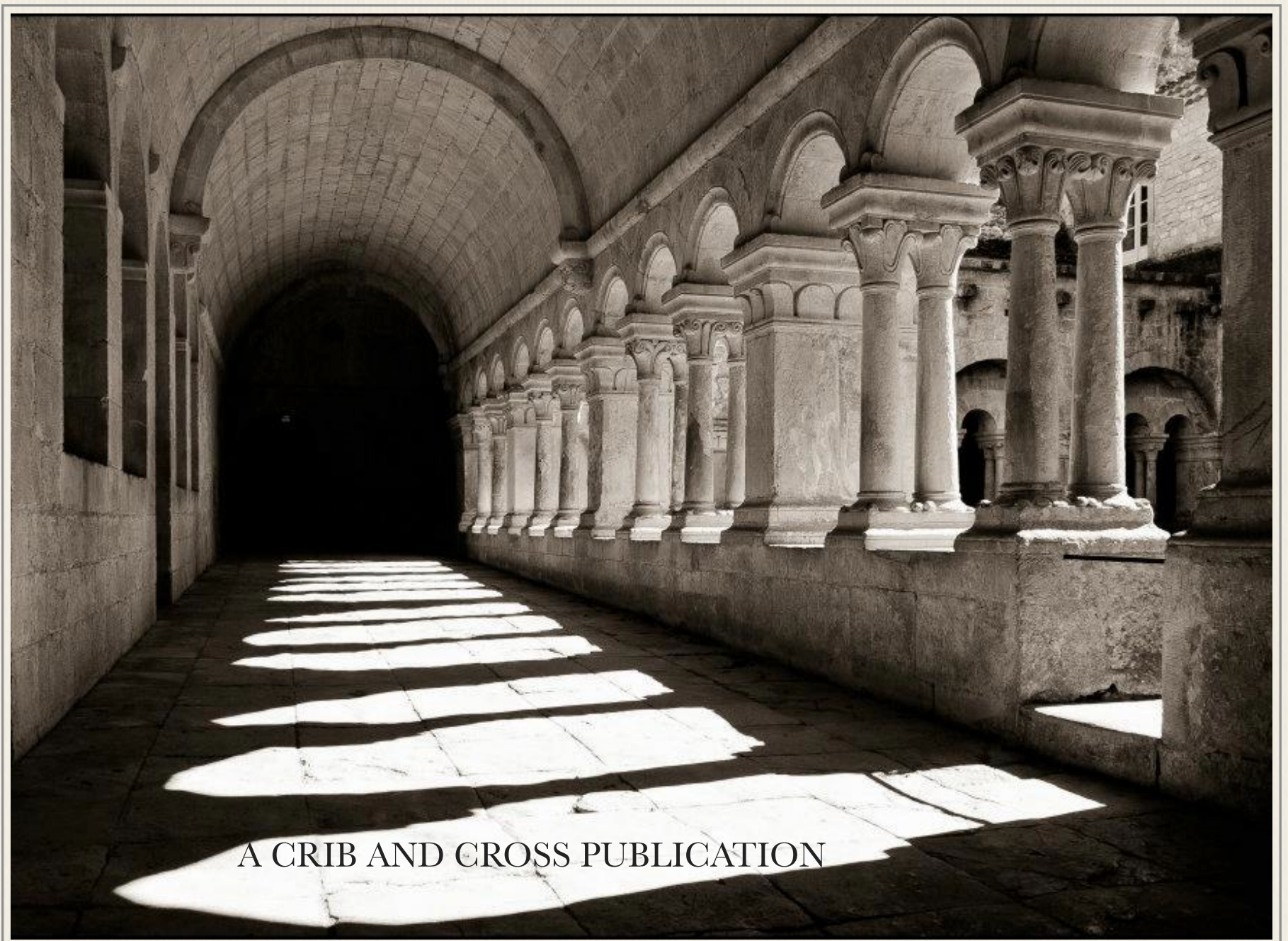

CONTEMPLATIVE
PRAYER

Discovering God Among Us

Richard Boileau



A CRIB AND CROSS PUBLICATION



A Deserted Place

The spiritual life, especially the Franciscan life, is a perennial tug-of-war between contemplative prayer and apostolic activity. One need only recall the struggle that Saint Francis had with his own vocation. After his conversion, he was inclined to withdraw to quiet places in the surrounding hills rather than deal with the world that had previously lured him. Nevertheless, God was calling him to evangelize that world by his imitation of Christ. So, through prayerful discernment, he concluded, “It seems to be more pleasing to God for me to interrupt my retirement and go out for such work.” (St. Bonaventure, *Legenda Major*) Yet despite this mission to engage the world in a dramatic way, Saint Francis always balanced these visible activities with extended periods of solitude.

We may compare this decision to the life that Jesus proposes in what I think is the most Franciscan of all chapters in the Bible, Luke 10. The chapter opens with the commissioning of disciples to deliver across the countryside a message of peace. In the closing narrative, Jesus settles a familiar dispute between Martha and Mary by judging that Mary, who “sat at the Lord’s feet and listening to what he was saying,” (v.39) had chosen “the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (v.42)

Jesus admonished Martha not because she was working hard to serve her guest but because her approach to hospitality, which is indeed a very worthy pursuit, caused her to be “distracted by her many tasks.” (v.40) Her concern evidently was not to be in relationship with Jesus, or Mary for that matter, but to perform a set of tasks according to her own standards. She had lost sight of the purpose of her work.

Saint Francis understood from the start that service must not “extinguish the spirit of holy prayer.” (*The Later Rule*, chapter V) In fact, his decision to devote himself to the service of others, especially by preaching about God’s love and the need for a conversion of mind and heart, was seen by him as mere pauses in prayer: “...to interrupt my retirement.”

Above all, Saint Francis understood that action must be constantly connected to God through prayer—that he was called to serve as Martha while being mindful like Mary of the love that service expresses. His inspiration came from the life of Jesus who was active in preaching and healing but never ceased to pray. Luke’s Gospel gives us many accounts of Jesus retreating from crowds in order to pray (e.g. 3: 21-22; 4: 1-13; 4:42; 5:16; 6:12).

In fact, Thomas of Celano reminds us that Saint Francis “often chose solitary places to focus his heart entirely on God...For his safest haven was prayer; not prayer of a fleeting moment, empty and proud, but prayer that was prolonged, full of devotion, peaceful in humility.” (Celano, *First Life of St. Francis*)

He found several secluded places in the Italian countryside to which he would retreat for private prayer between the major public events of his life, following the example of Jesus. Many are marked by monasteries today. The prayerful spirit of the *poverello* is palpable when they are visited in a quiet, unhurried way. But it would be a mistake to think of Saint Francis praying only in solitude. He also advocated praying the Divine Office with the community of brothers and regularly attended with prayerful reverence the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Dacian Bluma OFM points to the set of rules that Saint Francis prescribed for his brothers, drawing special attention to the rule for living in hermitages: “It has a distinctive Franciscan trait even in his hermitical way of life, namely, fraternity. Three to four constitute a community. They live together, conscious of their dependence upon each other and helped by it.” (*The Cord*, 1963)

Bluma suggests that there was from the start “something very practical in the way this provision for the contemplative life in the Order evolved in Francis’s own life.” He practiced contemplation on the concrete foundation of the historical events in the life of Jesus, especially birth and death of Christ. Hermitages at Grec-

cio and La Verna are emblematic of that fact. They serve too to remind us that for Christians Jesus is the model and inspiration for praying.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

Mark 1: 35

+ + +

The spiritual act of praying may be understood from a variety of perspectives. In its strictest sense, prayer is a petition or request. (*The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 1993) In the Old Testament, prayer is typically praise (e.g. exultation to the Lord), intercession (e.g. prayer for the life of the king) or supplication (e.g. plea for peace.) In the New Testament, the Greek words that are used connote a wish, a vow or a request.

Regardless of its content, what most strikingly characterizes Christian prayer is its personal appeal. It addresses God in the second person and is spoken in the first. God is addressed concretely, as in a conversation about something that is happening in my life, a fear or a desire. The hope is always to forge a personal relationship, a union or communion.

The other remarkable thing about Christian prayer is that it is understood to be a response to something that God has already done or said, whether perceived negatively or positively. It is as though God were “standing at the door, knocking.” (Rev. 3:20) It is instructive to note, especially in the Old Testament, the candor with which the response is expressed.

Saint Francis astutely turned to the example of Jesus to understand the purpose and nature of prayer. We benefit from doing the same. Jesus was prayerful, not as a matter of duty, but as though it was as vital as breathing. He drew not only strength and wisdom from it; prayer defined his very identity like it had defined the identity of Jesus. Being the Son of God, the Messiah of God, Jesus was intimately and continuously connected with the Father through prayer. His life’s purpose was not some self-styled mission but the work that his Father had sent him to accomplish.

Jesus spent the night in prayer before his important sermon on the bread of life, after which he spent the night in prayer. (Mark 6:46; Matthew 14:22-23; John 6:15) He prayed praise and gratitude to his Father when the disciples “returned with joy” after Jesus had sent them to preach the Gospel. (Luke 10:21)

He prayed for children (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16) and for Jerusalem. (Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 19:41-44) He prayed on his last day in the Temple as his hour was approaching (John 12:27-28); before the Last Supper (Luke 22:31-32); during the Last Supper. (John 17:1-26). He also prayed during his ordeal at Gethsemane and as he hung upon the cross. (Luke 23:34; Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46; Luke 24:46)

In all, there are 27 references in the Gospels to Jesus praying. Surely this only represents a small sampling of his use of prayer to orient his life, draw strength, grow in wisdom and feel connected to the Father.

Jesus instructed his disciples to pray and taught us a particular way of praying. He proposed that we address our heavenly Father in a distinctive structure of praise, commitment to God’s kingdom, doing his will, and petitions for our basic physical and spiritual needs. (Luke 11) Saint Francis so loved this prayer that he often made what we now call The Lord’s Prayer the subject of his meditation. On one occasion, he wrote a paraphrase of it that reveals the depth of his devotion.

From this model, we deduce that while there are many forms of prayer, some scripted and others spontaneous, there are two main purposes: the first is praise and thanksgiving; the second is petition and intercession. The first, a fitting place to start, looks back on what God has already done in our life. The second looks forward to what we need God to do for us. With this order, we avoid the mistake of making ourselves the centre of prayer rather than God. Nonetheless, it is right and proper that we express our deepest fears and hopes to “Our Father” whose many promises point to concern for our well-being.

As for style, it is good to use a variety but also to recognize which is most efficacious for us. This may change as our spirituality deepens. The range of possibilities includes mental and vocal prayer; discursive and affective prayer; meditation and contemplation; *kataphatic* prayer (affirmative, using words and images) and

apophatic prayer (negative, evacuating words and images); centering prayer; mystical prayer; and private and communal prayer. (Cf. J. Wright in *The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*)

Regardless of the style of prayer used, retiring to ‘a deserted place’ is essential to build the relationship that is needed to keep us grounded in God, whether the time is brief or extended and whether the setting is nearby or remote. To sit patiently in the gentle presence of God and there contemplate his wondrous love is the beginning and end of all things.

Thomas Merton once remarked that Saint Francis had the uncanny ability to ‘carry the world into his cell and his cell into the world.’ The same could be said of his closest collaborators. To do that, they would have had to understand the richness of contemplative prayer, which has much more to do with the disposition of the heart than with posture, setting or words.

Brother Leo...preached to the brothers to be eager to have and imitate pure and holy simplicity, holy prayer, and lady Poverty, on which the holy and first brother had built.

Ubertino Da Casale, *The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus*

Introduction

What does it mean to be contemplative? How does contemplation affect prayer? In the pages that follow, I have tried to address these questions from a number of perspectives, including through the lens of Franciscan spirituality.

Definitions of contemplation vary somewhat from one to another. Each depends to a degree on the context. For instance, a Buddhist or a Christian monk sitting in a temple or a monastery would offer definitions that differ somewhat, and these would certainly differ from one that might be proposed by a naturalist without religious beliefs resting at the edge of a pond at twilight.

The Oxford English Dictionary simply calls contemplation “the act of beholding.” It is a gentle gazing without distorting; viewing that engages the whole person; sensual basking in an unfamiliar experience or an unfamiliar way of experiencing something that had become mundane. Mostly, it is an experience of the heart. In the process, a bond is formed between the subject and object of contemplation.

We call prayer contemplative therefore that is essentially a communion of love with God who is at once is far and near; far inasmuch as he is separate and sovereign, and near insofar as he is within as well as without. Contemplative prayer is non-dualistic. That is perhaps its greatest challenge. We sees things as linked to everything else; it is not the product of an either-or mind.

Contemplative prayer is also non-analytical at least initially. There is benefit and even need for discernment regarding the meaning of the experience at a subsequent stage. But allowance must first be made for the heart to become a powerful organ of consciousness. The challenge is to keep the mind alert without adding its own coloration and to allow the unconscious mind to participate in the event unfolding.

Contemplation is sometimes associated with mysticism. This is partly correct although the word carries with it much unnecessary baggage. I invite you to use contemplative prayer in simplicity, even experimentally. Allow the present moment to be filled with the reality of what surrounds you now. Experience it honestly from the truth of your deepest self.

Though contemplation often begins through the eyes of the heart, ultimately, it is a union of the mind and the will. For this reason, what has been received by gazing in wonder at a scene, an event, a masterpiece of art or music, or the reading of a text must be interpreted and judged by the intellect, then forged into a decision and a course of action that coheres with the new insight.

My own preference is for the definition below. I share it freely just as I assume that in time you will find your own.

Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant source. Contemplation is above all, awareness of the reality of that source.

Thomas Merton



The Power of Three

True Christian prayer is necessarily Trinitarian. We cannot pray to the Father, to the Son or to the Holy Spirit in isolation as they are inseparable. Regardless of how we address God, we pray with, through and to them in relationship to one another and to ourselves. Blessed John Paul described the Trinitarian dynamic of prayer as mutual self-giving: “Wrought in the Holy Spirit, this reciprocity opens us, through Christ and in Christ, to contemplation of the Father’s face.”

This dynamic returns us to the Son whose Holy Spirit of Truth and Love permeates all of creation and continues to reveal a reality that transcends purely human understanding. We experience even fleeting moments of cosmic consciousness only by entering the mystery of the Trinity.

“Prayer, especially Trinitarian prayer or prayer in the Spirit, is indispensable for growing in holiness,” writes Capuchin Franciscan Friar Raniero Cantalamessa. (*Contemplating the Trinity*, 2007) Trinitarian prayer is also key to growing in happiness because true joy is always paired with meaning. In reality, the only meaning that satisfies human desire is truth that exceeds the reach of reason alone. The grasp of reality that most satisfies this yearning is a mystical or contemplative regard that does not rely on sensible evidence only.

What we learn from the Trinity about holiness and meaning is that ultimate reality is not static, despite our persistent efforts to shoe-horn God into the rigid categories that we might manage. Such labels inevitably prove to be inadequate if not altogether inappropriate.

A good example of the Trinity's creative energy is the interplay between God and creation. As the 14th Century mystic John Ruusbroec writes, "God is a flowing and ebbing sea which ceaselessly flows out into all his beloved according to their needs and merits and which flows back with all those upon whom he has bestowed his gifts in heaven and on earth." (*The Spiritual Espousals*) This suggests that only people who are not rigidly moored can move freely with the tides of human endeavor that are filled with God. That is the essence of Jesus' challenge to the apostles once they fail to catch fish in safe, familiar waters: *Duc in altum*, put out into the deep. Fr. Cantalamessa echoes this call, "...lift the anchors! Do not be afraid of venturing forth into the open sea of holiness."

This kind of boldness requires faith, hope and confidence that there is goodness that overflows from the mystery that envelops God. That confidence is expressed as contemplative prayer.

Prayer is tied to any bold adventure that is informed by faith. Indeed, prayer that is genuine calls for action just as action that is fruitful is firmly rooted in prayer. The partnership between God and a person of faith that is described here rests on a capacity for contemplative prayer. Essential is the awareness of God's presence, a presence first felt and only later reasoned (*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 1993.) A desire for communion with God exists in everyone. We need not create that desire. It is placed in the human heart by God's Holy Spirit and fueled by intuition that pierces through the limited evidence that the mind alone would misconstrue. Prayer allows us to enter with new vision the mysteries of our faith, especially the birth, death, and Resurrection of Jesus and to experience these as Trinitarian events of cosmic significance.

The resurrection of Christ is...the act of infinite tenderness by which the Father, after the terrible suffering of the passion, revived his Son from death by means of the Holy Spirit and made him Lord.

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa

+ + +

I have heard people claim that Saint Francis was principally focused on the operation of the Holy Spirit, a category of Christians sometimes called charismatic.

Such a belief is based on the observation premise Francis was open to new and sudden developments that were not of his own design but those of the Holy Spirit that called out to him. I have also heard it said that his attention was mostly fixed on the humanity of Jesus and the events of his life. Indeed, imitation of Christ's life was for Francis the path that he chose for his own life. Still others have argued that he related directly with the Father without mediation by Christ. He left the secular world by declaring, "From now on I can freely say Our Father who art in heaven." And, it was the unfathomable, awe-inspiring, and overpowering love of God—creator-father of all that is good—that moved him to radical conversion and led him to the Gospel life.

All of these statements are true, but they are also inadequate when they are taken in isolation from each other. Francis was above all Trinitarian, which is the mark of a true Christian. This is also the understanding of experts who have explored the depth of the *poverello's* spirituality.

To illustrate this point, take the example of his storied association with both the crib and the cross of our Savior. At Mount La Verna, the place where he received the wounds of Christ—the Stigmata—there is a lovely terra cotta relief glazed in white, with blue and green accents. It depicts the Nativity with the crowned Father and symbolic Dove along with a host of angels hovering over the silent scene. The Byzantine cross that seized the attention of Francis at the small Chapel of San Damiano and began the exciting journey that we call Franciscanism also features all three Persons of the Trinity. This time, only the outstretched hand of the Father is visible along with the Dove.

The overarching Trinitarian quality of Francis' spirituality is perhaps best exemplified by his letter to the entire order and by his very brief instruction to Saint Clare regarding the rule of life of the first community of sisters. The conclusion to his letter to all Friars Minor reads, "Most High, Who live and rule in perfect Trinity and simple Unity, and are glorified, God all-powerful, forever and ever. Amen." To Saint Clare and the Poor Ladies of Assisi, he writes, "Since by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the most High King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel," in other words, according to the ex-

ample and teaching of the Son, “I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have that same loving care and special solicitude for you as I have for them.”

Saint Bonaventure, who astutely theologized the spiritual intuitions of Francis, refers to the contemplation of the dynamic Trinity as the observation of self-diffusing Good. By this principle, we understand creation to be an overflow and expression of immense and continuous fecundity. What the Father had created is summarized in the Son. Jesus is the perfect example of what it means to be fully human and in communion with the Creator through his Holy Spirit.

The magnitude of things...clearly manifests the immensity of the power, wisdom and goodness of the triune God, who is by his power, presence and essence exists uncircumscribed in all things.

Saint Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*

+ + +

Francis' devotion to our Blessed Mother is also well known. What is perhaps less familiar is the degree to which it is tied to his devotion to the Holy Trinity. He expressed this well in his *Greeting to the Virgin Mary*: “Holy Lady, Queen and Mother of God, you are the virgin who has become the Church: chosen by the most holy Father in heaven, consecrated by him as a temple with his beloved Son and Consoler-Spirit; in you was and resides the fullness of grace, the One who is all goodness.”

Another vivid image of this relationship is a statue called Our Lady of the Trinity, which is to be found in a quiet retreat centre that I have visited twice in Blois, at the heart of France's lovely Loire Valley. It is an elegant reminder of the inexorable link between Mary and the Holy Trinity. The centre is animated by a community of Capuchin Franciscans. The statue features Our Lady with three Olympic-like rings intertwined on her chest as a representation of the three Persons in God. It also calls to mind the three privileges accorded to her by God, namely power, wisdom, and love.

The artist's presentation of her relationship to her Son as being inseparable from that of the Father and the Holy Spirit is insightful. It weaves together threads that must never be used in isolation. She did the will of the Father by conceiving the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the words of Saint Paul's final blessing to the Corinthians, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." (13: 13)

The Marian privileges of power, wisdom, and love led to the devotion of the Three Hail Mary's, first proposed by Saint Anthony of Padua and ratified by Pope Benedict XV on July 20, 1921. The practice of this devotion serves as a powerful way of contemplating the God of immeasurable vitality.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

Luke 1: 35

+++++



Beads of Awe

The Franciscan Crown is not something that sits on a friar's head. It is a devotional mantra that rises from the heart like incense to a realm beyond time and space. It is a ladder that leads, bead by bead, to the contemplation of a reality that eludes the mundane mind.

The Franciscan Crown is in fact a rosary—also known as the seraphic rosary—that consists of seven decades, rather than the usual five. It recalls the special joys of the Virgin Mary: the annunciation, the visitation, the birth of our Lord, the adoration of the magi, finding Jesus in the temple, the resurrection of our Lord, and the assumption of our Blessed Mother and her coronation in heaven.

According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the Franciscan Crown dates back to 1422. Evidently, a young novice who had that year been received into the Franciscan Order had, previous to his reception, been accustomed to adorn a statue of the Blessed Virgin with a wreath of fresh and beautiful flowers as a mark of his piety and devotion. As the story goes, the Blessed Virgin instructed him how, by reciting daily a rosary of seven decades in honor of her seven joys, he might weave a crown that would be more pleasing to her than the material wreath of flowers.

In 1905 Pope Pius X, in response to the petition of the Procurator General of the Friars Minor, enriched the Franciscan Crown with the benefit of several indulgences.

Too often, the Franciscan tradition is cast in austere tones. While it is true that the cross hold a privileged position in the spirituality of the *poverello*, it is even truer

that the coming of our Lord into the world and his rising from the dead that brought joy even to the suffering of the cross. So it was with the life of the mother of our Savior. The joys would outshine her agonies. Joy would crown each achievement.

The Annunciation reminds us of the blessings that are rooted in faithfulness to something more compelling than personal satisfaction. Saying yes to God for Mary was saying no to fear and the limits of our own desires. Hearing and heeding the call of God to assume a particular responsibility, regardless of risk, revealed the consolation that would offset every piercing of the heart.

The Visitation reminds me of the gift of fraternal living. The support that two people give to each other in doing God's work is of incalculable value. It brings joy to the heart to share ordinary experiences in order that they may bear extraordinary fruit. This sacred event also reminds us that what we do is only part of a plan. Mary and Elizabeth were the means by which two holy persons would undertake the mission of salvation.

The birth of our Lord is a glorious event of immense significance in Franciscan spirituality. Saint Francis was deeply moved by the knowledge that God so loved the world that he would send his only Son into the cold night of our humanity. The creation of a Nativity scene at Greccio in 1223 would attest to his impassioned devotion to the Incarnation that, while still a mystery, was a very concrete reality for the saint.

The Nativity would echo the gift of joy to all of humanity represented by two very different groups. First, the shepherds came from nearby fields; they were simple and poor people. But the adoration of the Magi reminds that God loves even those who would come by a different way. The metaphor is striking.

Saint Francis urged his brothers to espouse radical poverty, humility and simplicity. As a result, some falsely assume that he was anti-intellectual. I prefer to think of him as Jesus conversing with learned people, on his own terms, speaking insightfully without pretence. But Jesus' encounter would result in the anguish of his parents who did not know where he was. They rejoiced in finding him in the

temple just as Saint Francis rejoiced in finding Jesus at San Damiano. Learning turned out to be far less important than that relationship.

The resurrection of our Lord is the summit of our faith's journey. Saint Francis never lost sight of this, even as he focused so much reverence on the birth and death of Jesus.

The assumption of our Blessed Mother and her coronation in heaven is the zenith of joy for the man who added to our understanding of Christianity the human dimension of salvation. In using ordinary people to bring us to the Light, God is glorified as are the persons who collaborate authentically in this spiritual endeavour.

The Salutation to the Blessed Virgin Mary that was written by Saint Francis provides a glimpse into his joy in the heavenly coronation of the one who would make the Lord our brother. He begins, "Hail, O Lady, holy Queen, Mary, holy Mother of God: You are the virgin made church." His regard for her virtue and privilege is remarkable. As comment Regis Armstrong and Ignatius Brady in their publication of *The Complete Works of Francis and Clare*, Saint Francis "clearly perceives and presents the Virgin Mary as the model for every Christian who responds to the virtuous presence of God in his life."

Mary leads us to discover the secret of Christian joy, reminding us that Christianity is, first and foremost, evangelization, "good news", which has as its heart and its whole content the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the one Savior of the world.

Blessed John Paul II

+ + +

Some people will tell you that the rosary must be prayed with full awareness of each word in each prayer. I am not of that opinion. I believe that the rosary releases its fragrance once we have allowed it to lift us beyond the precise words, repeatedly recited, into a deeper awareness of their meaning.

The power of the tradition is its capacity to connect us with the Father, whose presence we praise, whose kingdom we hunger for, whose will unlocks the best of who we were created to be in this life and in the next. It is a complete communion in which we can unselfishly ask for what we need to carry out his mission every day in the fullest love that includes forgiveness and protection from evil.

The rosary incites us to enter into a visceral understanding of ourselves as filled with grace by our Father who is above but also inside us in Spirit and Truth, and that our work done in the name of Christ is blessed. Through the rosary, we are consoled by the knowledge that all the saints pray for us who are weak and often misguided so that we can accept the challenges of each day with confidence and on the last day we will see clearly what we only now see dimly.

In effect, the rosary is a contemplative prayer. It enables the eyes of the heart to gaze into mysteries not otherwise intelligible. For instance, it allows us to marvel at divine grace as it envelops creation, to contemplate the face of Christ through the eyes of Mary, to observe Jesus in all the phases of his earthly life and to see him gloriously enthroned at the right hand of the Father.

As well, the rosary is a prayer of gratefulness. It has the potential of carrying those who pray it beyond mere thanksgiving to transform the heart into the beauty it contemplates. Brother David Steindl adds, “Rosary prayer, in its outward form, is really the repetition of a Christian mantra. This connects those who pray the rosary with all their sisters and brothers in other traditions who also use mantra prayer. In fact, other traditions often use strings of beads. The Christian rosary itself may be patterned after Moslem prayer beads which crusaders brought back from the Middle East.”

**With the beloved mother looking for her beloved Son, do not cease
searching
until you have found him.**

Saint Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*

+ + +

In addition to developing the Marian devotion known as the Franciscan Crown, the Franciscans are credited with adding the final words, the intercessory part, to the Hail Mary: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” The first words of the prayer, of course, are taken from the Annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel, as recalled in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel.

As the glorious Virgin of virgins carries Christ materially in her body, you too, by following in his footsteps, especially those of poverty and humility, can, without any doubt, always carry him spiritually in your body.

Saint Clare of Assisi, *The Third Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague*



Humility

Contemplative prayer is rooted in humility, without which it lacks sufficient openness to wonder and grace. Humility is the foundation of prayer and serves to establish a right relationship with God, with others and with the universe that sings the praises of God, often in the most discreet ways. Only when we acknowledge that “we do not know how to pray as we ought,” (Romans 8: 26) are we ready to receive the gift of prayer from God’s Holy Spirit.

The Catholic Catechism reminds us that the gift of contemplative prayer “can be accepted only in humility and poverty.” (2713) Humility begins from the premise that all goodness, each wondrous thing and our very capacity to experience wonder comes from God. There is an intensity of contemplative prayer that is perceptible only to the eyes of a pure heart and is always grounded in joy and love.

Humility bears witness to the truth, just as Jesus, who was born, lived and died in humility, testified to the truth at his trial. (John 18: 37) On the other hand, pride is blindness. It sees only what false desire covets. Fear is blindness because it denies everything that lies beyond walls of false security. The universe that was created in love by God and that we admire with child-like hearts is far vaster than the illusions that are created by falsehood and fear. It gives voice to God’s goodness and invites us to enter the mystery of a Trinitarian dynamic that is unimaginably creative and healing.

I see that by humility (and) the virtue of faith...you have taken hold of that incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and the hearts of men with which you have purchased that field of him by whom all things have been made from nothing.

+ + +

Humility is both an attitude and an insight. It rests on the knowledge that each person possesses inherent dignity because he or she was lovingly created in God's image and purposed to a mission with a set of particular gifts. Included in that awareness is an understanding that human life is marked by limitations and fragility.

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston. She became aware of the nature of this fragility and focused her work on authenticity and vulnerability. She concluded that frank awareness of this vulnerability is the key to authenticity and honesty in relationships. This principle applies equally to human interactions and to contemplative prayer.

A little more than a year ago, she gave a talk in which she laid out her thesis: "We live in a vulnerable world. And one of the ways we deal with it is we numb vulnerability. And I think there's evidence--and it's not the only reason this evidence exists, but I think it's a huge cause—we are the most in debt, obese, addicted and medicated adult cohort in U.S. history.

"The problem is that you cannot selectively numb emotion. You can't say, here's the bad stuff. Here's vulnerability, here's grief, here's shame, here's fear, here's disappointment. I don't want to feel these. You can't numb those hard feelings without numbing the other affects, our emotions. You cannot selectively numb. So when we numb those, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness. And then we are miserable, and we are looking for purpose and meaning, and then we feel vulnerable, so then we have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. And it becomes this dangerous cycle.

"One of the things that I think we need to think about is why and how we numb. And it doesn't just have to be addiction. The other thing we do is we make everything that's uncertain certain. Religion has gone from a belief in faith and mystery to certainty. The more afraid we are, the more vulnerable we are, the

more afraid we are. This is what politics looks like today. There's no discourse anymore. There's no conversation. There's just blame. You know how blame is described in the research? A way to discharge pain and discomfort.

“We perfect but it doesn't work. And we perfect, most dangerously, our children. Let me tell you what we think about children. They're hardwired for struggle when they get here. And when you hold those perfect little babies in your hand, our job is not to say, ‘Look at her, she's perfect. My job is just to keep her perfect--make sure she makes the tennis team by fifth grade and Yale by seventh grade.’ That's not our job. Our job is to look and say, ‘You know what? You're imperfect, and you're wired for struggle, but you are worthy of love and belonging.’ That's our job. Show me a generation of kids raised like that, and we'll end the problems I think that we see today.

“We pretend that what we do doesn't have an effect on people. We do that in our personal lives. This is what I have found: to let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen; to love with our whole hearts, even though there's no guarantee—and that's really hard, and I can tell you as a parent, that's excruciatingly difficult—to practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror, when we're wondering, ‘Can I love you this much? Can I believe in this passionately? Can I be this fierce about this?’ just to be able to stop and, instead of catastrophizing what might happen, to say, ‘I'm just so grateful, because to feel this vulnerable means I'm alive.’

“And the last, which I think is probably the most important, is to believe that we're enough. Because when we work from a place, I believe, that says, ‘I'm enough,’ then we stop screaming and start listening, we're kinder and gentler to the people around us, and we're kinder and gentler to ourselves.”

Vulnerability pushed, I pushed back. I lost the fight, but probably won my life back.

Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*

+ + +

The key to understanding Saint Francis' prevailing attitude of humility is gratitude. For reasons that we will never fully know, he came to see everything within and around him as gift from the gracious King of kings, Lord of lords, the most generous and good God of creation, of salvation and of joy. From the perspective of humility and poverty, he opened his body, mind and heart to the providential care of Almighty Love. It was in total trust—one might add child-like innocence—that he adopted the stance of the birds of the air and the flowers of the fields that “neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet (our) heavenly Father feeds them.” (Matthew 6: 25-34)

Humility enabled Saint Francis to embrace his vulnerability rather than numb it as he had as a frivolous adolescent. He overcame his fears—fear of his father, fear of unpopularity, fear of leprosy—to live in fragility as a sign of his confidence in his heavenly Father's unconditional love. Poverty was humility's bloom. By it, he would declare to God that nothing, save what came from the generous heart of God, held value any longer. No fortress could bring peace to his mind; no fortune or fame could bring joy to his heart. Only the love of God could deliver him from the demons that haunted him.

There are many references to humility in the writings of Saint Francis. One that stands out for me is article 19 of the Admonitions, which some have called “The Franciscan Sermon on the Mount.” In it, he writes, “Blessed is the servant who esteems himself not better when he is praised and exalted by people than when he is considered unworthy, simple and despicable; for what a man is before God, that he is and nothing more.” I would add, “And nothing less.”

The insight here, I believe, is twofold. First, it liberates us from the often-self-serving judgment of others. When someone pays us a complement or registers a complaint, it is very often more of a reflection on them than it is on us. Yet that opinion can weigh heavily on our psyche and distract us from our mission. Second, it suggests that God has a fairer estimation of us—at once dignifying and edifying. We are neither worthless nor hopeless in his eyes.

Humility put Saint Francis in right relationship with God and others. Paired with poverty it recognized our dependency on God and our desire for nothing that

does not come from God. It was the foundation of virtue, the model of Christ-like behaviour and the antidote to pride that infects the heart and leads to all manner of sin. Humility also serves as a counterweight to offset the tendency in all of us to judge others, often harshly and unfairly.

Humility is highly valued in Franciscan spirituality and is a necessary predisposition to contemplative prayer because it is the gateway to Truth. Our regard for talent and abilities are balanced with the knowledge that they are not from us or even for us. They have value inasmuch as we use them to play our part in the building of a Kingdom of Love.

Saint Francis' desire to serve in humility...provides the key to understanding the poverello.

Regis Armstrong and Ignatius Brady, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*



Creation

Mark Elvins OFM Cap writes, “The beauty of creation, its order and harmony, bespeaks a divine Creator. Creation is not therefore just a backdrop for human activity, it is a sacramental sign of the presence of God. The meaning and purpose of God is the outpouring of his love and a sign of his prodigal generosity. The lesson of creation is the glory of God, for creation glorifies God by its very existence.”

He adds that “in this way Bonaventure views creation as sacramental and all created things as signs of God's presence. The world and all creation can in this way be understood 'as a means of God's self revelation, so that, like a mirror' it can reflect God's glory and lead humans to love and praise the Creator. This Franciscan view of the world is echoed by St Angela of Foligno, who proclaimed that the world was 'pregnant with God'. This book of creation was understood by Bonaventure to be a book of divine wisdom, made visible to all.”

The contemplation of God's goodness that is daily expressed through creation is perhaps the most powerful impetus to prayer—prayer of the heart, of praise and thanksgiving. Everyone familiar with Franciscan spirituality knows the exquisite Canticle of Creation that was written by Saint Francis of Assisi who, in mystical exhilaration, inebriated by the love of God, extolled poetically the wonders of God's handiwork.

As I reflected recently on his Canticle, I was moved by its power to reveal the ubiquitous fingerprint of God on every inch of our natural surroundings, and wrote, as a result, this adaptation.

A Song of Seasons

Inspired by The Canticle of Creation by Saint Francis of Assisi

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.

To you alone, Most High, do they belong.

Be praised, my Lord, by all the Seasons.

Praised be you, my Lord, by lovely Spring,

especially by Brother Sun.

You give new life through him,
and he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!

Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be you, my Lord, by Sister Water,
running energetically from melting white mountains,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be you, my Lord,

by fiddleheads and buds,

Chicks and tadpoles and cubs,

by furred and feathered pilgrims

entering the eternal sanctuary of sacred communion.

Praised be you, my Lord,

by Easter chants and childish laughter,

on muddy paths along scented trees.

Yours is the riddle and lyric of praise.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by every living thing
pregnant with potential,
which is filled with your Spirit.

Praised be you, my Lord, for lively Summer,
by flowers of every shape and shade,
which brings perfect joy
to the hearts of my sisters and brothers.

Praised be you, my Lord, by Earth,
that sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits and vegetables and herbs,
which make us strong for the journey ahead.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by monarchs that rest on velvet petals,
sovereign in enchanted gardens
filled with celebration.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by the breath of every living thing,

hopping, galloping, soaring, swimming,
transcending civil virtues
to a realm of holy meaning.

Praised be you, my Lord, by artful Autumn,
by Sister Harvest Moon
and the stars, in heaven you formed them
clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by forests ablaze
with crimson and gold;
enveloping birds and mammals
with broad loving wings.

Praised by you, my Lord,
by hope hoarding
nutritious berries and seeds,
trusting the stingless dawn,
with resurrected faith in Love.

Praised be you, my Lord, by wonder-filled Winter,
by Brother Northern Wind,
and by the air, cloudy and serene,

and every kind of weather through which
you give power to your creatures.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by glass-covered lakes,
giving rest to sleepy life.

Their stillness mirrors your peace.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by billowing dunes of snow,
shimmering with delight,
holding tenderly in their protective womb
warrants of transformation.

Blessed are those whom Sister Winter will
holds in the most holy hope,
for new life shall embrace them warmly.

Praise and bless, my Lord,
and give him thanks
and serve him with great humility.

AMEN

Contemplative prayer allows us to enter, to varying degrees, the mystery of God manifest in the universe that he created as self-effusing love. Like the apostles who accompanied Jesus to Mount Tabor, it reveals to our consciousness a glimpse

into the splendour of Love and Truth, but, again like in the case of the Transfiguration as well as the Epiphany, the experience is not the end of a journey but it inevitably leads to a mission—a return to daily life by another road. (Cf. X, y)

Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of Nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation.

Ralph Waldo Emerson



Mystical Moments

Essentially, contemplative prayer is an awareness of God that is intuitive. The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality states that it is “the presence of God (is) apprehended not by thought but by love.” Many things can serve as catalyst for contemplative prayer. We tend to think spontaneously of striking scenery and grace-filled events as classic triggers. One of the most fruitful is praying with scripture.

Saint Francis has often been described as a mystic, which is another way of saying that his religious insights were the result of contemplation. He saw God in creation. He saw God in the poor. And he saw God in the wisdom of the Gospel to which he dedicated his life. The Gospel for Saint Francis would be the alpha and the omega of his spirituality.

The Gospel had a special significance for Saint Anthony, too. He approached it with a heart that was open to more than its literal meaning. In it, he saw the overflowing self-communication of Love.

We find evidence of God reaching out to humanity throughout the bible. He made himself accessible so that we could enter into a meaningful relationship of mutual faith, hope and love. Jesus is the ultimate rapprochement between God and us. Because of the Incarnation, through our human experience, we can touch the heart of God.

There is nothing more awesome than that. This is precisely what struck Saint Francis to the core of his being. Quoting the Gospel in the words of John, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Until that moment a care-free youth,

Saint Francis would never exhaust the meaning of that verse. He would devote his life to responding with his entire being with such singular and uncompromising focus that he even became at times the object of derision.

God is manifest in countless acts of love. The Gospel is first and foremost a story of love. It presents poetically yet concretely the heights, depths and lengths of God's love for each and every one of us.

So, in religious life, Saint Francis would make time to preach the good news of this uncommon, healing and liberating love. He called anyone who would listen to reform their lives away from fear and the illusion of earthly prestige and power, and shift their attention to counter-intuitive truths: that the last shall be first; that life is secured only by letting go of it; and that love can only be held by giving it away.

Saint Francis' original intention was to live the Gospel before announcing it, to be an imitator of Christ before being a preacher, to accomplish works of penance before proclaiming them to others.

Servus Gieben, *Preaching in the Franciscan Order*

+ + +

Praying with scripture was the source of the evangelism of Saint Francis. Various passages, especially from the Gospels, arrested his attention, fed his imagination and nourished the discernment that would lead to life-changing decisions. For example, Bonaventure tells us that Saint Francis was profoundly affected by three passages: "If you will be perfect, sell all that you have, and give to the poor;" "Take nothing on your journey;" and "if anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

For Saint Francis, Jesus was not only the perfect expression of God's love but the exemplar of what it means to be fully human according to the mind of God. He was obedient to the words of Jesus but perhaps more remarkably he was attentive to the actions of Jesus. Scripture seared in his mind and heart critical moments in the life of Jesus: his birth and death in poverty; his praying and moving about as an itinerant preacher; his embrace of those most marginalized by the

elite of society; his rejection of hypocrisy in piety; and even his unwillingness to limit his response to God's immense love with lukewarm spirituality.

Saint Francis often retreated to solitary places in order to contemplate the fullness of God's love and his own relationship to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He did this, in part, by focusing on the wonders of creation but mostly by meditating on the Gospel passages that he would hear in Liturgy. We have reason to believe that he had a brilliant memory to recall key verses, especially as these related to the deepest longings of his heart.

Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel.

The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, Article 4

+ + +

Whereas the contemplation of the Gospel led Saint Francis to literal imitation of Jesus Christ, it led Saint Anthony (Feast, June 13) to an even deeper exploration of these narratives as poetic images, a sort of divine code with richer meaning than what the story would suggest. A good example is the parable. A parable operates on many different levels, each one valid in its own right.

Saint Anthony explains this method himself in the general prologue to his Sermons for Sundays and Festivals, of which I bought a copy while in Padua two years ago. Each Sunday commentary is explained allegorically, morally and anagogically. At the risk of boring you, allow me explain these terms.

Essentially, an allegory is a prolonged metaphor. It is the literary device by which a deeper meaning is vaguely hidden behind a more obvious one. In the case of scripture, especially with Jesus' use of parables, it is the use of commonplace stories to reveal a truth much more difficult to understand. Saint Anthony regarded much of the bible in this way. What was hidden behind the stories was for him more important than the narratives themselves.

Paul Spilsbury, the scholar who has recently translated Saint Anthony's Sermons for the first time in their entirety into English, explains that "in practice, allegory refers to the Christological or ecclesiological significance of the text." In

other words, Saint Anthony uses the allegory to paint a picture of how the Church must help the faithful to live as one body in Christ as represented by the Church.

He adds that Saint Anthony's presentation is moral inasmuch as he outlines the exigencies of Christian living. In concrete terms, what does it mean to conform our lives to that of Jesus?

And finally, we mean that Saint Anthony preached anagogically in that he spoke of the eschatological significance of biblical texts; in other words, what did Jesus' teachings have to do with death, immortality and a final judgement?

Like Saint Francis, Saint Anthony often referred to the Gospel. But Saint Anthony was wary of taking the Gospel in isolation. He typically compared or "concorded" them with texts drawn from the Old Testament. He also related these evangelical accounts to the Epistles. In fact, it is said that Saint Anthony's preaching was carried forward on a four-wheeled chariot, with the four wheels being the Gospel, his knowledge of history, Epistle and the Introit chant that would precede the readings at Mass.

Church Fathers were often quoted by Saint Anthony as well, especially Saint Augustine and Saint Gregory. As he was trained as an Augustinian friar when he lived in Portugal, we also find quotations from Saint Bernard as well as Pope Innocent III, the Pope of his youth and a man hugely influential in his day.

The content of his preaching is unmistakably Franciscan. His love of Franciscan values is evident in every crafted phrase. Like Saint Francis, he contemplates the wonder of Creation. Where Saint Francis wrote the Canticle of Creation, Saint Anthony used the book of creation to illustrate his teaching, writes Spilsbury. Only, as his education is more advanced, he turns to Aristotle and other writers to give examples.

Another scholar, Daniel Lesnick, points out that the early Franciscans spoke clearly and credibly to the culture of their day. They preached mainly to the rising class of artisans and workers and to the new urban society. The aim of their preaching was to move the faithful to action. Franciscan preaching was not scholastic as was the trend of the time, especially among the Dominicans and learned preachers, but rather vulgarized and accessible as it was in the days of Jesus.

Saint Francis offered his listener wisdom of a faith lived and a living witness to Christ in human life. This tradition is clearly present in the sermons of (Saint Anthony.)

Vincent Cushing, *Preaching Wisdom to a postmodern People*



Sacred Reading

For centuries, *lectio divina* was the sacred door to contemplative prayer. Though typically associated with Benedictine tradition, its practice is particularly well suited to Franciscan spirituality; in part, because of Saint Francis' practice of withdrawing to remote solitudes for prayer and, in part, because of the close association between the first fraternity and local Cistercians.

The term refers to spiritual reading with prayerful reflection, not theological study (neither exegetics nor hermeneutics are intended.) *Lectio* refers to reading as a stimulus to personal prayer and meditation. The purpose is to assimilate divine truth in a manner that strengthens or reforms our living out of faith.

The Rule of Saint Benedict is clear concerning the value of contemplating the word of God: "For anyone hastening on to the perfection of the monastic life, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which will lead him to the very heights of perfection. What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life? Or what book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? Then, besides the Conferences of the Fathers, their Institutes and their Lives, there is also the rule of our holy father Basil. For observant and obedient monks, all these are nothing less than tools for the cultivation of virtues."

Some people imagine that *lectio divina* is only suited to monastic life. That perception is quite understandable because our modern lifestyle is much more conducive to rapid reading and short bursts of concentration. We get the point of learn-

ing facts and theories but are reticent to sit quietly for long periods while simply ruminating on a word, a phrase, a verse or a short passage.

One method involves reading the sacred text out loud rather than silently because more senses are engaged in the encounter and interaction with the words. Reading aloud with a variation of pacing and intonations also helps to savour the text.

Though the goal is to digest the text and allow it to penetrate the mind and heart, it is worth noting that memorization was originally part of the Benedictine method because it enabled the monk to continue to be inspired by the text outside of formal prayer time. This practice remains fruitful when and where it can be applied.

Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading (lectio divina).

Benedictine Rule 48:1

+ + +

Saint Francis spent much of his prayer time contemplating the goodness of God after the inspiration of sacred Scripture. The four Gospels, specifically, were the nourishment and inspiration for his continuous reflection on divine nature and grace. Many verses are quoted by him at various pivotal moments of his life—chiefly his conversion and preparation of the rule that would govern religious life. We can assume that he reflected on these at length.

For instance, verse 9 of Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 10: After bidding the apostles to go “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” and “proclaim the good news...cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons,” Jesus instructed them to “take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belt, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.” The message was understood to advocate purposeful simplicity that is ordained to a sacred task. This would be the practical aspect of evangelical poverty for Saint Francis.

For emphasis, the message would echo in the Gospel of Luke (10: 4): “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.” The verse would call the early brothers to avoid distractions in the resolute pursuit of their mission. And again in Mark’s Gospel (6: 8): “He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belt.” Saint Francis was criticised for his strict adherence to the vow of poverty but one can hardly question the authenticity of his fidelity to Lady Poverty.

In fact, so attentive was Saint Francis to the wisdom of Holy Scripture that his own writings were little more than a quilt of biblical phrases. This is particularly notable in his Admonitions, often cited as the most significant reflections of his own understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ, and in his Earlier Rule (Regula Non Bullata.)

The rule and life of the brothers was developed over a period of many years following the inception of the Order. It begins with a series of four quotations simply linked with the conjunction “and.” Matthew 19: 21 refers to the need to dispose of personal possessions in order to follow Jesus; Matthew 16: 24 refers to self-denial and taking up the cross that is unique to each person; Luke 14: 26 instructs the disciple to prefer to follow Jesus above all else, including family and life itself; and Matthew 19:29 adds that leaving family, house and land will be rewarded with eternal life. These are all themes that are familiar in the life of Saint Francis. Clearly, the contemplation of Scripture had a major influence in the development of his spirituality and discernment.

After the Lord gave me brothers, no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the firm of the Holy Gospel.

Saint Francis of Assisi, *My Testament*

+ + +

Marcello Montanari recalls in a book on how to prepare lectio divina the contemplative prayer life of Saint Francis. In it, he outlines seven steps.

1. Read attentively: Choose a passage from Scripture and read it over very slowly, attentively and devoutly for five to 10 minutes after having prayed to the Holy Spirit to open your mind and heart to fully understand his message. Remember how Saint Francis opened the Lectionary three times in the Church of St. Nicholas to find out what God had in mind for him and his new brothers.

2. Meditate or reflect: Chew and ruminate on the Word of God, and apply what you have read to your life. You must let your life stand before the light of God's Word. Again, look up a text or incident from the life of Saint Francis which would illustrate this for you.

3. Pray: This is your way of responding to the God who has spoken to you. We have an example in Celano where Francis, reflecting upon the Gospel text is so moved, that he changes it into a prayer of praise to God.

4. Contemplate: Under the guidance of the Spirit, little by little, you will feel the desire to see the One who has spoken to you, to taste his love, to contemplate his wonderful deeds. You will even forget yourself to lose yourself in the praise of God and to rejoice in the Spirit as did Saint Francis. This is the path to the highest form of mystical prayer where the soul is lost in an ocean of love.

5. Discern: In the light of the reading which you have prayed over and contemplated, the Spirit helps you to understand what you should do, like the answer to the plea of Saint Francis: "Lord, What do you want me to do?...At Your word I will let down the nets." Recall examples of choices and decisions from the life of Saint Francis.

6. Live the Word of God: You must begin to form your life according to the words which you have read, according to the life of Christ which you have contemplated ... to live the Gospel. Again we have the example of Saint Francis who was no idle hearer of the Word but hastened to put into practice what he heard.

7. Return to prayer: Again, look to the life of Saint Francis that he dedicated to preaching the message of conversion and reconciliation. The greater part of the year was set aside for prayer and contemplation, the fruit of which was purposeful apostolic action according to the will of the Father, the example of Jesus Christ and the light of the Holy Spirit.

We speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

1 Corinthians 2: 13



Dialogue

In March, I had the pleasure of staying at the friary of Santa Maria Draperis in the historically fascinating and culturally vibrant city of Istanbul, Turkey. It is home to an International Franciscan Fraternity that serves to encourage encounter and dialogue with other religions present in the region, especially Islam and Judaism, but also the other Christian Churches, particularly the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Armenian Orthodox community.

Four friars from four different continents animate the centre in the spirit of Saint Francis' own experience of inter-religious dialogue at Damietta where he met sultan Kamil-al-Malik in 1219, at the height of the fifth Christian Crusade.

I realized while I was there how important the link is between inter-religious dialogue and contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer provides a ground of authentic and intuitive exploration of the great mysteries of our faith that is often blocked by theoretical models, conventional theologies and socio-political categories.

I refer to contemplative prayer here as the direct intuition of reality, what some call "pure awareness," which is sometimes erroneously limited to mysticism. In fact, insights are much more accessible via contemplative prayer than many imagine. The contemplative state is not a void, nor is it an illusory form of purity or silence or serenity. These are just as enslaving as other kinds of addictions. Rather, it is a balanced regard for what is neither filtered by bias nor embellished by fantasizing a false reality outside of what simply is. So it serves as a guard against making idols out of our own ideas about God and our relationship with God and others.

Meanwhile, I write about inter-religious dialogue as something other than the lazy path that leads to the blurring of established traditions. Such ambiguities fail to deepen understanding.

To see things differently, it helps to stand in a different place. Sometimes, seeing something from the outside is seeing it for the first time; as with understanding Christianity in a new way by considering its similarities with other religious traditions. Contemplative dialogue is authentic listening, without preconceptions or preconditions. It takes wisdom to walk in the garden of another person and leave no footprint yet still savour the sweet fragrances.

To go beyond the limits of each religion and realize the transcendent mystery which is manifest in all of them...we`re all pilgrims on a journey to the beyond...

Bede Griffiths, interview, August 1992

+ + +

In 1986, Pope John Paul II stated unequivocally during the landmark day of inter-religious prayer for peace at Assisi, every authentic prayer is brought about by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person.

Indeed, all that is true, good and noble in religious traditions can be attributed to the action of the spirit of God. Such was the declaration of the president of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, made in Assisi in 2005. He added that when followers of different religions contemplate the actions of God, they begin to recognize that all that is good in any religion is the work of the spirit of God: “A contemplative attitude is at the basis of inter-religious dialogue.”

The example of Saint Francis is striking; it is also timely. Many people today are repelled by established religious because of our failure to pursue common objectives and model fraternal behaviour that is so clearly prescribed by sacred texts.

Inter-religious dialogue, to be truly authentic, must meet certain conditions. A paper prepared in 1994 by Pierre-Francois de Béthune, OSB, refers to the need to assure a solid foundation by creating a harmonious environment; engaging in dialogue with maturity (common sense, realism, humor, solid human maturity, psycho-

logical balance and without anxiety); a deep sense of personal rootedness in the community and the Church, in the Christian tradition and in a program of spiritual maintenance that aids discernment. Moreover, the spiritual movement must be verified by examining the intensity of the desire and the purity of motivation.

The dialogue itself, he adds, must be evaluated according to criteria for discernment, including those related to authenticity and authority. For example, New Age representations of ancient traditions are often lacking vital elements of context and content; and some purveyors of such spiritual information write with more knowledge and insight than others.

In all circumstances, the dialogue must be marked not only by competence but also pertinence, universality, incarnation and interiority. Caution must be exercised regarding the temptation to overstate similarities when considering elements of teaching or practice; to gloss over various views of the relationship between body and spirit; action and contemplation; as well the proper roles of nature and grace.

Dom Bede Griffiths reflected deeply on contemplative prayer and inter-religious dialogue during his life. He observed that the image that favored these is that of pilgrimage. Such a perspective predisposed participants to ongoing change in the hope of encounter with the sacred and spiritual transformation. He pointed out that the sacred writings of Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity are filled with accounts of physical movement in association with pivotal events.

Pilgrimage, according to Griffiths, can be understood as movement along a series of horizons with the passing from horizon to horizon as stages of self-transcendence. The energy for this sometimes arduous journey comes from an intrinsic need to keep going beyond where we are: the One beyond all...beyond thought altogether...beyond concepts is revealed through the power of the non-rational mind, always conveyed symbolically.

Some people fear contemplative prayer, especially when associated with inter-faith dialogue because, they assume contemplative traditions to be anti-intellectual. That is a label that is sometimes ascribed to Zen Buddhists as well as Franciscans and Cistercians. On the contrary, we run a great risk of missing the

point when we place our whole trust in books and in learning, and neglect to grasp life in its existential reality.

Griffiths would not have denied the value of dialogue that is informed and rational. But he probably would have suggested that it is inadequate and probably limiting. Rather, an encounter that is hospitable to the mystery of another is most penetrating and insightful when it also embraces elements that cannot be conceptualized and verbalized. Faced with growing dangers related to racial and religious violence, eco degradation and a growing threat of nuclear annihilation, Griffiths placed increasing confidence in the contemplative experience and personal integration. He believed that the key to the impasse was to be found in lay contemplative communities, not at the expense of one's own tradition but to the benefit of all traditions.

At each stage of discovery of another tradition there should be a corresponding rediscovery of one's own.

Pierre-François de Béthune, OSB, *Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue*

+ + +

Inter-religious dialogue that is authentic and respectful, and is rooted in contemplative prayer may well be the tonic that is required for the ailments that afflict our times. Beyond its capacity to unite and celebrate the mystery of divinity in the human condition, it may serve as the clarion call to people who yearn for another way of living that is less stressful, less polarizing and less cynical. Perhaps it is in the irony of fewer words achieving more dialogue that the salvation of our world exists. Maybe purity of heart is best evidenced by faith, hope and love in one another in the light of a universalizing and integrating God, at once within and beyond.



Vulnerability

In the course of finding God in all situations, which is the rich discovery of contemplative prayer, we are often surprised to find that God is revealed in sadness as well as joy; in darkness as well as light; in doubt as well as faith. What each setting has in common is vulnerability. The essence of a contemplative attitude seems to be vulnerability, writes Veronica Ward, author of an article that appeared 10 years ago in *Spiritual Life Magazine*.

As often is the case, her experience of personal failure was the fertile soil of spiritual development. But the contemplation of failure is only fruitful if we accept beforehand that such a possibility exists. For many people, failure has no redeeming value and must be thrown behind without the slightest consideration.

She adds, “Suffering is not good in and of itself, but the contemplative person may put suffering to good use.” Fullness and failure may appear to be opposites. Essentially they are opposites but inextricably tied. They are two sides of the same coin, coexisting in symbiotic relationship.

Saint Francis had his share of suffering: imprisonment, illness, betrayal, rejection. He knew Gethsemane and Golgotha well. He also knew perfect joy. He experienced the joy of the Nativity and the joy of the Resurrection so intimately, in large measure, because he embraced the anguish and agony of the cross out of love for Christ Crucified. Marked by the stigmata, his reward was incomparable joy that, in his words, “Christ gives to his friends (for) conquering oneself and willingly enduring sufferings, insults, humiliations, and hardships for the love of Christ.”

It is in the confidence of knowing, as Saint Paul writes, “whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12: 10) that we can accept failure as merely a milestone on the journey of spiritual progress. But how can we arrive at a genuine understanding of this paradox without a contemplative attitude, one that does not pre-judge the value of an encounter with what stands before us or a sudden awareness of what sits inside us?

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

John 10: 10

+ + +

Philip Simmons’ promising literary career was just taking flight when he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease. Adjusting to this harsh reality was very difficult but he chose to claim each moment of life by writing about his experience and agreeing to allow scenes to be filmed for a full year at his home in New Hampshire with his wife and young children. His book is called *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*. The feature documentary, *The Man who Learned to Fall*, debuted in Montreal in 1994. A few years ago, I had the privilege of hearing a presentation to a group of therapists by its producer, Gary Beitel.

Part of the process of accepting loss for Simmons was a conviction that there is a silver lining to every cloud. He described a boyhood leap from rocks high above a pool of emerald clear water ten feet deep: “My eyes are focused downward on the water rushing toward my feet, and I am happy, terrified, alive...we are all falling—all of us—falling. We are all, now, in the moment, in the midst of that descent...If we are falling toward pain and weakness, let us also fall toward sweetness and strength. If we are falling toward death, let us also fall toward life.”

The genius of his book is in the word “learning.” It suggests two things. We can learn lessons from falling that help us to get up again, and we can learn how to fall as stuntmen and sportsmen to lessen the risk of serious injury from subsequent falls. We can avoid some falls but we cannot avoid them all. Pain, grief and loss are as much part of the human landscape as joy and growth. We learn to adjust our life strategies. Sometimes we even have to adjust our goals.

Like debilitating illness, growing older can feel like defeat, like losing the battle to live abundantly. We cannot achieve as much, as fast or sometimes even as well. We seem less productive, at least by the standard that the modern world measures success. We feel obliged to impress others with contributions that are valued in economic terms but cannot. Paradoxically, falling can be the direction of failure or of deepening. There is a richness to be discovered in what lies below the superficialities of modernity.

Falling is also an image that is used by Richard Rohr in his latest book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. As Rohr points out in the dust jacket notes, “Climbing, achieving, and performing will not serve us as we grow older...eventually we need to see ourselves in a different and more life-giving way. This message of ‘falling down’ is the most resisted and counterintuitive of messages in the world’s religions, including and most especially Christianity.”

The key to understanding the message of Christianity in regard to falling upward is the theological mystery surrounding the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. In order to achieve unfathomable joy, Jesus had to endure unspeakable suffering. While his story may be more dramatic than ours, it is not irrelevant to ours. Some suffering in the human experience is not only inevitable, it is necessary. Carl Jung called this “legitimate suffering.” The evangelist Matthew referred to it with paradoxical wit: “Anyone who wants to save his life, must lose it. Anyone who loses his life will find it.”

**Let us pray that if we are falling from grace, dear God let us also
fall with grace, to grace.**

Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall*

+ + +

Contemplative prayer doesn’t allow us to dwell in weakness or failure, or remain mired in negativity. Rather, it urges us to recognize that set-backs are real but that they do not define us unless we let them. All situations contain seeds of hope and joy. The contemplative mind sees and nurtures these seeds as the vital gifts of life that are unique to such situations. The contemplative attitude is one of abundance.

The contemplative eye is a healthy one, free from the infection of regret and anxiety, the blindness of ignorance, the myopia of fear, and the cataracts of defeatism. It allows light and shadow to reach the soul without judgement and reveal truth unblemished. The contemplative heart embraces light with joy and shadow with the consolation of deeper understanding. The contemplative spirit is alert to truth and love, which are to be found in proportions equal to freedom from fear and falseness. Contemplative prayer expects and finds grace in all situations.

As the prologue to John's Gospel reads, "A light shines in the darkness, a light that darkness cannot overcome." Contemplative prayer seeks and finds that light, no matter how faint it appears to be at first. Then, as it draws nearer, the light grows larger and larger until it fills all the dark spaces outside and inside. Sadly, most of us do not know this light; we do not trust that it exists or that it has the power to overcome the darkness.

Light is life. Shadows merely frame it. But like all frames, they can also serve to emphasize beauty, and to attract our gaze and awe. The light that darkness cannot overcome is blinding to those who seek bling instead. In time, the dazzle of human artifices diminishes and finally is extinguished by the despair of certain disappointment. Aging gracefully, accepting defeat graciously, and bearing adversity generously are what provide the discernment that is needed to recognize the true light that grows and endures, and satisfies our deepest yearning.

Contemplative prayer welcomes success spontaneously but soberly. It also examines failure with humility and care. The lessons of failure are practical and should never become pathological. Failure must never impair hope or injure confidence that is rooted in healthy self-understanding. Nor should it ever be permitted to undermine faith in God, in others or in our true and higher self. When others disappoint us, we must move forward with prudence and perseverance. When we disappoint ourselves, we must continue to advance with optimism.

But because set-backs on the journey of life often arrest movement that may have come from an unconscious drive or reckless will, they should be regarded as privileged moments to deepen our awareness of internal and external dynamics as well as the inter-dependencies between ourselves and others; between ourselves

and God; and between sometimes conflicted parts of our personality. In the complex operation of the human body, mind and spirit, things may have fallen out of alignment. It is never too late to deal with the conditions that led to failure—lovingly, judiciously and prayerfully.

It takes courage to confess and confront weakness without averting to denial or shrinking into shame or regret. It takes wisdom to stand in the gap between paralysis and growth. Sometimes, it takes the reassuring accompaniment of a friend, a spiritual director or a therapist to take that stand and hold that ground, and then to move forward freely.

How surely gravity's law, strong as an ocean current, takes hold of even the smallest thing and pulls it toward the heart of the world...This is what the things can teach us: to fall, patiently to trust our heaviness.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Book of Hours*



Simplicity

As far back as I can recall, I have valued simplicity. Fashionable clothes, sporty cars and other paraphernalia of success have never appealed to me, as my mother once reminded me, despairing as I left the house wearing uncoordinated, threadbare clothes. Intuitively, I have always understood simplicity to be synonymous with real beauty, universal truth and deep inner peace.

The simplicity of truth and beauty is a marvel to behold, indeed to be contemplated, in its rich range of colours and palpable textures. Like poetry, art or music, it seems that meaning is strangely summarized in the economy of simple verses, strokes and notes. Complexity, on the other hand, seems often to be the enemy of truth, especially when thoughts become convoluted and the language used to express them is opaque. Complexity is the enemy of beauty when it denatures the order and grace of creation.

In these times especially, people yearn for simplicity in the midst of manipulated desires, and lives filled with toxic stress, and endless rules designed to suit an elite and not those they are intended to serve, whether in commerce or politics. They feel like unwilling passengers on a dehumanizing and meaningless expedition that promises prosperity and pleasure but actually delivers desolation at the price of meaning, peace and true joy.

Why is simplicity so desired but so elusive? Why is it so prized and yet we almost always lean away from it? I propose that contemplative prayer helps to answer such questions and, more importantly, to channel our understanding and decisions in a way that brings us closer to this holy grail, which lies—even in the very best circumstances—beyond our reach and grasp.

Poets, artists and musicians may well be the best teachers in the curriculum of simplicity. Poets know that verses are nothing but random clusters of words if they lack a simple golden thread connecting images to one cosmic idea. Artists know that each classic painting has one unifying point. Musicians would pollute our world with chords of cacophony without simple melodies.

The contemplation of nature also teaches us that behind diversity lies unity. But we only get to see that unity if we give up our usual ambition of subjugating and exploiting creation. Sister Mother Nature, as Saint Francis called her in his Canticle of Creation, only reveals her simple, sacred secrets to those who regard her respectfully with contemplative eyes. Against those who would dominate and abuse her, she puts up a shield of impenetrable complexity. To those who would rape her, she reveals—sometimes dramatically, even violently—their foolishness. Hers is the last word, truth.

**The spiritualities of all great world religions teach us letting go:
how to step aside.**

Richard Rohr, *Simplicity: The Art of Living*

+ + +

Paradoxically, the human spirit is divided between an aspiration for freedom and an inclination for security in slavery; between genuine simplicity and the illusion of simplicity in insidious forms of complexity; and, in some cases, between liberation and the idolization of complexity. It craves for simplicity but is infatuated by complexity. As a result, simplicity is often overwhelmed by complexity. For that reason, the key to simplicity is often not in learning how to practice simplicity but in unlearning complexity.

Simplicity is difficult to achieve and harder to maintain. The truth of this statement is underscored by our own frustration. Some people reach discouragement in the fight against tyrannical complexities in their family life, community life, church life, not to mention national and world affairs. Unless simplicity is firmly held as a foundational discipline, complexity becomes rationalized and simplicity is dismissed as simplistic. Therefore, those who value simplicity must search for

deeper understanding and practical solutions that address the dissonant realities of hectic lives.

Simplicity has deep biblical roots and has marked most, if not all, of the saints whose lives we honour. Among the factors that affect its practice are the need to know who we are at the core; the knowledge of fragmentation that comes from many inward selves; the need to be in perpetual communion with God, the source of life; and our capacity for gratitude.

Richard Foster, an insightful Christian author of the Quaker tradition, wrote a guide, which he recently updated, for finding harmony in a complex world by confronting “the complexity of simplicity.” He proposes a series of principles that help to put its practice into perspective. First, durable simplicity is an outcome rather than something that we construct. In fact, it is a grace given to us by God, a “disciplined grace.” Second, we will inevitably struggle to stay on course as we face doubts about the choices that we have made. Third, balance must be kept between inner simplicity and various lifestyle choices.

Inward simplicity is obedience to the hunger for God that makes us dissatisfied with anything synthetic. It is achieved by continuously going deeper into the truth of ourselves and the central purpose of our lives. Inner simplicity requires humility and detachment. Outward simplicity is to focus on the purpose of our lives rather than the rules and conventions over which we often obsess. Simplicity also urges us to unplug from our consumptive society and measure success by standards other than power, prestige or property.

Fundamentally, health and happiness rest on our capacity for simplicity. Mindfulness is the protector of simplicity. Each step, word and bite becomes an expression of a delicious desire rather than the mindful binging that used to reveal our compulsive cravings. Stillness and silence now suffice where distractions were needed to mask our inner confusion. Frugality has become abundance, not deprivation.

There are two ways to get enough: one is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.

G. K. Chesterton

In recent years, I have come to understand simplicity as the fruit of prayer that seeks to discern one's unique identity and particular vocation, and the foundation of gratitude, which leads to happiness. Simplicity is a decision, an option for what matters most.

Simplicity is not based on a resignation to our incapacity to control our inner and outer universe. It is a celebration of gratitude for the intrinsic goodness of life. This is fundamental. Despite deceit, violence and the widespread prevalence of sin, it is my deep conviction that God still says that what he created is good, and we can see that elemental reality too in the frame of simplicity and through the lens of gratitude.

The deal is that these two qualities of life are inseparable and symbiotic in relationship. There can be no genuine gratitude without simplicity. And simplicity will not endure without gratitude. Moreover, without an appreciation of who we are and what our purpose is, simplicity remains elusive, and gratitude, which is the acknowledgement of abundance in the context of simplicity, eludes us also.

That is why I often explain that there exists a chain that begins with contemplative prayer, which helps to reveal us to ourselves by focusing on the larger picture rather than on the fear-ridden ego; extends into simplicity, which connects only the necessary dots in order to make decisions that are intentional; then gratitude for everything as gifts that are needed for our unique mission; then generosity of spirit or love, which sees grace overflowing; and joy, which is the fruit of love.

The culture of appreciation helps to understand that less really is more, and with that understanding we help to gain enough for all.

Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World*



Mindfulness

Contemplative prayer is a deep awareness of what stands before, inside and above us. It reveals truth about our world beyond sensible evidence. It expands our awareness of who we truly are and evaporates illusions. It opens our heart and mind to the truth of love. Simply stated, contemplative prayer sees through the barriers that would otherwise obscure our view and deny us the insights that are needed to develop our God-given gifts and grow into our full potential of joy.

Contemplative prayer leads to deeper awareness but it also changes our way of living, which in turn continues to raise our consciousness progressively. The change takes us to mindful living—mindfulness in the choices that we make whether in response to our basic human wants, needs and desires, or to the pressures of our modern consumptive society that tend to define on our behalf what self-actualization means.

Mindfulness is a process by which we focus our thinking and the energy behind everything that we do on an anticipated set of results and their ultimate outcomes. Contemplative prayer is the gateway to mindfulness because it makes us broadly aware of existing circumstances, the potential for improvement and the trail that must be blazed in order to reach that destination.

An important distinction must however be made between secular and religious mindfulness. The secular world equates mindfulness with the willful pursuit of self-satisfaction. Religious tradition, particularly the contemplative tradition, focuses mindfulness on God's will as the means of achieving authenticity. Therefore, it is expressed as humility and availability.

So it is with mindful living, which seeks to adhere to particular values, such as taking time for family and friends, despite the pressures of a demanding career; or favour specific priorities, such as advancing in education despite crippling financial challenges. Mindful living acts strategically to overcome distractions in order to grasp the pearl of infinite value. It is methodical rather than impulsive; perseverant rather than stubborn. Mindfulness is mindful of particular blessings that escape the notice of those who are single-minded about selfish motives and inattentive to grace.

At each moment, (St. Therese of Lisieux)'s sole concern is to carry out the will of God as it was revealed to her second to second.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*

+ + +

Simplicity is spontaneously associated with Franciscan spirituality. It is the practical expression of evangelical poverty that the poverello lived in a radical way. Simplicity gave Saint Francis a great deal of freedom from the constraints of an economically driven world. He used this freedom to focus his attention on what really mattered to him, the face of God in Creation.

Simplicity is also the alpha and the omega of a mindful lifestyle. Simplicity is not possible without being mindful in our choices, nor is mindfulness possible without a willingness to travel light, that is, without the encumbrance of unnecessary baggage or ambiguous plans. Ultimately, the purpose of simplicity is to increase our capacity to focus on the moment at hand, where awareness of God is at its highest potential.

Ernest Larkin, O. Carm. pointed out that the well established practice of awareness of God's presence does make possible a direct line of communication between the person and God but could lead to "abstractness...a mere nod of the mind to a theological truth with minimal resonance in one's being." One might say that mindfulness completes and even incarnates a divinely inspired intuition by allowing God to soak into every part of the body, mind and spirit.

Alluding to the classic spiritual discipline of recollection, what St. Teresa of Avila called “the soul collecting its faculties together and entering within itself to be with its God,” Larkin links true recollection to Christian mindfulness through presence to the moment: “recollection and mindfulness, separately and together, emphasize full commitment of one’s whole being to the moment at hand. They demand awareness of one’s self, the action, and the God who is there.”

Mindfulness fights the enemies of wholeness...our unfreedoms and attachments, our sins and imperfections....Mindfulness faces these temptations head on by maintaining attention to the call of faith.

Ernest Larkin, *Christian Mindfulness*

+ + +

Joy is the fruit of mindfulness. This applies to the mundane activities as well as the grand projects of life. The beauty of mindful behaviour is that it increases pleasure. Slowing things down in order to become more aware of them and of their effects makes it possible to savour the sight, sound, smell, touch and taste of what we chose with full intentionality. Conversely, acting reflexively and in haste numbs our senses. With time, we lose sensitivity to subtle aromas, soft notes and gentle movements.

Only the strongest stimuli then connect to the brain.

In many ways, this tendency is well summarized in our approach to food. Many of us tend to eat mindlessly, too fast and without much appreciation for the range of flavours that cross our palate. Once having eaten, we are not likely to be aware of the effect of food on our bodies and intellect, unless the reaction is sudden and dramatic. Except when it eventually results in illness, we are unlikely to register the differences between healthy and unhealthy foods. That’s because when we do not eat intentionally, the appropriate cues are overwhelmed by whatever is actually the focus of our attention: a conversation, a newspaper or simply a thought about what we must do after finishing the “chore” at hand.

Respecting our body and the disposition that is needed to live holy, whole lives requires mindfulness. Mindfulness is a kind of prayer, one that should be constant.

It is a prayer of gratitude in that it acknowledges everything as gift, and it is a prayer of discipleship in that it receives everything as material that is ordained to a particular mission.

Attentiveness and delight are the best ways of nourishing the body and the self. One author claims that traditional diets are doomed to failure because they depend on willpower, which we tend to associate with effort and sacrifice, to assure the good choices in the quality and quantity of eating. Eisenstein prefers enjoyment as a barometer, which he assumes to indicate that the body's true needs are being met. He understands enjoyment to be the result of careful preparation, slow tasting: "Chew your beverages." He further suggests that attentiveness must extend to the effects and feelings generated by digestion and later absorption by the body.

Another example of mindfulness is breathing. We tend to breathe in as hurried a manner as we do other things. Breath is a proxy for life. Our stress is revealed by shallow and erratic breathing. Sometimes, we catch ourselves and take a few slow and deep breaths, inhaling goodness and exhaling dark emotions. When we do, we feel great. Too soon, however, we resume mindless, superficial breathing that neither provides adequate oxygen to brain nor rest to the heart.

The premise and proof of mindful living is authentic enjoyment. By contemplating what is, and doing so gratefully and prayerfully, we come to hear our body and soul as it expresses delight or revulsion, depending on what is presented. Mindfulness trusts our senses and intuitions to sort through the chaos, and to discern what is whole and holy, what is edifying as opposed to what is toxic. Not to be confused with false pleasures that strive to satiate compulsions and addictions, the joy that is obtained by listening attentively to the body and the heart is pure.

So it is with the more spiritual aspects of mindfulness, including prayer—whether liturgical, discursive, meditative or contemplative. Larkin wrote, "If we want to live intentionally with commitment to what we are about, we have to gather up ourselves in recollection and be involved in what we are doing. It is a short step to being in touch with the God hidden in the moment." He added, "We enter (each moment) with wonder and gratefulness and with a receptive heart.

This is contemplative living; it is living in God's presence and cultivating the moment."

Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.

Aesop



Peace and Joy

The prayer that is often called the Prayer of Saint Francis is contemplative prayer. Its wisdom is at once human and divine. Its simple verses race across the universe carrying the promise of peace in grains of matter no larger than mustard seeds. This prayer is an anthem to our collective hope for peace and a revelation to the naked eye of the microscopic fibres that once braided together make peace strong. The opening words say it all: “Make me an instrument of your peace.”

Seek peace directly, especially by our own wit and effort, and you will not find it. It is too elusive to be claimed permanently; too fragile to be to be possessed and chained to any ideology. It is a gentle visitor who stays only as long as conditions warrant. That is why the prayer does not say, “Lord give me peace,” or “Make me a purveyor of peace.” Rather, it begs that the Lord use us as an instrument by which the necessary conditions may be created. What are these conditions?

The prayer elucidates, starting with the component of peace that is most essential and most difficult to nurture—love. The prayer understands that love begins with a tiny gesture, and that this seed will be most fruitful in the ground where hatred now thrives. It is a counterintuitive truth. We prefer to act lovingly where it is safe to do so; where love exists already. The desire for peace demands that we contribute to the establishment of peace by daring to counter hatred, and to love with humility, not self-righteousness.

This insight brings us to the second condition that is necessary for peace to emerge, namely pardon. There can be no peace without love and no love without forgiveness. Life is riddled with hurt, sometimes deeply felt. Forgiveness interrupts

the destructive cycle of injury and violence. Forgiveness is the test of love and the catalyst that makes it grow.

There can be no forgiveness, love or peace without faith. Faith in a power that is stronger than injury and hatred, faith in myself and my capacity to love and to overcome the temptation to seek revenge when I have been injured; and faith in the dignity and inherent goodness of others. I cannot cover all doubt with my faith but I can sow tiny seeds of faith by my confidence and witness to the virtues and values of faith.

Where there is despair, love suffocates and dies. Where there is hope, charity thrives and joy blossoms. Hope begins as a seed and beards the darkness as a tiny mustard seed defies harsh elements in order to grow into a large tree that harbour birds and provides soothing shade to animals resting from the scorching heat of the midday sun. God uses us as instruments to sow such seeds.

Where there is darkness, fear rules. In darkness, ignorance is the foundation of what we say and do. In darkness, trust is impossible and the fragility of life makes us obsessive about safety. Meaning is elusive and joy is ephemeral. Spiritual light, which is often experienced as insight gained in prayer, meditation or in simple reflection on past events, is the antidote to ignorance and fear. It guides our judgement and decisions about the issues that dominate our psycho-social landscape.

Where there is sadness, the light is shut out. Sadness affects attitudes, and attitudes warp perceptions and understanding. Sadness is a usual reaction to loss, for instance, but it must not be regarded as inevitable either in the intensity or the duration in which it is being experienced. At a point in time, we must chose joy over sadness, or maybe this would be more appropriately phrased as accepting joy over sadness because spiritual joy is a gift from God that is neither caused nor conditioned by factors outside the person. Saint Francis defined spiritual joy to a beloved brother in this way, “If we endure all those evils and insults and blows with joy and patience, reflecting that we must accept and bear the sufferings of the Blessed Christ patiently for love of Him, oh, Brother Leo, write that is perfect joy!” To be clear, joy is not enjoyment of suffering but the God-given capacity to

endure suffering. Joy is also an attitude of gratitude that focuses our attention on the richness of God's blessings more than the poverty of particular circumstances.

**Love is something if you give it away. You've got to give it away.
Give it away. Love is something if you give it away. You'll end up hav-
ing more.**

Children's Bible Song

+ + +

It is in giving that we receive. Peace is an enigmatic phenomenon. We can only give it if we have it and we cannot get it unless we share it. That's because true and lasting peace is not the product of human ingenuity. It comes from God. The best we can do is allow God to use us as the channel by which it is poured into a community. That is also how we receive it—by allowing God to use us as unobstructed and flexible instruments of grace. As it passes through us, some of it soaks into our inner being and brings life to heal the sclerosis of fear wherever it exists.

To become an instrument of God's peace for the benefit of others, we would profit by greater awareness of the presence of peace in our world. We might pray:

Lord, grant that I may better see with the eyes of my heart the handiwork of
your divine mercy.

In the midst of hatred, turn my attention to love that refuses to be overcome by
it.

Where there is injury, open my eyes to the courage of those who forgive.

Where there is doubt, reveal to me faith that resists the ravages of fear and cyni-
cism.

Where there is despair, cause me to savour the confidence of those whose hope
stands undiminished.

Where there is darkness, brighten my path with the reassuring light of those
who know the path of grace.

Where there is sadness, may I marvel at the emergence of joy in the human spirit that is seized by your love.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

John 14: 27

+ + +

Sometimes, we are troubled because our attention is too narrowly focused on ourselves, on our outrage and frustration; on our failures and disappointments; on our limitations and our envy of others. In those moments, we lose sight of the reality that joy comes from love and love is other-centered. For that reason alone, we can benefit from praying for the grace to align our lives to the Lord's peace: "O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life."

It is in giving what comes to us from God for the service of others that we receive the measure of benefit that we ourselves need. It is in forgiving that our heart open to receive the forgiveness of others and of ourselves. Indeed, it is in transcending our own particular needs—while not ignoring them—that we enter the Trinitarian dance, a life-giving energy of hope and joy that is bound to the truth and love of all eternity.

It is in giving that we receive. Allowing others to give to us is also a gift. Some people receive gladly but cannot give of themselves. Others become so obsessed about giving that they are too embarrassed to receive. That too is an excess inasmuch as it denies others the joy of giving. I recall having to remind myself that to accept a gift from a person who could scarcely afford it was a form of giving in itself—giving joy by receiving a gift graciously.

Receiving graciously makes it possible to be born to Eternal Life, beginning with the gifts that we receive directly from God and extending to those that we re-

ceive from God through the hands of others. The gracious reception of God's gifts is marked by humility and simplicity, and is expressed as gratitude and generosity.

It is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Letting go of fear, and allowing the false self to die in exchange for the truth and higher purpose of our lives, this is the pinnacle of the spiritual journey, a mountain sanctuary on the pilgrimage of Eternal Life. If and when it occurs, we recognize it as a moment of transfiguration—a victory that must be reclaimed over and over again because fear and the falseness that it induces always lurk in the shadow of the self. Reclaiming that victory gets progressively easier as those parts of the shadow that produce fear are integrated into our conscious understanding of who we are.

Practically speaking, holiness comprises two elements: grace received and the loving embrace of our gifts and of our failures. Grace is paramount. Eternal Life is unimaginable and unachievable without it. God gives it freely and our role is to receive it, to apply it and to deploy it in meaningful ways. Our job is to gradually widen the horizon of our consciousness to reveal more and more of our hidden gifts as well as the hidden fears that interfere with the meaningful deployment of those gifts. Conscious integration of the self is the effort needed for the journey of spiritual development and grace is the nourishment that gives it vitality. Along the road that leads to Peace as only God can give, we will find encouragement at important milestones: faith, hope and love; forgiveness, light and joy.

**Happy are those whose strength you are: their hearts are set upon
the pilgrimage!**

Psalm 84



Epilogue

“What then is Apollos? What is Paul?” asks the Apostle Paul rhetorically in his first letter to the Corinthians (3:5). The question goes to the very heart of our relationship with one another and with the world. Ultimately, it addresses the question of our functional relationship with God. Do we stand alone in an unfriendly universe? Or is there a larger system in which we have a role to play that is interdependent with those of others and dependent on God?

Paul’s answer is unequivocal: “Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each.” The salvation of the world, its shelter from evil, its pursuit of joy is not our responsibility alone. Our job is simply to dispose ourselves to the grace that God generously provides. Moreover, our joy is further amplified to the extent that we share its unfathomable benefits with others.

Disposing ourselves is taking the risk of investing in the truth of love. Faith leads to love through the hope that no human agency can assure. As we observe God’s works in the contemplation of all things that surround us, we grow in trust and confidence. Faith allows our eyes to see what others cannot or dare not see; to hear what is inaudible without faith; to enjoy fragrances that are not perceptible by those who are not aware or alert to God’s self-revelation. We touch God when we gently run our fingers along the beauty of a rose and recognize that it is a gift from God. Our heart smiles as we acknowledge that without God there would be no rose, no softness, no perfume, no color. No Eden that we enter with amazement each time we confess that God is the master gardner.

Paul explains, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who

gibe the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each.”

Joy is the fruit of knowing that ours is a privileged symbiotic relationship with God who pours life by love overflowing from the sacred embrace of the Holy Trinity. This is not a joy without anxiety, anguish and even suffering. But it is a joy filled with meaning, and meaning is what gives life its savor. Pity those who imagine themselves to be the ones that make things grow.

While we are participating in the creation of a wonderful garden, God is operating within us work that is no less exquisite. Paul’s message is encouraging: “For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field.” He elaborates by constructing another analogy: “(you are) God’s building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”

Further, Paul adds, “You are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in you.” The construction of a great edifice with materials of truth and love is ongoing.

Jesus Christ entered our world precisely so that we can observe that he is the foundation and draw our joy from it. Jesus Christ entered our world so that the seeds that we plant with diligence and water attentively may give life abundantly. Because his Spirit remains in our world, this truth is perceptible to those who have the eyes to see. It is perceptible to contemplative eyes but not to eyes that have been blinded by cynical attitudes and self-centered lifestyles. These are among the greatest obstacles to joy in our time.

Contemplative prayer is nourished by what is perceptible in our world. But the senses must be first stripped of what impedes their capacity to feast on the signs of God’s presence and wisdom. Anxiety and fear can obscure our seeing authentically. To the degree that we fail to heed the precepts of simplicity, gratitude and generosity, our vision is comprised. For this reason, contemplative prayer must be accompanied by the classic disciplines of Christian living. These enable virtue to flourish and vices to loosen their command of what the senses perceive.

We ought to be encouraged, however, by the fact that contemplative prayer can be informed by darkness as well as it can be illuminated by goodness and beauty. Sometimes the soul's consideration of failure is more honest than its celebration of success. God turns all evidence into wisdom. God will lead us, the prophet Hosea (2:14ff) tells us, to the wilderness where truth stands in pristine state, neither tamed by selfish desires nor subordinated to extraneous attachments. Contemplative prayer in the wilderness of an unfettered heart is abandonment to reality under the guidance of God's inscrutable mercy.

The reflections that you have just read will be most fruitful if you consider these principles that may help you to move from awe to awareness, from deep seeing to living in a new way.

Silence and Attentiveness

Theoretically, God's presence can be detected in any and all circumstances. But epiphanies are easier to experience when our heart is still, our body free of distractions and our mind focused on the present moment. In practice, this means that we must befriend silence. This is easier for some people than is for others. Personality and lifestyle will make this easier or harder to achieve.

Silence is not an end in itself. It is merely a condition that is conducive to attentiveness. To unlock the meaning of our daily experience of the world that one mystic described as being "pregnant with God" we need to develop a keen awareness of what occurs outside and what transpires within. Sensory details are important but so is our knowledge of the prior thoughts, opinions and attitudes that may affect our perception and understanding of a new experience.

In addition to silence, intentionality will make it easier to be attentive in the observation and processing of these experiences. Intentionality is related to mindfulness, the art of living that allows us to savor subtle flavors, run our fingers along deep textures, distinguish the melody of songbirds against the cacophony of busy lives. There is an entire chapter in this book that is devoted to that important subject.

Solitude and Discernment

Just as silence is an aid in observation, solitude can be of great benefit as we try to unpack the gifts that we have experienced. Again, solitude will be a haven for some and more difficult for others. You may wish to experiment with the location and duration of solitude that works best for you. Remember, solitude is a choice and not to be confused with isolation.

Solitude can be very effective in incubating insight but it only sets the stage. What matters more is what goes on in that space. What we seek in solitude is to examine our experiences and to find their meaning, particularly those that strike us as significant for whatever reason.

When considering an experience, we must take into account both its nature and its context. How would I describe that experience? What stood out in what I saw, heard, felt, tasted or smelled? Why was I there? If this is a wink from God, what is the feeling that it generates?

With what do I associate this experience? How does it fit within my understanding of the world and of my life? These and many other questions must be received and engaged, slowly and gently. They will help to decode the experience to reveal the rich message that it contains. God is rarely seen on the surface of things but only under the microscope of careful reflection.

Contemplation and Action

Ultimately, contemplative prayer must lead to action just as action must lead to prayer. Once having given an experience sufficient attention; once we have tried as best we can to understand its meaning in its own right and in context of the larger narrative of our life, we must decide what to do with the insight that has been gained.

Chances are a new experience will challenge us. In rare cases, it may shake the very foundation of how you view the world. Whether the revelation is large or small, some adjustment in how you think or act will be necessary. The good news is that change that is precipitated by an experience of God's presence in the world is for the good. Change that brings us closer to God is not always easy but it almost inevitably has joyful consolations. This wondrous moment in which they could contemplate heaven itself if they had.

My favorite illustration of the need to contemplate with awe and then move on to implement the changes that occur inside is the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew (...). The apostles who were with him were transformed by their own experience of that event. They were tempted to freeze that moment in time and to stay on the mountaintop forever. But we would not be talking today this wondrous moment if they had.

Essentially, contemplative prayer is gratitude and celebration of the Incarnation. By it, we see God among us. It is a sacramental sip of eternal life.

From the lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human health.

Psalm 104: 13-15

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Discovering God Among Us

© 2012 Richard L. Boileau

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author.