

Section III

You Need to Take Steps

Ten

Have Time for God

When the Syrian Naaman was told he would be cured of his leprosy by washing himself seven times in the river Jordan, he was disappointed. He had expected a more spectacular cure. Besides, what was so special about the Jordan? Surely, the rivers Abana and Pharpar, back in Damascus, were much better than any river in Israel! We know the reply he received from his assistants, "Sir, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, you would have done it" (2 Kgs 5:13). Naaman's temptation is still ours today. Like him, we may be inclined to expect great things only from what is strange, unusual or outlandish. Often the best cure for our ills may be simple and ready at hand.

When we seek to have an experience of the Divine, when we want to be sensitive to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and aware of Christ's life in us, we are not called upon to take extraordinary measures. We need not enroll in an expensive course or join an esoteric movement. We need not travel far in pilgrimage. We do not have to adopt another profession or effect drastic changes in our way of life. But one thing—simple enough in itself, but apparently more demanding than all those other things—is required: to set aside some time every day for silence, reflection and mental prayer.

Perhaps this requirement was less stringent in former ages when life proceeded at a more leisurely pace. In those days there were fewer distractions, fewer pressures of work, less noise. Most people were farmers or lived in the countryside; they were in close contact with nature. For thoughtful persons it was

easier to find "slots" for withdrawal and interior recollection. In our own century the pace of life has quickened and tensions have increased. The work ethos spurs us on to restless activity, while modern technology fills our days with an unending stream of noise. To remain true to ourselves we have to refuse to be carried along by the maelstrom of trivialities. We have to build an island that we can call our own.

The remedy is setting aside 20 minutes to half-an-hour a day for silence and prayer. Within our day it should be an oasis, a period of peace, an experience we enjoy and look forward to. Making space for this practice should be possible for everyone. No single person can claim to be so busy, so involved or so distracted by legitimate concerns that he or she cannot manage to find this time. But, such is our swirling pattern of life these days, if we are not truly motivated and firmly determined in our resolve, we may well fail.

Oriental Wisdom

At this stage we may well turn to the religions of the East for enlightenment. They have developed many methods of reflection and contemplation. Practically all of them—Yoga, Taoism, Buddhism—originated in reaction to externalism in an age of empire building. Although these Oriental religions disagree considerably on the methods they recommend, what they have in common is that they prescribe withdrawal and silence.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* (possibly 500 B.C.) is a treatise on mysticism presented in the form of a conversation between Krishna, an incarnation of God, and Arjuna, a general. The background scene is a battlefield; the point is, obviously, that mysticism should flourish in the midst of an active life. Krishna gives the following advice:

"Day after day let the yogi practice the harmony of soul: in a secret place, in deep solitude, master of his

mind, hoping for nothing, desiring nothing.

Let him find a place that is pure and a seat that is restful, neither too high nor too low, with sacred grass and a skin and a cloth thereon.

On that seat let him rest and practice yoga for the purification of the soul: with the life of his body and mind in peace; his soul in silence before the One.

With upright body, head and neck, which rest still and move not; with inner gaze which is not restless, but rests still between the eyebrows; with soul in peace, and all fear gone, and strong in the vow of holiness, let him rest with mind in harmony, his soul on me, his Lord supreme."¹

When reading such a description our mind jumps at pictures of Indian saddhus or gurus whom we may have seen: cross-legged Indian ascetics sitting upright in obvious trance. But this is not what the *Bhagavad-Gita* had in mind. The book had been written for soldiers, administrators, shopkeepers; in other words, people like ourselves with occupations and distractions. Such persons are advised, not to abandon their professions, but to become "yogis" by taking time off for daily meditation. The advice applies equally well in our own circumstances and it is not surprising that many people today have taken to yoga.

One of the greatest Hindu leaders of Indian independence, Mahatma Gandhi, is an interesting, modern example of the ancient ideal. Although Gandhi led a very active life, he always remained a yogi at the same time. "Ever since my childhood," he tells us, "prayer has been my solace and my strength."² In all his disappointments, during periods of utmost darkness, at counsels of despair and counsels of caution, it was prayer that saved him. This was his experience "extending over an unbroken period of nearly forty years."³

Prayer has been the saving of my life. Without prayer I should have been a lunatic long ago. My autobiography

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will tell you that I have had my fair share of the bitterest public and private experiences. They threw me into temporary despair, but if I was able to get rid of it, it was because of prayer.⁴

For Gandhi, prayer was truly an interior communion with God. The essence of prayer was silence.

Silence has now become both a physical and spiritual necessity for me. Originally, it was taken to relieve the sense of pressure. Then I wanted time for writing. After, however, I had practiced it for some time I saw the spiritual value of it. It suddenly flashed across my mind that that was the time when I could best hold communion with God. And now I feel as though I was naturally built for silence. . . . I have often sought silence for communion even during my noisiest time. I have had recourse to sea voyages for this purpose, though, of course, the radio has now robbed even a sea voyage of the privilege of silence one used to enjoy on the boat. But silent prayer is not a monologue, but a dialogue, and God speaks to us only when we are silently ready to listen to him.⁵

It is not sufficiently realized how many of Gandhi's important decisions flowed from his interior prayer. Take the example of "*Satyagraha*." This non-violent resistance to British rule proved a very efficacious weapon in India's political struggle for independence. Gandhi was intelligent enough to evaluate its strength from a purely secular point of view. Yet, it would be a complete misunderstanding if its effectiveness were merely ascribed to Gandhi's astute way of wielding this newly-found weapon. What made his non-violence convincing was the unmistakable fact that it rested on a sincere desire for peace in spite of unavoidable conflict.

Gandhi resolved conflict through prayer. Two years before his assassination, he wrote:

Emptying the mind of all conscious processes of thought and filling it with the spirit of God unmanifest, brings one ineffable peace and attunes the soul with the

infinite. . . . When the mind is completely filled with His spirit, one cannot harbor ill-will or hatred towards anyone, and, reciprocally, the enemy will shed his enmity and become a friend. It is not my claim that I have always succeeded in converting enemies into friends, but in numerous cases it has been my experience that when the mind is filled with God's peace, all hatred ceases.⁶

If great men like Gandhi saw the need for regular silence and withdrawal, and if we can see how it helped them to become spiritual persons, how much more should we Christians adopt such a practice.⁷

Advice From a Saint

Earmarking time for silent prayer is, of course, equally rooted in our own Christian tradition. Jesus himself gave us the example. Withdrawing to lonely places for reflection and prayer was his custom. If he found no opportunity during the day, he would pray at night. He would leave his disciples and go to a place where he could be alone. "Jesus went up a hill to pray and spent the whole night there praying to God" (Lk 6:12). "Crowds of people came to hear him and be healed from their diseases. But he would go away to lonely places, where he prayed" (Lk 5:15-16). "After sending the people away, he went up a hill by himself to pray. When evening came, Jesus was there alone" (Mt 14:23). Jesus himself seems to have needed moments when he was alone, away from the crowd, face to face with his Father in silence.

Throughout the history of the church, spiritual writers have stressed the importance of mental prayer and saints have shown how it should be done in practice. Instead of adducing many such witnesses, I propose to introduce here one saintly teacher who brought many people to an awareness of Christ. I am referring to St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), prince-bishop of

Geneva. In a time of great political and religious upheaval, in many ways as turbulent as our own, this "gentleman saint" taught a mysticism that was within the reach of his flock.⁸ His counsels were always practical and down to earth.

In the Middle Ages most spiritual exercises had been designed to fit the lives of priests and religious. De Sales rightly saw that this would not help his people. He would need to translate Christian ideals into a pattern of life that could be adopted by ordinary lay people. For this purpose he wrote a book, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1608), a work entirely aimed at spelling out how responsible Catholics should practice their religion. Later he added his chief publication, *On the Love of God*. Many of the sermons and conferences he gave and personal letters written to individuals have also been preserved. What does Bishop de Sales say about our topic?

First of all, he always insists on the need for regularly setting time aside for prayer. We should carefully choose the best time of the day.

Spend an hour each day in meditation. Do this before lunch, if possible at the beginning of the morning when your mind is still less distracted and fresh after the night's rest. Do not give more than an hour to this. . . . If it happens that your whole morning passes without this exercise of mental prayer, either on account of many commitments or for some other reason—something which one should really never allow to happen!—then try to make up for the omission to the extent possible after lunch, at some opportune moment in the course of the afternoon. . . . If you have not found an opportunity in the course of the whole day, you must make up for the loss by raising your mind more often to God in the course of your work, by taking up some spiritual reading and by imposing on yourself some penance to remind yourself of the seri-

ousness of the omission. And don't forget to make a strong resolution to take up the practice again on the next day.⁹

In his private letters the bishop does not always prescribe the same length of time. To one married lady he says, "As to prayer, you should apply to it much; especially to meditation, for which you are, I think, well suited. Make then a short hour every day in the morning before going out, or else before the evening meal."¹⁰ To quite a few others, men and women, married or widowed, he recommends, "Half an hour's prayer every morning—every day a good half-hour's spiritual reading."¹¹ The bishop explains that the length of time should depend partly on one's leisure and partly on the taste one has acquired. He advises one beginner to make her morning prayer "for a half quarter of an hour and even less."¹² To another he suggests, "Make your spiritual exercises short and fervent, that your natural disposition may not make prayer a difficulty to you on account of the length of it, and that little by little it may grow used to these acts of piety."¹³ Never does he say that such prayer can be omitted. From all, he requires at least some regular time of meditation, normally lasting for at least half an hour.

In a letter to Madame de Chantal he speaks of his own practice:

Yes, my child, by the grace of God I can say now better than before, that I make mental prayer, because I do not fail a single day in this; except sometimes on a Sunday, on account of confessions; and God gives me the strength to get up sometimes before daybreak for this purpose, when I foresee the multitude of the embarrassments of the day, and I do it all gaily; and meseems I have affection for it, and would greatly wish to be able to make it twice in the day; but it is not possible for me.¹⁴

The Where and the How

Francis de Sales also gives us advice as to how to spend the time. We should select a place where we are alone and at peace; we should deliberately seek solitude and silence.

You should also take a liking to real, physical solitude. I don't mean that you need to go out into the desert as the old hermits did. . . . It will be enough to stay in your room or walk in your garden or remain in any other place where you find it easy to recollect yourself. There you should withdraw your mind within your own heart and refresh yourself with some solid reflection, some holy thoughts or some useful reading.¹⁵

To help his clients the bishop suggests that one could follow these five steps: putting oneself in the presence of God; asking God for help; reading a part of scripture and thinking about it with the mind and the imagination; responding to the mystery contained in it by sentiments and acts of the will; formulating a final conclusion. It is good, he says, to prepare carefully and to follow such a procedure. It will help us enter into the spirit of meditation and make a good start. But at no time should we think that such a method is an end in itself. It should be abandoned as soon as we achieve our real purpose, which is communion with God in mind and heart.

It may sometimes happen that immediately after the preparation you will find your heart moved in God. Then you should let yourself go, without wanting to follow the method I suggested. . . . This is a general rule that you should never hold back your emotions, you should give them free rein whenever they present themselves. This is also true for other feelings, such as wanting to give thanks, wanting to offer yourself to God or to make petitions.¹⁶

Practice prayer either by points, as I have said, or after your own custom, it matters little: but I distinctly remember telling you just to prepare the points, and to

try at the beginning of prayer to relish them; if you relish them it is a sign that at least for that time, God wants you to follow this method. If, however, the sweet customary presence (of God) engages you afterwards, entertain it; enter also into the familiar discussion which God himself suggests, and which, as you explained them to me in your letter, are good. . . . Go simply, sincerely, frankly, and with the simplicity of children, sometimes in the arms of the heavenly Father, sometimes holding his hand.¹⁷

Do not torment yourself about your prayer, which you say is without words; for it is good, if it leaves good effects in your heart. Do not force yourself to speak in this divine love; he speaks in us who looks and is seen. Follow, then, the path into which the Holy Ghost draws you, though I do not wish you to give up preparing yourself for meditation, as you used to do at the beginning. This you owe on your side, and you should of yourself take no other way; but when you intend to put yourself in it, if God draws you into another, go with him into it; we must on our side make a preparation according to our measure, and when God carries us higher, to him alone be the glory of it.¹⁸

Remaining in God's Presence

The bishop teaches that it is a grave mistake to imagine that our meditation is like a job we have to do, like hard work of which we should see the fruits. This would be an altogether wrong starting point. No, we should from the outset think of our recollection as merely being in the presence of God, of being at his service. He has some interesting things to say about what it means to put oneself in the presence of God and to stay there:

To *keep* ourselves in the presence of God, and to *place* ourselves in the presence of God, are, in my opinion, two things: for, to place ourselves there it is necessary to recall our minds from every other object, and to

make it attentive to this presence actually, as I say in my book; but after placing ourselves, we keep ourselves there so long as we make, either by understanding or by will, acts towards God, whether by looking at him, or looking at some other thing for love of him; or looking at nothing, but speaking to him; or, neither looking nor speaking, but simply staying where he has put us, like a statue in its niche.¹⁹

We put ourselves in God's presence to give him the honor and homage we owe him; and this can be done without his speaking to us or we to him: for this duty is paid by remembering that he is our God, and we his vile creatures, and by remaining prostrate in spirit before him, awaiting his commands. How many courtiers go a hundred times into the presence of the king, not to hear him or speak to him, but simply to be seen by him, and to testify by this assiduity that they are his servants?²⁰

The expectation, then, we should have of our time of recollection, what we should try to achieve, is nothing more nor less than being attentive (at attention) in God's presence. If God wishes, he will act on us in his own good time. Our duty consists in withdrawing ourselves from other attachments, in making ourselves free and available to him. We make ourselves vulnerable and then wait in a relaxed and joyful manner.

You do nothing, you say, in prayer. But what would you do, except what you do, which is to present and represent to God your nothingness and your misery? It is the best plea beggars make us when they expose to our sight their ulcers and needs.

But sometimes again you do nothing of all this, as you tell me, but remain there like a phantom or a statue. Well, and that is not a little thing. In the palaces of princes and kings, statues are put which are only of use to gratify the prince's eyes; be satisfied then with serving for that purpose, in the presence of God; he will give life to this statue when he likes.

Trees only bear fruit through the presence of the sun, some sooner, others later, some every year, and

others every three years, and not always equally. While being happy to be able to stay in the presence of God, let us be assured that he will make us bear our fruit, sooner or later, always or sometimes, according to his good pleasure, to which we must entirely resign ourselves.²¹

Making a Retreat

Our practice of daily meditation will be greatly strengthened if at times we grant ourselves the opportunity of making a retreat. Many Christians know from experience what a retreat can mean; many others may never have taken it up. Even for those who know and appreciate retreats it may be helpful to reflect once more on what a retreat is meant to do and how it can achieve its purpose.

The essence of a retreat is our withdrawal from everyday life and all its involvements for a considerable amount of time. We go for a number of days to some other place where we shall not be distracted from our main task in hand: sorting ourselves out in the face of God.

We should select the place carefully. It should be such that it allows us to be fully cut off from our work, our family, the news and other business that normally commands our attention. We withdraw to a place where we can be free from attending to such matters, not because we want to escape responsibility for them, but because we know that having reaffirmed our relationship to God we shall be able to discharge our duties better. The place where we make our retreat should be friendly, not too austere, affording us a maximum of spiritual freedom. Sometimes a convent or monastery may lend itself to the purpose; at other times we may simply stay with friends who have promised to leave us alone.

In some countries the only retreat that is widely

known is the so-called *directed* retreat. In such a retreat a group of people come together, usually in a special retreat house, to follow a program of daily talks and spiritual exercises. The advantage of this arrangement is the availability of an experienced retreat master. Through his sermons and personal guidance the retreat father can help us focus attention on aspects of our spiritual life that we may consciously or unconsciously have neglected. A directed retreat also provides updated information which makes it of special value for people who have little chance of keeping themselves informed about what is happening in the church.

However, there are also drawbacks to such a retreat. The spiritual input may be overloaded, with too many topics introduced, too many items on the timetable. The retreat is then in danger of becoming a training course, profitable no doubt, but no longer a "retreat." Since the program is planned for the average person and addressed to groups, it may not respond to the needs of a particular individual. Moreover, there are other limiting factors in organized retreats, such as convenient dates, accommodation, etc., that may well restrict its usefulness in some cases.

That is why I should like to point out that the normal and perhaps best retreat we can make is one which we plan ourselves. Taking a few days off for our spiritual life should be possible and normal for almost anyone. Half a century ago, going away on a vacation was unthinkable for most; improved working conditions and a better living standard have brought it within reach of most people. Similarly, without too much inconvenience, it should be possible for individuals or married couples to arrange their own "retreat" in a convenient place.

How long should a retreat last? Obviously, no hard and fast rules can be given. Much can be achieved in three full days of silence and seclusion. But personally

I am more in favor of a six- or eight-day retreat, if it is at all possible. Experience shows that we need one or two days to set aside our immediate involvements, one or two days spent in gradually coming to rest and getting the taste of higher things. There are processes in life that we cannot speed up and this seems to be one of them. A horse that has been running a race is all steamed up and requires time and rest to gain its composure. Without knowing it, we, too, are mentally and emotionally so engrossed in external concerns that we require a few days to gradually let these anchors go. In a six-day retreat it is usually the fourth and the fifth days that give us the most peace and the deepest contact with God. However much we try not to, on the last day we shall be preparing ourselves to return to our normal engagements.

The essence of a retreat is what Benedictines used to call "*Vacare Deo*," that is, making oneself empty for God. We should not put ourselves under any kind of pressure. We should feel free and happy. Much of our time will be spent in leisure, walking around in a park or doing something else that sets our mind free. When we are ready for it, we may give ourselves some spiritual nourishment, possibly by a combination of reading from scripture and from a book that seems relevant to us. It is interesting to note that on the Mount of Transfiguration the Law and the prophets were present in their protagonists, Moses and Elijah.

While allowing ourselves a maximum amount of freedom, we should from the start put Christ at the center of our retreat. We should remind ourselves continuously of his presence. We should make up our minds that we don't want to do anything without him. We should feel a great desire to get to know him intimately. We should ask him to guide and help us at every stage. We should see the whole of our retreat basically as prayer in the widest sense of the word, a gradual opening of ourselves to all that Christ is. Our

fundamental attitude might well be expressed in words such as these which we repeat from time to time:

"Dear Jesus, I have come to sort myself out. Please, accept me as I am with all my contradictory aspirations. What I desire most of all is to be true to myself, to what you want me to be. I know that union with you will be my highest fulfillment. I admire you, Jesus, I adore you and accept you as my only master. Please, be with me during these days in a special way, speak to me, fill my heart with your presence. Help me to come closer to you during this retreat. With all my heart I want to know and love you better."

Should we make the retreat alone or in the company of others? It all depends. Discussions with others can be fruitful, but too much discussion destroys the seclusion and silence that are the main characteristics of a real retreat. However, if doing a retreat with others safeguards the individual's time of solitary prayer, if it means that occasionally we come together for common prayer, or for a prayerful exchange of our thoughts and experiences, then such an arrangement may, indeed, be a help. In fact, for married couples or for pastoral teams or for others engaged in the same type of work, such mutual support in prayer and reflection may deepen one's own experience. However, we should be aware of the danger that all too readily we may again be absorbed in dealing with other people rather than making ourselves empty for God. The retreat should make us free and available for Christ.

In the strict sense of the term there is, of course, no guarantee that during a retreat we will have a peak experience such as Peter, James and John had on Mount Tabor. Such events are not within our control. Yet we may not exclude the possibility either. If we make an effort to be really free and available, Christ in his own time and at his own good pleasure, will not fail to make his presence felt. In some unexpected way he

will reveal himself to us. His dazzling light will burn an indelible mark in us. Christ will not fail us.

Practical Conclusions

If we have not adopted the practice already, we should resolve to set aside *every day* a definite period of time for silence and mental prayer. For this we should choose a place where we are free and relaxed, where we shall not be disturbed by others. We make this withdrawal a "sacred hour"; we make up for it when, for one reason or other, we have missed our usual time.

After putting ourselves in the presence of God, we make a short, spontaneous introductory prayer. We then turn our thoughts to a passage of Sacred Scripture, to a book we are reading or to another spiritual input of the same kind. We do not try to force results. Rather, in a spirit of love and resignation we keep ourselves consciously in God's presence.

Once a year, or once every so many years, we make a retreat which we consider to be a vacation in God's presence.

In one of his sarcastic essays C. Northcote Parkinson introduces what he calls the "Law of Triviality." Finance committees are inclined to pass expenditure involving millions of dollars in a short time, but will spend hours discussing the outlay of a few dollars. "Briefly stated, the Law of Triviality means that the time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum involved."²² Having time for God is a start in recognizing where our real treasure lies. It liberates us from the Law of Triviality. It makes us invest time where it borders on eternity.