

Distractions and a feeling of emptiness in Prayer¹

When we set aside time to be in communion with God in prayer, we can find our imagination and our thoughts wandering off in all directions. We are distracted, recollection is disrupted and our heart, instead of being in communion with God and being attentive both to God's action in us and to our response, tends to follow the distraction. If we are keen to be close to God in prayer we can find such distractions disturbing. This is especially true when they are habitual. A restless imagination and a mind over which we seem to have little control cause us to experience disappointment and a sense of helplessness. We feel empty. We feel that nothing is happening and that we are wasting our time. Then we are tempted to give prayer away and to do something that is more obviously productive.

Feelings have an important role in our lives, so we should expect them to play a role in our prayer. The way we look at things is the decisive factor in creating our feelings. Sometimes the connection is obvious, sometimes our mental attitudes are so habitual that it takes some work to uncover them. In ordinary circumstances, for example, if while recalling our sins and the graciousness of God, we were to express our sorrow, we would expect to feel sorry. The thought gives rise to the feeling. Staying in touch with the feeling keeps us in an attitude of sorrow. In the same way, we might recall some wonderful way in which we have been graced and we express to God a sense of wonder and gratitude; we would expect to feel a sense of awe and of thanks.

However, things are not always as simple as that. Sometimes we are caught up, however unwittingly, in a mood that we cannot seem to shift. Negative ways of looking at things are dominating our consciousness and we seem powerless to change the way we feel. In these circumstances, we might realise that we have reason to be grateful and we might use words that give expression to gratitude, but we don't feel grateful. It is when there is a disjunction between our conscious thoughts and intentions and our feelings that we need to remember that it is our intention, not our feelings, that ultimately count. A courageous person is one who acts courageously, however frightened he or she may feel. A loving person is one who intends to love and who acts in a loving way. This is true even if the mental attitude and intention do not flow into feeling because of some other inhibiting factor.

The reason for focusing on feelings in this way here is to make the point that while feelings always indicate something that is important and that should not be ignored, they do not have to be followed and are not always good indicators of what is most important. Of greater significance are our intentions and what we actually do. We can love our enemy, meaning we can act towards him and in his regard in a way that respects him as a person and benefits him spiritually, even if our feelings are very confused or even quite negative in his regard. If we really want to be in communion with God, we are in communion with God, even if our thoughts are drifting and with them our feelings.

We know that we need to be disciplined if we are going to remain alert and attentive, listening for God. We realise that there is no point spending our prayer time slumbering or dreaming our time away. If we picture ourselves at prayer as a sailing boat, we know that it is the breath of the Spirit that moves us, but we know, too, that we must erect the sail and keep it trimmed. God won't force himself upon us. He waits for our Yes. If we think of ourselves at prayer as a field, we know that the water that irrigates the field of our soul has its origin in God, but we know, too, that we have a job to do: we have to lower the bucket into the well and draw it out. When we are distracted our heart is not awake to God; we are not attending to our part in the prayer, and tend to feel that we are wasting our time. Teresa of Avila speaks of: 'the afflictions of many people

¹ see Eugene Boylan, *Difficulties in mental prayer* (Dublin, Gill 1943) pages 55-57; Marie-Eugène OCD, *I want to see God* (Christian Classics, Maryland 1953) pages 234-249.

who practise prayer, and their complaints of interior trials. They become depressed and their health declines. They even abandon prayer altogether'(*Interior Castle*, IV.1). She knew what it was like from personal experience: 'Whenever I entered the oratory I used to feel so depressed that I had to summon up all my courage to make myself pray at all'(*Life*, 8.7).

Some distractions are avoidable with appropriate discipline, but there are others over which, with the best will in the world, we have little or no control. Let us look first at avoidable distractions, then at unavoidable ones.

Some avoidable distractions have their origin outside prayer. Eugene Boylan writes:

'Distractions may have their origin outside prayer, in some attachment, some unmortified curiosity, some morbid brooding over humiliations, for example'(page 55).

We cannot expect to be undistracted at prayer if our life outside prayer is dissipated and distracted. Living a generally reflective life will surely help provide the environment for less distracted prayer. We must also be attentive to resisting sin and living a virtuous life. How can we expect to be still and to look God in the face if in our behaviour we are acting in ways that we know are contrary to God's will? If we do not sincerely want to do the will of God, we will, however unconsciously, find ways of avoiding prayer, if only to avoid facing up to what we are doing. Teresa writes:

'We must never have any confidence in ourselves - that would simply be folly. But most of all we must walk with special care and attention, and watch what progress we make in the virtues.'

(*Interior Castle*, V.4.9).

There is necessarily an organic link between our active life and our prayer:

'God invites each of us to be intimately united with him in prayerful contemplation of how loved we are, and, at the same time, to be moved by that love to enter into the Lord's work of building God's kingdom of justice, love and peace ... Real prayer leads to involvement; real involvement leads to prayer. Deeper spirituality impels to action; action impels to deeper spirituality. And the circle continues and deepens. The mystic becomes prophet, the prophet becomes mystic ... The person deepening in prayer and growing in faith is not called out of this world to be with God, but is more profoundly immersed in that world's heart.'²

Since God is the one who hears the cry of the poor, how can we expect to experience communion with God in prayer if we ourselves are deaf to that cry?

'Many will say to me: Lord! Lord! ... But I will say: I never knew you'(Matthew 7:22-23).

'I was hungry and you never gave me food'(Matthew 25:42).

How can we expect to experience communion with God in prayer if we know that we are using the time of prayer to escape from fulfilling our ordinary obligations?

How can we expect not to be distracted if we prefer doing good things for God to actually being in communion with God? If that is our attitude we will find ourselves fitting prayer in and the activity which we put aside for the time of prayer will necessarily dominate our consciousness during the prayer. We must want communion with God more than anything else. Father Marie-Eugène OCD has this warning for those of us who are compulsively committed to action and place it ahead of prayer. He exposes some of the subtle rationalisations which we employ to avoid prayer. We should not be surprised that when we fit prayer in it is our activities that dominate our consciousness rather than our union with God, with the result that we experience distractions.

² Carrol P and Dyckman K 'Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet'(NY Paulist, 1981) page 79.

‘Activism takes cover under numerous and often noble excuses: necessities of life, urgent duties of one’s state, fear lest a certain milieu win and dissipate people, joys to be had in generous action which opens up and enlarges one’s power, the aridity and apparently useless abjection of prayer, and above all a great pity for those around us whose misery is a constant appeal to our Christian charity’(page 420).

The most valuable thing we can do is the will of God. If that means activity then let us be active. If that means taking time out to be in prayer, let us pray. If we find that we are inclined to put more value on activity than on prayer, we could well reflect on the following words of John of the Cross:

‘Let those who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they may not have reached a prayer as sublime as the prayer which we are describing here. They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labour, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm’(*Spiritual Canticle*, 29,3).

Spiritual writers encourage the practice of turning to God for short bursts of prayer during the day. During our activities we might regularly repeat short prayers such as: ‘Sacred heart of Jesus I place my trust in you’ or ‘Jesus, please teach me how to pray’ or ‘Lord, have mercy on me a sinner’. They also recommend setting aside some time to prepare the time of prayer. As in other areas of our life, preparation and expectation can help us be alert and expectant when the time of special communion with God comes. Spiritual reading can provide us with images that help focus attention and so assist our prayer.

Some avoidable distractions have their origin in failure to prepare for prayer. Eugene Boylan writes:

‘Distractions may be due to a failure to recollect oneself generously and completely at the beginning of the prayer’(page 55).

‘Before the time of prayer we must put ourselves in the state of mind we would wish to have in us when we actually pray. It is an inexorable fact that the condition of the soul at the time of prayer depends upon what shaped it beforehand’(John Cassian, Conf 10, page 139).

We can compare our imagination to a cooking range. Most lives tend to be busy: there is a lot going on simultaneously. Some things are simmering away while others are being brought to the boil. When we come to prayer we want to focus our attention on God and what God is doing in our souls. If we want our hearts to be attentive to this special communion, we will need to turn some of the gas jets off or have things simmering away on low heat so that the saucepan lids are not forever on the move and things are not likely to boil over unexpectedly.

We can help ourselves focus by having a special place which we associate with our formal prayer: a prayer-corner, for example, with an icon, a candle, a bible. We can find a chair in which we can be relaxed, but alert, for we do not want to fall asleep. We can find a position that is upright but still, in such a way that we don’t have to keep changing position.

We might find it helpful to spend a few moments focusing on our breathing. If we are attending to it, our attention will be diverted from what has been filling our attention prior to coming to prayer, matter that could easily distract. When we feel in touch with the rhythm of our breathing, we might focus our attention on various parts of our body that are experiencing

tension. One can find a number of suggested ways of doing this. The aim is to relax our bodies while remaining alert and to let the relaxation seep into our mind.

Then we remember that God is present, here in this place. God is present dwelling in my heart. Jesus is here with me. We pray to him for the grace of being in the love-communion which he is offering us.

Now is the time to enter the prayer. It may be that I enter a Gospel scene as described in an earlier reflection. Or I might be drawn into a prayer of simple awareness and find myself attracted to use a mantra - a simple phrase repeated over and over again in rhythm with my breathing. As I think of Jesus I hear him say as I breathe in: 'I am in you,' and, as I breathe out: 'You are in me.' I am listening to him as he repeats these words over and over again.

Some distractions, however, are unavoidable. They flow from the natural weakness of being human. Even if we are living a generally reflective life and are genuinely wanting to do God's will, we can still be distracted in prayer. Sometimes we are just very tired. If it is in carrying out the will of God that we have become tired, God will accept our desire to be attentive to him and love us as we are. That is the way it is with those who love each other. Eugene Boylan writes:

'Distractions may be due to fatigue; for if the powers of the mind are hard at work all day, it is not easy for them to make the effort necessary to remain attentive to what may be a very difficult task. In this case, when the distracting work is of God's appointment and not due to our own self-seeking, we can only glory in our infirmities, and hope in God's grace'(page 55).

If, however, we are always too tired to focus we need to examine our life-style and make some adjustments. Our state of health can also affect our ability to remain focused. Also some times of the day do not suit certain temperaments. We may have been unable to set aside time at the preferred time of the day and are attempting to make up for it at another time, but it is not working very well. God understands and takes our longing for what it is. The distractions don't hinder him from loving us, and if we want to respond we are responding.

Different temperaments tend to be more easily distracted than others, especially if we tend to worry or to be restless and excitable. We can only pray as we are. Whatever our circumstances, distractions are a very normal phenomenon. Eugene Boylan writes:

'Distractions may be due to the natural instability of the mind, especially the imagination. It is a psychological law that one idea tends to call up another, according to the well-known principles of association and contrast, so that the very effort to make one idea clear may be the means of starting a distraction'(page 55).

Other unavoidable distractions flow from the nature of God with whom we are in communion. One reason for distractions is that our intellect is necessarily very limited in its ability to focus on truths about God. It quickly comes to its limit and then gives up or wanders off following the imagination. When this happens the heart tends also to follow and so to cease being moved in relation to God. Eugene Boylan writes:

'Distractions may arise from the fact that the subject of our prayer, or the workings of God's grace, make no appeal to the imagination, to our natural tastes, or even to the more familiar part of our intellectual powers. Here it is especially true that the imagination and its attendants seem to run riot, and any attempt to recall them will only draw away the attention from the real prayer, which is going on in the depths of the soul, in what one might call the "invisible light" of faith'(page 56).

We must exercise discipline during our prayer time. Praying can be like trying to carry out a conversation with a friend whom we pass on the tarmac as we are about to board a jet. We have only a few precious minutes and the engines make it almost impossible to converse. What a pity

it would be if we spent those few moments complaining about the noise. It is possible, though not easy, to ignore the noise and focus on the person and share our hearts. So in prayer. If there is nothing we can do about the distraction, we must try not to let it bother us. Let us stay with God in the depths of our being. The ocean can be very disturbed on the surface and the waves can be moving in a different direction to the current. It is the current that matters and deep down the water can be calm. Let us stay deep and not come up to struggle with the surface distractions. The current of God's love will carry us.

Whatever happens let us, whenever we can, continue to turn our heart towards God. In her prayer journal Catherine of Siena records the following words spoken to her by God:

'Though you feel that I have withdrawn, do not turn away. Rather, persevere with humility and remain within the house of self-knowledge. There, with lively faith, wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, for me, the flame of love. How do you wait? Not lazily, but in watching and constant humble prayer. And your watching is not only physical but spiritual as well. Your mind's eye never closes, but watches by the light of faith and with contempt tears out your heart's wandering thoughts. Watch in love by my charity, knowing that I want only you sanctification' (*Dialogue: The Bridge*, chapter 63).

We must not let distractions discourage us from praying. Eugene Boylan writes concerning distractions over which we have no control:

'All we can do is to renew our attention to God according to the way in which we are praying to him. This should be done quietly, without vexation, or even without surprise at our own folly. If we could only realise how much this continual turning back to God shows Him our real love for Him and pleases Him more than that rapt attention that has its roots in self-love, we should never be dissatisfied with our prayer on account of its numerous distractions. If prayer be a lifting up of the mind to God, then every time we turn away from distractions to renew our attention to God, we pray – and we pray in the teeth of difficulty and despite ourself. What can be more pleasing to God? What more meritorious? We should be very greatly surprised if we could get a glimpse at the account book that the recording angel keeps, and see the different values that are set on our various attempts at prayer. The prayer that pleases us, and with which we were well satisfied, would often be quite low in his estimate, while the prayer that disgusted us, which was apparently made up of nothing but distractions, might be found to have won a very high degree of approval' (page 56).

Teresa of Avila writes:

'One must never be depressed or afflicted because of aridity or unrest or distraction of the mind. If you would gain spiritual freedom and not be continually troubled, begin by not being afraid of the Cross and you will find that the Lord will help you to bear it. You will then advance happily and find profit in everything' (*Life*, 11.17).

'It is not good for us to be disturbed by our thoughts or to worry about them in the slightest. If they proceed from our many weaknesses, let us have patience and bear everything for the love of God' (*Interior Castle*, IV.1.11).

Speaking in more general terms of the trials that occur in the life of a person committed to prayer, Julian of Norwich has this to say:

'When we fall back into ourselves, through depression and spiritual blindness and our experience of spiritual and bodily pains, because of our frailty, God wants us to know that he has not forgotten us ... God wants us to accept our tarrying and our suffering as lightly as we are able, and to count them as nothing. For the more lightly we accept them, the less importance we ascribe to them because of our love, the less pain shall we experience from

them and the more thanks shall we have for them ... If you be in so much pain, so much woe and so much unrest that it seems to you that you can think of nothing at all except the state you are in or what you are feeling, as soon as you can, pass it over lightly and count it as nothing. Why? Because God wants to be known; and because if we knew him and loved him we should have patience and be at great rest, and all that he does would be a delight to us' (*Showings*, chapter 64-65).

Above all we are to listen to Jesus as he pleads with us:

'Trust in God still and trust in me' (John 14:1).

Listen to Saint Paul:

'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it' (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In a well-known poem, Teresa writes:

'Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing cause you to fear.
All is passing. God never changes. Patience gains all.
Whoever has God wants for nothing. God alone suffices' (*Poesías*, 30).

John of the Cross has the same advice:

'When something distasteful or unpleasant comes your way, remember Christ crucified and be silent. Live in faith and hope, even though you are in darkness, because it is in this darkness that God protects the soul. Cast your care upon God, for He watches over you and will not forget you. Do not think that He leaves you alone; that would be an affront to Him' (Pentecost 1590).

'The soul has endured no tribulation, or penance, or trial to which there does not correspond a hundredfold of consolation and delight in this life' (*Living Flame*, 2.23).

With her customary clarity and simplicity, Julian of Norwich writes:

'I felt pain, and afterwards delight and joy. In the time of joy I could have said with St. Paul: "Nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ"; and in the pain I could have said with St. Peter: "Lord, save me, I am perishing". This vision was shown to teach me to understand that some souls profit by being comforted at one time, and at another to fail and to be left to themselves. God wishes us to know that he keeps us safe all the time, in sorrow and in joy. Our Lord gives joy freely as it pleases him, and sometimes he allows us to be in sorrow, and both come from his love' (*Showings*, chapter 15).

Can the distraction become part of the prayer? Eugene Boylan writes:

'Sometimes the mere return to God is sufficient to banish the distraction; but very often the same distracting thought keeps coming back, despite our attempts to get rid of it. One way of dealing with such obstinate intruders is to make them the subject of the prayer. With a little ingenuity, some relation can be found between the distracting idea and God. It may, perhaps, give us something to pray for; it may serve as a motive to praise God; it could be used as evidence of our need for God's grace ... If all else fail, we can fall back upon the advice of the author of *The Cloud* for dealing with distractions, that we should endeavour to look over their shoulders as if we were looking at some object beyond them and above them, – which is God' (page 57).

It is important not to give up setting aside periods for prayer even though it might seem to be a waste of time. We are to give God time to be with us even if we do not feel that we are with God. Eugene Boylan writes:

‘Another way of looking at prayer may help us when we feel we cannot pray at all. Let us regard the time of prayer as an appointment with God. If for his own wise reasons God decides not to keep his appointment, that is God’s will and, therefore, to be praised. For our part, by staying there, helpless, and almost hopeless, we are doing what God wants us to do, and we can confidently leave the result to God. These helpless half-hours spent fighting sleep and distraction, “getting nowhere”, as the phrase has it, have a providential part to play in our sanctification. Distractions which are not deliberate are a trial, not a fault; let us accept them, cheerfully and confidently. In his own good time, God will come and save us’(page 57).

Teresa admits that she herself was ‘terribly oppressed by the turmoil of thoughts’ till she came to realise that ‘physical turmoil is no hindrance to my prayer. The tranquillity and love in my soul are quite unaffected’(*Interior Castle*, IV.1). She advises:

‘Should you fall, be careful, be careful, for love of the Lord, not to be deceived into abandoning prayer ... Trust in the goodness of God which is greater than all the sins we can commit. God does not remember our ingratitude when we, recognising what we are, wish to return to his friendship ... Recall his words, and look at what he did in my case: I grew weary of offending him before he left off forgiving me. He never grows weary of giving, and his mercies can never be exhausted. Let us not grow weary of receiving’(*Life*).

John of the Cross agrees:

‘There are many who desire to advance and persistently beseech God to bring them to this state of perfection. Yet when God wills to conduct them through the initial trials and mortification, as is necessary, they are unwilling to suffer them, and they shun them, flee from the narrow road of life, and seek the broad road of their own consolation, which is that of their own perdition; thus they do not allow God to begin to grant their petition. They are like useless containers, for although they desire to reach the state of the perfect, they do not want to be guided by the path of trials which lead to it. They hardly even begin to walk along this road by submitting to what is least, that is, to ordinary sufferings’(*Living Flame* 2,27).

‘In tribulation, immediately draw near to God with confidence, and you will receive strength, enlightenment and instruction’(*Sayings of light and love* n.63).

Teresa acknowledges that there are even times when it is best to ease off praying:

‘The suffering experienced in this state will demonstrate that you are not to blame yourself and that you must not be perturbed, for that only makes matters worse. Nor must you weary yourself by trying to put sense into something - namely, your mind – which for the moment is without any. Pray as best you can; indeed, don’t pray at all, but try to rest your spirit as you do when you are ill, and busy yourself with some other virtuous action’(*Way of Perfection*, 24).

The fruit of prayer is often experienced later. Therese of Lisieux writes:

‘Our Lord has no need of books or teachers to instruct our souls. He, the Teacher of teachers, instructs us without any noise of words. I have never heard him speak, yet I know he is within me. He is there, always guiding and inspiring me; and just when I need them, lights, hitherto unseen, break in. This is not as a rule during my prayers, but in the midst of my daily duties’(*The Story of a Soul*, viii.131).

God’s longing is to love us. He is delighted when we put time aside to be with him and to open our hearts to receive this love and to respond. God knows our weakness and loves us as we are. If we want to be with God and are genuine in wanting our hearts to be alert to receive God’s Spirit, we may be disappointed because of various distractions and trials but we can be sure that God is

delighted with us and that the rain of his love is gently falling on the field of our hearts. No distraction on our part can hinder God from loving us. In any case we go to prayer not for ourselves but to praise, thank and love God. We are to trust that our good intentions are seen by God. Whatever our feelings, God is certainly loving us.