

THE PRESENT MOMENT

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Recently, there has been a great deal in the news about the potential of a flu pandemic. Every year thousands of people worldwide die from the flu, so the threat of a viral pandemic is a legitimate cause of concern. However, there is a different kind of pandemic that reaps havoc in our society. It is the emotional virus of anxiety and depression.

Normally, we associate these maladies with the stress that comes from failures, illness, financial losses, powerlessness, and the loss of a loved one. Certainly there is often a connection between these grave troubles and the feelings of depression and anxiety. However, there are those who endure great hardships yet live in a state of peace that leaves them untouched by depression and anxiety. They seem to have a secret that leaves them up beat and even joyous amid their painful trials. This essay explores their secret.

This discovery begins with an understanding of how God gives us the experience of time, which comes to us in infinitesimal bits of moment by moment. It is the only reality we can truly experience in the here and now, otherwise called the present moment. It's in the present moment that we get a very dim foretaste of God's existence and our future destiny where time does not exist. Eternity is lived in the everlasting NOW.

The past is no longer ours. That was God's gift yesterday, or a few minutes ago. The past is no longer ours because God has taken it back. When we focus too much on the past, it leads to sadness and depression. In the words of John Greenleaf Wittier: "Of all the words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, it might have been." Hell is a place of blame and recrimination without any movement toward repentance. When we live with a preoccupation on the past, it is like driving a car focusing on the rearview mirror. The outcome is disaster.

The future is not yet ours. God has not given it to us. Just as we can't change the past, so too we can't carry tomorrow's problems now. That grace has not been given to us. So when we become preoccupied with tomorrow's troubles or even the problems of the next five minutes, we pile on ourselves burdens that are too heavy to bear. This leads to anxiety and stress. Hell is the abode of everlasting anxiety as the dreadful refrain "forever" reverberates. Excessively focusing on the future is like driving a car with binoculars fixated on what may happen way up the road. The outcome is disaster.

However, God gives us the strength to cope with and live in peace and joy in the present moment. Peace and joy are fruits of the Holy Spirit's dynamic presence (Gal 5:22). Drawing on this power is simple, but not easy. It is simple because the key to living in the present moment in joy and peace is not complex. It is difficult because our emotions easily drag us in the direction of depression and anxiety when hard times overwhelm us. Besides, there's the constant battle against the fallacy that we are in control of our circumstances.

I have known people who endure great hardships with a marvelous tranquility. Their secret, which is not really a secret at all, is always the same. They focus on God and others and live in the present moment. No one is at peace or lives joyfully whose focus is on himself and not God and others. The preoccupation with oneself is the breeding ground of depression and anxiety.

It is a marvelous truth that with God's grace we can endure anything for one more moment! And when that moment is gone, we can endure for one more moment – yes, even at peace. How then do we acquire this ability. The answer is found in prayer, specifically in daily meditation for at least one half hour. It is my experience that many good people are stuck in mediocrity because they do not meditate.

Meditation, as I use the term here, has nothing to do with Oriental religions or practices. Rather it is an ancient form of prayer that was practiced in the Old Testament, and which has always been used successfully by Christians. In the first psalm we read: “but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he *meditates* day and night” (Ps 1:2). One simple, but effective method of meditation uses the following structure:

Introduction – A brief prayer to the Holy Spirit asking for enlightenment and strength.

Reflection – Slowly read a passage from the Bible (other suitable sources can be used) focusing on its inner meaning and its application to our life.

Conversation with God – Using our reflection as a spring board, we then enter into a prayerful conversation with God.

Resolution – Make a determination to apply this lesson to our life today.

Below is a very brief illustration of how this method may be used.

Introduction – Holy Spirit enlighten my mind so I can listen to the message you have for me and open my heart to accept and apply it to my life.

Reflection (Acts 4:13,19-20)– “Now when they [Sanhedrin] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus. . . . But Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard’.”

As I reflect on this scene, I'm amazed at the transformation of the Apostles. They are no longer timid and afraid. They were now brave and dangerous men, not dangerous in the sense that they threaten anyone physically. No, they have become dangerous in their boldness to live and proclaim the truth. They were eager for the battle of spiritual warfare. The result was they dominated the scene not the Sanhedrin. They could not be intimidated. They have embraced the great challenge in life – to bring Christ to a pagan world. This is the amazing result of the Holy Spirit's presence and their surrender to grace.

Conversation with God – Holy Spirit give me the courage to change and to faithfully follow the example of these bold Apostles. Like them I have betrayed and abandoned you. Like them I failed to pray lest I fall into temptation. Now strengthen me to be like them in courage. You have given me this power in Baptism and in Confirmation. Guide me to rely on it and not on myself. Let me be faithful to my mission at home. Help me to love my wife in such a way that my girls desire to be loved by their husbands the way I love their mom. Help me to be a faithful father in word and example. They see me every day, let it be Christ and not me coming through to them. Give me the boldness to always proclaim the truth and defend it.

[This combination of reflection and prayer should continue throughout the period. When there is nothing left one can see or say, go to another passage and continue the process.]

Resolution - Based on your reflection or prayer select a resolution that can be met that day. Tomorrow will take care of itself. For example, today I will not deny you anything, or for the rest of this day I will focus on the needs of the people around me..

Caution: If you have never tried meditation it would be prudent to begin with fifteen minutes and then work up to thirty minutes. Eventually, thirty minutes will go by quickly. The important thing in the beginning is to develop a rhythm you can do daily. In the words of an old TV commercial: Try it, you'll like it! Most people find that the first thing in the morning works best for meditation. Then find a quiet spot. This sets the entire day in the right direction.

If you want more information on prayer and particularly understanding meditation, you might order to my CD set titled conveniently "Prayer."

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