

14. Prayer reflecting on one's life

Good musicians take great care of their instruments. Violinists are constantly checking the tension on the strings to keep their violins in tune. In a similar way, if we are committed to a life of prayer we need to monitor our lives, for the quality of prayer is best assessed by examining our attitudes and reactions. As Jesus said: 'you know a tree by its fruit'(Matthew 12:23).

It is good to take time regularly to reflect on our lives with a view to noticing the movement of the Spirit of God in our hearts, and our attention or lack of attention to God's presence and inspiration. This practice of regular reflection is sometimes called an examination of conscience. This is accurate, as long as we do not limit our focus to observing where we have gone wrong. We must learn to be sensitive to the light, even more than to the shade, for if we neglect to look for the light we are in danger of stumbling from darkness to darkness, from sin to sin.

A few moments of reflection over our day provide the opportunity to note and relish with gratitude moments of communion with God, which might otherwise be forgotten and leave no trace. Such reflective prayer provides the opportunity also to note and express our sorrow for the times when we were inattentive. It makes us more sensitive to the action of God in our lives and we get to know God more intimately. We also become more sensitive to our habitual ways of responding to God, both positive and negative. We get to know ourselves better, always in the atmosphere of trusting prayer. The following suggestions might prove helpful.

Whatever we are feeling and whatever is happening to us, we begin by placing ourselves trustingly in God's presence and, in the company of Jesus, we search our memory for something, anything, however apparently insignificant, for which we can feel grateful. This will sometimes be difficult, but there will always be something. Having found it, let us focus upon it, savour the moment, and express our thanks to God. Can we say: 'Whatever you may do, I thank you'. We open our hearts to receive the Giver of all gifts.

Next, we pray to God to be able to see our day in the light of faith. We ask Jesus to look into our eyes and show us what he sees. We ask his Spirit, dwelling in us, to reveal to us our soul, remembering the words of Jesus: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'. The pure in heart will also see themselves as God sees them.

As a third step and in the presence of Jesus, we look back over the day at the places where we have been, the activity in which we have been involved, the people whom we have encountered. We ask God: 'Please show me *now* where you were then and what you were saying to me.' We keep our attention on God, on waiting for God to reveal what God wants to show us. This is not a time for looking in at our lives as though we were an outside observer. It is important to remember from the inside. We pray to recall the feelings, the movements of heart (or lack of them). We are not simply remembering, we are asking the Spirit of Jesus to shine gently in our hearts and to reveal how God was present in the moments of our day. Even when the surface of our lives is being whipped up by storms, there is an undercurrent drawing us into communion with God and 'guiding us along the right path.'

We will recall moments when what Saint Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit will be apparent. We will recall moments of ‘joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control’ (Galatians 5:22). These are moments when we were in communion with God and were responding to God’s love. We thank God for them. We will also recall moments when the fruits of the Spirit were absent. We may also recall moments when we rejected grace, when we sinned, when we followed a habitual line of self-gratification, neglecting the deep longing of our hearts. These are moments when we were not in communion with God. We express our sorrow and open our heart to God’s healing and forgiving mercy.

If something quite significant stands out, either positive or negative, we delay over it, savouring either our gratitude or our sorrow. We are to be especially attentive if we find that something is disturbing our feelings, or if we discover that we are doing something that we don’t want to reveal to our spiritual director but wish to keep secret.

We ask to be more alert to the grace which God is certainly offering us to continue listening attentively and to take steps to avoid the inattentive or sinful behaviour which we have observed. We finish the reflective moments with an act of longing and love, looking forward with expectation to the wonderful ways that God will be loving us in the time before the next reflection.

We will find that regular attention to the state of our soul such as we have described is essential to the fine-tuning of our spirit. It takes only a few minutes, and can save us from wasting our lives in activity that does not come from our heart. In Japanese the expression ‘too busy’ when written in kanji is composed of two radicals, one representing the heart and the other representing destruction. Jesus challenges us: ‘Even if you were to gain the whole world it would be worthless if in doing so you lost your life’. An unreflective life is not a life that is worth living.

To summarise:

1. Place myself in God’s presence. What do I feel grateful for today?
2. Ask Jesus to let me see my day through his eyes.
3. Ask Jesus to show me now what he was trying to show me during the day: the good and the bad.
4. Delay on anything that stands out, expressing gratitude or sorrow.
5. Pray to be more attentive and sensitive to God’s inspiration.
6. Conclude with an act of longing and love.