



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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VACATION

Taking a vacation is like falling off a log, right? Wrong: for many Christians, it is difficult to take a vacation without all semblance of Christian practice disappearing. Some people go on vacation to leave all responsibilities behind, including Christian ones. They do not want to go to Church on vacation or say their prayers. They want to take a vacation from God and His inexorable demands. They want to be free to indulge themselves without worrying about sin. This approach leads to a most unsatisfactory vacation: people end up feeling guilty and vaguely aware that something is wrong. It produces a mildly foul temper, which is only resolved when the return to Christian routine forces them to deal with their selfishness. Then, as they face all of the sin of the vacation, they can repent (with the inevitable remorse), and get on with their regular Christian life.

Some people have another sort of problem with vacations: they find it hard to relax. We might think that work is hard and relaxation is easy. Yet it is not always the case. Some people find it exceedingly difficult to stop rushing around. When they have a vacation, they approach it with a certain amount of dread. They fear the unstructured time. What will they do with it all? For such folks, a vacation is more tiring than the regular routine of work, for they must not only complete all their activities, but they must also supply the activities to be completed.

The foundation for Christian vacations is to be found in Scripture. We are taught that the times of rest are extremely important for us. Israel was commanded to keep the Sabbath. It was to be a day of worship, holy to the Lord; it was also to be a day of rest. It was to remind God's people that He had made them and that He sustained them. They did not sur-

vive by their own hand. It served to keep their labor in perspective. Labor was good and human. But it was no substitute for what God does for His people. The sanctified time of rest helped to keep this all in order.

One of the distinctly Christian problems is that vacations tend of their nature to be self-indulgent. We may well think of a vacation as a right, so that if something comes up to prevent us from taking our vacation as planned -- the situation at work, an illness in the family -- a certain amount of resentment results. Moreover, we go on vacation to do what we want. If we extend this to be the ruling principle of our time on vacation, we will surely end up in a great mess. For self-indulgence is the very opposite of Christian life, which has sacrificial love at its center. This does not mean that vacations are unchristian. It does mean that they present special problems.

Self-indulgence manifests itself in the attitude that everything ought to revolve around me: everything is here for my comfort. Then when anything goes wrong -- rain at the beach, bad food at the restaurant, no room at the hotel, car trouble -- I claim the right to resent it. (I may also claim the right to vent my anger on everyone else.) Similarly, I expect my desires to be satisfied -- I wish to see a particular movie whether everyone else does or not. And if my desire is not satisfied, I am entitled to compensation of one sort or another. It is surprisingly easy to fall into this on vacation. We are without the usual mechanisms by which we catch ourselves when we are selfish.

The key is to remember that we are Christians. This means that the vacation (as all of human life) is not our right but God's gift to us. It is to be received at His hand. This is the antidote for self-indulgence. We are on vacation to be refreshed as Christians, not to be refreshed by being pagans for a time. If we maintain an attitude of simple thankfulness we will not go far wrong. Then we will not expect everything to go our way any more than it does the rest of the year. If we fall (and the resentment begins), then we can repent and return, thanking God for what we have.

When we take time off, what is to be accomplished? From the human standpoint: rest and refreshment. It is time to lay aside our daily burdens of work in order to find some refreshment of spirit. In the time allowed us we will no doubt want to play -- however we may wish to do that. We will want to be with family or friends, and take the opportunity to be with them in the ways that are not possible during the routine of work. Laying aside our usual preoccupations of work allows us the energy for other pursuits. That change should in turn allow us a general refreshment, preparing us to return to work with renewed interest and vigor.

From a Christian standpoint there is something else which is to be accomplished in a vacation. The Christian will be seeking refreshment for the spirit as well as mind and body. He will be seeking rest and refreshment in Christ. If it is not to be a vacation from God but a vacation in God, then we must sustain our prayer life even while we relax. This is not easy. Often prayer requires effort and work for us. We are tempted to think that we should leave it behind with our other work when we go on vacation. While we cannot do that altogether, it is appropriate to alter our general rule of life when we are on vacation. As our schedule is undoubtedly changed, some such alteration is almost inevitable. But even beyond such necessary adjustments, some relaxation of rule is generally in order. Prayer should not be a burden on vacation. But neither should it be abandoned altogether. Between these two extremes lies the Christian pathway.

For a Christian's vacation to succeed, he must sustain his prayer, even if the supporting structures of rule are altered. For this is the substance of his relationship with God. To do this we must first of all recognize that we are not going away to get away from God: it is not a vacation from prayer and worship.

Then we need to examine our rule and make some practical adjustments. We will need to decide what we will maintain and what we will relax on vacation. We will need to retain some sort of set prayers on a daily basis. If we normally say both Morning and Evening Prayer, we might want to say just one. If we usually say one (and if that would be burdensome on vacation), we can substitute a briefer form of family prayer (from the Prayer Book, for example). The point is to take on enough to retain the spiritual continuity of what we do the rest of the time, but not so much that it is a burden all the time.

The same principles apply to the other elements of our rule, especially worship and meditation. Sunday worship may be a problem if we are travelling. Camping out in the wilderness or sitting on an airplane would make it impossible to be at the Sunday Eucharist. In such situations, we should be sure to take a special time for prayer in observance of the Lord's Day, corporately if possible. And if it is possible to participate in Sunday worship we will want to avail ourselves of the opportunity -- not because we have to but because we will miss it if we do not. (It seems that it always takes more effort to get to Church on vacation -- but that is just the temptation of sloth trying to get the better of us.)

The prayer of quiet (meditation) is essential for a successful vacation. It is also very difficult. We know from experience that it is the hardest type of prayer to establish, even with the support of a set rule. It is also especially dependent upon that set time

and place. Without the rule, it can easily disappear. On vacation, we are apt to lose our regular time and place for quiet, and so need special effort to keep it up. We may not need meditation every day. But we will need to plan to take the time at least two or three times a week. And then we will need self-discipline to carry through on the plan.

If we do succeed at this, we will keep our relationship with God intact. We will be able to share with Him the joys and trials of being on vacation (and there are surely both!). We will be able to catch ourselves falling into any sinful habits before we have gone very far. It will help to keep everything on an even keel.

While being on vacation presents special problems for the Christian, it also presents special opportunities. We have time on vacation to do some of the things we never get around to otherwise. If our Christian faith is important to us, we may well want to do some specifically Christian things with the extra time. It is an ideal situation for spiritual reading -- the sort of thing we have on the shelf but never quite found the energy to get into. Similarly we may wish to do some Bible study, particularly any large-scale reading that is of interest. For example, the daily office readings may have made us wish that we could read through one of the Gospels at a sitting instead of in little sections.

Vacation is also likely to present opportunities for special reflection on one's Christian life. So often, in the course of daily routine, we think of things we would like to think about -- and they never quite get the time devoted to them. Vacations can help. The month or two before, we should keep a list of such items, so that when we have the time (lying in the sun or walking on the beach) we will be able to remember some of the things, and give them the time we would like. A vacation is not the same as a retreat, but (depending on its circumstances) it can help us in similar ways.

We may want to frequent a weekday Eucharist if our vacation arrangements permit it. This will give us a splendid chance for quiet worship. All of these are opportunities to sanctify the time of rest. There are obviously many ways of doing so. If we consciously accept the need for sanctifying our vacations (in other words, vacationing as Christians), we will rise to the challenges of a vacation, and take best advantage of the opportunities. Our vacation will then provide growth and refreshment for the spirit as well as for the body and mind. It will be for us another opportunity for Christian growth.

