

## **Special Section: Spiritual Disciplines For Real People**

### **Praying The Ordinary**

**The spiritual disciplines can be as natural a part of your life as breathing.**

By Richard Foster

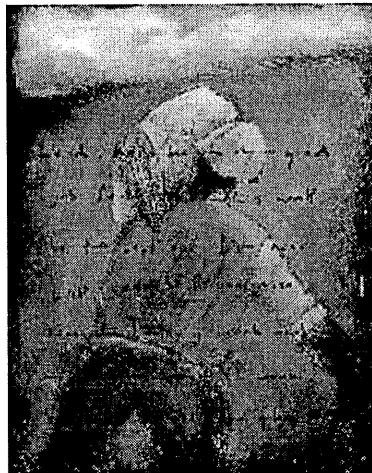


Illustration by Timothy Wu

Many of us today live in a kind of inner apartheid. We segregate a small corner of pious activities and then can make no spiritual sense out of the rest of our lives. We have become so accustomed to this way of living that we fail to see the contradiction in it. The scandal of Christianity in our day is the heresy of a 5 percent spirituality.

We overcome this modern heresy by Praying the Ordinary. We pray the ordinary in three ways: first, by turning ordinary experiences of life into prayer; second, by seeing God in the ordinary experiences of life; and third, by praying throughout the ordinary experiences of life.

#### **Vocation as Prayer**

What does it mean to integrate the sacred into every part of our lives?

Jesus spent most of His earthly life in what we today would call a blue-collar job. He did not wait until His baptism in the Jordan to discover God. Far from it! Jesus validated the reality of God in the carpentry shop over and over before speaking of the reality of God in His ministry as a teacher.

Many today see their vocation as a hindrance to prayer. “If only I had some time free from the distractions of work, then I could pray” is a common sentiment. But prayer is not another duty to add to an already overcommitted schedule. In Praying the Ordinary, our vocation, far from being a hindrance, is an asset.

How is this so? Is it that we learn the secret of praying as we work? Certainly this is important, but it is not why our work is such an asset to prayer. Our vocation is an asset to prayer because our work becomes prayer. It is prayer in action. The artist, the novelist, the surgeon, the plumber, the secretary, the lawyer, the homemaker, the farmer, the teacher—all are praying by offering their work up to God.

## **The Sanctity of Labor**

“Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” is Saint Paul’s counsel (1 Cor. 10:31). I came into a fuller understanding of this counsel when, as a teenager, I was privileged to spend one summer among the Eskimo people of Kotzebue, Alaska. The Eskimo Christians I met there had a deep sense of the wholeness of life, with no break between their prayer and their work.

I had come to Kotzebue on the adventure of helping to “build the first high school above the Arctic Circle,” but the work itself was far from an adventure. It was hard, backbreaking labor. One day I was trying to dig a trench for a sewer line—no small task in a world of frozen tundra. An Eskimo man whose face and hands displayed the leathery toughness of many winters came by and watched me for a while. Finally he said simply and profoundly, “You are digging a ditch to the glory of God.” I have never forgotten his words. Beyond my Eskimo friend no human being ever knew or cared whether I dug that ditch well or poorly. In time it was to be covered up and forgotten. But because of my friend’s words, I dug with all my might, for every shovelful of dirt was a prayer to God.

Even though I did not know it at the time, I was attempting in my small and unsophisticated way to do what the great artisans in the Middle Ages did when they carved the backside of a piece of art, knowing that God alone would see it.

## **God’s Pleasure in the Ordinary**

Anthony Bloom wrote, “A prayer makes sense only if it is lived. Unless they are ‘lived,’ unless life and prayer become completely interwoven, prayers become a sort of polite madrigal which you offer to God at moments when you are giving time to Him.” The work of our hands and of our minds is acted out prayer, a love offering to the living God. In what is perhaps the finest line in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, Olympic runner Eric Liddell tells his sister, “Jenny, when I run, I feel His pleasure.” This is the reality that is to permeate all vocations, whether we are writing a novel or cleaning a latrine.

It is at latrine cleaning that many have a problem. It is not hard to see how a Michelangelo or a T.S. Eliot is giving glory to God—theirs are creative vocations. But what about the boring jobs, the unimportant jobs, the mundane jobs? How are those prayer?

Here we must understand the order in the Kingdom of God. It is precisely in the “slop-bucket job”—the work that we abhor—where we will find God the most. We do not need to have good feelings or a warm glow to do work for the glory of God. All good work is pleasing to the Father. Even the jobs that seem meaningless and mindless to us are highly valued in the order of the Kingdom of God. God values the ordinary. If, for the glory of God, you are putting an endless supply of nuts on an endless line of bolts, your work is rising up as a sweet-smelling offering to the throne of God. He is pleased with your labor.

## **God’s Image Reflected in the Ordinary**

“Aren’t you glorifying work a bit too much—you know, Protestant work ethic and all?” you

may be wondering. I think not. Work came before the Fall, and the curse of the Fall was that work would be “by the sweat of your brow”—that is, the results would not be commensurate with the labor put in. In fact, one of the clearest signs of the grace of God upon us is when the results of our labor are far in excess of the amount of work we do. We glorify God in our labor because we most closely approximate the Creator when we engage in the creative activity of work.

“But what about those who have no jobs, the unemployed and the retired? How do they Pray the Ordinary?” you may ask. We can all work whether we have employable skills or not. Remuneration is not a factor in deciding the value of labor in the Kingdom of God. If our abilities or opportunities allow for nothing more than picking up sticks, we are to do so with all our might to the glory of God and the good of our neighbor.

“Can a person live a full, satisfying life that glorifies God without work?” you may question. I do not know how. Certainly all things are possible with God, but I am sure such a thing would be the exception and not the rule. In fact, I value labor as a reflection of the image of God within us so much that my personal conviction is that part of the bliss of Heaven will be joyous, creative, productive work.

### **When Prayer Becomes Active**

We are also Praying the Ordinary when we engage in what Jean-Nicholas Grou calls the prayer of action. “Every action performed in the sight of God because it is the will of God, and in the manner that God wills, is a prayer and indeed a better prayer than could be made in words at such times.”

Each activity of daily life in which we stretch ourselves on behalf of others is a prayer of action—the times when we scrimp and save to get the children something special; the times when we share our car with others on rainy mornings, leaving early to get them to work on time; the times when we keep up correspondence with friends or answer one last telephone call when we are dead tired at night. These times and many more like them are lived prayer. Ignatius of Loyola notes, “Everything that one turns in the direction of God is prayer.”

### **When Ordinary Experiences Help Us to See God**

Then, too, we are Praying the Ordinary when we see God in the ordinary experiences of life. Can we find meaning in the crayon marks on the wall made by the kids? Are they somehow the finger of God writing on the wall of our hearts?

Waiting is part of ordinary time. We discover God in our waiting: waiting in checkout lines, waiting for the telephone to ring, waiting for graduation, waiting for a promotion, waiting to retire, waiting to die. The waiting itself becomes prayer as we give our waiting to God. In waiting we begin to get in touch with the rhythms of life—stillness and action, listening and decision. They are the rhythms of God. It is in the everyday and the commonplace that we learn patience, acceptance, and contentment. Saint Benedict’s criterion for allowing a visitor to stay at the monastery is that “he is content with the life as he finds it, and does not make excessive demands . . . but is simply content with what he finds.”

I am attracted to this “contentment without excessive demands” because it is the way I would really like to live. In a world in which “winning through intimidation” is the order of the day, I am attracted to people who are free from the tyranny of assertiveness. I am drawn to those who are able to simply meet people where they are, with no need to control or manage or make them do anything. I enjoy being around them because they draw the best out in me without any

manipulation whatsoever.

## **When We Pray through Ordinary Experiences**

Another way of Praying the Ordinary is by praying throughout the ordinary experiences of life. We pick up a newspaper and are prompted to whisper a prayer of guidance for world leaders facing monumental decisions. We are visiting with friends in a school corridor or a shopping mall, and their words prompt us to lapse into prayer for them, either verbally or silently, as the circumstances dictate. We jog through our neighborhood blessing the families who live there. We plant our garden, thanking the God of Heaven for sun and rain and all good things. This is the stuff of ordinary prayer through ordinary experience.

## **The Heart of a Home**

Prayers arising out of the context of the family are perhaps the most common expression of Praying the Ordinary. Edward Hays in *Prayers for the Domestic Church* provides a host of prayers that can be participated in by the entire family, whether large or small. It includes everything from “Blessing Prayer for an Automobile” to “Prayer for Protection in a Time of Storm or Danger” to “Prayer of a Single Parent.” As we pray in the context of the family, we learn that holiness is homemade. The earliest altar was the hearth, whose open fire burned in the center of the home. Even today the family table can be a significant altar where meals are celebrated and all the great and small events of our personal histories can be recounted. Here mothers and fathers fulfill the priestly role.

Single-parent households often need different kinds of community structures to make these things work. It sometimes helps for various households to gather for periodic meals and activities. In this way single people, single-parent families, couples without children, and nuclear families can all be enriched by the presence of one another.

Some families have been helped and strengthened by experiences of a “family altar”—gathered times of Bible reading and prayer. Others have found such a practice extremely difficult if not impossible to maintain, and they experience considerable guilt over the omission. The guilt is unnecessary, for these things, by and large, represent a change in cultural patterns more than a lack of piety in the family. When farming communities and large families were predominant, gathering for meals and evening activities was common, and this kind of family altar made perfect sense. For most of us, however, those days are gone. We live in urban surroundings and belong to small families. We eat at fast-food restaurants much of the time and have to contend with ballet lessons and basketball practice and PTA meetings all in the same evening.

Question: What are we to do? Answer: The best we can! Try “blessing prayers” as the kids run out the door and “thank-you prayers” as they return. Before the teen years it is especially appropriate to pray over them at night. This can be done both before they go to sleep and again after they are asleep. We can pray for the healing of any emotional traumas from the day, and always we pray prayers of protection for the long night and the day to come. In doing so we are Praying the Ordinary.

## **Where the Ordinary and the Eternal Meet**

All of us share in what D. Elton Trueblood calls “the common ventures of life”—birth, marriage, work, death. Jesus, in His life and in His teaching, gave sacramental significance to these ordinary experiences of life. Think of this: In the Creation and the Incarnation the great

God of the universe intertwined the spiritual and the material, wedded the sacred and the secular.

The Bible is almost casual in its assertion that “God created the heavens and the earth . . . and it was very good” (Genesis 1:1; Genesis 1:31). Then, in the fullness of time, God reinforced and intensified this reality by choosing birth in a stable as His ultimate revelation. How the shepherds must have wondered at the twofold sign by which they were to identify the Messiah—swaddling cloths and a manger. How unimpressive! How commonplace!

The discovery of God lies in the daily and the ordinary, not in the spectacular and the heroic. If we cannot find God in the routines of home and shop, then we will not find Him at all. Ours is to be a symphonic piety in which all the activities of work and play and family and worship and sex and sleep are the holy habitats of the eternal.



*Adapted from Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home by Richard J. Foster. Copyright © 1992 by Richard J. Foster. Reprinted by arrangement with Harper San Francisco, a division of HarperCollins Publishers Inc.*