

The Sacred Way

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CHAPTER ONE

THE QUEST FOR GOD

Old habits are hard to break, and no one is easily weaned from his own opinions; but if you rely on your own reasoning and ability rather than on the virtue of submission to Jesus Christ, you will but seldom and slowly attain wisdom. For God wills that we become perfectly obedient to himself, and that we transcend mere reason on the wings of burning love for him.

Thomas à Kempis

I wrote a lot of this book in coffee shops. I was working at one in May when a spring thunderstorm came roiling across the plains of western Minnesota. The table at which I was sitting faced the large parking lot of an adjacent mall. As the wind picked up, the trees started to bend, and then the rain came in almost horizontal sheets.

It being a weekday afternoon, the mall's parking lot was only half full. Way out on the edge was parked a brand new BMW 525i—it didn't even have license plates yet. Someone had

parked it far away from all other cars, hoping to avoid the dings and dents of carelessly opened doors.

As the wind gusted, I saw a shopping cart begin to roll, pushed by the storm. Free from the constraints of the Cart Corral, the unmanned missile gained speed, unhindered by obstacles as it wheeled across the slick asphalt.

I saw it coming: The cart seemed to be caught in the tractor beam of the new car—250 yards and closing fast! 200 yards! 150! 100 yards! 50...25...10...5...Impact! That cart smashed right into the side of the as-yet unblemished BMW. I kid you not: There wasn't another car within 100 yards, but that cart was honed right in on its target. Mission accomplished.

It seems to me that God is a lot like that shopping cart—not that God has four wheels and a child safety strap, but that God always seeks us out. No matter how far away we park, and no matter how much we try to avoid bumping into the Divine Creator of the Universe, God finds us and leaves a mark. It's not a search-and-destroy mission; it's a search-and-give life mission. I've found that it's pretty common for God to hunt me down and smack me in the right front quarter panel. I know others share this feeling, hence the continued popularity of Francis Thompson's 19th century poem, "The Hound of Heaven," in which the protagonist proclaims,

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.*

And yet, Love pursues, with an "unhurrying chase" at an "unperturbèd pace," and a Voice proclaims, "Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me." Love wins; God wins, hounding the poem's protagonist toward the gates of heaven, never giving up, in spite of attempts to outrun him.

Now, this is a poem not a theological statement. It would be fairly silly to assert that one can't ignore God. In fact, it hardly needs to be stated that, of the six billion people on this planet, a pretty hefty number disregard God completely. But for a lot of us, Frances Thompson's poem articulates something significant. We have this nagging feeling that God is following us around, nudging us to live justly, and expecting us to talk to him every once in a while.*

I guess I'm one of those people—one of those whom God is constantly nagging. Every time I leave God's side, as it were, it's not too long until I feel God tagging right along beside *me*. I can't seem to shake him. Yet having this sense of God's company doesn't necessarily translate to a meaningful spiritual life. I know this because despite my awareness of God's presence, I have spent most of my life trying to figure out what to do about it.

why go ancient?

I was raised in a nice, Midwestern, church-going family. I went away to college and got involved in a conservative evangelical college group then went straight to seminary after graduation. In other words, by the time I was 25, my views of God, prayer, the Bible, etc. were pretty screwed up. I had more head-knowledge about faith, religion, whatever you want to call it, than a person should, but I really didn't seem to be able to put it into practice. I'd say there was one word that summed up my religious life: *obligation*.

I had been taught that the way to connect with God on a daily basis is to have a 30-minute "quiet time." That is, you should sit down with your Bible open, read it a little, and then lay a bunch of stuff on God, making sure to mention how excellent he is before running through the list of all the things you need.

I found this style of personal devotion to be a pretty shallow well, and it wasn't long before I was doing it only every other day, then once a week, and then, well, never. Taking the place of my 30-minute quiet time, however, were hours and hours of that great religious tradition: guilt. Here was the equation: God is out there + God wants to hear from me + I'm not talking = failure by me.

After about 10 years of this, and hearing this same pattern corroborated by many people who were also trying to listen for God in their lives, something occurred to me: People have been trying to follow God for thousands of years, Christians for the last two thousand. Maybe somewhere along the line some of them had come up with ways of connecting with God that could help people like me.

* I feel very uncomfortable referring to God as "he." On the one hand, I strongly believe that God is a personal being, but on the other hand, I believe that God is so much more than our words "he," "she," "him," and "her" can capture. Recently, I've been trying to explain this to my three- and four-year-olds. When they look around at other people, dogs, birds, and hamsters, they only know "he" and "she," so trying to convince them that God is neither and both and more than the two combined has been a challenge. So in this book, I'll try to avoid references to God as "he" or "she," but sometimes I'll have to break my own rule in order to avoid literary awkwardness.

About that same time, I happened to be due for a three-month sabbatical from my job, and I could think of no better way to spend it than to travel and read about different ancient ways of prayer and devotion. So that's exactly what I did.

My travels took me to England, where I stayed at the now defunct Boiler Room in Reading, a prayer center for young people. Some churches there got together and leased out an abandoned pub, which happened to sit on the site of a medieval abbey destroyed during the Protestant-Catholic tensions of the 16th century. The churches wanted to develop a place where the young people of Reading could come and hang out, but instead of filling the old pub with pinball games and loud music, those in charge constructed prayer chapels and piped in ethereal chants. While it was open (2,000-2003), the Reading Boiler Room boasted a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week prayer vigil, and people from around the world posted prayer requests on the "Wailing Wall" on their web site. A new Boiler Room has since been opened in West London, and other branches of the British 24-7 prayer movement are being launched as well.

I also flew to Dublin, Ireland, where I met with Fr. Alan McGuckian and the staff at the Jesuit Communication Centre, the keepers of the most popular prayer web site in the world (you can read more about it in chapter 8). And I went to Communauté Taizé, an amazing community of peace, brotherhood, and prayer in southern France (see more in chapter 11).

I voraciously read authors and books they didn't assign in seminary: St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila, and *The Pilgrim's Way*. I met with other Protestants, with Roman Catholics, and with Eastern Orthodox Christians. I took a long hike in the Red Mountains of Utah with a shaman. I corresponded by e-mail with people around the world, and I talked with others about prayer over the phone.

All this I did in an effort to solve my dilemma. For years I'd been told that to be a Christian meant I had to do three things: (1) read the Bible, (2) pray, and (3) go to church. But I had come to the realization that there must be something *more*. And indeed there is. There is a long tradition of searching among the followers of Jesus—it's a quest, really, for ways to connect with God—and it has been undertaken by some of the most intelligent and deeply spiritual persons ever to walk this planet. The quest is to know Jesus better, to follow him more closely, to become—in some mysterious way—wrapped

into his presence. And I thank God that some of these brilliant and spiritual persons wrote down what they learned.

For me, there is incredible richness in the spiritual practices of ancient and modern Christian communities from around the world. Incorporating new ways of praying, meditating, reading the Bible, and so on, have fueled my faith and my passion for spirituality in ways I never thought possible, and have, without question, brought me into a closer relationship with God. And beyond those rather self-centered outcomes, they've also helped me to become a better father, husband, and friend. And that's why I'm interested in writing about them as an offering to you.

WHY CHRISTIAN?

You've probably noticed that for me, the point of these practices is to draw me into a deeper relationship with the Christian God. You may or may not agree that spirituality necessarily involves God. Obviously, I feel strongly that the road to inner peace and connection with our Creator is through Jesus. If you are one of the more than two billion Christians in the world, you may feel the same way. But in case you don't, I think you'll still find a great deal of worthy information here. I'm not going to try to convince you that you can only do these things if you believe in Jesus—I've seen lots of people try to convince other people about Jesus, and it's rarely successful.

Instead, I suggest you try some of these spiritual practices with an open mind. Honestly, what have you got to lose? Even if you already count yourself among those convinced of the whole Christian thing, you may remain skeptical about the part where Jesus talks to you. (If you're like me, you get more than a little uneasy when your coworker says that when she was late for her son's soccer game, the Lord helped her find a great parking spot; or when your brother says the Lord told him to do this or that. The Lord just doesn't speak to me like that.)

So if you're unconvinced, or convinced but still skeptical, or even if you're a stalwart Christian who has a stale prayer life, the exercises in this book may prove helpful.

The funny thing is, I can't really tell you *why* they're helpful. I know they work because they have for me, but I'm still confounded by their effectiveness. Maybe it's because the ancient spiritual disciplines cause us to slow down and shut up, something at which most of us are not very good. Maybe it's that there's something mystical

and mysterious about these ancient rites, like we're tapping into some pretechnological, preindustrial treasury of the Spirit.

But I think they work because of Jesus. I'm afraid you're not going to get much more explanation from me than that. Still, I think that something about Jesus—who he was (Jesus of Nazareth) and who he is (Jesus the Christ)—inspired the people who developed these disciplines centuries ago. He led them on this quest, which really is unique to Christianity. For only in Christianity is there the belief that the one, true God came to earth as a human being, and that, to this day, we can know him in as personal a way as the disciples who shared lunch with him 2,000 years ago. That is, Christians engage in these spiritual practices not out of duty or obligation but because there is a promise attached: God will personally meet us in the midst of these disciplines.

It's really pretty crazy when you think about it—which is probably why some of the saints who favored these disciplines were driven to extremes that their contemporaries considered mad. (St. Francis preached to the birds in the forest—in the nude; Benedict's disciples tried to poison him because he was too strict about prayer; Julian of Norwich had herself walled into a little apartment for years with food thrown in to her once a day through a hole in the roof; the Stylites sat on tall poles for years at a time.) Despite their sometimes-odd methods, the passion with which these saints followed Jesus might be envied by us today. In our age of cynicism in which everything falls prey to deconstruction, it's inspiring to look back to an age before Newton explained how the world works and Freud explained how the psyche works. Following these saints' lead of pouring oneself into something without really understanding it can be an incredibly liberating experience. It has been for me.

Imagine thinking about spirituality in a time when the words of Jesus had not been picked apart and voted on by the Jesus Seminar; the veracity of Jesus' miracles had not been analyzed by *Time* Magazine; his sexuality had not been the subject of movies and plays. Having not experienced the cynicism of our postmodern age, the ancient saints pursued Jesus with a relentlessness we can hardly imagine—not all of them, to be sure, but enough of them to make the history of Christian spirituality one of the most fascinating fields in historical study.

And again, I submit that all this took place *because of Jesus*. In the end, there is something so compelling about the person of Jesus and the way of life he offers that it causes people to commit every-

thing to the pursuit of him and his way. Many are saying that right now is a time where the spiritual quest for Jesus is again on the rise—that people are tired of Jesus being hoarded by the academicians, that we want him back as Lord and Friend.

But is it cheating for us to jump backwards, to look for spiritual guidance in the era before the Enlightenment? Only if we look back with nostalgia, like the people who say, “I would have fit much better during the Renaissance than now,” or the people who spend all their time and money on Civil War reenactments. On the contrary, traditional Christian practice is not about nostalgia, but about a way of life and faith that has been honed by the centuries. It is a way—the way—to live in the sacredness of God.

WHY ME?

Because so many of the spiritual disciplines in this book were developed and practiced by those we now consider saints, there can be a sense of exclusivity, a belief that these are only for the deeply devout or those who are prepared to drastically alter their lives—to live in solitude, fast for months at a time, or give up all worldly possessions. But my hope is that you see them as truly practical ways of awakening your spiritual life. It may be a cliché, but if I can do it, you can too.

You’ll be either disillusioned or relieved to discover that I am not a spiritual guru (whatever that means). I’m not a monk, I don’t live on a mountain, and I rarely wear robes. Instead, I’m a husband, father, brother, son, and friend. I’m trying to make a living, stay in shape, and finish reading the novel I started two months ago.

This book wasn’t written high in the Himalayas while I lived on crusts of bread and honey. I wrote some of it in coffee shops and much of it on a folding table in the middle of the half-painted nursery for our new baby.

I say this not out of some false sense of humility, but to make the point that you and I are probably very much alike in our quest for God. I truly struggle to make time for God every day, and I struggle to set an example for my children. I can imagine them someday saying, “My dad writes books on spirituality, but let me tell you what he’s *really* like at home!”

In the end, following Jesus is not easy, and those who portray it as easy are doing all of us a disservice. It’s in fact a very difficult journey, and it’s quite easy to give it up, even on the most mundane days. So I would hope this confession gives you hope, and that

you see that the writings in this book are simply the scrawls of one journeyer to another.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

For that reason, the following chapters are pretty thin when it comes to how-to. To be honest, I don't really know how you're best going to achieve intimacy with God. I know what's worked for me, and I'll try to indicate that along the way. But please don't take my experimentation with these practices as prescriptive; they are merely descriptive of my wanderings. Yours will be yours.

That said, one of the things you may have to leave at the front cover is any denominational bigotry you have. A lot of the practices herein will seem very "Catholic" or very "Eastern Orthodox." If you aren't from one of those traditions and feel wary about adopting practices associated with them, remember this: Before 1054, all Christians were Catholic/Orthodox! That's right, for the first half of Christian history, there was one church and most of the practices in this book are from that time.

The next chapter is further introduction, including thoughts on spirituality and the practice thereof. Then comes the meat of the book: 16 ancient practices. The practices are divided into two sections. Those in *Via Contemplativa* are practices that rely on bodily quiet and stillness. For most of them you sit, and for all of them you primarily engage the Spirit of God via your own spirit. The following section, *Via Activa*, describes practices in which you engage your body, whether it be by depriving it of food (e.g., fasting) or walking (e.g., Stations of the Cross).

While this division of body and spirit, and the corresponding disciplines, is ancient, it's also a false dichotomy. To practice the stillness required for Centering Prayer, for example, takes an enormous amount of physical discipline—one must use the mind/brain (a physical organ) to bring the body to rest and to tune out all possible distractions. And to walk a labyrinth, though it is physical, is also deeply spiritual. However artificial, the division stands for it may be somewhat helpful.

Each chapter begins with a quote from Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, quite possibly the greatest, and surely the most widely read Christian spiritual classic after the Bible. It is a truly astounding book of spiritual insight, as I think you will see from the quotes I've chosen. I hope they pique your curiosity enough to get a copy and devour it yourself.

Each chapter also has several sections. The first is an opening anecdote, either from my own life or, more often, from someone else's. Hopefully, these stories will bring the practice to life and pull you into its snare.

Next is a section on the history of the practice, not only because I love history, but also because we do a great disservice to a discipline and to the faithful Christians who have practiced it when we do not consider from whence it came. Indeed, I find that many people are far more interested in trying a practice when they know the story behind it.

Theology is the next part of each chapter. In order for us to practice these spiritual disciplines with integrity, we must decide for ourselves if they are theologically defensible within our own traditions. The use of icons for prayer, for instance, has a long and contentious theological history. And the labyrinth, because of its pre-Christian origins and its use by the New Age movement, is avoided by some Christians. Obviously, I have included no practices with which I am theologically uncomfortable, but you will have to make those determinations for yourself.

Next is a section on practice, giving some general guidelines for the application of the discipline. These have been honed over the centuries by thousands of Christians, but I have found that all are adaptable to our present-day lives in which we have jobs and family responsibilities.

Finally, since I don't deserve to have the last word on any of these disciplines, there is a final word from someone much wiser than I to conclude each chapter. Then it's your turn: Try them, experiment, dive in, and see where God takes you.

A final word

Here's our first "Final Word;" consider it a blessing and exhortation as you finish the chapter.

In 1373, when she was 30 years old, Benedictine nun Julian of Norwich (1342-ca.1416) received 16 "showings," or revelations from God. She spent the rest of her life in seclusion, reflecting on her visions. Years later she dictated her visions and her interpretations to a scribe who wrote them down. They are now considered the height of late medieval Christian mysticism. She's notable for her optimism, for her emphasis on the motherly qualities of Christ, and for her supreme confidence in God's love. Here's a word of encouragement from Julian:

Therefore we can with his grace and his help persevere in spiritual contemplation, with endless wonder at this high, surpassing, immeasurable love which our Lord in his goodness has for us; and therefore we may with reverence ask from our lover all that we will, for our natural will is to have God, and God's good will is to have us, and we can never stop willing or loving until we possess him in the fullness of joy.