

POST #4 - FIDELITY TO PRAYER

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION
MSGR DANIEL TRAPP***Common Difficulties with Fidelity to Prayer: Jumping In, Swimming, Floating***

When we experience dryness, or desolation, in prayer, the way forward demands that we do one of three things: 1.) recognize that we have climbed out of the water of true discipleship and jump back in; 2.) swim harder; or 3.) stop swimming and float in God's providence.¹

Jumping In

Sometimes, our prayer is strained because we have stopped following Jesus. In those times, we need to repent and jump back in the water. If a man refuses to enter into further conversion, if he stubbornly holds on to harsh criticism of others, sexual fantasizing without repentance, or stonewalling when his expectations of prayer are not being met, he will likely rebel against submitting to the discipline of committed times of personal prayer, or to full, conscious participation in the Liturgy. Often justified by, "I don't get anything out of prayer," the man will find a thousand noble reasons to explain his not spending twenty minutes, let alone one hour, with the Lord. At these times, the spiritual directors should remember their own personal experience of prayer: when we are sinful and lazy, we will have little appetite for God, and the movements of the Lord will appear harsh and unpleasant.

Swim Hard

At other times, the seminarian's seeming inability to pray will be caused by the Lord's withholding graces, which can be perceived by the spiritual senses.² In these times, our lack of appetite for the Lord and prayer are because the Lord wants us to seek and knock. In these times, He wants us to choose Him, rather than His gifts. We become so quickly addicted to spiritual pleasures; we can be very confused when they are withheld.

Very often, men come to the seminary precisely because their spiritual senses have come alive. They really have begun *to hear* the Word of God, instead of perceiving dull moral or historical lessons. They have begun *to feel* God's love, perhaps even feeling God's presence in the tabernacle. Often, they have begun *to see* God's actions in their lives and in the world around them. Often, the men have begun *to taste* the difference inside

¹ These three actions correspond roughly to the causes of spiritual desolation suggested by St. Ignatius in Rule 9. While dryness may not be caused by spiritual desolation, one of these three actions can help us through the time of dryness. That help may lead to acceptance of the dryness as a gift from God.

² I use *spiritual senses* here as they are understood by the ancient authors in *The Philokalia*. The spiritual senses pertain to the intellect rather than to the imagination. As the Desert Fathers used it, *the intellect* is that part of the human soul which allows us to perceive God truly; they do not use *intellect* to describe our bare logical reason. As thus described, the spiritual senses give us true knowledge of God. Later western philosophy speaks of the imaginative faculty, which faculty can be influenced by us, by good spirits, and by evil spirits. The perceptions of our imaginations do have analogies to the five physical senses. In this short work, I will reserve the use of spiritual senses to those experiences in which we truly perceive God.

between motivations and inspiration that come from God and those that do not. They can almost *smell* when God is near and other times, when the devil is involved with something.

The awakening of our spiritual senses can be so profound, so abrupt, that we may almost assume that our complete conversion of manners and desires is just around the corner. For the vast majority of seminarians, such experiences, such awakenings, are only the first step on a long road of conversion which lies ahead.

It is not uncommon for a man's devotion, his vivid sense of God's presence, to shut down for a while within months of a man's entrance into the seminary. In the following years, devotion may shut down repeatedly. The director shows great compassion when he assists the men to see that this movement is neither a betrayal nor a tragedy, though this movement is often perceived to be both by those who are unfamiliar with the experience. The change is often due to the fact that the Lord wants us to grow spiritual muscles, muscles that grow when there is resistance and labor. As St. John of the Cross says so clearly, we have to learn how to walk; we cannot be carried forever. As St. Paul says, we have to move from milk to solid food.³

The goal for the director at this passage is to assist the seminarian to lovingly labor without developing the attitude that says, "You're not doing anything, so I'll have to take charge." At this juncture, many men are tempted to turn from an active receptivity to God to a closed off management of their own spiritual lives. Helping the men walk in the dark with humility and loving trust will assist them to transition back into the times when they can feel God within, and hear His voice. If they do not have this humility and trust, they may labor on alone, gradually making their spiritual lives their own work and not God's work.

Self-Glory

Such a time of dryness is hard to accept if we have begun to take ourselves sublimely, caught up in self-glory. For men who are tempted this way, I have sometimes suggested an exercise: that they draw their own future holy card, showing themselves in an edifying moment, with a touching motto or poignant biblical quotation. This exercise helps skewer self-glory and is entertaining at the same time.

Our encounter with God's love when our spiritual senses are awakened usually leads us to believe that we are lovely to God and lovely in our selves. We certainly are lovely to God, but our characters themselves are not transubstantiated by these encounters with grace at this point. We are loved and lovely to God, but we still may be selfish and very weak in our ability to truly love God and others. In addition, we are sometimes very weak in our ability to accept God's love for us because we do not yet know the depths of our spiritual poverty.

Confusion about the effect of God's love can lead the seminarian to withdraw in bewilderment or to come to prayer like a hurt and confused lover. By patiently explaining that God is making him able to love, training him in virtue, seminary formators can assist the man to release tension and to live faith, hope, and love at a deeper level.

³ To be clear, I use the analogies of walking and eating to describe the growth in virtue and prayer.

Just Float

The third reason why our experience of devotion shuts down is that the Lord wants us to float in His presence, trusting Him to hold us up, to keep us from drowning. During these times, when we have no perception of God's presence or action, the Lord, loving us as we are, calls us to trust in Him and not to strive any harder, but to walk in the darkness of faith.

The reason for this third experience of grace as dryness, blindness, or desolation is that the Lord wants to purify us from the conviction that our graces are deserved, that they are the result of our work, that we have "achieved a new level." Unless we pass through this time, we will retain the quiet self-satisfaction which is so off-putting to Catholics. The image of radiation can help the men understand what God is doing in love in these times. Instead of illuminating, which leads to insight and plans for conversion, in these times, the Lord works directly within, radiating His healing love, and the men need to rest in God.

Times of Dryness and Times of Peace

If a man has been living with much spiritual consolation, he can make a category mistake when the consolation tap shuts off. In addition to times of desolation, there are times of peace, when we are in the loving presence of God, but that presence seems absolutely quiet, hidden, or remote. For many young men, the move from the house of deep consolation to the house of peace is not at all welcome. Our intellects⁴ in these times do connect with God; we are not separate from Him, but our imagination and spiritual senses are very quiet.

Because the quiet is so unwelcome, it is often called "dryness" by our men. In such times, perhaps they need to spend more time fishing. They need to spend more time with their middle-aged fathers. People who go fishing together often do not speak much. They enjoy one another's company. They enjoy catching a fish, but usually are not put out when they do not. They enjoy the water, the sun, being outside, and being with other people who are good, non-chatty company.

When seminarians go home for the weekend, if they are fortunate enough these days to have a father who is at home, they often find that their fathers and mothers want them to spend more time with them than they wish to spend with their fathers and mothers. Often, their fathers do not say much to them, but they know that their fathers enjoy them being home. Expressive young men often find that they cannot speak easily with their fathers; my hunch is that often their fathers do not need to speak so much with their sons—they just like being with them. I am guessing that they might be confused by their sons' apparent restlessness. Learning to be quiet with those whom we love is a great asset to prayer.

My own mother spent the last years of her life at St. Catherine Laboure Manor in Jacksonville, Florida. There, she and the other women and men with Alzheimer's received excellent care. When I would come down to visit her from Michigan, there were long years during which there was no sign from her that she knew I was there. But, *I knew that she was there*. After trying my tricks to get her to respond, I would relax, take out a book

⁴ "Intellect" in the sense, again, of that part of us which can experience God directly.

and enjoy being with her. Being with her helped me gradually appreciate the quiet presence of Jesus in the tabernacle.

How do we help the men who are bored by the times of peace? It can be helpful to ask if they trust the love of God who loves them in peaceful quiet. When we make the acts of trust and love and hope in God, we come to enjoy the silence. We sometimes need to start with an act of faith in God's love for us. It is as if we need to send out sound waves of trust to God in order for us to perceive and receive God's love back. Once we receive that love in peace, fireworks are not needed. Love suffices.