

SP401 – Spirituality: An Introduction – Assignment 2

PRAYER AS A VITAL MEANS TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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Prayer is an indispensable part of Christian spirituality and perhaps the most important among the tools historically practiced to aid spiritual growth. This essay first describes the process of spiritual growth. It then deals with several ways of promoting growth, and lastly focuses on prayer as the cornerstone means of spiritual growth.

Spiritual Growth as a Journey to God

Christian spirituality involves all of life. Unique to each individual, it pervades all experiences and relationships. Rooted in the Trinity, spirituality involves relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Anchored in the world, it ties with relating to fellow humans. Being both transcendent and immanent, it involves a balance of contemplation in relating to God, and action in serving people – family, fellow believers, neighbours, co-workers, and those in the world at large. At its ultimate in this life, spirituality fulfils the two great commandments – love to God, expressed through prayer, praise, and worship; and love to neighbour, expressed through service and pursuit of justice.

Spiritual growth is basically the process of becoming holy. It is analogous to a journey – a unique journey paralleling each person's human development.¹ Motivated by a desire for a deepening relationship with God,² a Christian can be seen as travelling to God the Father and toward the image of Jesus Christ.³ Although never reaching perfection in this life, one learns from and helps fellow pilgrims, and is travelling with God and to God.⁴

The journey also follows the Twelve Steps in recovery programs such as the one used by Alcoholics Anonymous. It starts with recognition of powerlessness, and continues with: belief in a Greater Power; handing one's life and will over to God as understood; making a moral self-inventory; admitting to self, another person, and God one's wrongs; readiness to have God remove the character defects; asking God to work on the shortcomings; listing people harmed and willingness to make amends; making appropriate amends; continued transformation and freedom from the bondage of self through ongoing self-inventory and admitting wrongs; seeking through prayer and meditation to improve conscious contact with God, as well as to know God's will and be able to carry it out; practice of the preceding principles in all aspects of life and taking the message to others.⁵

The Christian spiritual journey is initiated by the drawing of the Father (Jn 6:44), which is a call to an allegiance and personal relationship with Jesus through whom salvation is offered (Jn 10:9; Acts 2:21; 4:12). God the Father sent the Holy Spirit to move people inwardly to love God with their whole heart, soul, mind and strength (Mk. 12:30) and to enable them to love each other as Christ loved them (Jn 13:34; 15:12).⁶

In response to the divine offer of love, a person comes to the risen Lord and is energized within by the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:36-39; Rom 8:14-17).⁷ Justified in Jesus, Christians have been freed from the bondage of sin. Having become children of God and sharers in the divine nature, they are becoming holy. While having Christ as the author and finisher of their holiness, believers are exhorted to hold on to and cultivate in their lives the divine righteousness they have received (Eph. 5:3-4; Col. 3:12-13; Gal. 5:22-23; Rom 6:22). Because of their proclivity to sin, they continually need God's mercy and must daily pray for forgiveness (Mt 6:12).⁸

As Christians grow spiritually, God leads them from security, through disorientation, to reorientation. On their life journey they pass through three stages – purgative, illuminative and unitive.⁹ Spiritual growth also implies renewal, which should be holistic, covering all aspects of life including personal, corporate, conceptual, cultural, and missiological.¹⁰

Following Christ is a progressive movement from imitation through intimacy toward an identification, where the believer's life becomes Christ's life (Gal 2:20).¹¹ There is then a deep mutual abiding and indwelling of Jesus and the believer as illustrated by Christ's vine analogy (Jn 15:1-17). This abiding is a life of love, from which comes the mission of sharing the gospel with others.¹² Abiding in Christ's love, through a union with him, means abiding in God (Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:7-21).¹³ The growing Christian moves toward self-transcendence expressed in more comprehensive love,¹⁴ as well as in a deeper self-giving to God despite obstacles and setbacks.¹⁵

Gradually conformed to and united with Christ, his disciples follow the new "Way of the Lord" (Acts 9:1-2; 18:25), demonstrating faith and love in concern and actions toward people in all strata of the world. They travel through life to death, looking forward to the object of the Christian hope – a glorious resurrection and the consummation of personal and cosmic history in the reign of God, where God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).¹⁶

Ways of Promoting Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth occurs within everyday experiences. Life is the place where we love, as well as the school where we learn to love. Hence, a vital aspect of growth is seeking out and facing up to problem issues of one's life and making them the focus of spiritual effort.¹⁷

The whole journey to God is struggle against pride and seeking independence from God – the root of sin. This human inclination can be counteracted by following Christ's example in relating to his Father in faith, trust, and dependence. Only when pride has been overcome is there a complete openness to God.¹⁸

Growth also involves adaptation of ones' spirituality to the changing world, and to contemporary understanding of spirituality and theology, while at the same time remaining faithful to God's Word and personal convictions of right and wrong.¹⁹ One needs to grow in spiritual wisdom so that the best decisions can be made in specific situations.²⁰

Another means of spiritual growth is cultivating awareness of God in experience and becoming more in touch with one's spiritual journey.²¹ Learning to see God in all aspects of life occurs by paying attention to moment-by-moment happenings, as well as being sensitive to one's feelings, ideas and motives – all central elements of spiritual life.²²

Growth in the knowledge of God also takes place through God's self-disclosure in life, Scripture, as well as history, nature, and other Christians.²³ God is speaking to and moulding each person through personal revelation in the present moment. Sometimes, however, God's will in our lives is not recognized and God's working is criticized or resisted. Perceiving and responding to God's revelation in perpetual self-abandonment to divine providence will be transformative.²⁴

Other means to spiritual growth include mental, moral and devotional discipline, ever-renewed dedication of one's will to God and death to the self, as well as communal involvement including reaching out in actions. A tension will always exist between effort and self-abandonment, loving communion and ethical struggle, illumination and purification, and renunciation of the will and deliberate use of the will.²⁵

The following disciplines have been found helpful in spiritual development: prayer, meditation, contemplation, reading of Scripture and spiritual classics, consciousness examen, and journaling. There is no one or best way of using these tools, but they can be adapted by each person. Following the Holy Spirit in shaping one's spiritual journey to God needs to fit individual circumstances, rather than necessarily conform to established traditional norms.²⁶

A lifestyle with the goals to live better and to keep one's life attuned to God is conducive to spiritual growth. Lifestyle involves active involvement with one's spiritual journey and dealing with unchristian issues in life. As a tool, not a master, lifestyle should be practiced faithfully and consistently, but flexibly. It should be regularly reviewed to see whether its goals are being accomplished, and if needed, adjusted to fit a new situation.²⁷

The realization that God is one's only worthwhile treasure will enable detachment from earthly pursuits. Priorities will be set in correct order to make God the centre of one's life. Otherwise Christians may be blinded by idols such as the love of money, pursuit of status, or maintaining a certain self-image. Radical actions may be needed since over-attachment to anything will thwart openness to the Spirit, produce anxiety, and impede the journey to divine union.²⁸

Spiritual growth occurs through communal worship and fellowship with other believers, as well as through celebration of God, spiritual direction, and education for ministry.²⁹ The church provides opportunities for hearing the Word of God and participating in the sacraments, liturgy, prayer, and service to others.³⁰ Further, the church is a vehicle for learning to love and encourage fellow believers. The struggle with human imperfections teaches each person that it is only the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ that opened their way to God and that binds them together as a family.³¹

Growth in spirituality precludes self-knowledge and understanding the interior of the human heart where the Holy Spirit dwells.³² With time, “the stirrings and touches of God” will become more and more recognised and one will become an increasingly responsive tool of the creative will.³³ Growing sensitivity to the inner movements and understanding God’s unique working in their lives will give a person a greater trust in their experience of God. Each individual is the final judge of their spiritual progress and needs to increase in discernment of their motivation and the subtleties of their actions.³⁴

A balance is needed in spiritual journeying between overemphasis of discipline on the one hand and too much relaxation and sentimentality on the other. Also, excessive focus on spiritual development can, paradoxically, lead to a self-righteous piety which could become the last and strongest fortress of sin.³⁵ Therefore, each person should enjoy the journey with God, confident that their sanctification is assured if they respond to God’s calling and in trust abandon themselves to the process of being made holy.³⁶

Prayer as the Cornerstone Means of Spiritual Growth

Prayer is a vital means to encountering God, communicating with God, and enhancing one’s relationship with God. It is a key tool for developing continuing awareness of the Lord’s presence within.³⁷ Far more than just a spiritual exercise, prayer is the heart of spiritual life and food of the soul. It is indispensable as a person who desires closeness to God allows increasing possession of their faculties by their Creator in submission to God’s plan and purpose.³⁸ Prayer can be considered a way of life – with the rest of life being preparation for prayer. It is more like turning up the volume than switching on.³⁹

Prayer bridges and in a way forms the capstone to the other spiritual disciplines. The examen of consciousness, for example, is a form of prayer. In fact, Ignatius of Loyola gives it first place when describing the various types of prayer, including meditation,⁴⁰ contemplation, and vocal and mental prayer. The five points of the examen – thanksgiving, asking for enlightenment, calling ourselves to account, requesting forgiveness, and resolution to change – are clearly related to communion with God.⁴¹

Prayer and contemplation are needed to develop and evaluate one's lifestyle, to perceive hidden idols in life, and to being empowered to place God at the centre of one's life. Contemplative prayer may unlock the spiritual nourishment in Scripture reading and in centuries-old classics that are at first sight incomprehensible.⁴²

Prayer can form an important aspect of journaling – both personal prayer and intercessory prayers may be recorded.⁴³ Upon journal review, seeing answers to prayers and resolution of problems can provide encouragement and hope for the future. Prayer also needs to precede the rereading of a journal if this is used as a spiritual discipline to monitor growth. God's aid is needed to discern important issues buried in the journal. Similarly, upon finishing the journal review, a prayer of thanks for the insights gained is appropriate, together with asking for guidance on what actions to take.⁴⁴

In the church context, communal prayer (also known as cathedral prayer) is a significant part of the worship experience. Outward looking and intercessory, cathedral prayer contributes to the spiritual journey by encouraging concern for the world. It needs to be balanced with individual prayer (also known as “monastic”) which by contrast is meditative, inward looking, and oriented to growth and sanctification.⁴⁵

Prayer must be approached with the understanding of who is praying and to whom, i.e., in humility as a creature coming before their Creator. Prayer is a response to divine initiative, the prior love of God.⁴⁶ Upon recognition of the divine Reality, the first step in prayer is awe, adoration, and worship – the lifting of the eyes of the little creature to the Living God, or to the symbol through which God has self-disclosed to the soul.⁴⁷

The second stage is personal self-giving which culminates in communion. An evidence of spiritual life, prayer has God, the inciter and mover of human souls, as its doer.⁴⁸ Every advance in prayer then becomes an expression of love, hope, and trust – an abandonment of thoughts, deeds, and desires in confidence to the mysterious purposes of the Eternal who first evoked the sense of worship.⁴⁹

Through the next stage of prayer, spiritual power is developed and humans become fellow workers with the Spirit in God's creative activities. The love of God and God's people, operating in the world of prayer, is the live wire along which the power of God, indwelling in human spirits, can and does act on other humans as intercession. Such hidden intercession is the supreme expression of spiritual life on earth: moving from God to those humans, who have ceased to be self-centred units but surrendered to an invisible love⁵⁰ and are now woven into the great fabric of praying souls – the mystical body of Christ.⁵¹

Prayer is a tool to be used regularly, consistently and in a way that fits each person's unique situation. When praying, one should also be fresh, focused, and diligent. In today's busy and fragmented world, extra time may be needed for prayer and seeking God. As Meister Eckhart said, "God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by a process of subtraction."⁵²

In conclusion, as borderland creatures in the making, humans need to be completed by a Reality that lies beyond them.⁵³ Prayer as a link with the Eternal puts them in touch with the enabling power of God and makes each moment of life an opportunity to express love for God.⁵⁴

Prayer helps to submit human wills to God's will and to make God central in one's life. From this follows love of fellow humans⁵⁵ as a new "heart of flesh" leads to compassion, intercession, and action on behalf of others.⁵⁶ The fruit of a deep life of prayer is not withdrawal from the world, but rather a life of service.⁵⁷ A praying person becomes a transmitter of God's grace and love.⁵⁸

Through prayer, meditation, and contemplation grows an awareness of God, ultimately seeing God in all things, including unattractive happenings. Nature and the universe come to be appreciated with wonder and awe, and all of life is seen as a gift from God.⁵⁹ (2501 words)

¹ Richard Byrne, "Journey (Growth and Development in Spiritual Life)," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. by Michael Downey (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 565.

² William G. Thompson, "Spirituality, Spiritual Development, and Holiness," *Review for Religious* 51, no. 5 (1992): 653.

³ David Walker, "Holiness: Pattern or Journey?" *Australasian Catholic Record* LXVI, no. 1 (1989): 20.

⁴ Byrne, "Journey", 565.

⁵ The idea and details are found in Joanna Thyer, *Steps to Life* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2004).

⁶ Second Vatican Council, "The Universal Vocation to Holiness in the Church," Constitution on the Church, par 39-42, in *The Teachings of the Second Vatican Council* (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1966), 131-132.

⁷ Byrne, "Journey," 569.

⁸ Second Vatican Council, "The Universal Vocation," 131-132.

⁹ Byrne, "Journey," 568-571.

¹⁰ Allan H. Sager, "A Spirituality for Our Times", in *Gospel Centered Spirituality. An Introduction to Our Spiritual Journey* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 83-84.

¹¹ Byrne, "Journey", 569.

- ¹² David Walker, "Holiness in Sacred Scripture," in *Spirituality: An Introduction; Readings 2*, by The Broken Bay Institute (Sydney: The Broken Bay Institute, 2008), 298, 301, 303.
- ¹³ Ibid., 295.
- ¹⁴ Thompson, "Spirituality, Spiritual Development, and Holiness", 654.
- ¹⁵ Walker, "Pattern or Journey?", 21.
- ¹⁶ Byrne, "Journey," 569.
- ¹⁷ Walker, "Pattern or Journey?", 21-23, 26.
- ¹⁸ David Walker, "Humility," in *Spirituality: An Introduction; Readings 2*, by The Broken Bay Institute (Sydney: The Broken Bay Institute, 2008), 516, 519.
- ¹⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History. Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991), 50-51.
- ²⁰ Walker, "Pattern or Journey?", 25.
- ²¹ Ibid., 24.
- ²² Elizabeth Dryer, "A Contemporary Spirituality: Blending the Past and the Present," *Spiritual Life* 33 (1987): 140-141.
- ²³ William A. Barry, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God. A Theological Enquiry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 32-33.
- ²⁴ Pierre De Caussade, *Self Abandonment to Divine Providence* (London: Collins, 1933), 43-50.
- ²⁵ Evelyn Underhill, "Spiritual Life," in *Modern Spirituality: an Anthology*, ed. John Garvey (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1985), 25.
- ²⁶ Walker, "Pattern or Journey?", 25.
- ²⁷ David Walker, "Lifestyle", in *Spirituality: An Introduction; Readings 2*, by The Broken Bay Institute (Sydney: The Broken Bay Institute, 2008), 567-571.
- ²⁸ David Walker, "God our Joy," in *Spirituality: An Introduction; Readings 2*, by The Broken Bay Institute (Sydney: The Broken Bay Institute, 2008), 507-509, 513.
- ²⁹ Dolores R. Leckey, "The Experience of God in Everyday Life," *The Way Supplement*, no. 60 (1987): 18-21.
- ³⁰ Second Vatican Council, "The Universal Vocation to Holiness in the Church," 136.
- ³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Community," in *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 12-13, 16-17.
- ³² Ronald Barnes, "Psychology and Spirituality: Meeting at the Boundaries," *The Way Supplement*, no. 69 (1990): 34-35.
- ³³ Underhill, "Spiritual Life," 25.
- ³⁴ Dreyer, "A Contemporary Spirituality," 136.
- ³⁵ Sager, "A Spirituality for Our Times," 79-80.
- ³⁶ Dreyer, "A Contemporary Spirituality," 142-143.
- ³⁷ David Walker, "Prayer," in *Spirituality: An Introduction; Readings 2*, by The Broken Bay Institute (Sydney: The Broken Bay Institute, 2008), 535, 538-39.
- ³⁸ Underhill, "Spiritual Life," 23.
- ³⁹ Walker, "Prayer," 535.
- ⁴⁰ Daniel A. Helminiak, "How is Meditation Prayer?" *Review for Religious* 41, no. 5 (1982): 780. According to the author, meditation is prayer when in theistic or Christian context it indirectly and implicitly praises the Creator; becomes worship through self-surrender; and reverences God through humility and receptivity to God's voice.
- ⁴¹ Peter G. Van Breemen, "The Examination of Conscience," *Review for Religious* 49, no. 4 (1990): 604-605.
- ⁴² Wendy M. Wright, "The Spiritual Classics as Spiritual Guides," *The Way Supplement*, no. 73 (1992): 44.
- ⁴³ Ronald Klug, "Experiencing the Benefits of a Spiritual Journal," in *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal. A guide to Journal Keeping for Inner Growth and Discovery* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 43.
- ⁴⁴ Lawrence Osborne, *Paper Pilgrimage. Keeping a Personal and Spiritual Journal* (London: Daybreak, 1990), 117, 128.

- ⁴⁵ Paul Bradshaw, *Two Ways of Praying. Introducing Liturgical Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1995), 17-25.
- ⁴⁶ Walker, "Prayer," 534.
- ⁴⁷ Underhill, "Spiritual Life," 22.
- ⁴⁸ Evelyn Underhill, "Life as Prayer," in *Life as Prayer and Other Writings of Evelyn Underhill* (Harris, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 1.
- ⁴⁹ Underhill, "Spiritual Life," 22.
- ⁵⁰ Underhill, "Life as Prayer," 1.
- ⁵¹ Underhill, "Spiritual Life," 22-23.
- ⁵² Sager, "A Spirituality for Our Times," 78.
- ⁵³ Underhill, "Spiritual Life," 16.
- ⁵⁴ Walker, "Prayer," 539.
- ⁵⁵ Leckey, "The Experience of God in Everyday Life," 17.
- ⁵⁶ Dreyer, "A Contemporary Spirituality," 139.
- ⁵⁷ Walker, "God our Joy," 512.
- ⁵⁸ Underhill, "Life as Prayer," 1-3.
- ⁵⁹ Dreyer, "A Contemporary Spirituality," 139.

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