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We Already Have All That We Seek: Prayer as Radical Simplicity

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The Remembrance of GOD

2019-1995

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We already Have All that We Seek:

PRAYER AS RADICAL SIMPLICITY

by Douglas Burton-Christie



DAVID KEHN

I CAN STILL REMEMBER the smell and texture of the large Sunday Missal as I turned it over in my hands. I was, I think, about ten years old. My older sister had brought me along with her after Sunday mass to the little room across the courtyard from the church where they sold religious articles—prayer cards, rosaries, and missals. I picked up the missal from the table and carefully turned its gold-edged pages. I remember feeling a longing to possess this book, even though I had almost no understanding of what it was or what one was supposed to do with it. The idea of a book of prayer intrigued me: Its multicolored ribbons promised to guide me through a secret maze of prayers and incantations. I would become initiated into what I perceived to be an elaborate and complex process: the quest for the holy. I imagined myself carrying this book around with me, reciting the words contained there, acquiring secret knowledge, becoming proficient at prayer, growing in piety.

But this was only an *idea*. I realize this now as I consider another book—outwardly similar, but otherwise different in every way. It is a copy of the *Book of Christian Prayer*, the psalms arranged for daily recitation, which belonged to Bob Burton, my wife's father. He died recently after a twenty-year struggle with multiple sclerosis; and his *Book of Christian Prayer* is everything my ideal missal was not. First, it is almost completely worn out: Its brown leather cover is deeply creased, the corners rounded and tattered. It would fall apart in one's hands except for the thick layers of scotch tape binding it together. This is not the ceremonial sacred book one so often finds in Catholic homes—to be seen but not touched. This book was *employed* steadily for the better part of twelve years, used up by Bob in the daily task of being present in prayer, of holding before God his own anxieties and struggles and the cares of all those Bob knew and loved.

There is something else about this book: In its bedraggled state, it symbolizes—and in so doing makes present—the concrete, radical simplicity of prayer as it came to expression in Bob's life. For him this book was not an elaborate cross-referencing system to the rarefied dimension of the holy. It was rather an instrument that helped him to focus his mind and heart on "the one thing necessary." It suggests not the ideal possibility of a life of prayer, which my Sunday Missal so admirably represented, but the *reality* of prayer. I hold *his* book and realize: "Here is a way to God. This man prayed deeply, every day, and became transformed in the process. It is possible to live a life of prayer."

Still, I am left wondering: Why do we pray this way, reciting words from a text, the same words, over and over, day after day? Does such a practice encourage passivity in prayer, an easy acceptance of what the text says? Or is this perhaps a form of prayer that requires particular courage? I am thinking of how much it must have cost him to recite psalms of praise and thanksgiving in the face of a painful, debilitating, and ultimately fatal illness. Further, how does transformation occur in such circumstances? In the ongoing dance between a text and one's life, how is it that a new vision of the world, of ever greater depth and texture, resonant with hope, continues to reveal itself?

As I watched Bob's life draw to a close, these questions began pressing themselves upon me with ever greater urgency. His tenacity in prayer proved not only an inspiration to me, but also an unnerving challenge: What do *I* know about prayer? How faithful am *I* in entering into that place of prayer where words and silence can perform their powerful work? How willing am *I* to face the unknown and intractable in my life? Will *I* ever know the freedom, the buoyant joy that ran so deeply through his life?

DISCIPLINE AND ABANDON

I CONFESS THAT I NEVER UNDERSTOOD, never *really* understood, what Bob meant when he spoke of his illness as a "gift from a loving father." I am not sure I entirely believed him either. Certainly I was filled with admiration, even amazement, at his sense of detachment—his willingness to give himself over to what the disease of multiple sclerosis had to teach him. But how could he speak this way about an affliction that had descended upon him in the middle of his life, that was slowly, surely eating away the protective myelin sheathing of his nerves, plunging him into acute pain, robbing him of his mobility, dulling his capacity for speech? What kind of a God was this? Bob was insistent: His illness was a gift. I don't mean to suggest that he did not have his own questions, that he did not struggle with this affliction. I know that it frustrated him at times, left him discouraged and questioning. But the note sounding deeply throughout his later years was trust. Gradually he was brought to a new place of honesty and intimacy with God.

His struggle with the illness had provoked him to experiment in prayer. In the early years, when the diagnosis was still not cer-

tain and the debilitating effects of the disease had not become so pronounced, he sought from God a healing. During summers spent in Boston doing research at Harvard University, he began to frequent the healing services of Fr. McDonough at St. Patrick's Church in Cambridge. Night after night he would attend the services with his family, praying, singing, asking for a healing. I came to know him during this time. He was convinced that such healings were real and believed that God could and very well might heal *him*. He longed to be made whole. And he placed himself completely in the hands of God. He never did experience a healing, at least not the kind of physical healing he had been hoping for. But I noticed that the absence of an "answer" to prayer did not dissuade Bob from believing ever more deeply in God's loving providence.

How willing am I to face the intractable in my life?

It was some time later that he came upon Jean Pierre de Causade's *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. This was the book for him. In typical fashion, he plunged in, immersing himself in Causade's brief but profound work. I can remember seeing stacks of the little blue volume piled on his desk: he had begun buying copies of the book, giving it away to his friends. It was as if he were saying: This is all you need, it's all here. Abandon yourself to God's loving care.

Bob's growing appreciation of this idea represented, I think, a fundamental shift in his understanding of his life, and of the meaning of prayer in his life. He had long admired the dictum of St. Ignatius of Loyola: Work as if everything depends upon you, and pray as if everything depends upon God. Sometimes in talking to Bob about this, I sensed that in the earlier part of his life he had really put most of his stock in the first half of that phrase: God was surely present, but as a kind of safety net if your own hard work fell through.¹ With his advancing illness, that idea became increasingly less tenable. Not only was he becoming more dependent upon others for physical and emotional support; it was

¹ It has been argued by Francis Smith, S.J. that the original phrase of St. Ignatius was very likely the *opposite* of that usually attributed to him: "Pray as if everything depends on you; act as if everything depends on God." Francis R. Smith, S.J., "The Religious Experience of Ignatius of Loyola and the Mission of Jesuit Higher Education Today," unpublished manuscript presented at the Fourth Institute on Jesuit Higher Education, the University of San Francisco, June 6-9, 1990, pp. 2-3. My thanks to Wilkie Au, S.J. for drawing this to my attention. I think Bob would have appreciated this early, simplified version of St. Ignatius's dictum.

also becoming increasingly apparent that the course of his illness and the shape of his entire life were beyond his control. Abandonment to divine providence became in this context a profoundly courageous response to what he had been given in his life. This expressed itself in two apparently dissimilar ways: strict discipline and reckless abandon.

*Abandon
yourself to
God's loving
care*

He was utterly disciplined in his prayer. Just as he had learned to regulate his diet and his schedule of rest, both crucial to his well-being, so he established a regular pattern of prayer. You could set your watch by him. At mid-morning and mid-afternoon, he would retire to his study, reciting the psalms for morning prayer or evening prayer. He never made a big production of this. He simply withdrew for a time from the activity of the household to be alone with God.

Then he would rejoin us, looking refreshed, having kept an important appointment.

Prayer never came to mean detachment from the people and things of his life, a piety of abandonment that masked an unwillingness to drink up what life offered. To the contrary, abandonment was for him akin to "reckless abandon." He came to embrace everyone and everything in his life with unstinting generosity. He was a notorious "gulper." He had a particular weakness for sweet things: Whether it was maple syrup on pancakes, a jar of homemade marmalade, or a thick wedge of chocolate cake, he had a way of making them "disappear" almost instantly. There he would sit perched in his chair with his Cheshire cat grin, as if to say: I would do it again in a moment. Why hold back? It was the same with his family and friends: He drank us in deeply and we became part of him. Even if we had not seen him for some time, he would amaze us by his asking about a friend or an issue at work that had been mentioned in passing some weeks or months before. He was tenacious in his memory of the things that mattered. He held our lives in his heart, he paid attention to the details, and he made them part of his own world of prayer. His illness had focused and intensified his gaze.

Did his intense prayer life have any concrete effects? This is often a question I have about my own prayer or that of others. Do our words or aspirations uttered before God ever come to anything? It is hard to know. In a letter we received recently from an old friend of Bob's I see vivid evidence that prayer *can* have a palpable effect on someone's life. She wrote:

Perhaps you know this, but he committed himself some years ago (I think in the late 1980s after my conversion) to praying for me on a daily or every-other-day basis. During the time he has been doing this, I was experiencing an intense "dark night of the spirit," as I think of it. I have been ill a great deal and have struggled a lot spiritually. Many, many times the fact that Bob was praying for me gave me a sense of comfort and enabled me to get through a difficult day or night. I drew a lot of strength from knowing that. He has also often been lovingly in my mind over these years, although I think I've been mostly on the receiving end. I feel keenly the loss of this spiritual relationship with him in the form it has taken. But I am very grateful for his faithfulness and spiritual companionship during this time in my life. I hope he received great pleasure from God in doing this for me.

A WORLD OF INFINITE DEPTH

AS I THINK OF ALL that Bob has taught me about prayer, especially about the intricate balance between discipline and abandon, I find myself reflecting with new understanding on the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers. I have spent a good deal of time in their presence these past few years, attempting to understand what it was that prompted them to seek God in the forbidding region of the desert and how they came to be transformed through their prayerful rumination on the word.² I now see that Bob stands in a long line of wilderness explorers whose lives have been reduced to a radical simplicity by the challenge of the unknown. Looking at them together sheds new light, for me, on the capacity of prayer to focus our attention on "the one thing necessary."

The desert elders had consciously looked to reduce the scope of their world, to sweep away all that was unnecessary and seek God in purity of heart. They retreated into the solitude and silence of the desert. They ruminated (literally chewed upon) the words of scripture, steadily, faithfully, with great intensity, so that they might gradually be made over in their image. It was not necessary to multiply words. True, there are stories relating prodigious feats of memorization by certain elders. But more often,

²Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

their attention was focused on a small group of psalms, or even a single word or phrase from scripture. Retreat and rumination: These are words for the discipline and abandon that characterized the monks' radically simple approach to prayer.

A story about Abba Pambo suggests the power inherent in giving oneself over to even a few words of scripture. Early in his monastic career, Pambo went to one of the elders to learn a psalm. Having heard the first half of the first verse of Psalm 39 ("I said, 'I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue'"), he departed without waiting to hear the second half of the verse. He said to himself, "This one will suffice, if I can practically acquire it." After more than six months, he finally returned to consult with the elder. He reproved Pambo for staying away so long, but the younger monk explained that he had been fully occupied with the (half) verse he had been given. Even now he "had not yet learned to practice the verse of the psalm." Many years later, when Pambo had become a revered elder in the desert, one of his companions asked him whether he had finally mastered this verse. He responded: "I have scarcely succeeded in accomplishing it during nineteen years."³ Understanding of scripture in the desert was always this practical. The only knowledge that counted was that which was acquired through hard experience. But knowledge of a single verse (or half verse)? How could the whole of scripture and the life of prayer be simplified so radically?

A passage from Cassian's *Conferences* helps to explain why this simplification was so highly valued. The desert elders spoke openly of the demonic. Often such language referred to the subtle forces at work in the psyche that threatened to unbalance a person. One of these was the power of dissipation. To fend off those forces that threaten the soul with dissipation, Abba Isaac advocates the continual repetition of a single verse from Psalm 70: "O God make speed to save me, O Lord make haste to help me." He says this verse, when repeated, becomes "an impregnable battlement, a shield and a coat of mail which no spear can pierce . . . It will be a saving formula in your heart, will guard you from the attacks of the demons."⁴ It is not just the inherent power

³Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV, 23, 23, in A. C. Zenos, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 107.

⁴Cassian, *Conferences* 10: 10, in Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), pp. 240-242. The psalm translation is from this volume.

of scripture that provides protection to the monk. It is also the *inner disposition* that one is to cultivate in repeating these texts. Isaac says, "A [person] who perseveres in *simplicity and innocence* . . . is protected, by his continual recollection of the Lord's passion and meditation upon this verse of the psalms. . . . This formula the mind should go on grasping until it can cast away the wealth and multiplicity of other thoughts, and restrict itself to the poverty of this single verse."⁵ The saving power of scripture thus lies in its capacity to unify the mind, heart, and soul, to help one overcome chronic dissipation and distraction and become focused on "the one thing necessary."

The desert elders were aware that to ruminate on a text in this way was to enter into a lifelong process of self-discovery. "There are times," Abba Isaac says, "when a [person] understands God's Scriptures with the clarity with which a surgeon understands the body when he opens up the marrow and veins. There are the times when our experience seems to show us the meaning by practical proof before we understand it intellectually." At such moments, we come to see the texts "reflected in the clear glass of our own moral experience."⁶ Eventually, a person's deep appropriation of scripture becomes an "interior possession." Abba Nestoros describes it this way:

If these things [from Scripture] have been carefully taken in and stored up in the recesses of the soul and stamped with the seal of silence, afterwards they will be brought forth from the jar of your heart with great fragrance; like some perennial fountain [they] will flow abundantly from the veins of experience and irrigating channels of virtue and will pour forth copious streams as if from some deep well in your heart.⁷

This is experiential knowledge, the kind that comes only from long struggle and intense focus.

This was the only kind of knowledge that counted in the desert. The desert monks developed a single, demanding crite-

⁵Cassian, *Conferences* 10: 11, in Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*, p. 243. Emphasis mine.

⁶Cassian, *Conferences* 10: 11, in Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*, pp. 243-244.

⁷Cassian, *Conferences* 14: 13, in Edgar C. S. Gibson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 442.

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tion for evaluating whether rumination on scripture had borne fruit: Could it be seen in a life? In their prayerful rumination, they manifested a passion for what George Steiner calls “execution.” “An interpreter,” Steiner says, “is, in essence, an executant, one who ‘acts out’ the material before him so as to give it intelligible life. Interpretation is to the largest possible degree, lived.”⁸ It is a striking feature of the desert literature that such acute attention is given not only to the words of the elders but to their gestures, their visages. We see this in a story told about three monks who used to visit Abba Antony every year. Two of them would discuss with him their thoughts and questions about the salvation of their souls. But the third always remained silent, never asking him anything. Finally, Antony asked him why he always accompanied the others but did not ask him anything. The monk replied: “It is enough for me to see you, Father.”⁹ The ultimate expression of desert spirituality was a *person*, one who embodied the sacred texts and who drew others out of themselves into a world of infinite depth.

A LIFELONG DANCE WITH THE WORD

AS I CONSIDER THE WITNESS of Bob Burton and of these desert elders, I find myself understanding this interpretive process with new depth, appreciating more than ever before the challenge and gift of radical simplicity. The challenge lies in learning to resist the flood of one ephemeral stimulus after another which, if left unchecked, can create in us an enervating and soul-destroying dissipation. The desert elders were determined to resist this. So was Bob. What they had in common was an appreciation of the power of simplicity—acquired through careful discipline and reckless abandon—to foster deep prayer, to facilitate a deep reading of scripture, to give shape to a life.

For the elders it meant attending to what the cell had to teach (“sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything”), ruminating over the course of a lifetime upon a verse of scripture, gradually being transformed, *reduced* to an essential, palpable expression of holiness. For Bob, it meant attending to what his

⁸George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 7.

⁹Antony 27 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. by Benedicta Ward, S.L.G. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p. 6.

illness had to teach him, plumbing the depths of his abiding conviction that this illness was indeed a “gift from a loving father.” It meant ruminating ceaselessly upon—and realizing within himself—the reality of God’s providential love. And it meant allowing himself to be transformed by his struggle into an exemplar, a saint, a person who was able to make present for the rest of us the loving, compassionate presence of God.

Thomas Merton, toward the end of his life, gave expression to this vision of radical simplicity in prayer. Speaking to the community of Cistercian nuns at Redwoods Monastery in California, Merton sought to dispel the notion that prayer is complicated, that it involves a long and mostly frustrating quest for an elusive, remote goal. With the model of technology, he said, you have horizontal progress, where you start at one point and move to another and then another. “But that is not the way to build a life of prayer. In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize you are already there. We already have everything, but we don’t know it and we don’t experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.”¹⁰

We already have everything. This is the astonishing truth that comes to light through radically simple prayer. The desert monks knew this. So, I am coming to realize, did Bob. His *Book of Christian Prayer*—bruised, ragged, *used up*—offers moving testimony to his willingness to place himself before God in loving trust. Bob himself was, by the end, weakened, frail, used up, reduced. There was for all of us who loved him a sense of great loss and sadness in this reduction: He was no longer what he once was and he was passing from our midst. But there was also power manifested in this reduction and grace. All that was unnecessary had been swept away. He had been reduced to a radical simplicity. He had been brought home to his own truest self. His luminous presence shines in our midst still, a testimony to the fruitfulness of his own lifelong dance with the word.

¹⁰Thomas Merton, cited by David Steindl-Rast in “Man of Prayer,” in *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p. 80.