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INTRODUCTION

EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS WITH GOD

As we make our way through life, we are often unaware that God is sending us messages each and every minute of the day. All around us, signs and reminders of God are to be seen. God also speaks to us constantly in our thoughts and inner life. Everywhere the voice of God very gently calls us to turn to him.

We may say, “I’m not aware of such a thing.” Of course, that’s true of almost all of us. Even though we may have been devout believers all our lives, we may not be sensitive enough to the persistent and ever-present call of God. And a reason we are not aware of God’s communicating to us is that we may not watch and listen carefully enough. That’s why Jesus challenged us by asking, “Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?” (Mark 8:18). So the purpose of this book is to awaken us to the countless ways God is speaking to us every day.

Long ago Jacopone di Todi (d. 1306), a great medieval Franciscan poet, said that we live as people locked in a castle, and that God tries to break through to us by appealing to our sight, hearing, sound, touch, and even smell. The more we become aware that God’s love pursues us in this way, the more we will experience the richness of the mercy he wants to show us. And as we let God touch our spirits through our senses, we will begin to practice that mysterious art called contemplation. Contemplation is nothing more than a constant awareness of the presence of God as we go about our daily lives.

In recent years, there has been a great deal of writing and interest in contemplation. This is all for the best. However, too often people are preoccupied with mastering techniques of contemplative prayer. We need to be occupied with listening to God and not simply listening to ourselves. Paying attention to God's voice is the essence of contemplation. He can speak to us through our desires and our inner experiences as well as through the world around us. God is calling us, and the basic technique of contemplative prayer is to learn how to listen to him.

In this book, we will explore different ways that God is communicating to us. (The author of the chapter will be identified at the end of the selection.) We have written about our world, our humanness, our relationships, our experiences, our spirituality, our life in the Christian community, and much more. A reflection question has been included to provide you with a way to pray and meditate on that specific way that you can encounter the Lord. In addition, each of the five sections ends with additional questions so that you can gather with others to discuss the issues that are raised.

Our hope is that our witness will open you to the numerous and diverse ways God is trying to get your attention. For as St. Paul declared to the Athenians, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God gives us all that we have. He joins with us, not only in the beautiful aspects of life, but also in our trials and troubles. His coming to us is called grace. This is a book about how to recognize the call of God's grace in our lives.

—BENEDICT J. GROESCHEL, CFR
—BERT GHEZZI

THE PRESENT MOMENT

DISCOVERING THE POWER OF “NOW”

*Our only satisfaction must be to live in the present moment
as if there were nothing to expect beyond it.*

—JEAN-PIERRE DE CAUSSADE¹

That strange little word “now” is the most succinct and common expression of the present moment. Now is a very mysterious idea. Don’t ever underestimate it. It moves through time, through the billions of years of the material world, and it moves on toward the end of the world. It comes from the day without yesterday and moves on to the day without tomorrow.

And now is incredibly real. The past is only a memory. Its significance comes from the fact that it has lasting effects into the now. The future is only a conjecture. It may be quite different than what we anticipated. But now is inescapable. It’s irreducible. It’s there. It’s reality. And it is now, in the present moment, that we work out our salvation. Only what we do now has significance for eternity. Not what we have been, because that can be repented. And not what we will be, because that we don’t even know and are not responsible for, except in so far as we now make preparations for the future. We steer the rudder of our lives into the future—now.

Throughout Christian history, many spiritual writers have reflected on the importance of now. Teachers who wrote about practicing God’s presence have encouraged us to realize that

now is the moment when we are present to God. For example, Jean-Pierre de Caussade and Blessed Julian of Norwich in their teaching about acceptance of the divine will emphasized the sacrament of the present moment, in which God's grace is revealed to us by what is happening now.

A person who has been a great sinner can turn to God in the now and completely reverse the direction of his life. A person hoping to do good may suddenly take a detour off the road of virtue and now find himself away from God or even going against God. So now is both the door to the freedom of grace and also to the slavery of sin.

Perhaps the sanest thing to do with our now moment is to anticipate where we are going at the end of time, the destiny of our earthly life. We will ultimately come to the last moment of now. We don't know when it will be. Our Savior in the parables warns us to watch and pray because we do not know when death will come like a thief in the night. And that's why he counsels us to live every moment as though we were preparing for God to call us home.

Take some time to think of your now moment. Think of how old you are. Think of what has happened since your first memories of childhood. Think of how you have used the innumerable now moments of life. You may have used some of them very well. Others you may have wasted or used badly. But at the present moment, you are completely able to steer your now into eternity, no matter what you have done in the past. As St. Paul exclaimed, "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

People addicted to destructive substances, even to drugs like codeine that put a steel band on the metabolism of their lives, have been known to change directions. I have known people who

were slaves of drug addiction, who with the help of others went one day at a time into a better life. They were able to move from one now moment to the next by twelve-step programs. If a person can reject a severe narcotics habit, anyone can redirect his life with grace.

If you lack appreciation for the meaning of now, go and listen to some people tell their story at open Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, or perhaps participate in a parish retreat where people give witness talks about their conversion. Even simply reading stories of conversions can give you a great appreciation of the now.

The greatest danger is not the abuse of the now moment, because a person can be called to conversion. In the New Testament itself, people like St. Paul in a now moment turned around and went in a completely opposite direction. What is really dangerous is not so much a bad use of the present moment, but a lack of awareness of now—an unawareness of freedom, of self-direction, and of struggle. If a person does not recognize the importance of the present moment, his life will slip away like sand passing through an hour glass. And there will be nothing left. Rather, we must be like the apostles, who heard the Lord say “follow me” and who in a now moment abandoned everything and went after him.

—FR. BENEDICT

For Reflection:

How can you use your now moment—today—to glorify God?

FRESH STARTS

SIGNS OF GOD'S REDEMPTION

*For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.*

—PSALM 116:8-9 (NIV)

Fr. Ed Thompson, associate pastor in my central Florida parish, is the best Bible-preaching priest I have ever heard.⁸ His “Bible Blitzes”—guaranteed by a gigantic alarm clock to last only one hour—draw large crowds. In a hot July and August, five hundred parishioners came on Monday nights to hear him teach about the Gospel of John. He is also a very popular counselor and confessor. Involved in many ministries, he is so active at eighty-four that our retired bishop called him “the busiest priest in my diocese.”⁹

Fr. Ed has not always been such a success. He is an alcoholic, and his addiction pushed him through a series of ups and downs until his drinking ended his pastoral work in 1991. “So long as you are under my authority,” said the bishop of a western U.S. diocese, “you will never again serve as a practicing priest.”¹⁰

But the story did not stop there. Fr. Ed believed that God wanted to restore him to the priesthood, and he prayed for that. Through a series of events that must be described as providential, God said yes to his prayer. Sober now for sixteen years, he has

served fourteen of them as a much-appreciated priest in our parish. Fr. Ed's renewed life and ministry testify to God's desire, no matter how far we fall, to pick us up, wash off the dirt, and restore us to a place of honor in his kingdom. To me, Fr. Ed stands as a sacrament of God's redemptive grace, a sign of God's unquenchable desire to release us from whatever sin imprisons us. His story will jog your memory, causing you to recall fresh starts that God has prompted in your life and in the lives of those around you.

Fr. Ed says he did not start drinking until he was thirty-seven years old and in the ninth year of his priesthood. The night that John Kennedy was elected president in November 1960, he was celebrating with a bishop and four other priests. "Since we have our first Catholic president," said the bishop, "I think we should hoist one."¹¹ That one drink was all that it took to put Fr. Ed on his downward slide. He says he was like the man in the joke who ordered six consecutive shots of whiskey and drank only the last five. "Why didn't you drink the first one?" asks the bartender. "Because," says the man, "it's the first one that gets me drunk."¹² "I could never take just one drink," says Fr. Ed.

For thirty-one years Fr. Ed suffered with his addiction. A few sober years alternated with years when he was often drunk. Alcohol ruined all of his pastoral assignments. Several extended stays in treatment centers failed to cure him. Finally in 1991 his bishop, despairing that Fr. Ed would never be free of his addiction, sent him to a treatment center and suspended him from public service as a priest.

But Fr. Ed prayed, asking God to restore him to the active priesthood. And God responded by sending people to support him.

In the summer of 1991, Fr. Ed heard from a woman whom he had helped enter the Carmelite order thirty years before. Now married and divorced, she made contact with him. "You were the only

one,” she said, “who believed that Jesus communicated with me.”¹³ And when she sensed Jesus telling her that Fr. Ed was in trouble, she knew she had to help him. In July 1991, he left the treatment center and came to central Florida, and she welcomed him to live a short time in her home until he could afford a room on his own. She had four cats who became the congregation for his private Masses.

Shortly after arriving in Florida, Fr. Ed began to attend the 8:30 a.m. Mass in our parish, where he met the pastor, Fr. Paul Henry. One day Fr. Ed asked him to become his spiritual adviser. “I will be your friend,” said Fr. Paul. He promised to pray for Fr. Ed and gradually involved him in parish ministries, arranging for him to teach in the adult education program and lead Bible studies. In November 1991, Fr. Ed attended the annual parish weekend retreat. On Sunday afternoon he sat in his car feeling physically, mentally, and spiritually spent. Crushed by the weight of his addiction, he shouted to God, pleading for release. Then he left the car and stood under a huge oak tree. Fr. Paul approached him and embraced him. In that moment of affection Fr. Ed says he had a spiritual awakening. He experienced all his resentment, anger, self-pity, and entitlement drain away. This new freedom helped him deal with the problems at the root of his alcoholism.

In August Fr. Ed had also started to attend Alcoholics Anonymous, which he had come to believe was his only hope for finally conquering his addiction. He had once heard Archbishop Fulton Sheen recommend that, if you wanted to find someone to give you good advice, you should look for a person who is suffering without complaint and trying to get close to God. Fr. Ed prayed for that kind of person to sponsor him in AA. He found such a man in Bob McCarthy, a sufferer seeking God, who had cancer of the throat and was worshipping at daily Mass. McCarthy agreed to sponsor Fr. Ed, but only on condition of absolute obedience.

“He put his finger in my face,” says Fr. Ed, “and said, ‘Disobey me once, and you’re history.’”¹⁴ For two years, McCarthy accompanied Fr. Ed to AA meetings two times and occasionally three times a day! His ministry to Fr. Ed. occasioned two redemptions: Fr. Ed has mastered his addiction for sixteen years running; and Bob McCarthy has been healed of his cancer, a mercy he attributes to his relationship with his priest friend.

Fr. Ed believed that God wanted to restore him to priestly ministry. He wrote his bishop in the western diocese, asking him to lift his suspension and allow him to function as a priest again. The bishop said no and declared that so long as he was his bishop, Fr. Ed would never serve as a priest again—unless another bishop was “crazy enough to accept him.”¹⁵

Fr. Ed and Bob McCarthy prayed for his restoration. One day in 1993 at a novena to Our Lady, Bob predicted that Fr. Ed would celebrate Mass on her feast day. In the meantime, our local bishop, who appreciated Fr. Ed and his work, intervened on his behalf with his brother bishop out West and won the day. And Bob’s prophetic insight came true: Fr. Ed was installed as a priest of our diocese on December 7, 1993 and celebrated Mass for the first time in our parish—the first public Mass of his restored priesthood—in honor of the Immaculate Conception on December 8.

Looking back now on his fresh start, Fr. Ed quotes his hero, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, who said, “Restored friendship is sweeter than unbroken love.”¹⁶

—BERT

For Reflection:

In what area of your life do you need a fresh start? Ask someone you trust to support you in prayer for that new beginning.