

March - April 1995

Living PRAYER



- As refined by fire
- Giving is gaining

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WISDOM QUOTES FROM...

Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) was remarkable for his intense love of God which manifested itself in the austerity of his life, the service of the sick and the poor and the ministry of preaching the word of God. He is considered to be, with St. Teresa of Avila, the first parent and teacher of the Order of Discalced Carmelites. His sound spiritual doctrine is contained in his writings which include *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, and volumes of poetry and minor works.

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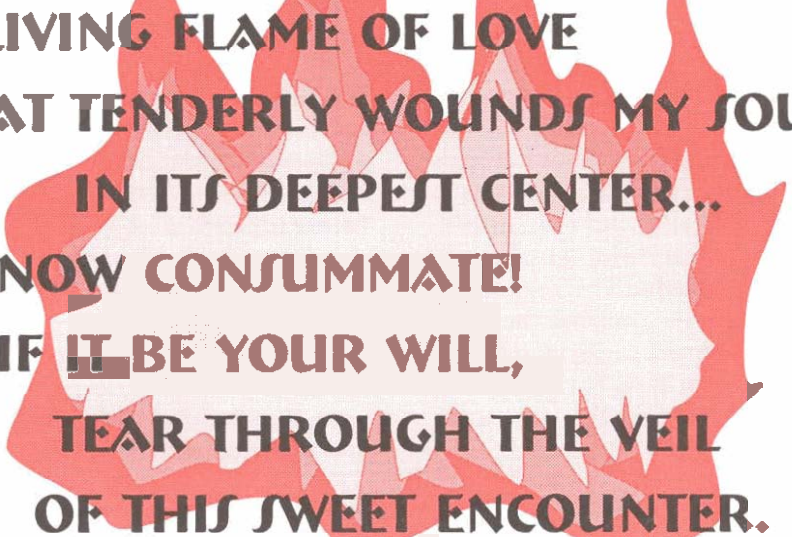
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**O LIVING FLAME OF LOVE
THAT TENDERLY WOUNDS MY SOUL
IN ITS DEEPEST CENTER...
NOW CONSUMMATE!
IF IT BE YOUR WILL,
TEAR THROUGH THE VEIL
OF THIS SWEET ENCOUNTER.**

St. John of the Cross

As refined by fire

As I thought about the challenge of looking for God during difficult times, the image of a refining fire surfaced in my consciousness. The symbol of God as fire makes most of us a bit nervous. We prefer more comforting images of God such as loving parent, or rock, or beloved. We know all too well, that fire burns as well as transforms. Difficult times test us. It is easy to believe ourselves to be prayerful, virtuous, good people during relatively easy times. Then it is easy to be trusting, calm, and patient. But in more difficult circumstances, which erode our sense of self-esteem and cause us to grieve, it is more difficult to continue to pray and be consistent in our behavior towards others.

It is relatively easy for our faith to wear away or evaporate through the challenge of facing evil in our world – witnessing the demeaning or crippling suffering of someone we love, experiencing disillusionment with the church, or the recovery of repressed memories of childhood abuse which cause us to question the very reality of God.

Many of us are experiencing real challenges to our Christian faith. To continue growing in faith requires nurturing an authentic belief in realities which for the most part are either ignored or misused in public life. When we endure a crisis of faith, it is not unusual to be afraid of speaking about our pain and confusion. We fear misunderstanding. Our sense of God seems utterly dif-

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ferent from that of others. In our fear and isolation we fail to recognize that our present distress is an invitation for growth that many others have also experienced.

Prayer during these difficult times often effects a purification of our images of God. When God visits us like a refining fire, we find ourselves wondering “Who is God for me now.” Difficult times can leave us with the burned wreckage of our former images until we discover the God beyond all images. Only when our sense of who God is rests on God as the Holy Mystery, incomprehensible yet present, do we achieve the freedom to experience all of our images of God as relative, changeable, limited, and also revelatory. The image of God as *consuming fire, burning bush* or *tongues of fire* points to the mystery and holiness of God. The untamed, unnameable, uncontrollable, yet also loving and passionate reality that God is. Most of us are unprepared for this kind of challenge. Joyce Rupp describes the surprise of this encounter:

I didn't know
the fire of God
could be more
than a gentle glow
or a cozy consolation.

I didn't know
it could come
as a blaze.

a wildfire
uncontrolled,
searing my soul,
chasing my old ways,
smoking them out.

In order to pray during difficult times, we need to understand what we are doing when we pray. Put very simply, prayer is an expression of our faith. We do not pray to get faith, but we pray to express or celebrate or make some response to God. Prayer enables relationship with God and our response to that ongoing encounter. Prayer is then about presence and about relationship. It is not about making God present; God is already present. It is the process of opening ourselves to that presence which creates and transforms.

WHO IS GOD FOR US?

As we change, so does our sense of God. Although God remains incomprehensible mystery, God both fascinates us and frightens us. God entices us but does not coerce us, allures us but does not overpower us. Jeremiah experienced such a compelling and pervasive presence of God.

I say to myself, I will not mention him. I will speak his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in. I cannot endure it. (Jer. 20.9).

God's life blazes up within us even as we search for or shrink from this encounter. Difficult times sort us out as we encounter God in ways that can require new namings.

As Christians, we believe in a Triune God, a God manifested in many different ways but who remains a singular fullness of being. For our part, we enter into relationship with God through these different manifestations. For some, the experience of God is almost exclusively a relationship with Jesus to whom we pray and who remains the focus of our attention. Others relate more to a creator God who is constantly addressing us in the beauty which surrounds us, whose presence we feel in nature and in other people. Still others discover that God is not so much outside us as inside, as spirit constantly welling up within us in blessing, grace, joy, and source of action. Still others relate to God as a loving parent either as mother or father. And still others may relate to

the darkness and inscrutability in God, the holiness and otherness of God, or a mysterious "I know not what." Each of us may specialize for some time in one or another of these manifestations of God, and each of us may find ourselves successively experiencing all of them without losing any of them.

The mystics suggest that in Christian prayer the mystery of God expands as one deepens in the spiritual life. Whatever our entry into relationship with this mystery,

*Difficult times can leave us
with the burned wreckage
of our former images
until we discover the God
beyond all images.*

God will gradually invite us into God's own trinitarian life so that we, too, participate in the wholeness and joy of God's own life. As we come to know ourselves and be known by God, we are inhabited by this mystery. God's own love and life and joy become our own. We are caught up into the love which comes from God and returns to God because that love dwells in us.

PRESENCE AND RELATIONSHIP

The journey of prayer makes us conscious of our participation in God's life. God is already active in our life but our consent and energy is also required. Thus, prayer is about presence and relationship, specifically becoming consciously present to the Mystery we name God, a God who's self is further revealed to us in Jesus. As we grow more deeply into this relationship, new aspects of the God mystery encompass us. I want to reflect on four perennial elements in prayer. Too often we are like Abba Lot who reported his successes:

"As far as I can, I keep a moderate rule, with a little fasting, and prayer, and meditation, and quiet. As far as I

can I try to cleanse my heart of evil thoughts. What else should I do?" In response Abba Joseph rose, and spread out his hands to heaven, and his fingers shone like ten candles: and he said: "If you will you could become a living flame."

Few of us are willing to become flame!

Difficult times often leave us frustrated in prayer. We realize we pray only when we like the effects. It is often better not to focus too much on what we want from prayer. In difficult times these expectations are often confounded. Frequently, the effects of prayer are more apparent outside of prayer than during the prayer itself. As a consequence it is important to look at what we bring to prayer regardless of what happens. These four basic dispositions that remain consistently important, especially during difficult times are: intentionality, intimacy, fidelity, and surrender.

INTENTIONALITY

First of all, prayer is an intentional act in which we become available for relationship with God without any other agenda. Intentional prayer differs from other types of religious experience which happen spontaneously outside of prayer. In intentional prayer we have chosen to open ourselves to God. Psychologically, prayer requires an attitude of openness, a willingness to be influenced. We relax a bit from our compulsions, from our need to achieve, from our self-direction. We participate in "shifting gears", in entering another state of consciousness which is closer to simply being, closer to our true selves. So we are intentional about being present, about being open, and about wanting to encounter God. Regardless, of what happens in prayer, our consistent choice is to open ourselves to God, to move more deeply into the experience of God and to be transformed in our consciousness, our values, our views, and our behaviors as a result of this encounter. It implies the willingness to be refined by fire. It is a choice to spend time in prayer. It is a choice to be as intentional about this relationship as we are about others. Regardless of whether things are



going well or poorly, the consistency of our intentionality is the least we can do to symbolize to ourselves and to God that we care about God and how we stand with God. Pragmatically, this intentionality also serves as a counter cultural support, reminding ourselves that we can neither grow in a faith filled vision of life nor live that way without being very conscious about it. There is simply too much which fosters pragmatic self-interest for us to be able to sustain a vision rooted in the values of the kingdom initiated by Christ without this kind of intentionality.

INTIMACY

If prayer is about presence and relationship, it is also a time of self-intimacy as well as intimacy with God. According to Kay Leigh Hagan,

...intimacy might be defined as the condition of knowing and being known at the level of our essential selves. ... When we drop our masks, we have a feeling of connection, of being truly *known*. And although most of us want more intimacy in our lives, we regard it with profound ambivalence; we feel attracted to and repelled by it at once.

Intimacy with God is no different. It is often our "out-of-touchness" with ourselves which prevents our close-

ness with God. We cannot feel or sense the connection because we are either unaware of how *we* are at this moment or we are afraid to find out. In prayer we bring our developed capacity for intimacy as well as our fear of it. Intimacy requires a mutual vulnerability and trust. Many of us do not experience intimacy with God because we do not really trust that we can both enjoy God and be safe with God.

Our intimacy with God will not be able to grow until we learn to face that which we fear or reject in ourselves as well as deal with whatever is impairing our ability to trust in God. One way we can block our intimacy in prayer is through our unwillingness to discover what we don't yet know about ourselves. There is a darkness within us which becomes accessible as we simultaneously allow ourselves to be seen and known and loved by God. If we keep the secret of our own darkness from ourselves we cannot ever experience ourselves as fully accepted and loved by God. It is our resistance to experiencing this part of ourselves that drives us to keep God at a distance. Difficult times unsettle us. Difficult times evoke our fears and insecurities and threaten our sense of control. We may respond with anger. We may not necessarily respond graciously. Prayer may elude us because we don't want to bring this challenged self to prayer.

Ann Wilson Schaef identifies four key behaviors which interfere with intimacy. Not taking responsibility, maintaining the illusion of control, being dishonest, and being self-centered. Growth in intimacy with God requires that we forego all of these behaviors. Intimacy suggests a mutuality. We deepen in our experience of the mystery of God when we shift our focus from our wants and needs to how things are with God. Do we ever ask to share the activities or experiences of God or Jesus? Or do we keep our focus on what we want or think we need. Can we simply allow ourselves to be in the Divine presence without demand or need? Dishonesty most frequently happens because of a lack of congruence in ourselves. We try to pretend that we are OK when we are not. Or we pray for what we think we should pray for

even if we don't want it. Or we are somehow dishonest because we are out of touch with ourselves and don't know it. This is why our prayer often improves when we can honestly admit to ourselves and to God how we are actually feeling. It places us in a congruent relationship in which the feelings are now free to change or shift because they are conscious. Finally, taking responsibility for our own process and feelings enhances our freedom to be in relationship because we are not expecting the other, even God, to do what only we can.

How we engage in our intimacy with God is unique for each of us. Some of us will express our feelings or present condition directly to God. The psalms are wonderful examples of this kind of feeling prayer, from complaint and lament to praise and thanksgiving. For others of us, the direct expression of feeling may not appeal. There are many meditative techniques in which one simply sits and notices what is going on in our consciousness. So instead of direct expression, we might simply notice what is coming up, what preoccupies us, how we are at this moment. Others may prefer an initial period of writing thoughts and feelings, addressing oneself more than God, then beginning prayer when one is fully present to oneself. Intimacy can not take place if we are not ourselves, if we are not present to who we are at this moment, if we are not willing to be in touch with deeper parts of ourselves that are not always available in the midst of our hectic daily round. Self-intimacy and intimacy with God eventually lead to the discovery of the true self, the self beyond ego and beyond all of our usual descriptors of the self. Augustine says that God is more intimate to me than I am to myself. The depth of the self which comes into the encounter with God is our deepest or most intimate self. And discovering that intimate self happens in our relationship with God.

SURRENDER

Together with our purposefulness and our intimacy, surrender is another key disposition. It is implied in both intentionality and intimacy. Intimacy is based on a trust

deep enough to surrender mutually to one another. It is not a giving over of the self, but a joining of the self with another. It is the relinquishment of ego-security and ego-defense in the favor of becoming a we. Ultimately, prayer leads us to union with God which can only occur when our intimacy deepens to the point of surrendering to God. This surrender yields to God acknowledging that God is our happiness and wholly benevolent toward us. God is God and we are not. Each of us goes through a long journey of discovering this. Ego must ultimately surrender its self-interest and control to that which grounds it and gives it being. To surrender is to be centered on God and not on ourselves. And our intentionality in choosing to pray includes this willingness eventually to surrender our small selves to the mystery of God. This, of course, is a life-long process since the final surrender is the one we make when we die. The mystics suggest to us that they have achieved the deepest possible surrender to God this side of death itself.

FIDELITY

The final disposition I want to reflect on is fidelity. Fidelity is not so much the regularity with which we show up for prayer, although it certainly includes that. But the fidelity to the relationship itself. To be in relationship with God entails more than the time spent in prayer. Fidelity implies being true to ourselves and our deepest desires. It implies the willingness to take the next step whatever that might be as the mystery of God and the Christ life opens up within us. Fidelity is our persistence in staying in relationship with God. It means that when we discover we are resisting, avoiding, or neglecting our availability to God, we humbly begin again. And we may find ourselves beginning again and again. Fidelity means finding a way to be present to God or at least available with every major change in ourselves and our self-un-

derstanding. When our sense of ourselves and consequently God's manner of relating to us changes, fidelity means remaining open to how God might want to be with us as we now are. It means giving God the benefit of the doubt that God is on our side and not against us. If our images of God have become inadequate or if we recognize them to be positively destructive, fidelity means struggling with God in darkness and unknowing until a newer or more adequate image emerges. Fidelity means returning again and again to God as the source and ground of our lives during and after every assault on that belief that occurs through out our lives.

CONCLUSION

We pray in order simply to be present to and encounter God. The God we encounter is the God revealed to us in Jesus and in our experience of ourselves and our world. Prayer is the most direct way we engage in this relationship although we experience God acting throughout our day and active in us, in our service and in our relationships. We bring intentionality, intimacy, surrender, and fidelity to prayer attesting to our commitment, to our side of the relationship. They express our freedom and our desires enabling God to draw near to us, fill us with joy and energy, and transform us into participation in divine life. Ultimately, this transformation is God's work in us, but we must be willing. We must at some point stop evading and surrender. Sometimes this feels as if we are being refined by fire. Transformation is uncomfortable. We don't know where we are going in the process. Yet as 1 Peter puts it,

There is cause for rejoicing here. You may for a time have to suffer the distress of many trials: but this is so that your faith, which is more precious than the passing splendor of fire-tried gold, may by its genuineness lead to praise, glory, and honor.