



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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SELF-PREOCCUPATION

Preoccupation with self is an unavoidable temptation. When we consciously try to live as Christians, we naturally spend a good bit of time and effort considering how to do it and how well we are succeeding at it. This necessary reflection about how we stand before God can be dominated by the "we" part to the exclusion of the "before God" part. We find that we are thinking about ourselves instead of God. In fact, we find that God has disappeared from our thoughts at the time of prayer altogether. Left unchecked this form of idolatry can devastate one's Christian life by closing in more and more on self. But more often, it is an occasional but significant nuisance, when we get off the track of God-centered prayer into self-centered "prayer."

Perhaps the most frequent occasion for self-preoccupation is self-examination. Self-examination is an essential part of any regular life of prayer. We must look at our lives to see how we are doing in our battle with sin and in our faithfulness to our rule. Ideally this self-examination is part of our daily recollection and prayer of quiet. Self-examination is essential, but it must not overwhelm the time of quiet. It is a means to an end: it is not itself the goal. The temptation is to turn it into a long, drawn out time of self-absorption. Instead of a brisk, forthright accounting of sins and faults, we get dragged into an endless (and fruitless) self-analysis. Am I really making any progress? Do I need to change spiritual directors? Is the root of my problem pride or is it envy? Should I relax my rule to compensate for my failings?

Much of the time, this preoccupation leads to depression. As we get progressively more absorbed with ourselves, we get depressed at our seeming lack of progress and at how far there still is to go. This is natural: when we look at our spiritual lives apart from God, there is no basis for anything other than depression. Without God we are sinners without the possibility of redemption. Self-preoccupation excludes God and leaves us alone with ourselves.

Self-examination is essential, but it must be brief and to the point. It sets the context for the Christian life: no more and no less. We must do it, and then get on with things. After looking at ourselves, we must quickly lift our sights to Jesus, and keep them fixed there throughout our prayer.

Another occasion of self-preoccupation occurs when we act as though all of our salvation depends upon us. We take our position in things too seriously, and in so doing preempt the place of God in the whole process. We may apply this false sense of our own importance to our own lives, or that of our parish, or even to the world. "If only they would do what I tell them, we would all make progress toward the Kingdom of God." We get upset and impatient with those who do not seem to recognize our wisdom and power in these matters. In our own lives, we may gradually exclude God by emphasizing to ourselves our responsibility for getting our prayers said, resisting temptation, etc. We behave as if it all depended upon us, when in fact it is God that saves us and not we ourselves. My role is one of cooperation -- an important one, to be sure. But if it is exaggerated beyond one of cooperation with the true (and only) Saviour, then I will be liable to self-preoccupation.

Another occasion of self-preoccupation is keeping a journal. While this discipline is helpful for many Christians, it carries with it the danger that one may become more concerned with the journal, and one's performance therein, than with the goal -- God. Again, the journal is a means to an end. When it narrows us in on ourselves rather than opening us to God, it is failing in that end.

Our spirituality is not, after all is said and done, for us at all. We are God's creatures, and we are meant to live for Him. The spiritual life is the means by which we learn to do that. It is the way we learn to receive His love and to love Him in return. It may teach us a lot about ourselves along the way, but that is not its basic purpose. Its purpose is to teach us to glorify God in this life, and to get us ready to do it in eternity.

This means that God is to be always at the center of our Christian life. That ought to be obvious: "Christian" life must be centered on Christ. We see in Christ's life the centrality of love. "So God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son ..." Love requires another as the object for the love. Thus God is a Trinity,

allowing Him to love even before He made a creature to receive that love. His love so overflows that He creates those outside Himself to receive of the abundance of His love.

Similarly, we grow in Christian life by loving. Love is focused outside of ourselves. It is not enough for us to love ourselves. We often fail to do that correctly anyway. We must learn to love Jesus who first loved us. And in Him, we must learn to love His creatures, especially other people. It is not just that we are to feel nice thoughts about others. Christian love is more than that. It is living for others as Jesus lived for us; doing for them as He would, since we are now His body on earth. Love is always centered on the beloved. In loving other people, our concern will be for what is best for them: that which they really and most deeply need. We will not be thinking first of the cost to us, but first of their need. This activity of Christian love will keep us from being preoccupied with ourselves. Of its very nature, it is centered outside the self.

As well as learning Christian love, there are a number of concrete things we can do to prevent self-preoccupation in our prayer. Virtually any activity of prayer properly done will help of course, for prayer is naturally centered upon God. Every prayer that takes us out of ourselves into the presence of God will help.

Within the context of our regular self-examination, it helps to reflect upon the failures in our Christian life which result from our attempts at self-dependence. From time to time, we try to do things on our own, sometimes out of the mistaken desire to do something for God apart from Him. More often, we do things on our own because we want to demonstrate our independence. We want to show (usually to ourselves) that there are some things that we can do. Virtually always, this ends in disaster. We find that we cannot do it as we wish. Or if we can, there is an unforeseen result: someone gets hurt or our actions are misunderstood. Or even if it all comes out right, we find that our prayer has suffered, as we are left rather far from God.

If we recognize that some such result is inevitable when we try to do things on our own and apart from God, this will be a support to us in avoiding self-preoccupation. Whenever we are tempted to make our self-examination into a preoccupation, then is the time to remind ourselves that left to our own devices we mess things up. We then see that the outcome of our preoccupation will be something we do not want. We can then recall ourselves to the true center of our prayer: Jesus.

A second technique to rid ourselves of self-preoccupation is faithfulness to the prayer of quiet. If we use our time alone with God to attend to Him and open ourselves to our Lord, then we will be drawn away from ourselves. Our quiet must be real attention to God,

and not prayer masking attention to self. We must cultivate that sense of Him as a Person: one we can know and love, and One that loves us.

Our model is that of two lovers: they wait upon each other, each simply enjoying the presence of the beloved. Speech is not required, though it may be present. They just wish to be in the other's presence, to drink it in, to give themselves wholly to it. It is the other that matters. Forgetting self, each attends to the beloved.

So it is when we wait upon God in quiet. We seek to have our whole attention filled with Him. For He is our beloved Redeemer, our Lord, and also our Father. We wait upon Him in order that our love may grow in proportion to our knowledge of Him. We seek to know Him, to know His love for us, and to love Him in return. This is a love which goes out of self and fills itself with the Beloved.

Similarly, a study of Holy Scripture is a great help in avoiding preoccupation with self. For in Scripture (and especially the Gospels) we learn who God is. We learn what He is like and how He deals with us. In studying the Gospels we get to know Jesus. He becomes real and human to us. His humanity makes Him accessible to us, even as His ascended humanity makes us accessible to God. Our study helps us to know Another, and thus to be focused on Him rather than on ourselves.

Finally, we will be well served by developing a sense of humor, and the ability to laugh at ourselves when we take ourselves too seriously. We must be ready to see the incongruity of our demands to get something out of the spiritual life: that we are in it for the feelings we have rather than for God. We must be ready to laugh at ourselves when we try to do things on our own and make a mess of things. We need to be able to laugh at our folly in getting bogged down with ourselves.

We are all in danger from time to time of taking the spiritual life too seriously -- or, at any rate seriously in the wrong way: acting as if it all depended upon us. Sometimes we act as if the salvation of the world (or at least our little corner of it) depended on us. Then we need to have a good laugh at our pretensions, and get back down to the mundane business of being a Christian. Salvation -- mine, the parish's or the world's -- is God's responsibility. I must cooperate in mine, of course, but it is His power that does it. If I lose sight of that, self-preoccupation is sure to follow. The best antidote is thus the conviction that it is God who saves me and not myself. Then I shall not be tempted to divert my gaze from my Saviour.

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