

## Transitional States in Prayer

Recently a good friend shared with me some insights he got while on a weekend retreat at a monastery which is approximately a three hour drive from his home. While he was giving a glowing account, the first thought that came to my mind was how could anyone benefit from such a short period of time? Apparently he did. Big Time. The very word “retreat” suggests withdrawal from one’s normal way of life and routine for an extended period of time even though a weekend doesn’t seem to fit the bill by reason of its shortness. In the case at hand, my friend (married with two grown sons with families of their own) typically arrives mid-afternoon on Friday and leaves Sunday around noon. That gives him just twenty-four hours—one full day or Saturday—to reap any benefits. Yet apparently quite a few people find their retreat weekend the most significant one in the entire year, a testimony that divine grace isn't limited to our notions of space and time. I guess the sharp contrast between this temporary withdrawal and the rush of modern society with all its gadgets and “apps” contributes to this experience. Not surprisingly my friend told me that he enjoys the three hour drive both to and from the place of retreat as an integral part of the experience. This is an expansion on that “down time” a lot of commuters enjoy by reason of the solitude, only a special occasion like this is more relaxing since you’re not en route to work but to some place you’ll enjoy all by yourself. And so the drive-to is a preparation and the drive-from is a time for reflection, a kind of extension of the retreat. Usually the drive-from is tinged with some nostalgia which spills over into the ensuing days, a sentiment common among frequent retreatants. Besides, family and friends remark on the transformation, so the retreat has ramifications broader than at first glance.

Those who go on retreats are a minority, to be sure, and often the reasons for it are hard to explain to loved ones. Yet all show some curiosity even though they don’t feel inclined to test the waters. It turns out that many retreatants take considerable pains to punctuate their schedules at home and work with prayer. Most do it on their own and are highly motivated while pretty much keeping this to themselves and rightly so. Instinctively they know that talking about this and their retreat experience would make them lose something. One such schedule might run as follows: the celebration of Lauds coupled with Mass, a pause during lunch hour, Vespers and perhaps more prayer and spiritual reading. Some amplify it even more, depending upon circumstances. At the heart of this schedule is a mixture of meditation and *lectio divina*, usually the morning and evening hours or before and after the day's rush of events. The devotion and stamina to implement this is remarkable, all done quietly and without fuss as these devoted people remain faithful amid the vicissitudes of family life, work and other obligations. The number of such people always will be small but hugely influential, albeit in a hidden way. This is a stock-way of putting it, but instinctively both those doing it and those observing them know something larger is at work even if they can’t put their fingers on it. At the same time they manage to sniff out like-minded folks without actively searching for them. It seems that once they establish a rhythm of prayer both private and public, the question of community pops into their lives at the right time and right place, tailor-made perfectly to their needs. To an outsider this seems miraculous but in actuality it’s quite natural. One could argue it’s the way we’re meant to live regardless of our circumstances.

Not long after my friend returned from his favorite monastery, I sat down with him to ask how it

went, a little get-together we've been doing for some years now. I'm just as eager to obtain the fruits of his experience which invariably rub off in one way or another. "Nothing happened" is always the first response to my question which by now has evolved into a ritual. True, because you can't describe much outside the weather, food and other external details. Yet this "nothing" is deceptive, containing volumes. All the action which happens on a retreat is on another level, far more than meets the eye. And so for a conversation to be meaningful, both the retreatant and his friend have to be on the same wave length, else it will dissolve into nothing. After we went through the usual preliminaries, my friend started to sketch an outline or history of his retreats at his favorite monastery, and that covers some twenty-plus years. He prefers the same place simply because it offers stability. For example, upon arrival he doesn't have to acclimatize himself to a new place, etc., so he can get right down to business. After all, time is of a premium...,a weekend which turns out to be abbreviated.

During our last conversation my friend was particularly predisposed to reflect back on more than two decades of weekend retreats. That period covers his own personal development of prayer which put into perspective my skepticism as to the forty-eight hour time span. While admittedly short, for a sincere person it forms a focal point to which everything else flows and from which everything flows out. So our conversation centered upon two views of time as they relate to prayer, neither being better than the other. That boils down to a distinction between the sacred and the profane. It starts out sharp but loses its edges with time. More on this later. A bit later my friend said he likes to take his yearly retreat at a given time, mid spring, which has become a pivotal point inserted within a given calendar year. Continuing along, he starts his preparation weeks beforehand, so we're talking serious stuff. That consists chiefly in setting aside more time for personal prayer which revolving around the Liturgy of the Hours, in common, if and when possible. Then when it comes time to actually setting foot upon the monastery grounds he gets into the right spirit with a bang. The reverse happens once at home. The first few days are a kind of decompression which eases him into the hectic pace of modern life. That's why the three hour ride from the monastery plays an essential role although he wasn't quite aware of its lasting effects until we discussed the matter.

While my friend continued on with his account, I was awe-struck at the preparation he put into his yearly retreat. So here I was, privy to a personal experience but without prying into any personal details. Those were of no interest since I was eager to hear more about the overall experience itself with a view towards applying his insights to my own life. Trying to lead a life of prayer in a highly secular society requires no small amount of discipline to keep the proverbial wolves at bay. Proper safeguards, too, must be put in place in order to preserve an atmosphere of prayer because society hasn't the slightest clue as to what's going on. This ignorance can be of benefit as well. Since no one knows what you're about, people leave you alone even when engaged in some intense interactions. Not everyone who goes on retreat has this experience, of course. It turns out that most are well-intentioned but discover they lack discipline or better, can't bring themselves to be disposed properly to sustain any spiritual practices at home. An important issue, to be sure, but not specific to the matter at hand.

My friend reflected back on the first quarter of his twenty years at the monastery saying that it was a fairly busy time, following along with the monks singing the Divine Office and the Mass.

Then there were the requisite retreat conferences, not to mention a good deal of spiritual reading and general reflection. An external structure is vital at all stages of one's prayer life, and being on retreat is no exception. You may start off with an extended period of so-called vocal and mental prayer and continue indefinitely until somewhere along the line you hear a gentle voice saying it's time to make a change. This change is preceded by a certain displacement with regard to what you've been doing as opposed to a dissatisfaction with it. A displacement is more subtle, hard to pin down, so you have to be attune to a shift in your attitude. That usually consists in needing a new environment, one not dependent upon external factors. This condition continues along for a while because you're used to a given pattern and are not quite familiar with other options, perhaps even their existence. They may present themselves, but you're fearful of taking the next step, which is completely understandable. Since this experience doesn't pertain to that many people, extra care is required which consists in bouncing your experience off someone else. Without this precaution you could continue on displaced, as it were, and not knowing the right hole to insert yourself.

If my friend is representative of those people who take the Christian life seriously, his experience during retreat is a template for like-minded men and women. After all, we're dealing with members of the Church—the Body of Christ—who bring to the table essentially the same longings and desires. Yet this sameness is not one of conformity but of a remarkable degree of diversity subjected to a desire to grow in divine love. Generally speaking, all start out with a certain enthusiasm which lasts for “x” number of years. Then it peters out or to use common parlance, people begin to experience “dryness.” As soon as you hear this word there comes to mind its opposite, possibly associated with the initial time of fervor, which may be called—certainly with a touch of humor—“wetness.” Judging from numerous conversations over the years, it seems the bulk of most folks' prayer life is “dry.” That's why not long ago Mother Teresa's autobiography created a sensation. She spoke openly of this dryness and added fuel to the fire by mentioning her so-called desolation which lasted decades. Instead of being surprised (there was some of that, of course) right away so many people could identify with her, taking the publication of that book as a kind of coming-out-of-the-closet. Then the excitement and discussion faded away, and people went back to their...well...their dryness.

If you have the opportunity to speak with some of these “dry” people, you can detect it by reason of a certain vague melancholy. However, it's offset by a remarkable fidelity to their external or structured lives. That is to say, they stick with their time of prayer and other spiritual exercises in season and out of season. Just about each one will tell you the importance of not wavering in their commitment. Inspiring, to be sure, but sounds not so much artificial but something you'd rather admire from a distance than imitate up close. This is not a criticism but a familiar way we've come to view the spiritual life over the years, pretty much a tough slog. While not to detract from this nor the struggles endured, such religious-speak sounds oddly out of place to the bulk of people whereas earlier it was not uncommon. It reveals more of where we've come from than anything else. Borrowing the words of Abraham from another context to show how alien is such talk, one could say that “between us and you a great chasm has been fixed” [Lk 16.26]. Indeed, the chasm is greater nowadays by reason of a more secular society than just a generation ago. Therefore such talk of “dryness” is relevant but is kind of out-of-date. The reality of dryness is not to be dismissed. Instead, what has to be dismissed is the vague, omni-present idea that it's a state in

which most of us have to remain, even the bulk of our lives. If we're lucky...very lucky...we may just escape Purgatory and go straight to heaven.

Such language colored my dear friend's religious sensibilities, for he is old enough to partake of an older generation while having his feet squarely in the twenty-first century. He suffers from having gone through the '60s with its radical question of the Church, etc., and as a result feels neither fish nor fowl. That is to say, quite a few people alive now haven't had that experience and prefer a more conservative approach. They look askance at people who came of age in the '60s and who today are considered an anomaly. I bring this up in the context of my friend speaking freely of that pervasive, mysterious dryness though he never went further. Not far beneath the surface, too, was some guilt that had to be resolved...perhaps not guilt of a personal kind but of just having lived through the tumultuous '60s. I figure that if I pressed him more on this dryness he'd feel uncomfortable. Therefore we left it like that, a kind of tacit agreement not to tread there. So if you wish to discover more about this dryness, you have to go about it indirectly. That means watching the language a person uses and assisting him along the way to clarify a point here and another there. It's not at all a deceptive approach but one motivated by a desire to know more about this phenomenon which recently came to greater light. We have Mother Teresa to thank for that. If we left it un-discussed as we had not so long ago, people probably would resign themselves to this dryness, remaining stuck, if you will, with the prospect of no relief. That is to say, no relief until death which means either Purgatory or heaven (Hell we leave out because we're dealing with sincere people, not those slated to be damned...). Indeed they are faithful Christians who'd give the shirt of their backs but for some of the reasons given above, no longer seem viable models for imitation except from a distance.

During a second discussion concerning this recent retreat experience my friend said something in passing which caught my attention and gave birth to an impulse to write this little document. He recounted in some detail that his earlier retreats were intense periods of both personal and liturgical prayer. However, in more recent years it had given way to a diffuse manner of comporting himself. He was attempting to come to grips with this new phase in his life and therefore was groping around for words. He knew he was in a different state but unsure what it was. That word "diffuse" instead of "prayer" was the key that revealed what was going on. Despite his admitted confusion, he went on with considerable enthusiasm about spending larger amounts of time alone and being perfectly happy while doing that. Our society frowns upon this, putting a premium on relationships and of always keeping busy, a pervasive and harmful influence we realize the further we move along in the spiritual journey. During one retreat this new realization dawned suddenly when he was unable to continue as had been his practice during the past few years. Any attempts at defining it were just beyond him, but one thing was certain. He couldn't continue as he had been. But was this good, bad or indifferent? His tried and true methods seemed to melt away on their own leaving him with an overall sense of peace—not that had been lacking earlier—but one of prolonged contentment at doing nothing in particular. This gradually informed his daily life more and more and ultimately, relationships with people. In sum, they were brief but more meaningful, all having come into being naturally. While my friend was presenting this in a matter-of-fact way, I was struck by the significant change that had taken place. It's easier, of course, to detect a change in another person which led to the conclusion that here before my eyes was a genuine example of what serious practitioners of prayer go through. I

could only look on with envy and hope that it may come my way at some future time.

The overall pattern of prayer for Christians is, course, centered upon the person of Jesus Christ whom they believe is both God and man. As theology says, this God becoming man or becoming incarnate makes Christianity the most body-oriented of all religions. At the same time it comes across otherwise. That's why the paragraphs above are included, a kind of preface to this. Instead, Christianity gives the air of being other-worldly which means somewhere, somehow it has trouble with physicality. In earlier centuries a number of practices of prayer developed which gave birth to traditions, many of which survive to the present. They all pattern themselves upon Jesus Christ which means living a life in close conformity to his. That's it in a nutshell, common to all forms of Christian spirituality. You can see it best in individual persons which is where we get our actual ideas of holiness or being a saint. Such is the classic view, valid today as it was eons ago and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Yet the idea of imitating Christ posits a gap between the person so doing in all his limitations and awareness of constantly falling short. That's why Purgatory has been a perennial favorite of discussion among Catholics. And a favorite word for this falling short is sin...sin, sin and more sin. And so our ideas about living the Christian life are more grim than joyful but with a marked determinism to see things through.

Behind Christianity's key tenet lays a rhetorical question of sorts: if God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ, and if he had ascended into heaven with his manhood fully intact—not leaving it behind as a soul would leave a body—why does Christianity have so much trouble when it comes to dealing with the physical world and human nature? Surely a lot of it has to do with the nitty-gritty details of living life physically, if you will. Christianity has taken this into consideration but only half-measures have filtered down to most people, putting this a bit awkwardly. An example. Christianity recognizes the connection between the divine and human physicality by devotion to the sufferings of Jesus, often in great detail. Then we walk away more or less satisfied. The comfort obtained is renewed by a return to the devotion and so on without, if you will, encouraging further development. A closer look shows the process is quite intellectual because these devotions contain a certain defensive stance. In other words, attention is upon lingering over the sentiments evoked by Jesus' suffering rather than his physicality. Over the centuries the desire to defend Christianity's admirable appreciation of physicality has contorted itself to no end without coming to full resolution. Examples of this can be found in the early Church councils and heresies, some of which seem irrelevant or quaint today but were all the rage back then. To explore in depth the issue of corporeality vs. divinity is obviously beyond the scope of this essay, yet it remains hovering in the background, wishing to be expanded upon in greater detail. Echos of the tension between intellectual-ity and physicality are found through the more notable issues related to sex: abortion, birth control, gay marriage, married priest and so forth. It may sound idealistic, but with Christianity's stress on the incarnation of Jesus Christ, you'd think these issues would be resolved more readily or not even rear their unseemly heads. Just the opposite has happened which is of some concern.

What makes this thorny problem stick around without going away has nothing to do with Jesus Christ having appeared in history, a history imbued with a tradition about Israel's God and the down-to-earth way it is presented. Although the two testaments are divided, they form one unit with different emphases. While the early Church saw itself different yet in line with the Hebrew

scriptures, over the centuries—and fairly soon at that—the rift grew, and there was no going back. Probably St. Paul had an outsized role to play with his spiritualization of Jesus Christ. Of course, Paul didn't deny the physicality of Jesus—he left it in the background, if you will—but focused almost exclusively upon a universal, abstract Jesus despite its orthodoxy. Both the Pauline corpus and early church documents are full of the word “God” as related to Jesus Christ. Actually it's tossed about with some abandon, as though taken for granted (no problem there, really). But when pressed what that means, all we get is an unquestioning, un-explainable acknowledgment but with the unspoken consent that not one of us—neither from the past as in tradition nor in the present as in church teaches and even doctrine—knows a thing, that it's an unfathomable mystery. Obviously it's acknowledged but brushed aside without asking the intriguing question of what's involved. The situation becomes more awkward in light of our modern outlook, that is, when we apply this term “God” with its more modern association of awareness to a historical figure as Jesus Christ. Should we do so, he ends up as this completely unknowable entity (God) inserted into a human form, an absurdity if ever there was one. It turns out to be absurd and left at that but without further examining the role of physicality in all this.

So when we consider prayer in the Christian context which obviously means taking Jesus Christ as an exemplar, we're combining the unknowability as in his divinity with a particular historical figure who, on the external level, isn't endowed with anything special. Jesus partakes of our corporeality just like everyone else before him and around him. That's what makes Christianity so different and prone to misunderstandings, some of which are called heresies. Because Christianity is the most incarnate of all religions and is among the most intellectual, you'd think physicality hooked up with God (i.e., unknowability) would lend itself to an approach not entirely unlike Zen. That is to say, it would prefer to foster an immediate perception of reality as we bump up against it in daily life. Indeed this happens on the unreported level where people live out their lives but can seem otherwise when looking at history and Church related documents. The long and the short of it is that a large part of our heritage comes across on the devotional level while leaving the lived level to go its own merry way, not unlike that famous unexamined life spoke of by Thoreau. Certainly historical and philosophical elements certainly played their part down the centuries, some not so good and others quite good. Then there's the division between clergy and laity and all that involves.

In sum, what's being described here is a rather thick blanket cast over Christianity. A blanket indeed was destined to be cast by any culture, but you wonder what would have happened if the faith took root in a different (non-Mediterranean, non-Semitic) culture. It would have a different approach to see how a person might fit into the very attractive picture of God as incarnate—unknowability united with our human nature—without being stymied by all the doctrine and church caveats. A conventional response to this union is that we should accept it on faith and all that. On paper it's true, but it doesn't satisfy and we know this but can't quite put our finger on it. In place of the challenge to see directly into how this incarnate God applies to our lives we prefer tinkering around the edges of accepted doctrine, and that prevents us from the one-on-one immediacy we desire. In other words, we tinker with what we know but when we get what we want, we want something else. That's why a desire for an immediacy of God's presence is acknowledged but looked at askance, well intentioned but not quite trustworthy, reserved for those who are “advanced” in prayer. And unfortunately this latter observation has held considerable sway



among Catholics who prefer leaving such prayer to the professionals...clergy and religious...although just recently this view has begun to loosen its grip.

When you consider biblical examples of prayer, of how people comported themselves when confronted with the divine, all consist of person-to-person contacts with God and almost always through the mediating element of a voice as opposed to a visible being. This presence of a voice is not some disembodied spirit but the very representation of the (divine) speaker. Neither is it an echo. In our desire to tinker around, we can substitute them for the Real Thing but ultimately fail. Our concoctions aren't usually devised with malicious intent but are more the fruit of that insatiable desire to fiddle around, this time being with tradition. And this tradition has a long line of biblical examples going all the way up to and including Jesus Christ who preferred the attractive format of stories and parables. These, in turn, are easily committed to memory and handed down for the establishment and maintenance of a relationship with God. Thus the voice that speaks a word or *davar* as in the prophets before Jesus Christ carries over into the Church as a *logos* about the *Logos*. To tinker with the *davar* or *Logos* certainly is to invite trouble.

Even adherence to correct or orthodox way of prayer can stifle the presence of the voice just mentioned. Most of us find it easier to have divine communication conform to a specific set of rules—completely within the church, of course—which can turn out to be a trap. That is to say, adherence to the Church's teaching is seen as more important than following Jesus Christ, the Pharisees being the most familiar archetype. Actually, it's unfortunate to separate the two which is unnecessary and unfortunate, but it happens. So while the desire to conform is powerful and plays into our preference for being correct in the juridical sense, the whole enterprise of prayer in accord with the Church's teaching, etc., is not the issue. It's presupposed and thus conveniently shunted off to the side. This tendency reveals that we place too much emphasis upon the intellect without taking into consideration that physicality already noted. In fact, often the two can be perceived as antagonistic. So when you pray under the array of influences put down here—divine transcendence, Christ's Incarnation, the Trinity and what tradition says of all this—a conflict between prayer and attempting to sort it all out is bound to arise. And that's a ready-made seed bed for an overly intellectual approach to Christianity which is more prone to dryness once an initial period of enthusiasm has run its course.

If you were to interview anyone who engaged in prayer, never would he say that he has seen God or Jesus Christ. He might say that he has heard his voice, but often that voice differs from the biblical one just put forth. Instead, one's voice can be an echo of personal desire, neither a *davar* nor a *logos* which has a certain objective legitimacy to it by reason of being able to get everyone's consent. Also this prayer may take place in the larger context of people on the look-out for whether or not your prayer is in line with Church teachings. They're not physically present, of course, but hovering in the background as unseen guardians, supposed of orthodoxy. In other words, the juridical mentality isn't far removed from the mentality of tinkering. All this can put a crimp in your style without you being fully aware of what's going on which is an attempt to see if you're "faithful" or not. If you are, you're on the right track. That's why Mother Teresa's so-called dryness has wide appeal. People can identify with it but haven't a clue that alternatives to her experience might exist. Just because she's a saint, and a recent one at that, it's assumed that she has it all.

One could ask whether all this has anything to do with the Incarnation. You can say yes, pointing to the suffering and misunderstanding Jesus endured and seeing him as model worth conforming to, well worth the efforts (usually strenuous) to get there. So often that's the focal point when we think of prayer, a mental activity when we're in desperate straights. It's less on our minds when things are going well, or more accurately, when there's not much going on which is our usual experience. With this in mind, no small wonder that prayer is perceived as an intellectual venture done only when at our wits' end. A life-raft indeed we keep hanging on the way but otherwise not an especially attractive enterprise.

So while there's much ado about the Incarnation of Jesus, often it's discussed within the social justice sense. One gets the impression that people don't have difficulty subscribing to it, but they have little insight as to its meaning, not that it could be plumbed or manipulated. On one hand we couch Jesus in devotional images while on the other, pile one theological concept upon another in order to explain him. The idea we end up with is that once Jesus became man, we ignore that basic fact and take delight in theological reflection, all mental and one step—a major step—away from the physicality of the Incarnation itself. Advances in modern science worsen the situation. A lot of energy is spent when Mary actually conceived the child which means the first—the very first—“live” contact between God and man. To tell you the truth, we can have a lot of fun, really, rolling these ideas around but ultimately they're useless. It's not unlike taking greater delight in the map rather than in the territory it depicts or better—something we see constantly nowadays—people playing with the mobile devices instead of the three-dimensional reality all around them. We end up with talk about the Incarnation in terms of virtual reality, attractive but not real.

Is it therefore possible in a thoroughly secular society to relate to the Incarnation which took place some two thousand years ago? Keep in mind that tradition has been constant in proclaiming two opposite realities held together while never being bothered by their dissimilarity. On one hand God is beyond our reach while on the other, he has become a human being. Obviously the most unlikely union of two entities no matter how you formulate it. Yet somehow they connected and have affected everything right up to the present day. Note: “up to the present day,” but any relevance of this union within the present time, let alone the time after that, is highly questionable. To make matters worse, the Church as we've come to perceive it seems sorely lacking as a vehicle for conveying transcendent reality. It is now coming face-to-face more with that well-documented spiritual hunger we have today. Tradition had the resources to address it, but those responsible for the tradition seem at a loss as how to go about the task at hand. It's largely no fault of their own but due to the society and culture from which they have emerged so recently. The challenge is at once exciting yet daunting, for it involves reconsideration of everything that had come before and the need to have it relate to a society different from the one which so swiftly had left the scene. The suddenness of its disappearance makes you wonder how deep in fact the tradition had sunken into our collective consciousness...not much, it seems. In his **A Secular Age** Charles Taylor speaks of the “porous self” that had been in existence until fairly recently. By that he means that people were imbued with religion, allowing it to enter their very selves along with the society and culture in which they lived. Now we have “buffered selves.” We erected various types of barrier to this influence and that, especially with regard to religion, and have not allowed it nor any other influences to have such control over our lives. Both are positive and negative, obviously.



This transition from a porous to a buffered self is partly responsible for giving rise to a misunderstanding about important teachings on prayer that have been handed down to us. In fact, some of the language in the texts doesn't make sense not because of the cultural and temporal differences which everyone acknowledges. Rather, in light of Taylor's observation, we could say that the texts had been written in a more "porous" age compared to ours. To make the texts more comprehensible for today, perhaps we need to consider that porous-ness and try to make the language less buffered, if you will, or more accurately, to make ourselves less buffered when we've come face to face with the "porous" texts. In this way the awkwardness between the ancient texts and our contemporary world may take a step toward reconciled. At least the difference between ancient texts and our contemporary world is brought into sharper relief. We knew the gap existed, but we couldn't give a reason for our uneasiness with it. The language of today which reveals our buffered state doesn't mean all is lost. Indeed, we have become buffered and our spiritual pores have become clogged. They require cleaning or readjustment, a seemingly arduous task up until now when we've learned to address our unease. Our desire for things spiritual which may have fallen in nicely with a devotional approach can now give way to an appreciation of our Christian tradition as mediated through the timeless practice of *lectio divina*.

One area where we feel the distinction between the older and more recent approaches to spirituality is through reading. In ages past the ability to read a text was quite exceptional. It was the duty of those who could read to pass on, usually in an oral fashion, what they had read which consisted in texts foundational to their culture. All in all, a rather slow process by our standards yet one where the limited material—and it wasn't very much—was absorbed with care and attention to detail. Some if not most of it was committed to memory by those who couldn't read, and they had just as much a grasp of the material as those who could read. Fast forward to today when everything is written down or more accurately, put into a digital format for instance access anywhere, anytime by anyone. No one person can absorb this infinite amount of material, even a small subset of it. The sheer amount by itself encourages speed reading or if not that technically speaking, to peruse summaries of longer books and the like. And so reading quickly and accessing synopses is a highly prized skill that goes unquestioned. If you look at religious practice, prayer in particular, the milieu from which it had sprung is wholly different, even alien. When we "speed readers" approach religion and therefore prayer, we can't help but bring this mentality to bear upon it. Here the more modern developments as devotions and extra-liturgical practices (i.e., not the Divine Office nor Mass) have continued to flourish yet will remain more or less auxiliary.

So with these two modes of reading more or less in competition, it's only natural that a conflict arises, albeit subtle, and difficult to resolve. However, the means of resolving it are available...simple at first glance but incredibly hard to practice in a sustained sort of way. The solution boils down to reading first selectively and then (more importantly) in a slow, deliberate manner which is in accord with the practice that has been in place for millennia. This isn't a matter of squeezing us into a practice way out of date but of confronting our modern tendency to read as quickly as possible. Surprisingly, that simple recognition lays at the heart of many of our problems. Should we make the decision to slow down—really slow down in our reading—a new panorama opens up. While we may delight in this new discovery, immediately we're confronted with the impulse to speed things up, perhaps a little at first but a lot more later on. The task is

seemingly arduous but in fact is not. It is we who require becoming more porous to the text at hand, and part of doing that is returning to the original languages of the original texts and taking it from there. Even that won't do the trick. Slowness of reading is paramount because it puts our souls in a mood wholly other than what they're accustomed to, thereby avoiding any clogs to get into our spiritual pores. When we speed things up, the pores get clogged...buffered...and allow only bits and pieces to filter in simply because we're moving too quickly.

There's something unnatural about this fast pace when it comes to reading, and we know it but feel powerless to remedy our first intuition. I put it this way in order to shed more light on that physicality offered as an entry to a type of prayer that comes natural to us. And that growth into that physicality works best when we move slowly which, of course, means reading slowly. In other words, there appears a close connection between reading slowly and appreciation of our inescapable physicality which consists in the here-and-nowness of our lives in all their outward banality. Proceeding otherwise would not be harmful but more akin to treading water where we move around in one spot without advancing very far. Acknowledgment of a reality beyond this often takes the form of aphorisms about living in the present, the eternal now and all the rest. However, that's where it stops. Here is the familiar landscape of spirituality as we know it which works under the guise of exhortations, language bearing upon sin and our failure to live up to God's commandments...all true if you subscribe to the Christian way of life. Nevertheless, this approach consists in a whole bunch of stock phrases which give birth to patterns of reflection which devalue how we actually comport ourselves. We stick with them even if they are painful, strange to an observer, but not to one doing it. Finding a pattern, even an uncomfortable one, is better than expending effort to look elsewhere.

Entertaining these new but common ideas has the supreme benefit of showing that we live constantly on two levels at once. On one hand we're inescapably grounded in our physicality where our hearts beat, our stomachs digest food and all the other physical stuff that goes on without our intervention (imagine where we'd be if it were otherwise?). Running parallel with this are thoughts and imaginings we entertain constantly. It turns out we day-dream not just sometimes but most of the time, an embarrassingly waste of time. Perhaps this is what's meant by our using a small percentage of our brain's power. Dreaming continues at night, of course, so its endless, the conclusion being that dreams are dreams whether they belong to the day or to the night. Our physicality continues to function on its merry own way while our ruminations go off on their own tangent. This dualism—it seems not unlike the famous dualism we always hear about between mind and body—constitutes our perception of the passage of time. So when it comes to prayer as we've come to conceive it, one time it may be “dry” while another time it may be “wet.” We alternate between the two which has a way of preventing us from getting a better relationship with the deposit of faith, our tradition. We're to confront that previously unfamiliar biblical conception of voice and word (*qol* and *davar* plus *logos*) so central to our religious heritage. The path which seems most viable is the one of *lectio divina* mentioned earlier. In addition to being at the root of our Christian heritage, *lectio* has the added boon of slowing us down which goes against a deep grain in our human nature.

So if we've come full circle exploring the various paths related to the Incarnation (all are attractive to one degree or another and certainly orthodox, so that's not the problem), is there something

else which requires further exploration? That brings us back to Square One, physicality. Here is where everything begins and surprisingly, where everything ends. Everyone has a body and interacts with the environment in a physical manner. At the same time everyone is engaged in that second tier not so much of thinking (certainly it's included) but of daydreaming where we're engaged in two things at once. In other words, we're born to multi-task even if we hear complaints about this practice. It's helpful to think like this, very simple when you come down to it, because reliance on physicality is a poor man's approach to prayer, not so much the easy way out but the natural way out. It's also idol-smashing to the nth degree because the images originating in the mind are objects we (day) dream about all the time even if we don't admit it.

The beauty of what's being proposed here is its simplicity, almost its very definition. What's more direct and simple than a pre-thought, pre-emotional apprehension of a physical body right before your eyes whether it be human, animal or otherwise? But just stop and think about it. We of the Judeo-Christian heritage have been raised not to think of prayer, our relationship with God, in terms of such directness. It has been argued convincingly that God is a spirit and a body is physical: two different modes of reality are un-combinable and beyond our feeble attempts to apprehend as in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. That isn't the issue. What's at stake is our tendency to miss the boat over and over again, of preferring what is more "spiritual" and disengaged from everything of the earth and therefore of the body. For us prayer = spiritual which, in turn (and mistakenly) = intellectual, of the mind. When you come right down to it, the latter is a definition of daydreaming of which disciplined rational thought is an appendage. Herein consists the way we usually consider prayer, even if done with considerable emotional content. When you boil it all down, we end up with forms. In other words, our prayer is not informal and is fearful of moving in that direction. So while our efforts may obtain a blessing from God and be designated as "very good" as with the six days of creation, it remains partial, just like those individual days which differ from the seventh day, the one of rest. Although we may acknowledge the value of our physicality, by disposition we'd rather "move on" to what we consider "higher" even if we don't know what this higher thing is. However, higher turns out to be the realm of dreaming, whether during day or the night, a tough realization to swallow, for it seeks to get away from corporeal reality and all that entails.

We can look at this in another way. Our daydreams are marked by motion and are centered around just a few themes which repeat themselves over and over. It follows from this simple observation that we prefer to be in motion instead of being at rest. Yet our motion, if you will, is confined to these repetitive themes and rarely steps outside them. Throughout this process the mental world informs us how we should comport ourselves within the physical world. So the drive to always be in motion lays at the source of our angst which, in turn, consists in a fear of being at rest. We prefer motion...any type will do...over immobility regardless whether the motion is tinged by darkness instead of light. In other words, our preference for "color" is secondary to our preference for motion. That's why our minds are made for continuously cranking out thoughts and images. The quality is secondary as in the just mentioned repetitious nature of daydreaming over the motion which is produced. We've grown so accustomed to motion at the center of our lives that to consider an activity as prayer apart from it is inconceivable. Part of this conundrum is that we distinguish sharply between good thoughts and bad thoughts instead of seeing them both as—and here's the tough part to accept—thoughts, pure and simple. So the drama that absorbs our

attention is going on within us unceasingly while the cure is at hand even though we don't know it. Almost always this cure dawns on us when something dire happens to us. And if we really wish to get to the heart of the matter, the best way is to cultivate dire-ness without being artificial or forced about it.

So what is this dire-ness? As already mentioned, our greatest fear is not to be in motion, to be still, and we resist it in many ways both obvious and subtle. Should we decide to be still (and this can be done, of course, through various disciplines of prayer and meditation), we obtain a sense of peace and oneness with the world about us, including ourselves, of course. But when something threatens or humiliates us, it's a different story. We don't seek these experiences actively but they come upon us despite our attempts to squirm our way out in any way possible. Generally speaking, this means taking action. And taking action translates into increasing our motion...spinning more quickly, if you will, around our personal center of gravity while going nowhere. Experience shows that this is a natural response and alleviates our distress, albeit temporarily. Yet the deeper we dig, the more intense our mental images become and hence, the more anxious we feel. So it dawns on us that being stationary both physically and mentally might do the trick...and it does, provided we stick it out. However, that usually turns out to be rather problematic.

Now to throw a different slant on the matter, one about which many of us experience daily yet don't reflect upon, namely, our inveterate desire for tinkering around. It was touched upon above more or less in passing but needs to be brought into clearer focus because it's a prime candidate to keep us from experiencing the full blown nature of physicality. And this most concrete of all realities keeps us in contact with invisible reality whether we know it or not. In pre-technological days tinkering certainly existed albeit in less sophisticated forms. In fact, it had existed ever since mankind invented the first primitive tools. Apart from the need to fabricate things to make life easier, there's the delight we take in playing around and experimenting with this or that. In such activity results are secondary while the enjoyment in the activity is primary. With the recent advent of electronic gizmos, especially of the portable variety, our inclination toward tinkering is raised to the max, the highest it's ever been in human history. We can't resist playing with our devices, a self-evident fact in people around you. Most of us will admit that quite literally 90% of what we do with these gizmos is useless, a way not just of passing the time but of satisfying that ill-defined tendency to simply fiddle around. And that fiddling is a type of movement which counteracts our fear of boredom.

Apart from this tinkering around with electronic devices, there are people who use computers for scholarly pursuits. While you can get a whole lot more done quickly and efficiently, a struggle between the task and hand and fiddling is always present and must be dealt with. In addition to the work at hand which involves maintaining updates of software and all the rest, there is, of course, access to the Internet 7-24. It isn't the intention of this article to discuss this matter but to single out the tendency to tinker while doing research and how it wears us down without even knowing it. When, for example, you've squandered some time on harmless but useless websites and return to your scholarly work, your focus of attention has can't be recaptured easily. It has become scattered like that information on a hard disk the requires being compacted and even reformatted. And so gradually, almost imperceptibly, you lose the special focus required for

working with primary sources. The task at hand, never easy to begin with, becomes more trying. Since we've convinced ourselves that a lot of it has been done already and is available on the 'Net, all we have to do is Google it and there we have it. Because work on the primary sources supposedly had been done, our task now is to look at this work through the lens of secondary sources which give ready-made answers to our inquiries. So part of the solution is to isolate oneself from this electronic media (discreetly, of course) and tread the hard and stony ground of the primary sources. The same dynamic holds true for exploring our Christian tradition which has an abundance of primary sources. The task isn't easy task because it essentially slows us down...very much so...to a speed we're not accustomed to. Holding our attention in that low gear is a large part of the task when we become porous to the text and do not buffer ourselves against it through unwanted intrusions.

Tinkering has reached its fullest expression in electronic, Internet based devices just described. Since it's such a delightful, indeed addictive, experience requiring full attention though not in a wearisome way, we can forget that it has an unintended, detrimental effect upon our memories which may escape us at first. Tinkering appeals to our innate creativity, offering endless opportunities which can be put to work immediately. This immediate appeal, however, grates against our deepest form of identity which the ancient Greeks called *anamnesis*...memory...or better, our recollective faculty. The classical tradition puts *anamnesis* as the ground of both happiness and beauty as well as the good.<sup>1</sup> For us moderns it's difficult to conceive memory as essential to our identity because we view it as a mechanism for storing facts. In other words, it's a back-up system. So if everything is available at our fingertips, why bother with the arduous task of remembering? Everything is right there for the grabbing or so it seems.

Part of the trouble in properly grasping the concept of *anamnesis* is that we moderns are forward-looking people and put a premium on such words as evolution, progress and advancement. These terms represent forms of movement directed toward the future and are taken so much for granted that barely are we aware of their impact. Even the prospect of an alternative—and that usually means being stuck in the past or the present—is abhorrent. In other words, moving forward = life. Actually the word 'recollection,' often used for translating *anamnesis*, is inaccurate. Because this Greek term is difficult to articulate, a quick look at its etymology might help. We have the root noun *mneme* (memory) to which is prefaced the preposition *ana* and which takes the genitive, dative and accusative cases. *Ana* variously translates as on, upon, throughout, up, upwards as well as back, backwards. Thus the preposition embraces a lot more than a backward gesture as popularly understood. In a nutshell *ana* is more referential and quite dynamic. It's as though the process of recollection contains two gestures: first we are going back and second, moving in an upward (as well as an upon) direction. We thus have a turn which connotes ascending a height in order to get a more comprehensive view of reality.

In light of this, *anamnesis* is immune to our inveterate desire to tinker. Despite being at the heart of our Western heritage from ancient Greece, it can seem quite foreign or better, alien. At the same time this ancient-ness has an ever present newness provided we work at it. So when we approach prayer we run the risk of acting rather dumb, of not knowing ourselves (the Delphic Oracle, if you will). Thus unwittingly we think of prayer in terms of manipulating the Divine

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<sup>1</sup>See Plato's **Meno** and **Phaedo** for more on this most basic concept.

according to our habitual mode of tinkering. The unintended result is an occasion for having distractions which never cease to plague us. And the issue of distractions is one of the biggest complaints out there when it comes to quieting one's mind for prayer. The general approach to genuine prayer always takes *anamnesis* into consideration which involves far more than having a poor memory. Actually we don't have knowledge of this faculty because it can't be pinned down and hence labeled. In a nutshell, *anamnesis* is making-present the awareness of who we are or more accurately, of who we had been all along. And this "all along" seems to extend into eternity whether before or after our birth...or both.

It appears that the reality of *anamnesis* is as close as we can get to the more contemporary notion of awareness which is part of the modern vocabulary when speaking about prayer. In fact, not using this term can confuse and even intimidate a person seeking to delve deeper into our Western heritage which is so full of images and ideas, all rolling around...beautiful in some ways yet in another, a dead-end. Yet actual references to "awareness," let alone "consciousness," are not to be found in the Western religious canon which makes this heritage simultaneously familiar yet foreign. Familiar in that we've been affected by it for approximately two and a half thousand years and foreign in that we've been unhinged from it, looking at it as though belonging to a museum. And how quickly this shift has come about, say, within one generation. So while our heritage and that of all major religions subscribe to the fact that we participate in the divine, our recollective faculty of *anamnesis* is not so much deficient, but we are unaware of our origin. Perhaps here and there throughout history it was stronger than at present, but seems always to belong to a minority. Yet it had affected culture more substantially because it lay at the heart of all human endeavors. That leads naturally enough to one conclusion: all we have is our limited body which goes about perceiving the world in the way and that. Yet this perception is clouded over by an amnesia partly induced by culture and society and partly by our own selves which wishes to rebel against this amnesia because it doesn't know its source. Somewhere in the back of our minds we feel uncomfortable, that we're made for something better, and follow a lead with good intentions which often goes awry. This is where our tendency to tinker comes into play, preferring to fuss over everything and anything in creation instead of letting go and seeing what just may happen. Indeed, quite a subtle and difficult tendency to lay hold of and to handle properly. In essence, we're trying to find the divine within the temporal while unaware that already we are divine by reason of *anamnesis*. In other words, we cannot lack anything without any knowledge of that thing.

This talk about our recollective faculty of *anamnesis* can remain quite abstract and divorced from reality which is the reason for the following example. Often in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, we hear of the image of an exile. This doesn't refer to any group of people which has survived a national tragedy but one chosen by the Lord for a specific purpose. Almost always this exile group has remained faithful through practice of the Torah, etc., amid a people which gradually became depraved. Here's a prime example of *anamnesis* at work. All this didn't happen overnight, of course. Then this small group is led away where it struggles to retain its identity in a land far more sophisticated than their own, one marked by a bewildering amount of gods. And so the exiles face a new challenge which tests them in order to become the core of a renewed Israel at a future date. Christians adopted it to a certain degree. It seems never have they been at home in "the world," considering it an alien environment which is usually hostile towards them. And so



both instances are familiar to students of the Bible.

There's something heroic about being in exile which heightens your sense of having value for a future when God will act decisively. You're out there at the head of everyone even if you've been beaten down. Others look up to you for inspiration even if you're abused to no end by people who don't understand you. It's an inspiration to hear about these people who managed to survive the sacking of Jerusalem, for example, and the journey to a far-off country after which they had to adapt in order to survive. However, an unspoken group, albeit tiny, remains behind and who are considered as undesirables. In fact, there doesn't seem to be a category for them although they are mentioned in the Bible a number of times such as Jer 52.16: "But Nebuzardan, the captain of the guard, left some of the poorest of the land to be vine dressers and plowmen." These are people who had no real stake in the city (Jerusalem) and could get along fine without it even though they had interaction with people there and of course, religious ceremonies in the temple. Even when the city was besieged, these nondescript people withdrew from the area obviously not to get harmed but also to get a better view of the tragedy unfolding before their eyes. In the meanwhile the invading army was rushing all around them, pretty much oblivious to their presence.

One the city walls had been breached and most of the inhabitants slain, the invaders picked out some of the more talented survivors who could be of service to them after which they were led into captivity. In the meanwhile, the poor outside the city who had been looking on at this unfolding tragedy went about their business as usual, having been interrupted for a brief period of time by the invasion and its aftermath. And so before the city's capture, during the siege and once the last exile had passed from view over the hill, the vine dressers, plowmen and so forth had experienced no change in their lives. What unfolded before their eyes was more or less incidental. While they depended upon the city's inhabitants for sale of their meager goods, its disappearance was no big deal. They had been accustomed to living on the edge for many years, this incident being no real disruption to their lives.

Due to the tragedy of such a siege (most likely the biblical examples pertaining to Jerusalem, heart of Jewish worship and the seat of government), one's sympathies lay naturally with the exiles. They have a formidable task ahead of them, namely, to keep alive their identity in lands almost always characterized by the worship of gods and goddesses. And so we follow their journey to a foreign land, how they adapted and the hopes they had for return home. Actually, more than a few adapted so well that they preferred to stay right where they were. It's an interesting mix of numerous elements with which we can identify and see as a model for how prayer develops. Parallel to this is the forty years Israel had spent in the desert after their exodus from Egypt. In many ways it was a romantic, formative period, so when they entered Canaan probably they experienced a let-down of sorts. That may have played a role once the exiles or more likely their descendants, returned to Israel in order to rebuild not just their ruined city but their lives.

Sure enough, upon their return there were the vine dressers, plowmen and others pretty much doing the same as after the city's destruction. The exiles may have recognized some but not very many because never in the first place did they give this group much attention. In other words, the feeling was mutual...not hostile but indifferent. The returning exiles may have felt some envy towards these "left-behinds" but wouldn't admit it. That leads to examining why this neglected

group may have some bearing upon this article's general theme.

It's of little concern how these people—and they don't have a name or category to set them apart, to give them a certain nobility—got the way they are. Always they fended for themselves but not entirely. Nearby was the city (let's stick with Jerusalem) in whose shadow they stayed, never having strayed far off. It wasn't so much a protection against foes (hence the walls), for these people had no need for protection. They even seemed a bit removed from the temple and hence the God of Israel, making them further suspect. The only time these people who bear some semblance to modern day gypsies interacted with the city's inhabitants was with business and worship. Though fully Jews, they may have been treated as second class citizens and not allowed full entry into the temple. Nevertheless, both groups had a working relationship built upon trade. What the outliers grew or raised they sold in the city, not needing much of the more sophisticated items for sale there.

This description of the outliers is built upon fact but obviously expanded but without making them into a romantic ideal. That belongs to the exiles. So while most people follow the saga of the exiles and later their return, the outliers are overlooked as always they had been. In fact, they wouldn't want it otherwise. Many a time, especially in the early morning hours or evening some of these people must have looked at the city with a perspective unavailable elsewhere. An almost unbridgeable gap existed between the two sides, all the more pronounced by the city ways and deep valley in between. Although the onlookers may have been overcome at times with a desire for being within the walls and to enjoy all the city offered, life outside was better. It was secure in its insecurity, and the city dwellers knew it but never could admit it. But what nagged at them was their semi-security. The outliers never strayed from the immediate vicinity of the city but pretty much hugged the walls. That made them suspect, not unlike leeching off the city without giving much in return. Indeed, they had vineyards and livestock, but most of that was in the control of over-lords or the like.

These observations concerning the remnant have some bearing upon some of the ways prayer is dealt with or more accurately, the cultural accretions that have grown up around it which can either impede or foster the act itself. The drawbacks are fairly obvious. Being left behind in the shadow of a ruined, once prosperous city in and by itself is discouraging. You're living not just in poverty of body but of memory. Memories of past glory can't but flood your mind as you move in and about the ruins, trying to squeeze a livelihood from the field around the city which, too, have been laid waste. All it's good for is grazing sheep and goats, nothing more. Yet people are reluctant to move away. Apart from the dire poverty, there remains the pull of the city, even in ruins. After all, it's the place in which you grew up and wouldn't know where to go even if you had the chance, and that chance is next to zero. All in all, a depressing situation.

Then there's the little appreciated positive side to all this. You're living in an environment of past glories and are reminded constantly of their fleeting nature. The best and the brightest have either been slain or hauled off into exile, and sometimes made out better in foreign lands. These people might get reports of their former residence and pit the remnant more than envy them. That means the remnant has to put up with the added burden of what people think of them. However, those thoughts are far away and don't impinge upon the situation at home. Once you

acclimatize yourself to a borderline existence, there's a chance for being free in a way not experienced to date. Previously people had looked down upon you, but now they're gone. You and your fellows are equals now with no one to lord it over you nor your family. But if your family had been slain in the confusion, you might even be freer than before once the requisite period of mourning has past. The freedom consists in that of a homesteader, of staking out property you haven't had before, including what's up for the take amid the ruins.

But is this a condition worth pursuing? Probably not, but more often than not something like befalls a lot of people today. Perhaps they might not be grubbing around for food on a daily basis. Instead, they are squirreled away in small apartments. Of course, their "cousins" exist in rural areas, but we'll leave them out since at least they have the outdoors for a consolation prize. Such people, urban or rural, have time to do a lot of observing. They've been freed-up involuntarily and are in the position of making the most of an unfortunate situation. They are at home in one place without leaving it or where they've been all along and where they are now, in the shadow of a city that has been destroyed. In the meanwhile, the exiles have adopted nicely to their new land.

Living on the edge as with this remnant compels them to live on a basic level as mentioned above; no luxuries or the like to distract them. They bear a certain parallel to that reliance upon physicality, this essay's central theme, and can use it to build any spirituality they may lay their hands up by the familiar art of foraging, not by lofty flights of spirituality. Their environment, bleak as it is, with a ruined city on one side and field that have been laid waste on another, fosters the basics. Yet these very basics which consist of watching in the sense of beholding how we comport ourselves all at once lays at the heart of any renewal of spirituality. It's one-on-one contact with (physical) reality by our (physical) bodies, no more, no less. Yet that point of contact is The Thing we long for ardently. No attempts to bottle it nor to store it away will work. It's a lesson in transcendence the hard and direct way. No cry for help nor cause for rejoicing intervene. That comes invariably and is quite secondary to physicality, our teacher and master.

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