Week 5. *Without Ceasing*

One final difference between centering prayer and the exercise of *The Cloud* is the use of a timer. Of course, the *Cloud* author lived in the fourteenth century so he didn't *have* a timer, but his intent was clear:

> In this exercise there is no question of moderation; I would prefer that you should never leave off as long as you live. I do not say that you should persevere in it with the same vigor; for that is not possible. . . . But I do say that you should always either be doing it or preparing for it, that is to say either actually or in intention. (*Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 41)

Centering prayer is an exercise that takes 20-30 minutes, twice a day, but the exercise of *The Cloud* is both faster and slower. The aspiration takes only an instant, an "atom of time," but you never stop aspiring. It's a lifestyle. A new mind. A death and rebirth. You never stop because of what you experience—consolation or dryness, joy or pain—but you also never stop after a certain amount of time. You never cease.

I suppose that's overstating the difference. You may need to go to work or do other tasks, and the nature of your prayer will change considerably. You may even need to set a timer so that you don't miss an appointment. Still, the goal is not 30 minutes to become more centered. The goal is a mind and heart continually, continuously turned to God, seeking God's will, surrendering, consenting to God's action, aware, at all times.

This aspiration carries on into all of life. Whenever you become aware that your heart is elsewhere, you turn to God, surrender, seek his presence. When you have a concern, you give it to God. When you have a decision to make, you seek God's will. When you don't want to do something that you ought, you do it because you love God.

I seem only to be able to remember to turn to God, to "lift up my heart," a few times a day, but others report that it can be habitual and continual. I imagine that this is one meaning of "pray without ceasing." So pray "sin—out!" and "love!" with all your heart, as a "vehement shriek," as the *Cloud* author puts it. Or, if love is lacking, pray for more love.

Perhaps this is a good place to recommend that you join a small group of other like-minded people, talk about your journey with your friends, or maybe even find a (human) spiritual director. Hopefully Journee has been helpful to you. (Let me know!) But Journee doesn't replace sharing your journey with other people. We inspire, encourage, and learn from each other. Iron sharpens iron.

But most of all, keep seeking God, keep aspiring to insight and love. Never cease. Keep your mind and heart open to God. Exercises such as centering prayer may come and go, but seeking God should be your life from now on.

Exercise for Week 5: Pray Without Ceasing

This week's exercise moves beyond timed sessions to explore prayer as a continuous movement of the heart toward God. While we'll still have a dedicated morning prayer time, our focus shifts to carrying this aspiration throughout the day.

1. Begin with your morning prayer time as usual:

- Pray for God's presence and for love
- Take a few minutes with the daily reading
- Practice contemplative prayer, but without a timer
- When you need to begin your day, continue your prayer as you go about your duties

2. Throughout each day:

- Set 3-4 specific times (perhaps meals or transitions) to pause and turn to God
- Whenever you remember God, send up a “sharp dart of longing love”
- If you become aware of anxieties or desires not rooted in God, give him your concerns as they arise. Seek to be at rest in God at all times

Continuing the Journey

At the end of the week, take some time to reflect on the whole journey. If you like, discuss it with Journee. Consider:

- What part of this journey resonated with you? Where did you feel resistance?
- Did you have any insights on yourself or on God?
- Have you noticed any difference in your life since the beginning of this journey?
- Do feel called to continue with this form of prayer?

Not everyone seems to be called to this exercise at all times of their lives. Maybe reading a good book and pondering is better for you. But don’t assume that dryness or pain means that you aren’t called to this work. According to Keating, most people who practice contemplative prayer do so without consolations or special feelings, let alone visions or raptures—and that may be a faster, safer road. But even if you don’t set aside time for contemplative prayer, you can always aspire, seek God, in all of life as well as in your prayer time.

Journaling and Journee

Reflect on both your daily practice and your overall journey either in your paper journal or through conversation with Journee. Also take time this week to review your previous journal entries or Journee conversations to notice how your practice has evolved over these five weeks.

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