

10-1-2013

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Repository Citation

Christie, Douglas E., "The Joy of Feeling Close to God: The Practice of Prayer and the Work of Accompaniment" (2013). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 110.

http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/110

Recommended Citation

Christie, Douglas E. "'The Joy of Feeling Close to God': The Practice of Prayer and the Work of Accompaniment." *Anglican Theological Review* 95.4 (Fall, 2013): 585-606. Print.

The Joy of Feeling Close to God: The Practice of Prayer and the Work of Accompaniment

DOUGLAS E. CHRISTIE*

What does it mean to pray in response to the most acute challenges of everyday historical existence? When prayer is conceived of primarily as a personal, deeply interiorized expression of the soul's longing to communicate with a transcendent God, it can be difficult to imagine what it might mean to incorporate the embodied, communal, historically mediated dimensions of human experience into the broader understanding about what it means to pray. The challenge is to find a way of understanding and articulating how the powerful and supple language of prayer comes to expression in and through the concrete, historically mediated forms in which human beings actually live. Thinking about prayer in this way, as an embodied, socially and historically situated spiritual practice, can help us overcome a long-standing habit of thinking of prayer primarily in terms of dispositions or mental habits and help us retrieve a sense of the wholeness of prayer within the Christian tradition.

I kneel on the ground to pick up a small handful of salt. It is coarse, luminous blue. I open my fingers and let it drift to the ground. Again and again I do this, marveling as I see these words slowly form before me: *juntos somos libres*. "Together we are free." Then: *Unidad. Esperanza. Paz. Amor. Fe*. Words full of feeling and hope that are also

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prayers. It is the anniversary of the martyrs of the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador.¹ Here on a narrow road running through the campus, hundreds of students, along with friends, family members, and others from the community, are bent over the ground, creating dozens of *alfombras*, or carpets, from colored salt. They are filled with the images and words of the martyrs, with crosses and churches, birds and trees—expressions of hope for a future different from the one that has led to the violent deaths of these women and men. A solemn occasion, marked by great seriousness of purpose, but also by much laughter and a sense of play: we are creating something beautiful to express our feeling for these witnesses and what they meant for our lives. Later that evening, hundreds more people, Salvadorans but also many who have come here to join in the anniversary celebration from other parts of the world, walk together in a procession along this path, the *alfombras* themselves marking the way toward a large field where we join in a communal mass in memory of the martyrs. The celebration continues long into the night, with music, food, dancing. No one wants to leave. Some of those who have traveled to San Salvador from the *campo* to be part of the celebration spend the night in that field, much like those early Christians who, in their longing to draw near to the presence of the sacred, engaged in the practice of “incubation”—sleeping near tombs of the martyrs.

There is such an evident longing among those gathered for the celebration: to draw close to the martyrs, to feel their presence, and in so doing to cultivate a sense of hope within the community. The presence of the martyrs is indeed palpable. But this is due in no small measure to the actions and gestures of those hundreds and hundreds of persons who have come to bear witness to their own faith, to call forth by their own embodied presence a vision of hope for the future. The need to remember, to touch and be touched by the memory (and presence) of the martyrs, is strong. So too is the longing to give it

¹ For a probing account of the events leading up to the murder of six Jesuits and two women on the night of November 16, 1989, and the enduring legacy of their witness, see Dean Brackley, SJ: “Remembering the Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador: Twenty Years On,” *Thinking Faith: The Online Journal of the British Jesuits*, November 16, 2009; http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20091116_1.htm. The Jesuit educators, along with two women who had sought refuge from the gunfire near their cottage, were murdered in the early hours of the morning in their campus residence by U.S.-trained commandos of the Salvadoran armed forces. See also: Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003).

concrete form—through the creation of *alfombras*, the commitment to walk together through the streets of San Salvador with images of the martyrs held aloft, the making of rich, beautiful music, the willingness to enter into a deep silence where the painful memory of the pierced bodies of the martyrs and the beauty of their lives can penetrate the soul. These gestures, at once communal and personal, are the means through which so many of the hidden longings and hopes of those gathered there come to expression.

Rarely have I felt the power and meaning of prayer in the life of the Christian community or the importance of practice to the expression of prayer as deeply as I did on this day. It is a particular kind of prayer to be sure, rooted in the distinctive cultural, political, and ecclesial reality of that place, and oriented toward keeping alive the witness of the martyrs and the historical and ecclesial narrative in which they played such a crucial role. But many of the gestures, words, and images through which the spiritual longings of the community are mediated here also have a more universal character, echoing the language and ethos that has marked the Christian practice of prayer from the beginning. As has happened so often in the history of Christian practice, this celebration—embodied, communal, rooted in a particular historical moment and a specific geographical, cultural, and political reality—creates the conditions in which a profound, personal, and intimate sense of divine presence can be expressed and experienced. Nor is the significance of this presence limited to the personal or individual dimensions of experience; it draws upon and contributes toward a profoundly communal vision of social transformation. Prayer comes to expression in and through the gritty, complex, contentious character of this entire reality. It becomes a crucial means for engaging some of the most painful dimensions of the shared history of this particular place and for articulating an emerging but still-fragile hope for the future.

Still, in the long unfolding of the Christian tradition, our understanding and practice of prayer have not always reflected a capacity to hold such complexity and ambiguity. The personal and the communal, the interior and the embodied, the hidden and the manifest dimensions of prayer often have been set against one another rather than held together and understood as elements within a larger whole. When prayer is conceived of primarily as a personal, deeply interiorized expression of the soul's longing to communicate with a transcendent God, it can be difficult to imagine what it might mean to

incorporate the embodied, communal, historically mediated dimensions of human experience into the broader understanding about what it is to pray. On the other hand, understanding prayer primarily as a socially constructed phenomenon or as a way of coping with, responding to, and managing social, political pressures can risk reducing the mysterious character of the soul's search for meaning in prayer to something thin and poor. The challenge is to find a way of understanding and articulating how the powerful and supple language of prayer—in all its varied meanings and with a full recognition that it often touches on a mystery too deep for words—comes to expression in and through the concrete, historically mediated forms in which human beings actually live. Thinking about prayer in this way, as an embodied, socially and historically situated *spiritual practice*, can help us overcome a long-standing habit of conceiving of prayer primarily in terms of dispositions or mental habits and help us retrieve a sense of the *wholeness* of prayer within the Christian tradition. At the same time, it can help to ground and make more comprehensible and meaningful those myriad intimations of the presence of God in prayer that have always been woven into the fabric of the Christian spiritual tradition.²

Prayer and Practice

What is prayer? *Why* do we pray? What, if anything, does prayer *do*? And what does it mean to *practice* prayer? These questions, in one form or another, have recurred continuously throughout the Christian spiritual tradition. Taken altogether, they provide a useful framework for thinking about the possible meaning of prayer in Christian life.

² In emphasizing the important of practice in this essay, I do not mean to suggest in any way that prayer in the Christian spiritual tradition should be understood as something that is fundamentally “earned” or “acquired” through hard work, in the absence of grace. Nevertheless, there is widespread and consistent testimony suggesting that the gift of prayer is bound to and strengthened by particular, embodied practices and by the social reality out of which it arises and to which it responds. See Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Matthew T. Eggemeier, “A Mysticism of Open Eyes: Compassion for a Suffering World and the *Askesis* of Contemplative Prayer,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 43–62; and J. Matthew Ashley, “Contemplation in the Action of Justice: Ignacio Ellacuría and Ignatian Spirituality,” in *Love that Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. Kevin F. Burke and Robert Lassalle-Klein (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2006), 144–165.

Still, they are immensely difficult to address, not only because they touch the most intimate and mysterious dimensions of the human experience of God, but also because the possible answers one might give to them must take into account an almost endlessly diverse range of historical and cultural contexts, theological assumptions, particular practices, and modes of expression. In their very complexity and density, such questions suggest the depth at which prayer can affect both persons and communities and the challenging character of the struggles that so often emerge in the actual experience of prayer. Nor can these questions be distinguished sharply from the lived character of the spiritual experience from which they arise.

Emerging work among historians, sociologists of religion, and feminist and liberationist theologians has helped to focus our attention more closely on the concrete, embodied character of spiritual experience and its historical, social, and political meanings. Particularly influential has been the work of critical social theorists on our understanding of what it means to *practice* religion.³ Similarly, there has been a renewed attention to the importance of material culture in shaping religious experience,⁴ while the category of “lived religion” has increasingly entered into the discourse about how spirituality is expressed in the lived experience of persons and communities.⁵ Nor can one ignore the importance of the work of critical liberationist thinkers regarding the politically and historically embedded character of all spiritual experience.⁶ As a result, there is an increasing recognition that the most profound reaches of Christian spiritual experience, including prayer, must always be understood as arising out of and responding to the fabric of embodied, social-historical reality.

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984).

⁴ David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁵ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁶ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984); Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2004); Philip Sheldrake, “Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 19–37.

Inquiring into the meaning of prayer, then, almost always involves asking about how the sense of divine presence is encountered and expresses itself in gestures, practices, and ways of living—from the most ordinary to the rarest and most extraordinary. But it also means asking how such gestures form and shape the human consciousness of divine presence, how and why they enable the transcendent force of divine presence to take hold of and reside within a person's embodied existence. And how the praying person's deepening awareness of divine presence that is both expressed and given life in such gestures and practice flows forth into an encompassing embrace of everyone and everything.⁷

If there is a single quality that has always marked the Christian attitude toward prayer—what Gregory of Nyssa described simply as the experience of “intimacy with God”—it is the sense of utter and complete *involvement* that it calls forth from the person and the community.⁸ This sense of involvement is vividly expressed in the attention Christians regularly gave, from the earliest moments of the tradition, to the kind of embodied *practices* that were deemed necessary and important for prayer: what posture(s) to adopt, how to breathe, the best location for prayer, how to comport oneself in relation to material things, whether or not to pray with images. Also important in this regard was the question of how to understand one's embodied existence in society and in the world, the character of one's life commitments, the meaning of one's life work. But it is also expressed in the myriad ways that Christians conceived of and struggled to express the kind of *inner dispositions* necessary for opening oneself fully and deeply to prayer—the capacity to become still, attentive, open, vulnerable; the willingness to risk intimacy, to sacrifice oneself, to love; these too were widely understood to be part of what it meant to practice prayer.

⁷ This sense of holism in prayer is not new to Christian spiritual experience, but can be traced back to some of the earliest expressions of Christian prayer. Still, in our own time, we are coming to feel the significance of this integrated, holistic sense of prayer in a new way as we seek a means of praying that can help us confront and perhaps help to heal an increasingly fragmented world. See Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer, The Beatitudes*, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 18, ed. Joannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe (New York: Newman Press, 1978).

Still, much of the difficulty of arriving at a clear understanding of prayer as an embodied practice has to do with the consistent and pervasive tensions arising throughout the tradition regarding its fundamental meaning and purpose and the best way to orient oneself toward God in prayer. These tensions reveal a great deal not only about significant differences in the way prayer is understood, but also about fundamental differences in the way it is to be practiced. Is prayer best understood, for example, as an essentially private form of communication between an individual and God? Or does it arise from and offer a way of responding to the often fraught social world within which every human life is situated? If prayer is understood as rooted in a deep human impulse to communicate or commune with God, should the primary emphasis be placed on speaking, self-expression? Or is prayer better understood as grounded in receptivity, listening? Is prayer a path to be walked, honed through careful discipline? Or is it more of a disposition, an attitude, a quality of awareness, requiring nothing but naked faith? Is it a response to a revelatory Word? Or does prayer arise most profoundly in response to a wordless silence? Does it depend for its meaning on images and the play of the imagination? Or is it fundamentally aniconic, imageless? Is it an experience of illumination? Or is true prayer marked by an ever-deepening descent into darkness? Does authentic prayer require a flight from, or systematic critique of “the things of this world” (whether understood as the body, society, or creation)? Or should it be understood as a deeply sacramental reality, mediated through the body, society, and the created world? Is prayer primarily affective in its orientation, rooted in the workings of the heart and the emotions? Or is it more of an expression of the mind or intellect? Does prayer ease or help to make sense of suffering (one’s own or that of others)? Or does it rather provide a space where suffering can be honestly acknowledged (if not resolved)?

The tensions suggested here are real and have often led to profound conflicts between and among different members of the Christian community about the appropriate means of approaching God in prayer. Still, reflections on this question often reveal not simple opposition between two distinct ideas of prayer or attitudes toward prayer, but a struggle to fuse and integrate different and complex elements within a single experience of prayer. At the heart of such reflections one often finds a simple but powerful question: is it possible to

practice prayer in such a way that it becomes incorporated into the whole of one's life?

"My Whole Life Will Become a Prayer"

In his work *On Reason, Faith and Prayer*, the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy grapples with precisely this question: "Jesus taught us to go into our own room and lock the door. In other words, prayer is complete only when done in solitude. The essence of prayer consists of communing with God who dwells within us." Here one finds a classic expression of prayer as a personal, solitary, and deeply interior practice. Yet, Tolstoy adds an important note: "Genuine prayer helps us towards life—in reforming and guiding it."⁹ The tension expressed here, between the recognition that prayer is always to some extent rooted in the hidden movements of the soul, and the acknowledgment that prayer also has a wider ethical meaning, captures one of the fundamental concerns found throughout the Christian tradition in reflections on prayer: whatever prayer achieves within a person, it must bear fruit in that person's life and in the life of the world. In one of his letters, Tolstoy extends these thoughts to consider how this can happen, how the very gestures and movements of a person, indeed a person's entire life, can come to embody, in fact *become*, prayer. He suggests that prayer "does not have to be expressed only through words or rituals or other things of short duration, as is usually understood. Why can't prayer be expressed through prolonged actions of the arms and legs (isn't the journeying of pilgrims prayer by legs)? If I go and work a whole day or a week for a widow, is this not prayer? . . . Isn't it better," he asks, "for me to broaden my understanding of prayer? . . . If I do this, my whole life will become a prayer."¹⁰

One hears frequent echoes of this aspiration among Christian writers reflecting on how individual prayer *practices* can be woven into a more expansive and seamless *practice* of prayer. In her *Dialogue*, Catherine of Siena addresses this concern in relation to what she calls "holy will": "Each of you must work for the salvation of souls according to your own situation. Whatever you do in word or deed for the good of your neighbor is a real prayer. (I am assuming that you actually pray as such at the appointed time.) Apart from your prayers

⁹ Leo Tolstoy, *Spiritual Writings*, selected with an introduction by Charles E. Moore (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 151.

¹⁰ Tolstoy, *Spiritual Writings*, 153–154.

of obligation, however, everything you do can be a prayer.”¹¹ Here one sees a tension similar to that reflected in Tolstoy’s comments, namely how to understand the relationship between discrete acts of prayer—which by common consensus are obligatory and are to happen at appointed times—and the wider scope of prayer that encompasses everything. Practice, for Catherine, is at the heart of prayer. And praying deeply involves coming to recognize the porous character of the boundary between the distinct acts of prayer (often liturgical) around which one’s life is organized and the more encompassing engagement with everyone and everything that ought to distinguish the life of a person of prayer. Discrete moments of prayer (whether solitary as Tolstoy envisions them or communal as Catherine imagines them), themselves understood as embodied practices, are critical to forming a person in the habit of prayer. But there is always the danger that such practices will come to be understood as identical with prayer, that prayer will be cut off from life, that its capacity for “reforming or guiding” life will become obscured or lost. Hence the need to develop a “broader understanding” of prayer, a way of understanding and practicing prayer as something that permeates every gesture of a person’s life, that becomes a way of life. Prayer takes hold in and is nourished by particular practices; but it always extends beyond them to encompass the whole of one’s life.

This concern that prayer should influence a person’s entire moral development, should become part of the fabric of one’s life, and so bind one more deeply to God and to the larger community, has been integral to Christian reflection on prayer from the beginning. Almost always such transformation in prayer is understood as being rooted in utterly specific and concrete practices—which themselves gradually become folded into a more capacious awareness of one’s whole life as an expression of prayer. Origen of Alexandria describes his own understanding of constant or continuous prayer this way: “He prays ‘constantly’ (deeds of virtue or fulfilling the commandments are included as part of prayer) who unites prayer with the deeds required and right deeds with prayer. For the only way we can accept the command to ‘pray constantly’ (1 Thess. 5:17) as referring to a real possibility is by saying that the entire life of the saint taken as a whole is a

¹¹ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Suzanne Noffke, OP (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980), 127.

single great prayer. What is customarily called prayer is, then, a part of this prayer.”¹²

Here we see a subtle integration of two elements of prayer that have always been taken as critical for Christians—that it be “continuous” (the witness of 1 Thessalonians 5:17 on “unceasing prayer” was hugely influential), and that it become completely incorporated into a person’s life. The practice of prayer, in other words, becomes bound up with a certain vision of spiritual maturity or holiness—something that signifies not only closeness to the divine, but also depth of moral integrity. But how does practice help to bring about this spiritual transformation? There is considerable reflection on this question in the tradition, much of it focusing on specific concrete practices (whether to stand or sit, which direction to face, where to pray, how to read or recite the psalms, how to breathe, when to speak and when to remain silent) that are believed to dispose one toward prayer. In the later tradition, in particular among the Protestant reformers, great suspicion would be cast on such practices and their capacity to help deepen one’s experience of prayer, especially when they were perceived as forms of “works” aimed at earning God’s favor. The earlier Christian tradition understood such practices differently; regular, disciplined practices were believed to help create the kind of climate in which prayer could begin to take root in the soul. Always understood as a gift, the intimacy with God that prayer made possible nevertheless benefitted from the regular observation of certain practices. It is significant then that Origen distinguishes between prayer in this larger, more capacious meaning (“the entire life of the saint taken as a whole is a single great prayer”) and the more discrete practices of prayer that enable this larger, transformative vision of prayer to take hold in one’s life. He spends considerable time in his treatise on prayer discussing the most basic elements of practice. How often should one pray? Three times a day. In which direction should one pray? Toward the east. What is the best posture? Standing with arms outstretched is best, but kneeling is also permitted, especially when one is seeking healing and forgiveness of sins. The best place for prayer? “Every place is suitable for prayer if a person prays well,” says Origen, but it is

¹² Origen, *On Prayer*, in *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Rowan A. Greer (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1979), 104.

also good to find “a holy place set aside and chosen in his own house,” or “the spot where believers assemble together.”¹³

As Origen’s treatise on prayer makes clear, these discrete practices were always understood as having importance because of how they embody and give expression to deeper, hidden impulses of the praying soul. Reflecting on how a person of prayer should think about the matter of posture, Origen comments: “Although there are a great many different positions for the body [during prayer], he should not doubt that the position with the hands outstretched and the eyes lifted up is to be preferred before all others, because it bears in prayer the image of characteristics befitting the soul and applies it to the body.”¹⁴ Here one catches a glimpse of the holism of prayer in the early Christian imagination, the way embodied practice was understood to both reflect and express the inner reality of prayer (here the soul’s deep yearning for God). Elsewhere in this treatise, Origen employs images of the body in prayer to comment on the kind of inner disposition one should seek to adopt: “This is how he should come to prayer, stretching out his soul, as it were, instead of his hands, straining his mind toward God instead of his eyes, raising his governing reason from the ground and standing it before the Lord of all instead of standing.”¹⁵

It has become a commonplace in writing about Christian spirituality to accuse Greek-speaking Christian writers of a certain dualism, a denigration of embodied existence. Certainly there is ample evidence for this sensibility in the writings of Clement, Origen, and other Christians influenced by neo-Platonic thought. But such a critique is too simple and does not take into account the delicate and subtle attitudes toward the body, toward the created world and society that one finds so often expressed in their writing on prayer.¹⁶ The effort to understand how embodied practices enable, indeed facilitate expression of a real depth in prayer recurs continuously in Christian writing. And while it is true that the image of “straining the mind toward God” (and many others like it), came to stand as the emblematic expression of what it meant to pray, there is little question that particular, embodied practices remained critical to the formation of Christians at prayer.

¹³ Origen, *On Prayer*, 166.

¹⁴ Origen, *On Prayer*, 164–165.

¹⁵ Origen, *On Prayer*, 164.

¹⁶ Gabriel Bunge, *Earthen Vessels: The Practice of Personal Prayer According to the Patristic Tradition* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 2002).

Attention: Prayer on Behalf of a Broken World

The sustained attention Christians have always given to prayer as an embodied practice reveals a concern to incarnate prayer in the depths of human experience and in the heart of the world. Prayer seems always to move in two directions at once—inward, into the depths of human consciousness, and outward, toward a fuller engagement with one's fellow human beings and the wider world. This double movement in prayer requires everything a person can give of himself or herself, because the movement within almost always involves a harrowing confrontation with the unhealed parts of one's soul and because the movement outward calls forth an ever deeper sacrifice of oneself, a willingness to live beyond oneself, on behalf of others. This fundamental tension—often articulated in the tradition in terms of the relationship between contemplation and action—points to the reality of *struggle* in the life of prayer, especially the struggle to stand in the midst of and hold in a compassionate embrace the reality of a broken world. Here one senses the immense complexity of prayer in the Christian tradition, the way in which prayer came to mean both seeking God at the very center of one's life, and engaging and seeking the well-being of the whole of reality from within that unitive experience of the divine. To reckon honestly with oneself and with God in prayer meant learning to live in God *and* in and for the world at the deepest possible level.

The ancient Christian monastic movement provides a useful lens for understanding how the sustained commitment to prayer could contribute to the healing of the world. This movement was itself formed at an historical moment of intense and widespread loss, in which the social and cultural fabric that had long bound life together in the ancient Mediterranean world had begun to fray to the breaking point. This particular tradition of spiritual practice emerged in part as a response to this tearing of the fabric, and represented a sustained effort to face it with courage and honesty, all the while remaining open to the possibility that paradise—a world whole and untarnished—might yet be rediscovered and made manifest. In his treatise *On Thoughts*, the fourth-century monastic writer Evagrius of Pontus gives expression to this vision of paradise as part of his account of “the place of prayer.” “When the mind has put off the old self and shall put on the one born of grace,” says Evagrius, “then it will see its own state in the time of prayer resembling sapphire or the color of heaven; this

state scripture calls the place of God that was seen by the elders on Mount Sinai.”¹⁷ The blue sapphire of the mind of which Evagrius speaks—that condition of serene and encompassing awareness of being immersed in the life of the divine—did not arise spontaneously in the life of the monk in a kind of blissful ignorance of suffering and loss around him, but emerged through long struggle, through a sustained practice of examining the sources of the alienation and fragmentation that afflicted the monks and their society. Contemplative practice in this sense meant opening oneself to the long, difficult process of relinquishing one’s attachment to the ego’s isolating and alienating power and realizing in oneself a more encompassing, whole vision of reality. As Peter Brown has argued, ascetic practice, including the practice of prayer, took on a significant social meaning, contributing toward the reknitting of the torn fabric of the world.¹⁸ This contemplative vision resonated profoundly among their contemporaries in Late Antiquity, for whom these monks came to be known simply as “those by whom the world is kept in being.”¹⁹

This is an audacious claim. But it echoes similar claims found in many other parts of the tradition regarding the significance of those who devote themselves to the work of prayer for the wider community and for the world. In its most profound expressions, such work can be understood as undertaken on behalf of the world and seen as contributing toward its healing and restoration. Indeed, the aim of contemplative living is to address the fragmentation and alienation that haunts existence and, through sustained spiritual practice, to come to realize a different, more integrated way of being in the world. Here, amid the inevitable fragmentation of existence, the contemplative seeks to recover a vision of the whole and a new way of living in relationship to the whole.

At the heart of this work is the mysterious process by which a person comes to be remade in God, which means simultaneously being drawn deeply into the life of God, and becoming more open to living, fully and courageously, for others and for the world. The *fruit* of

¹⁷ Evagrius of Pontus, *On Thoughts*, 39, in *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 180.

¹⁸ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Norman Russell, trans., *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 50.

prayer in the life of a person has always been understood as crucial to its meaning and its authenticity. Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century Spanish writer who developed an extraordinarily rich understanding of mystical prayer, remained insistent on this point throughout her work. In her masterpiece, *The Interior Castle*, she warns of the danger of conceiving of contemplative practice as detached from the work of moral transformation that should always (she believes) inform and issue forth from it: "It is necessary," she tells her sisters, "that your foundation consist of more than prayer and contemplation. If you do not strive for the virtues and practice them, you will always be dwarfs."²⁰ This is because, for Teresa, prayer is always relational, always oriented toward helping us apprehend and express our deepest capacity for love.²¹ "Let us desire and be occupied in prayer," she exhorts her sisters, "not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have [the] strength to serve." This includes the highest reaches of prayer, that sense of union with the divine that Teresa calls "spiritual marriage." In contrast to those who conceived of such prayer more passively, more quietistically, Teresa states bluntly: "This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works."²²

There is always the danger that prayer, understood in this way, will come to be understood simply as a utilitarian means to an end. But in its most mature and profound expressions, the practice of prayer has always been understood as a deeply integrated orientation toward God and others, a way of living that allows the latent qualities in the soul to come to full (and in a sense natural) expression. This is how Baron Von Hügel conceived of it in a letter he wrote to his niece in June, 1919: "I take it that God in his goodness has granted you the simple Prayer of Quiet—or, at least, that you get given touches, short dawns, of it, now and then. . . . Such formless prayer is the right sort if, in coming away from it, you find yourself humbler, sweeter, more patient, more ready to suffer, more loving (in effect even more than in affection) towards God and man."²³ This observation, disarming

²⁰ Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1979), 191.

²¹ See Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

²² Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 190, 192.

²³ *Letters from Baron Friedrich von Hügel to a Niece*, edited with an introduction by Gwendolen Green (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1928), 43–44.

in its simplicity, expresses an aspiration long cherished by Christians in relation to the practice of prayer—that the *gift* of God’s presence in prayer would, little by little, reshape one’s entire life, so that the power of God’s love might become more manifest in one’s life and in the world. But what sort of orientation or disposition was necessary for becoming more open and receptive to this gift? Among the many qualities or habits of mind believed to be crucial to this task, one of the most important was what came to be known in the early Christian tradition as *procoche*, or simple attention.

“Attention in search of prayer will find prayer, for if anything else follows attention it is prayer,” claims Evagrius.²⁴ More than fifteen hundred years later, French philosopher Simone Weil offers an even more compressed assessment of this conviction: “Prayer consists of attention.” The simplicity of this statement is deceptive. The practice of attention, for Weil as for so many writers on prayer in the Christian tradition, was understood to be an immensely demanding exercise. “It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God,” says Weil. “The quality of attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer.”²⁵ Still, the prospect of orienting oneself to God with such intensity of sustained attention was, Weil believed, something we can hardly bear to face. “Something in our soul has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue,” she says. But it has undeniable benefits, especially in helping us face and begin to heal those parts of ourselves where love has not yet come to abide. “Every time that we really concentrate our attention,” she says, “we destroy the evil in ourselves.”²⁶ In so doing, she suggests, we allow more room for the presence of God, for love, to suffuse our souls. Still, if the practice of attention has a profound inward orientation, it also leads inexorably outward, toward the other, toward a deeper engagement with the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our orientation toward those caught in intense suffering. Here Weil expresses the full, indeed miraculous, effect of learning to pay attention in prayer:

Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance;
the love of our neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is

²⁴ Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, 149, in *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 209.

²⁵ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1952), 57.

²⁶ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 61–62.

made of this same substance. Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in the world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough.²⁷

Weil herself struggled deeply to embody this kind of attention in her life, often at great cost; her refusal to eat anything more than her suffering compatriots in occupied France had available to them during World War II likely precipitated her early death. This was for her a way of paying attention to the plight of others, of accompanying them, entering into and sharing in their suffering: it was a way of practicing prayer.

“The Joy of Feeling Close to God”

This sense of prayer as a way of practicing vulnerability—before God and before others—has always been important in the Christian tradition. It is part of what it means to understand oneself as a member of a body, called to participate in, even sacrifice oneself on behalf of the body; it is part of what it means to practice accompaniment. Still, how does the very possibility of living this way arise in the soul? How does it eventually come to seem not only viable but necessary? There is no simple answer to such questions. But the very possibility of living with greater openness in relation to God and others often seems to arise in response to some actual experience of brokenness and vulnerability, and the realization that the isolating ideal of self-sufficiency can no longer be sustained.

The witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is helpful here. His letters from prison testify to a real struggle to confront and accept his own increasing sense of vulnerability and to find an honest expression of prayer that could enable him to stand fully and faithfully within that vulnerability, without fear and with compassion for others. But he did not arrive at such a place of honest, open, other-oriented prayer simply or easily. Writing from prison on November 18, 1943, he confesses: “I am praying now quite simply for my release.”²⁸ Here we encounter one of the most common and elemental expressions of

²⁷ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 64.

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1953), 45.

prayer: the longing for deliverance. Bonhoeffer returns to this theme often in his letters, noting the simple beauty of such expressions of prayer, but also questioning their sometimes narrow self-oriented scope. Still, in this moment, it seems to be the only way he can pray. A little more than ten days later, as the violence and threats to his own personal safety grow more acute, he writes again of his sense of prayer, this time with even greater urgency: "During these heavy air raids, and especially the last one, the windows were blown out by the land mine, and bottles and medical supplies from the shelves and cupboards fell to the ground. All this time I lay in complete darkness on the floor, with little hope of coming through it all safely. Now here's the point—it lead me back to prayer and to the Bible just like a child. . . . My confinement is acting like a wholesome and drastic cure."²⁹ Here, amid the desperation born of bomb blast, broken glass, and darkness, there appears what feels like the rebirth of prayer—without pretense or evasion. "Just like a child." What was prayer like for him before this? He does not say. But the implication is clear: he is being stripped clean of all posturing. His prayer is becoming more honest and simple. And in spite of the terrible fear that now haunts him, he welcomes what he calls this "wholesome and drastic cure."

One of the most striking things about this account is the unexpected juxtaposition of Bonhoeffer's sense of himself as an accomplished theologian and pastor on the one hand and his emerging sense of himself as a simple person of prayer (a "child") on the other. He does not elaborate upon this. But the sense of reversal that seems to be woven into this experience is real. And while it is clearly unsettling to him, it also seems to come as a relief. The question remains: what does this shift in his orientation toward the meaning of prayer yield? What meaning and value does it have for him as he continues to struggle with the fact of his imprisonment, and with the plight of others known to him (within and without the prison) who are also suffering and struggling to maintain hope?

He continues to struggle, personally and theologically, with what he calls "prayer in time of trouble." In a letter written toward the end of January 1944, he calls it "a difficult matter," but notes that "our misgivings about it can hardly be good." His reflection here centers upon the enduring power of Psalm 50 ("Call upon me in the time of trouble: so I will hear thee and thou shalt praise me"); he notes

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 49.

that “the history of the children of Israel is one long story of such cries for help. And I must say, the experience of the last two nights have reopened the problem for me in quite an elementary way. While the bombs are falling all around the building, I cannot help thinking of the divine judgement . . . and of my own unpreparedness.” But these very personal reflections on his own situation before God take an unexpected turn as he finds himself also considering the plight of those he loves. “I think of all of you and say, better me than one of them, and that reminds me how deeply I am attached to you all. . . . When all’s said and done, it is true that it needs trouble to drive us to prayer.”³⁰ If “it needs trouble to drive us to prayer,” perhaps it is also true that it needs trouble to drive us toward one another. This at least is Bonhoeffer’s experience in the midst of his own trouble. Vulnerability, acknowledged and embraced, yields not only a greater openness toward God; it also creates a deeper sense of solidarity with others, even a willingness to sacrifice oneself for others. The life of prayer unites these responses in a seamless web of thought and experience.

Such a view of prayer might suggest a practice governed by a spirit of grim determination, in which joy and hope, those characteristic hallmarks of Christian life, are largely absent. This is a question with which Bonhoeffer himself clearly wrestled. And in a letter written in August 1944, he makes an effort to address it. In typical fashion, he begins with a reflection on scripture, in particular 2 Corinthians 1:20 (“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him”).

The key to everything is the “in him.” All that we rightly expect from God and pray for is to be found in Jesus Christ. The God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with all that we, in our human way, think he can and ought to do. We must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings and death of Jesus in order to learn what God promises and what he fulfills. One thing is certain: we must always live close to the presence of God, for that is newness of life; and then nothing is impossible for all things are possible with God; no earthly power can touch us without his will, and danger can only drive us closer to him. We can claim nothing for ourselves, and yet we may pray for everything. Our joy is hidden in suffering, and our life in death. But all through we are sustained in a wondrous fellowship.³¹

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 66–67.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 130. For a thoughtful analysis of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of prayer, especially in relation to justice, see Geoffrey B.

If part of prayer can be said to involve striving to understand who we are and who we are becoming as we pray, this letter provides invaluable insight into this very process. Here we catch a glimpse of a person seeking to understand what it means to pray and to dwell in the presence of God under conditions so dark and threatening that such a hope might well seem impossible. In spite of these conditions, or perhaps because of them, he seeks that understanding anyway, inquiring into and struggling to deepen his grasp of the very character of faith sustained by prayer. There is a fundamental paradox here. Faith (rooted in and nourished by prayer) assures us that everything has been given to us by God in Christ. We know this. Yet, none of our usual categories of understanding can reveal to us what this really means. Only a continuous practice of “quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings and death of Jesus” can reveal to us “what God promises and what he fulfills.” Only this can give us the experiential awareness of the presence of God, which Bonhoeffer suggests, is “newness of life” itself. Nor, according to Bonhoeffer, can this newness of life ever be separated from an awareness of the “wondrous fellowship” of which we are a part or from the joy that sustains it.

Here, prayer is understood as binding us deeply to God while at the same time knitting our life and concerns more closely to the lives and concerns of others. In this way we participate in their lives, hold their concerns, their well-being close to our heart. There is no distance, no separation between us and God or between us and all those whose wondrous fellowship we share. There is a beautiful assurance here, a real hope, in spite of the presence of suffering and the threat of death: “No earthly power can touch us without [God’s] will, and danger can only drive us closer to him. We can claim nothing for ourselves, and yet we may pray for everything.” This assurance, this hope, is at the heart of the life of prayer. And it is sustained and nourished by the awareness that we are bound together, always accompanying one another along the way.

In the present moment, prayer as a form of accompaniment—an expression of the deepest truth of one’s life and of one’s commitment to stand with and for others—has become particularly important in the struggle for renewal and transformation within contemporary

Kelly, “Prayer and Action for Justice: Bonhoeffer’s Spirituality,” *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246–268.

liberation movements.³² A particularly powerful expression of this can be seen in the witness of those who have sacrificed their lives for the sake of others. In El Salvador, where the memory of the martyrs remains especially strong, prayer has come to be understood as bound to the practice of *solidaridad*—the commitment to enter into solidarity with all those struggling and suffering for life and peace. The witness of the Jesuits at the University of Central America, which has contributed so importantly to the Salvadoran church's self-understanding as a force for renewal, is itself deeply rooted in the practice of *solidaridad*. One can discern in their work and in their lives the influence of the Ignatian ideal of accompaniment—the commitment to walk with and for others—born of a strong contemplative awareness of how one's own life is always bound to the lives of others in God. This is an orientation toward life and prayer that has contributed significantly to the liberating vision of social transformation in the Church of El Salvador.

The sense of prayer as bound to this work of liberation is palpable on the day of the anniversary in San Salvador. Every external form—the *alfombras*, the songs that pierce the night air, the procession through the streets of San Salvador, the blood-stained garments of the martyrs hanging in the small museum nearby, the palm leaves on which images of those who have given their lives are held aloft, the reading of the scriptures, the sharing of communion—gives embodied expression to a deep interior reality, a sense of *solidaridad* whose bounds cannot be measured. The wounds are still fresh in the aftermath of a civil war that claimed over seventy-five thousand victims (all of whom are included among the host of martyrs remembered by the Salvadoran people), and the need for healing prayer that is manifested in the social reality of ordinary Salvadorans remains critical.

³² Claire E. Wolfteich, *Lord, Have Mercy: Praying for Justice with Conviction and Humility* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Janet K. Ruffing, RSM, ed., *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001). Also important to my own thinking about these questions is the work of anthropologist Michael Jackson, especially his essay, "Where Thought Belongs: An Anthropological Critique of the Project of Philosophy," in his book *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 253–269. Of particular importance in Jackson's work is his careful attention to the ethical-spiritual meaning of accompaniment, born of his work as an ethnographer and his awareness of the danger of assuming too intimate an understanding of one's subjects. Especially significant here is the distinction he makes between "identification" with the other and "accompaniment," a more humble, open, and less intrusive way of being and walking with another (268).

The ritual act of this particular gathering, then, must be understood as part of an ongoing quest for social, political, and spiritual renewal, part of the work of healing.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, whose image can be seen everywhere that day in San Salvador, and whose presence remains critical to this gathering, understood the importance of prayer in the work of renewal and healing. His own efforts on behalf of this work are well known. Less well known, perhaps, is the character of his own commitment to prayer and his sense of its meaning and significance in addressing the violent social-political struggle into which he found himself drawn. One catches glimpses of his own prayer practice and his sense of its meaning reflected in some of his later homilies. "We all have a church within ourselves, our own consciousness," he declared in a homily preached on July 23, 1978. "There God is, God's Spirit. . . . Blessed are those who enter often to speak alone with their God." The following month, referring to the example of Jesus at prayer, he noted: "He wanted to teach us . . . that we must lose ourselves in the beauty, the sublimity, of God. . . . How can a person spend a whole life without thinking of God, leave empty that capacity for the divine and never fill it?"³³

It is difficult to fathom, in light of the increasingly violent repression that was being inflicted on the Salvadoran people during this time, how Monseñor Romero could have summoned such images of the encounter with God in prayer out of his own experience. But he did, with the evident conviction that the cultivation of such awareness of God's presence at the heart of one's life was critical to the struggle for liberation and for personal survival. Nor was he himself distant from the challenge of this work. In the tragic days of May 1979, less than ten months before his own death, he exhorted his fellow Christians: "Always nourish in [your] hearts the fullness of joy. . . . I have tried it many times and in the darkest moments . . . when slander and persecution were strongest, tried to unite myself intimately with Christ, my friend, to feel more comfort that all the joys of the earth can give—the joy of feeling close to God, even when humans do not understand you. It is the deepest joy the heart can have."³⁴

³³ Quoted in James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 187.

³⁴ Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*, trans. James R. Brockman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), 133.

“The joy of feeling close to God.” It is difficult to imagine a better way of expressing the meaning of prayer in Christian life. That such joy can be present amid slander, persecution, and darkness, that it can help human beings learn to resist and overcome the forces arrayed against life and peace, is one of the miracles of prayer. Yet, this is precisely why Christians pray, why Christians give themselves body and soul to the beautiful struggle that is prayer: to feel themselves drawn into the great joy of God’s presence, to see their lives transformed by that joy, and to bear witness to the power of joy to heal a broken world.