



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“Prayer in Secret, Part 2”
Excerpted from
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Divine Love: The Heart of the Christian Spiritual Journey

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But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:6

Let's continue to unpack this wisdom saying of Jesus. We've already heard him say: If you want to pray, if you want the deep knowledge of God, then try this as a practice: Enter your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Abba who is in secret and your Abba who is in secret will reward you. What is the reward? Well, obviously, this is precisely the deep knowledge that leads to divine union, to accessing the presence of God that has always been within us, but which has been elusive, not because God is elusive, but because we have so much energy or stock invested in other forms of looking for happiness.

What does the closing of the door symbolize beside the deliberate intent to spend this time with God and not to leave before the time is over? In Centering Prayer, we recommend twenty to thirty minutes as a period of time in which to take a vacation from our ordinary psychological preoccupations. We don't take into this room any kind of expectation because the mystery that we're accessing is available for us as it is, and not as we think it is; or, as often happens, as it has been presented to us in various ways of trying to express the mystery.

In this connection I would like to remind you of what again St. Thomas Aquinas says – that we know more about God by what we do not say, than by what we try to say. This is another way of repeating that basic teaching that God's language is in silence. As soon as you put it into words, you've interpreted it, just like any translation is an interpretation of the original text. To get to God's original language requires letting go of our preoccupation with thinking ... thinking especially about particular objects, sensations, plans, concepts and memories or feelings.

There's one other thing that the Inner Room seems to represent and that is the invitation to discontinue our own personal interior dialogue. That means not only do we think about the things we are perceiving with the senses or reflecting upon with our intellectual apparatus, but it also means, and very significantly, terminating our interior dialogue during the time of this prayer. That

means: no expectations, no particular goals – such as having no thoughts, no perceptions or desires – such as having a spiritual experience or being consoled or experiencing peace of mind. All of these things are particular concepts or desires and hence they are thoughts. They are perceptions and they are not appropriate during the time we are in the Inner Room.

BEING IN SECRET WITH THE ABBA

And so, to let go of judging the prayer by our psychological experience is a mistake. It's not the practice. And so anytime that we have a particular thought that attracts us, interests us, whether it's a perception or a feeling, then it's time to reaffirm our original intention of closing the door and being in secret with the Abba, being exposed to the divine values, being immersed in the divine environment that graciously dwells within us with so much love and tenderness.

What is the interior dialogue? Well it's that discussion we have with ourselves usually, more or less, twenty-four hours a day, including our dreams in which we comment on what's happening with other people and our reactions to them, and deal with our commentaries and develop new desires or new plans, or new memories, and worrying about ourselves and those we love. In other words, it's an endless clatter of commentaries and words as noise that is just as noisy and just as disruptive of interior silence as the outer room of psychological awareness that we left.

And so, given that we have a habit of doing this from earliest childhood, we have to be patient in rolling back those habits of always reflecting on what comes to mind and little by little this is the discipline of Centering Prayer. It's primarily a relationship, a search for the deep knowledge of God, but without trying too hard because we believe that God is already here. Hence there's no place to go to find him, but simply to stop going in intentionality in other places besides the divine indwelling while this prayer is going on.

THE CASCADING EFFECT OF INTERIOR SILENCE

And finally, Jesus says: When you get into that private room and close the door, then pray to your Abba in secret. Now what could this mean? Notice the cascading effect of interior silence that is recommended here: first the letting go or the silencing of the external stimuli, then the silencing of the interior dialogue or interior stimuli. And then, when we've reached that degree of silence, at least by way of intention, we still are not silent enough apparently for the full effect of this formula to produce the reward.

And notice the reason that Jesus seems to suggest. It's ... we're not secret enough to be able to access the God who is in secret This is a marvelous wisdom saying. What it says is that God is so present, so close, that we don't have any faculty or instrument to interpret that presence. It just is there but as far as we're concerned, it might just as well not be there as far as our perceptive apparatus goes; whether the material, mental or spiritual.

GOD IS JUST TOO BIG TO BE PERCEIVED

And this is what pure faith is. And this is the movement beyond the Greeks who wanted wisdom and the Jews who wanted signs. This is a movement beyond those limitations. In other words, this is a liberation of insisting that God fit into those rather, human and rather, primitive, to be perfectly frank, and certainly naive criteria. And so, God is just too big to be perceived but that doesn't mean he isn't there. It simply means that: Pal, all you need to do is relax and you're in the middle of God.

You can't get away from God. There's no place to go to do that because wherever you go, as the Psalmist says, he'll be there ahead of you. And if you go to the ends of the sea, the ends of the universe, the ends of creation, he's there ahead of you saying. "Well, where have you been? I've been here all the time. Hello."

Here's an example, maybe a little clumsy perhaps, but one that is the best that I can suggest to grasp what prayer in secrecy really might mean. It means first and foremost, no self-reflection; in other words, no deliberate self-reflection. We tend always to think of ourselves. In fact, it's the last bastion of the ego to really let go of. And the ego is that false-self activity in which we never quite get to the present moment and the ego is a kind of bridge from the past and the future over the present moment that prevents us from ever being where reality actually is and where God alone is present. And that is in the now, in the moment, in the present moment.

Part of the discipline of the prayer is at least during the time of prayer to be able to be established in the present moment. So that anything from the past or the future that enters the horizon of the stream of consciousness that tends to pass through our imagination during the time of prayer is instantly disregarded and with ever greater ease as this practice unfolds.

A GIFT TO GOD

Letting go is another name. But we don't just let go for the sake of letting go. We let it go as a gift to God. In other words, it's part of our relationship with God to let go of these thoughts and give them to God as a present, so to speak ... so that we can be completely and comprehensively and totally present to the divine action. And this divine action is healing. It's not a punishment. If it's a little painful at time or boring or tedious or we seem to be going nowhere or there must be something better to do than this, or whatever our commentaries are. The fact that you have those commentaries is a sign that you're not letting go. And, hence, all we have to remember is when the thoughts get too urgent, again, or clearly urgent, to return ever so gently to the symbol we've chosen, which is normally a word; that is a prayer word, or a love word, or we normally call it a "sacred word," which is not sacred because of its content but because of the intent that you give it as a gesture or symbol of your intent to spend this time with God, but also in accepting the divine action within us.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE INNER ROOM?

This brings us to a very important issue: what goes on in the Inner Room? And two things are going on all the time. One is the affirmation of our basic goodness. The other is the purification of the unconscious; that is to say, of the repressed material, emotional material, of a lifetime that has been stored in the body as in a warehouse, the energy of which continues to influence our behavior and our decisions, even, all our life long, unless we take the spiritual journey seriously and assimilate Christ's invitation to join him at this level of our being.

The secrecy I was speaking about is related to this attitude of opening and accepting the divine action. The divine action is affirming but it also is challenging. It's healing the emotional wounds of a lifetime; hence, these wounds normally have to come to consciousness in some degree as primitive emotions that we don't have any idea of why they are there. They have no relation to the immediate past. This is the sign that they're probably; emerging from the deep rest and the permission that the body finally receives to evacuate this junk. I speak of it as junk because it's energy that has stagnated,

that has never gone anywhere, that was never dealt with as an emotional problem and, hence, is just sitting there like an undigested meal on an ordinary tummy.

Well, the deeper the secrecy, the deeper the silence in our prayer, the deeper the rest. And the rest is partially due to not thinking deliberately, and to the increase of trust that is the result of the affirmation of our basic goodness that is infused into us during our time in the Inner Room with the door closed by such perceptions as forgiveness, or of God's love, or peace, or everything is okay, or that God will take care of everything, or that there's nothing to worry about. All these are different forms of reassurance that God may give to us when we are in the Inner Room that are designed to help us relate to this wonderful God as the great beloved of our soul and spirit, as the one who is present and cares for us and whose chief desire is to heal the depths of our unconscious so that it can be filled with all the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Every time we let go of some glob of undigested emotional material repressed in early childhood because of the pain and frustration of the lack of gratification of our emotional programs for happiness; as soon as we do that, then the Holy Spirit rushes into that place and fills it with the fruits and gifts and the anointing of the Spirit which is profoundly healing on the spiritual level, just like therapy. And the combination of therapy and the very best medication in which the Spirit anoints our wounds and heals them, and especially our emotional wounds; and what can't be healed, he allows the body to do its thing, which is to get rid of it. And it comes up in the form of thoughts, a bombardment of thoughts sometimes, or of primitive emotions that reflect what the original source of our pain was.

Generally; it's not too clear because you don't know what the source of this feeling was. But sometimes after the period of prayer and in daily life because of the space that's now present within you that clarifies the mind, you begin to see what the dynamics of your unconscious are and how much energy we have put into maintaining them and trying to make them work. And no amount of trying will make them work, at least not over a long period of time and not with the kind of paradisaal results that we may have anticipated.

THE PURIFICATION OF THE SOUL

So, the quieter we are the more this rest occurs, the faster and more thoroughly the undigested emotional material of a lifetime is evacuated. And this is called, in Christian history – spiritual history, the purification of the soul. Now modern psychology has instructed us about the unconscious. And so, this is an enormous insight of great value, not just for medicine and psychotherapy but for the spiritual journey. Because now we know that any growth in human wholeness or health is really a growth in the spiritual life and enhances our potential to respond integrally to the divine advances of love.

In this situation, where we're sometimes immersed in the dark side of our personality and in allowing these feelings or this bombardment of dreadful thoughts to go through our awareness, all we have to do is to sink into it and to accept it. And as we do, then Christ can take it away. In the mass we say every day that we celebrate it: Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. So, if Christ has taken them away, where are they? They don't exist anymore except insofar as we think so or want them to.

OUR FULL AND FREE RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL VALUES

The trust in God and the inner freedom from the effects of these negative energies within us begins to provide us with the fruits of the Spirit which are especially: charity, the kind of love that we spoke about in a previous conference; and peace, the peace that surpasses all understanding; that is, you can't describe it. It's so wonderful, it's beyond articulation. And joy, which is not the joy of self-exultation, but the joy of trust, the joy of peace, and the bliss of knowing that everything is okay; that God is in charge and that God is protecting us, that God is liberating us and that we probably are going to have to recycle these same experiences that occur, not continually but once in a while, in which the divine therapist, represented by Jesus Christ, sends the Spirit to bring to our attention certain aspects of our emotional programs for happiness or overidentifications with our particular group that are paralyzing or hindering our full and free response to the Gospel values.

That kind of fascination with values that are counter-productive has got to go if we are going to enter into the narrow gate or pass through the eye of the needle without the baggage of our possessive attitudes towards those emotional programs for happiness or towards the acceptance or approval of a particular group that we happen to belong to. And this is going to take some time.

We see this happening in the Scripture – all over it – especially in the New Testament. You see that Jesus is doing exactly the same with the people of his time, only there he could use his voice and his presence and his gestures. Now he works mostly through the Holy Spirit, but just as effectively, and lovingly brings to our attention the things that we need to correct in order to move to ever deeper levels of love and unity, and to be able to dance with the divine dancer or to allow God to dance us, which is; perhaps; more accurate.

A VACATION FROM THE FALSE SELF

As we look at this marvelous formula of Jesus, we see that it's first of all a vacation from the false self, or an oasis in everyday life, in which we can be refreshed by the values of the Inner Room and move towards establishing habits of letting go of thoughts that are inappropriate. The reason why thoughts are so attractive to human nature is that when you're thinking, you don't normally have to think of what's causing you pain. It's easier to cover over those aspects of our life by thinking of someone else.

So, if once in a while something from the past or something we've done in the present strikes us as inappropriate or unkind or unfair or goes against any of those loving principles that Paul suggested, we don't identify with them and act them out; that is, we don't act out these negative feelings. And so, we begin to see that we are not our feelings; that we have feelings, but we're not identified with them.

And so, some of the favorite ways that we've used to over-identify with our feelings begin to fall away. Sometimes we say – it's in our vocabulary – “I'm angry!” Wrong! You're not angry! You have angry feelings. And since you have angry feelings, you can change them; or, with God's help, you can let them go; or you can, at least, not act them out. And you can, at least, not project them on others where you blame others for making you mad when, in actual fact, you've got the problem; that you're overly attached to one of the three emotional centers and are being frustrated by a failure to be gratified in those expectations.

THE CAPACITY TO BEGIN TO SEE GOD IN EVERYTHING

So here the secrecy, then, refers to the growing level of faith, of love, of peace and of joy; and the others, which are appropriate for daily life: gentleness, self-control, patience, goodness. Goodness is the capacity to begin to see God in everything else. So, now, when you see God in the storm, the storm takes on a wholly-different identity. Christ is in every storm. He's the leaven in this particular heap of dough that may strike us as being the last thing that should happen to us and which sets off our indignation, resentment or anger.

All of those emotions gradually need to be moderated and the divine therapy tends to regulate not only our experience of prayer to further this project, but also expands his office, so to speak, and his office hours, to include the whole of our life so that the whole of the day becomes an exercise of this dance, of recognizing the dynamics of our unconscious, of letting go of our over-identifications. And it becomes exciting, an adventure in faith, in which we're more and more skilled in promptly letting go of thoughts that are obviously defense mechanisms and are just trying to hide the pain that needs to be brought to consciousness. And since the energy of feelings is only energy, as soon as you feel it, it begins to dissipate or is gone forever.

CHRIST IS THE DIVINE THERAPIST

And, once in a while, there's some problem that is very deep in our childhood that may need psychotherapy or a longer period of the divine medication. But basically; Christ is the divine therapist. He said: "I'm a physician and only the sick need a physician, not the well," which is a good point. So, what he's telling us is that if psychiatry was present in his day, he would certainly have accepted it as part of his medical ministry.

The secrecy, then, and this now brings us to some grasp of the profundity of this wisdom saying is this: suppose in this room, as there are, there were all kinds of radio and television signals and perhaps if we had sophisticated instruments, we could pick up some neutrinos from outer space, or some magnetic energy of some kind, a little dose of gravity and different subatomic particles rushing around, having a great time annihilating each other and starting over in different directions. So, there's an enormous amount of activity in this apparent silence. And we know that it's there, you know it's there. And wherever you are, it's always accompanying us.

Prayer in secrecy is precisely this acquiescence and acceptance of the mystery of God's presence when there is no visible or sensible sign of its being there. This is the triumph of faith. And when this disposition takes root, God has no place more to hide. He's no longer a secret. But it's the precise degree of secrecy that enables you to find God in the only place where he exists, totally beyond our comprehension or any faculty to capture him except pure faith. And even that has its limitations, as Paul hints. We need the greater experience of love which penetrates all darkness, no matter how dark or destructive any situation may seem to us. So, again, there remain faith, hope and divine love, but the greatest of these is love.