

Recognizing God's Presence in Your Everyday Life

Our day-to-day lives are mostly spent doing ordinary, routine activities such as working, sleeping, eating, commuting, doing household chores and maintaining personal hygiene. The few hours, if any, that remain are normally dedicated to family, friends, hobbies, entertainment and spiritual pursuits. It is in this last category (spiritual pursuits) that our Christian culture has usually counseled us to develop our faith and pursue God's presence and kingdom. While practices such as Scripture reading and study, prayer and meditation, and fellowship and service to others are vitally important for our Christian experience, they generally are not incorporated into the remainder of our day.

Yet, if we are to live entirely for God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31, , 1 Pet. 4:11), then the 20 or so hours we dedicate daily to mundane tasks and demands should be as spiritually significant as our "special times" with the Lord. Thus, a fundamental aspect of our Christianity must be discerning the presence of God and His kingdom in our everyday lives.

If this is true, why do so many of us overlook this down-to-earth spirituality and only seek spiritual nourishment in the little free time we have each day? One possible reason is our tendency to take everyday activities for granted because of their sameness and repetition. In general, the everyday is ignored until it becomes a problem. Since we find nothing remarkable in the ordinary, we conclude that it has no spiritual value.

As a result, many of us seek out extraordinary experiences in our limited free moments. By doing this, we too readily place our Christian experience into the category of the unusual and, thereby, overlook the valuable spiritual dimension of everyday

life. Both orientations, however, are vital. Just as we are to pursue and hopefully *encounter* the extraordinary (supernatural manifestations of God's love and kingdom rule on earth), we are also to *discern* the presence of God in the mundane and humdrum activities of life.

Fortunately, our everyday affairs have the inherent capacity to reveal the sacred. Yet, to discover God's immanent presence and rule, we must move beyond merely going through the motions of daily life. Approaching life mechanically and mindlessly creates a dullness of heart that interferes with our spiritual perception and discernment. Our challenge is to pay reverent attention to daily life with the full assurance that God will meet us in the ordinary and extraordinary. Our common, routine activities and situations can then become "sacraments" that reveal the mystery of God and His kingdom. Over time, as we gain in our ability to find God in the pleasures and problems of everyday life—and not simply in signs, wonders and spiritual experiences—we can gain a deep love and respect for God, creation and our own existence.

The Workplace as Dominant Reality

From the very beginning of the Old Testament, work is portrayed as a divine ordinance for humanity (Gen.1:26–28). This charge was carried out so thoroughly by the Hebrews that they were eventually instructed to rest periodically rather than work longer or harder (Ex. 20:9–10).

In like manner, our modern society places a great emphasis on careers. For many of us, the workplace is the dominant reality. More energy goes into our occupations than into our home lives. More status is accorded to what we do at work than to any other factor. We ascribe more significance to our occupations than to any other activity and, as a result, generally worry more about them than about our health, families, and friends. Finally, more time is put into our work than anything else we do. The average, gainfully-employed

adult in the United States spends approximately 88,000 hours in the workplace from his or her first full day of employment until retirement. When this statistic is measured against the mere 8,000 or so hours most of us spend over a lifetime in church meetings and activities, we can readily see why it is necessary to seek God's presence and kingdom in the marketplace and not merely at church.

Indeed, if we endure our work simply to engage in spiritual pursuits in our leisure time, then we can understandably feel jealous of early Christian monks such as the desert fathers and mothers. These saints freely meditated on God while engaged only in simple tasks. But if the Christian conception of work includes discerning God's presence and kingdom in our ordinary occupations, then everyone—biblical patriarchs, ancient monks and modern adults—has an equal opportunity to grow spiritually.

Uniting the Sacred/Secular Split

Although work is the dominant reality in our waking lives, it is generally given little spiritual reflection. How often do we seriously consider the purpose and meaning of our work? What, apart from wages, an A on a test, or a thank you from a family member, do we receive for our efforts? How does work contribute spiritually to our personal, family and community lives? Is something "more" going on when we work? If we view work as wholly practical, rooted in the necessity to provide for self and family, we may conclude that there is nothing "larger" going on when we work.

Work and spirituality now appear as opposites. The latter seems distant and generally irrelevant to this major component of our lives. On another level, some connection between the two is possible either by recalling meaningful, work-related moments or by hoping for future encounters with God and His kingdom while engaged in our labors. Yet, this reflection and anticipation can never focus our attention on the here-and-now

spirituality rooted in our daily affairs. The former practice is inadequate because it relegates the spiritual component of work to past memories, whereas the latter practice is deficient because it keeps us from discerning anything spiritual in our work until our next inspiring experience.

Unfortunately, in our hesitation or unwillingness to seek spiritual meaning in our immediate tasks and duties, we ghettoize the kingdom of God by restricting it to the religious arena. This sacred/secular orientation has made it difficult for many of us to integrate our ordinary work with Christ's charge to put the kingdom of God first in our lives (Matt. 6:33). In addition, we may fault certain clergy and monks for making an artificial distinction between "secular" daily labor and "sacred" religious practices, yet we tend to do the same when we look for spiritual meaning in "Christian" endeavors rather than in our everyday work.

While a people-helping profession such as homemaking, social work, education or health care is the answer for some people, many of us believe that "ministry" begins only when we perform some type of church-related work or, better yet, when we are "divinely summoned" into a full-time, paid ministry in the church. Regrettably, as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin vividly points out, this hierarchical understanding of the spirituality of work is widespread among Christians.

I don't think I am exaggerating when I say that nine out of 10 practicing Christians feel that man's work is always at the level of a spiritual encumbrance. In spite of the practice of right intentions and the day offered every morning to God, the general run of the faithful dimly feel that the time spent at the office or the studio, in the fields or in the factory, is time spent away from prayer and adoration.

This conviction inevitably forces us into a kind of

schizophrenia in which our everyday, active life is disconnected from our spiritual life and God's presence. As a result, our "Christian work" and private devotions are seen as all the more necessary if we are to mature spiritually and experience God. This perspective is one of the major causes for the under-investment in work among Christians.

In light of this false dichotomy, how can we make our daily work a less secular experience? We could take an extreme approach and forsake our daily affairs for church-related or monastic pursuits. More feasibly, we could step back periodically from family, occupation, and community obligations in order to reconnect with God. Yet, while the practice of "work and retreat" is a legitimate spiritual regimen (a busy Jesus withdrew at times for prayer, (e.g., Luke 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 11:1; Mark 1:35, 6:46; Matthew 14:23), it does little to help us overcome the artificial distinction between sacred and secular activities.

Nor can we find the basic answer in thinking that we bring the presence of God into our workplace or household. This type of spirituality is inevitably patronizing. In this scenario, we look inwardly for the divine presence as we go about our daily activities, because God and His kingdom are not found in our everyday tasks as much as God is brought to remembrance in all that we do. Although this is also a commendable spiritual practice, it does not deal directly with the potential sacredness of ordinary activities and the qualities of God's kingdom hidden within them.

Ultimately, the key is to discern God and His kingdom in our everyday affairs—be they raising a family, running a home, giving a business presentation or writing a school paper—and not apart from them. To this end, we need to show reverent attentiveness to the task at hand rather than practice an ancient, monastic withdrawal from it. By carefully focusing on the present moment, we can not only deeply engage this activity with our five senses but also see and hear through it

to the even greater reality underlying it. Now, in the midst of our routine chores and special tasks, we have an opportunity to find the qualities and values of God's kingdom without withdrawing our hearts and minds away for prayer and meditation.

Several ideas relate to this heightened awareness. In order to live and work in the present moment, we must believe that there is nothing more important than the here and now. It is not easy, though, to remain focused on what is before us. Our minds keep pulling us away from the immediate issue. If we are to overcome this inclination, we must develop an ongoing attitude that enables us to view our work within a larger framework as we submit ourselves to God moment by moment. Two and one-half centuries ago, the Jesuit priest Jean-Pierre de Caussade made the point:

The present moment is like a desert in which simple souls see and rejoice only in God, being solely concerned to do what he asks of them. All the rest is left behind, forgotten and surrendered to him.

De Caussade implied that those of us who rest in the present moment are like the ancient monks who renounced everything for God (specifically, those who dedicated their lives to contemplation and practiced rigorous self-denial). We, too, forsake all distractions concerning the past and future that divert us from obeying God's immediate will. For example, by reverently attending to our tasks, we can overcome the desire to escape our daily lot. When work seems overwhelming, destructive, futile, or of little value, we are to trust that, with God's help, we can make some sense of the situation, work to create new possibilities, discern the hidden and often mysterious aspects of His kingdom, and mature spiritually in the process. Finally, this here-and-now spirituality provides a useful correction of desert monastic thought on work. Rather than thinking about God as we work (as did the Desert Fathers

and Mothers), we can find God in our work.

Work, Self-Denial, and God's Presence

The sacredness of the present moment is a truth that is not realized quickly. Only slowly does it move from a pious idea to a reality that is recognized within our every action. It is discovered through spiritual disciplines, one of the best of which is so ordinary that it is generally overlooked: work. If we live even in a minimally conscious way, we soon realize that life offers us numerous opportunities for self-denial. Accordingly, we begin not with the monastic practices of fasting, night prayers and strict work practices, but with reverent attention to our ordinary activities. When we focus entirely on the classic spiritual disciplines of abstinence, we fail to see that the primary locus of self-denial is in our everyday activities.

Indeed, if we never exercised self-denial at work, we would be a constant plaything of our whims and thus do real harm to others. What if mothers only fed their infants when it was convenient, or fathers only paid bills when nothing interesting was on television? What if homemakers only cleaned and sorted when they felt like it? We can see where this would lead family life. Likewise, employees who long to tell their bosses that they are making life miserable for them may exercise self-denial for the sake of their jobs and workplace harmony.

Work is its own spiritual discipline. Choosing to stay late at work to help a peer complete a project, telling the truth when our job is at stake, studying for a test instead of talking on the phone with a friend, shuttling the kids around town all afternoon so that they can participate in sports or take music lessons, taking the trash out rather than pressing it down in the wastebasket, focusing on a particular task so it is done with excellence, volunteering to deliver meals to the homebound once a week in place of playing golf—these acts of

self-denial are basic expressions of Christian spirituality and, more significantly, the kingdom of God.

This point brings out a key difference between monastic and modern forms of abstinence. The ancient desert monks tended to purposely orchestrate situations in which they used simple, non-distracting forms of manual labor to free their hearts and minds for meditation. This approach was adopted because they believed that routine, everyday activities generally blocked communion with God and, thus, spiritual development. We, on the other hand, can use the ordinary, day-to-day demands and frustrations of work as opportunities to exercise self-denial. As such, they are sandpaper for our souls and the seedbed for God's kingdom rule and reign in our lives. {eoa}

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