



Pilgrimage:

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DISTRACTIONS

We cannot learn to pray without having to deal with distractions. Sometimes it seems that our prayer is nothing but distractions, which is rather unpleasant! We would much rather be focused entirely on the subject of our prayer. We would rather our mind never wander off during Sunday worship. Those rare occasions when we find ourselves undistracted in God's presence are times of great spiritual pleasure for us, and we have a sense that this is how it ought to be all the time.

In a sense, we ought to be undistracted in our prayer: we should be single-minded and attend only to God. This is the ideal. But as with Christian perfection more generally, it is to be fully realized only in heaven. Only then will we know how to remain entirely in God's presence and at the same time be fully ourselves. Only then will we be able to attend perfectly and without distraction to our Lord. In the meantime, we aspire to that perfection, recognizing that we are on the way, in the life-long task of learning to be holy.

Accepting that distractions are a necessary part of prayer in this life gives us the foundation for dealing with them. It delivers us from two errors. We may be tempted to think that since we will always be beset with distractions we can give up our struggle against them. Then we too easily tolerate distractions, thinking that they are "normal". This is rather like refusing to help the poor on the grounds that we will always have poor people with us. We are also inclined to accept our distractions because they are "safe": they make no demands on us as God might if He could speak to us in quiet.

On the other side, we may be tempted to think that our prayer is totally useless whenever we are the least bit distracted. This is the perfectionist error. It denies that our perfection is something which God works in us over time, to be completed when we have passed through death. We are tempted to

think that we ought to be better than we are. But the real force of the temptation is that we should have accomplished perfectly undistracted prayer ourselves. We take responsibility for our distractions by asserting (usually implicitly) that we should have overcome them. This is an assertion of pride -- like claiming that we ought to have complete control of our thoughts. Moreover, it refuses to see that distractions might have a place in teaching us to be holy.

In fact, distractions are overcome in us by grace -- though certainly not apart from our own wills. They teach us to depend on grace because we cannot overcome them on our own. No doubt we have all tried: we sit there and furrow our brows and vow that we will think of nothing except the prayer before us. And before we have read two lines we are thinking not about the prayer but about our intention to be undistracted. It is all terribly frustrating! But there is a lesson here: we are to depend on God in our prayer, and not try to do it as a work earning His favor. Prayer is not to make points for our heavenly account. It is an act of love and filial obedience. We place ourselves in His presence because He has told us to, and because we love Him and wish to spend time with Him.

Learning attention is one benefit of dealing with distractions. Attention is necessary for prayer and worship, as it is for Christian charity, constancy in the midst of temptation, study, friendship, most kinds of work, and many other human and Christian endeavors. Attention (like patience) is a gift of God's grace which we receive by doing. Distractions give us the opportunity to learn attention. When we must deal with many and varied distractions, we have a chance to learn the fullness of attention. The benefits of that attention, that centeredness, will carry over into all that we do. By the same token, no effort of attention is ever wasted -- the attention a student gives to his studies, that which a woman gives in caring for her aged mother-in-law, the attention a teacher gives in trying to understand the difficulty of a pupil, the attention of one listening to a friend's problem -- these will bear fruit at the time of prayer.

Every instance of attention requires that we set ourselves aside for a time, and allow ourselves to be filled with that which is before us. So long as we are trying to maintain our own interests and concerns, we will not really attend. Part of our attention is distracted. The problem is that we do exactly this most of the time. In our conversations, we think about what we are going to say next instead of what the person is saying to us. Or we are trying to think of what it was we wanted to tell him. Or we are thinking about what we are going to do after we get through talking to him. We habitually reserve a certain portion of our attention for matters other than the one we are supposed to be attending to at the moment.

Since every effort of attention is an effort at putting self aside in order to make room for someone (or something) else, every

attentive moment makes us more able to pray. Prayer requires that we set aside our selfish concerns in order to make room for God. Our focus is to be on Him and not on ourselves. Thus attention is absolutely central to prayer.

Distractions are of two kinds: internal and external. The internal distractions are all those stray thoughts and memories and feelings that lead us away from attention in prayer. When we find ourselves thinking of breakfast instead of the Psalm before us, or of the day's work, or of how we are going to deal with some personal difficulty, or how so and so hurt us years ago -- these are internal distractions. They are all too familiar. In spite of our best intentions, our prayer is full of them. Sometimes we encourage them. When we think of something we need to remember when we are through praying, we are apt to put it aside in our mind, setting 10% of our attention to remember it until prayer is over. But once we are remembering half a dozen such things, we've not much mind left for prayer!

External distractions come from outside of us. The fire engine outside the window when we are trying to say Morning Prayer, the children playing (What are they up to?) downstairs, the other people at Sunday worship -- their dress, singing, whispering, demeanor, and so on -- these are the things from without that distract us from our prayer. Generally, external distractions are beyond our control. We cannot control our surroundings so completely that we will ever be able to eliminate them. At our times of private devotions we can minimize such distractions by choosing a time and place of appropriate quiet. To try to pray when the children are always in need of attention (if, of course there is an alternative), or to try to pray in the same place where our work is (be it kitchen or office) is asking for trouble. The kids will intrude or we will start thinking about the work which is to be done when we finish praying.

External distractions are perhaps most acute at corporate worship. There we have little control over our surroundings. We do not choose the other people present; the character of the building may be distracting (any church building can be a source of distraction if we give our attention to the architecture or decoration), so too the music, the words and actions of the liturgy. Since we cannot eliminate all the sources of the distraction at worship (or even at private prayer, for that matter), we must address whatever we cannot control from within: how we deal with them in prayer. At church as well as at home, we may be able to eliminate some distractions -- as for example by sitting in another pew away from the whisperer who so irritates us.

We must work on the remaining external distractions in the same way we work on our internal ones, by allowing God's grace to strengthen our wills. The key is to will one thing: to will the prayer.

This requires that we tell ourselves that this is the one thing which is important at this time. All that matters is our being in God's presence, and allowing Him to use the time entirely as He wills. We are to be at His disposal, yielding ourselves to Him in our prayer.

To do this, we must learn to let go of all distractions as they arise in the mind. If the distracting thought is of no real consequence, dismissing it is not too hard, once we have recognized that we are distracted. It is more difficult for those thoughts which seem important -- insights into ourselves or the faith, things we must remember to do, and the like. These too we must let go. At times of private prayer, it may help to keep a note pad at hand, to write down the things we wish to remember afterwards and then return to our prayer. At worship, we can use the immediate action or words of the service as a focus of attention, to bring back our wandering mind. It may also help to form some specific intention for the Eucharist beforehand -- a specific intercession for someone, a thanksgiving, some particular penitence and resolution. We can then use this simple idea as an anchor for our attention. Whenever we find ourselves distracted, we can return to the intention, within the context of the Eucharist. (The intention should not, of course, become a source of distraction from the Eucharist, but a key for attention.)

Distractions cannot be overcome by sheer effort, any more than we can control all our thoughts. Rather we must gently let them go, and bring ourselves back to our prayer. Any attempt at violently tearing them out will make matters worse, leaving us less attentive and more focused on self. We must let God give us attention, in His way and time. We need to resist the temptation to judge the quality of our prayer by the number of distractions. Sometimes we are better off struggling with distractions, for that forms our will to pray and forces us to rely on grace. It will not be pleasant, any more than struggling with temptation is pleasant. But it is part of Christian growth.

In our goal-oriented society it is doubly hard to let God take care of our prayer as may actually be best for us and not demand that it make us feel good at the moment. We will be tempted to think our prayer good when we have profound insights or religious experiences or when we have few distractions. But this is a temptation. Prayer is good when it is God-directed. So our goal is to place ourselves ever more and more in His hands, whether it is pleasant for us, or whether it gives us a taste of the Cross. Distractions as well as temptations He allows us, so that we may be tried in the fire and made perfect for our place in heaven.

