

17. Distraction and Emptiness

When in our desire to draw near to God we set aside time in the hope of experiencing communion, 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. We feel powerless to elicit thoughts or feelings in regard to spiritual things. If we are keen to be close to God in prayer we can find such distractions and lack of relish disturbing. This is especially true when this condition is 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 and the lack of them in prayer

Feelings have an important role in our lives, so we should expect the same in our prayer. In ordinary circumstances, when we recall our sins and the graciousness of God, and express our sorrow, we would expect to feel sorry. We expect the recollection to give rise to the feeling, and that staying in touch with the feeling would help to keep us in an attitude of sorrow. In the same way, when we recall some wonderful way in which we have been graced and when 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 so simple. 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 intention and our feelings that we need to remember that it is our intention, not our feelings, that ultimately counts. 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 we cannot shake off a prevailing mood, or because some other memory keeps coming into our consciousness and distracting us.

It is our intention that counts

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 aims to benefit him spiritually, even if our feelings are very confused or even quite negative in his regard. Likewise, if we really want to be in communion with God we need to be reassured that we *are* in communion with God, even if our thoughts are

drifting and with them our feelings. This is because God always wants to be in communion with us, and our intention to welcome God's offer is enough to ensure this communion, whatever the state of our feelings and however distracted our thoughts. What matters is that we keep our intention focused on God. Admittedly this is something that is difficult to maintain when we are distracted by a wandering imagination and mind.

The need for discipline

We need to be disciplined if we are going to remain alert and attentive, listening for God. There is no point in spending our prayer slumbering or dreaming our time away. If we picture ourselves at prayer as a sailing boat, it is true that it is the breath of the Spirit that moves us, but we need to know that we must erect the sail and keep it trimmed. God won't force a way in. God waits for our Yes. If we think of ourselves at prayer as a field, it is true that the water that irrigates the field of our soul has its origin in God, but we need to know that we have a job to do: we have to lower the bucket into the well and draw it up.

When we are distracted our heart is not awake to God; we are not attending to our part in the prayer, and we tend to feel that we are wasting our time. Teresa knows of the

afflictions of many people who engage in prayer, including melancholy, loss of health, and even the complete abandonment of prayer (*Interior Castle* IV.1.9).

She knew what it was like from personal experience:

I don't know what heavy penance could have come to mind that frequently I would not have gladly undertaken rather than recollect myself in the practice of prayer ... so unbearable was the sadness I felt on entering the oratory, that I had to muster up all my courage in order to force myself (*Life* 8.7).

Some distractions have their origin outside the time of prayer, and are avoidable with appropriate discipline. Perhaps we are over attached to something, or over curious, or find ourselves brooding over some humiliation or injustice that we have received. The answer to the distraction is found in doing something about these preoccupations.

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.

There is necessarily an organic link between our active life and our prayer. 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). 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 that 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.

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 (*I want to see God*, page 420).

In earlier years during an especially busy time in my ministry I thought that I could get by with praying 'on the run'. Thank God, I came to realize how foolish this is. If Jesus, with all his love, needed to make time to be alone with his Father in prayer, who was I to think that I could manage without it. God was kind to me, and the fruit of God's love continued to appear on the branch. However, I was deceived by this and lulled into a false sense of security. Had I been more faithful to setting aside time and space for prayer, I would have been more attentive and would have caused less hurt to others and to myself. I am sure that I am not alone in making this mistake. If we are 'on the run', let us 'pray on the run', certainly. But if we are always on the run and if this is the only way we pray, we have Jesus himself and every writer on prayer telling us that we are making a terrible and dangerous mistake. If we behaved like this in other significant relationships in our lives we would soon discover our folly. No relationship is as important as the relationship we have with God, and it is especially in prayer that we are offered this communion. To believe this is central to a life of faith. To neglect prayer because we do not experience this communion is to fail to remember that communion with God is necessarily mysterious. As disciples of Jesus, we should be content with his example. We would be unwise to ignore his teaching.

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 take time out. 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'.

Preparing for prayer

Distractions which have the origin outside the time of prayer would have less impact if we followed the advice of spiritual writers and prepared our prayer more carefully. 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. As noted in the previous chapter, another aid is good spiritual reading, which can provide us with images that help focus attention and so assist our prayer.

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 chapter. 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.

We cannot expect to avoid all distractions

Distractions are not always avoidable. Some 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 will love us as we are. That is the way it is with those who love. If, however, we are always too tired, we need to examine our lifestyle 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 God from loving us, and if we want to respond we are responding. Other distractions flow from the nature of God with whom we are in communion. 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.

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 runway 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, but in its depths quite still; and the waves can be moving in a different direction to the current. It is the depths that count; it is the current that matters. 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. Eugène Boylan writes:

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 God our real love for Him and pleases God 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 ourselves. 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 God's 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 (*Difficulties in Mental Prayer*, page 56).

Above all we are to listen to Jesus as he pleads with us: 'Trust in God still and trust in me'(John 14:1). We recall the consoling words of Paul:

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

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.

There are times when distractions can become part of the prayer. Eugène 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 fails, 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 (*Difficulties in Mental Prayer*, 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 continues:

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 God's own wise reasons God decides not to keep the 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 that are not deliberate are a trial, not a fault; let us accept them, cheerfully and confidently. In God's own good time, God will come and save us (*Difficulties in Mental Prayer*, page 57).

God's longing is to love us. God is delighted when we put time aside to be with God and to open our hearts to welcome and respond to God's love. 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 God's love is gently falling on the field of our hearts. In any case we go to prayer not for ourselves but to praise, thank and love God. Is it not true that the experience of being distracted and the feelings of emptiness remind us that of ourselves we cannot pray? We are taught by this to turn towards God in humility and wait on God's grace, all the while trusting that God sees our good intentions. Whatever our feelings or lack of them, however distracted our thoughts, God is certainly loving us.