

SOUL FOR ALL SEASONS

The secularization of society poses a formidable challenge to every Christian, the challenge to discover the face of Christ amidst the crowd of ungodly creatures. It is not an easy task, what with the conscious attempt in many sectors today to stamp out any influence of the Faith.

We spend a lot of energy exploring the world around us, but we hardly look into our inner self. Such poor interior disposition is propped up by external factors. The media, for example, bombards us relentlessly with eye-catching images and a barrage of information that does not foster reflection and deep thought. We are made to absorb a plethora of data without mentally processing them. And so, little by little we become inert and passive.

People who balk at anything spiritual do not pray obviously. But many others claim to be believers in God and yet they don't pray either. We hear the typical excuse: "I don't know how to pray," "I'm up to my neck with my work," "my prayers are not answered," "I feel dry," "distractions clutter my mind," or "it doesn't help." Not everything good is spontaneous, just as not everything spontaneous is good. Prayer requires effort and struggle. We cannot be content with mumbling a few phrases at bedtime. God expects more. We need to set a fixed period everyday devoted exclusively to meditation.

Have you ever found yourself speechless after an initial exchange of pleasantries with an acquaintance? It is an awkward situation. Two seconds of silence are like an eternity. Imagine yourself in a cocktail party, drawn to desultory conversations here and there. You bump into an old friend, greet him and look blank. Tactfully you try to open a topic. Yet it doesn't come out well, and the conversation ends too soon, leaving qualms as to whether you have acted right. With Our Lord you need not worry about what to say because everything in your life is familiar to him: your joys and sorrows, your past, present and future, your successes and failures, what you have done and plan to do, your family, friends, and everything else that concerns you. Neither does he care about how you say things, as long as you are humble and sincere. "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what your need before you ask him" (Mt 6:7-8).

At times things seem so bad and depressing until we reflect on them with humility in the presence of God. Prayer often changes our perspective. We begin to realize that we had been blowing things up. We now see a flicker of hope where before we saw only total darkness. God knows what has been happening all along and He has not turned His back on us.

Edith Stein, a German-Jewish convert to Catholicism, was deeply impressed by what she had seen one day in the Frankfurt Cathedral a few years before her baptism. A woman with a shopping basket came in and knelt down for a brief prayer. She was alone. There was deafening silence, and yet she stared at the altar as if talking to someone she could see. This was entirely new to Edith, whose attendance at the Synagogue in her early years evoked memories of long, dry and formal services. Here in the Catholic temple, she observed, was a personal encounter with God she had been looking for. It was a small incident, humanly insignificant, but would prove crucial in her itinerary to the Christian faith.

The place that prayer occupies in our life depends on our attitude towards God. If we think we can get by without paying Him much attention, we will not feel the urge to pray. Precisely the problem of people prone to activism is not the lack of time, but the lack of resolve to spare time for God. It is a question of the will. For if there is a will, there is a way. It may not sound good but

people who put God on the back burner and turn to Him only in times of trouble treat Him like a spare tire, something kept in the trunk and taken out only when it is sorely needed.

Want of interior life is translated into feelings of insecurity, human respect, vulnerability to temptations, loose tongue, unhealthy curiosity, and intemperance. "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Mt 26:41; Mk 14:38; Lk 22:40). By ignoring God or paying Him mere lip-service, we lose our supernatural vision and fall into an immanentist (earth-bound) outlook in life. We think we are totally self-reliant, only to suffer frustrations. Anxieties, insomnia, nervousness, irritability, distractions, indifference, boredom and lack of focus: all these may indicate the psychological constitution of a person, but many times they also point to a deep spiritual crisis.

Lord, make me a soul of prayer. "As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God" [Ps 42(41):1]. I want to count on you in everything that I do. Remind me that without you, I can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5). When I feel sad and lonely, assure me of your company; when I am troubled and scared, come quickly to my aid. Increase my faith. Teach me how to value silence. My attention gets dispersed so often, so instill in me a spirit of recollection. I do not know how to pray as I ought, but I take consolation in your assurance that the Spirit helps me in my weakness and that he himself pleads for me (cf. Rom 8:26). Grant me the grace to imitate the life of prayer of the Blessed Virgin Mary, my mother who "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19; Lk 2:51).