



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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MEDITATION

As we grow as Christians, we feel a need to spend some time in quiet prayer, time alone with God. We recognize that quiet is an essential part of our spiritual lives, and we sense that there must be some kind of prayer which will make the most of quiet. At times, we may have vividly felt the presence of God in our hearts. Or we may just feel the desire for such an experience, and see that quiet is necessary if it is to occur. Thus we are lead to try to establish some regular prayer of quiet.

Such prayer goes by various names: meditation, contemplation, colloquy and others. It is a matter of being quiet in the presence of God. If our prayer is a personal relationship, then we will naturally wish to spend time with God, as we would with any person we love. But the difference is (obviously) that God is not a material person, as everyone else we know. So it takes a little doing to learn to be quiet in His presence. It is also hard for us to be quiet. We also live in an age that glorifies noise, which makes meditation even harder for us. It is usually the last of the three basic types of Christian prayer (with the Eucharist and Daily Office) to be learned. Nevertheless, the prayer of quiet is essential to a balanced Christian prayer life, and it is also tremendously fruitful in many areas of our lives.

The question then, is: how do we learn to meditate? No doubt, the best way is to be taught by a Christian experienced in this sort of prayer. These people are not always easy to find. And even if we know someone, we may be too shy to ask for the help we need. Even if we know that that is the best way to learn, we would still rather learn from a book than from a person. Our prayer on this level is extremely personal, and we naturally have a hard time sharing it with someone else.

There are many methods of meditation. Every method is a means to an end. The end is being quiet with God. We find it hard to be quiet. When we sit down to try, we find our minds occupied with all manner of extraneous thoughts -- some of them pious and some terribly secular. We find it impossible to practice any sort of quiet prayer, at least on a regular basis. Thus the need for some method to help us learn to be quiet and focused. The method itself is indifferent. Some methods are better suited to some temperaments -- some are based more in the imagination, others in the intellect, others in the emotions. Whatever method is used, the aim is quiet with God. If one method does not seem to work after a reasonable period of use, then we should try another. This is where the guidance of an experienced spiritual director is invaluable.

If you are already using a method of meditation that works for you, fine. If not, here is a simple one to start with. It is called lectio divina, spiritual reading. It is based on the use of a text (Scripture or a spiritual book) as a focus for prayer.

The first requirement is a place and time of quiet. Generally, this should be set aside on a regular basis. To develop into a solid habitual quiet, it should be the same time and place each day. The best times for most people are in the morning (warning: it may require getting up earlier) either immediately upon rising, or a little later before going to work or the day's routine, or else after work in the early evening. A few people can do it just before bed, but most people are too sleepy to have much luck at that time. If you don't have a 9-5 job, you may be able to find a time during the day. Meditation can be done before or after Morning or Evening Prayer. As with all regular prayers, it helps if the meditation is before or after some regular event -- a meal or getting up or whatever. If it is not, it tends to get crowded out by other things or just forgotten.

Similarly, we need a place where we can be alone and relatively undisturbed. The bedroom is the most common choice. Any room will present distractions, but the place chosen should minimize that problem. One would not want to try to be quiet sitting at the desk piled with the day's work. That is asking for trouble.

Having settled on time and place (some experimentation may be necessary), the next step is to pick a text for meditation. This can be taken from Scripture (the Gospels and the Psalms are especially appropriate) or from a Christian writer. It should probably not be a book about meditation. That may be useful reading, but it does not usually suit this purpose. If you have some particular Christian writer that you have always found useful, that would make a good start. Again, a competent spiritual director can make suggestions about good texts for this purpose.

Then comes the meditation itself. This should start with a brief prayer asking God's help, for it is the Spirit that prays in

and through us. It is not our own work so much as our being taken into the prayer of the Godhead. Then we should take a little while to recollect: acknowledging any preoccupations which may be with us at this time, confessing the sins which burden our conscience, withdrawing the tentacles of our being which extend hither and yon. The aim of this preparation is to let go of the principle demands upon our attention at this particular time. Then we will have a chance to be free of these distractions, and thus to be quiet.

Then, being recollected (so far as possible), turn to the text. Begin to read. Read slowly and meditatively. The aim of this reading (and it is a very special kind of reading) is not to get through a certain amount of text, but to allow God to speak through it. If some particular train of thought is suggested by the text, pause and allow it to proceed. When it has run its course, return to the text. If having paused, you find that you have wandered off into utter distraction (be forewarned that this will happen again and again), then gently bring yourself back to the text. It is there as a focus for your meditation. Distractions will occur. Don't worry too much about them. Do not get angry at yourself on their account. Just bring yourself back to the text whenever you recognize that you are distracted.

When the appointed time is complete (you should set a specific time for your meditation -- at least ten or fifteen minutes at a time), then ask yourself what God has said to you in this time of prayer. Perhaps there is a clear and overwhelming message. (For most of us, this doesn't happen very often.) Or maybe it will not seem like anything has happened. Other times, there will be some insight, some new knowledge, some new experience of the love of God. Take a moment at the end of your meditation to recognize what that is, and to see if it requires action on your part. If so, resolve to do something concrete about it.

Finally, say a prayer of thanksgiving. This is essentially an act of love. At the end we naturally thank God for giving us this time of prayer, and for working in the depths of our souls that which is best for us this day. We acknowledge that this work is His love for us, doing for us better things than we can ask or imagine. And we pledge ourselves to return that love. We begin our meditation with recollection; we end with telling God that we love Him.

Sometimes you will spend the whole time reading. Sometimes you will read one sentence and spend the rest of the time carried up into God's presence. Both are fine. We aim in meditation to be at God's disposal. We pray for Him to give us that prayer which is best for us. Sometimes this is sweet and enjoyable to us. Other times, it operates more obscurely, and feels like nothing at all is happening. We must do the best we can, and trust that He will not fail us. Through the variations in how the prayer feels, God will train us to depend upon Him rather than upon our own perceptions about prayer.

So we will need to learn to give up any notion of accomplishment in this kind of prayer. We are not there to do anything, but to be in the presence of God. We try to make it into an accomplishment instead of being. We are ready to be proud of ourselves because we have finally finished the book. Or we think that we have done well if we have read only a little. Or we look for spiritual experiences. We demand (an unacknowledged demand, perhaps) that God give us some keen spiritual insights or some ecstatic experiences that we can tell our friends. If we are not careful, after we have had such an experience or insight, we will fall into the trap of thinking that such is the goal of meditation. It is not. The goal is simply being.

As with any other personal relationship, prayer has different characters at different times. Just because one kind of experience of prayer is more spectacular or more pleasant to us does not mean that we would thrive (or even survive) on a steady diet of that. God will always try to give us what is best for us. We must learn to accept it as offered.

Meditation is not easy. It is hard to be quiet. It is hard to be patient with our distractions. It is hard to persevere when nothing seems to be happening. We are tempted to think that it is all a waste of time, and that we should be doing something instead of sitting around. We are also a little afraid of being quiet with God, for He might want something: we are afraid of losing control of our lives. There are, then, many obstacles to meditation. But it is worth the effort. We are adopted as God's children, fellow-heirs with His Son, and meditation is one part of living out that calling. It is one way that we can enjoy our Beloved Lord.

Meditation is needed to provide the depth for our prayer in the Eucharist and the Daily Office. (By the same token, Christian meditation can only grow to maturity when it is fed by the Daily Office and the Eucharist.) Once the habit is established (which for many people takes some time), the time of quiet is a very special time in the day. For it is a time with no other responsibilities than to be with God. This is then a time of wondrous freedom -- freedom from our mundane preoccupations and responsibilities. This freedom entails the responsibility of complete openness with God -- and that is often frightening. But if it is frightening, it is also exciting. God rewards our efforts at quiet in wonderful and unexpected ways. The greatest of these is Christian maturity, the fulness of the stature of Christ.

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