

In the Trenches

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I once heard a story about two monks who enjoyed a cigarette now and then and were discussing the best time to have a smoke. Brother George and Father Ronald both wanted to have a cigarette when they were walking about the grounds of the monastery, praying. Father Ronald offered to ask the abbot for permission.

A few days later, they met in the orchard and Brother George asked Father Ronald how it had gone with the abbot. The priest shook his head and reported that the abbot would not permit it. After they had parted ways, the young brother decided to try himself and see if the abbot would change his mind.

It was a week before Father Ronald saw Brother George in the orchard again, and he was very surprised to see him smoking a cigarette under a tree as he prayed his office.

“Brother George!” he exclaimed, “Did the abbot not say this was forbidden?” “No, Father, I went and asked him myself and he gave me permission.” replied the young man. “How can this be? I asked him if it was all right for me to smoke while I prayed and he said absolutely not!”

The bewildered priest scratched his head. “Perhaps it was the way you asked, dear friend. I asked the abbot if it was all right if I prayed while I had a smoke and he thought it was a fine idea.”

This is one of my favorite stories. I see two messages in it that resonate in different ways over and over in my daily life. The first is about how we ask for something. The phrasing of our petition, whether it is a prayerful petition to God or a practical request for more work supplies can be very important to the response we receive. I do not mean to say that God is fickle or manipulable but when we ask God for something we so often ask for what we think we want that we do not get it. God, who knows our heart and desires, only what is good for us will never grant that which will harm us or pull us away from him. So, if we ask for something that seems like just the thing we need, we are vulnerable to our shortsightedness and limited view.

The other message I draw from this little story is that we must and often without realizing it, do pray while we work. Some jobs seem conducive to prayer while with others it seems impossible. A window washer, we can suppose, prays as the ropes lower her down from the roof. We can imagine that her prayer is that the straps were not made on a Monday morning or a Friday afternoon, when most mistakes are made. It is easy to envision police, firefighters, surgeons and school bus drivers praying for the very obvious grace of safety, and skill. And, of course, priests pray, monks and nuns pray, sisters pray, people who are retired and have a lot of time pray, mothers stuck at home with sick children pray, farmers in touch with the land and the seasons pray, soldiers pray.

Meanwhile we who are in controversial government jobs, teaching jobs in secular institutions, paper pushing jobs, jobs where we are alone in an office on the phone all day, jobs where we are out driving in traffic, traveling by plane, wheeling and dealing for demanding clients, standing before judges, helping people file for bankruptcy, divorce or child custody; we who wrestle special education students into a seat, deliver the babies of crack addicted mothers, defend the rights of rapists or lock people in cells night after night, when do we pray on the job? Sometimes the only time we notice ourselves praying is after dark, when we pray for protection from the muggers and panhandlers in the parking ramp.

How do we pray the way Francis prayed, the way we want to pray? Do we exist in a state of prayer as we go about our tasks, silently in communion with our God, simply being in God's love, moving in God's grace, raising and lowering our voices as we speak the words necessary for our work, touching and reaching with our hands as we build the kingdom of God, gazing upon the people and the tools of our trade with the eyes of a beloved child surveying wondrous gifts at our fingertips? I don't think so.

It is much more likely that we exist in a state of anxiety as we squeeze too many tasks into too little time, noisily in communion with our machinery, simply being on hold as we listen to a computer tell us to press one if we want to remain on hold for twenty minutes or two if we want this message to be repeated in Armenian. We raise our voices in anger and lower them when the boss walks into the break room in the middle of a good gossip. We do not gaze upon the tools of our trade; we rummage through papers looking for a check for five thousand dollars or a contract that should have been mailed to a client yesterday. We scroll up and down a computer screen frantically searching for information while our blood runs cold as we realize that we've lost it forever. We pour over the want ads desperately searching for something in our field, ready to take anything that will pay the mortgage.

John Michael Talbot prays at work. Sure he does. He prays for a living, in his brown robe with his lovely little community of prayer. Francis prayed at work, but it was easier then, there were not as many distractions, and he had a brown robe and a little community of prayer too. Wouldn't it be nice if we could just chuck the whole mortgage, car payment, tuition thing and join a nice little rural community of believers who pray and sing God's praises all day and never have to deal with the principal from hell or the boss with horns? Sure. Let's all live in a monastery. But wait a minute. Wasn't the beginning of this article about two monks? Monks who weren't sure how to pray? Do we really think that woods and trees and huts and brown robes make prayer any easier?

Ask our friar friends if they pray more heartily or more serenely in their habits. See if our firefighter friends pray more easily in the woods when they're surrounded by burning trees and airplanes spraying chemicals all over their heads.

Imagine a hermitage with no windows, just a roof and walls, you alone with God and creation and yourself drifting deeper and deeper into contemplation. Then imagine the warmth of your body and the light of your candle awakening a nest of snakes that decide to check out who is praying on their roof. This lovely scenario was related to us once by a jolly Irish Maryknoll missionary who not only lived to tell it but also actually wanted to go back to Africa where it happened!

So. No more excuses. We do not need permission from our bosses to pray at work. We do not need silence, a place to go, an hour to go there, or a brown robe to wear to set the mood. We do not need to sing or chant, or even speak aloud. We need very simply, to place ourselves in the presence of God, who is everywhere, and soak in his love. We need only to desire God's grace and it is ours. It may not show itself in ways we even recognize, but that is fine too. We are a people of faith, so that should not matter. Even without proof, we believe that God is with us and that nothing, not even death, can separate us from that love. So, whether our tool is a gun pulled from a holster, or a paintbrush dipped in a pallet of colors, we are beloved of God. Our REAL job is to spread the truth of that love. Our real prayer is the expression on our faces as we look at the world with the eyes of God. Let's get going. We have a bus to catch, a clock to punch, a job to do.