

# CONTENTS

## I. Divine Love and Presence / 7

1. “In Spite of” Love / 9
2. Here I Am! / 13
3. Quick-ey’d Love / 17
4. Presence of God / 21

## II. Prayer / 23

5. We Don’t Know How to Pray / 25
6. Two Minutes a Day / 29
7. *Vacare Deo* / 33
8. Praying the Psalms / 37
9. Pray and Work / 41
10. *Lectio Divina*: What Is It? / 45
11. *Lectio Divina*: What Is It For? / 49
12. Overshadowed by a Cloud / 53

## III. Calling and Commitment / 57

13. The Default Setting / 59
14. Living from Decision / 63
15. Seeking God / 67
16. Mutual Obedience / 71
17. The Noonday Devil / 75

**IV. The Christian Life / 79**

- 18. Baptized into His Death / 81
- 19. Yield / 85
- 20. Freedom / 89
- 21. Always a Life for Others / 93
- 22. God and Square Pegs / 97
- 23. The Rich Man / 101
- 24. Hospitality / 105
- 25. The Gift of Silence / 109
- 26. Fear of the Lord (and Nobody Else) / 111
- 27. Hoping for a Better Past / 113

**V. The End and Beyond / 117**

- 28. The Work Goes On / 119
- 29. A Joy to Be Around / 121
- 30. A Cloud of Witnesses / 125

## INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I was surprised to receive in the mail from The Word Among Us Press a suggestion and a request for a book of short spiritual essays on the spiritual life. What caught my attention even more was the remark that I could draw on my nearly five decades of monastic life and almost twenty years as abbot.

Had it really been that long? It had, of course, and by now the “nearly” and “almost” are no longer necessary qualifications because I have passed both those milestones. Another implication of the suggestion was that *surely* I would have something to say after that much experience as a monk and abbot.

One thing that seems to have changed since I became abbot is that I have not attempted the book-length writing efforts I did before. All of my writing has become more limited in scope: conferences, homilies, retreat talks, letters, book reviews, articles. I had an idea of doing something more long-range at one time or another during recent years, but found that as abbot, I could not guarantee the stretches of writing time it takes me to sustain a larger project.

This has not been a handicap, since my office doesn't call for such lengthy productions. I have the time to do what I need to do. Most of my formal writing is in short commentaries, columns, or articles. A couple of times I have gathered together some of the individual articles for later publication. This is the first time I have written spiritual essays with the intention of publishing them as a group.

That doesn't mean these essays cohere tightly under an overall theme. They are simply a series of probes into the spiritual journey, as I have sought light here and there from ideas and experiences that have struck sparks in my mind along the way. Everyone's insight into the spiritual life is focused by his or her life experience, so it's no surprise that my meditations are mostly generated by monastic living and the reading of sacred Scripture.

But as I think about the origin of these essays, I am struck by how seldom they originated in a quiet time in my monastic cell. More often a train of thought was set off by interaction with other people, often outside the monastery, by a point that was made at a meeting, or by someone's comment on a news event or a Church development, or a question that stopped me in my mental tracks. It is a reminder about how much we all depend on one another, and how God speaks to us through others.

The implication of the invitation to write these essays is that I should have learned something from my experience over the years. If that is so, I think it has happened as it was described in the story of an old man, a famous guru, who was visited one day by a seeker. "O Wise One," the young man said, "how did you become so wise?" "Wisdom comes from good judgment," replied the guru. "And how did you get good judgment?" the questioner went on. "From experience," was the reply. "And how did you get experience?" he asked. "From bad judgment," said the old man.

**Abbot Jerome Kodell, OSB**

## 5. WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO PRAY

**T**he words are so familiar that we hardly notice them as we hurry on to get to the main point. The main point is very powerful, but these are important too. And we would not be easily convinced that they are true except for the authority of the one who wrote them. The words are from St. Paul: “The Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Romans 8:26).

Paul goes on to explain that even if we can't express adequately what we want our prayer to say, the Spirit intercedes for us with “inexpressible groanings.” God the Father, “the one who searches hearts,” knows what the Spirit means, because the Spirit “intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will” (Romans 8:26, 27).

We all have anxieties about prayer: what formula to use, or to use no formula; how long and where to pray; what to pray for and whom to remember; to speak or be silent. St. Paul doesn't deny the importance of these concerns, but he tells us to put them in their place, which is a very minor place. It isn't our responsibility to pray perfectly. That would be an impossibility. He states flatly: “We don't know how to pray as we ought.”

Think of what St. Paul is saying. All our worries about prayer are misplaced. The only thing that matters is to set aside time for prayer and to do the best we can. The Holy Spirit will take care of the rest. All we have to do is try. The Holy Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves. He reads our hearts, interprets our deepest desires, and takes them to the Father. As long as we try to pray, there is no flawed prayer and there is no fumble,

no attempt at prayer that falls short. Every attempt at prayer is prayer because of the Holy Spirit's action on our behalf. This is an application of the overall promise in the verse just following the passage we have been quoting: "All things work for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28). God wants to hear from us, and he doesn't care how feeble our effort. The Holy Spirit overrides any weakness and perfects our plea.


But this is just one side of prayer. Prayer is communication and communion. We think of prayer as something we do, but that is the smaller part. The greater part is the action of God. For God is praying in us even before we begin to pray. "The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). When we pray, we dip into the eternal current of love that is in us by faith and grace. "It would not even occur to a person—nor to an angel or saint—to desire contemplative love were it not already alive with him" (*Cloud of Unknowing*, 34). Just as our communication to God is often beyond our expression, God's communication to us is often beyond our comprehension. When Mother Teresa was asked what she said to God when she stared silently at the tabernacle, she said, "I just listen." And what does God say to you? "He just listens."

Judging from the words of St. Paul, we can never expect to know how to pray, at least in terms of the knowledge we like to have. We can grow in prayer and become more and more at peace and confident of God's presence in our prayer, but we never will have a complete grasp of what is going on. This is not by accident. The control that knowledge gives would ruin our prayer. But when we come back day after day, often in the dark, we are

forced to turn loose the control we love so much and throw ourselves on God. Our helplessness opens us to the grace of God's presence and deepens our faith.

God is not being coy by seeming distant. He wants union with us even more than we want union with him, and God is teaching us to pray as only he can. In his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, written in the sixth century, St. John Climacus put it this way:

God himself will teach you the art of prayer. We need no words to teach us how to see, for seeing is a natural faculty. Neither can we learn from others the beauty of prayer; its interior ways are made known to us by God alone, who gives to each the necessary knowledge and bestows the gift of prayer on those who pray. (28)

A baby is born with the equipment necessary for seeing and does not need instructions in seeing, even though he goes through stages until he is able to make full use of his eyes. We have the ability to pray but we don't know how. God will show us how to pray as we pray. Our part is to make the effort. Seven centuries after St. John Climacus wrote his words, *The Cloud of Unknowing* made the same point: "God is a jealous lover. He is at work in your spirit and will tolerate no meddlers. The only other one he needs is you" (2). 

### 13. THE DEFAULT SETTING

**T**he computer age has spawned a lot of new vocabulary—blog, Web site, toolbar—and provided new applications for terms we already knew. One of the latter is “default,” not in its sense of failure, but in the usage “by default,” when a substitution is made automatically for something else when circumstances change. (Webster gives the example “remained the club’s president by default.”)

In computer language, “default setting” means an option that will be chosen automatically by the machine when a choice has not been specified by the operator: for example, the word processor’s type font, margins, and indentations. The default setting may be overridden at any time, and then the new option will remain in force throughout the current operation. But when a new document or project is begun, the machine will return automatically to the default setting. This is a great aid in freeing the operator from having to respecify the preferred program settings when changing projects.

Any major decision and commitment about our own life should proceed in the same way. When we decide to be a Christian, to marry, to profess monastic vows, or to be ordained, our lives should adopt the “default setting” that goes with the commitment. A married person’s default setting prevents romantic involvement with a third person; a monk’s default setting rules out large spending and acquisition without permission. Certain options or opportunities arise, and we know immediately if they

are compatible with our default setting. The commitment is interior, but it has consequences in the way we live. And the way we live is a series of choices about our actions.

For one thing, the default settings in our lives save us a lot of time, just as they do with the computer. When new opportunities or offers arise, most of the time we know immediately whether or not they are compatible with our life commitments. When the issue is not that clear, we can look at the opportunity more closely for discernment. But we don't waste a lot of time and energy going down dead ends, or worse, pursuing options that would contradict a commitment carefully made and, as a result, cause a shipwreck in our lives. A frequent theme in literature is the self-inflicted tragedy caused by departure from one's ethics and best instincts, as in *Macbeth*, one of the many reflections on the more far-reaching story of Adam and Eve.

The recommendation of a default setting in a life based on chosen principles might seem obvious to those of us who live within a firm tradition of faith and life, but it is not obvious at all in the world at large. In fact, to many it seems crazy—confining, deadly, smothering the excitement of living. What about adventure, experimentation, keeping one's options open? What about personal freedom?

The choosing of default settings in life is the highest exercise of personal freedom. It is the difference between deciding from within myself how I will live and being pushed and pulled by external forces: trends, tragedies, or relationships. Our effort should be to grow into free human beings who are not tossed about by the next event in our lives, but who evaluate and respond to the surprises—good and bad—from a stable center. The freedom comes

in evaluating the traditions and norms handed down from preceding generations and determining which ones will guide our lives. Lack of personal freedom is exposed in the inability to live by the chosen norm, the default setting. To be cut loose and drifting gives the illusion of freedom, but it provides no more ability to negotiate the challenges of life than a boat without a rudder trying to find its way among the rocks in the stream.

It takes an intelligent operator to program a computer to its various default settings, but once they are set, the computer adheres mindlessly to the instructions it has been given. We use our intelligence, our faith, and our personal freedom to adopt a default setting that will enable us to live faithfully the vocation we have chosen and accepted. We do not adopt the setting mindlessly, however, and we can override it at any time. But since we have chosen it with care, we will rarely need to tinker with it, and it will act as an ongoing support in our freedom to serve the Lord. 