

Growth in the Spirit

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The question of “growth in the Spirit” is the question of growth in the spiritual life. We hear much talk about spiritual growth.

The spiritual life is, most properly, about

- life in the Spirit, in the Holy Spirit
- being led, in my personal life, in my person, by the Holy Spirit
(Those who are led by the Spirit of God, are children of God” Romans 8:14)
- participating in the very life of the Third Person of the Trinity, *and thus*
- participating in the very life of the Trinity (for, wherever One goes, Three go!)

Now, we all ask ourselves (on a good day!):

- “How is my spiritual life?”
- “Am I growing spiritually?”
- “Holiness: *are we there yet?*”
- “Where do I stand with Christ?”
- “What exactly *is* the Holy Spirit doing?”

And these questions often seemed to be reduced to or summarized in the question:

- “How is my prayer life?”, *otherwise put*
- “How have my prayer times been of late?”

For although we journey all day, in all that we do (again, on a good day!), with the Lord (knowing, of course, that He journeys with us at all times, and everywhere;

“If we are unfaithful, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” II Timothy 2 :13), it is in our prayer time, when we make acts of faith, hope, and love, that there is a particular awareness and intimacy.

Understandably, then (for better or for worse),

we tend to evaluate our spiritual life by

- our prayer life
- our prayer times

How then do we evaluate our prayer life and times?

What do we evaluate?

What do we consider?

What criteria do we use in such evaluation?

From what I have observed (and experienced!),

we very often tend to evaluate our experience of prayer like we do our other experiences.

This makes sense, for prayer, in a sense, from a human perspective,

is *another* experience amongst many that comprise our day.

We tend to evaluate our daily lives, our daily experiences,
by looking for and trying to measure with the emotional impact of these experiences.
Am I right?!?

“That was a terrific party, i.e. I *felt* great.”

“What a great person, i.e. I *felt* encouraged by and comfortable in his presence.”

“I love my job, i.e. I *feel* productive and needed and free to be myself.”

“This is a good parish, i.e. something about it makes me *feel* good.”

“My prayer time this morning was particularly wonderful,
because I *felt* connected and *felt* very peaceful.”

We *all* think in these terms and along these lines.

We all evaluate, day in and day out, our lives
in great reference to what is happening emotionally.

Such evaluation is legitimate, but, dare I say, limited.

It is limited, quite simply, as regards

- the humanity of our experiences
- the deeper reality of human experience

For example, there are things in human interaction that escape

- the realm of feeling
- emotional “verification”

Such evaluation is *all the more* limited when it comes to the One who touches us
(the Holy Spirit)
in the depths of

- who I am
- my person

Thus, when we say,

“My prayer time this morning was particularly wonderful,
because I *felt* connected and *felt* very peaceful.”

- we only see a *portion* of the picture
- we only capture *some* of what is truly happening

The point of connection between God and my soul

- is humanly imperceptible
- is touched in faith alone

In other words, I know, in faith, that

- there is a connection
- I am *somehow* held by God

But I cannot otherwise tell this.

As stated earlier, it is important for us to realize

that the primary actor/agent in my prayer is *God*, is the Holy Spirit.
Prayer is primarily God’s deal, more than it is another one of *my* activities.

“We do not know how to pray as we ought...

but the Spirit itself intercedes for us in expressible groanings.” (Romans 8:26)
Consequently, any questions about our growth in the spiritual life

are truly turned towards the Holy Spirit, by whom we have a spiritual life. In other words, our preoccupation should not be ourselves, but *the Holy Spirit*.
Spiritual navel-gazing

- is not terribly fruitful
- in the end, is not terribly spiritual

“Come, Holy Spirit” should be our “mantra” or leitmotif of our day.

We do have a human obligation to know ourselves so better to live rich human lives, and so better to cooperate with the Holy Spirit.

[For there is definitely a cooperation, “The Spirit bears witness together with our spirit that we are children of God”. (Romans 8:16)]

But, the Holy Spirit, nonetheless, is our concern and focus.

Now, real and important questions arise:

- if our spiritual life is primarily the Holy Spirit’s responsibility
- if we cannot readily discern what the Holy Spirit is doing deep inside of us
how do we know we are spiritually on track?

The answer is so very simple, too simple for us sometimes to believe: *desire*.

If our growth as children of God depends on the Holy Spirit,

then we are to

- *desire*
- *want*
- *thirst for*

the Holy Spirit.

Saint Augustine says the following (in his commentary on the Epistle of John):

The entire Christian life is in fact an exercise of holy desire. You do not yet see that for which you long, but the very act of desiring prepares you, so that, when God comes, you may see and be utterly satisfied.

Indeed, we read in Ephesians 6:18:

“With all supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit.”

I propose that we can restate this, with all due respect:

“With all *desire*, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit.”

Jesus, in Matthew’s Gospel (7:7-9), reveals that the key is desire:

Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For the one who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. The one who knocks, enters.

All of this is so simply restated by Therese of Lisieux,

when she “defines” prayer as a “surge of the heart” (Mansuscrits Autobiographiques, C 25r).

It is all about desire.

Notice, also, how much Therese expresses herself in terms of desire in these excerpts from her “Act of Offering”, the great prayer which, in a sense, reveals, through the lens of holy desire

- how she sees God
- what she most deeply wants
- the relationship between her “well-beloved Spouse” and her heart

O my God, Most Blessed Trinity, I *desire* to love Thee and to make Thee loved, to labor for the glory of holy Church by saving souls still on earth and by delivering those who suffer in Purgatory. I *desire* to accomplish Thy Will perfectly, and to attain to the degree of glory which Thou hast prepared for me in Thy Kingdom; in one word, I *desire* to be a saint, but I know that I am powerless, and I implore Thee, O my God, to be Thyself my sanctity.

Her Divine Son, my well-beloved Spouse, during His life on earth, told us: "If you ask the Father anything in my name he will give it to you." (John 16:23). I am then certain that Thou wilt hearken to my *desires*...My God, I know it, the more Thou wiltest to give, the more dost Thou make us *desire*. Immense are the *desires* that I feel within my heart, and it is with confidence that I call upon Thee to come and take possession of my soul.

I desire, O Well-Beloved, at every heartbeat to renew this Oblation an infinite number of times, till the shadows retire (Cant. 4:6) and I can tell Thee my love eternally face to face!

And so Augustine and Therese and a host of others reveal to us that as we grow in the Spirit, our desire intensifies.

If so, then *our prayer simplifies and is increasingly interior*, for desire deepens the heart. There will always be a need for vocal prayer, because

- we are sentient beings and we need to engage our bodies in prayer
- vocal prayer tangibly engages the community as one body

But, the Holy Spirit leads us through praise and intercession and thanksgiving to silent, interior prayer.

We normally progress in this, in this way.

Growth in the Holy Spirit entails this.

This deeper, more interior prayer can be very challenging.

“Mental prayer” (as is often the translation for silent, interior prayer)

can be a desert, in which the only thing there is,
is the love of God, grace, sustaining our acts of faith, hope, and love.

With praise, intercession, and thanksgiving,

- there is at least something to think about
- the expression is more tangible

Such tangibility we need, and to it we return regularly.

That is why God invented the charisms:

tangibility to awaken the community that easily falls asleep without it!

We need our senses, emotions, and imagination touched,

...yet the Holy Spirit leads us beyond these touches.

Silent, interior prayer takes us beyond all of this,
naked before the Lord
a silent heart-to-heart

- in the certitude *and darkness* of faith
- in the strength of hope
- in the fire of love

Saint John of the Cross says,

What we need most in order to make progress is to be silent before this great God with our appetite and with our tongue, for the language he best hears is silent love.

If I may re-quote Augustine from his commentary on the First Epistle of John, and include a few more of his thoughts:

The entire Christian life is in fact an exercise of holy desire. You do not yet see that for which you long, but the very act of desiring prepares you, so that when God comes you may see and be utterly satisfied. Simply by making us wait God increases our desire, which in turn enlarges our soul, making it able to receive what is to be given to us.

What is given? The well-beloved Spouse gives *Himself*.

Now, if the spiritual life, and thus growth in the Spirit, is about desire (and my preoccupation, again is not how well am I desiring, but simply *to desire* – no matter what, no matter what I perceive happening or not happening in me) then we are to desire encounter with Christ,
there where he comes to encounter us in a special way.

There is one particular gift which I would like to mention, which is

- a particular “place”
- a particularly special “place”
of encounter with Christ: the Eucharist.

It is so special that it led Saint Pius X to declare that

“Holy Communion is the shortest way to heaven.”

The Eucharist in its reality is precisely this silent heart-to-heart.

The Eucharist is something tangible, and therefore something that touches us.

Yet the body and blood of Jesus are beyond the sense of touch.

The Eucharist is an experience of unique intimacy, i.e. the shortest way to heaven,
heaven being the life of the Trinity.

The Eucharist, in a sense, gives us the silence of God’s love for us
(hence its challenge for our senses!)

The Holy Spirit, therefore, is going to lead us to the Eucharist.

The Eucharist works in at least a two-fold manner to intensify our desire:

1. by giving us a real taste of Christ, as the bread of angels
2. by veiling Christ to the senses

The Holy Spirit leads us to the Eucharist where our desire will be intensified; and the Holy Spirit does so in such a way as to further intensify our desire for the Christ whom we seek in the Eucharist.

The way in which the Holy Spirit does this sometimes is to allow dryness in prayer, which can lead to two things

1. grave disappointment, and even despair
2. willful hoping, i.e. hunger

Note that we ought to welcome the dryer moments, and the vulnerability implied therein.

The vulnerability experienced in the dryness of prayer

is an opportunity to become more child-like.

Only the child-like can deeply receive Jesus, in particular in the Eucharist.

The Holy Spirit indeed takes a risk in allowing the experience of dryness in prayer, the risk that we stop in despair.

Why the risk?

- so that we grow in the Spirit
- so that, little by little, there only be love in us

We reach this by desiring it.

Saint Therese knew this.

Hence her words, in a letter to her Mother Superior, Agnes of Jesus:

I desire no sensible consolation in loving, provided Jesus know my love; that is enough for me. Oh! to love Him and to make Him loved...how sweet it is...

Growth in the Spirit comes from the Holy Spirit who truly seizes us only when we

- adore Him
 - adore the Trinity
- with a heart full of desire.

The more we adore, the more we are in awe, the more the Holy Spirit can take hold of us.

This adoration and awe the Holy Spirit ultimately makes possible.

Do we not acknowledge at Mass (Weekday Preface IV) that holy desire itself a grace?

“You have no need of our praise, yet our *desire* to thank you is itself your gift.”

Knowing, as Saint Augustine says,

that “God is more anxious to bestow blessings than we are to receive them”,

let us ask for the grace of holy desire.....