

Text from the Tradition: The Way of the Pilgrim (text drawn from pp. 1, 5-7, 2)

The Desire for Unceasing Prayer

On the 24th Sunday after Pentecost I went to church to say my prayers there during the liturgy..., and among other words I heard these—"pray without ceasing." It was this text more than any other, which forced itself upon my mind, and I began to think how it was possible to pray without ceasing, since [humans] have to concern themselves with other things also in order to make a living. (After wandering, the Pilgrim finds a guide)

"Well, it's like this, Father", said I. "About a year ago, while I was at the liturgy, I heard a passage from the epistles which bade [people] pray without ceasing. Failing to understand, I began to read my Bible, and there also in many places I found the divine command that we ought to pray at all times, in all places: not only while about our business, not only while awake, but even during sleep. This surprised me very much, and I was at a loss to understand how it could be carried out and in what way it was to be done. A burning desire and thirst for knowledge awoke within me. Day and night the matter was never out of my mind. So I began to go to churches and to listen to sermons. But however many I heard, from not one of them did I get any teaching about how to pray without ceasing. They always talked about getting ready for prayer, or about its fruits and the like, without teaching on *how* to pray without ceasing, or what such prayer means... The old man crossed himself and spoke. "Thank God, my dear brother, for having revealed to you this unappeasable desire for unceasing interior prayer. Recognize it as the call of God and calm yourself. Rest assured that what hitherto has been accomplished in you is the testing of the harmony of your will with the voice of God. It has been granted to you to understand that the heavenly light of unceasing interior prayer is attained neither by the wisdom of this world, nor by the mere outward desire for knowledge, but that on the contrary, it is found in poverty of spirit and in active experience in simplicity of heart... Doubtless a great deal has been preached about prayer, and there is much about it in the teaching of various writers. But since for the most part all of their reasonings are based upon speculation and the working of natural wisdom, and not upon active experience, they sermonize about the qualities of prayer, rather than about the nature of the thing itself. One argues beautifully about the necessity of prayer, another about its power and the blessing which attend it, a third about the things which lead to perfection in prayer, i.e., about the absolute necessity of zeal, an attentive mind, warmth of heart, purity of thought, reconciliation with one's enemies, humility, contrition, and so on. But what is prayer? And how does one learn to pray? On these questions, primary and essential as they are, one very rarely gets any precise enlightenment from present day teachers. Many people reason quite the wrong way round about prayer, thinking that good actions and all sorts of preliminary measures render us capable of prayer. But quite the reverse is the case, it is prayer which bears fruit and good works and all the virtues. Those who reason so, take incorrectly, the fruits and the results of prayer for the means of attaining it, and this is to depreciate the power of prayer... Ceaseless interior prayer is a continual yearning of the human spirit towards God. To succeed in this consoling exercise, we must pray more often to God to teach us to pray without ceasing.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

For myself, and certainly for many of us on the committed and intentional spiritual journey, the challenge of consistency in prayer has long plagued our practice. In my case, I would often feel hypocrisy when teaching new spiritual directors about the importance of consistency in prayer, even as I would hold my own awareness of my ongoing inability to pray in the ways that I had constructed consistency to look like: all three Mysteries of the Rosary every day, an hour of *lectio divina* every morning upon waking, two sets of silent sits a day, communal worship weekly, if not daily. The laundry list of possible rhythms of consistent prayer have certainly plagued many of us. Important and vital as regular and formal prayer is, to become obsessed or plagued by the performance of such prayer can carry a powerful shadow along with it.

Unfortunately, the sense of being overwhelmed or hypocritical about our inability to pray consistently, at least according to the ways we imagine consistently should look like, often drain energy from our aspirations, rather than give energy. It wasn't until I recognized a subtle shift in my worries about performing prayer, that the tables turned from the plague of life-sucking energy out of my aspirations, to a more lifegiving approach. The shift was subtle, but it made much difference.

We hear about it in the teaching of the *staret* to the Pilgrim. The *staret* helps us to look into the mirror of our prayer and recognize the ways in which we assume that it is our own actions and our own preparations that make us worthy or capable of prayer, rather than an inherent dignity or innate spiritual capacity. This troublesome tendency can creep into our worries not only about consistency of prayer, but also about the purity or perfection of our prayer; for example, the concern that if I don't say the right words or do the right action, my prayer might become invalid. With such a perspective, consistency, much less unceasing prayer, becomes a heavy burden to bear.

However, when we polish the mirror, when we recognize that even the desire for prayer is already a prayer in and of itself, we allow a bigger Hand, a greater Tongue, a livelier Song, to offer prayer for us, on our behalf. When we acknowledge the constant flow of prayer that is always, already filling all of creation with love and lifegiving energy, our responsibility shifts in a subtle way. Rather than causing or creating prayer, we simply align our prayer in the great flow of loving prayer that already envelops us. Upon recognizing this subtle shift, we're far more likely to be engaged in prayer in all activities of our day, and not limit our prayerfulness to only the formal times set aside for prayer. At the same time, it is important to set aside intentional times for daily prayer and extended retreat. Again, note the subtly: our intention in setting aside periods of time is not in service of offering yet another performance. As the Pilgrim is beginning to learn the Jesus Prayer, he initially sets aside long periods of time in order to allow the prayer to grow in him, to become integrated in his life. The practice of coming away to "a place apart" strengthens our desire for unceasing prayer, rather than diminish it.

Questions for Reflection:

- What catches your attention about the text and teaching, in your head, heart and senses?
- How does desire show up in your prayer or daily life?
- Are there activities in your life that you regularly engage in which you tend to lose yourself? What are they?