

Let's see how one of the saints approached this problem. It is possible you may be able to adapt his way to your life. Lawrence was a Carmelite Lay Brother who lived in the 17th century. He achieved this state of being in God's presence with the utmost simplicity. There never has been a simpler way, and anyone at all can do it--young or old, rich or poor, educated or ignorant. Brother Lawrence's first objective was to make the love of God the end of all of his activity. With that viewpoint, everything he did was for God. He did not confuse himself by wondering whether or not he was doing this for himself or for God. He simply did his best.

The second point is that he was in constant conversation with God. Whether he was at the altar, or washing the pots and pans in the monastery kitchen made no difference. He talked with God wherever he was and whatever he was doing. He did point out that, in the beginning, it is not easy to get into the habit of doing this. After a while, like everything else, it becomes easier. If he faced a difficult job to do he would say, "Lord, I cannot do this unless you help me," and he would receive the strength to get the work done. Sometimes he failed in his work, and he would say, "This is always going to happen if you leave me to myself. It is only you who will keep me from failing and to set right whatever is wrong." He said that we must always act with the greatest simplicity with God, speaking to Him frankly and plainly. When he had finished a job, he would examine himself to see how well he had done. If it was good, he thanked God. If otherwise, he asked God's pardon and without being discouraged, he set his mind right again and continued his exercise of practicing the presence of God as if he had never deviated from it. "Thus," he said, "by rising after my falls, and by frequently renewed acts of faith and love, I am come to a state where it would be as difficult for me not to think of God as it was at first to accustom myself to doing so."

There is something that should be pointed out, however. I have known many people, myself included, who start out practicing the presence with great enthusiasm for a few days. And then with much surprise a week or so later, I am suddenly aware that I am no longer doing it. The best way to begin is to, first of all, remind yourself during Morning office that you plan to do this. Then concentrate on practicing the presence of God during the major events of the day--at a meeting, important telephone call, especially during trying moments. This helps to establish the habit. William James pointed out that the only way to acquire a good habit is never to make an exception or an excuse for not doing it.

Brother Lawrence urges us to always work at it, "because not to advance in the spiritual life, is to go back."

Some years ago, I had asked Gerald Heard for an article on prayer - Mr. Heard, historian, anthropologist, philosopher - together with Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts and others - spent a number of years studying and experimenting with prayer, both as a group and as individuals. His thoughts reflected an aspect of prayer we so often forget: our growth as children of God.

A prayer sometimes does seem to fail, of course. As a matter of fact it seems to fail far more often than it succeeds. All the churches allow that. And they have their reasons. The main one, we are told, is that most prayers are not inspired by faith but by despair - not by love but by fear. And without faith, and lacking love, there can't be wholeness, true healing.

Most prayers that carry a real charge of intense concern are desperate. Everything that any other method might achieve has been tried. So just possibly a miracle could happen. Perhaps God will intervene supernaturally to do what all natural skill and human ingenuity has failed to effect, and what up to the present He has manifested no intention of doing on His own.

It is that attitude that spoils prayer, for there are premature answers that have the power to prevent us from getting the full, complete reply. But how can we know what that is? That is one of the best, most fruitful, and most searching questions we can ask ourselves.

What is the best reply we could have? We answer with conventional propriety: "the will of God, of course"; and then slip in the little footnote: "and I must use my intelligence and/or His guidance to discover what is His eternal will for me here and now." And so often we pencil in underneath, "And I am sure He meant me to be healthy and prosperous, so that I may perform His purposes, and people may see how God prospers those who call on Him."

But, when we try to think what is the will of God for all of us, can we put that purpose more definitely than "His will be done", and yet less ambiguously than that all-too popular thought: "He meant me to be happy"? Surely the Fourth Gospel gives us precisely the term we are looking for. There, Christ gives in one enduring phrase the will of God for us. He says that he came, that he was sent by the Father, that we "might have life and have it more abundantly". And more abundant life can be put in one word -- growth! That then seems the sure and certain test of what we should ask. And will get, if we ask -- growth.

Jesus himself generally took his similes and parables from the more mysterious and yet more intimate processes we call growth: the wheat, and the yeast, and the fruitful tree -- especially in the Fourth Gospel, the vine.

Growth means continuity of identity, identity preserved, and enlarged through profound, tremendous change. It was the failure of some of his converts to understand this tremendous truth, this creative paradox, this basic act of life, that made St. Paul so impatient that he called one of them a fool (a term of correction Paul's Master forbade) because the foolish creature did not understand Christ's teaching that unless the seed break down all its own limitations and lose the very form it had, it cannot become the utterly different, far greater thing: the whole plant, the mighty tree, the wonderful animal, the full man or woman.

(over)

We grow in three ways. We grow physically for a while and then stop. We grow mentally. Some reach a level and stop, though it is not necessary to rest on any plateau. A very few grow spiritually.

We can compare our growth throughout life with the growth of a child in its mother's womb. There it grows, increasing in strength for nine months until the moment of birth. We live our life for something like 900 months, and in a very real sense we are an embryo, growing toward our second birth. This is what St. John talks about so frequently. If we think of our life in this way, if we think of ourselves as growing toward our second birth, then we can realize how and why God strengthens us through adversity, for growth always implies struggling against something.

In Christ's great parable of the vine, we are told that not merely must the vine grow and be tended so that it may bear fruit, but even when it does bring forth grapes, that is not enough. It must bear a heavier yield than if it had been left to grow naturally. Though healthy it must be pruned, for its one purpose must be fruiting. So, many of Christ's parables deal with growth in one way or another.

If we are to grow in this life, we must not only swim with the stream, maintain ourselves up to the fullness of the life we have had, we must exceed that. We have within us unspent powers and buried talents. Life is patient with us. At the beginning it permits us to be wasteful of time, and doubtful, and even indifferent to an overall purpose. But we were made to achieve something memorable in this life, to become someone who has really achieved real, unique quality of being. The world need not know it, but those around us do, and we in our hearts know. We can test ourselves quite easily.

One question usually gives us the answer: Do I fear death, or do I look forward? If we are looking forward, we are growing healthily to our second birth. And to him who wills to grow, God gives all that he needs for his growth, and he knows his prayer for life and more abundant life never goes unanswered.

Yours in Christ,

Peter Funk

Dear Brothers and Sister,

Theology seeks knowledge - prayer seeks God. Admittedly, this is something of a simplistic statement. Nonetheless, there is truth in it.

You don't need theology to know God, and this was a point that St. Francis stressed. He was not against knowledge, per se. It was only that, as an undue concern for material things can crowd out and choke our spiritual life, an over-emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge and of philosophical hair-splitting can have the same effect.

"How do you pray?" I asked the pretty college girl. She has long blond hair and blue eyes that really do sparkle. Her face is alive and has quick, warm responses, and she is popular with almost everyone.

"It's very simple. I just talk to ~~God~~ that's all."

"But, what do you mean, talk?"

She shrugged. "Well, any time that something is not going right, or if I feel I need help, I just tell God about it. I know that everything is going to turn out as it should."

"Have you ever been disappointed?"

"About getting things? Sure! But I figure that God knows better than I do what's best for me, and that helps me to keep from worrying too much."

Like other normal youngsters, she experiences the peaks and valleys of moods, but her down periods do not last as long, and she has an implicit faith that God will take care of things in His own way and in His own good time.

"If it doesn't work out, well, I know that that's the way God wants it to be."

What is interesting is that so many of the girls talk to her about her faith and ask her questions. She is totally without self-consciousness in her replies. She speaks with a real awareness of the presence of God.

Her approach is only one way, of course, for prayer is as varied as are circumstances and human personality. Prayer can be formally structured or informally flexible. It can be for healing or for guidance, for self or for others. It can be simple or complex. Prayer can be quiet, or passionate, offering joy or bringing sorrow. But, there is one common denominator in all prayer. It establishes an immediate relationship with His real presence.

"Seek ye my face. Thy face, Lord, will I seek."

In contrast:

"Did you have any courses on prayer in the seminary?" I asked a priest who only graduated a few years ago.

For a moment he seemed surprised at my question. "No, not really. Well, there was one short course. I suppose you could call it that." There are courses on

history, philosophy, Greek, Hebrew, sociology, theology, etc.. But of prayer, there is almost nothing at all. And yet, prayer is to our souls as food is to our bodies. Certainly this must be one of the reasons why the Church has fallen into such confusion.

Each era has its own desperate need. In the time of St. Francis, the feudal age was ending and many people were without homes and in extreme poverty. Neither the Church, nor society in general, were concerned about the poor. When Francis embraced poverty and literally followed our Lord's commandments, he set an example for the Church and for all people. Through him the Church was renewed,

Our own particular need is even more urgent, for added to the problem of the poor in the world, there is the very real question of whether or not man may destroy himself. A strong Church could be helpful in shaping and changing attitudes; but the strength, the effectiveness of the Church lives in the prayer life of its people.

There is a tragic lack of awareness and of understanding of prayer within the contemporary Church. Our total concentration seems to be in the intellectual areas, in being physically active. To work for brotherhood, to heal racial clashes, to help to bring about peace in the world - all are basic, of course, to the Church's function. These are vital areas. But what seems to be forgotten is that the effectiveness of the Church is rooted in our ability to be receptive to the Holy Spirit. And it is only through prayer that we, priest and laity, can prepare ourselves for trying to interpret God's will.

The priests and ministers being ordained today seem to be more sociologists than they are clergymen. It is only through the Holy Spirit that the real power will come to deal constructively with social issues and to change men's hearts. Otherwise, any change is superficial.

The thrust of our work as Tertiaries, then, should be to develop a strong interior life and to set an example of prayer. This is the desperate need of our time, and through our prayer life, the Church can be renewed. For at the core of prayer is love: love of God, and love for all of His creation.

"The transition from the good man to the saint is a sort of revolution; by which one for whom all things illustrate and illuminate God, becomes one for whom God illustrates and illuminates all things."

This is the transformation of the mind of our total selves of which St. Paul speaks.

"Now I live, but it is not I, it is the Christ that lives in me."

Dare we pray, then, that God will grant us the grace to become saints?

Yours in Christ,

Peter Funk

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

"...they will seek after a continually deepening fellowship with God in personal devotion and will desire constantly to lift up before him...the needs of his body and of the whole world." From The Manual.

St. Teresa of Avila said that "the whole aim of those who undertake prayer must be to labor and resolve and dispose themselves with all the diligence they can to make their will conform with the will of God." In that short definition of prayer lies its glory and its difficulty.

The sine qua non of creative prayer for four words that are so familiar to us, we almost overlook them. Yet they are indeed the four pillars of prayer. If any one of them is lacking, our prayers will be wobbly. They are:

- love (of God)
- simplicity (of living)
- humility and trust (in God).

1. St. Francis, of course, exemplified the person who loved God. There are people who are puzzled by Francis' activities. Why would anyone want to live in such extreme poverty, or to suffer such extensive hardships, doing such extra-ordinary work? What is overlooked is that Francis was a man truly in love. He deeply and completely, what may seem to be a sacrifice to someone else is perfectly natural to us. Husbands and wives sacrifice for one another. Parents do all kinds of things for their children without thinking that they are heroes. And so it is with someone who loves God.

"But, how do you love God?" someone asked the priest in Kazantzakis' novel, The Greek Passion. "By loving people," came the answer. But this is only part of the real answer for we are also meant to love God directly. "But how can you love an abstraction?" the youngster asked. "Do you try to get yourself psyched up the way we do before we play a game?" What this youngster does not know yet is that God is not an abstraction. God is. But most of us have a similar problem and we feel guilty for not having the kind of love for God that we feel for a spouse or a child or a friend. Yet if we persist, this love does grow in us, and it is a real love and it fills the heart with an unspeakable joy.

"My heart hath talked of thee. Seek ye my face: Thy face, Lord, will I seek." One of the most important daily prayers is that we should ask to be taught to love --- that we be taught to love not only people, but God himself.

2. When it comes to simplicity of loving, we so often think only in terms of physical things. Quite often, a priest will write on his monthly report that because of his low salary, he is forced to live simply. Much more is meant by this word simplicity than material things. It is a whole approach to life. We can clutter our lives up with activities. Occasionally a novice has written that he is so busy that he really does not have enough time to say his Office or meditate. This type of thinking is detrimental to the growth of the inner spirit.

And, not to progress in spiritual growth to any degree, is to go backward. It is possible through neglect for one to start all over again. Admittedly, there are days when activities overwhelm us. This is part of being fully immersed in life. But when this develops into a consistent pattern, an

appraisal of our time must be taken so that unessential activities are/may be stripped away. We are custodians of our time just as much as we are of our possessions.

3. The third leg of prayer is humility, a subject deserving books, and which has been covered all too cursorily in previous letters. It is something that we must be aware of. St. Ignatius wrote that "each person must realize that he will make progress in all spiritual matters in proportion to his flight from self-love, self-will, and self-interest. All are directly related to the problems of humility.

4. One time, I went through the Psalter and marked every passage that referred to trusting in God, and I was astounded at how often the word, trust, was used. I did this for a purpose, because I was struggling with the problem of "doing God's will". Trusting in Him is a prerequisite for this. It is so easy to say thy will be done. The words trip off our tongue daily, and we understand the intent, and we more-or-less mean what we are saying; but we mean it a lot less than more.

Once someone was very ill. He had had an operation for an advanced malignancy. He prayed for recovery but there were periods when this possibility was in doubt. He was deeply distressed for he had much to live for and he loved all of life. He wrestled daily with God. But it was only when he fully surrendered, when he finally realized that he must trust in God's wisdom and mercy as to his fate that almost in anger he said, "If in dying I am doing your will, I now fully accept this." And he meant every word of it.. This was a turning point in his spiritual life.

We pray and we know what we want. But too often we do not trust in God and in our prayers and are shadowed with doubt. "There came up heavy displeasure against Israel, because they believe not in God, and put not their trust in his help." "Commit thy way unto the Lord, and put thy trust in Him, and he shall bring it to pass." "For in thee, O Lord, I have put my trust." Faith and hope are bound up in the one word trust, and it is a vital attitude in helping one towards doing God's will more perfectly.

Love, simplicity, and humility, and trust. These are the four wings of our prayers. To recall them more easily, you might think of the phrase, Lucky Strike Has Tobacco. Certainly the phrase is unrelated to prayer, but the words are easy to remember. To test your progress in prayer, or spiritual growth - they are one and the same - test yourself against these four areas. As your capacity to love, to live simply, or to curb self-interest, or to trust in God grows, so your capacity to pray will grow also.

These are desperate times, and we must meet secular strength with spiritual fortitude. The stronger we are in God's spirit, the more we will be able to do for him. In this way we are not only renewed within ourselves, but by following in the footsteps of Saint Francis, we will help to renew the Church.

Yours in Christ,

Peter V. K. Funk

"The tertiaries, rejoicing in the Lord always, will show forth in their lives the grace and beauty of divine joy. They will rejoice in God's world, its beauty and its living creatures, calling nothing common or unclean. They will mingle freely with all kinds of people, ready to bind up the broken-hearted and to bring good cheer into other lives. They will carry with them an inner happiness and peace which men may feel even if they do not guess its source." From the Principles.

Being joyful is quite different from merely being happy. Joy expresses a much deeper sense of expectation, and the realization of some good. Happiness is shallower, and more dependent on outer circumstances. True joy is like the parable of the seed falling on good ground.

If you and I were truly joyous as was Saint Francis, we could not contain ourselves, and we would want to share it with everyone. It would be our desire to give them the great secret of our joy, a joy that holds the sun in our hearts, a joy that suffuses our entire selves - so that there are no shadows left.

It is the sheer joy of knowing that God, who is the ineffable essence of joy, loves each one of us as we are. And in accepting this love, we are in His debt forever. But as all debtors should, we try to pay Him back by giving Him ourselves. It should be as though we are turning the pockets of ourselves inside out, shaking them so that there is nothing left. And because they become empty, there is now room for this love and joy of His, which He pours into them. This is the secret of true joy. "For it is in giving that you receive."

I knew a good man who said that he could only believe in whatever he could touch, see or hear. He never laughed much in his life, and was always struggling against temptations that hounded and haunted him. He lived on the surface of life, and simply would not accept the reality of the inner world. The paradox of giving and receiving, of losing one's life and gaining it, were completely foreign to him. Curiously, there is a fundamental law in physics which seems to apply to this paradox. It is that - to each and every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. In giving ourselves to God, He gives Himself to us. Yet, we do not do this for gain, but out of love.

Saint Francis has presented us with a clear plan of how to reach this state of supreme joy.

One of the reasons that people flocked to him is that they sensed he had the key to holiness, and through that, to joy. There have been other eloquent preachers, and there have been innumerable holy men that have enriched humanity immeasurably. But none have so fully exemplified joy as did Francis. Certainly he had heavy sorrows at times; but they reflected always the brilliant light of God's joyous love in him. For this is what it was. It was not the philosophical "agape" that connotes duty-love, or "eros" that is sensual-love. It was truly a joyous love that flowed from God, a love that encompassed everyone and everything he came in touch with.

Is this joy that embraced Francis available to you and me? Of course, for this was the whole point of his life.

When Brother Masseo asked him, "I wonder why the whole world runs after thee more than after others, all men want to see thee and hear thee and obey thee? Thou art not fair of body, thou art not deeply learned, thou art not of noble birth -- why does the whole world run after thee?"

And the saint replied, "Do you wish to know why this happens to me? For these (God's) most holy eyes have nowhere seen a greater, more miserable, poorer sinner than I; because in all the earth he has found no more wretched being to do his wonderful work, which he wishes to have done. Therefore, he has chosen me so as thus to put to shame the noble, the great strength and beauty, worldly wisdom, that all may know that all power and all virtue come from him, and not from creatures..." And he believed this to the depths of his soul. Just as it had been given to him, this blessed grace of love and joy could be received by everyone.

We know, of course, that he was not a great sinner. But in his eyes, he was because he compared what he was with God's infinite generosity, and his joy was that even though he was a sinner, God loved him fully. And when you and I understand, too, how much God really does love us and always will, how can we help, like Francis, but to throw ourselves at Him with complete and joyous abandon?

The life of Francis shows us how we can achieve this joy that most people spend their lives searching for, usually in the wrong places.

It lies:

- in realizing God's complete love for the world, and that He sent Christ to bring us this message.
- in humility, in understanding the truth that God is everything, and that we are wholly dependent on him. It means understanding this in all of its ramifications, and not just saying the words only. "And this humility filled him (Brother Masseo) with such an inward light that he was always full of joy.
- in trusting God utterly. When the friars were departing on their missions for the first time, Francis quoted the Psalmist to them: "O cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall nourish thee." You are in His charge, and He will care for you according to your needs.
- in giving Him everything of yourself, and He will return what you need when you need it.
- in getting rid of all of your hang-ups, whatever they may be, of everything that says, "I want, give me, it's mine, I can't, I'm afraid, I'm too shy, I don't know enough," and ad infinitum. It means - stop being a slave to anything, material; whether it is smoking, alcohol, money, comfort, sex, and on and on.
- in not being critical and cranky. Francis was neither critical nor negative. The only criticism he understood was self-criticism.
- in emptying ourselves. How do we do this? By getting rid of anything that has to do with selfishness, of loving self above others. It is trying to make sure that all of our intentions and actions are really for God's service. This is a thorny area to handle because, if we are honest with ourselves, we will be asking many times, "Am I doing this for me or for God?" But we must ask the question because, in asking, we will get the answer. So often we hear that the Brothers lived in poverty, chastity and cheerfulness. Because they had given up all self-love, they thought only of helping one another: "with longing they hurried home, with joy they abided there."

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It lies:

- in obedience. Obedience for a tertiary is obedience to his Rule of Life, and to the Church.

- in doing whatever work we are called to do; in carrying our share of the world's responsibilities and problems, in caring for those who depend on us.

- in prayer - above all, in prayer. Prayer is the sine qua non of joy. It is the heart of our lives. Out of prayer we will find "the evangelical joy in the Lord which drives all evil and dark thoughts away". If anyone happened to do anything displeasing to Francis at any time, "He would go apart and pray, until the natural irritation over the incident had subsided."

Francis overflowed with the happiness for God's children. He lived his life to bring others this joy.

"For what else are the servants of God than His singers, whose duty it is to lift up the hearts of men and move them to spiritual joy?"

- Peter Funk, TSF

My dear Brothers and Sisters:

"The heart of their prayer is accordingly the Eucharist, in which with their fellow Christians their union with their Lord and Savior is his sacrifice which is renewed and deepened as they make memorial before God of his death and passion, and feed upon his sacrificial life." From the Manual.

Too often we tend to take for granted those things that have become a routine part of our lives. What once was beautiful to us is now commonplace. What seemed to be miraculous is something to be expected.

Whether we have come to it late or early in life, for too many of us the Eucharist has become a part of a ritual rather than the incredible God-encounter it should be.

True, the presence of God may be practiced at any time, for he is with us continually. But the fact is that most of the time we do not consciously bring ourselves into his presence. We pray, but we know that we don't pray nearly as well as we ought. Paradoxically, that is one of the most intriguing and hopeful aspects of prayer. We can always improve. Even St. Francis felt this need.

But the heart of our prayer should lie in the Eucharist, because it is here that we can experience the utterly unique relationship with God. The Eucharist parallels the extraordinary drama of God's action in our individual lives.

In a very real sense, the four main divisions of the Eucharist recreate the life of Christ. On another level, it is the total experience of St. Francis. And on still another level, it is our own deep involvement with God.

He took bread.

He gave thanks, and in this sense, his blessing.

He broke bread.

He gave the bread to his disciples.

God took Jesus, he gave thanks for him and blessed him, he broke him on the Cross for our sake, and then through Jesus he gave humanity the supreme gift of all time: the knowledge of God's total love for all mankind, and the promise that we can continually experience the reality of his presence.

And what of Francis?

God called him--he gave thanks for him by blessing his endeavors--he almost literally broke the saint--and he gave Francis' vision and his leadership and his example to the world so that we may be better followers of Christ, and kinder and more perceptive brothers and sisters to one another.

And you! What of you and I as Christians?

1. God calls each of us in different ways. Just as he said to his disciples, "Come and follow me," if we are sensitive and alert we can discern, sometimes quickly more often gradually, that he is nudging us in a particular direction.

All of humanity is called, but each of us is called to different forms of service. You have been called to be a Christian and specifically beyond your ordinary secular and religious obligations you are trying to see if you are to serve the world also as a member of the Third Order of St. Francis.

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2. As Christ blessed the bread and gave thanks, so he blesses you as a Christian. And he gives thanks also, for he accomplishes his work on earth through living beings. In this sense we give ourselves to God to make use of us as he will. We are to be "a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice". We are to give ourselves to him, serving him not only with our lips but with our total selves. This is what his blessing means. He blesses our response to his call. It is he who will encourage us, strengthen us, give us insight, help us to serve others fully.

But he needs our response. When love does not find any return, when it does not evoke a response, it then becomes weakened, for it has not been accepted. When you accept God's love you have opened yourself to all of his gifts.

3. How does God break a Christian? The word, "break", is one of those ambiguous words that has well over a hundred different meanings. He does not break us in the sense of smashing or crushing us. What he does do, is to change us. In this sense it is a breaking with the past. It is a breaking up of an old life and reforming it into a new one. When a horse is broken, it is trained to obey commands. It is in this way that God breaks us. And there are times when, through this process, we experience great pain and suffering and confusion.

One of the technics of growing strong trees is that after the first year of growth they are pruned back almost to the ground. The result is that the roots, not having to support a larger tree, have had an opportunity to spread more deeply into the ground. By the end of the second year these two-year old roots are now supporting what is the equivalent of a tree only one-year high.

In a very real way, that analogy of a tree holds true for us. As God prunes back our pride, our anger and other flaws, our spiritual roots sink deeper and the tree that results is a stronger and more beautiful one.

4. Finally, we too are given to the world to do whatever work is asked of us. Because we have received from him we can give, for each of us can only give what we have. If we do not open ourselves to God, he cannot give himself to us. It is in the Eucharist that we are able to be more perfectly united with him.

What is so extraordinary about the Eucharist is that it is a representation of the entire spectrum of the spiritual life. We can treat it simply as a memorial service, or we can let it bring us into the real presence of God. We can pray that he will actually be in us and we in him--that we will actually carry his Spirit into the world.

If we live through the drama of our Lord's life during the Eucharist, and if we recognize this as also having the possibility of representing our own life united with Christ in making a perfect sacrifice, we will have an ever increasing awareness of God's presence. We will be aware that we live in and through him.

"My heart hath talked of thee; Seek ye my face: thy face, Lord, will I seek."

Yours in Christ,

Peter Funk, Novice Director