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## Keep Praying When the Thrill is Gone

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# Keep praying when the thrill is gone

*"All of a sudden my time for prayer became the most tedious thing in the world. I was just waiting for the hour to be over."*

Kathleen Cahalan

*That we pray at all is a gift of God.*  
—Saint Augustine

"After college I made a retreat and met people who prayed everyday on their own. I started to do it myself—just sit alone and think and talk to God. Sometimes I would read the Bible, but mostly I just talked to God. After a while I got bored with it. Nothing much happened. My initial enthusiasm was gone. Not long after, I was married and had children, and I never went back to spending that hour each day with God"—Jane Oppenheimer.

"I lost my mother after she suffered with cancer for many years. She had been a very faithful person and would lead prayer at our family meals. Even as she suffered from her illness, she would ask us to pray together. After she died, I had no one to pray with. I guess I relied on her too much. I couldn't pray at all. I was just too hurt and angry that she was gone. I was angry with God and didn't want anything to do with praying"—Joe Fortune.

These experiences do not mark the end of the spiritual journey for Christians; they are the beginning. When prayer dries up, as it did for Jane and Joe, it can signal that a new way of praying is needed. But there is an essential difference between Jane and Joe's experiences: one is the experience of spiritual dryness and the other of spiritual anguish.

Sister Suzanne Zuercher, psychologist and formation director for the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago, defines the difference between dryness

and anguish in terms of emotional and spiritual activity. "Spiritual anguish is the time of grappling with knowing something is so but not being able to accept it. It's an aggressive time when emotions run deep, and the mind and heart are very active. Dryness, on the other hand, is when you don't feel anything at all."

Every Christian who strives to live a deeper and more reflective life goes through periods of spiritual anguish. Experiences of loss and grief can create angry and bitter feelings toward God. Behind spiritual anguish is a deep desire to know why God, who is our creator and redeemer, has allowed a tragedy to happen.

## I couldn't care less

Spiritual dryness is a much different experience. The ancient spiritual writers called it *acedia*, which simply means "boredom." It is not necessarily precipitated by an experience of loss or grief; a person often does not have angry or bitter feelings; and dryness can be unrelated to personal problems. In fact, a person may feel at ease with life. Why does one experience this boredom then? Why do people such as Jane Oppenheimer abandon their daily prayer routine when spiritual dryness sets in?

*Prayer is a concept which it will take us our whole life to fathom, and a practice which our whole life will be too short to perfect.*

—Karl Rahner, *On Prayer*

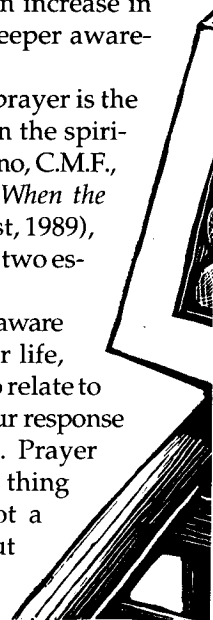
The central message of Jesus' ministry is that the kingdom of God is

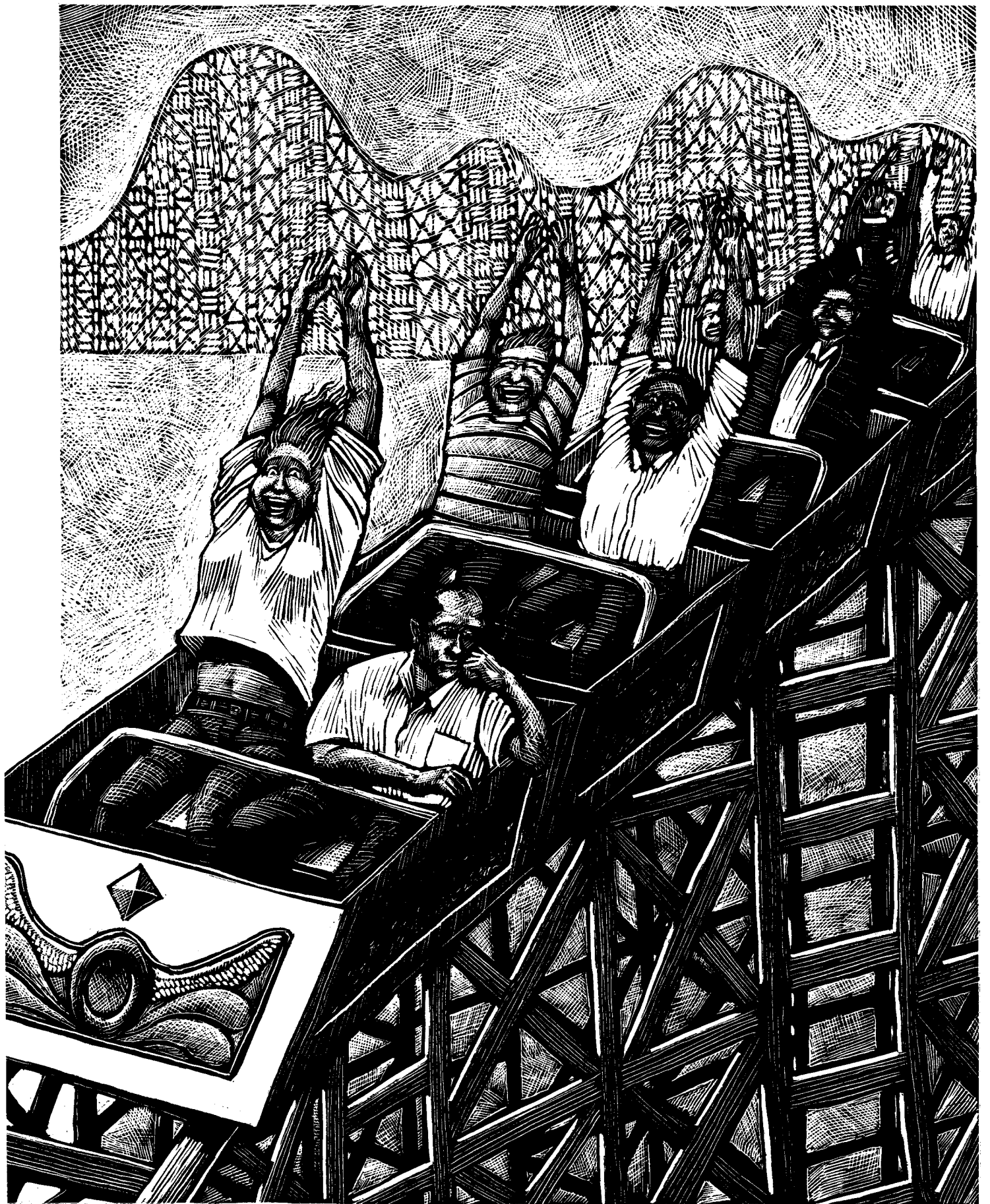
open to all. The Christian goal, as understood throughout the history of Christianity, is union with the divine and all people in God's kingdom, or under God's realm. There have been as many interpretations of what the kingdom is like as there have been interpretations of how to get there. Does a Christian advance to the kingdom by faith alone or through good works or from mystical union? Most would agree that a little of each is needed. But should every Christian seek to become a mystic?

Many Christians have a more modest desire to deepen their relationship with God. "I think that growth in the spiritual life is an increasing capacity and sensitivity to the mystery of God," says Father John Canary, vice rector of St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois. "For some that may mean mystical experiences, but for many it will mean an increase in self-knowledge and a deeper awareness of God."

Personal, individual prayer is the foundation for growth in the spiritual life. Father John Lozano, C.M.F., author of *Praying Even When the Door Seems Closed* (Paulist, 1989), defines prayer as having two essential parts:

"The first is to be more aware of God's presence in our life, and the second is to try to relate to that presence. Prayer is our response to God's self-revelation. Prayer should be a very natural thing for a Christian. It is not a matter of duty or guilt but the normal response of one who is grasped by





God and wants to respond in love.”

Spiritual writers have defined three phases of prayer: prayer of recitation, prayer of meditation, and affective prayer. Movement from one phase to the next often involves passing through a period of spiritual dryness. Prayer of recitation, or vocal prayer, usually consists of prayers that are read or memorized. “It is like the beginning stages of love between two teenagers,” says Lozano. “They have to say many words to each other, and they try to hide behind them because they are nervous. They talk and talk and talk.” Many Christians remain at this stage of prayer because when they experience boredom, they give up their daily routine rather than recognize the *acedia* as an invitation to the next stage.

Reflection and meditation mark the second stage of prayer. Lozano explains that this form of prayer is a deepening awareness of one’s relationship with God. “It is like the love achieved by two elderly persons sitting in front of the fire. They just hold hands; they don’t need all the words. They are present to each other: she knows everything he is thinking, and he knows her thoughts.”

The third stage of praying, affective prayer, is reached when reflection turns into a “loving gaze” and strong affections are experienced for the divine. This stage is reached after many years dedicated to prayer accompanied by many experiences of dryness.

*Pray inwardly, though you think it savours not; for it is profitable, though you feel not, though you see nought, yea, though you think you cannot. For in dryness and in barrenness, in sickness and in feebleness, then your prayer is well pleasing to me.*

—Juliana of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*

One of the most important insights into spiritual dryness is that it is an unavoidable part of the life of prayer. “While you pray, your prayer is very little,” explains Lozano. “There is a moment when you have done all you can and God begins to pray in you, but you don’t notice it as prayer. You notice only the absence of prayer.”

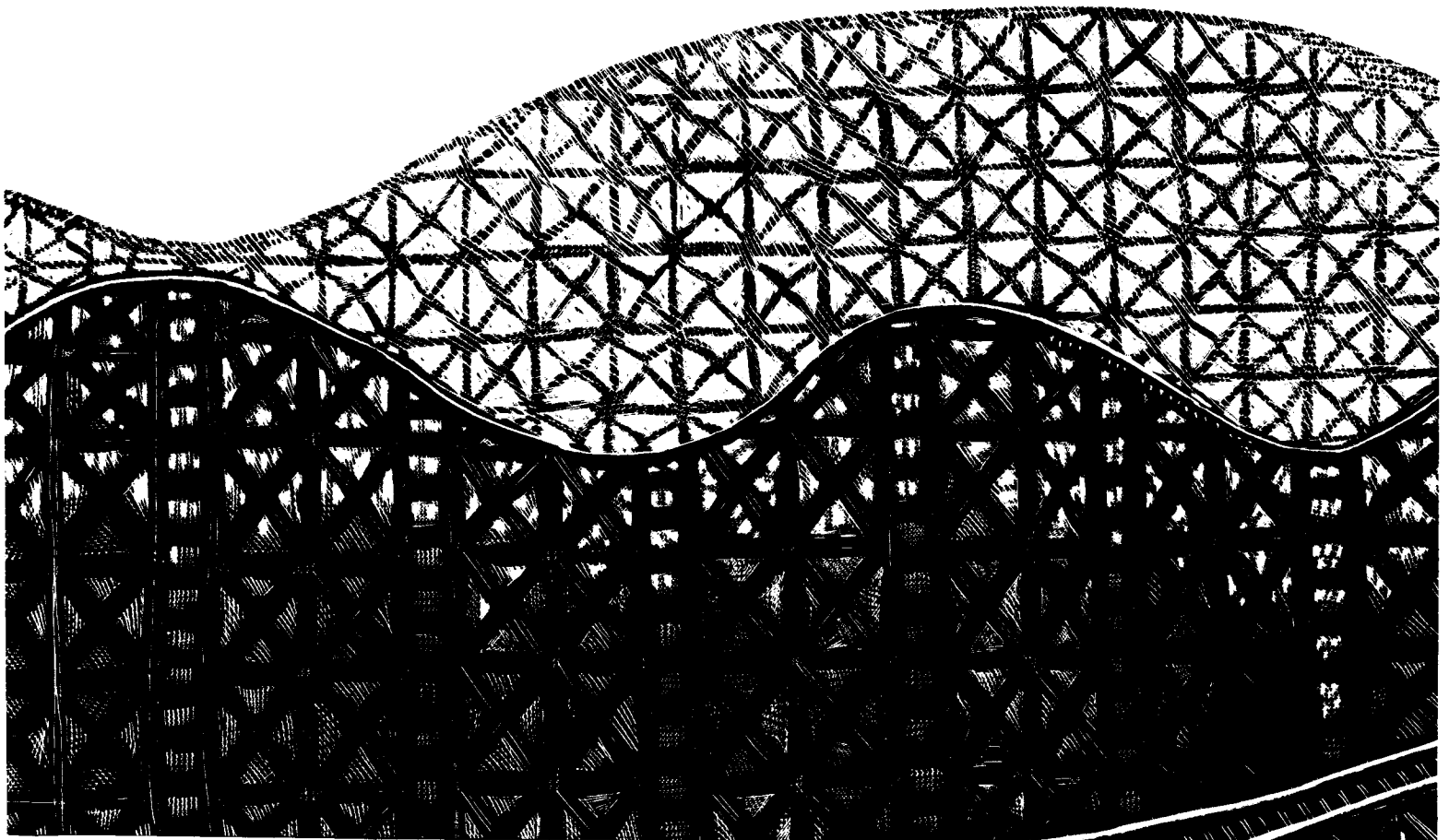
### Go through the motions

Beginners will experience a period of dryness shortly after they embark

on a regular routine of prayer. It can become difficult to concentrate, and one may think that God is suddenly absent. Spiritual directors advise at this point that a person remain faithful to the activity of prayer he or she has adopted.

Father Karl Rahner, S.J., the renowned Roman Catholic theologian, remarked that the purpose of everyday prayer is to increase faith, not to seek some mountaintop or earth-shattering experience. It is a “pious folksong, not an oratorio in a cathedral.” These initial periods of dryness can be passed through by being faithful to a routine of prayer.

“I had been faithful to my 30 minutes of prayer every day before going to work,” says Laura Plakow. “But after about a year I bumped into a wall. I just hated that half hour, and I felt like I was breaking a rule if I didn’t spend that time with God. But a wise friend, a minister at church, pointed out that God hadn’t left me at all: God was speaking to me in a different way and asking me to listen. He told me to just keep at it and not lose heart. This was a different way of thinking about prayer. I stopped chat-



tering and started listening and entered a new mode of prayer I never knew existed."

Another, more serious, period of dryness may occur after several years of prayer—after a person has moved beyond vocal prayer to reflective prayer. This kind of dryness may signal that a regular prayer routine may need to be abandoned and a quiet, more contemplative kind of prayer is called for.

"At the time of renewal our source of spirituality was the Divine Office," says Zuercher. "We were constantly exposed to scripture and lived by the liturgical calendar. When the renewal came, we cut down to two short periods of prayer a day, morning and evening. For so long all of us had been fed by the Office, and now there was just this little crummy Office.

"I realized that I needed a really private prayer life, so I made an hour each day—something we didn't do before because we always had prayer in common. I started to meditate on the scripture reading for the day, and this was a source of nourishment for years. It was a wonderful experience of prayer for me."

But then, says Zuercher, "All of a sudden it became the most tedious thing in the world. I would take up scripture, and what had previously leapt out at me was now nothing. I was looking at my watch all the time and asking myself: what on earth can I do? What is wrong with me? I was just sitting and waiting for that hour to be over. But what was really happening was that my hour was becoming too confining. It was time to put aside that way of praying and do something else."

*For a soul to attain to the state of perfection, it has ordinarily first to pass through two principal kinds of night, which spiritual persons call purgations or purifications of the soul; and here we call them nights, for in both of them the soul journeys, as it were, by night, in darkness.*

—Saint John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*

One of Christianity's greatest mystics, Saint John of the Cross, offers Christians some helpful guidelines to discern whether they're experiencing true spiritual dryness or dryness caused by some other set of circumstances—for example, mid-life hormo-

nal changes, psychological depression, or sin.

"There are three signs that John of the Cross provides," Canary explains. "The first sign that this dryness is of God—and that God's love is really moving a person in a different way—is that a person can find no satisfaction in the things of God or any other created thing. That second part is important because someone can find no satisfaction in the things of God if he or she is dependent on other sources of satisfaction that are not lasting sources. If a person is focused on power or money or status, then dryness may not be of God at all, and the person may need to refocus on a deeper level.

"The second sign of spiritual dryness is that a person is concerned and wants to do something about it. Sometimes people experience a flatness that comes from another place—perhaps they are in a rut or in a difficult psychological period. In that case, counseling or a change of routine might be helpful. However, if this flatness is spiritual dryness, then the third sign will also be true, which is that the person feels completely helpless to do



anything about the dryness."

For John of the Cross, Canary says that what is at stake is the issue of motivation. "What distinguishes romantic love from committed love, whether it's in one's prayer life, marriage, or the priesthood, is that maturing love is a slow process that involves a person's free decision and commitment to stay with it. Over a lifetime of giving oneself to God, the person moves in the direction of an ever-deeper union. But the pathway into that deeper union is initially through fidelity."

The feeling of spiritual dryness can be overwhelming at times. A person feels abandonment, loneliness, and nothingness. This experience has created some powerful images that have become part of the Christian heritage: the desert, the dark night of the soul, a dry well, the closed door. "I think of a parched mouth," says Zuercher, "when you try to eat something and there's nothing to juice it up."

*If it is really God and the Father of Jesus Christ we are seeking, then we must expect to find him as Jesus did.*

—Thomas Green, *When the Well Runs Dry*

"My wife had been sick for a long time," says Peter Hodges, "and we thought at many points it would never end. We had hope and tried to remain cheerful, but it just seemed that all we got was bad news. I felt that my faith, hope, and love were all being tested. I was so angry; I vowed to hold out against God—I was going to prove that my faith was stronger than his test or punishment or whatever he had decided to do to us.

"Then one day I walked into my wife's hospital room, and there were our two children and five grandchildren all laughing and talking and giving my wife all the love one person could possibly ask for. And it hit me: the God of Jesus Christ is not a god who punishes but one who calls us to love regardless of the hardships facing us. From that day on I stopped fighting God and decided to join his side—the side of compassion."

Dryness will cause each person to

ask: Is it me? Have I done something wrong? Is God punishing me? People may feel they are being tested by God, particularly if they want to pray and still desire God's presence but cannot feel anything. "If by testing we mean being punished, that is not the revelation of Jesus," says Canary. "God doesn't cause the difficulties and struggles in our life to punish us. Saint Paul says that the trials of life are to purify us; usually people say this same kind of thing after they have gone through a difficult time.

"In fact," adds Canary, "there does seem to be some truth in the belief that the trials of life push people to deeper levels. Or another way to say that is they surface the more important parts of who we are. The trials of life bring us to the essentials of life, and in that sense we can then say God leads us there. But that isn't the same as God causing the dryness. God is the source of strength in the dryness, not the cause of it."

Canary adds that it is important to remember what the gospel teaches: that one consequence of fidelity is suffering. "People who are going to move in the direction of selfless love, to live in the Spirit of God, will be giving up their lives."

## God gets a new image

A person's image of God will change if he or she remains devoted to a life of prayer. Images of God as testing or punishing will subside if a person is faithful through periods of dryness. "People who are wounded or insecure very often have a vindictive image of God. That can change if they are healed," says Lozano. "The person who goes through periods of rich prayer and then dryness is going to move from an image of God as anthropomorphic or mythical to an image of God as the creator involved in everything and present in everything."

*I believe, Lord: help Thou my unbelief.*

—Saint Augustine

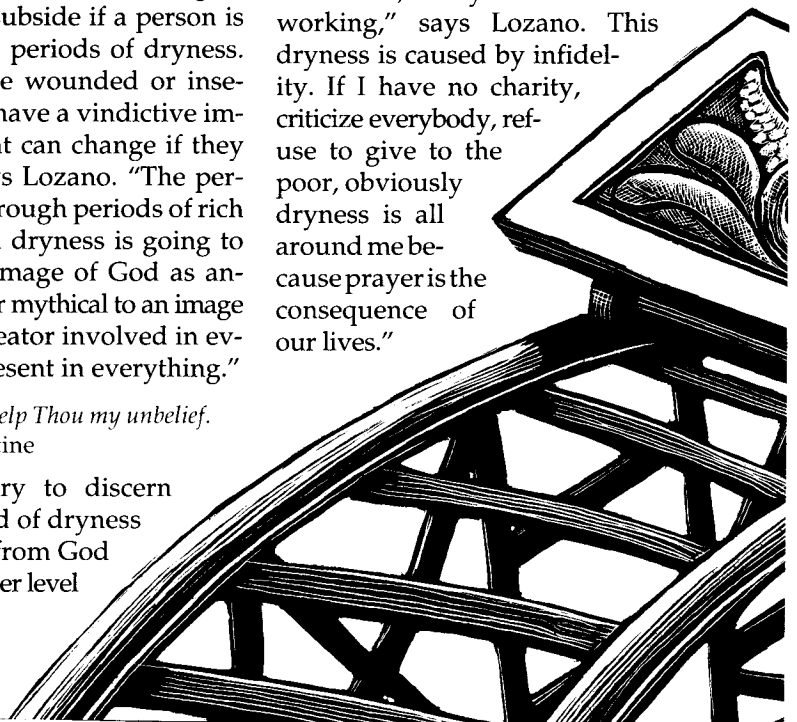
It is necessary to discern whether a period of dryness is an invitation from God to move to a deeper level

of prayer or if there are obstacles blocking the way to spiritual growth. Sin is the most obvious obstacle to prayer and growth. Prayer can lead to a deeper honesty of who we are before God; however, sinful patterns of behavior can be difficult to acknowledge and change. Moments of reconciliation can end a period of dryness that has blocked a person from prayer and communion with God.

"When I joined the convent, I did so in large part to get away from an alcoholic father," says Sister Marilyn Helms. "I thought the religious life would make me a better person and I could shield myself from the dirty, painful realities at home. But I never got very far with praying. I went through the motions; but after many years of frustration, I gave up. It was not until I reconciled with my father during his alcohol rehabilitation that my own inner life opened up. It was like cracking open a walnut. I had never made the connection, but in forgiving him I found that I could pray again."

Other obstacles to prayer can be a busy work schedule, too many commitments, and exhaustion, all of which leave a person without the sufficient mental capacity to focus on prayer. Broken relationships can also be a source of dryness. Christians should examine to what extent their prayer is connected to acts of charity.

"If you have cut that connection with God, it's your fault it's not working," says Lozano. This dryness is caused by infidelity. If I have no charity, criticize everybody, refuse to give to the poor, obviously dryness is all around me because prayer is the consequence of our lives."





Dryness can also be caused by a resistance to growth in God. "I think that dryness is always of our own making," says Zuercher. "God doesn't give us any darkness—it is our own fighting against God that makes our darkness. Dryness can come when we want to hang on to the status quo.

"For example," explains Zuercher, "if you have always prayed the rosary and all of the sudden you sit down and can't do it, you feel there is something wrong with you. But there is actually a denial of growth and change on your part that this form of prayer is no longer working. It has become too narrow and confining. Dryness is a sign of our resistance to God's invitation to move on."

*Contemplation should not be loved for its own sake, but for God's. Not the joys of contemplation, but union with God through love, that is our end.*

—Jacques Maritain, *Prayer and Intelligence*

When, after years of prayer, people have a prolonged experience of dryness, they often try to fix the problem themselves. Spiritual directors say that most people do the wrong thing: they strain to keep praying in their regular way. They try to force back the good experience they have lost.

Unlike a beginner's experience of dryness, for a person at this stage to continue a certain kind of prayer can be more harmful. What's Lozano's advice to people in this situation?

"Remain humbly in prayer before the wall—what I call praying before the closed door. Try spending just a little time every day sitting peacefully and reading a bit of the gospel without tiring yourself. Your ideas, meditations, and feelings are not essential. You're really in a better way now, but you don't know it. John of the Cross named these periods of dryness 'nights' because the 'consolations' that were experienced in prayer have ceased. One should wait humbly in God's presence; a new way will open up eventually."

John of the Cross cautioned people not to be attached to prayer and the consolations that can come with it rather than to God. Often people will persist at their own method of prayer rather than give up their tried-and-true way to move to another stage where God's grace and love can be experienced more fully.

"We don't have to be looking for prayer, we have to be looking for God; prayer is not the end, God is," says Lozano. This invitation may not be apparent if people are forcing themselves to pray in their own way.

## It just disappeared

Spiritual dryness can end as mysteriously as it began. After waiting a period of time for it to pass, people may feel themselves to have emerged into a new place. That place is usually one of deep peace and

rest with greater interior awareness of God's presence. There is no need for words or reflection, just silent contemplation.

"I don't have to say anything or do anything in prayer now," says Laura Plakow. "I just sit lovingly in God's presence and soak it in."

Yet spiritual dryness may persist for years. In that case a deep faith and hope are necessary to pass through this difficult way. Even though one may not feel God's presence, spiritual writers attest that God is very active and that the Spirit is preparing the person for the next stage.

Is God absent? "No," explains Lozano, "God is very active, more active than before when we were talking and talking. What we are waiting for is ourselves to be ready. I think you should do nothing in terms of finding some particular prayer or technique of meditation. What you can do is be patient and wait humbly."

*The higher part of contemplation, as it may be had here, hangs all wholly in this darkness and in this cloud of unknowing.*

—14th century, *The Cloud of Unknowing*

Passing through a period of spiritual dryness can teach a Christian many valuable lessons. People's images of themselves and God can be significantly altered.

If a person finds that spiritual dryness is caused by a breach in his or her relationship with God, then the person can strive to be reconciled and come to a deeper appreciation of God's mercy and love. If a person discerns that dryness is not of his or her own making, then an opportunity opens up for the person to learn how to become more dependent upon God, deepen his or her faith, and grow in wisdom.

This level of the Christian spiritual life is only reached if human activity ceases and the Spirit of God is allowed to work from within. But the process is slow and often painful for Christians; and, like Robert Frost's road, it is rarely taken. □

