

07. Distractions and a feeling of emptiness in prayer



When we are distracted it seems that our heart is not awake to God; that we are not praying. We tend to feel that we are wasting our time. Teresa of Jesus speaks of ‘the afflictions of many people who practise prayer, and their complaints of interior trials. They become depressed and their health declines. They even abandon prayer altogether’ (*Interior Castle*, IV.I).

She knew what it was like from personal experience: ‘Whenever I entered the oratory I used to feel so depressed that I had to summon up all my courage to make myself pray at all’ (*Life*, 8.7).

Some distractions are avoidable with appropriate discipline.

Eugene Boylan writes: 'Distractions may have their origin outside prayer, in some attachment, some unmortified curiosity, some morbid brooding over humiliations, for example' (*Difficulties in mental prayer* (Dublin, Gill 1943) page 55).

We cannot expect to be undistracted at prayer if our life outside prayer is dissipated and distracted.

‘Distractions may be due to a failure to recollect oneself generously and completely at the beginning of the prayer’ (Eugene Boylan, page 55).

‘Before the time of prayer we must put ourselves in the state of mind we would wish to have in us when we actually pray. It is an inexorable fact that the condition of the soul at the time of prayer depends upon what shaped it beforehand’ (John Cassian, Conf 10, page 139).

Prayer-corner.

Breathing

The aim is to relax our bodies while remaining alert and to let the relaxation seep into our mind.

Then we remember that God is present, here in this place. God is present dwelling in my heart. Jesus is here with me. We pray to him for the grace of being in the love-communion that he is offering us.

Now is the time to enter the prayer.

It may be that I enter a **Gospel scene** as described in an earlier reflection.

Or I might be drawn into a prayer of simple awareness and find myself attracted to use a **'prayer word'** - a simple phrase repeated over and over again in rhythm with my breathing. As I think of Jesus I hear him say as I breathe in: 'I am in you,' and, as I breathe out I hear him say: 'You are in me.' I am listening to him as he repeats these words to me over and over again.

However, even if we are living a generally reflective life and are genuinely wanting to do God's will, we can still be distracted in prayer. Sometimes we are just very tired. If it is in carrying out the will of God that we have become tired, God will accept our desire to be attentive to God and will love us as we are. That is the way it is with those who love each other.

'Distractions may be due to fatigue; for if the powers of the mind are hard at work all day, it is not easy for them to make the effort necessary to remain attentive to what may be a very difficult task. In this case, when the distracting work is of God's appointment and not due to our own self-seeking, we can only glory in our infirmities, and hope in God's grace' (Eugene Boylan, page 55).

If, however, we are always too tired to focus, we need to examine our life-style and make some adjustments.

Our state of health can also affect our ability to remain focused.

Also some times of the day do not suit certain temperaments. We may have been unable to set aside time at the preferred time of the day and are attempting to make up for it at another time, but it is not working very well. God understands and takes our longing for what it is. The distractions don't hinder God from loving us, and if we want to respond we are responding.

Different temperaments tend to be more easily distracted than others, especially if we tend to worry or to be restless and excitable.

We can pray only as we are.

Whatever our circumstances, distractions are a very normal phenomenon.

‘Distractions may be due to the natural instability of the mind, especially the imagination. It is a psychological law that one idea tends to call up another, according to the well-known principles of association and contrast, so that the very effort to make one idea clear may be the means of starting a distraction’ (Eugene Boylan, page 55).

Other unavoidable distractions flow from the nature of God with whom we are in communion. One reason for distractions is that our intellect is necessarily very limited in its ability to focus on truths about God. It quickly comes to its limit and then gives up or wanders off following the imagination. When this happens the heart tends also to follow and so to cease being moved in relation to God.

‘Distractions may arise from the fact that the subject of our prayer, or the workings of God’s grace, make no appeal to the imagination, to our natural tastes, or even to the more familiar part of our intellectual powers. Here it is especially true that the imagination and its attendants seem to run riot, and any attempt to recall them will only draw away the attention from the real prayer, which is going on in the depths of the soul, in what one might call the “invisible light” of faith’ (Eugene Boylan, page 56).



Whatever happens let us, whenever we can, continue to turn our heart towards God.

In her prayer journal Catherine of Siena records the following words spoken to her by God: ‘Though you feel that I have withdrawn, do not turn away. Rather, persevere with humility and remain within the house of self-knowledge. There, with lively faith, wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, for me, the flame of love.

How do you wait? Not lazily, but in watching and constant humble prayer. And your watching is not only physical but spiritual as well. Your mind’s eye never closes, but watches by the light of faith and with contempt tears out your heart’s wandering thoughts. Watch in love by my charity, knowing that I want only you sanctification’ (*Dialogue: The Bridge*, chapter 63).

‘All we can do is to renew our attention to God according to the way in which we are praying. This should be done quietly, without vexation, or even without surprise at our own folly.

If we could only realise how much this continual turning back to God shows God our real love and pleases God more than that rapt attention that has its roots in self-love, we should never be dissatisfied with our prayer on account of its numerous distractions.

If prayer is a lifting up of the mind to God, then every time we turn away from distractions to renew our attention to God, we pray – and we pray in the teeth of difficulty and despite ourselves. What can be more pleasing to God? What more meritorious?’ (Eugene Boylan, page 56).

Eugene Boylan (continued)

‘We should be very greatly surprised if we could get a glimpse at the account book that the recording angel keeps, and see the different values that are set on our various attempts at prayer. The prayer that pleases us, and with which we were well satisfied, would often be quite low in his estimate, while the prayer that disgusted us, which was apparently made up of nothing but distractions, might be found to have won a very high degree of approval’ (page 56).

Teresa of Jesus

‘One must never be depressed or afflicted because of aridity or unrest or distraction of the mind. If you would gain spiritual freedom and not be continually troubled, begin by not being afraid of the Cross and you will find that the Lord will help you to bear it. You will then advance happily and find profit in everything’ (*Life*, II.17).

‘It is not good for us to be disturbed by our thoughts or to worry about them in the slightest. If they proceed from our many weaknesses, let us have patience and bear everything for the love of God’ (*Interior Castle*, IV.1.11).

Julian of Norwich

‘I felt pain, and afterwards delight and joy. In the time of joy I could have said with Saint Paul: “Nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ”. And in the pain I could have said with Saint Peter: “Lord, save me, I am perishing”. This vision was shown to teach me to understand that some people profit by being comforted at one time, and at another to fail and to be left to themselves. God wishes us to know that God keeps us safe all the time, in sorrow and in joy. Our Lord gives joy freely as it pleases him, and sometimes he allows us to be in sorrow, and both come from his love’ (*Showings*, chapter 15).

Julian of Norwich

‘When we fall back into ourselves, through depression and spiritual blindness and our experience of spiritual and bodily pains, because of our frailty, God wants us to know that God has not forgotten us ... God wants us to accept our tarrying and our suffering as lightly as we are able, and to count them as nothing. For the more lightly we accept them, the less importance we ascribe to them because of our love, the less pain shall we experience from them and the more thanks shall we have for them ... (*Showings*, chapter 64).

Julian of Norwich (continued)

‘If you be in so much pain, so much woe and so much unrest that it seems to you that you can think of nothing at all except the state you are in or what you are feeling, as soon as you are able pass it over lightly and count it as nothing. Why? Because God wants to be known; and because if we knew God and loved God we would have patience and be at great rest, and all that God does would be a delight to us’ (*Showings*, chapter 65).

Above all we are to listen to Jesus as he pleads with us:

‘Trust in God still and trust in me’ (John 14:1).

Saint Paul assures us: ‘No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it’ (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Teresa

‘Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing cause you to fear.

All is passing. God never changes. Patience gains all.

Whoever has God wants for nothing. God alone suffices’ (Poesías, 30).

John of the Cross

‘When something distasteful or unpleasant comes your way, remember Christ crucified and be silent. Live in faith and hope, even though you are in darkness, because it is in this darkness that God protects you. Cast your care upon God, for God watches over you and will not forget you. Do not think that God leaves you alone; that would be an affront to God’ (*Pentecost 1590*).

‘You have endured no tribulation, or penance, or trial to which there does not correspond a hundredfold of consolation and delight in this life’ (*Living Flame*, 2.23).

Can the distraction become part of the prayer?

Eugene Boylan

‘Sometimes the mere return to God is sufficient to banish the distraction; but very often the same distracting thought keeps coming back, despite our attempts to get rid of it. One way of dealing with such obstinate intruders is to make them the subject of the prayer. With a little ingenuity, some relation can be found between the distracting idea and God. It may, perhaps, give us something to pray for; it may serve as a motive to praise God; it could be used as evidence of our need for God’s grace ... If all else fail, we can fall back upon the advice of the author of *The Cloud* for dealing with distractions, that we should endeavour to look over their shoulders as if we were looking at some object beyond them and above them, – which is God’ (page 57).

It is important not to give up setting aside periods for prayer even though it might seem to be a waste of time. We are to give God time to be with us even if we do not feel that we are with God.

Eugene Boylan

‘Another way of looking at prayer may help us when we feel we cannot pray at all. Let us regard the time of prayer as an appointment with God. If for God’s own wise reasons God decides not to keep the appointment, that is God’s will and, therefore, to be praised. For our part, by staying there, helpless, and almost hopeless, we are doing what God wants us to do, and we can confidently leave the result to God. These helpless half-hours spent fighting sleep and distraction, “getting nowhere”, as the phrase has it, have a providential part to play in our sanctification. Distractions that are not deliberate are a trial, not a fault; let us accept them, cheerfully and confidently. In God’s own good time, God will come and save us’ (page 57).

Teresa of Jesus

Teresa admits that she herself was ‘**terribly oppressed by the turmoil of thoughts**’ till she came to realise that ‘**physical turmoil is no hindrance to my prayer. The tranquillity and love in my depths are quite unaffected**’ (Interior Castle, IV.1).



Teresa of Jesus

‘Should you fall, be careful, be careful, for love of the Lord, not to be deceived into abandoning prayer ... Trust in the goodness of God which is greater than all the sins we can commit. God does not remember our ingratitude when we, recognising what we are, wish to return to God’s friendship ... Recall God’s words, and look at what God did in my case: I grew weary of offending God before God left off forgiving me. God never grows weary of giving, and God’s mercies can never be exhausted. Let us not grow weary of receiving’ (Life 19.15).

John of the Cross

‘There are many who desire to advance and persistently beseech God to bring them to this state of perfection. Yet when God wills to conduct them through the initial trials and mortification, as is necessary, they are unwilling to suffer them, and they shun them, flee from the narrow road of life, and seek the broad road of their own consolation, which is that of their own perdition; thus they do not allow God to begin to grant their petition. They are like useless containers, for although they desire to reach the state of the perfect, they do not want to be guided by the path of trials which lead to it. They hardly even begin to walk along this road by submitting to what is least, that is, to ordinary sufferings’ (*Living Flame* 2,27).

‘In tribulation, immediately draw near to God with confidence, and you will receive strength, enlightenment and instruction’ (*Sayings of light and love* n.63).

Teresa of Jesus

‘The suffering experienced in this state will demonstrate that you are not to blame yourself and that you must not be perturbed, for that only makes matters worse. Nor must you weary yourself by trying to put sense into something – namely, your mind – that for the moment is without any. Pray as best you can; indeed, don't pray at all, but try to rest your spirit as you do when you are ill, and busy yourself with some other virtuous action’ (*Way of Perfection*, 24).

The fruit of prayer is often experienced later.

Therese of Lisieux writes:

‘Our Lord has no need of books or teachers to instruct us. He, the Teacher of teachers, instructs us without any noise of words. I have never heard him speak, yet I know he is within me. He is there, always guiding and inspiring me; and just when I need them, lights, hitherto unseen, break in. This is not as a rule during my prayers, but in the midst of my daily duties’ (*The Story of a Soul*, viii.131).

God's longing is to love us. God is delighted when we put time aside to be with God and to open our hearts to receive this love and to respond.

God knows our weakness and loves us as we are. If we want to be with God and are genuine in wanting our hearts to be alert to receive God's Spirit, we may be disappointed because of various distractions and trials but we can be sure that God is delighted with us and that the rain of divine love is gently falling on the field of our hearts.

No distraction on our part can hinder God from loving us. In any case we go to prayer not for ourselves but to praise, thank and love God. We are to trust that our good intentions are seen by God. Whatever our feelings, God is certainly loving us.

Teresa writes: 'We must never have any confidence in ourselves - that would simply be folly. But most of all we must walk with special care and attention, and watch what progress we make in the virtues' (*Interior Castle*, V.4.9).

In the following presentation we will return to the critical importance as we set out on the journey of prayer of 'making progress in the virtues.'

Our prayer and our life must be coherent

‘God invites each of us to be intimately united with God in prayerful contemplation of how loved we are, and, at the same time, to be moved by that love to enter into the Lord’s work of building God’s kingdom of justice, love and peace ... Real prayer leads to involvement; real involvement leads to prayer. Deeper spirituality impels to action; action impels to deeper spirituality. And the circle continues and deepens. The mystic becomes prophet, the prophet becomes mystic ... The person deepening in prayer and growing in faith is not called out of this world to be with God, but is more profoundly immersed in that world’s heart.’ (Carrol P and Dyckman K ‘Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet’ (NY Paulist, 1981) page 79).

Since God is the one who hears the cry of the poor, how can we expect to experience communion with God in prayer if we ourselves are deaf to that cry? 'Many will say to me: Lord! Lord! ... But I will say: I never knew you' (Matthew 7:22-23).

'I was hungry and you never gave me food' (Matthew 25:42).

How can we expect to experience communion with God in prayer if we know that we are using the time of prayer to escape from fulfilling our ordinary obligations?

How can we expect not to be distracted if we prefer doing good things for God to actually being in communion with God, and to being open to be guided in our action by the inspiration of God's Spirit?

If our focus is not on wanting what God wants we will find ourselves fitting prayer in and the activity that we put aside for the time of prayer will necessarily dominate our consciousness during the prayer. We must want communion with God more than anything else.

Marie-Eugène has this warning for those of us who are compulsively committed to action and place it ahead of prayer. He exposes some of the subtle rationalisations that we employ to avoid prayer. We should not be surprised that when we fit prayer in it is our activities that dominate our consciousness rather than our union with God, with the result that we experience distractions.

‘Activism takes cover under numerous and often noble excuses: necessities of life, urgent duties of one’s state, fear lest a certain milieu win and dissipate people, joys to be had in generous action which opens up and enlarges one’s power, the aridity and apparently useless abjection of prayer, and above all a great pity for those around us whose misery is a constant appeal to our Christian charity’ (*I want to see God*, page 420).

The most valuable thing we can do is the will of God.

If that means activity then let us be active.

If that means taking time out to be in prayer, let us pray.

If we find that we are inclined to put more value on activity than on prayer, we could well reflect on the following words of John of the Cross:

‘Let those who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they may not have reached a prayer as sublime as the prayer which we are describing here. They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labour, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 29.3).