

WITNESS CORNER ~ DEACON JOE O'CONNELL
Reflection at the Advent Day of Recollection
December 3, 2022

“Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest.” Mt. 11:28 This rest Jesus speaks about is rest for your soul. It is an invitation to a close relationship with Him, and it’s addressed to each and everyone of us, not just the “spiritually elite”. This is something we all learned about on our Cursillo weekends, but as time goes by it can sometimes become obscured very easily.

When we look at the Group Service Sheet we see the tripod: Piety, Study, and Christian Action. Looking at the elements of these legs we see all that we are DOING - morning offerings; Mass & communion; visits to the Blessed Sacrament; rosaries; reading scripture, spiritual books, & Vatican II documents; listening to homilies; and other life experiences - all of which are designed to help us in our Spiritual Growth. Then we look at what success our action has had in our families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and other environments. These are all extremely vital and necessary in our spiritual journey, but I think we may be missing something. All of these things are connected to the verb “to do”, and that’s very good because “Christ is counting on each one of us.” But with all this “do-ing” and the hecticness of life especially at this time of year, have we taken time to “be-ing” in the presence of God.

What I’m talking about is just spending some time with Jesus. It could be in a Church, an Adoration Chapel, anyplace actually; just be-ing with Him. Not praying, not meditating on a scripture verse, just clearing your mind and being open to the Holy Spirit. One of my favorite Old Testament stories is from 1 Kings 19 about Elijah going up a mountain to “be” with God. Elijah looks for God in a windstorm but doesn’t find Him, neither is He found in an earthquake or a fire. Finally there was silence, then God was heard in a “tiny whispering sound”. Silence has always been the biblical symbol heralding the Presence of God. St. John of the Cross wrote “Silence is the language of love.” Contemplative prayer provides a space of silence in our depths for the soul’s tranquil “resting” in God.

Psalms 131 verse 2 says “Enough for me to keep my soul tranquil and quiet like a child in it’s mother’s arms.”

Throughout His earthly life Jesus exemplified the importance of contemplation by regularly taking time for solitary prayer even when the needy crowds surrounded Him.

In Luke 5:15 we read “Large crowds would gather to hear Him and to have their sickness cured, but He would always go off to some place where He could be alone and pray.”

In Mark 1:35 “In the morning, long before dawn, He got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there.”

Before the Apostles could be of any spiritual benefit or influence in the world, they first had to spend quiet time in the presence of Jesus. They had to be open to the infusion of Divine Love and Light before they could spread that same love and light in the world. If they needed time, so do we. We can only give what we have, and what we are inside.

We are all busy and our time is precious. Something valuable to us is the only thing worth offering to God; so we should give time from the little that we have to live on. It’s a case of putting first things first “Seek first the kingdom of God.” We should not try to fit God into our spare time like a hobby, but rearrange our priorities placing Him first.

God invites us to come to Him daily. Listen to Mt. 6:6-7 “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” We need to set aside a regular time for recommitting our wills, giving Him our undivided attention, and growing in the realization of our need of, and our complete dependence upon Him as the source of our soul’s development. This realization encourages growth not only in Divine Love, but in faith, gratitude, and humility.

There is a spiritual maxim “Pray as you can, not as you ought”. It’s not so much our technique, but our attitude that’s important. As we turn humbly to God, willing to be led, the beginnings of change are set in motion. Some refer to this “new beginning” as being “born again” or a “conversion experience”. St. John the Baptist referred to it as “metanoia” a word we are all familiar with. It’s a “turning around”, a change of attitude or inner direction, a complete turning of heart, soul, and mind to God. But as the years go by in our 4th Day, all of our “do-ing” -our Piety, Study, and Action - can become habitual; just something we do daily or weekly;

and we tend to no longer see, or be aware of, Christ's presence in our everyday hum-drum activities. Often when we think of a "close moment" - when we were most aware of Christ's presence and why - our thoughts immediately look for a time when we "felt" the presence of Christ, or some fantastic thing we did. We need to be aware of Christ's continual presence in our everyday lives. St. Teresa of Avila wrote "The Lord doesn't look so much at the greatness of our works, as at the love with which they are done."

In the Gospel accounts of healing and ministering, Jesus sought out one individual at a time, giving that person His complete and undivided attention, even if it meant that the rest of the people had to make the effort to seek Him out another day. He still seeks out each of us. A one-to-one relationship is essential for spiritual growth, healing, and love. To us, this attitude of Jesus says much, because we realize that we are deeply loved, each soul in its own special relationship.

The Spirit more easily reaches the conscious mind during a relaxed state of the body in prayer. That's why we need a quiet, private place sitting in a comfortable position. Looking at an image, scene, or cross may be helpful; or repeating a short phrase over and over. Distractions will always be a part of the human condition. The important thing is not to be overly upset by them. God looks at our hearts and sees our intentions. Our busy minds are used to being active. Teresa of Avila advises "One should leave the intellect go and surrender oneself into the arms of love. You cannot begin to re-collect yourself by force, but only by gentleness." Our responsibility is to be faithful to this prayer-time and give ourselves to the Lord; the rest is up to God.

Now I know what you're thinking "I tried this and I can't do it. My mind goes "a mile a minute & there's no stopping it." I have the same problem, and if I close my eyes I end up in a very deep meditative state some call sleep. So what can I do?

Well awhile back someone told me about a litany called the "Litany of Transfiguration". I found it online and it usually helps me clear my mind of distractions and focus on or "see only Jesus". I like the Divine Mercy Image so I gaze at that also. All of the statements begin with the words "When I ..." or "When..." followed by the mantra "Let me see only Jesus."

We have 3 weeks left in advent - a time to prepare for the second coming of Our Lord, and as usual we are all bombarded with hectic schedules, parties, gift buying, decorating etc. etc. Let's stop and listen to the words of Jesus

"Come to Me ...and I will give you rest."

And when life seems to be closing in on you

"May you see only Jesus"