

Good Friday.

From Thursday supper until breakfast Saturday morning, except for water, I am on a total fast.

I find this year, however, I examine more closely my motives for fasting. Is it simply an external exercise? By external I mean, am I doing this because of historical custom, because Good Friday has been known as a day of fasting? I think of the Jews who during Jesus' life performed certain rituals they did not understand. The rationale for them had been lost in the darkness of the past. But the law said they should be done. Is there a similarity to my fasting? Do I really understand?

Fasting is interwoven into the spiritual fabric of mankind. Every major faith has practiced it. Though Jesus laid down no specific rules for fasting, apparently he accepted it as part of his own religious tradition. He fasted (Lk. 4:2); he indicated that his followers would fast (Mk. 2:19); and he was critical of the ostentatious fasting of the priests (Mt. 4:16).

The various Christian rules and suggestions regarding fasting evolved slowly during the early years of Christianity. Gradually the Church as a whole codified the various seasons and days into recommended practice. One of the points the Church was trying to make was that we should remember that our Lord suffered for us. The minor discomfort of our fasts is in a way a kind of offering, a small gift, a remembrance. It is frequently thought of as a penance. It has the effect of turning us toward God, for if we are hungry we know that we fast for him and his love for us.

Today the Church has few guidelines regarding fasting, and the layman is left to work out his own approach. Perhaps the great irony is that many of the Church administrators have not understood the religious significance of fasting that non-Christian faiths recognize. Is it that they can see no merit in self-denial, which after all is the basis of the Cross? This denial is not negative, but rather positive. For we are giving ourselves to God for him to use as he can, and in this use we grow to be more as he intended us to be in the first place. It is a moving toward what is most important in our lives--that of putting God first.

For a better understanding of fasting, it may be helpful to know how that word differs from abstinence.

According to strict Catholic dogma, fasting is taking less food at specific times. On days of fasts, one full meal is allowed. Two other meatless meals may be taken according to one's needs, but together they should not equal a full meal. This rule has been somewhat mitigated in the Roman Church. As for abstinence, the reference is solely to meat. The Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary states that a Day of Abstinence is one on which meat and soup or gravy made from meat may not be eaten. At one time eating fish was something of a penance, for it was heavily salted to preserve it. Meat was far tastier.

And today! Why do I fast today? Perhaps because I am sorry for the blunders I have made against God and man, and this is an act of penance. In its own way, my fasting today could also be something of an appreciation of Jesus' sacrifice of his life for me. He gave his life not willingly but lovingly. This day I am

able to show some measure of my thankfulness.

Or do I fast because in a mystical way there seems to be a relationship between that activity and a deeper awareness of the Holy Spirit? All of one's life-senses seem to be sharpened by fasting. I am quieter, more peaceful, less troubled by circumstances, consequently more receptive and more aware of God. It is easier to thank him and to love him. The joy is gentler and more pervasive, my hunger a fullness rather than an emptiness. Because I empty myself, I am more able to receive. In this sense at this time I am less bound to things and more to God. I am not caught up as much in the high speed of living.

Of one thing I am certain. Fasting takes discipline.

But discipline has become a disliked word in our culture. This is unfortunate. There's a forceful incisiveness to it. The principal meaning, according to The American Heritage Dictionary is "training that is expected to produce a specified character or pattern of behavior, especially that which is expected to produce moral or mental improvement." Its Latin root is particularly interesting, if we think about the word within a spiritual context. It's related to the word, disciple, in that both words (disciple and discipline) grew out of the Latin, discipulus, which has as its parent, discere: "to teach".

Fasting is a way to train ourselves for God's service, and St. Paul drew an analogy about this training for the life of the spirit in 1st Corinthians 9:24. Brother Robert observes that discipline keeps one in spiritual training, so that when God challenges you to the roots of your being, you are ready for the confrontation. Fasting develops a certain toughness of spirit. We are not thrown off as much by the vicissitudes of life. Apparent success or failure is kept in better perspective. We learn to resist temptation, to control our negative emotions of anger, envy, pride, gluttony, etc. One of the truths we begin to learn about spiritual growth is that unless there is self-discipline, we cannot mature spiritually.

I fast, also, because I feel guilty of the abundance I have in a world where two-thirds of the people are always hungry. I think of Saint Francis who felt he could not eat happily when so many starved. He had a lively sense of the dramatic. When he wanted to give his brothers a spiritual precept, he knew how to capture their imagination so they'd never forget. They understood his warning better, about putting too much emphasis on eating, when they saw him sprinkle ashes or cold water on his food to take away the taste.

How do I turn my feelings into active work to alleviate suffering? It is easy to feel sorry for people. It is something else to help them. Some people give an active thrust to their feelings of compassion when on Fridays they have only soup and crackers at dinner and give what they save to some needy situation. We might do the same.

Fasting helps me to weed<sup>d</sup> out the superfluous in my life. It is this superfluity that at times chokes out the Holy Spirit in me so that I am threatened to remain spiritually stunted. Emily Gardner Neal in her book, The Healing Power of Christ writes about creating a climate that helps spiritual healing. "First comes fasting, which I believe to be invaluable. To do without food quickens the spirit, making the individual more receptive to the power of God (or if one is

attending a service as an intercessor, a more open channel for His healing grace). When the disciples asked Jesus why they had been unable to cast out an evil spirit, he replied, There is no means of casting out this sort but prayer and fasting." (Mk. 9:28)

There are pitfalls to fasting. Whether partial or total, it is always difficult to some degree. You do get hungry; and you do wonder at times: "What's the use? What difference will it make?"

Most of us find fasting is harder when we do it by ourselves. Our families and friends may not entirely understand, and we are tempted constantly by having food within reach. We miss the social act of eating, the warmth and communion of friendship and good company that goes with mealtimes. But as we grow more experienced, we begin to know the mysterious collaboration between body and spirit, and to learn that the appetite for food and the desire for the company of a friend could be transmuted into communion with Jesus Christ and the breaking of bread with him in the Communion Supper. (Elizabeth O'Conner, Search for Silence, Word Books)

If by mistake you break a fast, you may feel like giving up completely. Don't. Pick up where you left off. Don't think of it as a failure. There is no such thing as a failure in the spiritual life as long as you keep trying. In setting up a fast, however, be realistic. Don't take on more than you can handle. A young friend disciplined himself too severely with regard to fasting. He was not successful with it, and his entire approach to his spiritual life was affected adversely. He decided he should give up desserts on Fridays. This may not seem like much, but to him it was for he was very partial to desserts, and giving them up was a sacrifice. But he was able to handle it. It was amazing how his whole spiritual life came back into balance. One aspect of our spiritual life can affect the whole. Later on he may find he will want to take on a somewhat stricter program of fasting.

Once I had a crushing deadline to meet. I moderated my fast for that period of time, since other people were depending on me and I needed all my strength. In its own way, giving up the fast was a penance for me. You will want to find that middle ground between the extremes of too little and too much. Take into account your circumstances.

If we take our spiritual vision and journey seriously, at some point we are going to come into sharp conflict with opposing forces in the world; and at times we may question whether it is worth the cost. And once again another man is led by the Spirit into the Wilderness, where there are dangled before him all the satisfactions and rewards that will come to him simply by keeping on with his life as it is. All that belongs to one level of understanding in him makes war on the light which has broken through from a higher level.

"In the Temptation story is the vivid account of that conflict in Christ. It is a conflict between two orders--heaven and earth--which must rage within every man if there is to be a new age of the Spirit. The choice he makes, how that conflict is resolved in him, determines whether or not ministering angels come, and he walks under the sign of the Sign of the Cross." (Ibid)

The act of fasting strengthens us for this struggle.

Peter Funk

Since St. Francis thought of the Third Order as the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, it seems appropriate that the Sacrament of Penance - confession and absolution - should have a special place in our rule.

God Has Set Us Free

It is through Jesus that we burst into the sunlight of God's love. It is through him that we are able to slip off the chains of pride, anger, selfishness, of jealousy, of all the attitudes and actions that keep us prisoners of unhappiness. It is through His death that life has been opened to us.

Our freedom depends on one condition. We must accept Jesus as our Lord. Until we do this, we are in our own way slaves, just as were the Jews before they left Egypt. And when we do accept Him, our journey in faith is much the same as Israel's struggle toward the Promised Land. They faltered; we falter. They turned from God; so do we. They complained; we forget to trust. They lost sight of the vision that God put before them. And we? Well, somehow we ignore Jesus' teaching that we can enter the kingdom of God now.

It's true that Christ died for us and when we accept Him fully into our lives we are forgiven, totally forgiven. We have crossed the Red Sea. We have parted from our former life. But God expected the Jews to move on, and he went before them showing them the way. God does not expect us to sit around. Our mission is to continue to follow Christ. He will lead us toward God, where more and more we find ourselves opening up to His love, which we share with the world. We begin to live the promise of Galatians 5:22--of love, joy, peace, patience, etc.

We are part of all humanity, and whatever we do wrong is never related to us alone. Our sins are not on a one-to-one basis. When we fall, all of mankind stumbles a little. When we lift ourselves, we lift mankind with us.

A Loving and Trusting Relationship With God

You have been gloriously made; only a little less than the angels. You should bring to your confession a sense of hope, belief that God, having made you this way, can restore you even if you have fallen. Through the mystery of his infinite love, you will be lifted up again. To have faults is to be part of the human condition. We make mistakes, of course. Yet we should not dwell on them morbidly. Be sorry about them, certainly. But, come before God with praise and joy that he has given you an opportunity to realize you have been forgiven.

When a priest pronounces the official words of absolution, it is a reassurance not only that God, loving us the way He does, forgives us now; but that forgiveness has already taken place. And we respond to His forgiving love with our penitential love. Psychiatrist Paul Tournier tells of a priest who could not resolve a deep anxiety. It was only when Dr. Tournier assured him of God's desire to forgive that the priest could go to confession, receive absolution, and so be healed.

Both you and your confessor should be aware of God's power to heal and to strengthen, and should rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to change your life. Such people "believe that the Lord wants to forgive them so that they will be free and loving Christians, unchained by habitual sins." (Michael Scanlan, T.O.R., The Power in Penance, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana)

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Perhaps the essence of the Sacrament of Penance is caught in Father Scanlan's further thought: "The teachings of both traditional and contemporary theology emphasize that forgiveness alone does not restore the healthy relationship between man and God). Man has to be changed in his heart so as to willingly receive God's love."

Brother Robert Hugh, S.S.F., believes that "an expression of the Sacrament of Penance is a loving, trusting relationship to God. He accepts me, not because I might get around to doing something for Him; but He accepts me, frailties and all. The prayer of confession and faith is a very loving experience, for it cannot be apart from faith and trust. I am accepted by the Beloved, which makes it possible to accept the unbearable - the knowledge of myself."

### Confession and Healing

Why is it not just as useful to confess our shortcomings directly to God? Why go through an intermediary?

In the act of confession we break through to Christ. Yet, I find it often a profoundly humiliating experience to tell someone else my weaknesses and failings. It is pride-shattering. I can't help but think that my confessor must be surprised. What a disappointment for him. But I forget that he probably sees much of himself mirrored in me.

Confession helps to avoid self-deception. By myself I can easily excuse my faults, to slide over them without really thinking about them deeply. But when I speak of them to someone else within the context of a Christian community, rationalizing becomes more difficult.

Psychologists and priests know that usually the healing process begins when one no longer keeps to himself whatever it is that is troubling him. The nature of sin is that it seems to shun exposure. Once it is shared by a Christian who represents the Church - and by extension, the whole community of mankind - sin loses its power. The Church is empowered to hear and forgive sins, by Jesus. He said to His Apostles: "If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:20)

There is an interesting correlation between healing and confession. Jesus makes reference to it, as He heals, when He states, "Your sins are forgiven you." St. James writes, "Is there any one of you who is sick? He should call the Church elders, who will pray for him and pour oil on him in the name of the Lord.... and the sins he has committed will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you will be healed." (James 5:14-16)

When we seek forgiveness, when we remove whatever is blocking God's love, we are in a position to "be in Christ", to be whole, to live the Christian Gospel. We are open to God's healing love by our confidence in His forgiveness.

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Practicalities

One of the first decisions to make is to choose a confessor who is in sympathy with the concept of the Sacrament of Penance. You may trust him, for as a priest, he must keep to himself whatever he hears in confession.

Finding a competent confessor is as important as locating a doctor in whom you have full confidence. One's spiritual health is the sine qua non of all health, for our entire wellbeing depends on it. If we are spiritually ill, almost inevitably this will be reflected physically. It is important, however, not to confuse spiritual direction with confession. It is better to keep these two actions apart, and to have different individuals for each. A spiritual director need not be a priest. The way to locate a confessor is to ask your friends, and to talk directly to a priest whom you are considering, to try to discern his attitude in this area. It is possible your Bishop may be of help.

The place does not have to be in a church. I have confessed in the home of my confessor, as well as kneeling at the altar rail. Saint Francis urged that one should follow confession by attending a Eucharist.

How often should one go to confession? This depends on your needs. Some go twice yearly, others each Ember-tide, and others find monthly confession helpful.

Preparation

When you begin to prepare for confession, take Dietrich Bonhoeffer's advice to heart: be specific about your failings. Jesus dealt with people who knew they needed forgiveness, and they received it.

The Seven Deadly Sins, or Galatians 5:19-23, or the Ten Commandments, are useful aids in sorting out my shortcomings. There are so many different aspects of one's life that preparing for confession may be a bewildering experience.

The simplest way to begin is with our rapport with God, and other people. For example, I will be thinking carefully about my love for Christ, and for His Church, and my means of expressing this love. Do I really understand the full implications of what loving Christ entails? And my personal life - am I touchy about criticism? Do I try to dominate? Am I generous? Do I expose myself unnecessarily to situations that are morally destructive, that will draw me away from being in God's presence? Do I avoid superfluity and do I have self-control? Do I really want to overcome my major faults, and have I faith in God's mercy and my need for absolution?

The foregoing is simply offered as a possible stimulus when you think about yourself, in regard to God and people. Certainly there are other points to cover which may be more pertinent to your own, immediate needs.

Jesus explained in the Lord's Prayer that we can receive pardon only to the degree we pardon others. To understand this more fully, substitute "love" for "pardon". This is what we really are thinking about when it comes to the Sacrament of Penance. The love we are able to receive from God is in direct relation to our capacity to pass it on.

## PRAYER AS A FOUNDATION

The tertiaries, like the Brothers and Sisters in community, are to live in an atmosphere of praise and prayer.

"His prayer ended, Francis got up and went out of the church full of joy because he had been told what to do. Later he would know that God's command had a deeper content than he had at first understood, but his youth and humility could not realize that now. He obeyed the command of the moment with the simple literalness that was always his." (Goudge, Elizabeth: My God and My All, Coward-McCann, Inc., 1959.)

It is impossible to reach the essence of Francis unless we understand the absolute importance of prayer in his life. Francis' life revolved around prayer. It was the center of his existence. Prayer was the foundation of his spiritual life, the springboard of his extraordinary activity. He is a perfect example of combining the contemplative life with that of active work in the world, of being both a Mary and a Martha (Lk: 10:38). Continually on his lips were the words of the Psalmist, "Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths." (Ps. 25:4)

Consistently in the reports of postulants and novices are such statements as: "I'm simply not making any headway with my meditations." "So often when I have loose time, I don't think of praying, so my prayers seldom get done." "When I do observe meditation, it's not very well organized." "I know I'm too irregular in my prayer life."

It seems that the two most difficult portions of a Rule of Life to fulfill satisfactorily are that of Meditation and Personal Prayer. "Meditation and prayer?" a priest asked with some surprise, "Is there a difference?" There is, and there is not.

Like rivers and oceans, who can tell the precise part when one actually intermingles with the other? Yet, meditation is more like a river, and prayer an ocean. One leads into the other.

Though there are more-or-less different types of prayer; once again, we cannot be too categorical. What we say here is only an approximation; but because there is a certain amount of confusion about prayer, some delineation of this area may be helpful.

Meditation St. Francis de Sales in "Treatise on the Love of God", defines it in these terms - "Every meditation is a thought, but every thought is not a meditation. We often have thoughts which have no aim or intention at all but are simple musing; and however attentive this kind of thought may be, it cannot be called meditation. Sometimes we think attentively about something in order to understand its causes, effects, qualities; and this thinking is called study. But when we think about the things of God, not to learn, but to kindle our love, that is called meditating."

There are three broad areas of personal prayer.

(1) Vocal prayers are those using a set form of words, such as the Lord's Prayer, the Jesus Prayer, or the Angelus, which may be said aloud or silently. It is also participation in any formal worship, such as services held on Sunday mornings.

(2) Mental prayer, however, is that prayer in which we do not use words at all, or if we do they are spontaneous, giving expression to our own thoughts.

(3) Prayers of Grace, or Infused Prayer, or the Prayer of Quiet are different terms for the same experience. They are all dependent on God. At such times it is truly the Holy Spirit praying in us. These prayers are not something we can strive after, as such. Generally they are given to those who, throughout their spiritual journey, have been able to draw closer to God, even though they may be extremely active in the world. Perhaps it lies in one's total commitment to God's will.

No one prayer is necessarily better than another. Vocal prayer can keep one in the presence of God as much as mental prayer. There are advantages to mental prayer, however, which perhaps will become apparent in time.

A friend who is wise in the ways of prayer once said, concerning the difficulty some people have with mental prayer and meditation, "You must remember that one of the reasons it is difficult in the beginning is that mental prayer is a highly creative act. Anything creative is going to be harder to do." Don't be put off by this; don't become discouraged. If you persist quietly, steadily, you will find that prayer can become one of the simplest acts in your life. I believe it was St. Teresa of Avila who defined mental prayer in these words - "Prayer is nothing but a friendly conversation in which the soul speaks, heart-to-heart, with the One whom we know loves us."

Much of its complexity has to do with our own limiting human nature. If we understood love, had less pride, lived more simply, and truly trusted God, our prayers would be a natural outgrowth of our entire way of life. It's not that we become experts in prayer. When we begin to think we are an expert, we will find ourselves in deep spiritual trouble. As Thomas Merton wrote, "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!" (Merton, Thomas; Contemplative Prayer, Image Books, 1971)

Peter Funk says - Larry, a Jewish convert to Christianity, paid us a visit before leaving for Israel, where for a year he would live in a kibbutz. He had just returned from spending two weeks at a Christian camp involved in the Jesus Movement. He was nervous about going to Israel because he wondered whether his Christian faith could stand up when he would be undoubtedly the only Christian in the commune. "Do you read the Bible daily?" I asked. He hesitated; "Only when the spirit moves me. Not every day." "What about praying? Do you pray every day?" "Well, there again, it's when the spirit moves me. But I do think about God a lot." When he understood that through daily meditation, prayer and Bible study his faith would increase, and that he would not be alone, for he would bring himself into Christ's presence through his prayers, he went off much more confidently.

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A friend plunged into the life of the spirit with characteristic energy. He read religious books voraciously, and spent hours meditating and praying. He did not do this on a daily basis. As a matter of fact, sometimes days and even weeks would stretch by with no meditation or prayer. Fortunately, his spiritual director, an older man experienced and unsentimental, was not impressed with these flurries of activity. "Ten minutes a day for you," he said, "No more and no less." That was all. It did not seem like much. But it was far better to do ten minutes a day, each and every day, than a half hour or so every once in a while.

It is easy for us to become so involved in activity that we forget that the foundation of God's activity is prayer. Without this we can lose our direction and perspective.

Dom Chautard, author of The Soul of the Apostolate, stresses that mental prayer is the foundation for not only our entire spiritual life, but it is the inexhaustible fount which will nourish all of our other activities. Every saint, everyone deep in the life of the spirit, knows this. It is through prayer that we change and grow more towards what God wants us to become, because we are drawn into His presence by prayer.

No one can be in His presence and not change. If we are to change the hearts of others, to help bring peace and brotherhood to the world, we must change first of all, our own hearts.

You will discover, if you have not done so already, that there are no tricks or short-cuts to spiritual growth. Prayer on a regular basis is one of the most important elements in nourishing this growth.

Lord, teach us to pray.

"Why hast thou cast me off, O Lord;  
Why dost thou hide thy face from me?" (Ps. 88:14)

A friend of mine had a profound and unusual mystical experience. Startled, terrified, he awoke in the dark of night seemingly surrounded by flames. It was as if his entire room was on fire. He could feel the intense heat. He knew he was not on fire, and yet the flames were all about him. In his terror, he understood that he was being confronted with the shattering experience of God. Involuntarily, he cried out for help. The phenomenon continued, and he had no idea of time.

Suddenly, the flames vanished. He was plunged into deep, dark stillness. What perplexed him was that this darkness - the only word that seemed appropriate - lasted for more than a year. He felt like a spiritual nomad lost in a strange desert. There were no familiar landmarks.

He was in a dry period, a spiritual drought, which technically is called "accidie". Most people know it as being fed up with things, of feeling sterile, being restless and ill at ease in different ways. However, there is a specific spiritual connotation to the word which describes a common and frequently painful experience, that happens to almost everyone traveling the road of faith. It lasts for varying periods of time - a few weeks, to months, to years.

Meditations seem flat, dull, gray, uninspired. Nothing much seems to happen in them. They are not well controlled. Neither do we hold to that stillness where one is emptied of himself, to be filled with God. Nor do we think creatively about the scripture we read. Our minds wander, and we cannot hold to the center of what we try to reach. We are restless in our work. It is a chore to get through the routine of things. Enthusiasm has dried up for causes, and we have lost the elan, the spark, the zest for life.

You and I recall other, happier times when there was that sense of being in love. To be in love, and to be swept up by the Holy Spirit, is a similar sensation. There is a similar kind of light and lightness, the feeling of having stepped into a poem of joy, the warmth and patience and sympathy you have for all people. You seem to be more aware of God's presence, not only for yourself, but for everyone, everything.

Has God then forsaken us? Of course not. God never forsakes anyone. It is only you and I who forsake him. Our prayer should be rather, "My God, why have I forsaken you? Why do I not trust in you, knowing that you have placed me where you want me? God never changes. It is only I who fluctuate. He brings me to darkness to give me the gift of light. This is the paradox of Christianity.

Dryness isn't always from God. Sometimes it's brought on by us, because we are going off in the wrong direction. It's an indication we need to redirect ourselves. Abraham H. Maslow comments that, "Theologians used the word accidie to describe the sin of failing to do with one's life all that one knows one could do." The following is a brief, thumbnail guide that may be of help to see if this is the case.

If you are new to the spiritual life, you may be erratic in your habits, neglecting prayers and Bible studies, your obligation to be of service to others. In a word, your rule of life has fallen apart. When this happens, inevitably your inner life begins to dry up. A young woman just back from an inspiring religious conference told me how much she needed that weekend. "I felt so far away from God. I hadn't been praying or reading my Bible. That's why I was cranky and upset. The world was getting to me. Now I'm back on the track."

Another situation that brings on the wrong kind of dryness is falling into the pharisaic trap of being overly concerned with the externals of religion: the ritual and details. These things can become an end in themselves. (Mt. 23:1-36)

Many young people argue vehemently whether the Adam and Eve story is literally true, or try to determine precisely when the end of the world will come. These are peripheral to the great message Christ gives us: "I have come in order that they may have life; life in all its fullness." (John 10:10) Christ's teachings are centered on love - love of God, love for all mankind. The overly scrupulous particularize Christianity. Christ offers us a feast, and they are picky eaters, and of course their spirit cannot be properly nourished.

Sickness, consistent hassles, heavy pressures, frenetic concern over daily events, tend to pull us away, affecting our entire outlook. We are off center and out of balance. Our spiritual perspective becomes faulty.

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The dry periods that come from God have a purpose, and if we can understand that they are part of our overall spiritual growth and not simply a hiatus, we can use them creatively.

Thomas Merton gives sharp insights into such junctures. "As we advance on the way of sacrifice, we tend to submit more and more to a purifying action we cannot understand. The sacrifices that are not chosen are often of greater value than those we select for ourselves. Especially in meditation we have to learn patience, in the weary and arid path that takes us through the dry places in prayer. Aridities grow more and more difficult as time goes on. In a certain sense, aridity can almost be taken as a sign of progress in prayer, provided it is accompanied by serious efforts and self-discipline. In the prophecy of Hosea (2:14) the Lord says that He will lead Israel into the Wilderness and into the dry places in the Valley of Achor, in order to speak to her heart and espouse her to Him in faith." (Contemplation, Thomas Merton, Image Books)

Think of your dry period perhaps as a kind of spiritual wilderness, even a barren plateau... You are climbing the mountain of God, and for most of us it is simply not possible to go straight up, and so we take a more circuitous route. We climb for a while, exhilarated by our eyes being opened to new views and the heady feeling of progress.

But then our trail seems to peter out and eventually we lose it. Night comes on catching us unprepared. This becomes a period of confusion and frustration because we cannot see where to go next. We have lost our way.

Brother Robert of the Society of St. Francis suggests, however, that all plateaus need not necessarily be painful experiences. They may not be exhilarating, but "when we are on the plateau, progress seems easy and we have the peak in view; as we leave the plateau and start a steeper section, the going is tougher and the immediate foreground hides our view of the peak, which is disheartening. Only when we have stuck it out, breathless, and maybe with a stitch in our side, do we come to another plateau, see the peak again, and on looking back see just how far we have climbed."

There is great difficulty in discussing inner experiences such as this, for we have no adequate, precise language to use. Thus in groping for expression, frequently we turn to metaphors which are only a rough estimate and sometimes more confusing than helpful. The inner depths of the spiritual life are mysterious and inexplicable in terms of ordinary language.

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