

Purifying Prayer
Psalm 51:1-12; Mark 2:15-17
March 15, 2009

An elderly gentleman ran a curio and antique shop in a large city. A tourist once stepped in and got to talking with the old man about the many things that were stacked in that shop.

Said the tourist, “What would you say is the strangest, the most mysterious thing you have here?”

The old man surveyed the hundreds of curios, antiques, stuffed animals, shrunken heads, mounted fish and birds, archaeological finds, deer heads—then turned to the tourist and said, “The strangest thing in this shop is unquestionably myself.”ⁱ

That shop owner had a realistic sense of the complexity of human nature. His statement also indicates a depth of maturity and self-awareness. It requires honesty and maturity to know ourselves, both our gifts and our gaps, our positive qualities and our negative characteristics, for both are found in all of us.

The Psalmist was aware of this. That is why he prayed, in the contemporary translation of Eugene Peterson, “Generous in love—God, give grace! Huge in mercy—wipe out my bad record. Scrub away my guilt, soak out my sins in your laundry. I know how bad I’ve been; my sins are staring me down.”

How many of us pray that kind of prayer very often? I will honestly say that I have difficulty praying that kind of prayer. I like to think of myself as doing the right thing and seldom doing the wrong thing. It is painful to expose ourselves to cross-examination and allow God to reveal our record of wrongs, those feelings, attitudes, actions, and opinions that are not godly. We tend to attribute the problems in our lives to the faults of others. It is far easier to blame someone else for causing me pain than it is to confess my own responsibility for the pain. We are reluctant to discover the pride, envy, laziness, control, or other sins that are at the root of our problems. We’re certain that we’ve been misjudged, persecuted, or overlooked. We can become so preoccupied with other people’s attitudes that we drift far away from ourselves and our God.

A former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp was visiting a friend who had shared the ordeal with him.

“Have you forgiven the Nazis?” he asked his friend.

“Yes.”

“Well, I haven’t. I’m still consumed with hatred for them.”

“In that case,” said his friend gently, “they still have you in prison.”ⁱⁱ

The sin in our lives, the bitterness we harbor, the anger that consumes us make it very difficult to face honestly who and what we really are. When the

people of Israel were confronted by the prophets with hard truths about themselves, they reacted by trying to silence the prophets. When Jesus stripped away the masks of the religious leaders and revealed what was really going on in their hearts, they could not face the truth about themselves or stand to be revealed before others as who they really were. They acted defensively and sought to destroy Jesus.

The Gospel of John has Jesus saying, “This is the crisis we’re in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won’t come near it, fearing a painful exposure” (John 3:19-20).

When accused of wrongdoing or when they lose a game, the first instinct of children is to save face, deny any wrong, or find excuses for the loss. Most of us wear masks; we hide from the light. We are concerned about how we appear to others; we even attempt to fool ourselves about ourselves. It is very hard to face the truth about who we really are. It is hard to stand in the light that might expose our sin.

Think of the recent number of high profile athletes and celebrities who have denied any wrongdoing, even though the evidence is clearly against them. We’ve been horrified by revelations that executives of failed financial institutions had the gall to ask for bonuses when thousands of their customers and employees had lost money under their watch.

Purifying prayer strips away our masks, reveals the truth of our faults, and opens the soul to the cleansing presence of God’s Spirit. We can’t come to a deep knowledge of God without, at the same time, coming to a profound realization of who we ourselves really are. We are all in need of healing, but the Divine Physician can only heal us if we are willing to acknowledge our sin-sickness and seek healing. The truly mature person is able and willing to be seen as she really is. Self-knowledge and knowledge of God go hand in hand.

St. Ignatius of Loyola suggested a daily exercise called an examination of consciousness as a purifying prayer. It is a time of looking back over the day in order to discover where God has been in it, and where we have failed to respond to God. The steps of an Examination of Consciousness are listed on the Page for Personal Worship in your worship program, about p. 8. The first step is to give thanks to God for particular events, encounters, or insights received as a gift during the day. The second step is to ask for the grace to know my sins and to be rid of them. Third is an examination of the day in the light of Christ, to discern how we have responded to God’s loving presence in our lives. How has God been working in us? What has God been asking of us? Fourth is to recognize and seek

forgiveness for those areas in which you have failed to respond to opportunities to see or serve God, or responded inappropriately. The final step is, with God's grace, to decide to change our ways.ⁱⁱⁱ

This exercise done on a regular basis can open us up to the presence of God at work in our lives. It will also increase our self-awareness so that we become more conscious of those unconscious ways in which we deny God or pretend that God does not know what we are doing. In my use of the examen, some area for growth usually emerges: the dismissal of someone who chronically complains; my lack of attention while someone is speaking to me while I'm concentrating on something else; my ignorance of the beauty around me while walking to work because I'm focused on the tasks to be done during the day. Through this exercise, those areas of our hearts and lives that need cleansing and renewal are revealed. I find that when my consciousness is raised, so also is my ability to change.

Marjorie Suchocki suggests that prayers of confession help lead us past the block of our sin toward a richer and deeper self lived in communion with God. "Confession, which is the contrite naming of who we really are, unblocks us, opening us up to our good. Naming is important, because honesty before God brings us into greater conformity with God's knowledge of us. Contrition is important, because unless we name the ill quality with some sense that it is in fact an 'ill' quality, we will not be ready to let it go in favor of the transformation God can make possible for us."^{iv}

"Through confession God's will toward our well-being is immediately released. God's will toward our good is ever-present, but our sin blocks our ability to receive this good. Sin is like the dam that holds back the waters of God's grace; confession is like the breaking of the dam, releasing the divine waters for our thirsty souls. This divine will toward our well-being is itself God's forgiveness. Our reception of this forgiveness is at once our movement beyond our sin and into the transformation God makes possible for us."^v

A man was a regular customer at a restaurant, and the management did its best to please him. So when he complained one day that only one piece of bread was being given him with his meal, the waiter promptly brought him four slices.

That's good," he said, "but not enough. I like bread—plenty of it."

So the next night he was given a dozen slices. "Good," he said. "But you are still being frugal, aren't you?"

Even a basketful of slices on the table the next day did not stop his complaints.

So the manager decided to fix him. He had a colossal loaf of bread baked specifically for him. It was six feet long and three feet wide. The manager

himself, with the help of two waiters, brought it in and laid it on an adjoining table, then waited for the reaction.

The man glared at the gigantic loaf, then looked at the manager, and said, “So we’re back to one piece again.”^{vi}

Sin, whether it be stubbornness, bitterness, anger, hatred, greed, or envy blinds us to the grace of God and hinders us from living the life of grace, love, and joy that God intends.

Prayers of confession are the mark of a mature Christian. None of us is ever free of sinful thoughts and actions. We must continually examine how we have failed to respond to God and seek forgiveness. In this way we will be released from the sin that imprisons us and freed to live in the transformative grace of God. May we have the courage to lift our confession before the God of grace.

Creating Artist, as the beauty of springtime unfolds around us, we are once again awakened to your life-giving presence all around us. We marvel at the cycles of life, at small seeds bearing the promise of beauty and luscious fruit. We ponder our need for both sunshine and rain and the gifts of each which you supply. We stand in awe before the miracles of life unfolding around us, the growing self-awareness of children; the compassionate desire to serve aroused in our youth; the transformation of adults awakened to your love and grace; the wisdom of elders who teach us faithful ways of living. We are grateful for this community of faith and the many ways you work in us and through us.

In this season of new life, we are humbled by those forces that seek to destroy life. We pray for persons drawn to harm others by inflicting violence. Still the storms within them, that they might find fresh and healthy perspectives that enable them to appreciate the gift of life. Offer your healing comfort to victims of violence, ravaged in body, mind, and spirit. Enable them to integrate their loss and pain into their lives and regain hope and faith.

Forgive us, O God, for the harm we cause one another. Make us aware of the impact of word spoken and words unspoken, deeds done and those left undone. In a moment of silent confession, we reveal to you the truth about ourselves..... We yearn for the grace of your forgiveness. Help us to grow in self-awareness. Turn us toward the path of reconciliation and justice.

We share your desire for a life of health and wholeness for all, O Loving Source of Life. We lift into your care those whom we know and love, that they might be blessed with your healing touch. Abide with all who feel the absence of loved ones and the sting of grief.

We seek your spirit of peace to abide in places where conflict saps the energy and goodwill. From the chambers of our state legislator to the Congress to Northern Ireland, Pakistan, and Madagascar, shed your peace, Almighty God.

Move us from conflict to cooperation. Guide the use of our pooled energies toward justice and wholeness. Grant us clean hearts that we might serve your purpose with purity and fortitude.

We lift our prayers in the name of Jesus, and pray together as he taught us saying...Our Father

ⁱ Anthony de Mello, S.J., *Taking Flight* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 131.

ⁱⁱ Anthony de Mello, S.J., *The Heart of the Enlightened* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 107.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deborah Smith Douglas, "The Examen Re-examined," *Weavings*, March/April 1995, pp. 36-39.

^{iv} Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1996), p. 73.

^v Ibid, p. 73.

^{vi} De Mellow, *The Heart of the Enlightened*, pp. 106-107.

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