

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.

For example, when St. John of the Cross tries to catch the essence of this period which we feel is so upsetting, he uses the term: dark night of the soul. But he is not necessarily speaking of the discomfort one endures during dry periods. That he is trying to explain is that as we progress in these dry periods, the soul reaches an inner stillness that is beyond all outer sense. It is beyond feeling. It is where the soul is more surely with God. It is the "known" in touch with the "unknown", where the object and subject become as one. For Saint John, this darkness that seems to surround us is actually a light of illumination. He uses the term, also, the passive night of the senses--when vocal prayer, images, discursive meditation, seem to be irrelevant and one is drawn to the one who loves us, to simply rest quietly in that love. St. John considers this period to be far more desired than when our prayer life is filled with words and images. But it cannot be forced, for it comes to us by the grace of God.

However, we must be prepared that "during the 'dark night' of the feelings and senses, anxiety is felt in prayer, often acutely. This is necessary because this spiritual night marks the transfer of the full, free control of our inner life into the hands of a superior power. We will have to face our doubts and fears. We will have to call into question the whole structure of our spiritual life. We will have to make a new evaluation of our motives for belief, for love, for self-commitment to the invisible God. And at this moment precisely, all spiritual light is darkened, all values lose their shape and reality, and we remain, so to speak, suspended in the void."

"The most crucial aspect of this experience is precisely the temptation to doubt God himself. We must not minimize the fact that this is a genuine risk. For here we are advancing beyond the stage where God makes himself accessible to our mind in simple and primitive images. We are entering the night in which he is present without any image, invisible, inscrutable, and beyond any satisfactory mental representation.... We may not be able to face the terrible experience of being apparently without faith in order to really grow in faith." (Contemplation, Thomas Merton, Image Books)

It is at such times that, above all, we must hold fast to our rule of life, for it brings an absolutely necessary equilibrium to it. If we abandon this we are in danger of abandoning everything, and all the ground we have made is lost. Also, and I'm not entirely sure why, I have found that if you fast more often during this period you are helped along in reaching that mysterious relationship between yourself and God.

But there is no question that the most important experience we have in this encounter is to learn to trust God. As long as we rely on "feelings", we are on vulnerable ground, for feelings are fickle. We don't necessarily have to feel the Holy Spirit in us to know it is there, we don't have to feel our prayers to be sure they are being heard.

Being able to trust God, even though we do not "see" him is the sine qua non of the religious life. If we cannot trust, neither can we really believe; and so it does become at some point an either-or situation. We are faced with really taking that leap of faith, and taking Jesus Christ at face value. This is what
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St. John of the Cross means by understanding the darkness as being light. It is to give up a lesser faith that we may acquire a greater one.

The core of St. Francis' powerful humility which transformed his age, lay in trusting God implicitly in everything. God was all, and he himself was nothing. He was in His hands completely. When Francis presented his program to found an Order which depended completely on the mercy of God for all its temporal needs, the Pope and his councilors were extremely skeptical. Francis answered their skepticism: "Lord Pope, I depend upon my Lord, Jesus Christ. He has promised us eternal life and heavenly happiness, and will not deny us so trivial a thing as what we need here upon earth to maintain our life." As we learn to trust during these dry periods, we grow towards a fuller comprehension of love, of joy, of peace and patience and humility.

"Weeping may endure for a night; but joy cometh in the morning." (Ps. 30:5)

IN LIVING THE RULE OF LIFE

Humility: Brotherhood: Mental Prayer: Simple Life

"What I seem to lack most of all is a real sense of humility. Perhaps I don't really understand what the word means." "With respect to brotherhood, this is something I am not constant about. I am too often irritable, and pray that I will improve in this area." "I am still struggling and failing miserably with mental prayer." "Yesterday I bought a new record player, and today I took it back. It is a luxury I don't need. I have too many material things, and I am not living a simple life. It is too complex."

These quotations culled from monthly reports by American postulants and novices exemplify the four main categories that seem to be among the most troublesome in living a Rule of Life. Not long ago an area held one of its first meetings. The group was comprised of professed tertiaries, postulants, and novices. The meeting was informal and everyone participated in the discussion. Those four areas of difficulty were mentioned. There was almost unanimous agreement that each of us was similarly troubled by either some or by all of them.

As I look at this list I wonder if they are not especially revealing of the temper of our times--personal and national arrogance; wars, riots, genocide; the misconceptions so many people in the Church have of prayer; the stress on materialism? All of these are in alarming evidence. Our times are not only as chaotic as those during which Saint Francis lived; but there is a desperate urgency to the situation, for man now has the capacity to destroy himself. And these four areas of difficulty for novices are not esoteric problems involving a few people. They are at the heart of the sickness of our times. If Saint Francis and his followers were needed in the 13th and 14th centuries, how much more they are needed today!

HUMILITY: Cutting through the various layers of definitions and explanations the core meaning of humility, as a religious accepts the sense of the word, is a complete dependence on God for everything.

Our age is the complete antithesis of this kind of humility, for man is the measure of man in all things. There may be a tolerance for God or a token acceptance of the idea of him, but he plays no conscious part in human evaluations on the level of national or international decisions.

We may try to be humble, but humility is not a virtue that can be striven after. It is a part of a whole concept and way of life. How can I say that this month I will be humble? What I can say is that this month I will try to stop thinking so much of myself. I will not worry so much about failing or succeeding in my job, but with God's help will simply do my best. How on earth can I be humble when I am always worrying about myself? I will try also to realize that everything I am and have is the result of God's love of this world.

A truly humble person is no shrinking violet. Quite to the contrary. He enters into the world with zest and confidence, for he knows that God goes with him. And this is the way it was with St. Francis in all that he accomplished. An unknown, he dared to ask the Pope's approval for his way of life. In a world hostile to religion, he dared to dream of his army of beggars revitalizing the world. May we learn to be humble disciples of such a humble master.

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BROTHERHOOD: No wonder so many of our brothers and sisters in the Society of St. Francis are troubled. The word, brotherhood, has almost lost its meaning in a world rent with racial violence, civil war, refugees, and selfishness.

Not long ago I was working with a student on a school problem. Suddenly his mind grasped the answer, and with astonishment he found that he not only understood that particular problem but it was a key to understanding the underlying concept and a host of related problems. He could grasp the whole.

And so it is with brotherhood, when Christ becomes the central factor. Like the student suddenly we see the problems of mankind in a different perspective. Rather than isolated incidents they are part of a related, intelligent whole, and we are able to bring order out of chaos. Our mission is to make our Lord known and loved by men. This is the only real foundation for a peaceful world. What burst forth in everything Saint Francis ever said or did, was this love he held for our Lord. Through this love he and his followers affected his age. Francis and his followers today can affect our age.

May we remember always that God's love and mercy embrace the world.

MENTAL PRAYER: It is not difficult to see why this is one of the most difficult areas for a novice, or for any of us. Not only is prayer a highly creative act, but because it is so utterly "un-material" and apparently inactive, most people believe that the same amount of time spent in being active and in "doing things" would seem to be far more practical. Then too, we are all so used to the high pressure of always being on the go, that time spent quietly with God sometimes will make one fidgety.

But prayer is the foundation of religious life. Everything else is subordinate to it. Everything!

At its simplest and at times most effective, prayer is conversation with God for our needs and the needs of others. Prayer is the silent but certain awareness that he dwells in us and we in him. Through prayer we become effective channels so that his love for the world can work through us; for if we are to be Franciscans we are to be instruments of his peace.

What seems most difficult for novices is to get into the habit of setting aside time for mental prayer. It is better to do this only 5 minutes each and every day, rather than an occasional half hour.

O Lord, teach us to pray.

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TO LIVE SIMPLY: An aspect of contemporary life is the extreme emphasis put on material things. So often there is an honest difficulty in choosing as to whether an item is a necessity or a luxury. I am writing this letter on an electric typewriter. Should I have kept my old manual one? I do a great deal of writing and this one is so much faster.

Because of circumstances one person may not be able to live outwardly in as simple a manner as someone else. Are we to be critical of him? What of the woman tertiary who is married to a wealthy business man? How does she adapt to the requirement of simplicity?

The principles are explicit in pointing out that Simplicity of Life does not only involve material objects. It is an entire attitude that we are concerned with. But at its best, perhaps it is the simplicity of the true Franciscan that intrigues the world. For since he is not encumbered with "things", he can take on more of the burdens of mankind.

Sir Thomas Moore is a good example of how one individual handled the dilemma. His service to his king demanded that he live outwardly a rather affluent life. As an individual, however, he lived a life of discipline dedicated to God. When the time came for him to give up everything, he was able to do this willingly.

Help us, O Lord, to cheerfully accomplish those things you command.

Peter Funk

"The tertiaries, therefore, though they possess property and earn money to support themselves and their families and dependents, must yet by their readiness to live simply and to share with others, show themselves true followers of the Christ of Bethlehem and of their patron saint." (From the Principles: "To Live Simply")

How can I be a follower of Francis? If he were to come to our town today, would I be in the crowd close to him, or would I hang back on the edges listening, wondering, desiring, yet -- yet --. Yet what? Not daring?

The Society of St. Francis is founded on poverty. But I'm not poor. I have a home, clothes, ample food. I have access to doctors, dentists, schools. I have friends I can depend on. I have a car. In our home are various appliances. Poor? Far from it. How then can I call myself a follower of St. Francis? What is the validity of my claim? Why is there the gap between the desire and the reality?

I return to our Lord's commandment, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast and give it to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me." I compare my response to this commandment with the action that Francis took. He gave up everything, literally. But I know that I am not going to give up everything. I can't. What would happen to my family? Who would take care of them? It certainly would not be an act of love on my part, for my spouse and children were given to me by God and I am to care for them to the best of my ability.

How then can I resolve this dilemma? First of all, perhaps it would help to clarify my attitude more, if I could answer the following questions:

What if there were no one dependent on me?

Would I then be willing to follow the example of Francis?

If I understand fully what that question demands of me, then I will be able to answer whether or not I consider myself a Franciscan. Franciscan! Better yet, my answer will give me a clue as to whether or not I can call myself a Christian. Christ spoke to all men. St. Francis was not being a Franciscan in his response to our Lord's call. He was being a Christian who took Christ's words at face value, just as did another contemporary martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his book, "The Cost of Discipleship," Bonhoeffer explores what it means to take the gospel literally.

Christ gave the command. Saint Francis is an example of the near-perfect follower. If then I can answer that question posed above, I will have a clue as to my attitude.

Assuming, hopefully, that my answer is more in the affirmative, still I will not be satisfied entirely. There will be that sense of incompleteness, that feeling that the circle is not fully completed. But I must realize that this is part of the Christian tension. It is the result of being in the world, but not captured by it. I know that the tension will be with me all my life, and I thank God for it, since I will not be as apt to fall into a state of self-satisfied complacency. As one grows spiritually, he continues to see where he falls short, and this is part of the pain and of the thrilling experience of our journey. It was so with St. Francis.

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I had once thought if I were only a friar, achieving simplicity would be no problem. Read what Br. Paul, SSF, has to say about this: "Religious cannot ever know poverty as the poor know it. We have our security in God, and in the loving unity of our community. ... Nor can we know the physical needs of the poor. Our houses are warm, our clothes expensive, we have hot water, good wholesome food. We each have a private room - and some even have a private bath! We live in spacious buildings with separate rooms for eating, for worship, for library. To forego the exercise of dominion is a poor excuse for poverty. If Religious are to be a sign of God's love for the world, they must be a witness of His love for the poor, and not just as individuals; the community itself must find ways of identifying with the poor."

"How then are we to understand the vow of poverty? Some have even suggested that the vow of poverty be changed to a vow of simplicity, as more in keeping with the facts of life. But the vow of poverty can be understood in this sense:

(1) As ridding ourselves of impedimenta. If we are to identify with the poor of this world - poor in material things, poor in faith, poor in self-esteem, poor in spirit; then we must first clear the decks of everything we do not actually need in order to serve God. It is not a question of how much we can keep and still serve God, but of what is essential if we are to serve God.

(2) As attachment to God alone. Nothing else really matters. It is longing to be free of all things, so we may be completely dependent on God. Happy are those who know how poor they are, that God may be all in all. As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

(3) As a generous sharing of what we do have to give. St. Francis is quoted as having said, 'I should expect to be looked upon as a thief by the Supreme Almsgiver, if I did not bestow what I have on those whose need is greater than my own.'

(4) As an emptiness to be filled. I long to be filled with the fullness of God. I am nothing, I have nothing, I desire nothing save God alone. Empty-handed I stand before the throne of His grace, confidently, joyously, begging His love."

As tertiaries we can apply these words to our own lives, to whatever position or station in life God has called us.

Yours in Christ,

Peter Funk

Poverty and Simplicity

"Since complete love gives everything, tertiaries will be concerned for the generosity that gives all, rather than for the value of poverty itself. So doing, they will reflect in spirit the acceptance of that counsel of their Master; to sell all, give to the poor and follow Him."

If you and I are worrying always about having too much, it is probably true - we do have too much. What we must do is to prune things away so that we begin to worry about not having enough.

There is no neat formula which shows me how to determine the degree of simplicity I should achieve. Though there are helpful guidelines, it is still a situation that is between God and me. And simplicity is not only concerned with putting less emphasis on material objects.

It is also concerned with busy-ness. We can become too busy in our profession or in the different works of charity.

There is an apochryphal story about an excellent doctor who had a rare gift for healing. More and more patients flocked to him, so that finally he had so many to care for that he had not time at all for the individual patient. Consequently, no one was being healed, and his talents were not being used to help those who needed him the most.

Here is a thumbnail guide to discover the degree of my own busy-ness, as related to my interior life of the spirit.

- Do I find it nearly impossible to get time to follow my daily rule of life?

- Do my voice and eyes slide over the various prayers as if they were skates on ice? Am I merely reading words?

- During intercession for others does my mind wander?

- Do I feel impatient when I have to sit down and meditate, my thought constantly being side-tracked on all the things I have to do today?

These are all symptoms of the malady called busy-ness. It is an illness one should talk over with his spiritual director; and it is an affliction that priests are especially prone to picking up.

These are also indications of spiritual dryness. But so often, this dryness is the result of hurrying through our daily office. Take more time to be with God.

Do you think that my saying the daily office with time pressuring me like a dam ready to burst is effective? It is probably better than my not saying the office at all, but not much.

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Professor Linder, an economist, recently observed that, overwhelmed by a burgeoning store of goods and services designed for pleasure, the would-be consumer, trying to do everything at once, comes down with "pleasure-blindness. One may possibly buy more of everything, but one cannot conceivably do more of everything."

The rarest element on earth is time. Time cannot be stored or saved, or consumed at a rate faster than it is produced. The rich man has no more of it than the pauper -- and no less.

When I prune away things, I should examine carefully where and how I spend my time.

I must be in a position to give as generously of my time as I do of my money. I am just as much of a steward of my time as I am of my material wealth.

This means also that I must have enough time left over to refresh myself, and enough time for my family and friends and those others who depend on me.

It is in my relationship with God that I will learn the extent of his and my generosity. Hopefully, throughout the years I will learn what it means to be a follower of our Lord, and so to approach complete love. My generosity will then be a part of what I am, not something to be splitting hairs about, as to whether this or that is enough. In learning to love, I will learn to give.

Lord, teach me to love.

Yours in Christ,

Peter Funk

In the Principles we read, "The tertiaries, like the Brothers and Sisters in community, are to live in an atmosphere of praise and prayer. Their ideal is to be in so constant a recollection of God's presence that they do indeed pray without ceasing."

God reaches us in many ways under an infinite number of circumstances. Often we are doing His will without even knowing it. Usually, however, this is because in some way we have been prepared to accept His direction. This entire process is akin to that of a scientist who is so well trained that he is able to evaluate the data he is working with. For example, the discovery of penicillin was a fluke, a kind of fortuitous unplanned happening. In the scientific world it was a serendipity. Yet, Dr. Flemming's years of skilled preparation enabled him to recognize the mold's potential value, whereas I would have noticed simply a particular mold resembling many others.

The same analogy holds true with the religious life. The individual who prepares himself will be more likely to discern God's will, at times an extraordinarily subtle and difficult process.

These few words in the Principles, then, really sum up the essence of what it is to be a Christian. The end point we are trying to achieve is to be constantly in touch with God, to be living consciously in His presence. Yet, this demand presents problems, for it requires us to come as close to perfection as a human being can reach. Fortunately, God does not call us to perfection all at once. The religious life is really a school of prayer.

At times, however, I can't help but agree with St. Theresa when she writes, "No wonder you don't have many friends, God. You make it so difficult for them." (How many years have I looked at this admonition of St. Paul's to pray without ceasing? Too many! And have I ever been able to do it? Just once have I been able to get through a day, and say to God--yes, I have been in touch with you constantly? Never! And I know that today I'll try it again. But I realize that no matter how hard I try, by the time the day is finished and I examine my thoughts and actions for the past sixteen hours, I won't have been able to do it. There will be many moments--moments?!--there will have been hours when there was no thought of God at all. It is an impossible task. No one can do it. There are the saints--in the first place, I'm not a saint. And secondly, I'm in the marketplace of the world. I face all kinds of temptations, distractions, irritating circumstances.

Don't you think everyone faces these things in one way or another? Certainly the saints have this problem, as well as you.

The trouble is, you really do not understand how to go about praying without ceasing. You don't know what it means. Praying without ceasing is being constantly in God's presence. You are in union with Him. You are not separated from Him. The only way to be consciously in His presence is through prayer. In today's world the stress is all on activity; and it is an important part of the religious life, for God calls us to give service in our own best way. Too frequently, however, the outer activity overshadows the inner life, and we forget that this inner life is like the air inside of an automobile tire. You cannot see the air, for it is colorless, odorless and tasteless. Yet without it, the tire goes flat. And so it is with our outer life when we neglect the interior one.