"Like the ancient desert monastics whose wisdom tradition is 'a stream that surrounds him on all sides,' Benoît Standaert is a teacher worthy of the spiritual seeker who asks, 'Give me a word.' Each word in his alphabet connotes a world of meaning. There is rich food for the mind and the soul in these pages."

—Rev. Rachel M. Srubas, OblSB
Author of *City of Prayer: Forty Days with Desert Christians* and *The Girl Got Up: A Cruciform Memoir*

"This book is a spiritual gem. Written in the tradition of the Desert Father's transformation into God, Fr. Standaert uses each letter of the alphabet to designate spiritual practices to guide us in the art of living. What is more needed in our society today than such an art? As we make our way through this alphabet from Abba to Zero we find ourselves entering a world created from the wisdom of many ancient and modern traditions. We learn that each letter interacts with the one next to it just as monastics do in community. This type of interaction of word and person is true *lectio divina* and awakens the heart or core of our being where we find silence as the language of heaven."

—Fr. Brendan Freeman
Author of *Come and See: A Guide to Monastic Living*

"Reading Benoît Standaert's new book *Spirituality* is like having coffee with the prophet Isaiah. This longtime monk's 'alphabet of spiritual practices,' as the subtitle has it, welcomes us to the table with saints, desert fathers, ancient rabbis, Zen masters, and Hindu wise men. I have not been so delighted with a conversation in years, nor learned so much from a single book. Highly recommended."

—Paula Huston
Author of *One Ordinary Sunday: A Meditation on the Mystery of the Mass*

# Spirituality
# An Art of Living

*A Monk's Alphabet of Spiritual Practices*

Benoît Standaert, OSB

Translated from the Dutch by Rudolf V. Van Puymbroeck

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# TRANSLATOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I ask the same indulgence of the reader as the anonymous author of the prologue to the Greek translation of the book of Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, who says,

> You are invited . . . to read [this work] with goodwill and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labor in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophesies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original. (Sir Prol. 2)

While Fr. Standaert wrote in Dutch, he used Scripture and other sources written in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, and medieval Dutch. Rendering the author's intent in light of the different languages of his sources while remaining compliant with approved and respected English-language usage proved to be a significant challenge.

This translation uses the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible published by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America (1989). There are some exceptions to the rule indicated by footnote from the New Jerusalem Bible, Reader's Edition (New York: Doubleday, 1990), the Saint Joseph "New Catholic Edition" of the Holy Bible (1962), the Holy Bible in the Original King James Version (Gordonsville, TN: Dugan, 1988), and *The Revised Grail Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012).

My source for quotations from the Rule of Benedict is Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

All excerpts of poetry quoted by Fr. Standaert are my original translations.

I owe a great deal of thanks to David Gibson of Reston, Virginia, for reading and correcting the manuscript over the course of the two

years it took to complete this project. David was the founding editor of *Origins*, a documentary service of Catholic News Service, and served on the CNS editorial staff for thirty-seven years.

This translation was born out of a desire to help those for whom medicines and medical science fail. Fr. Standaert's work was immensely helpful to Bieke Vandekerckhove, author of *The Taste of Silence: How I Came to Live with Myself*, translated by Rudolf V. Van Puymbroeck (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015). As she battled ALS for more than twenty-six years, the monastic wisdom shared by Fr. Standaert, both in his writings and as a friend, became for her an indispensable source of nourishment and support.

The Spirit-filled life has its own mysterious way of leading us to beauty, kindness, and peace. One does not need to have a terminal medical condition to seek its blessings.

Rudolf V. Van Puymbroeck
January 31, 2017

# PREFACE

## *A Shift*

Spirituality exerts a powerful gravitational pull these days: everybody feels its attraction. We are witnessing a marked shift in the landscape of thinking and searching. "Philosophy has become the art of living. Theology is becoming spirituality," as Dutch philosopher Ilse Bulhof put it a few years ago. The philosophical works of the popular German author Wilhelm Schmid have words to the same effect: they constitute a veritable program, as is also true of his *A Philosophy of the Art of Living: The Way to a Beautiful Life.* He argues that this turning of the tide is nothing but a return to what philosophy has always been about, even though we sort of lost sight of it. Leaving Michel Foucault behind, he goes back to Montaigne and Seneca. In our day philosophy is rediscovering its roots in the wisdom traditions of humanity.

We see a similar evolution taking place in theological literature. We may wonder at the early and continuing popularity of people like Anselm Grün, Henri Nouwen, and Thomas Merton, but they all went through a process that led them to a particular kind of wisdom, a wisdom that is close to the heart and the body, close to the original forms of freedom and un-freedom. Indeed, all three men reach back to the wisdom of the Desert Fathers—several hundred monks of the fourth and fifth centuries in Egypt who, in the desert of Scetis, experimented with a way of mastery and passed it on through sayings and aphorisms. In Christian thought they continue the tradition of Seneca and his Stoic colleagues as well as the Epicureans. They ruminate on the words of Jesus and Paul, Ecclesiastes and Solomon, and they forge new proverbs, incisive and liberating, disarmingly human in their kindness and in their finely-honed sense of what may offend or what can be affirmed.[1]

1. It is appropriate to refer here to a kind of interreligious bible of all wisdoms, published by Bayard Presse in 2012, *Le livre des sagesses. L'aventure spirituelle de l'humanité* (*The Book of Wisdoms: Mankind's Spiritual Adventure*). The publication of such a book says a lot about the needs of our generation. For the Desert Fathers, see *Wijsheid uit de Woestijn. 365 dagen met de woestijnvaders* (*Wisdom from the Desert: 365 Days with the Desert Fathers*), collected and introduced by B. Standaert (Tielt: Lannoo, 2005).

### *Transformation*

I myself stand in this tradition. It is a stream that surrounds me on all sides; it permeates me and impregnates me. I keep receiving and cannot but pass it on. In the encounter with other cultures, at first African and in later years those of Eastern origin (Chinese traditions, Buddhism and Taoism), I found affirmation. Interestingly, wisdom turns out to be much more international, and more capable of intercultural identity, than science or technology.

Spirituality blossoms as an art of living, as wisdom to live by. Spirituality is, at least for me, the art of living. More precisely, spirituality is the cultivation of an art of living that through the application of concrete practices gradually works a transforming effect. Spirituality, thus, seeks transformation; we are dealing with a process. The list of these practices is ultimately indefinite, but the direction is constant: the transformative process leads to freedom, to beauty—to "the freedom of the glory of the children of God," in Paul's unforgettable formulation (Rom 8:21).

### *Doing Something Feasible Well*

A Buddhist aphorism may illuminate our perspective. Here is a saying by Rikyu, a Japanese Zen master from the sixteenth century: "Life is impossible. Let's do something feasible well. Maybe then life is possible after all?"

"Life is impossible"—this pronouncement reminds us immediately of the first truth of Gautama, the Buddha. Everything is *dukkha*, he said, "suffering," transitory, inconsistent. Life is not doable. It is impossible.

"Let us do something feasible well"—actually Rikyu was thinking very concretely about the offering of a cup of tea to a guest: let's do it well. Whoever has the good fortune to attend a Japanese tea ceremony—the *cha no yu*—discovers a ritual of perfection, entirely focused on the guest. Everything about it bespeaks harmony, purity, respect, and peace. Rikyu regulated its every aspect, even to the smallest details. After you drink the tea, life is different, although nothing has changed.

Other Japanese arts are based on the same principle, such as the arrangement of flowers in a vase: nothing more, nothing less. You can bend a bow, fit an arrow to the cord, and then cleanly and with

detachment swiftly release cord and arrow. Hit the bull's eye: simplicity, concentration of body and mind, creation of force or, better, drawing of force, aim. Everything is folded into oneness, without gimmicks, without words. No prior pretenses, no extra tricks. The movement is pure, as transparent as a ritual. That's the way "to do something feasible well."

Maybe we can take on life, in all its cluttered complexity, if we start with such simple feasible things, executed with perfection. The fundamental questions about life, about the practicality of human existence, the humanity of the person, and the humanization of life on our small blue planet, are still there. But the old wisdom of philosopher Karl Jaspers remains applicable: "This is certain: the world as it is must change. Otherwise we shall all perish. But the premise for this wholesale change is that I—here and now—change. Only then will there be a future: the world will change."

There is a complementary Eastern wisdom saying, in which we have perhaps less confidence: "He who in his room thinks the right thought is heard ten thousand miles away." Both pieces of wisdom are precious. I myself am responsible for the rightness of my life here and now. And if I do it right, I can stop worrying: the whole world will benefit, even the fish in the ocean and the stars in the sky.

## *Alphabet of Practices*

John Climacus, a seventh-century monk who lived high up on Mount Sinai, wrote a book of instruction called *The Ladder.* He gave his ladder thirty steps, the number that in his view corresponded to the thirty years of Jesus' hidden life, and for every step he discussed a virtue, something that accords life depth and freedom. His instruction was aimed at monks and at anybody with an interest in monastic life.

The present work unfolds as a complete alphabet, in which each letter supplies one or more practices. It comprises ninety-nine different practices or entrance gates to the spiritual life—just short of one hundred! The one gate that is missing exists beyond the last page, in life itself, and is different for everybody—unpredictable, a true surprise!

The book is addressed to believers and nonbelievers, the churched and the unchurched. Much comes out of the monastic tradition: this is my life. But is there not a monk in everybody or, in the intuition of Raimon Panikkar, is the monk not an archetype, present everywhere?

Monasteries are going through a deep winter these days: few candidates have shown up at our abbey in the last twenty-five years. But the intense longing for inner calm, mental freedom, artful living, and spirituality is felt by just about everybody, which demonstrates that there is great potential receptivity to the monastic inheritance. At least, that is my conviction. Thus, this book addresses itself to all who recognize that yearning in themselves and who are willing to go looking. Passing on the ancient monastic treasure to lay people is my purpose for this book.

More than half of the entries have been published in a more extensive treatment over the last thirty years in a thematic issue of *Heiliging* (*Hallowing*).[2] Here all materials are merged into a modest handbook that, above all, strives to be of practical use.

### *Spirituality as Art of Living*

By applying ourselves to mastering a set of concrete practices we fashion an art of living. One practice influences another, just like the manner in which we eat affects the way we sleep and vice versa. A person who fasts needs less sleep, which makes it easier to keep an hour's vigil in the night. People trained in silent meditation increase their powers of concentration and waste less energy in carrying out other tasks. Sitting behind the steering wheel of a car for hours on end is experienced differently by somebody who has learned to sit still in meditation, or who regularly reads a Bible passage in the morning, or whose memory is filled with verses from the psalms.

The different letters of the alphabet interact with each other and gradually build up a complete language system. After the discussion of each word, the reader will find references to other words, illustrating how the different practices fit together and form a philosophy of life.

### *Art of Living as Spirituality*

One of the remarkable aspects of the art of living envisioned in this book is that while everything is grace, everything is also discipline—a central paradox. "Give your blood and receive the Spirit." This

2. The periodical review, *Heiliging* (*Hallowing*), was published by the monks of St. Andrew's Abbey (Sint-Andries Abdij) in Zevenkerken, Belgium, from 1950 to 2009. Fr. Benoît Standaert was the editor and a frequent contributor from 1978 to 2003 [translator's note].

# A

## *ABBA*

We start with *abba*, one of the most cherished prayer words in the Christian tradition. *Abba* is an Aramaic word. According to the passion narrative of Mark, Jesus used it to address his God and Father ("*Abba*, Father") during his agony in the garden. A few scholars, such as Joachim Jeremias, deem it of equal value to our "dad." Others disagree. In any case, the word reveals a familiarity with God: it indicates an awareness of a filial relationship and the experience of being accepted as a child in his house.

According to Paul, the only other author to use this Aramaic word, the word *abba* was well-known to the Christians in Galatia and Rome. Apparently it had been passed on to them from the beginning of their life in Christ. With that name they received the Spirit and acknowledged they were children of God, co-heirs of Christ (see Gal 4:6 and Rom 8:15). As the ritual of baptism was a death, a perishing in the water, together with Christ, so the new members received from that death a new breath of life, the Holy Spirit. That Spirit cried in them "*Abba!* Father!" and lent them the dignity of being "son" in the Son. That spirit of childhood signified freedom from all other forms of slavish subjugation.

As an invocation, *Abba* is indeed one of our most-beloved mantras or prayer words. A Portuguese nun who lived for twenty years (between 1980 and 2000) in a bricked-in hermitage near Bethlehem in Palestine passed on to her sisters, the nuns of the Emmanuel convent, her heart's prayer. It consisted of four words: "Sim, *Abba*, Jesus, Amor," translated as "Yes-Amen, *Abba*, Jesus, Love." With these four words—names of God—she prayed in her heart. She started with the affirmation, the free acceptance, the Marian moment of assent; then she addressed first the Father, in his bottomless, intimate closeness, then Jesus, who revealed the depths of the Father, and finally the Spirit of love, who connects all people and all things.

Jesus taught that we should not use *abba* or "father" for anybody on earth: "And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven" (Matt 23:9) and "you are all brothers" (Matt 23:8). By recognizing God as our Father, we show that we are aware of our common brotherhood. Blessed indeed are they who treat their neighbors, wherever they may come from, out of this singular recognition.

Even though Jesus expressly said "call no one your father on earth" (Matt 23:9) certain Christians addressed their spiritual leader with *Abba* or Father. This phenomenon surfaced with the first monks in Egypt at the end of the third century and beginning of the fourth. The commonly accepted salutation of a master by his student became *Abba* or *Apa* (Coptic).

Why is it that these men, who proudly practiced the gospel as literally as possible, ended up contradicting the letter of Scripture so flagrantly? Or is there, in fact, no contradiction at all? Contemporary masters from the monastic tradition explain that the same Spirit who, after we have been initiated in Christ, makes us exclaim *Abba!* also put the word *Abba* on the lips of the first monks when they engaged with their own spiritual teacher. Looking at the teacher, they recognized Christ, the revealer of the Father. Literally, they did not call any earthly person *Abba*: They greeted the heavenly Father in him who, in God's name, provided them with nourishment and enlightenment in their own search for the One.

To say *Abba* connects us with Jesus and with the deepest connection to Jesus' own source. In his Rule, Benedict pays attention to the title of the superior: "abbot." Benedict sees the prompting of the Spirit in it, the Spirit who moves us to invoke *Abba*. As he notes, there is an act of faith in this. In obedience to a superior and ultimately to each other, monks in community discover that precious milieu of freedom and surrender that Jesus revealed to us all.

See also: Aspirations, Ejaculatory Prayers, God, Jesus and the Jesus Prayer, Name, Spirit

## ADORATION

"Just as a shadow is wiped out by the rising sun and disappears, so it is with the soul that reaches in prayer for the presence of the Most High" (after a saying from the Muslim tradition). "Everything becomes gift if we are able to prostrate ourselves" (after a Jewish *midrash*). "They who can adore cease to have worries" (after Francis of Assisi).

Adoration is one of the purest forms of life with the Holy One. Especially at night it comes about in simplicity and with force. In the night's stillness, adoration eventually becomes one continuous, wordless event. Adoration means that you acknowledge the Most High in his untouchable light full of diffidence and love. The soul becomes unified and hears within itself the plea of the poor psalmist: "Give me an undivided heart to revere your name" (Ps 86:11). Elizabeth of the Trinity exclaimed in one of her last notes:

> Adoration, ah! It's a word from heaven. In my view you can describe it as love's rapture: love annihilated by the beauty, by the power of the immeasurable grandeur of the Beloved. Love is overcome by a kind of powerlessness, in a complete, deep silence. It is of this silence that King David spoke when he said: "Silence is your praise." Yes, that is indeed the most beautiful song of praise, because it sings for all eternity in the lap of the tranquil Trinity. It is also "the final effort of the soul that overflows and has nothing more to say."[1]

Nowhere is the distance greater and the contact deeper than in adoration. Just as happened to the woman suffering from hemorrhages who was able, in the midst of the crowd, to touch the hem of his cloak in a gesture of faith and instantly felt in her body that her illness had left her, so the Holy One, the Most High, discerned in awe and trembling, touches the soul in its deepest intimacy.

In the most passionate forms of adoration, awe and love are no longer opposites. Diffidence and fervor are no longer distinguishable. John Cassian (ca. 400) speaks of "the prayer of fire" in which

1. Elizabeth of the Trinity, *La dernière retraite* (1906).

all discernible forms of prayer (grace, petition, intercession, praise) burn together.

To make time for just this one practice—kneeling with your whole being to let God be God—shows an awakened soul. This is the soul that takes to heart the Master's words: "Go into your room. . . . Strive first for the kingdom of God" (Matt 6:6, 33). "It is your face, O LORD, that I seek," prays the heart of the psalmist (Ps 27: 8). Or in the formulation of Bernard of Clairvaux: *facies informata formans*, meaning: God's face is without form, without traits, but those who seek it experience how it molds and reshapes the soul. In that fiery silence the heavenly Blacksmith forges his instruments to accord with his heart into instruments of peace and compassion.

See also: Confession of Faith, Gratitude, Meditation, Night Vigil

# *ANAWIM*: THE POOR AND THE HUMBLE

An understanding of the *anawim* is slowly entering into the mainstream of our language, even into some religious education manuals. The *anawim* form a distinct group of pious individuals (*chassidim*), with their own spirituality, within the people of Israel after the exile. The book of Psalms may be considered as the clearest exponent of this spiritual movement. They call themselves "poor," and "attendants" or "servants of the LORD," and are connected with each other in a worldwide community (see Ps 113:2 and Mal 1:11: "From the rising of the sun to its setting").

They are anything but downcast; on the contrary, they show great fighting spirit. They remember and recognize themselves in Moses and Elijah, in Jeremiah and in the later chapters of Isaiah (40–66). As lovers they constantly speak the Name (Lord, YHWH) and meditate on God day and night: "Merciful, charitable, patient, benevolent, full of compassion" (for Moses as a distant source, see Exod 34:6-7). In their mouths we find "the praise of God," in their hands "a two-edged sword"—the Word of God (see Ps 149:5-6).

What used to be a term of abuse, indicating a humiliating category in the social order, gradually became, under the influence of the great prophets Amos and Jeremiah, and also Zephaniah, a noble title worn with pride. They are poor in everything, except that they know the Lord and are known by Him!

All characters presented by Luke at the start of his gospel come from this milieu: Zacharias and Elisabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna. At the circumcision and naming of his son, Zacharias sings a totally new psalm. While visiting her niece Elisabeth, Mary exults in the *Magnificat*. From her well-furnished memory, she recreates a new song, in line with the psalms (see Pss 112, 103) or the song of Hannah, mother of Samuel (1 Sam 2). Simeon also creates a short hymn in the temple when he is allowed to see the Anointed One with his own eyes and to carry him in his arms. The "poor" know a thing or two about praise!

Jesus, born and raised in that milieu, does not hesitate to refer to himself with the honorable title of "poor": "learn from me,"

he says in the middle of Matthew's gospel, "for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Matt 11:29). The double expression used by the evangelist intends to explain the rich Hebrew notion of *anaw* in as nuanced a fashion as possible in the Greek. Jesus praises this poverty as blessing: "Blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (from Matt 5:3-10).

In the Torah we read this about Moses: "Now the man Moses was very humble (*anaw*), more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num 12:3). Jesus as portrayed in Matthew applies this concept to himself. The reference to Moses is clear. With this allusion in mind, we can read Matthew's text as telling us: "Here the new Moses is speaking." Thus we can emphasize the continuity with Moses, but we can also set off the new against the old. The latter is more frequent in the apologetic tradition. But when dealing with poverty or humility, does it make sense to play Moses against Jesus or Jesus against Moses? That would subvert the very idea of humility and, hence, defile the hidden greatness of both.

In the Jewish commentaries we read: "Why can we not find anybody today who talks as frankly with God as Moses? Because neither can we find anybody today who kneels as deeply in humility" (*Midrash Rabba* on Exodus 33).

The tradition of the "poor" has been carried forward in Israel as well as in the Church. In generation after generation poor women and men have applied themselves to all one hundred and fifty psalms, playing with the letters of the alphabet to praise the Lord in everything and to hallow his name until death. In today's interreligious dialogue, it's mainly the poor who find each other, in all openness, regardless of the differences among creeds, theological systems, or religious practices. The Buddhist nun from Nagasaki feels at home with the Trappist sisters of Berkel-Enschot while the Franciscan nun of Malonne near Namur rediscovers with joy the "brilliant poverty" of the Poverello in the Japanese Zen convent near Nagoya.

The Lord God himself pays attention to the *anawah* (poverty) of the *anawim*, as we are taught with great authority in Psalm 22: "For he has never despised nor scorned the poverty of the poor." God can do everything, except this: to despise the poor in their greatest poverty. "A broken and humble heart, O God, you will not spurn,"

says Psalm 51. Yes, "the Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the poor (*anawim*) with salvation (*yeshu'ah*)" (Ps 149:4). He crowns them in fact "with Jesus," as Christian commentators have invariably read this verse.

See also: Humility, Jesus and the Jesus Prayer, Mary, Memory, Mercy, Name, Psalmody

# C

## CHASTITY

Love and chastity go hand in hand. Woe to chastity that is not practiced out of love. Woe to love that excludes chastity. There are those who are celibate by necessity and are chaste and affectionate, and there are celibates by vocation who are afraid of love or who have cast chastity aside. There are married couples who in their love have developed the most sublime levels of chastity and who, at the end of their life together, still experience their sweet love each and every day with modesty as young lovers do.

If love is a source that never runs dry, it is thanks to chastity. Chastity keeps the heart alert, not to avoid love in fear, but to approach love with greater diffidence. You can never be too chaste in love, you can never overdo love when you have a chaste attitude. Having both go hand in hand is an art and, like every art, requires time and patience.

Chastity is a refined form of love and not its opponent or enemy. In our Western culture a rather odd development has taken place in the last few decades: often even the most elementary forms of chastity are deemed unnecessary or uncalled-for, indeed they are even found laughable. In the encounter with other cultures, for example, African, Indian, or Vietnamese, this creates incomprehension; people from other cultures are frequently offended by the lifestyle of Westerners.

The irony of this development leads to the following observation: where there is a greater practice of chastity there is more beauty ready to be admired, while a clear lack of sexual modesty may actually extinguish life's erotic dimension. In this respect, we from the West can learn a lot from others if, of course, we are still able to be open to it. The experience of chaperones who accompanied students from our Western schools to building camps in Vietnam or Congo shows that our young people have a difficult time appreciating norms that have meaning for others and how little inclined they are to accepting and learning even a little bit from others in this regard.

Chastity adds value to the whole area of how we relate to others. A chaste look is the fruit of a struggle, the sign of a victory, and a blessing for the person who receives it. That struggle is all the harder when popular culture diverges from traditional values. Those who carry out their jobs as nurse or doctor, as pedicurist or physical thera-

pist, or all who simply in their manner of dress, are able to convey gentleness as well as chastity, gain not only the appreciation of others but will themselves find greater satisfaction in the practice.

As the Dutch poetess Ida Gerhardt wrote, "What with timidity was abided, in timidity arrived."[1] A reciprocal chaste attitude graces life with an incomparable glow. No earthly world is more beautiful.

See also: Detachment, Fear of the Lord, Mary, Patience, Reciprocity, Sexuality

1. "*Wat met schromen werd verbeid, is met schroom gekomen,*" from *Green Pastures* in *Het levend Monogram* (1955).

## CONFESSION OF SINS

While confession of sins is an age-old practice, very few old practices have experienced as many swings as the confession of sins, the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. When Pope Pius X opened access to the sacrament of the Eucharist to children of six or seven years, all these children were also taught how to confess their sins. In schools and convents there were confessions at regular intervals: monthly or sometimes weekly. Perhaps we have known no century in which people used the sacrament of penance and reconciliation as often as in the previous one. But the last twenty-five years have witnessed a precipitous decline in the practice, certainly in Western Europe. However, if you travel through Poland during Holy Week you see something totally different: people by the tens waiting patiently in line for the opportunity to go to confession. And they are of all ages.

Perhaps the time has come for a revision of the practice. If we are ready for it, let's do it then as adults, spiritually awake and mature.

1) There is no need to condemn myself. Yes, I appear before God as the judge, as the Psalmist prays in Psalm 51, but it's not up to me to pass judgment on myself. In my proceeding I cannot be both accused *and* judge!

2) I come to confess my sins, but also to profess his righteousness and mercy. The first action gains deeper meaning in light of the second. There is an unbroken link between the two. Let us never focus single-mindedly only on the confession of our sins.

3) To confess indeed involves naming and bringing to light what I have done wrong. But in doing so I also discard all of that, I disengage. It serves me well to detach completely from my sins.

4) It is possible to confess without contrition, but this indicates an inner attachment to self-righteousness. It has been said of the famous *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau that they were confessions without contrition and without penance! Yes, he recounted his life in detail but there never was a smidgen of contrition, let alone penance. Contrition breaks through to our true condition, there where our heart is open and broken in pieces before God.

Psalm 51 is an excellent confessional mirror; it helps us to appear truthfully before God. Authentic contrition shatters our tendency to keep on justifying ourselves. Also, even if we can repent only in some inadequate manner, there is already true repentance. After all, contrition is not only our work: the person expressing repentance allows God's Spirit to enter, which creates the right condition in the heart. Psalm 51 also deals with that Spirit.

5) The sacrament of penance and reconciliation is a conversation between faith and faith. Penitent and priest speak and listen in faith. With either of them, knowledge of psychology or insight into human nature should not dominate, no matter how finely honed and no matter how welcome, but rather the miracle of a conversation from faith to faith (see Rom 1:17). Here God is speaking. The confessor listens believing in his heart that God is at work in a soul in the process of conversion. And the penitent speaks in faith in order to receive from God the words that will illuminate his life. Confession is an event of gratitude and light. The confessor is often privileged to see how the soul that pours itself out before God already has been touched by grace and completely forgiven. In such a confession, joy predominates—in God, in the priest, and in the penitent's heart.

6) Let confessor and penitent both be ready for the unpredictable and the unplanned: confession is an excellent opportunity for encounter.

7) Since the sins are always the same, does it make sense to go to confession? Thank heavens for the lack of variety! By confessing them again, I acknowledge that I fall and that I pick myself up. Probably there is no end to the falling—let's make sure then there is also no end to picking ourselves up! In what bad shape I would be if I fall and resign myself to it, without the strength to get back up! If I continue to go to confession I keep trusting in God's mercy and that keeps me standing, while I have learned not to take myself too seriously or to judge others as if I were perfect. I know my weakness and in my weakness I have learned how His power accepts me time and again and gets me up. This mature understanding grows with regular confessions, and only that way.

8) How often do we have to confess? No longer are there rules the way there used to be (see the canon law). Sometimes scrupulous people ask if it's alright to go to confession daily. Physicians and psychiatrists know there is little or nothing wrong with that. It is and remains a salutary custom for Christians when preparing for the celebration of a feast first to gather and to ask for forgiveness. To ask God and each other. Along the same line, it is also a healthy habit to prepare for the five or six principal feast days of the liturgical year by making use of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. We can start on a long voyage or a totally new undertaking by going to confession the day before. If you lead a stable and regular life, it is not necessary to go and confess more than five or six times a year. It is a personal feeling: it has to do with light. After confession you experience light, but after a number of weeks the light wanes and it's well to place your life again in the light of God's mercy. Even involuntarily you get dust on your feet and a full bath is necessary now and then.

9) Our whole Christian life is about forgiving. An Our Father, a Kyrie ("Lord have mercy"), the Eucharist itself: they all offer forgiveness. In addition, confession provides an opportunity for a deeper and more personal encounter with God as the One who reconciles us in a radical way with existence.

Is confession really that important? Charles de Foucauld, now beatified, at first lived a highly irregular life until he hit upon the idea of asking a priest for advice. He was hardly halfway through his statement when the mild and ordinarily nondirective Father Huvelin told him forcefully and in no uncertain terms: "Kneel down and confess!" Then something broke open inside Charles: it was the start of a whole new life. He became a Trappist monk and ended up as a hermit in the Sahara. Now he belongs to the beatified: nobody who knew him before his confession could have surmised such a final destination.

Rarely is the act of confession as staggering and determinative as in the case of the future Brother Charles, but what happened to him shows the positive power contained in a confession. What is important is not the act of confessing, but the forgiveness. In a confession God and human being meet, as for that matter in every sacrament.

That is precisely also the definition of sacrament: a meeting place between God and human being. But far too often we put on blinders and look only at the part of the person.

In the new universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we learn what is the part of the person, and what is the work of God:

> What is the part of the human being? Three things: "be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction" and all three under "prompting of the Holy Spirit" (1450 and 1453). All too frequently we only think of the confession, the profession of our sins, and in doing so we most often leave far too little room for the "prompting of the Holy Spirit."
>
> And what is the action of God, in the name of Jesus Christ? He does four things, thus one more than the human person, and what's more, the person does it under the prompting of the Holy Spirit! Through the apostolic work of the Church he forgives sins, determines the manner of satisfaction, and prays and does penitence for the sinner.

Here we taste how deeply the sacrament of penance and reconciliation touches you and reconciles you. In the priest to whom you address yourself you meet somebody who prays for you and with you, and who does penance for you. This is more than merely the reconciliation between individuals and their Creator. A whole gamut of reconciliations opens up in the sacrament. Using a text taken from an earlier document, the Catechism says this about it:

> It must be recalled that . . . this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations, which repair the other breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his innermost truth. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with all creation. (1469)

A little further on we read: "In this sacrament, the sinner, placing himself before the merciful judgment of God, *anticipates* in a certain way *the judgment* to which he will be subjected at the end of his earthly life. . . . In converting to Christ through penance and faith,

the sinner passes from death to life and 'does not come into judgment' (see John 5:25)" (1470).

We arrive at something we do not find in our usual world: life without being judged. While we normally have to live in a merciless place, a harsh world without forgiveness, the practice of the sacrament ripens our inner being into a mature existence. Then we can put aside the yoke of so many condemnations and, gently reconciled, we can blossom into quiet and forceful peacemakers while we season our milieu and culture with seeds of joyful hope.

See also: Forgiveness, Love for One's Enemies, Mercy, Peace, Profession of Faith, Sacrament, Spirit

## CONVERSATION

To maintain a conversation is an art, indeed one of the most difficult ones, and, these days, one of the most imperiled.

Radio and TV play such an important role in some households that there is no time left in the whole day to have a conversation. Some youngsters feel uncomfortable in the presence of a guest, or in a quiet moment in the living room. After a few minutes they excuse themselves, jump up, and disappear behind their computer or music apparatus. The narcissistic person—product of our culture—harbors a destructive proclivity that destroys the art of conversation. In order to carry on a conversation we have to learn to become interested, with an open mind, in the stories of somebody else, whether the subject is football or developments in Central Africa, religion or the recent elections. Those versed in conversation take interest in everything, are able to think along with the person who is talking, and do not have to intervene. They enjoy, quietly and receptively—you can see it in their body language. All this is too much for self-absorbed individuals: they get up suddenly, pull back, think it's all nonsense, believe they have more important things to think about.

It's no small thing to develop a culture of conversation. It requires time, quiet, a clear mind that is humbly receptive, wide-ranging interests, a sharing attitude, and appropriate modesty. Conversely, the archenemies of conversation are haste and busyness, noise, self-importance, rancor and gossip, lack of humor.

All great civilizations have recorded stories of unforgettable conversations, often around a table, where heaven and earth, life and death, war and peace, but also friendship and intimacy, asceticism and mysticism, the names of God, and the powers of herbs, have a place. Among the best known in the West are Plato's dialogues and the table conversations of Plutarch and Erasmus. In India, Hindus and Muslims have preserved brilliant conversations around an enlightened master: poetry, philology, ancient commentaries on the Upanishads, verses from the Koran, or expositions by Sufi masters—everything can find shelter under the wings of a broad, open mind. The dialogue wells up like a source. Thanks to great breadth of knowledge, the master does not dominate but confirms and elicits, suggests, and engages in free association.

Monastic literature used to speak of *colloquium* or *colllatio* (meeting for discussion). In Egypt *colloquium* was already practiced at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth century: Abba Ammonas received the brothers as evening fell. They discussed what had transpired during a day of solitude and silence, whether good or bad, humbly and sincerely. They shared the light they may have walked in that day. The *abba* summarized the experiences and put difficulties or possibilities in a larger context. Fortified, they returned to their cells until the following evening. In the company of people who equally searched for God in the purest way, they fed on each other and grew in a shared light. In many of the recorded conversations, two *abbas* sit together while hardly a word is exchanged. Sometimes the dialogue grows toward a pure silence, because all words fail: a fiery glow consumes any verbal communication. In wonder, they keep a silent vigil with the grandeur that arose in their midst.

Clearly, we are in the process of rediscovering the art of conversation. In the same way that book clubs are created for the silent reading of great literature, it should not surprise us if, by extension, discussion evenings are organized so friends can rediscover the delightful art of the open and sustained conversation.

See also: Dialogue, Friendship, Judge (Do Not), *Lectio Divina*, Wonder

# F

## FASTING

Of all the useful instruments in our arsenal for a spiritually liberated life, fasting is, nowadays, one of the most forgotten. We, Christians in the West, are the only ones among all religions of the world who no longer realize what fasting can mean.[1] In the East, Christians still know its meaning very well. And it is the Muslims in our midst who are the ones who now show us that there is joy in fasting for a whole month in global solidarity at Ramadan.

To argue for the re-introduction of an authentic practice of fasting is an uphill battle. Talk about fasting scares many people off. Actually, there are only two kinds of people: those who fast and everybody else. Bringing up the subject of fasting in a conversation tends to strike terror in the listener; and those who have no experience with fasting but would like to make counterarguments are quickly disarmed by the authority that comes from experience.

A few aphorisms and proverbs from various traditions may shake us awake and call our attention to the fact that fasting has to do with wisdom and joy:

> "Love fasting" (*ieiunium amare*), Rule of Benedict (RB 4:13).
>
> "Be cheerful in fasting" (*in ieiuniis hilares*) (Rule of Macarius).
>
> "Fasting, the soul's joy" (Abba Helladius).
>
> "Fasting is a check against sin for the monk. He who discards it is like a rampaging stallion."
> "It is better to eat meat and drink wine and not eat the flesh of one's brethren through slander" (Abba Hyperechius).

1. The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says nothing meaningful about the practice of fasting and refers to canon law, which itself is quite limited on the subject. Fasting is recommended on only two days: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. People older than sixty are no longer required to fast. And it is not supposed that during a day of fasting one should not eat anything at all.

“Fasting humbles the body, and keeping vigil purifies the spirit” (Abba Longinus).

“Hunger and keeping vigil cleanse the heart of impure thoughts and the body of the urges of the enemy, so as to make a dwelling for the Holy Spirit” (Anonymous saying of one of the Fathers).

“The whole body is transformed by fasting, keeping vigil, and repentance, and thus it may be led again by the Spirit. . . . In this manner, I believe, it already receives ‘the spiritual body’ that it will have at the resurrection of the just” (Abba Anthony the Great, first letter).

“Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen, ‘How should one fast?’ Abba Poemen said to him, ‘For my part, I think it better that one should eat every day, but only a little, so as not to be satisfied.’ Abba Joseph said to him, ‘When you were younger, did you not fast two days at a time, abba?’ The old man said, ‘Yes, even for three days and four and the whole week. The Fathers tried all this out as they were able and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount. They have left us this royal way, which is light.’ ”[2]

“If you want to win the battle with the first demon, the one of gluttony, and muzzle him, keep to these three rules: 1) never eat prior to the ordained time; 2) never eat till you are full; 3) gradually become indifferent to the quality of the food that is served” (John Cassian).

“A stomach that is always full cannot see secrets” (Zulu saying).

“Eat when you are hungry and drink when you are thirsty. And know this: all that is too much is detrimental” (Lao Tsu, Chinese sage).

“Most people eat too much. They live on one-fourth of what they eat. The rest serves to feed physicians” (found on Egyptian papyrus, third millennium BCE).

2. This and the previous sayings are from *Sayings of the Desert Fathers.*

> "Fasting is something between God and me. Feeling powerless, I rested my head on God's knees, and I fasted" (Mahatma Gandhi).
>
> "I only know two philosophies of life: the first begins with fasting and ends with a feast; the second starts with a feast and ends with a blasting headache" (Venerable Fulton Sheen).
>
> "You must fast on Fridays. Fasting does not mean to eat something in lieu of something else, but means not eating at all. Those who fast make themselves transparent. Others become transparent to them. The pain of others enters them and they are defenseless. Thus, those who do not wish to be consumed by love, let them fill up their senses and eat heartily" (Lanza del Vasto).
>
> "Prayer and fasting give us a pure heart. A pure heart can see God. When we see God in our neighbor we will know peace, love, unity, and joy" (Saint Teresa of Calcutta).

Let us fast joyously, for example on Fridays. In the ancient monastic tradition meals were taken twice a day: around noon and around three in the afternoon. A small fast meant skipping the first meal and eating for the first time around 3:00 p.m. Those who wanted a major fast moved the first meal to the evening. Benedict wanted his monks to take their last meal prior to sunset. Other fathers said the sun never had seen them eat: they ate after sundown. The fast practiced by Muslims follows this venerable tradition. This is perhaps something we all could do: waiting to eat till evening on Fridays and, thus, not to eat anything from Thursday evening to Friday evening.

In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus discusses three practices much beloved by the Pharisees: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The three go hand in hand. They support each other. They encompass the three possible relationships: *to the other* through alms, *to God* through prayer, and *to yourself and the universe* through fasting. Relating to the other receives emphasis in the Bible's prophetic tradition; relating to God occupies the center of attention in the priestly tradition; and the third relationship is analyzed with discernment by the sages and expressed in their proverbs. To neglect any one of these three relationships works to our detriment. When the third pole—relation to oneself and the cosmos—is neglected, self-knowledge

and proper relationship to the universe are lost. What room, then, is there for wisdom?

Jesus knew how to fast. Some people think he abolished the tradition. But the opposites of fasting and feasting are part and parcel of his life. Let's not forget that he started his public ministry with a long fast of forty days. There is little reason to believe that this was purely symbolic. At other times he praises fasting, albeit in a discrete, unassuming manner: "when you fast, put oil on your head" (Matt 6:16). This is not just a paradox. In fasting toxins are excreted through perspiration and the body starts to smell. Anointing or perfuming not only masks the smell but the body is cleansed, inside and out.

Just once do we see Jesus react negatively to the practices of the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist. He introduces a new norm that will become a sign for the Christian movement: "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matt 8:15; cf. Isa 53:8 on the Suffering Servant). The feast is defined by the presence of the Bridegroom; fasting signifies mourning his absence. As a result, for Christians the practice of fasting acquires a clear Christological reference point; it is not just something that is determined by the calendar. Whenever we learn about somebody's suffering we can show our solidarity by a fast, and whenever there is a feast we can freely break our fast because of the nearness of the bridegroom. Occasionally fasting with a person from another religious tradition creates an enormous interreligious bond.

Some of the church fathers transmit a word of Jesus that is not found in the gospels but that comes very close to other sayings of the Lord. Jesus would not only have said that we have to bless those who curse us, or to love those who hate us, or to pray for those who persecute us, he would also have said that it is well to "fast for those that persecute you."[3] Fasting and praying go hand in hand, the former reinforces the latter. That is why it is truly vile if we fast in form while at the same time we spread slander, or if we ostentatiously sit in sackcloth and ashes but go on extorting the poor. That kind of

3. *The Didache Online* 1:3, Paraclete Press, reproduced under Creative Commons license (accessed January 20, 2016) [translator's note].

conceit was already exposed in Isaiah's great chapter 58, which we hear each year at the beginning of Lent and which comes to us as a stern warning. Church father Basil the Great wrote indignantly, "To fast means to become a stranger to all vices. You don't eat meat but devour your brother! You abstain from wine but don't moderate your curses in the slightest! You wait till evening to eat your food but spend the whole day at the tribunal! Woe to those 'who are drunk, but not with wine' (Isa 51:21)."

Eating and fasting touch our humanness in a most vital aspect: every child struggles with it in the oral phase, which is so fundamental to the further development and structuring of life. Thus, we are dealing with something that is absolutely elementary and essential. The first sin in Genesis has to do with the mouth, just as the first temptation of Jesus in the desert ("command these stones to become loaves of bread" Matt 4:3). For that matter, life in the desert is marked by especially this kind of trial, as shown in the meditation in Deuteronomy 8, referenced by Jesus: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).

In her psychoanalytic study of Bible texts, Marie Balmary points out the foundational role of the primary command and prohibition: don't just devour everything (*ne pas dévorer).* What is out of the question is excessive, unlimited consumption. That is prohibited. You may eat from every tree except that one (see Gen 2:16-17). How wise is that command! And it can be found in just about all cultures. It establishes a framework against unbridled gluttony. In Africa there is a traditional rule of foregoing one's own food for the guest who passes by.

The question arises: as a culture, what are we doing today? Aren't we plundering the biosphere, devouring it, ruining it, despite all the promises made at Kyoto?[4] The great powers were the first to shirk their obligations. And they do it with impunity. How much longer?

A culture of fullness is afraid of emptiness, silence, slowness, fasting, openness, everything other than itself. The person who never fasts seeks to negate the other. Do we actually realize how serious this is?

4. See Detachment, n. 1.

The mystical side of fasting is fully elucidated in Jewish teaching, which deals with a fast that precedes creation, a fast in God. In the beginning God created heaven and earth by effectuating a contraction on himself. God did *tsimtsum.* He fasted (*tsom*) on himself! And thanks to the thus-created emptiness, otherness could be born.

Three centuries ago a great rabbi by the name of Judah Loew, also called the Maharal of Prague, lived in the city of Prague. He studied the teaching of God's contraction on himself and said,

> God does it in order not to be everything. This makes it possible for the human person with his innate freedom to arrive on the scene. But if from his side the human being cannot bring himself to fear God, then he will completely fill up that emptiness, worse: he becomes everything, in a totalitarian fashion. Then there is no more world, no more creation, and no more God. . . . Thus, for the world to be world depends completely on the human person! He also must fast on himself and needs to fear God.[5]

Fasting gives expression to my fear of the Lord. This creates a proper relationship in all directions and with everything that is different. Through fasting I create an emptiness for the otherness that exists outside myself. The person who never fasts lives out of an abundance that sooner or later chases everybody else away, that steamrolls along and reduces everything to itself, until only one world remains, ours, the same, and nothing different is left, or simply nothing is left at all.

So, good fasting is an act of wisdom, of balance, of immense respect. Fasting is even a political and a cosmic deed, a deed that engages the world's salvation.

How to put this into action? Try to eat nothing for a twenty-four period (see Lanzo del Vasto). Have no fear: the puny ego, just like a spoiled child, will manifest itself soon enough and whisper all manner of things in your ear. Be a wise mother for that child. Don't spoil it! The child will calm down after less than ten fasts. The more difficult thing after a somewhat longer fast is how to resume eating. Especially, do not hurry! Start with little and chew your food well. Do it for God and nothing else; do it on account of the Bridegroom,

5. André Neher, *Le puits de l'exil. Tradition et modernité: la pensée du Maharal de Prague* (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 175–77.

the reference point used by Jesus in the Gospel. Maintain silence during the day of the fast. Search for God in his word. Fill the time gained with quietude, mindfulness, and prayer. Pay attention to all the needs you know of. Put things in order. Seek peace and experience the poorest in your own body. Bless them and do not fail to attend to those hidden deeds of which the left hand does not need to know what the right hand does. Fast with a joyful spirit and end your fast as if it were a quiet feast. Everything becomes communion and your thanksgiving knows no end.

See also: Eating, Emptiness, Feasting, Gratitude, Night Vigil, Solidarity, *Tsimtsum*

## FEAR OF THE LORD

If our art of living is to have depth, we must devote ourselves to that distinctive attitude that the Bible calls "fear of the Lord."[1] Contrariwise, a world that lacks this dimension of awe before God is truly a terrible world. The paradox is this: those who, in contemplation of the Lord, allow awe into their hearts gradually lose their fear of anything. But those who live their lives denying that awe soon make fools of themselves or turn dangerous.

We must admit that the culture that surrounds us and that we breathe in every single day has lost all familiarity with the expression "fear of God." Even the very term is unattractive: we find it rather repulsive, and we spontaneously shrink from it. But it was not always so.

Whoever opens the Bible's Wisdom Books (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, but also the Psalms) discovers passionate praise for that "fear of the Lord" as a source of happiness, a way forward in life, the beginning and end of all life in wisdom.

Ecclesiastes concludes with this statement: "Fear God . . . for that is the whole duty of everyone" (Eccl 12:13). And the wisdom traditions repeat over and over: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps 111:10 *inter alia*). Another psalmist implores fervently: "give me an undivided heart to revere your name" (Ps 86:11; in *The Revised Grail Psalms* rendered as "single-hearted to fear your name.") This is at the same time the only and the loftiest essence of his searching desire for God. "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord," his whole life becomes blessed into the next generation, and Jerusalem and Israel shall know peace. God's blessing appears without limit as soon as we make room in ourselves for that holy reverence (see Ps 128).

In Isaiah we read that Jesse's offspring, a personification of the coming Messiah, receives the spirit of the Lord in abundance. The

1. A more extensive treatment of this topic can be found in Benoît Standaert, *De schat van God. Over de vreze des Heren. Een zoektocht door 25 eeuwen spiritualitei* (*God's Treasure: On Fear of the Lord: An Inquiry through 25 Centuries of Spirituality*) (Tielt: Lannoo, 2005). Published in French as *La Crainte de Dieu*, ed. Anne Sigier (Quebec, 2006).

Spirit is manifested in a series of seven gifts, in descending order. The first and highest gift is that of wisdom, the seventh and the last is that of the fear of the Lord, which is often equated with piety. Of this figure it is also said: "His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD" (Isa 11:3).

The Desert Fathers distill the same delight in their Proverbs: "Our breath and fear before the LORD must become one. We cannot but live by breathing that fear in and out."

Abba Poemen said: "The fear of God is simultaneously the beginning and the end. Because it is written: 'The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord.' On the other hand, when Abraham had finished preparing the altar for the offering of his son Isaac, God said to him: 'Now I know that you fear God.' " Abba Poemen also said: "As the breath which comes out of his nostrils, so does a man need humility and the fear of God."[2]

In the correspondence of John and Barsanufius, the wise hermits from Gaza (fifth to sixth centuries), we read how they often summarized the spiritual life in just two verbs: *to fear* God and *to thank* him in everything. They breathe in fear and breathe out thanks. In this manner their whole respiration is accomplished.

In various chapters of his Rule, Benedict sketches a portrait of the brother tasked with a specific function, such as infirmarian, guest master, cellarer, or prior. He always notes this one characteristic: he must be "*timens Dominum*, one who fears the Lord." We note that right away this opens an inner space. This person has an inner attitude of openness, accessibility; this person is not just occupied with himself. In one of these portraits Benedict amplifies that he has to be "a brother who is full of the fear of God" (*cuius animam timor Domini possidet*, RB 53:21). Awe of the Lord has conquered the man's inner castle and taken possession of it (*possidet*). Henceforth the brother belongs to the Lord and acts in Him.

When someone has acquired a holy reverence for the Lord, she gradually becomes possessed of a desire for God. Her life becomes unthinkable without Him. Once this basic attitude is acquired, everything receives depth. It qualifies even one's love of God—there is no contradiction between love and awe. In light of this, many of the masters made the following distinction. Beginners have a fear:

2. *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Poemen 49), 173.

they are afraid of the day of judgment, punishment, and hell. But, according to the great teachers, also the perfect ones know fear: awe, timidity, and immense respect are part and parcel of the holy life of those who come closest to God.

Many writers have discussed the relationship between love and fear; Julian, the anchoress from Norwich (early fifteenth century), penned perhaps the most lucid clarification. She distinguishes several forms of fear and, in its most authentic form, finds it a "brother" of love. It is worthwhile to read the whole discussion:

> For I recognize four kinds of fear. One is the fear of attack which suddenly comes to a man through weakness. This fear does good, for it helps to purify people, just like bodily sickness or other sufferings which are not sinful; for all such suffering helps people if it is endured patiently.
>
> The second fear is that of punishment, whereby someone is stirred and woken from the deep sleep of sin; for those who are deep in the sleep of sin are for the time being unable to perceive the gentle comfort of the Holy Ghost, until they have experienced this fear of punishment, of bodily death and of spiritual enemies. And this fear moves us to seek the comfort and mercy of God; and so it helps us and enables us to be contrite through the blessed touch of the Holy Ghost.
>
> The third is doubtful fear. Since it leads us on to despair, God wants us to turn doubtful fear into love through the knowledge of love; that is to say, the bitterness of doubt is to be turned into the sweetness of tender love through grace. For it can never please our Lord that his servants doubt his goodness.
>
> The fourth is reverent fear; the only fear that we can have which thoroughly pleases God is reverent fear; and it is very gentle; the more we have it, the less we feel it because of the sweetness of love. Love and fear are brothers; and they are rooted in us by the goodness of our Maker, and they will never be taken from us for all eternity. To love is granted to us by nature, and to love is granted to us by grace; and to fear is granted to us by nature, and to fear is granted to us by grace. It is fitting that God's lordship and fatherhood should be feared, as it is fitting for his goodness to be loved; and it is fitting for us who are his servants and his children to fear him as lord and as father, as it is fitting for us to love him for his goodness. And though this

reverent fear and love are not separable, yet they are not one and the same. They are two in their nature and their way of working, yet neither of them may be had without the other. Therefore I am certain that those who love also fear, though they may only feel it a little.

Even though they may appear to be holy, all the fears which face us, apart from reverent fear, are not truly so; and this is how they may be told apart. The fear that makes us quickly flee from all that is not good and fall upon our Lord's breast like a child upon its mother's bosom, which makes us do this with all our mind and all our willpower, knowing our feebleness and our great need, knowing God's everlasting goodness and his blessed love, seeking salvation only in him and clinging to him with sure trust—the fear which makes us do this is natural, gracious, good and true. And everything contrary to this is either completely wrong or partly wrong.

This is the remedy, then: to recognize them both and refuse the wrong one. For the same natural profit which we gain from fear in this life through the gracious working of the Holy Ghost, shall in heaven be gracious, courteous and delightful in God's sight. And so in love we should be familiar and close to God, and in fear we should be gracious and courteous to God, and both equally.[3]

And she ends her reflections with a supplication:

Let us ask God that we may fear him reverently and love him humbly and trust him strongly; for when we fear him reverently and love him humbly, our trust is never in vain; the greater and stronger our trust in God, the more we please and honour the Lord we trust. And if we fail in this reverent fear and meek love (which God forbid we should), our trust will soon slacken for the time being. And therefore we have a great need to pray to God that by his grace we may have this reverent fear and meek love, as his gift, in our hearts and in our deeds; for without this, no one can please God.[4]

3. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love,* trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), 162–64.

4. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 164.

When, a century and a half earlier, Francis of Assisi discusses fear of the Lord, he spontaneously experiences a surprising and revelatory fullness in the expression: in the fear of God it is Jesus himself who fears, who restrains himself, and who does not wish to overpower the human person as he draws near. The Lord approaches our freedom only with timidity, with apprehension:

> What with timidity was abided
> in timidity arrived. (Ida Gerhardt, from *Green Pastures*)

By experiencing awe before the Lord we are able, sooner or later, to detect this mysterious reciprocity. It is a source of enormous joy and inexhaustible bliss. Who would not want this kind of fear?

Toward the end of the last century Jewish thinker and philosopher André Neher drew attention to the original thought of Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (ca. 1700). Rabbi Loew reminded everybody that, according to Talmudic wisdom, God had created the world for only one purpose: to have reverence for the Lord. He also noted that God could do anything, except this: to experience that awe. This depends solely on the human person. Well, if God withdrew an instant to make room for otherness and to create the world, then it is imperative that, reciprocally, we humans show awe before God. If we are incapable of that, then soon there will be no more world, no more human being, and no more God.[5]

The warning of the eighteenth-century master from Prague sounds even sharper now that we witness a built-up world without any trace of true awe before God. If we wish to live in a world fit for humanity, we can only make it come about by continuing to reserve the deepest respect for God.

In the Catholic liturgy we pray Psalm 67 on New Year's Day as a response to the ancient priestly blessing in Numbers:

> The Lord bless you and keep you;
> the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
>   and be gracious to you;
> the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
>   and give you peace. (Num 6:22)

5. See Neher, *Le puits de l'exil*, 175–77.

This great blessing descends on the new year, and the psalm directs it to all peoples:

> May God be gracious to us and bless us
> and make his face to shine upon us,
> that your way may be known upon earth
> your saving power among all nations. (Ps 67:1-3)

The psalm then ends with: "Let all the ends of the earth revere him" (Ps 67:7). This reverence by all on earth is at the same time the fruit of God's blessing and its silent, indispensable precondition. Let us hope that over the years we may experience this blessing and reverence again and again, to the salvation of the farthest ends of the earth.

See also: Friendship, Hallowing, Hospitality, Mercy, Name

# Z

## ZERO

For the last letter of the alphabet we choose a word that denotes the number "0." This number does not look all that different from the last letter in the Greek alphabet, O-mega. So we end up with Zero or Nought. How important is Zero in our life?

One of the most valuable insights for any spiritual life has to do with the proper expenditure of available energy. In "Night Vigil" and "Walking" we already saw that even though some energy is consumed in these activities, a new and different energy arises and accumulates. The notion of "zero" in relation to the use of energy may offer a useful perspective. Allow me to illustrate with an example that has been used before but that is also pertinent here.

In the center of the abbey where I live sits a courtyard surrounded by a hallway, the familiar cloister walk of Benedictine abbeys. That central space, more central than the church building or the dining hall, connects all the spaces where the monks' various activities take place: praying, working, meeting, studying, meditating, eating, and receiving guests. But nothing happens in that central space. It is a zone of zero energy.

How precious it is to have access to such a still space in the heart of life! Here we have the opportunity to return to inner calm, to regain our balance, simply by passing by that area in the center of the cloister walk. It is a chance to let off steam or to replenish, thanks to the silence and the absence of other energetic activity.

Moving from one activity to another, we are physically constrained to pass by that interior courtyard. The person who hastens too fast through the cloister walk or who starts talking loudly kills the hidden potential of the space. He or she remains the prisoner of whatever is excessively or superfluously rampant in his or her inner world and misses out on the great blessing of that zone with its zero energy.

The zero energy zone works equally at night. If you want to be assured of a good night's sleep, calm and carefree, after doing scholarly work or after intensive reading or a captivating TV program, then just walk the four sides of the cloister walk, thinking of nothing. Sleep will then arrive on its own. That at least is my experience.

What the abbey's architectural structure has accomplished over the ages and continues to provide to this day, we are called to realize

in ourselves, with our available energy, with the shifts in our time and place. Nought is an abstraction, a limit, a border case. In actual reality there is always "something," and absolute "nothing" is not to be found anywhere. But if we wish to live a healthful life, then we must take time to do "nothing," to keep an open space for emptiness, for mindful breathing in complete silence, and to pull out of the spider web of thrilling and consuming relationships. Only then can we accomplish the inner rebalancing of our entire person in the great Zero.

Blessed are they who have a square inside themselves where "nothing" happens, a zone with zero energy, a nil that allows everything else to rotate freely. The zero is like the hub of every wheel. Without it we land in a rather harsh and rigid world, without even one wheel to propel us forward safely.

See also: Breathing, Emptiness, Keeping Silent, Meditation, Night Vigil, Sabbath, Sunday, Walking, *Wu Wei*

# EPILOGUE

### *A Festival of Light*

Spirituality has to do with applying oneself to practices that transform. But is that really sufficient?

*What* is sufficient? Life is sufficient. But life is also incomprehensible, it makes no sense. The superstructure of dogmatic systems that we have built up, sometimes over the course of many ages, is today best reduced to a minimum. "The Master is without ideas," as the Chinese Taoists remind us. The origin cannot be grasped, yet in our deepest being a source wells up and we discern an Act. The transformation that occurs when we apply ourselves to specific practices is one of steady interiorization of that original Act. As a result, an expanding sense of community is created. We become ever more "common," just as God is "common" in Ruusbroec's phrase.

In poverty and gratitude we breathe broadly and happily in solidarity with all that exists without pretense: a blade of grass, a sparrow, a child, a friend, a wisp of cloud in the sky, and a distant star. Death may knock at the door, it no longer scares us. A greater awe has already consumed that fear. To die is to give up one's spirit, to surrender one's breath completely—in a kiss, why not? The other side is a glowing Face, without features. Already now we walk in that light, and only what was light in our life will endure the crossing. The rest disappears into nothingness. The "light of Light" that visited us, and that ensured that we walked as "light in Light," shall lead us after death in what cannot be anything else but a festival of light.