

# Augustinian Friends Prayer Resource Guide

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## The Divine Image

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
All pray in their distress ;  
And to these virtues of delight  
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
Is God, our father dear,  
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
Is Man, his child and care..

For Mercy has a human heart,  
Pity a human face,  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every-one, of every clime,  
That prays in their distress,  
Prays to the human form divine,  
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must Love the human form,  
In heathen, Turk, or Jew ;  
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell  
There God is dwelling too.

*William Blake*

1789

### The Purpose of the Prayer Resource Guide

Each of us is on a journey to  
God like our patron Augustine.

The Friends prayer resource is  
offered to you as a support in  
your day to day prayer and  
will be sent to you 4 times a  
year.

It is centred on the Gospel  
readings for coming Sundays  
and quotes from Augustine. It  
also contains a prayer orient-  
ated letter from our Chaplain  
and some tips on Lectio Di-  
vina – the traditional Augustin-  
ian method of scriptural reflec-  
tion and meditation.

# The School of the Heart

## Toward a Healthy Spirituality of Aging

BY RON HANSEN

**W**E CAN BE FORGIVEN if we think the spirituality of aging applies only to the septuagenarians among us, but aging is a tricky term, for we are aging from the instant of our conception, and then there is the matter of perception. Victor Hugo noted that "Forty is the old age of youth; fifty is the youth of old age." And after many years of hosting "Kids Say the Darndest Things," Art Linkletter reported that the kids he interviewed recognized only four stages to life: "infancy, childhood, adolescence, and obsolescence."

But generally when we think of aging, we note those years when we become more aware of subtraction than addition, when our minds become slightly fuddled and our bodies shrink or wear down. Gypsy Rose Lee once said, "I've got everything I had 20 years ago—except now it's all lower." We notice the print getting smaller, the stairs getting steeper, sounds getting so muddled that Sprint can forget about dropping that pin; Sprint could drop a ball-peen hammer and we wouldn't hear it.

I'm reminded of the story of three elderly ladies who, while playing afternoon bridge, were also discussing the travails of getting older. One said she sometimes found herself holding a jar of mayonnaise and couldn't recall whether she was in the kitchen to put the jar away or to make a sandwich. Another agreed, saying she often paused, befuddled, on the stairway landing, unsure of whether she was going up or down. The third lady played a card as she responded, "Well, I'm glad I don't have that problem yet." She rapped her knuckles on the card table while adding, "Knock on wood." And then she looked up with surprise and said, "Oh, that must be the door. I'll get it."

My mother once passed along the joke that senility has its advantages. For one, you're always meeting new people. Plus, you can hide your own Easter eggs.

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Loss and diminishment seem to characterize many of our later years, and though the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge claimed, "One of the many pleasures of old age is giving things up," his friend, Anthony Powell, couldn't agree. "Growing old," the British novelist complained, "is like being increasingly penalized for a crime you haven't committed."

Even in the best of circumstances the elderly in America have become the people of Christ's Beatitudes: those who are poor, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those even who are reviled and persecuted. It was Christ's assurance that these are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, but many are skeptical about the real worth of that praise. The losses and limitations that menace the elderly, the slackening of mental powers, the ailments and disabilities that cause their bodies to seem to be their enemies, even the nearness of death—all these degradations can create a realm of terror for the aging, of increasing night and oblivion.

But there is also the promise of a new morning and the possibility for occasions of encounter with mystery, with transcendence, for what the French Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade called "abandonment to divine providence."

"For those who have surrendered themselves completely to God," de Caussade wrote, "all they are and do has power. Their lives are sermons.... They enjoy supreme bliss because they see the fullness of God's power being exercised in whatever conditions of body or soul they find themselves, in whatever happens to them internally or externally, and in whatever befalls them at each and every moment. Whatever the world offers them is nothing. They judge all things by God's standards."

**I FIND IT A NICE IRONY** that many Catholic retirement homes today were initially constructed as houses of religious formation, because old age is as much about spiritual formation as the halcyon days of youth are. St. Ignatius Loyola developed a program of formation for those in the Society of Jesus who sought priesthood, a course that included a two-year novitiate of prayer and service experiences, then many years of education in the arts and sciences, philosophy and theology, culminating in ordination. But then, after so much hard study, he required a third year of the novitiate, called tertianship, in which the Jesuit could develop a deeper relationship with God. St. Ignatius called this period of further spiritual formation "the school of the heart."

We are taught in the school of the heart the crucial differences between acceptance and resignation, hope and dread, doing and being. With faith we can find significance even in the negative aspects of aging, and find pride in our

increasing contact with that which is the wellspring of our existence. With faith we can find that praying is the one thing we can still do exceedingly well.

When I liken retirement living to religious formation, a school of the heart, I am thinking of it in terms of the story of Jesus, Martha and Mary in the Gospel according to Luke: "Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'"

We read in the Johannine Gospel that the village was Bethany, that Martha and Mary are the sisters of Lazarus, and that while Jesus was reclining at their supper table, Mary "took a pound of very costly, genuine, spikenard ointment, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair," which is a foreshadowing of the typical preparations of a body for burial in Palestine at that time. We do not know if Luke and John are writing of the same evening, but I like the symmetry: that Mary's heeding everything that Jesus said and her reluctance to leave his side are forms of adoration and surrender similar to the more ostentatious ministrations of anointing Jesus and wiping his feet with her hair. "Mary has chosen the better part," Jesus tells Martha in Luke—meaning, do not let diversions, the ordinary distractions of kitchen toil, or even service of others deter you from seeing why you're doing all these worthy things.

It would be wrong to interpret Luke's account as Christ's vote in favor of passivity or retreat from the world. Quite the opposite. The healthy interiority that is the product of prayer helps us to get in touch with our deepest desires, those still secret needs of our psyches, and helps us to explore new areas of learning, to seek out wider and deeper friendships and, most important, to serve others as we are still able.

As the French Jesuit theologian and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote in *The Divine Milieu*, "If Christ is to take possession of all my life...then it is essential that I grow in him not only by means of...the supremely unifying amputations of suffering, but also by means of everything that my existence brings with it of positive effort."

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is justly famous for

her studies of the heavenly experiences of those who were judged medically dead but were later resuscitated. The product of her inquiries was published in her book *On Life After Death*, in which she notes "all the hardships that you face in life, all the trials and tribulations, all the nightmares and all the losses most people view as a curse, as a punishment by God, as something negative. If you would only realize that nothing that comes to you is negative. I mean nothing." Rather, our illnesses, privations, injuries and misfortunes are opportunities for growth and each should be accepted, Kübler-Ross writes, "not as a curse, or a punishment, but as a gift to you with a very, very specific purpose."

Annie Dillard was reflecting that very thing when she wrote in *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, "I think that the dying pray at the last not 'please,' but 'thank you,' as a guest thanks his host at the door."

Looking back on our life journeys, we are apt to see many occasions when our grand designs and schemes were impeded or upset; when our own hopes and plans seem to have been quashed, and our purpose on earth put into question. The hindsight of prayer generally shows us, however, the many ways in which God has helped us to revise our own headstrong notions, perfected our imperfections, gently guided us onto an unthought-of path and, as the psalmist puts it, granted success to the work of our hands.

A healthy spirituality of aging will be not just a fond reminiscence of the Holy One's action in our lives; it will include the hope of the future good we can do for ourselves and others, even if only through hospitality and caring. In such a way we shall finally graduate from the school of the heart, saying not "please," but "thank you," as a guest thanks his host at the door. ▲

*"Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,  
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives  
Among us, men and (women) who walk within the fire  
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.  
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land...  
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,  
It works like radium in the dark...  
Yet somehow, between prayer and commonsense,  
Hearts may be touched, and lives have influence."*

A Letter to John Dryden

- James McAuley

## From our Chaplain

December 20th . 2004

Dear Friends,

the weeks leading up to Christmas are peppered with end of year parties and celebrations that speak more of our relief at having survived another year together than any real focus on the birth into our history of what William Blake described as "the human form divine" made fully manifest in the person of the Christ Child. A party I attended last week tried to bridge this gap by having us listen to the opening lines of Christmas Carols and list as many titles as we knew, which is not as simple a game as it sounds. One of the songs had a calypso beat and it spoke of how Jesus "he come, he come from the Glorious Kingdom".

A friend of mine used to sing that verse to his young niece from the time she was a tiny baby. Some years later when she was four or five she began to wonder where *she* had been when her older sister was born. Was it possible that she had been waiting dormant in her mother's tummy until her time to be born arrived? And then came the triumphant answer: "Of course, that was when I was in the Glorious Kingdom", like Jesus waiting to be born! St. Augustine ponders the same mystery in Book One of his Confessions.

*"... I do not know whence I came into this life. I do not know where I came from. But this I know, that I was welcomed by the tender care of your mercy provided for me, for so I have been told, by the parents who gave me life according to the flesh, those parents through whose begetting and bearing You formed me within Time, although I do not remember it myself." (Ch. 7)*

When a child is brought to Baptism in the Greek Orthodox Church the priest tells the parents "Here comes God", meaning that the divine life never shines more purely on a person than at that moment. The Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore covers similar territory when he writes: "When a new-born baby arrives afresh from the hand of God, it proves that God still believes in Man". Perhaps that is why the Feast of Christmas has such power over us because in it two images merge together. When we gather to reverence the Christ child in the crib we are honouring the Christ child in ourselves in that purest of all moments, the moment of our Baptism, and through this insight (if only fleetingly) we too have our belief in humanity restored.

The mystery of the Incarnation, simply stated, is the mystery of God taking on human flesh and dealing with human beings in a visible, tangible way. We are not good at dealing with intangibles. We need to be reassured by concrete reality. "The Glorious Kingdom" is not somewhere we have come *from* – trailing images drawn from the self-saucing Philly-cheese commercial – but rather, somewhere we have come *to* which is being worked out in the here and now and which had its beginning simultaneously with the coming of the Christ child into our troubled world. Nikos Kazantzakis in his novel The Last Temptation of Jesus tells of a pauper, barefoot and hungry, who speaks this prayer:

*"God", he whispered, "The eyes of a human being cannot look directly at the sun, for they would be blinded. How, then, Omnipotent, can they look directly at You? Have pity, Lord, temper your strength, turn down your splendor so that I, who am poor and afflicted, may see you". Then he hears this reply: "Listen, old man, God became a piece of bread, a cup of cool water, a warm tunic, a hut, and in front of the hut, a woman nursing an infant".*

*"Thank you, Lord," the pauper whispered, "You humbled yourself for my sake. You became bread, water, a warm tunic and a wife and child in order that I might see you. And I did see you. I bow down and worship your beloved many-faced face". (pp. 189 ff.)*

God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church, every child becomes the Christ-child, and all food and drink become a sacrament. God's many faces are now everywhere so that our human eyes can see him; he has become as accessible and visible as the nearest "Meals on Wheels or Matt Talbot hostel. Clearly, God's presence in the world today depends very much upon ourselves. We embody that presence by an openness and compassion towards areas of human need that we meet which may have escaped other people's notice. These may be in our parish, our suburb or street. As Augustine tells us "We mustn't be barren; our souls must be fruitful with God". (Sermon 189,3) May that fruitfulness spill over into the sharing of the birthday of Jesus with your family and friends, and may the world know something of the Glorious Kingdom from which Christ came, because *we* are in it.

With much Love,

*Paul*

AUGUSTINIAN FRIENDS  
SHARING THE SPIRITUALITY OF AUGUSTINE

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