

Prayer and Life

God the Holy Spirit longs to inspire in us prayer that includes and embraces the whole of our life. It is a great privilege to be called to the religious life, which offers us every opportunity and encouragement to welcome the Spirit's transforming grace so that prayer may enter more and more into all that we are and all that we do.

Resisting the tendency to restrict prayer to set times, we are to aim at eucharistic living that is responsive at all times and in all places to the divine presence. We should seek the gifts which help us to pray without ceasing. The Spirit offers us the gift of attentiveness by which we discern signs of God's presence and action in creation, in other people and in the fabric of ordinary existence. We are called to spiritual freedom by which we surrender fretfulness and anxiety in order to be available to God in the present moment. There is the gift of spontaneity, which gives rise to frequent brief prayers throughout the day in which we look to Christ and express our faith, hope and love. There is the gift of prompt repentance, which encourages us to turn to God and ask for forgiveness the instant we become aware of a fall. Through these and other like gifts, prayer comes to permeate our life and transfigure our mundane routines.

The life of prayer calls for the courage to bring into our communion with Christ the fullness of our humanity and the concrete realities of our daily existence, which he redeemed by his incarnation. We are called to offer all our work to God and ask for the graces we need to do it in Christ's name. In our prayer we are to test whether God is confirming our intentions and desires or not. We are able to pray about one another, our relationships and common endeavors. We are to bring him our sufferings and poverty, our passion and sexuality, our fears and resistances, our desires and our dreams, our losses and grief. We must spread before him our cares about the world and its peoples, our friends and families, our enemies and those from whom we are estranged. Our successes and failures, our gifts and shortcomings, are equally the stuff of our prayer. We are to offer the night to God as well as the day, our unconscious selves as well as our conscious minds, acknowledging the secret and unceasing workings of the Spirit in the depths of our hearts.

This deep intention at the heart of our life to find God in all things means learning to trust that divine companionship continues undiminished even when we feel only boredom and frustration. We can learn to stay still in our experience of numbness and resistance, and trust that Christ is just as truly alive in our hearts in these times as in those in which we enjoy the sense of his presence.

The more we discover through prayer how completely the divine presence permeates our life, the greater will be the integrity of our ministry as we teach others to pray. Men and women come to us not merely to learn to pray, but to learn to pray their lives. The prayer that has spread its roots into our whole life bears fruit a hundredfold as we use the resource of our own experience in guiding and initiating others.

Silence

The gift of silence we seek to cherish is chiefly the silence of adoring love for the mystery of God which words cannot express. In silence we pass through the bounds of language to lose ourselves in wonder. In this silence we learn to revere ourselves also; since Christ dwells in us we too are mysteries that cannot be fathomed, before which we must be silent until the day we come to know as we are known. In silence we honor the mystery present in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, strangers and enemies. Only God knows them as they truly are, and in silence we learn to let go of the curiosity, presumption and condemnation that pretend to penetrate the mystery of their hearts. True silence is an expression of love, unlike the taciturnity that arises from fear and avoidance of relationship.

Silence takes root through our cultivation of solitary prayer in which we are free to take delight in our aloneness with God undisturbed. The Spirit helps us through our struggle with distraction to return to that inmost place of mutual love where God is simply present to us and we to God. If we are faithful here in our movement into silence, we will bring the same spirit into our liturgical worship and cherish the silences observed before and during the Eucharist and Offices. Without this constant opening of the heart in silence alone and together we are unable to feel the touch or hear the word of God. Silence is a constant source of restoration. Yet its healing power does not come cheaply. It depends on our willingness to face all that is within us, light and dark, and to heed all the inner voices that make themselves heard in silence.

Our ministries demand silence for their integrity, in particular our speaking to others and our listening to them in Christ's name. Without silence words become empty. Without silence our hearts would find the burdens, the secrets and the pain of those we seek to help intolerable and overwhelming. And our ethos of silence is itself a healing gift to those who come to us seeking newness of life.

Each of the disciplines that protect silence in our common life calls for respect. The Greater Silence makes the night and early morning a healing time for recollection. Silent meals and those accompanied by music and reading accustom our guests and us to enjoying fellowship without needing to converse. Appointed days of retreat and quiet invite us to deepen our awareness and prayer. Our cells welcome us into the silence of God's company, and we spurn that welcome if we rely unthinkingly on radio, music and conversation. We cultivate a thoughtful respect of one another's need to stay focused by avoiding unnecessary interruptions.

Our own strength is not sufficient for weaving silence into the fabric of daily life. For the hours of the day to be permeated by mindfulness of the divine life we must be engaged in constant struggle, depending on God's grace. Powerful forces are bent on separating us from God, our own souls, and one another through the din of noise and the whirl of preoccupation. Technology has intensified our risk of becoming saturated with stimuli. We who are called to maintain a lively interest in our own culture, so that we can bear witness to Christ within it, can never rest from the effort of discernment and resistance or we shall fall captive to scatteredness and stress.