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PRAYER IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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INTRODUCTION

I broke my smartphone, but not on purpose.

Perhaps it should have been on purpose. As someone prone to the perils of workaholism, I had developed the tendency to check the thing far more than necessary. It wasn't the smartphone's fault; before, when I had been the slightly embarrassed owner of a more conventional and less tricked-out flip phone, my psyche was still marked with the mad compulsion to constantly check my laptop to see if anyone had emailed me in the last ten minutes.

This tendency to check and recheck for even the most meaningless of digital messages was only augmented by my acquisition of a better communications mousetrap, the kind that could bring me not just audio, but also textual and visual contact with my peers and colleagues; a device that could pick a playlist that could sing me to sleep at night and remember what time to wake me up the next morning. I had R2-D2, C-3PO, and a volume-controllable personal secretary rolled into one; and on top of it all, I could fit the thing in my pocket. In our symbiotic relationship, I swore never to abandon it so long as it continued to supply me with an endless stream of information and assistance on a host of matters, be they recreational or professional.

And so it was, roughly a month into my dependence upon this miracle device, I decided to unplug (only metaphorically, of course) and go on a brief retreat at a Benedictine Abbey in Washington, D.C. I say

metaphorically, because my trusty multifaceted digital companion was slated to join me for the few days I would be staying with the monks. But on the morning that I was scheduled to take off for the abbey, the haste with which I was preparing my belongings for the two days of semi-solitude (with, of course, access to satellite coverage) was, though I didn't realize it at the time, just one more indication of how badly I needed the slower, more contemplative experience offered to me by a little time with the monks.

Then tragedy struck.

Or at least the scene appeared tragic at the time. In the aforementioned haste of preparation, shortly after beginning a load of laundry, I began to look, first with mild frustration, then with growing panic, for my omni-faceted electronic sidekick. I stopped just short of calling after it as though it were a lost beagle. With the terror that comes from realizing all too late one's inadvertent folly, I raced to the basement, flung open the washer, and with trembling hands, fished my waterlogged personal assistant and life manager from the swishing tank of retreat apparel.

Towels were hastily laid out. Batteries were removed. Rudimentary surgery was performed. I threw my smartphone in a plastic bag full of rice, and with trembling fingers, dialed customer service using a (gasp!) landline. The prognosis came from the phone company and was met with sickening silence on my end. In words framed sympathetically so as to try and lessen the tragedy, I was told that my warranty didn't cover water damage, and because I hadn't invested in the eight dollars' worth of insurance offered to me when I purchased my phone, there was nothing that could be done; I would have to buy a new one. My robotic friend had been cut down in the prime of its youth.

I can look back on the events of that morning and see the irony much more clearly now than I could in the heat of the moment. Seriously, who takes a smartphone to a silent retreat? My rationale, I had thought at the time, was sound: how would I be able to find the monastery guest-house without my GPS? How would I know what time it was if I were

anywhere besides my cell? What if anyone needed to get in touch with me regarding a work- or family-related matter while I was on retreat? These questions from the world outside the abbey were clamoring for the opportunity to haunt me inside the abbey as well.

I had a great retreat, as it turned out. I ended up finding the abbey without the aid of turn-by-turn voice navigation. I was able to get to prayer on time, using the same hour-counting tools that Benedictines were using a thousand years before the invention of portable timepieces: the bells. I never answered the phone once nor felt any sense of deprivation or remorse at not contacting anyone from the “outside world.” I read books that weren’t backlit. I was briefly and mildly upset at not being able to post a photo of a second edition *Erasmus* from the monastery library to my social network profile, but that discomfort quickly passed. Most importantly, I was, for the first time in a long time, able to pray.

I know now, as I did on some level then, that it is not necessary to live with monks in order to be able to pray, but the steady stream of multimedia with which we are constantly confronted in the digital age can, if we are not vigilant, deaden our souls to the spiritual sensibilities needed for prayer. We can find our resolve weakened, our senses overdriven, and our humility crippled. Prayer offends our modern notions of practicality and constant connectedness, and requires of us time which we do not think we have to give. And yet it is an essential aspect of Christian life. Without prayer, we simply cannot live in relationship with God. We can only live in relationship to God.

How do we break out of the tendency to confuse the urgency of temporal concerns with the importance of eternal concerns? Urgency is the squeaky wheel that makes us rush for the oil can; importance is the still, small voice that calls us to things of more lasting significance. For me, the drowning of my smartphone was a wake-up call, telling me that it was high time I started to try to discern the difference between the fleeting “now” of the present moment and the eternal “now” where God dwells in majesty.

Over the next several pages, I hope to explore more deeply the challenges associated with, as well as the benefits available through, praying in this age of progressively compounding digital communication. In a time in which society continues to develop more and more efficient methods of horizontal communication with itself, it is more essential than ever to maintain our insistence on prayer, the unique form of vertical communication given to humans by God, which predates even print culture.

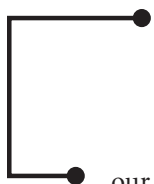
As such, this is not meant to be a comprehensive theological study of prayer, nor even an elevated mystical meditation on the ultimate things of God. If this book accomplishes its purpose, at the end, its reader will have developed a greater self-awareness of the obstacles to prayer unique to our age, and will hopefully be able to walk away with an improved sense of how to overcome them in order to better incorporate prayer into daily life; even the life of an overstimulated twenty-first-century human. I hope it finds its readers well.

Author's note:

The first-person plural pronoun “we” is used in almost a gratuitous sense in the pages that follow; and while in many cases, this pronoun can be used to indict the reading party while the writing party sits in an ivory tower and only vaguely attaches such aspersions to him or herself, please know that the personal nature of the following reflections comes from a desire for individual holiness by the author, and that whenever the reader feels convicted, the author feels convicted doubly so. Let us examine our consciences together, and share in the labor pains of the cultivation process and the joys of an abundant harvest.



Digital, But Disciplined



The pace of the digital age is not tied to any sense of constancy. It is, by contrast, married to our worries about frenetically completing tasks so as to move on to other tasks, in order to accomplish our business (or pleasure) as rapidly as possible. Someone needs something from us, and they need it quickly, and so our hasty responses to “work orders” or digital social messages make us feel like we’re semi-efficient when we supply responses in accordance with demand. We recklessly multitask, working on multiple current projects while simultaneously checking back on past projects to make sure they’ve met with approval, whether those projects are related to our work or our social network. But the fact of the matter is, most of the time when we check and recheck for responses to our performance, it is more of an attempt to reassure ourselves of our effectiveness and self-worth than it is a move forward in any sort of measurable way.

This sort of mad cycle has only been made madder by the advancements of the digital age, as new developments in technology exponentially demand from us new developments in regard to our ability to process them. A phone ringing off the hook used to mean that we were busy. Now, many of us respond to emails while talking on the phone at the same time. The art of letter writing, a slow art that requires us to think and rethink our approach to communications because of the time it takes to communicate, has been abandoned in the digital age in favor of the art of the speedy response. Grammar, spelling, and the formerly common courtesies of greeting and salutation have become things of the past, replaced by unpunctuated one-line sentence fragments designed to expedite whatever process seems to be the most demanding at the present moment. The digital culture demands an answer, and when we finally unplug from it, there is a sense of helplessness and a feeling that we’ve failed someone somehow, even if we can’t put our finger on who or what we’ve failed. All that we know is that there is something out there that we should have done something about five minutes ago.

To complicate matters, we are citizens of an economy that runs on greed and envy; our desire to have the latest luxury keeps us constantly searching for new technologies that simplify our recklessly thrown-together lifestyles, and we obsess over our desires to keep up with those whom we consider to be on the “cutting edge.” We go to great financial lengths to try and establish ourselves as valid and relevant participants in the global culture. If we’re not “with it,” it is most likely, in our minds, because we are “without it,” whatever that particular “it” happens to be at the time.

But there can be a point at which staying busy is actually more of a hindrance to production than an aid to it. It’s perfectly possible to stay continually busy and yet accomplish virtually nothing. We can keep ourselves occupied by buzzing around from short-term task to short-term task and never make an inch of headway toward the kinds of long-term accomplishments that would make such short-term tasks totally unnecessary. Perpetual motion does not necessarily a productive person make. If we are nothing else, we are an obsessive and compulsive culture, loaded with movement and struggling for meaning. The words of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* seem even more applicable to our culture than his; lives lived in this way are “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Finding a Digital Rhythm

We find our prayer lives defined by the same compulsions which define our consumer lives; we want something bigger, something better and faster, and we want it now, often because we see that someone else has it, and, on some level, we resent him for it. Our spiritual jealousy can parallel our material jealousy. Often, the side effect of this is that the rhythms that should sustain and balance us are disordered and therefore discarded in favor of the routine acquisition of new gadgetry that merely keeps us technologically and socially afloat.

Some might argue that the Mass and forms of devotional prayer such

as the rosary are nothing more than mindless routines, but in the digital age, where mindless routine is the order of the day, it seems hardly fair to characterize these engaging and dynamic forms of prayer as such. When I think of my own mindless routines, they involve things like refilling my coffee, rechecking my email, or reinspecting the progress of some task that I've completed but that has yet to take full effect or be responded to. Even non-work-related mindless routines, such as cycling through social network profiles or blog comment boxes, suck us into cycles of repetitive and, if we were honest with ourselves, mostly pointless activity. Such is the secular liturgy of the rat race.

What, then, is the distinction between the mundane routines that bind us and the dynamic kind of rhythm that balances us? We can contrast this constant tension of the digital age's mindless and break-neck routine with the idea of rhythm, as practiced most compellingly in contemplative religious orders. Thomas Merton, writing about this kind of rhythm in his book, *Thoughts in Solitude*, reminds us that "the bells say, 'business does not matter.'" When the bells sound that call monks to prayer, monks are supposed to stop in their tracks, no matter what task has been occupying them up to that point. The bells inform them that it's quite a nice and even necessary thought that things need to be done, but that such things have to take a backseat to the more important responsibility of stepping back from the temporal in favor of stepping forward into the eternal, so that a proper perspective can be gained as to what really needs to be accomplished; namely, the increase of one's relationship with the life of the Trinity. This pressing temporal matter may be loud in its demands upon our attention, but loudness does not automatically mean importance.

Incorporating rhythm in the midst of routine is no easy task, especially given the social pressures of the digital age to perform in accordance with the demands of a technology-driven and industrialized society. We live in an age of manufactured individuality—we think that our gadgets and social media have helped us to assert our uniqueness as

persons, when in reality, the more technologically advanced a society is, the more materialistic and homogeneous it is likely to be. And the more that we fixate on common electronic devices, the more we who think we are so very advanced look like a mob. If you doubt this, check the lines outside an electronics store the next time a major new mobile media device is released. Bluntly speaking, the more advanced we fool ourselves into thinking we are, the less likely we are to realize that we have become homogenized by our common lusts. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves no longer the masters of our own destinies but rather caught up in the current of culture, tossed from trending topic to trending topic without any recourse or initiative toward a critical analysis of our spiritual state. We will merely be rafts buffeted about upon the seas of technological innovation.

One of the spiritual casualties in the conflict between routine and rhythm is discernment. What are we to do in order to serve God, and why? How many of us, when making an introduction for the first time, start the conversation by asking one another what each other does for a living (occupation), as though that were the most important fact about us? Our self-images may be wrapped up in our obsession with the routines that dominate our schedules, but our vocations are defined and fulfilled by our attention to rhythms.

It is a byproduct of a society focused on functionality that we tend more often than not to perceive ourselves in light of our careers—perhaps most of all emblematic of the routine—rather than our vocations. Vocations are what we are called to live out according to the image of the God in which we are made; careers are mere means by which we might fulfill such vocations. Even the language of employment has changed in such a way that the confusion of these two life callings has been enshrined in our culture. One can attend a “vocational school” that has as its mission no connection with the classical idea of a “vocation.” Properly understood, our vocation is integrally entwined with our personal identities in the scope of eternity, whereas our careers

are secondary tasks imposed upon us by the world that can either aid or hinder us in the pursuit of our vocation, depending upon how we approach them.

Conformity to the demands of routine can deaden the renewal of our minds that Saint Paul boldly calls us to in Romans chapter 12: “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect” (Romans 12:2). A mind is renewed by focusing on what is important, and not merely what is urgent. Urgency demands a short-term solution to a problem that will be forgotten two weeks later. Importance demands that we align ourselves with eternity, regardless of the demands of the moment. Unfortunately, urgency is the squeakier wheel, and so renewing our minds by focusing on what’s important, namely our relationship with God, can be a difficult pattern to develop. We cannot, alas, escape the incessant demands of urgency. We can, however, carve out spaces, no matter how small, wherein we focus on what’s important over and above the demands of routine and work to create oases of rhythm, even in a world as noisy and immediacy-motivated as ours. This can only be done if we apply discipline to our prayer lives amid the demands of the digital age.

Pray Because You Have To

One of the main reasons that we often claim that we cannot pray is that we do not feel we have the time in our busy schedules to make prayer a part of them. What can be more intimidating than the idea of a holy hour to someone who has a family and works almost sixty hours per week? The idea of such devotion seems impossible, and yet, were we to count the minutes that we waste checking and rechecking progress on work- and social media-related items that we cannot meaningfully do anything about, we would find a wealth of opportunities for prayer. And while waiting for sporadic opportunities for prayer to present themselves might be a hopeful way to approach the concept of infusing

prayer into our daily lives, most of us are wired in such a way that we need a concrete, disciplined, specific format to help us actually follow through with our intentions to be a prayerful people in the midst of the challenges of the digital age.

Scheduling one's life according to the bells that signal hours for prayer may seem all good and well for those who live in an intentional community that has such breaks as part of its scheduled daily structure, but it is a far more difficult rule to follow for those of us who live outside the walls of a monastery; we have no monastic bells as such, no summons ringing through the community to call us out of routine and into rhythm, or so we might argue. Muslims install minarets in their communities that remind them when it is time to pray, just as Catholic Church bells often ring out periodically to call us to pray the *Angelus*. Those of us who don't have someone hovering over us to remind us of what our response should be when prayer times approach can very quickly end up treating prayer with a minimized priority in relation to other tasks. But do we not live in an age where we can arm digital devices to set off alarms to remind us to pause for moments, even seconds, to remember what the purpose of existence really is, and to acknowledge and reflect upon our situation in the light of things eternal? Is it not possible to intersperse scheduled brief communication with God amid scheduled brief communications with our business associates and social network connections?

Saint Ignatius of Loyola's daily examen is one of the more fruitful and time-tested templates for setting up one's schedule in a way that incorporates prayer throughout the day, and for elevating it to a level of responsibility that becomes infused with our other responsibilities. Although the Jesuit order he founded was not one that was organized into conventual religious communities, Saint Ignatius realized that the Society of Jesus in its active ministry would never accomplish its mission if it did not insist as a religious order upon a dedicated life of contemplation that called all Jesuits to prayer, no matter what part of the

world they happened to occupy. Because of their missionary charism, the Jesuits would travel into many foreign territories nowhere near the bells that communitarian orders such as the Benedictines relied upon; but they would still, as a matter of self-preservation if nothing else, by necessity have to make room at specific times during the day for contemplation if they had any hope of spiritually informing and sanctifying their action.

In constructing his daily examen, it is as though Saint Ignatius foresaw the ever-growing need for contemplation amid the coming storm of industrialism and progress, even though many of his Jesuits would live the majority of their missionary lives far removed from anything resembling even the most primitive technologies. Some principles of prayer are applicable no matter the technological situation.

Many Christians of the digital age, who also live far away from monastic bells, have learned to incorporate prayer into their work routines by setting their phones or watches to go off at various times during the day to remind them to mentally remove themselves from the demands of the workplace, if only briefly, to devote mere minutes to prayer. A profitable form of this, adapted for busy schedules and promoted rather effectively by Randy Hain of *The Integrated Catholic Life* e-Magazine, breaks the daily examen down into the following five periods of reflection:

1. **Thanksgiving.** Immediately after waking up, while getting ready in the morning, one can offer a moment or two of this time as a period of gratitude for life, family, and other blessings. Beginning the day with gratitude rather than reluctance sets a constructive tone for whatever one might face during the course of a day. Praying something like the Fátima morning offering can be seen as a special form of such thanksgiving.

2. **Prayer for insight.** Mid-morning, after the first couple of hours of work have passed, is a perfect time to take a couple of minutes to pray for direction, wisdom, and discernment as to how to conduct oneself in the relationships and work situations one might find herself in once the day starts to pick up a head of steam.
3. **Where is God?** After lunch is a good time to reflect for a moment upon what has happened up to this point in the day, what thoughts have occupied our minds, and how we are called to act based upon the ways in which we have seen God at work in the course of our daily activities and interactions.
4. **Petitions.** The end of a workday is a great time to take into account all of the day's experiences and to use that reflection as a basis for making an appeal to God on behalf of all the situations that we have encountered throughout the course of the day. Notice that a dedicated time for asking for favors from God comes late in the daily schedule—most of the daily reflection time up to this point has been focused on listening.
5. **Reflection and resolution.** As we lie awake, preparing to doze off, we can focus our thoughts on the elements of our day which gave glory to God and ask ourselves which of our actions and patterns need to be reformed in order to be consistent with our goal of serving him. What do we want tomorrow to look like? Insofar as we have the limited ability to change ourselves and our circumstances, which direction will be truest to the vocation to which we have been called?

Taking two to three minutes to focus on each point of Saint Ignatius' daily examen may seem trivial or insignificant, but doing so accomplishes something vital in the spiritual life: It puts prayer into the mix of daily priorities as though it were as important as any other aspect of our schedule. Suddenly, the abstract idea of a relationship with God becomes a non-negotiable engagement; an appointment with the Almighty that is at least as important as a scheduled meeting with a work supervisor or a potential client, or a seemingly important response to a non-work-related email from a friend. Even for those who aren't in the workplace, for reasons intentional or otherwise, the same kind of series of reflection periods from the daily examen can help to establish prayer as a priority amid the constant din of household tasks, bill payment, or job searching. For students, these reflections can break up the stresses of study, class time, and social time in a way that may help to direct them toward their vocation, and not just their career; it can also help to train them to get into the habit of setting prayer as a spiritual priority before they get aggressively assaulted and assimilated by the demands of whatever realm of the work force they hope to enter.

Some might argue that this method of scheduled reflection makes prayer a disproportionately small priority; but for those who have never set regular times for prayer in their lives, it can be a significant step in the right direction and a major catalyst for spiritual growth. Suddenly, prayerful reflection makes the list of daily tasks, just like every other pressing matter does. Something eternal has been injected into our grinding routines, and for once, we make the kind of time for God that we might make for any other client. However small a step this is, for many of us, it is progress. There are 1,440 minutes in a day; devoting one percent of our day (less than fifteen minutes) to prayer should hardly be considered a sacrifice.

Without such time for reflection built intentionally, and even rigorously into our schedules, our routines will hardly smack of rhythm. Instead, we will find ourselves manipulated by systems rather than

being masters of our environments. Our spiritual lives will always take a backseat to whatever pressing issue of the moment happens to be the most vociferously demanding of our attentions. We see many examples in society, and even in ourselves, of a culture of exhaustion from the “rat race” that is regulated by a routine of stimulation and depression that is anything but rhythmic; excessive caffeine is consumed in the morning, excessive alcohol is consumed in the evening. Every twelve-hour cycle of life seems to be marked by an attempt to overcompensate for the excesses of the last twelve-hour cycle. A disciplined life of prayer helps us to see the radical difference between correcting something and overcorrecting because of it, and shows us that rhythm offers life-giving stability, whereas routine merely offers us life-preserving efforts toward survival.

Transforming Our Daily Routines

If we begin to associate various activities from our daily routines with prayer, we can attach spiritual disciplines to nearly every aspect of our lived experience, if we take the concept far enough. We can start simply: praying the morning offering every day when we turn on the shower, saying the Lord’s Prayer when we start our vehicles, or reciting a quick prayer to Saint Michael when we get out of the car to go to work. If we were to treat the spiritual life as we treated a smoking habit, we could associate traditional addictive fixation times with intentional prayer times.

Building from that kind of effort, we could expand from these routinely experienced occurrences into more spontaneous situations: for instance, some Christians have made into a habit the practice of offering prayers for the sick every time they hear an ambulance go by, or of making the sign of the cross whenever passing a Church. In our rich Catholic tradition, there are patron saints for just about every aspect of life and composed prayers for just about any situation one might encounter. There is even a composed prayer to Saint Isidore of Seville, the patron saint of the Internet, that one can keep next to the computer

and pray before entering what can be a very dicey environment for one not fitted with the armor of prayer.

In order to saturate our lives with prayer, we must look for opportunities for prayer where prayer does not always seem to be the most obvious course of action in a particular situation. If we are not proactive in our attempts to incorporate prayer into our daily rhythms, it will not beat down our doors to remind us that we should be making it a priority. The onus of placing prayer at the top of our list of responsibilities lies solely upon us.

At the same time, we can easily discourage ourselves by biting off more than we can chew when it comes to applying the principles of discipline to our daily lives in a digitally dominated age. An overly ambitious plan to incorporate prayer into one's routine will almost certainly be destined for failure. Zeal for a prayer life in the midst of an insane schedule can actually serve as an enemy of the spiritual life, if we are not prudent in our implementation of it. Any spiritual director worth her salt will affirm the idea that setting overly lofty goals for spiritual improvement inevitably can only lead to short-term disappointment and raises the likelihood that the one being directed will abandon the whole project altogether.

Saint Benedict of Nursia, the founder of Western monasticism, gave his monks the mission statement of *ora et labora*, that is, prayer and work. This is the standard to which we must hold ourselves in the digital age; living lives of action fueled by contemplation. Benedictines are required, as are we all, to create goods and render services to sustain their way of life, but, as we all wish we could do, they force upon themselves interruptions of work in order to make prayer a priority. They understand, and have since the sixth century, that making a living without institutionally incorporating contemplative prayer is a dead-end road and will only leave those who follow it totally fried and ill-equipped to address the hectic pace of secular society with any meaningful forms of contribution.

Trying to live a life that glorifies Christ in the world without equipping ourselves with lives of prayer is equivalent to trying to drive a car without an engine. This is why we who are part of the secular work force have traditionally had to go out of our way in order to engage in lives of contemplative reflection that lead to lives of spiritually informed action. As Jesus tells us in Luke chapter 14, “Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion?” If we are to go about the work that God has given us in the various situations in which he has put us, then we must by all means contemplate the cost, save up the capital (financial or spiritual), and go about the active work of putting up the building. Only by giving ourselves a true and honest appraisal of whatever situation to which we are called will we be able to authentically and effectively engage our respective environments in the kind of way that takes account both of temporal inconveniences and eternal realities.

If we are to sanctify the world, as the Second Vatican Council has called us to do, then we must begin by looking at the ways in which we can sanctify small aspects of our interactions with the particularities of our own environments, work, family or otherwise. The world is an awfully big thing to try to sanctify on one’s own. But each moment we experience can be looked at as an opportunity for some measure of grace. If we can fight the war for our souls in the digital age by winning one small daily skirmish at a time, we will end up building our own personal morale and can in the process learn more about the divisive tactics of the enemies of our soul in the process.