



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## PROCRASTINATION

Procrastination is familiar to most of us. We know that we put things off that we really should be getting done: household chores, doing our income taxes, writing letters, perhaps something at work. We may recognize this as a practical problem, but we do not often associate it with Christian life. In fact, putting things off is a spiritual problem, even when it involves things having nothing to do with prayer.

In addition, there is the spiritual form of procrastination, where we put off our prayers and spiritual disciplines in order to keep up with seemingly more important (and more worldly) concerns. This is a constant temptation for anyone seriously embarked upon a life of prayer. For prayer all too often seems irrelevant to our responsibilities in the world. The time spent on prayer is time which cannot be spent serving the poor, working at church, or caring for the family. Prayer time can seem unproductive, and in our accomplishment-oriented society we are tempted again and again to think that since prayer does not produce immediate, material results, we ought not spend much time on it. Especially when we do not seem to be getting anywhere in our prayer, our thoughts suggest that our time could really be better spent in other ways.

Similarly, it seems as though there are always more pressing things that we must do than prayer. If we are not careful, much of our life is spent under the tyranny of the immediate. These are things that we know are important, even though we recognize that they are not necessarily more important than prayer. They claim our attention at the moment. We feel that they are of more immediate concern than prayer, so we put off the prayer. This can quickly

become a habit. Then we get to the point where anything at all will take priority over our prayers. In some form, this is virtually universal. Ask yourself: when was the last time you put off something in order to say your prayers? If you can think of even one such instance, you're doing well.

The aim, of course, is not to do one to the exclusion of the other. We are not to pray all the time and never do anything else. The aim is balance. To live fully human lives, we must pray. We must also work, have friends, care for family, sleep, manage the home life, and so on. Our aim is to develop an integrated life where each necessary element has its proper place.

There are a number of reasons for spiritual procrastination. It often appears that we have an indefinite amount of time in which to become saints. Our worldly pursuits seldom have such freedom. There always seems to be a deadline with everything but prayer. Since we do not know when the Judgment Day will dawn, we assume that it will not be today. This leads us to take our Christian responsibilities rather less seriously than we ought, since they do not seem to be immediate.

Then we are also tempted to think that we have so much to lose by making a wholehearted commitment to Christian life, that we should put it off. "Make me a saint, Lord, but not yet." We think of all the fun things that we would have to give up if we consciously started to live as Christians (gluttony, envy, anger, self-righteousness, etc.). This is based on the mistaken notion that we can have more fun apart from God. In fact, our only true joy and fulfillment is in Him.

We may also fear losing control of our lives. Out of this fear, we put off making a commitment to God. We recognize (whether dimly or consciously) that making the commitment to God requires a renunciation of our own authority as final in our lives. That is something of a deterrent for those of us who are used to controlling (or at least, thinking that we control) our own lives.

Then we look at our lives as Christians and see how much farther there still is for us to go, before we reach the point where we are fully God's. We are so far from being saints. We are tempted to think that it is such an immense task that it can just as well wait for tomorrow. What difference can one day make? So we put off the serious spiritual work. We content ourselves with half-way measures, which do not really satisfy us, nor do they accomplish the things we know should be happening. We fail to set aside the time for quiet, and we allow ourselves to say the Daily Office in an inattentive and unprayerful manner.

Then procrastination will feed on itself, because we begin to feel guilty for putting things off. We have a dim sense that we are not getting done everything we should, but (more often than not) we do

not face the source of our guilt. In this situation, procrastination, whether worldly or spiritual, becomes a deterrent to being quiet. The guilt keeps us from wanting to face its source, lest we have to change something about our lives, and so it leads us away from the quiet in which it might all be resolved. Thus we find ourselves trapped in a vicious circle.

As with so many problems of Christian life, there is no easy and quick(!) solution to procrastination. We would like to know the one little thing that we could do and be delivered from procrastination forever. But the only solution is long-term.

To begin with, a certain application of will will help. If we pay attention to the things we are putting off, and take systematic steps to remedy the deficiency, then we are bound to make some progress. This requires, first of all, that we make an inventory of the things that are not getting done, including both prayer and worldly things. This can take a place in our regular self-examination. It is also worthwhile to consider why these particular things are distasteful to us. This can reveal a lot about who we are.

Then we need to lay out some plan of discipline to begin the attack on procrastination. Begin with one area of procrastination, and decide concretely how you will deal with it. If you are putting off calling someone, then make a deadline for yourself. Make it part of the discipline of your Christian life. This has two advantages. First, you will then be accountable to yourself when you make your self-examination the next day (or whenever). And second, you will have brought God into the situation. Having asked His help in deciding how to proceed, you will be able to call upon His grace to do that which you are putting off. When the time comes that you have set for making the phone call and you are tempted to put it off, you will be able to say, "Lord, help me do this." It will be an occasion of drawing closer to Him, rather than being separated from Him by the guilt of putting it off.

When we are tempted to procrastinate about something, we should call upon God in a short prayer for help. We can also give ourselves a little lesson in the reality of things. For, after all, what is really important? Is it not obedience to God in little things as well as big? And if we have this task before us, should we not accept it as from His hand? Then we really have no reason to put it off, however difficult or unpleasant the task may seem. Most important is living in God, and we will not wish to separate ourselves from that for any reason. Put in these terms, our love for God may help us over the difficulty.

More generally, it will help to cultivate a sense of the immediacy of Christian life: a life lived in the presence of God. The Desert Fathers (some of the first monks of the Church) used to say that we

should treat our bodies as if they would last forever, and our souls as if we would have to yield them up to God on the morrow. Care for the soul is a matter of always having it ready to behold the face of God. This requires practice. In particular, it requires that we cultivate a sense of being with God in our prayer. This must include a sense of our present lack of holiness, and our desire for God to work in us to make us holy as He is holy. Day by day we must pray for this, asserting to ourselves (if necessary) that we must work today to accomplish that which God would have us do for our souls. The contemplation of the Four Last Things (death, judgment, heaven, hell) which is often suggested during Advent, will help.

The final solution to procrastination is doing everything in Christ. "Whatsoever ye do in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus." (Colossians 3:17) The difference between the Christian and the nonchristian is not so much in what they do (God willing, the Christian sins less), as it is in how they do what they do. Christians and nonchristians alike spend much of their time in mundane activities. The Christian — at least when he has grown into a mature Christian — will do all that he does in Christ. This means that it is part of his Christian life. It does not necessarily mean that he is thinking about God the whole time he is doing it. Usually that is not even desirable: we would not want a student thinking about God all during a chemistry exam. That is when he should be thinking about chemistry. Having committed the test to God beforehand, he should then give his mind wholly to the matter at hand. It is one that requires all of his intellectual attention.

It is a matter of where our basic orientation of being lies. If it is in self, then our actions will be basically selfish, one way or another. If it is in God, then all that we do will be a part of our life in Him. Then when we enter combat with some problem of procrastination, it will be based on our desire to please the Lord we love. We will seek His strength in the battle, because we know we will fail on our own. From our past attempts with our procrastination we know that our wills are weak, and on our own we never get very far. But when we turn the whole problem over to our Lord, knowing our weakness, then we have a chance, because it is His power that comes to bear on the problem.

Procrastination is but one area of our lives where we cannot succeed on our own. It therefore gives us a splendid opportunity to live the more in God, to let God redeem another corner of our lives, to let Him do in us that which we cannot do ourselves. It is a chance for God to train and strengthen our wills. For if the problem cannot be solved by the force of our wills, neither can be it solved without the cooperation of our wills. As we deal with procrastination over a period of time (and that is the only way it can be dealt with), we will see the growth of our wills. We will see them grow strong as they become increasing accustomed to willing what God wills.