



May 2008

The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
110 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60602 ❖ Phone: 312-372-5111
E-mail: FriarsLegion@aol.com ❖ Web Site: www.stpetersloop.org

HOW TO MEDITATE

One of the most helpful and practical books on the spiritual life is nearly fifty years old. I first ran into Thomas Merton's *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* during my seminary days, and have kept a copy with me ever since. I don't read it as often as I should, obviously, since every time I do read it, it offers something new and leads to a change, sometimes great sometimes small, in the way I do things. As short as the book is (about a hundred pages), it is really two works: the first presents the history and practice of spiritual direction, and the second is a manual on meditation. The book is still in print and available from Liturgical Press. Here, we will only look at and try to summarize the second and shorter part of the book. In what follows, italicized words are quotes from the book.

Merton begins by assuring the reader that *meditation is really very simple and there is not much need of elaborate techniques to teach us how to go about it.* "Simple," however, does not mean "easy," and he insists that no progress will be made in meditation *without constant and strict interior discipline.* This is always true, but is especially true in the modern age *when the intellectual and moral flabbiness of a materialistic society has robbed man's nature of its spiritual energy and tone.* Strict discipline does not here mean a rigid adherence to an unvarying system or routine: *The well-disciplined soul, like a well-disciplined body, is agile, supple and adaptable. A soul that is not pliable and free is incapable of progress in the ways of prayer. An unwise rigidity may seem to*

produce results at first, but it only ends by paralyzing the interior life.

This, in turn, does not mean that everyone is on his own, and that everyone's spiritual life is radically different from everyone else's. There are *certain universal requirements* for mental prayer that cannot be neglected by anyone, and the first of these is recollection. Recollection is withdrawing the mind from anything that would keep me from focusing on God, and the obvious first step here is pulling in the senses and not letting them run away with me in a thousand different directions. Yet, Merton insists, if the only time we try to do this is when we try to pray, we are bound to fail. *It is almost useless to try to recollect myself at the moment of prayer if I have allowed my senses and imagination to run wild all the rest of the day.* If we are going to be recollected in prayer, we must work the whole day long to maintain *moderate recollection.* Merton's description of "moderate recollection" probably sounds pretty severe to most of us. It means taking no wilful interest in anything that is not necessary or helpful to the spiritual life, and this will demand that we not give our attention to the radio, television, newspapers, magazines, movies and the constant urgings contained in these media that we buy (sometimes literally and sometimes metaphorically) what they have on offer as an indispensable part of our happiness. This is just so much stuff and noise, and we cannot let it capture our attention and form our desires for most of the day, and then expect to be able to withdraw from it all for the one hour that we wish to give ourselves completely to God in prayer. Thus,

prayer requires a level of self-denial that most people would regard as heroic. *In practice, it may mean giving up many or most of the luxuries which I have come to regard as necessities, at least until I have acquired sufficient self-control to use these things without being enslaved by them.*

Why would anybody do this? Only if he knows in his blood that he has to do it, that there is no choice, that prayer and only prayer opens the door to what really matters. Only the person who is genuinely hungry and thirsty for holiness will be willing to live this way so as to be able to pray this way. Thus, the person of prayer will have and must have a sense of need, a keen awareness of his own emptiness and of God as the only one who can fill that up. *We have to enter into our meditation with a realization of our own spiritual poverty, our complete lack of the things we seek, and of our abject nothingness in the sight of the infinite God.*

Thus, meditation requires a sense of urgency and neediness, virtues whose opposite vice is a sense of spiritual well-being and self-satisfaction. *Habitual self-complacency is almost always a sign of spiritual stagnation. The complacent no longer feel in themselves any real indigence, any urgent need for God. Their meditations are comfortable, reassuring and inconclusive. Their mental prayer quickly degenerates into day-dreaming, distractions or plain undisguised sleep. For this reason trials and temptations can prove to be a real blessing in the life of prayer, simply because they force us to pray. It is when we begin to find out our need for God that we first learn how to make a real meditation.*

Recollection and a sense of one's own poverty of spirit are necessary but not sufficient conditions for meditation. Whoever wishes to pray from the heart must also acquire silence, tranquility and peace, and so attention must be paid to the "external atmosphere" of prayer, which will involve things like the time and place of prayer, as well as bodily posture. For the last, Merton is firmly convinced that sitting works best for most people, but that this is very much

an individual matter. If kneeling or walking seems to work better for you, then go with that unless and until you have reason to think that something else would be better. Likewise, there is no hard and fast formula for the proper time and place for prayer, but it will have to be "time apart," time when nothing else is making demands on our attention. This is true at least in the beginning – Merton is convinced that for the spiritually mature, prayer is possible even in the middle of many activities in a very busy day. Prayer that is done in a special, specific time (and it will often be difficult to maintain the discipline required to keep that time for prayer) must be eased into gradually. The human mind cannot be wrenched out of busyness and set down into meditation all in a moment. Leisure time is required here, the time needed to disengage the attention from one thing, or many things, so that it can be wholly committed to the Lord. This is not wasting time, but using time well in the necessary preparation for prayer.

Most of what has been said up to now has been directed at the living context of our meditation and our preparation for it. Clearly, Merton regards these matters as crucial, and the neglect of them will mean that virtually all of the effort put into meditation will be wasted and the meditation itself will be profitless.

When it comes to the meditation itself, it is important to keep in mind that this is private prayer. It may be done in the company of others, but it is necessarily an intensely personal experience, and so Merton does not put much stock in books of meditations, or in similar devices or formulas. The proper subject of meditation is always the mysteries of the faith, especially as they are presented in the scriptures and as they are renewed in the events of the present day. No one who is seriously intent on the practice of meditation needs any instruction in what these are. The birth of Christ, the events and works of his public ministry, his passion and death, his love, his offering of himself to the Father, his resurrection and ascension, the sending of the Holy Spirit – we all know about these and we can all use these as the subjects of our

meditations, either working from memory or, even better, beginning with an intense and leisurely reading from the Bible. Here we use our senses and our imagination to feel ourselves present and participating in the mystery we have chosen for our meditation. If, for example, a person is meditating on the birth of Christ, he uses his mind and memory so as to come to *feel and act as if he had been present among the shepherds at Bethlehem. Bethlehem is part of his life. He is completely familiar with the Nativity as though it were an event in his own history. And indeed it is, though on a mystical and invisible level. The function of meditation is first of all then to enable us to see and experience the mysteries of the life of Christ as real and present factors in our own spiritual existence... The real function of meditation is to enable us to realize and to actualize in our own experience the fundamental truths of our faith.*

Most of our meditations will probably be of this type, with the mystery of Christ at the center. Merton, however, insists that there are other subjects for meditation, other things that we must meditate on, and these for the most part fall into two broad categories.

First, we ourselves can be the subject of our own meditation. *Our own life, our own experience, our own duties and difficulties, naturally enter into our meditations. Actually, a lot of "distractions" would vanish if we realized that we are not bound at all times to ignore the practical problems of our life when we are at prayer. On the contrary, sometimes these problems actually ought to be the subject of meditation. After all, we have to meditate on our vocation, on our response to God's will in our regard, on our charity towards other people, on our fidelity to grace. This enters into our meditations on Christ and His life; for He desires and intends to live in us... Meditation that ignores this truth easily tends to be aimless and confused.*

And second, and for pretty much the same reason, we should be prepared to meditate on the events of the history of our own time and to try to penetrate their significance, terrible as that may sometimes be. *I would be inclined to say that a nun who has meditated on the Passion of*

Christ but has not meditated on the extermination camps of Dachau and Auschwitz has not yet fully entered into the experience of Christianity of our time. For Dachau and Auschwitz are two terrible, indeed apocalyptic, presentations of the reality of the Passion renewed in our time. Many pious people might be inclined to think that such things were "distractions" and attempt to exclude them from their minds. If such a revulsion were elevated to a level of strict principle and unvarying policy, it would lead to a complete lack of realism in the spiritual life. Such things should be known, thought about, understood in prayer. The one necessary warning here is that such meditations cannot be conducted at the superficial level one always finds in the media, which tends to be so slanted and so shallow that it scarcely lends itself to serious thought, much less meditation.

The mysteries of our faith, ourselves, our times – anything in any of these, no matter how small, can be a fruitful subject for meditation if it is viewed from a religious perspective, one that is serious and that takes seriously all that it encounters. *This perspective demands first of all that we frequently renew the realization of the fact that we must die and that our life must pass through the inexorable light of judgment. One who never thinks of the hour of his death cannot make really spiritual decisions during his life. He will never be anything more than a short-sighted opportunist whose decisions will have no lasting value.*

All mental prayer, then, is rooted in Christ and ordered towards love, towards union with God. The subject and style of meditation may vary greatly from time to time and person to person, and this is good. *The peculiar value of mental prayer...is that it is completely personal and favors a spiritual development along lines dictated by our own particular needs... The love of God remains a cold and abstract thing unless we can bring ourselves to realize its deeply intimate and personal character.*

Merton's slim volume is the perfect book for those who would like to try meditation or who have tried it before and not had much success.

—Fr. Bob Spratt, 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)*