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PRAYER

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This morning, feeling fearful about giving a presentation on prayer to major religious superiors, I remembered a novitiate experience, which gives me confidence to proceed.

Young, and intimidated by other novices who seemed so much more talented than I was, I was feeling afraid that I could not measure up to expectations of what it meant to be a good Sister. So, I went to confession to confess my insecurity and that I did not know what to do about making vows. I was told to consider the image of God as a gardener who had lawn filled with leaves to rake up. It did not matter to God that the rake He used was missing some of the tines, because nothing is impossible for God. I was to consider myself like that broken rake missing some of its tines. If God chose me as an instrument of God, all would work out fine. So, with confidence in God, I'll begin this presentation!

Living our evangelical conversion of life in a spirit of prayer requires prayer as the nurturing element, the necessary ingredient that provides the momentum for daily transformation into the likeness of Christ. Within ourselves we make a "dwelling place and home for the one who is Lord God almighty, Father and Son and Holy Spirit," so that with undivided hearts we may increase in universal love. Re-reading the prologue to our Rule--the words of Saint Francis to those who do penance--we see that Francis quoted from the Gospel of John¹ to remind us that we who persevere in our penitential life prepare for God to make His home and dwelling place within us.

Pregnant Virgin My reflection intends to evoke consideration for us as leaders (ministers) of Third Order Regular men and women, to teach by word and example that prayer makes a dwelling place for God with us. Becoming aware of God's love for us and God's will for us requires daily attentiveness to the Beloved. Our prayer is the rendezvous with the Beloved whereby we humbly dispose ourselves to become the dwelling place for God.

St. Francis used the image of the intimacy of motherhood to describe carrying God within us. He exhorted the penitents, saying "We are mothers when we bear Him in our hearts and bodies." It was Jesus who gave us the imagery of being His mother: a crowd had gathered to hear Jesus when someone whispered to Him that His mother was standing outside and wanted to speak with Him. He asks "Who is my mother? And my brothers?" Then Jesus gestures to all present saying, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mt 12:50).

Saint Clare in her third letter to Agnes of Prague shares her thoughts about being the mother of Our Lord. She wrote "only a faithful soul is His dwelling place and throne." She went on to describe that the faithful soul [Agnes] could be like Mary following in her footprints of poverty and humility and thereby she could carry Christ spiritually in her chaste and virginal body.

Gaze Clare used three verbs for the inner dynamic of prayer: gaze, consider, contemplate as found in her Second Letter to Agnes, 20. Prayer begins with the first of the three verbs, gazing. The question I raise for us is this: "How might these three verbs- gaze, consider and contemplate-be operative in our communal prayer?"

¹ John 14:23

First of all, the word “gaze” means to look at intently and steadily using the physical sense of sight. It also can mean a steady wonder or expectancy, so I will use the word “gaze” to expand beyond sight and say that gazing **involves all five senses**, perceiving our surroundings with an expectancy of God’s presence. The entire universe speaks to us of our Creator whose infinite designs for creatures and environment provide us with endless inspirations of gratitude for the beauty, the wonder, the magnificence of God. All five of our physical senses—sight, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touch—are entrees to interior prayer as they bring to us the revelation of God in our daily environment.

We Franciscans are so conditioned to the beauty of creation as a meeting place with God that we naturally spend time out of doors noticing the flowers, the sky, the gardens, etc. Even these days at the conference we are experiencing new sensations that impact our consciousness. We walk outside and see many colors, we feel the breezes of air on our skin, we smell the aromas in the air from wood fires and from blossoming plants. We hear bells ringing, foreign languages spoken... Beverages and food delight our taste buds. This manner of coming to know and love our God is incarnational spirituality - the bodily senses lead us to the Divine.

How are the senses involved in our communal prayer? When we focus on the sense of **hearing**, perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is music. Our minds and hearts are lifted up to pray through song. Very important is the proclamation of Scripture by good voices, persons trained for lecturing. And, we need to provide hearing aids for those who need it. Fragrant **smells** can stimulate prayerful sensations awakening a realization of the transcendence of God. This is why we use incense, or fragrant flowers in the chapel. And think about what we focus our **eyes** on; the visual in our environment makes a difference for our disposition in prayer. Beautiful displays of sacred art and flowers, or the San Damiano cross, or the monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament, are a few examples of setting an environment for prayer. Jesus reminded us of the importance of **taste**: “Eat of my body and drink of my blood.” The satisfaction of the external taste buds prepares us for the hidden sweetness of God. Clare instructed Agnes in her third letter that through prayer “you too may feel what friends feel in tasting the hidden sweetness that from the beginning, God Himself has reserved for His lovers.” And the sense of **touch**? The felt sense of a shared sign of peace expresses the grace of the sense of touch. Touch can also include bodily movement such as dance. Dance as a prayer form has developed in post-conciliar time as we appropriated the teaching from the *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy*. **I quote:**

“the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not implicate the faith or the good of the whole community; rather does she respect and foster the genius and talents of the various races and peoples... Sometimes in fact she admits such things into the liturgy itself, so long as they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit.” **End of quote**

Our private and communal prayer begins with the use of the external senses. However, some of us are so overloaded with external sensations that we choose absolute silence and bare simplicity for private prayer. In the 1400s, Blessed Angelina of Montegiove lived at St. Anna’s monastery in Foligno. She became the first minister general of a congregation of Third Order Women Religious. She understood the need for solitude for personal, private contemplative prayer and had the monastery constructed so each Sister would have a private cell; the cells were very tiny—about 3’ x 5.’ This personal space divested of external symbols was conducive for deepening contemplative prayer. That example raises the question, “What space do we provide in our congregations for those seeking more solitude, especially the introverted members who need more time in quiet?” Perhaps congregational ministers can act similarly to Blessed Angelina and assess the availability of private silent space and

time for their members, and for ourselves. Do we value solitude for our own practices of private prayer?

The second verb - Consider

The prayer activity of **consider** means to think about in order to understand. Gazing is the manner in which we take into our interior self the images, the messages, the revelations of God. Then, in the interior faculties of memory, intellect and will,ⁱⁱ we enter into the cognitive activity known as meditative prayer, in which we **consider** many things. A few examples of how we “consider”:

- When we meditate on scenes from the Gospel, we might conclude with a resolution for the day. Inspiration for actions to pursue overcoming injustices flows from meditative activity.
- At some times in prayer, our memory puts forth thoughts and feelings that might move us to a litany of gratitude, or desires for repentance, intercessory prayer, or humble adoration.
- There are times during consideration that our feelings of sorrow, anger, or pain extend beyond our limits of reasoning and we plunge into lamentations. Such lamentations can bring us into deeper intimacy with and sharing in the suffering Christ. In such intimacy we hear Jesus say, “Yes, I am with you. Do not be afraid.” Does our communal prayer provide expressions of lamentation? Most of us would respond that through our intercessory prayer we reach out to suffering peoples
- There is consolation in reflecting on the Divine Presence with us in communal prayer. Trusting in the words of Jesus, (“where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst (Mt 18:20),” we are blessed that our gathering exists as a communal dwelling place for God.

The third verb, Contemplate

The Latin origin for the word **contemplate** comes from an expectant looking at space. When visiting the interior of the Pantheon in Rome, we can imagine the origin of the word “contemplate” as we look through the opening at the top of the dome to view the infinite sky. Clare, in the Fourth Letter to Agnes, uses the word contemplation to speak of experiencing the dwelling place of the Holy One within us by describing this as “resting in contemplation.” Contemplation uses no words while being attentive to the Presence of God. In such a nonverbal state, we are transformed like clay in the potter’s hand. Examples of “resting in contemplation” during communal prayer:

- Silent pauses within our Liturgy of the Hours for the proclaimed messages to be absorbed in our hearts
- allowing designated times At congregational gatherings, for sitting together in silence. Such quiet can transform a congregation from reactionary responses in conversations to sharing a more contemplative dialogue. This is a maturing process - to communally sit in silence and trust that the “Spirit of God is at work with us.” This state of absolute trust and receptivity to God allows the members of the congregation *to be overshadowed* by the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 1:35).

During times of “resting in contemplation”, we may sense that we are lost in the seeming darkness. This state of receptivity is the disposition for interior openness, e.g. for God to come, to dwell within.

Communally, moments of “resting in contemplation” will deepen our love and respect for each other. Jesus foretold the outcome: “by this will all know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another (John 13:35).”

Conclusion

The three actions, Gaze, consider, and contemplate, lead to imitation of Christ. Keep in mind that prayer disposes us for God to come and make a dwelling place within us. Francis interpreted this as a type of pregnancy: “We are mothers when we bear Him in our hearts and bodies with divine love and with pure and sincere consciences; and we give birth to him through a holy life which should enlighten others because of our example.” Our prayer life overflows in our lifestyles and ministries. Thomas of Celano described the early penitents as those people of all ages and both sexes who hurried to behold the wonders which the Lord worked anew in the world through his servant, Francis. Through our conscious efforts for renewal of our communal prayer, may the world see in us the wonders of the Lord.

In summary, I ask “What are best practices that have rekindled the flame of love in our communal prayer?” Remembering how we have been renewed by praying the Liturgy of the Hours in our vernacular tongue, we might consider introducing various translations of the psalms to bring a newness to our prayer. Or, maybe it is time to put in a new microphone system. There are many aspects of examining our communal prayer. As we share our stories, we will reflect on how we might encourage our local communities to be renewed in the purpose of Franciscan prayer: “to give God ceaseless praise and thanksgiving for all He has done and does in creation and in our re-creation in Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (4 December 1963), #37.

ⁱⁱ For further reading on the interior faculties, see Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, chapter three.

ⁱⁱⁱ Margaret Carney OSF and Thaddeus Horgan SA, *Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis and Commentary* (Washington, DC: Franciscan Federation, 1982), 23.