



Reflections on the Devotional Life

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I hadn't seen him in two years. During the years I had lived in this Midwestern city, I had often eaten at his cafe. We became close friends. Coming as a young immigrant from Greece, he had worked long and hard, until his eating place was the finest in the city. Now, at 70, he was beginning to turn things over to his son. Seated with me at the table, he reflected on how well things had gone for him. He paused, tears formed in his eyes, and he said, "But, Al, I haven't taken time for my soul." He was a successful man; he was reasonably rich. The community esteemed him. What else did he need?

It is as if each of us goes through life with a bag to fill. We use our years to fill them with good things: family, friends, knowledge, money and property, honor, perhaps power. Then death comes, and we must leave the bags behind. If we have accumulated our cargo at the expense of our souls, everything is gone.

Occasionally the word *soul* is used to indicate some kind of entity apart from the body or mind or spirit. More properly it is an all-inclusive word, including the whole person. But my friend could hardly have conveyed his meaning to me had he said, "I haven't taken time for my whole person." He might have come close had he said, "I haven't taken time for God," or "I haven't taken time to cultivate the presence of God."

How do we take time for our souls? What is the key to spiritual formation? How do we deepen our devotional life? How do we cultivate the presence of God? These are some of the shapes of the question as we reflect on the devotional life.

SEEKING GOD

Ever since Adam and Eve fled and hid from God in the Garden, people the world over have had a subtle and deep inclination to keep God at bay. We use subterfuges. We may try to deny his existence. Or we may seek comfort in the

thought that he is indifferent. In Camus' *The Stranger*, a young man is caught in a web of circumstances and is sentenced to die. He declines to have a priest come and "is comforted by the benign indifference of the universe." A thoroughgoing determinism does give strange comfort. Nowhere is this as beautifully and wistfully expressed as in Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*:

Tis all a chequer-board of nights and days
Where Destiny with men for pieces plays:
Hither and thither moves, and mates and slays,

And one by one back in the closet lays.

We who have been brought up in the Christian church are not likely to dismiss the universe or God as indifferent. But we face God as a stern landlord. One may wonder whether even Luther in his early encounter with God was not trying with utmost austerity to keep the landlord at bay. It was when he discovered that he had life by grace, “rent free,” that he yearned to be in God’s presence. God’s face turned from one of anger to one of love. In Christ’s death and resurrection he found a great and merciful Father.

More than we may want to recognize, perhaps much of our lives of worship and good works are still attempts to pay the landlord. Grace is hard to comprehend and accept. We may still be haunted by the landlord hovering around for the rent. We may even conclude that the level of our devotional zeal or spirituality may be the very payment that will make him friendly and congenial.

THE CROSS AND FORGIVENESS

To pursue the devotional life or spirituality as a goal is as counter-productive as to win happiness by a frontal attack. Both are products of something else. In the devotional life, the very first thing to know is that God is a loving God. We must discover grace. The cross of Christ is the unique clue. It is not by chance that we sing, “all the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime.” In his book, *The Unfinished Task*, Stephen Neill says:

It is as the Crucified that Jesus draws the hearts of men to Himself. God has taken the place of horror and disaster and made it a place of peace. In our darkest hour of despair, it is to the Cross that we turn to find consolation. When we are tempted to doubt everything, it is the Cross that tells us plainly that God is love. Bowed down by the sense of failure, we turn to the Cross and receive the grace of forgiveness. When the way is not clear before us, and we hesitate about a vocation of a lifetime, it is the Crucified who says to us, “Follow me.”

The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places, and it is not hard for me to find evidences of God’s love in the variables of life. I have had work to do, health, happiness in family and friends, and a good land. The list of blessings is long. I have had few instances when I have been driven to the Cross as the last evidence of God’s love. But I do know that if everything were to go, my Lord would be there still. I do have a fixed, unchanging foundation for knowing his love. Nothing can alter what he has done “once and for all” for me and for the world on the Cross. Now all life can be suffused by his love. As in the ballad the lover sings, “Every little breeze seems to whisper Louise,” so we find the love of God everywhere because we have found it at the Cross.

To live in the wonder of forgiveness is the fountain of our devotional life. To measure ourselves by the Law makes us sinners, but to measure ourselves against the love of God makes us even greater sinners. We exult because we are the forgiven ones.

PRAYER

All sorts of reasons can be found for the futility of prayer. Why pray to a God who already knows what we need? He loves us, his children the world over, even when we ignore him. Certainly he cannot withhold his blessings until we remind him or press him. There have been times when I have thought that he has told us to ask for all sorts of things, even trivial things, because he wants us to talk to him. After all, it would be strange for members of the family never to communicate at all with their father.

So I pray. I ask for health for myself and for my dear ones. I have along and assorted catalog—safety, security, guidance. On a Sunday morning I join the prayers of the congregation: “defend thy church...give it pastors according to thy Spirit...preserve our nation in righteousness and honor...sanctify our home...comfort all who are in sorrow and need...” I assume that God wants all these values for us long before we ask for them. I also assume that he will not, in some sort of pique, let these blessings lie in his celestial warehouse undelivered unless we ask for them. Yet we pray.

There are other difficulties. We pray for health, and health ebbs away. We pray for safety, and a dear one is struck down in the streets. We pray for the end of war, and wars grind on.

I dare not put limits on God. What he may do or be able to do in the wake of my prayers, I leave to him. A friend of mine, more cautious than I, said, “Prayer does not change things; it changes you.” Of course it changes me. I am in God’s presence when I pray, and am therefore exposed to him and to the powers that surge from him. But I must disagree with my friend. I believe that in some mysterious way prayer also changes things—maybe the chemistry of the body, the hearts of people I pray for, the turn of events, even the shape of history. How this can be, I cannot know. But God has invited me to pray; in fact ordered me to pray. He has assured me that I can dial him direct, and the line will never be busy. The more we pray, the more likely it is that we will spend more time thanking him than requesting favors from him.

IN FELLOWSHIP

Our devotional life is private, but it is much more. Its springs are in God, but are profoundly in and through his church, its Word and Sacraments, and its fellowship. The church of Christ is not a collection of a billion separate pebbles on the beaches of the world. Nor is it the sum of the many denominations. We speak of many churches, but the *one* church. We are members one of another, separate cells in one body, the body that Christ claims as his bride. More than I can know, my spirituality—though highly individual—draws its life from God through the body of the whole.

As we assemble for worship, our souls are fed not alone through the Word and Sacraments, but by the mystical union with all who are the Lord’s, both the church militant and the church triumphant. When we sing in our communion liturgy, “Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven...” we are not soloists. We are one transcendent choir.

Worship at its best wafts us into the presence of the Holy. At the end of the hour we may not remember specifically what hymns we sang, the sequence of the liturgy, the precise passages from Scriptures that were read, even the content of the sermon. But the total result of the hour is that we have been in God’s presence and our souls have been fed.

In the words of P. T. Forsythe, “The greatest product of the church is not brotherly love but divine worship. And we shall never worship right nor serve right till we are more engrossed with our God than even with our worship, with his reality than our piety, with His Cross than our service.” From the beginning to the end of worship, we confront the God of holiness, sovereignty, and love. He draws us to himself and knits us together into his church, in which church, said Luther, “He daily forgives abundantly all my sins, and the sins of all believers.”

In almost every branch of the Christian church, Holy Communion is the most solemn moment of its worship. Great preaching and inspiring hymns may move people more deeply, but for the church as a whole Communion has become the point where Christ’s death for the sins of the world is brought into its most ineffable and concrete form. “This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you.” The nature of Christ’s presence in the Sacrament has been divisive in the churches. C. S. Lewis says, “This remains for me, hidden,” and adds that “...here a Hand from the hidden country touches not only my soul but my body. Here the prig, the don, the modern in me have no privilege over the savage or the child. Here is big medicine and strong magic.”

There is a magnificent continuity in Christian worship. Here I am praying the very prayers uttered by Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and others. When we sing the Kyrie or the Sanctus of the Eucharist, our voices blend with the echoes of voices throughout the ages. The Lord’s Prayer unites us with the disciples on that day when our Lord taught it to them, and through Aaron’s benediction (“The Lord bless you and keep you...”) we stand with those receiving God’s blessing in the wilderness after the Exodus.

MASKS

When in the words of Psalm 130 I say, “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,... my soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen for the morning,” I ask myself whether I really do. How can I yearn for him whom I have never seen or touched? Simone Weil, called one of our modern saints, helped me. She said that since God is not immediately present to the soul, nor can be, he has us love him through his three masks: religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world, and our neighbor. Here God is within reach. We can and do love the Word and Sacrament, hymns, liturgy, prayers, sermon—everything that touches on the presence of God. And nature. If we let him, God will let us feel him in the splen-

dor of the sunset, the song of birds, the twinkling stars: “When I consider thy heavens...” And people. A friend of mine, in the days before his death, said, “I have now seen the face of Jesus in all sorts of people, doctors, nurses, friends.” And we see him in the faces of all who are in need; “I was hungry... thirsty...a stranger....As you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.” Thank God that we can reach out to him through his “masks.” George Macdonald in his *Diary of an Old Soul* expresses this yearning for God himself:

Not in my fancy now I search to find thee;
Not in its loftiest forms would shape or bind thee;
I cry to one whom I can never know,
Filling me with an infinite overflow;

Not to a shape that dwells within my heart,
Clothed in perfections love and truth assigned thee,
But to the God thou knowest that thou art.

MOTIFS

Our devotional life with God is a symphony of many melodies. Sometimes one dominates; sometimes another. Sometimes it is a cry; sometimes a rhapsody. There is the *De Profundis*, “out of the depths”; there is unalloyed joy. At times the soul is in grief over sins, sins of commission and of omission; at times it soars on the wings of forgiveness. There are stretches of dull indifference; there are days of unbroken tranquility. The one constant is the love of God in Christ and the Cross.

Joy. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis describes the joy of the Divine that captured him after his long struggle to resist. “Who can truly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape?” The joy of Christian life is not an emotional ride on cloud nine; it is an all-pervasive assurance that, come what may, we are claimed by God. We may be weighed down by fears and doubts, but we are at *home*. We have reached harbor.

Remorse. For the Christian to regret is not to despair. Aware of the overwhelming fact that all our sins are forgiven and that we are beyond the sentence of the high court, we cannot be in God’s presence without grieving over the gap between what we have been and should have been, between what we yet are and should be. Our lives are littered with the missed opportunities for good, with the hurts we have done to others, knowingly and unknowingly. In the midst of the jubilant majors of our joy in the Lord, there will always be the minor chords of remorse. Repentance and faith will rob these regrets of their crushing power, but they will be there till the end. To obliterate them is to deny our humanity.

Trust. Faith is to rest back in the work of Christ for our redemption. It is to count on the promises of his Word. It is to know his infinite patience with us. “He knows our frame, he remembers that we are dust.” We come to him, said Luther, “as beloved children come to their dear father.”

Fear. In the most spiritual of Christian lives, the fear of the landlord is not altogether lost. We are still a mix of the new creature in Christ and the old Adam. The Lord’s comforting words notwithstanding—“Fear not, I have redeemed you, you are mine”—the slavish fear of a righteous God will haunt us. But not for long. Not if we shift quickly to the Word of his promises. He has promised not to remember our sins and urges us to forget them too.

Peace. Jesus gave his followers a parting blessing, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you.” In the midst of our troubled lives and turbulent world, we are to claim the gift of peace. Obviously, this cannot mean that we abdicate valid responsibilities that give us concern. Nor can it mean that we stop reading newspapers and retreat from the struggles for justice and peace. We are in the world but not of the world. It does mean that I am allowed to vault into the presence of God, be swallowed up in his power and love, and rest there.

Knowledge. I like to think that studies about God, searching the Scriptures, and understanding the doctrines of the church, only increase the wonder of his majesty and love, so

that we can express our devotion in symphonic dimensions instead of in a one finger performance. There may be a subtle hurdle from knowing “objective” truths to a love of God himself. Kierkegaard charged that the theologians and pastors of his day did their building in castles but lived in kennels. But the mind too is for praise.

Merriment. Once relieved of guilt and gnawing remorse, we are free to make merry in his world of nature and in our companionship with one another. Mirth, laughter, and a sense of humor are all gifts of grace to his restored children. Heaven must be a place of gaiety, and we should claim some of it here.

Gratitude. The dominant motif of the devotional life is gratitude. We pray for things, and we pray for his grace to reshape us into his image. But the longer we live in God’s presence, the more our prayers become sheer thanksgiving.

Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom this world rejoices;
Who, from our mothers’ arms,
Hath blest us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.

PERSONAL NOTE

For most of us, our devotional life has been shaped by circumstances in our past, many no longer remembered. My parents marshaled their six children to church every time there was a service of any kind. When on a Sunday there were no services, I remember my farmer grandfather assembling us in the living room and reading an interminably long Norwegian sermon. I have his *Hus Postil* in my library. There were prayers before and after every meal and at the close of the day. In my own family we read from Hurlbut’s *Story of the Bible*. Hymns were sung from memory. “Abide with Me” became a constant. When in a windswept cemetery in South Dakota I had finished reading the committal Scriptures for our 24-year-old son, in the quiet that followed it seemed right that his mother

began singing softly the familiar words that had ended his day for so many years.

Now that I have the leisure of retirement years, my daily intercessions have grown vastly. Some time ago I found that I was trailing off in sleep before finishing, so I began using my two to four mile daily walk to usher people, name by name, to God for his blessings, beginning with my family, then people in my former parishes and school, friends who had lost their spouses, on and on. Out of curiosity I once counted them. There were over six hundred. It has been a delight to have a moment’s remembrance of each one.

In our first year of marriage, my wife and I conceived the idea of going through the Bible for our daily devotions. We mired in the Book of Numbers, and since then have used selected readings from the Psalms, Isaiah, and the New Testament. Occasionally for my private meditations I read one of the Gospels or one of the Epistles through in one sitting. We have used

many prayers from our Hymnal and from some of the classics: Augustine, St. Francis, Luther, and the Book of Common Prayer. George Macdonald's *Diary of an Old Soul* has drawn me into God's presence again and again.

My generation was schooled in memorizing. To know selected portions of the Scriptures, Luther's Small Catechism, and hymns so well that the tongue takes over, as in the Lord's Prayer, is a great boon for private meditation and prayer. I have a friend, now 85, who believes that he can repeat the whole New Testament from memory.

Brother Lawrence, a 17th century French lay monk, to whom menial tasks in the kitchen were assigned says that "for all times, every hour, every minute, even in the height of my work, I drove away from me everything that was capable of interrupting my thought of God." Whatever Paul meant by "pray constantly," perhaps it may be to emulate Brother Lawrence by being aware of God hovering over us at all times, even when in our busy lives we are not consciously thinking of him. Differing as our precise practices may be, we rest in his promise: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."