so fairy-story-like—into the periphery of our life. It becomes translated into "Do your best." The Gospel is stifled.

We fear to brush up against His determination, His word. We prefer His silence. Becoming aware of His desires is being impelled toward this unreal future, a future that was realized in the lives of the saints—and we can read about it—but that has no realistic hold in our world.

Imagine a mother at the bedside of her badly injured son. All her will is into healing him. Or a doctor, a close friend, bending over you by the roadside where you were thrown from a car, impelled by an image of you—healed. When God saw that the one He loved was sick, He made Himself a doctor, out of intense desire. It can frighten us, to be stirred toward the future. It can appear cruel as—April is, in Eliot's poem, "the cruelest month"—drawing us out of our slumbers, our sense of spiritual well-being, into the unknown future of a much fuller confidence in God, and a much deeper awareness of others' needs.

But what if the seeds of His promises do take root. We will then be flooded with desire. This desire will lead to action. We will feel called upon to make this vision real in our lives. We will

arouse ourselves to generous efforts to realize ourselves as believers. We will see a need for courage in overcoming our failings, our falling short, our deep-rooted weaknesses.

We will set out on a path of reform. Frequently it begins in a greater faithfulness to our prayer periods. We add some discipline, and an effort to be nice to people who turn us off. This tendency of desire—that it leads to action—is very visible at retreat times, and often it takes the forms mentioned. The person can leave the retreat happy to be launched on the path of conversion; a bit anxious about how it will go, and especially whether it will survive the post-retreat let-down, but determined.

And it usually does not survive the let-down. It's such a common occurrence: to be with someone who has had an unusual retreat experience, as he returns to earth. Actually the efforts are doomed from the start. The focus is in the wrong place, on the wrong person. The worst thing that could happen would be if I did see myself succeed and become more faith-filled. More prayerful, more disciplined, and more friendly with those I don't like. That would put me back in that state of inertia where God's ever-present promising cannot penetrate. I would be again needing to hear Him, and largely unaware of that need. To arrive at that sense of spiritual well-being where I see myself as fundamentally sound, basically on track and moving forward—to get such a self-image, I have to do a lot of falsifying, a lot of not letting much contrary data come into view.

A friend recently told me of an experience in a class on debating. He was to share the podium with a student he despised. He had, as usually, been angered by the other's talk, but he felt he had himself well under control, and was happy that he had not lost his temper. It was videotaped. When he watched the videotape, what he saw was a very angry self—not only very angry but quite obviously angry. What he had hidden from himself and thought he had concealed from others was known to everyone.

But we can kill such data. We can bury them. We can see ourselves as loving people no matter what the facts may be. This tendency, as I mentioned, returns us to that worst state of all, inertia and self-satisfaction, a mood most difficult for God to deal with.

But what happens if we admit the truth? If we allow the facts to surface? We start to see instances of failure. In relation to this person I see my hostility. My jealousy of those two! My contempt for that one! My persistent judgment on so many! How easily resentment gets its teeth into me! How commonly in my dealings with people I am carrying heavy baggage from past experiences.

If my courage grows, and I can become even more honest, I will find abundant data to show a pervasive selfishness in my relating to almost anybody. I will begin to see myself as fundamentally selfish. And, to all appearances, incurably so. I will come to see that I have no real love in me, that the love-command is beyond me.

The same will happen in the faith area. If I allow the real depth of my anxiety to be revealed, I will see that I keep my life quite firmly, quite carefully in hand, that I hand over very little to the Lord, that when the vital choices are made, I invariably and instinctively choose to take no chances, to play it safe. I will see myself as incapable of trust, filled with deep anxieties, crippled by them, fearful of reality.

This seeing myself as falling short of real love and real faith usually leads to renewed efforts. I pick myself up from the floor and courageously steel myself to get back on track. This may happen a few times more before I give up, or it may go on and on. For years I may lock myself into a pattern of spiritual life that gradually takes its toll, weakens me, depresses me, and leaves me with one consolation, "at least I can say I tried." My defense on judgment day, "I did my best; what more could God ask?"

This pattern is one we are comfortable with, painful though

it is. The pain is a dull pain. The pattern is dishonest.

But I may be able to break the pattern and let the truth in: I am *not* a loving person. I do not believe very deeply in the Lord's care. This will bring me into a state of despair.

The filling up with despair in the midst of our massive efforts is a necessary stage even though it is not God's doing, but our own. I feel: "What's the use of all this effort? It has not delivered—exactly as I felt when I launched myself on this path. I was a happy person before I got caught up in the promises of God. They are unrealizable. How many more times will this happen before I learn to settle for realistic goals."

A temptation comes, to return to a life apart from imagining the great things God wishes to accomplish in me. At the same time, another voice is heard, the voice of the Lord: "Ask and you shall receive!"

We crucify ourselves by placing upon ourselves the task of conversion. It is a gift. God is not looking to us to transform our affections, to make ourselves sensitive, to increase our faith. It is all His work, and it enters our life by a different path, a gift path. It is all for the asking. The fulfillment of God's promises in us takes place if we ask for it to happen. The effort path with its focus on the self leads to despair.

It is much easier, unfortunately, to believe that God has imposed a heavy burden on us: the task of growing into the Gospel. It is impossible to believe that all is gift, that all is for the asking, yet that is what God invites us to believe. It is so incredible, so much against common sense, so contrary to human wisdom, that we do not believe it until we experience a despair about ourselves. It is only when we have tried and tried, and failed and failed, that we can hear the Lord's words suggesting that there is another way. It is only because we are without any reasonable way out that we entertain the possibility that Jesus meant what He said: ask!

In a way, it is the cruelest verse in the Gospel: Ask and you shall receive. It reveals to us that our misery and our cross comes

from our unbelief, our refusal to take God seriously. Yet at the same time that it condemns us for our imbedded self-reliance, it is the Good News of deliverance. It confronts us with the spectacularly good God proclaimed by Jesus. It summons us to the central act of faith, which were we not to believe, all other believing becomes useless.

All of God's moving in us reaches its goal at that moment when we hear His invitation to ask. For that were we given ears. Through His promising, He hopes to lead us, through desire and dissatisfaction, not to a program of massive self-improvement, but to an asking filled with expectation. It is in the asking that our focus becomes centered on reality, the reality of God's great power to transform us, and His intense desire to do so. We find ourselves at the core of the Gospel.

Before going into more detail on the specifics of asking, I would like to take two concrete examples of the way God's promising works within us.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT IF I CANNOT LOVE? WHAT IF I CANNOT TRUST GOD?

Let us take the central promise of the Gospel: the love command. As is the case often, it does not appear to be a promise, but in due course it will be shown how that is what it really is.

In my annual retreat I confront some of my negative relationships. I may enter the retreat feeling quite justified in the way I am dealing with everybody. I may have a sense of myself as a basically cooperative person, for the most part sensitive to the needs of others. Perhaps the director suggests that I apply the love-command to one particular relationship. Let's imagine a typical problem. A new person came to live in the community. I went out of my way to be friendly, and I was ignored. But I was able to persist, and I still do. However, the person still treats me with a certain contempt. I have never allowed that to lead to resentment or revenge.

"Do you love that person?" Well, yes, I do. I am still keeping myself open and doing my best to show that I would welcome his friendship. "Do you love that person as Christ loves you!" Well . . . "Do you have any affection for him?" Must I have affection for him? Must I have affection for everybody?

We enter into a great debate. What did Jesus mean by the love-command? And it can get very complicated, as if we were studying the highly technical language of some abstruse philosopher. We cannot accept the words at face value. So we seek to translate them into something more acceptable. We draw out of the word “love” most of its meaning. We extract all the “liking” out of “love.” “I must love him, but I don’t have to like him.” The love Jesus commanded us becomes a cold, affectionless relating.

We suffer the consequences of this decision—to separate loving and liking. We end up with a “Yes, God loves me” that has little value in it. As if God were to say to you: “Yes, I love you. I don’t like you, no. but I do love you.” As if the love Jesus has for me is affectionless.

I will develop this question of what Jesus meant at greater length in a later chapter, but for now I would like to continue with the illustration of the consequences of God’s promises in our life.

So God says: love him as I love you. And we defend ourselves against it by trying to translate it into his telling us to do what we are pretty much already doing. We minimize the command. We neutralize it. We see the situation as one where I can wait for the other to wake up to Gospel values.

What if we accept the love-command literally. I must have real affection for him—just as Christ has for me. He is my enemy, a person who is being unfair to me, and the love command holds out an image of me filled with affection for him. What would it be like if I really loved him? The Gospel invites me to spend time with God’s will, God’s desire. God sees us both as children of His. He sees our lovelessness, and he knows how unhappy it makes us. He gazes on each of us with affectionate mercy. And He wants me to share His experience. So He projects into my imagination a new me, a me who has affection for this fellow, a me who isn’t yet present, who is still in the future.

What would I be like? If I have real affection for someone, it is amazing how much I can take from him, how much unfairness I can endure. Let us say that this new member of the community is actually a younger brother of yours, a blood brother. Even as a child, he was always making enemies by his exclusiveness; and it hurt to see him isolated and lonely. He has been, then, a source of pain and worry in the past. You were delighted when he entered the community. What sadness, though, when you found him again showing himself so unfriendly! But notice: there is no thought of anger or revenge or resentment, just an everlasting pity for him and for all of us and our suicidal ways. An awareness of his pain fills your consciousness. Your own pain is peripheralized. That is love. "I didn't want him transferred to Cincinnati where I could forget him. No. I want him here—even though he causes me pain."

That is the image of myself that Jesus suggests to me, an image of a me filled with unyielding affection. It is a me clothed-with-Jesus. That was Jesus—unyielding in his affection. That is God, pursuing me even when I return no love to Him. It is a new me, the me that God had in mind when He created me. He wanted to make a new, unheard-of splendor—a me-filled-with-love. By this loving I will become like Him. My enemy becomes a peculiar moment in my life, where I am invited into the fullness of reality.

What, then, if I did love him like that! All would be so different. I would have an enthusiasm for dealing with him, instead of an instinct to avoid him. What a contrast that would be to the way I do relate to him. And now I begin to see that my present state is not love at all. Loving him like a lonely blood brother—that is what love is. Love is the mother's heart expanding to embrace the weakness of her weakest child, a persistence in going-out to the most rejecting of her children.

So, desire is born out of dissatisfaction. My present state is revealed to me for what it really is—lovelessness. And I want to become a truly loving person.

I get to work at it. I keep reminding myself of the love-command. I stir myself up to kind, affectionate deeds. I can try to see Christ in him. This often results in making the other person very nervous. It can be a trying time for everyone concerned, and it can go on for years. By my repeated efforts and reminders I can persuade myself that I do love him. It is painful not to be loved, but most painful is it when the person who doesn't love you thinks he does. This basic dishonesty leaves the door open to manipulation and a likely confrontation.

But if I can be led by the Lord into the truth, then after a while I will see that I do not love him. All my efforts have not produced any real affection. I have tried and tried, but there's no real warmth. I sowed love where there was no love, but I did not get love back! And I am back where I started. I made a mistake, perhaps.

Two spirits enter. One: I was better off before I got on this "affection kick." I let myself get raised up to consider new possibilities of life, and now I must return to the real world.

And the other spirit: ask, and you shall receive. Into the despair we experience at our inability to love, comes the Good News. What does the believer believe that makes his life so different from that of the nonbeliever? What is that fundamental article of faith? The Resurrection? The Trinity? The Incarnation? Not these but this: "that the power to love will be given to him when he asks for it. For that is the believing in Christ which the Apostle urges—'a faith which works through loving'" (St. Augustine).⁴

Then, St. Augustine spells out with precision the nature of all effective spiritual activity. "What you do not yet have in the area of loving, ask for so that you may receive it. For faith asks what the law commands: without the gift of God, without the Holy Spirit through whom charity is poured into our hearts, the law can order us but it cannot help us."

At that moment of despair, when I have exhausted my own

energies, and spelled out my own helplessness, at that precious moment only, can I hear the Good News: ask. Stop pretending to love. Stop acting as if you did love. Enter honestly and persistently into your lovelessness and your reluctance to love, and turn to the Lord, your deliverer. For you are at that most blessed spot where God can touch you. God gazes on your enemy with everlasting affection. He wants you to share that. That is what Jesus' life was about—God sharing with us His power to love, His spirit.

But we place upon ourselves a yoke of fulfilling the commands on our own. It is easier for us to believe that God wants us to get at it, and go to work on it. Our focus narrows to our sincere efforts. And God is left out, His will, His power. While we may verbally mention Him, we effectively expect nothing from Him. We see Him as a bystander urging us to stretch ourselves more.

We live as if there were no Good News. We live as if we had never heard of the Holy Spirit. Instead of being my deliverance, God becomes one who points out to me the path along which I must deliver myself. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" "How can you believe that the Father will not give you the Holy Spirit when you ask?" "O ye of little faith!"

This journey from hearing the love command to hearing the invitation to ask for its fulfillment is a journey God is constantly drawing us along. It is not that we hear the love command only in the beginning of spiritual growth, and hearing the invitation to ask is the summit of years of traveling. No, these events are taking place all the time. God is always promising a much more loving future even to saints, and His invitation to look to Him and ask is heard even by beginners. This is the way God is always relating to each of us.

Notice, too, that the love command is really a promise. By commanding us to love as Jesus loves, He lifts our eyes to an

incredible future, and seeks the moment when we are ready to believe that He will give us that future for the asking.

In the faith area, a similar pattern evolves. A promise is glimpsed, “no one who follows me ever walks in the darkness.” We are told of a life so filled with faith as to be free from worry, from anxiety. “Do not be troubled.” Again it can appear in a command-form.

Perhaps it will come to us as: what if I were to really start believing! To get an image of what faith would be like, imagine this scene. We come back late from a meeting—seven of us. We had to miss the crucial varsity football game. But it was on TV, and a friend was asked to videotape it. We deliberately avoid finding out the score. When we go to the rec room, there it is, all set for use. I go out for some popcorn, but I run into a member of the community who is unaware of the arrangement. The first thing he says, eyes aglow: “That should put us in the top 10!”

I go back with the popcorn. I decide to watch anyway. We fall behind right away. It’s 14-0 at the quarter. At the half, after three horrible fumbles, it’s 31-0! We stop for a few minutes. Everyone is watching the same data, but our experiences are so different. Two of them want to leave and go to bed. They’ll stay just to see how the second half starts. Everyone is depressed. But not you. You are eager to see what will have to be a sensational second half.

That is how faith operates. The believer *knows* because the God who knows tells him so. The believer has only the same evidence as everyone else. But he has heard a witness, and he has believed the word of that witness. What if Jesus is right and our anxiety arises from illusion, a basically false picture of what is happening. I am everlastingly anxious because I am caught up in superficial data.

It is only natural to defend myself against the image of real faith. We minimize it. We justify our anxieties. We see the command as exaggerated, and we translate it to mean: don’t be overanxious. In other words, try to be somewhat less anxious.

But if I let God's vision of me and His will to transform me enter into my consciousness, I am revealed as an unbeliever. This can be very frightening. It can make my way of life appear to be meaningless. It calls for great courage to be honest about the shallowness of my faith.

Once we let in the promises of what faith could be like, we experience dissatisfaction and desire. Why should I go through life unbelieving! A desire comes to deepen my faith in God. I rouse myself up to be free from anxiety. I will trust from here on out. And I set out on a path of redoubled efforts to reduce the anxiety in my life. Often certain texts become the instruments of this campaign. I print them up and put them where I will be constantly reminded of His providence. A form of self-hypnosis is used. At worst it will appear to work, and I will have a sense of believing. I will feel myself in the grip of a deepening faith. It will be enjoyable to note my growth.

At best, it will fall apart soon. I will see myself as falling short—as others see me. I will notice a persistent stumbling in faith. I will see myself caught by an imbedded anxiety, my days dominated by anxious moods. Only in the early morning or late evening will I find myself free. Unfaith will be seen as me. An incapacity to believe will surface. True believing will be a world I hear about, but one quite alien to my experience. I will see that nothing I did or can do will really change me.

At that moment various suggestions will come. "Return to what your life was before you got caught up in this unrealistic view of faith." "Come back to earth. You are not a saint." "God just wants you to do the best you can."

There will also come the invitation to ask, and to receive as a gift that deeper faith I was so intent on building. God presses into my consciousness a suggestion that my life could be so much more filled with faith and joy precisely because He has that level of living in His hands as a gift for me. He had a new creation in mind when He made me—a 'me-clothed-with-Jesus'—faith. And He is restless until I let Him gift me with it.

Notice again how this evolution from God's holding out to us a promise of a much richer life up to when He invites us to ask for it—all this is not divided into a part for beginners and a part for the “perfect.” Even with the saints, God is entering their life as a promise of what they could be, a promise which makes them dissatisfied and desirous. Even to beginners God is able to speak His words, inviting them to trust in His power to transform them, and not to focus their attention on their own efforts. This is what God is engaged in with each of us all the time.

He has seen a “you” that is still not existing, a “you” you have never imagined, a “you” clothed with faith and love, with God's own armor, with Jesus Himself. That vision of His sets Him going, gets him to invade our consciousness by every means—in season and out of season, He presses that vision upon us. “This can be you.” “How much you are obstructing the great things I wish to accomplish in you.”

Those great things are, substantially, a much deeper loving and sensitivity to the needs of others, and a greatly enlarged faith: a new heart within you that He knows will make you a Gospel-invitation to all you meet, an invitation He knows they badly need.

Through dissatisfaction, desire, and despair, the Lord leads you to a most intimate union with Him. A union of hearts where what concerns Him so much begins to concern you more and more. You get to know Him, to know what He's up to, and what He is wanting to do with you. You come to share the divine consciousness.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE THREE CONDITIONS OF EFFECTIVE ASKING

Jesus puts great emphasis on asking. He makes it sound so simple. Just ask, and you will get. Our own past, our experiences in prayer may be teaching us a very different message: asking does not deliver. As often as not, nothing happens. And we are led to believe that asking has to be accompanied by something else if it's going to be effective.

Commonly we add on penances, if it's a favor we want badly. Or we feel that prayer, to be effective, must be part of a steady, faithful spiritual life, and that if we are not generous with God, He will not be generous with us. Neither of these is true, of course, but it is easy to fall into such false convictions.

We minimize the promise contained in Jesus' words. "What that really means is . . .," and we end up with something that pays only lip-service to Jesus' promise. "He can't mean . . ." But he does. Asking is our role. No payment is demanded.

Why, then, don't we receive when we ask? There are, of course, gifts that may harm us, that will not be a part of His will. But what of those fundamental Gospel gifts that God is always wanting to increase in us: why don't we receive them when we ask?

What we are going to discuss here is the very nature of effective asking. There are three essential elements in effective

asking. Without them the asking is a pretense, and not a real asking.

Let's begin with the need for real desire when we ask. What if I do go to prayer and I ask, but I have no real desire for it? Well, why would I ever ask for something I don't want? Because the Gospels tell me to ask, and I want to do the right thing. I've been told to ask, so I do. It's an easy step to take. But wait a moment! Why would anyone ever *not* desire the gift of the Holy Spirit? Can't we take for granted that we do want the Holy Spirit?

What is this Holy Spirit? In human life, the Spirit is the power to love someone whom we do not love, whom we judge, or feel resentful toward. Do we want the coming of love? It may be a threatening future. "If I get a real love for Charles, I'm going to have to be nice to him, forgive him and forget the books he has borrowed and never returned, and let him back into my v friendship and I know he will start to take advantage of me again." I may not really want that. I know that once I start I start being friendly again, Carlotta will start stepping all over me. The gift of love can frighten us. We can suspect that beneath it there will surely be the cross. We suspect, very naturally, that any coming of God to me will be a purification, a crucifixion. Handing myself over to the workings of love may appear to be pure foolishness.

As a result of my fear, my desire for the coming of the Spirit will be shallow. But I may ask anyway, knowing that asking for the Spirit is what prayer should be.

What happens to such prayer? What can God do? Can He force His Spirit on someone who has no desire for it? Not at all. Like all the higher gifts, like friendship itself, which it is a form of, the Spirit cannot be forced on anyone. God's desire is blocked. So, one of the essential elements of asking is the desire for what I ask. It is pointless to ask for something I do not really want.

A second essential to effective asking is the awareness of my need for the gift. If I come to prayer and ask for what I feel I

already have, the asking will be meaningless, and have no effect. It would be a pretense, a routine I am submitting myself to without any reality in it. Why would a person bother asking for something he feels he already has? Once again, a sense that I *should* be asking can lead to this.

Take this instance: I am not getting on well with Edgar. I do love him, but he has ways of doing things that are unfair; and I do not love those ways. This has made our relationship somewhat unpleasant. Instead of telling him plainly, "When you are not using the car, the keys belong on the board," I am too reserved, and I just put up with it. I feel I should confront him, but I hesitate. My spiritual director tells me to pray for a deeper love. So I do. But I know that is not the solution because I already do love Edgar. It's what *he's* doing that is the problem. Any time I spend asking to love Edgar is pure waste. It's a pretense, a mockery of what Jesus meant.

Without an awareness that I need love, asking for love is perfectly ineffective. Unless I see my need for faith, asking for faith is idle. The Lord who is wanting to fill me with a deeper loving and a more intense believing is blocked.

So, for asking to be effective as Jesus wishes, we must be asking for something we really want and something we know we do not have.

The third essential element in asking is an attitude of expectation.

If I go into prayer and ask God for His gifts, but I honestly don't expect to get them, such asking is futile. In order to give us what He wants, the Lord needs to find us asking with great expectations. Effective asking calls for a taking for granted that God wants to give me this, and can do so. Without that confidence, the prayer is going nowhere. This is a most common problem: we do ask, but we expect nothing. And because we expect nothing, nothing comes; and soon we stop asking. Our prayer can become an effort to settle peacefully for whatever it is that's actually happening anyway and a giving up on any hope that

God will actually do anything, will enter and transform my heart, in a way so intensely active it is called a new creation.

Jesus encountered this problem constantly, and repeatedly addressed himself to it. Real Faith is a rare commodity in his life, occurring in some surprising places, and not being present where he had expected it. A Jew says, "If you can . . ."; and a pagan says, "Only say the word . . ." (*Mk. 9:22-23; Mt 8:8*).

Why is it that expectation is necessary for the receiving of God's gifts when this is not paralleled in the human scene where we can be surprised by a gift we never expected?

Even in the human scene, the higher gifts require our expecting another to act, our waiting on another's choosing. Even love is not a looking to our own will but a depending on another's letting the other choose. If we try to guarantee it, we will destroy it, and at best receive a substitute of real love.

But an example may help indicate how desire and faith are essential to effective asking. I need a ride to the airport. The plane leaves at noon. I plan to go to the airport by subway and to start at 8:00. You hear about it and you come to offer to drive me. We can leave at 10:00. Well, I do not really desire to spend that time with you. You bore me. "No thanks: I'm meeting someone at the subway." If I do not desire the favor, you cannot give it.

But what if I do desire. I'm delighted at the favor. But in the morning I start wondering: "What if he doesn't come? It will be too late to go by subway and I'll have to take a later plane, and that's impossible." I go back and forth. Finally I opt for safety, and I take the subway and have someone call you. I wanted it, but I didn't expect it. I suspected you might be late. And my lack of expectation blocked your favor.

God's desire to share His gifts is blocked when He encounters a false asking—an asking without desire, or without expectation, or without any sense of need for the gift. So, much of our asking is routine and, in a way, without hope, hesitant. The

Didache teaches that to ask hesitatingly is to receive nothing. Christ urges us to take for granted that God responds, simply to refuse to entertain any doubts about His desire to give and His power.

Often we pray convinced that we have confidence and desire. We tell God how deep is our desire for the gifts. We would do better to listen to Him on whether our desire is deep or quite shallow. We would do better to let Him tell us of *His* opinion. Often we feel our desire is deep, but we are in contact with a superficial feeling only. As He sees our inner depths, God can see how shallow is our desire compared to what it could be, to what He would wish to make it through His gift. Has He not Himself a profound desire to give, a desire so deep it is to the shedding of blood? Now that is deep desire. When we pray, it would be much more effective if we were in touch with the depth of *His* desire to give and how that overshadows our desire to receive. Does He not wish to give us a share in Jesus' own desire to receive at the hands of the Father? Is any desire of ours deep in comparison with that? Yet that is where He wants to lead us through His gifts.

What if I do not have a deep desire, is it worthwhile to pray? Of course. Prayer is the path along which desire comes. "Lord, I don't want to forgive her." "Do you wish that you did want, or are you just as glad that you don't want?" On that willingness to be changed into a person of deep desire, the Lord can move. It is the desire *for* the desire that St. Ignatius mentioned. Some writers talk as if in prayer we need bring "nothing but desire." But even that can be given to us by God's transforming us. Desire in us is a share, a small share of the desire He has been wanting to fill our hearts with. St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that the coming of the fervor of desire is the goal of prayer, not a predisposition.

What if I come to prayer and I have no sense of God's desire to grace me and His power to do that? Is that prayer useless? If I were to start asking for what I don't really expect, it would be

useless. But there is a way of praying at that time which is effective. I may become aware of how shallow or even nonexistent are my expectations, how disheartened I am. The Lord, too, can reveal to me at what a superficial level of expecting I live, how far I am from expecting the way Jesus expected the Father to sustain him and fill him with all he needed. I see myself in the grip of an illusion, a despair-filled illusion of God's powerlessness or indifference. Whatever the reason is, I feel that nothing will come but what I put in.

Jesus led the father of the possessed boy into effective prayer: from "Heal my son," which the man did not expect to happen, to "Help my unbelief." It is the only effective prayer at such moments. It puts us in harmony with God as He relates to us in our great need for faith. He does not need our affirmations of faith, our assurances to Him of how deeply we believe. He does need our honesty. He needs us to let Him reveal how shallow is our faith, how badly we stand in need of His gift of faith, how atheistic is our mood, our lack of expecting.

What if in prayer I never ask for love or faith. That would be strange. My God is desirous most of all of clothing me, and I never think of His desire, of what He comes to prayer to do, what He has in mind for me. Not that this asking has to be verbal. No. But for prayer to be effective there must be present in my consciousness an awareness of my needs especially in loving and believing, and a desire and a trust in His will for me and His power to fill those needs. Any prayer which lacks one of these elements is not true prayer. It is an ignoring of God's desire.

The saints experience great consolation in prayer, overwhelmed at the riches of His desire and at the shallowness of their own. The exaltation that is the Lord's doing is not based on some flattering self-image, but on an honesty, a humiliation, a compunction—that is the word used for centuries to describe the first part of prayer, our part: to stand before Him in all my poverty, and to be filled with awe at His goodness. I am poor in

loving, and in believing, and in wanting to love, and in expecting Him to save me, and poor even in awareness of my poverty. That is the consciousness which the Lord floods with consolation.

The awareness of our poverty in spiritual areas is the central focus of our spiritual activity. It has to be worked on. It cannot be presumed to be there. Operating against this honesty are natural mechanisms within us that propel us to distort our self-image in a flattering way. These mechanisms are very powerful, and their working has been described by psychologists as well as spiritual writers. They operate instinctively and without much awareness on our part, we develop an image of ourselves inflated with righteousness. “At least, I can say I tried.” “I did my best, no more can be expected.”

To counteract them, we need a spiritual life, a program of spiritual choices, even a prayer life. We shall get into greater detail on this in a later chapter.



Figure 7: Expectation is necessary to receive God's gifts, as illustrated by the centurion's "Only say the word" *Mk. 9-22-23, Mt. 8:8* (COC, p. 36). Figure from Nadal, "The parable of the seed," *The Illustrated Spiritual Exercises*, p. 27.

CHAPTER SIX

CHOOSING TO EXPECT— EVEN WITHOUT SIGNS

Let us return to the question of faith and expecting in prayer. How can we expect that God will deliver what we ask when we have so many past experiences of His not delivering? Here we are at the center of the nature of faith. God promises, but He does not appear to deliver. Often people observe the effects of prayer selectively. When their prayer is for sunny weather and it is sunny, they remember it as an answer to prayer; but when it rains, they forget it. Or they feel God said no. But in the matter of deeper loving and a deeper trusting, God will never say no. His whole purpose in choosing to create us is precisely to share Himself with us. He is always wanting and able to increase our love and our faith. Why then doesn't He?

How do we know He doesn't? We make judgments about whether or not the grace has been given. We feel we have signs of the grace, and if they do not appear, we conclude that the grace has not been given. But what if these signs are not valid.

St. Francis de Sales says that the spiritual journey is much like sailing across the ocean. On the first morning you come up on deck, and you look around, and you see nothing but water in every direction. Are you going forward or backward? You do not know. The captain knows, and you trust the captain.⁵

What if there really are no signs of growth in the spiritual life, signs by which I can accurately measure my growth. What if we

are forced to rely on the Lord's word, and to trust in the promises He has made? But can't we measure a growth in love, for example? Once I would not even speak to Olga, and now, ever since the retreat, I have been speaking to her. My angry feelings are gone. Isn't that a sure sign? Not at all.

Love is a good example of the problem, since all growth in the spiritual life is in its essence a growth in love. But love is a most peculiar reality. It is not self-conscious. The lover's consciousness is elsewhere. Where there is love, there is a great sensitivity to the needs of others. There is no great focus on the self. Remember the man who leaped into the icy Potomac to save the drowning woman. When he came back, he was unaware of having done anything that heroic. That is the very nature of love. A love that is conscious of its own loving is only superficial. Love turns our eyes outward toward the needs of our fellows.

Jesus defined love in a parable—the Good Samaritan. Yet when the Samaritan arrived home that night and told his wife of his finding the man in the ditch, and she asked him, "What did you do?" I can hear him saying, "What *can* you do?" Unimpressed with his own behavior—that is love! It is a sign to others, but not to ourselves. Love fixes the lover's attention on the needs of others.

Let us take an oversimplified example. Brother John stops his many activities once each month and evaluates his spiritual health. This month he is aware of ten areas of need in his life, and he feels he is responding well to all but one of them. He expresses gratitude to God—it's a 90% grade, and he resolves to do better. He prays for a deeper love. And the Lord obliges him. He fills Brother John with a depth of love he has never had before. As a result John is much more sensitive to the needs around him. He now sees one hundred needs where before he saw only ten. He doubles his efforts and responds to eighteen of them eighteen out of a hundred. But his overall mark falls to 18%. This can be shocking. Where before he had felt good about his fulfillment of the love command, now

he sees he is falling far short. So he begs the Lord for a vast increase in his loving-power. And the Lord obliges him. Through this gift of deeper loving, Brother John now sees one thousand needs. He is seeing how much he missed, how insensitive he was all along. His self-image is crumbling, even as his love is growing. That is the nature of love.

Von Balthasar talks of a state where at last we see true love with clarity in Christ—and we realize that we do not have true love.⁶ The saints are not buoyed by their image of themselves loving. “How sensitive I have become!” Quite the opposite. They have the courage to be honest, and they see themselves caught in an imbedded insensitivity.

Yet they are very joyful. How can that be? They trust the Captain. Into that sense of their own ingrained lovelessness comes the word of the Lord, His voice, assuring them of His love and total commitment to them, and His determination to spare no expense in saving them from their loveless ways.

On the one hand they have the data which indicate how deep is their unlove. On the other hand they have God's word assuring them, "I am at work within you as a seed in the ground: secretly, yes, but effectively. Fear not." It is that assurance which sustains them. God is wanting to assure each of us of that working of His within us. But such assurances can only be given to the honest; such exaltations are for the humble.

Jesus does not invite us to check on God's faithfulness, but to trust in it: to know that God delivers, no matter how things may appear; to choose to believe Him even without evidence. Any other believing would be no believing. Once I hear His promise, even in the very hearing of His promise, I am enabled to believe it true, to trust that it is being done. When we ask for a specific loving that we have not had, we tend to check to see if it comes. People will say, “The grace did finally come.” They were watching for it. But Jesus tells us, “When you ask for something in Prayer, know that you are receiving it!” Don't bother to check! Know! That is the trust we

are invited into, a trust that refused to doubt the Father's promise, a knowing of God as the One who always delivers on His Word.

Such trust based on a hearing of His word alone can only come from Him. In the gift of faith, God shares with us His inner awareness of His own trustworthiness. It is a breaking into our consciousness of His consciousness. It is one way of describing what Jesus lived and died for: to liberate us from the depressing illusion that God is not nearly so committed to us as the Gospel suggests. Bowed down by that illusion, we become slaves. Faith makes us His children. We waste so much energy trying to assess our spiritual health. We grasp at signs of growth from which we can draw some consolation about ourselves. To see ourselves growing is important for our general happiness. Because of a fear of losing this happiness we suppress any indications that we might not be growing. We very actively engage in a self-consoling. All the while the Lord has for us intense consolations flowing, not from an awareness of our growth, but from an awareness of His determination to give Himself. That is the Good News. It is all about Him, and His spectacular and unexpected choice to love us. To believe that is to be freed from sign-seeking.

God's promising, then, is what we are given, with no apparent delivery. On Monday of the Second Week of Advent we ask God to ". . . sustain us with your promise . . ." It sounds like a rather thin substance, a promise. But how sustaining it is depends on the faith with which it is received.

What if I *knew* that God was trustworthy! I would then live in His promises. They would be carved on my heart. I would be recalling them constantly, instinctively. My whole day would be permeated with their aroma. They would be my distraction.

In a way the Eucharist is a symbol of the way God works within us. It *looks*, and *tastes*, and is. It *looks* like bread and wine. It is the flesh of Jesus, and his blood. And it has a sweet and joyful *taste*. When love comes to us, it is the power to forgive

someone, to let go of a “justified” resentment, to stop judging someone. But it doesn’t look like that. It looks *like* unlove. There is the pain. Am I willing to see my unlove, to focus on it, and grow more loving? If, in its coming, love looks like unlove, how can anyone endure the coming of love? Because it *tastes* like joy. Its coming is accompanied by a strange, unpredictable joy. And that joy sustains the lover and enables him to serve with gladness. The coming of the Spirit is the coming into my heart of a new ability to love someone. It makes me conscious, though, not of my new loving, but of an insensitivity so much deeper within me than I had imagined. And it floods the heart with joy.

God is wanting through Jesus to be about a new kind of people, a people who love one another. Jew and Greek united through Jesus. I and my enemy united through Jesus’ death. In that uniting, we become a sign to others, a Gospel. A piece of great news: God is at work powerfully in the world, delivering us from our antagonisms, and the darkness our competitiveness brings on. It is not His goal to make us anxious to measure our growth, or to have us take delight in our deepening love and faith. Real love is conscious of the terrible needs of others, real faith is in awe with its gaze fixed on the unwavering trustworthiness of the Father.



Figure 8: “I am at work within you as a seed in the ground: secretly but effectively. Fear Not” (COC, p. 43). Figure from Nadal, “The parable of the seed,” *The Illustrated Spiritual Exercises*, p. 38.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE GOSPEL FOCUS ON OUR UNLOVING WAYS

Let us look more carefully at the love command, the center of our Gospel.

I mentioned the problems that it raises: how apparently it cannot be taken literally because such love is beyond our power. How can God command us to change our affections? We then substitute for love, “Try to be nice to her.” We have even taken to distinguishing between liking and loving, and freeing ourselves from an obligation to like another. What is left in the word “love,” when liking is taken out? All the affection is gone. So Jesus is seen to demand from us an affectionless loving. By dropping out affection we set up a situation where we can feel ourselves doing reasonably well in fulfilling the love command.

In this way we deal with the love command exactly as Paul sees the Jews dealing with the law. By receiving the Law, Paul says, the Jews were given a path to awareness of their sinfulness and of their great need for salvation. It was intended to prepare them for the coming of a redeemer, by drawing them into the truth about themselves: their inability to fulfill the Law.

But, in order to avoid the despair that accompanies the knowledge of the self as sinner, the Jews rewrote the Law, interpreting out of it all the weightier matters, such as justice and love. Once these were removed, the Law became possible to

fulfill. As a result, on Jesus' appearance, there were many, apparently pious people, who felt no need for a redeemer.

We do the same with the New Law. We must see ourselves as all right. To avoid the condemnation that will come if we accept the love command literally, we take the core out of the command. It brings the command down to a level where we can fulfill it, and we rest there. The gift of the Holy Spirit which God is so intent on gracing us with becomes irrelevant.

What if we accept the love command literally? What if we accept as a fact that, by using the word *love*, Jesus did not have in mind a special religious meaning, but actually intended it as most people would understand it. If that is so, then we must relearn, and be constantly relearning, the meaning of love. To counter our inclination to minimize any obligation, we must constantly be putting back into the word its full meaning.

When St. Thomas Aquinas talks of love, he says that the lover takes the beloved as his other self. Is that a part of what Jesus meant? Must I take my enemy as my other self? When we assert: God loves me, am I saying that He takes me as His other self, or am I just saying that while He does indeed love me, He may not like me at all? Once I start dealing in an affectionless loving, the Good News of God's love for me loses much of its splendor. If I start to measure out an affectionless love to others, it will be measured out to me. It will be my chosen world.

But if I accept the full meaning of the love command—while it will condemn me because of my lack of real love—it will free me to trust in His real and full love, a love of a father for his child. That condemnation is only a step on the path of focusing my life on God's gifts rather than on my sense of spiritual wealth. Through the love command we are drawn up above the world of our own powers into the world of gifts. We are forced to rely on the coming into our lives of the Holy Spirit. Without the gift of the Spirit, our lives have no meaning whatsoever. The inability to love as we are commanded brings us into a state of helplessness, and shifts our attention from what

we can and cannot do, to what God alone can do. He becomes our savior, coming to us in our loveless prison.

The love command is not given to us so that we can, by some measurable behavior, fulfill it. Not at all. Its fulfillment is hidden from us. Any resting in a sense of doing fine in the area of love is not from the Lord. From Him comes a sense of a vast chasm that separates us from the love that we should have. And from Him comes that welcome promise, "How can you believe that the Father will not give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?"

By means of the love command, we enter into a truer image of ourselves. We are not in the same league with Jesus; the love we see in Him is not found within ourselves. And this is not just for beginners, a purgative stretch. As the believer draws nearer to God and becomes ever more perfect, his consciousness of his lovelessness becomes more and more acute, and precise. He not only knows that he is a sinner, but he can *prove* it; and this the beginner is reluctant to do. These two go hand in hand: a deeper entry into God's intimacy and a bolder honesty about our manipulating, jealous, judgmental, resentful ways, our fear of true love. What is present in the saint's life is not a freedom from lovelessness, but a freedom to look honestly at it. He gets to see a self that had been a stranger to him but was well known and loved by God, and whose great need for a redeemer moved God to send Jesus.

Thomas tells us that in real love the lover has affection for the other just as he has affection for himself.⁷ Is this what God is commanding me? To have for my enemy an affection such as I have for myself? God gazes on my enemy with great affection. God's desire is to share that affection with me. That is the sending of His Spirit to me, a new heart for me, enabling me to love my enemy as myself. It is a loving I may not want; I may even fear. It can also be a gift I do not believe in. Yet, as Thomas tells us, "it is the Holy Spirit Himself who is the New Testament by effecting love in us—the fulfillment of the Law." Jesus lived and died to make available to us a loving-power that is God's own, now ours

for the asking. As Gustavo Gutierrez puts it, “The only thing that is really new is to accept day by day the gift of the Spirit who makes us love with the fullness with which Christ loves us.”⁸

The love command is not about a general feeling toward humanity, but a centering of our attention on our enemy and our lovelessness. The contrast between ourselves and God is most forceful in the contrasting ways we relate to that one person—His fullness of affection and my indifference or anger or even contempt. His desire to clothe me with a share in His affection is the Good News. All the joys of intimate knowledge of God come to us only along the path of the coming of love into our unloving. Our life is an accepting. We are given Him, for the asking. He seeks to make us expect from Him, as a gift, a new heart. As long as we feel we are doing reasonably well with the old heart, we will not be eager for His gift.

If your superior told you at breakfast, “Listen, we have a heart transplant for you. I’ll drive you to the hospital at 9:15,” would you be elated? That depends. If you are in good health, or at least you think you are in good health, then it’s a shock and, you hope, a misunderstanding. But if you have been laboring through the corridors, and avoiding staircases, and needing people to help you with any packages, and feeling exhausted all the time, and been waiting for the operation that was held up only because there was not transplant available, then you would be elated.

God is constantly at work leading us toward that true knowledge of the self, the knowledge of our inability to love. Resentment by resentment, we enter the real world of human competitiveness. We see that what is so visible in world wars has its counterpart, and its roots clinging to our own hearts. Our life centers more and more on two realities, the self—which produces a salutary sadness—and the Lord’s great giving, the only path out of the inner hell. One who sees himself loveless finds his whole life centered on God’s promise of the Spirit.

In the *Enchiridion* also, St. Augustine talks of the uselessness of faith if it does not include a believing that the power to love will be given to me when I ask for it. “For that is the believing which the Apostle urges, a faith which works through loving.” What use is it to believe in any person or any creed if it does not include a rescuing from my lovelessness? If my faith does not relate to my inability to love, as a power to change me, what a useless faith that would be! What if I say: “I believe that Jesus was God and that He wants me to change my unloving to love on my own.” Such faith is of no value. But if I see myself as doing reasonably well in the area of loving, I may easily come to that belief.

To avoid seeing myself as not needing a new heart—a state of inertia—and to enable me to unite myself with God’s desire to change me, I must take steps. St. Augustine spells them out with marvelous precision. “What you do *not* yet have in the area of *loving*, *ask for* so that you may receive it.” It is a description of the spiritual life. It is the Gospel program for using our energies in order to grow. He is locating the central component of the believer’s prayer life.

First of all, he locates for us where we should focus our attention: in the area of loving. Here, of course, he is resonating with the thrust that Jesus Himself pressed upon us. Perfection and loving are identical.

Then he further limits the focus: in the area of loving look at what you do not have. Again like Jesus: “if you love those who love you, what value is there in that?” None, of course. The Kingdom of God, the Kingship of God, is in the relating to those we do not love, who do not love us, who are not grateful, who are hostile, who are unfair, who are manipulative, resentful toward us, or contemptuous. The Spirit will draw near to me in his, the enemy’s face and features. The enemy is the locus of God’s present burning desire, and the doorway to all the gifts of deeper faith and more intense joy.

This is so much the case that a Desert Father said, “. . . if you go into prayer and the face of your enemy does not come, then

you are not in the presence of the living God.” What is in God’s heart as He comes to me in prayer? A desire to transform me into Himself, love. There He will focus where my wound is most serious, the fear to love that chills my relations with the enemy. That focusing on the face of the enemy is nothing but a uniting of my imagination to God, letting His will, His concern, His focus become mine.

Prayer is an attitude of expecting. In prayer we expect God to give us what we need to fulfill His will. We take for granted that God will do so. That is perfect prayer. As Augustine says, “Faith asks for what the Law commands.” Faith asks for love. It is such faith that makes the burden light, the yoke sweet. “Without the gift of God, without the Holy Spirit through whom charity is poured into our hearts, the Law can order us but it cannot help us.” For the person of faith, the task imposed by the love command becomes a willingness to receive gifts, and no task at all. Am I willing to live out my life on the presupposition that the fulfillment of the love command is mine for the asking?

Had God not ordered us to love so perfectly, we would never have come to know the lofty nature of the gifts He desires to give us. What a frustration for God, then, when we reduce the command to an affectionless loving. Once we do that, we no longer need affection. We no longer bother with it. We no longer seek it from God. His desire to share with us the affection He has for our enemy is blocked.

This experience of our helplessness, our inability to love specific people, is not unique to beginners. In fact, it is frequently not present in the beginning. It is only with the coming of a certain freedom into our lives that such honesty can be endured. The focus of the advanced is so heavily fixed on their unloving ways that they see themselves in a very negative light; they find themselves “loathsome.” This is far from what we feel to be a healthy psychological approach. By all our human laws they should be depressed and hard to deal with, but it isn’t so. Their ability to shut down their defense mechanisms

frees them to become more sensitive to people's needs. As their need for building a positive self-image fades, energies are released to heighten the powers of their sensitivity-antennas. Seeing others in need energizes them to a life of service. And an unexplainable consolation makes that a "serving in gladness."

To think that some day I will be able to look at myself as loving, with all my lovelessness left behind me, is to raise illusory hopes. That vision of myself as loving is not for me, to be consoled by it; but it is a promise of the Lord. It is my future; and to the degree that it is already realized, it is in the Lord's vision of me, not in my vision of myself. There, in His vision, it is kept for the day of judgment when He shall surprise me with it. It is His secret, and it results from His secret working. We are not invited to possess it, to dissect it, to uncover it.

In one sense, then, the growing into the love command produces a growing darkness. The self-image is denuded of love. The self sees its own poverty more and more clearly. Into that darkness shines the real loving of God. How He loves me "anyway," and how He loves my enemy with the real affection of a father! Our humility and unworthiness are bathed in His warm affection for us. We become very unconscious of all the good He is working within us. We live in faith. That anxious attention to "How am I doing?" gets swallowed up in the terrible needs of our brothers and sisters.



Figure 9: Love of enemy requires God to grant me a miracle, as a child asks with desire, expectation and need. Mt. 18:1-4, (COC, pp. 50-52). Figure from Nadal, “Jesus teaches the disciples about humility and fraternal correction,” *The Illustrated Spiritual Exercises*, p. 70.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GOD DECIDES TO INTERVENE

One way to state the core of the content of our faith is in Augustine's words, "that the power to love will be given him when he asks for it . . ." This spells out the central role of the love-command and the gift of the Spirit in our spiritual life. In this respect I will try to look at reality from God's side—what is it like for Him to be constantly pressing His gifts upon us? Some would consider any effort to look at reality from God's side futile because it will end up in anthropomorphisms. But Jesus, and the New Testament writers, in line with the prophets, are quite willing to take that path. Since the human is the most perfect image available to our experience, to avoid all anthropomorphisms usually leads to images of God taken from less perfect areas, a kind of mechanicomorphism. In prayer, by not letting God be so personal as to have a real, concrete desire to act upon me, I can find myself in the presence of a pleasant humming consolation, something like a Cola machine still lighted up in an empty store. Or the presence of God can become like a visit to a hospital bed. Your friend is there, bandaged from head to foot, with only a breathing hole. You are present to him, but you expect no input from him. You count on his hearing you and being cheered or resonating sympathetically, but he will do nothing more perceptible than be there and breathe. Is this the presence of the Living God?

Sometimes, were someone to ask us a few minutes after we left breakfast, "Who was that you were talking with?" we might not remember. It was all rather blah. But with certain other people, we can remember, even days later and even every word. God is not, according to the prophets, someone in whose presence you can fall asleep. No. He has too much on His mind. His desires are burning Him. What is it like to be in the presence of someone who has a great determination to transform you?

"Did you see Ellie's brother at the reception?"

"Well, I don't know, I did see some fellow that looked like her."

"You couldn't have seen him then. He had green hair!"

To get near him is to notice at once his green hair. To get anywhere near the presence of God is to feel His intense desires, and the active energy of this very determined person.

Sometimes New Testament translations conceal this aspect of God's reality. For example, the New English Bible's version of the beginning of *Ephesians*: "From Paul, Apostle of Christ Jesus, commissioned by the will of God, to God's people at Ephesus." In his commentary on *Ephesians* in the Anchor Bible, Markus Barth objects to the word "will." He urges the word "decision" instead.

"Decision" here means God's free volition; "will" might be misunderstood in the sense of a fixed plan or testament. *Ephesians* does not support the notion of an impersonal fate or cosmic blueprint that underlies historic events, or of an impersonal and unchangeable divine rule that determines all acts of human obedience. God's 'decision' describes an action and manifestation of the One who is living, personal, wise, and powerful. An event in God Himself is now revealed.⁹

The Gospel text can lose its vitality for us. We need to read it afresh in order to catch the flavor originally intended. Our faith is in a God so personal that our intellect is unhappy with it, a God who is willful, determined, active—not at all peacefully enthroned in sleepy self-containment. In a sense, His throne is empty. He has

been called from it to engage in a pursuit. His children are in great need. His presence is a hurrying wind. A shepherd in pursuit of a dear lost sheep is Christ's suggestion.

Later, in the same chapter, the New American Bible translates verse 9, "God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery . . .," and again Markus Barth urges a different word. He prefers the word "secret." A mystery is an event which, even after it is known, is not really known; but a secret is something which is not known but, once it is revealed, is then known.

In the course of discussing this, Barth spells out God's secret:

Before the creation in God's counsel, during the historic fulfillment of God's decision, and at the consummation of God's will Jesus includes in himself a great people.

This secret includes within it many mysteries, but it itself is far from being an unknowable mystery. "It is known by revelation and is to be made known all over the world."

This is the secret that is finally revealed to the saints: God loved them before the creation. He loves them despite their sins and death. He loves them with the intention that they praise his glory.

Man did not know this love; the powers did not. But God did. It was God's secret because it was hidden in his heart, identified with his own being, his whole self. Now it has been laid bare. The whole true God is no longer hidden and unknown. His very heart is opened.

When a lover confesses to his beloved his secret love, he does not reveal a method or technique. Rather he reveals himself; he opens his heart, and in so doing he delivers and gives himself to the beloved. The secret revealed is his innermost heart. He is essentially and totally for the other, and makes known that he never wants to be without or against the beloved.¹⁰

The Christian's life is centered on a spectacular image of God. God is personal and has entered history and can best be understood as having a history Himself. His choices have

involved Him in others' lives, as can be seen most clearly in Jesus. Because of His desire to befriend us, He has undergone ups and downs, successes and failures. And it is His choices that are at the bottom of any meaningfulness we can have in our lives. Meaningfulness, in other words, is a gift to us: we can accept it and we can reject it, but we cannot achieve it apart from His decisions. From now on our lives are going to be meaningful and remembered only in this: this person accepted God's decision; this one rejected it.

Our life, then, takes its meaning from the decision of another. Let us imagine a village in Russia hundreds of years ago. Great poverty is everywhere. No family is really well off. One man gets the inspiration: let us take advantage of every opportunity no matter how slight. He begins, in his spare time, to farm a small ribbon of marginal land. And his wife spends her spare time picking up small pieces of wool, gathering every bit she can, and then, as material collects, she knits a cap. Some neighbors are scornful. But a few are inspired, and they begin to work, too. As the months go by, with occasional failures, a slow advance is made. There's a little bit more money available. Some room for choice results. Of course, the five or six families involved are such a small minority in this village. Most try to ignore it; some laugh; a few scorn. All are envious.

Far off in St. Petersburg, the Czarevitch's birthday approaches. It is a special birthday, and the Czar decides on an especially large gift. He tells his son of it, and asks what he would want. The Czarevitch says, "Let's help the poor!" But the Czar warns him, "Even if we distributed the whole gift to the poor, it would mean little because they are so many." The Czarevitch suggests, "Let's give it all to one village!" "That would make a difference, a huge difference in their lives," says the Czar, "but which village?"

His son still loves his nursery maid, and he suggests the village where she was raised and which she sometimes mentions. So it is done.

Messengers are sent to inform the villagers: the first installment will be distributed Saturday morning to all heads of families. Now each member of the village is in a new situation: the energetic, the lazy, the envious, the responsible. It doesn't really matter any more. Their future is going to be based on a new decision: to accept the emperor's gift, or to reject it. But rejecting it will not mean that their life will go on as before. No, they will be marked as people who rejected the gift, and that refusal will characterize their future life.

Nor does hard work make it more likely that they will accept.

The two are not related. When Jesus made his offer, some very hard workers rejected his gifts. Nor does laziness guarantee a rejection. It is a whole new world based on a new set of values, and the old set of values are rendered useless.

For a while, what the Czar was up to was a secret, known only to himself and his son. With the arrival of the messengers in the village, the secret is published, the Good News. A palace-event is now revealed, and that event is going to make history. The villagers are finding out that their lives rotate around someone else's use of freedom, rather than their own use or misuse of it. All their meaningfulness now centers on how they relate to this act of another's choosing. Because God has chosen to relate to us in a totally new way, beyond our powers to imagine, the meaning of our life comes from a new base. Courageous efforts are no longer the central response, but faith and receptivity, expecting God to act and wanting His will to be done, being aware of our helplessness.

Going to hear the messengers, going to collect the first installment these are decisions of the villagers; but they are very different from farming the marginal land. Now what counts are decisions that focus on the choice of the Czarevitch. The will of another person becomes the foundation of the villagers' lives. An event has taken place in God, and He has made a choice, a bold choice, and that choice of His has been revealed to us; and for the believer it is the meaning of his life. Every

activity of the believer flows from that choice of God. The believer is no longer purchasing anything by his efforts to do all he can. His efforts are given to him as gifts, but this will not occur if he does not become absorbed in this spectacular God who has made such a blessed choice.

In order to grasp the radical nature of the transformation of human life by God's entering it with His love, artists can help us. We hear the words of the Gospel, but they can be without vitality for us because the images have been over-used and rendered trite. We no longer experience the shock of what is being said. Sometimes as the preacher preaches—if he also listens—he can be shocked at the spectacular nature of what he's saying.

In Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* we have an image that may help us to grasp the radical shift of meaning that the Gospel brings. A creature named Salo from a much more advanced civilization on a distant galaxy happens to pass near our solar system on his way to deliver a message to another distant galaxy. His ship develops a mechanical difficulty: he lands on Titan, a moon of Saturn, and sends word home, to Tralfamadore, about the problem. It would take 150,000 earthling years for this message to reach his home galaxy, but he is much longer lived than humans and these thousands of years are to him as but minutes and hours.

He could watch the activities on Earth by means of a viewer on the dashpanel of his ship. The viewer was sufficiently powerful to let Salo follow the activities of Earthling ants, if he so wished.

It was through this viewer that he got his first reply from Tralfamadore. The reply was written on Earth in huge stones on a plain in what is now England. The ruins of the reply still stand, and are known as Stonehenge. The meaning of Stonehenge in Tralfamadorean, when viewed from above, is "Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed."

Stonehenge wasn't the only message old Salo had

received.

There had been four others, all of them written on Earth.

The Great Wall of China means in Tralfamadorian, when viewed from above, "Be patient. We haven't forgotten about you."

The Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero meant: "We are doing the best we can."

The meaning of the Moscow Kremlin when it was first walled was: "You will be on your way before you know it."

The meaning of the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, is: "Pack up your things and be ready to leave on short notice."

How did it happen? Vonnegut explains, "the Tralfamadorians were able to make certain impulses from the Universal-Will-to-Become echo through the vaulted architecture of the universe with about three times the speed of light. And they were able to focus and modulate these impulses so as to influence creatures far, far away, and inspire them to serve Tralfamadorian ends."

Our human history has a meaning from outside, a meaning that is being offered to it, and it will have no meaning apart from a willingness to receive. We are serving another's purpose! Fortunately, the Other is holy, and all love. And He has chosen to bless us beyond our deserving. He has chosen to make available to us the whole of His riches, His whole self.

He does desire to send a message, too. But it is not meant for alien creatures only, but for Earthlings; and the message is the Good News: God has chosen us in His Son. He does want to write His message on Earth, not in stones, but in people. He is, through his powerful will, making us love, making us into instruments of His love. He is forming a grouping of people in a way of relating to each other, that acts as a proclamation of the Good News to those around them. There are people in our world so open to God's influence that they become formed into a proclamation of God's love for the world. Just as Jesus was

the bearer of the message, so has He left behind peoples who embody His message.

Another's will dominates our world, and determines totally what meaning it has. It is a will of spectacular benevolence. He has chosen to love us. He has chosen not to turn His back on wayward Israel. He has chosen to love us despite our death-bringing sinfulness. Costly for Him will be that loving choice.

There is in the tradition an image of this decision-making of God where the angels urge God to take back His love. They warn Him of the cost He will be forced to pay, of the worthlessness of the objects of His love. They urge Him to start over with a new group, a new race.

Jesus images the Father's determination in the parable of the wedding banquet. "I want my banquet hall full." This is Jesus' sense of the Father's deep willfulness. He intends to get His way.

Even when evil finds a home in human hearts, He persists. In one of the parables Jesus has the servants ask the farmer, "Where did the weeds come from?" And, in a moment of awareness that the scene has been transformed by a will hostile to His own, the master answers, "An enemy has done this." God becomes aware of the active hostility of a part of His creation. When the servants suggest a quick solution—ripping up the weeds—the owner says no. He sees that to save all, another path, a much more costly one of separating, will take place. God sees the need for the death of Jesus. With this awareness, the Father meets Jesus in the agony. All will be lost if Jesus looks only to His rights and His privileges.

Jesus has an image when he pictures the Father as a vineyard owner, saying to those who doubt the excessive generosity of the decision He has made, "Friend, is your eye evil because I am good? Have I not the right to do what I please with what is mine?" He has chosen to respond to our neediness, not our unworthiness. His kindness impels us to the same way of behaving. He presses on us to love as He does, to forgive the unforgivable. The affection. He has for our enemy can threaten us. We can try to ignore it. We can in praying to Him keep that part of His personality

hidden. But it is His innermost self! It is alien to us. It is a way of behaving that can frighten us. It will be possible only with a way of looking at the world so different from our common path.



Figure 10 Parable of the wedding feast and the Father's willfulness (Mt. 22:1-14). Fr. Sampson (*COC*, p. 62) writes:

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Figure from Nadal, "A king holds a wedding feast for his son,," *The Illustrated Spiritual Exercises*, p. 93.



Figure 11: Parable of the vineyard owner's excessive generosity (*Mt.* 20: 1-16; 20). Fr. Sampson (*COC*, p. 62) writes:

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Figure from Nadal, "The parable of the daily wage," *The Illustrated Spiritual Exercises*, p. 72.

CHAPTER NINE

A DAILY MINIMUM OF MENTAL PRAYER?

One of the common effects of a retreat experience is a desire for a more intimate relationship with the Lord. The retreatant looks around for things to do that will preserve this new-found joy, and even deepen it. And one of the most common decisions is to get really serious about the prayer life. Very often there is in the rules of one's congregation an obligation to a specific quantity of daily mental prayer. Commonly this is not a firm part of the retreatant's past year, and he feels that he must make sure it become a part of his life this coming year.

Recently, in a workshop on the spiritual life, I began by setting up a case of such a retreatant. I imagined the retreatant coming to get advice on how much time to put aside each day for mental prayer, and when to make it. Six of the fourteen people present suggested a minimum of forty-five minutes. Four others suggested a thirty-five minute minimum. One suggested twenty minutes as a minimum. The most common suggestion on when to make it was the early morning. The late evening was suggested by a few. I think that these suggestions would be rather common today.

Let us look briefly at a suggestion made by St. John Chrysostom:

He who prays should *not* try after long prayer, but should pray often, for both Christ and St. Paul teach us to make

use very frequently of short prayers, repeated frequently at intervals.

Now Chrysostom was a desert monk for a time. These monks got into the whole question of prayer, so his suggestion is not just a surface impulse, nor is it meant for beginners only.

What harm does Chrysostom see in long prayer?

Should you pray at great length, it will often happen that you open yourself to attacks of the devil, giving him ready access to your mind to distract and upset you, leading you away from what you are saying.

I can just imagine telling my dear novice master that I stopped praying after three minutes for fear the devil would get in, as blessed Chrysostom warns.

But if you give yourself up to short, frequent prayer, dividing up the time of prayer discreetly, you will easily retain control of your mind, while making such prayer with greater recollection.¹¹

Notice the values he sets forth: attention is critical. Length may harm that critical value, so it is not advisable. Brief prayer can be attentive.

Is Chrysostom a single voice speaking in a way that is far from the actual tradition in the early centuries? Let us hear St. Augustine. He is writing to a woman who is starting a "house of prayer," the lady Proba. Augustine tells her that attention should never be forced.

The brethren in Egypt are reported to have very frequent and very brief prayers; the prayers are, as it were, quick and ejaculatory, for fear the wide-awake conscious attention so indispensable in prayer should vanish or lose its keenness by prolonged exercises. And in this they show plainly enough that, just as this attention should not be allowed to exhaust itself if it cannot continue for long, so neither should it be suddenly suspended if it be sustained.

This is rather strange, and so different from our practice today. Augustine maintains that prayer should be shortened to

suit the capacity of the soul, rather than that the soul be forced to do something it cannot continue over a long period. Here is that same set of values that we saw in Chrysostom: attention is the key to effective prayer, and the length of prayer should be determined by its effect upon attention.

“The brethren in Egypt are reported to have very frequent and very brief prayers.” Not just “frequent and brief” as in Chrysostom, but “*very* frequent and *very* brief.” Now how brief is brief? These are desert monks and contemplatives. Perhaps they mean: don't go over four hours; keep it short—an hour or two. In his next sentence Augustine spells it out. “Their prayers are, as it were, quick and ejaculatory.” Now that *is* rather brief. Ejaculatory! And then Augustine gives the reason why mental prayer should be brief:

. . . for fear the wide-awake conscious attention so indispensable in prayer should vanish or lose its keenness by prolonged exercises.¹²

There it is again: attention as an absolute in effective prayer, the determinant of how long prayer should be.

What a different world this is from the spirituality that is common today where a minimum daily input of mental prayer is considered by many—if not most—to be an essential for spiritual growth. On most lists for things to be done to bring about renewal, the daily mental prayer input ranks at the top. We do not consider it likely that intimacy with God will come into a person's life without such a practice. There are articles in spiritual magazines on how this person and that experienced great growth when they began giving their prayer more time. Yet this minimum daily input of mental prayer was not always considered all that vital.

St. Thomas Aquinas specifically raised the question: how long should prayer be. His response:

It is becoming that prayer should last only so long as is useful for arousing the fervor of interior desire; but when it goes beyond this measure, so that it cannot last without

tedium, prayer is not to be stretched out.¹³
If only I had that text when I was a novice!

Notice that St. Thomas has a norm. If a person comes to the fervor of interior desire quickly—is, in other words, in consolation—his prayer will be short. This is similar to the suggestion of St. Ignatius Loyola: to pray longer in desolation. It also spells out that prayer has a purpose in which length of time is irrelevant.

What if someone said to you: “Today I must go to the doctor. I am worried about it. I am not sure how long I should stay. And I’m not sure what to say—I’m trying to be as well prepared as I can. But I fear I will be very distracted and inattentive. So could you help me? How long should I stay in the doctor’s office; what are some things I can say that would make it a useful experience; how can I avoid becoming distracted?” You would know at once that this person is confused about the basic meaning of a doctor. These questions never get asked because a visit to a doctor has a clear goal that dictates each of the answers; and once that goal is grasped, the questions disappear. Does our present-day concern with quantity in prayer reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of what prayer is about, or more aptly, what God is about in our prayer time? The emphasis on quantity of mental prayer is a relatively recent development in the history of the Church, and became common only in an age when Scripture was much less to the fore than it had always been, and than it is again becoming.

St. Ignatius Loyola was not eager to see his men get into the habit of long prayer. He said on different occasions, “. . . of a hundred men given to long prayer the majority of them or ‘ninety of them,’ or ‘ninety-nine of them’ ordinarily came to grave consequences.” It is not a ringing endorsement of our current trend.

Someone directed by St. Francis De Sales presented for his approval a daily schedule of spiritual exercises which began with one hour of prayer. The saint crossed this out and in its place put “24 hours.”

Yet St. Francis prayed at length. As did St. Ignatius. As did, at times, Jesus. Did Jesus urge long mental prayer on his followers? Though Jesus had much to say about prayer, he refers to long prayer—as I have been able to find—only twice, and those references are not encouraging. Do not be like the pagans who think that they will win God's favors "because their prayers are long" (*Matt 6:7*, Good News). And again: "You lawyers, you rob widows' inheritances and you cloak it in your long prayers" (*Mark 12:40*). In neither case is he pushing the practice.

From Jesus, the early Church took a string of brief prayers, such as "Help my unbelief," "Lord, that I may see," and—the most famous—"Lord, have mercy on me a sinner," from the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, an ejaculation which became over the course of time the Jesus Prayer. From Paul comes the exhortation to pray always which played a great part in the development of prayer approaches in the early Church.

If mental prayer of regular length—fifteen minutes or a half hour or an hour each day—is not so important as we tend to make it, what is the nature of the spiritual life? How can a series of brief, ejaculatory prayers open us to the gift of God's deepest intimacy? This is the crux: the deepest intimacy with God is not dependent on a regular minimum input of mental prayer. On what then does it depend? Doesn't God first desire to gift me with a regular prayer life (e.g., a daily half hour faithfully kept), because that gift must precede, or ordinarily precedes, the highest gifts of union with Him? No. He has *other* gifts that *do* precede the highest, but this focus on a daily prayer time is a false lead.

How can this be? How can ejaculations suffice? What are the elements that *do* count, elements that may not be present in long prayer? Is it possible that long prayer approaches do not stress those elements in prayer that are most crucial to growth!

Such a radically different suggestion about the prayer life as is made by St. John and St. Augustine and St. Ignatius comes from thinking about the spiritual life in a rather different way. It is a view of spirituality where faith plays a decisive role.

I would like, then, to say something about faith in general, then about faith in the sense of God's gift of faith, before I discuss the crucial role of faith in the spiritual life, and how it lends itself to brief, frequent prayer rather than long stretches of prayer. Here are a few words on faith.

Your provincial comes to you, the province treasurer. "We've just been given over a million dollars. Where should we invest it?" Your brother works for the government agency that allocates contracts on government jobs. You call him in Washington. He tells you, "I've got all my money right now in the Brady Construction Company. It's just about to get a huge government contract; and if you look at the market, you'll see it's rising fast."

You put the money into Brady stock. Each day you notice it's on the rise.

Friday afternoon at 2:00, you get a call from your brother. "I had to go into the boss's office today to put a paper on his desk. He was away. I couldn't help but notice a letter on his desk addressed to John Brady. The contract is not approved. I right away called my broker. I don't think Brady Construction will survive this rejection. Now you've got an hour before the market closes. By Monday everyone will be pulling out."

You do just what your brother did: you sell the stock. But you did not see the letter. What you saw was each day's rise in the market report. To all appearances, all was going well. Despite what you see, you are selling the stock. That is because of what you have heard. Faith is blind, we say. But faith is not deaf. If faith were deaf, there would be no faith. No phone call means no selling of the stock. But faith *is* blind. It does not see the letter, the truth beneath the appearances.

Faith hears what it doesn't see. It requires, therefore, a witness, someone who does see what you don't, a witness who speaks the truth to you, a witness who reveals the illusory nature of what you see. Faith, then, is a hearing. It is a hearing experience. You did not sell because of any reasoning of yours. No. You sold

because you got a phone call, and what you heard was something not subject to reason at all.

Faith has many meanings in human conversation. But the meaning that it has in the Gospel is a hearing of a witness who assures me of what I myself cannot see. What makes me prefer to believe him rather than my own eyes—that we will take up soon. For the moment we need the fact that faith always involves a witness who does see and who speaks to me in some way and whom I hear and whose words I choose to act upon.

Now let us take an example of faith in the Gospel area. There are events in our world where God appears to be in control. The bad weather breaks just before the outdoor graduation. A nephew gets a good job after everyone has been praying hard. Someone bounces back from an operation. There are also events where God does not appear to be in control. A young mother dies. A brother keeps on drinking, and it keeps getting worse. Children starve to death on East Timor.

That is our world: a mixture of events. In some, God's hand appears strong; in others, absent.

How to build our faith, in such a world? If God's hand always appeared strong, the building of faith would be so easy. But given this mix of events, what path will lead to a strong faith?

We have a tendency to focus on the good things: the weather we needed, the job he got, the curing of someone. We fix our attention on the good things that happen. Gradually we can build up an image of the world where only the good things happen. We can, then, say and feel, "God always comes through."

But, of course, this isn't faith at all. It's an illusion. Most of the real world has to be ignored, left out. This fake faith requires a constant turning away from reality. Certain TV shows I turn off. "They depress me—to see all those people starving, sick." Certain parts of the city are avoided. My world narrows. This fake faith can be consoling, but it is not from the Lord. It is a natural, instinctive way of responding to the evil, the apparent absence of God from certain areas of our world.

To get at the real faith experience, I would like to use an example from Jesus' own life. I am not a Scripture scholar, so I have no reputation to lose if I am reading into the text, but the example will be most useful anyway.

Jesus encounters a crowd of people, and he is moved with pity (*Matt 9:36-39*). He sees them as "sheep without a shepherd," a very depressing image. But with the next verse Jesus will make a strong positive statement about the same scene. The Gospel does not tell us how come he changes from negative to positive. I suggest: perhaps it was those words "without a shepherd." These are abandoned people. They are without a shepherd. In the midst of his feeling sad at their abandoned look, did Jesus hear, "Who calls these people 'shepherdless'? I am the shepherd of Israel. These people are not abandoned. They are my chosen people." Did Jesus enter into—through a faith experience, a hearing experience—a deeper sense of God's commitment to Israel? Certainly he had faith experiences, and they were central to his mission as savior. Did he here become more deeply aware of God's determination to save this people?

God affirms His involvement with this people. He is at work, hard at work, right in the midst of this scene, though it doesn't appear to be so. But He *is* indeed at work, secretly. It is hidden from Jesus' eyes. But it is God Himself who is at work secretly like a seed, hidden beneath the depressing appearances. And since it is God who is at work, then it is surely an effective working. Surely God will not fail. Surely that seed will grow and triumph. And there will be a day of glory.

Jesus then turns to the apostles and talks of a "great harvest." It is an image filled with hope based on what cannot be seen. It is a conviction that the reality of this scene is very different from what it appears. Jesus did not see the Father at work any more than we do. He heard the Father's word, and he believed. We, also, are invited to hear the Father's word and believe. What was visible was surface. What was basic was known only through a hearing. Jesus heard the Father, and the Father

was the witness. The Father does see His own actions in the heart of each person in the crowd, the invitations from the Spirit to love, to trust, the history of each one's life in relation to God. The Father does see His own determination to save. The Father knows the effectiveness of His own work. He speaks that in our ears. And by choosing to believe, we enter into a vision of the world as it really is, a world being invaded by the Godhead. The great harvest looms immense in the believer's consciousness.

Here is another example to illustrate the nature of the faith experience. Chris loves Marie very much, but she is not so taken with him. She does go out with him regularly, but she's not interested in getting closer. In fact, she's looking around for someone new. She never says this to Chris. Whenever he professes his love to her, she responds in the same words, but for her it's just a form. Now Chris actually knows this because one day he overheard Marie on the phone when she spoke of how limited her love for him is. He never lets her know.

But nothing better for Marie comes along, and they keep on dating. And gradually Marie changes. She falls in love with Chris. This fills her with delight. She tells him of her love, but she must use the same words she has been using all along. She notices that Chris is not all that delighted—no matter how often she tells him of her love.

Something has happened inside Marie. An event has taken place within her. She has become strongly attached to Chris. It fills her with delight. But Chris does not know about it. If he were to realize the change, he would be delighted. Marie wishes that there were a way whereby Chris could become aware of what has happened inside her, could share in her awareness. If only there was a way his consciousness and hers could interpenetrate.

God is in that same situation with us. He is quite aware of His decision to love us. He is conscious of His affection for us. But we are not. The data we have are ambiguous. They don't decide the issue. But with God there is a way for Him to penetrate

our consciousness and to make us aware of what only He knows. We call that action of God the faith experience. Through it we share in the divine consciousness. We come to know what we could never know by our reasoning on the surface data.

Here is a description of faith taken from *Sacramentum Mundi*:

When you believe, you share in the divine consciousness. Faith is a divinizing, supernatural participation in the very life of God. It is a personal encounter . . . God offers you His friendship by disclosing the secret of His divine consciousness, and you enter God's intimacy.¹⁴

Jesus felt himself invited to affirm God's love for Israel no matter how abandoned they appeared. Under the indications of abandonment, in a secret working, God was present delivering His people. To become aware of this produces great joy in us. Such is the nature of the gift of faith.

Faith, then, operates apart from seeing the evidence. It is a form of hearing someone who sees what we do not see. The words of this witness invite us to believe. If we believe, we pass out of the illusion that the surface presents, and we enter a deeper truth.

The path to true faith is the opposite of the path to false faith. Instead of ignoring those scenes where God appears to be absent, the believer seeks them out! The worst possible situations are the best for hearing God's voice. Christians have persistently sought out the lepers, the abandoned, the starving, the wretched—those whom God seems to have turned His back on. It is among them that His voice can be heard. Where else would the loving Father be except among His most needy children!

If I work among the needy in the hope that I will soon see great changes, I will not stay long in this work. Only the consolations that the Lord alone can give can sustain the believer in the midst of apparent ineffectiveness. The believer knows that God is helping the poor, not because of this or that indication, but because he knows the Lord and His commitment to the poor. We

never get past faith in this life, and faith is not a seeing, but a hearing.

"Of course, God is here with all His mighty love!" We are invited to affirm that, and enabled to affirm it, by the gift of faith.



Figure 12: William P. Sampson (1946), "If only I had that text [Aquinas's admonition not to stretch out prayer] when I was a novice!" *COC*, pp. 67-68; and "I can just imagine telling my dear novice master that I stopped praying after three minutes for fear the devil would get in" *COC*, p. 66. Figure from Anonymous, *Regis Yearbook: 1946* (New York: 1946). The graduation picture is available courtesy of Anthony D. Andressi, Ph.D., the Regis High school archivist.



Figure 13: The story of the Good Samaritan (*Lk.* 10:29-37), illustrates Fr. Sampson comments (*COC*, p. 74):

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Figure from Nadal, “The parable of the Good Samaritan,” *The Illustrated Spiritual Exercises*, p. 33.

CHAPTER TEN

HONESTY, THE GOAL OF OUR SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY

Let us now look at the role that this gift of faith plays in the spiritual life.

When I look at my spiritual scene, I will find some areas where growth is evident. "At last, I am keeping to a regular prayer schedule." There will be others where there is no sign of growth: "I still cannot see why I should forgive Harry."

How are we to acquire "indispensable self-esteem"? If we focus on our areas of weakness, we will become permanently depressed. As we lose all sense of self-esteem, we lose our ability to function. So we are tempted to focus on our strengths. We keep in our memory the indications of growth. We dwell there. It leads to a feeling of being loved by God. "I know God loves me," and I have ready at hand the evidence for it. This is, of course, a false faith.

Imagine yourself called to the principal's office. "Mary, our coach, is quitting. There are only three games left on the schedule. None of us knows a thing about basketball. Would you mind just being there? The coach will be at today's game. If you go, you might learn enough to be able to fake it through the last two games."

That afternoon you are in the stands. There is one player on your team who has fantastic hands. They even look bigger

than normal. Whenever the opponents come near him, he steals the ball and fires it up. He is extraordinarily quick. But his shooting—frequently from half court—is very bad. You start counting after a while and you notice one basket out of thirty-one attempts.

At half time they all gather at the bench, He sees you and says, "Sister, did you see that shot I sank from half court!" Yes, you did. But you also saw something he didn't see, or, at least, soon forgot—the thirty misses.

Will you play him? Probably not. He's no real help. And when you don't put him in, he'll blame it on the fact that he's Irish and you're Italian! He is out of touch with reality. As a result he will have great difficulty in relating to you. If you had filmed the game, then you could make a short film out of his thirty misses. You could tell him, "Sean dear, I will play you, on one condition. Every afternoon you must look at this film three times." He would see himself in a new light—as other see him. That kind of knowledge always leads to changing our ways.

If I insist on focusing on my strengths, I will experience consolation perhaps, but it is not from the Lord. It is brittle. It can be shaken by facts. It requires endless effort to keep up—lest the truth appear and depress us. Keeping my attention on my acts of loving and believing does not lead to true growth, but is only an appearance of true growth.

What if there are no signs of spiritual growth anyway! What if the deeper our love becomes, the less we see it, and the more we see our insensitivity. What if the deeper our faith become, the less we are aware of it, and the more we see our reluctance to trust. How could we persist in our spiritual endeavor if we had no way of knowing whether we are going forward or backward? As St. Francis De Sales put it: "You do not know whether you are going forward or backward. But the Captain knows, and you trust the Captain."

What makes up for not seeing any evidence of growth is a hearing, a faith experience. We must be assured by the Captain.

Otherwise we will never be free from misusing our good deeds to console ourselves. The question then becomes: how do I go about receiving these assurances from God?

The path is parallel to the path of faith in general. Just as believers seek out those parts of the world where God appears absent, so, too, in order to hear God's assuring word in my spiritual life, I must enter into those parts of my spiritual life that are as yet unredeemed. I must enter my weaknesses. I must look honestly at my unloving ways. I must dwell on them. Into that sad scene will come the Lord with His assurance, "I love you anyway. I am at work within you in ways you do not know. Where else would I be but there, within you, healing your wounds."

It is the strength that come from hearing His voice that frees me to be honest, to get clear of the need to distort my self-image, to enter the real world where I stand in terrible need of Jesus' death.

Honesty is the essence of prayer. It is in your weaknesses where the Spirit dwells, and where He can be encountered. It is very easy to enter prayer and to say, "Lord, I want to be here. Lord, I love You. I do believe in You. Sacred Heart of Jesus, I put my trust in You. I do want to love others more." Perhaps it's the truth. But it is not the whole truth! No. There is present in us, alongside these wonderful desires and loves and believings, another part of the self. This part does not yet trust or love or desire. This part is silent, ignored, left outside in our prayer.

At times, of course, I do not even feel like praying. It is crucial to pray from this weakness: "Lord, I do not want to be here." At times I feel no trust. The temptation is to put off the prayer until I feel better. "Sacred Heart of Jesus, I do not put my trust in You." This is the moment when I need prayer, not later when I'm feeling better. But to pray is to be honest. I must not cover up my reluctance to pray, my lack of trust, my lack of desire, by some pretense. I must trust that the Lord *will* come to

me as I am, turned off, dispirited, desolate, without any sense of Him or desire for Him. And He will come.

We strive so hard for virtue and good desires. The Little Flower said, "When He sees me *without* virtue and *without* desire, that is when He makes me the object of His consuming love." She knew that He came into her weakness, her despair.

Rarely did Jesus speak in abstract forms. He was constantly using images and parables, and he boasted that he would only speak in parables. But occasionally he utters a principle. Here is a principle he used at the end of his longest statement on prayer—the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. He offers us an experience of exaltation. It is one of God's great promises—always being made to us were we to get near to Him and hear Him. "You will be exalted!" That is the promise—part of it.

Notice that the verb is passive. Here, Jesus is describing the second moment of prayer, the moment when we are acted upon by God. We do not exalt ourselves in prayer. We do not need to hypnotize ourselves into feelings of belief. In prayer something will be done to us that is beyond our powers to achieve. An exaltation will occur that does not depend on or use our energies. This being-exalted will produce energies within us.

If this doesn't happen during our prayer, we should ask ourselves why. It is promised. St. Ignatius has his retreatant look back at his prayer and ask about what the Father was hoping to do for the prayer. Was He hoping to fill you with "courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace"? Was He hoping to arouse within you "an interior movement" by which you would be "inflamed with love" for Him? Was He hoping that you would experience His touch so intensely that you would weep?

In other words, was God wanting to fill you with exaltation during that prayer? We can be very uncomfortable with this promise. It seems to condemn our prayer as not up to the mark. "Must I be exalted every time I pray?!" But the real question is, "Does God want to exalt me when I pray?"

"You will be exalted." That is the main clause of Jesus'

statement as he puts down the principle of effective prayer. That tells us what will be done to us if God is allowed to do what He wants. But what is the path that leads to this being exalted? Jesus spells out the path in a subordinate clause that precedes the main clause. It is a conditional clause. It tells us the one condition that must be fulfilled before God can exalt us. It is not, “If you love Me . . .” “If you love your brothers and sisters . . .” “If you trust Me . . .” “If you desire . . .” He can exalt us even when we have none of these. In fact, if He does not exalt us first, we cannot become loving and trusting. No, the only condition Jesus lays down for effective prayer is to be honest. “If you humble yourself . . .”

The Pharisee had strengths and weaknesses. So did the publican. The one prayed from his strengths. He had programmed into his prayer thanksgiving. The other ignored his strengths. He had programmed into his prayer his weaknesses. Both felt consoled. The Pharisee felt good about his self-image. The publican was met by the Lord, and justified by Him.

For the Lord to come to us in prayer, we must be present to ourselves. We must be honest. We must let go that false image. We must be willing to let the Lord introduce us to ourselves. We are so competitive, so judgmental. Resentment finds a ready welcome within us. We are anxious people. We are unforgiving. These words are not meant to describe other people. They are for us, each of us. As we grow in holiness, we become more able to see this truth. Our unlikeness to God starts to come out of its hiding place. *He* has such intense desire to bless us, and *we* are so little willing to have Him come near. He has such love for the poor, and we are so cold to them. He identifies with our enemy: the very person who is so unfair to us, who infuriates us—or for whom we have nothing but indifference, or (a more honest word) contempt.

It is the assurance of His love for us that exalts us in effective prayer, not any love we feel for Him. Even when we have feelings of love and of desire, they are not the believer's

focus. How can we become absorbed in the Good News of His love for us if our focus is on our feelings of love for Him? These feelings can be very superficial, and can be present even when, in deeper areas, we have suppressed strong negative feelings. The Lord can help us from being drawn to center our attention on these feelings. He can reveal to us how little we love if we are willing to hear Him.

To a medieval mystic, God said, "I am the One who loves; you are the one who does not love," That is the authentic voice. He consoles us with His loving, and He reveals our darkness.

There is a going-down, a death, in Gospel spirituality. There is no "rising from the living" in the Gospel. There must be an honesty, a death to the inflated self-image which we cling to for the great consolation it brings. This dying is not just for beginners. The inflated self-image is present even in the saints. There is no getting out of the need to deal with it. What comes with holiness is not a being-free-from-it, but an ability to acknowledge it, to recognize it, to specify its workings. As it looms larger in our conscious awareness, it loses its power over our choices.

For effective prayer, then, all that we need to do is to stand in the fullness of our weakness, just as for a growing faith we need to stand next to people with great needs. It sounds simple, but it is not so. Both psychology and the Gospel reveal a terrible flaw in human nature. It is not easy for us to come up with the negative realities about ourselves.

We have defense mechanisms that thrust away from our consciousness any images of ourselves that are unpleasant. Like the basketball player with the marvelous hands, we easily forget the thirty missed baskets. It results in a distorted self-image, and great difficulties in relating to other people who—also are equally caught in these mechanisms.

When the celebrant invites us to enter into our sinfulness, it can easily happen that we have no particulars. We know we are sinners, but we cannot prove it. Edmund Burke

called such knowledge-without-particulars a cloak of hypocrisy. For without the particulars, our confession of sinfulness is just words in the mouth. Our hearts are not convinced, or disturbed. “Oh, Father, if there’s one thing I am sure of, it’s that I’m a sinner.” But when any particular is suggested, “Oh, no, Father, I’m not contemptuous of anyone. I never judge them. I really love people.” And so on. Somehow I have become a sinner without any sinful acts!

When someone starts to try to pray from weakness, he will find that the particulars are not easy to come by. His memory will serve up one or two minor items—ones where he feels rather justified, anyway—and his general sense of spiritual well-being remains strong. The Eucharist has to be reinterpreted as something other than the coming into his heart of Jesus’ forgiving blood. It becomes a thanksgiving to God for how nicely He is bringing him along.

Here is the great enemy of spiritual growth: a sense of spiritual wealth. We can even feel invited by God to count over our spiritual goodies, and thank Him for them. In this way, as St. John of the Cross tells us, our good deeds act like mirrors, and we see only the self, the shiny, adorable self. “I am a loving sensitive person.” He urges us to focus on our weaknesses, and he assures us that they will be like windows, and the Lord will be seen through them.

But how to find a weakness, when our psyche has these hidden ways of burying them? That is the task of Christian prayer, to get around the defense mechanisms. For that purpose brief prayer was found to be most useful.

Let us take the method St. Ignatius recommended for reaching the truth. It is a method that was not new. It was most traditional. In fact, it was the ordinary form of mental prayer through the centuries. In looking closely at his method, the examen, we will be seeing traditional spirituality in a detailed form.

Let us consider a typical day. When we awake, we tend to be rather peaceful. There are no strong antagonisms. Nobody is around yet. The negatives are buried deep. At breakfast, perhaps, a word

is spoken, and emotions are aroused. They approach the surface. They may even break through the surface, and I snap at someone. As the day's work begins, tensions increase. People impose upon me. By noon I am into the swing of things, quite absorbed in the minute-to-minute events. After supper things may start to settle down again. By nine or ten o'clock, the negatives are no longer near the surface.

When should I pray? The usual advice is an extended period of thirty or forty-five minutes each morning. Or in the evening. Why at these times? Because that is when you will feel most yourself!

Remember the task of our prayer: to provide me with the negatives I need for effective prayer; to give me an honest picture of the self; to enable me to come readily into my own presence. If I come to prayer—any prayer, mental or vocal, the office, the Eucharist—if I come to this prayer realistically present to myself, I will be exalted. This will happen even if the prayer is very brief, even if it is ejaculatory! St. Ignatius affirmed that if a person is alert to his true weaknesses, he should expect "great visitations" even in short prayers.

But how to become alert to my weaknesses? If I pray early in the morning, I am praying at a time when my weaknesses are far from my consciousness, buried deep. In the evening this is also true. It's like drilling for oil in that part of the field where the oil is nowhere near the surface. What purpose does such prayer serve? It may provide me with a few moments of peace before the day starts. But that is not what God wants. "Doesn't He want me to feel myself when I pray?" Of course. But the "yourself" He is wanting you to feel is the true self—the "yourself" that lives through the day.

St. Ignatius suggests that we must pray during the day when the negatives are near the surface—or even on the surface. That is when we can easily reap a rich harvest of negatives. But we do not have time for any long prayer during the day. Therefore he

recommends that this daily prayer be very brief and very frequent—as did Augustine and Chrysostom and the Desert Fathers.

How frequent? There's a story about St. Ignatius meeting a Jesuit one morning. He asked the man how often he had made his examen that day. The man replied, "Seven times." St. Ignatius responded, "Humph! Only seven times!" The examen was meant to be very frequent, and, of course, very brief.

Let us take an instance.

I may see myself as a person of deep faith. I notice that my prayer includes many assurances to God of my trust in Him and much listing of my many reasons for trusting. Some preacher says: "How little we trust Him!" I wonder: can this include me?

I take a phase: "Do you expect victory?" The true believer expects victory. It is the atmosphere of the believer's consciousness. We may be behind 31-0 at the half. So what! The second half will be fascinating to watch as we come back to win. Surrounded by lions, the true believer is filled with God's assuring word, and he sings.

I use: "Do you expect victory?" as my ejaculation. It will be a quick path into the atmosphere of my consciousness.

Early in the morning, I feel good each time I use it. It reminds me of the great truths of the faith. By breakfast, though, it may seem less welcome. By noon, I realize that unless the blue Buick is back by two, utter disaster threatens. The ejaculation has become irrelevant. Survival is the issue. So the day goes. The ejaculation becomes a form of mockery, a friend no longer. By the evening God is back in His heaven, all is right with the world.

Through the examen I come to see the true self—that large part of me that was hidden from me. For that part of me, the Gospel is terribly and simply irrelevant. For a huge part of my day, the atmosphere of my soul is identical with an unbeliever! God's word has no grip on me most of the time—only in the early morning and in the late evening: when there are no threats! In other words, I

believe *only* when I do not have to. In this new image of myself, I will be coming to the Eucharist as an unbeliever. It is the right place to be. With Jesus' flesh will come a share in his faith in the Father. He has purchased it for me. He is determined that the price he paid for it will not be wasted. He is at work within me. "Lord, help my unbelief." Now I am talking from the heart of the Gospel. The Lord will hold this unbelieving son of His in His arms. "All *will* be well. Have I not promised. Even your unwillingness to believe is being bathed in the willingness of Jesus."

Unlove, of course, is the root area of negativity. It is our refusal to love that leads to our inability to believe. Were we to love as Christ did, we would be among friends only, very needy friends, and we would be anxiety-free. But unlove is even harder to locate than unfaith. We much more readily acknowledge our anxiety than we do our malice. We know some angry people, and we dread seeing ourselves like them.

When we are angry with someone, we bury it. Anger, though, is hard to bury—it's too hot. We transform it into something cooler: contempt. "I used to get so angry at her, but ever since I realized what a fool she was, she doesn't bother me any more." We change the word "contempt." It's still unacceptable to see ourselves contemptuous of anyone. We become "indifferent" toward that person. "Do I have to love everybody?" I become uncomfortable.

An ejaculation for unlove: "what if once again he's sitting opposite me at supper?" A sadness may surface. It's hatred. I would prefer to avoid him. I would prefer that he not be around. I want him out of my world. But God wants him close to Him. The face of my enemy is the ejaculation for unlove.

If I would prefer to feel positive, I could ask, "What if she is transferred suddenly to San Diego?" A pleasure comes. It is hatred. God identifies affectionately with her. He takes her as His other self. He does not want to be without her, apart from her. He wants to share His affection for her with me. The living God

wants to talk to me about her.

What I may experience as I go through the day can be a surprise. My animosity may reveal itself to be massive, self-justifying, in possession of my soul. My reluctance to love may be seen in its full strength. The contrast between my will and His will may become terribly clear.

Then I can enter into the Eucharist effectively. "Lord, here is unlove come into Your presence." That vision of the self that comes from the examen can undermine the false idol of myself as a basically good person needing just a delicate touch here or there. If I come to the Lord seeking a low-strength pill because I feel that's all I need, He can give me only a low-strength pill. But if I see my real neediness, I will be asking for more—a transfusion. "I am a living need before You, the loveless in the presence of Love." I may hear Him express His desire to give me more than a transfusion. "You need a new heart!" But to hear those words I would have to be willing to see myself during my day treating others with my heart of rock, ruthless in my condemning, judging contempt, and resentment. That is painful. Any sense that I am worth something is undermined. The power to continue looking comes only from hearing the Lord's words as He raises me up. "I love you anyway. Fear not." What using the examen brings us to see is a powerful antagonism—so powerful that it appears more than human. It seems to be stronger than we are, irremovable in its grip on us. For that reason, in Christian tradition, it has received the title "devil". We appear to be possessed by a force greater than ourselves.

Let's use an image. I walk around with a sharp knife in my pocket. At table, one of the brothers makes a very unfair remark to me. I take out the knife and plunge it into my own shoulder. He keeps on, and I keep hearing him and watching him and stabbing myself.

The Lord appears. "Look at what you are doing to yourself!" I snap back—still looking at my enemy—What am I supposed to do when he says things like that? Two evils are taking place. My

enemy is being unfair to me, and I am giving way to resentment. My inner world is growing dark, expelling all joy. The Lord is trying to get me to look at what is happening *within* me, but I am wanting to talk to Him about the unfairness of my enemy.

If I follow His lead, I will be introduced to a much more savage enemy. I will see an inner world in torment, myself inflicting wounds on myself. I will get a good look at what is behind injustice and war—a suicidal pattern of self-destruction at work within me. It will be frightening to see. That is the path of the examen.

One of the Desert Fathers, the Abba Macarius, said, "If you keep on remembering the evils that men do to you, you will lose the power that comes from remembering God. But if you remember the evils that the devils do to you, you will become invulnerable."

Jesus leads me to focus on what this devil is doing to me. It is not the words of the enemy which are so catastrophic. It is my willingness to entertain resentment.

One day, Jesus was visiting two ladies. The one, Martha, worked in the kitchen to prepare the lunch, while the other, Mary, sat and chatted with Jesus outdoors.

As Martha worked away, a pleasant fellow entered and asked her, "What are you doing?" She replied, "Preparing lunch for us: Jesus is visiting."

"Where is Mary?"

"She is out chatting with Jesus."

"Isn't she going to help at all?"

"I suppose not."

"Didn't she do this the last time?"

So, Martha roars out the door and strikes back. "Look at her, Lord, not helping a bit."

"Martha, Martha. *You* are upset and anxious."

Jesus calls Martha to notice the disarray taking place within her own soul.

“What am I supposed to do when she treats me so poorly?”

But if she is willing to look, she will see another Martha, in the grip of a demon of anger, in need of the Lord's power to deliver her. In the course of seeing herself honestly there comes a new awareness of God. I stand before Him filled with rage and righteousness. But He is the only foundation of my life. I have no rights in His presence. My birth was unmerited, as are my eyes. Had I not His loving gift of ears or a mind, would *my* rights be of any importance to me. He could have not bothered. But He did. He blessed and blesses me each day with breath, and lungs, legs, and a nose, and a free will as a crown. It is all intended for one moment: for me to welcome forgiving love into my life. That is the gift of Himself for which He made me. The greatest gift He can give me is forgiving love—it is His personality at its most divine. It is the “becoming like to God,” the “becoming God,” that the Fathers of the Church speak of.

I stand here in His presence heaped high with His precious gifts, and filled with anger. I am not angry at being starved. Nor am I angry at the fact that children are starving in a world of abundant food.

Fortunately for us and for her, Martha did not pray as we so often pray. She must have been tempted to enter the Lord's presence leaving her angry self, the bad Martha, behind in the kitchen. Smiling, “Now, if you two would like to continue your conversation in the dining room, everything is ready.”

Jesus could have said nothing. But she is very honest. Her anger is in her mouth, not just in her heart. The anger is not directed only at Mary. Jesus, too is attacked. “Lord, don't you care . . .”

In a brief moment, Martha sees herself and the Lord anew. It is not a long prayer, but it is an honest one, and it receives its reward. “Martha, Martha.” His strong affection for us—the incredible reality, too good for us ever to be quite at home with in this life—His affection enables us to forgive.

"I forgave you. Should you not also have forgiven your sister?"

"But, seven times, Lord?"

"Seventy times seven—as I forgive you."

Once Jesus was speaking to a Pharisee at supper, and he used a parable to explain the new wine He was offering the world. It centers on the question of how to become a person who loves much, for it is in loving much that we fulfill the New Law. How do we get close to the perfect fulfillment of the Law?

Jesus introduces us to a character in the parable who does indeed love much, and describes how she got there. "She was forgiven much." That's the step that leads to the highest intimacy with God, to the very peak of Christian perfection. You must experience being forgiven many times.

It's all very odd. Imagine poor Simon the Pharisee as he hears this. He has been trying hard to keep the Law, using the old skins and the old wine. Now Jesus calls his attention to a rare experience in Simon's life, those moments when he was forgiven. Those moments must become common, everyday. If I am forgiven little, I will love little. If I am forgiven much, I will love much.

Jesus invites Simon to take a fresh look at himself. That perfection he has been striving for is available to him. But it demands a new look. Simon must find that part of himself which needs endless forgiving. There are deeds in Simon's life that need Jesus' blood for their undoing. There is a self so filled with self-love and pride that it demands that others worship. It will even murder. "He who hates his brother is a murderer." It will even murder God Himself.

Unless I look honestly at that depth of malice within me, the much greater power of God's love for me will not grip me either.

Jesus calls us to repentance, to change our way of thinking. It is a call to put our trust in ruthless honesty rather than in our prayer-efforts. It is an invitation to find within myself the reason why my brother is starving, why my sister goes her way unforgiven

by me. I am invited to see in the way I choose to live the very patterns of selfishness that led to Jesus' death.

I need methods not to console me. Nor to help me see myself acceptable, in a good light. Consolation is God's doing, not ours. I need methods to help me see myself realistically, to see where I block and obstruct the "great things God is wishing to accomplish in me."



Figure 14: Martha, in the grip of the demon of anger, needing the Lord's power to deliver her. *Lk. 10:38-42*. (COC, p. 89). Figure from Kennedy, *Eyes on Jesus*, p. 126.

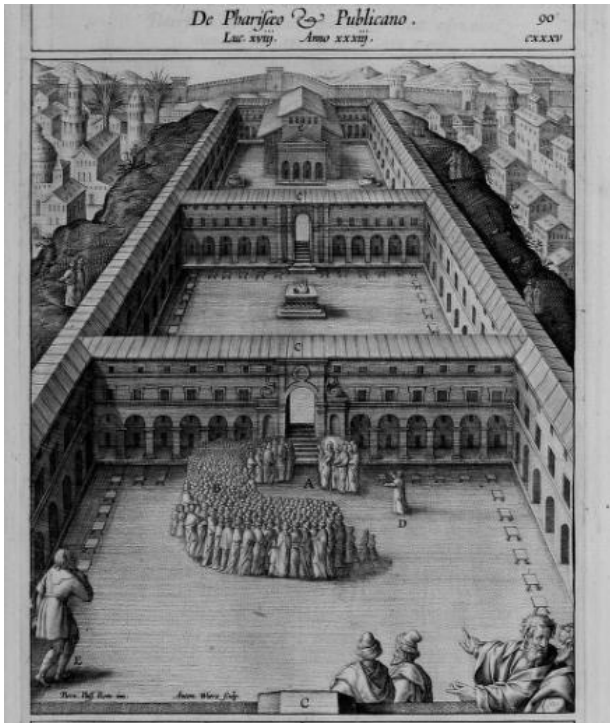


Figure 15: Parable of the Pharisee and Publican (*Lk.* 18:9-14). Fr. Sampson writes (*COC*, pp. 80-81, 96) that God wants to exalt me when I pray, as He did for the publican who programmed into his prayer his weaknesses—his coldness toward the poor and his enemies. Depicted is the boasting Pharisee on the upper right at the temple and the remorseful publican on the lower left standing alone, saying “God, have mercy on me, a sinner”. The examen enables me to come before God as a child and see the Pharisee within, mistakenly convinced of my decency. Figure from Nadal, *Evangelicae historiae* p. 90.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TRUE MYSTICISM

There is a way of imagining union with God that can bedevil our path with its illusions. I see myself at prayer, my heart beating in perfect rhythm with God's own heart. I see myself being totally absorbed in God's will. I imagine my being totally in the grip of the Holy Spirit. I imagine myself feeling the tremendous uncreated energies of the loving Trinity within during my prayer, and I see myself yielding to this movement.

There is a kernel of truth in this attractive image of the self. A Spirit has, indeed, been let loose upon the world. The very energy of God is at our disposal, an energy that was only thinly tapped when He created the world. That mighty act, before which scientists are in awe, was the work of His little finger, as one of the early Fathers says.

What He offers to us now is that same energy He used when He raised Jesus from the dead! There is a force in the world that transcends all human energies. It will not make us invisible. It will not make us physically invulnerable, or even a bit more muscular. It will not make us move with the speed of light. All these could be measured and located as happening here or there.

What then will it do? It will change our hearts. But this change will *not* be perceptible to us. We will not see it. We will not be conscious of our new loving. This great power will invade

us without our becoming conscious of any growth in love within us. This energy will open our sealed eyes. We shall see what we have been blind to—the terrible sufferings of others—and we will see a deep-seated insensitivity within ourselves.

Karl Rahner described this experience as “a humble alarm at our lovelessness.” As we become more and more open to the Spirit’s invasion, our humble alarm will grown greater. Yearning for the day when my morning prayer will no longer include alarm at my lovelessness is yearning for what never will happen as we approach God.

Love is that new energy entering me. Love will open my eyes to my neighbor and his needs. Love will draw me out of myself in spontaneous service. There will be no room for self-consciousness. Instead I will feel how inadequate is my response and I will be alarmed by it.

Let us then imagine the true mystic, filled with alarm at his own lovelessness. Will he not despair of his spiritual growth? Not at all. As Durrwell puts it, he will have reached the perfection of humility; he will have “wholly given up seeking greatness for himself.”¹⁵ His eyes and his mind and his heart will be fixed upon the needs of others. He will derive no consolation from any sense of spiritual growth. He will not see any.

This is what Jesus invited his followers into: becoming aware of their radical powerlessness in the world of the Spirit. This helplessness in the area of loving and trusting was their meeting-place with the Lord. In matters of the Spirit, they were to acknowledge their ignorance. They were to come to see themselves as knowing nothing, lacking wisdom. How else could they let the Lord do His work within them?

They were to be in a state of amazement at God’s persistence in loving them since they would see their own shabby response, their own reluctance to give up judging, resenting, and writing others off.

In the area of this new energy which God had let loose upon the world in Jesus, they were to be children, joyful in their

humble dependence. Let us take an image. You enter a bank. You ask the teller for eight thousand dollars. You have no gun. Do you expect to get it? That depends.

If you have no account, you don't have any expectations. In fact, you don't go in and ask.

But if you had an eight-million-dollar account in the bank, your expectations would be very high. There'll be some papers to sign, but you *will* be given the cash, and you expect it.

In human life, our expectations are proportional to our worth. If we feel that we are worth a lot, we have great expectations. If we feel that we are worth little, we have shallow expectations.

But what Jesus was offering was not a salary. He was the one who had already purchased it. It was a gift. He knew that those who felt they were worth a lot would *not* receive this gift. But, at the same time, to receive this gift, you had to have great expectations. So he was seeking for someone who had no great sense of worth, but who did have great expectations. This is a rare, unlikely combination. We take for granted that "you get what you pay for." We trim our expectations to our estimated worth. The gift that Jesus offered required someone who knew he was not worthy to receive it and who, despite this sense of unworthiness, nevertheless had great expectations that he would be given this gift anyway. Jesus was searching for a rare person.

He found it in the child. Is he hurt? He runs to his mother, without out worrying about Blue Cross, and he *knows* he will be helped. If it is a very minor bruise, he may fear that she will tell him to go back out and play. But if he has a broken finger, he knows she will treat him with tender, loving care. If he needs a lot, he has strong expectations. The child's expectations depend on how serious is his *need*.

Jesus invited us to take for granted that God would take care of our needs. The greater our needs are, the more the Father will come to us. God will be most active on those most in need. Because of this the saints sought to see themselves as a living

need. That was where they invested their spiritual energies. That is the place of the examen for St. Ignatius. It makes us despair of earning this kingdom that we so desperately need.

The examen, then, is a way that enables me to come before God filled with needs. I see myself in the grip of jealousy—not just looking at this jealous me with a passing glance, but with a persistent gaze—I will experience my alienation from God’s will, I will lose the pedestal I stand on to judge others. But I will not see myself losing that pedestal. Nor will I see myself becoming the Gospel child. That would be so nice!

But even as I become the child, I will be seeing more and more sharply the Pharisee within, the one convinced of his own goodness and cooperation and decency, the one who can’t help but notice that some others are not like that at all. The vision of the adorable self—even the adorable-self-as-a-gift-of-God—is not what the Lord’s coming brings with it.

The self-awareness that comes from the examen enables me to hear Scripture quite differently. The examen brings a searchlight to bear on the darkneses of my heart. During moments of interaction with other people the thrusts of negativity are so powerful that they break through into the consciousness and can be seen with great clarity. Very soon, the defense mechanisms regain control, and suppress the emotion. I will remember it only briefly, and as a somewhat unpleasant moment. It will not disturb my image of myself as basically decent and easy to get along with. This will keep my prayer a charade.

One remedy is to notice the emotions even as I am having them. “My heavens, how furious I am!” Most often the situation calls for a temporary repression. It probably won’t help the salvation of the world if I give vent to my feelings and sock the principal—even though he clearly deserves it, and even though it’s hard to see what else will really help.

But what we suppress at that public moment, we should notice carefully—especially the emotional storm within. Then, in a

later moment of prayer, it is vital to bring it all back, to rehearse it. Here the face of the enemy plays its vital role. The voice—that pompous voice—and that mouth pouring forth its foolishness! Now in prayer, I will feel again what I once felt—and what I still do feel even if I have not been conscious of it.

Now I will see the nine-to-five "me," the "me" that others have to live with. It will be quite unpleasant, saddening, even alarming. This is the only knowledge of self that leads to change, to growth. In the area of loving, every one of us needs to be saved, even the saintliest. The only difference between us and the saints is that they are more in touch with this truth than we are.

Unless this image of myself comes into my prayer, the prayer is useless, and the longer it goes, the more of a waste of time it is. Not being present to myself, I will not encounter the true God. I may have a consoling hour day after day, but it serves no purpose.

What if my God is in agony—as Pascal suggests—and I go into His presence seeking peace and consolation for myself! When we turn prayer into a search for peace apart from honesty, we do not allow the true face of God to appear. The coming of God's consolation is not along that path.

True consolation comes with the discovery of God's torment and with the discovery of what in me is the cause of His torment. As He introduces me to Himself, God is introducing me to a myself I do not know—superficial and unreal, so unlike Him. His true face will betray the horror He feels at the wretchedness of the poor.

It is very easy to pray at length—and even over many years—and never meet this God.

Even the reading of Scripture without an openness to true self-knowledge serves no purpose. St. Thomas calls the Gospels a dead letter, unless the Spirit gives life. That is why the examen was a way of life in traditional spirituality.

While long periods of mental prayer were not added to this practice of self-examination, the reading and study of Scripture

was. During the sixteenth century—that moment when long mental prayer became widespread—the reading of Scripture as a staple of spirituality all but disappeared. Fortunately it is coming back. The lack of familiarity with Scripture naturally leads to confusion. A return to the reading and study of Sacred Scripture will help in sorting out the many suggestions that are around today. Scripture contains in many different forms of expression the radical and ever-new spirituality that flows from the revelation. The central role of God's action, and our need for honesty, are constantly being preached in the texts of Scripture.

The demands of the New Law are preached so clearly and in such an uncompromising way that the honest reader is repeatedly shocked at how the text condemns him.

The glorious nature of God's kind favor is spread out before us in parable, incident, argument, and explanation, as well as in Jesus' own life. For one who has an honest image of himself, the Good News comes through as too good to be true—a deliverance when all hope is lost.

The examen enables us to read Scripture effectively and to partake in the liturgy fully. Christian mysticism centers on the liturgy and the liturgical year. Our mysticism is an entering into someone else's story. Because He made our condemnation His, He has become our justification, our sanctification. Our being lifted up to the heights of the divine life is so much a gift that it is imagined as an opening of our mouths and the Lord Himself feeding us. Into our mouths comes His flesh, His blood, and into our hearts His love for our brothers and sisters and His unshakeable faith in the Father.

Such a mystical path does not lead to openly showing *our* affection toward God. Modesty and humility prevent it. The emotion that finds expression is an embarrassed regretting. A momentary awareness of ourselves as obstacles to growth and faith, to love and joy. "There is no one who grasps how much he impedes and obstructs the great things God wishes to accomplish in him." That blessed and joy-filled awareness will never come, if

I do not labor, by means of a persistent, ruthless honesty, to destroy the illusory self-image that my defense mechanisms build.

We do not need to program into our prayer acts of thanksgiving. God is not served by programmed gratitude. Our gratitude is only of value if it is spontaneous. What needs programming is our ingratitude. That is always heartfelt, but ordinarily suppressed.

How much of my life is lived as if I am not a gift! How much of my day goes on as if the Gospel is irrelevant!

Jesus wanted to utter "what had not been heard since the foundation of the world" (*Matt 12:35*). An event had occurred in God. So spectacular was it that it makes refusing to forgive the unforgivable meaningless. Were we to pass into an awareness of the truth, we would begin living in a world where forgiving is easy! What is it that could have made such a way of living possible?

Jesus urges us to take his yoke upon us, the yoke of loving. Let the love command press you down with its impossible demand—to love as he loves—for you will be exalted, raised up. You will move so strongly into the grip of that resurrection future, you will live in this world, but not of it—straining forward in anticipatory joy.

In Rome there is a Jesuit church called St. Ignatius. In the middle of the nave there is a marble circle. If you stand on that spot and look up to the ceiling, you see a remarkable sight—walls that rise into the heavens, because there is no roof. Clouds and heavenly figures above you in the blue skies!

If you move away from the marble circle, and you look up at the ceiling, you can see it is flat. There is no sky, no rising walls. It is a painting, and you can see what the painter wanted to do, but you no longer experience the effect he intended. The perspective is distorted.

What if you never had the chance to stand on the marble despite many visits to the church—perhaps because of the crowds? You could still talk very intelligently about the ceiling.

But you would never have had that central vital experience.

In Christianity, there is such a marble circle. When you stand on it and face the Scripture, every line falls into place. You realize then that the words are meant for you, standing there. That marble circle is despair. Everything that is written is meant for those experiencing despair. In those moments when we recognize the futility of all our effort, the overpowering hold that unlove has on us, the emptiness of our expressions of faith, we stand in our poverty. St. Francis De Sales says, “Not only can the soul which recognizes its poverty have great confidence in God, but it can *only* have true confidence if it does recognize it.”¹⁶

Because of this the saints cultivate despair. It is not easy to come by. It is not natural to us. But it is the one condition for hearing Scripture meaningfully.

In a film a few years ago, “The Neverending Story,” the main character was a boy who was reading a book. He gets very involved in the book, and eventually becomes a character in the book. This occurs when a young princess in the book starts to talk about “the boy who is reading this book.” At first, he is very reluctant to believe that her words refer to him. The princess also mentions the many others who are watching the boy as he struggles with the book: the movie-goers!

We do not readily accept the fact that the words of Scripture are meant for us. We are not being addressed—at least, *I* am not being addressed. I know in a way that it is meant for all and, therefore, for me. But I do not experience myself being spoken to. What a terrible significance Jesus placed upon our free choices.

Jesus himself heard the Old Testament as no one before him. He experienced an invitation to save his brothers and sisters by dying for them.

Most of the time, we know that the text is meant for us but we do not experience it as being spoken to us. It doesn't come alive. we know it, but we do not hear it. We are not conscious of

some other person who is desiring to speak to us here and now through these words.

How to get the words to come to life? Stand in the truth, in despair. Then you will be able to hear the words meant for you—the most incredible of all the texts—“ask and it will be given to you.” Durrwell tells us, “Hope in God begins at the very moment when we despair of ourselves.”¹⁷ And George Maloney: “Only when the contemplative enters into a vivid experience of his own utter poverty and sickness, of his incompleteness before his Maker, can he begin to experience something of God's richness.”¹⁸

It is at such moments that we become conscious that, while we are seeking the Lord, as St. John of the Cross puts it, “the Beloved is seeking us much more.” From within another story we are being called, and named.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, as the two hobbits struggle forward toward their destiny, they have a quiet moment of rest before their next challenge. They chat about stories, and how people get into them, and how they have such varied endings. One of them muses, “I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?” It is meant for all the readers, too. We have indeed fallen into a tale beyond our understanding. We would prefer a tale of our own telling. That would humor us more with rules that reward our achievements. It would be painful but we could identify with it. We like knowing why happiness comes and why it doesn't.

With the Good News, another story intersects ours. Its rules are upside down. It promises much more. We apply to it our old rules. They only appear to work. Those moments when we see that our rules do not work, that the promises are all beyond us, that we are locked out, those are the moments when we enter in.

The saints go to great lengths to cultivate such moments. To be present at the liturgy with all its golden promises when my heart is filled with despair at what I see within myself at what I see within myself—that is the goal of my spiritual activity. When I am most conscious that I am not fit to be a character in this

glorious story of God's only Son, that is when I can hear that voice speaking with authority. He summons me in. It is the child who in his helplessness can alone enter the Kingdom.

The tradition talks much of compunction. It has two elements to it. I glimpse something of what God is like and what He wants to transform me into, and I see my own selfish ways; and it's rather sad and embarrassing. It does not produce the words, "Lord, I will die for you." It wasn't at the Supper that Peter felt compunction. It was later, when, after his denial of the Lord, Jesus looked at Peter. He knew now what love was all about, and he knew it was not in him, but it would be all right anyway. His God was going His way alone, and saving Peter. But Peter had to accept the fact that he did not understand what was happening, that he was like a child "moving about in worlds unrealized." He had to accept the fact that he could not yet understand what was being done to him, and trust the Lord to be doing what needed to be done. Peter had encountered—in a sudden moment—God wrestling His way forward through the world—carrying us all on His broad back.

So, too, we must become children. Years ago, I was living in a small village in the Andes. The big event of each day was the coming of the bus. Everyone who could came to the plaza to watch. One day I saw a woman get off the bus with a suitcase. It was a neighbor. Her little son, Jonson, followed. He was about four years old, and she worshiped him. Though she was poor, he was always carefully dressed.

She picked up the suitcase—probably purchases she had made that day—and took Jonson's hand in hers, and began to walk toward her house. But, after a few steps, Jonson pulled his hand free, and ran to the other side, and put his hand up on the handle of the suitcase. He wanted to help. His mother smiled, and they walked on. But, after a few more steps, Jonson began to strike her hand. He did not want her help. He wanted to do this for her. She kept saying, "It is too heavy for you." He began to cry.

She put the suitcase down. She looked so sad. Jonson reached up, determined. But he could not lift the suitcase. He struggled a bit and then began to bawl. She picked him up in her left arm and held him against her, and reached down and found the suitcase handle with her right hand. She walked the rest of the way with both burdens.

Jonson was not willing to be a child. His mother paid the price. God invites us to be children. What has to be done, only He can do. We constantly forget that. We must allow the Lord to do what we need. We must let Him save us.

We must accept the fact that our spiritual growth is hidden in Christ in God. Loving as Christ loves has nothing to do with seeking to locate God's successes within me. "How am I doing?" In the sight of the wretched of the world—those who so desperately need bread, those who even more desperately need forgiveness—with my eyes newly opened on this, I will find concern for "how I am doing" out of place.

How can I, then, be grateful if I'm going to ignore God's gifts to me—take them with never a word of thanks? First of all, I can thank God for my very life, for my eyes, my ears, my brain, my freedom. I can thank God for my baptism, the Eucharist, the Gospels, Jesus. I can thank God for my parents, my relatives, my friends, my intelligence. There are endless gifts that we can thank God for. Or, if we don't feel the least bit grateful for any of them, we can admit that. "Lord, I know in my head that all these are your gifts, but I do not feel a shred of gratitude. I guess my heart sees them all as facts, things I wake up with each morning. Let me come, Lord, into the truth that I am a heap of gifts constantly flowing from You. Let the mist of illusion clear away and let me see myself with no foundation within, resting entirely on Your kind will. Lord, make me grateful."

Once, a Sister told me about her experience teaching paraplegic children. One boy, Billy, about fifteen, had no control over his body except for his head. Even his neck muscles were

not in his control. Each day he was strapped into his wheelchair, but his head drooped forward on his chest.

This particular day Sister announced, "I am going to teach you today about prayer."

Billie's voice from below. "Sister, I know how to pray."

"Oh, Billie. Then tell us how to pray."

"Each morning, Sister, I say to God: thank you, thank you, thank you."

The Sister told me she immediately left the room. After she had composed herself, she went back in, but she never mentioned prayer again.

Am I ever grateful like that? How powerfully the Lord was at work within Billie, revealing Himself to him, consoling him. What I experience may be more like ingratitude.

This is all a safe thanksgiving—or, even safer ingratitude. But God does not invite us to thank Him for the growth in believing and loving that we see coming into our lives. In fact, this growth is hidden from us, so it cannot be seen anyway. There is no checking on the delivery of God's promises.

And that's the second point. With some people we wait until they fulfill the promise before we thank them. With others, we thank them when they make the promise. "I'll take care of it." "Thanks." It means I trust him. His word is enough. I already know it will be done I respect that will of his. I touch his will to do it, by his word. I do not need delivery to become grateful. I already feel grateful.

So it is with faith. I hear the Lord's promise: His goal is my salvation. "I will raise you up." That is His Word. He has revealed His Will to me. If I trust Him, I will already experience gratitude, the lifting of the burden. Where He may have already scored some successes within me—that is no concern of mine. I must not seek evidence for His Word. That loving me that He is bringing to birth is His secret working. It is not meant for my admiration. My eyes are meant for others, for loving. He does not invite us to go through life worried about whether or not He

is doing what He said He would. We are invited to trust, to take for granted that all we need will be given to us. We are called to trust that God, despite our self-centered way of living, is indeed fully at work within us and within the world.

The believer affirms, in the teeth of much contrary evidence, that this world is the arena where God's loving will is bringing us forward. Anyone who believes that, anyone who comes into touch with God's decision as it is revealed in His word, will enter into gratitude. It is a spontaneous effect of faith. It does not require a programmed listing of all the evidence of God's love. It springs from faith in His word. We thank Him because He will raise us up, and because He is raising us up. How do we know that He is going to do, and is already doing that? Because He gives us His Word.

Our spiritual life should enable us to come to each Eucharist standing firmly in one reality, and facing squarely another. We stand firmly on the circle of our shabby response to our enemies, and to the poor, and our reluctance to trust God. We face the heavens where, in the words of the liturgy and in the ritual gestures and in the sacramental signs, we find God's loving Will toward us. Our poverty meets His wealth, and we are blessed. Our liturgy is named Eucharist/Thanksgiving because it contains His loving Will toward us—the focus of our gratitude.

The more our consciousness becomes absorbed in our enemies and the poor, the greater will be the power of God's promise within us. This is the atmosphere that the saints dwell in, an ever-deepening compunction. To us, rooted in a world of self, comes a heavenly washing in the forgiving love of God. We are seated at His supper table, and fed with His Spirit. We are led to honesty and joy. It is with such people that God cares tenderly for the wretched of the earth.



Figure 16: In discussing our need to be children and allow God to save us, Fr. Sampson used an example from his stay in Quito, Ecuador from July 1966 to June 1967 (*COC*, p. 102). The picture depicts those he worked with at Fr. John Halligan, S.J.'s Working Boys Center. The picture is in the possession of the editors.

Appendix:

Biographical Sketch and Bibliography

Father William “Bill” Paul Sampson, S.J. was born on September 4, 1928 in the Bronx, New York to William Paul Sampson (1895-1929) and Margaret “Daisy” Gordon (Sampson) (1896-1944). He was the fourth of five children. When not yet a year old, his father died from pneumonia after a short illness. His youngest brother was not yet born. Due to a dispute between his mother and his father’s mother, he was raised without any contact with his father’s family. This added to the normal curiosity he had about his father and learning everything he could about him.

The Sampson family belonged to St. Raymond’s Parish in the Bronx and young Bill attended its grade school between 1934 and 1942. Then from 1942 to 1946 he was a student at the Jesuit-run Regis High School from which he graduated at age 18. In September 1946 he entered the Jesuit noviate and for the next 15 years he studied the liberal arts, philosophy and theology, taught three years at a Jesuit high school and acquired experience in the prayer life. He graduated from the Woodstock Theological College near Baltimore and received a master’s degree in teaching from Fordham University. He was ordained to the priesthood in June 1959.

In the 1960s Fr. Sampson taught religion, Latin, French and English at Gonzaga, the Jesuit High School in Washington, D.C., except for a number of years starting in 1964 when he engaged in a variety of experiments, including that of being a priest-worker in a Cleveland factory, a missionary in Quito, Ecuador, a stint at a self-study educational program in Boston and another stint in Washington, D.C. at living independently from the Jesuits and working as a bank teller and a public school junior high teacher.

In 1971 Fr. Sampson embarked on the spiritual retreat and allied spiritual directing work that occupied him until his death 30 years later. He followed the approach of Jesuit founder, Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. He had been following this spirituality since the 1940s while attending high school. In the post-Vatican II period there was a renewal in how the *Exercises* were

done toward the original individually directed 30-day retreat instead of the preached system to a group of retreatants.

As he became involved in this work, Fr. Sampson spent increasingly more time on the road. The Jesuits and other religious orders had retreat centers in rural areas. The Sisters of Bon Secours (C.B.S.), with whom he often worked, had a center west of Baltimore. It is called the Marriottsville Spiritual Center. The Religious of Jesus and Mary (RJM), another order of nuns with whom he collaborated, had centers at Bethany, New York and Guelph, Ontario. He also worked with the Sisters of Mercy (R.S.M.), who were headquartered in Buffalo, N.Y. The retreats lasted three, seven or thirty days. He stayed at the centers during the retreats. In 1974 Fr. Sampson started making regular visits to Kerala, India to do directed retreats and teach the new methods so that the local religious could take over.

The *Coming of Consolation*, originally published in 1986, was written longhand. Fr. Sampson's friend, James Walsh, S.J., typed it up for him and found a publisher. It summarized the insights gained from his work. He later wrote several other books and published a number of articles. They are listed below. A longer biography is online at <http://www.angelfire.com/un/crp/>. Fr. Sampson died on July 29, 2000 and is buried at the Jesuit Cemetery, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

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NOTES

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²Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love* (tr. James Walsh, S.J.; New York: Harper, 1961), p. 83.

³Ignatius of Loyola, "Letter of St. Ignatius to St. Francis Borgia," (late 1545). Letter 101, *Monumenta Ignatian I, Epistolae*, pp. 339-342.

⁴St. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 117.

⁵St. Francis De Sales. *Entretien Spirituel* (Spiritual Care) 8, *Oeuvres Completes de Sales* (Paris: Louis Vives, 1866), Vol. 3, p. 371. Cf. *The Spiritual Conferences* (ed. Aidan Gasquet; Westminster, Maryland: Newman, 1943), p. 135.

⁶Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), p. 51.

⁷St. Thomas Aquinas, In II Cor., cap. 3, lect. 2.

⁸Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973), p. 307.

⁹Markus Barth, *Ephesians* (Anchor Bible 34; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), p. 126.

¹⁰Barth, *Ephesians*, p. 127.

¹¹St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia de Oratione*, PG 63:583.

¹²St. Augustine, Letter 130, X (20).

¹³St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, 83, 14c).

¹⁴Juan Alfaro, S.J., *Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), vol. 2, p. 316.

¹⁵F. X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R., *In the Redeeming Christ* (tr. Rosemary Sheed; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 141.

"The man who takes delight in his own poverty attains the perfection of humility: he has wholly given up seeking greatness for himself."

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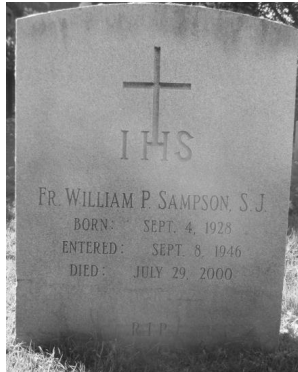


Figure 17: Fr. Sampson’s tombstone at the Jesuit cemetery on the campus of Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. An epitaph from *COC*, p. 28, “Into the despair we experience at our inability to love, comes the Good News. What does the believer believe that makes his life so different from that of the nonbeliever? What is that fundamental article of faith? The Resurrection? The Trinity? The Incarnation? Not these but this: “that the power to love will be given to him when he asks for it. For that is the believing in Christ which the Apostle urges—‘a faith which works through loving’”.