

Praying "down the Track"

Understanding the Difficulties

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Introduction

Prayer as Failure

I sometimes get the feeling that a number of people in active ministry, priests, religious and laity, have given up formally praying because they wrongly interpret the experience of their prayer as failure. They come to believe that they cannot really be cut out to pray. If they were, their experience would be different. It is difficult to keep enthused about something that seems to endorse consistently the message of failure, day in and day out. And so they feel obliged to see their work as their prayer, and try to get on with the business of living.

In their hearts they would like to pray. They possibly feel vaguely guilty that they do not. But past resolutions to get back to it have not worked for long, and there seems little point in continuing the persecution.

Appropriate Spirituality

Some come to believe that active people need an active spirituality. Diocesan priests, for example, claim that their spirituality has yet to be explored in depth, but that it must be different from that of monks and religious, who write most of the books about it. Their experience would seem to convince them that a diocesan priestly spirituality could prescind from lengthy periods of formal prayer. Active religious, and certainly active lay people, can be tempted to think the same way.

I would say that the spirituality of each person is different. Spirituality speaks to me of the way that we look at life and respond to it. It is the assessment and response that we draw from the level of our own spirit, from that inner point of our self that is closest to God. It is made up of the values, beliefs, convictions, insights, etc., absorbed and developed over the years, which enable us to give meaning and pattern to the myriad

experiences of life, and on which we base our deliberate choices.

Though this spirituality is unique to each of us because our personal history and experience of life are necessarily uniquely our own, there are elements that we share with each other. We Christians give a central place to the reality of Jesus. Unlike his first disciples, we reach him only in faith, but his impact on our lives through faith is overwhelming. The way he lived and died, and the message he preached, open up for us new possibilities of understanding and responding to the situations we encounter in our lives. The action of his Spirit empowers us beyond expectation.

Jesus calls us to a deep friendship with himself. That friendship is central to our spirituality, to our sense of the meaning and direction of life. We want to face life as he faced it. But like all friendships, this friendship with Jesus needs to be worked on. It does not just happen. It takes time. It requires dialogue. This is the essence of prayer.

Teresa of Avila wrote: *"Prayer is nothing but an intimate exchange of friendship and frequent solitary conversation with him who we know loves us"*. *Life, chapter 8*.

Problem Areas

The definition is simple, but here the disappointments begin. I think the disappointments come from a variety of areas: from our consistent experience of distraction; from our expectations that are rarely, if ever, met; from a too rigid understanding of what prayer is meant to be; and sometimes, too, from a faulty theology that, in the desire to preserve the divinity of Jesus, pays only lip-service to his humanity and unwittingly denies it.

I believe that a grave disservice is done to the busy priest, religious or

lay person if our talk about prayer serves unduly to build up unreal expectations and does not take into account their actual, generally constant, experience of it - which rarely, if ever, matches the talk. As far as anyone involved in active ministry is concerned (and I do not doubt that the same applies to the active priest, religious or lay person), their ministry gives them enough exposure to failure, without their prayer seeming to reinforce it. A proper understanding of their prayer experience, on the other hand, rather than confronting them with a consistent and crushing reminder of their own inadequacy, can in fact become a source of insight that brings their ministry into new light and shows what they might interpret as failure to be in fact the proper context of victory and a privileged opportunity to share in the redemptive task of Jesus.

Distractions

For someone involved in an active ministry a distracted prayer soon becomes the norm. This is not only pardonable. It is in fact inevitable. Indeed, it is important. It is not an indication of failure. It is the context of enlightenment.

It may help to clarify what we mean by distraction. Distraction is the opposite of attention. We want to focus our thought or imagination on something specific, and instead our thought or imagination is drawn to something else.

Distraction consists itself of either of the two operations: thinking, or imagining (fantasising). Distraction gets in the way of and displaces our deliberate thinking about or imagining what we want to be attentive to (and as a consequence, can also affect what we feel as we pray). Some distractions absorb all our attention. (They are "distracting" distractions). Other ones may not necessarily absorb our attention to the same extent, though they sometimes do. They can move into and out of our heads, without

crying out strongly for concentration and without necessarily drawing all our attention after them. When we review our time of prayer, we may realize that our attention was disturbed, though we may have no precise recollection of what the thoughts, images or fantasies were. (They are "distracted" distractions).

Distraction is inevitable.

St. Teresa of Avila writes about the inevitability of distractions:

"I have sometimes been terribly oppressed by this turmoil of thoughts and it is only just over four years ago that I came to understand by experience that thought (or, to put it more clearly, imagination) is not the same thing as understanding Thoughts, as a rule, fly so fast that only God can restrain them... It exasperated me to see ... the thought ... confused and excited... So we suffer terrible trials because we do not understand ourselves; and we worry over what is not bad at all, but good, and think it very wrong... Just as we cannot stop the movement of the heavens, revolving as they do with such speed, so we cannot restrain our thought... It is not good for us to be disturbed by our thoughts or to worry about them in the slightest; for if we do not worry and if the devil is responsible for them they will cease, and if they proceed, as they do, from the weakness which we inherit from the sin of Adam, and from many other weaknesses, let us have patience and bear everything for the love of God."

The Interior Castle Book IV, chapter 1.

The important thing about distractions is their energy component. The distracting thoughts or fantasies have an energy source behind them that can be stronger than the felt attraction of what we are trying to think about, and so they easily interrupt our concentration and exert a strong influence on the will to follow them deliberately. Obviously, two factors are involved here: the strength of the feeling-energy behind the distractions, and the weakness of the attraction associated with what we want to focus on.

In prayer we endeavour to be attentive, in some way or other, to God. Because we have no direct experience of God either as we are praying, or in our memories, we usually experience little feeling-attraction.

We pray in a variety of ways. There may be, for example, words or images in our heads, such as Father, Mother, Brother, Creator, Spouse, etc.. Sometimes feelings are associated with these words from our experience of human persons. These feelings may help to centre our attention a little. But since these associations and projections are in the background, and since we are not directly thinking about these human experiences, they do not attract our attention strongly.

At times we may be consciously exercising our imagination in our prayer, imagining scenes from the Gospel, for example. Depending on the strength of our imagination, we may have some success at controlling our attention. But even these conscious images lack the strength and clarity of remembered incidents, and may have little feeling accompaniment, so that they can easily be replaced by more vivid and attractive distractions.

A more directly meditative prayer where we try to reason from step to step requires a degree of concentration. While the process is flowing, there is little scope for distraction. But the process is often tiring; it often does not lead in the direction of our spontaneous desires and attractions, and sometimes even away from them. So the unwanted distractions break in with their more attractive feeling content.

Distraction is particularly our experience when we try to move to a more strictly contemplative stance in our prayer. Then we consciously try to exclude all deliberate thoughts, images and feelings, and reach out to him behind "the cloud of unknowing". Nature abhors a vacuum; and so our deliberately emptied minds and imaginations are inevitably filled with indeliberate thoughts and images. Our activity appears to be directed more to consigning these distractions quietly to "the cloud of forgetting" than to

directing ourselves to the God in "the cloud of unknowing".

Since the normal dynamic of our prayer is towards quiet contemplation, our experience will be that of moving into more inevitable distraction. I think it is important that we realize this. If we expected that our prayer would become less distracted, we can misread what is happening and act against the movement of grace. I would expect, however, that the type of distraction in this kind of prayer would become increasingly only the "distracted" images rather than the more "distracting" thinking and planning processes.

(For those who have accepted the invitation made in the Ministry to Priests and Religious programs to move away from a busy way of praying and to enter into a more centring prayer, this realization is particularly important, lest their experience of further distraction discourage them and compound their estimate of themselves as poor "pray-ers".)

Loving despite Distraction

We might be tempted to wonder, against this background or fairly constant distraction and rare attention, about the value of time spent in such disappointing prayer. The point is that what matters in any relationship is not much thought but much love. Thought and love are not the same operation. So while our thought and attention can be elsewhere, our love can be reaching out towards God. In practice it is usually hard for us to be convinced of this, especially when our upbringing has been consistently cerebral.

A similar difficulty exists for those whose upbringing has been predominantly affective and emotional. We are likely to wonder whether there is any love for God in our hearts at all. It is helpful to remember that in its essence we do not necessarily feel our love for another. We can feel our desires and other emotions. But in itself love is not a feeling or an emotion; it is a decision and an orientation of our selves. We cannot always know of its presence by feeling it. Certainly the absence at some particular time of any

feelings of warmth or closeness to another is not indicative of whether I truly love the other or not.

So our prayer, especially our contemplative prayer, will often seem to be devoid of love on our part. And when the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* recommends that we beat on the Cloud with thrusts of love, his advice does not console us all that much because we feel uncertain of the presence of such love in our hearts. We can seem to be doing nothing, getting nowhere. This experience is normal, especially for someone whose life is reasonably busy.

An indirect way of knowing whether we do have any love for God and a genuine openness to intimacy in our hearts, is simply to observe our love for our friends. The First Epistle of St John (1Jn.4.20-21) is quite emphatic in indissolubly coupling love of God and love of neighbour. We develop our intimacy with God as we develop our intimacy with others. This is true both of our giving love and of our receiving love.

Distractions can be Valuable.

Distractions persist because there is a strong energy component behind them. Something keeps driving them into our awareness. The presence of the distraction can lead us to discover the restless source behind it. This becomes a way to greater self-knowledge. I think that time spent in pursuing this self-knowledge is very valuable, particularly in our earlier experiences of prayer.

It is important that the energy be integrated, i.e. that it be recognized and accepted. The energy component is tied to a feeling of some kind or other that will be one of the thousand varieties of either anger, fear, joy or desire.

The energy component of anger is triggered either by past or present hurts that have not been healed. Though the distraction may be some immediate past event that has hurt us and whose hurt has not yet been healed. that hurt may not always be the important one. If the distraction is persistent, and if the energy behind it seems to be out of proportion to the recent hurt, then probably the recent

hurt is simply the symbol that gives shape to deep and accumulated hurts from the past that have not been integrated. are seeking integration. and will not rest until they are integrated.

The first step to integration is to recognize the feeling. This may call for some patient, and sometimes painful, searching. When the feeling is recognized, even if the specific causes are lost to memory, it must be owned, i.e. given permission to be there and not denied and suppressed. Some of our hurts and angers can be quite deep. For them to surface a competent spiritual guide or an experienced therapist may prove necessary. Certainly a trusted friend can be a valuable support in the midst of the pain and the searching.

Forgiveness then becomes necessary. This may prove quite difficult, but the persistent dryness can be God's way of revealing this to ourselves and of insistently calling us to this step. Distractions can be powerful invitations to surrender and forgiveness, and to consequent integration. We forgive best as we try to surrender to the flow of God's forgiveness into ourselves and outwards from ourselves to the world. God's forgiveness of ourselves can be not simply a source of motivation for us to forgive but a healing and enabling power.

Anger can also come from the present experience of our prayer. If our expectations are not met, we feel hurt. If we expect God to be present, then any seeming distance between us becomes a source of disappointment. We need to recognize this hurt and the anger that goes with it, to own it, and to forgive God. Or else, we can modify our expectations, perhaps, and remove the basis of the disappointment. This is not as easy at it may seem - it is easier to convince our heads than our hearts.

A frequent source of distraction is our fear. We need to plan for the future to control the future by anticipating it, to prepare for future possible contingencies. The present is a very slippery spot, and we constantly slip either backward into the past or forward into the future. We can meet God only in the present, but the power

of our fears can keep us constantly out of that present. Our fear of the future and need to anticipate it spring from our radical insecurity, the possibility of shame and the experience of self-doubt. Like our angers, these fears need to be integrated. They need to be faced, felt and recognized. A wise and experienced soul-friend may be a valuable help in this task. Once recognized the fears need to be owned and given permission to be there. Their integration is completed as we surrender our own need to control, and hand over our insecurity into God's Provident love.

This does not mean that we do not need to plan for our future, but it does recognize that, unless we have consciously chosen that it be so, prayer is not the time for the planning. It also recognizes that the power of the distraction does not come from the reasonable recognition of the need to plan but from our unintegrated fears.

Distractions can also draw their energy from our desires. One reasonably strong kind of desire is the erotic kind, but there are a host of others as well. They can engage our imagination and dominate our attention. Desires, like angers and fears, need to be integrated. They need to be recognized for what they are. They are as natural as our angers and fears, and have no morality in themselves. Morality becomes possible only when the will makes a decision regarding them.

An unconscious fear of our desires, particularly, in the case of celibates, of erotic desires, often results in a mild panic and a strong effort to suppress the desire, that is, to try to make the feeling itself disappear by directly fighting it. This can be so tiring that in a moment of weakness the will sometimes consents to the very desire it fears.

A more healthy approach is to remind ourselves that the feelings of themselves have no morality. The presence of erotic desires is perfectly natural, an indication that we are alive, and an opportunity to thank God for the gift of life. The longing for intimacy that they excite can remind us of our incompleteness and invite us to try to get in touch with the even deeper thirst for God within us. What

can be equally profitable is to confront the desires and ask ourselves if they really reflect our values to the extent that we are prepared to move beyond idle fantasy and plan to achieve what we desire. If we are not prepared to make such plans, then our experience is one of pure fantasy. To cling to it would be a waste of time, a conscious deception of ourselves, a classic example of "time incompetence". This tactic also gives us the opportunity to integrate the often unwarranted fear of our own weakness that is sometimes present. A named fear is often a tamed fear!

A value of the distraction, however, is that it confronts us with our own vulnerability, with our propensity, for example, to sacrifice value for pleasure, or to compromise, for our own selfish purposes, what we really stand for, or to exploit another, or ourselves, under the guise of love. Self-knowledge is always profitable. And in this case, it can remind us of our need constantly to rely on the grace of God and the power of the risen Christ within us. Our vulnerability is the point of entry of the grace of God!

Distractions are invaluable

The constant experience of distraction can be something through which God instructs us and purifies us.

It confronts us with our own powerlessness. It deprives us of the feeling of being in control. It prevents us from any bargaining with God on the basis of our performance. It opens us to the realization that in our relationship with God everything is gift, everything is grace. It is a powerful antidote to pride, a quite indispensable experience. Without it, it is hard to imagine how we could otherwise come to discover the truth about ourselves, i.e., that we are at best unworthy servants, and yet still endlessly, faithfully loved.

Certainly other aspects of our pastoral work or life in the world confront us with failure, and can serve to moderate to some extent our instinctive thrust towards pride. But if we can keep busy enough, or if we can lay the blame on others and their lack of cooperation etc., we can often

avoid facing the valuable lesson of our failures. In our prayer, however, we do not have the busyness that otherwise relieves the need to face reality, and we have no one else to blame. We have to face the truth. This can be a possible reason why we are tempted to withdraw from prayer. There is no way that we can persist in prayer without, experiencing the trials of personal growth.

The roots of our pride go deep. Were we prematurely to have the feeling that we could control the experience of our prayer, we would almost certainly take pride in our achievement. The more we are filled with ourselves, the more we distance ourselves from God. One aspect of the original sin is that we want to be like gods. We would very much like to be able to be in a position or strength with God. But it would be at the price of the truth of ourselves. We are called to intimacy with God, but not to untruth.

We would like to be able to measure our performance before God, and we are very easily tempted to use our prayer experience as the criterion. There is nothing to be gained in measuring our performance or "knowing where we are". There is no point of arrival - the opportunity for the infinite always stretches out before us. The regular experience of our powerlessness gradually serves to wean us from the attempt at measurement.

Distraction also purifies our search for God. It eventually leads us to decide whether we are seeking the satisfaction or being good "pray-ers" - and the comfort attached to it or are seeking nothing more than God alone in the darkness of unknowing. In the face of regular distraction we can persevere only if we are seeking God.

Distraction can be a Privilege

The Scriptures give little detail about the experience of Jesus' prayer. The clearest insight is given in the Passion narratives. At the time of his dying, at the most sacred moment in the history of the human race, at the most powerful moment of redemption, Jesus felt only the absence of his God. The cumulative effect of his physical, emotional and spiritual struggle had

drained his ability to feel the presence of his Father. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" But beneath the distracting experience of struggle lay the level of his values and his faith. Drawing on every reserve of strength, he was able to respond from the deepest point of his spirit to what he knew to be the truth, and in love he prayed: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit". In the face of powerfully distracting forces he responded in love.

Jesus can give to those he trusts the privilege of sharing a similar experience. In the face of distraction and the felt absence of God, he can lead us to draw from the deepest reserves of our own values and beliefs, and to respond in faith to our God in loving surrender and acceptance. Through the patient acceptance of our dryness and distractions, our prayer "to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death" (Phil.3.10) can be answered in the immediate experience of our prayer itself. Our prayer draws us into the redemptive work of Jesus. The experience gives us the opportunity to check out quite consciously how honestly we want that privilege.

Consequences

I like very much the book entitled Spiritual Letters by an English Benedictine abbot, Dom John Chapman. His letters were collected and published after he died in 1933. In my experience he gives a most down-to earth treatment of prayer. On this question of distractions, Chapman writes:

"As distractions, when involuntary, do not spoil our prayer, and when merely of the imagination scarcely even disturb it, we ought to be perfectly satisfied to have them. We are not to be resigned to them but more - to will them; for a contemplative is never to be resigned to God's Will, but to will it. The result of this practice will be to decrease distractions by decreasing worry. If we only want God's Will, there is no room for worry". p. 294.

Expectations

Another factor, in addition to the presence of distractions, that interferes with our persistence in prayer is that the actual experience of the prayer itself, as we are praying, rarely meets our expectations; and in the light of these unfulfilled expectations, we wonder if we are praying at all. We know vaguely what we would like our prayer to be like. When it does not work out that way, we tend to blame either ourselves, or God.

It could sometimes be an interesting exercise to check the origin of our expectations of our prayer. God has not promised too much regarding the experience of prayer, even if the Scriptures do record some promises regarding its consequences and effectiveness. (In this brief article, it is not my purpose to look at the reasons why we pray, whether our petitionary prayers are answered in the ways we would expect etc.. I want simply to deal with the actual experience of our prayer at the time of the prayer itself.)

As we pray we seem either to want to feel warmth, closeness and security (or sorrow or relief after the experience of sin or guilt), or we want interesting insights and clear motivation, or else an experience of deep recollection (without really knowing what that means).

The expectations are not necessarily clearly formulated and may rest just beneath the surface of our consciousness, but their non-fulfilment can lead to a sense of wondering, disappointment, restlessness, guilt or failure.

I think such expectations are fairly inevitable, and to some extent are present in all of us. If they are recognized and integrated, they present no problem at all. It is when they are not recognized nor understood nor integrated that they become problems.

We pick up the expectations simply from the fact that, before we became adults, we necessarily lived through the stages of childhood and of adolescence. We have grown beyond them, yet in some ways the "child" and the "adolescent" continue to live in us.

Warmth and Security

The "child" within us wants relationships to be warm and loving and to bolster our feelings of security and acceptance. It tends to evaluate a relationship precisely on those criteria. Consequently, the "child" wants its relationship with God to be warm and loving and to make it feel secure. Since prayer is the context in which this relationship is sought, prayer is evaluated on the basis of how close God seems, the warmth that is felt and the security that is reached.

The absence of God and the experience of dryness instead of the expected warmth are not understood. To the "child" within us the experience feels unbearable. The expected feeling of security yields place to one of decided insecurity. The consequent feelings may range from disappointment to anger to fear to guilt to depression. A first reaction to dryness is often to feel that it must be our own fault. The "child" may see it to be some kind of punishment that we deserve because of our sinful behaviour in the past, recognized by us or known only by God (who sees and keeps a record of everything!), or because of our stupidity now as we pray and our inability to keep ourselves recollected. Sadly the reaction may be due simply to the fact that we have such a low self-image and so little self-esteem that our experience only serves to reinforce the conclusion that we are quite unworthy and not good enough ever to merit being close to God.

When this 'child within us' is not recognized as such, it tends to take over. Feelings dominate our approach to our prayer. The easiest way to avoid the disappointment etc. is to stop praying. And many do this. But some can't, because they fear that, if they don't pray, they will be even more worthless and abandoned, and this time it will clearly be their own fault. The very sense of pervading insecurity, that makes the "child" in us yearn for warmth, at the same time lays it wide open to fear because the God that can be warm and respond so powerfully to the feeling of insecurity can equally be felt to be decidedly arbitrary and ruthless.

So the time of prayer becomes filled with anger and fear, strong but usually unrecognized, and these very feelings themselves make the closeness and warmth that are so dearly wanted virtually impossible to be felt. A consequence of the presence of anger is that it automatically tends to "distance" us from the one who is the occasion of it; and the intensity of our anger is often tied to the depth of our desire to be close to that person. Quite a bind!

It would seem to me that the "child" within us needs to be recognized as such and gently owned and accepted. In other words, we need to recognize the probable existence in us of the real desires for warmth and security, for a warm and benevolent God. There is no need to suppress these desires. But we need to know their origin, and know that there is no real basis for the expectation that God meet these desires as we pray. We may not be able to stop the desires being there, but we do not need to heed them. We need not expect them to be met. We can own the little "child" within us and give it permission to feel whatever it feels and to desire whatever it desires, but we do not give it permission to run us or to control our decisions.

We believe that God loves. We listen to God revealing again and again the certainty of that love. But we can accept that God may not make us feel warm, nor in turn seem present to us. Feeling warm and being loved are two different realities. Warmth is felt - being loved is believed. Warmth is the need of the child - being loved is the deeper need of the adult.

Certainly this act of faith in God's love is more than a notional assent. It is more than a "head" thing. It is also more than a feeling and quite different from one. God's love is "known", not felt, but it is known not by the head but by the "heart". This knowledge is more subtle than any feeling, but it is real.

Insights and Motivation

The little "child" is not the only boarder within us. We have also lived through adolescence and young adulthood, and these states continue, too, to live within us. Tue

“adolescent” and particularly “young adult” are concerned with performance, with "getting it right". We want to think rightly and to behave rightly.

When we come to prayer, therefore, we feel a need for insights, for better understanding, for more obvious connections, for exciting illuminations. As well, we want to be more strongly motivated, to become through our prayer more in control of our behaviour. In some way, the “adolescent's” or “young adult's” feeling about itself is determined by the quality of its thinking and its behaviour - not just in life as a whole, but also right now during the time of prayer.

Somehow it expects that the experience of prayer will be a time for insights and illuminations, and for resolutions also.

Its feeling about God and prayer is perhaps ambivalent. It sees God as the giver of the insights and the director of the resolutions. At the same time it sees the insights and the resolutions as the criteria of good prayer, on the basis of which it is judged by God. If the insights and resolutions are not forthcoming, then the prayer is not going "right". There must be a better way to pray, a way that will "come up with the goods", but it is elusive. And in the meantime, God is watching and is not pleased when the numbers are not up on the board.

We need to deal with the “adolescent” or “young adult” within us in the same way that we dealt with the “child”. We need to recognize this drive within us for performance, the constant tendency to monitor "how we are going" with our prayer, and the disappointment and even fear that we feel when our performance seems to be very poor. Indeed, we probably may need to recognize that we may also be angry at ourselves for our own inability to get on to the "best" way to pray. We may be angry at God, too, for staying in the background and for being unfair in judging us for our failure to pray "well", when perhaps we feel that God is partly responsible for our “poor” showing.

We need to own the immature expectation we have of prayer, and be gentle with ourselves for expecting such. But as adults, we need to surrender what are purely immature expectations. God made no commitments about the quality of our experience of prayer. What God has promised is to love us; and has told us that that love is not conditional on our "performance", either in life or at prayer. our adult task is to accept God's word.

It may be that the word "prayer" has become so inextricably caught up with the expectations we almost invariably have of it that we would be better off if we coined some other word to talk of our "frequent solitary converse with him whom we know loves us", as Teresa describes it (op.cit.).

Consequences

John Chapman makes a wise comment on our experience of prayer:

“One must accept joyfully and with the whole will exactly the state of prayer which God makes possible for us here and now; we will to have that, and no other. It is just what God wills for us. We should like to be rapt to the third heaven; but we will to be as we are, dry, or distracted, or consoled, as God wills. It is just the same out of prayer. We may wish for a great many things - for a good dinner, or for more suffering, or the prayer of quiet - without any imperfection, provided these are involuntary wishes. But we will only what we have, what God's providence has arranged for us - only no sin. we repeat, only no imperfection”.

Intimacy

God offers us relationship and calls us to it. It is a call beyond admiration, beyond imitation, to intimacy. God calls us to the kind of intimacy that is appropriate to us and to our level of growth and maturity.

The intimacy of a child to its father or mother is an intimacy based on trust. It is experienced as warmth and safety. When revealing himself as Father, or using the image of Mother,

God calls us to an intimacy based on trust. God asks us to believe that intimate love and to surrender to it. I think this is what is meant when Jesus says that “unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18.3). The "little ones" are those who choose to trust and to surrender to this "Abba", this Father of Jesus. This is something that is within our power to do because trust and surrender rest on decisions of the will. Inevitably, however, the "child" within us expects the experience of warmth and the feeling of safety. These do not depend on the will, and are not in our control at all, and so, obviously, cannot be what Jesus had in mind when he said we must “become like little children”.

The God of the Old Testament is spoken of as Father, as Mother, indeed even as Lover. In the Gospels Jesus speaks to his God as Abba - Father. This God dialogues with the adult Jesus, and dialogues with us, too. It is a dialogue between adults. The intimacy between adult friends certainly supposes trust, but it is itself specifically based on the mutual acceptance of our personal identity, of the reality of ourselves. God wants the adult “me” to relate as the adult I am, not as the young child I am not. The intimacy between adults beautifully surpasses the intimacy between young child and father or mother.

In adult intimacy I offer myself as I am, without masks, without secrets, with my strengths and weaknesses, to the other whom I want also to be real to me. I give myself, not as I should be, not as I want to be, but as I am. In turn, I accept the other in his/her reality, not as they should be, not as I want them to be, but as they are.

As I come to God, I do not pretend to be a child nor act as though I were a child. I come as the adult that I am, still very imperfect, but real. In my prayer I own myself before God, with my feelings over which I have no control, my fears, my desires, with whatever love I have and which I am quite incapable of measuring directly or even of feeling, with my past history of betrayals and of commitment, and with my uncertain future, precisely as I am at the very

moment of my prayer, not pretending to be what I am not, not trying to be what I am not yet or could have been.

I offer myself to God. I try to let God be God. I try not to fit God into some mould of my own making that might originate in my own childhood or adolescent needs and fears. Schooled by the long and painful, but necessary, experience of dryness and unfulfilled expectation, I learn in time to give to God the freedom to be mystery beyond my comprehension.

With the Real Jesus

When my prayer is directed to Jesus, I also allow him to be as he is. I try to meet him in his humanness. I can understand his humanity. It is the same as mine. He was, as the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, "completely like his brothers" (2,17), indeed, "he has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin" (4,15). His was a humanity, then, that knew the limitations of humanness. We also know that he is God, but we cannot know or understand that divinity. It is appropriate to leave that in mystery. We can sometimes impede our relating to him by our tendency to bring the mystery instead into his humanness. We thereby make him anything but "completely like" us. We make him distinctly unlike us, and unwittingly have him pretending or playing, as it were, at being human like us. Luke states quite clearly that Jesus "increased in wisdom" (2,52) with experience. In his humanity he knew joy and fear and desire and anger. He felt hurt and lonely, uncertain and vulnerable.

Intimacy requires that I allow Jesus to be as he is.

Conclusion

In this article I have wanted to speak to our real experience of prayer in the hope of encouraging whoever might read it to persevere in the work of prayer despite what might seem to be indications that we cannot pray well.

Sometimes we do have wonderful experiences in our prayer. It is not uncommon that people experience a strong "breaking-through" of the Spirit of God, followed by a time during which they feel a strong desire to pray, a sense of the closeness of God, a new joyfulness, a welcome healing of long-suppressed feelings, often an unexpected power in their prayer. It is not surprising, after such an experience, that people expect the experience to be maintained and indeed to become their normal experience.

In fact, experiences like this do not last. Of their nature they are temporary, a necessary breaking-in of the Spirit into our experience, especially at the level of our emotional life, and a breaking-down of blockages accumulated through the years, with accompanying new feelings of personal freedom and closeness to God. With time, however, the Spirit's action begins to concentrate on the deeper, but unfelt, level of our own spirit.

The wonderful felt experiences become fewer, more subtle, and in time the feelings dry up. Once more the prayer becomes not only distracted, but one constant distraction with only a few, if any, moments of recollection. And this may be, not a

rare experience, but constant. There is a difference, however, I believe, between this experience of prayer and earlier ones. It is now possible for us to spend longer time in obviously dry and distracted prayer than we could have done previously. We have become more used to the wilderness, and more at home in it. If only we understood it, we would even be quite content to stay here.

In the absence of proper instruction we are inclined to think that others do not experience the same frustration that we do, that their prayer must be "better" than ours. We presume that others may be "putting themselves down" when they say that they, too, have distractions like us. Perhaps we do not talk seriously enough about our prayer.

I hope that through these few pages we may understand a little better the inevitability, and even the real value and necessity, of distraction. I hope that we appreciate better the need also to get in touch with our expectations, sometimes hiding beneath the surface, and to see where they come from, and then disregard them.

I hope above all that we may understand more clearly that the intimacy to which God calls us is simply an invitation to be who we are before God, and to let God be God to us. This is an act of surrender, an act of faith. Prayer is the privileged time where again and again we learn to accept ourselves as we are and to grow into wholeness. This is the work of the empowering love of God, whose presence is not felt, but whose life-giving strength becomes obvious in the gradual transformation it brings about and the peace it engenders.