



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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DISTRACTIONS

How often do you sit down (or kneel down) to your prayers, and before you know it, you are thinking not about your prayers but about something completely different? Instead of self-examination, you are thinking about what you are going to have for supper when you are through, or someone you need to remember to call, or whether your boss's decision was really the best thing to do in the circumstances. Everything seems to come into your mind except what is really supposed to be there.

Welcome to the world of distracted prayer. This is the common lot of Christians who pray, not just beginners. The problem persists to some extent for virtually all Christians, however mature they may be. The problem is one of extraneous thoughts pressing themselves upon our attention when we are at prayer. We do not especially want them, nor do we seek them. They just appear. Usually we do not notice when they arise nor where they come from.

Distractions occur with all types of prayer. They are perhaps most acute with meditation, since that is the least structured form of prayer. Our immediate focus is not as concrete as it is with the written and spoken prayers of the Daily Office and Eucharist. But distraction is also common with the Daily Office and with the Eucharist. Even when we are reading a prayer (as in the Daily Office) we are not immune to distraction, especially if the prayer is familiar. We find that we can come to the end of a prayer without having paid any attention to it at all.

There are two ways of dealing with distractions — the right way and the wrong way. The wrong way is an attempt to rid ourselves of them by force of will. After being distracted for the umpteenth time, we decide that enough is enough. We grit our teeth, and promise ourselves (and maybe also God) that it will never happen again. We set ourselves to it with our best intention. Alas! we never have much success with this approach. Distractions return however vigilant we make ourselves. And, worse, our vigilance turns into another occasion of distraction. Our attention ends up being focused on heading off distractions and not on the subject of our prayer.

We will never get anywhere with distractions while we approach them in this way. We cannot overcome them by the force of our own will. This is hard for us to accept, for we think we ought to be able to control our own thoughts. But that is not the way it works. Our attempt to get rid of them on our own fails in one crucial respect: we are trying to deny that the thoughts are really a part of us. The attempt is based on violence to ourselves. We pretend that they do not really belong to us, and so can be removed without affecting the rest of who we are. It is the same as approaching an inconvenient emotion by trying to deny that it is really there. It doesn't work, because it is there whether we like it or not. Denying it is only a refusal to accept reality. The same is true for our distractions. They are part of us. We will not succeed against distractions by trying to rip out one part of us in order to be whole. Our wholeness comes from another Source, one outside ourselves.

If we cannot eliminate them by driving them out by force of will, how are we to deal with them? There is another way. Rather than trying to tear out our distractions, we need to learn to gently let them go, settling back to the subject of our prayer. Whenever we find ourselves distracted, we need to let go of the thought, and bring our attention back to our particular prayer. The center should be the prayer and not the distraction, and it should not be the sort of activity which will in any way disrupt the basic quiet of prayer.

It requires, first of all, that we do not get angry or frustrated or impatient with ourselves over our distractions. This is harder than it sounds. When we find ourselves beset over and over and over again with these distractions, it is very easy to get impatient. When we find ourselves distracted (again), we are anything but gentle in dealing with the situation. We tend to be very hard on ourselves, for our "weakness". This just makes the distraction all the worse. Patience is one of the lessons we have to learn from distractions.

Second, we need to admit that we cannot ourselves overcome the problem. We need God to take care of it. Only He has the power to give us that undistracted prayer which we crave. Prayer is not a matter of our own accomplishment. It is really pride that teaches us otherwise. When we get impatient over distractions it is a sign that

we believe that we must do it ourselves: pride. Then we are depending upon ourselves for the development of our prayer rather than upon God.

Third, we must be willing to let go of the distraction, whatever it may be. This requires that we treat prayer as the most important thing (at the time of prayer), and that we trust that everything else will get done in its proper place. Some distractions claim for us a certain importance -- as, for instance, things that we must be sure to do after our time of prayer is over. Then we are tempted to put the distraction aside, but with the commitment to remember it when we are through praying. This means that we give a portion of our attention (say 10%) to remembering the item, and return the rest to our prayer. Then, after a little while, another item suggests itself, and we are left with only 80% of our attention for prayer. With only three or four things (and all important things) to remember to do, we are left with only half our mind for our prayer. Not a good situation!

A practical suggestion: take a pencil and paper with you to prayer. Whenever any such distraction presents itself, jot it down. Then you will not have to think about it any more, nor worry about forgetting it. If it returns, gently but firmly put it out of mind and return to the subject of your prayer. This is especially valuable for times of meditation. Whatever technique of this sort you use, the aim is to help let go of the distractions. The distractions are normally things which are important in their own right. They are usually perfectly good thoughts. But they are out of place, and thus need to be gently put aside. This requires trust that we will not lose anything by giving ourselves to prayer instead of to our thoughts. We must trust ourselves to God now, at this moment; and equally we must trust that he will take care of us later. This is an expression of our commitment to prayer as the central activity in our lives. We are willing to let go of all other thoughts at the time of prayer because prayer -- being with God -- is so central to our being human. We can then abandon ourselves to Him in prayer, letting go of everything else.

During the Daily Office, we may be tempted to think that we must say all the prayers without distractions, or else we are not doing it correctly. Then when we find that we have been distracted during a prayer, we will go back and say it all over again. This can happen a number of times, before we are satisfied that we have gotten through it with appropriate attention. This approach is misguided, however. It treats our prayers as accomplishments of ours, to be performed at a certain standard of perfection. But prayers are not strictly speaking ours at all: they are the actions of the Spirit in and through us. This means that we are to do the best we can and not worry about the results. The aim of all prayer is not accomplishment, but communion with God. And that is not something that we are in a position to judge: it takes different forms at different times, according to what is best for us. We must leave the judgement of such things to God.

The aim is for prayer to be God-oriented and not accomplishment-oriented.

Corporate worship presents many external opportunities for distractions -- the other people, the details of liturgy, the ministers' peculiarities, the music -- in addition to the internal distractions which are possible in any prayer. The principle of dealing with them is the same: we must gently let them go and return our attention to our Lord, using whatever prayer is presently at hand. We can also use the cross or picture of our Lord which is there in the church to focus our attention upon Him. Resisting distraction requires not just that we turn from the distraction, but that we turn to something as well -- God as we find Him in the subject of our prayer.

The basic lesson we learn from distraction is dependence upon God. We learn that we cannot overcome distraction on our own, that only God can deliver us. This is but one instance for us to learn the great cosmic truth that we cannot save ourselves or make ourselves worthy of God's mercy. Distractions make us painfully aware of this, as they go on much longer and more commonly than we would like. Thus they teach us patience with our weakness.

At the same time, they teach us to depend upon God for what we cannot do ourselves. Prayer is a process of becoming increasingly dependent upon God. Distractions are an opportunity, though sometimes a difficult one. We find that we cannot heal ourselves, and so we throw ourselves into the arms of our merciful Father. That should be our response to persistent distractions. We should not get mad at ourselves, but laugh at our folly and weakness, and return to God. After all, we should not expect that we can overcome these obstacles by ourselves. That would be a thought of pride and not humble dependence upon God. Distractions will teach us that we cannot accomplish successful prayer by ourselves -- try as we might -- and that the more we lean upon God in all things the better.

This means that the aim of dealing with distractions -- like that of prayer generally -- is to become progressively more centered upon God. Thus we must let go of our distractions, since they tend to focus our attention on us rather than God. When we try to overcome them by the force of our will, we center on self rather than God. That is the real threat of distractions: they focus us in on ourselves rather than opening us up to God.

Distractions will pop up. That much is inevitable. The question is what we do about them. Will we use them as an opportunity to learn patience and dependence on God, or will we get frustrated and angry with ourselves? Our constructive use of distractions will give us a spirit ever more able to pray wholeheartedly. We will find ourselves more able to give our attention -- and ourselves -- to God in prayer. We desire to give Him our all: we will find that we have more and more of our "all" to give Him.