

3 Movements of the Spiritual Life

From Loneliness to Solitude
From Hostility to Hospitality
From Illusion to Prayer

From Illusion to Prayer

1. In what ways do people pursue immortality? _____

 2. What personal "idols" can distract us from our faith? _____

 3. What makes intimacy with God difficult? _____

 4. Why do we take prayer for granted? _____

 5. Why do we pray? _____

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The Illusion of Immortality

- The greatest obstacle in our prayer lives is our illusion of immortality
- Every time we search for another person who can break the chains of our loneliness, every time we build new defences to protect our lives we find ourselves caught in the illusion of immortality
- Seemingly innocent events keep telling us how easily we eternalise ourselves and our world. We keep giving eternal value to the things we own, the people we know, the plans we have and the successes we "collect"
- By acting on the illusion that the world belongs to us as private property which nobody even can take away from us, we become a threat to each other and make intimacy impossible.

The Idolatry of Our Dreams

- The inner thoughts that are driven by our insecurities, self-love and dissatisfactions can give rise to illusions of dreams.
- In our dreams we become who we want to be, eg. Where praise is lacking we lift ourselves high.
- The images with which we often fill our unfulfilled desires remind us how quickly we substitute one idol for another.
- The idols of our dreams are humbling reminders that we still have a long way to go before we are ready to meet our God.

A spiritual life without prayer is like the Gospel without Christ.

All that has been said about solitude and hospitality points to someone higher than our thoughts can reach, someone deeper than our hearts can feel and wider than our arms can embrace, someone under whose wings we can find refuge and in whose love we can rest, someone we call our God.

If prayer, understood as an intimate relationship with God, is indeed the basis of all relationships to ourselves as well as to others how then can we learn to pray and really experience prayer as the axis of our existence?

The Paradox of Prayer

The paradox of prayer is that we have to learn how to pray while we can only receive prayer as a gift.

We need to learn how to pray, many in history have written books and provided many techniques and guidance.

The Apostle Paul addresses it simply,

"Pray constantly" (1 Thes 5: 17)

A Russian writer put it another way,

Make yourself a rule always to be with the Lord, keeping your mind in your heart and do not let your thoughts wander; as often as they stray, turn them back again and keep them at home in the closet of your heart and delight in converse with the Lord.

We need serious discipline to pray...

We cannot truly pray by ourselves, but that it is God's spirit who prays in us. Apostle Paul put it very clearly:

"Nobody is able to say, 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3).

We cannot force God into a relationship. God takes the initiative to come to us, and no discipline, effort, or ascetic practice can make God come.

God has entered into our lives in the most intimate way; so that we could enter into God's life through the Spirit. That is the meaning of the powerful words Jesus spoke to his Apostles on the evening before his death:

"I am telling you the truth: it is for your own good that I am going, because unless I go, the Paraclete [=the Spirit] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn 16:7).

Jesus came to us to become as we are and left us to allow us to become as he is.

By giving us his Spirit, his breath, he became closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Prayer is often considered a weakness, a support system, which is used when we can no longer help ourselves. But this is only true when the God of our prayers is created in our own image and adapted to our own needs and concerns. When, however, Prayer makes us reach out to God, not on our own but on God's terms, then prayer pulls us away from self preoccupations, encourages us to leave familiar ground and enter a new world beyond the limits of our mind and heart.

Words, Silence, and a Guide

It seems possible to establish a few guidelines. A careful look at the lives of people for whom prayer was indeed the only thing needed (see Lk 10:42) shows that three "rules" are always observed:

- a contemplative reading of the Word of God,
- a silent listening to the voice of God,
- and a trusting obedience to a spiritual guide.

Without the Bible, without silent time, and without someone to direct us, finding our own way to God is very hard and practically impossible.

In the first place, we have to pay careful attention to the Word of God as it is written in the Bible. Reading the scriptures is not as easy as it seems since in our world we tend to make anything and everything we read either subject to analysis and discussion or we simply skim over the words without thinking about them or applying them.

To be continued...