



Knitting in the Presence of God

Praying without words

From the syndicated column “The Prayerful Heart”

By Julie McCarty

In “Beginning to Pray” (Paulist Press), Archbishop Anthony Bloom recounts how a woman in her nineties came to him when he was newly ordained, frustrated with her prayer life. She complained that, in fourteen years of praying the Jesus Prayer, she had never really felt God’s presence. (Imagine saying the rosary all that time and not perceiving God’s presence even once.)

Father Anthony commented that perhaps she wasn’t giving God a chance to get a word in edgewise.

He suggested that each morning, she should take out her knitting supplies and “knit before the face of God” for fifteen minutes. He forbid her to utter even one word of prayer. “You just knit and try to enjoy the peace of your room,” he said.

Although his advice sounded rather strange, the elderly woman decided to give it a try. After breakfast, she went to her room, lit a candle before the icon, pulled up a chair, and sat down.

At first, she felt relief at being allowed to “do nothing,” and then, as she looked around the room, she experienced fresh gratitude for all the things in her room.

She began to knit in a calm, unhurried fashion. With only the sound of the clock gently ticking and the needles rhythmically clicking, the old woman began to be aware that the silence was not an absence. The silence of her room was filled with the rich presence of God, a divine silence that permeated the quiet within her soul.

Practicing the Presence of God

Words of prayers can certainly help us express ourselves to God. Yet, as we mature spiritually, God invites us to pray in other ways as well, ways that do not always involve the use of words.

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a seventeenth-century Carmelite, discovered a way to pray in the midst of his daily work that involved few or no words. The classic book “Practicing the Presence of God” describes his approach as recorded in conversations, spiritual maxims, and letters.

Brother Lawrence sought to remember God’s presence in every moment of the day, no matter where he was or what he was doing. When he was first assigned to work in the monastery kitchen, he felt an inward aversion to the idea. The more he practiced recalling God’s presence while working amidst the pots and pans, the more he began to find joy. After fifteen years of cooking, Brother Lawrence came to feel God’s presence as much in the kitchen as in the chapel.

Practicing the presence of God was something Brother Lawrence encouraged others to do, including people outside the monastery walls. For example, in a letter to a laywoman, he wrote: "...think often of God, by day, by night, whatever you are doing, in your duties, even in your amusements. He is always near you and with you; do not neglect Him. You would think it rude to leave a friend, who came to visit you, alone; why then leave God alone? Do not then forget Him, think about Him often—to do so is the proper business of a Christian: if we do not know our calling we must learn it."

Practicing the Presence of God Today

We, too, can practice the presence of God. The best place to begin, I believe, is to think of God during the simplest tasks we do, like washing our hands, sweeping the floor, doing lawn work, or walking in the parking lot. When done quietly, with little fuss or hurry, these simple tasks can become occasions for practicing a simple awareness of God.

Gradually, we can focus our hearts on God's presence in slightly more complicated tasks. When rocking a child to sleep or embracing a loved one, we can thank God for his presence. Turning on the evening news or powering up the computer to answer e-mail, we can recall God is with us. We can come to know God's presence when encountering a homeless person, dealing with a difficult situation at work, or being stuck in a traffic jam.

And, like the ninety-year-old woman, we can knit before the face of God. For the rest of her life—she lived another decade—she was able to find the contemplative silence containing God's presence whenever she truly entered the quiet stillness within herself.

