

COLUMNISTS

The gift of prayer: to be in God and with God

I recently read an article on meditation by Laurance Freeman, OSB, in which he points out that meditation started out being a kind of practice, or exercise, that would help an individual receive the gift of "prayer of the heart." Of course that notion hardly appealed to me as a righteous American Western-style Christian. Who wants to think about a "gift" of prayer? I like to think it's an achievement that I worked at and brought on myself. Gift, indeed!

Freeman presses on, however. He points out that our understanding of meditation took on "the marked prejudice of the Western mind to intellectualize both the idea and the practice of prayer." I think he means by this that some of us might tend to make prayer into a kind of very conscious, very systematic, very rational mental exercise akin to thinking. He even says that our approach to prayer became a kind of intellectual obsession for analysis. This is the kind of approach we take to almost all areas of knowledge.

When we applied it all to prayer, we ended up talking to God or thinking about God rather than trying, in a thought-free way, to simply be in God and with God. Freeman describes the development of methods of prayer that tried to organize and facilitate meditation. These methods came to be called "mental prayer," and Freeman complains that it caused some people to lose "the



the
moral
life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

simple and spontaneous prayer of primitive and monastic Christianity."

I remember hearing once that those of us in Western cultures became so unconsciously dominated by Descartes' claim "I think, therefore I am" that we hardly know that we have mental capacities beyond those of rational, discursive thought. Imagination, intuition, analogical association are hardly valued at all, even in religious training and certainly in the attempt to pray. A teacher I had once pointed out that when we want a portrait or picture of someone, all we want is the head and shoulders. "I think, therefore I am."

In Eastern cultures a "portrait" of someone is likely to show a rendering of their entire body. Moreover, the figure is seen as part of a larger landscape that may include some symbolic references to important places, people and events in the individual's life. The idea behind that kind of portrait is that there is more

to a person than his or her capacity to think. In the East there never has been a very pronounced notion that thinking equals being. Lucky for them! They would never reduce a person to head and shoulders only. They understand that it's the connections that make a person a person. If they try prayer, they probably don't get all hung up trying to have a "thought" about God. They probably just go right ahead and be in God and be with God.

Today we might encounter various forms of prayer that took life in response to the Second Vatican Council's insight about the "universal call to holiness" and the need to deepen the life of prayer in the church. One practice has been compared to the use of the mantra in some Asian religions. Mantra itself is a Sanskrit term that means "a sacred word or syllable." It implies the continuous repetition of a word or phrase that helps us focus our attention beyond thought. In fact, the repetition of a phrase like this is known to take one even beyond imagination to a kind of "still, wakeful presence to the reality of God," in Freeman's terms.

Today some people use self-help books and techniques that adapt some of these religious notions to habits that are not themselves religious. So some people take up a meditation technique emptied of religious meaning in the effort to reduce stress in their lives. Others aim at a

kind of self-enhancement, or the acquisition of some special powers. In some ways these "secular" forms of prayer have helped individuals arrive at a more mature faith, simply because they offer a way to transcend oneself and one's "heroic" effort to cause or achieve prayer. Something about our American ethos — sometimes we don't even like gifts. We'd rather think and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, even in prayer!

As we look forward this weekend to the great feast of Pentecost, we might try to be mindful that prayer isn't a practice or discipline that leads to better thoughts about God. Neither does it lead to more congratulatory accomplishments by hard-praying — when they're not hard-working — Christians.

If it's really prayer, it leads to an encounter of our whole person (not just the thinking part) with the redemptive holiness of Christ. Prayer is an act of faith. It certainly requires generous commitment and perseverance. But its source and goal is God. The Spirit of God is a gift to us and fruit of the work of Christ. We can't cause it. The problem is, we have a hard time just receiving it. Maybe Sunday we might benefit from just being — for a few seconds — in the lovely, loving presence of the Spirit of God.

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Spring Sports Wrap-up

Publication date: June 6 • Advertising deadline: May 23

Three times each year, high-school sports in the diocese reach their crescendo with sectional finals, and, in some cases, state-championship play. These editions will profile the success of Catholic school teams and profile Catholic athletes who attend public schools. While focusing primarily on younger sports stars, these issues also will recognize adult athletes who excel on the turf or in the gym. What a terrific combination for promoting your business to a sports-oriented demographic!

