

Reflection on Prayer -- Chapter III of the Constitutions

by Bob Malloy

"It's not in the look, it's in the gaze." If you are from my era, you may remember being told this comment in novitiate. It had to do with chastity. If you see something inappropriate, the sin is not in the seeing; it's in the ongoing gaze!

When I consider our life of prayer, I'd offer the same quote from another perspective. It is more in the gaze than in the look. In this case, a contemplative gaze upon the "face of God." The 7th item in number 46 states:

Beholding Christ in all creatures, let us go about in the world announcing peace and penance as witnesses of His love, inviting all to praise God.

For me, our contemplative stance consists in "beholding God" in every aspect of creation, especially in our brothers and the people with whom we work and minister. It is, in a sense a call to gaze upon the presence of God everywhere."

Another quote that was given to me as a novice came from St. Conrad of Parzham. When he entered the order and was shown to his room, as simple as it was, he saw the crucifix on the wall and was satisfied. He stated: "The cross is my book." I was taken by that statement and wondered how he meant that. I practiced looking (gazing at the cross) in prayer. I did that for some years. Then, one day as a student at Marathon in the late 60s I found myself gazing upon the crucifix in my room when I was transported to another dimension. I considered it a "religious experience," and it was then that I learned what Conrad meant. But, I couldn't explain it. I just knew it, but not in my brain. I knew it on a different level.

I have only had that kind of experience a couple of times since then, and it is fleeting. But, I continue to gaze upon the cross and try to gaze upon the reality of life that surrounds me in the very busy days at the soup kitchen. I see people who are hurting, wounded, and in some cases seem to be lost. But, I perceive a reality of faith, of deep spirituality there that in some way transforms me. Again, I know it not with my brain, but on another level. It's in this encounter from day to day that I begin to feel inadequate and know my own weaknesses that leave me so limited. Sensing my part in this hurting mess of humanity, I am humbled and feel a call to conversion. Somehow in all of this there rises a kind of unity among us that brings joy in the midst of struggle. I believe that is the face of God somehow breaking through all of this pain and struggle, and it is shared equally between myself and those with whom I spend time. It is nourishing and deeply fulfilling, and sometimes exhausting. It is good.

I know many of the regulars who come to eat at the soup kitchen, and one of my favorite activities, when I'm not barraged, is to sit at the edge of the dining room as I eat and gaze upon the people and activity in the room. There is something very good happening, and I can feel my

soul smile as I look at people I know. I know their names; I know many of their struggles. I love them, and they love me. There is a strong element of contemplation in this picture and an experience of God, but it's not in the brain. It's on another level.

Contemplative prayer is an essential building block for our life of community and ministry, at least as I see it. Chapter III goes on to speak to our communal prayer, our experience of Eucharist and sharing scripture and psalms in the Hours, etc., all essential to our life as brothers to one another and to the world. But, if the practice of prayer on that level is not based on our identity as contemplatives (i.e., engaged in contemplative living), then it risks becoming shallow and even empty. I image God as a creature and am one with every other creature, not privileged, not better than, only one with it all. As I gaze upon that reality within myself and appreciate my place in this world, especially among those who are wounded, I find the lines between "them and me" fading and the praise and glory of God radiating from my and our new life. It's humbling; it's exhausting; it's exhilarating—all at the same time. And, it never ends. The process just digs deeper and deeper into the awesome presence of God everywhere I look. How can I do anything other than gaze upon it with ever growing gratitude?