

PRAYER IN TIMES OF SPIRITUAL DRYNESS (Part Two)

Our hope for you is firm, for we know that as you share in the sufferings [of Christ], you also share in the encouragement. (2Corinthians 1:7)

It may be useless—and perhaps a source of still greater agitation—to want to seek assurance that we are in the grace of God and what we are experiencing (a time of spiritual dryness) is only a trial, and not abandonment on the part of God. At such times it is God's will that we should not have this assurance. And he does this so that we may humble ourselves more and increase our prayers and acts of confidence in his mercy. We desire to see, and God wills that we should not see. (St. Alphonsus Liguori)

This article is a continuation of the article on the treatment of the nature and role of spiritual dryness in the prayer life. We must ask ourselves the remaining three questions below about this important topic.

Question 4: How can we tell when a particular desert experience is caused by our own infidelity?

If dryness occurs in prayer, particularly in the early stages when God is giving alternating periods of dryness and consolation, we may tend to blame ourselves for our condition. We may wonder what latest infidelity we have committed to bring about this dryness. The fact may be that we have done nothing wrong to occasion it. God may be allowing us to experience it because he wants to purify some aspect of our relationship with him or teach us some of the lessons (discussed in Part One of this article). On the other hand, we may think the dryness is from God when in fact it is caused by our own laxity and sinfulness. Therefore, it is important that we be able to discern its true cause because our response to it will differ, depending on whether the dryness is something permitted by God or something we caused ourselves.

There are various reasons *why* we may be the cause of our own spiritual dryness. Here are some of them.

First, we may be indifferent to a sinful pattern of behavior in our lives. If this is the case, we can expect difficulty in prayer. In a human friendship, a negative pattern of behavior (e.g., a critical or lying spirit) which we make no effort to change, will have a destructive effect on the whole relationship. Likewise, if in our relationship with God we are deliberately ignoring a sinful pattern of behavior (e.g., involvement in illicit relationship, unforgiveness, or unethical business practices), we can rightfully expect tension in

our relationship with God. When we conduct ourselves in such manner, we are deliberately excluding the Lord and his influence from some area of our lives. Hence, it is no surprise that we do not feel God's presence in our times of prayer.

Of course it is important to note that this does not refer to a sinful pattern of behavior that we are trying to change and that we are bringing before the Lord in prayer. In this case, we are recognizing sin and struggling with it. Instead of keeping us from God, our struggle with a particular sin or weakness may be the very means that God will use to allow us to experience his love, mercy, and power. St. Paul's experience of how his thorn in the flesh became the very means of God's power is an example of this (see 2Corinthians 12:7-10).

Second, we may be harboring repressed anger at God. Two highly respected spiritual directors, Frs. William Connolly and William Barry, write in their book *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*: "*When prayer flattens out, or appears to be facing an iron wall, the director must always suspect the presence of unexpressed anger.*" To add to this problem, many of us were raised in a culture where appropriate expression of anger was socially unacceptable. In this vein, the above authors continue: "*Hence resentments, holding a grudge or subdued rage, when they are present, are all likely to be given other names like indifference and rational analysis.*" When others hurt us, our relationship with them diminishes. We may try to cover up by presenting an affable, friendly front, but in reality we will distance ourselves emotionally from them. In a similar way, if we become angry with God about something, we may continue to be faithful to our prayer time, but on an emotional level we can be fairly sure we have distanced ourselves from him. It is important for us to realize that if life is handing us a raw deal, we may well be unconsciously blaming God for our unfortunate situation.

Third, dryness may come as a result of our separating prayer from life. *The spiritual life is all of life* and not just one segment of it. The Lord refuses to be a compartmentalized God; he wants to be part and parcel of our whole life. When we try to keep God in church or in our prayer closet and not allow him to guide all the activities of our day, we can be sure that we are setting ourselves up for dryness in prayer. If we exclude God from the activities of our day, we should not be surprised that he is missing from our prayer time. Even on a human level, no one likes to be a "tag-along" in someone else's life.

Fourth, overwork can lead to dryness. When our prayer life dries up, it is good for us to ask if we are pushing ourselves too much on the vital and functional dimensions of life. Am I overworked? Am I too exhausted? Am I coming down with the flu? Am I neglecting physical exercise? Do I have a tendency to convert leisure time into work? These are important questions to ask ourselves because their answers affect our prayer life. If we fail to care properly for our bodies, we are neglecting a dimension of ourselves that we depend on to help us to pray. When we are very tired and overworked, prayer may well be seen as just another duty to be performed or something to be done automatically.

Fifth, there may be a lack of honesty in our prayer. Just as shallow or dishonest sharing dulls human relationships, the same holds true with divine-human relationship. If our prayer is no more than “sweet talk” to “sweet Jesus,” we should not expect Jesus to be too interested in our conversation. We must learn to talk honestly to the Lord about the real fabric of our lives.

Sixth, we must avoid half-hearted efforts at prayer. On a human level we may fail to really connect with others because our conversations are just words—words that fail to express what we are truly thinking and feeling. The problem may be that, deep down, we are scared to encounter each other in a deep way. When a relationship is characterized by this type of communication, we should expect it to be empty and unfulfilling. In a similar vein, when our prayer time consists mainly of rote recitation of certain prayers or of inattentive spiritual reading—with no real desire to encounter God and grow in relationship with him—we should expect little or no satisfaction in prayer. In fact, our spiritual exercises may become a substitute for a real relationship with God.

If we discern that we are the cause of our spiritual dryness, we should do all we can to remove the particular obstacle. For example, if our problem is holding onto a grudge and doing nothing to let go, we may need to pray for the grace of forgiveness or we may need to speak openly to the person with whom we are having a problem. If spiritual dryness is due to our tendency to separate prayer from life, the solution may be to work at allowing the Lord to walk with us *in all* the activities of our day.

In short, we ought to remove whatever obstacles are causing our spiritual dryness. Judging from the experience of most, if not all, disciples of the Lord, once we begin to struggle with an obstacle, prayer again becomes alive and we experience a new closeness to God. Of course, in trying to discern the

cause of our spiritual dryness, it would be well to seek the counsel of a good spiritual director. Most of us tend to think that spiritual dryness is due to some infidelity on our part. The truth may be that God is permitting us to experience the desert so that he can continue his purifying work in us—which leads us directly to the next question.

Question 5: What indications do we have that God might be permitting our spiritual dryness to continue his purifying work within us?

While we can never be absolutely sure—since we live by faith and not by clear vision—when spiritual dryness is being permitted by God, we can say that the following are good indications that the dryness is the purifying work of God.

- During the time of dryness we remain faithful to prayer.
- Our prayer is honest and flows from the real fabric of our lives.
- We endeavor to integrate prayer and life.
- We strive to live a life of charity; our prayer helps us to be more loving.
- We genuinely try to avoid sin and to live our lives according to God’s Word.
- We thirst for God as we walk in the desert.

It is crucial to remember that our desire for God is in itself a tangible sign of his presence in our lives. We couldn’t even desire God if he didn’t place that desire in our hearts.

Prayer, like so many other aspects of life, is a series of “arrivals” and “starting points.” We arrive at a point where we feel good. We experience the grace of consolation. But that lasts only a little while and then a certain discontent (a kind of desert) sets in, which may be caused by us or permitted by God. Then we are faced with the challenge of discerning who is causing the discontent: “Is it God or me?” If it’s God, his purpose is to stir in us a longing for more, and to encourage us to move closer to him. In the spiritual journey, God brings us to a particular point or state, lets us rest there and enjoy that plateau for a little while, and then he says, “Okay, let’s move ahead and seek for more” (see Exodus 40:36-37). But it is not easy to move when we are not sure where he is leading us. All he says is, “Move, and trust that I’ll take you to a new and better place.” If our thoughts, words, or actions are the cause of dryness and discontent, it is necessary for us, with God’s guidance, to chart a new course for our spiritual life.

In summary, if we are in doubt about the cause of our discontent or dryness, we should talk to a spiritual

guide or, if that is not possible, simply say a prayer like this: “Lord, if this dryness I am experiencing is due to some failing of mine, please reveal it to me. Until you do, I am going to assume that I am not the cause of the dryness.”

Question 6: What are some measures we can take to help sustain us in our spiritual dryness?

There are four measures available to us.

First, we should find a wise spiritual director who understands the role of the desert in the spiritual life and, hopefully, has endured and grown through the desert experience in his/her own spiritual journey. Many people whom God led into the desert for purification have suffered much at the hands of well-intentioned but misinformed spiritual guides. (St. John of the Cross reserves some of his harshest words for this type of spiritual director.) A misinformed guide, for instance, might insist that we continue to meditate and double our spiritual reading when God is actually calling us to the prayer of contemplation.

A good desert-experienced spiritual director will always be a source of guidance, encouragement, and inspiration. That is why when we are spiritually dry, it is so important that we find and place our trust in a good and wise director. But as most of us know, wise spiritual directors are nearly as scarce as palm trees in Alaska. The truth is that the road to authenticity is dangerous, hard, and narrow, and few decide to travel it. In the absence of a wise spiritual director (and there is really no substitute for such a person), we may receive some guidance from books that are written or recommended by people who are recognized guides of the inner journey.

Second, we need to maintain a strong faith which will enable us to believe that:

- God knows what he is doing when he allows us to experience the desert (see Roman 11:33-36).
- In the desert, God is not punishing us but is purifying us (see Deuteronomy 30:6).
- God grows his best flowers (virtues) in the desert (see Hosea 2:1-11).
- God works in us while we rest in him (see Mark 4:26-29).
- In the struggles of life, God is on our side fighting our battles (see Exodus 14:13-14 and Deuteronomy 1:30-33).
- In the desert, God’s seeming absence is just a different type of presence, one that we may not as yet have recognized (see Exodus 16).

- We can be secure with insecurity (see Romans 8:28).
- We should abandon ourselves generously to the purifying work of God (see Luke 23:46).

Third, we should remain faithful to prayer. In the desert, prayer is usually dry and therefore we find it difficult to remain faithful to it. For this reason, spiritual guides counsel us to avoid two extremes or temptations. The first temptation is to quit prayer, thinking that our best efforts are leading us nowhere. The second is to overload our prayer time with extra prayers, rosaries, Scripture reading, and more. It is not helpful to think that if we try harder we will once more feel the presence of God. This second temptation needs to be resisted not only because it blocks God’s purpose in the desert but also because it is (usually unconsciously) our attempt to remain active and in control of the prayer process.

In general, prayer in the desert leads us to be much less active and much more passive—less us, more God. The desert challenge involves learning to sit quietly in the presence of God, trusting that he is at work in us while we rest in him. Learning to “waste time and do nothing” in prayer is, without a doubt, one of the most difficult lessons we have to learn in the school of prayer. Unfortunately, most of us never learn to waste time gracefully in the presence of God. Such a practice goes completely against our Western, work-ethic nature that drives us to do, to achieve, and to produce. We are conditioned not to be satisfied until we see tangible results for our efforts. Because of this need, most of us fill the vacuum that we feel in the desert with readings or prayers of some sort. For those of us who are willing to try to do less (that is, to be less active) in prayer so that God may do more in us, the following suggestions might be helpful.

- Spend some time just being present with the Lord, aware that as we rest in him he is at work in us. Put aside all effort to achieve “success” in prayer and realize that achievement (growth) is God’s work.
- Spend some time slowly repeating prayers like: “Incline my heart to your will, O Lord” or “Make me want you, O Lord, more than anyone/anything in my life.”
- Take a phrase of Scripture, e.g., “You are my beloved Son” and dwell on it.
- Take one word like “Jesus” or “love” and repeat it gently and slowly, letting God do the work, leading us beyond conceptual thoughts, images, or feelings to wordless depths.

- Be present with Mary after she lost Jesus (see Luke 2:41-50) and at the foot of the cross (see John 19:25-27) which must have been a real dark night of the spirit for her. Then ask her to intercede for us so that we may have something of the faith which she had when she thought she had lost Jesus.
- Read something on spiritual dryness. Reading and rereading portions of a book like Fr. Green's *When the Well Runs Dry* will encourage us to persevere in the desert.

When we pray, we must place ourselves at God's disposal. What actually happens at prayer is God's business. This piece of wisdom should help to free us from thinking that it is up to us to make things happen in prayer. Once we relax, knowing that our role is to be faithful in coming aside, we can eliminate distractions from within and without, and pray as we feel led. ("Pray as you can, not as you can't.") The rest is in God's hands. If God chooses to bless us with a deep sense of his presence, we should indeed be very grateful. If the Lord chooses to bless us with his seeming absence (God is always only seemingly absent), we should try to be grateful for that because we believe that God knows what will help us best to grow. According to Fr. John Dalrymple, *"Our prayer is good when our hearts are fixed on God, even if it is filled with boring aridity or passionate turmoil."*

Fourth, we should seek the support of fellow pilgrims. While each person's inner journey is very personal and unique, much can be learned from the journeys of co-pilgrims. Only the foolish try to travel the inner journey alone. In the desert we are all beggars sharing morsels of bread with each other. Also, if we are blessed enough to be part of a small, faith-sharing group, we have available to us an excellent resource for the dry times. In the dry times, the prayers of fellow pilgrims are usually a big help.

Finally, this prayer of Fr. Henri Nouwen, taken from his book, *A Cry for Mercy: Prayers from the Genesee*, can be a source of great encouragement during times of spiritual dryness and desolation.

Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience or understand. My mind is not able to concentrate on you, my heart is not able to remain centered, and it seems as if you are absent and have left me alone. But in faith I cling to you. I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or

heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed.

Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort. I want to let you know that I love you even though I do not feel loved by you, and that I hope in you even though I often experience despair. Let this be a little dying I can do with you and for you as a way of experiencing some solidarity with the millions in this world who suffer far more than I do. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What insight in the article spoke to you the most?
2. Did you disagree with or have trouble with anything in the article?
3. What helps you to persevere in prayer during times of spiritual dryness?