



STUDIES

IN
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

Let the Spirit Speak

Learning to Pray

FRANCIS X. HEZEL, S.J.

47/4



WINTER 2015

THE SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

The Seminar is composed of a number of Jesuits appointed from their provinces in the United States.

The Seminar studies topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially American Jesuits, and gathers current scholarly studies pertaining to the history and ministries of Jesuits throughout the world. It then disseminates the results through this journal.

The issues treated may be common also to Jesuits of other regions and to other priests, religious, and laity. Hence, the studies, while meant especially for American Jesuits, are not exclusively for them. Others who may find them helpful are cordially welcome to read them at: ejournals@bc.edu/jesuits

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the first word . . .

One Sunday afternoon last October, as we wrapped up our weekly liturgy with freshmen and a few townies at the Trinity Chapel on our Newton campus, the congregation started the usual shuffle and squirm in its customary eagerness to leave the sacred confines. The rush to check out the score of the Patriots game and the menu for Sunday dinner (which will probably be pizza and diet soda anyway) has become, year after year, as much a concluding rubric for the liturgy as the Prayer after Communion. Like Moses holding back the Red Sea, I ask them to sit down for a couple of announcements. These are the usual campus-ministry events and meetings, and they are no doubt echoed in every college chapel in the country. The last item each week, however, may not be quite as universal. We ask them for money.

The collection basket on a table in the middle aisle has acquired its own name: "Mary Ann's Guilt Basket." Who or what is Mary Ann? you wonder. Fair question. Every college in the country, and probably in the world, has its local student watering hole, which constantly teeters on the edge of being closed down for serving underage customers. Ours is Mary Ann's, nestled cozily in the shadow of the cinder block car barn and repair shop for the Boston trolley cars. Overage customers may find the ambiance a bit—to put it diplomatically—primitive and thus not terribly attractive. But students love the place as their own. Cleveland Circle would never be confused with Rodeo Drive in travel brochures, but it's a home away from home for a good many thirsty and hungry undergrads. The smell of grease from all the fast food restaurants in the area can be overpowering for anyone above the age of twenty-one, but students love it. Nectar and ambrosia; ambrosia and nectar. Clogged arteries can await another time and place.

Why honor the Mary Ann's with a regular mention in a Sunday liturgy? Another fair question. My madness occasionally has its method. I tell my congregation to imagine all the money that their fellow students pour out there on Friday and Saturday night, feel guilty, and then on Sunday night think about putting a mere token into the collection basket. Not much. The price of a bag of chips or a candy bar. The concept may be arresting, but it's not a terribly effective form of fund raising, since student services has devised an ingenious system of on-campus credit cards. No one on campus carries cash any more. And long gone are the days of having everyone in the family check pockets and purses every Sunday morning to make sure they have

the right coins for the first and second collection. Today church-going families that regularly contribute to their parish most probably have a subscription plan where a certain amount comes directly from their credit card each week or month. The Sunday collection strikes most nineteen-year-olds as something from a weird alien culture, like discovering that their grandmother actually had to fasten a tissue to her head with a hairpin to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, because women couldn't enter a church without a hat.

The list of announcements was relatively short that week, but the Mary Ann item jumped out at me. The collection always goes to some good work off campus, since, as I try to explain, the Eucharist extends to the entire world and must reach out beyond one chapel and one campus. This particular week, the campus-ministry people had selected Xavier High School on the island of Chuuk in Micronesia, out there in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It's halfway around the world from here, yet it holds an emotional claim on us members of the former New York Province of a certain vintage. As we novices settled in to Jesuit life, we learned that the two province missions, as we called them then, were located in the Philippines and on what we knew as "The Caroline and Marshall Islands" in the Pacific. At some time or other most young scholastics at least entertained the idea of serving the Church in some exotic, faraway lands. This impulse surely continues the tradition of Xavier's longing for the Indies or Jogues's and Brebeuf's asking to be sent to the St. Lawrence Valley in North America. For a young, idealistic Jesuit, the missions were a concrete realization of the "magis."

In 1960 the Buffalo Province sprang full grown from the brow of New York. The missions were divided as well. New Yorkers would continue to be sent to the Philippines, but Buffalo would assume responsibility for "the Islands." Puerto Rico and Nigeria would come into the mix a few years later. That limited the options for those who continued to find themselves attracted to ministry in distant lands. Two or three New York classmates went to Cebu, in the Philippines for philosophy, and a few more followed them for regency. Fran Hezel, a proud son of the Niagara Frontier, headed off to Truk, as Chuuk was then called. Could one imagine anything more exotic? Fortunately, our readers were able to share that wonderful confluence of the exotic and the mundane in Fran's earlier contribution to this series: "Life at the Edge of the World" (41, no. 4, Winter 2009). As his engaging narrative and thoughtful reflection demonstrated, regency at Xavier High School, Truk, was only the first of his many ministries in that region over the next half century.

To return to Trinity Chapel and the Guilt Basket for a quick parenthetical digression, just a few weeks earlier, the revised typescript of this present essay arrived in my office through the wonders of an e-mail attachment. Memories of Fran, the Buffalo Province, Truk, and, in a generalized way, "the old days" were very much alive in my mind when the announcement for the collection jumped out at me. Here we were, two Jesuits who have gone our separate ways on opposite sides of the world, reunited as author and editor in

a common task, just as though those sixty intervening years had never happened. We're still two brother novices raking leaves and picking apples together at St. Andrew-on-Hudson, filled with aspirations yet having not the slightest clue what the next six decades would have in store for us.

Fran's earlier essay filled in the gaps in biography and added a serious theological reflection on the changing rationale of blending the gifts of traditional, established churches with younger ones from the perspective of one who's been there and seen it all. This current essay offers something quite different. In this one, Fran opens the curtain on his inner life and reveals his personal perspective on how a Jesuit grows in prayer through the various stages of his ministry. What happens when a Jesuit prays? Fran's forthright chronicle offers not only a window into his own religious life, but it spurs a reflection on what has been happening to my own struggles with prayer.

One final thought: before reading this, I had no idea. That insight alone was the real value of this essay for me. We live with Jesuits, know their quirks, often admire their dedication, and celebrate their accomplishments. Yet there is that hidden inner life, that really shapes who the person is. How is it possible to be a companion for so long, and yet understand so little about the other? It's not much of an exaggeration to say that in the end the human person is infinitely complex and ultimately unfathomable. The delight of being human is our endless capacity to reveal ourselves and discover something new in the other. (I like to think that even after fifty years married people can still surprise each other: "I never knew.") We Jesuits share a common spirituality and have developed a common language to talk about it. Understanding one another should be simple but, as we all know, it isn't. Here we have a rare opportunity to see how someone actually tries to live it. I hope our readers are as surprised as I was.

the last word . . .

This issue marks both the close of volume 47 of this series and the end of my involvement with the project. In 1998 John Padberg invited me to join the Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, and in 2002 asked me to assume the editor's role. It's been a long run. Perhaps too long. That span included well over fifty issues with their introductions, at least two Seminar meetings each year and some years four, the posting of the entire archive on the Internet, the closing of the Institute of Jesuit Sources and the formal transfer of ownership to the Jesuit Conference. It's been a busy time. The series continues, but without me. With the next issue, editorial responsibility passes to the very capable hands of Bart Geger, currently at Regis University in Denver. He'll become only the

fourth editor since the series began under George Ganss in 1969. His academic background in Ignatian spirituality makes him an ideal choice, and we can all be grateful that he generously agreed to add this new role to his already busy regimen.

As Tom Hanks said in *Apollo XIII*, when the crippled lunar module started its precarious return to earth, “Gentlemen, it’s been a privilege flying with you.” Privilege is the perfect word. The Seminar welcomes three new members each year for three-year terms. This for seventeen years. Very few Jesuits have had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with such a variety of dedicated brothers over the years. We’ve tried to recruit members from different regions, ministries, academic specializations, and age groups. The talent in the U. S. Assistancy is breathtaking, and I’m privileged to have witnessed it firsthand. As a bonus, many communities have hosted the Seminar during this time. Without the Seminar I could never have visited so many communities and been able to enjoy the hospitality of men I would otherwise never have met.

The editor’s desk provides a wonderful crow’s-nest to survey the workings of the Society. The Seminar reviews a fair number of manuscripts in the course of the year, some of which appear in print and some, of course, do not. It’s fascinating to experience the variety of scholarship and reflection on Ignatian issues going on in many different areas in the U. S. and around the world. It’s even more fascinating to participate in discussions about them and witness the different perspectives of individual Seminar members. The written content holds its own interest, of course, but it’s even more intriguing to witness how values and presuppositions surface during the editorial discussion. One man might want to reject an article on the very grounds that another might find admirable. The conversations often reveal as much about the readers as the texts. I’ll miss the animated exchange of ideas.

At the risk of sounding like an acceptance speech during the Academy Awards, I would like to thank the many people who provided support over these seventeen years. Surely, someone will be forgotten, but here’s my shot at inclusivity.

First, of course, thanks to the Seminar members, who volunteered their time, talent, and wise counsel to the project. Thanks also to the many contributors, Jesuits and laypeople, men and women, who shared with us their thoughts on matters Ignatian. Let me add a note of thanks to our readers. Normally, if someone likes an article, he or she will photocopy it (without permission) and pass it on to others. Notes to the editor most frequently express outrage. With some few exceptions, this has not been my experience. I am grateful for the words of support, written and spoken, that let us know our efforts serve a purpose. This goes especially for those who participated in the Survey Monkey, designed and analyzed by Tom Gaunt at CARA. Thanks to those who took the time to respond, and especially to those who had posi-

tive things to say about us. It's gratifying to realize that some have found the series useful. Their support assures our continuation at least for the immediate future.

The Seminar has moved from one tent to another in its journey these past few years. When I began, *STUDIES* was still a function of the Institute of Jesuit Sources. John Padberg had the flexibility to bring me in from the outside, and then John and the late Marty O'Keefe eased the transition by continuing to handle subscriptions at IJS, with their capable administrator Joni Hosty. John McCarthy, the veteran copy editor and compositor at IJS, continued to handle that part of the operation at long distance, with the aid of FedEx and e-mail. One might fall back on the old cliché, "I don't know what I would have done without them." In this case, I know exactly what I would have done without them. I would have resigned.

At the other end of the journey is the Jesuit Conference. Gradually, it replaced IJS as our parent organization. Brad Schafer, Tom Smolich, and now Tim Kesicki have been invariably supportive, and mercifully "hands off." With the completion of the transfer of legal incorporation from IJS, Gerry Stockhausen became the official publisher, a role that took more time and energy than anyone anticipated, as the bank and the Post Office buried us with administrative forms to establish ownership and tax-exempt status. Bob Drewes, president of A Graphic Resources in St. Louis, the company that handles printing and subscriptions, deserves a Hero of the Republic medallion for his work in coordinating all these legal and fiscal complications. Frank Herrmann, a Jesuit at the Law School, agreed to become "treasurer" of the corporation and drew up new bylaws to register with the bank, the IRS, the Post Office, and who knows what else. Who would have thought a tiny operation like ours could lead such a complicated life? They supplied the patience that I found growing very thin as the details and delays piled up.

We've gone electronic, and as a certified technoklutz I remain mystified by the very idea. Jane Morris, at the Boston College library, supervised the transfer with her colleagues Brian Meuse and Emily Toner. Jane keeps her eye on copyright regulations, and Brian and Emily keep the site current and functioning. Their counterpart in Washington, Marcus Bleech, posts the recent issues on the Website of the Jesuit Conference.

God's plans work out in strange ways. I initially resisted the appointment on the grounds that I was neither a theologian, nor a historian, nor emphatically a spiritual director. Yet for some odd reason, I was called to collaborate with many fine Jesuits who were. They, and the work enriched my life intellectually, of course, but even more spiritually. We were together, pooling our talents, doing a truly Jesuit ministry. It was more than a privilege. It was a blessing.

Richard A. Blake, S.J.

Editor

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Francis X. Hezel, S.J., has, with few interruptions, served the Church in Micronesia since 1963. He has been teacher and principal at Xavier High School in Chuuk, regional superior of the region, and superior at Pohnpei. From 1972 to until 2010, he directed the Micronesian Seminar, a pastoral-research institute, published sixteen books, and produced radio and video programs on local history and culture. He is currently doing parish work on Guam, where he is assisting the archbishop with the cause of Blessed Diego Luis de San Vitores, the Spanish Jesuit who introduced Christianity into the islands in the seventeenth century.

Let the Spirit Speak

Learning to Pray

Even after years of saying prayers as a child in a devout Catholic home, a young Jesuit can find the challenge of mental prayer daunting. This intensely personal activity changes as the person matures and becomes comfortable with simply being present before God without words.

I. Introduction

Prayer is “raising the heart and mind to God,” as we learned in our earliest catechism class. Easy, it would seem, for someone who was a cradle Catholic raised in a strongly religious home and who spent all his post-high-school years in a religious order. But it wasn’t. The pursuit of prayer is a lifetime adventure, I since learned. I would imagine that most of those reading this piece could say the same.

When Jesuits discuss their prayer life—usually one-on-one with spiritual counselors or retreat directors, but now and then among themselves in support groups—we usually discuss the fruits of our prayer: graces received, spiritual movements, and lights revealing something more of ourselves. The attempt to articulate the personal effects of prayer, as we all know, has undeniable benefits in advancing our spiritual growth, not to mention in strengthening our bonds with our brothers. Yet, there are still other questions that could be asked.

“How do you pray?” is a more neglected question, one that I myself have seldom been asked by retreat directors, although one I always feel obliged to ask when I’m guiding others on retreat. It’s not a question that most of them find it easy to answer—the “how” of prayer always seems to reduce even the most introspective of us to incoherence—but it offers an important glimpse into the spiritual life of the retreatant and provides us an opening for suggesting new prayer methods in the course of the retreat.

The subject of this autobiographical essay, however, is a different question: How did you learn to pray? It’s less a statement on present-day prayer methods than an attempt to track over time the changes in one’s approach to prayer. In this attempt to describe my own experience, I am certainly not presenting myself as normative for others, much less an ideal. I offer this essay as nothing more than the testimony of one aging Jesuit who has been struggling with prayer for years and continues to do so. My hope is that it might move forward the conversation on how people grow in prayer through the course of their lives.

Early Years

At my earliest age, as was probably the case with most of you, prayer was the equivalent of prayers—reciting prayers that we learned as soon as we could speak.

Just a few years ago, on the feast of the Guardian Angels, I started my homily with the words “Angel of God, my guardian dear . . .” Then the rest of the congregation, most of them nearly as old as I, surprised me. They lost not a beat as they recited in unison the remainder of the prayer: “to whom God’s love commits me here, ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen.” In my homily I reminded them of what I regarded as the significance of the feast. If God was too big and abstract a concept for our young minds to embrace, we had his loving care personified in the figure of the guardian angel appointed for each one of us.

We might have been too small to understand Psalm 139, but we could easily grasp prayers like the one I remember saying every night:

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,
Guard the bed that I lie on.

If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Even my personal prayers, those not composed and written down somewhere, were formulaic. As children we boys were taught to pray as we knelt alongside our bed: “God bless daddy and mommy and . . .” (here we continued through the other members of our family, followed by a list of those close relatives who had died).

We had barely learned to speak when we were first taught our prayers: morning and evening prayers, blessing before and thanks after meals. They were formulas: easy to remember, crafted for certain moments in our daily life. They served us well when we were young, and some of us have even held on to them through the years. The Morning Offering I learned as a boy, for example, was one prayer that I recited for years afterwards, even through my early years in the Society. When I finally dropped the prayer, it was only because I had found other ways of expressing the same sentiments.

But prayer in our German Catholic family wasn’t always left to each of us to do on our own. We experienced at times a type of family prayer that could almost be considered para-liturgical and remains much more memorable, even years later, than any of the Masses I attended. During May and October we prayed the rosary as a family. We also knelt for the prayers of the novenas (always read from a book), the most important of which was the Novena of Grace in March. This evening devotion always ended with all of us singing, “Blessed Francis, Holy Father” in honor of Xavier. (We knew almost nothing at that time about St. Ignatius, the other saint honored in the novena.) There were other novenas, too—all made in front of statues and lit candles that sometimes inspired us boys to try it on our own. Once or twice this earned us a scolding from my father when we packed into a bedroom closet with a lit candle. He admired our devotion, he told us, but preferred that we not play with matches and risk burning down the apartment and ourselves with it. In all, we learned from an early age and lived by the consecrated phrase that Fr. Patrick Peyton had made popular: “The family that prays together stays together.”

Our family devotions were echoed by celebratory events in our parish. Most of the Holy Name Society events are no more than a blur, but I can remember how proud I was to participate in the father-son breakfast. We processed from our small and undistinguished cement-

block church to the adjacent school building where the breakfast was to be held, fathers marching with their sons behind a large Holy Name Society banner fringed with gold-colored tassels. These parish activities were more memorable than the feast-day liturgies (including Christmas and Easter), liturgies that were set apart by singing rather than anything else. Feast-day liturgies at that time, as I recall, didn't seem like much more than dressed-up Sunday Masses that served mainly as preludes to the glorious family celebration afterwards.

We were bonded in our faith by ceremonies and rituals, but the most powerful of these were not strictly liturgical. After my mother died suddenly when I was six years old, I can remember nothing at all of the funeral Mass that I must have attended. But I will never forget the blessing of the casket before it was lowered into the grave as I stood next to my dad and my younger brothers. I might not have had the words or the presence of mind to make a prayer of my own but, then again, it may not have mattered. As the priest in his stole sprinkled holy water on the casket, the Church was praying for us, making up for what we ourselves might have been unable to do at the time. It was only years later that I would realize the significance of this—allowing others to do the praying that I was incapable of doing on my own. Meanwhile, those memories persisted, along with the basic scriptural stories we learned in catechism class and from our parents. They were the glue that kept us bonded in our faith before we really knew what faith meant.

When Andrew Greeley and others wrote about the Catholic imagination, they refer back to such memories as these—the smell of incense during benediction, or the sprinkling of holy water as the priest in his cope came down the aisles, or the fear of entering the dark confessional box, or even the welcoming flicker of the sanctuary lamp in the evening.¹ These are the unforgettable symbols of the faith that remain embedded for life, Greeley argues, even in those who have long

¹ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Greeley may have popularized the subject, but other authors had explored this line of inquiry earlier. See, for instance, David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), and William Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (originally published in 1960; now available in ISI Books, 2004).

since stopped practicing their faith. Some may stop attending church and regard themselves as fallen-away Catholics (or “enlightened ex-Catholics,” as some of their number might put it), but the memories linger on and fuel their imagination throughout their lives. I can attest that they have in my own case, along with memories of some of the other features of our parish life.

Reflecting on this, I often wondered whether early candidates for the priesthood or religious life did not all spring from a family background like mine: one in which prayer played such an important part of family life. That might well have been true back when my generation was considering the priesthood, but when I ask that question of younger Jesuits today, I often receive quizzical looks. They suggest that such early prayer experiences in the family are much less vivid and essential today than when we entered the seminary nearly sixty years ago.

Prayer without Prayers

We had been raised to say our prayers and to participate in the prayer life of the Church. But leave us to our own devices and we were lost. There were times, as children, when we were thrown on our own without the prayer formulas on which we depended so heavily. Our private thanksgiving after receiving Communion was the most recurrent. What would we do during those few minutes when we were meant to be conversing with Jesus? We had no guide unless we flipped to the end of our missal (if we even had one) and began reciting the prayers suggested for this time. I didn’t have a missal and found this the most challenging of prayer times. I could list the gifts for which I wanted to thank the Lord, as I sometimes did before going to bed. But the list was always much shorter than the time allowed for it.

This was challenging territory for most of us in those days. I remember seeing older women walk to the front of the church, light one of the votive candles, and kneel silently for several minutes in prayer. What could they have been saying? Somehow the prayer of these women, I marveled, had been liberated from the need for the formulas on which I had come to rely so completely. Years later I remember reading somewhere about an elderly woman, much like the ones I had seen praying before their lit candles, who sat quietly in the back of her parish church for a half hour or longer each day. When one day someone asked her what she prayed about so fervently and at such length

without a rosary or prayer booklet in her hands, she replied simply, "I look at the Lord and he looks at me." Wordless prayer? I couldn't have imagined such a thing at that time.

Things weren't so different after I began high school at Canisius in Buffalo. I would serve Mass regularly in the morning and happily attend the First Friday Mass in the auditorium with the rest of the school, but I recall the distaste I felt for the Sodality, the school activity seemingly made to order for the pious. My problem with the organization, as I remember, was less with the people who joined it than the requirement that members make fifteen minutes of mental prayer a day. What was "mental prayer?" I asked myself. How could I possibly comply with such a requirement when I was still stretching the limit in trying to make my five-minute thanksgiving after Communion? When I finally told our student counselor, a Jesuit priest, that I was hoping to apply for the Society after graduation, he strongly urged me to join the Sodality, if only to get used to praying on my own. This advice I managed to stoutly resist after attending just a meeting or two on an experimental basis.

Like so many of my peers, I could proudly claim that I attended Mass regularly and even felt some personal satisfaction in these forms of group prayer. The problem wasn't that; it was the empty space of time that I had to fill on my own somehow by speaking to God. It never occurred to me that perhaps I only needed to listen to him. Or, as the woman in the back pew put it when asked about her prayer, watch him.

II. A Young Jesuit Begins

The Plunge into Mental Prayer

My high-school student counselor was right when he argued that the fifteen minutes of daily prayer recommended for members of the Sodality was modest compared with what we would face when we entered the Society. The novitiate brought the problem of mental prayer to a head. From our entrance we were told that we were expected to make an hour of mental prayer each morning and another half hour in the afternoon for good measure. This wasn't wading into the shallow end of the pool; it was being thrown off the diving board.

Full initiation into the Ignatian insights on prayer did not come at that time. They wouldn't have registered even if they had been present-

ed. We were offered a very scaled-down version during novitiate. We may have received a conference or two on the various forms of prayer that Ignatius explains in the *Spiritual Exercises*—I don't remember for sure—but this did not build into our daily prayer. As novices, we were instructed in what we all called mental prayer—something that clearly moved us beyond our reliance on the formulas we lived and prayed by while growing up. To prepare for the hour-long morning prayer, we were given fifteen minutes the evening before. This period of preparation was known as “points,” because it ordinarily meant choosing a gospel passage and picking out three salient points from the text for our prayer the next day.

Novitiate prayer for me, like so many of my peers, was mulling over a scriptural passage, sometimes repeating the words slowly and letting them sear themselves into my mind. I would read over the passage slowly, pausing to allow bits of the text to sink in. Whether into our heads or hearts, or both, I don't know for sure. *Lectio divina* (meditative reading, generally of Scripture), as this practice was called, had a long history in Christian spirituality. It was embraced by the monastics and recommended by St. Ignatius for those untutored in prayer, and it served as a good transitional tool for us novices as we moved from the prayers of our childhood into a longer and more open type of prayer. Many have continued to use this form of prayer in their later years with great profit. I still find it helpful from time to time when everything else fails, but more as a take-off than anything else.

Yet, we all knew that “mental prayer” was meant to be more than a matter of the mind. It involved the heart as well, since the colloquy at the end of the hour's prayer was supposed to allow our heart to speak to the Lord. Thought and reflection might be an element, but it was not to be the final stop; the prayer was intended to open our hearts to Christ. But how did we go about attempting to open our hearts during the novitiate? My recollection was of interrupting the “meditation” on the points from time to time and giving little speeches and then following up with a longer heart-to-heart monologue at the end of the prayer. Perhaps the awkward formality of those colloquies was simply because I wasn't yet familiar enough with the One I was talking to. Consequently, my attempts at a colloquy could sound in retrospect more like speech making than easy conversation.

There were other types of prayer, of course. What about contemplation—watching the gospel scene unfold in our mind as we took it all in? There may have been some who could pray this way, but I couldn't. I never had the imagination to do so. Even much later, at the most intense prayer times of my life, I had the same difficulty: the scenes were like old-time movies. They were in black and white, there was no sound, and the film stuttered and stopped at times before the image faded completely. At best, my contemplation was more like looking through an old photo album of grainy and blurred images that didn't move and certainly didn't speak. In time, of course, I began to realize that even such poor images can become a portal for stirring movements inside myself. But that realization was a thing of the future.

Sometimes in the course of prayer I experienced consolation: strong feelings that swept over me in the form of disgust for evil (abstract, for the most part) or joy at some aspect of the Good News (again, removed from my own life). But for myself, as I suspect was true for my fellow novices as well, such emotional moments were rare. Many of us counted it as a success if we had managed to stay awake from the beginning of the prayer to the end. After prayer, we novices were obliged to spend fifteen minutes reflecting on the hour and jotting down any lights that we might have experienced in our reflection notebooks. For myself, and probably for most of the other novices, this was a frustrating exercise since there was so little of real interest to record. Then again, Ignatius himself, as schooled as he had become in prayer, wasn't much of a model in this regard; his later spiritual journal entries were often simply "tears and consolation." Admittedly, we young latter-day sons of Ignatius had a long way to go to achieve either. If we had, we would probably have found ourselves as hard-pressed as Ignatius to articulate the results of our prayer.

Tom Green, the Jesuit spiritual writer who spent most of his life in the Philippines, recalls making meditation on his knees at a wooden kneeler beside his desk.

How many mornings I knelt there trying to meditate but obsessed by my aching knees, wondering what prayer was all about and whether I would ever really discover its meaning! My reflections were labored and the labor produced very little water of devotion. Worse still, as I looked around me the others seemed to have

discovered some inner spring of ecstasy which was totally alien to me. Worst of all, one of the novices . . . always seemed to be writing down some profound insight or feeling in his journal. His apparent success made my own failure all the more wretched! I hated him and all the rest of them! What had they found that was forever out of my reach?

As I was to learn years later, most of them hadn't found anything. They were thinking the same thoughts I was, and to them I looked like the one who had found the secret of it all!²

So prayer, which even by those standards was supposed to have an affective component, remained largely a matter of the mind. There were exceptions, of course, but by and large prayer remained mental during novitiate and for many years afterwards. There were occasionally times of stillness in prayer—moments when the disorganized flow of thoughts came to a full stop while I was wondrously still awake—but I didn't know what to make of that at the time. The moments of strong affection were relatively few, and I quickly learned not to count on such experiences. Much of what we did in novitiate, at any rate, seemed to be based on the premise that even if not inherently enjoyable, it was good for the spirit. So it was easy for us to believe that mental prayer, as unrewarding as it might seem, brought spiritual benefits in time. Any kind of self-discipline could be expected to do the same.

Older Jesuits, I noticed many years later, continued to refer to their morning prayer as “mental prayer” well into their old age. Many sadly admitted that they had dropped the hour of prayer or had simply adopted the practice of reading their breviary instead. I don't blame them. If I had nothing better than “mental prayer” to fall back on, I might have done the same thing. Then again, perhaps the real problem for them, as for all of us, was the label with which we had tagged prayer and the understanding of prayer this tag implied.

²Thomas Green, *When the Well Runs Dry: Prayer Beyond the Beginnings* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1979), 43-44.

III. A Jesuit in Formation

During studies following our novitiate, prayer was a chore without many intrinsic rewards. It was an obligation to be fulfilled each day even as we devoted our fuller energy to our academic routine. We had an hour of prayer written into the daily schedule, even if no one checked on us. We were warned that if we gave up prayer, however unrewarding it often seemed, we would soon be leading a spiritually uprooted life. Many of us simply felt that to neglect even the kind of prayer we were doing would be to deny an important element in our lives—one that was recognized as such by all those whose lives were supposed to inspire us.

Do I remember being swept into the prayer on occasion? Not really. Not even during retreats, in which the periods of meditation were more frequent and more intense than during the year—and consequently dreaded by most of us. There was consolation and desolation, which we regarded, without the nuances given in Ignatius's writings, as simply sensible feeling or lack of the same. For most of us the operative word was "dryness"—the lack of any kind of affect. Despite the cautions of Ignatius on the subject, many of us tended to identify any kind of feeling in prayer as success and the absence of any insight or emotion as failure.³ Unfortunately, rated this way, most of our prayer would have been written off as unsuccessful.

So we plodded on with the understanding that some might have the gift of prayer: their prayer would sparkle with feeling and fervor. But for most of us, the sterile prayer we offered was just another of the sacrifices demanded of us as religious. To expect real rewards for doing our duty other than the satisfaction of knowing that we were fulfilling our obligations was risky. We had learned that consolation was a gift freely given by the One to whom we were praying. Sometimes it was offered to us, but far more often it was conspicuously absent. Our lives could not be built around the hope of achieving a satisfaction as fickle as this.

³In *Spiritual Exercises*, 322, Ignatius advises beginners that there are other causes for desolation or dryness than simply negligence in our prayer life; lack of affection in prayer might be a test of our spirit, he writes, or an important lesson in how little we can accomplish on our own.

Nonetheless, we were learning a few things about prayer. In the first place, fidelity counted for a great deal, as our master of novices insisted in his conferences on the subject. Simply showing up was important—for prayer as much as for most other things in life, as Woody Allen famously noted years later.⁴ Our presence was at the very least an expression of interest on our part. Moreover, we were often powerless to control what actually took place during our time of formal prayer. Whether we went through the actual preparation required of us in the novitiate or not, other factors seem to determine what actually happened during our prayer time. Drowsiness, preoccupations with studies or other concerns, our physical ups and downs—all seem to be major factors in the outcome. Since we couldn't control the outcome anyway, we could afford to relax a bit and let our psychic nature take its course. For me at least this was training in the importance of letting go: in other words, being slow to judge the effectiveness of our prayer by the tumble of distractions, the restlessness or even the utter boredom that we endured during what should have been our prayer.

There is little doubt that many of us grew in our relationship with the Lord during this time. How could we have survived otherwise? During those years, the 1960s, our fellow seminarians were leaving the Society at an unprecedented rate. Every letter I received during my regency in the middle of that decade seemed to name two or three men who had left the brotherhood. There were distractions all around: some academic, but others of a more carnal type. Yet, through it all, some of us remained in the Society; we may not have been unscarred, but we were still enchanted by our calling and presumably strengthened by the relationship with God that inspired it. Our prayer (in the broader sense of the word) must have been defined by more than our struggling attempts to communicate during the formal prayer that we practiced each day. But my experience in prayer was still so limited at the time that I wouldn't have known what to say if asked the most basic questions about the subject.

Our ordination retreat was made at the Cape May villa house on the New Jersey shore in April 1969. The retreat was anything but the silent retreat that we had made in earlier years of formation. This was

⁴“Showing up is 80 percent of life.” Woody Allen once famously remarked, although the percentage sometimes varies, depending on the one quoting Woody.

the late 1960s, after all, and so we were ready to try anything—so much the better if it had not been tested and proven. The retreat was open, conversation was animated through the day, and when I finished the obligatory three hours of prayer, I went to work editing a manuscript I had been working on. Dinners were convivial, lasting for a couple of hours over conversation. I prayed after a fashion during the hours when I sneaked off to my room to fulfill this obligation. (It was a retreat, after all!) I expected no surprising revelations from on high and I received none.

Oddly enough, our not-so-silent retreat occurred just at the time that personally directed Ignatian retreats were being rediscovered. By the early 1970s, directed retreats made it to Micronesia, where I had returned to work as a young priest teaching at Xavier High School. I dutifully made the yearly directed retreat as expected, consulting with our director daily and doing four or even five hours of prayer a day rather than the customary three. But the results of the retreat were much the same as in earlier years: a duty performed, an exercise completed. I hoped that I had gained something from it all, but I couldn't be sure.

Tertianship: Something New

Our tertianship in the Philippines was more than an intense revival of spirituality; it was a much needed opportunity to concentrate on the mechanics of prayer. Tertianship began with an eight-day workshop run by Fr. Tony deMello, the celebrated Indian Jesuit who was bringing a Buddhist dimension to the practice of prayer. DeMello's principal focus was on awareness exercises: what later came to be called centering prayer. The point of it was not simply to achieve quiet, but to generate the type of inner stillness that allows us to see into the depths of ourselves. It is this that deMello called awareness. By focusing on the simplest of things—our breathing, different parts of our body, the sounds in the background, even distractions themselves—we learned that we could slow down our mind and prepare to find what lies closer to the inner core of ourselves.

As we dig into the depths of ourselves, we can objectify not just the thoughts and feelings that flit in and out of our consciousness, but we should even be able to distance ourselves from some of our deepest personal needs and goals. Over time we acquire the ability to look upon some of our most intimate desires with a certain dispassionate

eye. DeMello himself tells us that the goal is to see ourselves in the third person, as a young child might when he describes his activity: "Tommy had his breakfast this morning." To "disidentify" from oneself is a mark of a mystic, deMello says.⁵ The uncluttered "I" that can objectify even one's deepest longings is the grace that Teresa of Avila constantly prayed for. It is what the mystic masters of the East and Meister Eckhart urged others to discover.

We were far from such sublime goals as we began tertianship in Manila—just as far as we were from mastering the forms of awareness exercises deMello introduced to us. I didn't exactly learn to pray at the deMello workshop, but I certainly acquired some enormously helpful tools. It could be that these tools sharpened concentration, limited the place of the mind in formal prayer, and helped me explore depths of myself that might otherwise have remained unfathomed. Whatever they may have achieved, they certainly made long periods of prayer more tolerable, sometimes even interesting. With these new tools, prayer became an exciting experiment after all those years of trying to practice it according to the book.

During the tertianship long retreat, I spent from five to seven hours a day in formal prayer, usually sitting in as close to the lotus position as I could get. At times the prayer was dry, as it had been so often for me in the past. Often, however, I felt a sense of peace and quiet. At special times, there was even strong emotion. The surprising difference was not so much what happened during my time of prayer as what happened afterwards. For as long as I can remember, reflection on prayer was a seemingly unrewarding chore, so I avoided it whenever I could. Yet during our tertianship long retreat I began to cherish the reflection period after the prayer when we were expected to jot down our reflections on what had just happened. Throughout the retreat that short reflection period became important to me as it never had before, because thoughts that were never fully formed during the prayer itself tumbled out afterwards as I filled page after page in my retreat diary.

The most memorable experience I had of this was during the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises in which we are considering sin. For a

⁵ Anthony deMello, *Awareness: The Perils and Opportunities of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 73 ff.

full week I prayed on the first sin of Adam, hell, death and judgment, and personal sin; but none of this produced any real insight on my sinfulness. Naturally, there was nothing close to the “shame and confusion” that Ignatius urges the retreatant to pray for. Then one morning, as I was doing yet another repetition on personal sin, the floodgates opened. It might not have been too clear to me during the prayer itself, but during the reflection period afterwards I wrote on and on. It wasn’t

Although we cradle Catholics had been raised to believe that only genuine saints prayed constantly, could it be that even we lesser mortals might be called to engage in a conversation that was not just carried on at certain moments during the day but never really ended?

simply about actions, but about the very roots of sinfulness in myself: the self-righteousness that conceals from me my own transgressions; the contempt of the weak (or even the physically strong for being weak-minded, or intellectuals for being without social grace); the fear of being dismissed as irrelevant by the world; and a kind of incipient

self-indulgence that was often disguised as kindness toward others. This realization was the fruit of at least a week’s prayer, and it spilled into thoughts and words after prayer more than during prayer time itself. That experience not only proved how difficult it could be to penetrate the protective armor we wear, but it confirmed something else I was learning—that prayer doesn’t end when the time period allotted for it is over.

For some reason even contemplation, always my bugbear in the past, seemed easier during the retreat. Perhaps it was that we were required to repeat most of our contemplations as many as three or four times during the day. Knowing that I had time to work through the event spared me from the unconscious worry that everything had to be done in a limited period. The scenes slowed down even more for me. Always limited in what I could imagine, I was content to see the beggar at the side of the road, even if he never moved, and to remain focused on him (well, until I drowsed off, that is). The retreat was a lesson in something I had long failed to grasp—that you didn’t always need an aerial view of the scene, the view from the edge of the road would do just fine. Bigger wasn’t necessarily better, as Ignatius kept trying

to teach his men (“non multa sed multum”). You need not capture the grand and glorious sweep of the action, just as I had already learned it need not be in live color or at full speed or in enhanced sound. The mere movement of the mouth of a beggar as Jesus approached, even if you couldn’t hear the sound coming out, could offer insightful hints of what was happening.

Given my long-standing problems with ordinary contemplation, I wouldn’t have dared to attempt the Application of the Senses if our tertian instructor had not directed us to do so. He insisted that we attempt this form of prayer only after we had repeated our contemplation on the same event a couple of times. The results were surprising. In our Application of the Senses, we were expected to see and hear the gospel scene—with predictable results for me, given the problems I had in getting action movies with sound. But when we got to taste, everything changed. I found, after a few false starts, that I could “taste” the emotions of the scene in a way that I had never expected. At least at times while praying this way, I felt a visceral, rather than simply emotional, reaction to what I was watching. Another Ignatian prayer mystery solved!

Once upon a time I had imagined formal prayer as a conversation with God—although God didn’t always seem so good at holding up his end of the conversation. What I began to learn over the years, beginning most seriously with tertianship, was that formal prayer wasn’t in most cases the conversation itself. The formal prayer was just the preparation for the conversation: the tuning in of the headset, or the formalities exchanged when entering a person’s house, or the satisfied sigh after flopping into a chair next to a good friend. The real conversation goes on and on; it doesn’t stop. It happens when you sit with notebook in hand reflecting on what happened, while you’re showering or changing your clothes, when you’re riding a bus, and at every other imaginable time throughout the day. The formal prayer is just the resumption of a conversation that never ends.

Could this have been what Ignatius was telling us when he advised that, as his men became more experienced in religious life, the requirements for formal prayer could be reduced because Jesuits were

expected to pray constantly?⁶ Although we cradle Catholics had been raised to believe that only genuine saints prayed constantly, could it be that even we lesser mortals might be called to engage in a conversation that was not just carried on at certain moments during the day but never really ended?⁷

IV. A Growing Maturity

The Later Years

Now, forty years later, I can safely say without exaggeration that my prayer life was changed by the long retreat during tertianship. Awareness exercises became a part of my prayer routine ever after. To be sure, there were still the usual challenges in prayer time: dryness and distractions, even with the awareness exercises. I found that I could fall asleep in the middle of an awareness exercise almost as easily as during my older forms of mental prayer. Even so, my formal prayer was more satisfying on the whole than it had ever been before.

My understanding of myself had greatly increased. I found that I could not be content with less in other retreats afterwards. The stakes had been upped; expectations were higher than they had been before. Oddly enough, other challenges in my Jesuit life grew much more intense after tertianship, and I certainly did not respond well to all of these. So it's not that I found salvation all of a sudden, but at least I felt that I had the tools I needed to deal with these challenges.

The deMello workshop and the long retreat gave me a game plan for prayer that I never had before. Formal prayer would begin when I had twisted myself into something akin to the lotus position; I would

⁶ Although in the Constitutions, Ignatius dictates certain regulations for prayer in those undergoing the novitiate, he recommends that those in other stages of formation spend an hour a day in prayer—with the hour including the two examens, the litanies, and other devotions [*Cons.*, IV, 342]. For fully formed Jesuits, he writes that “in what pertains to prayer . . . it does not seem fit to give them any other rule than that which discreet charity dictates” [*Cons.*, VI, 582].

⁷ Ignatius once told Jerome Nadal that “for a truly mortified man a quarter of an hour suffices to unite him with God in prayer.” Ignatius clearly valued “mortification”—that is, the subordination of “me” to the One who seeks my heart—more than lengthy prayer. See Edward Kinerk, “When Jesuits Pray: A Perspective on the Prayer of Apostolic Persons,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 17, no. 5 (November 1985): 1-9.

then do a brief awareness exercise—perhaps breathing or possibly bodily awareness—for five or ten minutes. Then came the prayer for the day—usually a short scriptural verse or possibly even a phrase repeated over and over again. At times it could be a scriptural scene in as close to a contemplation as I could come—one frozen image that was symbolic somehow of the entire passage. The soldier’s hammer raised above the nail positioned over the wrist, for instance. The eyes of the adulterous woman raised in relief and gratitude. The lamb comfortably settled on the shoulders of the shepherd. Now and then I might try a different prayer form, but it wasn’t long before I went back to the basic prayer menu I had adopted during tertianship. Less was more, as I had been learning about prayer even before tertianship. Better to keep things simple: limit the scope of what I hoped to pray about and let the Spirit speak.

Let the Spirit speak! This is something that we heard from our earliest days in novitiate, but it took some time for me to recognize that this tired old directive described just what was happening. We were encouraged to let God speak to us rather than spend the whole prayer time assailing him with our words. We were assured that if we just opened our inner ears, God would indeed speak to us. An inspiring assertion, but something that took some time to verify from experience. Simple prayer—the type that I learned to rely on after tertianship—helped me understand that this was not just a pious statement. If from an hour spent repeating the same short phrase or watching the same still shot—often amid distractions and without any affect—a rich mixture of ideas and feelings often tumbled out, it was difficult to attribute this to anything I had done other than put myself in a position to watch and wait. If in earlier periods of my life I might have had doubts that God was really listening to me, my later experience removed any such skepticism.

But there was another step to be taken. The Spirit wasn’t just speaking to me in prayer. The Spirit was somehow speaking for me. Paul wrote about the Spirit groaning within us: another of those sayings that had always mystified me.⁸ Was Paul suggesting that it wasn’t

⁸“In the same way the Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray: the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought

really God who couldn't keep up his end of the conversation, but we ourselves? He may have been writing of mystics, but surely not of us ordinary foot-sloggers, I once thought as I relegated that passage to my long list of unintelligible biblical texts. Then again, we readily believe that the Spirit can offer us all manner of good counsel, that he even lives in us. (We have always boasted that we are nothing less than vessels of the Holy Spirit, after all.) Why should it be so difficult to admit that the stirring in our hearts that we call prayer should also be attributed to this Spirit?

I had to admit that my best prayer often seemed to be that in which I had the least involvement. As I grew older, it became easier to see that my own role in the symphony that we might call prayer was

Maintaining a rhythm of personal prayer by allotting time to it each day remained as important as ever, even though I no longer saw prayer merely as a daily obligation that had to be fulfilled, regardless of how unsatisfying it might seem at times.

a much more modest one than I had ever imagined. I always knew that I was not the conductor, but little by little I was forced to admit to myself that I was not playing first violin or even sitting in the percussion section. I was the security guard who had unlocked the concert hall in which the symphony was being played. I was beginning to understand

(at long last) that I was less an active participant in this prayer conversation than a medium for the One who was praying through me.

In an earlier issue of *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS*, Joseph Conwell keenly observes that the *Baltimore Catechism* definition of prayer that we all learned as kids missed one fine point. Prayer may indeed be the lifting of the mind and heart to God, but it fails to note that John Damascene, from whom the definition was borrowed, intended the passive voice rather than the active. We don't do the heavy lifting, the saint suggests; God does. Conwell then remarks: "No wonder a tertian could say to me about his prayer during the long retreat, 'Sometimes I just watch Jesus praying within me.' No wonder an older veter-

of the Spirit is: because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will" (Rom. 8:26-27).

an could say about his eight-day retreat, 'Sometimes I just let Jesus do the praying.'"⁹

All this was at odds with the expectation I had when I entered religious life close to sixty years ago. If only I persevered in prayer, I imagined that in time I would come to master the art just as I might gain fluency in a language or become proficient in a discipline. Just stick with it, I told myself, and you'll learn the secret of good prayer as you would any skill—within the limitations of your natural aptitude, of course, and allowing for the free gifts that God offers. To expect the soaring prayer of one of the saints might be out of the question, but I should be able to hope for a moderate level of mastery over prayer. The requisite skills would include a reasonable level of control over distractions, the attainment of a decent quotient of consolation in prayer, and the assurance that I was indeed making progress in my prayer life. Long dry spells in prayer might be the test that God demands of some of his heroic servants—Saint Teresa and other mystics, for example—but we lesser souls would not be held to such standards. The awareness exercises to which we were introduced in tertianship promised a measure of control over our prayer—techniques for minimizing distractions and drilling deeper into ourselves than we had ever imagined. Surely this was the path to mastery of prayer that we all sought.

Yet, whatever the limitations of [my] earlier prayer, however much it might seem to have been a mere formality done out of a sense of obligation more than anything else, it clearly had an effect.

Instead, I found myself drifting toward mediocrity—prayer that was often not much more fervor-filled than the prayer I had experienced before tertianship. Then, too, many of those I spoke with about prayer seemed to have gone through the same experiences. Rather than rise to a peak, our prayer life seemed to bob this way and that, sometimes offering the illusion of forward movement, but usually unremarkable in anything that I would call progress. (So why even try to talk about prayer if it is so difficult to identify any hint of progress?)

⁹ "Jesuits Praying: Personal Reflections by Past and Present Seminar Members," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 21, no. 5 (November 1989): 14.

The difficult lesson of turning over control to the One with whom we are conversing is slowly learned, at least in my case. It's all the harder when the quality of the conversation seems to show no marked improvement over time, perhaps even a deterioration. Here is where I found helpful Tom Green's image of learning to float in prayer. To float is to "learn to relax, to let their head be pillowed by the water, to let go, hang loose, float free"—in essence, to surrender to the currents and to "learn to be at home in the sea that is God."¹⁰

My understanding of prayer freed me little by little from some of the structures that I had used. Although I kept the time of prayer (first thing each morning), I gradually become cavalier about some of the rules for posture that I adopted during tertianship. Just as most of us soon after novitiate had abandoned the *prie-dieu*, I stopped trying to entwine my legs so as to contort my aging body into the proper Buddhist prayer position and settled instead for a much more relaxed posture. Some manner of formality as an expression of reverence I found helpful, but I saw no need to torture myself simply to pray.

Maintaining a rhythm of personal prayer by allotting time to it each day remained as important as ever, even though I no longer saw prayer merely as a daily obligation that had to be fulfilled, regardless of how unsatisfying it might seem at times. I knew that its value could not be judged entirely by what had occurred during the time reserved for it. My formal prayer was the kick-off in the morning—the mumbled words over a cup of coffee, as it were—that started the daily conversation once again. The conversation, I knew by this time, would be resumed at different times and in different ways throughout the day. I suppose this is just another way of saying that any doubt I may have once had that prayer had real consequences was resolved.

Years ago, as I read those parts of the Jesuit Constitutions touching on prayer, I remember how surprised I was at the easy-going, non-prescriptive directives Ignatius offered to those who had been formed in the Society. An hour of formal prayer, including Mass and the Exa-

¹⁰ Green, *The Well*, 143–44. In this essay you may notice that I rely heavily on Green, possibly overly so, for two good reasons. His book offers a wealth of descriptive material on prayer, while also attempting to offer a broader interpretation of the bits and pieces of prayer life. Then, too, it was among the few sources available to me when I began to write this piece.

men, should suffice for a mature Jesuit. If that was so, then I had accumulated a healthy credit balance along the way. Perhaps Ignatius was acknowledging that the conversation, once begun, would not be hard to sustain during the rest of the day.

In another place Ignatius offered the suggestion that his followers might use their formal prayer entrusting to the Lord those persons they work for and with. But why spend all those hours trying to master contemplation and the other prayer forms that he had laid out and described so meticulously in the *Spiritual Exercises* if in our old age we were simply to revert to

the petitionary prayer of our childhood? Back then I dismissed Ignatius's comments as a concession to those who just couldn't manage to do any better. But I surely could, I remember thinking. Then, as the years piled up, I found myself moved to spend more and more of my prayer time doing just that. How could I

You can't shake the presence of this Other during the day even when you're busy with the ordinary things in life, so the prayer spills into the rest of the day. I imagine that is what Ignatius meant when he spoke of "finding God in all things."

fail to pray for the penitents who ended their confession with the request that I pray for them? Or for the generous souls who were committed to finishing an education project that might impact on the local population, even if it meant serious loss of sleep and perhaps a meal or two? Somehow, as time went by, it seemed natural to include all these people in my prayer.¹¹

Age and mounting responsibilities placed no limit on the number of people and projects that I could have entrusted to God in my prayer if I had let myself do so. But old habits die slowly, and I couldn't help suspecting that to use the morning prayer in commending these to the Lord might be a distraction—or, even worse, a barely concealed kind of self-promotion. They were, after all, my projects and my clients and friends. If my prayer were to begin and end with my own needs, I worried that I might be trapped in a narrow circle of self-seeking rather than escape the gravitational pull of the ego in search of transcendence.

¹¹See Kinerk, "When Jesuits Pray," 12.

As time passed, I found that I need not have been so concerned with such things. The Spirit who prays within us seems to have the remarkable ability to begin with just about any of the flotsam and jetsam of our lives but somehow to lead us well beyond this. In my own case, I found a desire that grew ever stronger over the years to pray for wholeness in these people as for myself. My prayer may have begun with a sick mother or unemployed father, but it also moved rather quickly to universals expressed in very simple forms: “Grant them peace, Lord,” or, “Make them whole.”

Little by little I found myself more generous in my judgments regarding the earlier stages of prayer life. Earlier prayer, even the kind of mental prayer I was doing, may not have made much of an impression on me at the time. From a later perspective, it may have seemed rote and mechanical, perhaps more so than it really was. Yet, whatever the limitations of this earlier prayer, however much it might seem to have been a mere formality done out of a sense of obligation more than anything else, it clearly had an effect.¹² Stilted words and awkward routines, perhaps, sometimes a tumble of compulsive speech just to fill the silent voids, but this prayer must have advanced conversation with that mysterious partner. It must have made the presence of that partner more real, or I wouldn't be writing about the subject right now. Perhaps all this was necessary, as some spiritual writers propose, simply to help us become acquainted with the Lord. Green proposes that early meditation and contemplation are necessary in getting to know the Lord—an early stage in priming the prayer pump.¹³ Once that happens, a change in prayer occurs.

As the years passed, I grew much less interested in the “how to” manuals on prayer, including the *Spiritual Exercises* itself. I had long years of practice in the techniques by this time and didn't need much

¹²George Ganss, reflecting back on discursive meditation and affective mental prayer in the novitiate, wrote: “The usefulness of those methods wore out like the exercises in English composition we received in high school. But they remain a stage of training which I am glad I went through.” Over time, Ganss explains, “a simplifying process occurred, a peaceful gazing on God which directors encouraged and called contemplation (quoted from Kinerk, *Jesuits Praying*, 18).

¹³Green, *The Well*, 42-44.

more training in those. I knew dozens of ways of beginning prayer, handling distractions, and amplifying my own voice with Scripture. They didn't always work, of course, but that was not at all alarming; they had never been foolproof. Despite the undeniable benefit I had derived from the awareness exercises during tertianship, not to mention the Spiritual Exercises over the years, I knew well that there was no magic key for prayer.

What I found myself looking for in writings on prayer, instead, was for some confirmation that my own prayer experience over the years matched the experiences of others. Much of what I read suggested that people who prayed went through the same stages I had—from lots of scripted words to their own distinct speech; from smothering God with our words, scripted or not, to listening to him and trying to make out what he was saying; from a formal conversation (the kind that might occur after you were first introduced to someone) to the sort of informal chat (sometimes wordless) that occurs at the breakfast table with a spouse or a good friend. The results of these encounters are predictable for anyone with the slightest experience of close friendship and love. You can't shake the presence of this Other during the day even when you're busy with the ordinary things in life, so the prayer spills into the rest of the day. I imagine that is what Ignatius meant when he spoke of "finding God in all things."

A Personal Understanding of Prayer

Prayer is an attempt, often fumbling and sometimes halfhearted, to contact God and to experience the presence of God. The immediate result of the prayer may be disappointing, as if after a whole day fishing we have caught nothing and must return with an empty creel. This was the case time and again for many of us during our years of formation and afterwards. We were teased by the Spirit now and then as we found ourselves touched in prayer, perhaps emotionally moved. But we seemed to know that such occasions would be a rare treat—perhaps even a tantalizing ploy to keep us from giving up altogether, to swear off fishing.

"Distracted and dry" is the way I would encapsulate most of my prayer, whether preceded by awareness exercises or not. I've logged hundreds of hours of so-so prayer without the pronounced consolation and the rapture that those saints whose lives we read so assidu-

ously in novitiate seemed to enjoy. Unless I'm unusual in this regard, I would have to assume that after the initial "getting to know you" phase of prayer, we often find not the mountain peaks we hoped for, but a dry and semiarid plane. I was encouraged to find, again in Green, the counsel that "beyond the early stages of prayer is not a splendid oasis of Omar Khayyam delights for the soul . . . but rather a vast desert of purifying dryness with, perhaps, occasional small oases to sustain the spirit."¹⁴

"In my end is my beginning," wrote T. S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*—a line that could be applied to my own experience of prayer, among many other things. I sometimes wonder whether the prayer journey isn't circular, after all, a journey in which we finish where we began. My history of prayer, like that of so many, began with short memorized prayers repeated over and over again. The rosary was like that, and so were the prayers we had been taught even before we learned the full Hail Mary. The changes I've described here moved me toward discursive prayer, later toward contemplation and a few other forms of prayer, and finally back toward short simple formulas that could be repeated over and over while the heart seeks the Lord. In the words of T. S. Eliot,

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹⁵

The simplicity of short prayer formulas repeated during prayer—this sounds as much like folk prayer as it does the personal prayer of a Jesuit after a lifetime of searching. It leads me to wonder whether there is any real difference between what I do now and what the unschooled layperson does when saying the rosary, making the stations of the cross, or repeating aspirations. Perhaps those uneducated people, never exposed to more complicated prayer forms, are on to something. Might it not be hubris for us religious to think of ourselves as masters of prayer and them as learners?

¹⁴Ibid., 12.

¹⁵T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding V*, in *Four Quartets*. For this, too, I am indebted to Green, who quotes this passage in *The Well*, 150.

The effect of prayer, as so many attest, is that over time we find ourselves changed. The change might have been imperceptible, but it is real. Somehow we find ourselves feeling that mysterious presence, even embraced by it, throughout the day. At times it might be a conscious awareness of God, but at other times it becomes residual, half buried as it is in the other things we are doing. As we grow older, the presence is felt more and more strongly until it becomes inescapable. This presence—that of a friend, a personal force, a source of power—grows to the point that we couldn't escape it even if we wanted to. But who would want to? It becomes such a part of our life that it conditions the way we look at other people, sort out what we would like to do during the day, and decide how we would do it. Little by little, we begin to understand those strange passages that were once entirely beyond our comprehension—phrases like “putting on the mind of Christ.”¹⁶

The acid test of prayer is whether our heart is changed—whether the prayer has transformed us so that our love for others is stronger—or, to use another image from Green, whether the flowers are being watered.¹⁷

None of this, of course, is to say that we who try to pray are models of perfection. When I read what I wrote about my own sinfulness forty years ago, I still shake my head and say Amen. The roots of that sinfulness are still very much there, with plenty of examples over the years and new evidence every day. Indeed, one of the effects of prayer is to sharpen our awareness of sinfulness; so prayer leaves us more convinced of our sinfulness and confounded at our infidelity than ever. But even the sinfulness is the occasion for receiving a renewed sense of the presence and love of the Lord. And it is a good motive for continuing to pray, as J. L. Appleyard acknowledged: “I pray because of the hope summed up in a one-liner from the opening prayer of the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time: ‘May your love make us what you call us to be.’”¹⁸

Prayer seems to flower best in times of conflict. Even the saints, preeminent persons of prayer that they were, constantly faced the

¹⁶ 1 Cor. 2:16.

¹⁷ Green, *The Well*, 80-81.

¹⁸ Appleyard's comments are found in Kinerk, *Jesuits Praying*, 3.

shocking gap between what they were called to be and what they were. We might think it a pious exaggeration when they call themselves the worst of sinners—at least until we begin exploring the gap in our own lives between spirit (the sustaining Spirit that loves us) and flesh (all our own self-seeking interests). It's not surprising, then, that our prayer is especially earnest when we are most troubled. Our need for God is the greatest when we feel incapable of coping with a major threat of any

Finally, I can understand what that woman who visited church all the time meant when she said, "I just look at him and he looks at me."

kind. This is the kind of prayer that emerges from soldiers in foxholes when the first shells start falling around them. Enemy fire breeds prayer, as the old aphorism suggests, but so does the loss of a beloved friend or a diagnosis of a terminal illness. Whether the

threat is external or internal, it prompts us to look beyond ourselves for assistance—the dynamic that is central to prayer. I've always maintained that if we believers were fully able to take care of ourselves, there would be no need for faith. "Bullet holes are a precondition for belief," I used to tell my high-school religion students. Wounds of one kind or another can throw us into the arms of a loving God through prayer, while the understanding of ourselves that we develop as we pray (perhaps a more sublime type of wound) keeps us there.

We may call prayer a conversation—to use the term that goes back to our childhood—but it is a conversation that invariably ends the same way: with an ever more profound sense of my own weakness and an ever deeper appreciation of the One who has accepted me despite everything. Once upon a time I prayed because I felt that I was obliged to. Now I pray because I need to. Not much difference, it may seem. But, in fact, all the difference of a lifetime.

The Power to Transform

Prayer, then, sustains a relationship, and that relationship, in turn, transforms us. The transformation, halting as it sometimes has been, has had real effects on me and on others I know.

First of all, it makes me increasingly sensitive to the plight of other people. Without overstating it, we can say that we see all persons

as God's own creatures, ringed with little haloes and loved by him the same way we are. If prayer makes me conscious of God's unfailing love for myself, it's not too long a leap to understand that God intends to work this same magic in all other human beings.

Then, too, prayer makes me more aware of the gap between what I am and what I would like to be. That gap, I suppose, is what we mean by our failure to meet even our own standards: our sinfulness, in other words. Somewhere in my spiritual notes from 1980, I found a passage that spoke strongly of the tension I was feeling then and no less today. It was a comment on my divided heart and the battles being fought within. "What do I do to become whole-hearted and unhedging in my work for the Kingdom? I think I want this more than anything else." Thirty years later, I was praying for the same thing—the strength to shed the compromises and become whole-hearted in my service to the Lord. Another thirty years from now, if I were to live that long, I should imagine that I will be praying for the same elusive gift: whole-heartedness.

One of the themes that emerges again and again in my spiritual journal is the frustration at never making a definitive commitment—another way of saying my inability to cease being a sinner. If the sinfulness doesn't show up in one form, I've found, it appears in another. That conclusive moment at which I take on the mind and heart of Christ once and for all never seems to come. If the failure is not some shocking transgression, it might be the hunger for respect from others, the vain desire to be liked, the self-gratifying need to be seen as a hero.

We can take some consolation, as I noted in a retreat journal many years ago, from a passage in *The Cloud of Unknowing*: "It is not what you are nor what you have been that God sees with His all-merciful eyes, but what you desire to be."¹⁹ Underneath our sinfulness, our tenacious desire to justify ourselves, is a thirst for the Lord and for a purity of heart and purpose. I am aware that personal sinfulness and of grace seem to be closely intertwined in my life. The rest of us, I would imagine, can say the same.

¹⁹My search for this text in *The Cloud of the Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling* (ed. William Johnson [New York: Image, 1973], 146) came up empty. Is it possible that this notation in my prayer journal was merely wishful thinking?

That decisive moment at which our life becomes an unequivocal Yes to the Spirit never seems to come. The struggle continues throughout our whole life, even if it doesn't take form in any terrible actions. Our sinfulness continues to be a source of embarrassment and shame, so we call out once again for help. Even as we do so, we recognize the love that Jesus has for us and the tight embrace in which he holds us. This, in turn, deepens our own commitment to him, even if this commitment is sure to be lived out in an awkward and halfhearted way. So we come to realize that our personal sinfulness and the blessings we've received both stem from this recognition of Jesus' love for us and are closely linked. The yawning gap between what we are called to be and what we truly are is what we acknowledge as our sinfulness.

An enhanced awareness of personal sinfulness and the deep love that invites us are closely intertwined in the life of anyone who prays. The love relationship, in turn, transforms us—all of us—not just those presumed to be living ascetical lives, but those as well who finger their rosary beads and kneel in silence before the tabernacle. Is there any better way to encapsulate the personal transformation that prayer works on us than that well-known phrase describing what at bottom is a Jesuit? A Jesuit—or any Christian who seriously prays, for that matter—in the words of the often quoted document on Jesuit identity from General Congregation 32—"knows that one is a sinner, yet called to be a companion of Jesus."²⁰ This is confirmed by the prayer life of all.

Throughout our struggles with prayer many of us find that bit by bit something happens to us. We fall in love with our conversation partner. We can't imagine life without this Other. Our guilt and unworthiness, once such an apparent obstacle to a relationship with the Lord, is taken for granted. We've explored it time and time again. Each time our past shames us, but it also opens to us reasons for deeper gratitude and love for our partner. He hasn't dropped us yet, has he? The bonds between us have just grown over time, whatever the problems we've had along the way.

In a scene in *Two for the Road*, the 1967 movie starring Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney, the young couple are in a restaurant doing some table watching as they engage in an animated conversation. One

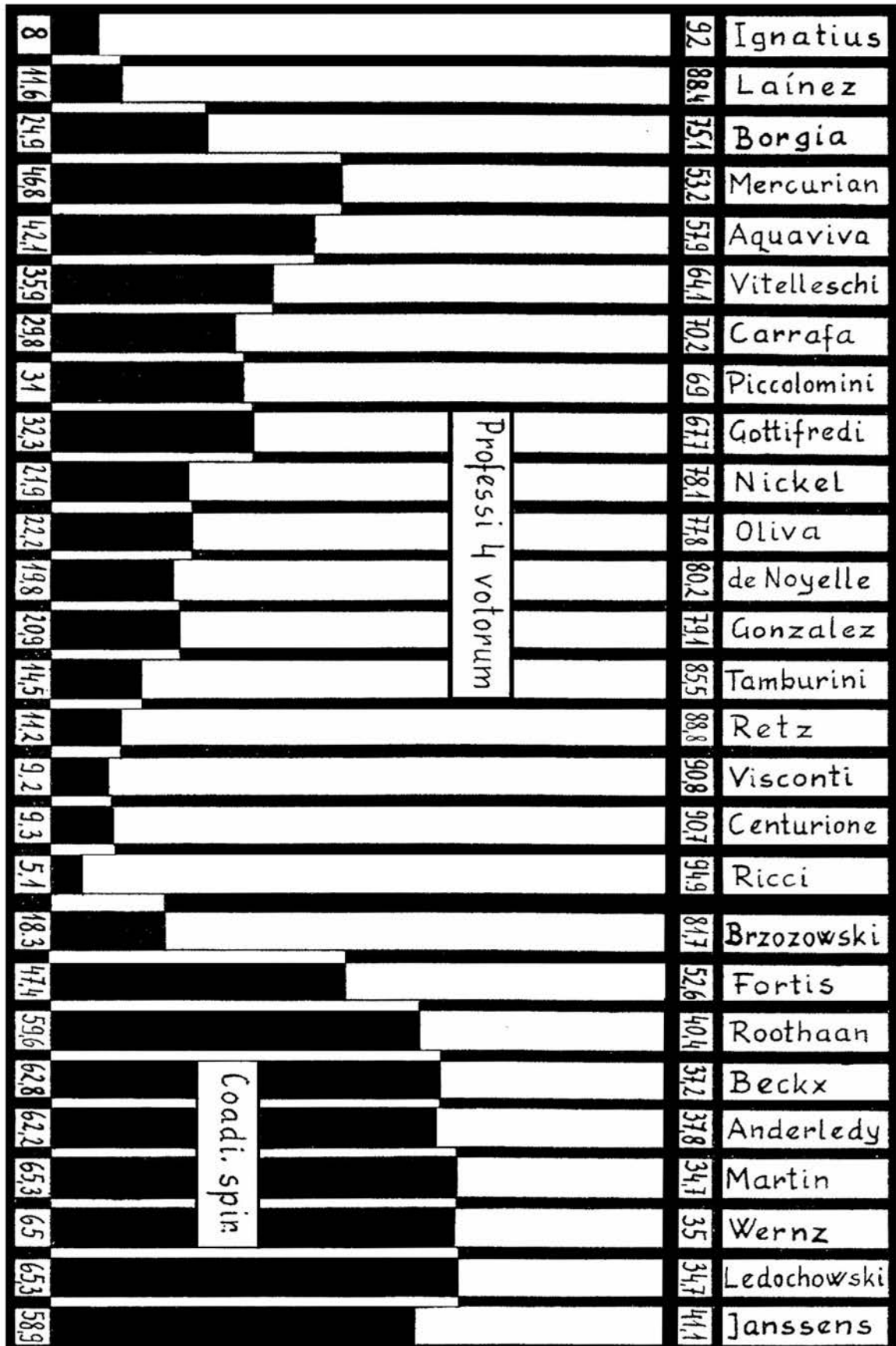
²⁰Decree 2, General Congregation 32.

of them points to an older couple sitting together silently enjoying their coffee in silence. "What kind of people can sit there without a word to say to each other?" she asks. "Married people" is his reply. When I first saw the movie years ago, I might have shared their disdain for an older couple who seem to have lost the thrill of continual conversation. But now, many years older myself, I perceive a couple comfortable enough in one another's presence that they can do without chatting.

I might also see a reflection of my own prayer history in the scene. The thrill of discovery may have faded, but the heart has been conquered. Finally, I can understand what that woman who visited church all the time meant when she said, "I just look at him and he looks at me." Isn't that what we call love?

Corrigendum

In the previous issue, Mark Lewis's "Unfinished Business," 47, no. 3 (Autumn 2015), the following chart was omitted in the production process. It should be appended to note 15, on p. 11 of that issue. *STUDIES* regrets its omission from the appropriate issue.



Proportio inter profesos 4 votorum et coadiutores spirituales in universa Societate (1541-1965)

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