

# POST #5 - PRAYER IN THE LORD'S PRESENCE

## SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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### *Coming into the Lord's Presence in Prayer<sup>1</sup>*

#### *Speaking with God: Acknowledge*

Jesus arrives among us through the word He speaks through the priest over the bread and wine and through the Holy Spirit, which overshadows the species. He comes so powerfully that the bread and wine just give up being bread and wine. A young man's deep encounters with the Word and Spirit can lead him to believe that he has undergone a kind of transubstantiation, so changed that he will have no more struggles ahead with virtue. However, people's modality of change is not the same as the Eucharist's modality of change; our change through the Sacraments of Initiation allows us to successfully struggle against sin and leads us into a lifetime of conversion. Venerable Solanus Casey, a Capuchin friar who served in Detroit for many years, was recognized as a saint in his day. He would often ask people to pray for his conversion. That conversion continues throughout our lives.

In order for us to pray in front of the Lord, we must acknowledge His Real Presence to us and bring our real presence to Him.

#### *Acknowledging Who God Is and Who We Are*

As mentioned above, it is good for seminarians to begin prayer with a moment of beholding God and examining themselves. A simple exercise is for the man to begin by asking himself if he is living and acting at that moment as if he were a beloved Son of the Father, a redeemed sinner and a temple of the Holy Spirit. Our prayer time is a key point of the day to claim what is true and to take soundings of any false notes inside.

#### *Beloved Son*

We are sons in the Son.<sup>2</sup> By our Baptism, we have become the sons of our heavenly Father. If this primary identity remains an abstraction, the man will often try to establish his identity on a less substantial foundation,

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Ms. Kathy Kanavy of The Institute for Priestly Formation for the schema of Acknowledge, Relate, Receive, Respond (ARRR) as a pattern for encountering God.

<sup>2</sup> St. Bernard comments on Songs 2:13, where the Bridegroom says, "Arise, my beloved, my bride and come." The invitation is to work in the vineyard, where she works, and also draws near to the wine of love. St. Bernard says, "When she will have attained to it and become perfect she will celebrate a spiritual marriage; and they shall be two, not in one flesh, but in one spirit, as the apostle says, 'He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him (I Cor 6:17)' (Sermon 61:1)."

St. Bernard writes of the soul as the bride of Christ, in keeping with the patristic writers and most of the mystics of the Eastern and Western churches. This understanding flows from the Church's understanding of the Church as the Bride of Christ. Now, most men have to work with this understanding of being "brides of Christ" as much as women have to work with the notion of being "sons in the Son." The gender dissonance is there, and we need to challenge our seminarians to do their own translating, to benefit from as much of this language as they can.

a foundation which often turns out to be shifting sand. Encourage the man, as he begins his prayer, to take a kind of sounding: does the message of him being a beloved son resonate within, or does it hit up against something? If what he hits up against is the inner perception of actual sin, encourage him to repent, either through the Sacrament of Reconciliation for mortal sins or by making an Act of Contrition at that point. If he experiences a general sense of unworthiness, suggest that he check that sense: does it come from a refusal to accept salvation, or is it an accurate perception of his need for ongoing conversion? The inner experience of the two perceptions is very different. If he is experiencing the former, encourage him to repent and make an act of faith in God. If he is experiencing the latter, encourage him to peacefully acknowledge it and, with so many of the saints, say to God, “I will always be this way unless you change me.”

### ***Redeemed Sinner***

In Jesus, we are redeemed sinners. God’s grace is not an outward gift; it changes us. A helpful exercise for the men is to check to see if they accept this identity, that is, that they are redeemed and that without Christ, they are sinners. The devil often deceives seminarians with a spirit of self-condemnation, so that they shy away from accepting their redemption in Christ. If this is the case for your directee, encourage him to rebuke the lying spirit and to put on the “helmet of salvation” (Ephesians 6:17). Some men have to spend years actively accepting, in their prayer, that they have been redeemed; beginning one’s prayer with such a self-assessment can help make sure that the man is bringing his true self to his prayer, and not a beleaguered, deceived self.

### ***Temples of the Holy Spirit***

Some time ago, a visitor to the seminary chapel at Sacred Heart commented on the quality of the brick work in the chapel. The visitor was a bricklayer. He said that the whole seminary was very well built, but he could tell right away that the best work in laying the brick had been done in the chapel.

We have traditionally built beautiful churches and chapels because they are the house(s) of the Lord. “The Lord is in his holy temple” (Habakkuk 2:20). We, the new temples of the Lord, gather together to worship the Eucharistic Lord; churches and temples house the Body of Christ. Our most beautiful churches imitate what God has made of the Christian, a temple of the Holy Spirit. Unless we have sinned mortally and have not yet repented, the wholly Other/Holy Other dwells in us.

A good way to bring our true self to prayer is to begin by acknowledging to ourselves where we are, or who we are at that point<sup>3</sup>. God’s first question to man was “Where are you?” It is a good question to ask ourselves when we begin our holy hours.

Many of our seminarians come to us in their 20s and 30s. As adults, they have, rightly, been formed not to let their feelings control them. They have learned not to physically attack those whom they feel are threatening them. They have learned not to stay in bed all day, hiding from the world, when they are anxious or saddened. This is all well and good. As directors, we need to assist them not to be controlled by their feelings, *but* to be able to acknowledge their feelings and understand them.

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Ms. Kathy Kanavy of The Institute for Priestly Formation, Omaha, NE for this concept.

Our feelings help us to recognize where we are. We may not like where we are, but pretending or hoping ourselves out of where we are does not work. I once knew a seminarian who, when asked how he was, would always enthusiastically respond, “Just great!” Everyone else could see that he was not always great, but he was so afraid of acknowledging how hard things were, he would present what was essentially a positive—but false—face to the world.

Part of guiding a man in prayer can mean assisting him to appropriate the vocabulary of feelings. It is perfectly acceptable and accurate to be able to say, “I feel bad,” or “I feel fine.” Some young men simply do not know how to connect with words like lonely, sad, angry, worried, frustrated, irritated, peaceful, joyful, etc. Giving these men a vocabulary list of feelings can be helpful, as a way of assisting them in connecting the words with what they are actually feeling.

A helpful exercise to assist the men in acknowledging their true interior state is to ask them, in direction, to feel the feelings that they have identified. So, for example, if they feel irritation, ask if they can feel that feeling, or if they can only remember having felt it. If they can feel it, ask them to identify the belief or perception which is right next to the feeling.<sup>4</sup> The perception may be that they are being put upon by the seminary schedule, or unfairly burdened. Or, if the men feel joy, very often the belief which produces the feeling is the belief that they are loved, or the belief that all is well in their world.

A good exercise is to ask the men to identify their feelings in the days ahead and to identify the beliefs which produce the feelings. Encourage them to write down what they find and discuss it at the next direction meeting.

When we first begin this work of acknowledgement, it can be slow going and can seem overly self-concerned. In my experience, it becomes an exercise that can be done in a matter of seconds, after one has learned the vocabulary and categories and most importantly, after one has gained the confidence to face the darkness, fears, and anger within. Rather than leading to self-absorption, the exercise leads to humility and greater honesty.

### ***Relate***

After the man has grown more accustomed to identifying where he is, encourage him to relate to the Lord what he has acknowledged. Encourage him to speak simply and honestly to the Lord, as a friend. The man may not feel that He knows God, and he may feel awkward in addressing God—assure Him that God knows him. God is not abstracted from him.

Very often, in the act of relating something to God, we will correct ourselves in order to speak more accurately. For example, in expressing anger, the man might begin saying to God, “I hate him; he’s such a jerk.” That statement is a bold statement of honest feeling, but it may be that in blurting it out, the man sees that it is not fully true. It may be emotionally true, but the presence of God in prayer draws truth from the

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<sup>4</sup> In describing feelings and beliefs, I am following Dr. Ed Smith as he describes the relationship between feelings and beliefs in Theophostic Prayer Ministry. See the Theophostic Prayer Ministry website at <http://www.theophostic.com>.

man, and he realizes that it is more true to say that he does not really hate his formator. But, it is true that he is very angry with the formator who did not treat him respectfully.

God's presence has a way of clarifying our communication, whether it seems that God is speaking or not. Often, men find that whatever has been causing tension is clarified because the very act of relating to the loving and true presence of God is itself healing and light giving.

### ***Receive***

After teaching the man to relate to God, teach the man the importance of taking a moment to receive from God. If the man has become used to managing his prayer, if his attitude is, "He never shows up, so I'll take over," he needs to consciously learn to listen to God—in whatever mode God wants to communicate with him.

God speaks to us in four ways in this moment: through our spiritual senses, through our imaginations,<sup>5</sup> through our God-given reason, and through His silent, loving presence. At times, when we are deeply in prayer, God speaks to us through our spiritual senses. We bring our confusion to the Lord and in prayer, we have the distinct feeling that God is with us. We are filled with doubt about a series of problems, and in prayer, we see with great clarity how to move forward. At times, we are sure we have heard a response from God in our hearts.

God speaks to us through our imagination. It can be helpful to explain to the men that through the faculty of the imagination, God works, and so do other spirits and our own psyche. God sometimes speaks to us in our imagination and these are often times that we very much value, times that we feel that God really speaks to us or times when we can really feel His presence or His will.

The problem with this mode of communication is that evil spirits can work in this arena; our own psychological makeup and histories also are at play, informing our imaginations. A further problem that may arise is that if we have the experience of God speaking to us through our imaginative faculty, we can, as mentioned earlier, begin to believe that our souls and virtue correspond to the intimacy of these moments. If a seminarian is so deceived, he will often begin speaking in phrases lifted from the writings of saints or from other sources such as, "special graces," "private revelations," "words of knowledge" (for example, "The Lord revealed to me..."). False confidence in either this mode of prayer or in one's level of prayer is a detour which we must help the men avoid.

With these cautions, God does speak through this mode and we are right to receive such words with joy—and discernment.

A third way God speaks is through our God-given reason. St. Ignatius reminds us that reason is not just "the flesh" or "man's work." Such reminders are necessary in our context, where so many of our men have

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<sup>5</sup> Some Eastern Christian authorities warn their students to avoid the use of the imaginative faculty because they see it as a fallen means of perceiving. In addition to the cautions about the sources of ideas in our imagination, they teach that the faculty itself is a flawed way of apprehending and, therefore, of prayer.

followed some Protestant authors who disparage reason as something which is separate from God. God does enlighten our reason, moving us to apprehend His will through our reason.

In every mode of God's conversation with him, the seminarian must come as he is—a poor beggar. When we are living the truth of our created inability to be spiritually rich on our own, when we acknowledge and accept our status as the merest children, we are happy to have God speak to us however and whenever He wants. We must trust that He knows what is best for us, including how He communicates with us.

A fourth mode of God's responding to our relating is peace perceived in silence. Sometimes, the silence can be so massive, seminarians can become very agitated. Such silent presence is good medicine for our untrusting, obsessive souls. Later on, as Father von Kolvenbach writes, after this silent encounter, we, like Moses, sometimes "see God's back." That is, while we are in the prayer, we do not perceive Him, but afterward, we see that God was with us, though at the time, we could not see His face.

### ***Release/Respond***

In the fourth moment of our ARRR prayer, we release whatever it was that we acknowledged and related. At this point, the man will often sense in himself a resolution, a sense of peace. Sometimes, this sense of resolution does not come in the moment. It is good to teach the men that when we come to the Lord with faith, we will sometimes experience relief of troubles at the moment; sometimes, that relief comes later. The experience of emotional release is not the criterion for our prayer; acting in faith, hope and love is the criterion for our prayer.