

**The Family and
Contemporary Social Reality—
Pastoral Priorities and Challenges**



PROCEEDINGS

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INTIMACY AND MUTUALITY WITH GOD: RELATIONAL PRAYER

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In the context of the adult self and its development in faith elaborated by Dr. Shea, I will focus on relational aspects of Christian prayer and meditation. My reflections on Christian prayer as it develops in this mode of adult life, share many important characteristics for all of us regardless of whether or not we are single by choice or by circumstances, married without children, or married with children. Our specific relational and vocational context, however, changes how and under which conditions we engage in spiritual practices - especially in forms of personal and communal prayer which lead to and develop into contemplation.

Vatican Council II, in its *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* asserted very strongly that all are called to one and the same holiness of life. Christian tradition consistently affirms that this holiness of life consists of love - love for one another and love for God. Contemplative prayer can be understood as the transformative experience of God's love and presence. Prayer is then both presence and relationship. Reflective or meditative forms of prayer both foster such experiences and prepare for them in addition to the great variety of liturgical prayer and devotional life which nurture our spiritual awareness and our developing relationship with God.

Prior to Vatican Council II, many assumed that much of this rich tradition of prayer and contemplation in Catholic life was restricted to clergy or religious people and thus not part of ordinary lay life. Hence the full resources of the tradition were not made available to the People of God. Since Vatican II, this perspective has radically changed. There is a great hunger for the spiritual among all sectors of the church - for actual, on-going experience of God which takes many forms. As charismatic prayer, Scriptural based meditation, simply reflecting on the Word of God, or more spontaneous colloquial prayer deepens and begins to open up into periods of silent receptivity to God, experiences of contemplation frequently begin to occur. From having heard about God from someone else, Christians experience the mysteries of Christian faith taking place within their own intimate experience. The Triune God becomes an intimate familiar entering into a relationship which becomes increasingly mutual in its texture despite the ontological differences which remain between God and human persons. For us to enter into this loving intimacy with God as adults requires both the developmental skills of intimacy and an adult self capable of relating personally to the unfolding and encompassing mystery of God.

Karl Rahner emphasised the absolute unity between the love of God and the Love of neighbor. This was one of the key themes of vatican II as well. At the deep core of any experience of love, either human or divine, is a unity among our loves. We simply cannot really love God without loving all whom God loves - literally everyone and the creation itself. Conversely, we cannot really love any other human being authentically without also loving God who resides at the core of the other. Our particular loves invite us into the deep mystery of God's love disclosing itself in and through out human beloveds. Particular loves when they are not closed in on themselves lead to more universal forms of love.

Likewise, a focused and intimate experience of God's love for us and our reciprocation of it, animates us and compels us toward loving the particular persons who constitute the interpersonal context of our lives, especially our families. Within the family, our loving relationships are specific, primary and constantly changing in relationship to the development of each of the spouses and of the children. Even as adults who may not have joined with another to form our own family, we remain members of our family of origins as siblings or as adult children. Yet familial relationships do not exhaust our love for others. Families exist within larger networks of extended families and communities which claim their love and care. Each member of the family enjoys a network of relationships beyond the circle of the immediate family.

There is a reciprocal relationship between the style of loving which first shapes us within our families and influences us in subsequent contexts and our relationship with God. We learn the skills and style of relating both within the process of prayer and within the process of human interpersonal relating. What we learn in one situation fortunately and unfortunately carries over to the other. Without some experiences of human intimacy and mutuality, it is most unlikely we will experience intimacy and mutuality with God.

Without the divine-human intimacy of contemplative prayer or least some form of solitude, we may be unable to risk being ourselves with others.

Recognising that Dr. Musgrave will offer a full psychological development of intimacy, the remainder of my remarks describe the growing intimacy with God that characterises an on-going life of prayer. Teresa of Avila spoke of prayer as "the intimate sharing between friends." Teresa knew what she was talking about. She was a lively conversationalist and enjoyed friends. Because friendships of all kinds were an important part of her personality, she gradually learned to discriminate among those friendships which supported her central religious quest and those which frustrated her mystical development. When these loves had become harmonious with one another, she has a lovely vision which revealed how she had integrated her deep human loves with her all

encompassing love for Christ. When she questioned her deep love for Garcia de Toledo, often a source of encouragement to him in his apostolic life, she says: "I saw Christ with awesome majesty and glory showing great happiness over what was taking place. Thus he told me and wanted me to see clearly that he is always present in conversations like these and how much he is pleased when persons so delight in speaking of him." (Life, 34.17). Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, comments on this passage. "Now her God not only rejoiced in her human conversations and loves, but understood her love and concern and compassion for others as an extension of the love that was flooding her life" (1988, 82).

Friendship with God is an apt metaphor for developing intimacy with God and for the kind of mutuality with God which the mystics describe resulting from the transformation of the self through prayer. Friendship is the primary form of relationship for an adult self in a mutuality of relating. God appears to describe friendship with us if we are to believe Jesus who says, "I call you friends," or Aelred of Rievaulx who claims "God is friendship."

PRAYER AS PRESENCE AND RELATIONSHIP*

Prayer is any activity or passivity which enables relationship with God and our response to that on-going encounter. Prayer is then about presence and about relationship. It is not about making God present; God is already present in us by grace and active in our world. Prayer is the process of opening ourselves to that presence which creates and transforms us. Thus it can encompass an enormous variety of styles, forms and approaches. Our prayer changes as we change and as our sense of who God is changes. Spiritual awakening may occur at any developmental stage. It is fairly common for children to have an acute personal awareness of God. In some cultures, this sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life is taken for granted. Other cultures deny its possibility. Once spiritual awakening occurs, we choose whether to live in on-going personal relationship with God or not. Who God is for us changes as we grow and develop. Although God remains an incomprehensible mystery, God both fascinates and frightens us. God has not given us an impossible task of fruitlessly searching in vain, but draws near to us in invitation and self-disclosure. God entices us but does not coerce us, allures us but does not overpower us.

The mystics suggest that the mystery of God expands as one deepens in the spiritual life. Whatever our entry into initial conscious relationship with this

* Much of what follow appeared in a slightly different form in Living Prayer (March - April 1995) "As refined by Fire", 4-7 and in In formation, "Celibacy and Contemplation" (May - June 1997) 1-2, 10-11.

mystery, God will gradually invite us into God's own Trinitarian life so that we, too, participate in the wholeness and joy of God's own life. As we give ourselves over to God, come to know ourselves and be known by God, we are inhabited by this mystery. God's love and life and joy become our own. We are caught up into the love which comes from God and returns in God and returns to God because that love dwells in us.

The journey of prayer makes us conscious of this participation in God's life which God is already doing but which requires our consent and participation to complete. Thus, prayer is about presence and relationship, specifically becoming aware and present to the mystery we name God, and who has further revealed God's self to us in Jesus. As we grow more deeply into this relationship, more aspects of the God mystery encompass us.

I believe pastors, teachers of prayer, and catechists can encourage four basic dispositions that remain consistently important in our prayer. Here I look not so much at what happens to us in prayer but rather at what I believe we bring to prayer in both good times and challenging ones: intentionality, intimacy, mutuality, surrender and fidelity.

INTENTIONALITY

First of all, prayer is intentional. We attempt to make ourselves available for a relationship with God no other agenda. Intentional prayer differs from other types of religious experience which often happens spontaneously outside of prayer because we have made a choice to open ourselves to God. Psychologically, prayer requires an attitude of openness, availability, a willingness to be influenced. We relax a bit from our compulsions, from our need to achieve, from our self-direction. We participate in "shifting gears," in entering another state of consciousness that is closer to simply being and which is closer to our true selves. So we are intentional about being present, about being open and about wanting to encounter God. Regardless, of what happens in our prayer, consistent choices and practices to open ourselves to God bespeak a desire on our part to move more deeply into the experience of God and to be transformed in our consciousness, our values, our views and our behaviours as a result of this encounter. It is a choice to spend time in prayer. It is a choice to be as intentional about this relationship as we are about others. Regardless of whether things are going well or poorly, the consistency of our intentionality is the least we can do to indicate to ourselves and to God that we care about how we are with God. Pragmatically, this intentionality serves as a counter-cultural support, reminding ourselves that we can neither grow in a faith-filled vision of life nor continue to live it without consciously fostering it.

INTIMACY

If prayer is primarily presence and relationship, it is a time in which we practice self-intimacy as well as inviting intimacy with God. According to Kay Leigh Hagan, "intimacy might be defined as the condition of knowing and being known at the level of our essential selves ... When we drop our masks, we have a feeling of connection, of being truly known. And although most of us want more intimacy in our lives, we regard it with profound ambivalence; we feel attracted to and repelled by it at once (1989, 6). Intimacy with God is no different. It is often our "out-of-touchness" with ourselves which prevents our intimacy with God. We cannot feel or sense the connection with God because we are either unaware of how we are at this moment or we are afraid to find out. In prayer we bring our developed capacity for intimacy as well as our fear of it. Intimacy requires a mutual vulnerability and trust. Dr. Musgrave defines intimacy, in part, as "the process of extending oneself actively in trust to listen to and respond to another, the process of allowing one's inner spirit to be touched by the inner spirit of another." God's Spirit already dwells in us - spirit to spirit. Many of us do not experience intimacy with God because we do not really trust that we can both enjoy God and be safe with God. Until we allow our inner selves to be touched by God, entrusting ourselves to God, we will not experience this sense of loving presence with God. Whether or not our operative image of God conveys this trustworthiness will greatly affect our ability to be intimate with God. Not only do we seek to be listened to and responded to by God, so too does God want to be listened to and responded to by us. This is a delicate form of spiritual intimacy.

Frequently, our intimacy with God cannot deepen until we learn to fear or reject in ourselves as well as deal with whatever is impairing our ability to trust in God. Oneway our intimacy in prayer can stall is our unwillingness to discover what we do not yet know about ourselves. There is a darkness or sinfulness within us which becomes accessible as we simultaneously allow ourselves to be seen and known and loved by God. If we keep the secret of our own darkness from ourselves we cannot ever experience ourselves as fully accepted and loved by God. Our unwillingness to experience this part of ourselves drives us to keep God at a distance. Prayer may elude us because we do not want to bring this ego-challenged self to prayer.

Ann Wilson Schaef (1989, 18-23) identifies four key behaviours which interfere with intimacy. Not taking responsibility, maintaining the illusion of control, being dishonest, and being self-centred. Growth in intimacy with God requires that we forego all of these behaviours. Intimacy suggests a mutuality. We deepen our experience of the mystery of God when we shift our focus from our wants and needs to how things are with God. Do we ever ask to share the

activities or experiences of God or Jesus? Or do we keep our focus on what we want or think we need? Can we simply allow ourselves to be in the divine presence without demand or need? Dishonesty most frequently happens because of a lack of congruence in ourselves. We try to pretend that we are fine when we are not. Or we pray for what we think we should pray for even if we don't want it. Or we are somehow dishonest because we are out of touch with ourselves and don't know it. This is why our prayer often improves when we can honestly admit to ourselves and to God how we are actually feeling even if we don't like having those feelings. It places us in a congruent relationship in which feelings are free to change or shift because they are owned and present. Difficulty with control is a major obstacle I will discuss under the rubric of surrender. Finally, taking responsibility for our own process and feelings enhances our freedom to be in a relationship because we are not expecting the other to do what only we can.

Intimacy with God is entirely unique for each one of us. Some of us will find it desirable to express our feelings or present condition directly to God. The psalms are wonderful examples of this kind of feeling prayer, from complaint and lament to praise and thanksgiving. Others may not welcome such direct expression of feeling. There are many meditative techniques in which one simply sits and notices what is going on in our consciousness. So instead of direct expression, we might simply notice what is coming up, what preoccupies us, how we are at this moment. Others may prefer an initial period of writing thoughts and feelings addressing oneself more than addressing God and beginning prayer after that, when one is fully present to oneself. Intimacy cannot take place if we are not ourselves, if we are not present to who we are at this moment as well as willing to be in touch with deeper parts of ourselves that are not always available in the midst of our hectic daily round. Self-intimacy and intimacy with God eventually lead to the discovery of the true self, the self beyond ego and beyond all of our usual descriptors of the self. Augustine says that God is "more intimate to me than I am to myself." The depth of the self which comes into the encounter with God is our *intima mea*, our deepest or most intimate self. And discovering that intimate self happens in our relationship with God.

This intimacy with God is not a one-way sharing. It tends toward a real mutuality with God. God shares God's self intimately with us. It includes not only how I am but how God wants to be with me. The mystics consistently describe mystical transformation as a real mutuality with God. God wants to be known and loved by us. To this end God companions us developmentally until we acquire the capacity to receive this divine self-disclosure. This is described by Ignatius of Loyola as "a mutual sharing of goods" and by Catherine of Siena

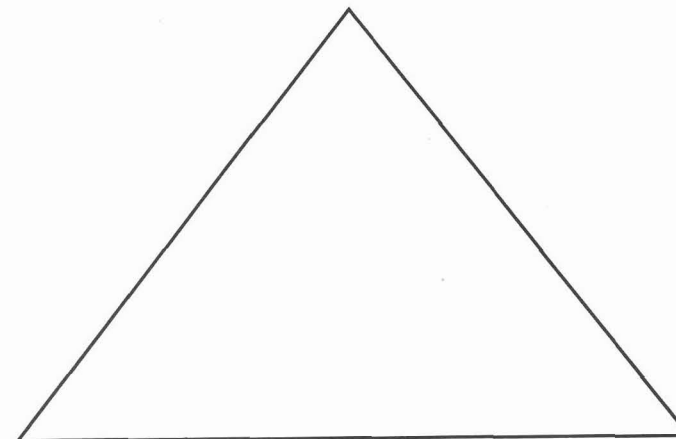
and Mechtilde as an exchange of love, and God's entrusting to us God's work in the world. The distance between God and human persons is overcome in this mutuality of relating through divine-human intimacy.**

TYOLOGY OF MEDITATION

A three-fold typology of meditation contributes to our understanding of the vast array of forms of prayer or meditation which intimacy with God might take. Some of them are standard practices with which we are all familiar. Others are adaptable and can take place in the midst of our daily round without the leisure or freedom from household concerns which have characterised monastic life in both the East and in the West. Claudio Naranjo (1971) identifies: the negative way, the expressive way, and the way of forms.

CLAUDIO NARANJO'S TYPOLOGY OF MEDITATION PRACTICES

THE NEGATIVE WAY: ELIMINATION,
DETACHMENT, EMPTINESS, CENTRED,
THE "MIDDLE WAY", MINDFULNESS



THE WAY OF FORMS:

CONCENTRATION
ABSORPTION, UNION OUTER-
DIRECTED, TRANSFORMATION

THE EXPRESSIVE WAY:

SPONTANEOUS, PROPHETIC, SHAMANISTIC,
SURRENDER, VISIONARY, ENTHUSIASTIC
INNER DIRECTED

** See Ruffing (2000) "Mutuality with God: Where Beloved and Loved One Wholly Flow Through Each other" in *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*. Mahwah: Paulist.

The negative way is characterised by emptiness, elimination and detachment. Typically, the meditator focuses on breath, counts breath, or sounds a mantra, or in Christian tradition the person simply remains in God's presence. The Cure of Ars talked about sitting in the church and looking at Jesus who simply looked back at him. This is a "middle way" between inner directed and outer directed forms.

The expressive way is typical of prophetic impulses, shamanistic practices in which one surrenders to enthusiastic stirrings, enters visionary states. This way is "inner directed" meaning that experiences are initiated from within the practitioner who express internal feelings, impressions, stirrings, and welcomes unconscious content into awareness. Practices might include dancing, artistic expression of every kind, direct expression of emotion in poetry or conversation, fostering trance states through the use of music and/or rhythmic instruments, or simply writing or paying attention to thoughts, feelings, etc while walking or doing some repetitive kind of task. A number of devotional practices fit this style as well as pilgrimages and acts of devotion.

The third way is the way of forms. This way is characterised by concentration, absorption or union with an object of deity outside oneself. Hence, it is outer-directed. In these practices the focus is on the other - often through a symbol. Practices such as visualisation external or internal is common. Praying with scripture in a variety of ways is frequent. Praying with an icon or sacred image is also done. Rituals of various kinds, including liturgy frequently have elements from both the way of forms and the expressive way. According to psychologists individuals tend to prefer one or another of these styles as most helpful to them but most people can benefit from adopting practices from their non-dominant forms at different times in their lives. For instance, during transition times in Christian prayer when using scripture may become burdensome or simply no longer conveys a sense of God's presence, one of the practices of the negative way may help the person remain available to God through a simple breath prayer. If the disturbance in prayer is a result of avoiding some emotion or situation, an expressive form may release the content and lead to an open space where God might again be felt.

SURRENDER

Coming into the harmony of our full adult selves with the otherness of God results in mutuality and surrender. Surrender is another key disposition in ourselves before God which is implied in both intentionality and intimacy. Surrender is adjustment of the ego to otherness. Intimacy is based on a trust deep enough to enable mutual surrender to one another. It is not a giving over of the self but a joining of the self with another. It is relinquishing of ego-defence

in the favour of becoming a 'we'. This can happen because the adult self can simply be in relationship with God without programme's of control or dishonesty. Ultimately, prayer leads us to union with God which can only occur when our intimacy deepens to the point of surrender, it means the experienced awareness and yielding to God which acknowledges that God is our happiness and is wholly benevolent toward us - that God is God and we are not yet receiving from God a remarkable empowerment and strengthening of the self. Each of us goes through a long journey of discovering this. Ego must ultimately surrender its self-interest and control to that which grounds it and gives it being. To surrender is to be centred on God and not on ourselves. Our intentionality in choosing to pray includes this willingness eventually to surrender our small selves to the mystery of God. Paradoxically, this becomes not submission to God but a being-together-with God, an amazing partnering to reciprocity in relating and in action in the world. It is mystical. This, of course, is a life-long process since the final surrender is the one we make when we die. The mystics suggest to us that they have achieved the deepest possible surrender to God this side of death itself.

FIDELITY

The final disposition I want to reflect on is fidelity. Fidelity is not so much the regularity with which we pray although it certainly includes that. Rather it is fidelity to the relationship itself. Relationship with God entails more than time spent in prayer. Fidelity implies being true to ourselves and our deepest desires. It implies the willingness to take the next step whatever that might be as the mystery of God and the Christ life opens up within us. Fidelity is our persistence in staying in relationship with God. It means that when we discover we are resisting, avoiding or neglecting this availability to God, we humbly begin again. Fidelity means being present to God or at least available with every major change in ourselves and our self-understanding. It means giving God the benefit of the doubt that God is on our side and not against us. If our images of God have become inadequate or if we recognise them to be positively destructive, fidelity means we struggle with God in the darkness and in unknowing until a newer or more adequate image emerges. Fidelity means returning again and again to God as the source and ground of our lives during and after every assault on that belief which occurs throughout our lives.

CONCLUSION

Ministry which supports the full development of families in the spiritual dimensions of their lives includes attention to development of prayer. It is in our families that we, as children, first glimpse the otherness of God through the bodily sense of our parents praying. Parents are the first teachers of prayer to their

children. They literally introduce their children to saying prayers, give them a vocabulary for prayer in words, gestures, and practices, and convey to their children our first images of God are parental. However, as we grow and develop into adult selves, more than parental or authoritarian images for God are needed. No image captures the reality of God. God discloses Godself through a wild profusion of images which continually open up new ways of relating to God. Ministry to prayer for families means supporting family practices of prayer with children but also supporting and fostering the adult development of the parents into relational prayer which is open to the unfolding of the mystical.

Prayer in this profoundly relational mode is the primary means for cultivating our core relationship with God from which all else flows. This central relationship, the self in God and God in the self, is the religious experience which enable self-giving parenting and appropriate spousal love. Love begets love. The self which is secure in God's love through intimacy and mutuality is also available for family, work, friendship, and community.

The essence of contemplation is an experience of communion, a to and from with God, an experience of the love of God being poured forth into our hearts. This communion of intimacy and relatedness expands to encompass every aspect of life, ceasing to be restricted discrete times of personal prayer. As this communion with all that is - an increased capacity to receive and appreciate the Real - manifests itself in every part of our Christian lives, the fruition of our relationship with God begins to be experienced. No part of life is untouched by this expanding relationship with the Divine Presence whether solitude, family activities and care, work, leisure, prayer, relationships or ministry. The unity of love of God and love of neighbour and the responsive capacity to apprehend reality with increasing clarity and compassion bears fruit in both the inner circle of familial love and the concentric circles of care and concern which emanate outward from it.

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REFLECTION PROCESS

1. Take at least - minutes of quiet reflection time. Recall an experience of God either during prayer or under other circumstances when you felt God's presence personally. Describe the event and recall your response. Did these experiences become more frequent or happen not at all, or once or twice? What did God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit feel like? Does an image come to mind that describes the quality of presence or quality of the relationship?
2. As you remember these events or note their absence, what is happening to you right here and now as you contemplate the possibility of intimacy with God? Is there any longing or desire for this? Is there any reluctance or fearfulness about it? What image of God do you project as you contemplate this?
3. Of the forms of meditation/prayer described by Naranjo, which best facilitate our intimacy with God? Do some of the less familiar forms attract you toward experimentation? Did you recognize that you were already "praying" more than you had realized when you considered these possibilities?
4. Of the obstacles to intimacy and mutuality with God, which one(s) affect you the most? Do you have some way of working with it?
5. How does family life foster the development of intimacy with God in prayer as a result of spousal or familial intimacy?
6. What kind of solitude or aloneness might be part of the regular rhythms of family that support self-intimacy as well as intimacy with God?