

Second naïveté is to refuse to ask the tough questions. It is genuinely agnostic, fully open to wonder, and knows so little of a rich and multifarious reality that there just might be a Santa Claus after all.

And there might be a God after all! Atheism is not, as we so popularly imagine, the result of the human race coming of age and having the courage to rid ourselves of fairy tales and superstitions. Atheism, for the most part, is rooted in the opposite. It questions too little, and it examines too narrowly. Jesus tells us that it is children who will see God.

To exercise our contemplative muscles, we must work at regaining the wonder, awe, and openness of a child. If Jesus was my spiritual director and I came to him complaining that the sense of God was habitually absent within my everyday experience, he would challenge me to get into more vital contact with the little boy and the virgin inside me.

The Practice of Contemplation

There is a parable about our search for God. There was a little fish who swam up to his mother one day and asked: "Mummy, where is this water that I hear so much about?"

The mother replied: "You stupid little fish! It's all about you and in you. Just swim up on the beach and lie there for a while and you'll find out."

And so the person who is searching for God. One day she walks up to her spiritual director and says: "Where is this God that I hear so much about?"¹¹

The parable ends there. God is to us like the ocean is to fish, all around us and in us. In God we live and move and have our being. If we can never get outside God how can we keep ourselves aware of God's reality? If we are swimming in God but he does not seem as real to us as the heartaches and headaches of our daily lives, how can we make ourselves more aware of him?

Classical spiritual authors, not just in Christianity but in all the major world religions, suggest that one of the ways out of this dilemma is the practice of contemplative prayer. This, to cite just one example, is the basis of the famous fourteenth-century English mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It is also a strong motif in many of the writings emerging today from the post-Merton Trappist communities.¹² The Cistercians generally call this "Centering Prayer," but what they advocate is in fact what older classical authors call contemplation.

In classical Christian spirituality, there are two essential ways of praying: meditation and contemplation. Very early on in Christian spiritual writings, as we've seen, authors distinguished between *praxis* and *theoria*. *Praxis* refers to what we can do in our attempt to reach God and others, namely, works of charity and justice, discursive prayer, and ascetical practices. *Theoria* refers to what happens within us when God and others were actually encountered. Hence, *praxis* refers to what is active and *theoria* to what is receptive and passive.

Prayer is called meditation when we are active within it. You decide to spend a half hour in prayer. You sit down in a quiet place and pick up the Bible. You find

a text you want to meditate on and begin your prayer. You read the text slowly and try to let it speak to you. It does. You begin to feel consolation from God, challenge from God, sorrow for your sins, joy in being blessed by God. You feel yourself becoming more insightful. You pray for others. But you also experience distractions. Every so often, your mind wanders and you catch yourself thinking about other things—your heartaches and headaches. When these distractions occur, you catch yourself and bring yourself back to what you are praying about. All this activity, all this *praxis*, is meditation.

Contemplation, or centering prayer, is quite different. Unlike meditation, which is an exercise in concentration, contemplation is an exercise in refusing to concentrate on anything, including holy thoughts and divine inspirations. You decide to spend a half hour in prayer. You sit down in a quiet place. You do not bring the Bible, nor do you bring anything to pray on or about. You begin contemplating by making a brief act of meditation. You actively focus yourself on what you are about to do, pray, and tell God that you are here to pray, that this next half hour will be prayer. Then you calm and center yourself, perhaps using a breathing technique and a prayer word (though these are optional). Then you begin to contemplate. What do you do? Nothing. You let your heart and mind go and you interfere in the stream of feelings and consciousness only when you catch yourself concentrating very long on anything, including holy thoughts and divine inspirations. In contemplation there is no distinction between distractions and holy thoughts. You try to hang onto God by refusing to hang onto anything else, including thoughts and feelings about God. The whole time of prayer, save for a

very brief explicit act of meditation at the beginning and again at the end, consists of this stream of consciousness and feeling.

But how is this prayer? And how will it make us more aware of God? Let us return to the parable of the fish and the ocean.

Imagine you are the mother fish and your child comes to you and says: "Mummy, where is this water we hear so much about?" To give your child some sense of water, even though it is totally immersed within it, you could set up a slide projector at the bottom of the ocean and show your child pictures of water. (Since this is a parable and anything is possible, you could do this.) As ironic as it would be, these pictures, which are not water, would in fact give your child, who is living in water, some idea of what water is. Eventually, after having shown your child hours of pictures of water, you turn off all the TVs and the slide projector and tell the child: "Now that you have some idea of what water is, I want you to sit in it and let it flow through you." Our new parable demonstrates the difference between meditation and contemplation of God.

All thoughts and feelings about God, even scripture itself, are not God. Good as they are, they are not the reality. At a point, they must give way to the reality. Meditation must give way to contemplation. Instead of thinking and feeling *about* God we must sit *in* God. Meditation is watching the slides. It brings concepts, thoughts, and feelings about the reality. Contemplation is sitting in the reality. Normally it does not feel like prayer.

Suppose you are sitting in contemplative prayer regularly. How do you know whether you are actually pray-

ing or wasting your time? Unlike meditation, you do not make any assessment during or after prayer. You do contemplative prayer for a substantial period of time, several months perhaps, and then check yourself: Am I now more restful than restless? More free than compulsive? More calm than hyper? More patient than impatient? More humble than competitive? More self-forgetful than self-preoccupied? More grateful than bitter? If there is progress in these things, then I am praying and God is more vitally in my life.

If a sense of God's presence is absent within our lives, more than likely restlessness, obsessions, impatience, competitiveness, self-preoccupation, and bitterness are not absent. Small wonder God cannot break in! Contemplative prayer, practiced regularly as a discipline, is an invaluable exercise for purifying awareness.

Kissing the Leper

A story about Francis of Assisi, perhaps more mythical than factual, illustrates how touching the poor is the cure for a mediocre or dying faith:

One night prior to his conversion, Francis, then a rich and pampered young man, donned his flashiest clothes, mounted his horse, and set off for a night of drinking and carousing. God, social justice, and the poor were not on his mind. Riding down a narrow road, he found his path blocked by a leper. Francis was particularly repulsed by the deformities and smell of lepers. He tried to steer his horse around the him, but the path was too narrow. Frustrated, angry, but with his path clearly blocked, Francis had no other choice but to get

down off his horse and try to move the leper out of his path. When he put out his hand and touched the leper's arm, something inside him snapped. Undeterred by the smell of rotting flesh and unashamed, he kissed that leper and his life was never the same again. In that kiss, Francis found the reality of God and of love in a way that changed him forever.

Many of us struggle with the same issues as the pre-converted Francis, with a pampered life and a mediocre and dying faith. We know that our faith calls us to work for social justice and that this demand is non-negotiable. We know, too, as somebody once put it with a praiseworthy succinctness, that strength without compassion is violence; that compassion without justice is weakness; that justice without love is Marxism; and that love without justice is baloney! What we don't know is that the preferential option for the poor is the cure for our mediocre and dying faith. We must kiss the leper.

If we touch the poor we touch Christ. Touching the poor can be a functional substitute for prayer and, given the culture we live in, we need this substitute.

Western culture today is so powerful and alluring that it often swallows us whole. Its beauty, power, and promise generally take away both our breath and our perspective. The lure of present salvation—money, sex, creativity, the good life—has, for the most part, entertained, amused, distracted, and numbed us into a state where we no longer have a perspective beyond that of our culture and its short-range soteriology.

One way out of this, of course, is through prayer. A life of prayer can cure a dying faith. The problem is that our life of prayer is precisely what our culture erodes in us. It is the hardest thing to sustain in our lives today.

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Everything militates against it. Perhaps the only way we have of not letting ourselves be swallowed whole by our culture is to kiss the leper, to place our lot with those who have no within it, namely, the poor with their many faces: the aged, the sick, the dying, the unborn, the handicapped, the unattractive, the displaced. To touch those who have no place in our culture is to give ourselves a perspective beyond our culture.

Daniel Berrigan describes in his memoirs how much his perspective changed when he began to work full-time in a cancer ward ministering to the terminally ill. When you walk home from work after a day with people who are dying, he says, your vision clears pretty well and what your culture offers no longer seems so irresistible. Concrete contact with the poor is Christian contemplation. It knocks the scales off one's eyes.

"Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, that you do unto me," Christ assures us. God is ever-present in our world in the face of the poor, waiting to be met. In the powerless, one can find the power of God; in the voiceless, one can hear the voice of God; in the impoverished, one can find God's treasures; in the weak, one can find God's strength; and in the unattractive, one can find God's beauty. The glory of God might indeed be humanity fully alive, but the privileged presence of God lies with the poor who are not fully alive in the eyes of our culture.

Like Francis, we need to get off our horses and kiss the leper. If we do, something will snap, we will see our pampered lives for what they are, and God and love will break into our lives in such a way that we will never be the same again.

The Contuition of God in Everyday Life

A hundred years ago, Nietzsche's mythical madman smashed a lantern in the marketplace at high noon and announce to Western culture that "God is dead!" Few people took Nietzsche very seriously because, at that time, God was still very much alive in the Christian churches even if he was quite dead in everyday life. Today, the children of Western culture, we struggle with practical atheism. Our churches are slowly emptying and more and more the sense of God slips from our ordinary lives.

This problem with God stems not from the fact that we are any less sincere or moral than previous generations, but from the fact that, for reasons whose roots go back hundreds of years, our consciousness is so clouded with self-centeredness, practicality, and restlessness that we are contemplatively asleep. We need to do contemplative exercises if we are to regain a vital sense of God.

The road back, however, is not through a better rational and intellectual apologetic for the existence of God. Nobody is ever going to prove to anyone that God exists and that the only rational option is faith. To quote Shakespeare somewhat out of context, proofs for the existence of God only "help to thicken other proofs that do demonstrate thinly."¹³ Nor is the road back through miracles, apparitions, healings, Marian appearances, or extraordinary religious experiences. The God of ordinary life will be found in the ordinary.

The road back to a lively faith is not about answers, but about living in a certain way—contemplatively.

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Blessed are those who do not take life for granted, for they are within measurable distance of taking it as granted to them by God.

Blessed are those who learn to see the finger of God in the conspiracy of accidents that make up their lives; they shall be rewarded with daily miracles.

Blessed are those who say yes to something higher than themselves; in that genuflection they will say the creed.

Blessed are those who take on the heart of a child and the heart of a virgin; they shall again delight in Santa Claus and believe in God.



*The God of ordinary life
will be found in the ordinary.*

Blessed are those whose discipleship includes the discipline of regular prayer; they shall know that it is in God that they live and move and have their being.

Blessed are those who kiss a leper, who make the preferential option for the poor, for love and God will overwhelm them.

And blessed are those who make this a life-long quest; they will make a good beginning.

Notes

1. Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, pp. 103-4.
2. This is Mackey's central idea in the Eucharistic theology he gives in "Anticipatory Incompletions," in *The Christian Experience of*