



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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RECOLLECTION

If we are serious about our Christian lives, we will need to take time on a regular basis to see where we are going. This is called recollection. Think of what we do in other areas of our lives. When we set out on a long-term task such as learning to play the piano, we pause from time to time to see how we are getting along. We naturally think about our progress: are we getting along as planned? Do we need more work on the left hand? Does it appear that we are totally unsuited to the piano and should be trying something else? Have we been failing to get the necessary practicing done? Do we need a new teacher?

The same sort of questions need to be asked (and answered) on occasion in the Christian life. How are we getting along? Are we living up to the rule we have established for ourselves? Does some particular aspect of our prayer life (quiet, for example) need special attention? Are we getting the appointed prayers said? Are we in need of a new spiritual director?

Or, in another area of human life, think of what goes into a personal relationship: the two people reflect more or less consciously on the condition and nature of the relationship. They consider whether it is healthy, whether it is in need of basic changes, whether it is doing good for them or ill. Such reflection is essential (at least sometimes) if the relationship is to grow. The same is true of our relationship with God. We must take stock of our part in it to see what we should be doing in it that we are not, and what we shouldn't be doing that we are.

In addition, we know from experience that if something is wrong with the relationship, we resist the examination necessary for its correction. We avoid asking the very questions which would lead to an understanding of the problem and its solution. We do this because we are afraid of what the answers might be. We fear that the root of the problem might lie with us, and that we would have to change in order to correct the problem. In short, we are afraid that we might be the problem. That deters us from dealing with it. We instead try to ignore it and hope it will go away.

Often we do the same thing in prayer. We begin to have a dim feeling that something is wrong in our lives as Christians. We may find that we are not being quiet much at all: something always seems to come up in its place. Or perhaps, we continue in our prayers, but never get very close to God in them. Or, more generally, we begin to feel that something is wrong in our spiritual lives, but we don't want to admit it to ourselves. So we just go around a little angry or edgy or guilty.

At root of much of this is our human resistance to admitting our own sinfulness. We would rather maintain the illusion that we are good people all the time. But since this is an illusion (for we are sinners in need of redemption and not good people), it often conflicts with reality. When it does, then we are hard pressed to maintain the illusion. And that, in turn, leads to the feeling that something is wrong, for we are trying to maintain both our illusion and our commitment to reality.

A regular time of recollection as part of our prayer life can be a great help in avoiding these problems. The best times for recollection are those in connection with the other parts of our prayer life. For example, it can be done in connection with Morning or Evening Prayer. Perhaps the best time is just before the daily time of meditation and quiet, because it will help to provide a foundation for that quiet. When recollection is done as part of evening prayers, it includes a summation of the Christian successes and failures of the day just past.

There are four basic elements of recollection. First is self-examination: looking at our sins since the last recollection. This is harder than it sounds. Looking at our sins is basically an unpleasant task, and we naturally avoid it as much as possible. For a Christian, however, it is dangerous to avoid it altogether. What we refuse to acknowledge as needing redemption will not willingly be brought within God's redemptive grace. We must see our sins for what they are in order to receive God's redemption. We must see the full extent of our sinfulness or else we will not value what God does for us.

Similarly, our self-examination is essential to our progress as Christians. It will give God an opportunity to show us the areas of

our lives that need attention. It is a matter of settling down in God's presence, and asking, "How have I failed as a Christian today?" The answer is essential to our growth. The golfer who wants to improve his game will ask himself what he does wrong -- with his swing, his putting and so on. It is never pleasant to look at our mistakes. But it is essential if we are to correct them.

The second part of recollection is related to self-examination: an evaluation of how we have done with our particular resolutions for the day. If, for example, we decided the preceeding night that we had to work on procrastination today, and in particular, that we would write three thank-you notes today -- how did we do? Did they get written? Recollection is thus an on-going process of evaluation. It is not so much a process of self-improvement, as it is a process of the acknowledgement of need and of the action of grace. The improvements in our Christian lives are, after all, the work of the Spirit. Our recollection helps us to become aware of what He is doing, and of what still needs to be done.

The aim of this second aspect of recollection is to develop a life focused on Christ. We ask, "Where have I been off on my own today? How have I failed in living in Him?" The answers to these questions will no doubt suggest things that we should try to do on the morrow. If we find a failing in the observance of our rule, than we will form a resolution to correct it. If the problem is a particular sin, then we will decide on a way to reduce the temptation (or better resist it).

The third element in recollection is to deal with other pressing concerns (if any) which would tend to interfere with prayer. Often when we sit down to be quiet with God, we have something on our minds. It may be a relationship which concerns us, or a problem at work, or anger about something. Any problem which is a preoccupation falls into the category. In our recollection, we will need to do something about the problem, or else there will be no quiet.

Sometimes, the preoccupation is so great that no other prayer will be possible. We will spend our time laying the situation before God and asking His help. That is perfectly legitimate, when necessary. Most of the time, however, we will be able with God's help to let go of the preoccupation. This requires, first of all, that we acknowledge the concern. Sometimes, we keep these things a little below the surface, and may not have even recognized that we are angry or preoccupied (or whatever). Then, having acknowledged it, we need to lay it before God. This means that we share it with Him, and submit it to His authority, making ourselves ready to do whatever He may wish us to do with it. We will ask Him to take from us the preoccupation, so that we can be open to Him in prayer. If we commit the situation to His hands, then by His grace we will be able to let go of our emotional attachment, and be freed from its hold on our minds.

This part of recollection is especially important in preparation for our time of quiet. If our quiet time is first thing in the morning, the recollection can be done the night before. If the quiet is later in the day, recollection had best come immediately before.

The final element of recollection is a placing of self in the presence of God: giving Him an opportunity to give us a word if He wishes. The aim is to maintain the centeredness on Christ, and avoid getting drawn into extraneous pursuits, in prayer as well as in daily life. This presence of God is the natural conclusion to a time of recollection. Having accounted for our failings, our faithfulness to our resolutions for the day, and our pressing concerns, we find ourselves quiet and in God's presence. We are open to Him as deeply as we can be. For we are honest -- with Him and with ourselves -- about who we are as sinners and as His adopted children.

The whole process of recollection need take no more than a few minutes (unless there is a major preoccupation to be dealt with). Indeed, it should not normally take any longer, lest we get preoccupied with ourselves. There are people who are habitually tempted to get preoccupied with themselves -- especially with their failings -- in prayer. Such people need to maintain a discipline about recollection. The time of recollection is to open them to God not close them in on themselves. It is to be liberating, not a matter of morbid self-absorption.

For most of us, however, the danger is not too much but too little. We avoid recollection if we possibly can. It is very easy to let it slide for a day or two. It is, after all, unpleasant to look at our sins, and it is hard to be quiet. But while recollection is not easy to begin or to persevere in, it is well worth the effort. To bear fruit, it needs to be a part of the regular discipline of prayer. Then it can serve as a foundation to the rest of our daily prayer. It will support our quiet. It will help reduce distractions at the Daily Office and at the Eucharist. It will give us a standard for progress in the daily battle with our besetting sins. It will help us open ourselves to God for Him to work in us all that He will.

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