

Points to Ponder-July 19-25, 2020

Taken from Letters to Jacob by Fr. John-Julian, OJN

Fr. John Swanson (religious name John-Julian), an Episcopal Priest founded the Order of Julian of Norwich in 1985 with the intention of providing contemplative monastic life and witness as a leaven of spiritual renewal in the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church formally recognized the Order in 1997.

The book is a collective of 22 short letters on how to grow in the life of prayer and pitfalls to be avoided. Along the way I found it to be very practical and easy to read.

Sunday

That phrase— “I will pray for you”—can be redeemed. It can mean “I will declare to God that I stand in solidarity with you in your pain/trouble” or “I will be with you in your need” or “I will offer to you whatever grace I have” or even, possibly, “I will try spiritually to bear some of your pain myself.” And I think you should notice that this kind of intercessory “praying” has more to do with my relationship with the sufferer than with God. It recognizes the human (and mystical) bond that exists between myself and the sufferer—that we have limbs of the same body, united both in joy and pain—and that my prayer simply recognizes and makes palpable what already exists.

Monday

You can begin to see why I think it is spiritually wiser to avoid praying for any specific outcome for one’s self or others. Certainly there may be a psychological benefit in expressing one’s hopes/wishes/desires in prayer—it’s a way of ‘venting,’ of getting it off one’s chest—but it is better that the heart of the prayer always be the desire to see (and recognize) the Will of God. The benefit of this kind of prayer falls mainly to the one doing the praying—because it reinforces for the pray-er the ultimate necessity of placing oneself (or one’s suffering friend) in God’s hands, neither making demands nor adding qualifications. This sense of prayer is clear in Mother Julian’s definition: “Prayer is a true, gracious, lasting intention of soul one-ed and made fast to the will of our Lord by the sweet, secret working of the Holy Spirit.”

Tuesday

What then, does all this say about the prayer of repentance? Well, I think there are two important aspects to that prayer: first, we must stop the cringing, groveling, and pleading for forgiveness—as though it were something God granted only grudgingly or resentfully. Our repentance must truly be sincere, honest, and sorrowful, but real repentance is rather like backfilling—that is, we already know the outcome before we start. We know we are forgiven the moment our repentance is genuine. So, our responsibility is to be as deeply sincere in our penitence as possible—not because it wins us any favor, but because it discloses the integrity of our contrition. And without that integrity or sincerity the forgiveness remains obscured.

Wednesday

When I founded our Order, I developed a four-part axiom—a touchstone, as it were—regarding our life of prayer: Await, Allow, Accept, Attend.

Await: no one can rush God! God knows exactly what one needs and when one needs it. Indeed, God knows us better than we know ourselves. And sometimes our greatest unperceived need may be simply for patience, serenity, and quiet readiness.

Allow: God is who God is—and God is not who you or I think God might be. We must simply forsake our expectations of what God is like because all of them are wrong and inadequate. God will define his own divinity—and we will never wholly understand it.

Accept: Once we concede that God is neither recognizable by us nor predictable, we must be ready to accept whatever manifestation (or lack thereof) God may choose.

Attend: We must develop the habit of paying attention to every aspect of present reality because God is revealing the Divine Self to us at every moment in unimaginable and scarcely conceivable ways—in hearing someone else’s words, in the pages of a book we may be reading, in some natural phenomenon, in an unusual and unpredictable insight. (In Zen, they call this “mindfulness.”) We need to recognize that our minds are both the home of our free will and God’s primary door into our lives. God simply cannot and will not compromise our free will by “making” us do anything (to do so would be to rescind our humanity), but God can urge, suggest, hint at, or remind us of possibilities for the exercise of virtue, and we need to learn to be sensitive to such subtle divine inspiration.

Thursday

The verbal approach is quite simple: it means taking a few lines of Holy Scripture or a few lines from the writings of classical masters such as Thomas Kempis, Francis de Sales, John of the Cross or of modern guides such as Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr, or James Finley—or even a phrase or two from a familiar liturgy. You read that passage and reread it perhaps six or seven times—and then you simply give your mind over to move freely among those words, hopeful that your attention may be drawn to something of value that may be hidden there, or something that others have tended to overlook, or some insight that is particularly relevant to you at that moment in time. This is usually called *lectio divina*. Most people translate that over-simply as “divine reading.” I prefer “heavenly learning.”

Friday

The fact that God is ready and willing to help us make ourselves unconditionally available, and our serious wish to be quietly available will be supported and aided by God. But this requires discipline. It means arranging a time and place where we can be undisturbed by other aspects of our lives as possible. A “prayer corner” is a good idea, if it is separated from the main highways and byways of your life. Even the anchorite in her cell usually had an “altar” as a focus for the life of prayer.

Saturday

We also speak of “following Jesus,” but (unless by that we mean that we mystically go to the cross with him) that, too, seems a worldly concept. One “follows” a great teacher, but one lives within Christ. Christ is not just some great man who gave us a valuable set of rules about how to live a good life—which rules we should obey. Christ did not come to make us better people; Christ came to reincorporate us into himself (and therefore directly into the Holy Trinity). Christ’s concern is not with behavior but with being, not with activity but with ontology. We are about as separate from Christ as a bird is separate from the air beneath its wings. Try to recognize this intrinsic character of your life within him. There is no wall or distance that separates us from Christ; there is only refusal to see him and to recognize him and to experience him as he is. As Thomas Merton said (paraphrasing St. Augustine): “God is not someone else.” And as Paul writes, quoting Deuteronomy: “The word is near you: on your tongue and in your heart.”