

Saturday Catechism: Handout: Lesson 39

Ralph Martin, in *Hungry for God*, aids us to overcome profound fear in prayer, to be with the Spirit.

“Another common fear that keeps us from God is rooted in the belief that ‘I’ve made a fatal wrong turning, a basic mistake, & now it’s all over, there’s no hope of living a deep life of union with God.’ Whether it be a suggestion to the effect they you should never have dropped out of school, or you never should have married, or you never should have chosen celibacy, or you never should have had nine kids, or you never should have left a certain city where there was a Christian community, or whatever. Satan can make use of doubts and suggestions like this to cut us off from God. ‘The grass is always greener’ syndrome is an insidious weapon that Satan uses, & we are vulnerable. We are where we are, and God is there with us ready to work with us where we are. We may never know how to evaluate some past decision, if there is something to repent of, repent, and receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. If you’re still bothered after a reasonable time of openness to the Lord, or consultation with a mature Christian, forget about it, and go on. No mistake or sin, real or imagined, cannot be dealt with. God wants to take care of it, and wants us to move on with Him from where we are now.” 144

Bro. Brian’s comment: Martin warns us to keep our imaginations under control. Satan uses imagination to distract us from prayer. He uses our real experiences to build imaginary distractions. If we repent a sin, and confess it, we experience great relief. Satan urges us to seek relief for other choices, which weren’t sinful. We want more relief. By the sacrament of Penance, God repairs our broken souls. He restores our integrity, as if He joined all our fragments together. God will heal a broken heart, if we give Him all the pieces. Our profound joy at this fresh integrity can overwhelm us. Then we try to gain more joy by imagining another change. Martin gives several examples of changes we can’t make, but which upset prayer, and disturb our advance toward God.

Martin reminds us that we should not yearn for the grass that looks greener on the other side of the fence. Instead, we should bloom where we’re planted. The deeper trouble with all prayer is that we try to obtain the consolation of God instead of the God of consolation. Our infinite journey toward God leaves us always short of complete fulfillment. But we remember how consoled we were not so long ago, and yearn to repeat that joy. But that prayer is done, and advanced us some distance toward God. Now we must go from there, not try to get there again. Our road to God is ever onward, as J. R. R. Tolkien reminds us in his novels.

Martin’s double negative may have distracted you from the positive way to understand God’s infinite mercy. Every sin can be forgiven. God’s mercy is infinite. Nothing we can do will even stretch it, much less strain it, and never exhaust it. God’s plan for us is infinite growth in His Life, which is Love. We should never hand up on our previous success with prayer. That fine prayer was merely a step on the way. It may be the best prayer experience ever, but better ones are ahead. We must move on. Even if today’s prayer is not consoling, it is somehow better than yesterday’s glorious prayer. Imagine continued improvement, go for it, and it will happen. From this good advice, Martin advances to another profound fear that can assail us in prayer.

“Another block can be fear of God Himself. Our conception of God can be based on a whole number of negative experiences in our families, in our schools, among our friends, in the Church, or by chance. Fears of being exploited, of not being loved, or of being used, commonly block the free giving of ourselves to God. Because of a negative series of personal relationships in college while I was away from the Lord, I had developed a deep-rooted, almost unconscious, fear of God, and of other people, that blocked receiving their love. Gradually, I became aware of the fear, and came to understand its roots in those relationships. Gradually, at first intellectually, and then emotionally, I realized there was a difference between the love I had experienced then, and the love of God. God’s love is pure, holy, gentle, wise, non-exploitive, non-violative. He can be totally trusted. Now I rejoice in receiving God’s love in the infinite number of ways in which it is communicated every day, and I rejoice to abandon myself to Him, trusting Him completely. 144

“One of the biggest obstacles to abandoning ourselves to God is the fear of not being accepted, or not being chosen, not being worthy. We commonly feel that real union with God is for others, who are ‘better’ than we are, and that we are too sinful, too ordinary, too busy, too normal, too messed up, or whatever, to be close to God. God wants all people to be intimately and tenderly united to Himself. The call to love God with our whole

heart, whole soul, whole mind and strength, is addressed to all, He gives the means to achieve what He calls us to do. God stands ready to meet us where we are, and gradually and gently, step by step, lead us to intimate union with Himself. One of the most damaging lies of Satan is that we have a unique problem or character flaw that makes us incapable of being closely united to God. That ought to be called by its rightful name whenever it surfaces and attempts to do its ugly work of keeping God's people from Himself. You *are* called, you *are* chosen, you *are* able to be with Him. Anything else is a lie, and its intent is your death, your distance from the God of life, mercy, and love." 144

Bro. Brian's comment: Martin puts this difficulty quite well. After some time advancing into God's love, we experience how vast it is. The more we contact God, the more we realize is beyond us. His infinity becomes rather clear to us. This can scare us. God goes on forever. Our littleness seems to shrink from His infinity. Add to this the way that people use His Almighty Power to step on us, and you see reasons to fear God. Some people use God to frighten us. Don't let them succeed. Jesus shows us how gentle God is. Christ dies for us in agony on the cross. So don't let anyone play God by stomping on us. That's the opposite of God, as Jesus proves. Yes, we can have a deep-rooted fear, projected onto God. But it's an illusion. Pay attention to what Christ did, and that illusion blows away. By watching Jesus in action, we realize the difference between people trying to assert themselves against us and God, Who is totally **for** us.

Martin then shows that God's infinite love overcomes our unworthiness. Because God loves us, we **are** called, chosen, & going toward Him. God's infinity means that nothing can stop His love. Infinite love easily unites with us. When tempted to say we're unworthy, read John's Gospel, chapter 15. Confront your image with the reality of Jesus sustaining us by love. Just tumble into God's greatness. Trust His infinity. When we accept His infinite love, He envelopes us. Let Him love you. Martin shows what God does if we allow Him.

"When we have laid the foundation, and dealt with the major obstacles to a deepening union with God in our lives, we can expect to see it happen. We will see God making progress in us. Approaching the question of progress to union with God, however, is a delicate matter. We ought to grow in our knowledge of God, and be more fully joined to Him, but self-consciousness and a focus on progress can be the most deadly thing for true union and freedom to happen.

"One of the sicknesses in the churches today is the incredible vagueness that exists when it comes to talking about the spiritual life. When 'old styles and systems' of spirituality were thrown out, in many cases the baby was thrown out with the bath water. Today's 'return to spirituality' is often so vague and muddled that it may seem impossible to judge whether spiritual progress can be assessed in any way. But it has always been the case, starting with the New Testament and continuing through Christian tradition, that spiritual progress can be evaluated, and ought to be happening. Here are some objective indicators of growth in union with God. In isolation they may mean nothing. When they form a pattern, ... they reveal growth, or lack of growth: 146

"Is the person overcoming temptations to serious sin? Is the person overcoming temptations to less serious sin. Is the person using more time, talent and money in the Lord's service? Is the time spent in prayer authenticated by growth in loving behavior with brethren, and loving service to neighbor? Are the Holy Spirit's fruits (love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, self-control...) apparent in the person's life, while works of the flesh (envy, jealousy, lust, quarreling...) receding? Is the person willing readily to admit mistakes, to admit wrongdoing, and to accept others' criticism?

"... It is not uncommon for someone who has rigidly adhered to Christian morality, and outwardly charitable behavior, to experience *less* self-control ... after a real conversion than before. The externally imposed controls are breaking up as the Holy Spirit brings to birth a new set of control. What appeared to be virtue and a Christian character was perhaps a fear-response with no inner transformation. The breakdown is what appeared to be virtue may be an essential part of moving to a better state, and not lack of progress." 147

Bro. Brian's comment: Be careful with this set of questions. You can see that they are general, subject to interpretation, and could be misused. Martin mention protections from all these difficulties. In the end, he recommends working with a wise spiritual director. There are not many of them around. Too much of American

Catholic survival was by living up to Protestant standards. Those standards are rigid and superficial. So we are not familiar with the Spirit's charism. It's a new ballgame, but delightful to enter, and to play. Seek out a spiritual director who knows how to work with the Spirit. That's the sure way to use these questions properly, and to grow most rapidly in prayer. The Spirit is moving all over, calling us to more complete Catholic life. Our parents lived up to the old standards, and made way for us to join the Spirit as He enflames us. He urges us to greater prayer, and to expressing that prayer in charity to all around us. As Martin noted earlier, the mark of advanced prayer is greater loving service to our neighbors. That is the ultimate way to realize that we are praying our way to God, and that the Spirit has advanced us. Only He can take us all the way to God.