

Distraction & Prayer

by Archimandrite Meletos Webber

It seems odd that during much of our lives, most of the time, we seek distraction. Any sort of distraction seems to do, anything that takes us away from the present moment. The mind gravely distrusts the present moment and will do almost anything to get us away from it. This is all the more puzzling when we realize that the present moment is the only moment we have.

Succeeding generations seek different sorts of distractions, and generally each group prefers their own to those popular among those who are younger. We justify our own choices of distraction for all sorts of empty reasons. We love to be lost in thought or to have our emotions tugged. Almost every television show we watch involves the invention, then the resolution, of a tension—a tension whose main purpose is to engage our emotions. But the tension is entirely unreal, entirely unnecessary, and does nothing but kill time, usually in chunks of thirty minutes or an hour, every hour, from late afternoon to late at night, or even longer.

Organized sports are a massive form of distraction. An artificial world is created in which teams struggle for supremacy. Nevertheless, for all its lack of meaning, it provides enough apparent pleasure to enough people that it is almost unthinkable to have a world without sport. Other distractions include reading, running marathons, and sewing, all of which can be quite constructive. We can do things which are obviously good with a view to being distracted. For example, we can go to church to be distracted. Good music, a fine and moving sermon—these can all lead to distraction. It is not uncommon to go to church, find our place, and then attempt to get lost in our thoughts for the next hour and a half. We can do the same in the concert hall, the movie house, or the library. The only difference is that we usually feel a greater sense of satisfaction when we do it in church.

There are "posh" distractions like collecting first editions, listening to Beethoven's late string quartets, enjoying fine wines, and reading Shakespeare for fun. There are not-so-posh distractions like football, roller coasters, and the happy hour at the local bar. However, they are all distractions. They all lead us away from being the person we are and towards attempting to find fulfillment outside ourselves, preferably away from ourselves and certainly away from the present moment.

Distractions contain the seeds of a further danger. If they become the central theme of a person's life, they are likely to become an addiction—a situation in which the person does not have the behavior, but the behavior has the person. When a person seeks himself or herself in drinking or smoking, taking drugs, or any other activity which lends itself to the thought, "When I do such-and-such I am really myself," it is always a mistake and can eventually lead to soul destroying trouble. Actually, one is really one-

self when one is free of all distraction, both external (noise, other people, phone calls) and internal (the mental buzz, the inner conference, loose and unattached thoughts).

Sometimes people suppose that in order to reach complete reality, to be entirely in the presence of God, one must achieve a total absence of the things which distract us. This is a mistake. Another, rather complicated, factor is at work here. Distraction that we do not recognize as such is still distraction. Distraction that we attempt to reject is still distraction. However, distraction that we both recognize as distraction and accept, without any sort of reservation, is no longer a distraction.

If I am a monk and I stand in church day in and day out feeling resentful, though not quite sure why, then I am being distracted by my feelings. If I am a monk at-id I stand in the church, day in day out, next to another monk who always sings flat, and I am annoyed by that fact, then I am distracted. However, if I am that monk and I simply accept that the monk is beside me singing flat, that he is not going to stop singing flat, and that his singing is actually every bit as important as my own, then I am no longer distracted. I can enter into the silence even when surrounded by noise.

When we attempt to cut out the distractions that accompany our everyday lives, we often simply replace one distraction with another. Thus, a couple who are not doing too well in their marriage will choose, consciously or not, to have a baby so that they do not have to focus on each other for the next eighteen years. Of course, at the end of the eighteen years, life is considerably different. It may be that the focus of the couple's problems has shifted, and what they considered as problems at the beginning have now quite disappeared, or been replaced by other ones. It is also possible, though, that the couple may meet each other again and find that they still need to do the work-they have just postponed it by eighteen years.

It is not difficult to describe what happens when we distract ourselves, or why. However, when we come beyond our distractions, what happens then? What happens when we are not affected by distraction?

When we cease to be distracted, the heart (or the nous) starts to operate. When the mind is quiet, even for a part of a second, the nous begins the process of recovery. Since its action is subtle rather than obvious, a high degree of inner peace is necessary before we even notice its existence. Setting aside the i-i-iiii with its intrusive thoughts and the story it writes (which we have called the ego), we find a place unaffected by the constant fragmentation of the mind's efforts. The heart is not affected by fragmentation, although I would think it fair to say that it does miss the mind. The splitting of ourselves into little bits occurs in the mind, not the heart, so when we stop distracting ourselves, we move away from the activity of the mind and the ego and towards the heart. We do not confront ourselves, but rather we are ourselves.

When we are completely ourselves, in the present moment, we are in the presence of God-we meet God. Meeting God is not a "doing" activity, but rather -i "being"

activity. In fact, when we stop all the doing—absolutely all the doing—then we begin to be.

When we are completely free from distraction—when there is no "no" left in us—when we are completely focused, then prayer can begin.

Scripture provides us with some powerful images about the nature of prayer. Two examples stand out in particular, one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

And there be [Elijah] went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" So he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." Then He said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. (1 Kings 19:9-12)

Like Elijah, we generally expect God to be in the earthquakes, the fires, and the wind. However, it is in the "still small voice" (translated elsewhere as "the sound of silence," and in the Septuagint as "the sound of a tiny, gentle breeze") that he actually encounters God.

The New Testament example is also well known:

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

This beautiful story, so reticent, yet so revealing of the relationship between Jesus and these two sisters, provides a wonderful word icon of what discipleship actually means. In any normal situation, we would expect Jesus to respond to Martha's complaints by standing up, encouraging Mary to help her sister, and perhaps even helping her Himself. That is not what happens here.

Martha is full of distraction. The things she is fretting about appear real enough, important enough, to take all her attention. But she is missing the entire point of her life. Jesus is present right there (as He is for us also), but instead of spending time in silence

with Him, as her sister Mary is doing, she is concerned with the ephemera, things which in the eternal dimension are insignificant.

Some of us lead entire lives filled with insignificance. We need to take steps to move from insignificance to reality, 'There are many ways of doing this, but one that has been favored by the Orthodox Church for many centuries is the use of the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner").

There are many ways to use the Jesus Prayer that encourage the very sort of attention Jesus says is, in effect, the most important thing in life. Many people use the Jesus Prayer as they go through their day, particularly at times when they are doing routine things that allow them to be mentally disengaged, or on occasions when they are waiting for something to happen (sitting at a red light, waiting for a bus, and so on), They will say the prayer at, or near, conversational speed, and will take care to bring their attention back to the prayer whenever their minds cause them to be distracted.

Another way to use the prayer, however, is to go to a place where there will be no disturbance (here the full force of Jesus' words about locking yourself in your room may be applied), then reciting the prayer very slowly. Some people find it is better to shorten the traditional words of the prayer for this purpose, perhaps only using five words- "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy."

Here the words are important, as we would expect, but so too is the silence between the words. We say a word, slowly, listening to the sound of the word in our heads (or on our lips), but then we listen carefully to the silence between the words, before going on to the next one. We have no expectations, and indeed, nothing has to happen. We do not expect to think anything, feel anything, or hear anything. We simply listen to the silence.

In the world at large, there is a silence which is simply the lack of all noise. This is a negative silence, a silence waiting to be filled. However, in the spiritual life we discover another, much more valuable sort of silence, and that is the silence which is the voice of God. The two sorts of silence sound similar, but they are not the same. The silence sought by the hesychasts is the voice of God. Within this silence we are bathed in the goodness and love of God.

Silence is the language of God. Everything else is a mistranslation.

-: INTERCESSION.*-

There is one area in which distraction can be used to good effect, although in a deeply spiritualized fashion. While news, conversations, and gossip form a lively part of the distracted human existence, these are all areas that can be transformed by the practice of intercession.

Intercession is praying for people and situations, Typically, in the Orthodox Church, we do not pray for specific outcomes, but simply make the act of remembering

someone or something before God in prayer a gesture of love. "Lord, remember..." followed by a name or a situation is quite sufficient. Again, we do not rely on mental images here, nor are our emotions of any particular significance,

Particularly powerful are the prayers we offer for those who have wronged us or hurt us in some way. Sometimes it is good to make a list of such people (one hopes it will not be too long), and to undertake to pray for those people in particular at a regular time each day. This is a potent way of encouraging our emotions to change after we have met the first mandatory requirement of forgiving such people.

Our care and concerns for other people, for our country, for our planet, are not all empty, nor are they all selfish or egotistical. This is demonstrated in the very powerful experience of bringing concerns to God in prayer. This is not the intercession that starts out by pointing out what mistakes God is making in the running of the world, followed by a list of things we would like Him to do about it. That practice is simply another aspect of the ego's desire to control, an empty soul-less activity which leads us further away from God, even while we think that because we are participating in something "religious" we must be progressing in the other direction.

Intercession is not a matter of telling God what to do, even with the best of possible intentions. Nor is it a question of trying to change God's mind about something. Intercession is simply a matter of bringing the concerns of our own lives—friends, relatives, but also enemies and competitors—to the throne of God and leaving them there. Any person and any subject can be brought to God.

When someone bothers us, bringing that person to God in prayer is very powerful, but the effect of the prayerful action is more likely to be seen in oneself than in the other person. If we feel dislike for a person, or other stronger emotions, there is nothing more powerful than bringing that person to God in prayer. This we can do until the feelings subside, since there is nothing God cannot tame and enliven—even our own personal dislikes and prejudices.

Like an offering of fruit, of grain or wine or oil, we bring things to God, not that He lacks them in any sense, but simply because He accepts our offerings. Intercessions are like that. We simply offer our concerns to God. We do not pray for specific outcomes, and we do not demand particular results, since to do so would place our own desires as the point of the prayer, whereas in reality the sole and entire aim of prayer is to discover the will of God. It may seem rather obvious to state that we do not discover the will of God by simply repeating our own demands over and over again.

Nor do we expect to leave off our prayer with a sense of certainty as to what the will of God is—at least, not most of the time. In most cases, we are no clearer in our minds after prayer than we were before. The clarity, where and when it exists, exists in the root of our being, in the deep recesses of who we are. We rarely pay attention to that extent, since it requires effort (as opposed to listening to the constant chatter of our

minds) and courage to find the still and silent center of our being, the wordless expression of our contact with God. That place is, of course, the nous, the heart.

When we encounter God, we have to be prepared to meet someone who exists, who functions and acts in ways quite unlike anything we may expect. So strong is our tendency to try to make God act in a way we might expect that there is a special word for it: anthropomorphism.

In the realm of love, in particular, we have much to learn. The love of God is something completely beyond our experience in the human world. For us, love is a choice- accompanied by feelings, often strong feelings, which cause us to pick a partner, a soul-mate, or a friend. It also means that we reject others in these roles. In this respect, our love is limited-we love this person, but not that one. We only have enough love for a small number of people; there is not enough to go round.

The love of God is so completely at the other end of the spectrum that it sometimes might appear to be something else entirely. The love of God is not limited, since in God it is impossible for there to be love for one person but not for another. In fact, lack of love for anyone would mean that it is not love at all. When we say things like, "I love all my children/parishioners/students equally," we usually mean we do not love any of them very much. Yet God's love ceases to be love at all if it is measured in any sense.

The love of God is not earned-there is nothing we could possibly do to earn it. It is simply the natural state of God's Being. When we reflect His love (as the moon reflects the light of the sun, or the smile of a child reflects the smile of his mother or father), we are also in that natural state. In that moment, we are operating from the heart. Fear and suspicion have no place here; they only exist properly in the mind of mankind.

-: PRAYER IN THE LITURGY.

The Orthodox liturgy is careful to engage our senses—all five of the physical senses, and perhaps others as well. The icons, the music, the incense—these are not simply aids, memories, reminders; they are pointers towards the present moment, the "acceptable time," the moment of reality in which the liturgy lives. If we allow ourselves to be distracted by anything, to let our minds drift and wander, sometimes very far away from where we are, it is both sensible and useful to go back to our primary senses to bring ourselves back into focus and harmony with what is going on around us.

Sometimes we go to church and there is nothing but distraction: the chanter sings too loudly or off-key, the celebrant's actions are awkward, the sermon is too long, or the liturgy is interrupted unnecessarily. All these things, and much worse, can happen, since the treasure of the Divine Liturgy is delivered into the hands of mere mortals. In some ways, this might be the greatest weakness of the liturgy, but it is also its greatest teaching point, since it encourages mankind to experience heaven.

At the end of St. Basil's Liturgy, the one preferred by the Church for its most precious moments, the priest says a prayer right before the dismissal of the people: "We have accomplished the liturgy, as far as we are able to do so." This is our commitment to God, the promise of the liturgy, that it will take our awareness, our knowledge, our artistry, and our hope to the highest level, to the very limits of our ability. This is, of course, true at any liturgy, not just that of St. Basil.

Our ability to concentrate is actually quite poor. Even with all the help afforded by the physical setting of the liturgy, we can find ourselves quite distanced from what is going on. We find it very difficult to switch our minds off. It is difficult, but not impossible. It is something we do not learn to do in the normal course of events. On the contrary, our training in schools and colleges is generally to keep our minds active. However, in prayer we do not need to think—we need to be.

The liturgy explicitly invites us to do this at one of its high points. At the Great Entrance, we sing what is probably the most ancient hymn in our liturgy—a one-word hymn that comes to us straight from our Jewish prehistory: Alleluia. The hymn is preceded by the instructions required to sing this one-word hymn correctly: "Let us, who represent the cherubim in a mystical way, and sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity, now lay aside all the cares of this life, so that we may receive the King of all, invisibly surrounded by the hosts of angels: Alleluia." Laying aside the cares of this life is essential if we are to fulfill our role as human auxiliaries to the angelic forces. Yet, it is precisely the cares of this life that are conjured up and given life in our minds. Notice, too, that the hymn insists on the present moment as being that when the action takes place. In this beautiful example of Byzantine clarity, we see how "now" and "the cares of this life" cannot exist together. Here cause and effect flow into each other—the awareness of "now" excludes the "cares of this life."

Source: *Bread & Water, Wine & Oil: An Orthodox Christian Experience of God*, by Archimandrite Meletios Webber, Conciliar Press, pp 51-60