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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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THE EPISTLE OF PRAYER

England in the late 14th century could well be considered a “writers’ workshop,” and one that produced a literature of astonishing range and depth. Not only was Geoffrey Chaucer hard at work on his *Canterbury Tales*, but there were also authors who produced books on religion and mystical theology that remain highly prized, and not just as period pieces. This was the age of Julian of Norwich, and the two versions of the collection of her revelations and reflections have left an enduring mark on the development of Western mysticism. At the same time and in the same vein labored an author whose name we will never know. He wrote seven books that have survived, the most famous of which is *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a classic of religious literature. The contents of these books make it very likely that he was a “professional” churchman, but beyond that there is only the sheerest speculation; he may have been a friar, a country parson, a cloistered monk, a hermit, or something else.

More certain than his identity and his vocation, however, are the authors he drew from and relied upon. Although he was clearly well read in Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Thomas Aquinas, there were two other writers who stamped his thought much more deeply, and in the end these two really come down to one. Closer in time to him was Richard of St. Victor, who died in 1173. Originally from Scotland and later a member of the great Abbey of St. Victor in Paris, he was a scripture scholar, a philosopher, and a mystic. Richard was himself heavily influenced by Dionysius the Areopagite. Nowadays we are fairly sure that this Dionysius was a

5th century Syrian monk, but throughout the Middle Ages the works that bear his name were thought to have come from the pen of the Dionysius mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (17:34), an Athenian converted to Christ by the preaching of St. Paul. The *Cloud* author got his Dionysius not only indirectly, through Richard, but also directly – one of his seven books is a translation of the Areopagite’s shortest work, *The Mystical Theology*. This treatise on the way the soul is lifted up to union with God shaped the *Cloud* author’s understanding of the spiritual life and the role of prayer within it.

Although his identity is unknown to us, the *Cloud* author must not have lived in total obscurity. At least one young contemplative, probably a monk, knew him and his reputation well enough to write a letter asking for advice on the subject of prayer. Like most of us, the young man needed help in dealing with distractions: how could he control his mind while he was at prayer? The *Cloud* author’s answer, *The Epistle of Prayer*, is not nearly so well known as his longer work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*... but it ought to be.

The *Epistle* begins with a very practical suggestion, one that does not sound very pleasant at first hearing. The one thing that will help you the most when you start your prayer, he says, is to tell yourself that you will die before your prayer is over. Yes, this sounds crazy, but of course we all must acknowledge that it is theoretically possible. Our lives are not in our own hands, and none of us can say with certainty that we are going to make it to the end of the

day. So, when we start to pray, knowing that our life will end before our prayer does is simply a more vivid and immediate realization of something that we know always to be true. The reason behind this suggestion, the author continues, is that “it will bring to your heart a genuine feeling of dread.” The thought of one’s own death taking place within the hour, added to the general sense of weakness and sinfulness that is always a part of any honest look at oneself, is bound to produce fear, and odd as it sounds, fear is precisely what is needed at the start of any prayer. Psalm 111:10 states, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” and the same idea can be found frequently throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Few things concentrate the mind so well as honest to God fear, so this is where you must start.

Dread, however, all by itself leads to nothing but more dread. Fear added to growing fear can only sink a person into a deep depression. “So you must link your original idea with this further thought: you are to believe that if through the grace of God you can clearly speak the words of your prayer and bring it to its conclusion, or if you do die before you reach the end having done what you could, then God will accept it as full payment for all your neglect from the time your life began up to that very moment.” This belief in the grace and goodness of God, a belief that is founded on the promise and power of Christ, is the hope that sustains us in this life. We trust in his goodness, and hope that his promise of peace and reconciliation will be fulfilled in us. Thus we begin with fear, a fear based on the truth of our mortality and sinfulness, and yet this fear is always linked with a holy hope in the grace of God given to us in Christ.

These two, seemingly contradictory attitudes work together to effect our amendment. Conver-

sion, after all, is nothing else than leaving evil behind and doing good. “For what can better take away the love of sinning from one’s life than a real fear of death? And what moves one to live more fervently and to do good more than confident hope in the mercy and goodness of God, brought about by this second thought?” Thus are we provided with the solid foundation for a life of devotion. Aquinas defines devotion as “the readiness and will of a man to do the things that belong to the service of God.” Service of God, doing the deeds of love, is a necessary step forward, and a more valuable and profitable thing than what has been discussed up to now. Dread and hope are in the realm of thought, and although these are good and necessary thoughts, what follows from them is what really counts, namely, the love and devotion that expresses itself in action. Devotion, of course, can also be expressed by means of ascetic practices (fasting, vigils, hairshirts, and such like) but while the author acknowledges that these may have a limited use, the active doing of the deeds of love is the main goal. If a specific practice helps towards that, then fine; if it does not, then it becomes a distraction and is worse than useless.



At this point the *Epistle* introduces the image of the tree, an explanatory analogy that will be carried through to the end of the letter. The tree in question is a fruit tree, and the whole point of a fruit tree is the fruit. The fruit of prayer, as we will see, is reverent affection, a pure love of God. Developing his analogy, the author says that the root of the tree, that part that is deep below the earth and quite invisible, is the dread that he first recommended as the needful first element of prayer. The hope that is joined to the fear of the Lord is the trunk, that steadfast and sure part of the tree that supports all that must grow out from it. When hope in the promises of

God and hope for his pardon move us to do the deeds of love, it is like the trunk putting itself forth out into branches.

But this is not the end. A fruit tree that ends in branches and nothing more is not worth much, and is certainly not deserving of the energy that its cultivation requires. It must produce fruit. In the same way, the life of prayer and devotion must lead to the performance of the deeds of love, the service of God, but if that's all there is, then it has stopped well short of its full potential and has not become what it ought to be. The fruit of prayer is "the love of God... loving him with a pure love, for his own sake, and not for what he gives." Calling this love "reverent affection," the *Cloud* author identifies it as the hallmark of a soul raised up by grace to perfection, and then he launches into one of the more lyric passages of the work:

What I am meaning when I talk about perfection and the reward of this reverent affection can be expressed in a more lofty way: a perfect soul, whose affection has been touched by the conscious presence of God as he is in himself, and whose reason has been enlightened by the clear beam of eternal light (which is God) so that he sees and feels the loveliness of God in himself, at that moment loses all recollection of any good or kind thing that God has ever done for him. What previously caused him to love God he now neither feels nor sees, for he has God himself.

This is a kind of love that we have all heard of, and I think we instinctively know what it means, but it is not the level of being and of love where we spend our daily lives. In our own experience love is almost always bound up with gratitude and reverence for gifts that we have received from the one who loves us. Those who love us seek to do good for us, and we seek to give them good things in return. God gives us many blessings, and the *Cloud* author does not deny that, but agrees that these gifts are indeed what cause us to love God at first. Loving God for his goodness to us, having affection for him for his bounty, that is like the fruit that is still on the tree. It is love, to be sure, but it is love that is not yet ripe. The mature fruit of love, love that

is perfect and that makes the lover perfect, is found a step beyond, when the lover loves the beloved not for what the beloved has done or can do for him, but just for who the beloved is. Of course, God loves us with this kind of love, for there is really nothing that we can do for him. Even our worship of him is his gift to us and for our own benefit. Perhaps, maybe once in a great while, we can catch a glimpse of this kind of love in a love that we have for another human being, although most of the time we love others for the love that they have shown to us.

Of course, God has shown us great love and given us many blessings, and so we love him in return. But the uttermost height of love is a step removed from this. Without in any way denying the good things that God has given us and done for us, we pass beyond them to a love that loses itself in the beauty of God, that forgets the specific gifts that God has given us, and that even forgets the *us* who has received them.

This is the mature love of those to whom God has given the gift of perfection, this is union with God, a foretaste in this life of what God has prepared for those whom he loves and who love him. This is the full fruit of prayer. It has grown on the tree, it has been nourished by the roots of fear of the Lord, it has been supported by a holy hope in God's goodness and promises, it has formed on the branches of an active charity and solicitude for others. But now it is ripe and plucked. It no longer depends on either fear or hope, but looks only to the beauty of God in which everything, even one's very self, is left behind. Roots, trunk and branches have all played their part and now there is the ripe fruit, which a later generation of mystical writers will call the "grace of union" and "infused contemplation."

How many have this grace? Not many. Perhaps even the original recipient of *The Epistle of Prayer* had it not. One suspects that the *Epistle* author wrote from personal experience, but we cannot be sure of that. We do not need a lot of such mystics – only enough to show us, on this side of the grave, where we are headed and what God's love has in store for us.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.



MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*