

## On Distractions

(as related to the origins of Christian, contemplative prayer)

Usually when you finish a writing project there's a period of waiting, a kind of gestation, while the focus you brought upon the earlier material requires taking a break so it can recede into the background and make way for new insights. Unless you're especially gifted, the urge to continue writing should be resisted momentarily, otherwise you run the risk of becoming superficial. Failure to abide by this warning sign is going against nature, for creative juices from the unconscious work according to their own clock and seep to the surface when they wish, regardless of how hard we try to elicit them. Obedience to this suspension of the creative urge is an acknowledgment that something is transpiring within the unconscious just below the surface of our normal attention span. On one hand this obedience is frustrating because the creative urge makes its presence felt even if it's formless...a kind of presence by its absence. This urge can be perceived, albeit indirectly, as a reservoir of formless energy. It can mock us, as it were, by our lack of activity as what to do and how to advance. Although nothing appears on the radar screen at the moment, you can catch a glimpse of this unconscious realm from the corner of your eye. It is there all right but percolating just beyond our reach. Although we get a glimpse of its presence as by taking a break from writing or a pause from some other project, it comes to the fore when we give way to inner silence which has nothing to do with being insensitive to the world around us.

Such a reduction to silence we tend to resist or ignore, thinking ultimately that it is akin to being dead. We can grasp this intellectually, but it's another matter to live out. However, the basis for perseverance in silent attentiveness rests upon previous experiences when we've had a number of suspensions of our creative faculties. Sooner or later we emerged from them...again and as always, in their own good time, not ours. It is as though those faculties had a vision larger than our own, not unlike hosting a greater reality. And so it's worthwhile to recall how we comported ourselves within a given suspension and ponder what gave rise to a new creative impulse. Hence the importance of memory not just as the ability to pull something from the past out of our mental cabinet but as a faculty which comes to bear upon our current situation. I've dealt with this in another article by exploring the Greek term *anamnesis* which translates as memory but is a much richer term signifying genuine access to significant things and events that had transpired regardless of how long ago that happened to be. *Anamnesis* is not unlike lifting us from this world and transporting us to another, it's that astounding a faculty. When a creative impulse makes its presence known, it starts with near complete forgetfulness of the last project, at least on the conscious level. Often reading new material propels our minds forward to different interests, the best way to handle the awkward time or interval between writing projects.

To lift us from these awkward situations, appropriating a proper image is helpful. For example, consider the hovering of a bird not unlike the "Spirit moving over the face of the waters" depicted in the opening verses of Genesis. Such hovering is at the heart of divine creativity as the ensuing chapters of that book reveal. Here the Hebrew verb for "moving over" is *rachaph*, suggestive of a bird brooding over her young ones as she cherishes them. This would include the mother bringing food to her chicks and as found among some species, pre-digesting it for them. A similar action takes place during our period of quietude. It allows submission to those workings deep within us without consciously thinking about them. As for this *rachaph*, it occurs in the second verse of Genesis or right at the beginning of the divine creative process. Though not mentioned specifically at the beginning of each day of creation, we can assume that this *rachaph* is present among them. Note the words after the completion of each day: "and there was evening and there was morning, a (third) day." We could take this period between evening and morning as symbolic of that silent rest...pause...with respect to the creative process. Using this as a model, we can rest after one creative period, that is, at night, during which we become sensitive to the Spirit's *rachaph* over us. Let's say that nothing creative came of this, contrary to our expectations. Being under the influence of this spiritual brooding is sufficient in and by itself regardless of the outcome because it is a direct touch of God which transcends any creative tendency on our part. Perhaps this is why God is prodding us: not so much to be creative but to remain in his presence through the *rachaph* of the Holy Spirit. That *rachaph* is consummated on the seventh day when God rests from creation.

You don't hear much about the desirability of putting limitations upon creativity, of subordinating it to a greater good, yet that's what happens when the divine *rachaph* comes to a halt on the seventh day of creation. That day, now known as Sunday, is a day of rest, a time to reflect back on the six days of creation and how the Spirit brought various things into existence. Not only is Sunday a day to reflect upon the past six days but the coming six days as well. In this way Sunday stands apart from the past and future, existing in the present moment. Although we have a tendency of making this seventh day into one of work (in fact, modern society has done it already), the Spirit knows better than us when to put a cap on things, being more familiar with our limitations than ourselves. While we may give lip service to this fact, the creative urge is unrelenting, really, and not having access to it as freely as we would like makes us more keenly aware of our innate poverty. No matter how many times we've been exposed to this poverty and have reaped benefits from its realization, for example, by translating it into rest, the reluctance to accept such an abeyance keeps haunting us. In short, on each occasion we must wrestle with it as though for the very first time. We may wonder why this is so despite our good intentions. It appears to be a way of returning to that pre-temporal instance of "in the beginning" when the "Spirit (was) moving over the face of the waters" just when the six day creative process got under way. Perhaps our desire to see our creativity in action once more is like that. However, it is finite, not infinite like the Holy Spirit.

Seeking ways to channel our innate creativity bears some resemblance to that perennial problem experienced by many folks when it comes to silencing the mind as in the practice of contemplative prayer. The latter is a type of creativity although one which doesn't assume a manifest form, so it lies beyond the scope of mere curiosity and manipulation. One could say that inner silence is *the* source of creativity itself...participating in the divine *rachaph*...so learning how to quiet the mind and keeping it from being dissipated is a principle way of allowing our potential to issue forth. Here's where the topic of distractions comes in, a subject that has occupied spiritual writer for centuries. In fact, it is the very meat and potatoes of their literature. Pick up any mainstream religious magazine, and you'll find reviews of new books about prayer appearing every week. The bulk of this literature centers around obstacles to God's presence, the chief being the constant conniving of our minds. This is indicative that it touches up a major concern for quite lot of folks. With this in mind, I throw in my two cents worth which is based upon some four decades of monastic practice. This interest also accounts for the subtitle, "as related to the origins of Christian, contemplative prayer," for I saw the two as going hand-in-hand. During this period which covers the bulk of my life I can testify that distractions don't go away; instead they intensify. At the same time the ability to handle them and see their role comes into clearer focus. As already noted, the subject of distractions arose indirectly, almost in a kind of no-man's-land, while I was awaiting an impetus from above (or from anywhere else for that matter) to continue with my modest writing projects. For most folks the realm of distractions forms a "light" imprisonment from which we can't escape. I say "light" because distractions don't weigh us down completely, even if we've been dealing with them many a year. They are more like an unwanted, subdued background noise: always present yet not loud enough to interrupt our daily routine. However, they become increasingly bothersome the further you advance in either a creative activity or a life dedicated to contemplative prayer. That is a subject all to itself.

Usually any creative urge which comes upon us is short lived, a fact which does not at all detract from its value. It happens that once we've gotten the initial "stuff" of this urge out there in one form or another, we succumb to the restlessness of our minds, an embarrassing admission we'd rather keep private. While developing some insights for this article, I experienced this first hand. On occasion ideas kept flowing smoothly and without interruption though in relatively short bursts, a very pleasant experience of being grounded. However, in times when I was not in this situation I found myself frittering away time such as playing that infamous game of solitaire built into most computers (after all, the icon was invitingly there on the desktop) as well as performing minor computer chores. All were clearly superfluous yet indicative that two forms of energy (or whatever you want to call it) were operative at the same time. For the most part the distractions weren't enjoyable, more or less neutral, though they and my experiences of creativity seemed connected. I knew the reason intuitively but could not yet articulate it. Also, I was struck by the suddenness these distractions impinge upon us, that barely have we time to see their emergence which accounts for the difficulty of accounting for them. While not enjoying them, I could observe that they induced a type of habituation, parasite-like on the mind, offering a diversion from the task at hand. The best part is that distractions are interior, hidden from the prying eyes of other people, which makes us relieved that no one can

observe us. Fortunately the computer I use lacks an Internet connection...deliberately so...for that would make matters worse. Although this restlessness is of a low grade order, i.e., "light," it demands attention because it's so pervasive. I think that at the end of one's life...even if lived admirably...a person looks back and regrets not having done something about this imbalance. The disorder is increasing the more connected or wired we get. Though generally I'm unacquainted with current books on prayer, I'm sure that many of them all deal with this modern affliction.

Thus we must learn not just to cope with but to live with distractions; instead of attempting to drive them out, we should explore avenues to make them manageable that they may be at the service of our creative efforts. One may compare dealing with distractions to fighting a guerilla war as opposed to a conventional one. That means dismantling the conventional arsenal in our repertory and adopting tactics suitable for small, quick assaults in the form of insights aimed not at destroying but at capturing these distractions and directing them elsewhere. If distractions were animate beings, chances are they'd entice us to eliminate them with a head-on attack, knowing full well that we can't succeed. When we do conduct a skirmish operation into the nature of distractions, that is, by perceiving directly into their source, we don't squander as much mental energy and thus better understand their character. In effect, we're imitating the way distractions assault us, in bits and pieces. After a while the understanding we get consists in realizing that distractions have no legs upon which to stand; they're spontaneous sparks of energy, if you will. And so, little assaults over an extended period of time allow us to weaken the distractions and reveal their spontaneous coming to birth and their equally spontaneous dissolution. Because the task at hand is wholly interior and difficult to wrap one's mind around, it's helpful to visualize them as one would project pictures onto a screen. For example, we may visualize our distractions as a reverse *rachaph*...a reverse hovering...which hounds us with persistent thoughts arising out of the blue. This requires keeping in mind the genuine *rachaph* of Genesis, how the Spirit hovers over creation. Carefully read the first chapters of Genesis, the account of creation, and see how God brings each living thing into being through *rachaph*. If it works there, why not with distractions? We can use this positive image as a mirror not just to reflect but to reverse the stream of thoughts hovering around what we wish to do either creatively or in prayer. This isn't a bad idea, really. It takes a positive biblical principle and employs it to mirror indirectly that which is negative or bothersome while at the same time not succumbing to this negativity. Despite the two *rachaphs* being radically different, in a certain way they are the same, namely, in their quality of hovering: one does so creatively and the other to undo creativity. It takes some practice getting the hang of this, for at first it can be alien to grasp. Better to say it requires the acquisition of a habit (in Greek, a *hexis* or disposition) founded upon an undesirable experience in order that the true *rachaph* overtakes gradually the false *rachaph*. I'd say that even a partial, imperfect stab at making such a gesture is sufficient in that it demonstrates our courage to take the correct step. It whets our appetites for a more thorough adoption, of wanting to be under the Spirit's wings to let its *rachaph* assume more control of our lives. Now we can let the six days of creation proceed followed by the seventh of divine rest.

When pondering the Genesis account of the Spirit's *rachaph* we see that is active...brings six days of creation into existence...whereas we are passive to the *rachaph* of distractions. In other words, despite being passive to the former's activity, mysteriously this passivity makes us participate in the divine *rachaph*. And despite we being passive to the latter, never do we gain the upper hand but remain subject to its whims: we are not just passive but become subjugated, enslaved. This difference between the two *rachaphs* is crucial, one we may accept intellectually but have a hard time incorporating into our lives. After having pondered the viability of the image which got distractions out of our heads and onto an objective screen, as it were, it's vital to try out this practice in the field, to see if it works. This means having faith in the process, of actually committing ourselves to the process. By doing away with the obstacles as much as possible to an understanding of how *rachaph* works...both the divine and the human ones, for that would be caving into a distraction...we move closer to a commitment and thus to its actuality. This is not unlike a leap over a deep chasm but one where the two sides are very close to each other.

As for practice, allow me briefly to refer to an article composed before the current one, The Importance of Kata. There I examined the Greek preposition *kata* (according to; it also means 'down,' not unlike going down...and going back up...as in a list) found in the Septuagint rendition of Gen 1.26, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." *Kata* is used for both "in" and "after." This small preposition governs how we

comport ourselves so divinely fashioned. That is to say, *kata* involves something like a sequence or a row of multiple items all lined up with a wide variety of choices. It's more inclusive than what we've inherited through tradition, that is to say, as being made *in* the image and *in* the likeness of God. Surely nothing is wrong with this approach, but "in" means...well, in...or a full presence within a larger reality. The problem is that being attentive to this in-ness can be taxing on our nervous system, that it's too intense and undifferentiated. You're aware of being either in or being out, no choice in the matter, so if pressed to the extreme as sometimes happens when people are engaged in contemplative prayer, trying to be "in" God's presence can make you a bit schizophrenic. *Kata*, on the other hand, allows fluidity in our attempts to realize the divine image and likeness. One could even incorporate distractions into this approach, for as noted above, they are inescapable, a basic fact of the spiritual life. This doesn't mean giving into distractions but accepting them more graciously. Even better, you can learn to arrange them...put them in (*kata*) an order...that they find their proper place and not overwhelm us. Should you try the same with being made *in* the same divine image and likeness, quickly you could become discouraged and give up the practice. It's too demanding and tempts us to rely upon our own resources instead of the Spirit's *rachaph*. Appreciation of the preposition *kata* as used in Genesis turns out to be a genuine boon whose merits can be tested almost immediately. It has the further benefit of loosening up our attachments to fate, compulsion and the inability to change our circumstances or at least our attitude toward them.

As time went on between completion of the *kata* article and wrestling with ideas which eventually took the form of the current one, I saw that my attention shifted slightly to the origins of contemplative prayer, of attention to God with a minimum of words. This included asking a number of people in-the-know, much better informed than I about such matters. When did this type of prayer—neither the formulaic nor the liturgical variety but the quieting of the mind—come on the scene? As you'd expect, being in the monastery makes this high on the list of things to ponder. Some people whom I asked, monastics and otherwise, came up with stock answers as to sources but when pressed further, they admitted they hadn't a clue. They didn't put it so directly but directly enough for me to know what they were thinking. A Carmelite sister of some repute was one such person who admitted her ignorance from the get-go and was delighted that the question was raised in all its simplicity. One of the stock responses that came my way was influence from the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, much older than the Christian one. Both contain sophisticated techniques and beautiful texts with regard to how a person should comport himself relative to the quieting of his mind, let alone established monastic traditions. However, this influence is difficult to pin down as having an effect during Christianity's early centuries. I and other monks always have pondered this mysterious period since we live in a tradition which sprung directly from it. Over the years quite a few monks have speculated about the influence of Buddhism through Asia, etc., but that was about it. Such questioning was done, if you will, in a non-professional way but squarely within a community of monks devoted to the practice of contemplative prayer. Hence that defect in historical knowledge was compensated more than enough by living example. As time passed, it became more apparent that many people, including monks, had lost their bearings as far as the Western classical tradition is concerned (another favorite theme of this Home Page). They tended to substitute a possible scenario where they were ignorant of facts and literature. By that I mean the influence exerted from the Roman-Hellenistic world upon Christianity in all its manifestations. That's where a recently published (2009) book like **Among the Gentiles** by Luke Timothy Johnson comes in handy. He shows the close connection between Christianity and its ancient milieu, a realm often clouded over by religious prejudices favorable to Christianity. While that book goes a long way to clarifying facts, one already familiar with classical literature wouldn't find Johnson's observations that novel. However, his research has the benefit of clearing up presumptions such as Buddhism's supposed influence upon Christianity or better, by pointing out the sophisticated philosophic and religious tools that ancient culture had in its possession which Christianity adopted.

Apart from this, immediately an objection may be offered. These traditions aren't theological strictly speaking, for they don't admit the operation of grace. Be that as it may, a matter left for experts, there remains the question of when prayer of a contemplative vein make its presence felt in Western (or Eastern) Christianity. If we limit ourselves within the confines of Christianity's reach, the answer is a bit fuzzy. Chances are influences from the Orient made their way west and were adopted by monks, that is to say, people who set themselves apart (as in the East) from society. This desire for voluntary segregation appears paramount regardless of

external influence. Something deficient in society triggered these people to withdraw and look inwards, mostly as hermits or recluses. Then when you look at the difficulty of this enterprise, of all the “junk” we find within ourselves, it’s no small wonder that people actually took this path. Despite this, the contrast between prayer (as we’ve come to know it) and Christianity’s immediate roots (Judaism and Hellenism) make the advent or contemplative prayer all the more a remarkable phenomenon. Raising questions about the source of contemplative prayer within Christianity is important as is the case here, but this can go only so far. It is not unlike the mentality lying behind causality in science which wishes to trace back as far as possible...to the Big Bang or even before...the ultimate source of all things. That’s what I’ve run up against when inquiring about the origins of contemplative prayer, even from quite gifted people.

Despite the value of historical research into the circumstances and conditions which allowed both men and women to develop silent prayer, its source(s) remains shrouded in mystery. It appears that monks and hermits imparted to the society they left that which they had learned in solitude, at least that’s how the story generally comes down to us. For example, it would be interesting to put yourself back at that time, a society which had venerated gods and goddesses. Such prayer was both liturgical and political: liturgical as a work-of-the-people and political as the proper expression of a city state or *polis* which extended into Roman times as well. Let’s say by chance you’ve heard the Christian Gospel preached or met some members of that new faith and come away with a favorable impression. It so happens we have such a documentation by St. Athanasius in the person of St. Anthony of Egypt. Upon hearing the Gospel, this apparently illiterate peasant took off for the desert and worked out a life style on his own. What got him going was reflection upon how the early Christians in the Acts of the Apostles gave all they had to be in common. But the real spark lay in two verses from the Gospels: “If you would be perfect, go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mt 19.21) and “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself” (Mt 6.34). Certainly a person like Anthony took to heart not just these evangelical counsels but the rest of them. We would expect that having heard them, he would make a bee-line for the nearest city to share the joy he had just discovered. Not only that, he’d want to associate himself with a local Christian community engaged in social work such as serving the poor, working in a hospital or the like, pretty much as folks do right now. In other words, the first impression one gets from reading or listening to the Gospels is their social nature. As for Anthony himself, I believe he had a precedent, St. Paul of the desert, but apart from him, he was pretty much on his own. I mention Antony because his life became a template for future generations of monks, not just those living as hermits but for those dwelling in communities. Strange how a socially oriented religion as Christianity gave birth to a desire for solitude and this quite early in its history. Chances are that Anthony, being pious by nature, had familiarity with the native Christian religion of his place and time. We could assume that the prayers used were primarily liturgical and formulaic, so this milieu leaves us with no basis as to how he was able to make the transition from listening to the Gospel to a life of solitude which gave birth to quiet, contemplative prayer. The only account is his desire for solitude and what transpired there. As to how he learned it we’re left empty-handed. Certainly while in the desert Anthony must have pondered the two verses from Matthew’s Gospel which moved him to choose isolation. Here he is sitting around, not anxious for the morrow and having sold everything. Where do you go from there when you’re in the desert, not just for a brief period, but for your entire life? Surely you’re bound to change your original impetus if not leave the desert after some time. One caveat to this: until quite recently people didn’t live long, so it might have been easier to stay in the desert for one’s entire (short) life.

There are bits and pieces about prayer, Jesus withdrawing and so forth, but all are directed to proclamation of the Gospel. One person whom I asked about this wondered if St. John’s Gospel had anything to do with giving rise to contemplative prayer. That may be true, but as far as I know, the evidence points more to laying the basis for Christian theology. In short, the natural response to the Gospels is to get involved socially, neither to withdraw nor go off by oneself and this for one’s entire life. So the question is as follows: is there something in the Gospels that evokes this impulse toward solitude? When one gets to a place (wherever that happens to be) conducive to living the evangelical counsels, what do you do with yourself? Of course, early Christianity gave birth to parishes, schools and hospitals, a social network that continues to the present day. You’d think here is where the action’s at, not out in the desert by oneself. There comes to mind the popular image of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. While engaged in intensive social interaction, she remained focused upon prayer. She remains a modern example of what the Gospel is all about, social action combined with prayer. The two

are intertwined, not separated. Along this vein of the social nature of the Gospels and their little teaching on prayer (i.e., solitary or contemplative prayer requiring a more or less permanent withdrawal from society), several years ago I took a look at St. Matthew's Gospel, it being the closest to the Semitic spirit of Judaism. The brief document (posted on this *Lectio Divina* Homepage) presents commands or injunctions by Jesus Christ intended to narrow down as closely as possible those instances when Jesus tells his listeners to act in a certain way, that is, in accord with his teachings. If you go through them, all are pretty much socially oriented as well as exhorting us to self-denial aimed at a greater good, not heading off to the desert. In addition to this, most have little to do with theology except general exhortations.

This is a fascinating topic, no question about it, and as far as I can tell, not much explored. It appears that such a basic question as to the origins of contemplative prayer vis-a-vis the Christian (social) tradition hasn't been asked. Some two thousand years after the birth of Christianity we have come to consider prayer, either liturgical or the silent variety, as part and parcel of tradition, almost that it popped out the womb fully developed. Today we have many grand streams within this tradition: Carmelite spirituality (especially the phenomenon of the Little Flower), St. Ignatius's thirty day retreat and *lectio divina* of the Benedictine order, to name just a few. Yet at the birth of Christianity no models within the existing Greco-Roman (and to a certain extent, Judaic) society had existed for what we've come to take for granted as contemplative prayer. The formulaic variety seemed favored by the mass of people, coupled with interest in mystery religions, whereas the educated classes leaned more in the direction of philosophical inquiry. Yes, studies exist showing some influence upon Christian contemplative prayer from the East such as Hinduism and Buddhism, though this doesn't seem to have sunken down to the common level nor to have made an impact that's conspicuous. While this is a fascinating subject, it reflects a temptation to trace as far back as possible the sources of such prayer. There's something within us that makes us surprised that someone could have come up with a new idea or approach to prayer that hadn't been around earlier. Also, we do know from experience that people from all cultures and walks of life have an inbuilt tendency for quiet prayer. How they expressed it in ancient times generally is a matter of speculation. I'd say that the vast majority went about their business with barely a clue as to what they were doing. At least they had the advantage of living closer to nature. In some instances the same applies today but to develop this gift requires the larger framework of one's religious culture.

It seems that the philosophical schools of Greece and Rome had more influence upon Christianity compared with anything else that resembled a tradition of contemplative prayer. This may have been true with regard to educated folks, but Christianity inspired many less gifted persons who became essential for the church's growth. As far as monks are concerned, most pioneers were barely literate, St. Anthony, for example. However, this cross-cultural influence shows the broad appeal of the new religion. One approach to the origins of Christian contemplative prayer, especially with the Gospel imperatives to social action, is to consider what may have triggered in the minds of those earlier listeners the impulse to withdraw. In other words, what made people follow an impulse opposite to the socially involved one? That impulse to withdraw, it seems, is the prime requisite for contemplative prayer. Closely allied to it is voluntary poverty as noted above with regard to St. Anthony. Sure, one can see that contact with a brand new message might compel a person to retreat and ponder its implications...but to live in the wilderness permanently? On one hand we have those who actually withdrew and on the other, their proponents such as St. Athanasius. The latter is a prime example of a thoughtful person who began to reflect on the Gospel and flesh it out...not just the text but in the lives of persons who lived its principles. For the most part these people were gifted with the ability to contemplate as well as how to express it within the Christian context. Here, it seems, are the genuine roots of contemplative prayer, all the more remarkable since many of these formulators were in ecclesiastical positions engaged with both church and political issues of the day. One wonders how they did what they did given the pressures to which they had been subjected, persecution included. Rightly so the Church refers to these giants of the early centuries who set the tone for generations yet to come for the emergence of various strains of contemplative prayer.

As a footnote to the above paragraph which might be worth sharing, recently I had a conversation with a friend of mine well acquainted with Church doctrine and history as well as ancient Greek and Latin. I put forth my question to him as to the origins of Christian contemplative prayer within the Hellenistic-Roman-Judeo world, the one I'm wrestling with. His response? At the completion of the Council of Chalcedon (the

year 451), all the basics of Christian doctrine were in place and all the nuances regarding the Trinity and the Incarnation were worked out, so it was time to take a break. My friend mused, what did they do then? Go back to their dioceses and monasteries and reflect on what had been accomplished not only at Chalcedon but in the earlier councils. Despite the strenuous efforts of four centuries hammering out details, participants at Chalcedon concluded that they as well as their forebears hadn't a clue as to what the divinity was about. They couldn't put this down in writing but knew it full well. All they could do was sit in silent awe before God not knowing a thing about him. Yet this not-knowing became a kind of knowing which shortly took off in the form of hesychastic or apophatic prayer. This response from an informed friend of mine parallels an incident I had during the Oxford Patristic Conference somewhere in the early '80s. During a break of talks dedicated to Gregory of Nyssa, a chief proponent of apophatic prayer, I asked an elderly French participant as to where Gregory might have gotten his ideas, original as they were. This was in the context of several panel discussions having dealt with the same matter. This fellow...I forgot his name...who was nearly blind said with a twinkle in his eye, "sa femme!" In other words, Gregory got his ideas from his wife. A good a response as any.

In my frequent recourse over the years to the **Dialogues** of Plato neither have I come across him nor Socrates speaking of distractions. This is a bit misleading, putting two traditions together when one (Christianity) hasn't come into existence. Furthermore, the dialogues are philosophical by nature, not spiritual, strictly speaking, though that can be debated if you're familiar with the texts in the original Greek. Applying modern concepts to ancient texts is perilous, for the distinction between philosophical, theological and spiritual realms was more of a unity for early Christian thinkers. Nevertheless, you don't find in the **Dialogues** so much source material for Christian prayer but material for theology, a fact beyond contention. By that I mean early (and later) Christians didn't hesitate to mine the **Dialogues** in order to shore up their religious beliefs. They found there premonitions or intimations to Christ as well as treasure trove of material relative to the origin of the human soul as well as life after death. Apparently such a term as distractions was alien to pre-Christians though a kindred word, *polupragmon* or being a busy-body is pretty much in the same ballpark. This is more akin to moving away from mining for theological terms and concepts to applied spirituality. Obviously the term "distraction" is more specific to prayer, and from what I surmise, prayer for the ancients took the form of uttering formulae to the gods and goddesses. The Greek term for prayer reflects this, *proseuche*, referring as it does to the making of vows and worship of gods, almost always done in public. Implied is that *proseuche* is a function of the state...the *polis* or city-state...and is not a private matter. At the same time there are numerous points where philosophical inquiry and contemplative prayer intersect, one of which is the well-known image of prisoners in a cave (Book Seven of the **Republic**). Such unfortunates take shadows projected onto the cave's wall for reality and are content with their voluntary imprisonment. Only the person who has gotten loose from the self-imposed bonds in the cave and has made his way upwards to the sunlight is free, that is, he has made his way to the "intelligible realm" or *noetos topos*, *noetos* deriving from *nous* (mind) and applied by Christian theologians to the spiritual life. Though this person enjoys newly found freedom, he is moved to return to the captives in the cave in order to lead them out. The intent is that they may "spend their time above," *diatribo*, a verb literally meaning to rub between. Though this part of the **Republic** is replete with references to life above and thus is parallel with a Christian way of life, nothing is said of the inner workings of a person's mind, of how it maintains this *diatribo* "above." Certainly not engaging in *polupragmon* is paramount; if this is true of outward behavior, it reflects one's inner state as being at rest.

Now if we take this profound image of a cave and others similar to it which were applied freely to Christianity—one can understand how irresistible it was to do this—we can see how the introduction of more properly theological elements carried them forward. Such was the accomplishment of the early Church Fathers, both East and West. While this was going on more or less in quiet, we also have those following a life style known as "white martyrdom." This phrase was applied to people like the early monks shortly after the major persecutions of Christians by Roman emperors. They wished to continue their *marturion*...their witness...by heading off to the desert. At first glance you'd think the best place to be a "white martyr" is in the city, being involved with people and giving Christian *marturion* to them, but this wasn't the case or the one that history remembers...and those who wrote that part of history were champions of monks and hermits. Some may consider it a heroic gesture to live in relative isolation for the duration of one's life, sitting in solitude with nothing to do except say prayers, read Scripture and weave baskets. Then again, others thought it absurd, a waste of one's life and talents (still a common observation about monks today). After all, a literal

reading of the Gospels pointed to the imminent coming of Jesus Christ in glory, quite important in the early Church. Why bother with anything except to sit around and wait? After some decades went by and Jesus didn't return, what next? Continue sitting around? Those who were doing this already seemed a bit foolish. While expectation of Jesus' imminent return went out of style early on, the monastic life style (considered a true *marturion* to Jesus Christ) was assuming more formal shape, indicative that something more profound was at work.

With no immediate return of Jesus and the reduction of blood martyrs, a gradual melding of theology with philosophy which had been going on came on the scene more fully. Much of it centered around the person of Jesus Christ or more specifically, how he could be both man and God. This isn't the place to go into that complicated though fascinating history, but what had emerged from several centuries of reflection formed in essence the basis for contemplative prayer. So everyone was in the end concerned with how a human being also could be God, a genuine paradox. That fundamental premise pervaded how a person (let's say in the context of this article a hermit or a monk, one living alone or in small groups) could replicate this in his own life or to put it in more modern terms, how he could imitate the life of Jesus Christ. Anyone familiar with even the minimal requirements of the spiritual life will acknowledge that these two realities (traditionally put as the world and God) are so different that it's virtually impossible to reconcile them. So if you're focused upon this noble endeavor, of realizing the life of Christ within you, you're bound to experience conflicts. That is to say, you're on the fast track to experience things which militate against your enterprise. To top it off, you have few sympathizers. Apart from extreme circumstances such as persecution and painful illness, here I believe is where we can pinpoint one source relevant to talk about distractions. It occurs at a nexus where both the "white martyrs" and theologians of their day weren't working in isolation but in concert. Much later when prayer took on a more definite shape and practice, increasingly it got detached from the Hellenistic philosophical tradition. On top of all this was the development of greater insight into what it means to be an individual person and hence more introspective, but that is outside the limited scope of this essay.

In this milieu the notion of distractions is quite different from the philosophical concept of *polupragmon* noted several paragraphs above though some aspects are carried over by reason of the sameness of the human condition. It appears that distractions, as a term more proper to spirituality, may be defined as points of conflict with everything that isn't Jesus Christ (and that includes a lot). Even better, they are sharper points of a more comprehensive insight into *polupragmon* as applied to one's inner disposition. At one or several of these sharper points, if you will, revelation comes in actual touch with our lives. For the most part, the contact is gentle, not violent. The question is, how do we handle these contacts? A tall order, to be sure, which becomes "taller" the further you advance in the spiritual life, realize how deficient you are and how impossible it is to raise yourself up unaided from our common human condition. Distractions (keeping in mind one interpretation that it is an inner manifestation of the outer one of *polupragmon*) stand in the way of a more comprehensive reality just beyond our reach. We might not have much a clue as to what this reality is, but everyone of every age and religious persuasion admits to its presence. The first way of handling distractions is to become more aware of the dynamic transpiring within us and, in essence, ride it out. You have an idea that you're not in the best of spaces and want to move into one conducive for the flow of our creative juices. Thus the perception of time dragging on is equivalent to being uncomfortable with the space we happen to occupy at present. The two are always tipping this way or that, never in the direction you wish them to be. That means inner dissatisfaction arises as manifested through distractions come from a place just out of reach from which we perceive our imbalance.

One can agree that *polupragmon* or being a busy-body is a legitimate topic for discussion, one to be wary about in all walks of life, and that Plato described it exquisitely through the mouth of Socrates. But what about distractions? We wouldn't expect Plato to talk about them in the context of his **Republic** which deals with founding a city state. In truth, Plato hadn't a concept of distractions since they relate more to prayer in a Christian context. Such discussion lay several centuries in the future. Yet we know from the record that *polupragmon* interferes with how one functions within a *polis* or city state, and Socrates himself has much to say about the negative influences of this bothersome vice. Basically he says to his interlocutors, get rid of *polupragmon* or you can't be a member of a *polis*. Otherwise, you would cause strife among its members. On the other hand, distractions became a big issue among practicing Christians, a topic more suited for the individual person, who, in turn, relates to his own form of *polis* or church (*ekklesia*). If this issue is so

important, what, after all, are we distracted from? Why the big deal? I haven't a clue as to when this term entered Christianity except by referring to the earliest possible records such as the struggles of St. Anthony and writings by early Fathers such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Origen. So if you have people well versed in Hellenistic philosophy (especially Plato) considering Jesus Christ who claimed to be God, it was only natural they wanted to know more about him. Not only that, they wanted to take forward reflections already handed down from the Age of the Apostles and develop them further. In later centuries the Church summoned a series of councils which brought forward new insights which built upon earlier ones. So while all this was transpiring, people were living according to the Gospel and monks were off in the desert, each in their own way attempting to gain better insight into the mystery of Jesus Christ. That makes three general groups operative in the early Church: "regular" Christians, monks or hermits and Church Fathers, the last often associated with their insightful text as well as Church councils.

Chief among the teachings of Christianity is that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, more or less the basic premise from the beginning. People of ancient times as well as today toss around words such as "God" and "divinity" as if they knew what they were talking about pretty much in the same category of things with which we're familiar, even abstract ones. But when you stop and consider what they're talking about, the opposite is true. That is to say, when dealing with the Divinity neither we nor our predecessors, non-Christian and Christian alike, haven't a clue as to what that term means. Such words represent a completely unknowable entity and uncover our ignorance as to the matter, though by no means this isn't a defect (It can be a defect or even worse if you claim exclusive knowledge, not that uncommon throughout history). It seems that most folks never have made the fundamental association between their innate ignorance and the unknowability of God. Perhaps part of the reason is that when speaking of unknowability, it's too abstract, impersonal and beyond the grasp of most folks, let alone their own personal ignorance. At the same time this unknowability is right out there for all to experience. Someone like Socrates excels at getting down to this the task. On the grander scale of things, unknowability makes perfect sense when it comes to monotheistic religions. The drawback, if you will, is that all they can do is repeat stock words and phrases such as "God is great," etc. Christianity is among this group, though when you come down to it, is on the borderline compared with the others. That's what makes Christianity so fascinating. It posits a juxtaposition between unknowability (God) and humanity (Jesus Christ)...not just as separate entities but as existing in one person. To complicate matters further, Christianity has three divine Persons. The former teaching, crystalized in the Council of Chalcedon, says something about the human condition that has been acknowledged but despite its extraordinary teaching, appears little implemented or reflected upon as a viable way of speaking about contemplative prayer.

With this in view, I present the official "definition" wrought by Council of Chalcedon in order to make a point. Despite the stilted language, it's quite rich and deserving to be unpacked more closely:

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

The underlined words and phrases sum up the definition and are presented as a kind of abstract:

- complete in Godhead
- complete in manhood
- truly God

- truly man
- reasonable soul and body
- of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead
- one substance with us as regards his manhood
- begotten of the Father
- as regards his manhood begotten
- recognized in two natures
- the distinction of natures being preserved and coming together to form one person and substance not as parted or separated into two persons
- but one and the same

This summary can be further divided into two parts (as well as reduced for greater convenience), those which belong to divinity and those which belong to man, both being in one person, Jesus Christ. The first list pertains to his divinity and the second to his humanity:

- complete in Godhead
- truly God
- of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead
- begotten of the Father

—

- complete in manhood
- truly man
- reasonable soul and body
- one substance with us as regards his manhood
- as regards his manhood begotten

At first I was reluctant to present this outline because its official, dogmatic verbiage gives the impression of coming down from On High. Note only that, such language is quite remote from prayer. A person can hide behind such statements, a kind of security blanket. Unfortunately this defensive attitude can be present when dealing with such texts, a sad commentary on the separation between dogma and contemplative prayer. After all, dogma is meant to reflect one's prayer life. However, reading the same text in the original Greek is another matter simply because it's so rich and doesn't smack of the Western tendency to dogmatize religion. Putting all that aside for the moment, take a look at the two words from the definition's summary, "Godhead" and "God." Here is a prime example of how familiar terms couched in official language are taken for granted, that everyone knows about them, especially the Church. Almost surreptitiously we could substitute "unknowability" for "Godhead" and "God" when it comes down to the practice of contemplative prayer, of actually confronting the Divinity. In brief, the definition and summary is a thumbnail sketch as how we comport ourselves in prayer. Immediately a red flag is raised: does this mean we partake of the same two natures as Jesus Christ? Obviously not, but the definition can be taken as a type of imitation of that reality. One could, in a sense, as a sincere practicing Christian go back to when Chalcedon was in session or shortly afterwards. As word of the deliberations leaked out, such a person would try to find in them guidelines for his or her life of prayer. Surely it must have been a thrilling moment when the definition appeared. Not only did it sum up the previous councils from Nicea but verified one's efforts to conform as closely as possible to Jesus Christ both through prayer and action. In other words, a devote Christian would desire to imitate him all the more and now had the ammunition to do so. So one can conclude that a deeper appreciation of contemplative prayer arose in the context of Chalcedon and earlier councils which were devoted to the formulation of doctrine. Though the distinction between prayer and theological reflection appears blurred, not fully sorted out yet, its essence was there and practiced, especially by monks in communities which recently had sprung up in desert places.

As far as this imitation of Jesus Christ is concerned, again I am mindful of that article written prior to the current one, The Importance of Kata, where I examined the key Genesis verse 1.26, "Let us make man according to our image and according to our likeness." There I argued for the desirability of *kata* or "according to" as replacing the familiar preposition "in." Actually the insights gained from those reflections have remained

constantly in the background as I was pondering material for the current one. I found researching the Kata article a wonderful experience since it threw into light one of the basic premises of Christianity, the divine image and likeness. There the tiny Greek preposition *kata* had the capacity of altering our understanding by allowing us to read Gen 1.26 in an enhanced light. I don't think the current examination is a re-interpretation or a reading into the verse but the uncovering of a richer understanding. If *kata* could be used to revalue the Genesis verse, could something similar happen with regard to the definition of Chalcedon? After all, it presents us with what comes down to the most astounding fact ever, how one person (Jesus Christ) could exist with two natures, human and divine. Despite its extraordinary claim, we've become de-sensitized to it because of dogmatic pronouncements. Actually *kata* is used several times in the definition. Even though inserting the preposition in each phrase runs the risk of overstating the matter, it's important because of God's intervention into human history. Note that the first two phrases occur twice:

-as regards (*kata*/according to) his Godhead (begotten of the Father).

-as regards (*kata*/according to) his manhood, begotten.

-like us in (*kata*/according to) all respects.

This means that *kata* is employed with respect to both the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ within one person, not two, as some heresies asserted. As for the first phrase, *kata* is used with respect to Jesus' divinity vis-a-vis his Father. Given the "downward" tendency of *kata*—that is, it signifies attributes which are suspended in an order or a list which are dependent upon the subject at hand (i.e., Godhead-from-Father)—we can say that Jesus gets his divinity "according" to this same Godhead. Better yet, it implies that other things can relate to this Godhead while not being confused with it, chief among which is his humanity. As for the second phrase, *kata* is used with respect to Jesus' manhood (i.e., "begotten"). The same principle applies here as with his Godhead, namely, his manhood "hangs down" from him as a person. Thus we have two completely different modes of being governed by the preposition *kata* which is situated, so to speak, within his person or *proson*. As for the third phrase, it falls under the second in that it applies to Jesus' humanity. "Like us" is inserted to show that the "as regards his manhood" is not alien to our human nature and that we can be "like" (*homoios*) him and visa versa, the latter having been realized in the Incarnation. This third *kata* reveals how our capacity for imitation can be employed to the utmost. Keeping in line with the "downward" nature of *kata*...after all, that's one of this preposition's definitions...we can work upward, if you will, to the source from which *kata* derives its dependency. Such *homoios* as applied to Jesus "in all respects" (*kata panta*), not just in this one or that one. It means that we can employ our imitative capacity with regard to Jesus both "up" and "down" the same scale of his humanity and his divinity. And to think this is a definition given by the Church regarding what it means to be made "according to our image and according to our likeness." All in all, quite remarkable; no wonder it misunderstood and still hard to swallow today.

Because the definition of Chalcedon is so difficult to grasp, I believe that heresies which have spun off it are pardonable. Instead of taking of them as deviant (the usual approach), we can view them as more descriptive of how the mind recoils at something so alien to human experience. You can attempt to work out the relationship of two natures within one person with all the theological and philosophical tools at your disposal, but that's not enough. This impossibility must give way to faith, not blind belief, where application of the principles of *lectio divina* to our efforts are most helpful, presumably not unlike how the participants at Chalcedon examined the question at hand. We can just picture each participant alone in his room pondering the day's deliberations in light of Scripture, etc. This might be wishful reading into official ecclesiastical deliberations which had a tinge of politics about them. Yet I don't think this is too far off the mark when reflecting back upon that momentous council. The participants couldn't just breeze through Scripture and earlier Church documents in order to come up with their formulation. And so as an aide to understanding the definition of Chalcedon and to get in the heads of the participants, I decided to focus upon the preposition *kata* within that document as a kind of rallying point through the practice of *lectio divina*. Then I came to the conclusion, if we can't understand Chalcedon (or better, don't subscribe faith to the definition) as a template for contemplative prayer, it's best to move on; otherwise, the text is sterile.

Several paragraphs above I noted how persons interested in the deliberations at Chalcedon must have waited intently for information to leak out. By that I don't mean gossip mongers waiting in the wings but truly

devote Christians wanting to know how to live their faith better. Then when the definition and supporting documents became available—in actuality they must have been comprehensible for just a few, given their difficult language, etc.—folks such as monks and scholars now had guidelines and confidence as how to proceed with their *lectio* and filter it down to their congregations. Until that time and afterwards monks and hermits were fond of reciting psalms, a well-documented fact. We get the impression that's what they did all day long (many said the entire Psalter in one day from memory), fine for a while but onerous after over an extended period of time. I gather from current monastic experience not completely alien to this ancient one that yes, the recitation of psalms continued until a crisis emerged. There comes a time when that practice becomes heavy, even oppressive, and you need to move onto something else. Trouble is up to this point no one has defined this something else. That's the reason why elders make frequent appearance in stories about ancient monks, and perhaps some had interpreted the Chalcedonian definition to their spiritual sons. They couldn't just pass on information like this unknowingly but had to pass through the same arduous initiation which qualified them to help younger monks. Such are the qualifications, if you will, for handing down contemplative prayer, of moving from verbal recitation (even if interiorized) to one without words which transcended psalms and supporting prayers. In actuality, then as well as now both co-exist and alternate between each other. By so pondering the psalms and Gospels, these monks must have gained profound insight into the mystery of Jesus Christ, of how God became a man. When it came to learning how to pass beyond this intellectual level, the task was made easier by familiarity with sacred texts.

The monks had a strong intimation of God as that which is unknown, a fact that dawns on you quickly out in the desert where you're pretty much on your own. They must have pondered how this unknown entity must have become united with a man and how two natures kept together in one person...even if they couldn't articulate this with precision. It can be argued from lived monastic experience that the weariness monks experienced from constant recital of psalms must have impelled them to experiment, one luxury of living alone yet requiring more discipline than meets the eye. They may have been encouraged when reports of Chalcedon reached their ears or was explained to them by their elders. Now these men sitting out in the desert could experiment based on the certainty of Christian faith. They could visualize how one nature (God or that which is unknown) can be united with a man, someone like themselves, both under the one roof of a single human being. For them this may have started out as a paradox, even a heresy in the eyes of some, yet perseverance with their experimentation allowed them to work out the difficulties. After all, monks then as well as today, have special time...*otium* or leisure...to do this which is a rather disciplined enterprise. We could visualize a monk engaged in the act of pretending, a good way of trying out the viability of something, a good approach as any other. Our theoretical monk could say to himself, here I am already with a human nature and being one person. Let me try adding to this human nature another nature to this one person, that is, a nature which is divine and by divine (as I know from personal experience here in the desert) that means that-which-is-unknown. This latter, unknown nature is easier to add to my existing human one: because it is unknown, it has the advantage of fitting in somewhere though I don't know exactly where. If I fail in this pretension, always I can abandon it without harm to myself.

Now a problem arises, one stemming from the fact that our imaginary monk has one human nature and one person (already built in) to which he has added the divine nature or that nature which is unknown. Would one nature dominate the other, even swallow it up (Such is often the case in Church history, that the divine would swallow up the human)? Where would this leave me as a person, one with such a swallowed-up nature or worse, a nature which is semi-digested? Could I live this way and explain it to other persons? After all, that which is unknown lies outside knowledge. Despite this ignorance, my experience here in the desert is attracted to the unknown, actually drifts in that direction. I know too that attraction to this unknown element doesn't make me less a person nor detracts from my human nature. It would cause harm should I interject magic or force the unknown into my categories of knowing, gnostic-like. Instead of lessening me as a person, my attraction to the unknown enhances it, something never I could explain yet am happy to live with it and leave behind everything else for such a strange possession. After a while our imaginary subject observes that he continues with his monastic schedule: he works, eats and sleeps as he had done before. Nothing has changed whether he went along as a person with one (human) nature or as a (pretending) person with two natures, the human and divine (i.e., the unknown nature). Yet something is added that wasn't there previously. Having continued with his so-called pretension...the only way something incomprehensible can be made

comprehensible...he discovers the benefit of being one person with two natures. What prevents our man from falling into disillusionment, of thinking he's either a god or Jesus Christ himself? In brief, the inability to sustain this pretension continuously but only here and there. These heres and theres should be taken as signs of our innate human weakness; they do increase in frequency though not enough to become a sustained awareness. In fact, it is disadvantageous to have such an uninterrupted continuity. The fallibility of human nature, a fact our theoretical monk comes to grips with fairly early on in his experimentation by way of pretension, grounds him in this world. Perhaps unbeknownst to him his more or less sustained pretension results from a semi-conscious switch from psalm recitation to contemplative prayer or of abiding in a wordless presence before that which is unknown.

In contrast to our experiment which employs that underestimated faculty of pretension and gives a clue as to how the Chalcedonian definition might be realized, we have the phenomenon of gnosticism. To be sure, gnosticism is a slippery topic. In brief it implies that we attain the divinity by a certain knowledge not available to most people. Gnosticism goes against the definition of the Church as *koinonia*, of fellowship, with its preference for inclusion and exclusion. On the other hand, the Church focuses upon inclusion alone: her knowledge is out there for all to see, so everyone has equal opportunity. Often associated with gnosticism is an initiation into the supposed special knowledge it has, further indicative of its secretive nature. While much research has been done and continues to be done in the field, personally I believe gnosticism's abiding force stems in part from a failure in how to do *lectio divina* properly. That is to say, *lectio* is grounded both in Scripture and tradition. *Lectio* simply doesn't ascribe parrot-like to doctrine but seeks the presence of God by slowly and carefully reflecting upon Scripture. The interplay between slow reading and silent, contemplative prayer automatically precludes going off on a tangent saying something like, yes, this is wonderful knowledge...*gnosis*...but I'm going to keep it to myself and share only with a few intimates. Here's where our faculty of pretension goes awry compared with its proper use as a means to realize the definition of Chalcedon. In its attempt to reduce both doctrine and contemplative prayer to a special type of hidden knowledge, it seems that gnostic teaching wouldn't stand up to the definition of Chalcedon.

This article began with an attempt to shed some light on the topic of distractions as related to contemplative prayer. Then it evolved to how this form of prayer may have originated within (or without) the Christian tradition, especially in its relationship with the classical world of Greece and Rome, Judaism included. This interaction remains a lively topic of debate which finds echo in several essays on this home page, namely, the loss of the classical tradition in the West and how that has led to a loss of appreciating the Christian-Catholic heritage. Perhaps the strong-point of Christianity is that it appeals to both those wanting to implement the Gospel teachings in the market place as well as those going off into the desert. The latter preference received more coverage down the centuries which to some degree sounds strange due to the social nature of the Gospels. This withdrawal doesn't make sense vis-a-vis most of Jesus' teachings. Yet the desire to fathom the person of Jesus Christ—if one accepts him as God incarnate, à la Chalcedon—seems to play a role in driving quite a few folks into the desert whether to live alone or in communities.

At Chalcedon attempts to express the unity of the human and divine natures in one person reached an important point, and even today we're trying sort out what this means. I had suggested one possible way, our ability to pretend, as a means to this end. It's subject to misunderstanding and abuse, yet if you stick closely to the Church and her documents in the spirit of *lectio divina* as a vehicle toward contemplative prayer, chances are you'll come off okay. There's a word employed by some Church Fathers at/around Chalcedon, *perichoresis*. Lars Thunberg's **Microcosm and Mediator** is one source written in English which explains this term as related to Maximus Confessor, a champion of Chalcedon. In brief, *perichoresis* applies to the mutual inter-penetration and indwelling of the three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's a tough word to translate adequately: cyclical movement, recurrence, reciprocity, inter-penetration. We have the preposition *peri* (around) used with the verb *choreo*, to go round, come to in succession. This makes *perichoresis* a paradox of sorts to articulate...a going-round or succession encircled by *peri* which serves to set it off (NB: *perichoresis* shouldn't be interpreted as some have done as a 'dancing around,' a mis-read of the verb *choreo* for *choreuo*). Only our imaginative faculty, resting upon our ability to pretend, can make sense of it. Thus a sense of play and enjoyment is implied, a sentiment not associated with theological or spiritual reflection. And so we may apply *perichoresis* to a person who reflects upon Church teachings in the spirit of

*lectio divina* which results in an appreciation of one's human nature which, in turn, is open to divine influence. As noted, "divine" is a synonym of sorts for that which is unknowable resulting in one (human) person comprised of two natures, one of which is human and the other being divine (unknowable). It's not a question of figuring this out, mission impossible. Rather, our task is to reflect, actualize and stand in awe of what we are composed.