

Time as the Problem

Whenever we set our minds to pray, we do it out of a pressing need and at the drop of a hat. The idea of how to pray or how to prepare ourselves doesn't even cross our minds. Actually we don't even have a word for it, so natural and spontaneous is this activity common to everyone. Later after some reflection and discussion we might identify our response to such an extreme situation as through the medium of prayer. At least that localizes it in our minds. Our usual notions of prayer are secondary to what we're after here, that is, prayer which goes under the guise of meditation, recitation of formal prayers or sitting silently in church. Clearly they don't fit the bill when we're *in extremis*. Everyone knows the familiar saying that there are no atheists in foxholes. We can also say there are no atheists when we're desperate. In other words, a situation with apparently no way out automatically makes us dig deep within. While doing so, we discard any and all formal training we may have garnered about prayer whether it be rudimentary or advanced. Such categories don't apply right now. This can be summed up rather starkly in an equation, despair = God. Yet as experience teaches, when we emerge from this despair and put some space between us and it, God pretty much evaporates until the next bout comes around, and surely it will, for the process is bound to repeat itself.

So this digging within is done without foreknowledge of where we're going or even what we're doing. We just do it and do it with utter perfection, pushed on by the urgency at hand. We also do it alone, unaccompanied by even our closest friend or relative. Later in a more relaxed atmosphere when we reflect back on our experience we remark that we've hit upon our true selves even if the cost had been very dear. Then the question invariably arises, is a sudden and present danger essential to prayer? Is it, in fact, the very definition of prayer? The evidence points in this direction which makes us wistfully dwell in the memory of that paradoxical experience which had been both so urgent and satisfying. We know, however, that to live like that permanently is impossible nor is it desirable to pursue suffering (It'll come later down the road, no question there). We'd be dead by sunset if not sooner.

While the more immediate memory of our distress vanishes, there remains a longing for having been set right, and we wish to take up residence there. We know this is our permanent home, for what we had come into the world, yet find living there to be precarious since we don't seem able to hang on to it. Some of this has to do with the details of daily life crowding in and blotting out memories of our intense prayer during stressful times. Their assault is constant but not necessarily trying, and this puts us on auto-pilot when after a short time dull our senses. At the same time we're aware of all the stuff going on in the world which presses in on us continually through the media. Without our knowing it, exposure to one crisis after another intensifies our personal distress. Some research must have been done about how this bombardment affects us. It doesn't take much to realize that recovering from even a brief exposure to a tragedy on the other side of the world takes longer than we imagine even if we fool ourselves into thinking the opposite. Thus our sense of peace rests on unstable ground and is ready to be toppled in an instant.

The awareness of personal vulnerability and vivid images of violence presented through the media keeps us on edge whether we're tucked away on some desert island or live in an environment where everything is taken care of. These tragedies oblige us to remain a state of constant tension in order to show solidarity with those in need. It's a natural temptation colored with noble sentiments, and many people fall for it. However, these sentiments cloud our vulnerability, delicate to begin with, and are crouching there to jump on us when confronted with distressing images. Peer pressure, coupled with guilt, has something to do with it, a need to "get involved" because everyone else is. This heaps distress upon the already present distress of our daily life. Because the tendency to take on more than we should is fairly universal, strangely we accept it as part of being normal. What gnaws at us is that if we don't incorporate this stress into our lives, we're not connected and even worse, are insensitive to the suffering going on in the world. Actually this "obligation" to be in distress borders upon a conspiracy theory to keep us from being at peace. By no means is this a sentiment of paranoia, but it does have a ring of truth. The conspiracy is to keep us from being at peace which, almost miraculous to say, is our normal condition. The more you look at it, the more you realize something...some principle or the like...seems to have a hand in keeping us un-peaceful. If such is the case, we should give serious consideration as to why this is so, for the disturbance of our peace spreads more quickly than any

plague. Once gone it can be recovered, but the effort required is exhausting, even double or more than our initial efforts to attain peace. Perhaps this contributes to our dilemma. Better to remain un-peaceful or at least in a state of un-ease instead of getting peaceful, losing it and spending time recovering it. It's kind of weird but true.

A verse from the beginning of the Book of Job might be helpful to describe this. "There was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them" [vs. 6]. Here Satan isn't the demonic personification we've become familiar with but a supernatural being pretty much like these sons of God though not necessarily of their company. In other words, he's the odd man out, ready to be summoned but not to associate with his fellows. This is intimated by the Lord asking Satan in the next verse, "Whence have you come?" To which Satan responds, "from going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it." We can hear the casual, slightly haughty tone in his voice indicative of his restlessness lacking among the sons of God, so evident that the Lord saw it on his face and was dying to ask where he had been. These sons were present and looking on with amazement, glad that they aren't associated with him, a feeling that must be mutual though it's left unsaid. As for Satan's "going to and fro," the Hebrew verb is *shut* coupled with the preposition "in" (*b-*) the earth, as though he was right smack in the center of it. Why he was there is left unsaid, just the fact that he was there and summoned to appear before God and his sons. The verb *shut* means to whip or to lash as well as to row. Rowing can be a group effort. If one rower is out of harmony as Satan is out of harmony with the sons of God, we could say that he's lashing the sea with his oar instead of pulling his weight. Harmony is the very definition of a crew. By not being in harmony with one's fellow rowers, the boat is prevented from moving forward efficiently. Thus *shut* is what sets Satan apart from the other divine beings.

At first glance this disharmony between Satan and the sons of God as they stand before the Lord appears to be the main issue. While important, *shut* belays something more subtle. This verb intimates making a lot of noise by the flat part of an oar when it comes down hard on the water. This gesture causes a lot of spray as well. In other words, the noise and commotion produced is somehow more appealing than everyone rowing together. It gets attention without which life would be boring. So despite the disharmony, we take the noise and discordance as a sign of life which, in turn, we deem more precious than the light as represented by being in the Lord's presence. Surely the sons of God were outstanding in their character but quite boring in comparison with Satan. The Lord was fully aware of the fact but obviously couldn't disclose how he felt. If so, it'd just blow over them. The next step was for the Lord to appoint Satan as an agent to tempt Job, he being admirably suited for it. Surely the sons of God were appalled at this and never could conceive of such a mission.

Life-threatening situations galvanize us like nothing else because they teach us to pray immediately or better, they thrust us into it. Actually there isn't any space for teaching. Desperate situations thus are more like a trigger producing an immediate effect. Once the danger has passed, we look back on it and consider that it had revealed our true selves which, if we consider the dynamics involved, contains an element of transcendence. This seems the natural way life is set up. If so inclined, we can replicate these situations without necessarily bringing in real fear and dread but a *memory* of them...not just their recollection but a firm establishment of them in our hearts and souls. *Anamnesis* is the technical word here and will be discussed below in greater detail. Any threat that comes our way abolishes the element of time since we're focused on one thing, staying alive. Certainly we can't expect this of our fellows and shouldn't bother worrying about that. At some time—and this is guaranteed—they will hit upon the same situation and handle it accordingly. Keeping this in mind puts at rest our tendency to worry what other people are doing and to judge them. In other words, we learn to let them be and avoid the insidious and ultimately boring tendency to be envious. Boring insofar as we're assaulted repeatedly by the same thoughts which produce the same emotions and keep us in the same place. In other words, we don't grow.

So when we put some time for reflection between a major crisis and normal life reflection, to our amazement during the crisis perception of time had been abolished. More specifically, time had been suspended. While in the crisis, we couldn't care less about its passage. This leads us to examine what actually occupies our minds on a daily basis, namely, those mental images which unceasingly emerge within us, the source of which can't be

fathomed. They are also the source of our joys, for who doesn't delight in daydreaming? The inner disharmony—that *shut* so vividly described concerning Satan—has no place when we're in true distress. It comes only when we reflect upon the crisis, memories of which perpetuate themselves into the present and set the stage for projection into the future. As for the element of space, time's twin, perpetuation of it doesn't seem to share the same character. However, that's of secondary importance. Scientifically speaking we know that space and time are one entity and thus may share the same mental and spiritual correspondence. Regardless, that's secondary to the issue at hand. Instead, what we're after is the essence of that despair found within a desperate situation which had been thrust upon us, and how we comport ourselves within it. This takes place after we've dealt with the initial onslaught of surprise, injustice, pain...whatever. Usually they preclude us from moving forward, preferring instead to make us wallow in our present miseries. Because we've removed ourselves somewhat from the actual experience we can look for directly at its essence. We run through all the superficial though bothersome memories and finally, take a good, long hard look at the despair in and by itself. We discover that something remains beneath the garbage and apparently is immune to destruction. "Remains there" is quite accurate in that while we may move around, in and out of the presence of this immutable reality, if you will, "it" goes no where while being devoid of qualities familiar to us. Actually "it" seems independent of what we call our selves, tagging along all the while. Conscience may not be far off the mark, but that seems to be a faculty that inform us, one part of us informing the other part.

All in all, we've hit upon a very strange situation. Naturally we shun pain and don't desire to put ourselves in a desperation situation voluntarily. To do that could be setting us up for a failure...big time...because we lack a roadmap as to where we're going. Besides, we have to taken into consideration whether or not it will work even though we know that life has in store sufficient desperate situations. Yet we're drawn to explore the mysterious, in-dissolvable reality we had hit upon which lays beneath the surface of our pain. We devise fantasies about the mechanism of all that transpires, wondering how we will act when our time comes. This inclination to fantasize is more common that we think because we project how we comport ourselves in familiar situations, and see if we'll behave in similar fashion when things get desperate. We know this doesn't work because it's artificial, trying to force something into a projected, imaginary state of affairs. Knowledge of ourselves now doesn't necessarily mean it will translate into the same knowledge when we're in dire need. Here truth seems to be at its starkest: no props, no tinkering nor fidgeting works. Added to this is our fascination with things electronic because they take us away from the task at hand, more than traditional distractions in the past. True-blue despair or its close equivalent is the only way. Although we might not be in it right now, we can use the time at our disposal when all is well in order to examine past experiences of despair and abstract from it in the literal sense of drawing out something from it. This brings to mind the unrolling of a scroll. The problem is to keep the scroll open and not allow it to roll up in a flash as is wont to happen. Yet even the threat of that happens adds to the adventure at hand.

The more we persevere looking beyond the gory details to that mysterious underlying reality, the more it seems we can replicate it without being artificial. Immediately there comes to mind the bugaboo of how to handle the passage of time. This is a fairly modern dilemma partly because our lives have become divided or compartmentalized. Nevertheless, it become tantamount to press on with our inquiry. Discovery of this new, omni-present reality which comes only through the mediation of a desperate situation is a total surprise...a true delight...and naturally we wish to hang on to it. Of course there exists the usual temptation about wanting to latch on to this reality and possess it which means, in fact, we're dying to manipulate it. This desire will be with us always...it's part of the spiritual quest...and once recognized, can be handled more easily because we've identified it.

If we get this straight right off the bat, we can avoid the expenditure of lots of energy. We need to handle this with the utmost care but at the same time not dwell on it. Such dwelling leads to the real attachment we Westerners may have read about and acknowledged but never fully accepted as part of ourselves. The issue at hand more precisely is our unswerving attachment to form. We want something in one form or another. "Bad" is preferable to "no" form because at least it preoccupies our attention. Yet we're at the threshold of moving into a different dimension and should take advantage of our new discovery. Cool, calculated examination of our despair reveals that what we've hit upon initially seems like a form but turns out not to be such. For the sake of discussion, we call it formlessness but not a cosmic black hole that scoops us up, never

to spit us out again. We know its formless because it stands apart from everything else in our lives (and all that consists in form, and that's a lot of stuff). In sum, it stands apart from form. We know this instinctively and rejoice in our discovery, the biggest imaginable, almost too good to be true.

So moving on, it dawns on us that we have to acclimatize ourselves to being formless, a bit awkward sounding but not inaccurate. In other words, we have to become something like we've never been before nor have had any experience with. It's like trying to describe a glacier to an inhabitant of the Amazon rain forest. The very foundation for making comparisons don't exist. So when we get into this further, we discover that what may be termed our "tinkering nature" kicks in. We love to play round with things, something in our very nature. Our interests may be mechanical, technological, artistic or the like; tinkering is simply fun, and we learn a whole lot while doing it. But most important of all, tinkering helps to pass the time...kills it, as the expression goes. The formless reality we're beginning to recognize as such is immune to tinkering. No amount of trying to figure it out works which means we have to abandon something very dear to us. Here's a prime example where an encounter with a brand new reality becomes a confrontation and will remain so until we obtain sufficient wisdom to see otherwise.

So what is this otherwise? It means throwing our love for tinkering to the wind, an attachment more painful than at first glance. Voluntarily we've agreed to suspend our mental faculties in a gamble whose outcome isn't certain. Still, that reality we hit upon is like a goad as it thrusts us into a situation of despair and acts as a guide. And to tune into it means we keep returning to the suspension of our mental faculties it had wrought. The situation is quite strange, really. For how could memory of something insubstantial keep us going? That means memory of an instance when memory had been suspended compels us to look more deeply into what constitutes our human nature or a more accurately, what lies beneath it. Again, the temptation to think of all this in terms of a form turns out to be the problem. Recognizing it and letting it go is the start of the solution.

Now the way to cozy up to this formless reality is, as said above, by becoming formless. We can conceive of this in a playful manner which means thinking in terms of assuming a disguise. However, it goes only so far since even being playful is a form...a human expression...whereas the "object" at hand doesn't have a form, for at this stage it may be said not to exist. That is, not to exist in the conventional way we think things existing and not existing. So every way we turn gets us no where which builds up our frustration. At this preliminary stage we might be tempted to throw in the proverbial towel thinking we're engaged in a game of make-believe. Yet something impels us on which eventually and hopefully makes us realize that our very constitution may turn out be formless. We want it more than anything else because nothing else satisfies. Such is the ultimate desire in life, bar none. And so we learn to correct our striving. The ancient Greeks had a word for this innate desire, *thumos*, which lacks precise definition but centers around notions as principle of life, temper, desire or inclination. It seems this *thumos* isn't conditioned by anything, that it just is. Sounds like we're getting a bit metaphysical...true...but this metaphysics is more real than anything else we've experienced since it's pushing the limits to our lives.

We know this *thumos* when we latch on to it because it bestows on us an authority we haven't had before which enables us to cut through any manifest reality...reality with forms...and see them for their worth which is both positive and negative. It's called authority because according to the Latin derivation (*auctoritas*), we become the creator who authorizes (that word again) things into existence. To be an author means you're in charge, and we know we have this in-charge-ness because everything in the realm of form is subject to our creativity. This is as far from lording it over people and things as we can get, nor is it a rash, stupid assumption based on a passing insight. Rather, it's founded upon the distinction already made, form vs. formlessness. So we get the clear intuition that formlessness which appeared so cold and removed from everything turns out to be the source of creativity. For if you have an existence without forms, it just may make you to sit down and decide to try your hand at experimenting. That means you'd do what's opposite to yourself, that is, make forms. This creativity (check out the opening verses of Genesis here, 'Let us make') is opposite to the tinkering described above where we exert our faculties upon things that already exist and manipulate them to our hearts' content. It turns out to be rearranging stuff already there instead of being really creative.

This way of looking at things is based upon experiences from real life which seem a bit odd but lays at the essence of all our desires, that all-important *thumos*. Constant appeal is to be made for going out into the field and trying it out. If it doesn't work, that's that. Move on. But the distinction between form (and without a doubt, there are a lot of them out there) and formlessness lays at the heart the major problem affecting us today, the passage of time. We have two extremes of time. It passes too quickly or drags on. We either have too much or too little. Both always have been with us, but the distinction is starker in today's fast-paced modern society. During our productive lives most of us subscribe to the first prosaically put as "Time flies." This expression is mentioned so often that instead of reflecting upon it and doing something about it, we acknowledge it and move on more or less passively. The second extreme is that time drags on interminably. Such is the experience of those we've stashed away conveniently in rest homes. This phenomenon of warehousing just might tie in somewhere, somehow with our inability to deal with the painful experience of time's passage. Yet we all know that some day we'll end up in that situation, the exact opposite condition in which we've lived our entire lives and have had painfully little preparation. Perhaps, too, this endless stretch of time reminds us, albeit indirectly, of our inherent formless nature we're perceiving right now, however imperfectly, in terms of form. Thus what is outside time we perceive as being in time. The two are so jarring that when put together, we subscribe to one or the other. Since we lack proper training in this regard, it's natural we dread being inactive or stationary with nothing to do and nowhere to go even if we have the best room service at our fingertips.

So it appears the Biggest Challenge in life is how to handle time. In the normal course of events, first we consider all the elements involved as discussed in the last paragraph. That must be kept firmly in mind in order to trace as accurately as possible the reality of time's two-faceted nature as passing quickly or having no end. Next we see if a resolution is possible which may mean some experimentation, of going in a direction opposite to what has just been outlined. And that opposite is negative: of time not passing quickly but of having, in a sense, stalled. It seems pretty close to inverting the order laid out but isn't because the only two experiences of time worth considering have now been posited as negatives, and negatives we don't want: either too discouraging or too apophatic, if you will, smacking of the mystical and other-worldly which isn't the case here. We want something to grab onto...facts...and also want to stick with them. Anything mystical, if you will, is up to the person doing experimenting. He'll have to decide whether this falls under the mystical and take it from there. Just the fact of having gotten this far in our understanding of time, simple as it is, is a big step by way of preparation for taking the next...The Big One...on which we've set our sites. We can look it another way. We're preparing ourselves to realize that we don't have to prepare ourselves since we have nothing to prepare for. Everything is set in place, ready to go, without our meddling. That's as contrary to the dearly held experience of striving after something as it comes. When suddenly confronted with this paradox, we tend to do lots of re-evaluation which boils down to throwing out most, if not all, of our assumptions about the meaning of life. It's also threatening because we don't have to bother changing anything in ourselves. Sounds quite attractive but goes against our deeply ingrained notion of having to strive for this or that. In sum, we're jettisoning stuff and making our lives lighter.

So we come right down to the issue at hand, that is to say, suspension of our awareness of time's passage. Things around us continue moving continuously in space from point A to point B, no doubt about that. Such is not our object of suspension for obvious reasons. We can't stop the world from turning nor is it desirable to wish thus. Our aim is to see if in actuality it's desirable to bring a halt, albeit temporarily, to this point-to-point movement which characterizes everything out there. Ecclesiastes took this seriously but felt it was too tricky, hesitating to go against his culture and reverence of God. Instead, he adopted a pessimistic view of the fleeting nature of all things and hence the passage of time. And to his credit (depending on how you feel about it), he doesn't bring in God. His observations and the divinity are wholly different realms to be kept apart. How he felt about the two being connected, of course, is recorded, but we can intimate what he was trying to get at.

Ecclesiastes speaks a lot about the rise and fall of natural and human events, his way of expressing the passage of time. Behind this gloomy picture lays something unsaid we're on the lookout for, namely, a desire first to escape this inescapable dilemma and second, to ensconce oneself in a "place" where time doesn't flow. This

ties in neatly with the title of the essay at hand which says that time is *the* problem. What's so amazing about time is that there's so much of it. It comes at us relentlessly and becomes burdensome as we grow older, all the more painful by observing younger people oblivious to time's passage since they are caught up in doing constructive things. They're going full tilt at what we defined as tinkering. However, Ecclesiastes reminds us that they too will end up the same way as old folks and then die. So if we're caught between this unceasingly flow of events but somewhere down the line experience a rupture, even threatening us with death, where do we go from here, "go" being used, of course, figuratively.

So when we experience, even for the briefest moment, suspension of the perception of time, a heaviness latches on to us which is nothing like anything we've experienced before. Most likely perception of this heaviness prevents people from exploring further. For no small reason the Hebrew word for divine glory is *kavod* which derives from a verbal root meaning to be heavy. That pretty much sums up the Lord's way he deals with Israel through such notables as Moses on Mount Sinai. In other words, this *kavod* "weighs down" upon someone, leaving him suspended...paralyzed...but not crushed out of existence. Generally speaking it's a momentary experience and not sustainable throughout daily existence. Memory of it in the sense of *anamnesis* makes this *kavod* inform our lives which is what we want and want now, not later, for we're after the fulness of reality or as much as we can take in with one gulp. Since the ebb and flow of life and therefore time demands our participation, we have no choice but to respond in order to continue in existence.

The value of this ebb and flow, already quite familiar, now assumes a different character which we haven't noticed earlier. Without realizing it we correspond to this ebb and flow with full correspondence from our physical bodies. After all, they've been at it all along while our minds have been elsewhere. However, now they take over our normal perceptions or better, our fantasies which have both entertained and frightened us. Another way of putting it is that we've learned to move around minus any interference coming from our thoughts which have been accustomed to deal with past or future stuff. In essence, stuff which doesn't exist. Then if we turn away from the past and future and focus upon the present (speaking like this admittedly has become so hackneyed), we find that to be our dwelling place. It takes some getting used to, once we allow the ebb and flow of events to escape us like water dribbling from our hands. And so our lives pass between two points. First we're confronted with this fleetingness which is marked by something we can't lay hold of nor will we ever be able to do so. Secondly, by giving up reliance upon our thoughts we discover that our physicality which had been with us all along turns out to be a more reliable guide in life than we had given credit.

Because we live life between the two poles of fleetingness and memory, sometimes we don't know which way to go because each has its own unique value as well as risk. If we choose the former, we go through life unanchored. If the latter, then we remain stuck in the past. There is no third choice, really, which puts us right back in that predicament with which this essay opened...despair...and that throws us back upon our innate resources to discover a reality, new but one which always had been present, and goes by the name *anamnesis*. This is a term favorable to describe the reality at hand because it's rooted in our Western heritage which avoids falling into a trap that might arise if we were to use words like "soul" or "spirit." This groping around for adequate terms, while essentially secondary, turns out to be quite important because it keeps us on a course where we hearken back to that unchanging reality already described and grounds us there. That's why *anamnesis* is helpful. It pertains to a going up-on (*ana-*) memory which is continuous, not static. The best part about all this is, of course, that it satisfies.

Mention of *anamnesis* brings up a larger issue worth touching upon, namely, the terms we use with regard to our Western philosophical-theological heritage. We find them most useful on those occasions when we fall into a bout of distress because they are an anchor garnered from real life situations over some two thousand plus years. In other words, the images (the chief means by which the religious realities are conveyed) do not just enable us to identify our distress but are the vehicles by which this heritage becomes registered in our memories. A picture is worth a thousand words, and an image...an *eikon* (icon)...is even more valuable. Yet in an amazingly short period of time, let's say a generation or two, this heritage has melted away and no longer appeals to modern folks. Some research into why this is so seems needed though we might be too close to events to sort them out properly. Nevertheless, the incompatibility between that tradition and us today is

quite unfortunate. Apparently it no longer offers the same comfort, if you will. At least pointing this out identifies the precise nub or center of concern for a lot of people today who feel this unease keenly yet have trouble (and understandably so) putting their finger on it. In sum, people fall into troublesome situations as already described, cry out for help and despite these desperate pleas, complain that their prayers go unanswered. The next step is easy. One can either claim that God doesn't exist, is a product of our imagination or whatever. And so the images derived from inherited religious tradition have fallen out of favor. This doesn't mean, of course, that the reality behind them has vanished. In a way it's good that these traditional images have fallen out of favor. At this crucial point, *all* images are valueless. How to handle this gets us further down the line of what's really on the minds of many people.

Although for the most part we as Westerners have the Judeo-Graeco-Roman heritage, we might feel tempted to jettison it or good parts of it. The alternatives are Eastern religions, Buddhism being the best among them, yet despite their appeal and sophistication, they don't fit our mold. Not that they ever will, but anyone familiar with these things will quickly find the two are incompatible except, for example, those who have delved deeply into the matter over an extended period of time. This involves mastery of the Sanskrit language in which major texts have been written. Perhaps someone like Thomas Aquinas will come along and make compatible Christianity with Buddhism although chances are it will involve a group effort, not a one-man show. Until that day comes, we can make a general observation about how to handle religious and philosophical issues which remain based in our Western, Christian heritage. And they turn out to be as good as any other tradition can offer provided we take the time and divest ourselves of prejudices and preconceived ideas, harder to do than first imagined.

There are two general approaches: the devotional stance (very fine) and the theological one (very fine as well). One comes from the heart and the other from the head. Of course, the two can be combined and when they are, we get something outstanding as in the actions and writings of a saint. Still—and this is tricky—there's something kind of passé about such talk. No longer does it convey the truth in a way that has been convincing in the past despite the outstanding character of the person subscribing to it. Some kind of middle point between devotion and theological reflection might be in order, and that is partly the impetus to this brief article. You go to the religious sources of the West, primarily through the original languages (you'd do the same with Sanskrit), and ponder them in a way that impacts you directly as had been their original intent. It should be noted that both devotion and theology have done this for aeons and came up with lots of good insights. However, they don't resound with us today as with past generations. People just don't want to be inspired devotionally nor theologically. It's hard to pin down the reason for this, and we all know it but remain at a loss to do anything constructive about it.

One quick observation on this matter. Sanctity has been a goal of practicing the Christian way of life, no question about it, and will remain so. Yet there's another issue that pre-dates this which runs parallel and can appeal to a wider audience, that is, as a guide...a handmaid...to pursue sanctity. That handmaid is philosophy in the original and literal sense of the word, *philos* + *sophos*, love in the sense of friendship and companionship + wisdom which originally meant technical knowledge, artistic skill. There's nothing especially devotional nor theological about *philosophia*, but it lays at the heart of our Western-ness and was employed by the early Church, especially the Greek tradition. Everyone desires companionship, the appeal of *philos*. Similarly, everyone desires *sophos* and, in a sense, already is *sophos*. Putting it in more modern terms yet sticking with the word's original meaning, the noun *sophia* can apply to that tinkering discussed earlier. Now if we can tap into this love of tinkering, of engaging in creative work, explore how dear it is to us, perhaps we could shift it onto another plane, wisdom, as more commonly it has become known. Once that has been established, we can move in a direction that is both appealing and rewarding right from the start. This is just a quick outline, obviously requiring deeper consideration, but thrown out there for now.

Whether we like it or not, the devotional-theological heritage is passing off the scene with alarming rapidity, leaving us pretty much hanging despite the fact that many rich images from the Bible continue to inform our lives even though most people don't believe in them. In a sense, they've passed from being religious to being cultural; still with us but not informing us. This situation can't be remedied, it seems, by the usual arguments because the language used, while based on the Bible, is unreflective. Even more to the point, it tends to be

thinly veiled as either didactic or polemic or both. Actually the Bible is an ideal storehouse for ready-made answers. Yet those who wish to inquire more deeply as to why this is so run up the problem that the Bible doesn't teach much about prayer and prayer for such persons tends towards mediation...and mediation is a fuzzy word with a wide variety of meanings and applications.

So this gets back to a familiar theme running throughout this home page and in fact forms its title, *lectio divina*. It turns out that *lectio* can be a viable solution to many problems relative to the Bible, prayer conceived as meditation and especially how we deal directly with distressing situations. *Lectio*, however, has been considered something akin to a poor man's theology since it lacks the rigorous discipline of formal theology and comes across somewhat disorganized. However, the task of *lectio* is to stay rooted in the Bible, enabling us to launch out into new ways of presenting the old which has nothing to do with changing or adapting fundamental doctrines or the like. If we can confine ourselves to a more intense focus upon a given text, we have a better understanding of it. However, this presupposes a special discipline, of reading slowly and resisting mightily the desire to press ahead. Focus upon a very small passage of a sacred text differs from the more profuse approach of devotion and theology by making us stay in a confined space where we roll around until something gives. And it won't give by caving into our desire to cover more territory. What has the potential of emerging is an insight we haven't had before as through the practice of devotion or reading a lot of theology. This potential may be called a third possibility, one with its roots in that *philosophia* described above but informed with biblical insights.

Earlier the unusual proposal was made to first examine our past experiences of despair and then capture the essence of how we comported ourselves when so afflicted. And that comportment, if you will, turns out to lack any type of form whatsoever. This is very different, of course, from having such-and-such thoughts, weighing them against alternative thoughts. A bit later we intuit the essence of such reflection and replicate it, if you will, minus the despair. We do this because we've hit upon something that invariably attracts us and won't let us go. What that "it" remains mysterious for now but will become clearer as we advance. The essence of this replication, of course, is the suspension of our mental and emotional faculties. With that done (this sounds so casual and prosaic but put as such because for the moment accurate words are lacking), the suspension so recalled—inserted into our faculty of *anamnesis*—broaden out the text. It does this in a way which isn't devotional nor theological but right where the sacred text speaks.

Our replicating (not mimicking) of despair points like the straightest of arrows to a reality where our faculties are held in abeyance. Now they find a wonderful correspondence with the sacred text and hand. And that sacred text can extend beyond Scripture, even a philosophical essay from Plato or a text from Marcus Aurelius, because now we've found the means to look at differently. So when *lectio* uses a biblical text it does so with the explicit intention to leave or transcend it right from the beginning. To our delight, it has an effect contrary to what you'd think it would have, namely, to move into some nebulous space where we float around aimlessly. Instead, *lectio* is always getting at the text—and admittedly the original languages are ideal for this—which as soon as they are intuited (as opposed to being understood), are promptly left behind. Now any questions about how the Bible relates to meditation dissolve on their own, for the reality underlying the text is allowed to step forward. In other words, we've come to learn how to use the text in order to leave it.

One effect that stands out, not at once but over a period of time, is that we've develop a genuine friendship with what we're reading. This is quite alien to our modern approach where the goal is to gain information and to do that as quickly as possible. Once the information is gotten, we leave the text behind and cease having any relationship with it. One might be tempted to say a certain mystical approach is being suggested here, not true. There's nothing exotic going on, simply a much slower reading punctuated with plenty of pauses for reflection. They tend to keep us in that confined space, deliberately so, for our greater benefit. Another benefit emerges a bit later down the line. We develop a sensitivity to the physical nature of the world about us that seems to require a slowness of mind to appreciate. While we're reading slowly, the outside world is allowed to filter into us slowly and almost imperceptibly. And so attentiveness to the physicality of everything minus judgment starts to make itself felt which can't be done when the goal is to read as much as possible in the shortest period of time. And because Western thought and religion tend to keep away from the physical, treating with suspicion, it's the last place we look for a solution. However, it turns out to be the only place

worth looking.

The value of physicality...our bodies as well as the natural world...are valuable insofar as they enjoy a direct, unmediated contact with reality. We appreciate this when we've managed to suspend our emotional and intellectual faculties, even momentarily, and intuit that they rest on some kind of mysterious ground we know is present but can't explain. When obedient to this physicality we don't allow any temporal interval to squeeze in between it and us and therefore color our perception. Once this insight is established and is done so immediately once and for all, we may allow thoughts and emotions to drift in and capture our minds. Still, the memory...the *anamnesis*...of this immediate contact remains in order to inform us. Engagement in this process implies a loss of individuality, but that's fine, exactly what we want. Prior to that we've felt our individuality, wonderful as it may be, as a burden and are relieved when we shed it, even momentarily.

This continuous rise and fall of experiences leads to a consideration of the nature of progression and succession which for most of us goes unexamined because the former has become so embedded in our culture that barely we give it a thought. And that means reflection of succession is left to wither on the sidelines. We think of one event (either in our own lives or outside ourselves) as being strung together as a series, all inter-related, even if on occasion they are disparate. Generally what we're looking for...to make sense of...is an evolution from a less complete state to one which is more complete. What we have achieved now should be better than the past and hopefully we turn out better in the future than what we have right now. In other words, progression involves a looking back and a looking forward, both pretty much the same. This process is fraught with threats coming from every direction which threatens to overturn our already precarious situation in the present. So while the idea of progression (let's throw in evolution for now though the two may not be similar) has mass appeal, it's standing on shaky ground. The reason is because in the final analysis it resembles training, and that can always go one way or another. And so we know the relative instability of progression to be true but don't seem able to put a finger on it.

With this brief summary of progression in mind, we can look for an alternative in the notion of succession. This seems to involve a more comprehensive inner structure where things and events follow a given order, and that order can be pre-ordained, if you will. It can be related to the lessening of tension of an earlier situation as with the removal of our various states or degrees of blindness. When one stage...one succession...comes onto the stage, it hangs around for a given time and is replaced by another, pretty much whole and entire. In other words, we don't think of a succession as progressing somewhere or to something but as coming on rather quickly and as an entirety. For example, a new president succeeds one who has just left office. The office remains the same but the succession does not. In sum you wouldn't say that such a form of government progresses but succeeds. It's going nowhere but everywhere, so to speak.

Let's take another example which is more to the point, the Church's liturgical cycle. It speaks in terms of time, no so much a calendar of days though that's part of it. For example, it contains the fundamental parts of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Ordinary Time with a host of subdivisions (feast days, octaves and so forth). One block of time doesn't progress nor advance to another. Actually that concept is alien to perception of liturgical time. Rather, one succeeds the other not unlike that example of a new president replacing the old. You wouldn't say that Advents progresses toward Christmas nor does Lent progress toward Easter. Clearly one block of time *succeeds* the other without losing its identity. We all know that the liturgical cycle begins with Advent and starts all over with an new one. While going through the cycle we think in terms of "season," this term being more amenable to succession rather than progression. This might sound like an issue of semantics but is intended to reveal that the notion of successive is more conducive to expressing that which is sacred. There's something inimical about progression and the sacred; we just know it in our bones because the two realities just don't jibe together. We don't think in terms of, for example, "Liturgical Cycle 2014" or the like although a year will be assigned to it for readings, no other purpose. Obviously a liturgical year corresponds to a secular one but only for the purpose of reference.

Anyone who takes seriously the coming and going of celebrations between two Advents, if you will, knows that he is lifted from the common experience of time's passage. Sometimes you'll hear someone say that during a particular service time had been suspended. This is literally true, not an exaggeration. More specifically, we're

dealing with awareness of time's passage because we're so accustomed to look at it as progressing from point A to point B and so forth. Point-to-point movement is boring which is why we try to spice it up. It will last a while but bound to fizzle. One of the best features of being in liturgical time is that we intersperse it with things that appeal directly to our senses: incense, bells and music, all aids at the service of suspending our awareness of time's passage. Nevertheless, there comes a time when we leave liturgical time upon exiting a church or some holy place. It's a common experience to hear remarks about this, of how being in a sacred space (really they mean sacred time which equals suspension of 'secular' time's passage) makes you homesick. That implies you know what home is about but are unable to abide in it for a sustained period of time. Such is the chief concern of this article, of why the title "Time as the Problem." We might italicize one word in it, "Time as *the* Problem."

So two main points have been garnered in this article and not expressed perfectly, that's for sure: a sudden, distressing situation which suspends the passage of time and close attention to physical processes and events which effect the same thing. Most of us can't sustain this attention constantly but weave in and out of it, many times during the course of a day. We tend to think that by increasing the intervals between these weavings we'll attain what we want, the complete suspension of our awareness of time's passage. A natural intention but not on the mark. It belies a presupposition that we're outside these suspensions and need to crawl back in. And once in, we find ourselves, by reason of our weakness of intent, to be outside once again. Thus the cycle is set in motion which continues on and on. Perhaps here the notion of succession may shed some light on this perpetual cycle. Note that "cycle" is used parallel to but not identical with the liturgical one which goes up one level, if you will, upon its completion compared to our experience of rolling along on the same plane.

If we could view our experience of liturgical time as one unit, whole and entire, comprised of numerous subdivision (Advent, Christmas and so forth as pointed out above), that would enable us to live within "secular" time in a way we haven't done before. Memory of the liturgical time...an *anamnesis* of it...informs us in a direct way which treats lightly, if you will, secular time, not being bogged down by its Ecclesiastes-like eternal repetition. This seems to be quite different from treating experience of both modes of time as progressions. If so, we'd progress...advance...from one state to another instead of allowing one part of liturgical time to succeed the previous one. The basic reason: while one part of liturgical time celebrates a given event of the Christian life, it contains the rest, whole and entire. Then when you come across the next event in this same cycle, you forget about the earlier one as well as unmindful of the next one. All are whole and entire just like the overall liturgical cycle itself. You can talk on and on about this but only participating in the flow of the liturgical cycle brings it to life.

Upon further reflection, one of the greatest tragedies of the Reformation was to do away with this liturgical cycle. Sure, the reformers celebrated the major feasts, but they were left unanchored and unconnected with awareness of time's passage. This seemed to have affected the emergence of modern society and the way it keeps time, making it very secular and unappetizing. Once this view of time gets hold, life quickly becomes boring and in many cases, worse than that. At least such is one of the main culprits that make our recovery of sacred time difficult. Difficult but certainly recoverable. That means not harping on the Bible nor its traditions but of what people desire most, to have time suspended. Once it's done within a Christian, liturgical context, we're on a more stable footing. We've learned to bring over (import) those suspensions of time as experienced through tragedies and cast them on God through the liturgy which is why people flock to church when in such circumstances. The time and therefore the memory of the tragedy is not so much forgotten but assumed into awareness of a new kind of time, one apparently new but familiar which hearkens back to that homesickness people feel when leaving a church. Awareness of repeating a horrific experience may cause hesitation, to be sure. However, we might use progressive means as an aide to work this out, kind of like animal training which is fine for a while, but later we realize that we need to make a real jump. And that jump consists of realizing we have everything whole and entire and have never left it. Such is the function of *anamnesis* which is not memory. Memory belongs to the realm of progressive-ness.