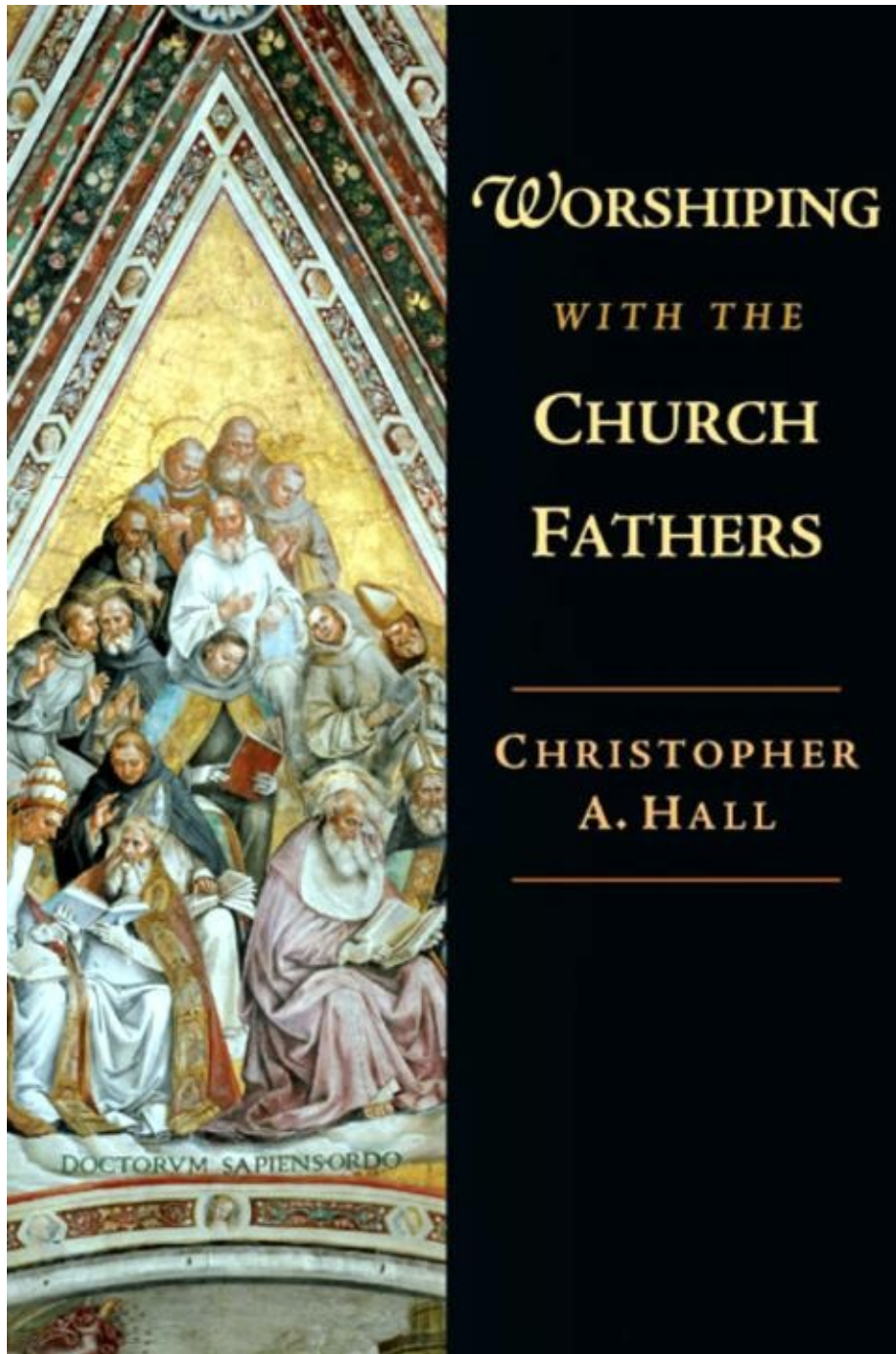




WORSHIPING
WITH THE
CHURCH
FATHERS

CHRISTOPHER
A. HALL



"Christopher Hall helps us to read the church fathers contextually and not anachronistically. At the same time he manages to incorporate his own life experiences of worship in ways that make the book deeply personal as all prayer life must be. The result is a rich treasure trove of the prayers of the church."

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"In the end Christopher Hall has not written a book about the early fathers' views on worship and prayer. Instead, with expertise and humility, he invites us to join an ongoing conversation with Christian siblings who centuries ago reflected on distractions in prayer, self-deception, passions and other concerns central to the Christian life. Chris has mined the ancient resources, uncovered the gems, and set them in a context that makes them highly accessible for consideration by Protestant evangelicals (of which he is one) and all others in the Christian family who want to deepen their understanding and practice of worship and prayer. You won't want to read this book hurriedly as if you were gulping down spiritual junk food. Feast on a richly laden table as you slowly savor each bit of insight and advice from those who have come before us,"

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clear, readable exposition of what the leading church fathers understood about baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer and spiritual disciplines. A special strength of this book is that Hall explains the biblical and theological reasoning used by the fathers as they developed their approaches. This book is essential reading for pastors, lay leaders and students who are looking for a reliable introduction to the spirituality of the early church:'

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LAUREN F. WINNER, assistant professor of Christian spirituality, Duke Divinity School, and author of *Girl Meets God*

WORSHIPING WITH THE CHURCH FATHERS

CHRISTOPHER A. HALL

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To John Boyer, Chip Olson and Jack Templeton, valued friends in the faith.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
ANF	The Ante-Nicene Fathers
NPNF1	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1
NPNF2	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2
PG	Patrologia graeca
PL	Patrologia latina
SC	Sources chrétiennes

INTRODUCTION

Over ten years have passed since I began work on the four-volume set *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, *Worshiping with the Church Fathers* and *Living Ethically with the Church Fathers*. Originally, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* was to stand alone as an introductory text on patristic hermeneutics designed to aid subscribers to the patristic commentary series, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, published by InterVarsity Press.

Once I had finished writing *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, though, it became clear to me that there were still vast areas of patristic thought and practice that I had not addressed, especially in three areas: theology, worship and ethics. *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* had a very specific goal: to introduce pastors and lay people unfamiliar with the ancient church to patristic biblical interpretation. I said little in this volume concerning the fathers' theological explorations and insights. Nor did I address the fathers' rich prayer life and deep perspectives and practices regarding worship itself. And so in the second volume in this series, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, I presented the fathers' thoughts on key theological foci: the Trinity, Christ, the church, providence, resurrection and so on.

In this present volume-what I had thought would be the last volume in the series-I turn my attention to a third great patristic interest and emphasis, prayer and worship. I had originally thought to title this book *Praying with the Church Fathers*. The more I and the editors at InterVarsity Press reflected on the title, the more we became convinced that my original thoughts on the book's title were too constrictive. Yes, the fathers prayed deeply and continually and have left us a number of key treatises on prayer, some of which we will examine carefully in the initial chapters of this book. Yet Origen-in this case representing the fathers

well-teaches that all life offered to God is prayer and worship.

If so, ethics is an integral aspect of worship. When wealthy Christians perceive their material prosperity as a gift given to them to be used on behalf of the poor, this offering is prayer and worship. When an early Christian refused to sacrifice to the emperor and suffered martyrdom as a result, a genuine act of worship occurred. Since all of life can be offered as worship, it shouldn't surprise us that the fathers' reflection on ethical issues such as abortion, marriage and the family, and military service flows from their daily, habitual grounding in prayer and worship. For the fathers, ethics and worship are an integrated whole. Anthony Bloom, representing well an Orthodox perspective rooted in the teaching of the church fathers, speaks of the importance of a life "turned in the same direction as your prayer.... A prayer makes sense only if it is lived. Unless they are 'lived,' unless life and prayer become completely interwoven, prayers become a sort of polite madrigal which you offer to God at moments when you are giving time to Him."

The sacraments themselves are the backbone of worship; here I am especially thinking of the great initiatory rite of the church-baptism-and the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper. In both the church offers rich worship to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so prayer, worship, ethics and the sacraments form an integrated whole, one that I thought could be well represented in one volume. Yet as I researched and wrote, I increasingly realized that the attempt to include all these aspects of the church's rich spiritual heritage in one book would place too great a burden on the reader (and writer!). And so the need for a fourth volume became clear, one in which the ethical perspectives of the fathers could be treated clearly and thoroughly.

In this third volume, then, we will focus specifically on baptism, the Eucharist, prayer and the spirituality of the desert fathers. The church fathers thoughts and practice on a wide variety of ethical issues-war, abortion and

family life come to mind-will follow in the fourth volume.

The years I have spent under the tutelage of the church fathers have been for me a time of intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth. My evangelical roots, first planted during the Jesus Movement of the late sixties and early seventies, have been nourished by the fathers' perspectives. The Jesus Movement, for instance, had no ecclesiology. In many ways, Jesus freaks like me, though we loved Jesus himself, were highly suspicious of the church and authority in general, whether institutional or individual.

I have learned from the fathers that the church is much broader and deeper than I had ever imagined. My individualistic, evangelical bent has been tempered by a historical, theological and spiritual lengthening of memory. My listening skills have been enhanced. Voices that once seemed strange, foreign and occasionally distorted-sometimes because of the historical, cultural, ecclesial and linguistic distances separating them from me-are now old friends. This is not to say that I always find myself in agreement with the fathers. We still have our disagreements, but our quarrels now resemble family squabbles and in-house arguments.

I invite you too into an active, lively engagement with the church fathers, and in this particular volume, with their understanding of worship. For some evangelicals-perhaps many-the fathers' beliefs and practices concerning prayer, baptism and the Eucharist will be foreign and even jarring. The church fathers view life sacramentally, while many evangelicals have found and worshiped Christ in a nonsacramental tradition. Hence, the idea that God uses tangible, earthy means such as wine, bread and water to communicate blessing and nourish fellowship will strike some readers as farfetched, implausible, superstitious and a misreading of Scripture that has warped the church's tradition.

In this book I have tried to present the fathers' perspectives and practices on

worship faithfully, clearly and accessibly. And, much more than in the first two books of this series, I have shared my own life experiences with the reader, not to focus attention on myself but to show how a patristic world view can offer twenty-first-century Christians insight and guidance as we continue in the unexpected, mysterious period between Christ's first and second comings.

I have attempted to present as clearly as possible the fathers' understanding of what worship is and what it isn't. I have tried to allow them to speak for themselves, to present their case and then to encourage readers to make their own decisions as to the validity of particular patristic viewpoints.

Reading ancient texts is tricky business. Readers should keep in mind specific obstacles that may hinder our effective and discerning entrance into the world of the fathers. First, of course, we have the historical, cultural, linguistic, ecclesial and theological perspectives the fathers bring to their understanding and practice of worship. We live in a vastly different world from that of the fathers and must do everything possible to enter theirs openly and fairly; an awareness and acknowledgement of our own cultural, ecclesial and theological background and presuppositions can be quite helpful at this juncture.

Who, for instance, has taught us about God? Who have been the significant voices that have shaped our understanding of Scripture and, more particularly, worship? How have we learned to pray? What do we do, how do we speak, when we pray? What are the practices we engage in as we worship? How do we use our minds? Our bodies? Why do we believe that our own specific set of perspectives and practices reflects the teaching of Christ and the apostles?

Further, are there either personal or perceptual obstacles that may prevent us from listening to the fathers well? M. Robert Mulholland Jr. refers to a number of personal obstacles that can block an effective reading and appropriation of biblical truth. I believe these obstacles can also hinder our entrance into the world of the fathers: these roadblocks include specific areas of resistance to God,

damaged emotions, "unholy habits of thought and action," specific and "deep-seated rebellions against God," inner darkness and "the false structures of the ego-self."²

Both the Bible and the writings of the fathers are loving, astringent texts; these texts lovingly teach us, encourage us, rebuke us and cleanse us. "Cleansing love can be astringent to our precious uncleanness. Liberating love can be painful to our familiar brokenness. Transforming love can be deadly to the whole false structure of the ego-self," as Mulholland puts it. Ancient Christian texts, because they often approach the human dilemma from a Christian perspective different from our own modern and postmodern views, possess a power to crack us open like nuts. They pop us open "at those points of our being where we tend to be closed, where we protect the false ego from the death which is inevitable if we are to become whole persons in the image of Christ."³ It is highly probable that we will be most likely to react against the fathers at those very places where they are infiltrating the cracks in our personalities.

Personal obstacles are often linked to perceptual obstacles, roadblocks Mulholland describes as

deeply ingrained, usually unconscious patterns and structures of interaction with the world which hinder our encounter with God in reading scripture [or the church fathers]. Our culture has nurtured us in a way of knowing which militates against an openness to God in reading scripture. We have come to perceive the world as an object out there to be grasped, controlled, and manipulated for our own purposes. When we read, the text tends to become an object for us to grasp with our mind, bring under the cognitive and affective control of our intellect and emotions, and then use to enhance our structuring of events, situations, people, and even ourselves to suit our own agenda .⁴

It is our agenda that the Bible and the church fathers will often challenge directly.

I must mention two other obstacles that may block or hinder our entrance into the fathers' teaching and modeling concerning worship: aesthetic resistance to a text and negative listening.' For example, we may dislike allegory and view with suspicion and distrust an allegorical approach to the biblical text. As a result of our suspicion and distrust, we "lose sight of the truth being conveyed.... We may remain spectators, not really involved spiritually and personally in the text and its meaning to us. We remain connoisseurs with no real personal involvement."⁶

Beware of negative listening-ignoring all that is said positively in a text and drawing our attention to what is not said and what we think should be said.' The combination of aesthetic resistance and negative listening is a lethal one; either or both undercut our ability to enter empathetically into another's world. Rather than listening attentively and openly to a text, we distance ourselves from a text and create a critical buffer between ourselves and the message the text offers. It is likely, then, that it is at those very points in this book where readers find themselves vigorously disagreeing with the fathers that readers need to listen most carefully. This is not to say we shouldn't disagree with a theological position that makes little sense to us. It is to say, though, that we must first have listened carefully to the text, entering willingly into its rhyme and reason, before we have the right to disagree.

Now to the specifics of Worshiping with the Church Fathers: a roadmap of sorts may be helpful to readers as they make their way through the text. In chapter one I explain in some detail what a sacrament is and then discuss baptism, the great initiatory sacrament for the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican wings of the church. Chapter two focuses on a second great sacrament, the Eucharist.

The heart of the book-chapters three through six-centers on prayer itself. In

these chapters I discuss a number of key themes and questions that appear in patristic discussions of prayer:

- . the nature of prayer
- . the problem of self-deception
- . praying the Psalms
- . the problem of distractions in prayer
- . the foundations of prayer
- . the problem the passions pose for prayer
- . four key elements of prayer: supplication, intercession, thanksgiving and confession
- . fiery prayer
- . imageless, wordless prayer
- . the problem of unanswered prayer
- . unceasing or continuous prayer
- . common roadblocks to prayer
- . fixed times for prayer
- . the Lord's Prayer

Worshiping with the Church Fathers finishes with two chapters on the spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers. Here we take a close look at Athanasius's biography of Antony and also at the wise, enigmatic sayings that emerged from the desert monastic communities. I realize that few, if any, readers of this book are monks. Yet I am convinced that aspects of the wisdom of the

desert are applicable-even healing-for busy Christians living in the twenty-first century.

My prayer for this book, as for others in this series, is that pastors, priests and lay people may be nourished as they become familiar with brothers and sisters in Christ who for too long have been distant family members at best.

Christopher Hall

Eastern University

January 20

PART ONE

SACRAMENTS



Great is the baptism that lies before you: the ransom of captives, the forgiveness of sins, the death of sin, the regeneration of the soul, the garment of light, the holy perpetual seal, a chariot to heaven, the delight of paradise, a welcome into the kingdom, the gift of adoption.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM PROCATACHESIS 16

It is the Holy Spirit who effects with water the second birth, as a certain seed of divine generation. It is a consecration of a heavenly birth and the pledge of a promised inheritance.

NOVATIAN TREATISE CONCERNING THE TRINITY¹

Faith and baptism are two kindred and inseparable ways of salvation: faith is perfected by baptism; baptism is established by faith, and both are completed by the use of the same names. As we believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so we are baptized into the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Confession leads the way and brings us to salvation; baptism follows, setting the seal on our assent.

BASIL OF CAESAREA ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

O N E

BAPTISM

Entering the Worshiping Community

The Sacramental Mysteries

Some readers, particularly those from an evangelical background and perspective, may find themselves surprised, bewildered and perhaps troubled to discover that the church fathers thought, lived and worshiped sacramentally. That is to say, the fathers believed that God delights to use tangible, concrete, earthy means-matter itself-to communicate his grace, redemption and presence to us, elements as simple and specific as bread, wine, water and oil. Sometimes this perspective is known today as sacramental realism.

The word sacrament (Lat. sacramentum) was borrowed by Latin Christian writers such as Augustine from its common use in the Western Latin world; in a Roman context sacramentum was the term employed for the oath sworn by a candidate entering the military service. Because entrance into Roman military service included religious rituals and sacrifices, sacramentum possessed religious connotations, non-Christian though they were.²

With the passage of time Latin fathers began to use sacramentum in a specifically Christian sense and related its meaning to the Greek word mysterion³ Sacramentum never lost its pagan Roman overtones, however, in terms of obligations taken under oath. To enter the church in baptism was to accept certain clear and distinct obligations and to profess a commonly held faith.' As we will see, baptism was serious business-both joyful and solemn.

Why would the church fathers embrace a sacramental worldview, a way of viewing the world that seems strange and counterintuitive, at least from an Old Testament perspective? Are we not a step away-if not closer-to the heinous sin of idolatry? Isn't the attempt to merge the divine with the material idolatry's foundation stone? One can imagine an Israelite carpenter fashioning an image out of wood or stone and quickly encountering the wrath and sarcasm of Isaiah. "To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple" (Is 40:18-20). To unite or combine the realm of the Spirit with the realm of the material, then, appears deeply troubling-both foolish and dangerous-from a biblical perspective.

So again we have to ask the question, why would the church fathers clearly and openly affirm that God has chosen to draw near to us through the medium of his own creation? There is only one safe, solid, coherent answer: Jesus Christ. In the incarnation of the eternal Word we discern the rhyme and reason of the sacraments. In the wondrous, mysterious, divinehuman person nestled in the Virgin Mary's womb, we encounter the sacramental principle. The eternal Word, the Son of God, has humbly joined his nature to the human nature trustfully and lovingly offered to him by Mary. In Christ the divine and human, the immaterial and the material, the Spirit and the flesh, are married. Who would have thought that such a wonder was possible?

The incarnation, then, is the bedrock upon which all sacraments are built. The sacramental principle-God wills, indeed, delights in using tangible, earthy means to draw near to his image bearers-is grounded on the Word made flesh. John of Damascus captures this principle well:

I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became

matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked.... I reverence the rest of matter and hold in respect that through which my salvation came, because it is filled with divine energy and grace. Is not the thrice-precious and thrice-blessed wood of the cross matter? Is not the holy and august mountain, the place of the skull, matter? Is not the life-giving and life-bearing rock, the holy tomb, the source of the resurrection, matter? Is not the ink and the all-holy book of the Gospels matter? Is not the gold and silver matter, out of which crosses and tablets and bowls are fashioned? And, before all these things, is not the body and blood of our Lord matter?"

Those grounded in the tradition of the fathers believe that to reject a sacramental worldview is to cut oneself off from the very means God has ordained for human growth and flourishing. Theophan the Recluse, a nineteenth-century Russian Christian and spiritual father of the Orthodox Church, puts it this way: to "reject" the "natural means" of the sacraments is similar to "someone who wants to cross a river by means of some spiritual power, while boats and bridges are at his disposal. Such a person will wait in vain for the power of the Spirit. And while others cross to the other side, he will be left on the riverbank, alone." A sacrament, Theophan comments, "is like a framework that supports one's inner attitude and ensures its stability."⁶

Both Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa emphasize that the sacraments are indissolubly linked to "the historical economy of salvation in the events of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ." For instance, when the fathers contemplate the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper), they interpret them through the lens of the biblical narrative from beginning to end. If God has chosen to use water in baptism to signify redemption and re-creation in Christ, it should not surprise us to find the fathers mining the Old Testament references to water for deeper redemptive,

christological meaning.

The apostle Paul himself provides the pattern for this Christ-centered reading of Scripture. Paul teaches that key events in the exodus experience of Israel were themselves a kind of baptism. The food (manna) and water providentially provided for Israel in the wilderness came from Christ's presence with them. "They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:2-4).

Key figures, events and practices in the covenantal history of Israel prefigured the fulfillment of God's purposes in Christ. The type (Gk. *typos*) of the Red Sea, for instance, finds its eschatological and sacramental fulfillment in the waters of baptism as the age to come invades this present evil age. Peter links the protection of Noah and his family within the ark to the protection baptism offers. "In [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also-not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God" (1 Pet 3:20-21).

Augustine provides a well-known definition of a sacrament: a sacrament is "a visible form of an invisible grace."⁸ Irenaeus speaks of the sacraments as "the mysterious operations of God." Chrysostom refers to them as "spiritual realities under sensory signs," grace-filled wonders that "bring to pass what they signify ... and make visible." They are "the invisible in the visible."⁹

The sacraments of the church are not magical rites, divorced from the faith of the person receiving them. "They are like fire: if the wood is damp that is, if the soul is passion ridden, the inner warmth does not make itself felt immediately after receptions of the sacrament."" The sacraments' pattern and efficacy are based on faith-faith in God's actions in history on our behalf, that God in Jesus Christ is presently reigning in the midst of this present evil age. The fathers ponder God's actions in history as related in the narrative of the Bible and build

their sacramental worldview on this biblical basis. Thus the sacraments are both biblical and eschatological in nature. God has invaded this present evil age in Christ, and the sacraments communicate that reality to believers. Hence, a sacrament is a lively, living remembering of the holy Trinity's loving actions for human beings, "the bringing of the past into the present before God's (and not primarily men's) eyes, so that He may remember, act, and make his people walk forward from the covenant towards the end of the ages." Indeed, the fathers' linking of sacramentum with Paul's use of mysterion indicates their clear awareness that "the plan of salvation eternally hidden in God," the Lord's divine secret, has now been "revealed in and by Christ. 1112 This is the mystery now revealed in the "economy."

Latin writers such as Ambrose connect sacramentum and mysterion in phrases such as sacraments mysteriorum and mysteria sacramentum. In these phrases the sacramentum designates what we can see, for instance bread and wine, while the mysterion is the interior aspect of the sacrament, the spiritual reality the sacrament is conveying and communicating. "The sacraments introduce us to the mysteria and, in turn, the mysteria make us understand the outer sign, the sacraments." One reality functions as "a sign of another," an "efficacious sign" which wondrously, mysteriously, sacramentally communicates what it signifies.¹³ There is "a force in the sacrament," a power communicated by the Holy Spirit, so that the sacrament actually "produces the signified effect."¹⁴

Two KEY SACRAMENTS. BAPTISM AND THE EUCHARIST

In the first two chapters of this book, I want to focus on the fathers' fruitful reflection and teaching on two key sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist. The fathers view baptism as the door through which one enters the church and receives the life of salvation. It is the great initiatory rite of the church. In turn, it is the Eucharist that early Christians viewed as "a key component in the continued development of the believer and a central element in Christian worship."⁵ Boris Bobrinsky comments on the "bipolarity of baptism and the

Eucharist.... This bipolarity ... signifies in particular that every baptism tends toward the Eucharist as to its fullness, and that every Eucharist finds its source in baptism, as in the entrance door of the world to the Church."⁶

Both baptism and the Eucharist are concrete, grace-filled, earthy means God employs to communicate central themes of the gospel narrative and the overarching biblical story to the mind and body of a Christian. Henry Chadwick speaks of Christians gathering together on the pattern of the Jewish synagogue, but to celebrate a new covenant in continuity with the old. In "water, bread, and wine" the church possessed "covenant signs ... means of divine grace and ... ordered rites which provide both form and vitality to the disorder of human life." In early Christian worship, believers communed with God through "a pattern of symbolic words and actions through which the presence of the Lord" was "expressed."⁸

We should not overlook the ethical dimension of church's sacramental life. To be baptized and to share in the Eucharist entailed a definite "yes" to Christ and "no" to sin. In a word, the renunciations involved in baptism, "dramatically reinforced by exorcism, affected people's jobs."¹⁹ For the baptized, certain activities and vocations were off limits.

A married man who also had a concubine or mistress or slept with his slave-girls had to change his ways. A priest serving idols could not so continue. (It is instructive that there were applications from people employed in this way.) Actors and actresses, who in antiquity were mostly slaves, or professional gladiators had to find different work, raising inevitable questions about trying to finance emancipation, perhaps with help from the church chest. In general the public entertainments industry was looked on with aversion. Considerable qualms attached to those whose duty, as soldiers or as prison gaolers, involved them in taking human life, and the same held good for provincial governors, whose duties constantly required

attendance at idolatrous ceremonies, not to mention ordering torture and execution of criminals. Sufficient evidence of the bribery of judges survives to make it certain that this was a widespread problem, and especially offensive when used to bring about a death sentence. (Capital punishment was not approved by Christians.) The list of those before whom the Church erected barriers is not only a sign of the Christians' determination to be a society of purged saints rather than a school for sinners continuing in unacceptable positions but also a testimony to the wide cross-section of society attracted by the gospel.²¹

A closer look at an ancient Christian worship service may well prove helpful as we explore the fathers' thoughts on baptism and the Eucharist.

EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP SERVICES

Baptism always occurred in the context of the church's worship. Justin Martyr, a second-century Christian apologist, describes in some detail the worship service that followed the initiatory rite of baptism. Justin writes:

We all assemble on the day of the sun [Sunday] because that is the first day, the day on which God drew matter out of darkness and created the world. It is also the day on which Christ our Savior rose from the dead.... We pray in common, for ourselves and for everyone ... to attain to the knowledge of truth and grace ... to keep the commandments ... When the prayers are over we give one another the kiss of peace. Next, bread and a cup of wine mixed with water are brought to the president of the assembly of the brothers. He takes them, praises and glorifies the Father of the universe in the name of the Son and Holy Spirit, then he utters a long eucharistic prayer as a thanksgiving for having been judged worthy of these blessings. When he has finished the intercessions and the eucharistic prayer all the people exclaim Amen. Amen is the Hebrew word meaning "so be it." When the president has finished the thanksgiving and all the people have responded,

the ministers whom we call deacons distribute the consecrated bread and wine to all who are present and they take some to those who are absent 21

Justin points out a number of interesting aspects of early Christian worship, information we can supplement from other early Christian writers such as Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria.

Worship occurred on the first day of the week, the "Sun's Day" from a Roman perspective. The early Christian community felt free to utilize the Roman calendar, substituting Christian meanings for pagan ones. Yes, the Romans may consider the first day of the week to be the Sun's Day, but for Christians this was the day of Christ's resurrection, when the light of the world broke forth from the tomb.

Either the writings of the apostles or the prophets were read to the gathered community. Here we have an indication that by the middle of the second century A.D. early Christians acknowledged and understood that texts from the hands of the apostles were authoritative for the church and should be read in the context of worship. Justin also mentions "the prophets," evidence of the high regard in which the early Christians held the Hebrew Scriptures.

The "president" of the assembly would comment in an exhortatory style on the passages read, delivering a sermon that was practical in nature, biblically based and designed to elicit concrete change in the lives of those listening. Tertullian supplements the information Justin provides, referring to "elders" who presided over the church and who received their position because of their proven character. He also mentions the reading of "sacred texts" in worship and sermons that contained instruction, exhortation and "divine censures."²²

Clement of Alexandria characterizes the early Christian teacher as "not enslaved with fear but ... true in word, patient in labor, unwilling to lie in spoken word; thus he always accomplishes what is without sin, since a lie inasmuch as it

is spoken with a certain deceit-is not an empty word but works evil. 112' Truth in word and life were the fundamental prerequisite for those who would teach the gathered community.

Desert monastic teaching reinforces Clement's point. Amma Syncletica warns, "It is dangerous for one to teach who has not been trained in the practical life. It is like someone who has an unsound house and receives guests; he will cause harm by the collapse of the dwelling. In the same way, those who have not first built themselves up destroy those who come to them. For they may summon them to salvation by their words, but by their evil conduct they injure even more those who follow them."²⁴

Group prayer followed the president's exhortation. It is difficult to know with certainty the exact nature of this group prayer. Was it spontaneous, similar to the relatively unstructured prayer often offered, for instance, in evangelical circles? Or was communal prayer more liturgical in nature? Tertullian lists a number of specific emphases in the church's prayers: prayer for government officials such as the emperor; prayer for the divine preservation and maintenance of civil order; and prayer for the delay of God's judgment on the world ²⁵

In all likelihood, the singing of hymns accompanied the prayers of the church. In his First Apology Justin comments that "We praise [the Maker of the universe] as much as we are able by the word of prayer and thanksgiving for all the things with which we are supplied ... being thankful in word, [we] send up to him honors and hymns for our creation, all the means of health, the various qualities of the different classes of things, the changes of the seasons, while making petitions for our coming into existence again in incorruption by reason of faith in him."²⁶

Ancient Christian worship displays a charismatic side. Tertullian specifically mentions a "sister in the congregation" who possessed "gifts of revelation." She would experience these revelations "by ecstasy in the Spirit during the regular

services of the Lord's day in the church." Visions could also occur at almost any other time in the service.²⁷

The Eucharist was celebrated on a weekly basis, with the serving of both bread and a mixture of wine and water. The church's understanding of the Eucharist was "realistic" in the sense that Christians believed the wine and bread-once consecrated-were Christ's body and blood, though the "how" of this mystery for the most part was left alone. In other places in his writings Justin describes the Eucharist as both a sacrifice and as a memorial of Christ's body and blood.²⁸

The consecrated Eucharist was taken to believers unable to attend the weekly assembly, demonstrating the importance of the Eucharist to early Christians. This practice continues today in the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The early church was extremely concerned that money be handled wisely and honestly. An offering was collected weekly, with "those who have means" freely choosing the amount they would give, though all members were expected to give to the best of their ability. Justin Martyr comments: "For no one is compelled, but he contributes voluntarily."²⁹ This money was then distributed to orphans, widows, the sick, prisoners, foreigners and anyone else in need of assistance.

Nicholas Wolterstorff comments on the "nicely balanced bifocal service" of the early church between the preached word and the sacraments, a balance he feels Protestants have had a hard time maintaining. In Reformed and evangelical circles it is the weekly preaching of the Word that is prominent, with the Eucharist or Lord's Supper more often celebrated on a monthly or quarterly basis. "The Reformed service became a preaching service-except for those four times a year when it was a Lord's Supper service. Whereas the medievals tilted Justin's [Martyr's] nicely balanced bifocal service way over toward the Eucharist, the Reformed now tilt it almost all the way toward the sermon."³⁰

THE WATER OF BAPTISM

Apart from early Gnostics, ancient Christians affirmed and celebrated the marvelous ability of matter to bear and communicate spiritual life. Clement of Alexandria observes how easily milk can be blended with water. Similarly, the milk of the Word blends naturally with the water used in baptism. They have a natural affinity for one another that God has ordained and delights in ³¹

Early Christian teachers acknowledge that a sacramental understanding of baptism may initially be strange and improbable for some. The act of baptism appears too simple and obvious to convey such mysterious import. Its very simplicity, Tertullian believed, was a stumbling block for the human mind. Divine works should be grand, complex and mysterious. Or so it would seem. "How foolish and impossible it is to be formed anew by water!" Tertullian exclaims. How could this "material substance" merit "a position of such high dignity?"³² Yet in the simplicity of baptism a grand effect is promised and produced by the Spirit of God, though to the naked eye all that appears to occur in baptism is a simple dipping in water "amid the utterance of some few words."

Tertullian sees in baptism a perfect example of what Paul means when he speaks of God confounding the wisdom of the world with divine foolishness (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27). "For if God is wise and powerful"-self-evident truths for Tertullian-"it is with good reason that He lays the material causes of His own operation in the contraries of wisdom and of power, that is, in foolishness and impossibility."³³ Though it seems impossible for God to use something as humble and common as water in his saving acts, this is exactly what God has done and continues to do. God loves to use matter in remarkable, unexpected ways. As we have seen, the incarnation provides the fundamental paradigm for the sacramental principle.

Ambrose, writing in the fourth century A.D., helpfully explains and develops the sacramental principle illustrated in baptism. "What did you see?" Ambrose

asks those who have experienced baptism. "Water, to be sure, but not only that." In baptism, the invisible Spirit communicates and empowers by means of the visible, divinity manifesting its presence and action through matter and in turn through matter leading the believer to adore invisible realities. Ambrose turns to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4 and Romans 1 to illustrate the sacramental principle at work in baptism. "The first thing that the Apostle taught you was that we must not contemplate `what is visible but what is invisible, since what is visible is temporal, whereas what is invisible is eternal' (2 Cor. 4:18). And elsewhere you read that, `since the creation of the world, the invisible things of God are understood by way of the things that have been made. His eternal power and also his divinity (Rom 1:20) are known through his works." Jesus himself taught that "If you do not believe me, at least believe my works" (see Jn 10:38)

34

Thus, on the basis of the sacramental principle, Ambrose beckons the newly baptized to believe in the efficacy of what they cannot see. Though they have seen what appeared to be water, Ambrose calls believers to trust "that the Deity is present there. Do you believe in his working but not in his presence? Where would his working come from were it not preceded beforehand by his presence?"

As we explore the church fathers' thoughts and practices concerning baptism, it should not surprise us if they find multiple meanings in baptism and numerous references to baptism in both the Old and New Testaments. It bears repeating that the fathers read the entire biblical narrative in light of its fulfillment in Christ and found predictions and types of Christ's person, work and sacraments throughout Scripture.

Think, for instance, of the water used in baptism 36 We have our first references to water in the book of Genesis within the context of creation, judgment and redemption. Tertullian delights in mining these texts for

information and illumination regarding baptism. In Genesis 1 water is present on the earth's "unshaped" surface, before God furnished the earth with its unique characteristics. Water is "ancient," older than almost every other aspect of the earth as created by God 37

Water is not only ancient but honorable. It possesses a unique "dignity," for it was on water that the Spirit rested (Gen 1:2), a biblical clue that water was "more pleasing" to the Spirit "than all the other then existing elements." It "alone ... supplied a worthy vehicle to God.""

Water supplies life. It is to the "waters" that God gives the command "to bring forth ... living creatures" (see Gen 1:20 NRSV). Should it surprise us that writers such as Tertullian view the waters of baptism, then, as lifegiving? The pattern fits. Creation through water-re-creation in baptism through water. The links in Tertullian's hermeneutical chain are unmistakably coupled to the sacramental principle. Material substance, in this case water, the very substance that "governs terrestrial life," also acts as a creative agent "in the celestial. 1131

Tertullian is amazed at how often water is mentioned in the scriptural narratives as a sign of the judgment of sin, cleansing from sin and deliverance from its power. At Christ's baptism the Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. This dove draws Tertullian's mind to the time of Noah and the judgment of the flood (Gen 8:8-12; cf. 1 Pet 3:20-21). The flood's waters in the days of Noah "purged" the earth of sin-a baptism of sorts in Tertullian's thinking. So the return of a dove to the ark "announced to the world the assuagement of divine wrath, when she had been sent out of the ark and returned with the olive branch." In like manner, according to what Tertullian calls the "law of heavenly effect," the dove of the Holy Spirit descends to the earth of human flesh as the believer rises from the baptismal font, "bringing us the peace of God, sent out from the heavens," the celestial home of the church, typified by Noah's ark itself.40

Other fathers saw Israel's crossing of the Jordan under the leadership of

Joshua as a type of baptism; just as Israel spent many years in the wilderness traveling toward the land promised to Abraham, so it was not uncommon for catechumens (those being instructed for baptism) to receive up to three years of instruction before their baptism. The crossing of the Jordan pointed to the true "completion of the catechumenate by the mystery of baptism."

Other redemptive deliverances through water come to Tertullian's mind as he ruminates on Scripture. At the waters of the Red Sea, Israel is delivered from Pharaoh. Similarly, the waters of baptism defeat the world and the devil 42 By the power of God, Moses' wooden staff, a "tree" of sorts, removed the bitterness from the waters of Marah and restored them to their "native grace of `sweetness'" (see Ex 15:24-25). Likewise, Christ's tree-the cross-has healed "the veins of envenomed and bitter nature into the allsaving waters of baptism. This is the water that flowed continuously down for the people from the `accompanying rock,'" identified by Paul as Christ (1 Cor 10:4) 43

Tertullian is especially struck by how often water is connected with key events from Christ's own life. Christ is baptized in water by John (Mt 3:13-17), changes water into wine at a wedding at Cana of Galilee (Jn 2:1-11), invites all who are thirsty to drink of the living water he offers (Jn 7:37-38), commends anyone who is willing to offer a cup of cold water to a disciple in need (Mt 10:42), recovers his strength at a Samaritan well (Jn 4:6), walks on water (Mt 14:25) and washes the disciples' feet (Jn 13:1-12).

In addition, at least two key events of Christ's passion concern water: Pilate washes his hands with water after surrendering Christ to the cross (Mt 27:24), and blood and water pour from Christ's pierced side (Jn 19:34). "How many," Tertullian exclaims, "are the pleas of nature, how many the privileges of grace, how many the solemnities of discipline, the figures, the preparations, the prayers, which have ordained the sanctity of water ?114

The blood and water that flowed from Christ's wounded side drew the

attention of many church fathers and were occasionally connected in patristic thinking to the Genesis account of Adam and Eve's creation by God and subsequent fall into sin. Many church fathers view the church, composed of all who are baptized into Christ, as the new Eve. The first Eve, created from Adam's rib, sinned. The second Eve-the church-is created from Christ's pierced side, from the water (baptism) and blood (the Eucharist) that flowed from Christ's body.⁴⁵ Origen comments: "For the thirsty he sends a spring of living water from the wound which the spear opened in his side.... From the wound in Christ's side has come forth the Church, and he has made her his Bride."

A cluster of significant themes express the fathers' views on baptism and baptism's implications for Christian faith and living, some reflected in Tertullian's treatise.

In baptism we die with Christ and are resurrected with Christ. An ancient prayer of the church captures well the mystery of our death and resurrection with Christ. As the rite of baptism begins, the presiding priest prays that the water to be used in the baptism be sanctified, or set apart, by the Holy Spirit to bring both death and life: "Sanctify this water, that those who are baptized in it may be crucified with Christ, die with him, be buried with him, and rise again through adoption." Basil writes: "How then do we enter into the likeness of his death? By being buried with him in baptism. There is only one death and only one resurrection, of which baptism is the figure ... the water being the likeness of death and the Spirit imparting life. 4s

Baptism's waters are pictured by the fathers as a means of capital punishment, a tomb, and a womb; the transformation from tomb to womb is solely based on Christ's resurrection ⁴⁹ First, we must die and be buried. Yet death is not the last word. Just as the Spirit of God hovered over the primeval waters in the Genesis account of creation, birthing life and order out of chaos, so the Holy Spirit hovers over the waters of baptism, impregnating them with divine, "maternal"

life. This time the Spirit's work is "re- creation."⁵⁰ As Basil expresses it, the sanctified, sacramental water is infused with life by the Spirit, renewing the lives of the baptized to "the state of original life." In baptism, the great story of God's purposes for creation is renewed for each new Christian. It is in baptism, and the union with Christ that baptism offers, that the ancient story of sin and death ends and God's new story of re-creation is birthed sacramentally as the believer is joined to Christ in his death and resurrection ⁵¹

Tertullian is less concerned about the type of water used in baptism cold, running, calm, warm-than the key role the Holy Spirit plays in the sacrament of baptism ⁵² It was the Holy Spirit, rather than the water itself, who created the water's "sacramental power of sanctification." "It makes no difference whether a man is washed in a sea or a pool, a stream or a fountain, a lake or a trough.... All waters ... attain the sacramental power of sanctification. For the Spirit immediately supervenes from the heavens and rests over the waters, sanctifying them through Himself. And being thus sanctified, they acquire at the same time the power of sanctifying. ¹¹⁵³

The Spirit touches the created matter of water and divine life is communicated to it. In turn, as a person enters into the waters of baptism, life is communicated to her. Why? How? Because Father, Son and Holy Spirit have promised to be present sacramentally in this particular place at this particular time. "For if in the mouth of three witnesses every word shall stand" [cf. Dt. 19:15, Matt. 18:16, 2 Cor. 13:1]-while, through the benediction, we have the same (three) as witnesses of our faith whom we have as sureties of our salvation too-how much more does the number of the divine names suffice for the assurance similarly of our hope!""

The person choosing to be baptized is openly, publicly trusting in God's promise. Though it is incredible-indeed, seemingly impossible-that something as simple and unpretentious as words of invocation over water could produce such a remarkable effect as salvation, Tertullian delights in the mystery and wonder of

the connection between the spiritual and the material. Tertullian is not thinking magically, as though it is simply the incantation of words that produces the sacramental nature of the water. No, he is referring to God's promise and commitment to save and deliver those who have faith that God's Spirit has sanctified baptism's water for a special purpose and promised to meet them there, in this particular substance and place.

The same sacramental principle applies to other "matter" used in the rite of baptism. Consider, for example, the ointment or oil used to anoint the newly baptized. Once the presence and action of the Holy Spirit have been invoked over this ointment, its nature changes. Cyril of Jerusalem sees the sacramental principle at work in this change.

Beware of supposing that this is merely ointment. For as the bread of the Eucharist, after the invocation of the Holy Spirit, is no longer simply bread, but the Body of Christ; so also this holy ointment is no longer merely ointment, not what one might call ordinary ointment, after the invocation; it is the gift of Christ, and by the presence of the Holy Spirit it conveys the power of his divinity. It is applied symbolically to the forehead and the other organs of sense; and while the body is anointed with the visible ointment, the soul is sanctified by the holy and life-giving Spirit ."⁵

In his discussion of the chrism, or anointing that follows baptism, Tertullian emphasizes the connection between actions under the old covenant and the sacramental realities of the new covenant. He points to the similarity between the chrism and the anointing of priests with oil under the old covenant. In both cases matter is set apart for a special spiritual purpose, communicating rather than simply symbolizing a spiritual reality. "When we come from the font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction [i.e., oil]. This practice comes from the old discipline, where on entering the priesthood, men used to be anointed with oil from a horn.... In our case, the oil runs physically, but it profits

us spiritually. It is similar to the act of baptism itself, which is also physical-in that we are plunged in water. Yet, its effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins."⁵⁶

Not only does anointing remind Tertullian of previous old covenant practices, but the subsequent laying on of hands and prayers of the baptismal service remind Tertullian of key old covenant types and "sacramental" rites that pointed to Christ and find their fulfillment in him. Jacob, for example, laid his hands on the heads of both Ephraim and Manasseh as he blessed them. When Jacob did so, though, he crossed his arms (Gen 48:12-14). Tertullian believes the Old Testament narrative draws the discerning reader to think of Christ, "with his hands laid on them and interchanged, and indeed so transversely slanted one over the other, that, by delineating Christ, they even portended the future benediction of Christ."⁵⁷

Tertullian realizes that a perceptive reader will wonder about the situation of believers who lived before the time of Christ. People such as Abraham surely believed in the promises of God under the old covenant and yet were never baptized. What of folk such as Abraham? Does Abraham's great faith-though Abraham was never baptized-undercut the importance of baptism in the church? Tertullian responds with a strong no, and lays out a fundamental principle for understanding the relationship between events, people and principles of the old covenant and those present and operative under the new. He writes, "in all cases it is the later things that have a conclusive force, and the subsequent that prevail over the antecedent."⁵⁸

Before the "passion and resurrection" of Christ believers such as Abraham were saved through the exercise of "bare faith." In light of Christ's coming, however, "faith has been enlarged." Christian faith, a faith in continuity with Abraham's faith in the promises of God to him, "believes in [Christ's] nativity, passion, and resurrection." The birth, ministry, cross and resurrection of Christ

have amplified, as it were, the sacrament. "The sealing act of baptism," has become, in Tertullian's understanding, "the clothing, in some sense, of the faith that before was bare."⁵⁹ The connection between baptism, the cross and the resurrection of Christ in patristic thought surely deserves a closer look on our part.

BAPTISM, THE CROSS AND THE RESURRECTION

Very early Christian writings link trust in the cross of Christ to the act of baptism. The Epistle of Barnabas specifically investigates "whether the Lord took care to foreshadow the water and the cross." Among other Scriptures, this ancient epistle points to Psalm 160

The psalmist speaks of "a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither" (Ps 1:3). Here, Barnabas believes, we encounter a metaphor of baptism and the cross. "Notice how he pointed out the water and the cross together. For this is what he means: blessed are those who, having set their hope on the cross, descended into the water, because he speaks of the reward in its season'; at that time, he means, I will repay. But for now what does he say? The leaves will not wither.' By this he means that every word that comes forth from your mouth in faith and love will bring conversion and hope to many."⁶¹ In what may be a veiled reference to Ezekiel 47:1-12, Barnabas mentions "'a river flowing on the right hand, and beautiful trees were rising from it, and whoever eats from them will live forever.' By this he means that while we descend into the water laden with sins and dirt, we rise up bearing fruit in our heart and with fear and hope in Jesus in our spirits."⁶²

Perhaps some readers are rolling their eyes over Barnabas's imaginative, christological interpretation. A tree is a tree. Period. A river is a river. We can gain spiritual insight from Psalm 1 without engaging in these hermeneutical flights of fancy. Fine. A fair enough response, though perhaps a bit heated. These

readers should understand, though, that their point of view, one that would limit the meaning of Psalm 1 or other Old Testament literature to its own age-with applications then made to a twenty-first century context-is not the majority view in the history of biblical interpretation.

Patrick Henry Reardon, an Orthodox pastor of All Saints Antiochian Orthodox Church in Chicago, well represents the ancient perspective in a modern context. For instance, Psalm 1 begins with "Blessed is the man ... [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD" (Ps 1:1-2). Is this reference to a "man" in the time of David limited only to those living in David's timeperhaps with an application we can make to our own-or might the text be referring to a greater man, one even greater than David?

Reardon observes that the words translated "man" in Psalm 1-the Hebrew is, Greek *aner*, and Latin *vir*-are all "emphatically masculine," singular nouns. They have a deeper significance than simply "human being." "The 'man' of reference here is a particular man. According to the Fathers of the Church, he is the one mediator between God and man, the Man Jesus Christ. The Law of the Lord, which is to be our delight and meditation day and night, finds its meaning only in Him. Christ is the one who fulfills it, and He is the key to its understanding."⁶³ Here we have an interpretation that respects the Old Testament itself while also interpreting the Hebrew Scripture through the culmination and consummation of the biblical narrative in Jesus Christ. Reardon, like the church fathers, is right to see Psalms, and the Old Testament as a whole, as chock full of references to Christ's person and work, texts often highlighting old covenant textual clues to the cross and resurrection.

Ignatius of Antioch speaks movingly of the cross in his letter to the Ephesians and portrays the waters of baptism as communicating to the believer the cleansing effect of Christ's death. The Ephesians, Ignatius writes, have received "new life through the blood of God."⁶⁴ They are "stones of a temple, prepared

beforehand for the building of God the Father, hoisted up to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using as a rope the Holy Spirit; your faith is what lifts you up, and love is the way that leads up to God.""

In a manner similar to what we have already seen in Tertullian, Ignatius acknowledges the seeming foolishness of the cross and the faith that believes the cross's benefits are communicated to the believer in baptism. "My spirit is a humble sacrifice for the cross, which is a stumbling block to unbelievers, but salvation and eternal life to us. `Where is the wise? Where is the debater?' (cf. 1 Cor 1:20) Where is the boasting of those who are thought to be intelligent? For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary according to God's plan, both from the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit. He was born and baptized in order that by his suffering he might cleanse the water."⁶⁶

If we fast-forward to the fourth century, we find fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa speaking of the "descent into the water and the threefold immersion" as imitating Christ's resurrection. Gregory teaches that "the method of our salvation became effectual not so much as a result of instruction ... as by means of the flesh which [Christ] assumed ... therefore it was necessary that a means should be devised by which there should be in what is done by the follower some kinship and likeness to the leader." Since Christ died and was buried for three days, something "resembling this must be devised for us."⁶⁷ Gregory then draws a number of parallels between Christ's death and resurrection and the experience of Christ's followers in baptism:

Christ died and was buried. Likewise, "the imitation of death on our part is represented in water, the neighboring element."⁶⁸

Christ was resurrected on the third day. "So every one who is linked to him in virtue of his bodily nature and fixes his eyes on the same victory (and by this I mean the consummation, which is life) has water poured upon him, instead of

earth, and thus, by submitting to this element three times, represents the grace of resurrection attained after three days."⁶⁹

In Christ's death and resurrection human nature has been restored and recreated, Although Christ's disciples do not experience "exact and complete imitation" of Christ in their human nature, they do receive "as much as" their human nature "is able, while the remainder is reserved for the time to come." How does baptism represent this "annihilation of wickedness"? "By the image of dying presented by the water. It is not, however, a complete annihilation; but a kind of breach in the continuity of evil, two things concurring to effect the removal of wickedness-the repentance of the offender and the imitation of the death of Christ."⁷⁰

Gregory's mention of the importance of repentance in connection with baptism emphasizes a link made by patristic writers from the apostolic fathers down to Gregory's life in the fourth century.

FAITH, REPENTANCE AND BAPTISM

The following patristic voices are one in their insistence that baptism means nothing if not accompanied by heartfelt faith and repentance.

Justin Martyr refers to baptism as a "laver of repentance and knowledge of God," a rite "ordained on account of the transgression of God's people." Personal repentance and faith naturally lead to baptism, a baptism that Justin contrasts with Jewish baptisms or cleansings. Christian baptism is "alone able to purify those who have repented." It is "the water of life." Jewish cleansings, by contrast, can only clean the body. "For what is the use of that baptism that cleanses the flesh and body alone? Baptize the soul from wrath and from covetousness, from envy, and from hatred; and, lo! The body is pure."⁷¹ Repentance, faith, baptism and internal change are inextricably connected for Justin.

Clement of Alexandria weaves together faith, repentance, cleansing in baptism's waters, illumination from the Holy Spirit and eschatological hope in an insightful and lively passage from *The Instructor*. He writes of sleepers who have "shaken off sleep and suddenly become all awake within." It was as though a "film" covered the eyes of these sleepy souls. In baptism, "having wiped off the sins that obscure the light of the Divine Spirit," the eye of the spirit has been freed and is now "unimpeded and full of light, by which alone we contemplate the Divine, the Holy Spirit flowing down to us from above."⁷²

In baptism, through the Spirit, "an eternal adjustment of the vision" has occurred, with a corresponding refocusing of loves. The believer now loves what is lovable and is drawn to the holy: "like loves like; and that which is holy, loves that from which holiness proceeds. 1173 Faith exercised or "generated" in time receives the "promise." "If, then, those who have believed have life, what remains beyond the possession of eternal life? Nothing is wanting to faith, as it is perfect and complete in itself... Faith is not lame in any respect."⁷⁴ Through faith-again, expressed and exercised in baptism-we have "in anticipation grasped ... that which is future." "And where faith is, there is the promise; and the consummation of the promise is rest."⁷⁵

Knowledge of God, Clement writes, replaces ignorance. The "bonds" of ignorance "are with all speed loosened by human faith and divine grace, our transgressions being taken away by the one ... medicine, the baptism of the Word. We are washed from all our sins, and are no longer entangled in evil."⁷⁶ Clement pictures the "washing" of baptism as "the one grace of illumination. ... Our characters are not the same as before our washing.""

Clement then explains the relationship between faith, knowledge, baptism and illumination: "Knowledge springs up with illumination, shedding its beams around the mind; the moment we hear, we who were untaught become disciples. Does this, I ask, take place on the advent of this instruction? You cannot tell the

time. For instruction leads to faith, and faith with baptism is trained by the Holy Spirit. 1171

While questions of timing may be hard to pinpoint, Clement is absolutely sure of one thing: those who have been baptized into Christ are all equal members of Christ's body, all illuminated, all changed. "There are not, then, in the same Word some `illuminated (Gnostics); and some animal (or natural) people.' Rather, all who have abandoned the desires of the flesh are equal and spiritual before the Lord."" Clement is especially irritated by his Gnostic opponents, people who claim that only they have a knowledge of God, and only they have been illuminated. No, Clement insists. Everyone who has been baptized into Christ has been illuminated by Christ. And the route to illumination, knowledge, purity and change is through repentance and baptism. "We also, repenting of our sins, renouncing our iniquities, purified by baptism, speed back to the eternal light, children to the Father." S0

We should realize that the early church fully expected that those who had been baptized would leave a life of sin behind. The Apostolic Constitutions, a fourth century document (A.D. 390), teaches that "those who are baptized into the death of our Lord Jesus are obliged to go on no longer in sin; for as those who are dead cannot work wickedness any longer, so those who are dead with Christ cannot practice wickedness. We do not therefore believe, brothers, that any one who has received the washing of life continues in the licentious acts of transgressors." The Apostolic Constitutions, though, do acknowledge that postbaptismal sin is possible and can be forgiven. Those who sin after baptism must repent and leave their sins behind, or they "shall be condemned to hell-fire."⁸¹

Baptism is not a magical rite that confers divine forgiveness apart from the intention of the person being baptized. This point needs to be emphasized: If one comes to baptism unrepentant, one will leave unforgiven. Origen, for instance,

insists that if the person being baptized is not repentant, his baptism will lead only to "greater condemnation." The "intention" of the person coming to be baptized, then, is of great significance.⁸²

The Apostolic Constitutions, written over a hundred years after Origen's comments, clearly distinguish between those who desire to repent and "complete Christians." Repentance normally comes through hearing the "Word" preached in church, while baptism is the door to full communion with Christ and other Christians. "When they wish to repent, we receive the pagans into the church to hear the Word. However, we do not admit them to communion until they have received the seal of baptism and are made complete Christians."⁸³

Cyril of Jerusalem, writing in the fourth century, carefully instructs catechumens in the ethical standards that accompany new life in Christ. Those to be baptized are given forty days to cultivate the repentance that leads to baptism: "Put off fornication and uncleanness, and put on the shining garment of self-control.... You have ample notice; you have forty days for penitence."⁸⁴ Cyril warns those to be baptized that Simon Magus "was baptized, but not enlightened. He dipped his body in water, but did not admit the Spirit to illuminate his heart. His body went down and came up; but his soul was not buried together with Christ, nor with him raised" (cf. Acts 8:31-40).⁸⁵

Cyril mentions the situation of Simon Magus to prevent new Christians from divorcing a life of holiness from baptism or from viewing the sacrament as a magical rite. "Let no one of you be found tempting grace ... through ... an insincere heart."⁸⁶ God is looking for "honest resolve" and "honesty of purpose" in those coming to be baptized.⁸¹ If people are baptized while disguising their intentions to remain impenitent over their sin, "though the water shall receive" them, "the Spirit will not accept" them.⁸⁸

Basil of Caesarea, also writing in the fourth century, accentuates the indissoluble link between faith, baptism and salvation. "Faith and baptism are

two kindred and inseparable ways of salvation: faith is perfected by baptism; baptism is established by faith, and both are completed by the use of the same names. As we believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so we are baptized into the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Confession leads the way and brings us to salvation; baptism follows, setting the seal on our assent."⁸⁹

Basil's mention of the Holy Spirit draws our attention to the crucial role of the Spirit in the sacrament of baptism as understood by the church fathers.

BAPTISM AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

The fathers draw attention to the role the Holy Spirit plays in baptism, one they often associate with regeneration and the remission of sins, though they sometimes disagree on details concerning the Spirit's baptismal role. The principal patristic emphases include the following:

Baptism must take place in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Justin Martyr, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa) ⁹⁰

. Some patristic writers see the water of baptism as preparing the believer for the reception and sealing of the Holy Spirit. Consider the comments of four significant ante-Nicene patristic figures (Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Methodius):

Tertullian: "It is not that in the waters we obtain the Holy Spirit. Rather, in the water ... we are cleansed and prepared for the Holy Spirit."⁹¹

Hippolytus: "The ropes that stretch around her [the ship of the church] are the love of Christ, which binds the church. The net that she bears with her is the bath of the regeneration that renews the believing, from which too are these glories. Just like the wind, the Spirit from heaven is present, by whom those who believe are sealed.""

Cyprian: "He who has been sanctified, his sins being put away in baptism, and has been spiritually reformed into a new man, has become fitted for receiving the Holy Spirit."⁹³ Cyprian is not entirely consistent. At other times he speaks of the Holy Spirit as being received in baptism itself.⁹⁴

Methodius: "Those who are born again by the bath receive ... of his holiness and of his glory.... The illuminated receive the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, and they are appropriately born again to incorruption."⁹⁵

The link between the Holy Spirit and regeneration in baptism is one that we will need to revisit.

It is through the laying on of hands that the Holy Spirit is invoked and invited (Tertullian) ⁹⁶

It is by the agency of the Holy Spirit that a new birth occurs in the waters of baptism (Irenaeus, Origen, Novatian).⁹⁷

BAPTISM AND REGENERATION

A closer look at the thought of Gregory of Nyssa on baptism will shed light on how the fathers in general understood the relationship between baptism and regeneration.

Gregory refers to a "regeneration" that occurs in baptism, a new birth grounded in the sacramental nature of baptism itself. How so? Gregory speaks of "a regeneration perceived by thought, not observed by the eyes." Through God's "kingly grace," God's "kingly bounty," one scarred with sins and grown old in evil habits" can be restored "to the innocence of a babe."⁹⁸

On the one hand, Gregory teaches that "It is not the water that bestows this bounty ... but the commandment of God and the intervention of the Spirit, which comes sacramentally to give us liberty." In a word, God has "commanded" the

church to baptize and promised that his Spirit will purify those who come to the waters of baptism. Purification from sin is the Spirit's work, yet is intimately associated with water itself through the sacramental action of the Spirit. "But water has a part to play, by giving an outward sign of the purification. For when our body has been soiled by dirt and mud it is our practice to make it clean by washing in water. We therefore use water in the sacramental action also, signifying, by something perceived by the senses, a shining cleanliness which is not a bodily cleanliness.""

Gregory then moves into "a more searching inquiry," beginning his investigation with a comment on a key verse for many of the fathers, John 3:5: "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Why does John mention both water and the Spirit? "Why is not the Spirit alone considered necessary for the fulfillment of baptism?" Gregory asks. Both the Spirit and water are necessary for regeneration because a human being "is composite, not simple." We are a composite of a "visible body" and "invisible soul," with each aspect affected by sin and in need of healing. Thus, Gregory believes, "medicines are assigned which suit and resemble [a human being's] double nature."¹⁰ The "visible body" needs water, just as the "invisible soul" needs the Spirit.

What occurs in the wonder of the sacrament is a movement of "the unseen Spirit, invoked by faith," who "comes in a fashion we cannot describe." The Spirit both "blesses the body which is being baptized, and the water that baptizes."

Matter itself, in this case the water of baptism, is set apart or consecrated for a special use by the Holy Spirit. Gregory sees the same as being true of the "holy altar," the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the oil used to anoint the newly baptized, and the priesthood. The altar, for instance, "is in itself an ordinary stone slab, in no way different from other slabs with which our walls are built

and our pavements are adorned." Once it has been "consecrated for the service of God," however, "and has received the blessing, it is a holy table, an undefiled altar, no longer touched by the hands of all, but only by the priests, and by them with reverence." Likewise, the bread used in the Eucharist is in itself "common bread, but when the sacramental act has consecrated it, it is called, and becomes, the body of Christ." So too "with the sacramental oil, and the wine." The central sacramental principle is this: "though things of small value before the blessing, after the sanctification by the Spirit each of them has its special effectiveness."⁰¹

THE QUESTION OF INFANT BAPTISM

Did the early church baptize babies? Testimony as to infant baptism, at least through the second century, is mixed. Irenaeus refers to Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and comments that Jesus was "thirty years old when he came to be baptized, then possessing the full age of a Master." Rather than "despising or evading any condition of humanity," Jesus' thirty years encompassed and sanctified every age.⁰²

Jesus had once been an infant, grown up as a child, moved through his teen years and finally attained adulthood. "For," Irenaeus writes, "He came to save all through means of Himself—all, I say, who through him are born again to God—infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age," and so on.¹⁰³ Christ sanctifies every stage of human life through his embrace of each period of life's journey in his own humanity. Irenaeus does not mention baptism, but his comment concerning infants is significant.

Tertullian is one of the strongest early Christian voices against infant baptism. His objections to the practice indicate at least two things: Christians were baptizing infants and not all Christians were convinced this was a good idea. Tertullian writes that "baptism is not to be bestowed rashly" and that "it is more

salutary to delay baptism according to the state and character of each person," with delay especially appropriate "in the case of infants."¹⁰⁴

Tertullian worries that the sponsors of infants for baptism place themselves in danger because they have no way of determining what the character will be of the baby being baptized or if they will live long enough to bring up the child in the ways of the Lord. Jesus does invite the little ones to come to him (Mt 19:14), but Tertullian views Christ's invitation as a call to children to be educated in the faith, rather than baptized. "'Let them come,' then, when they are growing up: let them come if they are learning, if they are being taught to what they are coming; let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ." Like modern day Baptists, Tertullian speaks of an "age of innocence," when baptism is not necessary. "Why does the age of innocence hasten to the remission of sins?"¹⁰⁵

Cyprian represents well what comes to be the majority view among the church fathers concerning infant baptism. Even the worst offenders against God are invited to the waters of baptism. If no one is turned away, if even great sinners bring a life filled with rampant sin to Christ and ask for forgiveness, how can the church turn away infants? Though babies have not willfully sinned, they have still been born "of Adam's line according to the flesh" and have "contracted the contagion of the ancient death. Indeed the infant's approach to the reception of remission of sins is the easier from the very fact that the sins remitted are another's, not his own."¹⁰⁶ As far as Cyprian is concerned, there is no age of innocence for babies, precisely because Adam's sin has infected all human beings, regardless of their age. Simply put, all who have been stained with sin, both through Adam and through their own intentional acts of sin, need to be cleansed in baptism's waters ¹⁰⁷ Augustine will make much the same point in the late fourth century.

Before we examine Augustine on infant baptism, a glance at a few of Augustine's contemporaries in the East may prove helpful. Gregory of Nazianzus

acknowledges that one cannot know whether a baby will grow up to be a person of faith and proven Christian character—a concern, as we have seen, for Tertullian. Rather than viewing this uncertainty about an infant's future development as a roadblock to Christian initiation, though, Gregory calls his audience to trust in God. What about Hannah, the mother of Samuel? "Why, Hannah vowed Samuel to God before he was born, and no sooner was he born than she made him a priest and reared him in a priestly robe; for she had no human fears but put her trust in God." Better to trust and sanctify than to fear and leave someone outside the community of faith. "Have you an infant?" Gregory asks. "Do not let wickedness seize its chance. Let him be sanctified from babyhood, and consecrated by the Spirit in his tender years.""

Gregory supports the baptism of infants because of the "pressing danger" that infant mortality posed in the ancient world. For "it is better to be sanctified without being conscious of it than to depart without being sealed and initiated." In addition, the circumcision of infants under the old covenant provided a rationale and precedent for the baptism of infants into the community of the church. "And we find our justification for this practice in the fact that circumcision, which in some degree prefigures the baptismal seal, was administered on the eighth day to babies who were still irrational:"¹⁰⁹

In similar fashion, the anointing of the Israelites' doorposts at the time of the Passover protected the firstborn of Israel, including babies, from God's judgment. If so, should not the babies of Christian families be similarly protected? Gregory suggests waiting for three years before baptizing infants and toddlers, "by which time they are capable of some spiritual understanding and are able to reply; even if they cannot fully understand, their characters and minds are in process of formation.""

Gregory, like other fathers in the East, believes a human being's age is a key factor in determining the level of accountability before God concerning sin and

baptism. "For the case stands thus. Children begin to be answerable for their actions as soon as their reason is fully developed and they have been instructed in the divine revelation; they are not answerable for the sins of ignorance which are due to their tender years."""

Chrysostom also links accountability and punishment for sin to moral agency. Though humans are "mortal" as a result of Adam's sin, they are reckoned as sinners before God because of their own sin rather than Adam's. "But how should it follow that from his [Adam's] disobedience anyone else should become a sinner? For unless a man becomes a sinner on his own responsibility he will not be found to deserve punishment. 11112 Still, as Gregory argues, in light of the dangers that surround the young, "it is on every consideration more profitable for children to be fortified by the baptismal washing."113 Chrysostom also comments that "we do baptize infants, although they are not guilty of any sins."114

In the West, it is Augustine who argues most fervently for infant baptism. Original sin has been passed on to all of Adam's descendants, including infants. When babies are baptized they receive "the sacrament of regeneration," Augustine writes. Whether these babies are actually saved, though, is decided by wider considerations than baptism itself. "The sacrament of baptism is one thing, the conversion of the heart is another; but the salvation of human beings is effected by these two. If one is missing, we are not to suppose that the other is absent: in an infant, baptism can exist without conversion; in the penitent thief, conversion without baptism.... There can be conversion of the heart when baptism has not been received, but not when baptism has been rejected."15

Augustine believed that God condemns and punishes unbaptized infants. Augustine's strong belief in original sin drove him to this troubling conclusion, one related to his prolonged conflict with the Pelagians.

Might it not be better for a baby never to be created than to be created by God,

die in infancy unbaptized, and then experience condemnation because of Adam's sin? No, Augustine answers, arguing that the punishment unbaptized infants experience is small. "I do not say that those who die without Christ's baptism are to be involved in so heavy a punishment that it would be better for them not to have been born.... Who could doubt that unbaptized infants, who have only original sin and are not burdened by sins of their own committing, will suffer the lightest possible condemnation. I cannot define the nature and extent of this, but I cannot bring myself to say that it would be better for them not to exist than to exist in that condition."""

The church was later to reject Augustine's position concerning the condemnation of unbaptized infants. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, for example, entrusts unbaptized children to the "the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. The great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: 'Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,' [Mark 10:14] allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church's call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism." 7

By water, the fathers teach, human beings enter the church. In the Eucharist, through the common, earthy elements of bread and wine, Christians are fed with the body and blood of Christ. In our next chapter we will take a close look at the fathers' teaching on this second great sacrament.

I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life-which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.... And I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH EPISTLE OF IGNATIUS TO THE ROMANS¹

Our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and, in turn, the Eucharist

establishes our opinion. For we offer to Him His own, announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and spirit. For the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist-consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly. So also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having hope of the resurrection to eternity.

IRENÆUS AGAINST HERESIES 4.18.52

Since Christ himself in his own words asserted of the bread, "This is my body," who will dare any longer to have doubts? And since in his own words he insisted, "This is my blood," who will have any doubts or say that it is not his blood? Once, in Cana of Galilee, he changed water into wine (and wine is akin to blood); is it incredible that he should change wine into blood?

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM ON THE MYSTERIES³

He is the bread of life. Whoever eats life cannot die.... Go to him and take your fill, for he is the bread of life. Go to him and drink, for he is the spring. Go to him and be enlightened, for he is the light. Go to him and become free, for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.... I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst (John 6:35).

AMBROSE COMMENTARY ON PSALM 118⁴

T W O

EUCCHARIST

Feasting with the Worshiping Community

It is sad and ironic that the sacrament of the Eucharist continues to divide Christians. Interpretations of Christ's invitation to communion with himself in bread and wine and through him with other members of his body have often led to misunderstanding, suspicion, conflict, hatred, violence and death among Christ's own disciples. Too often the Eucharist has led to schism rather than unity. Sadly, disagreements over the meaning of the Eucharist continue to divide Christians to this present day. Surely the Lord is not pleased with this state of affairs.

Evangelicals themselves seem confused about the rhyme and reason of Communion. Leonard Vander Zee, author of a recent, helpful book on the sacraments, has observed an evangelical perplexity regarding the Lord's Supper: "Today, especially among evangelicals, the real question is why? Why celebrate the Lord's Supper at all? What good is it? What spiritual benefits does it bring?"⁵

Vander Zee believes that evangelical confusion over Holy Communion is related to a gnostic, dualistic tendency in evangelical thinking and practice, bewilderment related to an imbalanced, warped Christology. Evangelicalism "is less surely anchored in Christ's true humanity and much more comfortable with his divinity, and therefore it has a greater tendency toward losing that crucial bond between the physical and the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly, the sign of the sacrament and the reality of Christ's presence it conveys."⁶

THE GNOSTIC THREAT

Gnosticism was a constant threat to the ancient church's understanding of Christ's person and work. Gnostic teachers taught, for example, that matter could not be saved or redeemed; it was by definition evil. If so, Christ only seemed or appeared to be human, the early heresy doceticism (from the Greek verb *dokeo*, to seem); Christ's body only seemed to be like ours. If so, if God the Son was reluctant, even averse to assuming human nature in its entirety, then there must be something about bodies, about human flesh, that is irredeemable, so evil, so bent, so skewed, that even God cannot save it. In fact, God has no desire to save it. For the Gnostic, and the Gnostics' god, the human body-brain, bone, blood, skin, flesh-is a horrid mess that must be suppressed, denied, well-nigh obliterated, if spiritual growth is to occur. In Gnostic cosmology, the body-indeed, matter in all its manifestations-can only be a hindrance to a human being's relationship with the divine. Matter weighs us down, Gnostic teachers proclaimed. By its very nature it pulls us away from God. The assaults of the body with all their nastiness-the body's ceaseless clamor for food, sex, sleep-must be transcended.

The church fathers responded with a firm no to the Gnostic view of matter as essentially evil. If Christ's body was real in appearance only, he couldn't possibly have saved us from our sins through the bodily sacrifice of his life on the cross. Nor, as Irenaeus, among others, realized, could Christ commune in the Eucharist with his church, his body on earth after his ascension into heaven, if he had no real body or blood. An incarnation in appearance only simply wouldn't do.

Ignatius of Antioch, writing early in the second century A.D., showed little tolerance for Gnostic theology and understood clearly the implications of Gnostic cosmology for Christian ethics. To denigrate the body would undercut our concern about what we do with our bodies or the suffering of others in their bodies. Bodily life simply didn't matter. "They [the gnostics or docetists] have no concern for love, none for the widow, the orphan, the afflicted, the prisoner, the

hungry, the thirsty. They stay away from the Eucharist and prayer, because they do not admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins, which the Father raised up by his goodness." Of course, the Gnostics didn't believe that the Eucharist was in some manner the flesh and blood of Christ. If they had admitted such, their own theology would have imploded.

If the body is inherently evil, why would Christ himself offer his body and blood for the nourishment of our bodies and souls? The church's sacramental understanding of the Eucharist, what we will call sacramental realism in this chapter, was firmly established by Tertullian's day. A heretical threat had clearly ignited patristic reflection on the meaning of the communion meal. What the Gnostics denied, the church affirmed with one voice. Christ came in the body, died in the body, was resurrected in the body and ascended in the body to heaven. Now from heaven he fed his body on earth-the church-with his body and blood through the Spirit. Tertullian makes much the same point as Ignatius had earlier. "How can [the Gnostics] allege that flesh is incapable of the gift of God, which is eternal life, seeing that the flesh is fed on the flesh and blood of the Lord and is a member of him?" The body "feeds on the body and blood of Christ that the soul may be nourished on God. They are united in this service; they cannot be separated in their reward."⁸ The eucharistic practice of the church, and the church's reflection on that practice, demonstrated that Gnostic cosmology was a dead end, christologically and soteriologically. If Christ didn't have a real body, no one gets saved, plain and simple.

WORD AND MATTER

Benedict XVI (the former Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger), speaking from a Roman Catholic perspective rooted in the world of the church fathers, stresses the importance of perceiving the connection between "word and matter" and its relationship to "the structure of the Christian relationship with God in general."⁹

To be in relationship with God, created in God's image, is to stand in intimate relation to the Creator of the universe, the God who with a Word has sprinkled galaxies across the universe and fashioned the tiniest subatomic particles. God plainly likes stuff: water, bread, wine, birds, blood, trees, rocks, zebras, lions, cells, stars, caterpillars, comets ... the list could continue for page after page. God is no Gnostic.

I remember attending a lecture in the mid-1980s at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. To be honest, I can't remember the topic of the lecture nor who the lecturer was. I do still recall, though, that section of the lecture illustrated with a series of pictures taken by an electron microscope. Photo after photo of tiny, wonderfully complex crystalline structures flashed across a screen. I thought to myself, what kind of God would create miniature beauties such as these? Who is the God who created millions of miniscule, microscopic formations-geometric, multicolored-that for age upon age only God could discern and enjoy? He is the God who has revealed himself through the union of the divine nature of the eternal Word with the human nature offered to him in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

God's word is living, powerful, active and creative. In the psalmist's words, "he spoke and it came to be; he commanded and it stood firm" (Ps 33:9). The fathers rejoice in seeing God's eternal Word-Christ-creatively at work in the world and more particularly in the Eucharist. They are quick to discern similarities between the creation account of Genesis and God's creative activity in the bread and wine of Communion. "Since the word of Christ, then, was able to make out of nothing what had not existed, can [Christ's word] not change what already exists into what it had not been?" (Ambrose)^{1°} That is, to change the nature of bread and wine in order to facilitate deeper communion between God and human beings fits the pattern of God's creative acts from their very beginning.

INCARNATION AND EUCHARIST

God loves matter-stuff-and the potential that matter possesses for divine creativity. The incarnation-God's entering his own creation through joining the divine nature of the eternal Word to human nature-shows clearly God has no aversion to using matter, in this case human nature, for redemptive purposes. The mystery of the Eucharist is illustrated by the cluster of mysteries surrounding the incarnation of the Son.

Think of Jesus' birth from the Virgin Mary. Here, surely, was a generation "outside the normal course of nature." On the basis of the incarnation, we should expect other surprises from God, other end runs around nature's normal course. And we find them in the Eucharist: "this body that we bring into being [at the Eucharist] is from the Virgin. Why do you look for the normal course of nature in the case of Christ's body when the Lord Jesus himself was born of a virgin and apart from nature? Most certainly, therefore, the true flesh of Christ, which was crucified ... is truly the sacrament of his flesh" (Ambrose)¹¹

Gregory of Nyssa develops the implications of the incarnation to enrich the church's understanding of the Eucharist. He compares "God the Word" indwelling and transmuting Christ's human body and God the Word transmuting or transforming the bread of the Eucharist. "The body ... by the indwelling of God the Word was transmuted [transformed] to the dignity of godhead. If this is so, we are right in believing that now also the bread which is consecrated by the Word of God is transmuted into the body of God the Word."² As believers consume the bread and wine of the Eucharist, elements that have been "consecrated by the indwelling of the word that `tabernacled' in the flesh" (see Jn 1:14)-here again we have the incarnational pattern-Christ's body is blended "with the bodies of believers, so that humanity also may share in immortality by union with the immortal." By "virtue of the blessing" the bread and wine have received, "visible things" have been transformed; the elementary nature of bread has been changed "into the immortal body" of Christ.¹³ All of this makes good sense in light of both the pattern of creation and the incarnation.

Who would have thought that God could become incarnate, that deity and humanity could be married? The angels themselves could not restrain their praise as they joyfully, solemnly watched a baby wriggling in a manger in Bethlehem, kicking its legs as it cried for Mary's milk, while simultaneously reigning over the universe. The Magi too "adored this body lying in the manger." This is the body-human nature in its entirety joined to the Son's divine nature—that would grow into a boy, then a man, whiskers and all, and would finally suffer and die for the sins of the world.

This is the same body that was covered in blood, pierced by the spear, pouring forth the saving streams of blood and water for the whole world. Christ soared up from the abyss in dazzling light and leaving his rays there he went up to his throne in heaven. It is that body that he gives us to hold and eat now. (Chrysostom)¹⁴

To return to Pope Benedict's reflections: In baptism and the Eucharist the church celebrates "the two-in-oneness of word and matter.... Christian belief knows no absolute separation between spirit and matter, between God and matter." Benedict warns against both Gnosticism's rejection of the goodness of matter and a "Cartesian division of reality" in which "we do not want matter to have any part in our relationship with God." Descartes (1596-1650), you might recall, is responsible for a rationalistic turn in philosophy during the seventeenth century, a turn based on a fundamental principle: *De omnibus dubitandum est* (everything is to be doubted). Only those truths that could be determined through rational thought alone should be acknowledged and trusted ¹⁵ In a nutshell, Descartes's principle resulted in a profound mind-body dualism, one in which the mind through careful reasoning can ascertain the basic principles of reality, while the body and its senses are distrusted as reliable sources of knowledge. Benedict's point is that Descartes's methodology has deeply affected—perhaps almost subconsciously—how many modern Christians think through and conduct their spiritual lives.

Though the Christian tradition has consistently affirmed the goodness of the body and "the glorification of matter" in the incarnation, "we are, even now, deeply influenced by the Cartesian division of reality: we do not want matter to have any part of our relationship with God.... We do not consider it [matter] capable of becoming the expression of our relationship with God or afortiori the medium through which God touches us."¹⁶ The Cartesian Christian is all mind: studying, thinking, pondering. For this type of believer the body is too often unconsciously or consciously viewed as a hindrance to spiritual development—apart from the brain, of course.

A SACRAMENTAL WORLDVIEW

How differently the church fathers view the world. As we will see in coming chapters, all the fathers led an ascetic or deeply disciplined spiritual life. At times they could be very rough on themselves and especially their bodies. Aspects of God's creation aroused deep discomfort. Few church fathers, for instance, thought positively about the sexual drive that rippled through their bodies. Some viewed sexual arousal as linked to the fall of human beings into sin.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the church fathers felt that their asceticism or spiritual exercises nourished their sacramental vision of reality, a way of seeing God's world that always affirms that "matter and word belong together."¹⁷ For the fathers, the Spirit and matter are not divorced, antithetical, opposed. Rather, matter—through the movement of God's gracious, creative act—becomes the vehicle or means for the expression of the Trinity's love.

The sacramental realism of the church fathers is evident in the realistic, sometimes graphic, language they employ in speaking of the Eucharist as a feeding on the blood and body of Christ. Justin Martyr writes in his first Apologia that "we do not receive these gifts as ordinary food or drink. But as Jesus Christ our Savior was made flesh through the word of God, and took flesh

and blood for our salvation; in the same way the food over which thanksgiving has been offered through the word of prayer that we have from him-the food by which our blood and flesh are nourished through its transformation-is, we are taught, the flesh and blood of Jesus who was made flesh." 8

The fathers joyously affirm that God gladly uses elements from the created order to feed Christ's "members." "He has acknowledged the cup which is a part of the creation-as his own blood ... and the bread-also a part of the creation-he has established as his own body, from which he gives increase to our bodies" (Irenaeus). The bread and wine are "made" "the blood and body of Christ" when they "receive the Word of God."19

How can our human bodies be nourished by the Eucharist with the body and blood of Christ-a given for Irenaeus-if matter cannot become the means to communicate spiritual life as a gift of God? "How can they [the Gnostics] affirm that the flesh, which is nourished from the body and blood of the Lord, and is a member of him, is incapable of receiving the gift of God?" Irenaeus directs his reader to Paul's words to the Ephesians: "'We are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones' (Eph 5:30 KJv). He does not speak these words of some spiritual and invisible man, for a spirit does not have bones or flesh; rather, he refers to that dispensation by which the Lord became an actual human being, consisting of flesh, and nerves, and bones. He speaks of that flesh which is nourished by the cup which is his blood, and receives increase from the bread that is his body."21

The fathers' understanding of the Eucharist is grounded on Jesus' words in John 6:51-54:

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Catechumens in the early church-those people being taught the basic principles of the Christian faith as they prepared for the initiatory rite of baptism-spent time studying Jesus' teaching in John 6 and pondering its implications. The church wanted its new members to understand that spiritual nourishment-for many fathers even physical nourishment-was available in the Eucharist. Cyril of Jerusalem reminded his catechumens that "Christ himself declared, speaking of the bread, 'This is my body.' Who will dare then to hesitate in the future? And when he himself asserts categorically that this is my blood,' who will doubt it and say it is not his blood?'" Cyril sounds a little bit like Martin Luther. Luther taught that if Christ has promised that his body and blood are present in the Eucharist, who are we to dispute and disbelieve his promise?

Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the fourth century A.D., draws our attention to the implications of the last supper Jesus ate with his disciples in his discussion of Christian worship. Ambrose discerns a pattern of consecration and transformation that marks this sad, poignant meal. Jesus and the disciples are celebrating the Passover, God's great redemptive act in saving Israel from bondage in Egypt. Bread and wine have been provided for the meal, as at any Passover celebration. When Jesus blesses the bread and wine "with heavenly words," Ambrose believes a transformation occurs. "Before the blessing with heavenly words occurs [the bread] is a different thing that is referred to, but after the consecration it is called a body. He himself says that it is his blood (cf. Matt. 26:28). Before the consecration [the wine] has another name, but after the consecration it is designated blood. And you say: 'Amen,' which means: 'It is

true.' What the mouth speaks, let the mind confess within; what the word says, let love acknowledge .1121

Olivier Clement captures the excitement the church fathers experienced as they meditated on Jesus' words in John's Gospel: "The Fathers never ceased repeating these stupendous assertions of Jesus Jesus is 'the bread of heaven,' the 'bread of life'-the Risen One gives himself fully to us in the Eucharist which is thus resurrection food.""

ISSUES TO PONDER

Evangelicals are rightly concerned that such an elevated view of the Eucharist may undercut the importance of personal faith in Christ. Ritual can replace relationship. "If I simply show up every week, confess my sins, and come to the altar, everything has been taken care of." Yes, such an impersonal, almost magical approach to the Eucharist is possible. If care is not taken to teach carefully how lively faith is related to the Eucharist and the intimate nature of Communion, our response can become rote and mechanical. It is not a far step from *hoc est corpus meum* ("this is my body"; Lk 22:19) to *hocus pocus*, a term well-known to medieval magicians.

Many people have moved from sacramental traditions into the evangelical world, a largely nonsacramental world, because they felt the lack of a personal relationship with Christ. Indeed, some evangelicals feel they never really heard the gospel in churches representing a sacramental perspective.

What if, however, careful and consistent teaching helped Christians to understand that the invitation to the Eucharist is a call to come to the table by faith, to commune with Christ by feasting in faith on his body and blood, with the happy result that our personal faith and trust in Christ is ever more deeply strengthened? What if Christ has promised to nurture our personal relationship with him as he offers his life to us in his body and blood? What if a personal

encounter with Christ—a deeply intimate one—is available to us in the Eucharist? And is the danger of a nominal faith only present for Christians who view life sacramentally?

Christians err if they believe that partaking is all that is required to be fed spiritually in the Eucharist. Sharing in the Eucharist must be accompanied by faith. "That which is 'sanctified through the word of God and prayer' (1 Tim. 4:5) does not of its own accord sanctify the recipient" (Origen). The benefits of the Eucharist come to those who receive the bread and wine "with a pure mind and a clear conscience." It is our faith and the holiness that results that bring blessing, just as "wickedness and sin" cause deprivation (Origen).²⁵

Augustine argues strongly that the efficacy of a sacrament such as the Eucharist is dependent on the faith of the person receiving it. The time when faith is exercised for specific individuals may vary. A baby receives the "sacrament of regeneration" in baptism, though the infant has yet to exercise faith. Later, if faith marries baptism in "Christian piety, conversion in the heart will follow." If a baptized baby never exercises faith on reaching what Augustine calls its "years of discretion," its baptism will not save in and of itself. For "the sacrament of baptism is one thing and the conversion of the heart is another." Yet baptism and faith join together to save human beings by bringing the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection to them.²⁶

As I ponder the church fathers' sacramental realism, I do think we're facing an either-or proposition: that is, either I have a personal relationship with Christ through faith or I have sacramental understanding of the Eucharist and baptism. Such a suggestion hits me as a false dichotomy. The church in its healthiest moments has always affirmed the crucial role faith plays in a sacramental appropriation of the Eucharist. It is true, though, that among sacramental churches, differences still remain concerning how Christ is present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, a topic peripheral to the fathers' ruminations on the

mystery of Communion.

A THANKSGIVING MEAL

The Fathers emphasize that the Eucharist is a thanksgiving meal. In fact, the word Eucharist means thanksgiving. An ancient church document, the Didache, teaches that in every Eucharist service, the church gave thanks for both the "cup" and the "broken bread."

And when you have had enough give thanks in this form. "We give thanks to you, holy Father, for your holy name, which you have made to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality that you did make known to us through Jesus your Son: yours be the glory for ever. You, almighty Master, did create all things for your name's sake; you did give food and drink to people for their enjoyment, so that they might give thanks to you; and on us you did bestow spiritual food and drink and eternal life through your Son."²⁸

The connection between "spiritual food and drink" and "eternal life" in this teaching from the Didache is striking and frequently occurs in the church fathers' reflections on the Eucharist. We give thanks to God the Son for his body and blood, precisely because it is through his body and blood that salvation was accomplished for us and is communicated to us by faith through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has promised to meet us here, at this table spread for us with resurrection life or "resurrection food," as Clement expresses it. To be fed by Christ is to receive what Ambrose calls "the leaven of immortality."²⁹ "He is the bread of life. Whoever eats life cannot die.... Go to him and take your fill, for he is the bread of life. Go to him and drink, for he is the spring."³⁰ Christ's "glorious body which showed itself stronger than death ... has become the source of life for us" (Gregory of Nyssa) ³¹

ALL GIFT, ALL GRACE

For the church fathers, the Eucharist is all gift, all grace. Here, in the humble elements of bread and wine, the incarnate Creator of the universe deigns to come in "the economy of grace," giving "himself as seed to all the faithful. His flesh composed of bread and wine is blended with their bodies [the bodies of believers], thanks to their union with his immortal body." Union with Christ by faith gives us eternal life, "the condition of immortality" (Gregory of Nyssa) 32 "Mere bread," as John of Damascus puts it, has been "united with the Godhead."³³ Or, as Irenaeus writes, "We offer to God what is his own, as we proclaim the communion and union of flesh and Spirit. For in the same way that earthly bread, after having received the invocation of God, is no longer ordinary bread but Eucharist, made up of two components, one earthly, the other heavenly, so our bodies that share in the Eucharist are no longer corruptible, because they have the hope of the resurrection. 1114

The Eucharist is all about Christ and Christ's willingness to enter into union with all those who believe in him. Evangelicals tend to view union with Christ as entirely spiritual, an internal work of the Holy Spirit joining us to Christ spiritually. Believers in sacramental traditions see union with Christ as both spiritual and material. Again, the model offered to us by the incarnation is of importance here. The church fathers affirm strongly that in Christ the material has become the conveyer of the spiritual. The Eucharist communicates Christ to us because Jesus has lovingly promised to be present in the elements of bread and wine. "The union is effected through the food that he has given us in his desire to show the love he has for us" (Chrysostom) 31

Should we be surprised to find nuptial emphases in the fathers' thoughts on the Eucharist? Life in Christ's body, the church, is wedding life, married life in its most joyful aspects. Thus, when fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa read the Song of Songs and ponder its graphic metaphors of human love, they see Christ's love presented and the invitation to partake of it deeply. Eat and drink deeply.' . . . and the intoxication is Christ himself."³⁶

A MEMORIAL MEAL

The celebration of the Eucharist is a "memorial" (Gk. *ananeisis*) of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, a remembering in which past events are brought into the present, just as eschatological blessings of the future are also here in the bread and wine. The Spirit brings Christ to the Eucharist, a foreshadowing of Christ's own second coming, and a remembering of Pentecost. The early church recognized this past-future element in the Eucharist, an awareness demonstrated by the appearance of the Aramaic word *maranatha*-"come, Lord"-in ancient Eucharistic prayers 37

In the Exodus God provided the people of Israel with manna as sustenance for their journey to the land promised to Abraham. Similarly, the church as a new Israel is God's pilgrim people-Christ's eschatological community traveling toward home and fed by eschatological manna, a "manna of eternity."

The fathers enjoy mining Old Testament texts for eucharistic nuggets. Ambrose links a number of old covenant themes to the wonder of the Eucharist: the relationship between the church and synagogue, the manna provided by God to Israel in the wilderness and the unique priesthood of Melchizedek. He is especially concerned "to demonstrate that the sacraments of the Church are more ancient than those of the Synagogue and more excellent than the manna is."³⁹

To prove his thesis, Ambrose analyzes the priesthood of Melchizedek, the priest who encounters Abraham as he returns from the battle of the kings (see Gen 14:14-18). Melchizedek meets with Abraham, Moses' ancestor, and receives tithes from Abraham. Ambrose believes that to encounter Melchizedek is to encounter the Son of God. "Do you recognize who [Melchizedek] is? Can a man be king of righteousness if he is barely righteous? Can he be king of peace if he can barely be peaceable? [Melchizedek] is without mother according to his divinity because he is begotten of God the Father and is of one substance with the Father; he is without father according to his incarnation because he was born

of a virgin. He has neither beginning nor end because he is himself the beginning and end of all things, ,the first and the last"" (see Rev 1:17) 40

Ambrose explores an immediate implication of Melchizedek's true identity for the Eucharist. Because Melchizedek (Christ) is older than Moses, the sacraments of Christ are also "more ancient" than the worship offered in the synagogue, an important point in the ancient world, where older by definition was better. Not only so, but the food offered to the believer in the Eucharist is superior to the manna provided for Israel in the wilderness, a theme we've already explored briefly. Those who ate the manna in the wilderness finally died (Jn 6:49). "The food that you receive, however, the living bread that comes down from heaven,' provides the wherewithal for eternal life, and whoever eats it `shall never die' (Jn 6:50), for it is the body of Christ."

Can "the bread of angels," the manna on which Israel fed in the wilderness, possibly be superior to "the flesh of Christ, which is in fact a life-giving body"? Not at all. "The one, the manna, was from heaven; the other is above heaven. The one was of heaven; the other is of the Lord of heaven. The one was liable to corruption if it was kept for more than a day (cf. Ex 16:19-20); the other is free of all corruption because whoever tastes of it devoutly will be unable to succumb to corruption. 42

Ambrose then ponders the meaning of the water that flowed from the rock in the wilderness and how this event illustrates the dynamic of the Eucharist. "For them there flowed water from a rock (cf. Ex 17:6); for you there is the blood of Christ. Water satisfied them for a time; blood washes you forever.... The one is a shadow; the other is a reality.'43

How can believers be assured that the elements they receive at Holy Communion are actually the body and blood of Christ? Appearance alone would indicate we are simply eating bread and drinking wine. Ambrose turns to the Hebrew Scriptures to answer this question, sure that the examples he offers will

"prove that this [the consecrated bread] is not what nature fashioned it to be but rather what the blessing consecrated, and that there is a greater force in the blessing than there is in nature, because nature itself is altered by the blessing!"⁴⁴

Consider the staff of Moses. When Moses cast his staff to the ground in the presence of Pharaoh, the natural substance of the staff was transformed into a snake. Through God's grace at work in Moses, "the nature of a serpent and of a staff was altered twice."⁴⁵ Or think of the miracle at the Nile. At one moment the Nile is flowing with "pure water." At the next moment, "from out of their sources blood began to pour forth; there was nothing drinkable in the rivers."⁴⁶

The material, natural world is transformed, from water to blood and from blood to water, when Moses prays. In like fashion, when "Moses lifted his staff" the waters of the Red Sea divide and Israel passes through their midst on dry ground. Moses strikes the rock in the wilderness and water pours forth. All these occurrences, Ambrose believes, demonstrate a fundamental principle, "a grace beyond nature at work."⁴⁷ If God has acted graciously in the history of Israel in transforming nature for his saving purposes, why should we be surprised or puzzled if at the Eucharist words of grace transform bread into the body of Christ? "We see, then, that grace has a wider scope than nature.... If a human blessing was so powerful that it could alter nature, what shall we say of that divine consecration in which the very words of the Lord, the Savior, are at work? For the sacrament that you receive is brought about by the word of Christ."⁴⁸

From the perspective of the fathers, the eucharistic memorial of Christ's death is not simply a symbol drawing our memory back to what Christ suffered, an account of the Eucharist Ulrich Zwingli advocated in the sixteenth century and a popular explanation of the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper) in all nonsacramental churches (independent Bible, Baptists of all stripes, most evangelical churches).

Rather, Holy Communion is a remembrance that makes Christ's sacrifice

present to the church in time and space. "What the Lord did not endure on the cross [the breaking of his legs] he submits to now in his sacrifice for his love of you: he permits himself to be broken in pieces that all may be filled.... What is in the chalice is the same as that which flowed from Christ's side. What is the bread? Christ's body" (Chrysostom) 49 Thus, in the Eucharist we not only see Christ on the altar. We "ought to take him in our hands, eat him, put our teeth into his flesh, and unite ourselves with him in the closest union" (Chrysostom) so

Let's explore for a minute the church fathers' thoughts on the Eucharist as a making present of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, surely a controversial idea for many evangelicals. After all, wasn't Christ's death a once for all occurrence? Isn't Christ now reigning at the right hand of the Father? How can we keep sacrificing him again and again? The fathers' response to these crucial questions is straightforward: the sacrifice of the Eucharist is not a repetition of the crucifixion. It is a remembering (Gk. an *innesis*) of the crucifixion in which the past is brought into the present. It is the introduction into present time of a past event.

Chrysostom does not see the Eucharist as many sacrifices because Christ's sacrifice was "offered once." "We always offer the same person ... the same oblation: therefore it is one sacrifice.... Christ is everywhere one, entire in this place and in that, one body ... and so, one sacrifice.... We offer now what was offered then, an inexhaustible offering.... We offer the same sacrifice: or rather we make a memorial of that sacrifice.""

Gregory of Nazianzus calls the Eucharist "a bloodless sacrifice by means of which we have fellowship with Christ, both in his sufferings and in his Godhead."⁵² Gregory employs extremely vivid language to describe the role of the Christian priest in the sacrament of the Eucharist. In a letter to a priest who had prayed for Gregory while he was ill, Gregory mentions "the tongue of a

priest." Not only do a priest's prayers accomplish much, but his words at the Eucharist "draw down the Word, when with a stroke that draws no blood you sever the body and blood of the Lord, using your voice as your sword."⁵³

Many years earlier, Irenaeus referred to the sacrifices offered under the old covenant and compared and contrasted them with the "sacrifice" of the Eucharist. God has no need for sacrifices, whether under the old or new covenants. What God does require are "faith, obedience, and righteousness." The offering of sacrifices to God, though, provides a significant opportunity for remembrance and thanksgiving. "He also counseled his disciples to offer to God the first fruits of his creatures, not because he needed these gifts, but so that they should not be unfruitful nor unthankful. 1114

The sacrament of the Eucharist is the new sacrifice, or "oblation," of the "New Testament," or new covenant. "This oblation the Church receives from the Apostles and throughout the whole world she offers it to God, who supplies as our nourishment the first fruits of his gifts in the New Testament."⁵⁵

The Jews offer sacrifices as "servants," and the church offers a sacrifice as "sons," with each sacrifice possessing its own distinct character. "Only the kind of sacrifice is changed, for now sacrifice is offered, not by servants but by sons. There is one and the same Lord; but a servant's oblation possesses a certain character, as does the sacrifice of sons, so that even by means of the oblations a token of liberty is displayed. 1116

Cyprian employs the language of sacrifice as he discusses the Eucharist. "If Christ Jesus, our Lord and God, is himself the high priest of God the Father, and first offered himself as a sacrifice to the Father, and commanded this to be done in remembrance of himself, then assuredly the priest acts truly in Christ's stead, when he reproduces what Christ did, and he then offers a true and complete sacrifice to God the Father, if he begins to offer as he sees Christ himself has offered."⁵⁷

THE INVOCATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

How does this special remembering occur? The Holy Spirit, in response to the invocation (Gk. epiklesis) of Christ's representative-the pastor or priest presiding-descends on the eucharistic elements. In a word, the past is brought into the present at this particular place through the power of the Holy Spirit. With the epiklesis, or invocation, "the bread becomes the bread of heaven, because the Spirit comes to rest upon it. What is there in front of us is not the work of any human power. He who did this at the Last Supper still does it now. For our part, we hold the rank of servants: it is he who sanctifies and transforms" (Chrysostom) 5S

"We pray God to send the Holy Spirit on the gifts laid here, to make the bread the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ. For the Holy Spirit sanctifies and transforms all that he touches" (Cyril of Jerusalem) s9 In an earthy phrase Ephraim of Syria describes the eucharistic bread as "kneaded and cooked by the Spirit."⁶⁰

Through "the invocation of God" bread "is no longer common bread but Eucharist, consisting of two things, an earthly and a heavenly; so our bodies, after partaking of the eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of eternal resurrection" (Irenaeus).⁶¹ When "the cup that man mixes and the bread that man makes receive the word of God, the Eucharist becomes the body of Christ and by these elements the substance of our flesh receives nourishment and sustenance" (Irenaeus).⁶²

As we just saw, Chrysostom directly couples the invocation of the Holy Spirit with change in the eucharistic elements. The very same Christ who was present at the Last Supper "now adorns this." Chrysostom is very careful in his language; it is not a human being [the priest] who somehow magically transforms the elements. No, it is "Christ himself, who was crucified for us. The priest stands, fulfilling the original pattern, and speaks those words; but the

power and grace come from God."⁶³

Chrysostom draws a parallel between the command given to Adam and Eve to increase and multiply (Gen 1:28) and Christ's promise that "This is my body." `As the command, `increase and multiply,' spoken once, extends through all time, and gives to one human nature the power of reproduction; so the statement, This is my body,' uttered once, makes complete the sacrifice at every table in the churches from that time until now, and even till Christ's coming."⁶⁴ Christ is not sacrificed anew. Rather, Christ's sacrifice at Golgotha is made sacramentally present through the invocation of the Holy Spirit.

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE EUCHARIST

The Father and the Spirit are inseparable from the Son, though the church fathers are clear that it is the incarnate Son's body and blood on which the church feeds. To commune with the Son in the Eucharist is to commune with the Spirit and through the Spirit with the Father. The Eucharist is a trinitarian meal. The fathers connect Paul's exhortation to not be "drunk on wine" but "filled with the Spirit" (Eph 5:18) to the Eucharist and the communion with the Son the Spirit offers: "For one who is drunk with wine totters and reels. But one who is intoxicated with the Spirit is rooted in Christ" (Ambrose).⁶¹

The early church viewed the Eucharist as a unifying meal, celebrated under the supervision of the bishop, priests and deacons. Union with Christ and union with other believers in Christ's body were inseparable realities. "When the Lord calls his body bread, made from the collection of a large number of grains, he is pointing to the unity of our people. And when he calls his blood wine, which is pressed from a large number of grapes to form a single liquid, he signifies that our flock is made up of a multitude gathered into unity" (Cyprian) ⁶⁶

Hilary of Poitiers also speaks of the unity the Eucharist represents and produces. Hilary turns his readers' attention to Jesus' words in John 14:19-20:

"Since I live, you also will live, since I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." This is not a unity engineered or produced by the human will. Rather, it is a unity in the life of Christ shared by all members of his body. Jesus' "purpose surely was that we should believe that he was in the Father by nature, as being divine; whereas we are in him in virtue of his birth in the flesh, and he is in us through the mystery of the sacraments: and that thus we should have a doctrine of a unity consummated through the Mediator."⁶⁷

The unity of the Eucharist is rooted in Christ's willingness to give his body for us. As we feed on him, he abides in us; in turn, because Christ always abides in the Father, we abide in the Father through him. The Eucharist is a "real and natural unity" between the believer, Christ and the Father, an "honor granted to us by the Son, and the Son's dwelling in us through his flesh, while we are united to him bodily and inseparably."⁶⁸

The ecclesial unity the Eucharist represents is grounded in our reconciliation to God accomplished by Christ on our behalf. The Didache-a very early church document-teaches that the Eucharist is a meal in which reconciliation with God is replicated on a finite scale as reconciled members of Jesus' body share in bread and wine. "On the Lord's Day assemble together and break bread and give thanks, first making public confession of your faults, that your sacrifice may be pure. If any man has a quarrel with a friend, let him not join your assembly until they are reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled. 1169

FRUITFUL UNION WITH CHRISTI THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE EUCHARIST

The eucharistic liturgy celebrates the fruitfulness of our union with Christ; union with Christ births union with one another in Christ and union between heaven and earth. Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican eucharistic liturgies exhort the gathered community to "lift up your hearts." The church responds, "We lift them to the Lord." Or, as Patrick Henry Reardon paraphrases: "Hearts up!"⁷⁰

Orthodox theologian Olivier Clement sees in this liturgical exhortation a reminder that in the celebration of the Eucharist heaven and earth join together in the praise of God, a thought we find echoed in Chrysostom. "On high the armies of the angels are giving praise. Here below, in the Church, the human choir takes up after them the same doxology.... The festival of heaven's citizens is united with that of the inhabitants of earth in a single thanksgiving, a single upsurge of happiness, a single chorus of joy.""

What the church celebrates in the Eucharist should ripple through the ethical dimensions of its daily life. Here is the pattern: In the Eucharist we share sacramentally in the life of Christ. Similarly, on the basis of Christ's own teaching, our own brothers and sisters in the church-particularly the poor-are mini sacraments. To care for our needy brother or sister is to care for Christ. To love them is to love Christ. To ignore them is to ignore Christ (Mt 25:40-46). No person felt more strongly about these ethical aspects of the Eucharist than John Chrysostom.

Do you wish to honor the body of the Savior? Do not despise it when it is naked. Do not honor the church with silk vestments while outside you are leaving it numb with cold and naked. He who said, "This is my body," and made it so by his word, is the same that said, "You saw me hungry and you gave me no food. As you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." Honor him then by sharing your property with the poor. For what God needs is not golden chalices but golden souls.⁷²

Olivier Clement paraphrases John's thoughts: "No one can receive God's pardon and peace in the Eucharist without also becoming a person of pardon and peace. No one can take part in the Eucharistic feast without becoming a person prepared to share."⁷³ All believers, then, are called to become "eucharistic persons.... The eucharistic celebration is an apprenticeship in new relations among people, and between people and things; it cannot but have a prophetic

dimension."⁷⁴

Augustine is deeply skeptical of those who would claim to be faithfilled partakers of the Eucharist while simultaneously leading a hellish life. In the *City of God* Augustine ponders the implications of Paul's teaching in Galatians 5:19-21, where Paul warns his readers that those who practice "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like ... will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Yes, Augustine acknowledges, Jesus has promised that anyone who eats the bread of his body will live forever (Jn 6:50-51). Yet Jesus' words do not promise "liberation from the fire of eternal punishment to those who have lapsed from the unity of that Body," nor forgiveness to those who consider themselves members of the Catholic church while "their moral behavior is disreputable and deserving of condemnation."⁷⁵

Those who continue to live in such rampant sin have effectively deserted Christ and Christ's body, the church. "Those who behave in that way will inevitably be in eternal punishment, seeing that it will be impossible for them to be in the Kingdom of God. For in persevering in such conduct to their life's end they are not to be said to have persevered in Christ right up to the end, because to persevere in Christ means to persevere in faith in him."⁷⁶

Not only so, but those who deny Christ in their behavior "cannot be said to eat Christ's body, since they are not to be reckoned among the members of Christ. Apart from anything else, they cannot at the same time be members of Christ and members of a harlot" (see 1 Cor 6:15).⁷⁷ Christ himself taught that "whoever who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him (John 6:56)." If so, as Augustine views matters, those who willfully continue in sin cannot possibly be said to be in Christ.

In effect, continuous, unrepentant, rebellious sin violates the heart and core of the Eucharist. Augustine, reflecting Paul's own teaching, insists that the sacrament must be sealed off from those "for whom it would not be fitting" (cf. 1 Cor 11:23-34). Yet we are never without hope. The most rampant sinner, through repentance and confession, can find "fertile ground" in the Eucharist "into which we can sink our roots deep." The result? "Good fruit-bearing trees" sprouting "with good fruit thanks to their new and fertile origin" (Ambrose) 71

A SPIRITUAL FEEDING

Occasionally early Christian writers interpret feeding on Christ's body and blood as a metaphor for feeding on Christ spiritually. Clement of Alexandria speaks of a "Strange mystery!" Christians are called by God to change their diet. "We are asked to put off our old fleshly corruption, as we leave off our old food, and partake of a new diet, that of Christ; to store him, as far as we can, in ourselves and take the Savior to our hearts, that we may put in order the affections of the flesh." Clement then interprets allegorically and somewhat fancifully Christ's words concerning his body and blood. "Put it this way. 'My flesh' is an allegory for the Holy Spirit, for the flesh is his handiwork. 'Blood,' by analogy, stands for the Word, for the Word is like rich blood poured into our life. The mixture of flesh and blood is the Lord, the food of his infants; the Lord is Spirit and Word. The food-that is the Lord Jesus, that is, the Word of God, Spirit made flesh-is the sanctified heavenly flesh."79

Origen too at times opts for a spiritual interpretation of the Eucharist. Yes, he recognizes, "we are said to drink the blood of Christ ... in the way of sacraments." But we also drink his blood "when we receive his words, in which life consists; as he himself says, The words which I have spoken are spirit and life" (cf. Jn 6:63).⁸⁰ "That drink which God the Word proclaims as his blood is the word which 'so wonderfully refreshes and inebriates' (Ps 104:115).... The bread is the word of righteousness which by eating our souls are nourished, while the drink is the word of the recognition of Christ according to the mystery

of his birth and passion.""

Athanasius's understanding of the Eucharist is remarkably similar to that of John Calvin, the sixteenth-century reformer. Calvin believed Christ was spiritually present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist after the invocation (epiklesis) of the Holy Spirit, though not physically present. After Christ's ascension his physical body remained at the right hand of the Father. Through the Spirit, though, Christ was genuinely present in the eucharistic elements. In like manner, Athanasius focuses on the ascension of Christ, commenting that the ascension points us away from a "material notion" of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Christ is indeed present, but in a spiritual fashion. "The reason for his mention of the ascension into heaven of the Son of Man (cf. John 6:61ff.) was in order to draw them away from the material notion; that thenceforward they might learn that the flesh he spoke of was heavenly food from above and spiritual nourishment given from him. For, he says, 'What I have spoken to you is spirit and life,' which is as much to say, 'What is displayed and given for the world's salvation is the flesh which I wear: but this flesh and its blood will be given to you by me spiritually as nourishment, so that this may be bestowed spiritually on each, and may become for individuals a safeguard to ensure resurrection to eternal life .1182

THE TRANSFORMATION OF BREAD AND WINE

Cyril of Jerusalem, writing in the same century as Athanasius, explicitly states that Christ transforms the bread and wine of the Eucharist into his body and blood, though he refrains from trying to explain how such a transformation occurs. Cyril is not surprised by the transformation of the elements. After all, had not Christ clearly taught that "This is my body" and "This is my blood" (cf. 1 Cor 11:24-25)? Sounding much like Martin Luther, Cyril writes: "Since Christ himself in his own words asserted of the bread, 'This is my body,' who will dare any longer to have doubts? And since in his own words he insisted, 'This is my blood,' who will have any doubts or say that it is not his blood?""

The transformation of the eucharistic elements is a wondrous, mysterious affair. Should this surprise us? Cyril points to the miracle of the wedding at Cana of Galilee. If Christ changed water into wine at Cana, why should we consider it "incredible that he should change wine into blood"? Cyril continues: "Therefore with complete assurance let us partake of those elements as being the body and blood of Christ. For in the symbol of bread his body is given to you, and in the symbol of wine his blood; so that by partaking of the body and blood of Christ you may be made of the same body and blood with him."⁸⁴

Cyril speaks of a quite realistic nourishing in the Eucharist as Christ's body and blood is "distributed in the parts of our body." Cyril admits that the bread and wine will still appear and taste the same. Faith, though, will embrace what the eye and tongue cannot perceive. "Therefore think of the bread and wine not as merely that, for they are in fact, according to the Lord's express statement, the body and blood of Christ. For though sense suggests the mere elements, let faith assure you otherwise. Do not judge the matter from taste, but from faith be assured, without hesitation, that you have been granted the body and blood of Christ. 1185

GROUND RULES FOR THE EUCHARIST

Christians participated in communion quite frequently. Ignatius encourages the Ephesians to gather together for the Eucharist often; he views the meal as an apt antidote for the attacks of the devil. "Therefore be eager for more frequent gatherings for thanksgiving [eucharist] to God and for his glory. For when you meet frequently the forces of Satan are annulled and his destructive power is cancelled in the concord of your faith. There is nothing better than peace, in which all hostility is abolished, whether it comes from the powers of heaven or the powers of earth .1181

Basil, close to three hundred years after Ignatius, writes that he received the Eucharist "four times a week: on the Lord's Day, on Wednesday, on Friday, and

on the Sabbath; and on other days if there is a commemoration of any saint."" Jerome reports that it was "the custom" in the churches of Rome and Spain "to fast on the Sabbath and to receive the Eucharist daily."⁸⁸

Only the baptized could participate in the Eucharist. The Didache (first or second century A.D.) commands: "Let none eat or drink of this Eucharist of yours except those who have been baptized into the name of the Lord. For on this point the Lord said, 'Do not give what is holy to the dogs. 11,⁸¹ Justin Martyr comments that "only those are allowed to partake who believe in the truth of our teaching and have received the washing for the remission of sins and for regeneration; and who live in accordance with the directions of Christ."⁹⁰ Chrysostom (late fourth century A.D.) almost offhandedly observes that "it is not fitting that someone who has not been initiated through baptism" should partake of the Eucharist.⁹¹ The Eucharist is a community meal and celebration for members of Christ's body, the church, a community that, from the perspective of the church fathers, one enters through the waters of baptism.

The idea that one enters into relationship with Christ through faith would make absolute sense to the fathers. That this faith should be somehow separated from baptism would surely be considered an exception to the rule. Hence, the connection the fathers make between faith, baptism and the Eucharist. No one of the three should be thought of in separation from the others.

Cyril of Jerusalem provides details on how communion was received. The right and left hand of the communicant would form a cup into which the bread was placed. Communicants would then touch their eyes with the bread before consuming it. "When you approach, therefore, do not come forward with wrists outstretched, or with fingers spread open. Make your left hand, as it were, a throne for the right, since it is about to receive a king; hollow your palm, and receive the body of Christ, adding your Amen.' Then, after you have carefully hallowed your eyes by the touch of the holy body, partake of it. Take care to lose

none of it."⁹²

Believers would also share in the cup; while their lips were still moist communicants touched their hands to their lips. In turn they touched their eyes, forehead, "and the rest of" their "organs of sense," sanctifying them. A final prayer followed in which thanks was given "to God who [had] counted [them] worthy of admission to those great mysteries."⁹³

Cyril's mention of communicants hallowing different parts of their bodies by touching them with the bread and wine of the Eucharist brings to mind an interesting story told by Gregory of Nazianzus concerning the healing of his sister Gorgonia. Gorgonia was deathly ill. No physicians had been able to heal her. In her desperation she "had recourse to the Physician of all mankind." In the middle of the night Gorgonia came to the altar of the Eucharist. She "fell on her knees before the altar with faith, calling with a loud cry and with every kind of invocation upon him who is honored upon the altar, recalling to him all his mighty acts, whenever they were performed."⁹⁴ Imitating the "impudence" of the woman with a flow of blood (Lk 8:43-48), Gorgonia clung to the altar. She "threatened that she would not leave off until she was restored to health."

Although the text of Gregory's funeral oration for Gorgonia contains ambiguous language, Gorgonia apparently seized the reserved, consecrated Eucharistic bread on the altar and "applied to her whole body this medicine." Gregory reports that she was immediately healed. "And wonder of wonders, she at once perceived that she was healed, and went away, light in body and soul and mind, having received what she hoped for as a reward for that hope, and having gained strength of body because of her strength of soul. An extraordinary story, but quite true.""

AUGUSTINE AND THE SACRAMENTS

We close our discussion of the sacraments with a look at the thought of

Augustine. Space allows for only a brief overview, but we do need to think through certain key issues with Augustine. A key question for Augustine, especially as he considered the sacraments in the wider context of his debate with his Donatist opponents, concerned the efficacy of sacraments performed by heretics or unbelievers.

The Donatists, a group of Christians situated largely in North Africa and named after one of their early leaders (Donatus), had broken away from the Catholic Church. The question at the heart of the Donatist controversy was this: Were the rites and sacraments of the church, such as baptism and ordination, validly exercised and practiced by those who had lapsed during a time of persecution ?⁹⁶

The Donatists pictured the church as a pure, holy society inhabited only by pure, holy believers. From a Donatist perspective, any priest who had denied the faith during persecution proved himself to be an unbeliever. Thus, baptisms and Eucharists celebrated by apostate priests were no sacraments at all. Only a pure church could offer holy sacraments.

Augustine disagreed strongly with the Donatist demand for a pure church offering pure sacraments. The Donatists were demanding purity only attainable at the end of this present evil age. For life between the ages, between the first and second coming of Christ, the church is a *permixta ecclesia*, a mixed society made up of wheat and chaff, good fish and bad.

If you do not wish to be deceived and if you want to continue loving one another, be aware that each way of life in the church has hypocrites in her ranks.... There are bad Christians, but there are also good ones. At first glance you see a great number of bad Christians, who as a thick layer of chaff prevent you from reaching the good grains of corn ⁹⁷

As I've written elsewhere, for Augustine this present age is a time of

"humiliation" for the church in which she "is preparing for future exaltation." Presently, the church "is being trained by the stings of fear, the tortures of sorrow, the distresses of hardship, and the dangers of temptation; and she rejoices only in expectation, when her joy is wholesome."⁹⁸ During her pilgrimage home "many reprobates are mingled in the Church with the good, and both sorts are collected as it were in the dragnet of the gospel; and in this world, as in a sea, both kinds swim without separation, enclosed in nets until the shore is reached." It is when the sojourning, pilgrim church reaches her final destination "that the evil are to be divided from the good, and among the good, as it were in his temple, `God will be all in all.'"

What, then, of the sacraments? If a priest who had denied the faith during a time of persecution subsequently celebrated the Eucharist, was the sacrament itself defiled? How was the faith of the celebrant related to the efficacy of a sacrament? In the previous century, Cyprian had argued that people baptized by heretical priests, that is, priests who had broken away from the Catholic Church, needed to be rebaptized by orthodox, faithful clergy. Cyprian reasoned that "Christ's baptism could not exist among heretics or schismatics."¹⁰⁰

Augustine disagrees with Cyprian's position and offers the following sacramental principle: a sacrament can be offered by a wicked person and still be efficacious for the person receiving it. "Even when a wandering sheep has received the Lord's brand-mark at the hands of dishonest robbers, and then comes into the security of Christian unity, it is restored, freed, and healed.... No difference is made to the sanctity of baptism by the demerit of the individual who receives or confers it."¹⁰¹ A person's baptism from the hands of a schismatic was valid, as long as the person receiving baptism was not in schism himself. However, "if the recipient is in schism the peril of its [baptism] reception is measured by the greatness of the good which he has received when in no state of good. 11102 If the schismatic later repented of his schism, he could be admitted to the Catholic Church without being rebaptized.

The Donatist church, then, "was separated from the bond of love and peace, but joined in the one baptism." Though the Donatists were willfully separated from their Catholic brothers and sisters, the baptism practiced in Donatist churches was Catholic baptism. It was the Catholic church "which gives birth" to the Christians baptized in Donatist churches, though "not all to whom the Church gives birth are attached to that unity which will save those `who persevere to the end'" (Mt 10:22).¹⁰³

Baptism and the Eucharist are the possession of Christ, not of the particular people celebrating them. The water used in baptism remains pure when "the name of God is invoked," even if the person invoking the divine name is a wicked person. "The baptism which is consecrated by the words of Christ in the Gospels is holy, even when conferred by the polluted.... This holiness is itself incapable of contamination, and the power of God supports his sacrament, whether for the salvation of those who use it correctly, or the doom of those who employ it wrongly. The light of the sun, or of a lamp, is not defiled by contact with the filth on which it shines: so how can Christ's baptism be defiled by the wickedness of any man?" ¹⁰⁴

A FINAL REFLECTION

In my own journey with Christ I have learned to see the world through a sacramental lens. The church fathers have helped me to understand and embrace a sacramental worldview, as have other worthies such as Aquinas, Luther and Calvin. But I would be remiss if I neglected to mention another person who has deeply shaped my faith and perspective: Uncle Bob.

I still have the New Testament Uncle Bob gave me in 1968 as I began my college days at UCLA. Uncle Bob could see I was a searching, frustrated, angry young man; I longed to know God but had little idea of how to reach him. God seemed distant, inaccessible, incomprehensible. Uncle Bob's consistent, patient, often humorous coaching over the years, in his words and in his life, brought

Christ close to me.

On many weekends I would drive up the coast to Uncle Bob and Aunt Ern's house in Portola Valley, often times showing up unexpectedly. There was always a spare room for me. I'd hunker down with earphones over my head, listening to the Doors for hours on end, and occasionally making an appearance at a meal, oftentimes voicing my displeasure with God, Christians and the world in general. My aunt and uncle would listen patiently, frequently to the same rant repeated ad nauseam, and would try to answer my questions, sometimes with greater success, sometimes with less. I wonder if they knew how closely I was listening and watching. They weren't perfect, but I thought to myself, if there is such a thing as genuine Christians, they would look like them.

With the help of Uncle Bob, Aunt Ern and many others, I finally found myself in the kingdom of God. I can't remember a specific day or time when I first believed in Christ. All I know is that a day came when I crossed a line in the sand-the line between belief and unbelief, faith and mistrust. A friend of mine baptized me in the Pacific Ocean. I had little understanding of the church and absolutely none concerning sacraments. All I knew was that I loved Jesus, believed he had died for my sins, and that he somehow had a plan for my life.

I stayed in contact over the ensuing years with Uncle Bob as my faith and understanding grew slowly but steadily. I studied the Bible at a Jesus freak Bible school-the Light and Power House in West L.A.-and then at Fuller Theological Seminary. I later served as a church planter and pastor in France, returned to graduate school at Regent College and then Drew University, and began teaching theology at Eastern University in 1991. All along Uncle Bob was a presence in my life, though a more distant presence because of our family's move east.

I still remember the phone call I received sometime in the early 90s. It was Uncle Bob. We chatted for a while and then he dropped the bombshell: "I've become a Roman Catholic." "What?" I exclaimed. "Does Aunt Ern know about

this?" "Yes," Uncle Bob replied. "She's not real happy." Aunt Ern's unhappy response to Uncle Bob's move into Catholicism was no surprise to me. She was the daughter of evangelical missionaries. Uncle Bob's parents, my grandmother and grandfather, had been Presbyterian medical missionaries in Korea. I couldn't imagine anyone in the family rejoicing over Uncle Bob's decision. I'm sure many were thinking it would only be a passing phase.

I remember asking Uncle Bob a specific question during that phone call: "Why?" "Well," he responded, "I've been going to Communion for years and have always been told that all we're doing is simply remembering Christ. I never really agreed with that. It always seemed to me there was more going on." His voice on the phone choked up a little bit, I think with joy.

I wish Uncle Bob was still with us. Sadly, in the mid 90s he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Before long, the disease spread to his lungs. One of my happiest memories of that hard time is having dinner with Uncle Bob at a Red Lobster restaurant in Wilmington, Delaware. He had come out for a visit-it would prove to be his last trip east-and I had picked him up from the airport down in Baltimore. On our drive back to Philly we managed to visit four states as we continually lost our way, immersed as we were in discussions about Christ, the Eucharist, the cross and Jesus' resurrection from the dead. That night at dinner Uncle Bob teared up whenever we talked about the Eucharist. I was able to share some thoughts from the fathers with him on Communion, and he ate it up.

Uncle Bob remained a member in good standing in his local Presbyterian church while simultaneously enjoying the sacramental life the Catholic Church offered. I think he managed to obtain some kind of special dispensation from his local bishop to pull this off. It was just like him to bridge two worlds that for so long have been separated. And it still makes me smile to remember his happiness at finding Christ in the most unexpected places bread and wine. I cried hard when

I learned Uncle Bob had passed away.

I've not become a Catholic. I worship in a local evangelical Episcopal church (yes, there are some). There are still some things that Catholics and yes, the church fathers, affirm that I just can't buy. But I'm listening and thinking and praying. It wouldn't surprise me if Uncle Bob is praying for me too and perhaps even chuckling to himself, "if only you knew." I think the fathers would be pleased.

PART TWO

PRAYER



We must offer God not expensive sacrifices, but those he loves. The compounded incense that was commanded in the Law (Ex 30:34) is the blending of many tongues and voices in prayer.... We pray for those things we ask for, and we ask for those things that we desire. Our prayers and desires correspond; they aim at the good things and the benefits available in creation.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA MISCELLANIES I

We must devote ourselves more to prayer. For prayer is like the leader of the chorus of virtues. Through it we ask for the other virtues from God. The person devoted to prayer has fellowship with God and comes in contact with him through a mystical holiness, a spiritual energy, and an inexpressible disposition. Taking the Spirit as our guide and fellow contestant, our love for the Lord is kindled, and we seethe with longing. Since no satiety in prayer is found, we are always burning with passion for the Good and stirring up the soul.

GREGORY OF NYSSA ON THE CHRISTIAN MODE OF LIFE 2

The brothers also asked Agathon, "Among all good works, which is the virtue which requires the greatest effort?" He answered, "Forgive me, but I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it, he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath.

APOTHEGMATA PATRUM3

Some asked Abba Macarius, "How ought we to pray?" The old man said to them, "There is no need to make long prayers, but extend your hands and say, 'Lord, as you will and as you know, have mercy.' If the conflict is urgent within you, say, 'Lord, help.' He knows what is good for us, and he acts with mercy toward us."

APOTHEGMATA PATRUM4

T H R E E

THE BASICS OF PRAYER

I've encountered a number of difficulties in writing about the church fathers' understanding of prayer. First, prayer itself is difficult to write about, largely because it is difficult to comprehend. What a strange way God has designed and ordained for us to communicate and commune with him. I speak to God, yet I don't see God. I've never heard God respond audibly to my prayers. On my worst days I wonder, is God really there? Is God listening? Can God make any sense of my babblings? Am I talking too much? Does the Lord wish I would just quiet down a bit? Isn't prayer supposed to be a two-way conversation? If it is a dialogue, how do I know when God is speaking to me? How can I discern God's voice and distinguish it from the lingering effects of last night's pizza? And, my goodness, am I distracted. The moment I sit down to pray I feel as though ten thousand bumble bees are flying through the atmosphere of my brain. So much interference. So much static. Things I haven't thought about in years suddenly bubble to the surface of my consciousness. The to-do list for today that I've been ignoring for hours suddenly becomes a high priority. What is one to do?

Not only is prayer inherently mysterious and difficult, but the fathers themselves can be obtuse, cloudy, highly technical and madly esoteric in their discussion of prayer. Simultaneously there are diamonds of insight in the patristic writings on prayer that I've found nowhere else. The challenge I face in communicating with you, the reader, is that of bridge-building. How do I bring the prayer life of the fathers into the twenty-first century without drowning myself or others in too much detail, technical vocabulary or instances of patristic folly rather than wisdom? Quite a challenge.

I've decided to basically abandon my first draft of this book's chapters on

prayer. Here's why: I originally focused on specific patristic treatises on prayer, some of which centered on the Lord's Prayer. These readings included Gregory of Nyssa's *The Lord's Prayer*, *The Beatitudes*, Origen's treatise *Prayer*, Tertullian's *On Prayer* and John Cassian's ninth and tenth *Conferences*, both devoted to prayer.' All four works are insightful, wise, rich and dense; however, they are not easily accessible. In my previous draft I recognized the density, detail and richness of these works, laid them out for the reader-almost line by line-but did little to build a bridge between the modern reader, whose struggles with prayer might be quite similar to mine, and those of these four great writers. It was as though I plopped a chocolate angel food cake in readers' laps and asked them to eat it at one sitting. The first bite or two might be tasty, but mouthful after mouthful would be overwhelming. Indigestion and discouragement could only result. Smaller, manageable desserts seem the recipe to follow.

So I've decided to take a different tack in this revised draft. I'll surely draw on the insights Gregory of Nyssa, Origen, Tertullian and John Cassian have to offer, but I'll also be perusing a wider group of early Christian writers, hopefully broadening our pool of wisdom and insight in the process. In addition, I'll occasionally be drawing on the insights of Olivier Clement.

Clement has written a wonderful book titled *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, a text whose references to the church fathers' thoughts on the Eucharist I found quite helpful in chapter two of this book.' The title of Clement's book might worry some readers, particularly evangelicals. Don't worry. This is not a book about Buddhist or Hindu mysticism. It is a book on key concepts of the spiritual life: the incarnation of the Son and its wide implications for our lives in Christ, spiritual warfare, the struggle we all face with passions, prayer and the call to love. Most of the book consists of direct quotations from the fathers, but Clement's comments are themselves invaluable.

During our exploration of prayer we'll also examine a wider range of church fathers and their modern interpreters. Hopefully, by the time we've finished examining the church fathers' thoughts on prayer over the next three chapters, we'll have a good understanding of how the fathers viewed prayer and how it can best be applied to the lives of Christians today. It is best to know from the beginning that some of the fathers' thoughts and practices will resonate with members of particular Christian communities, while leaving other Christians cold and even confused. In this book I'm particularly trying to build a bridge between the church fathers and the broadtent evangelical world. I ask, then, for the patience of Orthodox and Catholic readers when I may oversimplify, omit or misinterpret key patristic perspectives on prayer. Though I've spent a fair amount of time in the world of the fathers, aspects of their thinking and lives are still new terrain for me. I continue to learn as I travel their home country.

THE MYSTERY OF PRAYER

So what is prayer? Do the fathers provide us with any clear-cut definitions? Consider the following:

Prayer is conversation with God (Clement of Alexandria).⁷ Conversation with God is like and unlike conversation with other human beings. As I communicate with human beings, I must verbally communicate the thoughts within my mind—whether through my voice or through my pen—or we as humans will remain sealed off from one another. You don't know what I'm thinking until I tell you. My body language or facial expressions may provide a clue, but unless I speak a thought into the air or onto paper, mutual communication remains sorely crippled. Even the deaf must learn a language in which they communicate to those who can and can't hear: their hands speak their thoughts. Without their movements or signals, no communication happens.

Communication with God seems quite different from communication between human beings. For one thing, as Clement of Alexandria perceives, God knows

our thoughts before we ever express them. Silence may seal off other human beings from what we're thinking, but it's useless against God.

"God knows absolutely the thoughts of all. What the voice communicates to us, our thoughts speak to God. For, even before the creation, He knew what would come into our minds. So prayer may be uttered without the voice."⁸

Of course, the question immediately arises: if God knows what I'm thinking anyway, why bother talking? If God knows what I'm going to ask for in prayer- and knew this before time began-why bother asking? What difference does my asking really make? God's omniscience seems to foreclose genuine dialogue and meaningful communication with humans, unless more must be taken into account in prayer than what God knows. Let's explore this issue for a moment, because a misperception of God's omniscience can paralyze our prayers.

I think we can find an answer in what the church fathers mean by theology. Generally for the fathers, theology is reflection on, worship of and prayer to the Holy Trinity, the personal, wondrous, loving, inseparable, unmixed union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Maximus the Confessor defines theology as the doctrine of God the Trinity, the initiation "into the mystery of the mode of existence of the creative Cause of things." The Lord's Prayer, with its invocation of God as "Father," helps "us learn from the source himself to honor, to invoke, and to adore the one Trinity."⁹ "Prayer and theology are inseparable. True theology is the adoration offered by the intellect. The intellect clarifies the movement of prayer, but only prayer can give it the fervor of the Spirit. Theology is light, prayer is fire."¹⁰

Before time ever existed, before God's creative Word commanded the first atom to pop into being, Father, Son and Holy Spirit danced timelessly and lovingly, always giving, always receiving, always loving. To be God, then, is to be love in communion.

The Triune God has freely chosen to share this love with his creation. God did not create because he was lonely; God was always in communion, always dancing, if you will. Yet the divine love has willingly run beyond its borders and is rippling through the universe, if only we have eyes to see. He has invited us to join the dance. Yes, the knowledge the Trinity possesses is infinite. But God's knowledge is inseparable from God's love.

So what might be the implications of divine, loving knowledge for our question: "If God knows already, why ask?" The answer could be as simple as this: love often likes to be asked something, even when it knows the answer. Such is the nature of love. "We like our children to ask us for things that we already know they need because the very asking enhances and deepens the relationship.... Love loves to be told what it knows already.... It wants to be asked for what it longs to give."¹¹

THE PROBLEM OF SELF-DECEPTION

Our lives, our habitual patterns of thinking and behaving, are inseparable from our prayers. If our thoughts and actions are habitually angry—a significant issue for the church fathers—our anger will inevitably infect our prayers. "Prayer should be uttered from a spirit like the Spirit to whom it is sent.... What reason is there to go to prayer with hands indeed washed, but the spirit foul?" (Tertullian).¹² My, that was direct, but it's par for the course with Tertullian.

Tertullian is raising the volume for a reason. We are deeply, horribly, infinitely self-deceived. And our fundamental self-deception manifests itself in a deep-seated tendency to lie about the true state of affairs in our lives. We imagine ourselves generous yet rarely give anything away. Pure in our thinking yet addicted to a weekly jaunt through the Web's darkest corridors. We can blithely assassinate someone's character and five minutes later be sitting in a worship service or retreat center, praying for the very same person whose character we murdered earlier. Our habituated thoughts and behaviors are who we are—they are

us, our character. And it is our character that we bring into prayer with us. This doesn't mean that we should stop praying, for prayer is a principal means of healing and reshaping our character into the image of Christ.

It does mean, as Tertullian points out, that it's impossible to separate our lives into hermetically sealed boxes-my spiritual life in Box A, my day-today life in Box B. The walls of these boxes are permeable; they leak. What's going on outside of prayer invariably leaks into prayer itself.

Prayer is not the time to show off. The church fathers took Jesus' instructions to retire to one's room to pray alone very seriously (Mt 6:5-15). They seem reluctant to have individuals pray publicly, at least in terms of public, spontaneous prayer, because of the danger of using prayer as a method of self-promotion. The fathers viewed with wariness exaggerated posturing, speaking loudly in prayer as though we needed to catch God's notice, and any attempt to draw attention to oneself rather than God in prayer. Tertullian, I think with a hint of humor, advises us to use a "subdued" voice in prayer, rather than a loud one. "For, if we are to be heard for our noise, what large windpipes we would need! But God is the hearer-not of the voice but of the heart."¹³ "It is characteristic of the shameless man to be noisy with his cries" (Cyprian)¹⁴

He does not need to be clamorously reminded, for he sees peoples' thoughts.... Hannah prayed to God, not with clamorous petition, but silently and modestly-within the very recesses of her heart. She spoke with hidden prayer, but with open faith. She spoke with her heart, not her voice."

We don't need to shout to wake a sleepy deity. God is always listening and watching. To be truthful, it is we who possess the hardened eardrums and have blinders on our eyes. "Be constant in both prayer and reading," Cyprian exhorts, "First, speak with God; then let God speak with you. Let Him instruct you in His teachings, let Him direct you."¹⁶

The fathers wisely understood that God is the audience for our prayers, not our family, the members of our small group, the larger congregation or TV spectators. This is not to say that the fathers forbade public prayer. Tertullian acknowledges that Paul and Silas sang in prison, with wonderful results (Acts 16:25-34). It is to say that the fathers understood that pride often undetectably infects even the most holy actions. Human beings adore center stage and the spotlight. We can deceive ourselves too easily, imagining that we are talking to God when we are only talking to ourselves, sometimes about ourselves.

I'm reminded of Jesus' words about the hypocritical Pharisee: "The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-robbers, evildoers, adulterers-or even like this tax collector'" (Lk 18:11, emphasis added). The Pharisee's self-deception and pride bloated, exaggerated self-estimation-blinded him to the truth. Is he "not like other men"? Hardly. Indeed, this Pharisee's state before God has placed him in a very perilous position. If he remains blind, he will never see his need for the truth and will continue his merry, deeply self-deceived journey through life. A false self-estimation has trapped him in a dead zone of self-deceit.

LEARNING TO PRAY

Can we learn to pray? How does learning to pray occur? Contemplate the following questions: Who taught you to pray? Was it your parents? Your pastor? Your youth group leader? What did they teach you about prayer? What did they model for you? How did they speak in prayer? Were there patterns of speech that you heard again and again and discover have entered your own speech patterns in prayer? For example, I've noticed the following speech pattern in evangelical prayer-talk: "Lord, we just ask that you would bless the worship today. We just pray that there would be a movement of your Spirit within us. We just ask that you would touch grandma's body and heal her. We just confess our sins to you." What word keeps reappearing in these prayers? Why do we keep saying just? As I've pondered this question, I think the use of just is an evangelical way of

showing reverence for God, strange as this may sound. We know we don't deserve to be in God's presence. We don't want to presume on God's generosity. So at least some of us fill our sentences with just to let God know that we're aware of how much we're asking and that we realize all we receive from God finds its source in God's grace. Others of us, perhaps most, have never really thought about the language we use in prayer or the models of prayer we've assimilated; we haven't thought carefully about what we're doing and why we're doing it.

I bring up the issue of models for prayer because the church fathers believed that our dispositions-our deeply habituated thoughts, words and actions-are shaped by those we listen to and imitate. There are, for instance, some people who really know how to pray. King David comes to mind. A principle reason that the ancient church prayed the psalms again and againearly monastic communities would pray all 150 psalms in one day-was a firm belief that the repetition of the psalms nurtured the dispositions that foster prayer. Through repetition, the dispositions and words of the psalmist, the fathers believe, become those of the one who continually prays the psalms. Early monastic communities offered this model to the church as a whole.

As Christians prayed the psalms day and night, they increasingly realized that by praying the psalms David's experiences in prayer and spiritual growth could become their own. Athanasius emphasized this point in his letter to Marcellinus on the interpretation of the psalms. The "astonishing thing in the Psalms" is how they transform the one praying them. Many psalms lend themselves to personal appropriation: "the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs."⁷ The experience of the psalmist, whether it is the confession of sin, the experience of persecution or the exaltation of worship, slowly seeps into the experience of those who pray them repeatedly. "He who recites the Psalms is uttering the rest as his own words, and each sings them as if they were written

concerning him, and he accepts them and recites them not as if another were speaking, nor as if speaking about someone else. But he handles them as if he is speaking about himself."18

The psalms are like a "mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul, and thus affected, he might recite them." As David confesses his sins, those who pray with him confess their own. "For in fact he who hears the one reading receives the song that is recited as being about him, and either, when he is convicted by his conscience, being pierced, he will repent, or hearing of the hope that resides in God, and of the succor available to believers-how this kind of grace exists for him-he exults and begins to give thanks to God."19 John Cassian reiterates Athanasius's point: "Penetrated by the same feelings in which the psalm was composed, it is as if we became the authors of it.... The sacred words reawaken our experience, reminding us of the assaults we have undergone and still undergo, every day, of the marks of our negligence or, on the contrary, of our fervor, blessings of divine visitation or wiles of the enemy, the havoc wrought by the forgetfulness that is so ready to creep into our soul, our frailty ... and our blindness."20

The correspondence between the experience of the psalmist and the experience of those who pray the psalms after him is the work of the Holy Spirit. `And so, on the whole, each Psalm is both spoken and composed by the Spirit so that in these same words ... the stirrings of our souls might be grasped, and all of them be said as concerning us, and the same issue from us as our own words, for a remembrance of the emotions in us, and a chastening of our life. For what those who chant have said, these things also can be examples and standards for us.'"

The goal of praying the psalms daily, even hourly, is not vain repetition. It is the forming and shaping of human character. "Psalmody gives its rhythm to the life of a monk and each of the faithful ought to practice it to some extent"

(Olivier Clement)." The Holy Spirit desires for us to hear these words, to meditate on them, to speak them with our tongues and hide them in our hearts. Without doubt the Spirit could have provided a different prayer book for us or no prayer book at all. Instead, the Spirit has given us the psalms.

The Holy Spirit knows we need help learning how to pray; the Spirit knows we are apt to stumble and perhaps lose our way if we exclusively rely on our own words and thoughts in prayer. The point is that it is our thoughts, words and actions that need remolding, reshaping. We need mentors in prayer, and the psalmist is one of the best. If we listen carefully, immersing ourselves in his words and life, our own disposition will change, in prayer and out.

One last point on the psalms: for the church fathers, Christ was present everywhere in the psalms. Should this surprise us? It was his Spirit that inspired the psalmists to pray. "When we listen to the psalms ... we must pay attention to seeing Christ, to discerning him.... Yes, he will show himself to those who seek him, he who appeared to people who were not seeking him. He who saved those who scorned him will not shun those who desire him" (Augustine)."

THE PROBLEM OF DISTRACTIONS

Do you have a hard time maintaining your concentration in prayer? Do you get distracted easily? Have you ever felt when you began to pray, as Henri Nouwen puts it, that your mind was "a banana tree filled with monkeys"?` Thank goodness, this problem is nothing new and the fathers offer great advice in dealing with it.

Their thoughts on distraction are linked to another puzzle of prayer, Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to "pray continually," or as the Kings James Version expresses it, "pray without ceasing." The fathers, in part because of their profound respect and reverence for Scripture, took Paul's words seriously. If Paul commanded to pray without ceasing, the fathers reasoned, there must be a way

to do so. But how? How could one pray continually in the midst of the busy activities each day presented? How could one pray continually when the human mind acted like a flighty, wild bird, always ready to fly away at the least provocation or distraction? Abba Agathon, an Egyptian monk, speaks of the spiritual dimension to our struggle to pray, the problem of distractions and their possible link to supernatural interference: "For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey."²⁵

John Cassian, a fifth-century Christian monk, combed the deserts of Syria, Palestine and Egypt, seeking advice from well-known "abbas" or "fathers" (often the heads of monastic communities or well-known monastic sages) on the spiritual life and particularly on prayer. Cassian's talks with these monastic wise men are collected in a series of "conferences," or interviews ²⁶ In Conferences 9-10 Cassian, through an interlocutor named Germanus, engages in an extended discussion on prayer with an Abba named Isaac. Abba Isaac was personally acquainted with the great Antony of the desert and provides us with a vivid example of desert spirituality, a topic we will explore at some length in later chapters. Isaac's advice can help us with some of the important issues and questions we've already encountered in this chapter.

The ninth Conference begins with Isaac teaching that "the end of every monk and the perfection of his heart direct him to constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer; and, as much as human frailty allows, it strives after an unchanging and continual tranquility of mind and perpetual purity."²⁷

Here Abba Isaac is emphasizing a theme we have already broached. If a believer is to learn how to pray and grow in prayer, certain virtues and dispositions are essential. "The disposition we need to cultivate, even when care weighs heaviest, is that of remembering that God exists and loves us; that we are not alone, lost, ridiculous in the presence of nothingness or horror; that there is

Another, whom we may approach in union with Christ, in him, in the depths of our being."²⁸

Let's take a more thorough look at Cassian's description of Isaac's teaching and what Cassian learned in a very strange environment, the barren desert of Egypt.

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

Cassian describes "a kind of reciprocal and inseparable link" between our bodily behavior, the inner state of our soul and the cultivation of the virtues necessary for unceasing prayer. As we persevere in prayer-another important theme for the fathers-corresponding virtues develop that in turn enable and energize unceasing prayer. "For just as the perpetual and constant tranquility of prayer about which we are speaking cannot be acquired and perfected without those virtues, neither can these virtues, which lay the foundation for prayer, achieve completion unless we persevere in prayer."²⁹ In a word, perseverance in prayer is the seedbed in which continual or ceaseless prayer blossoms. Olivier Clement comments on the same dynamic between prayer and the virtues: "Prayer upholds the virtues and is itself upheld by them.""

To "obtain" continual prayer requires that we reject certain things and acquire others. In an initial demolition project, we must purge ourselves of the vices that are central obstacles to prayer, the "passions" we will also encounter in our discussion of Antony and desert spirituality. What do monks such as Cassian, Isaac and Antony mean by the passions? Perhaps it's best first to understand clearly what early Christian writers did not mean. For instance, modern people often connect passion or passions with "any very strong emotion, positive or negative. 'She has a passionate desire to serve the poor.' He was in a real passion when he killed the man. 'She is a passionate lover.' He has a passion for chocolates.""

For early Christians a passion may have a strong emotional element or tone, but can just as often refer to "a state of mind, or even a habitual action. Anger is usually a passion, but sometimes forgetfulness is called a passion. Gossip and talking too much are also regularly called passions.... Depression, the very opposite of a passion as we usually use that term in our modern world, is one of the most painful passions."³² The passions, then, are a "conglomerate of obsessive emotions, attitudes, desires, and ways of acting. ... It is these passions that blind us in our dealings with ourselves, each other, and the world, and so pervert perfectly good and useful impulses which take away our freedom to love."³³

The logismoi or dialogismoi, what one ancient writer describes as maggot eggs from which evil thoughts, motives, and actions spring, are the "seeds of the `passions,' those suggestions or impulses that emerge from the subconscious and soon become obsessive."<sup>34</sup> From the perspective of abbas such as Isaac, the passions "are blockages, usurpations, deviations.... They are forms of idolatry, of that `self-idolatry that deflects towards nothingness our capacity for transcendence" (Olivier Clement) 3s

Cleansing from the passions is an indispensable first step toward unceasing prayer. `And once the tottering and dead rubbish of the passions has been dug out, the firm foundations of simplicity and humility can be placed in what may be called the living and solid ground of our heart, on the gospel rock. 1136

The preliminary weeding of the passions insures the stability and strength prayer will demand, for conflict, demonic attack and struggle can be expected as we seek to draw ever nearer to God. Isaac encourages us to lay a firm foundation for prayer in light of its inherent difficulties and challenges. "For if it rests upon such foundations, even though the heaviest rains of the passions should come down and violent torrents of persecutions should beat against it like a battering ram and a savage tempest of adversary spirits should rush upon it and press upon

it, not only will it not fall into ruin but no force of any kind will ever disturb it .
1131

BASIC REQUIREMENTS

The relationship between our thoughts and our prayers is indissoluble. The problem, as we've seen, is that what we're thinking about before we pray predictably seeps into our prayers. For the fathers, our thought life and prayers are inseparable, particularly because our memory continues to kick in as we pray. "For whatever our soul was thinking about before the time of prayer inevitably occurs to us when we pray as a result of the operation of the memory." Therefore, "we must prepare ourselves before the time of prayer to be the prayerful persons that we wish to be. For the mind in prayer is shaped by the state that it was previously in, and, when we sink into prayer, the image of the same deeds, words, and thoughts plays itself out before our eyes .1138

Isaac's insights strike a resonant chord with all who have desired to enter more deeply into prayer. The moment we sit to pray, a thousand thoughts fill our heads like a swarm of mosquitoes, humming loudly for our attention. An interesting exercise would be to take an inventory of the thoughts you've engaged in over the past day, week and month. What are the articles and books that you've read? The conversations you have had with others or internally in your own mind? The television programs you've watched? The films you've viewed? What events have pulled you into their orbit? How has this constellation of words, images, actions and events affected both how you think and the thoughts that occupy your mind as the day and evening pass by? The fathers were well aware that our patterns of thought could become addictive, compulsive, obsessive, disturbed. And, because of the memory stick called the human brain, our thoughts remain with us-whether we want them to or not. How, we ask ourselves, can we empty the trash, once it has collected?

Isaac calls us to the conscious cultivation of a quiet, focused "heart" before we

ever pray, an inner calm and concentration that aids us in stilling the voices that so quickly distract us when we pray. "Before we pray we should make an effort to cast out from the innermost parts of our heart whatever we do not wish to steal upon us as we pray."³⁹ For instance, if I want my heart to be pure when I enter into prayer, I need to be attentive to temptations to impurity outside of prayer.

Isaac calls attention to the human soul's sensitivity to outside influences that easily divert it from its "natural" goods: the cultivation of virtue and the contemplation of God.

For the character of the soul is not inappropriately compared to a very light feather or plume. If it has not been harmed or spoiled by some liquid coming from outside, thanks to its inherent lightness it is naturally borne to the heavenly heights by the slightest breath. But if it has been weighed down by a sprinkling or an outpouring of some liquid, not only will it not be borne off by its natural lightness and snatched up into the air, but it will even be pressed down to the lowest places on the earth by the weight of the liquid that it has taken on ⁴⁰

The soul can easily be weighed down by "worldly vices and concerns" that "assail" the soul, hindering its natural buoyancy and preventing it from lifting "to the heights by the subtlest breath of spiritual meditation." The remedy? A focused, disciplined effort to draw the mind away from the distractions and passions that so easily weigh it down. In a word, a healthy spiritual life will demand certain yes's and no's that we stick to with the help of others.

We will have to learn to live wisely. I remember one of my first Bible teachers defining wisdom for me: "Wisdom is knowing how to live," a knowledge grounded in our relationship with Christ. After all, it is Christ who has created the world. He knows what works and what doesn't. He understands our hard-wiring, our spiritual, emotional and physical DNA. If we attempt to live against the grain of the universe, we'll only end up scraped, bruised, frustrated and

disillusioned. And, among other things, deeply distracted. Yes, "true life involves living in a particular way."⁴¹

We will have to say no to those influences and appetites that we-in our most honest moments-know are choking our desire to know God. I can remember Jim Houston saying in a class at Regent College: "You can't read Playboy and expect to have a fruitful prayer life." And we, by God's grace, will need to say yes to the concrete means God has ordained for spiritual healing and growth: prayer, silence, solitude, meditation, worship, simplicity, service and so on.

A chief problem we face is how easily habits are formed. Because of the nature of the central nervous system-what researchers call its plasticity-it takes only two or three choices to create a deeply habituated thought or action; if these choices are bad ones we can quickly create dead zones in the soul. Where once we were sensitive-light like a feather to the winds of God's Spirit-we have become resistant, hard, brittle, spiritually dull, heavy as a stone.

Happily, we can also make good choices through the power of the Spirit, and our dead zones can begin to reverberate with life. However, rare is the time when the Spirit automatically, instantly reverses the fallen, destructive tendencies we have created over time. The more normal means the Spirit uses to ignite spiritual healing involve careful, honest analysis and the creation of a game plan-undertaken through the power of the Spirit and utilizing the means the Spirit has ordained for spiritual change and development (the classical spiritual disciplines). Isaac employs the issues of food, drink and overindulgence to illustrate the problems bad habits can pose for our prayer life.

CONTENTMENT AND MODERATION

What does immoderate indulgence look like? Think of a nagging, persistent dissatisfaction with simply enough. Immoderation can even hide itself under the guise of hard work. For Isaac, whatever exceeds "the minimum of daily food and

the unavoidable requirements" of the body fertilizes the very vices the monk is attempting to weed from the garden of his personality. "Here are some examples ... if working for one solidus [a gold coin] were able to provide for the needs of our body, but we wished to exhaust ourselves by more effort and labor for the sake of earning two or three solidi; and if two tunics were enough clothing for day and night, but we succeeded in becoming the owners of three or four." The insatiable desire for just a little bit more, at least in Isaac's eyes, is an indication of "the passion of worldly lust," a type of "sickness of mind."

A monk could manifest his immoderation through "restlessly constructing and repairing unnecessary things." Here is a monk who surely is working diligently, but unable to discern what work is valuable and what work is simply distracting him from more important matters. His incessant work, laudable by all appearances, proves on closer inspection to be a buffer separating him from drawing near to God. Isaac believes the demonic realm could not be happier with our distracted, hard-working monk; as long as his attention is fixated on his work, the devil will rest satisfied and, indeed, be glad to lend a hand. Isaac imagines a demon at the side of our monastic workaholic, encouraging him to labor in a disordered, frenetic manner, "striking blows along with him, their hands joined together ... urging him on in this work with fiery brands."⁴³

While the monk actually wants to rest from his "burdensome" effort, the demon spurs him on in his work. "For when the brother was completely worn out and wanted to rest and to put an end to his work, he was encouraged at this spirit's instigation and was pressed to take up the hammer again and not to cease from applying himself to the work that he had started."⁴⁴ This monk's fervent and relentless work-think of modern Christian workaholics-was actually a sign that the virus of "worldly ambition" had infected his spiritual bloodstream.

Skewed ambition and desire may contaminate the poor as well as the rich and are significant distractions from what is genuinely important. Isaac is ruthless at

this juncture, with the ruthlessness of a surgeon acting to save his patient's life. Anything that distracts or diverts from "the highest good"-unceasing longing for God-must be painstakingly eliminated from the monk's life. Why? The passions continually, inevitably, it seems, distract us from the most important things. If a wholehearted devotion to a lesser good can prevent us from embracing the highest good, so much the better, at least from a demonic perspective.

Few readers are called to a monastic vocation. So how can we translate Isaac's admonitions into a modern vernacular? We've been talking quite a bit about distractions, for instance. So ask yourself two specific questions: (1) When do I get distracted? (2) What distracts me? If you have a hard time zeroing in on specifics, have a pad and paper on hand the next time you sit down to pray. When the mosquitoes start buzzing or the monkeys start chattering, write down the specific thoughts that are flooding into your mind. Hang on to your notes. After a week or two, patterns will appear that can be quite helpful in identifying specific distractions-distractions that may be related to the specific passions Isaac discusses. The distractions are often related to core issues. Digging up the earth of a distraction to reveal its roots is often the hardest, most difficult work.

This hard work can be facilitated by learning to slow down and quiet down-what Isaac calls "tranquility." It is only "when the mind has been established in tranquility" that unceasing prayer becomes a possibility. An addiction to noise-even beautiful and tasteful noise-is itself a type of passion, a spiritual neurosis that can manifest itself in the most surprising places. "We are always filling our world with noise. Even our Communion services must be filled with sound. Quietly reflecting on the fact that we are eating the Lord's body and drinking the Lord's blood seems too threatening; as soon as we go forward or pass around the elements, a piano or guitar starts up and we cannot even hear ourselves consume Christ."

Just as the passions distort human thinking and behavior, so their elimination

engenders prayer. "For, if we may speak in this way, when the thoughts of the mind have been seized by this purity and have been refashioned from earthly dullness to the likeness of the spiritual and the angelic, whatever they take in, whatever they reflect upon, and whatever they do will be most pure and sincere prayer. 1146

Germanus, Isaac's chief interlocutor in conferences nine and ten, is quick to raise a number of questions in response to Isaac's teaching, queries that many modern readers are likely pondering. For instance, the moment we begin to think about spiritual matters, perhaps "through the recollection of Scripture or through a glimpse of the heavenly mysteries, they [spiritual thoughts] immediately vanish, having as it were imperceptibly taken flight:" Not only so, but when we finally succeed in thinking spiritually, our insights quickly escape from us. The mind, Germanus complains, is unable to sustain the "constancy" required for unceasing prayer. This flightiness of the mind really bothers Germanus. His mind flits from thought to thought like a bird. It appears the mind's only constant characteristic is inconstancy!

BACK TO THE BASICS

If we are to pray continually, Germanus asks, exactly what are we doing? What is "the character of prayer"? We've already mentioned a number of prayer's aspects and also roadblocks to prayer. Still, we need to take a closer look at what Isaac thinks prayer actually is. We've seen the fathers describe prayer as conversation with God, but what makes up the conversation? Are there specific topics for discussion especially fitting for prayer? Germanus asks two specific questions:

What should we say when we pray? What sort of prayer should specifically be prayed?

. How can we possess prayer, "whatever it is, and practice it without ceasing"?"

Isaac believes that the character of prayer is different for different people. Each person's soul has been marked and shaped by its own unique history. One person's soul may be damaged and in a state of decline "because of what has happened to it." Another's may have a more positive history. Fortunately, whatever damage the soul may have suffered, it can be "renewed," purified and restored to a condition that facilitates prayer.

The diversity and uniqueness of people's experiences and their individual effects eliminates easy or uniform answers to the question of prayer's specific character. Each person's own story and specific life situation will shape the character of prayer. There is no cookie-cutter design for prayer. Life is more complex than that, and so is prayer. "For a person prays one way when he is happy and another way when he is burdened by a weight of sadness or despair; one way when he is enjoying spiritual successes and another way when he is oppressed by numerous attacks; one way when he is begging pardon for sins and another way when he is asking for grace or some virtue or, of course, for the annihilation of some vice."

INSIGHTS FROM THE APOSTLE PAUL

Abba Isaac turns to Paul's insights as he explores the character of prayer. Paul specifically mentions four different types of prayer (cf. Phil 4:6-7): "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings."⁵⁰ What does each specific term mean? Are all four kinds of prayer to be prayed "simultaneously"? Should they be offered one after another? In addition, are these four characteristics of prayer representative of different levels of prayer, "depending on the maturity to which each mind is progressing according to the intensity of its effort"?

Isaac momentarily considers whether Paul's list is simply given "in an inconsequential manner," but rejects this possibility out of hand. The Holy Spirit simply does not speak randomly. "For it ought not to be believed that the Holy

Spirit would have said something through the Apostle in passing and for no reason." Thus, Isaac will consider each characteristic individually, "in the same order in which we began, as the Lord permits."⁵²

SUPPLICATION IN PRAYER

Isaac begins his analysis of Paul's text with a discussion of "supplication." In the prayer of supplication heartfelt remorse, or compunction, moves us to confess our sins honestly and transparently, with a corresponding determination to leave these habitual practices and attitudes behind. We then offer specific prayers, "those acts by which we offer or vow something to God."

The range of verbs Isaac employs to discuss prayer and supplication is significant: renounce, pledge, serve, promise, disdain, spurn, cling, utterly eliminate and return. Many of the negative verbs relate to specific sins or arenas for sin. We "renounce the world," "disdain worldly honor," "spurn earthly riches," and "utterly eliminate from our heart the roots of death-dealing anger and sadness." One great danger Isaac mentions is a spiritual laziness manifested by a return "to our former vices."

More positively, our prayers entail serving "the Lord with utter earnestness of heart," clinging "to the Lord in complete contrition of heart and poverty of spirit" and keeping "pure chastity of body and unwavering patience."⁵³ Isaac's emphases reflect the early Christian desert community's longing for holiness and deep interest in what undercuts it. Remember that Isaac is speaking to another monk, but through that monk to the broader Christian community. To modern ears his language sounds strident, uncompromising, legalistic, unforgiving, unrealistic. We are not comfortable with adjectives such as complete, pure and unwavering. We want Isaac to turn down the volume. He seems to be screaming at us.

Perhaps Isaac is speaking in such stark terms because he's aware of dangers to

which we have become insensitive. Imagine you couldn't find your child, looked out the kitchen window and saw her playing on a railroad track. In the distance you see a train bearing down on your daughter, sounding its horn in warning. How would you respond? Isaac's stridency is related to his deep concern over the havoc that sin wreaks. Sin kills. He knows it destroys human lives.

Isaac was convinced that human beings were not created for sin, but for love in the multitude of its manifestations. All sin-in whatever form wounds love, infects love, kills love. And human beings, made in the image of God, are wired for love and for God. Love is in our DNA. Unfortunately, our DNA has mutated and now disordered loves, crooked loves, self-centered loves, have replaced the real thing. What Isaac is attempting to do, in his unique, monastic fashion, is to apply gene therapy to our mutated DNA. The therapy may be excruciatingly painful, but its healing power will bring restoration, re-creation, renewed hope and exquisite love.

INTERCESSION

When we make intercessions we move from prayer for ourselves-petitionary prayer-to prayer for others, for those close to us, our "dear ones," for our enemies and for the world at large. It is in intercession, Isaac teaches, that we especially center our prayers on those persons in positions of power, praying that peace would come through the actions of "kings and for all who are in authority."⁵⁴ The ground of intercession is "fervent charity." Again we see fundamental characteristics of Isaac's comments on prayer: a no to sin and yes to holiness, ever deeper formation into the image of Christ, the nurturing of love within us as we deepen our relationship with Christ and intercession for others as the fruit of our love.

Think of some of the powerful figures who dominated the political landscape in North America in, say, the election year of 2008: George Bush, John McCain, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Dick Cheney. Did our anger or disillusionment

over the specific policies or behaviors of these leaders cause us to neglect or forget Abba Isaac's understanding of Paul's teaching on intercession? Or are there other people of significant influence in our culture-perhaps celebrities-whom we have presumptively crossed off our prayer list because of our anger over their perspectives and actions, people that we somehow know God could never reach. When was the last time we prayed for Howard Stern? Hugh Hefner? Madonna? Larry Flynt? How quickly our perspective is distorted by presumptive, self-righteous judgments, twisted passions that mask themselves as righteousness. That's Isaac's very point. Holiness never compromises, but it is never divorced from love.

THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving has a past, present and future perspective. Thanksgiving is a special form of remembering: we recall "God's past benefits" and our recollection leads us to contemplate "his present ones," or foresee "what great things God has prepared for those who love him."

What short-circuits thanksgiving? A short memory. A selective memory. Some of us have forgotten the long story of our lives and the instances of God's provision dotting the years. Maybe recent events have been painful, heart-rending, tragic; our tears have blurred our vision and our memory has shrunk: we have forgotten or overlooked how God has cared for us over the long haul. Others of us remember selectively-we forget God's goodness and provision and remember times of drought-days when the rains of God's favor seemed distant.

If we are to be thankful, at least in the manner Isaac describes, we will have to cultivate attentiveness, even when we're hunkering down against the wind. By the way, Isaac and other ancient Christians moved out to the desert to do just that-to reinvigorate their vision, hearing and memory-with the result that love sprouted from thanksgiving and blossomed in the wilderness.

To summarize: supplication is rooted in regret for our sins; the prayer of supplication helps "beginners who are still being harassed by the stings and by the memory of their vices." The prayers that flow from our supplication flower in the fertile ground of prayer itself: a "state of prayer which flows from faithfulness in our offerings and the keeping of our vows because of a pure conscience"; in modern parlance, a state of prayer flowing from a gracefilled, disciplined spiritual life.

Intercession is woven from love's fiber. The movement from self-deception to self-awareness-a fundamental movement of the spiritual lifebirths intercessory love in those who pray for others. Those who intercede know that they themselves are apt to wander. They "are moved to intercede for others also in consideration of their frailty and out of zeal for charity."

Thanksgiving results from a long memory that remembers and meditates on "God's benefits and his greatness and lovingkindness." Those gifted in the prayer of thanksgiving have cleansed their consciences and "now, free from care, consider with a most pure mind the kindnesses and mercies of the Lord that he has bestowed in the past, gives in the present, and prepares for the future." 56

CHRIST AS THE FUNDAMENTAL MODEL

Christ himself modeled the four kinds of prayer. Though he had no sins to confess, he used "the form of supplication" when he asked that "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26:39 KJv). Christ's prayer from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46), was also a form of supplication.

Christ's intercession, past and present, is woven into the fabric of his prayer. "For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth" (Jn 17:19 NRSV). Christ intercedes for us as he prays, "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you

have given me" (Jn 17:24). He intercedes for his enemies as he asks the Father to "forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34).

Finally, Christ's thanksgiving to the Father acknowledges and remembers the Father's ready and listening ear. Even in his darkest hours, Jesus knew that his Father was attentive to his needs and well aware of the dark turn of events at the end of Christ's life. "Father, I give you thanks because you have heard me. But I knew that you always hear me" (see Jn 11:41-42) 57

FIERY PRAYER

Have you ever experienced a time when you knew you were praying, but your prayer-because of the depth of its fervency, devotion and love-could not be captured in words? In these times, all we can do is sigh, grunt, groan, whimper, cry, shout. Sometimes we're unaware of what we're actually thinking as we pray like this. At other times we have encountered a situation so grave, so insurmountable, so overwhelming, that all we can do is allow our suffering to call out to God for us.

We desire to experience God's love more deeply. We moan about our sins, but our moaning is beyond words. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of God's beauty and it snatches our breath away. We know we are experiencing God, but our experience can't be expressed in our normal vocabulary. Words fall short. They break under the strength of our experience. They are too fragile and limited to capture the weight of glory we have unexpectedly encountered. Our knowledge of God is growing, but this is a knowledge beyond words, knowledge we will find impossible to express with nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Our experience is a knowing beyond knowing.

Isaac speaks of a "fiery prayer" those who have practiced the four kinds of prayer (supplication, the prayers, intercession, thanksgiving) may experience. He relates this fiery, wordless prayer to Paul's mention in Romans 8 of the Spirit

praying for us "with unutterable groans, unknown to us, conceiving at that moment and pouring forth in wordless prayer such great things that they not only-I would say-cannot pass through the mouth but are unable even to be remembered by the mind later on."⁵⁸

This wordless prayer is related to an immersion in God's love, and hence is sometimes given to those still practicing what we might call the earlier stages of prayer. For example, a person who continues to feel deep regret over past sins might enter into "pure and intense" prayer as he more fully realizes all that God has lovingly done for him in forgiving his sins. "For, according to the words of the Lord, the one who realizes that more has been forgiven him begins to love more."⁵⁹

A "sublime and exalted position" follows supplication, intercession and thanksgiving. The mind has been "dissolved and flung into love of" God and "speaks most familiarly and with particular devotion to God as to its own father." In this marvelous address we recognize that we have moved from a "servile condition into an adopted sonship," a status reflected in the first sentence of the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father." ⁶⁰ Prayer, Isaac believes, is the family language of God and leads us ever more deeply into the intimate family circle of the Holy Trinity.

The movement to fervent, wordless prayer is energized by "different types of compunction, with their origin and causes." For instance, during the singing of the psalms some monks may be deeply touched by the Spirit of God, with wordless, pure prayer flowing through their minds and hearts. Others, Isaac teaches, are moved to wordless, ineffable prayer by an "exhortation" or a "spiritual discussion." Some, seeing the moral failings or downfall of another Christian are "seized by utter compunction," both over the other person's sin and their own. Still others, as they recollect their "own lukewarmness and negligence, are inspired by a "salutary ardor. 1161

Compunction is not always the result of sorrow over sin, though the modern connotation of the word is usually negative. Some monks experience compunction as the fruit of "ineffable joy and gladness of spirit, such that it even breaks forth into shouts." For others, joy leads to "an outpouring of tears."⁶²

Compunction is a varied, multicolored, nuanced, mysterious response to life and to God. Even Germanus, relatively new to the monastic life, can relate to Isaac's words. He too has experienced tears over past sins and "unspeakable joy" as Christ has visited him, offering mercy and pardon.

Compunction and its accompanying emotions and states cannot be manufactured at will, though. Germanus has tried and failed in his attempts to conjure up tearful compunction so that he might experience again the sweetness of God's grace and mercy. He has learned that God cannot be manipulated. "For sometimes, when I wish to excite myself with all my strength to a similar tearful compunction and I place before my eyes all my errors and sins, I am unable to achieve again such an abundance of tears, and my eyes become as hard as the hardest flint."⁶³ Spiritual experiences cannot be manufactured at will. Our experiences with God are in God's hands, not our own. We can put ourselves in a receptive stance where God may touch us, for example, through meditation on Scripture, but it is up to God to choose when and how he will respond. God is not a divine bellhop or genie. To think otherwise leads us directly to the magician's chamber.

Tears can be the result of a genuine compunction over sin, but not necessarily so. Yes, we sometimes experience tears "when the thorn of sinfulness pricks our heart with compunction." At other times "the contemplation of eternal goods and the desire for that future glory" elicits joyful weeping.

Thoughts of future judgment and hell can cause us to cry. Finally, Isaac observes, the sins of others are enough to make one sob. Samuel weeps over the sins of Saul.⁶⁴ Jeremiah weeps over the sins of Jerusalem.⁶⁵

Even the tears of a hardened heart, Isaac teaches Germanus, are of some worth, as they indicate "a good will." Nevertheless, artificial compunction, the attempt to manufacture an emotional state for the spiritual high it produces, "should never be forced in this way by those who have already acquired a virtuous disposition." To manufacture emotional states or responses only drags "down the mind during prayer," weakening the mind "in the face of sterile and forced tears. 1166

WILL GOD ANSWER?

How can we know that God is hearing and responding to our prayers? Abba Isaac refers to three key characteristics of those who generally receive positive responses to their petitions and intercessory prayers. It is important to remember, though, that God's positive responses may not initially, if ever during this present evil age, be recognized as positive by us. We still "see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor 13:12 KJv). Still, Isaac believes that the following characteristics mark the disposition and actions of those people to whom God is apt to respond: hopefulness, persistence and assurance.

- . Hopefulness and confidence in God's ability to answer our prayers
- . Persistence in prayer
- . Assurance that our prayers have been answered

"For a person will deserve to be heard and to receive to the extent that he believes that he can be seen by God and that God can act on his behalf." Fine, Germanus replies. Yet such confidence must surely be grounded in "a pure conscience."

What of those who are experiencing genuine compunction because of their sins? Can a person experiencing deep compunction over sin also experience confidence in prayer? Haven't we all been tempted, at one time or another, to

stop praying because of the guilt we've felt, especially over deeply habituated sin? Persistence in prayer is especially difficult if our persistence is linked to persistent sins that we confess persistently! Can Isaac help Germanus and us? He begins his response to Germanus's question somewhat obliquely.

Prayers are heard "for different reasons," Isaac teaches. The multiform manifestations of God's grace should encourage rather than discourage us. Even those who lack virtue, have no one else to agree with in prayer and only possess the faith of a mustard seed can still in faith persistently call out to God in prayer, knowing that persistence itself is a gift of grace. "For the Lord, who wants to bestow what is eternal and heavenly, encourages us as it were to coerce him by our persistence. He not only neither disdains nor refuses the persistent but he even welcomes and praises them, and he very graciously promises that he will give them whatever they have perseveringly hoped for."⁶⁷ The bottom line is the grace of God empowering our persistence in prayer. Indeed, the very fact that we are praying is a sign of God's grace at work within us.

Persistence in prayer "does not depend on worthiness or effort." God may delay in answering our prayers. Daniel prayed and God waited twentyone days to respond to his prayer.⁶⁸ Demonic opposition to our prayers might also be a factor in a delayed response from God.

Hence neither must we ourselves cease from pursuing a prayer once we have begun, even if we think that we are not being heard soon enough, for perchance either the grace of being heard has been postponed for some good reason by the Lord's design or the angel who has gone out from the face of the Almighty to bring us a divine gift has met delay and resistance from the devil.⁶⁹

"Confident trust" rather than "hopelessness" should characterize our petitions. We can expect to encounter times when God seems to have turned a deaf ear to our requests or simply says no, an answer of sorts I suppose, but one we should

never treat lightly or flippantly, particularly if the no has been given to another and not ourselves. To say to one who prayed fervently for the healing of her mother from cancer-and then buried her mother three months from the onset of the disease-that "God heard your prayer; he simply said no," is insensitive at best and cruel at worst. C. S. Lewis poignantly observes that "Every war, every famine or plague, almost every death-bed, is the monument to a petition that was not granted.""

Still, Scripture and Christ strongly encourage us to make our petitions and intercessions, though unanswered prayers remain a reality to be wisely and sensitively dealt with. Isaac provides some good guidelines for making what sense we can out of the enigma of God's noes.

Occasionally, for instance, our asking can be askew, however persistent it may be. Thus, when we pray "thy will be done" in the Lords' Prayer, we affirm "that we sometimes ask for things which are contrary to our salvation. ... What we ask for is quite properly denied us by him who sees our wellbeing more clearly and truly than we do.""

The apostle Paul experienced firsthand the perplexities inherently involved in petitionary prayer, those prayers where we focus on our own needs, desires and hopes. Afflicted by a "thorn in the flesh," Paul prayed at least three times that God remove his suffering. Instead, Christ chose to allow Paul's weakness and suffering to remain. "But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:8-9). Jesus also encountered the perplexity of unanswered petitions, both in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. In the garden of Gethsemane Christ prays that his cup of suffering might pass, yet also submits to the mysterious, perplexing will of his Father, a will that was united with his own (Lk 22:40-44). On the cross Christ calls out in agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34). Yet Christ's last words on the cross are trust-filled and victorious: "It is finished. Father, into your

hands I commit my spirit" (Jn 19:30; Lk 23:46). Christ expresses the trusting language of a Son to his Father to the very end.

Two final comments as we draw this chapter to a close:

First, I think petitionary prayer, prayer in which we pray directly for ourselves, is especially difficult because of a theme we have already explored, the problem of self-deception. This deeply rooted difficulty doesn't vanish into thin air when we come into a relationship with Christ. In reality, it is our relationship with Christ that increasingly brings to our attention how deeply self-deceived we actually are. Though we can be progressively healed of our self-deceptive tendencies, they do influence how we pray, and particularly manifest themselves in the petitions we make as we pray for ourselves. As we form petitions that focus on our own needs, "we are not disinterested parties. It is far easier to pray with clarity regarding matters that have no direct impact on us than regarding our infected toe. This must never keep us from praying for our own needs, for we are commanded to do so, but it should remind us that we are capable of infinite self-deception."⁷² There are specific disciplines we can learn to practice that will help us in our movement from self-deception to self-awareness in Christ, and we will explore them in our chapters on desert spirituality.

Second, Germanus's initial question to Isaac concerned the question of "unceasing" or "continual" prayer. Isaac has not yet addressed this topic in great detail. He has been laying a spiritually and conceptually rich framework within which to ask the question: how can we pray continually? In the next chapter we will explore the details of Isaac's answer.

The end of every monk and the perfection of his heart direct him to constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer; and, as much as human frailty allows, it strives after an unchanging and continual tranquility of mind and perpetual purity.

ABBA ISAAC, JOHN CASSIAN S THE CONFERENCES1

For whatever our soul was thinking about before the time of prayer inevitably occurs to us when we pray as a result of the operation of the memory. Hence we must prepare ourselves before the time of prayer to be the prayerful persons that we wish to be. For the mind in prayer is shaped by the state that it was previously in, and, when we sink into prayer, the image of the same deeds, words and thoughts plays itself out before our eyes.

ABBA ISAAC, JOHN CASSIAN S THE CONFERENCES2

For a person prays one way when he is happy and another way when he is burdened by a weight of sadness or despair; one way when he is enjoying spiritual successes and another way when he is oppressed by numerous attacks; one way when he is begging pardon for sins and another way when he is asking for grace or some virtue or, of course, for the annihilation of some vice; one way when he is struck with compunction by reflecting on Gehenna and by fear of future judgment and another way when he is inflamed by the hope and desire for future goods; one way when he is needy and in danger and another way when he is safe and at peace; one way when he is enlightened by revelations of heavenly mysteries and another way when he is fettered by sterility of virtue and dryness of thought.

ABBA ISAAC, JOHN CASSIAN S THE CONFERENCES3

F O U R

THE CHALLENGE OF UNCEASING PRAYER

PRAYER'S PICTURE OF GOD

Let me pose a question to you, the reader. When you pray, do you ever form a picture of God in your mind? If you do so, what does God look like? An elderly man? A bright light? Jesus? Allow me to tighten my query a bit: if you're not talking to Jesus, but are talking to the Father, what do you imagine the Father to look like? Do you ever picture the Father as possessing a body, a face? Or when you address God in prayer, is the person you are addressing invisible in your mind's eye? Let me add one more question: can you ever be talking to Jesus and not talking to the Father or the Spirit? If not, and yet you have a mental picture of God in your mind as you are praying, who are you seeing? Imagining?

Let's shift from seeing to speaking. When you speak to God, do you actually form words that you speak out loud? Do you conceive words in your mind and communicate them to God, but not speak vocally-no one in the room would actually hear you say them? Or when you pray, is your prayer practice more a matter of simply "hanging out with God"-a phrase of Richard Foster's-much like sitting on the beach with your wife or husband, or perhaps a best friend? You're enjoying each other's presence, but you don't have a need to say anything. Maybe you're communicating through the expressions of your eyes, the light touch of a finger, sighs or your body language. You surely are communicating or communing, but your personal encounter is through an unspoken exchange of love. There's simply no need for words. In fact, words might get in the way, at least for this time in this place.

Let's try one further thought experiment. What if Christ appeared to you as he did to Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration? The veil of Christ's flesh is somehow drawn away as light begins to radiate from Christ's body-intense, lively, overwhelming light brighter than the sun-flashing from Jesus' face like a strike of lightning. Yet somehow this strange, unexpected light is also communicating immensely personal love. Who could have imagined that light could be personal?

How would you respond to such an experience? Peter wanted to remain on the mountain. He suggested setting up three tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah (Lk 9:29-33). Later, the Father's voice burst from the cloud enveloping the disciples and told Peter to listen to Jesus. What a strange, wondrous experience. Was this personal encounter with the transfigured Christ a kind of prayer?

I know these are provocative, perhaps humorous questions to begin a chapter on prayer, but the issues they raise are among the concerns we will examine in this chapter. For instance, the question of God's corporeality or incorporeality-whether God possesses a physical body of some kind-was an extremely vexing and controversial topic for ancient monks such as Abba Isaac and John Cassian.

Many Christians in Cassian's day, including numerous desert monks, pictured God as having a physical form similar to that of human beings; this form was related to an early text in the first chapter of Genesis: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'" (Gen 1:26). If human beings are created in the image of God, many ancient Christians reasoned, God must have a body. After all, humans do, and the image must reflect what it represents. And so, as these early Christians prayed, they visualized an embodied God in their prayers. Seeing God's body in prayer-perhaps God's face-deepened and personalized many ancient Christians' prayer lives.

Some ancient Christians misinterpreted the host of anthropomorphisms the

Old Testament contains, figures of speech in which God is portrayed as having arms, hands, eyes, ears and so on. Almost all modern Christians recognize these descriptions of God as metaphors: biblical writers are using the human body to teach us important things about God, but the literal meaning of the metaphor is not physical, but figurative. To speak of God's "arm," for instance, is to speak of God's strength and power to act on our behalf.

Some early Christians, people Cassian describes as naive, interpreted these bodily metaphors woodenly. That is, some early Christians did not recognize the metaphors in the Bible as metaphors. Rather, if the Bible says God has an arm, God must have an arm. If human beings are made in the image of God, and human beings have a body, God must have a body.

When we fail to recognize a biblical writer's use of metaphor and interpret a verbal image or illustration in a rigid, literal fashion, the force of the writer's metaphor evaporates. We lose the very insight the biblical writer is attempting to communicate to us. We don't think along with the metaphor to what it's illustrating. We get stuck at the image itself. And when we misinterpret metaphors about God, we run into all kinds of problems-biblically, theologically and devotionally.

Theophilus, archbishop of Alexandria in the fourth century A.D., was concerned about the manner in which many monks were picturing God in their prayers as having a physical form-something like a human body. Origen's writings had taught Theophilus that metaphors speaking of God as having arms, eyes and so on were not to be interpreted as literal descriptions of God's body, but should be interpreted symbolically. So Theophilus decided to issue a letter strongly condemning anthropomorphic misinterpretations, a communication that threw many of the desert monks into uncertainty, anger and confusion.

A word or two about Theophilus is necessary. Theophilus is one of the less savory figures in the history of the early church. He was a deeply troubled man:

vindictive, angry, weak, mean-spirited, greedy, violent. The content of his festal letter was correct theologically, at least as the church finally viewed matters, but Theophilus himself hastily waffled when he met strong monastic opposition to the theological stance expressed in his letter. In fact, he quickly anathematized the very teacher who had taught him that God had no body-Origen himself-and threw the church into an extended period of conflict over hermeneutical issues clustered around the thought and interpretations of Origen, ground we cannot cover in detail here.

The confusion and anger over Theophilus's letter were so widespread that, as Cassian comments, apart from Abba Paphnutius, no other abbas would allow Theophilus's letter to be read to their communities. Cassian sided with the interpretive outlook represented in Theophilus's initial festal letter, and surely with the position of Origen regarding God's incorporeality. Conference, or interview, 10 begins with Cassian referring to the unhappy situation of the monk Serapion as a poignant illustration of the dangers of misinterpreting biblical metaphors-in this case, anthropomorphisms.

Positively, Serapion "was a man of long-standing strictness, fully accomplished in practical discipline." Serapion had lived a long, holy, spiritually disciplined life and was highly regarded within his monastic community. He lived well, but from Cassian's perspective, prayed poorly, precisely because Serapion's misunderstanding of God as corporeal or possessing a body distorted Serapion's prayers.

Cassian relates an encounter between Serapion and the deacon Photinus, "a man of very great knowledge" who had been assigned the task of explaining God's incorporeality to the monastic communities in Egypt. During the course of his discussion with Serapion, Photinus explains that the book of Genesis's mention of human beings as created in the image of God does not include the human body itself (cf. Gen 1:26).

[Photinus] explained that the image and likeness of God were treated by all the heads of the churches, not according to the lowly sound of the letter, but in a spiritual way ... showing that nothing of this sort [that God possessed a physical body] could be the case with that immeasurable and incomprehensible and invisible majesty-that it could be circumscribed in a human form and likeness, that indeed a nature which was incorporeal and uncomposed and simple [not made up of parts] could be apprehended by the eye or seized by the mind.'

Church fathers such as Gregory of Nazianzus warned against the use of visible images of God in prayer, precisely because they created a "barrier" employed by the imagination. A false image of God present in the mind during prayer actually distanced a person from the true God. Anthony Bloom, a modern Orthodox writer and bishop, comments:

The moment you try to focus on an imaginary god, or a god you can imagine, you are in great danger of placing an idol between yourself and the real God. This is a thought which was expressed as early as the fourth century by St. Gregory of Nazianzus. He said that the moment we put a visible sign in front of ourselves, whether it be a crucifix, a tabernacle, an icon or an invisible image-God as we imagine Him, or Christ as we have seen Him in paintings-and we focus our attention on that, then we have placed a barrier between ourselves and God, because we take the image which we have formed for the person to whom we address our prayer. What we must do is to collect all the knowledge of God which we possess in order to come into His presence, but then remember that all we know about God is our past, as it were, behind our back, and we are standing face to face with God in all His complexity, all His simplicity, so close and yet unknown. Only if we stand completely open before the unknown, can the unknown reveal itself, Himself, as He chooses to reveal Himself to us as we are today. So, with this open-heartedness and open-mindedness, we must

stand before God without trying to give Him a shape or to imprison Him in concepts and images, and we must knock at a door.⁶

Serapion humbly accepted Photinus's clarification of Genesis's teaching, yet experienced great difficulty and deep sadness as he attempted to incorporate his newly discovered orthodox understanding of God's nature into his prayer life. When Serapion attempted to pray, the beloved bodily images of God he had utilized for years flooded into his mind. To cease using these images in his prayers would be to bid farewell to God himself.

But the old man got so confused in his mind during the prayers when he realized that the anthropomorphic image of the Godhead, which he had always pictured to himself while praying had been banished from his heart, that he suddenly broke into the bitterest tears and heavy sobbing and, throwing himself to the ground with a loud groan, cried out: "Woe is me, wretch that I am! They have taken my God from me, and I have no one to lay hold of, nor do I know whom I should adore or address."

It isn't hard to identify with Serapion's struggle and sorrow. For year upon year Serapion lovingly offered his prayers to God, doing his best to pray as well as he knew how. And now, after spending time with Photinus, Serapion realized that his understanding of God was twisted and close to idolatrous. What was he to do? Had all the years in prayer been wasted? Does God only hear theologically well-informed and well-phrased prayers? If so, where would we all be?

God's grace is always surrounding, supporting and empowering us as we pray; even when we err in our prayers, imagining things about God that are far from true, God still accepts our feeble offerings, mumble though we may. We do not have to pass a theology exam before we dare to pray. God knows our hearts better than we and accepts the offering of the heart, even when the mind's thoughts expressed in prayer are foggy. We are called to think ever more truly of

God, but God accepts us where we are-delighting in our mumbles-and slowly teaches us the grammar and content of prayer.

A story from Jewish folklore reminds us that God understands our heart, even when our mind is confused. There once was a shepherd who nightly offered God a bowl of milk to drink at the end of the day, an offering of love and devotion. Moses, though, was upset by the foolishness of the shepherd's gift and was quick to set the shepherd straight. Didn't the shepherd realize that God was "pure spirit" and "does not drink milk"?

The shepherd was surprised by Moses' teaching and remained awake one night to see if God indeed did not drink milk. "The shepherd hides, the night comes, and in the moonlight the shepherd sees a little fox that comes trotting from the desert, looks right, looks left and heads straight towards the milk, which he laps up, and disappears into the desert again. The next morning Moses finds the shepherd quite depressed and downcast. 'What's the matter?' he asks. The shepherd says 'You were right, God is pure spirit and He doesn't want my milk.' Moses is surprised. He says 'You should be happy. You know more about God than you did before.' 'Yes, I do' says the shepherd, 'but the only thing I could do to express my love for Him has been taken away from me.'

"Moses sees the point. He retires into the desert and prays hard. In the night a vision appears to Moses in which God speaks to him. 'Moses, you were wrong. It is true that I am pure spirit. Nevertheless I always accepted with gratitude the milk which the shepherd offered me, as the expression of his love, but since, being pure spirit, I do not need the milk, I shared it with this little fox, who is very fond of milk.'"⁸

We should never forget that all prayer is grounded in the grace of God. Prayer starts with God and ends with God, undergirded at every moment by God's grace. Likewise, we should never presume against God's gentleness and patience. The truth offered to us in Jesus Christ can never harm us; God calls us

to holy, clear, discerning, loving thinking about himself and about the world he has created.

Our shepherd friend plainly loved God, and his love for God was based on what he had learned about God, as rudimentary-even incorrect-as his thoughts may have been. The key, it seems, is to help one another to think well of God-in line with the truth-while not damaging the heart's tenderness or fostering spiritual confusion and discouragement.

Let us return to Serapion, our desert abba who pictured God as having a body. The teaching Serapion received about the incorporeality of God was indeed true, but resulted in a bad case of theological and spiritual dissonance. Serapion understood the rationale behind Photinus's teaching and Theophilus's letter, but didn't know how to modify his prayers to fit his new understanding. He was moving in the right direction but was stuck theologically, spiritually and emotionally.

Cassian doesn't tell us how things turned out with Serapion. My hope is that, with the good coaching of a wise abba, Serapion was able to unite his mind and heart into an integrated whole. Serapion's struggle, though, illustrates how our thoughts about God-the models of God we carry within ourselves of what God is like-can harm or help us.

I don't know of any evangelicals who believe that God has a physical body, though my Mormon friends believe God is corporeal. Serapion's efforts to pray more truthfully may be foreign to many of the people reading this book, simply because you're not struggling with his particular problem. Yet I've discovered that many Christians are troubled by other models of God that cripple their prayer life, models I believe are equally unorthodox and harmful.

SKEWED MODELS OF GOD

Consider the following three skewed models of God: God as a distant, demanding, whiny parent who is never satisfied with our performance: "Honey, you know I love you, I really love you, but I don't understand why you're always getting B's. You know I love you. You really should be doing better. After all, look at all I've done for you. You know, on some days I'm so disappointed in you. I'm sure you could do better if you just tried a little harder." Or God as a divine drill instructor: "Don't tell me you're tired. Nobody gets tired here. Do you understand me? We have a lot of work to do. You can rest later. Now is the time for work. Do you hear me? I can't hear you!" How about God as a self-indulgent grandfather, pleased with us as long as we're happy at the end of the day? "Oh, my goodness! Look at what they've done again. They always seem to be getting into trouble. Well, what's to be expected? They really can't help themselves, you know."

These models of God-and others-can fracture our prayer lives and spiritually wound us. Some of us are a walking spiritual shrapnel wound, and we don't even know it. The fault lines in our models of God don't always directly or consciously affect us; they more often lurk below the surface of our personality, invading our dreams or incubating our subconscious fantasies of what God should be like as we unknowingly create God in our image. These models of God inevitably leak out into our living, though, strangling our ability to love God and others in line with the truth of who God actually is.

We are often unaware of these unhealthy thought patterns about God because they are so deeply habituated in our personalities. Some "stinking thinking" has been with us so long we no longer detect its presence. Evagrius Ponticus, one of John Cassian's own monastic mentors, cataloged "the human propensity for evil, what he called the eight evil thoughts."¹⁰ In turn, largely through the influence of Cassian, these eight evil thoughts made their way into the Latin Christian worldview, known as the seven deadly sins, distortions that mark fallen human character and cripple our prayers.¹¹ Let's briefly take a look at each one:

Vainglory. Vainglory is the "all-too-human thirst for fame," an evil especially present in cultures that idolize celebrities, whether they be politicians, actors or athletes. Christians are not immune to this vice; it can subtly disguise itself as a virtue, hence revealing its insidious character. A monk, for instance, might publicize his spiritual struggles and triumphs, not for the encouragement of others, but to draw attention to himself. Holy people could succumb "to the desire to be acclaimed for one's healing touch, to send demons squealing, to have clients knocking at the door seeking tidbits of wisdom, to be forcibly enlisted into the ranks of the clergy." Vainglory is a subtle, spiritual exhibitionism. The person infected with it wants the world to gaze on his spiritual progress with admiration, all the while pretending he wants them to look away. It is a hollow, decayed, feigned humility. If not checked, vainglory will soon birth pride.

Fornication. The "demon" of fornication, as Evagrius describes him, works hard to insinuate himself into human relationships. He foments thoughts within the monk of other people as mere bodies to be exploited and discarded and of the silliness and fruitlessness of chastity and abstinence. A monk suffering from fornication will crookedly fantasize a counseling session with a woman as a "ruse for a hidden sexual agenda. Here the demon prompts thoughts of spending long periods of time with a married woman, with frequent visits at close quarters, as if she were deriving great spiritual benefit from us"; or again, it suggests "the thought which takes the form of a beautiful woman engaging us in serious conversation, while we wish to do evil and shameful things with her."¹⁴ Fornication is sexual self-deception run wild.

Acedia. It's hard to translate acedia into English. William Harmless describes acedia as "a sort of restless boredom, a listlessness, and underneath that, discouragement," a "despondency of spirit" or "ennui."¹⁵ Acedia attacks the monk-and Christians today-by repeatedly focusing our consciousness on the difficulty of spiritual growth. What is all this spiritual discipline accomplishing, anyway? Are my fasting, study, silence and simplicity really amounting to

anything? I could be doing so many more worthwhile things than sitting in my cell-or my study-praying. I'm bored, tired, distracted. I'm sick of this. There surely are better things I could be doing with my time. Harmless comments: "We all know the feeling: when time moves at a crawl, when 'the day is fifty hours long.' ... [Acedia] induces the monk to stare at the hard, drab sameness of his life.... [It causes people] to mask the real issue. Here the monk complains about how community life is going downhill, how it has lost its Christian charity.... [He] yearns for escape, for distraction of some sort, of any sort."16

If not treated wisely and lovingly, the monk's world turns grey: the disciplined rhythms of his life that once fed and ordered his love for God and neighbor are now screamingly tedious. His desires are increasingly topsyturvy. What he once detested he now desires; what love once attracted now repels. He is restlessly bored. Anywhere else on the planet would be better than the still, aching quiet walls of his cell.

Gluttony. For desert monks such as Isaac, Germanus and Cassian, the stomach was viewed as "the gateway to the soul."7 Was it not food that proved the trap for Adam? One abba, Abba Poemen, worried that a failure to guard the stomach, "the gateway and outer precincts of the human person," left one open "to attack at the core, the spirit." The tasty diversions food offers are the problem: people are naturally wired for the contemplation of God; food easily diverts us from this fundamental orientation 18

Cassian sees three fundamental signs of gluttony in the monk's life: eating before the canonical hour (three o'clock in the afternoon); eating more than is needed; and "getting special joy from delicate and expensive taste treats."9 These three characteristics of gluttony are signs that the monk is subtly being diverted from something more important. Lesser goods are replacing greater ones, with the sad result that prayer is withering. Doesn't this make sense? If prayer is nourished by love, then skewed, twisted, distorted desires can surely

endanger love's root system. A poisonous inversion of values results. Lesser goods receive extravagant attention. Greater goods are devalued, even derided.

Love of money. A one-word translation of the Greek word for this vice, *philargyria*, would be "avarice." Once again, like all the eight vices or evil thoughts, the love of money is a distorted desire that undercuts or eviscerates love. Money itself is a neutral thing: it can be used for great evil or great good. How money is used depends on the disposition of the person using it. If our personality is increasingly formed into the image of Christ—a chief goal of the fathers' thoughts on spiritual formation—we will employ money safely and sanely. If our character remains cracked, inverted, turned in on ourselves, then money will become dynamite in our hands and empower our descent into other key vices: fornication, gluttony, vainglory and pride come to mind.

Sadness. Sadness manifests itself in a weariness and grief of the spirit in which the difficulties of spiritual growth—and its harsh, demanding environment for the monk—are slowly draining joy from the core of the monk's being. He has lost perspective. His eyes have been diverted, deflected on to the dark penumbra that marks life in this present evil age. "It is all too much. I've been at my exercises for thirty years and I haven't changed one whit. I'll never change. I'm simply wasting my time. I should have known a long time ago that the gospel was too good to be true—at least for someone like me." If not diagnosed, sadness can easily energize our next vice, anger.

Anger. The challenges of spiritual formation—spiritual growth's demanding disciplines and maddeningly slow pace—can make someone mad, very mad indeed. Even more difficult are the people one lives with, day in and day out. If only they weren't so fallen. "They hurt me so often. I'm underappreciated. How happy I would be if I lived in a world of one." As Harmless notes, for the monk, "The challenge was human relations." To release our anger to God, especially when we have been wronged, is to trust that God remains active in his world and

will right all wrongs. Thus, anger therapy, at least from a Christian perspective, is eschatological. God will make all things right. This truth does not release us from the responsibility to seek the justice of Christ's kingdom, but it does diffuse our tendency to take matters into our own hands and to seek revenge when God desires for us to manifest mercy. Consider the story of a monk who had suffered an injustice. He went to his spiritual guide, Abba Sisoës, and told him of his plans to seek revenge. "Raising up his hands, Sisoës prayed, 'God we don't need you. We can avenge ourselves.' The brother heard Sisoës's prayer and fell at his feet and begged forgiveness. He recognized in an instant that anger and vengeance presupposes a godless world, a world in which the crude violence of human justice replaces the wisdom of God .1121

Pride. The great danger facing all who would grow spiritually-whether our monastic friends in the desert or Christians living in the twenty-first century-is pride. And what is pride? An exaggerated, bloated, overblown, unrealistic, evil self-estimation. Pride is a constant peril facing all who would grow spiritually and engage in the means of grace-the classical spiritual disciplines-that facilitate spiritual growth.

Many church fathers viewed pride as the root of all the other deadly sins, and other lesser sins that mar human existence. A vivid Latin phrase describes fallen human nature, one that sums up pride's essence: *incurvatus in se*. Fallen human nature is "curved in upon itself." After the fall of human beings into sin, we naturally place ourselves at the center of the universe, a position only God should occupy. This skewed orientation kills prayer.

Think of Paul's call to continual or unceasing prayer in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Some abbots, Abba Isaac included, understood continual prayer to be a wordless, imageless prayer, an idea we will explore in this chapter. Other abbots understood continual prayer to entail "the unceasing recitation of verbal prayers."²² How quickly pride could infiltrate such worthy endeavors. For instance, Paul of

Pherme "tried to say 300 prayers per day, and to keep count he had pebbles in his lap that he would toss out after each prayer said. He then became dejected when he learned of a virgin who had spent thirty years saying 700 prayers."²³ Spiritual competitiveness-a form of pride had infected Paul's perspective. Fewer prayers combined with a good dose of humble manual labor might be just the prescription for rinsing pride out of Paul's spiritual bloodstream.

BACK TO SERAPION

Let's return to Serapion's problem. Isaac, as a physician of the soul, considers different possibilities as to the root cause for Serapion's strange model of God. Had the devil or his minions planted false images of God in Serapion's consciousness? Probably not.

Isaac attributes Serapion's error more to ignorance than to demonic influence. Because Serapion had never received helpful instruction in interpreting the Bible, the pagan culture around him had squeezed his thought patterns into a foreign mold, though Serapion himself was unaware of this influence. Unrecognized cultural pressures were not unique to Serapion in the ancient world. New Christians often transferred aspects of their past religious beliefs into a Christian context. Habituated patterns of thinking, living and even interpreting texts were hard to change.

For, as is the way of that error, according to which they used to worship demons in human form, now also they hold that the incomprehensible and ineffable majesty of the true Deity should be adored under the limitations of some image, and they do not believe that anything can be grasped and understood if no image of it is set up, which they can always approach with their petitions, circumscribe in their minds, and keep constantly before their eyes.²⁴

Monks such as Serapion, "who had never been polluted by pagan

superstition," still had unknowingly and ignorantly employed a pagan hermeneutic in their interpretation of key biblical texts such as Genesis 1:26. The result was that the "immeasurable and simple substance of the Godhead" was reduced to human "contours and a human shape."

There is a way of praying that Isaac believes avoids the pitfalls Serapion has fallen into. For those of us who are accustomed to using words in prayer this new kind of prayer will seem especially mysterious and strange. If we're not talking, are we praying? This is the question we will have to explore with Isaac, Germanus and Cassian. For Abba Isaac's part, he has no doubts concerning a form of prayer that is "purest," one that does not "mix" any "representation of the Godhead" or bodily shapes "into its" requests. Neither words nor deeds nor shapes appear in this imageless, wordless prayer.²⁵

IMAGELESS, WORDLESS PRAYER

Isaac reminds his two young apprentices of his previous discussion of purity as an indispensable mental virtue that facilitates and nourishes prayer. Purity of mind is not only freedom from sinful thoughts as we pray. Even more importantly for Isaac, mental purity consists of our conscious and disciplined withdrawal "from the contemplation of earthly and material things. ... Its state of purity lets it progress and causes Jesus to be seen by the soul's inward gaze—either as still humble and in the flesh or as glorified and coming in the glory of his majesty."²⁶

If Germanus and Cassian are to "see" Christ in "his Godhead" in an interior, elevated vision, they must purify or cleanse their minds of everyday, normal, habitual sights, sounds, rhythms and stimulations. For these monks, the desert's solitude provides the space and silence for the cultivation of this interior vision. They see more clearly when they have settled down, quieted down. Yes, people living "in cities and towns and villages—that is ... those who have an active way of life and its obligations—" can also see Jesus, "but not with that brightness with

which he appears to those who are able to climb with him the mount of the virtues-namely, to Peter, James, and John. For it was in the desert that he appeared to Moses and spoke to Elijah."²⁷ The basic principle? Christ appears more brightly, more clearly to people to the extent they are able to receive him. An environment free from unnecessary distractions and stimulations assists this reception as

We need to take a closer look at Isaac's understanding of imageless, wordless prayer, certainly a strange concept for evangelical readers. What in the world is he talking about? Think, for a moment, about Serapion's problem. He had learned to pray to a corporeal God and was having a hard time shifting to a different way of thinking about God.

If God is incorporeal-God doesn't possess a body-other truths seem to follow. Evagrius Ponticus, from whom Cassian learned about imageless, wordless prayer, taught enigmatically: "When you pray, do not try to represent the divine in yourself, do not let any specific form be imprinted on your mind. Instead approach the Immaterial immaterially, and then you will understand .¹¹²¹

William Harmless helps us understand Evagrius's point: "God is utterly beyond material confines, beyond shape, color, or time. To pray before any image, even a mental image, is idolatrous. Thus the one praying must seek complete transcendence."" In Evagrius's words: "If the mind has not risen above the contemplation of the created world, it has not yet seen the place of God perfectly.""

The highest level of prayer, for Evagrius and Abba Isaac, is not only imageless; it is wordless. Yes, as we have seen, Isaac does refer to prayer as conversation with God. And both Evagrius and Isaac allow for "words in prayer, especially in prayers of petition or prayers for help against demonic attack."³² The goal, however, "is to move beyond words into wordless contemplation. Prayer in its higher form meant not simply moving beyond words; it meant the

stripping-away of thoughts.'""

At times Evagrius will describe imageless, wordless prayer as "the ascent of the mind to God." Let's think this through. For Evagrius and Abba Isaac, the mind is not a mental computer that enables us to reason, add, think logically from premises to conclusions and so on. For these early Christians, the mind (Gk. nous) reflects the image of God within us and is the intuitive ability human beings have to know and see God, but in a wordless, imageless manner. "Evagrius would say that there is nothing more natural to us as human beings than praying: 'The mind, by its very nature, is made to pray'; 'prayer is the activity best suited to the dignity of the mind'; 'undistracted prayer is the highest mindfulness of the mind.'""

In Evagrius's understanding, "prayer is not just an activity of mind; it is a state of mind, a *katastasis*. That means that prayer is not so much something one does as something one is ... prayer is not *ekstasis*, not leaving oneself; it is a *katastasis*, a coming to one's true state."³⁵ In a manner of speaking, we are wired by God for prayer. The ability to pray is part of our spiritual DNA. When we are in this state of prayer, attained by good coaching and consistent practice, we have found our heart's true home, at least from the perspective of Evagrius, Abba Isaac and Cassian.

What Abba Isaac is offering to Germanus and Cassian is a particular model or paradigm of prayer, one which we as modern Christians can understand, ponder and then introduce or not introduce into our own prayer practices. Fortunately, one does not have to accept the model of imageless, wordless prayer to benefit from Isaac's words to Germanus. Much of the advice Isaac has to offer will facilitate and strengthen many ways of praying and can be readily applied to petitionary and intercessory prayer, the models of prayer most commonly understood and employed by evangelicals and most Christians in the Protestant world.

THE MODERN CHRISTIAN

Let's be frank. Few Christians living in the twenty-first century are called to a monastic vocation. The life that Isaac and other monks led in the desert is hardly inviting, unless we add a good dose of idealistic romanticizing. Abbas such as Isaac lived in a drastically different physical and cultural environment than we do: a geographically isolated, dry, barren desert devoid of television, radio, computers, the Internet, cell phones, email, family obligations and most work responsibilities. Monks led extremely simple, and to many of us, shockingly austere, boring lives. As we'll see in a future chapter, and have already noticed in our discussion of acedia, many monks were more than willing to admit that life in the desert could be agonizingly tedious, endlessly repetitive. There just wasn't a lot to do out there in the wilderness: plait some palm branches into a basket, eat a piece of bread, watch a horned toad munch on a fly. So boring, so tedious, so quiet, so tiresome, so uninviting from a modern perspective.

How can we learn to appreciate what Isaac is saying and to receive discerningly what we can from his teaching while continuing to live in the complex, rapidly changing, noisy, info-saturated, cluttered environment of the modern world? Many of us have a hard time setting five minutes a day apart for God. When we do manage to find moments of silence and attempt to pray, we fumble, mumble, gaze out the window, try to maintain our attention and often walk away from our attempts to commune with God discouraged and disillusioned. I talk too much in my prayers, am easily distracted, too often discouraged and frustrated. Why would I much rather read a book about prayer than actually pray? I don't know whether to cry or to chuckle.

It's best to admit, I think, that Isaac offers a full-course meal and most of us will only be able to nibble at the feast. So be it. Why should we allow frustration, remorse, guilt or anger over our limitations and circumstances to foreclose an opportunity to visit Isaac in his environment and time, listen to his teaching and then make our way back into our own vastly different world, even

though some of his words and disciplines will remain beyond our understanding and practice?

We can turn away from Isaac in frustration and sulk. Or we can continue to listen, test, ponder, consider. Is there a way we can wisely assimilate aspects of Isaac's teaching, even if other aspects remain opaque to us? I think there is.

Within the context of his comments on wordless prayer, Isaac turns our attention to a significant pattern in the life of Jesus. Though Christ's own "disposition" was flawless, pure and perfect, Jesus still habitually withdrew to deserted places to pray. Let's think about this last sentence for a moment: Jesus' disposition was perfect. His habitual responses to all that life offered-in the midst of this present evil age-were exactly what they should be. He lived his life in steady, solid, loving trust in his Father. He saw and heard things from his Father that others around him rarely, if ever, discerned. Jesus was a perfect human being. That is to say, he fully reached or attained his telos (Gk.).

What do I mean by telos? A tree reaches its telos by growing into its fullness as a particular tree. A perfect Cypress tree is one that fully, perfectly expresses its DNA as a Cypress. A butterfly reaches its telos by growing into all that it is created by God to be; a perfect Monarch butterfly is one that exhibits fully all the potential creatively present in its DNA as a creature of God. The perfect human being Jesus Christ-has developed into all that a human being can be. If you want to see what a human being was created by God to be, take a good look at Christ.

Perfection, then, isn't the ability to keep a moral code perfectly. Perfection does have a moral dimension, but our moral perceptions and choices are simply aspects of what it means to be a human being created in the image of God. Human perfection-present for us to gaze on in the life of Jesus Christ-is the ability to love in any and every situation. Perfection entails knowledge; the perfect person knows how God's love would apply in context A and context B.

Perfection also is the ability to carry out, to live out, love's demands once they are known. Everything that Christ said and did is the manifestation of God's love within a particular context. Love is the telos-the goal-for all human beings, and Christ modeled this genetic endgame for us all. To see Christ is to see what we are called to be and to do as human beings. He is love, goodness and a host of other virtues in mind and in action. Again, if you want to know what a human being is created to be, take a good look at Christ.

Now here's the really interesting thing: though Jesus was perfect in every way, he found it necessary to do certain things to maintain the health of his relationship with his Father and the Spirit. He wasn't a divine computer whose hard drive had been programmed for loving obedience. Jesus was characterized by everything that marks human life, apart from sin. He had a genuine human body: blood, bone, brain, stomach, intestines. He had a mind that learned as time passed, as he listened to the rabbis teach in the synagogue, as he worshiped at the temple in Jerusalem. As the years passed, Christ grew in his relationship with his Father. And a principal means that nurtured Christ's growth was prayer.

Prayer was the lifeblood of Jesus' relationship with his Father. It was in the silence and isolation of the wilderness that Jesus addressed God with, as Isaac puts it, "purity and integrity of heart ... apart from all the turbulence and confusion of the crowd. 113' A single-minded, almost ruthless pursuit of prayer and solitude marks Jesus' life.

Note what Luke juxtaposes in describing the rhythms of Jesus' ministry in Luke 5. On the one hand, "the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses" (Lk 5:15). There was so much for Jesus to say and to do. I can see crowds of people surrounding him, calling out for healing, restoration, new life. Yet in the very next verse Luke writes: "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Lk 5:16). Christ would consistently, regularly withdraw from the very people

who needed him most. Why? So that when he was with them he would know what to do and how to do it.

I would think that Christ could have simply stayed with those who needed him, ministering to them day and night. And if he had done so, he would have become unimaginably tired. Why? Because Jesus was human, just like you and me. He needed to rest. He needed to sleep. He needed to pray. What Isaac is saying is this: to remain spiritually sane, emotionally stable and physically healthy, silence, solitude and prayer must characterize our lives. For these disciplines marked the life of our Savior and were the avenue by which God's life continually flowed into the human life of Jesus: it was as though the life of the age to come-the life of heaven, as Isaac would view matters-continually manifested itself in the life of Jesus. And Isaac believes the same can be true of us if we model our lives after the example of Christ.

At present, Isaac teaches, we sojourn in the body. We are pilgrims traveling toward home, but we've yet to reach our destination. Still, if we heed the example of Christ, imitating his life through the power of the Spirit gracefully at work in us, we can even at the present time "prepare ourselves for the likeness as it were of that blessedness which is promised to the holy ones in the future, and God will be 'all in all' for us."

Christ desires to enfold us in his love, the love of his Father. To receive Christ's love, however, we must in turn embrace him fully, completely, unconditionally. "Every love," Isaac exhorts, "every desire, every effort, every undertaking, every thought of ours, everything that we live, that we speak, that we breathe," will be immersed in God's love when the "perfect love of God ... has passed into our heart's disposition. 1137

The "goal of the solitary," his "whole intention," is to "possess the image of future blessedness in this body and as it were to begin to taste the pledge of that heavenly way of life and glory in this vessel." The entire life of the monk fully

immersed in the love of the Father and Son, an immersion facilitated by life in the desert and its accompanying disciplines, becomes "a single and continuous prayer,"³⁸ the very thing Germanus has been searching for. What Isaac has done is to expand Germanus's understanding of prayer: prayer can be a life lived before God in wise, consistent, sane, safe, powerful love. The life of the future can invade our lives in the present as we allow God to crack us open like nuts, exposing us to his redeeming, renewing love.

Isaac and other desert monks literally used the desert as a learning environment to become skilled at loving. The challenge for us in the twenty-first century is that of adaptation: we need to wisely, courageously and creatively adopt and adapt the thoughts of church fathers such as Isaac to our own environment.

THE PROBLEM OF DISTRACTIONS (AGAIN!)

Germanus again poses a question that may still be troubling many readers as they listen to Isaac's instructions and exhortations to continual, unceasing prayer. What is one to do with the maddening tendency of the mind to flit about like a bird, constantly distracted during prayer by the humming wings of a thousand different thoughts? On the one hand, Germanus is excited and amazed at the possibility of unceasing prayer. On the other hand, he is discouraged and intimidated by the difficulties entailed. "For we fall into greater despair the more our desire for perfect blessedness is inflamed by the stimulus of this teaching, since we do not know how we can strive for and acquire the discipline regarding something so sublime."³⁹

Germanus walks Isaac through the fundamental difficulty he has encountered as he meditates on the vocation of unceasing prayer. Germanus seems to have a firm grasp of the basic principles involved in continual prayer; how to maintain unceasing prayer, how to actually pray continually, though, is a different matter. "Consequently, we want to have explained to us how this awareness of God may

be conceived in the mind and perpetually maintained there."4° Yes, there's the rub. All of us are aware of God at one time or another. The problem is that of maintaining our awareness, of sustaining our attentiveness to God and the demands of love throughout our normal, everyday schedules. Is it possible to maintain our awareness of God as we prepare meals, drive to work, answer emails, finish business deals, solve calculus problems, study English literature, sink a free throw and encounter and engage the other challenges, joys and responsibilities of life in the twenty-first century? Can we somehow learn to carry the wisdom of the desert in our hearts wherever we go-in the midst of the rhythms of normal, human life?

The delights of prayer, Germanus complains, are frequently offset by its accompanying distractions. Germanus finds within his mind the inveterate tendency to wander both during prayer and outside of prayer. As his mind drifts he loses his "spiritual awareness." "Before we find it we lose sight of our goal once again, and before any spiritual vision is brought forth, our heart's attentiveness, already conceived, vanishes." What is one to do? Germanus proposes keeping "something special fixed before our eyes as a kind of formula to which the errant mind can be recalled after numerous detours and wanderings and into which it can enter, as into a safe harbor, after repeated shipwrecks," an idea which Abba Isaac will affirm with enthusiasm 41

Germanus's struggle actually encourages Isaac. "Your search, so meticulous and careful, foreshadows that purity is near at hand." Germanus's very desire for unceasing prayer is evidence to Isaac that Germanus's heart is being weeded by the Holy Spirit of competing, disordered loves that would dissipate or diffuse his devotion to Christ. Germanus's love for Christ is increasingly "unmixed," or pure. I think of Kierkegaard's phrase: "Purity of heart is to will one thing." It is "one thing" that Isaac keeps pushing Germanus toward: uncompromised, unmixed love for Christ, a love that is constantly attentive, aware, alert to the Spirit's touch. For to be touched by the Spirit is to be touched by Christ.

Two factors have led Germanus to the portal of purity: first, he has a "diligent," active, inquiring mind, one that is drawing him ever more deeply into key issues of spiritual development. Learning "what ought to be investigated" is half the battle.⁴² Second, Germanus is working hard to live what he is learning. The "constant striving for and actual experience of a disciplined life have made him seek out the threshold of this purity and knock at its portals."⁴³

Learning to pray unceasingly is similar to children learning the alphabet for the first time. The letters of the alphabet will remain an unintelligible jumble unless the child learns "to recognize their outline" by tracing "their forms with a steady hand ... with unceasing attentiveness and daily imitation." To do so children must carefully study a model and reproduce that model or pattern with pen and paper. And the beginning writing exercises will be especially difficult.

Do you remember your first attempts in school to copy the letters of the alphabet? I recall well the intimidating environment of my first grade classroom. Looking forward from my desk, I saw my first teacher at the front of the classroom, holding a long yard stick in her hand. With gentleness and authority she pointed to the letters of the English alphabet, a series of green cards perched above the chalk board. How strange the letters looked—a capital A, like a mountain with a line drawn through the center, and a capital C, like a smile on its side.

How in the world would I ever remember all these letters, much less learn to print them? Though it felt unnatural at first, my teacher taught me to properly hold my pencil and print the letters. With exquisite patience, for what seemed days on end, she encouraged, cajoled, reprimanded and educated me in the mysteries of printing and, eventually, writing. Although my first letters were imperfect, slowly something began to happen, almost magically. What had seemed grossly unnatural became ever more natural. The discipline of my first weeks in school led to an unexpected liberty, the freedom to do two things at

once. While printing-and later writing-I could also be thinking about history, social studies or English. I was no longer thinking about the mechanics of writing. It was a skill that before long seemed almost innate.

Isaac sees a similar educational dynamic operating in Germanus. All beginnings are hard, whether we are learning to write or learning to pray continually. But Germanus's spiritually disciplined efforts to learn the dynamics of prayer will finally lead to his goal: uninterrupted communion with God-an internal, constant attentiveness to the loving embrace of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Germanus, like all human beings, has been created in the image of God, the image who in reality is Christ himself. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Col 1:15). Hence, just as prayer was a constant, unceasing aspect of Christ's life, so it can be for Germanus and all human beings. We are created for prayer. The problem we face, one that is linked to the virus of sin, is our tendency to wander away from God, in our prayers and in our actions. Isaac insists we need a tether for the mind, a means of securing our thoughts to God as we move through the activities of the day and the silence of the night. Isaac offers such a tether to Germanus, a means of continually drawing his drifting mind back to God before he loses his "spiritual awareness."

Isaac teaches Germanus that the model for unceasing prayer can be "transmitted" with the aid of a specific "formula for this discipline," what Isaac describes as a "devotional formula." "This, then, is the devotional formula proposed to you as absolutely necessary for possessing the perpetual awareness of God: `Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me'" (Ps 70:1) 44

PSALM 70SI

At first glance we may rightly wonder how this particular verse from Psalm 70

answers Germanus's heartfelt query concerning unceasing prayer and the nagging problem of distraction and inattention. Why this particular verse out of all the treasury of Scripture?

Isaac knows that Germanus might well be puzzled by the selection of the first verse of Psalm 70 and dives into a detailed discussion and defense of Psalm 70:1 as the perfect tether for the wandering Christian's mind. The psalmist, Isaac believes, captures the constellation of intense emotions involved in prayer, the broader conditions of prayer, and the spiritual opposition we can expect to face as we take prayer seriously. "[Psalm 70:1] contains an invocation of God in the face of any crisis, the humility of a devout confession, the watchfulness of concern and of constant fear, a consciousness of one's own frailty, the assurance of being heard, and confidence in a protection that is always present and at hand: 45 Those who pray the psalmist's petition acknowledge openly and honestly their own weakness and their awareness of the spiritual challenges that surround them as they move into a life of prayer.

As Christ's disciples continually call on God's help as defender and shield, they-as spiritual warriors-can continue to wage confidently and courageously the battles unceasing prayer will naturally entail. To pray continually is far from easy. Many of us would consider it impossible. Yet Isaac is convinced that we are capable of more than we could possibly imagine, but must avoid a number of pitfalls in prayer that can easily trip us up.

Isaac runs through a laundry list of difficulties those who pray will sooner or later encounter: demonic attack, boredom, spiritual dryness, anxiety, sadness-especially over the seeming hopelessness of ever changing, and pride over success in prayer, problems we have already examined in this chapter. The moment, it seems, that we experience a small degree of spiritual success we become "puffed up because of our good fortune." Even our small steps into prayer can become stumbling blocks to further growth.

As we experience these struggles, Psalm 70:1 immediately reminds us that God knows how difficult spiritual growth is. He knows that we are apt to wander, to lose our focus, to fall back into old patterns of behavior, to forget the most important things. None of these possible missteps surprise God. What Psalm 70:1 teaches us is that God is not far off, a distant deity unconcerned about our attempts to draw close, or disappointed or surprised by our tendency to lose our way.

The image comes to mind of a baby learning to walk. As a baby takes her first steps she toddles. She is a toddler, after all. And what do her parents do? Scold her for her inability to walk properly? Do they think she should be able to run wind-sprints the moment she gains her balance for the first time? No. The entire family gathers around the swaying infant, cheering her on as she takes her first wobbly, uncertain steps. Her parents' hands are there to steady her if she loses her balance. Yes, almost all infants pick up a few bumps and bruises in learning to walk, but wise, loving parents, hovering over their baby to prevent serious harm, know they must give her enough freedom to learn to step, then walk, then run. In like manner, the Holy Trinity delights in our first steps into prayer and is surely not surprised by the challenges that we will face.

Think, for a moment, of the issue of spiritual warfare, a very important topic for Isaac and other desert abbas. The apostle Paul warns clearly that all believers will face severe spiritual opposition as they live in the midst of this present evil age. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12). Psalm 70:1 acknowledges this spiritual warfare and teaches that God is eagerly waiting to be asked to join us in the battle.

As we pray the petition of the psalmist we honestly and openly acknowledge we are too feeble for prayer, too weak for the combat facing us, and will surely

fail without God's constant support, encouragement and protection. "For whoever desires to be helped always and in all things shows that he needs God as a helper, not only in hard and sad affairs, but also and equally as much in favorable and joyful ones.⁴⁷

Ponder a monk struggling with the sin of gluttony in the middle of the Egyptian desert. Imagine that in his previous vocation our monk had served his Roman patron as head chef, often sampling the food he was preparing for the day's meals. And, to be honest, our chef turned monk had not been above squirreling away a morsel or two for a late night snack. He had loved a fruity glass of red wine, well prepared sea bass and the vast variety of vegetables tended by the family gardener, right outside his kitchen window. To be sure, he had managed to put on quite a few pounds. And he found himself anxious over his growing inability to control his appetites. "Thank God for Christ," he said to himself. "He saved me from an early grave. I would have eaten myself to death and died with a smile on my face, lost forever."

Our monk was deeply attracted to the desert holy men who occasionally showed up in town and warmly desired the freedom they seemed to experience in their lives in Christ. One day he took the plunge-he bade his Roman patron farewell and headed off to the desert. Initially, his new life had been interesting, exotic, exciting. There continued to be moments of great spiritual joy, even exaltation. But, oh my, how hungry he could become, especially as he prayed. The instant he began to pray-his abba said he should be praying continually-his mind wandered to food. In prayer he was inevitably distracted as he imagined in his solitude the inviting aroma of the food being prepared in his kitchen back home. The colors, scents and tastes he had so loved would envelop him in a gluttonous haze. Guilt soon arose within him over feeling the constant urge to eat and his inveterate tendency to succumb to culinary fantasies. In the midst of such struggles what could he do but call out to God with deep groaning, "O God, make haste to help me"? Little did our novice monk realize that the very

willingness to call out for divine aid in the midst of agonizing temptation and struggle was a sign, from Abba Isaac's perspective, of a maturing monk, one who with the help of Psalm 70:1 is moving toward unceasing prayer.

The struggles monks experienced in their spiritual lives were not limited to prayer. Many encountered distractions the moment they attempted to study the Scripture. Picture a monk attempting to memorize a psalm or study the gospel. The instant he begins to study or meditate on a text a headache strikes or sleepiness occurs. Sound familiar? For other monks sleeplessness, rather than the gift of sleep, attacks, weakening the body and enervating the emotions. What better prayer than to call out to God for help and strength? "Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me."

Unexpected, heated temptations to lust, anger, avarice, sadness, bitterness and boredom were constant companions of the faithful monk. The difference between the faithful and faithless monk-and Christian-is found, Isaac believes, in the continued willingness to swallow one's pride and call out to God for help and sustaining power in the midst of temptation. "If I think that the impulses of wanton desire have died down and that the genital heat in my members has grown cool, then, in order that this virtue, once begotten, may indeed by the grace of God abide longer and remain in me, I should say intently: `Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me.'"

Isaac lists a catalog of common monastic struggles, many quite complex:

Sudden "urges" of "anger, avarice, or sadness" that attempt to "cut off gentleness" and can lead to "poisonous bitterness."

. An insidious drive to compare one's spiritual state with that of others, "subtly fancying that others are negligent or lukewarm," sinful suggestions that Isaac attributes to demonic influence.⁴⁹

- . Distracting, "wandering thoughts," similar to the reveries that plagued our monk friend. The moment one begins to pray, interruptions and fantasies suddenly appear, along with boredom and "dry barrenness," a kind of "foulness of mind" that makes prayer well-nigh impossible so

The horror engendered by nighttime struggles with demonic apparitions, so that "the very hope of salvation and life is being withdrawn.""

Common monastic adversities such as these-many of which nonmonastics can readily identify with-were best fought by simply calling out for God's help and deliverance. "Help," indeed, is a wonderful one-word prayer.

Psalm 70:1 was and is also an effective prayer during times of spiritual exaltation and fruitfulness. If the Holy Spirit graced Isaac with spiritual insights, "steadfastness of thought, and joy of heart, along with an unspeakable gladness and ecstasy of mind ... an overflow of very holy ideas which had been completely hidden from me before, then, in order that I might deserve to abide longer in these, I should frequently and anxiously cry: `Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me.'"

Psalm 70:1 is a petition that can be prayed continually, in "adversity" and in "Prosperity."" Isaac can't imagine a single situation, a single moment, when this prayer would not assist us. "You should, I say, meditate constantly on this verse in your heart. You should not stop repeating it when you are doing any kind of work or performing some service or are on a journey. Meditate on it while sleeping and eating and attending to the least needs of nature."53

Isaac believes the constant repetition of Psalm 70's first verse will ultimately lead to the imageless prayer that Serapion had sadly missed due to his mistaken interpretation of biblical metaphors describing God as having a body. Habitual repetition of Psalm 70:1 will strengthen the mind and gradually lead it beyond mental images in prayer, a renunciation and rejection of "the whole wealth and

abundance of thoughts," leading to a poverty of mind that Isaac sees expressed in the beatitude, "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."⁵⁴

Germanus is convinced by Isaac's insights. Yet Germanus's candid, open character cannot help but repeat what is the most important question, "namely, how we can hold fast to this verse [Ps 70:1] which you have given us as a formula, so that just as by the grace of God we have been freed from the foolishness of worldly thoughts we may likewise firmly grasp spiritual ones."⁵⁵

Germanus's problem is much like the dilemma of a modern reader who attempts to carry out Isaac's advice concerning unceasing prayer. For a moment our mind wraps itself around a psalm-perhaps Psalm 70:1-and our focus remains sharp as we pray it. Before we know it, however, "imperceptibly it slips away," and our mind heads off in a different direction.⁵⁶ Or, like many monks, we have a difficulty focusing only on one verse or text.

As our mind wanders from text to text, things get further muddled as thoughts on one passage mingle with thoughts on another.

The recollection of another text shuts out reflection on the previous material, although it had not yet been completely aired. From here, with the introduction of another reflection, it moves elsewhere, and thus the mind is constantly whirling from psalm to psalm, leaping from a gospel text to a reading from the Apostle, wandering from this to the prophecies and thence being carried away to certain spiritual histories, tossed about fickle and aimless through the whole body of Scripture.⁵⁷

An undisciplined mind is like a shallow, spiritual bohemian dilettante, "unable to come to a conclusion about anything by fully judging or examining it, having become a mere toucher and taster of spiritual meanings and not a begetter and possessor of them." Or, to change metaphors, the unfocused, unfettered mind is

similar to a hummingbird flitting from flower to flower, but never lingering long enough to drain a bud thoroughly of the nectar it has to offer. The undisciplined mind is aimless, distracted, lazy.⁵⁸

Germanus describes well his own tendency to fly too quickly from text to text: "When [my mind] is praying it is recalling a psalm or some reading. When it is chanting it is meditating on something else than what the text of the psalm itself contains. When it is doing a reading it is thinking of what it wished to do and what it wished it had done. Thus it receives and rejects nothing in a disciplined and proper manner."

How can we teach the wayward mind to "cling tightly" to the scriptural "formula" Isaac has proposed, with the fruitful result that "our thoughts may not toss freely about but may be under our control"?

Isaac proposes "three things" that stabilize a wandering mind: vigils, meditation and prayer itself. These three practices, though, will fail to anchor the distracted mind if the monk has not deeply entered into his community's disciplined life. All three require a willingness to leave other things aside, a determination to say no to activities and concerns others in the broader world readily embrace. And in the willingness to say no, freedom comes, specifically freedom from "care and anxiety."⁶⁰

Exact times of vigil, meditation and prayer will be unproductive, though, if we only pray during these specific occasions. In a word, regularly scheduled prayer deepens within a broader lived life of prayer. If our lives outside times of solitude, meditation, and prayer are deeply shaped by influences, habits and contexts inimical to prayer, should we be surprised that when we come to pray at a specific time and place prayer seems impossible?

And therefore we have to be outside the hour of prayer what we want to be when we are praying. For the mind at the time of its prayer is necessarily

formed by what went on previously, and when it is praying it is either raised to the heavens or brought low to the earth by the thoughts on which it was dwelling before it prayed.⁶¹

In Origen's own words, "He prays without ceasing who joins prayer to works that are of obligation, and good works to his prayer. For virtuous works, or the carrying out of what is enjoined, form part of prayer. It is only in this way that we can understand the injunction, pray without ceasing, as something that we can carry out; that is to say, if we regard the whole life of the saint as one continuous prayer." Specific times of prayer then become part of this greater whole, a life immersed in continual communion with God.⁶²

Where could one find an environment, a sacred schoolroom for applying Abba Isaac's teaching? For Isaac and Cassian, there was no better environment for learning how to pray than the daunting setting of the desert, the subject of future chapters.

To me, there is no doubt but that the earth abides because of the prayers of the Christians.

ARISTIDES THE APOLOGY OF ARISTIDES 1

Prayer is the wall of faith. It is her arms and missiles against the foe, who keeps watch over us on all sides. And so we never walk unarmed.

TERTULLIAN ON PRAYER'

Be constant in both prayer and reading. First, speak with God; then let God speak with you. Let Him instruct you in His teachings, let Him direct you.

CYPRIAN THE EPISTLES OF CYPRIAN, EPISTLE 1 TO DONATUS³

In prayer, a person is present with God, for the person who prays is separated from the enemy. Prayer safeguards self-control, controls the temper, restrains

pride, cleanses us of malice, overthrows envy, destroys injustice, and corrects impiety. Prayer is the strength of bodies, the prosperity of the home, the good will of the city, the strength of the kingdom, the victory in war, the security of peace, the bringing together of enemies, the preserver of allies. Prayer is the seal of virginity, the pledge of marriage, the shield of the traveler, the guard of those who sleep, the courage of those who keep watch, the productivity of farmers, the deliverance of sailors.... Prayer is conversation with God, the contemplation of unseen things, the fulfillment of things desired, equal in honor with the angels, the progress of good things, the overthrow of evils, the correction of sinners, the enjoyment of the present, and the substance of things hoped for.

GREGORY OF NYSSA ON THE LORD'S PRAYER⁴

F I V E

FURTHER COACHING ON PRAYER

Thus far we have covered fairly broad territory in our discussion of the fathers' thoughts and practices on prayer: the mystery of prayer, the problem of self-deception, steps in learning how to pray, learning to pray the psalms, the problem of distractions in prayer, basic requirements for prayer, fiery prayer and the question of continual or unceasing prayer. In this chapter I want to continue to explore these significant issues by listening in some detail to two of the great teachers on prayer in the early church: Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa. We'll return to some themes we have already explored in previous chapters and explore some new territory as we consider Augustine's letter to the widow Proba on prayer, and insights from Gregory and John Chrysostom. We'll also return to Gregory's sermons when we study in detail the fathers' thoughts on the Lord's Prayer in chapter six.

ROADBLOCKS TO PRAYER

In A.D. 412 Augustine wrote on the topic of prayer to the well-known, consecrated widow Proba, a woman also known to Jerome and Chrysostom.⁵ Proba had asked Augustine for "guidance in prayer," and Augustine responded with a long letter of exhortation and advice. As we move into the body of the letter, we find Augustine expressing concern that Proba's reliance on her family and personal wealth may prove a roadblock to a life of prayer.

While Proba's family and wealth provide her with comfort and apparent security, Augustine encourages Proba to remember that we too easily rely on

what we possess and our broader family context for our sense of security and well-being. Are we really as secure as we believe? Is genuine security to be found in the status of a wealthy Roman family? Or, in a modern context, in a well-stocked portfolio? "Indeed," Augustine writes, "this life is a dying life, no matter what finite comforts it affords us, no matter the companions it brings us, no matter what wealth it lavishes on us."⁶ Augustine encourages Proba to remember and meditate on life's brevity and death's inevitable embrace. Such meditations will serve to reorient her perspective on who and what brings lasting, genuine happiness and security.

How do you find yourself responding to Augustine's comment? Is Augustine overly morbid in his perspective? Or deeply Christian? When was the last time you heard a sermon exhortation to spend the following week meditating on your approaching death and the folly of finding security in your possessions? I can't remember ever hearing a sermon, for instance, on the importance of *memento mori*, reminders of death. How different from the world of the church fathers!

It's striking how often the fathers warn us of our fallen propensity to forget the most important things, including the reality of our own death. We can blissfully and foolishly live as though we will never die and in the process squander the wisdom our mortality offers for learning to live well. Yet, as Augustine understands so clearly, contemplating the reality of death leads to a profound appreciation for what is genuinely important in life. Is it not true that if you knew you were going to be dying tonight, or in a week's time, the next seven days would not be "normal human life"? Rather, the week would be devoured by important things.

An awareness of the fleeting nature of life brings a healthy, indeed, life-giving perspective: perspective about ourselves, our families, our vocation, our sins, God, the resurrection of Christ and hope for the future. Contemplating our quickly approaching death is an effective antidote for our deep-seated self-

deception. Somehow we believe our life on earth will last forever. How surprised we are when someone actually dies.

Among other things, as we think about our death we learn that we plainly are not as important as we thought we were. The world will go on without a moment's pause on the day of our death. We are dust and to dust we will return. Richard Foster comments that "the contemplation of one's own death is among the most time-honored approaches to personal transformation," one of the chief goals Augustine has in mind for Proba. "In our day [Foster's North American context] of runaway narcissism it is a practice we would do well to revive. What would happen if you were to die today? If I were to die today? One of the most sobering insights from such a meditation is the realization that life would continue right on without us-and quite well for that matter.... This is a hard reality for us who carry the illusion that the world revolves around our decisions .117

There is a big difference between the perspective of the pilgrim and the settler. The settler looks at the present world and sinks his roots down deep-as far as he is concerned, he has reached his final destination. The pilgrim is on a journey and travels light; he has his eyes on home but knows there may be miles to travel before he reaches his destination. As the fathers view life, this present world is all preparation, the preface to the first chapter of the real story.

Augustine warns Proba that before she knows it-in the blink of an eye-her life will be over. So why would she set her roots down deep here, a mere way station on her journey home? The brief span of time God has given Proba to live trustfully between the times-between the first and second coming of Christ-will quickly be expended, an unwavering truth for all of us. At her life's end Proba will be little concerned about the size of her villa or the number of her servants. The pressing question for Proba-and us-will be, "did I serve Christ well during the gift of years he graciously gave me? Did I remember the most important

things and live and pray accordingly?" Augustine is sure of a fundamental principle: a skewed perspective on life will lead to skewed prayers.

Yet we, like our ancient brothers and sisters, have an inveterate tendency to forget the brevity of our lives, to be distracted by the latest fad, to drown in the materialism of North American culture, to swallow the lie that "he who dies with the most toys wins." No, the fathers remind us, "he who dies with the most toys is dead." I'm reminded of the words of David in Psalm 39: "Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it" (Ps 39:4-6).

If we forget the most important things—those attitudes and behaviors that birth and nurture true happiness—not only will life make little sense, but our prayer life will wither. We will return to the issue of genuine happiness later in this chapter.

ADVICE FROM GREGORY

Gregory of Nyssa, like Augustine, warns that most people "grievously neglect in their life this sacred and divine work which is prayer." Frequently our neglect of prayer is not intentional. We don't plan carefully not to pray. We don't wake up in the morning and say to ourselves, "The last thing I want to do today is pray. How can I arrange my day so that the thought of praying never enters my mind?" No, most often, we simply get too busy for prayer. Or we're distracted by less important things. Gregory cautions that distraction from important things is a fundamental human problem; as we misread the urgent for the important, our vision is increasingly blurred. Our ability to discern what is genuinely important atrophies. Gregory thinks of the "tradesman" who "rises early to attend to his shop, anxious to display his wares sooner than his competitors so as to get in before them, to be the first to attend to the customer and sell his stock." In like

manner, the "customer does the same; he takes care not to miss what he wants by letting someone else anticipate him; and so he hastens not to church but to the market."⁹

Whether it is the tradesman, customer, "orator" or "judge," "everyone devotes all his energy to the work he has in hand, forgetting completely the work of prayer because he thinks that the time he gives to God is lost to the work he has purposed to do." Gregory observes the mind's predisposition to center "its attention on material, earthly things." Sin and its attendant forgetfulness engender confusion and distort perspective. "For the craftsman considers that the Divine assistance is quite useless for the work he has in mind. Therefore he leaves prayer aside and places all his hopes in his hands, without remembering Him who has given him his hands. In the same way someone who carefully composes a speech does not think of Him who has given him speech."^o

Soon specific sins seep into the lives of those who have lost their perspective and forgotten the most important things. "Thus, it comes about that life is so full of sin.... Everyone keeps forgetting God, and people do not count prayer among the good things worth pursuing. Covetousness enters together with trade; but covetousness is idolatry."" Busyness and forgetfulness quench the Spirit's flame.

Gregory is profoundly concerned that our habitual surrender to the urgent tasks of the moment leaves us spiritually numb, vulnerable to our culture's lies and exposed to spiritual attack. If we are to be urgent about anything, Gregory teaches, let it be about prayer. Holiness, wisdom and spiritual protection blossom from prayer, though the process of reorientation from the urgent to the important will be long and arduous. Gregory is confident, though, that if "work is preceded by prayer, sin will find no entrance into the soul." The evil one will find little opportunity to execute his schemes. "For when the consciousness of God is firmly established in the heart, the devices of the devil remain sterile."²

As we have seen in the time we spent with Abba Isaac, the cultivation of a

constant awareness of God is the precise challenge facing all Christians. Yet to "leave God out" of the daily rhythm of our lives, either purposely or unwittingly, to focus our attention solely on business or the other pressing demands of the day-peripheral issues from the perspective of the fathers is to expose ourselves to spiritual infection. It is sobering that from a patristic viewpoint spiritual sickness looks a lot like normal human life: hectic, frenetic, self-absorbed, self-deceived. And so it seems that we're back to the passions.

BACK TO THE PASSIONS

Like Abba Isaac and John Cassian, Gregory knows that left to our own devices, we are apt "to descend to the mean, earthly level" of our "own desires," with skewed requests in prayer the unhappy result.¹³ Prayer can actually become an unholy and destructive weapon in the hands of people trapped by "the perverse movements" of their "mind." For example, distorted prayer can be a means to punish our enemies or harm ourselves. Like James and John, we are apt to call down God's fire on the Samaritans driving us crazy (see Lk 9:54), while remaining rampantly blind to vast areas in our own lives worthy of the divine flame. "Worst of all, they want to move the Divine toward contrary desires.... On the one hand they want Him to be gracious and gentle to themselves, on the other they ask Him to show Himself hard and bitter to their enemies. 1114

Twisted prayer manifests itself within the contours of our own particular culture and time. Ancient Christians were sometimes tempted to pray for "fame" in the "games" or the "theater." Has our modern North American fixation on celebrity and renown similarly warped Christian perspectives and prayers? The possibility is at least worth considering. "I know, Lord, if I could only make it on to the speaking circuit, I could do so much to advance your kingdom. I'm not asking to become famous or recognized for my own sake. But how much more I could do for you if I were better known. Well, it might be nice to see my face on the cover of Christianity Today, but this is not what I'm seeking.""

Gregory describes these twisted, fevered passions as a "mental disease," a spiritual virus that distorts our thought patterns and inverts our values. Spiritually sick people trapped by their passions may actually desire "that the disease might be brought to perfection," feverishly making petitions whose answer would only make them sicker. "If they fail to obtain these things, each one holds this to be a calamity. Truly they babble nonsense, imploring God to become their fellow patient in this mental disease."⁶

Gregory links the inverting effect of the passions to a short memory. We have forgotten that all things begin with God's grace, the grace that continually supplies what we need to be fulfilled as human beings, though thankfully not what we want. Forgetfulness of God's grace and gifts foments a decline into materialism; fallen human nature "is almost completely involved in the pursuit of material things."

In turn, a materialistic perspective anesthetizes our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit; we are increasingly unable to discern what to request in prayer; "base petitions" are the predictable result.⁷ "It is just as if a very poor and uneducated man who thought earthenware precious, approached a king who had decided to distribute riches and honors. But the poor man would not make requests worthy of the king, but asks from so great a personage to take clay and make it into something according to his own mind."¹⁹

THE SEARCH FOR GENUINE HAPPINESS

As Augustine and Proba continue their conversation, Augustine's correspondence indicates he is quite concerned that Proba's failure to identify the source and nature of true happiness will weaken her ability to discern those people and things on which she should center her intercession in prayer. If Proba equates happiness with the pursuit of pleasure, this false or disordered love will cripple her ability to identify the true good. Inevitably she will end up praying for the wrong things. In a shocking move—at least at first glance—Augustine

expresses his hope to Proba that she "experience a sense of desolation ... no matter how much you may enjoy the good fortune of earthly riches." Augustine is not being unkind; his hope is that desolation will lead to genuine consolation for Proba. Remember, Augustine exhorts Proba, that "we live in the things which we love, which we seek, which we believe will bring us happiness."²⁰ Thus the absolute necessity of identifying what happiness is and what it is not.

We are reading someone else's mail, looking from the outside in so to speak, so it's hard to read between the lines of Augustine and Proba's correspondence. Was Proba unconsciously allowing her wealth to buffer herself from reliance on God and the cultivation of a deeper trust? It is hard to tell. Clearly Proba desires to bring her will and its inclinations in line with God's purposes and design. She wants to intercede wisely on behalf of others. Yet Paul's words in Romans confuse her. Paul writes, "We do not know what we ought to pray for" (Rom 8:26). How can we form petitions, Proba wonders, if we don't know what we should ask? Is it better to avoid intercessory and petitionary prayer than to pray for the wrong things, for even Paul acknowledges that we can be confused about what to request in prayer? If we avoid prayer, though, don't we disobey Paul's words concerning unceasing prayer (1 Thess 5:17) ?

Augustine returns to the issue of happiness and encourages Proba to "pray for happiness." Even wicked people seek happiness, Augustine comments, though only "the good" actually attain it. If happiness is demonstrably a universal human longing, "What is the nature of that happiness?" Is it found, Augustine asks, in simply following the desires and inclinations of our own will? "God forbid that we should think that true," Augustine responds. "For what would happen if a person willed to live wickedly? Could we not prove that person to be wretched in proportion to the ease with which his evil purpose was fulfilled?" ²¹ Augustine, in agreement with "those who practice philosophy without recognizing God," insists "it is essentially a most unhappy thing to wish for what is not proper." To have what we desire, but to only desire proper things appears

to be the key to happiness.

Let's take a moment and think through the cluster of ideas surrounding Augustine's thoughts on happiness.

If we're to pray for happiness, as Augustine instructs Proba, we need a clear understanding of where genuine happiness is to be found. Not only do we need to understand the nature of true happiness, but we must identify false happiness and the false loves that seek after it. The dynamic seems to be this: a disordered will births disordered loves. Left to ourselves and the fallen inclinations of our twisted will, we embrace, almost without thinking, false loves, loves that cannot bring us the happiness we are seeking.

What might some of these false loves be, loves that can never meet our deepest longings? Or to put the question positively, where is the good life to be found? This question faced me the summer of 1985. At that time I had a wonderful job as one of the cofounders of an international church in FerneyVoltaire, France, right across the border from Geneva, Switzerland. My family lived at the foot of the French Alps in Gex, a small, almost idyllic French village. I was earning a solid salary and had formed many significant friendships. Everything seemed right. And then the Holy Spirit started to nudge me back to graduate school. Deb, my wife, sensed this nudging too, as did our church community in Ferney. So, in the summer of 1985, the Hall family transitioned from life in France, a life of financial security, vocational fulfillment and pristine geographical beauty, back to the life of graduate school, in our case, at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia.

We packed and shipped our belongings to Vancouver, said our goodbyes to our dear friends in France and made our way back to the states. In Los Angeles we made a down payment on a small Mazda hatchback that we grew to love and began our drive up the coast to Vancouver, occasionally stopping to visit friends. I specifically recall a visit we made to a former roommate from UCLA who was

shepherding a church in Foster City, just south of San Francisco, near where Deb had grown up.

I especially remember the visit because of a newspaper article I read early one Sunday morning in the San Francisco Chronicle. I was browsing through the financial section and discovered, to my dismay, that if by the age of thirty-five I wasn't worth at least \$40,000, my hopes of reaching the "good life" were an illusion. Because of our recent decisions, choices we believed were guided by the Holy Spirit, we seemed to be moving away from the good life-genuine happiness-rather than toward it. I had quit my job in France, taken my entire family out of an environment they knew and loved, and committed my entire future to the pursuit of academic degrees I would need by my name if I was ever to teach in a university. And there was no guarantee of a teaching job after I had finished school! Instead of our bank account growing, it was shrinking before my eyes as our expenses mounted: the need for a car, school tuition, rent, health insurance and so on. We surely seemed to be poorer rather than richer because of our decision to leave France. We were much less secure financially, materially and vocationally. We were moving away from the good life, away from happiness, at least as North American culture defined it.

I sometimes share this story with my students as we explore together the question of happiness and the good life. Why? Because almost all of them are facing the very same questions and struggles as we did. These students, almost all North Americans and most from Christian homes, readily identify with my family's struggle to discover the nature of true happiness while immersed in a context and culture offering a diametrically opposed vision of the good life.

In class we attempt to answer two questions: How does our culture define "the good life"? How does Christ define "the good life"? Here are some of the most common responses to the first question: money and the financial security and various pleasures money brings including a nice house; physical beauty;

perpetual youth-remaining "forever young"; the possession and exercise of power; an active sex life; fame and celebrity.

As we discuss these issues in class we're always surprised by-myself included-how different Christ's definition of a good life is from that of North American culture. Christ mentions none of the characteristics North American culture most often trumpets as the sources of genuine happiness and fulfillment. In fact, Jesus specifically teaches that happiness cannot be found and does not consist in the abundance of our material possessions. "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk 12:15). Where is happiness found? In what does life truly consist? "Seek first [the kingdom of God] and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33).

Let's be very clear on one point: Christ is not saying that food and clothing are not important. Jesus-and the church fathers-insist that the needs of the poor be met precisely by those who have been given greater material prosperity by God. Physical poverty is no blessing. All human beings should have enough to eat, clothing, housing, access to education and the chance to earn a living. It's far too easy for a wealthy American-I'm thinking of myself-to broadcast the virtues of poverty while living at a level the majority of the world's population could not even imagine. Yet what principle should guide and protect us from disordered desire, from spending more on ourselves than is right, from forgetting what is really important?

The principle that Augustine presents to Proba and to us through her is twofold: first, happiness is not to be found in what we possess. Second, our decisions concerning what we possess should be based on the principle of need rather than opportunity. The fact that I can afford to buy something does not prove that I should make a purchase. Desire guarded by necessity should guide our decisions.

Augustine admits that there are many "proper" things one may desire "without impropriety," among them marriage, the chaste life of a widow or widower, and the basic necessities of life. It is good and proper to desire those things we need to live from day to day, as long as we desire only what is necessary, a main theme emphasized in patristic thinking on wealth and poverty. "Therefore, if we wish for ourselves and our families only what is sufficient for the necessities of life, this sufficiency is not an improper desire in whoever wishes this and nothing more."²²

Contentment married to godliness is the key. "He wished wisely and prayed well who said, 'Give me not riches or poverty, but only what is necessary for life, lest, being wealthy, I should become a liar and say, 'Who sees me?' or, being needy, might steal and deny the name of my God.'"

As we pray that our desires be healed we increasingly pursue what is necessary and wise, not for its own sake, but to enable us to obtain safely and sanely other objects such as "personal safety and friendship"; all three (what is necessary, personal safety, friendship) are goods it is proper to pray for. "These are the goods we must pray to keep when we have them, to acquire when we do not have them."²⁴

Still, Augustine wonders, have we identified all that is "comprised" in happiness? Surely not, for our discussion thus far has been largely limited to temporal goods created for the needs of the body and soul. Friendship, the love of our neighbor, is a worthy, desirable good, but an even higher good to be pursued and prayed for is the love of our neighbor for the sake of God. "Inasmuch as we love ourselves in God, if we really love Him, so also, according to another commandment, we truly love our neighbors as ourselves, if, as far as we are able, we lead them to a similar love of God. Therefore, we love God for Himself, but ourselves and our neighbor for His sake."²⁵

Augustine's quest to reveal true happiness to Proba as the lodestone for our

desires in prayer is not yet complete. He has yet to mention the foundational incentive for a good life. "But, even when we live thus, let us not think that we are established in happiness, as if we had nothing left to pray for. How can we find happiness in life when the one incentive to a good life is still lacking to us?" And what is that incentive? To reflect the desire of the psalmist in our own prayers: "One thing I have asked of the Lord, this will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. That I may see the delight of the Lord, and may visit his temple" (Ps 27:4 Dv). The psalmist, Augustine believes, expresses clearly and unambiguously the ultimate goal of all our asking and desiring in prayer: the vision of God. The desire to see God in all his glory and majesty draws us ever deeper into prayer, a thirst that can never be quenched. This fundamental desire-to see God-is the headwaters of all lesser desires and joys.

OTHER COMMON ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN PRAYER

At this juncture in Augustine's letter to Proba, he shifts from the question of what we should pray for to other common issues and problems Proba faces as she learns to pray. Augustine reminds Proba of two key Gospel texts that have much to teach us about prayer: Jesus' parable of the persistent widow and the parable of the friend in need of bread (Lk 18:1-8; 11:5-13).

Consider the situation of the importunate widow who insists on receiving justice from an unjust judge. "She petitioned an unjust judge so often that she made him listen to her, not through any motive of justice or compassion, but through weariness of her importunity."²⁶ The woman refused to be silenced, though the unjust judge had no desire to listen to her. The point of Jesus' teaching? "In this way we were to be taught how surely the merciful and just God hears us when we pray without ceasing, since the widow, because of her continual petition, could not be treated with contempt even by an unjust and wicked judge."

The parable of the man in need of bread makes much the same point. This man wakes up his friend in the middle of the night and asks for three loaves of bread to feed an unexpected visitor. (Augustine interestingly ponders whether the three loaves might symbolize the Trinity.) In a manner similar to the persistent widow, the man continues to knock on the door of his unresponsive, unwilling and unsympathetic friend. The importunate man is not going to take no for an answer. "By this we are to understand that if a man, roused from sleep, is forced to give unwillingly in answer to a request, God, who does not know sleep, and who rouses us from sleep that we may ask, gives much more graciously." Z' Both parables make the same point; if an unjust judge or grumpy friend finally succumb to an insistent petition, how much more will a kind, gracious, eager and willing God grant our requests?

Jesus assures us that if we ask for a fish, God will not give us a snake. If we ask for an egg, God will not give us a scorpion (Lk 11:11-12). Augustine asks what these four key nouns, fish, snake, egg and scorpion, might represent. The request for a fish draws Augustine's thought to faith, "either because of the water of baptism, or because it remains unharmed by the waves of this world." The snake? "The Serpent is opposed to" faith, and "craftily and deceitfully" persuades people "not to believe in God." As for the egg, it symbolizes hope, "because the chick is not yet alive but it will be. It is not yet seen but it is hoped for-`for hope that is seen is not hope' 1121 (see Rom 8:24). The scorpion is "opposed to" hope, "because whoever hopes for eternal life forgets the things that are behind and stretches himself forth to those that are before" (see Phil 3:13-14). Thus it is "dangerous" for the believer "to look backward; he is on guard against the rear of the scorpion, which has a poisoned dart in its tail."29

As for the request for bread itself, Augustine believes the bread symbolizes charity and refers to Paul's listing of love as the foremost of the virtues 30 The bread of love is superior to all other foods, while "the stone is opposed to it, because the stony-hearted cast out charity. It may be that these gifts signify

something more appropriate. Nevertheless, He who knows how to give good gifts to His children urges us to ask and to seek and to knock."³¹

The more "ardent" our love is, the more "strongly founded" our hope is, the greater will be our ability to receive all that God offers to us and desires to give us. Augustine stresses that we do not make requests to God in order to inform God of our needs, as though God did not already know what is best for us. Rather, our very asking deepens our ability and willingness to desire what God wants to give us. "He wishes our desire to be exercised in prayer that we may be able to receive what He is preparing to give. That is something very great, but we are too small and straitened to contain it. 1132 As our hearts expand in hope and love, our desire to embrace what God offers us will correspondingly expand.

THE QUESTION OF UNANSWERED PRAYER

Still, Augustine's argument has significant gaps regarding the question of unanswered prayer. Some may find his interpretation of snake and scorpion to be interesting and insightful. Others, like myself, are less satisfied. Have there not been times for you, the reader, when it seems that you asked God for an egg and received a scorpion's sting in return? And what of the question of importunity? My bet is that many readers have fervently importuned God for healing, for deliverance, for the basic needs of life, and by all appearances God remained silent or appeared to respond sadistically to their prayers. It occasionally seems that God ignores our deepest requests, no matter how persistently we make them. If so, why should we keep asking? How much asking, importuning, does it take to catch God's attention?

We cannot sidestep these issues. For a moment we need to move outside Augustine's correspondence with Proba to attempt to answer a very perplexing question: why is it that we can pray as Jesus instructs in his parables-importuning God until we are blue in the face-and God seems to give us the very opposite of what we have asked, or even worse, appears to ignore our requests

entirely? Yes, we are called by Christ to pray persistently, not giving up. But what sense can we make of those times when we pray persistently and our persistence produces, it seems, little response from God? My reply to these questions will draw on a modern writer, Richard Foster, and a church father, John Chrysostom.

Foster and Chrysostom understand that the question of unanswered prayer can plague us and, if not dealt with, actually quench our desire to pray. Why pray, we ask ourselves, if our prayers don't make any real difference anyway? Good question. In response to our query, Foster first asks two related questions:

1. Why should we ask God for "things when he already knows our needs"?
 2. Is God really interested in the "petty details" of our lives? Surely, there are much greater issues that occupy God's attention and concern than whether I can find a parking space in a crowded university parking lot. Or so it would seem
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Foster encourages us to see that our answers to these questions are profoundly shaped by how we view God. If God possesses "an Abba heart," inviting us to call him Abba" in our prayers, should we be surprised that God is interested in the smallest details of our lives? Surely the family illustrations and images biblical writers draw on to explain God's love and concern for his children should teach us something about prayer. For instance, don't spiritually and psychologically healthy parents mirror the divine love through showing interest in the details of their child's day? Why would God's interest and love for us be less than the interest and love parents have for their children, especially if God has invited us to look at healthy family relationships for clues about God's love? If God's love were less than the love of parents for their children, we would indeed live in an upside-down universe, one in which creatures loved more deeply and consistently than their Creator.

So why should we ask God for things that God already knows we need? Just

as attentive parents know their children's needs before they ask, yet enjoy listening to their children's questions, concerns and delights, so it is with God and his children. "The most straightforward answer to this question is simply that God likes to be asked. We like our children to ask us for things that we already know they need because the very asking enhances and deepens the relationship."³⁴

Chrysostom also counsels us to draw on parental imagery to expand our awareness of the depth of God's love. "Do you see how the degree of God's love exceeds that of a mother? ... As great as is the difference between light and darkness, between evil and goodness, so great is the difference between the goodness and providence of God in comparison to the tender love of a father. 1131

The context of Chrysostom's comments on God's love is his concern that Christians will misinterpret or misread God's actions in the world-or God's apparent lack of action-as signs that God doesn't love the world or his human image bearers. If we simply judge by appearances, looking only at the world around us and the vast suffering that ripples across it second by second, we will surely be tempted to believe that God doesn't care about what is happening and is not responding to our prayers-whether we're praying for the broader world or for specific situations in our own lives.

Chrysostom himself had been praying that God would deliver him from the persecution of his enemies and from his lonely exile in the town of Cucusus, hidden away in the Taurus Mountains. He and those who loved him were tempted to feel abandoned by God. Could this actually be the case? Not if what the Scripture had taught Chrysostom about God's love was genuinely true. Chrysostom reminds his audience and himself of how frequently the prophets speak of God's love for his people and creation, a love aptly illustrated by maternal love. Chrysostom points to Isaiah's words: "Can a woman forget her

nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?" (Is 49:15 NRSV). The lesson to be learned is patently clear: "The prophet says this to make the point that just as a woman would not forget her own children, so neither would God forget humankind. 1131

Chrysostom exhorts us, however, to move beyond the human illustration itself. Human comparisons are inadequate to communicate incomparable glories such as the divine love shown to us in Jesus Christ. Once we have grasped the human illustration we must exercise our reason and imagination to move beyond it. "I have given you these examples so that when I introduce other illustrations you wouldn't limit your thinking to the measure of what is spoken by the prophets, but having this rule you should use your reason to go even further and see the unspeakable excess of the love of God."

Chrysostom focuses on one central affirmation as he views his own painful situation and God's apparent lack of response to his prayers for deliverance and restoration to his congregation in Constantinople. God loves humanity with an infinite, unchanging love, a love that "differs from all these [illustrations] as much as evil differs from goodness. 113' That is, "He speaks this way, not so you would think his love to be something human-I will not stop saying the same things over again-but that through these images you might discern the warmth, genuineness, excess, and fire of his love. 1139

It is the love of the Holy Trinity itself, the unimaginably personal love exchanged eternally between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that beckons us to make our petitions in prayer. Yet, having laid this foundation for petitionary prayer, a key question remains. If God loves us so much, why does he appear to say no so often to our prayers, even when we knock persistently on the door of God's house, importuning God as Jesus has so clearly instructed us to do (Lk 11:5-13)? Why does infinitely personal love seem to hurt us so frequently in matters that are of such great importance to us?

Foster carefully builds a framework for helping us to understand the mystery of unanswered prayer. First, Foster wisely warns against any flippant answers. "We must not rush too quickly here to solve this problem with glib talk about God answering with 'yes, no, or wait' and the like. If we are honest, and not just trying to cover up our insecurity, we must all admit to deep perplexity over these things ."40 Once again, we are reminded of C. S. Lewis's words: "Every war, every famine or plague, almost every deathbed, is the monument to a petition that was not granted."41

Part of our problem, both Lewis and Chrysostom believe, is that we tend to think divine love will always act in the manner and timing of human love. Sometimes this is true and sometimes it isn't. Lewis warns against trivializing the word love. We do so, for instance, when we equate love and kindness.

By Love, in this context, most of us mean kindness-the desire to see others than the self happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, "What does it matter so long as they are contented?" We want, in fact, not so much a Father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven-a senile benevolence who, as they say, "liked to see young people enjoying themselves," and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, "a good time was had by all."42

Thankfully, God's love is greater than mere kindness. Perhaps we can construct an interpretive grid for making some sense of God's denials to our prayers, though we best acknowledge from the beginning that unanswered prayer will remain a puzzling enigma. Clear thinking can remove aspects of the enigma, but God's actions in response to our prayers and, providentially, in history and current life are in many ways-at least for the present-inexplicable. "We stand here under the mystery of the ways of God, and we are peering through a glass darkly. Only in the age to come will we understand fully, even as

we are fully understood (1 Cor. 13:12)."" What can we say wisely and lovingly in response to the vexing question of unanswered prayer?

We can be shortsighted in our prayers, asking for things that would actually harm rather than help us. How many of us have dated people we were convinced were "the one," prayed fervently and persistently that God would cement the relationship, and presently are on our knees thanking God that things didn't work out? From the distance of the years we can see clearly what we couldn't see up close. Or some of us may have prayed for a ministry for which we simply weren't prepared and gifted and God said "no, you are not ready or gifted for such things, my child."

At times our shortsightedness produces prayers that may be "detrimental to others, or mean the refusal of their prayers, or both."¹¹⁴I recall a cold winter's evening when the Philadelphia area had been smacked by a northeaster filled with snow. I was up in my daughter Nathalie's room and we were praying together. Like every other child in the suburbs, Nathalie was hoping that school would be canceled. She prayed accordingly: "Oh, Lord, let it snow and snow and snow." Her mean-spirited, theologian father thought to himself: "Now we have a teachable moment." Natty and I had occasionally distributed lunches to homeless folk in Philly and I knew she had a very tender heart for the poor. "Nat," I asked, "do you think your homeless friends are praying for more snow?" Rather than popping her dad in the nose, Natty simply sat and thought. "Why no," she finally said. "More snow will only make them colder. They're probably praying that the snow will stop."

Only God can possibly handle the millions of prayer requests that are made each second around the world, many of which if answered will deny other requests. We simply have to trust that God knows what is best and answers our prayers accordingly. We shouldn't stop praying, but need to acknowledge the possibility that a yes to me may well be a no to you or vice-versa.

We can pray self-contradictory prayers. "Oh, Lord, grant me patience quickly." "Oh, Lord, soften my heart toward the suffering of the world, but please protect me from suffering." "Oh, Lord, allow me to enter the world of the sick as a healer, but protect me from ever getting sick myself."

I recall how deeply I desired to have a healing ministry while I was a pastor in France. In the mid-80s I was sure God was nudging me in the direction of the sick. I read everything I could find on healing prayer and began to experiment, praying fervently for the sick people I almost daily encountered as a pastor. What happened? I got sick. Not terribly sick. I could still function, but for months on end I had a low-grade fever. This was a new experience for me. I really hadn't experienced any significant illnesses in my life, much less a chronic sickness that refused to go away, no matter how hard I prayed.

Not only so, but the people I prayed for tended to get sicker rather than better! It was discouraging to approach a sick person to pray for them and receive a look back that said, "I'm really feeling better. Thanks all the same." When sick people flee from your prayers, you know something's amiss.

Had I misjudged the leading of God? Was I wrong to become interested in healing prayer and the plight of the sick? I don't think so. I was indeed nudged by the Holy Spirit, but misread the direction in which the Holy Spirit was pushing me. I thought God was guiding me into a healing ministry, when in reality God had a different vocation in store, a vocation to the psychologically ill and the dying. Little did I know in France that within a few years I would become director of pastoral care at New Jersey's only state geropsychiatric hospital, an institution where all the patients were suffering psychiatrically and physically. Almost always someone was dying. God knew what was in store for me in the future and was preparing me in France, though I had no idea at the time.

In addition, I think the Lord knew that if I was going to be ministering to sick

people, I needed to experience, if only on a very low-grade level, what it was like to be sick day in and day out. I wanted to see God heal, but I didn't want to experience sickness and suffering myself. I wanted to intervene on God's behalf in a sick person's world while remaining separate from it. So, in a manner of speaking, I had been praying in a contradictory and shortsighted way. Yet, as I continued to pray for discernment and circumstances developed, things clarified. God indeed answered the deeper intent of my prayers.

Sometimes we are not ready for what we are praying. "Our prayers, if answered, would do us in. We simply are not yet prepared for what we have asked.... It is God's grace and mercy that prevent our prayers from being answered. God withholds his gifts from us for our good. We could not handle what might come if our requests were granted."⁴⁵ In such a case, as I experienced in France, God will answer "the deeper intent of our prayers," responding to "a greater need, which, in its time and in its way, solves our specific prayer concern."⁴⁶ I may be praying for an expanded ministry. God may answer the deeper intent of my prayer by introducing difficult circumstances into my life to refine my character, so that when my ministry is expanded I serve safely and wisely.

Or consider the possibility that while I or a friend might desire physical healing and pray accordingly, God may have a deeper healing in mind that he will offer as the answer to our prayers, a lasting healing related to God's ability to discern the deeper intent of our prayers. I do not say this lightly. Let me tell you the story of my dear friend Reba Yoder. I don't think she'd mind.

I first met Reba in the mid-1990s. I was teaching a class at Eastern University titled "Foundations of Christian Spirituality," and during the course of a lecture I touched on the issue of suffering and the role suffering plays in our spiritual formation into the image of Christ. I noticed one of my students listening intently, an older student-perhaps in her mid-forties. At the end of the class she

came up to me and introduced herself: "Hi. My name's Reba Yoder. I liked what you had to say. I've got cancer." This greeting was what I came to know as classic Reba: direct, honest and open, to God and to others. "Nice to meet you, Reba. I'm so sorry about the cancer."

Over the next few years, Reba and I became very close friends. We prayed fervently, consistently, imploringly to God that her cancer would be healed. And for a while, during a wonderful period filled with grace and joy, Reba's cancer went into remission. We thought she may have been healed and hope filled our hearts like a balloon. Our spirits lifted as the future seemed to open up to Reba like a budding flower.

Then, at first almost imperceptibly, Reba began to feel tired. Old, worrying symptoms reappeared. Perhaps, we thought, Reba was just working too hard. She decided to take a short vacation to Oregon, hoping the rest and change of scenery would do her good. And then I received a phone call I will never forget: "Hi, Chris. It's Reba. It's back." My heart sank like a stone. "Oh, Reba. I'm so sorry. We won't give up, though. We just need to pray even harder for your healing. God hasn't forgotten you." "I know that," Reba replied, somewhat shortly. "But we're going to pray differently."

I didn't like the direction the conversation was headed. I longed for Reba to be healed. I wanted her around for years to come. I didn't want to hear anything about praying differently. "What do you mean, praying differently?" I asked, my voice tinged with impatience, anxiety and sadness. "We are going to pray that I die like a Christian," Reba replied.

No we aren't, I said to myself. There's no way I'm going to pray that prayer. Reba was just discouraged, tired; she wasn't seeing clearly. She only needed some encouragement. "Reba, I know this has to be terribly discouraging. But we don't want to give up. Christ has heard our prayers in the past. This cancer's not the last word." I then attempted to convince Reba that we should continue to

pray for her physical healing. She listened for a while, I'm sure biting her tongue, but finally she'd reached the end of her patience. "Stop it," she said curtly. "You're not listening."

Reba was right. I wasn't listening. Among other things, I wasn't listening because I didn't want to accept this ending to Reba's journey on earth. I wanted her around for a long time. I wanted her to be there for her children, for her husband. I wanted her to see the birth of her grandchildren. I wanted to be able to dance a jig with Reba, and Christ had decided that the music for our last dance together-a dance he would join with us-would be a waltz, a slow, solemn, sad, waltz-occasionally beautiful beyond words, and occasionally unspeakably painful. What strange music Christ sometimes sings to us!

So, over the next few months, Reba listened to Christ and discerned more clearly than I the words he was speaking to her. Indeed, we both came to believe that Jesus was answering the deeper intent of our earlier prayers for Reba's healing: a deeper healing was approaching, one that would last forever. I still fought against this healing, because I knew, as did Reba, it would involve partings-if only for a time. And I didn't want to say good-bye.

As Jesus' waltz with Reba began to slow into its last steps, Joe Modica-the chaplain at Eastern-and I promised to visit Reba every Friday afternoon, until her earthly dance with Christ ceased its grace-filled rhythms. We'd make the hour drive from Eastern to Reba's home in Salem, New Jersey, talking about Reba as we came and went, and pondering together the strange ways of God with his creatures. We never figured out why God chose to dance such a strange dance with Reba; to this day we don't know why. There are many things, it seems, we must leave trustingly in God's hands, choosing to trust on the basis of the strange and wondrous truths God has made clear to us in the incarnation and cross of Christ. Two thousand years earlier Christ himself had danced the waltz he now danced with Reba. He has never distanced himself from our sufferings.

He will never ask his disciples to endure something he has not first undergone himself.

Chrysostom teaches that fellowship with Christ and suffering with Christ are mutually entwined, as did St. Paul before him. Fellowship with Christ in our sufferings not only leads to encouragement, but also trains us how to respond to adverse circumstances, especially as we imitate Christ's own responses to his Father's will. Reba was much quicker to learn this lesson than I was. Chrysostom writes: "For he himself passed through all these things and shared in them with you ... training and teaching you not to be anxious about any of these trials."

The apostle Paul's life demonstrates the same Christocentric pattern of suffering, fellowship, imitation and courage, characteristics I continually observed in Reba over the last months of her life. Chrysostom writes:

Do you see the courage? Do you recognize the boldness? Do you perceive the spiritual perspective of a Christian? The Philippians saw their teacher in prison, wrapped in chains, throttled, hit hard, and suffering a thousand hardships; not only were they not shocked or troubled, but they acquired an even greater zeal. The sufferings of their teacher fueled their own progress in the conflict 48

Christ's incarnation, cross and resurrection have wrought a great reversal, a dramatic change in perspective Reba embraced faithfully, courageously, discerningly. Circumstances and actions human beings might normally flee, scorn or reject are-in Christ-transformed in light of the pattern he himself followed in his own loving and trusting submission to his Father's will.

Chrysostom delights in the way the cross and incarnation have turned the world upside down. By all appearances, the cross seems to offer and communicate nothing but pain, separation, disaster, "for the cross has not merely no appearance of being a sign sought out by reasoning, but even the very

annihilation of a sign-is not merely deemed no proof of power, but a conviction of weakness-not merely no display of wisdom, but a suggestion of foolishness."49

Yes, if I chose to judge by appearances, Reba's sickness and death seemed an act of divine foolishness, God extravagantly spending Reba's short years; by all appearances it seemed there was a much better path God could have taken, one of restoration, happiness, joy, healing. Yet Reba discerned, in a manner I didn't, that God was at work deep down, under the surface of things, fertilizing her roots through his Spirit. Unexpected fruit was being borne in the midst of her suffering, if only I had eyes to see. But how difficult it is to look and discern beyond appearances.

Many people observed the crucifixion of Jesus, watching him die a painful, forlorn death, by all appearances deserted by everyone, including his own Father. "How many stumbled over the cross of our Master-a cross shared by all of us-and became even more lawless and insolent?"50 Indeed, the crowd surrounding the cross judged by appearances-all, it seems, except the believing thief and perhaps Mary the mother of Jesus.

Jesus' tormentors-the Jewish religious authorities and the Roman executioners-said they would believe only if Jesus were delivered from his sufferings. These people, Chrysostom comments, lacked a believing, discerning disposition-a key aspect of the life of prayer-and misinterpreted Christ's greatest act on their behalf. The believing thief-and Reba in her own time-believed despite the sufferings of Christ and their own profound anguish. In fact, Christ's willingness to suffer strengthened Reba's determination "to live and die like a Christian." He had provided the pattern, and he asked Reba to imitate it. Reba's faithful disposition-her openness to Christ and her increasing ability to discern how Christ was choosing to work-was forged in the fire of pain and loss. But her pain and loss were not foreign to Christ. Jesus had already danced the steps of

the waltz he was asking Reba to learn. And he had not left her alone. Christ was continually taking the lead.

The believing thief was lifted beyond mere human speculations, Chrysostom writes, "by the winds of faith." He meditated "on the things of the future," confessed his sins and pondered the resurrection. This man's broader, eternal perspective was the fruit of a teachable and humble disposition enabled and shaped-in his case in only hours-by the thief's response to the grace of God as he watched Christ die. God's grace gave the thief eyes to see and ears to hear the message embodied in Christ's horrific death on the cross, as the thief's own life came to an excruciating but hope-filled end. "You see, then," Chrysostom writes, "that the senseless and negligent gain nothing from the things which are beneficial. Those, however, who have a right disposition and are vigilant derive a tremendous profit from those things that scandalize others."⁵¹

What the believing thief and Reba in her own time of suffering understood much better than I was that Christ's death, resurrection and ascension have burrowed deep into the midst of this present evil age. Yes, evil, sickness, injustice and death remain to be faced, but always within the broader, wider, deeper context of righteousness, health, justice and life.

What appeared to be the greatest tragedy in the history of the world was actually the most blessed event. If so, Christians can view the circumstances of their lives-and the inexplicable answers God sometimes gives to their prayers-in a new light. For John Chrysostom, reality rather than appearance is the heart of the matter. The cross of Christ turns out to be-contrary to all appearances-"the foremost good ... a proof of God's great providence, goodness, and love."⁵² The paradigm of the cross becomes the fundamental pattern according to which Christians are asked by Christ to mold their own understanding of God's providence and how Christ may respond to their prayers. Paradoxically, only life lived in the shadow of the cross enables us to see God's love and goodness at

work in this present evil age.

I want to introduce you to one other person who taught me the danger of judging by appearances. She was a psychiatric patient at the state geropsychiatric hospital where I served as director of pastoral care. Let's call her Rachel.

Make no mistake about it: working at a geropsychiatric hospital is very difficult. Not only are patients suffering from a vast host of psychiatric illnesses; they are also suffering from a wide variety of end-of-life issues: frequent sicknesses, loneliness, the fear of death, deep remorse over past mistakes that seem beyond repair and so forth.

I had experienced a series of bad weeks at the hospital, bad in the sense of the sheer weight of suffering I had encountered day in and day out. I recall, for example, walking on to a unit and a patient down the hallway spotting me as I walked toward her. She was strapped into her chair to keep her steady as she ate her breakfast. Suddenly, she started screaming and banging her head into her breakfast tray. "Rev. Hall, Rev. Hall, I don't want to die. I don't want to die." Susie was all alone; she had been an abuser of other people and been abused by them. Her family had written her off. And now she was dying. I rushed up to her, cradled her head in my hands to prevent further injury, and said softly, "I know, Susie, I know." I had been praying for Susie and others for a number of months and it seemed that God was refusing to listen. I asked and asked and asked for healing and the restoration of hope, and all that appeared to happen was that patients grew worse, mentally and physically. Indeed, Susie died a few days after this incident. I buried her; a few family members came, the very people who refused to visit her while she was still living.

Finally, a few days after Susie's death, I decided I had seen enough. Another long day at the hospital had passed and things looked just the same. I simply wanted to go home. I was discouraged, sad and angry. Quickly I fell into the sin

of presumption. And what is presumption? I presumed-on the basis of appearances-that God was not working in the hospital, that patients were not being helped, that my prayers were not being heard.

I was sitting in my office at around 5:00 in the evening, fuming at God and the circumstances around me at the hospital, when the phone rang. It was my boss, the clinical care director of the hospital. "Chris, Rachel has just been admitted into the ICU unit at Easton Hospital. She's in bad shape. Could you pay her a call on your way home?" "I'd be glad to," I lied.

The last thing I wanted to do was to visit a dying schizophrenic. I was sick of suffering, sick of pain, sick of sadness, sick of death. I drove to Easton, parked in the hospital parking lot and steeled myself for more agony. The nurses at the ICU unit smiled and nodded as I walked past. I had absolutely no expectations that God was at work here or anywhere else. I was tired, discouraged, angry, frightened. I just wanted out. I can distinctly remember thinking, first in my office and later as I entered Rachel's room, that God was not working. God was not responding to my prayers. God didn't care about these suffering people. I wanted out, plain and simple.

When I entered Rachel's room things were just as I expected. Any last vestige of faith in me slipped sadly away. Rachel was strapped to her bed with pieces of linen cloth. Both her arms had been tied loosely to her bed frame because in her confusion she kept pulling out her IVs. A respirator had been inserted in Rachel's throat because she couldn't breathe on her own. Her eyes were swollen, seemingly in terror. I glanced at the monitor listing her vital signs and realized that Rachel's life was drawing to a close. Her body was shutting down. What was I to do?

I walked over to Rachel's bed and she looked up at me with distended, frantic eyes that begged me to help her. I reached out for her left hand. "Rachel, can I say a prayer for you?" She nodded yes. The expression on her face never

changed; the distended eyes-frantic, frightened, seemingly despairing. And what did I have to offer her? The short, sad prayer of a faithless chaplain. "Lord, please help Rachel in her time of need. Touch her body. Touch her spirit. Relieve her suffering. Be with her throughout the night. Amen." I squeezed her hand and turned to leave. I didn't want to see anymore suffering, anymore dying.

Her left hand caught my sleeve. I turned and there was Rachel staring at me with the same frightened eyes. She began to raise and lower her left hand, signaling to me that she had something she wanted to say to me. Her hand, though restrained, still had about a foot of wiggle room. I placed a piece of paper on a hospital clipboard, slipped a pencil into Rachel's hand, and held the clipboard in front of her. She wrote for about five minutes, struggling to form every letter. Her expression never changed. By all appearances she was still a terrified, lonely, dying schizophrenic. I thought to myself, You should have known better. She could tell you were lying and didn't care about her. She knew you were just going through the motions. You deserve to get chewed out. And that's just what I thought Rachel was doing as she wrote for minute after minute.

Finally, she stopped writing. I took the pencil from her hand and lifted the clipboard. Rachel had managed to write five sentences in what looked like stilted print. I still have the message she wrote me, in her own handwriting, some twenty-one years ago. First line: "Thanks for visit." You shouldn't be thanking me, I thought to myself. If you only knew what I was thinking as I was praying. I just wanted out. Second line: "I'm so blessed." Blessed? You looked so frightened, so alone, so discouraged. Don't you realize you're dying? Third line: "Jesus loves me." Fourth line: "My Jesus loves you too." This was the line that both broke my heart and filled me with wonder. Had Rachel sensed my struggle, my discouragement, my anger over so many prayers that seemed to be unanswered? The room seemed to be suddenly, almost densely, filled with the presence of God-not visibly present, but tangibly present. I actually looked over my left shoulder to see if someone was standing there. An angel, perhaps. No.

The only people in the room were Rachel, a faithless chaplain and God. Jesus had lovingly used the mind and body of a dying schizophrenic to remind me, "I'm working at the hospital. I'm working in and through you. I love Rachel. She's going to be fine. Stop judging by appearances. Trust me." Fifth line: "Thanks be to God."

Jesus' message to me seemed to be: "Thank me, Chris, for those things you do understand. Thank me for the forgiveness of your sins. Thank me for the beauty of my creation. Thank me for all the gifts I have sprinkled into your life: your family, your friends, your vocation, your health. And please, stop trying to figure out matters that I have not chosen to explain to you. You're going to have to trust me."

We'll return to Augustine's letter to Proba in our next chapter and also discuss the Lord's Prayer, a model for prayer that all the church fathers loved. For now, let's draw this chapter to a close, pondering the lives of Augustine, Proba, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Reba and Rachel. I think all of them would agree on a key point: keep praying. And don't judge by appearances. God is always at work, often in an incomprehensible fashion that escapes our analysis.

Many of you may have known of Tony Snow, President Bush's press secretary who died of cancer in 2008. Tony's comments in one of his last emails capture well key emphases in this chapter: "I don't know why I have cancer, and I don't much care. It is what is a plain and indisputable fact. Yet even while staring into a mirror darkly, great and stunning truths begin to take shape. Our maladies define a central feature of our existence: We are fallen. We are imperfect. Our bodies give out. But despite this-or because of it-God offers the possibility of salvation and grace. We don't know how the narrative of our lives will end, but we get to choose how to use the interval between now and the moment we meet our Creator face-to-face." I can hear Augustine, Proba, Gregory, Chrysostom, Reba and Rachel applauding.

In fact, a summary of the whole gospel is included in the Lord's Prayer. ... In these summaries of a few words how many sayings of the prophets, evangelists, and apostles are touched on-sermons of the Lord, parables, examples, precepts! How many duties at the same time are captured! The honor of God in "Father" the testimony of faith in "name"; the offering of obedience in "will" the remembrance of hope in "kingdom"; the petition for life in "bread" the confession of "sins" in the prayer for forgiveness; the concern for "temptation" in the request for protection. What about this is to be wondered at? God alone is able to teach how he wants to be approached in prayer.

TERTULLIAN ON PRAYER¹

How great is the kindness of the Lord! How abundant his goodness and regard for us when he willed that we make our prayer in his sight and call him "Father," and that just as Christ is Son of God we also are named children of God! None of us would dare to utter that name in our prayer unless he permitted us to pray in this way. Therefore, dearest brothers and sisters, we ought to remember and know that when we call God Father we ought to act as children of God, so that just as we take pleasure from God as Father so he might take pleasure from us.

CYPRIAN ON THE LORD'S PRAYER²

Therefore, when I pray, "May your name be hallowed in me," by the meaning of these words I pray the following: By working together with your help may I become blameless, righteous, godly, keeping away from all evil, speaking the truth, working righteousness, walking in the straight path, shining in self-control, adorned with incorruption, beautified in wisdom and prudence, meditating on things above, despising what is earthly, distinguished by an angelic way of life.

GREGORY OF NYSSA ON THE LORD'S PRAYER³

S I X

THE LORD'S PRAYER

We closed our last chapter with a fairly detailed look at the question of unanswered prayer. Augustine had encouraged Proba to pray after the pattern of Jesus' parable in Luke 11: keep knocking at God's door. God, unlike a sleepy man, will not refuse your requests. He will not give you a snake instead of a fish or a scorpion in place of an egg (see Lk 11:5-13). Yet, as we all have to admit, there are times when it seems, on the basis of all appearances, that God has violated his own promises: we have asked for a piece of bread and God seems to have given us a stone. John Chrysostom and Richard Foster helped us to think through this difficult issue of "unanswered" prayer.

In this chapter we want to return to Augustine's letter to Proba. Proba, like John Cassian, Germanus, Abba Isaac and many other Christians of her day, was perplexed by the call to unceasing prayer. How could she build a rhythm of unceasing prayer into the patterns of her life as a Roman matron?

FIXED TIMES FOR PRAYER

In response to Proba's desire to pray without ceasing, Augustine encourages her to "pray to God in words at certain fixed hours and times, so that we may encourage ourselves and take note of how much progress we have made in this desire, and may rouse ourselves more earnestly to increase it. The more fervent the desire, the more worthy the effect which results."⁴

Augustine is eminently practical at this juncture, and rightly so. The busyness of life can quickly, almost unrecognizably, quench the life of prayer. How readily our desire to pray dissolves in the midst of each day's incessant demands. Augustine coaches Proba that specific times for prayer throughout the day at

"fixed hours" can help curb our tendency to be consumed by the urgent and the mundane, our propensity to be distracted from the most important things. He is sure that without the help of a regular pattern of prayer, our love will rapidly grow cold and our desire to pray wither.

The idea of regular times for prayer is a common one in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican communions; many Christians in these branches of the church have been nourished by regularly taking a prayer break during the night, morning, afternoon and evening. Evangelicals who are not members of these communions may find the idea of regular times for prayer-other than a morning "quiet time"-to be strange and almost legalistic.

Yet isn't it true that the vast majority of our time is carefully regulated by the demands of raising a family and earning a living? Our employers expect us to show up for work at a given time and-in most cases-carefully regulate how the day is spent so their investment in our time and work is not wasted. Athletes, if they are to attain their goals of winning an Olympic medal or a championship, readily submit to disciplined schedules (see 1 Cor 9:24-27). So it seems to me we shouldn't be surprised that Augustine is encouraging Proba to pray at fixed times. He understands clearly the relationship between discipline and freedom.

The question then becomes: how can we build fixed times for prayer into the midst of our busy schedule? What would fixed times for prayer look like in the workplace? Can we pray silently at specific times, even if we work for a secular business or institution? I think so. Only God needs to know what we are doing. Why not learn to pray with our eyes open?

One would think things would be a bit easier within a Christian setting. Gary Haugen, head of International Justice Mission, has found that fixed times of prayer for him and his colleagues are a necessity, particularly in light of the difficulty and stress of the work Christ has placed in their hands. So, at 8:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.-when possible-workers at IJM pause to pray.

I'm wondering what this pattern of prayer would look like in other settings. For instance, I now find myself as chancellor of Eastern University. How could Eastern, as part of its normal day, create time and space to pause at different moments of the day for prayer? I've thought of purchasing a bell that would sound at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., calling our community to five minutes of silence and prayer.

Yet a host of problems immediately appears that show the seeming foolishness of such an attempt: what about the classes that begin at those times? Or other events such as afternoon athletic games, music rehearsals and so on? What if meetings are taking place? Would we just stop the meeting to pray? Would the sounding of a bell be more distracting than helpful? I don't know.

I am convinced, though, that Augustine is on to something. The difficult task is to bring his teaching into the environment of the twenty-first century. To be honest, do we not schedule other events on a regular basis? Perhaps something that at first will seem strange and uncomfortable would, with time, discipline and practice, become a normal aspect of the day, an individual and communal habit of sorts. I'm still thinking about my own life situation-at work and at home-and I invite you to do so about your own particular circumstances. Be as creative as possible in your thinking. Don't trap yourself in a model of prayer that simply can't be adapted to your circumstances. Let others know what you're thinking of trying.

As I've mentioned, Christians working in a secular setting will find the challenge of regular times for prayer to be even more challenging. Perhaps the key is to begin small: a five or ten minute coffee break offers us a chance to catch our breath, to move momentarily away from the immediate demands of our desk or assembly line. Even as we are chatting with others we can learn to pray internally for those we are relaxing with. We will have to go slow. We will have to learn new skills. But with creativity and discipline new habits of

attentiveness and intercession can be built.

We surely can openly acknowledge at least two things: first, our need for prayer to fill all the rhythms of life ("pray without ceasing") and, second, the large amount of time that most of us spend on other activities, some good, some not so good. Dennis Okholm mentions the response of a student after a visit to a Benedictine monastery. The student "reported that he just did not see the point of spending all one's time in a praying community. I suggested he compare that to many of the activities we engage in day after day, for example the four hours and thirty-five minutes that the average individual in the United States spends watching television each day." Okholm provocatively asks: "Is the monastic balanced life, which puts possessions and relationships and the life of the soul in proper perspective, less real than our consumptive preoccupation with gadgets, television, celebrities, war, and spirit-numbing work? Who has distorted reality: the monk or the materialist?"⁵

How LONG SHOULD WE PRAY?

Augustine mentions that we may occasionally lengthen our specific times for prayer "when the obligations of other good and necessary works do not prevent us." To pray at length does not necessarily mean, though, that we have to increase our talking in our prayer. Yes, there is a time to speak in prayer, even a time to shout! But there is also, and in times of lengthy prayer more frequently, a longing of the heart that speaks to God silently, a yearning that "is not the same as much speaking." We yearn, but don't know how to express our yearnings. They are too deep for words. In these times, we are simply quiet before God, trusting in the Holy Spirit's ability to read our unspoken heart's desires (see Rom 8:26-27). We can relax in God's presence, freed from the expectation that we always need to be saying something.

Lengthy prayer is difficult, among other reasons because our attention tends to drift, an issue we've addressed at length in previous chapters. Distractions fill our

minds with their constant buzzing.

To overcome distractions, Augustine suggests a discipline practiced by the "brothers in Egypt." To maintain their attention in prayer, members of Egyptian monastic communities prayed short, concise, ejaculatory prayers, shooting them to the Father much like arrows launched from a bow. "It is said that the brothers in Egypt have certain prayers which they recite often, but they are very brief, and are, so to speak, darted forth rapidly like arrows, so that the alert attention, which is necessary in prayer, does not fade and grow heavy through long-drawn-out periods."⁶ These short prayers, such as "Lord, make haste to help me" (see Ps 70:1), serve to anchor and sustain the "attention." They might also well be the kind of prayers we can use during our regular times of prayer in a secular setting, praying them silently as we enjoy a cup of coffee with our colleagues.

The fruitful result is prayer that is "free of much speaking, but not of much entreaty." The prayer of a fervent heart "is transacted more by sighs than by speech, more by tears than by utterance. For He sets our tears in His sight and our groaning is not hidden from Him who created all things by His Word and who does not look for human words."

Words are helpful, though, for they heighten our attention and remind us "of what we are asking." But, Augustine reminds Proba, "we are not to believe that the Lord has need of them either to be informed or to be influenced." God reads the deepest desires of our heart, and as we have seen, answers the deepest intent of our prayers.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

We need to pause for a moment and take a good look at the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that was loved by all the church fathers. I turn to the Lord's Prayer not only because this prayer is the next main topic of conversation in Augustine's letter to Proba but also because the church fathers were convinced that the model

of the Lord's Prayer encapsulated the heart of prayer itself. So, over the next few pages, we'll break down each petition of the Lord's Prayer and analyze its content with the help of Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Origen, Tertullian and other early Christian leaders. The key will be to say enough about each aspect of Jesus' model for prayer without weighing you, the reader, down with too much information.

Our Father, who art in heaven. In Christ the "fullness of time" has arrived and with that arrival a confidence in addressing God in prayer that Old Testament figures did not experience. Origen rejoices over what God has accomplished through Christ: "Therefore, even though God is called 'Fa ther' [in the Old Testament], and those who are begotten by the word of faith in Him are called 'sons,' yet one cannot find among the ancients the concept of positive and unalterable sonship." With Christ's coming the perimeters of intimacy with God in prayer have been expanded as those who believe in him receive adoption as a gift of grace.⁸

The fathers view with awe Christ's invitation to call God "Father." They are well aware that human beings are deeply sinful, while God is infinitely holy, and rejoice in the restored relationship God has made possible in Jesus Christ. Gregory of Nyssa associates the invitation to call God "Father" with humanity's creation in the image of God. He sees the "image" as related to a human being's soul, encrusted with the rust of sin. Through our cooperation with the grace of God-Gregory has a synergistic understanding of salvation in which humans freely cooperate with God's grace-the rust on our souls is gradually eradicated, and we come to reflect more clearly our resemblance to God. Gregory speaks of God's "offspring" as "made lovely by the goodness of their Father," who gracefully reforms and cleanses human nature."⁹ Gregory also exhorts his audience to remember our responsibility to bear God's likeness well. If we call God "Father," one who is "incorruptible and just and good, we must prove by our life that the kinship is real.""

As Gregory contemplates Christ's invitation to call God "Father," his mind is drawn to the parable of the prodigal son, for the petition "our Father" reminds all Christians "of the fatherland from which we have fallen and of the noble birthright which we have lost." The young man in Jesus' parable "shows the misery of human beings in the form of a parable which tells of his departure and dissolute life." It is only through repentance that the young man is "brought back to his former happiness." To address God as Father, Gregory teaches, is to be reminded of heaven, our true homeland that we have forgotten in our vain and empty desires for the temporary pleasures this present life offers. When the prodigal son regains his sanity he repents, returns home and is welcomed warmly by the father who had longed for his return 11

Hallowed be thy name. Most readers will be familiar with the biblical commonplace of a person's name standing for that person's character. As Origen puts it, the name of a person "summarizes and manifests the personal character of him who is named." Paul's name, for instance, represents his own distinct character. "This character, personal and incommunicable-for there is no man living who is identical with Paul-is made manifest in his being called 'Paul.'"" Furthermore, as the "personal character of biblical characters change, so do their names." Abram changes to Abraham, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul and so on.

God's name, however, never changes, precisely because God's character never changes. The name of God revealed to Moses on Sinai, "HE WHO IS," names God "as always the same, unchangeable ... immutable." Thus, as Augustine and Gregory will also observe, God's name cannot become more holy through our petitions. Rather, as Origen sees things, our prayer that God's name be hallowed is a request that our own comprehension of God's holiness and indeed, of his entire character, might expand.

Augustine explains clearly to Proba that when we ask that God's name be "hallowed," we are not praying that an unholy name be made holy. God's name

is holy, regardless of what we pray or how we behave. Rather, we are praying that God's name might be made holy in our lives, in the way we live from day to day. This prayer should deeply move us "to desire that His Name, which is always holy, should be held holy also among human beings, that is, that it be not dishonored .1113

Gregory makes a similar point. Do we pray that God's name be hallowed because it is not yet holy? "Would it be at all possible that God's name should not be holy?" Hardly. Likewise, do we pray that God's kingdom come because God does not reign over the universe? Surely not, for "nothing escapes" God's "powerful dominion. 1114 What are we praying for, then, when we ask that God's name be hallowed and that God's kingdom come? These petitions are for our sake, not God's, a point Augustine also emphasizes. "Human nature" left to itself "is too weak to achieve anything good.... We can obtain nothing of the things for which we are anxious unless the good be accomplished in us by divine aid." And among the "good things" we ask for, "the most important for me is that God's name should be glorified" through our lives."

Christians live their lives before a watching world, a world that judges the truthfulness of our words about Christ by our integrity. If our words and deeds don't fit together, if we lead lives marked deeply by evil, the world will likely ignore what we attempt to say about God. Our practical atheism horrifically results in the blasphemy of God's holy name. Thus, the petition that God's name be hallowed is, in Gregory's thinking, "the principal part of prayer." It is a petition that God's "dominion" or rule be firmly established in us. By God's grace the result of our prayer will be lives of integrity; our words and actions will fit together, leading the watching world to praise God rather than to blaspheme him 16

The prayer that God's name be hallowed is actually a prayer for power from God to change how we're living. "May I become through thy help blameless, just

and pious, may I abstain from every evil, speak the truth, and do justice. May I walk in the straight path, shining with temperance, adorned with incorruption, beautiful through wisdom and prudence."17

Origen believes we have much to learn about God's holiness. "Since then we all, although making a variety of suppositions about Him, know something of God, but do not all know what He is-for few indeed, and fewer-if I may say so-than few are they who grasp His holiness in all things-rightly are we taught to pray that our concept of God may be hallowed among us."18

As our conception of God deepens in response to our prayers, our ability to discern God at work in the world and church correspondingly expands, for God's character or name is inseparable from how God chooses to act in the world. "Thus we shall see His holiness in creating, in providing, in judging, in choosing and abandoning, in accepting and rejecting, in rewarding and punishing."19 In turn, in our daily response to God-or lack of it-we either hallow or profane God's name.

Thy kingdom come. When we pray that God's kingdom come, are we praying that God might begin to reign over his creation, as though God hadn't been already? God's power presently and always "governs the entire universe," Gregory observes, but does so "not by violence and tyrannical dictatorship, which enforces the obedience of its subjects through fear and compulsion." No, "virtue must be free from the fear of a taskmaster, so as to choose the good by a voluntary act; since it is a principle that all that is good should be subject only to the power that gives life."20

If virtue must choose freely to do the good, Gregory teaches, when we pray that God's kingdom come, we are praying that God empower our will so that it is no longer dominated or "tyrannized" by evil. In the fall of humanity into sin, "man's nature was deceitfully led astray from the discernment of the good" and "the inclination of his free will" was "directed to the opposite." If the inclination

of our wills is to be redirected, God's empowerment is essential. "Since, then, we are hard pressed by such tyranny and become slaves to death through the assaults of the passions, which attack us like executioners and enemies in war, we rightly pray that the kingdom of God may come to us. For we cannot escape the wicked dominion of corruption except the life giving power take over the government in its place."²¹

Origen also sees the petition for the coming of God's kingdom as a request that God's reign be ever more fully extended in the life of a Christian. "It is clear that he who prays for the coming of the kingdom of God rightly prays that the kingdom of God might be established, and bear fruit and be perfected in himself."²²

We need to pray for the extension of God's rule because at present we live in a war zone, under the foreign tyranny of the devil; we can choose to either resist or succumb in our struggle against evil. Our petition for the coming of the kingdom is a direct request that sin might be broken in us wherever it lurks. Justice can have no communion with injustice, or light with darkness. In a word, "the kingdom of sin cannot be reconciled with the kingdom of God."²³

Gregory views the heart of the petition for God's kingdom to come as the request for supernatural, grace-filled power to move from the kingdom of darkness to God's kingdom. He sums up well the heart of this key petition:

I long to be a stranger to corruption and liberated from death. Oh, that I were freed from the shackles of sin and that death no longer lorded it over me. Let us no more be tyrannized by evil so that the adversary may not prevail against me and make me his captive through sin. But may thy kingdom come to me, so that the passions which still rule me so mercilessly may depart from me, or even better, be altogether annihilated.²⁴

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Tertullian, in a somewhat unusual

interpretation, sees earth and heaven in this petition of the Lord's Prayer as referring figuratively to a human being's "flesh" and "spirit." Thus, when we pray that God's will be done on earth, we are praying that God's will be accomplished in its entirety in all that we are as human beings-in our bodies, minds and spirits.

Tertullian acknowledges that not everyone will accept his metaphorical interpretation; the basic thrust of the petition-whether earth stands for a human being or not-remains the same: we are asking that God "may supply us with the substance of His will and the capacity to do it."²⁵

Christ, Tertullian reminds his audience, has modeled for us what the will of God is, "to preach, to work, to endure even unto death. And we need the will of God, that we may be able to fulfill these duties." What could be safer, wiser and saner than to pray that God's will be perfected in us? "We are even wishing well to ourselves, in so far that there is nothing of evil in the will of God." Yes, we may suffer in our bodies as we obey God's will, just as Christ suffered in his body in surrender to his Father's will, but this suffering is not evil and cannot harm us, painful as it is. Our weakness, as Paul teaches, becomes the opportunity for God to manifest his power in us.²⁶

When we pray "thy will be done," we openly and repentantly acknowledge before God that our spiritual health is utterly dependent on the gracious actions of our divine physician. At the core of this petition, in Gregory's words, is the plea that God have "pity on" our "misery" and fully accomplish his will in our wills. The problem, of course, is that the sinful will, if left to itself, habitually inclines toward pride, hatred, envy, rage and other disordered desires. Thus to pray that God's will be done in us is to pray that his love be gracefully wrapped around our warped will, renewing and reshaping it. We simply can't straighten out our wills on our own. "May this good will be accomplished in me by your power," Gregory prays.²⁷

To pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven is to ask that the life of heaven, our true homeland, a life in which the will of God is fully manifest and always obeyed, might also rule on earth and in our own will, straightening it out through the power of the Spirit. Just as those angels who have not fallen carry out God's will perfectly-manifesting the life of heaven-"so may the good be accomplished in us."²⁸

Give us this day our daily bread. Almost all the church fathers see this petition as multilevel. Its first level pertains to our daily life in this world and the basic need that all human beings have for food, water, clothing and so on. Augustine, for instance, sees bread as "signifying the whole of our need."²⁹ To ask God to meet our needs is not only permitted; Christ commands us to ask our Father to meet the needs that make the flourishing of human life possible.

The problem sinful human beings face, however, is the rapid mutation of legitimate needs into disordered desires, the thirst we all have for "just a little bit more," as John D. Rockefeller put it, a thirst that can never be slaked. Gregory describes the dynamic of disordered desire along the following lines:

Temptation arrives in the form of a desire for just a little bit more than we really need. For instance, we take a bite of a donut and are overwhelmed by its sweetness. One donut would more than meet our need. When we finish that first donut, though, we notice there are five more sitting in the box: five chocolate-coated delights demanding to be devoured. "Well, one more donut won't hurt anything," we say to ourselves. But, if we're not extremely disciplined, the second donut leads to a third and, before we know it, we're staring at an empty box. "I lost my mind. I just tossed down three thousand calories."

If we simply could wipe our indulgent experience from our mind, we might have higher hopes for the next time we passed the donut shop. The problem is that we have experienced the pleasure self-indulgence can produce and the memory of indulgent pleasure lingers, a memory linked not only to our mind but

to our body. Not only does the specific memory of our donut debacle remain, but its dynamics easily spill over into other areas.

Gregory has no doubt that once we succumb to the desire for more than we need, our desires begin to multiply exponentially. What we once have considered luxuries mutate into needs. It seems there is a sliding board effect to the temptations Gregory is describing.

Once we've crept from necessary food towards delicacies, our desires will proceed to what is pleasant to the eyes; we will seek shining dishes and attractive servants. And so on to silver couches, soft divans, and transparent, gold-embroidered veils, magnificent chairs and tripods, washing vessels, mixing bowls, drinking horns, wine coolers and pitchers, water basins, candlesticks, censers and similar things. And all of this serves only to increase the desire for more 30

We are not incorporeal beings like angels; we possess bodies with central nervous systems that readily respond to our choices. And, if we make a specific choice to engage our bodies as the means to carry out a disordered desire, a habit is quickly formed. Though the fathers were unaware of the key role the plasticity of the central nervous system plays in habit formation, they clearly understood that our physical senses and the desires they raise could easily lead us astray. Gregory describes the body as possessing "chinks," much like the skin of a snake. After all, Eve was deceived by a serpent! Lust, the disordered desire for more and more-whether our desire be for more sex, money or power-can sneak up behind us and attack through the chinks in our physical senses. Thus, Gregory advises, "block up as much as possible" the weak points in our skin or "scales."³¹

If, for instance, you find that every time you visit the donut shop you overindulge, you may have to avoid donuts, if only for a season. If you find yourself reading Playboy every time you pick up a paper from the airport

concession stand, you may have to fast from the news for a few minutes and grab a copy of the paper once you board your flight. If you find that you habitually cruise channels on your hotel TV that feed into disordered desires, you may have to ask the front desk to turn off those channels, embarrassing as this may be. If you recognize that you're impatient with your spouse or children when you don't get enough sleep, you may have to forgo late night television, as much as you enjoy David Letterman; eight hours of sleep and gentleness the next day trump six hours of sleep with grumpiness and impatience. These specific choices are not legalism; they are simply a mild rule of life that nourishes wisdom and love.

Gregory emphasizes that disordered desires, if not wisely and consistently dealt with, generate a spiral of ever-increasing false needs; what was once only a muted wish, a legitimate desire for something to be enjoyed only rarely, too quickly grows into a necessity. Fulfilled desires can become increasingly jaded. What once satisfied, indeed, was new and exciting, no longer pleases a sated tongue.

In addition, often an uncontrolled appetite has been quenched unjustly. For how, Gregory inquires, have we managed to satisfy our twisted desires? From whose fields have we obtained our food? Have others been exploited so that we could satisfy our cravings? We preserve a good conscience when moderate desire protects others and ourselves.

Moderate desire and the demands of justice must be wedded. We might end up with all we need, but if what we have gained is obtained through the exploitation of others, it is not God who has answered our prayer for daily bread. "For the bread of God is above all the fruit of justice, the ear of the corn of peace, pure and without any admixture of the seed of tares. But if you cultivate what is another's property, if you practice injustice, then you may indeed say to God: Give bread; but another will hear this your plea, and not God. . . . The man who

cultivates iniquity is fed by the father of iniquity."³²

Finally, Gregory reminds us that we are to ask God for bread for "this day." After all, this day is all we have. "Only the present each one can call his own; the hope of the future is uncertain."³³ Gregory illustrates the principle of the present day by drawing our attention to Jesus' parable of the rich fool in Luke 12. The wealth of this foolish man failed to bear lasting fruit, principally because the vision of the rich fool was distorted. His eyesight was blurred by "vain hopes, pulling down, building up, hoarding and dissipating, shutting up long periods of years as it were in barns, without letting them bear fruit." And suddenly the rich fool's gift of years unexpectedly draws to an end. In one night everything drastically changes: the futility, foolishness and emptiness of the rich man's life are unveiled. From Gregory's perspective, the rich man had solely focused on the needs of his body, stimulating his senses through what he could consume and store up, but had foolishly and woefully neglected the greater needs of his soul. "Will not one night prove false all these imagined hopes," Gregory asks, "like some vain dream about something that has no real existence ?"¹¹³⁴

Bread is a good thing, an indispensable good. We cannot live without it. It is created by God to meet the needs of our body for sustenance. And when we think of "bread" in an expanded sense-as the fathers often do-we acknowledge that sufficient money to provide for the basic necessities of life is a blessing. The sustenance that money offers, though, cannot meet our deepest needs. There are greater things, greater truths, that Christ asks us to place at the center of our lives. And it is wisdom that enables us to discern what these greater truths are.

THE BREAD OF THE EUCHARIST

It shouldn't surprise us that when the fathers considered asking God for "daily bread," the Eucharist quickly came to mind. For in the Eucharist the Christian receives bread that nourishes on a level that earthly bread simply can't reach. Both Origen and Tertullian emphasize that the bread we pray for in the Lord's

Prayer is first and foremost "spiritual bread." "For Christ is our bread, because Christ is Life, and bread is life. 'I am,' he says, 'the bread of life:...' Then, we find, too, that his body is reckoned in bread: 'This is my body.'" Even when we employ the word bread "in a carnal sense ... it cannot be so used without, in addition, the religious remembrance of spiritual discipline; for [the Lord] commands that bread be prayed for, which is the only food necessary for believers.""

Origen, like Tertullian, believes it is a mistake to think the "bread" in question is "material bread." Rather, it is the "true bread" that "nourishes the true man, the man created after the image of God, and through which he who is nourished by it is made to the image of Him that created him. What is more nourishing for the soul than the Word? And what is more precious for the mind of him that understands it than the wisdom of God? And what is in better accord with rational nature than truth ?1136

Origen is careful to point out the many meanings of bread in Scripture, emphasizing that "every form of nourishment is called 'bread' in the Scriptures.... The word that nourishes is manifold and varied," as is the state of those who come to be fed by God. To interpret the Bible's references to bread in a wooden fashion, Origen is convinced, is to miss the wonderful, Christ-filled meal God has prepared for us. Jesus himself taught that his "flesh" was "bread" given "for the life of the world." "This is the true meat, the flesh of Christ.... When we eat and drink Him, then He dwells among us. When He is distributed, then is the text fulfilled, We saw His glory. This is the bread that came down from heaven.... He that eats this bread will live forever."³⁷ Origen encourages his readers to feast deeply on the food that God supplies in Christ. "In order, then, that our soul may not become ill through lack of nourishment and that we may not die to God through hunger for the Word of the Lord, let us ... ask the Father for the living bread which is the supersubstantial bread.""

Supersubstantial? What in the world does that mean? Supersubstantial is the English translation of the Greek word *epiousios*, often translated "daily" in modern translations. Origen discusses *epiousios* at length, noting that it sometimes refers to an incorporeal reality and sometimes to corporal matter "as the prime matter of all existing things, that from which the things that exist come into being.... It is the first undetermined principle."³⁹ Origen believes-on the basis of his study of *epiousios* and related words-that "the bread" that we ask for in the Lord's Prayer is spiritual rather than material. This spiritual bread nourishes "the mind and soul," just as material bread nourishes the body.

Origen teaches that God offers us this bread in various forms according to our ability to receive and digest it. Some Christians are "infants" and receive the bread as "milk." Other believers are "weak" and are given "herbs" to eat. The "athletes" receive the bread as "meat" that provides the strength needed for their engagement in spiritual "combat."⁴⁰ One can grow from infancy to maturity "as he gives himself up to the Word," and increasingly is "able to do this or that, or become a person of such or such character."

God's bread nourishes. Other foods, at first glance attractive, are deadly. "Some so-called food is actually noxious, some is disease-bearing, and some even impossible to take."⁴¹ The law of Moses, for instance, clearly distinguishes between clean and unclean food, a differentiation that Origen refers "to the varying dispositions of rational beings ... namely, that some beings can serve us as nourishing food, while of others quite the opposite is true, until God purifies them and makes them all nourishing-even those of every kind."

What might Jesus mean by "this day" in the petition, "give us this day our daily bread"? While Gregory understands "this day" to be the very day we are praying, Origen eschatologically interprets Jesus' reference to "day" as likely referring to "the age to come." "That is to say, that we are bidden to ask for the bread that properly belongs to the age that is to come. Thus God by anticipation

gives it to us now, and in this way what should be given as it were tomorrow is given to us `this day.' Here `this day' means the present age and `tomorrow' the age that is to come."⁴³

We can expand a bit on Origen's comment. If the age to come has unexpectedly invaded the midst of this present evil age in the entrance of the eternal Word into human history in Jesus of Nazareth, if we now live in an unexpected overlap between the ages, we shouldn't be surprised if we can presently partake of food once thought only available at the end of the age at the great messianic banquet (see Lk 14:15-24). The end of history is now present in the midst of history, the reign of God has broken into the midst of this present evil age, and though Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father (see Col 3:1), he invites us to feed on him spiritually in the daily bread he offers to us in earthly elements as common as bread and wine.

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. What does Jesus mean when he links God's forgiveness of our own sins to our willingness to forgive others when they have sinned against us? Gregory of Nyssa is quick to notice that in this petition of the Lord's Prayer, we ourselves resemble God. After all, who has the right and power to forgive sins? God alone. And yet as we image God in our willingness to forgive others their transgressions against us, it is as though, in Gregory's words, we leave "human nature" behind. Our forgiveness of others imitates God's forgiveness of us; by God's grace we are becoming little Christs to the world around us ⁴⁴

Our willingness or refusal to forgive our debtors is a clear indicator of how close we bear and manifest the character of the God who has continually, consistently, mercifully and graciously forgiven us throughout our lives. God is "good and just," "forbearing and kind," "benign and gentle," willingly and lovingly communicating "good things" to us and dispensing "mercy to everyone." A refusal to forgive others demonstrates a hardened, unresponsive,

insensitive heart; we have forgotten how much we have been forgiven by God. What could be more ironic, perhaps even perverse, than for one who has been forgiven much to refuse to forgive little? A "callous man," Gregory warns, is "far from the divine mercy," precisely because contraries are naturally opposed. "Hence someone who cruelly detains a person who is in his power on account of debts, separates himself from the divine kindness by his very way of life. For what communion has kindness with cruelty, a loving character with ferocity?"⁴⁶

Gregory views the willingness to pray and practice forgiveness toward others as an aspect of the divinization (theosis) that the Greek fathers place at the heart of salvation itself. As we are progressively formed into the image of Christ, forgiveness toward others should increasingly mark our lives. To use a metaphor of Gregory's, our willingness to forgive others is a sign that the rust on our souls is disappearing. We are becoming more and more like God as God's image bearers. God offers his goodness to us and proposes that we imitate his love in our willingness to forgive others.

Gregory invites his listeners to a "holy audacity which is inherent in the freedom of the soul," precisely "because it has been joined to its very essence from the beginning." There is no need for Christ's disciple to speak "the language of abject servility" to his Father, nor to "crouch with fear like a slave." If we forgive those who have sinned against us, Gregory invites us to announce our own forgiveness.

Yet you may lawfully say whatever is worthy of God, because your mind is free in its own right. Be yourself your own judge, give yourself the sentence of acquittal. Do you want your debts to be forgiven by God? Forgive them yourself, and God will ratify it. For your judgment of your neighbor which is in your power, whatever it may be, will call forth the corresponding sentence upon you. What you decide for yourself will be confirmed by the Divine judgment ⁴⁷

Origen encourages us to "act with humanity" to those who have sinned against us, "not remembering their debts to us, but rather those that we owe ourselves in which we have often failed-not only our debts to other human beings, but also to God Himself." Only a short, stunted, selfdeceived memory will fail to recall how often we have not discharged responsibly and lovingly our debts toward others.

Remembrance of our debts will produce sympathy for those who, for one reason or another, have not paid their debts to us. "When we but recall the debts which we have not discharged but have refused to pay: debts incurred when the time went by in which we ought to have done certain things for our neighbor, we shall be more sympathetic to those who are debtors to ourselves and who have not discharged their debt. This is especially true if we do not allow ourselves to forget our transgressions of God's law."⁴⁸

Jesus' parable of the unjust servant illustrates well the dynamic of the petition for God to forgive our debts as we forgive the debts of others. The servant-in reality the villain-in Jesus' parable had been forgiven much and yet forgave little. His short memory regarding his previous dire situation resulted in intense, intolerable cruelty toward another who found himself in similar circumstances-facing a debt that could not be repaid. The particular irony in Jesus' parable is the quick and angry judgment exercised by one who had been forgiven "much," while the debt owed to the forgetful servant was a mere pittance ⁴⁹

In the final analysis, there is no need to punish others for the sins they have committed against us. Those who fail to recognize their debts against others are actually punishing themselves. "It is not we that will be hard towards those who do not repent: such people themselves do harm to themselves; for he that rejects instruction hates himself. But even in such cases we must do our best to heal a person who is so completely perverted that he is not even aware of his evil plight ... and this is the more ruinous-drunk with the darkness of evil-doing."so

Gregory reminds us that both those who forgive others and those who receive

forgiveness are infected with sin. When we remember our common plight and common need of God's mercy, our understanding of God's mercy expands, as should our willingness to demonstrate mercy toward others.

How quickly, Gregory writes, we forget our debt to God! We are runaways, apostates from our "natural Master." Insanely and rebelliously, we prefer enslavement to freedom, the tyranny of sin to the "companionship of God."⁵ To be sure, we have lost our minds and our souls. We have forgotten the most important things and sold ourselves for a mess of pottage.

Freedom from slavery is possible if we willingly return home like the prodigal son, one who "had endured the long affliction of feeding the swine. When, like him, we return to ourselves and remember the Heavenly Father, we may rightly use these words: Forgive us our debts.""

Remembering well our debt to God-always a painful, but cleansing exercise-entails an exploratory voyage into our own conscience. Our explorations, if nothing else, will highlight the immense debt we owe to God. For "everyone's conscience is sufficient to make the petition for mercy necessary by his own life." In point of fact, our wounded consciences bear witness to the many times we have allowed our senses to lead us into sin of one kind or another. The senses, Gregory believes, are similar to "windows ... through which the soul moves into the outside world and grabs those things it likes. Thus, these windows ... provide an entrance for death." All of the senses-sight, hearing, taste, touch-can easily become avenues for sin to enter our lives 53

A PERSONAL INVENTORY

For a moment, let's take an inventory to test Gregory's analysis. Over the past month, what have we willingly allowed ourselves to see? Has the window of our eyes introduced light or darkness, beauty or ugliness, peace or disruption, into our interior life? Has the field of our vision birthed twisted thoughts that soon

erupted in crooked actions? Surround these questions with the grace of God. We won't be able to answer the questions our conscience poses unless we remember constantly the love of God for us. God demonstrated his love to us when we were blatant enemies of God, spiritual messes (Rom 5:8-10). He will not love us any less as our self-deception is exposed and our self-knowledge grows.

So again I propose we explore a difficult and significant question: did we sin with our eyes over the past month? Be specific in your response. Allow the light of Christ's love and forgiveness to invade any darkness that has entered your life through your sight.

Let's move on to our sense of hearing. Whose are the voices we have listened to over the past month? What has been the result? Are there voices we refuse to listen to that deserve our listening ear? Why? Where or through whom is Christ speaking today, if only we would have ears to hear? Gregory himself pictures the ear as a window for the passions: "fear, sorrow, wrath, pleasure, desire ... and similar things."⁵⁴

How has the music we have listened to across the years shaped us and how we view the world around us, positively and negatively? Have our musical tastes increased our ability to love God and our neighbors or decreased it? I remember, for instance, how much I loved the music of Jim Morrison and the Doors in my late teens and early twenties. Yet the darker tones in Morrison's music proved a hindrance for me as I attempted to move more fully into Christ's light and love. The music Jesus was singing and the music Jim sang too often clashed for me.

Perhaps some of you have had the same experience with other singers or groups. Perhaps not. This is not the time to become moral rigorists. It is the time to be wise and acknowledge the profound effect words and music have on human beings. Some may be able to listen for hours on end to the Doors and remain protected and unaffected by the darker side of Morrison's lyrics and rhythms. I found I couldn't, so I had to leave him behind on my new journey

with Christ. Yet I must admit that when a Doors song begins to play on the radio, I find it virtually impossible to turn off. The man could sing.

How about reading? Since reading is a type of close, usually intense listening, what do our reading habits reveal about ourselves? Are there books on the shelf that remain unread because of the effort they might require? Have we been tempted by intellectual laziness? Has our curiosity concerning God's world been numbed by overexposure to less demanding, inquiring voices? Has an addiction to entertainment undermined our willingness to engage in the robust exertion and discipline inherent in intense intellectual exploration?

What of our sense of taste? Gregory is especially direct in his remarks on how rapidly undisciplined taste engenders a host of sins, with gluttony at the top of the list. I wonder whether the moral implications of what and how much we eat may be one of the ethical blind spots of North American Christian culture. Perhaps I'm wrong, but how many sermons have you heard on the topic of gluttony or overindulgence, either in terms of the variety or quantity of what we consume at the table? I'd bet you could number the sermons you've heard on gluttony on one hand. By way of contrast, it's striking to observe how often we find church fathers speaking or writing about the constellation of issues related to food consumption-gluttony, a thirst for luxury, a failure to be satisfied with "enough," eating to the point of "satiety"-in comparison to the palpable silence on the same subject in North American churches. Are there certain "acceptable" sins in Christian circles in North America? An objective observer would likely say yes.

Last of all Gregory mentions the sense of touch and assorted temptations and sins related to it. To examine our conscience in the area of touch is especially difficult, at least partially because sins related to the body so quickly become habitual and hence, deeply discouraging; habitual sins are deeply resistant to our efforts to change. It is very difficult to break the hold sins directly related to the

body have over us, partially because of the plasticity of the central nervous system. These are often the sins we have confessed tens, if not hundreds of times. Still, in light of God's infinite mercy shown to us in Christ and his promise of grace-filled power to change, let us have the courage to probe, to go deep, to ask ourselves the very hard question: "What is my body history?" In a word, how have we conducted ourselves in our bodies over the past week, month, year, even lifetime?

For us to look honestly into the past in such an intimate area would be impossible were it not for the boundless grace of God. There is nothing we will discover in our internal investigations that God has not known already, down to the smallest detail. The exploration of our body history, including its remembrances of the times when "touch" has led us into forbidden territory, is for our sake, not God's. And what do we do when we discover sins that for too long we have buried, rationalized or ignored? We take each remembrance, each act, each sin, name it for what it is, and lay it at the foot of the cross. We cling to Christ, knowing that his embrace, however stinging or astringent it may be, is the source of the forgiveness and renewal we long for.

For where else can we go with all of our "stuff"? The only alternative, it seems, is to try to clean ourselves up on our own, to make what we have done less than it is, to deceive ourselves into thinking that our actions are somehow excusable; if we do so, we will attempt to bandage a shrapnel wound with a Band-Aid and continue to hemorrhage spiritually. We can never be healed in our deepest, darkest places if we refuse to be a poor debtor before God. And so the Lord's Prayer, as Gregory understands, invites us to admit what we are, to receive gratefully Christ's forgiveness and to offer the forgiveness we have received to the debtors around us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. We come to the last petition of the Lord's Prayer: "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from

evil." Is Jesus referring to a specific temptation? Gregory points to the evil one, the devil himself, and how the Bible's many names for the devil represent the evil actions the devil commits. Christ "calls the evil one by many different names according to" the devil's own evil actions. "He names him variously devil, Beelzebub, Mammon, prince of this world, murderer of man, evil one, father of lies, and other such things. Perhaps, therefore, here again one of the names devised for him is `temptation. "ss

Gregory argues that the "juxtaposition of clauses" in this last petition confirms his identification of "temptation" with the evil one. "For after saying, Lead us not into temptation, He adds that we should be delivered from evil, as if both words meant the same. For a man who does not enter into temptation is quite removed from evil, and if one who has fallen into temptation is necessarily mixed up with evil, then temptation and the evil one mean one and the same thing."s6

Gregory then asks what might be the purpose of the request to be delivered from temptation, that is, from the evil one and the evil he produces. When we pray to be delivered from temptation, we pray "to be separated from the things that belong to this world." Inherent in the petition is the call to separate ourselves from occasions of temptation and evil, "For temptation finds no opportunity for touching the soul unless this preoccupation with worldly things is held out to greedy people like bait on the hook of evil."57

It is as though the devil is fishing, occasionally changing his bait to catch unwary prey. The only way to avoid being caught, Gregory believes, is to refuse to swim near the bait. Avoid it at all costs. Don't toy with it. Don't nibble on it.

To make his point, Gregory employs a variety of metaphors. "The sea is often dangerous on account of its mighty waves, but not to those who are far removed from it. Fire destroys, but only if inflammable matter is near it. War is full of danger, but only to those who take part in the battle." We can escape the dangers

of stormy seas, raging fires and the horrors of war only by wisely keeping our distance. So too with occasions of temptation and sin.

"He who fears the assault of the evil one should pray that he may not fall into it." The prayer must be accompanied by strategic action. "Therefore, if a man prays truly to be delivered from evil, he asks that he may be far from temptation. For no one would swallow the hook unless he had first gulped down the bait in his greed .1118

Tertullian agrees with Gregory. When we pray "lead us not into temptation," we ask for deliverance from occasions of sin. Specifically, "don't allow us to be led into temptation by him (of course) who tempts."⁵⁹ God himself is not "eager to overthrow" the faith of anyone; when temptation comes, it finds its source in the evil one, not God. God will test, but not tempt to evil. "For God had commanded even Abraham to make a sacrifice of his son, not for the sake of tempting, but testing, his faith." Christ's own temptation in the wilderness demonstrated clearly that the devil is the source of temptation. "He Himself, when tempted by the devil, demonstrated who it is that presides over and is the originator of temptation."⁶⁰

The issue of temptation also occupies Origen's thoughts. Origen openly acknowledges that existence "upon the earth" inherently involves temptation, a thesis he feels is convincingly demonstrated by the narrative of Job.⁶¹ Various psalms make the same point, as does the apostle Paul. "Has anyone ever thought man to be beyond temptations of which he was aware from the day he attained to reason?" Origen asks. "Is there any time when a man is sure that he has not to struggle against sinning.... Paul himself, rich as he is in all utterance and in all knowledge, has not because of this been exempted from the danger of sinning through exalting himself."⁶²

Favorable circumstances can easily deceive us, anesthetizing us to the danger of temptation. Those in good health, for example, are apt to imagine they are

"above temptation." Thus God will occasionally allow people to become ill to illuminate their internal condition, a condition too easily masked by the illusions of health or wealth. "Many who succumbed to toil and could not courageously endure sickness, have shown that they were more grievously ill in their soul than in their body."⁶³

Whether we are struggling against our own flesh or against supernatural powers, temptation is inevitable. If so, Origen asks, what does Jesus mean when he "orders us to pray not to enter into temptation"? It is the strength to resist temptation, Origen believes, that is at the heart of the petition. "Let us pray to be delivered from temptation, not that we should not be tempted-which is impossible, especially for those on earth-but that we may not yield when we are tempted. He who yields to temptation enters, I believe, into temptation because he is entangled in its nets."⁶⁴

Still, God permits temptation to fulfill his own purposes. God will, for instance, deliver us over to our sins in judging and punishing them. ⁶¹ Why would God choose to do so?

God, in a manner of speaking, takes the long view. God always acts toward "every rational soul" with "regard always to its eternal life." The soul itself, "by its own responsibility ... either finds itself in a better state on ascending to the summit of all good, or, on the contrary, descends through carelessness to such and such great depth of evil," depending on how the soul exercises its "freedom of choice. 1166

A fundamental principle for Origen is that God will not force the good on anyone. Rather, God providentially orders events in such a manner that the pain and shame of evil will shape more positive choices on our part in the future. "For God does not wish that good be done to any one against his own will, but that he accept it voluntarily; and there are perhaps some who have been so long habituated to wickedness that they are slow to discern its shame and turn away

from what they had falsely mistaken for what is good .161

The underlying dispositions of key biblical figures are revealed by the temptations they encounter and their response to them. Cain's inward disposition toward anger and self-indulgence reveals itself as he violently murders Abel in anger over God's rejection of Cain's sacrifice (Gen 4:1-12). Noah's drunkenness is the temptation that reveals Ham's wicked character and "his brothers' reverence and respect for their parent" (see Gen 9:20-27). Jacob's theft of Esau's blessing unveils the preexisting wicked character of Esau, for "his soul had in it even before this the roots of his being a fornicator and profane person" (see Gen 25:27-34). Joseph's temptations in Egypt unveil his underlying disposition to trust God (see Gen 37-50).⁶⁸ Joseph's "magnificent continence" would have remained hidden "if his mistress had not conceived a passion for him" (see Gen 39:1-18).⁶⁹

Macarius the Great affirms the key patristic principle that evil attempts to remain hidden in the soul. `Just as water runs through a pipe, so also sin runs through the heart and the thoughts. All those who deny these statements are refuted and ridiculed by sin itself, which is always intent on victory. For evil tries to hide itself and remain undetected in man's mind .1170

The Christian living in this present evil age will always face temptation. Our ability to withstand temptation depends on our present preparation. Are we training as Christ's apprentices to become people who habitually respond with a firm no to temptation when it suddenly raises its head? What, for instance, were the spiritual disciplines that Christ practiced in order to overcome the temptations he faced? Prayer, meditation on Scripture, fasting, silence and solitude come to mind (see Lk 5:15-16). Are we following the pattern our Master has given us for developing the requisite dispositions for withstanding temptation? If not, it is likely our weak dispositions will not be able to withstand temptation's assaults.

Origen urges us to "prepare ourselves against whatever may befall us." A key aspect of this self-preparation is a disciplined life in which the choices we make serve to shape our character in such a manner that we respond in obedience to the sudden heated attack of the wicked one. Our own effort and God's assistance coalesce to form a firm, steady, faithful disposition. "Whatever may come, we must not be taken by surprise but show ourselves well-disciplined. What is wanting to us because of human weakness will, provided we have done what is in our power, be made up by God who cooperates unto good in all things with them that love him."⁷¹

Connected to the petition "lead us not into temptation" is the request for deliverance from evil. Temptation and deliverance are intimately connected. God delivers us, not by preventing the devil from attacking us, but by enabling us to withstand his wiles and the concrete instances of temptation they introduce. "Now, God delivers us from evil, not when the Adversary does not attack us at all with his own devices, whatever they may be, and the ministers of his will, but rather when we overcome him through taking a courageous stand in face of whatever befalls us."⁷² Origen affirms that as we cooperate with the Word who is already present with us, the Word who encourages and saves us, "our mind through God's help is made joyful and courageous in the time of trial."⁷³

Origen highlights faith as the key element that protects the Christian in the midst of temptation. Those who withstand temptation effectively do so "thanks to the shield of faith.... [They] extinguish all the fiery darts hurled against them by the Evil One. They have within them fountains of water springing up into life everlasting, which prevent the fire of the Evil One from growing strong and easily extinguish it with the flood of inspired and salutary thoughts engraved through the contemplation of truth upon the soul of him who tries to be spiritual."

PROBA AND AUGUSTINE REVISITED

It is in the Lord's Prayer that we discover the fundamental answer to Proba's question: "what should I request in prayer?" Augustine confirms the thoughts offered by Gregory, Tertullian and Origen. Our spontaneous petitions should be patterned after the model the Lord has given to us. The Lord's Prayer teaches us what to ask, what to say and how to say it. "For whatever other words we may say, whatever words our fervor utters at the beginning of a petition to define it, or follows up afterward to intensify it, we say nothing that is not found in this prayer of the Lord, if we pray properly and fittingly." To move outside the boundaries of the model the Lord has given us for prayer is to move into the realm of the "carnal" and even the "forbidden." "But whoever says anything in prayer which does not accord with this Gospel prayer, even if the prayer is not of the forbidden sort, it is carnal, and I am not sure it ought not to be called forbidden, since those who are born again of the Spirit ought to pray only in a spiritual manner."⁷⁵

In his letter to Proba, Augustine offers the following closing thoughts on the nature and object of prayer:

. Genuine happiness is found in a healthy, reverent, expectant prayer life.

Spiritual disciplines such as "fasting and abstinence" are "great helps to prayer."⁷⁶

. Augustine encourages Proba to "strive in your prayer to overcome this world, pray in hope, pray with faith and love, pray insistently and submissively, pray like the widow in the parable of Christ." Prayer entails hard work, consistency, grounding in key virtues, deep trust and persistent faith.

Augustine reiterates at the close of his letter the importance of the parable of the insistent woman, particularly for widows such as Proba. "When the Lord exhorted us to pray always and not to faint, He told of the widow whose continual appeal brought a wicked and impious judge, who scorned both God

and man, to hear her cause."" Jesus, Augustine believes, had widows in the back of his mind when he taught this parable. "From this it can easily be understood how widows, beyond all others, have the duty of applying themselves to prayer, since an example was taken from widows to encourage us all to develop a love of prayer. 1178

It is especially the "poverty and desolation" widows experience that provides fertile ground for the cultivation of prayer. Even people who have not experienced pain and grief over the death of a spouse can enter into a "widowhood" of the soul, with its accompanying desolation and poverty.

Desolation and poverty, though, are not ends in themselves; their unremitting intensity provides the opportunity for us to acknowledge our weakness, helplessness and need for God as "defender" of the Soul. 79 The awareness of our weakness and desolation in this present life can shield us from our self-deceptive tendency to rely on wealth, status, beauty or family for our security. Reliance on false securities can only harm us, in both the long and short run.

How might we enter into the widowhood of the soul Augustine describes? Certain spiritual disciplines frequently function like divine can openers as they pop us open and reveal to us the true state of affairs within. Augustine recommends the discipline of fasting to Proba, a discipline that was part of the spiritual regimen of every church father. In the ancient world, Tomas Spidlik notes, "fasting was almost always associated with rites of mourning," rejuvenation, initiation and renewal .80

Fasting can foster an internal mourning, even desolation, as we are forced to acknowledge our reliance on food, entertainment, the opinions of others, the strength of the stock market, the status of our vocation or our physical attractiveness and health for our sense of well-being and security. Fasting raises to the surface of our consciousness, like a divine magnet, what we genuinely value and deeply desire. It quickly reveals the cracks in our personalities, flaws

that remain hidden when our needs are met, but open up when fasting's "no" impedes our body's and mind's incessant "yes." For instance, I would like to imagine I'm a patient person, patient, that is, as long as I get what I want when I want it. How quickly my patience evaporates when my body cries out, "feed me," and Christ says, "Not now. Allow your hunger to increase your desire for me and your compassion for others."

Self-deceptive thoughts may convince us that we have not been molded by the values of this present evil age; fasting compels us to face the true state of affairs. In this way, fasting is much like prayer, an avenue by which the values of the age to come invade the midst of this present evil age. Spidlik, in fact, reminds us that the fathers viewed fasting as "the outer manifestation of prayer; it is, so to speak, the prayer of the body."⁸¹

PART THREE

DISCIPLINE



Whoever hammers a lump of iron, first decides what he is going to make of it, a scythe, a sword, or an axe, Even so we ought to make up our minds what kind of virtue we want to forge or we labor in vain [i.e., aimlessly].

ANTONY THE GREAT SAYINGS OF THE DESERT FATHERS¹

I never get tired of asking the Lord on your behalf, that you may know the grace that has been given to you. For God, in his mercy, reminds every one of the means of the grace given to him. So never lose heart or be lazy, my children, in crying to the Lord night and day, that you may force the Father's benevolence to grant you aid from above.

ANTONY THE GREAT LETTERS²

I ask day and night from my Creator ... that you may know your shame, for he who knows his shame is he who seeks the true glory, and he who knows his death has known his eternal life.

ANTONY THE GREAT LETTERS³

I will show you another work that can establish man firmly [on his way] from beginning to end. It is to love God with all his heart and intention and to worship him. God will then give him great strength and joy, and all the works of God will become to him as sweet as honeycomb. So will all labors of the body become light and sweet, along with his meditation, vigil and carrying the Lord's yoke. However, on account of God's love for human beings, he unleashes upon them adversities so as not to be conceited, but stand firm in their struggle and proceed

further in their growth. Instead of strength they feel languor and feebleness, instead of joy sadness, instead of sweetness bitterness. Many similar things befall those who love God. Nevertheless, they are all the more strengthened in their struggle against them and eventually overcome them. Once they do so, the Spirit of God stands by them in all things and strengthens them so as never to fear anything evil.

ANTONY THE GREAT LETTERS4

S E V E N

THE TRANSFORMING CALL TO THE DESERT

ANTONY RECEIVES A CALL

Toward the latter stages of the third century A.D. a young man named Antony found himself sitting in church listening to the Gospel reading from Matthew 19:21 (RSV): "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Athanasius, Antony's biographer, comments that Antony sensed that Jesus' words in Matthew's text were directly and personally addressed to him. "It was as if by God's design he held the saints in his recollection, and as if the passage were read on his account." Antony immediately decided that he must respond to Jesus' command through a concrete act of obedience. Step by step, almost methodically, Antony initiated his move into the desert to lead a life characterized by solitude, conflict with the demonic realm, prayer and service.

Why would Antony respond to Jesus' teaching in such a radical fashion? Perhaps the question we should be asking ourselves is "why not?" What was he thinking? Was Antony hearing truths in the gospel to which other Christians of his day and our own are tone-deaf? Is such far-reaching, radical discipleship what Jesus meant by his commandment to the rich young ruler to give away all his possessions (Mk 10:17-25)? How are we to understand-especially those of us who live lives of material prosperity and security-Antony and the many other early Christians who made the desert a home for most of their lives? Surely there is an immediacy, dedication and seriousness in these early Christians' obedient response to the gospel that is worth our close examination.

Other Christians in the church's history have been deeply affected, encouraged and challenged by the example of Antony. Consider Augustine. Augustine records in his Confessions his deep resistance to a wholehearted, sacrificial, deeply repentant response to Christ. Augustine was intensely conflicted. He was attracted to Christ and simultaneously attracted to the manifold pleasures of the present life. Augustine remained trapped by habitual patterns of sinful behavior so extremely interwoven in his psyche and body that a genuine, lasting conversion to Christ seemed impossible and unrealistic. Yet, as Augustine sat in the garden of his friend Alypius-still actively resisting the gospel-he recalled the example of Antony.

Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment? I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain "Take it and read, take it and read."... This could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. For I had heard the story of Antony, and I remembered how he had happened to go into a church while the Gospel was being read and had taken it as a counsel to himself when he heard the words Go home and sell all that belongs to you. Give it to the poor, and so the treasure you shall have shall be in heaven; then come back and follow me. By this divine pronouncement he had at once been converted to you.'

Again we ask: what moved people like Antony to live such an austere, demanding and often achingly lonely life in the desert regions of Egypt, Syria and Israel? Why did such a seemingly eccentric and outlandish type of discipleship touch people like Augustine so profoundly? We can best answer these questions by examining closely the central themes Athanasius weaves together in his narrative of Antony's life.

EARLY TRAINING AND DISCIPLINE

After Antony's initial response to Jesus' commandment to sell everything and follow him, Antony attached himself to an old man who lived in solitude not far from Antony's village. Antony observed this old man carefully, emulating his "goodness." Observation and emulation are words we will want to keep in mind as we explore desert spirituality.

A number of key words and phrases characterize this early period of Antony's apprenticeship on the outskirts of the desert: discipline, training, growth in self-awareness through "paying heed to himself," and the observation and emulation of those who were already well trained in the virtuous life. If Antony "heard of some zealous person anywhere, he searched him out like the wise bee."⁷ As he spent time with experienced masters of the spiritual life, he "received supplies for traveling the road to virtue." He observed and imitated carefully the disciplined patterns of his teachers' lives: prayer, the memorization of vast sections of Scripture, silence, solitude, service to others, struggle against temptation and demonic attack, and manual labor.

Athanasius's metaphor of Antony as a "wise bee" effectively describes Antony's habitual practices well. He gathered the wisdom of a number of abbas, or desert fathers, collecting their wisdom much like a bee gathers nectar from fragrant blossoms. The key for Antony was close observation and imitation. "He observed the graciousness of one, the eagerness for prayers in another; he took careful note of one's freedom from anger, and the human concern of another. And Antony paid attention to one while he lived a watchful life or to another as he pursued studies, as also he admired one for patience, and another for fastings and sleeping on the ground."

What do all these attitudes and behaviors have in common? Antony discerned that each discipline and virtue is a means to cultivate a loving disposition or the concrete manifestation of love itself.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND TEMPTATION

Almost immediately upon his decision to enter into the spiritually disciplined life of the desert monk, Antony encountered demonic opposition, a major thematic element in Athanasius's portrayal of Antony's spiritual development. For many modern readers Athanasius's description of Antony's combat with the demons will sound fanciful and far-fetched. It is best for us to keep two points in mind. Though for some modern readers, especially those from a Western background, the demonic is a superstitious relic from the ancient past, the desert monks themselves had no doubt concerning supernatural evil and that reality itself was multilayered. They would have considered the secular mindset to be naive and underdeveloped.

We should also note that the apostles themselves, like Jesus, treated the reality of the devil and demonic seriously and soberly, fully expecting demonic resistance to the extension of the kingdom of God into the midst of this present evil age. Paul, for example, writes: "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:11-12). So, while Antony's encounters with demons may appear to some of us as exaggerated wives' tales, they did not appear so to the vast majority of his contemporaries, Christian or not. Antony's move into the desert was an invasion of the devil's territory and opposition could be expected, though I readily admit that the vividness and extent of Antony's conflict with the devils is foreign to my experience.

Antony's combats do make sense theologically though. He was taking Christ at his word and willingly leaving behind all things for Christ's sake. From the perspective of the Bible, Antony's heartfelt response was apt to catch the eye of the evil one. Demonic resistance is quick in coming. "The devil, who despises and envies good, could not bear seeing such purpose in a youth, but the sort of

things he had busied himself in doing in the past, he set to work to do against this person as well."⁹

The temptations and struggles Antony experienced are extremely important to ponder, for they are frequently mentioned in early monastic literature as the common experience of the Christian in the desert. These tests, trials, battles and temptations included the irruption of various memories, the struggle with deeply habituated patterns of behavior-some sin ful-and anxiety over common human concerns. Consider the following-

- . Memories of possessions Antony no longer owned (avarice)
- . Family concerns and considerations, reflected in Antony's concern for his sister (desert Christians often left loved ones behind as they moved into the solitude of the wilderness)
- + The desire for money and glory (greed; vanity)
- . The pleasure of eating and food (gluttony)
- . The desire to relax and take life easy (laziness)
- . The difficult, taxing and rigorous discipline unavoidably entailed in developing a virtuous life, both in terms of temptations and struggles specifically related to the body and "the length of time" involved in spiritual discipline and formation

Athanasius portrays Antony as a spiritual athlete who has entered into the arena to compete against and combat the evil one and his demonic hordes. Not only did Antony experience physical torment in his battle against evil, but the evil one frequently attacked Antony's mind, fomenting a host of disturbing thoughts. In this heated contest the devil "raised in [Antony's] mind a great dust cloud of considerations," "disturbing [Antony] at night," "troubling him in the daytime," hurling "foul thoughts," resorting to "titillation," and even assuming

the form of a woman to torment and "beguile" Antony.¹⁰

Antony successfully resisted the attacks of the devil through the consistent practice of what were then and now recognized as classical disciplines of the spiritual life: prayer and fasting. It is not Antony alone, though, who fought in the arena of faith. Christ was with him and fighting on his behalf. "Working with Antony was the Lord, who bore flesh for us, and gave to the body the victory over the devil, so that each of those who truly struggle can say, It is not I, but the grace of God which is in me." As Athanasius emphasizes carefully, in Antony's first triumph over the devil, "this was in Antony the success of the Savior."¹²

Antony's temptations and struggles multiplied as time passed. Things got tougher rather than easier. Yet as Antony continued to immerse himself in the "discipline with intensity," his "eagerness" gradually formed into a settled "disposition." New habits of thought and behavior gradually replaced old ones.

Antony's regimen-the "discipline" Athanasius describes in detail-included practices directly related to Antony's body that many moderns will find mysterious, bizarre and even repellent. "His watchfulness was such that he often passed the entire night without sleep.... He ate once daily. ... There were times when he received food every second and frequently even every fourth day. His food was bread and salt, and for drinking he took only water.... A rush mat was sufficient to him for sleeping.... More regularly he lay on the bare ground."¹³

What was the rationale behind such harsh bodily disciplines? Athanasius explains that Antony's exercises were based on the intimate connection between the body and the soul. Antony was habituating his body to "labor" that maintained the soul's strength. "For he said the soul's intensity is strong when the pleasures of the body are weakened," a theme we will continue to explore in this chapter.

One of Antony's strengths, Athanasius writes, was his willingness to simply

take things one day at a time. He consciously avoided measuring his progress or obsessively taking his spiritual temperature. Antony was competing with no one and had no interest in comparing his spiritual progress with that of others. Rather, he "did not hold time passed in his memory, but day by day, as if making a beginning ... [Antony] increased his exertion for advance, saying continually to himself Paul's word about forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead."" The goal for each day was quite clear: "to present himself as the sort of person ready to appear before God-that is, pure of heart and prepared to obey his will, and no other."¹⁵ Antony's spiritual exercises or "discipline" served to develop and nurture purity of heart, singleness of will and love for God and neighbor.

FURTHER INTO THE WILDERNESS

As Athanasius's narrative continues, Antony moved deeper into the wilderness and set up residence in a tomb located some distance from his village. He was destined to spend the next fifteen years of his life in the uninviting environment of a cemetery. The life of the kingdom of God present in Antony was invading the realm of sin and death. In his new home-a tombAntony was frequently tempted by various demons who assumed the shapes of "lions, bears, leopards, bulls, and serpents, asps, scorpions, and wolves." Under the watchful eye of his Lord, Antony successfully withstood these demonic attacks ¹⁶

Various temptations afflicted Antony in the form of an "apparition of a great silver dish" and "actual gold thrown into his path." Eventually Antony moves from the tomb to a "deserted fortress, empty so long that reptiles filled it ... and took up residence in it.... He was hidden within as in a shrine. He remained alone in the place, neither going out himself nor seeing any of those who visited."⁷

Years of demonic attack and conflict continued. Despite this unrelenting battle, however, two key transformations were occurring: the transformation of enemy ground into the realm of Christ's kingdom, and the transformation of

Antony himself into Christ's own image.

Frances Young rightly emphasizes a theme we have already mentioned: Antony's move into the desert and his combat there are a "victory over the powers of evil." Through Antony, Christ was cutting "the sinews of the devil." As Christ in Antony invaded enemy territory ever more deeply through Antony's habitation of tombs and then the desert itself—light overcame darkness, wisdom dispelled foolishness and deception. With the weapons of prayer and the sign of the cross, evil was increasingly vanquished and Christ's kingdom extended. Young comments: "To display one's belief ... by brandishing the weapon of prayer and uplifting the sign of the cross," was to disarm the devils. "With these weapons, the devil's own territory, the tombs and the desert, can be invaded with success. In the accounts of visions, miracles, and temptations, we are given a lively picture of the victorious Christ working through Antony to overcome evil and confuse the worldly-wise."⁸

Antony spent close to fifteen years wrestling in solitude and silence with his demonic opponents before he commenced his journey to the "mountain," the next key geographic move in the narrative. Christ was continually present with him and in him, though Antony was not always aware of Christ's care, and occasionally became disturbed when Christ appeared to have left him to fend for himself. Occasionally, judging by appearances, Antony has to stand alone against attack, both spiritual and physical.

During a momentary lull in Antony's combat with the demons, Christ appeared to Antony and encouraged him. "Where were you?" Antony asks. "Why didn't you appear in the beginning, so that you could stop my distresses?" Christ responds: "I was here, Antony, but I waited to watch your struggle. And now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be your helper forever, and I will make you famous everywhere."⁹

DEIFICATION IN ANTONY

Another twenty years followed, with Antony immersing himself in prayer, meditation on Scripture and continuing conflict with the demons. When these twenty years are combined with Antony's earlier years of preparation, we reach a total of at least thirty five years of preparation and training for Antony's ministry to the church. As things turn out, Antony's preparation in the desert was not for his own sake, but for that of others.

Finally, when Antony moved into a more public, active ministry, he was clearly a human being who had been transformed by the Spirit into Christ's own image. Antony was close to fifty-five years old, with at least another forty-five years to live, and is portrayed by Athanasius as a living example of theosis, or deification. Antony had developed into Christ in miniature. He is a little Christ. To see Antony, to listen to Antony, to encounter Antony, is to encounter Christ. We should not be surprised, then, by the many similarities between Antony's life and ministry and that of Jesus. Athanasius quite clearly means for us to discern these connections.

Through years of faithful discipleship framed by consistent spiritual discipline—a process empowered by the grace of the Spirit—Christ as the image of God had been tangibly renewed and profoundly formed in Antony. Athanasius's point, however, is that deification—transformation into the image of Christ—is available to all believers who respond in obedience to the Son's call to discipleship.²⁰

EMERGENCE FROM THE DESERT FORTRESS

Ponder Athanasius's description of Antony as he emerged after twenty years in his desert fortress. "Antony came forth as though from some shrine, having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God." When Antony's friends saw him, they were "amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons, but ... just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal. 1121

Antony's interior state had been purified by the Holy Spirit, a purification reflected in the condition of his body. "The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection.... He maintained utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature."²²

Athanasius's description of Antony is foreign to the modern mind. Antony didn't grieve? Never experienced pleasure? Was entirely unaffected by those around him? These qualities hardly seem laudable or desirable. What's Athanasius's point? For Athanasius, freedom from the undulations of human life-and its attendant emotions-is a gift rather than a curse and reflects Christ's enduring, unchanging love and steadfast concern for his creation. As Antony is increasingly renewed into Christ's image, his soul's steadiness or state of "equilibrium" reflects the deeper reality of Christ's own impassible love. By "impassible" the fathers mean a love that never wavers, never lessens, never weakens, never ceases. In a manner of speaking, Christ's impassibility means that his infinite, divine love is always "on." It can't ever be turned off by the response of his creatures to it. It never clicks off because of grief or the sudden irruption of self-centered pleasure. In Christ's divine nature he cannot experience a diminution or increase of love-or pleasure for that matter-because he is all love, all the time, always giving, healing, caring, restoring and so on. To the extent that it is possible for a fallen human being, Antony has entered into this wondrous divine love. He has been transfigured into Christ's image, with the reflection of Christ's love the happy result. He has become what he and we are all created to be, genuine human beings.

At this juncture in Athanasius's narrative, Antony's inner equilibrium, grounded in Christ's impassible, ever-flowing love, begins to manifest itself in concrete, consistent acts of love toward others.

Should we be surprised that Antony begins to replicate many of Christ's own

works, as Christ works in him? Antony's desert experiences have transformed him into Christ's image, and Christ's works result. "Through him the Lord healed many of those present who suffered from bodily ailments; others he purged of demons, and to Antony he gave grace in speech. 112' The ultimate result of Antony's schooling in the desert? The blossoming of Christ's love within Antony, a love which quickly manifests itself in his words and actions toward the wider world.

Athanasius relates two events in Antony's life that illustrate well the power of Christ working through Antony. The first incident concerns Martinianus, a military officer who persistently begged Antony to come and pray for his demon-possessed daughter. Antony initially appeared both callous and unkind, refusing to open the door of his cell to Martinianus. Why would Antony act so inhospitably, by all appearances violating a key monastic virtue?

Antony wanted Martinianus to realize that the same Christ who was at work in Antony's life was also readily available to Martinianus, if only Martinianus would believe. "Why do you cry out to me, man?" Antony asks. "I, too, am a man like you, but if you believe in Christ, whom I serve, go, and in the same way you believe, pray to God, and it will come to pass. 1121

Martinianus responded favorably to Antony's exhortation, exercised faith and his daughter was subsequently delivered. We should not overlook the similarity between this healing story and the biblical accounts of Jesus' own healing ministry (cf. Lk 7:1-10; 8:40-56; 17:11-14). Athanasius wants his readers to comprehend Christ's desire to reduplicate himself and his ministry in his followers, just as he had in Antony's own life. "For what holds true for the image necessarily holds true also for that of which it is the image. 1125

This theme of mirroring or imitating Christ reappears in a second story from Antony's life, that of the healing of a young woman from Busiris who suffered from both infection and paralysis. Antony demonstrated a preter natural

awareness of the woman's situation and of God's desire to cure her; after the woman was healed Antony exhorted her parents to remember that "this good deed is not mine, that she should come to me, a pitiable man; rather, her healing is from the Savior who works his mercy everywhere for those who call on him."²⁶

THE NICENE CHRIST

It is clear that Athanasius's biography of *The Life of Antony* presents the life of Christ on a reduced scale in Antony's own experiences.²⁷ Even more importantly, Athanasius wants his readers to understand that what the Trinity has accomplished in Antony is possible for all who would abandon themselves into the hands of God in a life of faithful, courageous discipleship. Antony's willingness to leave all for the sake of Christ opened the door for the full manifestation of the Son's life and power in Antony's life. And which Son is this? Why, of course, the Son revealed in the Nicene Creed, the creed which Athanasius defended as the test of Christian orthodoxy for almost all of his life.

Thus, Athanasius's frequent references throughout *The Life of Antony* to Antony's impeccable orthodoxy should not surprise us. For example, Antony responded to Greek inquirers by asking "which is preferable, to say that the Word of God was not changed, but remaining the same he assumed a human body for the salvation and benefit of mankind"-a shortened form of the creed-or "to make the divine very much like the irrational beings, and on these grounds worship four-footed creatures and reptiles and images of men ?¹¹²¹ Should we be surprised-in light of the years Athanasius spent supporting the creed formulated at Nicaea-that near the end of his life Antony warns his followers against "fellowship between you and the schismatics, and certainly none with the heretical Arians. For you know how I, too, have shunned them because of their Christ-battling and heterodox teaching."²⁹

ANTONY'S PUBLIC MINISTRY

After thirty-five years of practice in the disciplines of desert spirituality, Antony began what might be called his "public" ministry, a combined ministry of both teaching and action. At this moment in Athanasius's biography we encounter our first extended teaching discourse of Antony, a section that encompasses twenty-four paragraphs. As Antony teaches he addresses a number of important issues and questions facing the Christian in the desert.

Boredom and discouragement. When the initial glow and excitement of the monk's call to the desert had passed, boredom, monotony and discouragement were apt to set in, as we've already seen in other chapters of this book. Spiritual disciplines that were initially novel and exhilarating in time became dull and routine. The barrenness of the desert landscape only accentuated an inner barrenness all monks would have to face.

Other monks were not troubled so much by boredom as by the discouragement that occasionally accompanied the growth in self-awareness that life in the desert often engendered. Then, and now, it was very difficult to face the truth about oneself; the lack of distractions in the desert made things even more difficult for the monk. There was literally nothing in the barren space of the desert that monks could employ to buffer themselves from the penetrating gaze of God and God's insistent call to change. Imagine for a moment life in the desert from the perspective of the present: no television, no news, no sports, no film, no newspapers, no magazines, no radio, little human contact, few books if any, no entertainment of any kind to distract or amuse oneself. It was simply the monk, the desert and God for day after day.

Antony deals with the issues of boredom and discouragement in his first lengthy teaching discourse. Recall that Antony had himself faced these difficulties for thirty-five years. He had learned firsthand how bitter and harsh boredom and discouragement could be. "In the first place," Antony encourages his listeners, "let us hold in common the same eagerness not to surrender what

we have begun, either by growing fainthearted in the labors or by saying, 'We have spent a long time in the discipline. ' Though the years might stretch ahead for what seems to be an interminably barren period of time, Antony urges his fellow monks to begin each day "as though making a beginning."³⁰

Best not to dwell on the past nor be paralyzed by the future. We don't, in fact, know when our years on earth will end, and in light of eternity, our lives' brevity or length will seem as nothing. In reality, years in the desert were simply a blip on the radar screen of eternity. "For the entire life span of human beings is very brief when measured against the ages to come, so that all our time is nothing in comparison with eternal life."³¹

In the present we are "contestants" who have yet to obtain their inheritance. Remember, then, that we will reign with Christ eternally, but the time for reigning has not yet arrived. We are still in a testing, purifying time; it will not last forever. "When, therefore, we live the whole eighty years, or even a hundred in the discipline, these hundred are not equal to the years we shall reign, for instead of a hundred we shall reign forever and ever."³²

Boasting and carelessness. Imagine a monk is neither discouraged nor bored. Instead, things seem to be going well. The pain of leaving his possessions behind is manageable, his prayer life is lively and active, and his surroundings adequate, if not entirely comfortable. While all is going well for this happy monk, Antony warns against twin dangers: boasting and carelessness. At least three times Antony warns against a lack of vigilance or carelessness. If we have given away all our possessions, we have "no reason to boast or grow careless." "With these thoughts let a person convince himself not to grow careless." "Therefore, my children, let us hold to the discipline, and not be careless."³³

The human will. We must interpret Antony's understanding of the human will carefully. At first glance, Antony might be interpreted as saying, "simply try harder." For example, in coaching discouraged monks, Antony states that virtue

is not far from them and actually easy to nurture. The cultivation of virtue "is easy if only we shall will it." What could Antony possibly mean? Isn't the willing of the good the very problem a weary monk might be struggling with? Antony employs an interesting comparison to clarify his teaching.

Think, Antony encouraged his disciples, of how the Greeks learn. Ordinarily a Greek student would leave home to attend a university or to place himself under the instruction of a well-known teacher. Similarly the desert monk has also entered on a course of education, but under the greatest instructor, one who not only teaches but empowers. The monk should not be afraid of the call to a virtuous life, nor "a stranger to the term" virtue. How so? God has inaugurated his reign in the heart of the believer. "For the Lord has told us before, the Kingdom of God is within you."³⁴ If God asks the monk to exert his will toward the good, the monk can know and trust that God will provide whatever is needed to respond to this call.

Antony teaches that the soul has retained its "natural state," but also warns that the soul can respond to the lure of temptation, much like Adam and Eve responded to temptation in the Garden of Eden. "So the task is not difficult, for if we remain as we were made, we are in virtue, but if we turn our thoughts toward contemptible things, we are condemned as evil." ss

The question, of course, is whether "we remain as we were made" after the fall of humanity into sin. Antony argues that the soul as created by God still remains in its created purity. He does not view the soul as so vitiated by sin that it cannot, with the aid of the grace of God and the indwelling Christ, be fully renewed into the image of Christ. If we had to rely on "something external that must be procured," the call to virtue and holiness would seem insuperable. However, we have received our soul "as a trust," and must act accordingly. Antony teaches that our soul is "just the same as he made it" and has not been twisted or wounded by the sin of our predecessors, a controversial position that

other church fathers would dispute, particularly those from the West. If the soul turns from virtue, though, and "is twisted away from what it naturally is," then Antony speaks of "the vice of the Soul . 1116

What is the antidote for carelessness? Antony has already mentioned it. Remember to focus on each day; avoid prolonged ruminations on either the past or future. Carelessness can be avoided and vigilance developed if we remember that we are called to die each day. If we truly believed that this day was the day of our death, the day we were to meet God, would we not be intensely focused on the most important matters? Less important things would simply drop to the wayside.

"For if we so live as people dying daily, we will not commit sin. The point of the saying is this: As we rise daily, let us suppose that we shall not survive till evening, and again, as we prepare for sleep, let us consider that we will not awaken." The very uncertainty of life itself, Antony believes, should teach us the wisdom of living daily and dying daily. He exhorts us to avoid unnecessary concerns and distractions that may blur our vision of the kingdom and the wonder of Christ; our primary characteristic should be our willingness to offer the forgiveness we have received to all people. In addition, Antony, like many abbas of the desert, is not averse to reminding us of the reality of future judgment as a motivating factor in learning to live each day well before God 37

Antony's demonology. As we have already seen in some detail, Athanasius vividly portrays Antony's life as spent in active combat with demonic forces. Antony teaches that the demons were originally good creatures. "The demons were not created as the figures we now identify by 'demon,' for God made nothing bad. They were made good, but falling from the heavenly wisdom and thereafter wandering around the earth, they deceived the Greeks through apparitions.""

After the demons fell into sin, they became envious of human beings; they

presently do all they can to prevent humans from reaching the safe haven of heaven, "so that we might not ascend to the place from which they themselves fell."39

How can the desert monk thwart the tactics and attacks of the demonic? Antony considers both prayer and an ascetic lifestyle as necessary aspects of successful combat against demonic evil. In secular parlance, the Greek word *askesis* meant "training" and in an athletic context referred to the strict regimen willingly adopted by Greek athletes to hone their skills for competition. If a runner planned on competing in the marathon, for instance, part of his *askesis* entailed running many miles each day, and other exercises that were painful, tiring and demanding. No runner loved his *askesis*. He did love, though, the freedom and self-mastery *askesis* produced. Both a Greek athlete and a desert father would immediately grasp the idea of ascetic freedom. Those who hoped to be successful in the unavoidable combat with the powers of evil had to adopt the *askesis* of prayer, fasting and so on. These spiritual disciplines-all very difficult at the beginning-offer freedom, courage and grace-filled power to say no to evil and yes to love.

Antony discusses in great detail the specific tactics demons employ in their attempt to confuse and discourage disciples of Christ. Some demons attack believers with the stumbling block of "evil thoughts." If this tactic is overcome by "prayers and fasting" they will try other approaches, appearing as apparitions and "phantasms" designed to frighten and intimidate.

More insidious, though, is the demonic attempt to counterfeit godly activities such as prayer, meditation on Scripture and fasting by leading the monk into an exaggerated, undiscerning, extravagant spirituality that quickly discourages the monk and encourages him to forsake his vocation. "While we are sleeping they [the demons] arouse us for prayers, and they do this incessantly, hardly allowing us to sleep. It is possible, when they model themselves after the form of monks,

for them to pretend to speak like the devout, so that by means of the similarity of form they deceive." The result is that genuine Christian spirituality is replaced by deceptive, demonic imitation. "They do not do these things," Antony stresses, "for the sake of piety or truth, but so that they might bring the simple to despair, and declare the discipline useless, and make men sick of the solitary life as something burdensome and very oppressive."⁴⁰

Antony coaches monks to "pay no heed" to the demonic admonition to an excessive, oppressive spirituality. At times it will be difficult to identify this specific form of demonic temptation, precisely because it is attired in Christian clothing. While all Christians are called to prayer, study and fasting, Antony warns that demonic temptations distorting these disciplines prod the monk toward an excessive, harsh, unreasonable asceticism. Indeed, Antony advises that it is better to get a good night's sleep than to attempt to remain awake, if such exaggerated vigilance leads to fatigue, discouragement or self-righteousness. "Therefore let us pay them [the demons] no heed, treating them as strangers to us, and let us not obey them, even in the event that they arouse us for prayer, or talk to us about fasting. Rather, let us devote ourselves to our own purpose in the discipline, and not be led astray by them, though they do all things with cunning."⁴¹

The truth of the matter is that demons are gifted bullies and intimidators, but lack authentic power to wreak lasting harm. "But because they have no power to act, they do nothing except issue threats. If they had the power, they would not delay.... They know that as we advance [into the desert] they are weakened. 42 The demons are pretenders, play actors, hollow, insubstantial, withered. "The demons ... unable to effect anything, play parts as if they were on stage, changing their forms and striking fear in children by the illusion of the hordes and their shapes. For these antics they deserve instead to be ridiculed as weaklings."⁴³

Antony draws our attention to the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mt 8:28-34; Mk 5:1-20; Lk 8:26-39). The demons appear to exercise fearful destructive power as they enter a herd of swine and drive them over the cliffs into the sea. This destruction, though, is permitted by God. Christ allows the demons to enter the pigs. Apart from Jesus' permission, the pigs would still be munching grass peacefully. "But if [the demons] held no sway over the swine, how much less do they hold over people made in the image of God !1144 If the monk must fear anyone, let it be God, rather than a blustering demon.

Antony viewed the continued attacks of the demons as an opportunity for him to grow ever stronger in Christ through the "discipline." The discipline-the ascetic exercises of the desert monks-itself causes the demons to cringe in fear. "They are afraid of the ascetics on several counts-for their fasting, the vigils, the prayers, the meekness and gentleness, the contempt for money, the lack of vanity, the humility, the love of the poor, the almsgiving, the freedom from wrath, and most of all for their devotion to Christ." All these grace-filled disciplines and the virtues they produce facilitate growth in Christ and resistance to evil. "For they [the devils] know the grace that has been given to the faithful for combat against them by the Savior."46

DEIFICATION REVISITED

I have already briefly mentioned deification as a significant theme in Athanasius's biography of Antony. A closer look at Athanasius's understanding of deification may well prove helpful in understanding Athanasius's portrayal of Antony's life. In *On the Incarnation* Athanasius teaches that through disciplined prayer and meditation a human being increasingly discerns the glory of the incarnate Word in Jesus Christ. In turn, as we meditate on the wonder of Christ, we more and more comprehend the high calling of our own creation in the image of God 47 We are called to be little Christs, God's image bearers .41

Athanasius acknowledges that God is "by nature" invisible. If we are to

"perceive and know him" we must look to "His works." Similarly he who fails to "see Christ with his understanding" can at least "consider Him in His bodily works and test whether they be of man or God."⁴⁹ In fact, through the "humble means" of death itself "deathlessness has been made known to us." Likewise, "through the Incarnation of the Word the Mind whence all things proceed has been declared, and its Agent and Ordainer, the Word of God Himself. He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God."so

It is extremely important for us to understand that Athanasius is not blurring ontological categories here. He knows full well that human beings can never become God by nature or essence, as though we could cross the line between the created and the uncreated. Humans are created beings and will always remain just that; yet we are wondrous and exalted members of the created order, distinct from other creatures as God's image bearers. Human beings are created in the image of God Jesus Christ-and in our redemptive renewal in the image of the Son in us we partake of the divine nature by adoption (cf. 2 Pet 1:4). Christ as the embodied, incarnate Word has made it possible for humans to be renewed in his image through participation in the wonders that stream from his incarnation, cross and resurrection. Our embodied self is lifted by faith into Christ's embodied self through our faith in him and his redemptive work for us.

An essential aspect of this redemptive, renewing process, Athanasius believes, is the Christian's perception of the revelation of God in Christ, an awareness deepened by meditating on the incarnate Son's embodied acts during his earthly ministry.

He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the unseen Father. He himself was unhurt by this, for He is impassible and incorruptible; but by His own impassibility He kept and healed the suffering men on whose account He thus endured. In short, such and so many are the Savior's achievements that follow from His

incarnation, that to try to number them is like gazing at the open sea and trying to count the waves. One cannot see all the waves with one's eyes, for when one tries to do so those that are following on baffle one's senses. Even so, when one wants to take in all the achievements of Christ in the body, one cannot do so, even by reckoning them up, for the things that transcend one's thought are always more than those one thinks that one has grasped si

Athanasius's understanding of deification enlivens his description of Antony's emergence from "nearly twenty years" of life in isolation in the desert. When friends finally come and tear down Antony's "fortress door," whom do they encounter? A human being who has been transformed into the image of Christ. `Antony came forth as though from some shrine, having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God.¹¹² This was the first time Antony had been seen in years, time he had spent in disciplined spiritual exercises-grace-filled means, so to speak-designed to melt Antony, extract impurities from the metal of his soul and reform him into the image of his creator and redeemer.

Once again, we encounter the picture of Antony as mirroring Christ. Christ images God, Antony images Christ. Athanasius's point, though, is that all human beings, if they follow the pattern of faith and discipline left by Antony, can also reflect Christ in the manner exemplified in Antony's soul and body. We will explore more fully in our final chapter how modern Christians living in the twenty-first century-the vast majority of whom will not be monks or members of monastic communities-can become "smaller-version imitators" of key patterns left to us by Athanasius and Antony.¹³

Antony's life, teaching and ministry, like Christ's, attracted many followers. Soon communities of monks begin to proliferate in the desert. Indeed, as Athanasius puts it, "the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens. ¹¹¹⁴ From Athanasius's viewpoint, heaven appears in the desert as men and women hear

and respond to Christ's call to discipleship. It is time to take a broader look at the call to the desert manifested in Antony's life and in the life of those who followed in his steps and to consider how modern nonmonastic Christians might incorporate, on a smaller scale, the insights of Athanasius.

Many people living secluded lives on the mountain have perished by living like people in the world. It is better to live in a crowd and want to live a solitary life than to live a solitary life but all the time be longing for company.

AMMA MATRONA SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS1

Someone asked Abba Antony: "What rules shall I keep to please God?" The old man replied: "Keep my instructions, and they are these: Wherever you go, recollect God in your mind's eye. Whatever you do, do it after the example of Holy Scripture. And wherever you stay, be in no hurry to move. If you keep these three rules, you will be safe."

ANTONY THE GREAT SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS2

Abba Pambo asked Abba Antony: "What shall I do?" The old man replied: "Trust not in your own righteousness. Be not penitent for a deed that is past and gone. And keep your tongue and your belly under control."

ANTONY THE GREAT SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS3

They said of Abba Theodore and Abba Lucius from the region of Alexandria, that they lived fifty years enticing their souls onward thus. They said: "When the winter is past, we will move from here." And in the summer they said. At the end of the summer let us move from here." And so those memorable fathers lived their whole lives in devotion.'

SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS

E I G H T

A SPACE TO DRAW CLOSE TO GOD

What attracted early Christians such as Antony to the bleak, seemingly godforsaken reality of the desert? What did the desert represent to them? Was the movement of many Christians to the desert environment a sad, deluded, faddish case of spiritual escapism from the demanding responsibilities inherent in living in the world? Were desert monks turning their backs on Christ's teaching to his disciples to be salt and light in the world (Mt 5:13-16)? Or did life in the desert offer a variety of possibilities and opportunities for spiritual growth into Christ's image that were unavailable or more difficult to embrace in other contexts?

Consider for a moment the distinctive, beautiful and harsh geographical space Christian desert dwellers inhabited day in and day out. The desert offered early Christians desiring to enrich their relationship with God intense, unremitting solitude and silence, "a space," as Parker Palmer puts it, "in which obedience to truth" was facilitated and "practiced." Desert Christians learned to listen intently to Scripture, to the voice of God in prayer, to their inner habitual thoughts and to the unique sounds and silences presented by this particular area of God's creation. In the desert it was difficult, if not impossible, to escape the truth about oneself, one's deepest dispositions and the behaviors linked to them.

The desert was a variety of things for the monk: among others, a school room, cell, church, garden and cemetery. For instance, Ammonas, who might well have been a disciple of Antony, relates life in the desert to the initial transgression that occurred in the first garden God created for human beings. Eden was surely a place in which human beings could flourish and find contentment and purpose.

Yet with the disobedience of Adam and Eve, creation cracked, its design and purposes suddenly skewed by the entrance of sin; Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, suddenly facing a life of toil and pain.

We, like our ancient parents, were created for intimate communion with God, but now find ourselves distracted and pulled in a thousand different directions by the magnetism of sin's perverse attractions. Sin's deeply embedded presence in the world and in our own personalities sends our internal spiritual and moral gyroscope wildly spinning; we find ourselves attracted by the pull of spiritual and natural forces over which we appear to have little control.

The silence and solitude of the first garden, created by God to nurture an interior space in Adam and Eve that was sensitive to God's voice and the movement of God's Spirit, is now replaced in our globalized world by noise, crowds and frenetic urgency; an infinite variety of distractions, many demonically inspired, bombard us daily, diverting us from the most important things.' How, Ammonas wonders, can we regain our center, our grounding, our internal compass pointing toward our true north pole, Jesus Christ? How can we reset the spinning gyroscope within us? Only, Ammonas and many early Christians respond, by finding a place quiet enough, free enough from distractions and competing voices, for us to once again discern the quiet, insistent voice of God.' The exterior silence and geographical starkness of the desert provides just such a place, then and now, for aiding the monk in creating, through the power of the Spirit, an interior space sensitive to God and God's calling to love and holiness.

To draw close to God is to encounter love and truth. Divine love is always a holy love, a love grounded in truth: stringent, bracing, achingly attractive, amazingly beautiful and insistent in its desire to overcome any roadblocks to the reception of what love offers. The goal, then, of desert monks was to learn to accept the love of God and to share this love with their neighbors.

The first step in the reception of God's love was to accept and embrace the truth about themselves. The desert-unlikely as it seems-proved to be just the right learning environment for comprehending, embracing and passing on love and truth. The desert fathers and mothers saw the desert as "a space in which obedience to truth is practiced."

Space is central to the spirituality of the desert.... Abba Felix and his fellow seekers left the crowded cities to meet truth in the desert, one of the most open and spare spaces on earth. They went there to enter an outer space free of the cities' clutter, but also to open up an inner space of heart and mind, free of inward noise. In desert emptiness the soul is able to settle on truth, to concentrate on that which is essential to salvation.⁸

If this goal of immersion in God's love and truth was to be attained, though, arduous discipline, hard work, and internal and external pain awaited. Surprisingly, perhaps, all these rougher characteristics of the spiritual life would become conduits for the grace of God to flow into the monk's life. Palmer comments: "The desert teachers knew ... that in the desert we must first wrestle with the demons of untruth that arise in the silence, demons that come from our own need to manipulate and master truth rather than let truth transform us.... The desert teachers disciplined themselves to stand their ground, to stay within the boundaries of the learning space so that truth might seek them out."⁹ We must always remember, though, that the disciplines of the desert were not the end but the means to cultivate an ever deeper love for God and for neighbor.

FROM SELF-DECEPTION TO SELF-AWARENESS

In the desert environment a fundamental movement of the spiritual life could be birthed and nourished-with the wise direction of experienced guides (abbas and ammas) and the practice of key spiritual disciplines-the movement from self-deception to self-awareness, with safe, sane, healthy, robust love the result.

To admit the truth about oneself is always a harrowing, and sometimes, a horrifying, experience. Some monks lived in the desert for years and never changed. The self-knowledge or awareness that nurtures the growth of love was simply too threatening for some to face. This refusal to accept God's graceful call to change short-circuited the healing process entailed in moving into God's love. If a monk persisted in lying to himself, others and God about the condition of his own personality and habitual patterns of life, his spiritual growth was stunted rather than enriched. Indeed, the inherent tensions, demands and difficulties of the desert actually widened the cracks in the self-deceived monk's personality. We find disintegrated as well as integrated personalities in the desert.

It shouldn't surprise us, then, that the literature that emerged from the desert communities is a mixed bag. We find wisdom and folly, insight and insensitivity, gentleness and harshness, balance and unsteadiness. Desert dwellers were not perfect and most readily admitted their shortcomings.

The desert readily magnified human weaknesses and sinful, habituated attitudes and behaviors; it also advanced the work of the Spirit. The result is that desert teaching will both attract and repel. Some sayings of the desert abbas and ammas delight, encourage and deeply instruct us in the ways of Christ.

Other teachings and actions recorded in the desert sayings shock and horrify. One example will suffice at this point: in the midst of a struggle to overcome his battle with lust, a monk learned that the woman who had been the object of his lust had died. He traveled to her grave, exhumed her body, wiped her blood on his clothing, and hung his stained cloak in his cell as a reminder and antidote against further excursions into lust. "When it smelt too bad, he put it in front of him and said to his temptation, 'Look, this is what you desire. You have it now, be content.' So he punished himself with the smell until his passions died."^o Clearly, bizarre and distorted spirituality could erupt in a desert environment. It

would be misleading to sentimentalize or sugarcoat desert spirituality.

Hence, we must read the desert literature with discernment, care and empathy. If we do read discerningly and sensitively, as Jason Byassee observes, the desert monks-despite their weaknesses-have much to offer the modern person living in the complex, crowded world of the twenty-first century. They "witness to the broader church that a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience is extraordinarily beautiful and ought to attract smallerversion imitators among us who do not or cannot go all the way."¹¹

The silence, solitude, heat, nighttime cold and barrenness of the desert function like a spiritual nutcracker for those who would invade its spaces in search of a closer relationship with God. Desert dwellers learn quickly how helpless, weak and dependent they are-on God and on others-and how the diversions and delights of town and city life have buffered them from recognizing their innate helplessness, a recognition that with expert guidance can lead to a deeper love for Christ and neighbor. A modern desert father, Abuna Elia, comments that the "desert teaches us how helpless we are, how much we depend upon one another for survival. It is with a complete sense of dependence, a complete sense of helplessness that we must approach God."¹²

The desert environment mercilessly reveals the sinful human tendency to hide from the truth. In the desert the truth relentlessly pursues the monk. In the desert's arid expanses there is a dearth of the distractions human beings commonly employ to distance themselves from God and from the knowledge of their own inner psyche. In the desert, where was one to run? There were few alternatives: remain where you are and learn the lessons God desires to teach, remain where you are and continue to flee from God internally, or return to the wider world, the very world that had driven you to search for God in the isolation of the desert.

The desert environment functions much like a powerful magnet, drawing to

the surface of the monk's awareness hidden compulsions, ingrained patterns of behavior and skewed dispositions. As frightening and painful as these internal revelations can be, the alternative-continuing to live in deep self-deception-is worse. Unless this vast, hidden, habitual repertoire of sin is unveiled, how can the monastic-or we today-ever experience deep forgiveness and healing and release into the freedom to receive and give love? So there is a definite rhyme and reason to desert spirituality. People like Antony and other desert monks "disciplined themselves to stand their ground, to stay within the boundaries of the learning space so that truth might seek them out."¹³

For many monks, then, the harsh environment of the desert was transformed by God's grace into a "learning space" for the nurturing of self-awareness rather than self-deception, and the unveiling of deeply held illusions. The final outcome of this rigorous education-one especially grounded in the geography of this particular corner of God's creation-would be the tangible fruit of love and the blossoming of prayer, though surely such was not the case with all people ¹⁴

As the dynamic of desert spirituality fulfilled its purposes, in the best scenario the monk was progressively sensitized, strengthened and nurtured by silence, solitude, prayer, worship and manual labor to an ever-deepening awareness of the complex nature of reality itself and God at the center of that reality. As days lengthened to months and months to years, desert dwellers learned to see under the surface of things, to discern that much more is going on than a first quick glance perceives.

As we have seen illustrated in the life of Antony, the desert fathers and mothers were keenly aware of the resistance of personal, supernatural forces of evil to the extension of the kingdom of God in individual believers and into the wider world. Freedom from distraction clarified the monk's spiritual vision, enabling him to discern the reality of evil and strengthening him to oppose it in prayer. In turn, resistance to evil, though difficult and at times discouraging,

nurtured joy and love.

A TRAINING GROUND FOR GOOD WORKS

The movement into the desert was not designed to be an end in itself for early Christians. Rather the discipline of desert spirituality-in its best moments-was a training ground for good works as the kingdom of the evil one-this present evil age-was invaded by the kingdom of God.

This is why the holy fathers also withdrew into the desert alone, men such as Elijah the Tishbite and John the Baptist. For do not suppose that because the righteous were in the midst of men it was among men they had achieved their righteousness. Rather, having first practiced much quiet, they then received the power of God dwelling in them, and then God sent them into the midst of men, having acquired every virtue, so that they might act as God's provisioners and cure men of their infirmities is

It's only fair to ask whether the monk's withdrawal (Gk. anachoresis) into the desert was an escape from responsibility, the act of an introspective, immature, selfish personality who simply couldn't handle life in the real world. Kallistos Ware honestly acknowledges that for some monks, life in the desert solely concerned the self-centered quest for their salvation and theirs alone. Ware points to Abba Macarius as occasionally advocating an apparently self-centered perspective: "Flee from humans," Macarius says. And what does such fleeing entail? "It is to sit in your cell and weep for your sins."⁶

Yet, as Ware makes clear, in a healthy asceticism, withdrawal is always accompanied by a return of some kind, even if the return is not a literal return from the desert. The monks' withdrawal into solitude, silence and prayer was intended to be on behalf of others. We see this pattern in the life of Antony. "Even though he does not go back to the world in an outward and topographical sense, on the spiritual level he does indeed `return: He makes himself freely

available to others, he accepts disciples under his care, and he offers guidance to a constant stream of visitors, serving as a physician given by God to Egypt,' in the words of his biographer."¹⁷

Withdrawal to the desert, Ware explains, can be world affirming as well as world denying. "Although [Antony] begins by avoiding all contact with fellow humans, he ends by accepting great numbers of them.... Antony felt an intense compassion for others, a direct sense of responsibility. 'From our neighbor is life and death,' he said. 'If we gain our brother, we gain God, but if we cause our brother to stumble, we sin against Christ.' Such is the pattern of Antony's life: silence gives place to speech, seclusion leads him to involvement."¹⁸

Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century monk who spent many years of solitude and silence at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, speaks of the same dynamic of withdrawal for the sake of others. He writes in his retreat journal: "This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding the country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking and falling apart. It is this monastery if only this one.... This is the only real city in America-in a desert."⁹

Indeed, while standing at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky, Merton received an epiphany of sorts, a revelation that his withdrawal from human beings was for the sake of human beings. As he contemplated this experience, Merton wrote:

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race.... God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate.... My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them that I have a responsibility for it in their

regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone 20

Jason Byassee gets things right when he observes that the desert monks had just as much an affirming perspective and posture toward the world as an antagonistic one. Yes, they were pursuing "an unbridled life with God," but their pursuit rippled through the world, often times through what they composed and others read. "Readers of these works become themselves a certain sort of `community of those who find the monks worth reading for whatever reason. 1121

The willingness of the monk to occasionally leave the silence and solitude of the desert for service to others was, in Ammonas's understanding, a reflection of the incarnation itself. "For as the Father sent His very Son from heaven to heal all the infirmities and sicknesses of men (as it is written, He took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses,' Is 53:4), thus all the saints who come among men to heal them follow the example of the Creator of all, that so they might be made worthy of adoption as sons of God. And as the Father and Son are, so should these be, unto the ages of the ages, Amen."22

When an early monastic such as Antony journeyed into the desert, his pilgrimage was often viewed, by himself and other Christians, as a pilgrim age leading to engagement with and for others in love, rather than as an escape from Christian responsibility. Antony's frequent battles with demonic forces were not fought for himself alone.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE IN THE DESERT

As we have seen in our examination of Antony's life, Athanasius presents Antony's frequent confrontations with demonic forces as a sign that the kingdom of God is invading Satan's own backyard. Derwas Chitty explains well the early Christian belief that viewed the desert as "the natural domain of the demons, to

which they have retreated on being driven out of the cities by the triumph of the Church. 1123 To follow Antony into the desert, then, was to continue the church's assault on demonic strongholds. The early Christian abbas and ammas served as the church's shock troops, forces explicitly trained in the art of spiritual warfare. Therefore, Antony's forays against the demons, pictured vividly on almost every page of Athanasius's biography, perform a pivotal theological role in the narrative. The demons struggle so strongly against Antony because they know well what he is up to. To give up the desert to Antony's incursions is to surrender their own kingdom to the invading forces of the king they hate so intensely Jesus Christ.

Modern day desert fathers such as Abuna Sidrak also stress the spiritual warfare that occurs in the desert. "The monks commonly use the word af- farit to denote the external, personal force of evil in the world, the fallen angelic race.... There is an engagement with the Evil One in the life of all Christians after baptism.... The further one grows in holiness, the greater is the possibility of that combat, that spiritual combat." No one is "exempt from the possibility of attack, the possibility of temptation and struggle. Just as Jacob wrestled with the angel whom God sent, we are always wrestling with the fallen angels.... It is always something which is especially a problem with the monks; they are always struggling against evil in the desert .1121

It is striking how Abuna Sidrak's insights-written over fifteen hundred years after Antony's life had ended-correlate with Antony's wisdom and experience. Abuna Sidrak emphasizes the following points:

The evil one delights in alluring us with false pleasures that can never satisfy our deepest longings. If we succumb to the lure of these pleasures, we will be apt to miss the deeper pleasures that God sprinkles through each day. The irony of the false or counterfeit pleasures is that "there is not even much enjoyment in them.... The more we attained them, the less joy they gave us," a principle we

might call the spiritual law of ever diminishing returns. Why? "It is not the intention of the Evil One to give human beings pleasure. And if he should tempt us to pleasure, he would do so only by giving us the minimum of it-even just the illusion of it."²⁵

Satanic deception creates a world filled with empty humans pursuing empty pleasures. "So the whole world will be filled one day with people appearing to be happy, appearing to enjoy all of their wealth and possessions. Yet so unhappy and miserable will they be, that they will not allow themselves to appear as they really are. They will lie about it and try to deceive others about how awful they really feel; otherwise they will feel absolutely alone."²⁶

- . Occasionally the devil sends wicked people to tempt and "harass" us. Abuna Sidrak mentions that it is not uncommon in the valley of the Wadi Natroun for devils to "appear in confreres [fellow-brothers] ... who unwittingly act as agents to upset or anger or sadden us." The assault of supernatural and natural evil can lead to intense physical and spiritual fatigue. Hence, the emphasis in Antony's biography and in comments of modern desert fathers on endurance as a key aspect of the monastic vocation. "It is really about whether or not we can endure and persevere and grow in our vocation. 1121
- . How should the desert disciple fight against the devils and their temptations? Honestly, openly and quickly identify temptations, yet don't obsess over them. "We must be alert to recognize temptations as early as possible and to nip them in the bud. By doing so, we can prevent the attractions from overpowering us," Abuna Sidrak noted, "for they can quickly grow in us. They send out their roots rapidly, and soon we find that they preoccupy the majority of our thoughts in one form or another. 112' Abuna Sidrak refers to a troubling verse from Psalm 137-"happy the man who shall smash your little ones on the rock"and applies it spiritually to the monk's struggle against temptation and sin. "Babylon's power to enslave, and the devil's power to

tempt, might first suggest themselves with little faults, but they will one day grow big enough to rule over us."29 It is surely easier and wiser to weed out small plants at their first appearance than later to face the task of uprooting large trees.

The devil also delights in desensitizing us to pleasure by attempting to immerse us in it. He "improves on our desires; he makes things seemingly more sweet. But things are not more sweet. Life becomes more base. Our senses are lowered in terms of their capacity for true enjoyment. While we appear to be enjoying more and more, we are actually experiencing less and less pleasure" (again the law of ever diminishing returns). Only Jesus can raise "our capacity for joy to the highest level possible."

- . Abuna Sidrak is careful to distinguish between natural desires and sin, a distinction Satan attempts to blur through various temptations and trials. Sidrak believes fear is the underlying factor that causes us to succumb to Satan's temptations, fear related to distrust in God's providential goodness. "The devil has convinced us that unless we grasp for what will satisfy us, it will not be given to us by God; that God is not so generous, apparently, as he claims to be. So we fear, in our own desperation, that we must place our priorities ahead of God's, and make our own anxieties and our own neediness greater than our trust in his solicitude or his Providence. 1131
- . Abuna Sidrak focuses on the human mouth as the main target of Satan's strategies and "the special foothold of temptation." Whether it be the desire for more food than we actually need or "malicious or deceptive speech," the "taming of the tongue-especially as St. James speaks about it in his letter (Jas 3:1-13)-is the primary ascetical work of the monk, and of every Christian." One is reminded of the temptations Antony himself experienced in the desert. "First [the devil] attempted to lead him away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of

kinship, love of money and glory, the manifold pleasure of food, the relaxations of life, and, finally, the rigor of virtue, and how great the labor is that earns it, suggesting also the bodily weakness and length of time involved .1132

Abuna Sidrak suggests that fasting, both from food and "from words," "humbly" accepting "the yoke of silence ... deprives the tongue of the mastery of our hearts and minds. The tongue is a very useful tool for the art of love and for the art of prayer, but it is also the means by which we afflict others and even our own selves.... It must become the locus from which we allow the grace of the Gospel and the merit of the Cross to win for us a liberation from evil. 1133

THE SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS

Readers interested in exploring further the world of the desert fathers and mothers will find the sayings of the desert fathers interesting, puzzling, enlightening and sometimes shocking. Yet the sayings, if pondered discerningly, have much to teach us about God, creation, human nature, sin and the slow, supernatural, graceful movement into love and holiness.

The desert sayings, often grouped according to father (abba), mother (amma) or theme, first began to appear as collections in the late fourth or early fifth centuries 34 The meaning of a "word" or saying is not always immediately clear. The desert fathers often speak obliquely rather than directly. Frequently, rather than providing a direct answer to an inquirer's question, the fathers and mothers would respond with a metaphor, a short, enigmatic saying or a story addressing the heart of what had been asked or leading to where the answer might lie to an inquirer's question.

What follows below is a sampler of some desert dwellers' questions, perspectives and occasional answers. I have tried to select topics that remain of interest to modern readers and have purposely avoided questions, responses and

concerns that are idiosyncratic or largely irrelevant to the circumstances or issues facing people living in the twenty-first century. Most questions and issues raised in the desert, however, remain quite relevant to the lives of twenty first-century Christians. I have prefaced each saying with a brief introduction-sometimes consisting of a series of questions-not to reduce the saying to my own interpretation, but to offer a springboard into the saying itself.

CONCERNING QUIET

How has human speech helped or harmed us? What have we heard that has brought us life? Who are the voices or what are the sounds that we habitually listen to? Are there distinct patterns discernible in our speech or in our silence? What's our "word history"? Have we used words to exploit, manipulate, attack or deceive? To encourage or support? What have we heard? What have we spoken? What have we seen? To what or whom is our vision attracted? Are we drawn to silence? Are there times when we remain silent when we should be speaking? Or vice versa? Do we find silence threatening and anxiety producing? Or deeply comforting? Why? What bubbles to the surface of our consciousness when we are alone and have nothing-music, for instance-to distract us?

He also said: "The man who abides in solitude and is quiet, is delivered from fighting three battles-those of hearing, speech and sight. Then he will have but one battle to fight-the battle of the heart" (2.2.40) 3s

Once again I am reminded of Richard Foster's words in *Celebration of Discipline*: "Our adversary the devil majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us involved in muchness and manyness he will rest satisfied. 1131 Or consider the insight of Jason Byassee:

It is hard to find quiet in our world. Cell phones ring and people talk loudly in places they never used to. We fret if we haven't received an e-mail in the last few minutes, as though worried we shall cease to exist. Blackberry,

appropriately nicknamed "crackberry," keeps us linked to the Internet like sick people on an IV. David Brooks describes the moment when the airline asks passengers to turn off their cell phones as no more welcome than a request to rip out their tracheas would be 37

Yet, apart from developing quiet within the heart, it will be extremely difficult to hear God speaking to us, whether in the pages of Scripture or in prayer. God tends to whisper, not shout.

Said Abba Nilus: "The arrows of the enemy cannot touch him who loves quiet. But he who moves in a crowd will be often wounded" (2.10.42) 38

And he was silent for a little, and poured water into a cup. And he said: "Look at the water." And it was cloudy. And after a little he said again: "Now look, see how clear the water has become." And when they leaned over the water, they saw their faces as in a glass. And then he said to them: "So it is with the man who lives among men. He does not see his own sins because of the turmoil. But when he is at rest, especially in the desert, then he sees his sins. 1131

THAT WE SHOULD JUDGE NO ONE

The desert fathers and mothers took very seriously Jesus' warning that we would be judged with the same measure we used in judging others (Mt 7:1-5). It is one thing to make moral judgments concerning right and wrong, injustice and righteousness. It is another thing to peer constantly around us with our moral yardstick ready to calculate who is measuring up and who isn't. We too quickly condemn others while remaining staggeringly blind to our own moral foibles and failures. How swiftly we forget the mercy we have received at the hands of others! We forget what we should remember and remember what we should forget 40

In Scete a brother was once found guilty. They assembled the elders, and sent a message to Abba Moses telling him to come. Then the presbyter sent, saying: "Come, for a meeting of monks is waiting for you." Moses rose up and went. He took with him an old basket which he filled with sand and carried on his back. The people who went to meet him said: "What is this, father?" The old man said to them: "My sins are chasing me, and I do not see them-have I come today to judge the sins of someone else?" They listened to him, and said nothing to the erring brother, but pardoned him 41

Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen: "Tell me how to how to become a monk." The old man said: "If you want to find rest in this life and the next, say at every turn, Who am I?' and judge no man .1142

A brother asked Abba Poemen: "If I see my brother sin, is it good to tell no one about it?" The old man said: "Whenever we cover our brother's sin, God will cover our sin. Whenever we tell people about our brother's guilt, God will do the same with ours."43

Often we unconsciously project our habitual sins onto other people and condemn them in others rather than acknowledge our own guilt and responsibility. That is to say, we frequently condemn sins in others that we ourselves battle against. Our expertise in condemning is grounded in our own moral struggles and failures.

A brother, being tempted by a demon, went to an old man and said: "Those two monks over there who live together, live wickedly." But the old man knew that a demon was playing with him, and he sent and called them to him. And at evening he put a mat for them, and covered them with a single blanket, and said: "They are sons of God, and holy persons." But he said to his disciple: "Shut this slandering brother up in a cell by himself: he is suffering from the passions of which he accuses them."44

CONCERNING LUST

We live in a sexually overheated society. How can one learn to live a sexually sane life in the midst of so much sexual insanity? Sexual habit patterns are deeply ingrained and dishearteningly repetitive. Developing new sexual habits is a terribly difficult, daunting and frequently discouraging task. Almost invariably we will need help and support as we learn to live sexually holy lives, but finding good coaches and counselors is a difficult task and requires discernment and wisdom.⁴⁵ It is good to know that we are not alone, though, in our struggle to move more fully into sexual purity and wholeness. What seems well nigh impossible alone becomes possible when we link arms with another who has fought the battle against lust and understands well the dynamics of sexual temptation.

Abba Cassian said: Abba Moses told us: 'It is good not to hide the thoughts but to disclose them to discreet and devout old men; but not to men who are old merely in years, for many have found final despair instead of comfort by confessing to men whom they saw to be aged, but who in fact were inexperienced.'"⁴⁶

On this same temptation, another old man said: "You should be like a man walking along the street past an inn, and sniffing the smell of meat frying or roasting. Anyone who likes goes in and eats. People who do not want it, pass by and only sniff the smell. So you ought to put the smell away from you; rise, and pray, 'Lord, Son of God, help me: Do this against other temptations. We cannot make temptations vanish, but we can struggle against them.'"

Another brother was goaded by lust. He rose up in the night and went to tell his temptations to an old man, and the old man consoled him. So he returned, comforted to his cell. But again the spirit of lust tempted him. And a second time he went to the old man. This happened several times. The old

man did not reproach him, but spoke words to his profit: "Yield not to the devil, and guard your soul. Whenever the demon troubles you, come to me, and rebuke him, and so he will go away. Nothing troubles the demon of lust more than disclosure of his pricks. Nothing pleases him more than the concealment of the temptation." Eleven times the brother went to the old man, and blamed himself for his imaginings. And then the brother said to the old man: "Of your charity, Abba, speak to me a word." The old man said to him: "Believe me, my son, if God allowed the imaginings which goad me to be passed on to you, you would not bear them but would be utterly destroyed." And so by his words and deep humility, that brother found rest from the goad of lust 48

Remember that Christ is always with us; his constant presence should both encourage and admonish us. We are never alone in our struggle or in our sin.

Another old man said: "We suffer this through negligence. If we remember that God dwells in us, we shall never bring into ourselves a vessel that is not his. The Lord Christ abides in us and with us, and watches our life. And because we bear him with us and contemplate him, we ought not to be negligent but ought to make ourselves holy as he is holy. If we stand upon a rock, the wicked one will be broken. Do not be afraid, and he will do nothing against you. And pray with courage this psalm: 'They that trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion; they that dwell in Jerusalem shall stand fast forever.' "49

The desert fathers and mothers stressed the importance of a disciplined mind. An undisciplined mind is fertile ground for temptation and sin. Garbage in, garbage out. The fathers could be quite rough with those who toyed with temptation and sin, a sternness grounded in love. Toying with temptation is much like toying with a rattlesnake. Sooner or later you're going to get bit.

A brother, held in the grip of lust, went to a great old man and asked him:

"Of your charity, pray for me: for I am troubled by lust." The old man prayed to the Lord. And he came a second time to the old man and said the same: and again the old man was careful to beseech the Lord on his behalf, and said: "Lord, show me why the devil is doing this work in that brother. I prayed to you, but he has not yet found rest." And the Lord revealed to him what was happening to that brother. And he saw the brother sitting down, and the spirit of lust near him and, so to speak, playing with him: and an angel was standing near to help him and was frowning upon that brother because he did not throw himself upon God, but took a pleasure in his thoughts, and turned his mind towards them. And the old man saw that the chief cause was in the brother himself. And he said to him: "You are dallying with your thought." And he taught him how to resist thoughts like this. And the brother's soul revived under the old man's teaching and prayer, and he found rest from his temptation so

Sin offers much more than it ever delivers. The devil is the ultimate huckster. What we imagined would be sweet leaves bitterness in our mouth and wreaks havoc in the lives of others. It's important to remember that the consequences of our behavior can carry a terribly high price tag.

A brother said to an old man: "What am I to do, for these foul thoughts are killing me?" The old man said to him: "When a mother wants to wean her baby, she smears something bitter on her breasts: and when the infant comes as usual to suckle, he tastes the bitterness and is repelled. So you ought to put a bitterness into your thought." The brother said to him: "What bitterness is this?" The old man said to him: "The thought of death and torment, which is prepared in the next life for sinners."⁵¹

CONCERNING PATIENCE AND FORTITUDE

Change is hard, terribly hard, distressingly hard. Our battle against particular temptations and sins may last for years. As a valued mentor once said to me,

"Spiritual growth is the slowest of all human movements." We are tempted to give up. We are tempted to succumb to discouragement. "I'll never change," we say on the days we fail. "I might as well give up. I've confessed this sin a thousand times." Sometimes we think, "I'm struggling because of my environment. If only I moved, found a new job, a new school, a new place to live, a new wife or new husband, all would be different." But the wisest desert fathers advise us not to be self-deceived-to stay where we are and not flee from our sin, deflect it on to others or blame our sins on our environment. They teach us to keep confessing; even if we've confessed a sin over and over, we ought to confess it one more time. They instruct us to keep running the race and to remember it's a marathon, not a sprint; to get back up every time we fall; and to cling to the cross. Cling to Christ and you'll finally make it home.

A brother asked Abba Agatho: "I have been instructed to go somewhere, and I have a grievous struggle in the place where I have been told to go. I want to obey the order, yet I am frightened of the inner struggle which will ensue." The old man said: "Agatho was like that. He obeyed orders, and so won the battle. 1112

Abba Ammonas said that for fourteen years he had prayed God in Scete night and day to give him power to control his temper.⁵³

They said of Abba Theodore and Abba Lucius from the region of Alexandria, that they lived fifty years enticing their souls onwards thus. They said: "When this winter is past, we will move on from here." And in the summer time they said: "At the end of the summer let us move from here." And so those memorable fathers lived their whole lives in devotion ⁵⁴

Abba Mathois said: "I want to find some easy but continual work, rather than a heavy work that is quickly finished."⁵⁵

A brother asked an old man: "What am I to do, father? I do nothing like a monk. I

eat, drink and sleep as I like, I am much troubled by vile thoughts, I shift from task to task, and my mind wanders everywhere." The old man answered: "Stay in your cell, and do what you can without trouble of mind. It is only a little that you do now, yet it is even as when Abba Antony did mighty things in the desert. I trust God that whoever stays in his cell for God's sake, and guards his conscience, will be found where Antony is."⁵⁶

Your endurance will conquer the enemy. Seamen beginning a voyage set the sails and look for a favorable wind-and later they meet a contrary wind. Just because the wind has turned, they do not throw the cargo overboard or abandon ship: they wait a little and battle against the storm until they can again set a direct course. And when we run into headwinds, let us put up the cross for our sail, and we shall voyage through the world in safety."

Abba Hyperichius said: "Keep praising God with hymnody, and meditate continually, and so lift the burden of the temptations that come upon you. A traveler carrying a heavy burden stops from time to time to take deep breaths, and so makes the journey easier and the burden lighter."⁵⁸

An old man said: "We do not make progress because we do not know what we can do; we lose heart in the work we have begun; and we want to be good without trying to be good."⁵⁹

A brother asked an old man and said: "My thoughts wander, and I am troubled." He answered: "Go on sitting in your cell, and your thoughts will come back from their wanderings. If a she-ass is tethered, her foal skips and gambols all around her but always comes back to the mother. So will it be with the one who for God's sake sits patiently in his cell. Though his thoughts wander for a time, they will come again."⁶⁰

The fathers used to say: "If you are tempted where you are, do not leave the place at a time of temptation. If you leave it, you will find the temptation which

you are fleeing wherever you next place your cell. Be patient till the temptation is past; then your departure will scandalize no one and bring no trouble to the other people who live there. 1161

For nine years a brother was assailed by temptations to leave his community. Every day he picked up his cloak to go, the cloak in which he wrapped himself at night. At evening he would say: "I will go away tomorrow." And at dawn he would think: "I ought to bear this torment and stay here just today for the Lord's sake." He did this every day for nine years, until the Lord took away temptation 62

A brother said to Abba Arsenius: "What am I to do, Abba? My thought troubles me, telling me 'You cannot fast, nor work, nor visit the sick, because even these things are selfish.' " The old man saw that the devil had sown the thought and said: "Go, eat and drink and sleep, only do not leave your cell; remember that staying in the cell is what keeps a monk on his proper path." He did it for three days and then suffered from accidie. So he found a few palm leaves and split them; the next day he began to make a plait from them. When he grew hungry, he said to himself: "Here are a few more palm-leaves. I shall lay them out before I eat." And after he had finished, he said: "I shall read a little before I eat." And after he had finished, he said: "I shall say a few psalms, and then I shall eat with an untroubled mind." So step by step he made progress with God's help, until he came back to the right way. And when he had received confidence against evil thoughts, he overcame them .13

An old man said. `A tree cannot bear fruit if it is often transplanted. So it is with the monk. 1164

DISCRETION

What is discretion? A spiritual gift that enables its bearer to get to the heart of the matter; the capability to discern truth from falsehood; the skill of living

wisely; the ability to apply a principle or practice in a specific situation. Some monks possessed it and others didn't. Jason Byassee helpfully describes the monk or spiritual advisor who possesses discretion as a wise physician of the soul, one who knows "how to apply what spiritual teaching to whom and in what way. The analogy here is that of a medical doctor. She must know all the potential cures at her disposal, with all the technical skill necessary to know their possible applications. But medicine is not formulaic. She must also know how to 'read' her patients to know what should be applied and how. So, too, with directing novices in the spiritual life. 1161

Three brothers once came to an old man in Scete. One of them asked him: 'Abba, I have memorized the Old and New Testaments.' And the old man answered: "You have filled the air with words." And the second asked him: "I have written the Old and New Testaments with my own hand." But the old man said: 'And you have filled the window-ledge with manuscripts.' And the third said: "The grass is growing up my chimney." And the old man answered: 'And you have driven away hospitality.'"66

A brother asked one of the fathers: "If by chance I oversleep, and am late for the hour of prayer, I am ashamed that others will hear me praying so late, and so I become reluctant to keep the rule of prayer." And the old man said: "If ever you oversleep the dawn, rise when you wake, shut the door and the windows, and say your office. For it is written, The day is thine and the night is thine.' God is glorified whatever time it is."67

Abba Antony said: "Some wear down their bodies by fasting. But because they have no discretion, it puts them further from God."68

A brother said to Abba Antony: "Pray for me." And the old man answered: "Neither I nor God will have mercy on you unless you take trouble about yourself and ask God's help."69

Abba Mark asked Abba Arsenius: "Is it good not to have any comfort in one's cell? I saw a brother who had a few cabbages, and he was rooting them out." And Abba Arsenius said: "It is good. But each man should do what is right for his own discipline. If he has not strength to endure that, he will plant them again."⁷⁰

Abba Daniel also said that when Abba Arsenius was in Scete, there was a monk who stole the property of the old men. Abba Arsenius, wanting to do him good and free the old men from being troubled, took him to his cell and said: "If you will stop stealing, I will give you whatever you want." And he gave him gold, money and trinkets, and everything he found in his bag. But the monk stole again. The old man, seeing that he was always troubling them, expelled him, and said: "If you find a brother committing crime through bodily infirmity, you must bear with him. But if he does not stop after being warned, expel him. He hurts his own soul, and also disturbs everyone who lives there.""

Abba Evagrius said: "A wandering mind is strengthened by reading, and prayer. Passion is dampened down by hunger and work and solitude. Anger is repressed by psalmody, and long-suffering, and mercy. But all these should be at the proper time and in due measure. If they are used at the wrong times and to excess, they are useful for a short time. But what is only useful for a short time, is harmful in the long run."⁷²

Abba Ephraem was passing by when a harlot (she was someone's agent) began to make every effort to attract him to unlawful intercourse: or, if she failed in this, at least to stir him to anger. For no one had ever seen him angry or brawling. He said to her: "Come now, I will lie with you as you wanted." She looked round at the crowd and said: "How can we do it here, with all these people standing round? We should be ashamed." He said: "If you blush before men, should you not blush the more before God, who discloses the hidden things of darkness?" And she went away without her pleasure, nonplussed."

Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen: "How should we fast?" And Abba Poemen said: "I would have everyone eat a little less than he wants, every day." Abba Joseph said to him: "When you were a young man, did you not fast for two days on end?" And the old man said to him: "Believe me, I used to fast three days on end, even for a week. But the great elders have tested all these things, and they found that it is good to eat something every day, but on some days a little less. And they have shown us that this is the king's highway, for it is easy and light."⁷⁴

Some old men said: "If you see a young man climbing up to heaven by his own will, catch him by the foot and pull him down to earth: it is not good for him."⁷⁵

An old man said: "The prophets wrote books. Our fathers came after them, and worked much at them, and then their successors memorized them. But this generation has come, and it copies them on papyrus and parchment and leaves them unused on the window-ledge. 1171

As we draw this chapter to a close, we do well to remind ourselves of the dangers and weaknesses of desert spirituality as well as the strengths and possibilities it continues to offer the wise and discerning Christian today. Owen Chadwick writes that "not everyone possessed the strength of Antony. The demons did not always lose their battle. The loneliness of the solitary's life increased the chance of abnormality, eccentricity, even madness. The admiration of visitors could turn weaker heads." Not only so, but "the ordinary aids of the Church-the sacraments, corporate worship-were less accessible. 1177

Experienced guidance "in ascesis and prayer" was sometimes lacking, opening the door to an exaggerated asceticism and "the exaltation of suffering" itself. This danger was increasingly recognized by monastic communities and steps taken to remedy it.

It became the standard teaching of the Antonian leaders that no one should be allowed to attempt the solitary life until he had served a long probation in a community.... A renunciant might remain twenty years or more in a community before venturing to join a hermit group-in the endeavor to learn the first steps in conquering self-will by obeying a superior; to train his patience and his charity by accepting the necessary frictions of common life; to become disciplined in common worship, regular prayer, regular reading or memorization of the Bible; and to have his spiritual development watched and guided by experienced men."

The challenge remains of reading ancient Christian literature without interpreting it anachronistically, on the one hand, or discarding it in the dustbin of history, on the other. It is best, as Harmless notes, "to try to pitch one's ear to hear the ascetics speaking to their world, not ours. 1179 Just as the desert fathers encouraged their disciples to use discernment and wisdom in interpreting the Scripture, so must we in interpreting the teaching of the desert fathers and mothers themselves. Yet when we listen with a discerning, sympathetic and sometimes critical ear, there remains much that we can learn, sensitively, safely and sanely.⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

We have traveled quite a distance with the church fathers in this book. Hopefully by now the landscape of the fathers' thoughts and practices concerning the sacraments, prayer and spiritual discipline looks more familiar to readers. Perhaps for some travelers a way station has been spotted that looks inviting and worth an extended visit.

Some pilgrims may want to investigate more thoroughly the patristic sacramental worldview. My suggestion is to immerse yourself in the fathers' own writings. Read primary source material from the fathers to expand your horizons-my chapters on baptism and the Eucharist provide entryways into this primary material.

You might also consider participating in a worship service in the sacramental tradition. For some, this may be an Orthodox or Roman Catholic service. For others, an Anglican service will do. All three sacramental traditions deeply respect the perspectives of the fathers and have significantly drawn on their insights. For some readers, attending a worship service in the sacramental tradition may well put flesh and bones on the fathers' writings. To cross denominational and sacramental lines will be a big step for some readers-particularly those from an independent church background or Christians in the Baptist and Anabaptist traditions. But how will we ever understand another's theological and ecclesial world if we refuse to pay them a visit, if only a short one?

It's worth remembering that the incarnation of the eternal Word undergirds all sacramental thought and practice. The Son has become all that we are so that we might become what he is. No, we will never become "God," but we can be ever more fully formed into the image of the Son-and it is to this deeper spiritual

formation that the fathers call us.

So pay your fellow Christians a visit. Watch, listen, ponder, even taste. As we have seen in our discussion of the fathers' thoughts on baptism and the Eucharist, humble and simple elements such as water, bread and wine can be used by God to communicate graceful wonders to us. Keep your eyes, hearts and minds open to what the Lord may desire to teach you.

Almost two-thirds of *Worshiping with the Church Fathers* was devoted to an exploration of patristic thoughts and practices concerning prayer: the basics of prayer, the challenge and difficulty of unceasing prayer, and the Lord's Prayer. Some of the fathers' ideas and disciplines regarding prayer may have been familiar, at least to some readers. For others, the fathers' perspectives may have seemed wild, unreasonable, naive, exaggerated, harsh, demanding, legalistic. Some will need to meditate more fully on the fathers' ideas in relation to prayer before actually practicing what the fathers taught. Others will be ready to begin to practice patristic prayer disciplines in a wise, structured fashion, with the aid of a good coach. It is best to go slow and to exercise patience in two directions: with the church fathers and with ourselves. Embracing new perspectives and learning new skills-particularly in the spiritual life-are hard, not easy steps. Spiritual growth is more like a marathon than a sprint. Recall Jim Houston's words: "spiritual growth is the slowest of all human movements." Patience, humility, discernment and prayer will all be required as we interact with our ancient friends.

As you begin to flex your spiritual muscles with the fathers, don't be hard on yourself if you find their disciplines extremely difficult-even unattainable. Recall that many of the fathers were either monks or came from a monastic background. They had more time to devote to specific disciplines than we normally do. Chrysostom, for instance, spent two years in a cave above Antioch memorizing the New Testament. Very few of us have a call to a monastic

vocation or ready access to a community grounded in the fathers' point of view. We live in a very different world from that of the fathers. The key, I think, is a skilled adaptation of their views to our present context.

Though we live in different worlds and see things through different cultural lenses, our different cultural horizons can lend themselves to comprehension and practice. Yes, from where we stand and live in the twenty-first century, some patristic outlooks and disciplines will remain foreign-even loony-to us. Yet, because the church fathers lived in a time and culture far removed from us, they see things to which we remain blind, just as they have their own cultural and time-bound blind spots. We do not, however, tend to be blind to the same things. Can we trust the church fathers enough to allow patristic clarity to illuminate areas where our modern perspectives and practices-whether we be Baptists, Anglicans, Presbyterians or independent evangelicals-are muddled, fuzzy or even wrongheaded?

Here's one practical possibility: take a look in the white or yellow pages of your telephone directory and see if there are any monasteries in your area. There are more than you might think. For instance, in Paoli, a short distance from Eastern University where I teach, there is a community of Norbertine monks. Both I and my students have occasionally given them a call, told them we need to go on retreat and been welcomed with open arms. There might well be such a community near you. At least the possibility is worth investigating.

I suggest visiting communities familiar with the fathers because some things can't be learned well if our learning is limited to reading words on a page. To understand a sacramental worldview, to enter into the church fathers' thoughts on prayer, to begin to practice one or two of the patristic disciplines, requires a participation that goes beyond reading itself. So let me encourage you to take the next step, intimidating and anxiety-producing as it might be, into another's world.

For some, this step into a sacramental world will move us beyond our comfort zone. Our visit may well be only temporary. Fine. Even if our visit is short and limited, try not to judge too quickly. Be as open and receptive as possible. And welcome whatever seems to reflect the mind of Christ as given to us in apostolic revelation, adapting any new possibilities to the providential realities of your own life situation. Monks had the time to pray for hours on end. Young mothers don't. So be it.

I close Worshipping with the Church Fathers with the realization that our journey is not yet complete. For the fathers indissolubly connected worship with the ethical challenges that faced the ancient Christian day in and day out. In a word, the fathers believed that right and reverent worship fostered holy living, lives filled with the love and grace of Christ.

Not surprisingly, the ethical issues facing the fathers are not entirely foreign to the moral challenges confronting Christians in the twenty-first century: what is our responsibility as Christ's disciples to the poor, the widow, the orphan, the disenfranchised? How is Jesus' exhortation to not resist an evil person to be applied to questions of military service (cf. Mt 5:38-42) and other contexts? Did early Christians serve in the military? Why or why not? What did the fathers have to say about issues of human sexuality, marriage and the family, and abortion? Issues such as these, so hotly debated in the present time, were also of extreme importance to ancient Christians. And so, in the fourth volume in this series on the church fathers' lives and perspectives, we will closely examine their thoughts on living well in the inescapable presence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

NOTES

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Chapter 1: Baptism: Entering the Worshiping Community

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121, 107.

22Ibid.

21Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 7.9.52, quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), p. 192.

24Apothegmata Patrum, Alphabetical Collection, Syncleitica #12, quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 192. (All Apothegmata references are quoted from Ferguson.)

25Tertullian *Apology* 30, 33, quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 40.

26Justin Martyr *Apology* 1.13, quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 83.

27Tertullian *A Treatise on the Soul* 9, in ANF 3 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 188. Visions and other "charismatic" elements are not foreign to early Christian literature. I'm reminded of the role visions played in the life of Monica, the mother of Augustine. For instance, Monica is promised in a vision that the ship carrying her to Italy to rejoin Augustine will make it safely to port. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated with an introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin, (New York: Penguin, 1982), 6.1.111.

28Cf. R.J. De Simone, "Justin; in *The Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1:463.

29Justin Martyr *First Apology* 67.1, 6, quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 285.

"Quoted in Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, p. 185 (emphasis added).

"Clement refers to the "union" of the Word with water "for the purpose of cleansing, as baptism for the remission of sins" (Clement of Alexandria *The Instructor*, in ANF 2 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994], p. 222). I originally ran across Clement's statement concerning milk and water in David W. Bettor's *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998). Bettor's book is a treasure house of ante-Nicene insights across a broad

spectrum of topics.

32Tertullian On Baptism, in ANF 3 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 669. I have slightly modified the translation.

"Ibid., pp. 669-70.

34Ambrose On the Mysteries, trans. Boniface Ramsey, in Ambrose 3.8 (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 147.

"Ibid.

36Benedict XVI demonstrates a deep grounding in early Christian reflection on the "matter" used in baptism. He, like Tertullian, ponders the broad symbolic range of "water" in Scripture: "In conjunction with the process of immersion, water is ... primarily a symbol of death. Rescue from the waters of the deep is as much a part of this imagery of the Bible as is the understanding of the sea as the abode of Leviathan, the enemy of God, and hence as an expression of chaos, of hostility to God, of death. Building on this symbolism, the Apocalypse says that there will be no sea in the new heaven or new earth (Rev. 21:1)-God will reign alone, and death will have been conquered forever. Consequently, it is possible for the water of baptism not only to serve as a reminder of the great experiences of death and rescue in the Old Testament, especially of the Cross of Christ and point to it as the mystical center of the whole of salvation history." Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), p. 39.

37Tertullian On Baptism, p. 670.

38Ibid.

39Ibid. I have slightly modified the translation.

40Ibid., p. 673. Tertullian believes that the Holy Spirit descends upon the believer after baptism, while many fathers speak of the descent of the Spirit on the believer in the act of baptism itself.

41John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville:

Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 69.

42Tertullian On Baptism, p. 673.

43Ibid. I have slightly modified the translation,

44Ibid.

41 Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, p. 95.

46Origen Commentary on Psalms 77,31 (PG 17:141); Commentary on Proverbs 31.16 (PG 17:252), quoted in Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, p. 95.

47Apostolic Constitutions 7.43 (trans. F. X. von Funk), quoted in Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, p. 103.

48Basil On the Holy Spirit 15 (PG 32:128-29), quoted in Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, p. 103.

49Cf. Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, pp. 103-7.

"Ibid., p. 104.

"Early Christian writers are not reluctant to use the language of regeneration in their discussions of baptism. Justin Martyr, for instance, speaks of the baptized as "regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated." Justin feels that regeneration in baptism is clearly indicated by Jesus' reaching in John 3:5: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Justin Martyr First Apology 61, in ANF 1 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 183.

52Tertullian's view is a debatable point, even among ancient Christians. Benedict XVI (formerly Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger), draws our attention to the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles or Didache: "Now concerning baptism, baptize as follows: after you have reviewed all these things, baptize 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' in running water. But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so in warm, But if you have neither,

then pour water on the head three times 'in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit'" (emphasis added). The Didache 7.1-3, in Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), p. 153, quoted in Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 39. Benedict comments: "The Church very early adopted the life symbol of the source in the rubric requiring that the water of baptism be living, that is, flowing water. Death and life are here uniquely combined: that sacrifice alone leads to life, that only the giving of oneself in the mystery of death leads to the land of the living-this becomes wonderfully clear in the twofold symbolism of water in which the unity of death and resurrection proclaims itself in a single symbolic action" (Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 39).

53Tertullian *On Baptism*, pp. 670-71. Tertullian seems to have connected the sanctifying of the water with the movement of an angel upon the water, much like the legend surrounding the pool of Bethesda.

54Ibid., p. 672. I have slightly modified the translation.

"Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechetical Lectures* 21 [On the Mysteries] 1-5, quoted in Henry Berenson, *Later Christian Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 44.

sb Cited in Bercot, *Dictionary of Early*, p. 57.

57Tertullian *On Baptism*, p. 672. The Epistle of Barnabas also draws our attention to the Christian symbolism present in Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh: "And he brought Ephraim and Manasseh, intending that Manasseh, because he was the older, should be blessed, for he brought him to the right hand of his father Jacob. But Jacob saw in the Spirit a symbol of the people to come. And what does he say? 'And Jacob crossed his hands and placed his right hand on the head of Ephraim, the second and younger, and blessed him'" (The Epistle of Barnabas, in Holmes, ed., *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 180).

58Tertullian *On Baptism*, p. 676.

59Ibid. The relationship between the old and new covenants and their corresponding Scriptures was a topic of deep concern and interest for the early church. Ignatius, for example, refers to early believers who were resistant to

any new teaching that they could not find supported in the Old Testament Scriptures, what Ignatius calls the "archives." Ignatius expands the "archives" to include the "inviolable archives" of Christ's cross, death and resurrection "and the faith which comes through him." Cf. Ignatius The Letter to the Philadelphians, in Holmes, ed., *Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 108-9.

"The Epistle of Barnabas, in Holmes, ed., *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 176.

"Ibid., p. 177. Again, readers will find Bercor's *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* to be of great benefit in helping them to mine early Christian texts on specific topics. Begin with Bercot and move from his excerpts to the fuller texts themselves, as I have often done in this chapter.

61Ibid., pp. 177-78.

63Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond, Calif.: Conciliar, 2000), p. 2.

64Ignatius of Antioch The Letter to the Ephesians, in Holmes, ed., *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 86.

65Ibid., p. 89.

66Ibid., p. 92 (emphasis added).

17 Gregory of Nyssa Catechetical Oration 35, quoted in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 158 (emphasis added).

68Ibid.

69Ibid., p. 159.

70Ibid,

'Justin Martyr Dialogue with Trypho, in ANF 1 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 201.

72Clement of Alexandria The Instructor 1.6, in ANF 2 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 216.

73Ibid.

74Ibid. (emphasis added).

75Ibid. (emphasis added).

76Ibid. (emphasis added).

77Ibid., pp. 216-17.

78Ibid., p. 217 (emphasis added).

Ibid. I have slightly modified the translation.

"Ibid. (emphasis added).

"Constitutions of the Holy Apostles 3.7, in ANF 7 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 398.

BZOrigen Commentary on John, in ANF 9 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 367.

83F. X. von Funk, ed., Apostolic Constitutions 7.414, cited in Bercot, Dictionary of Early, p. 56.

s4Cyril of Jerusalem Procatechesis 1, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 40.

"Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on the Christian Sacraments: The Procatechesis and the Five Mystagogical Catecheses, ed. F. L. Cross and R. W. Church (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), sec. 2, pp. 40-41. I have slightly modified the translation.

"Ibid., sec. 2, p. 41.

"Ibid., sec. 1, p. 40.

"Ibid., sec. 4, p. 43.

89Basil of Caesarea On the Holy Spirit 28, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian

Fathers, p. 87.

"Justin Martyr Apology 1:183, quoted in Bercot, Dictionary of Early, p. 51. Basil of Caesarea On the Holy Spirit 28; Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures 20 On the Mysteries 2] 2-4; Gregory of Nyssa, On the Baptism of Christ The Basil, Cyril of Jerusalem and Nyssa references are from Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, pp.43, 162.

91Tertullian (ANF 3:672), quoted in Bercot, Dictionary of Early, p. 54.

"Hippolytus (ANF 5:217), quoted in Bercor, Dictionary of Early, p. 54.

93Cyprian (ANF 5:387), quoted in Bercot, Dictionary of Early, p. 55.

94Cyprian (ANF 5:360), quoted in Bercot, Dictionary of Early, p. 54.

95Methodius (ANF 6:320), quoted in Bercot, Dictionary of Early, p. 55.

96Tercullian (ANF 3:672-73), quoted in Bercoc, Dictionary of Early, p. 57.

97Irenaeus (ANF 1:574); Origen (ANF 9:367), Novatian (ANF 5:641), all quoted in Bercot, Dictionary of Early, pp. 52, 54.

"Gregory of Nyssa On the Baptism of Christ, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, pp. 160-61.

99Ibid., p. 161.

100Ibid.

101Ibid., pp. 161-62. Gregory sees the sacramental principle as extending to the priesthood.

"Again, the same power of the word also makes the priest revered and honorable, separated from community with the general public by the new quality given by the blessing. Yesterday he was one of the crowd, one of the people; he is suddenly made into a leader, a president, a teacher of religion, a guide into hidden mysteries: and he performs these functions without being changed in any way in body or in form, He continues to be the same as before to all appearance;

but he is transformed to a higher state in respect of his invisible soul by an invisible power and grace" (p. 162).

102Irenaeus Against Heresies 2,4391.

to3Ibid,

104Tertullian On Baptism 18, cited in Henry Bettenson, The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 201,

lo5Ibid,

106Cyprian Epistle 64.5, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 371.

107Ibid,

1o8Gregory of Nazianzus Oration 40.17, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 120.

109Ibid, 40.28, p. 121. I have slightly modified the translation,

11°Ibid,

ullbid.

112Chrysostom Homilies on Romans 10, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 169.

113 Gregory of Nazianzus Oration 40.28, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 121.

114Chrysostom To Neophytes; cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 169, Bettenson comments that because of passages such as this one in Chrysostom's work, Julian of Eclanum "concluded that Chrysostom disbelieved in original sin, Augustine argued that [Chrysostom's use of] sins (plural) meant personal sins and quoted passages [in Chrysostom] in which he found, to his satisfaction, the doctrine of original sin" (Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 169).

115 Augustine On Baptism, Against the Donatists 4.31-32, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 243.

116 Augustine Against Julian 5.44, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 243.

117 Catechism of the Catholic Church (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori, 1994), p. 321.

Chapter 2: Eucharist: Feasting with the Worshipping Community

'Ignatius of Antioch (ANF 1:81), quoted in David W. Bercot, A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), p. 251.

2 Irenaeus (ANF 1:486), quoted in Bercot, Dictionary of Early, p. 486.

'Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures 22 [On the Mysteries 4] 1-6, quoted in Henry Bettenson, The Later Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Cyril of Jerusalem to St. Leo the Great (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 45.

'Ambrose of Milan, Commentary on Psalm 118 18-28 (PL 15:1203), quoted in Olivier Clement, The Roots of Christian Mysticism (New York: New City, 1993), p. 108.

'Leonard j. Vander Zee, Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 188.

6 Ibid,

Ignatius of Antioch To the Smyrnaeans 6, cited in Henry Bettenson, The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 67 (emphasis added).

'Ter tullian On the Resurrection of the Flesh 8, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 198.

'Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), p. 29.

10Ambrose On the Sacraments, in Boniface Ramsey, Ambrose 9.52 (New York: Rourledge, 1997), p. 158.

"Ibid., 9.53, pp. 158-59.

"Gregory of Nyssa Catechetical Oration 37, cited in Berrenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 163.

];Ibid. I have slightly modified the translation.

14Chrysostom Homily on 1 Corinthians 24.5 (PG 61:204); Homily on Matthew 50.3 (PG 58:507); Homily on 1 Corinthians 24.4 (PG 61:203-4), quoted in Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, p. 109.

15Cf. Donald Palmer, Does the Center Hold? An Introduction to Western Philosophy (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 1991), pp. 58-89.

16Ratzinger, Principles of Catholic Theology, p. 29.

17Ibid.

"Justin Martyr First Apology 66, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 86 (emphasis added).

19Irenaeus Against Heresies 5.2, ANF 1, cited in Steven A McKinion, Life and Practice in the Early Church (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 106. I have slightly modified the translation.

20Ibid, pp. 106-7.

21Ibid., p. 107 (emphasis added).

22Cyril of Jerusalem On the Mysteries 4.1 (SC 126:134), quoted in Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, p. 108.

23Ambrose On the Sacraments, in Ramsey, Ambrose 9.54, p. 159.

24Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, p. 107.

ZSOrigen Commentary on Matthew 11.14, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian

Fathers, pp. 344-45.

26Augustine On Baptism, Against the Donatists. 3.15, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 242.

27The Didache 9, ANF 7, cited in McKinion, p. 100.

"Ibid., chap. 10, cited in Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 70 (emphasis added).

29The Ignatius quotation is from Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 107. Clement does not provide the reference for the quotation.

"Ambrose Commentary on Psalm 118 18-28 (PL 15:1203), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 108.

"Gregory of Nyssa Catechetical Oration 37 (PG 45:46), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 109.

32Ibid,

"John of Damascus On the Orthodox Faith 4.13, quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 110.

34Irenaeus Against Heresies 4.18.5, quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, pp. 110-11.

35Chrysostom Homily on John 46.3 (PG 59:260), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 114.

"Gregory of Nyssa Homilies on the Song of Songs 10 (PG 44:985), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 111.

37Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 114.

"ibid.

39Ambrose On the Sacraments, in Ramsey, Ambrose 8.44, p. 156.

40Ibid., 8.46, p. 156.

41Ibid., 8.47, pp. 156-57.

42Ibid., p. 157.

43Ibid., 8.48, p. 157.

44Ibid., 9.50, p. 157.

41Ibid., 9.51, p. 157.

46Ibid.

47Ibid., 9.51, p. 158.

48Ibid., 9.52, p. 158.

49Chrysostom Homilies I Corinthians 24, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 175.

50Chrysostom Homilies on John 46, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 175.

51Chrysostom Homilies on Hebrews 3.17, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 174.

52Gregory of Nazianzus Oration 4.52, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 124.

"Gregory of Nazianzus Epistle 171, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 124.

54Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 4.17.4, cited in Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 130.

"Ibid.

"Ibid., pp. 130-31. I have smoothed out the translation.

57Cyprian Epistle 63.14, cited in Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 375

(emphasis added).

58Chrysostom Homilies on John 45.2 (PG 59:253), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, pp. 112-13 (emphasis added).

"Cyril of Jerusalem On the Mysteries 5.7 (SC 126:154), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 113.

"Ephraim of Syria, "2nd Sermon on Holy Week" quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 114.

61Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 4.18.4-6, cited in Bercenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 132.

62Ibid., 5.2.2-3, cited in Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 134.

63Chrysostom *On the Treason of the Jews* 1.6, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 173.

64Ibid.

"Ambrose *The Sacraments* 5.13.17 (SC 25:92), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 114.

66Cyprian *Letters* 69.5.2 quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 116.

67Hilary of Poitiers *On the Trinity* 8.15-17, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, pp. 57-58.

"Ibid.

"The Didache 14, cited in Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 72,

75Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond, Calif.: Conciliar, 2000), p. 47.

71Chrysostom *On Ozias* 4.1 (PG 56:120), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 118.

72Chrysostom Homilies on Matthew 50.3 (PG 58:508), quoted in Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, pp. 120-21.

73Clement, Roots of Christian Mysticism, pp. 119-20.

74Ibid.

"Augustine City of God 21.25 (trans. Henry Bettenson [New York: Penguin, 1984]), pp. 1008-9.

76Ibid., p. 1009.

77Ibid., pp. 1009-10.

"Ambrose On the Sacraments, in Ramsey, Ambrose 9.57, p. 159.

79Clement of Alexandria The Instructor 1.6 (42-43), cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 249.

soOrigen Homilies on Numbers 16:9, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 345.

S'Origen Commentary on Matthew 85, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 346.

12Athanasius Epistle to Serapion 4.19, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 412 (emphasis added).

83Cyril ofJerusalem Catechetical Letures 22 [On the Mysteries 4] 1-6, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 45.

84Ibid.

"Ibid. Cyril writes: "Do not trust your palace to form the judgment; trust unhesitating faith. For those who cast are not bidden to cast bread and wine, but the body and blood thus symbolized." Cyril ofJerusalem, Catechetical Letures 23 [On the Mysteries 5] 20-2, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 46 (emphasis added).

86 Ignatius of Antioch To the Ephesians 13, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 55.

"Basil Letter 93, cited in McKinion, Life and Practice, p. 110.

"Jerome Letter 71, NPNF2 6, cited in McKinion, Life and Practice, p. 111.

`The Didache 9, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 70.

"Justin Martyr First Apology 65-66, cited in Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, p. 85.

91 John Chrysostom Homilies on Ephesians 3, NPNF' 13, cited in McKinion, Life and Practice, p. 113.

92 Cyril of Jerusalem Catechetical Lectures 23 [On the Mysteries 5] 20-2, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, pp. 46-47.

93 Ibid., p. 47.

94 Gregory of Nazianzus Oration 8 [or, funeral oration for his sister] 18, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 123.

"Ibid.

96 I am here drawing freely on material from my book: Christopher A. Hall, Learning Theology with the Church Fathers (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 241-47.

97 Augustine Enarrations on the Psalms 99.13, cited in Hall, Learning Theology, p. 242.

"Augustine City of God 18.49, cited in Hall, Learning Theology, p. 243,

191 Ibid.; cf. 1 Cor 15:28.

too Augustine's own comments in On Baptism, Against the Donatists 6.1 and 7, cited in Bettenson, Later Christian Fathers, p. 241.

105 Ibid,

102Ibid.

to3Augustine On Baptism, Against the Donatists 1.14, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 242.

"Augustine On Baptism, Against the Donatists 3.15, cited in Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers*, p. 242 (emphasis added).

Chapter 3: The Basics of Prayer

'Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 7.6-7, quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings from Today from Ancient Christian Writers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), p. 245.

2Gregory of Nyssa *On the Christian Mode of Life*, quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 248.

3Apophthegmata Patrum, Alphabetical Collection, Agathon # 9, quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 248.

4Apophthegmata Patrum, Alphabetical Collection, Macarius # 19, quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 248.

'Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer, The Beatitudes*, trans. Hilda C. Graef, ACW 18 (New York: Paulist, 1954); Origen *Prayer*, trans. John J. O'Meara, ACW 19 (New York; Ramsey N.J.: Newman, 1954); Tertullian *On Prayer*, trans. Rev. S. Thelwall, ANF 3 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994); John Cassian *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, ACW 57 (New York: Newman, 1997).

6Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New York: New City, 1993).

7Clement of Alexandria *Stromata*, ANF 2:534, quoted in David W. Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), p. 534.

8Ibid., ANF 2:535, quoted in Bercot, *Dictionary of Early*, p. 529.

9Maximus the Confessor Commentary on the Our Father, in *Inquiring After God: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Ellen T. Chatty (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 314.

¹⁰Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 183.

"Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 181. Part of the quotation is from P. T. Forsyth, quoted by Foster,

12Tertullian *On Prayer*, ANF 3:685, quoted in Bercot, *Dictionary of Early*, p. 529.

13Ibid., ANF 3:686.

14Cyprian *The Treatises of Cyprian*, ANF 5:448, quoted in Bercot, *Dictionary of Early*, p. 530.

"ibid.

16Cyprian *The Epistles of Cyprian*, ANF 5:279-80, quoted in Bercot, *Dictionary of Early*, p. 530.

17Athanasius *The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus* 11, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980), p. 109 (emphasis added).

18Athanasius *Life of Antony* 11-12, pp. 110-11.

19Ibid.

20Cassian *Conferences* 10.11 (SC 54:92), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 201.

21Athanasius *Life of Antony* 12, p. 111.

22Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 200.

"Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm 98* (PL 37:1258), quoted in Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 200.

24The illustration is from John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 180.

25Abba Agarhon is quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 248.

26I think the best translation of these interviews is by Boniface Ramsey. See John Cassian, *The Conferences*. All my quotations from *The Conferences* will come from the Newman 1997 edition unless otherwise noted,

27Cassian *The Conferences* 2.1, p. 329.

28Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 181.

29Cassian *The Conferences* 2.1, p. 329. I have slightly modified Ramsey's translation.

30Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 182.

31Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 57.

32Ibid., p. 58.

33Ibid., p. 57.

34The illustration is from Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, p. 180.

35Clement, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 167.

36Cassian *The Conferences* 2.3, p. 330.

17Ibid., 2.4, p. 330.

"Ibid., 3.3, pp. 330-31.

39Ibid., 3.4, p. 331.

40Ibid., 4.1, p. 331.

41Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond: Conciliar, 2000),

p. 65.

42Cassian The Conferences 5.5, 6.1, p. 333.

43Ibid., 6.1, p. 333.

44Ibid.

45Dennis Ockholm, *Monk Habits for Everyday People: Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), p. 40.

46Cassian The Conferences 6.5, p. 334 (emphasis added).

47Ibid., 7.1, p. 334.

48Ibid., 7.4, p. 335.

49Ibid., 8.3, pp. 335-36.

50Ibid., 9.1, p. 336.

51Ibid., 9.2, p. 336.

52Ibid., 10.1, p. 337.

53Ibid., 12.1, p. 337.

54Ibid., 13, pp. 337-38. Cf. 1 Tim 2:2.

55Ibid., 14, p. 338.

56Ibid., 15.1, p. 338.

57Ibid., 17.1-3, pp. 339-40; cf. Ps 22:1; cf. Mt 26:39; Lk 23:34; Jn 11:41-42; Jn 17:19, 24.

58Ibid., 15.2, p. 339. Cf. Rom 8:26-27. I've slightly altered the translation.

59Ibid., 15.3, p. 339.

60Ibid., 18.1-2, pp. 340-41; cf. Mt 6:9.

"Ibid., 26.1-2, p. 346.

62Ibid., 27, pp. 346-47.

63Ibid., 28.2, p. 347.

64Cf. 1 Sam 15:35.

6tJer 8:23-9:1.

66Cassian The Conferences 9, 30.1, pp. 348-49.

61Ibid., 34.5, pp. 350-51 (emphasis added).

68Cf. Dan 10:2-4.

69Cassian The Conferences 9, 34.7, p. 351.

70Lewis is quoted in Foster, Prayer, pp. 181-82.

71Cassian The Conferences 34.9, p. 352.

72Foster, Prayer, p. 183.

Chapter 4: The Challenge of Unceasing Prayer

'John Cassian, The Conferences, trans. Boniface Ramsey, ACW 57 (New York: Newman, 1997), 2.1, p. 329.

2Ibid., 3.3, p. 330.

3Ibid., 8.3, pp. 335-36.

4Ibid., 3.1, p. 372.

'Ibid., 3.3, p. 372.

6Anrhony Bloom, Beginning to Pray (New York: Paulist, 1979), p. 45.

7Cassian The Conferences 3.4-5, pp. 372-73.

'Bloom, Beginning to Pray, pp. 48-49.

9I've run across this idea in C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain.

"William Harmless, Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 322.

"Ibid.

12Ibid., p. 323.

"Ibid.

14Ibid., p. 324.

"Ibid.

16Ibid., pp. 325-26.

'7Ibid., p. 246.

""bid,

`Ibid., p. 384.

20Ibid, p. 236.

25Ibid.

22Ibid, p. 288.

23Ibid.

24Cassian The Conferences 5.1, p. 374.

25Ibid, 5.2-3, p. 374.

26Ibid, 6.1, p. 374.

27Ibid, 6.3, p. 375.

28Ramsey's note in Cassian The Conferences, p. 391.

29Evagrius Ponticus De oratione 66 (PG 79:1180), trans. and quoted by Harmless, Desert Christians, p. 351.

"Harmless, Desert Christians, p. 351.

31Evagrius Ponticus De oratione 57 (PG 79:1180), trans. and quoted by Harmless, Desert Christians, p. 357.

"Harmless, Desert Christians, p. 352.

"Ibid.

34Evagrius Ponticus Praktikos 49 (SC 171:612); De oratione 84 (PG 79:1185); De oratione 34a; all trans. Harmless, Desert Christians, p. 352.

35Harmless, Desert Christians, p. 352.

36Cassian Conferences 6.4, p. 375.

37Ibid., 7.1, pp. 375-76.

38Ibid., 7.3, p. 376.

39Ibid., 8.1, p. 376.

40Ibid, 8.4, p. 377.

41Ibid, 8.5, p. 377. I have slightly altered the translation.

42Ibid., 9.3, p. 378.

43Ibid., 9.1, p. 378.

44Ibid, 10.2, p. 379. I have replaced Ramsey's somewhat stilted translation of Ps 70:1 with the NW translation.

41ibid., 10.3, p. 379.

46ibid., 9.3, p. 379.

47ibid., 10.5, p. 380.

48ibid., 10.9, p. 381.

49ibid., 10.10, p. 381.

50ibid., 10.11, p. 381.

51ibid, 10.13, p. 382.

52ibid, 10.13-14, p. 382.

"Ibid., 10.14, p. 382.

54ibid, 11.1, p. 383; cf. Mr 5:3.

55ibid., 12, p. 385 (emphasis added).

16ibid., 13.1, p. 385.

17ibid., 13.1, p. 386.

58ibid., 13.2, P. 386.

59ibid,

60ibid., 14.1, p. 386.

6'Jbid., 14.2, pp. 386-87 (emphasis added).

62Origen Prayer, trans. John J. O'Meara, ACW 19 (New York: Newman, 1954), pp. 46-47.

Chapter 5: Further Coaching on Prayer

'Quoted in Donald W. Bercot, ed., A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs

(Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), p. 528.

'Ibid., p. 530.

'Ibid.

'Quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), pp. 250-51.

'Agnes Cunningham, *Prayer: Personal and Liturgical, Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1985), p. 110.

6Augustine Letter 130, to Proba on Prayer; cited in Cunningham, *Prayer*, p. 110.

7Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco: 1992), p. 64.

'Gregory of Nyssa *The Lord's Prayer*, ACW 18, trans. Hilda C. Graef (New York: Paulist, 1954), Sermon 1, p. 21.

'Ibid., pp. 21-22.

lolbid.

`Ibid., p. 22.

12Ibid., p. 23.

13Ibid., p. 28.

14Ibid., p. 29.

"I'm reminded of Thomas a Kempis's advice: "No one can safely appear in public who does not enjoy seclusion. No one safely calks but he who gladly keeps silent. No one safely rules but he who is glad to be subordinate. No one safely commands but he who has learned well to obey" (Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. E.M. Blaiklock]London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979], p. 47).

16Gregory of Nyssa The Lord's Prayer, p. 29.

"Ibid., p. 26.

°Ibid., p. 28.

19Ibid.

20Augustine Letter 130, to Proba on Prayer, p. 111.

21Ibid., p. 113.

"Ibid., p. 114.

23Ibid. I have slightly modified the translation.

24Ibid., p. 115.

21Ibid.

26Ibid., p. 116.

27Ibid,

`Ibid., pp. 116-17.

"I bid,, p. 117.

30See 1 Cor 13:13.

"Augustine Letter 130, to Proba on Prayer, p. 117; see Mt 7:7-8.

12Ibid., p. 117.

"Foster, Prayer, pp. 180-81.

34Ibid.

35Chrysoscom On Providence, in Christopher A. Hall, John Chrysostom's On Providence": A Translation and Theological Interpretation (Ann Arbor, Mich.:

University Microfilms International, 1991), p. 58. Unless otherwise noted, references to Chrysoscom's *On Providence* are from this edition.

36Ibid., 6.3.

"Ibid., 6.8 (emphasis added). I am freely drawing on the insights of Chrysosrom I discussed in some derail in Chrsropher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InrerVarsiry Press, 2002), pp. 183-205.

38Hall, John Chrysostom's "On Providence," 6.22.

39Ibid., 6.14.

4Foster, *Prayer*, p. 181.

41C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (New York: Harcourt, 1964), p. 58, quoted in Foster, *Prayer*, p. 182.

42C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 40.

43Foster, *Prayer*, p. 182.

44Ibid.

45Ibid,

46Ibid., pp. 182-83.

47Chrysosrom *On Providence* 8.8.

48Ibid., 14.6

49Chrysostom *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 4.5, NPNF1 12:18; cf. PG 61:33D.

s°Chrysosiom *On Providence* 14.8.

sllbid., 4.13.

"Ibid., 15; 17 (intro).

Chapter 6: The Lord's Prayer

1Tertullian On Prayer 1.6; 9, quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), p. 252.

2Cyprian On the Lord's Prayer 11, quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 253.

'Gregory of Nyssa On the Lord's Prayer 3, quoted in Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom*, p. 254.

4Augustine Letter 130, to Proba on Prayer, in Agnes Cunningham, *Prayer: Personal and Liturgical, Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1985), p. 117.

'Dennis Okholm, *Monk Habits for Everyday People: Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), p. 32.

6Augustine Letter 130, to Proba on Prayer, p. 118.

7Ibid., p. 119.

SOrigen, *Prayer, Exhortation to Martyrdom*, trans. John J. O'Meara, ACW 19 (New York: Newman Press, 1954), pp. 73-74.

'St. Gregory of Nyssa *The Lord's Prayer, The Beatitudes*, trans. Hilda C. Graef, ACW 18 (New York: Paulist, 1954), p. 40.

"Ibid., pp. 39-40.

"Ibid., p. 41.

12Origen *Prayer*, p. 81.

"Augustine Letter 130, to Proba on Prayer, p. 119. I have slightly modified the translation,

14Gregory of Nyssa *On the Lord's Prayer*, p. 48.

"Ibid.

16Ibid., p. 49.

17Ibid., p. 50 (emphasis added).

18Origen Prayer, p. 81.

141Ibid., pp. 81-82.

20Gregory of Nyssa On the Lord's Prayer, p. 51.

21Ibid., p. 51 (emphasis added).

22Origen Prayer, p. 85.

23Ibid., pp. 86-87.

24Gregory of Nyssa On the Lord's Prayer, p. 51. I have slightly modified the translation.

25Tertullian On Prayer, trans. Rev. S. Thelwall, ANF 3 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 682 (emphasis added).

26Ibid. See 2 Cor 12:10.

27Gregory of Nyssa On the Lord's Prayer, p. 60.

281Ibid., p. 62.

29Augustine Letter 130, to Proba on Prayer, p. 119.

"Gregory of Nyssa On the Lord's Prayer, p. 26.

"Ibid., pp. 65-66.

32Ibid., pp. 67-68.

"Ibid., p. 68.

14Ibid., p. 69. I have slightly modified the translation.

35Tertullian Prayer, p. 683. I have slightly modified the bumpy ANF translation.

36Origen Prayer, pp. 92-93; cf. Jn 1:1; 1:14; 14:6; 17:17; 1 Cor 1:24, 30.

17Ibid., pp. 94-95; cf. Jn 6:54-57; 1:14.

38Ibid., p. 96.

39Ibid., p. 97.

40Cf. 1 Cor 3:1-3.

41Origen Prayer, pp. 98-99.

42Ibid., p. 101. Origen's words here might well reflect his belief that at the consummation of the age all creation, including demons and Satan, would be reconciled to God. The church declared Origen's thought at this juncture to be unorthodox.

43Ibid., p. 102.

44Gregory of Nyssa On the Lord's Prayer 5, p. 71.

45Ibid.

46Ibid., p. 72.

47Ibid., pp. 72-73.

48Origen Prayer, p. 110.

49Ibid., P. 110; cf. Lk 17:3-4.

50Ibid., pp. 110-11; cf. Prov 15:32. I have slightly modified the translation.

51Gregory of Nyssa On the Lord's Prayer, pp. 74-75.

52Ibid., p. 77.

"Ibid., pp. 78-79.

54Ibid.

"Ibid., PP. 82-83.

561bid., p. 83.

571bid. I have slightly modified the translation.

58Ibid., p. 84.

59Tertullian On Prayer, p. 684. I have modified the ANF translation,

"Ibid.

61Origen Prayer, p. 113.

621bid., pp. 115-16; cf. 2 Cor 12:7.

63Ibid., p. 117.

64I bid.

65Ibid., pp. 119-20.

661bid., p. 120.

67Ibid., p. 124 (emphasis added).

"Ibid., p. 126.

69Ibid.

70St. Macarius the Great Homilies 15.21, in *Spiritual Homilies*, cited in *Matthew the Poor, Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (Crestwood, N.Y.: Sc, Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 137 (emphasis added).

71Origen Prayer, p. 126; cf Rom 8:28.

72Ibid., p. 127.

781bid, pp. 127-28.

741bid., p. 129; cf. Jn 4:14; 7:38.

"Augustine Letter 130, to Proba on Prayer, p. 120.

76Ibid.

77Ibid, p. 121.

78Ibid.

791bid, p. 122.

80Tomas Spidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1986), p. 224; idem, *Prayer: The Spirituality of the Christian East*, Vol. 2 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 2005), 2:286-87.

61Spidlik, *Spirituality of the Christian East*, p. 224.

Chapter 7: The Transforming Call to the Desert

'Quoted in Matthew the Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 274.

2Quoted in *ibid.*

'Quoted in *ibid.*

'Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 255. I have slightly modified the translation.

5Athanasius *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* 2, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980), p. 31.

'Augustine *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), pp. 177-78 (emphasis added).

7Athanasius *Life of Antony* 3, p. 32.

'Ibid., 4, pp. 32-33.

'Ibid., 5, p. 33.

10Ibid., 5, p. 34.

11Ibid., 5, p. 34; cf. 1 Cor 15:10.

12Ibid., 6, p. 35.

"Ibid., 7, p. 36.

14Ibid., 7, pp. 36-37; see Phil 3:13.

"Ibid., 7, p. 37.

16Ibid., 10, p. 39.

"Ibid., 11-12, pp. 39-41.

"Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 82.

19Athanasius *Life of Antony* 10, p. 39.

21Consider Irenaeus's definition of deification, quoted in Tomas Spidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1986), p. 351: "For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and he who was the Son of God became the Son of Man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving adoption, might become the son of God." Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.19.1 (PG 7:939C; ANF 1:448); 3.16.3 (PG 7922B; ANF 1:440).

2 Athanasius *Life of Antony* 14, p.42.

"ibid.

23Ibid.

24Ibid., 48, p. 67.

21Ibid., 74, p. 85.

26Ibid., 58, p. 74.

271 am indebted to William A. Clebsch, Robert C. Gregg and Frances Young for this insight.

2'Athanasius Life of Antony 74, p. 85.

29Ibid., 91, p. 97. Arius and his followers denied the deity of the Son.

30Ibid., 16, p. 43.

31Ibid, I have slightly modified the translation.

32Ibid., 16, pp. 43-44.

33Ibid., 17-19, pp. 44-45.

34Ibid., 20, p. 46.

35Ibid.

"Ibid.

37Ibid., 19, pp. 45-46.

"Ibid., 22, p. 47.

39Ibid.

40Ibid., 25-26, p. 50.

41Ibid., 27, pp. 50-52.

42Ibid., 28, pp. 52-53.

43Ibid., 28, p. 53.

44Ibid., 29, p. 54.

45Ibid., 30, p. 54.

46Ibid.

47G. L. Prestige's comments on deification are helpful: "Man, the Fathers might have said, is a supernatural animal. In some sense his destiny is to be absorbed into God. But they would all have repudiated with indignation any suggestion that the union of men to God added anything to the godhead. They explained the lower in terms of the higher, but did not obliterate the distinction between them, Not only is God self- dependent. He has also all those positive qualities which man does not possess, the attribution of which is made by adding the negative prefix to the common attributes of humanity. In addition, in so far as humanity possesses broken lights of God, they are as far as possible from reaching the measure and perfection with which they are associated in the godhead.... Though in Christ human nature has been raised to the throne of God, by virtue of His divine character, yet mankind in general can only aspire to the sort of divinity which lies open to its capacity through union with the divine humanity. Eternal life is the life of God. Men may come to share its manifestations and activities, but only by grace, never of right. Man remains a created being: God alone is *agenetos*." G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1964), pp. 74-75 (emphasis added).

48Achanasius's emphasis on human beings as the image bearers of God reflects an ancient Christian insight that we often find in early Christian literature. For instance, every one of Ignatius of Antioch's letters written to various churches on his journey to martyrdom in Rome begins with the self-description, "Ignatius, the Image-bearer to the church." Cf. "The Letters of Ignatius," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 183, 203, 215, 225, 237, 249, 263.

49Athanasius *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, N.Y.: Sr. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), p. 92.

50Ibid., p. 93 (emphasis added).

51Ibid.

52Athanasius *Life of Antony* 14, p. 42.

"Jason Byassee's phrase. See Jason Byassee, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2007), p. 4.

54Athanasius *Life of Antony* 14, pp. 42-43. Mark Gruber comments that desert holy men continue to attract people to the desert in Egypt. He mentions, for instance, Abuna Mina el Muttawahad, a modern day desert father. "He would live in the caves or out in the desert; then he would stride into the villages or into the cities, gather up disciples, inspire congregations, and head right back out into the desert again. This kind ofcommu to has apparently been the rhythm of the Coptic monk and the desert holy man for hundreds of years." Mark Gruber, *Journey Back to Eden: My Life and Times among the Desert Fathers* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), p. 34.

Chapter 8: A Space to Draw Close to God

'Owen Chadwick, ed., *Western Asceticism* 2.14 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), p. 43.

2Ibid., 1.1, p. 37.

'Ibid., 1.2, p. 37.

'Ibid., 7.7, p. 83.

'Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1983), p. 69.

'Richard Foster comments that "our Adversary the devil majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in 'muchness' and 'manyness,' he will rest satisfied." Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p 15.

7Ammonas *Epistle* 12, quoted in William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 82.

'Palmer, *To Know*, p. 69.

'Ibid., p. 73.

"Quoted in Jason Byassee, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2007), p. 43.

Ibid., p. 9.

¹²Mark Gruber, *Journey Back to Eden: My Life and Times among the Desert Fathers* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), p. 42.

"Palmer, *To Know*, p. 73.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁵Ammonas Epistle 12, p. 82 (emphasis added).

¹⁶Abba Macarius, quoted by Kallistos Ware in "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative," an article listed on the home page of Christopher Haas, professor of ancient Christianity at Villanova University, <www29.homepage.villanova.edu/christopher.haas/ascetics.html>.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

"*ibid.*

¹⁹Thomas Merton, journal entry from April 7, 1941, in *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Harr and Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 28, quoted in William J. Harmless, *Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 23.

²⁰Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. 156, quoted in Harmless, *Mystics*, p. 31.

²¹Byassee, *Introduction to the Desert*, p. 2.

²²Ammonas Epistle 12, pp. 82-83.

²³Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City* (1966; reprint, Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), p. 6.

²⁴Gruber, *Journey Back to Eden*, p. 58. Gruber notes "how little the struggle

with evil is mentioned in contemporary circles of spirituality in the West. Hollywood is far more interested in this combat than seminaries" (p. 58).

"Ibid., pp. 59-60.

26Ibid., p. 60.

27Ibid, pp. 60-61.

"Ibid., p. 61.

29Ibid.

30Ibid.

31Ibid.

32Athanasius The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus 4, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980), p. 33 (emphasis added).

"Gruber, Journey Back to Eden, p. 62 (emphasis added).

34Cf. Owen Chadwick, ed., Western Asceticism (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), pp. 33-36. I am drawing on Chadwick's introduction to the desert sayings, which is quite helpful.

35Ibid., p. 40.

"Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 15.

37Byassee, Introduction to the Desert, p. 21.

"Chadwick, ed., Western Asceticism, p.42.

39Ibid., p. 43.

40Chrysoscom begs his congregation to "avoid altogether passing sentence on our neighbor. You see, even though you have no share in judicial authority and yet you still pass judgment in your mind, you have rendered yourself guilty of

sin for accepting no proof and acting in many cases only on suspicion and mere slander.... If we, too, want to reduce our own faults, we should be on our guard about this most of all, not to condemn our brothers or to encourage those anxious to slander them," Chrysostom Homilies on Genesis 42.14, quoted in Quentin Wesselschmidt, ed., *Psalms 51-150, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 206. Augustine makes much the same point: "[The Lord] admonishes us not to condemn a person whose purpose is hidden from us, or when we do not know how a person will turn out later on." Augustine, *Christian Combat* 27.29, also quoted in Wesselschmidt, *Psalms 51-150*, p. 34.

41Chadwick, ed., *Western Asceticism*, pp. 102-3.

42Ibid., p. 103.

43Ibid.

44Ibid., pp. 68-69.

"Francis de Sales writes of the importance of discernment in choosing a counselor: "choose one among a thousand, Avila says; and I say among ten thousand, for there are fewer than one would think capable of this office, He must needs be full of love, of wisdom, and of discretion; for if either of these three be wanting there is danger." Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 11.

46Chadwick, ed., *Western Asceticism*, p. 60.

47Ibid., p. 64.

48Ibid., p. 63.

49Ibid., p. 64.

50Ibid., p. 65.

51Ibid., p. 69.

52Ibid., p. 83.

53Ibid.

54Ibid.

"Ibid., p. 84.

56Ibid., p. 92.

57Ibid., p. 87.

58Ibid.

59Ibid., p. 88.

60Ibid, p. 91.

61Ibid., p. 92.

62Ibid., p. 93.

63Ibid., p. 91.

64Ibid., p. 93.

65Byassee, Introduction to the Desert, p. 71.

66Chadwick, ed., Western Asceticism, p. 126.

67Ibid., p. 128.

68Ibid., p. 105.

69Ibid., p. 106.

70Ibid.

71Ibid., p. 109.

72Ibid,

73Ibid., pp. 109-10.

74Ibid., p. 115.

75Ibid., p. 130.

76Ibid., p. 131.

77Ibid., p. 24.

78Ibid.

79Harmless, *Desert Christians*, p. 232.

"I have found the following sources on desert spirituality to be quite helpful: Chadwick, ed., *Western Asceticism*; Harmless, *Desert Christians*; Harriet A. Luckman and Linda Kulzer, *Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1999); Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); idem, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991); Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Gruber, *Journey Back to Eden*; Matthew the Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003); Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1975); Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City*; Byassee, *Introduction to the Desert*.

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