



Introduction

Keeping God in the Conversation: Enhancing Prayerfulness in Your Spiritual Life

The key elements of spiritual intimacy in the time allotted to us on earth are fairly straightforward. They are, in order of importance:

Love God deeply,
Do what you can for others,
And, please, take good care of yourself.

But this, of course, is easier said than done. Such a life requires a heart filled with the cardinal virtue of humility and a growing desire for self-awareness. A full life also involves a willingness to serve others, rather than simply being wrapped up in ourselves, and—most important—a sense of spiritual mindfulness in our daily encounters so we can be open to the new lessons with which God continually graces us. Prayerfulness, in its purest form, is true receptivity to the essential lessons needed to live a full life. And, even when we are lost or resistant to a much-needed new perspective, spiritual mindfulness can actually position us to be surprised by grace. Let me illustrate.

In 2008, like so many others, I was caught in the middle of the dramatic downturn in the economy. I was concerned that I might not have enough cash on hand to provide support if someone in my family required it. Consequently, rather than selling only some of a small stock portfolio I had, I sold it all. It provided me with the cash on hand should my wife and I or a family member need some emergency funds. However, in the process of selling at a low point, I lost close to forty thousand dollars—a great deal of money to me! (It also didn't help my peace of mind that the next day the market jumped one thousand points.)

In response to my feelings of upset, my wife, Michaele, encouraged me to put it behind me with the thought that I had made the best decision I could given all of the factors I had to consider at the time. There were a number of truly more important things that were going on in my life at that point that really should have taken precedence. For instance, my two older brothers had recent brushes with serious illnesses. The brother closest to me in age wound up in the hospital for the first time in his life due to atrial fibrillation. Shortly after he was discharged, my oldest brother, who is already in a wheelchair, contracted an infection that affected his artificial heart valve, and he, too, was hospitalized for what would turn out to be a month-long stay. On top of all this, my daughter was also having a serious, renewed bout with asthma.

Yet, what continued to preoccupy me were not the illnesses of those close to me but the recent loss of money in the stock market. I knew in my head this was wrong. Very

wrong. However, I could not seem to release myself from it no matter what psychological or spiritual approach I used. Finally, during one of my long walks I decided to put it in the hands of God.

I am a believer that the spiritual life is like a journey that passes through open fields and dense forests. When we are in the fields, we can travel across them with our own intuition, intelligence, and the help of our friends. We shouldn't expect God to do for us what we can do for ourselves. However, when we pass through the forests—the mystery of God—we are entering unfamiliar and often dark surroundings where only God can lead.

At this point I knew I was definitely in the forest, and I put my trust in God!

As I left my home and walked down the road, I waved to a neighbor. We passed the time for a bit, commenting on the weather because even though it was mid-October, it was a surprisingly warm and wonderful, sunny, Maryland fall afternoon. After walking a bit further, all the while admitting I could not seem to let go of my recent financial loss, a car pulled up next to me and the driver rolled down the window. It was the neighbor I had just chatted with minutes before.

She said, "There is something I want to share with you that I think you should know." Then she told me this story:

Several years ago, a woman friend of mine was getting a divorce, and she asked if she could move in

with me for a few months. The few months became several years.

After leaving her husband she got involved with a man who I thought was a real loser. He was so bad that I would make sure I wasn't around when he visited. I also had a chance to meet her husband, who I thought was such a sweet guy.

At any rate, she came in the house one day and told me that she had run into you while you were doing some gardening in the yard and that you gave her one of your books. She later told me that after reading it, she felt that she was getting the message to go back with her husband. From what she took from the book she felt she and her husband needed to give it another chance, and that is just what she did!

After they were back together again for a few years, she discovered she had terminal-stage cancer. She died after a number of months, and her husband was at her side through it all. It was beautiful to see.

The reason I am sharing all of this with you is that you were a blessing to her when she needed it. A real blessing. Your spontaneous gift of one of your books was a surprising grace to her and her husband, and I just wanted to thank you from the bottom of my heart. *You* are indeed a blessing.

Well, when she started telling this story to me, I didn't know where she was going with it or why she was telling it

to me. I barely knew her, and as the story proceeded, I only vaguely remembered giving her friend one of my books. But as she drove away, I could feel a new sense of perspective. I began to see more clearly what was really important in life. But, God was not through with me yet.

Later that night, I was amazed that a story shared by someone I barely knew, about an event I had long forgotten, had made such an impact on me. Yet, if I were being honest, a lot of precious energy was still being wasted on self-recrimination around my decision to sell some stock. When I was going to bed, I prayed, "What will it take to let me release this?" Then, as I lay there ready to fall asleep, I remembered something from over ten years ago.

A colleague in the pastoral counseling department in which I teach told me a story about a friend of his who was a very successful entrepreneur. As we sat together over lunch, he said to me, "As you know, my friend owns a number of prize horses and has even raced some of them in the Kentucky Derby. He was especially proud of one of his horses and anticipated making a fortune when he put him out to stud. Recently that horse broke its leg, and it had to be put to death."

"Wow, how is he doing with this loss of potentially millions of dollars?" I asked.

To which he replied, "Well, that's what I asked him, and in response he half smiled and said to me, 'I guess God was just keeping me in conversation as to what is really important in life.'"

As I recalled that story, the preoccupation about my own loss seemed to just melt. It was as if it were never important, certainly not as important as the health of my daughter, or my brothers, or the life story of my neighbor's friend. I was finally regaining a sense of spiritual perspective, and yet I knew it wasn't due to my own inner strength or wisdom. It was a grace given to me that I was grateful to receive and one that I certainly did not want to take for granted. (I had done that in the past a number of times and knew how disastrous that had been!)

The message was clear then and remains so now: even if we claim to be religious, a healthy spiritual perspective is neither automatic nor assured unless we are *spiritually mindful*. It is difficult to stay focused on what is truly important during the short life we have. The reality is that even if we are religiously committed, without even knowing it we can close our hearts to God's grace and the possibility of having a healthy perspective. Even worse, in some cases we may in our blindness believe that we are doing the right things and standing for the right principles in life.

A young priest and seminary faculty member once shared with me that he was worried about one of the men he was asked to mentor. In response, I asked if the man was taking out time in silence and solitude in chapel. I feel meditation is at the heart of the spiritual life, and when it is neglected, even the most generous, psychologically healthy person can become lost.

To my surprise he responded, "Yes. He religiously takes the time to pray, but when he leaves the chapel, he gossips

about the faculty, is hurtful to many of his fellow students, and comes across in an arrogant way about what he believes is the only way to see certain things. Rather than attracting people to the Lord's loving presence, his sarcasm and certitude put people off."

After the mentor finished his story and as I was offering a few ideas on how this seminarian might be encouraged to look at some of his behaviors and attitudes, my mind went back to two other instances where the behavior of the persons didn't fit their religious commitment. One was a very religious older person who prayed the rosary regularly and went to daily Mass in her local Catholic church. However, despite her fervor, her family informed me that she was a very difficult person to be with. Any time someone would suggest that what she was doing was self-centered, she would respond harshly and say, "You just don't understand." As a result, she was *persona non grata* now in most of the healthcare facilities where she had been a patient over the past several years, and her sisters and one brother were estranged from her. Also, home-health aides hired to help her would quickly quit. Yet, despite all of this, she would constantly preach to whoever was present on the importance of having a close relationship with the Lord. The family was at its wit's end as to what to do since she had no insight into her style of interacting with others. There was little motivation for her to change since she was not under stress herself—but she certainly was a carrier!

Another example of this type of religious paradox was the case of a self-proclaimed Christian peace activist I had

met. Being with him was anything but peaceful. Once, I remember sharing breakfast with him. He was so intense that every time he would say, "Pass the sugar!" it was like an incoming missile attack. As a matter of fact, when he finally got up to get himself another cup of coffee, the Irish priest who was eating with us looked up and said to me with a light brogue, "Glory be to God, Robert. Every time that boy speaks about peace, he scares the hell out of me!"

All of these people had never learned the truth of what St. Charles Borromeo said a long time ago: "Be sure that you first preach by the way you live. If you do not, people will notice that you say one thing but live otherwise." Although we might not have interpersonal styles that are as extreme or as noticeable as in the case of the young seminarian, the older devout Catholic woman, or the Christian peace activist described above, if we are honest, we will admit that all of us at times wear a set of spiritual blinders that can be hurtful to others. When this is so, it is often a lack of prayerfulness that prevents us from having our eyes fully open to the will of God in our daily interactions.

On the other hand, when we do seek to combine daily prayerfulness with meditation or contemplation, a "circle of grace" is formed that feeds, deepens, and enlivens our spiritual life. Then we can see clearly and act with love. Such a sense of spiritual awareness also helps us navigate the perils of spiritual intimacy that face anyone interested in having a rich interior life. It is only out of spiritual intimacy that we can live compassionately and meaningfully in today's anxious world. And so, while prayer must be at the

heart of our spiritual life, if it is not simultaneously joined with prayerfulness, destructive spiritual and psychological pitfalls may remain unseen, uncorrected, and dangerous. In turn, our actions and attitudes may then become spiritually hurtful, rather than inspiring, for those we meet who need our help.

Still, avoiding such negativity by becoming more prayerfully aware in our daily activities is not so straightforward, even when we have a good mentor. When contemplative Thomas Merton was asked about offering others advice about their spiritual life, he responded, “No one can give you a map . . . your terrain is unique.” Another wisdom figure also echoed this hesitation, but from a slightly different vantage point. He said, “If I tell you something, you will stick to it and limit your capacity to find out for yourself.” However, to this a fellow spiritual guide countered, “[But] if the teacher says nothing, the students [will] wander about sticking to their habitual way of being.” So, we need to avail ourselves of whatever and whomever we can in order to face ourselves and our lives in a loving, clear, spiritually mindful way.

So, exactly what are we to do to become more prayerful? I think Jesus gives us good direction on this in the Parable of the Sower (Mk 4:1–20), indicating the differences when the spiritual seed is able to land on good soil instead of rocky, thorny ground. The lesson clearly is that we must prepare our inner soil so we can be ready to receive the seeds that God so graciously sends us. The alternative can be to ignore and waste that gift of grace that is ever before

us. As contemplative Thomas Merton wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them; for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.

How do we express our gratitude for the spiritual seeds we are given? How do we make the inner soil rich so we and those with whom we interact may benefit from them? In other words, what will aid in our “inner formation,” what will equip us for the journey, no matter what terrain we might encounter at different phases of our life?

Inner Formation

Inner formation is not a set of techniques to be mastered. Rather, it is an ethos to be absorbed, an attitude to be cultivated. An abbot once alerted candidates about to enter a monastery, “There is no training here; it's just living the life so it gets “into your bones, under your skin.” Prayerfulness