## SENIOR THESIS

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<td>The Struggle to Pray in a Technological Age</td>
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Call it the fault of civilization. God isn’t compatible with machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness. You must make your choice. Our civilization has chosen machinery and medicine and happiness.

– Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

I. Introduction

Having grown up since childhood in a technologically-centered culture, it is difficult for many to imagine life without the comforts and excesses which technology provides. In the past several hundred years, the way in which man measures himself and technology have drastically altered. These transformations have often occurred under the guise of scientific invention and progressive innovation. Little to no thought has been given to this emerging worldview and how it would affect the norms of human life. Technology is yet another frontier for man to conquer. What is significant about this frontier, however, is that it promises to extend man’s life – maybe even to the point of eternity, if he so chooses – and eliminate as much suffering as possible. The promise of a good and eternal life used to fall under the jurisdiction of religion, specifically Christianity, but now that technology dictates the kind of life toward which man should strive, God is being unceremoniously excluded from the place which is rightfully his – the heart of man.

A technologically-obsessed society is filled with motion and noise. Man initially struggles against this because he desires silence and inner solitude. This is a difficulty which is often not overcome because from a young age he has been taught to do homage to technology and let it govern his life. Man does not use tools as the farmers and carpenters of former years used tools. Rather, he allows himself to be overrun by technology with barely a question as to why he must live this way. Man’s life is impoverished by the absence of silence and inner solitude, though it is not easy to identify their absence as the
cause of his unhappiness. It negatively affects his relationships with his neighbors and with God. True prayer requires that man empty himself of “distracting, evil, and worthless thoughts.”¹ He cannot accomplish this unless he can maintain and be comfortable in silence and inner solitude.

The implications which this kind of technology has on the religious and theological life are grave. Man struggles to practice a meaningful asceticism for the sake of holiness because he is conditioned to comfort – physical, intellectual, and spiritual. Technological progress posits that not only should man not have to suffer intense pain, such as amputation without anesthesia of painkillers, which I am not suggesting is a good thing, but that he should not have to suffer discomfort of any kind, i.e. being minimally thirsty, hungry, or with the most minor of headaches or muscle pains. Moreover, man has lost the notion that he was created with a certain dignity which includes a specific purpose for the whole of humanity. He tries to bring meaning to his life by surrounding himself with things and attempting to possess these goods. Evolutionary science tells man that he is an accident, and while some still regard human life as miraculous, the majority of people believe that life is non-necessary and non-intended.

The greatest consequences which the religious and theological life suffer at the hands of technology are in the realm of man’s prayer life. It is through prayer that God’s will is mediated to man. Technological noise makes it extremely challenging for man to attain an environment which is conducive to prayer. This loss of communication between God and man is not merely a loss of an emotional connection. It is a genuine loss of attentiveness to what God desires man to do. It can appear on a small scale in man’s careless, non-directed thoughts and words to others. The loss of communication can also
manifest itself in man’s indecision about major life choices, especially questions of vocation. The struggle to maintain and increase the number and quality of religious vocations may be a result of man’s inability to even hear God, let alone discern what God desires for man.

II. A Brief History of Technology

Setting aside the traditional eras of Stone, Bronze, Iron, and Steel Ages, critic and educator Neil Postman divides history into three types: tool-using cultures, technocracies, and technopolies. Until the beginning stirs of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, all civilizations were tool-using cultures. Tool-using cultures were characterized by a dual need to “solve specific and urgent problems of physical life” and “serve the symbolic world of art, politics, myth, ritual, and religion.” In these cultures, technology was something which was intended to affirm the dignity and integrity of society. Tools did not propagate their own worldview, and so they did not exclude man from believing in “traditions, God, politics, methods of education or the legitimacy of his social organization.” Further, man’s use of tools was informed and guided by his beliefs, not vice versa. In these civilizations, man viewed technology as dependent upon the spiritual ideas and social customs of the people. The use of tools was integrated into all other aspects of society, especially the dominant worldview, which in most cases was a theologically- or metaphysically-informed theory. Either theology or a unifying metaphysics is necessary for a tool-using culture because they confer structure and significance to man’s existence, excluding the possibility that man could be inferior to any thing. A theology or a metaphysics preserves the dignity of the human person in a culture in which technology is present and necessary.
The technocracy differs from the tool-using culture primarily with regard to integration and worldview. In a technocracy, technology is not integrated with the other aspects of society. Technology strives to become the unifying principle of civilization. Tools “attack” the culture, so the social and spiritual traditions struggle to maintain their stay in society. The 1600s saw the rise of the thought of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. Newton followed soon after, which ignited the destruction of the medieval conceptions of theology and metaphysics. Consequently, existence itself became subject to severe scrutiny with many questioning if there was any meaning at all to being. While these men were members of tool-using cultures, they enabled the birth of the technocratic age. Postman identifies Francis Bacon as the father of technocracy because he was the first to make a clear and distinct connection between science and human progress. Not only was Bacon a scientist, he was also a revolutionary. He was an educator who wanted to raise people’s awareness to the benefits that could be reaped for the improvement of human life because of technological invention. Science, as it is practiced today, with all of its hierarchical structure, financially endowed by higher institutions, operating in the eyes of the public as man’s most powerful enterprise, was Bacon’s ideal. The technocratic age was marked by the belief that “knowledge is power, humanity is capable of progressing, poverty is a great evil, and the life of the average person is as meaningful as any other.” The rise of technocracy was also the decline of God and the separation of moral and intellectual values.

By the twentieth century, technocracy had denigrated into technopoly. The communications revolution of the 1800s and the industrial revolution added to the stress of technology on society. The striking difference between technocracy and technopoly is
that in a technocracy, the traditional worldviews of the culture still prevail; while in a technopoly, the traditional worldviews are no longer an option. Anything within society which does not place technology at its center of thought is rejected. Technopoly makes alternatives “invisible and therefore irrelevant. And it does so by redefining what we mean by religion, art, family, politics, history, truth, privacy, intelligence, so that our definitions fit its new requirements.” Technopoly is a totalitarian technocracy. Postman identifies the Scopes Trial as a turning point because, with its ruling in favor of science, it asserted that truth is inductive and scientific. This leads to the conclusion that religious truths, which are neither inductive nor scientific, are hogwash and represent an unintellectual naïveté.

America was the birthplace of the technopoly because its newly-developing character was predisposed to the conditions necessary for the growth of such a culture. First, Americans believed that if something were new, it could be immediately and intimately associated with improvement. Nature imposed no limits on human endeavors. This belief is closely followed by Americans’ distrust of limitations and an overall skeptical attitude toward culture because it often proposed constraints on man. Second, Americans regarded technological innovation to be the supreme good. They believed that it must be preserved at all costs. The future, not the past, would guide man to greater and greater heights. Third, Americans were gluttons for the “convenience, comfort, speed, hygiene, and abundance” with which technology provided them. The former social and religious traditions of bygone times were deemed irrelevant and outdated. Americans no longer sought other forms of “fulfillment or creativity or purpose.” Lastly, the old social and religious customs suffered direct attack at the hands of science and scientific efforts.
Thinkers like Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx, Freud, John Watson, and Einstein secured society’s confidence in technology by toppling the foundations of the former belief systems.\textsuperscript{27}

III. A Few Critiques of the Contemporary Worldview: On Technology

When faced with contemporary society’s struggle with and against technology, Aldous Huxley’s \textit{Brave New World} aptly depicts the worst-case scenario, one which man comes to fear because of its extreme cultural innovations and the likelihood of its inevitability. The New World is founded upon a global society which trumpets “Community, Identity, and Stability.”\textsuperscript{28} As Socrates originally proposed in \textit{The Republic}, the New World has abolished the nuclear family, so that the members of society are educated (for Plato) and conditioned (for Huxley) to assimilate to a culture which runs contrary to man’s experiences henceforth. Scientists create embryos and fetuses, not babies or children, in factories, each according to the tasks which will befall someone of a particular physical and intellectual predisposition. Artificial conception and growth are the norm, so much so that the natural way of creating and bringing life into the world are taboo and offensive. The New World is structured on a distinct and rigid social order, which resembles in many ways the caste system of Hinduism. People of different social standings are separated. Those of the higher order look condescendingly upon those of the lower order. They are not to intermingle. Contrary to the caste system, there is a certain respect that each order has for the other so that man appreciates what they contribute to society without envying their position for himself.

The members of this global world order are overly contented and excessively entertained. At the slightest discomfort or inconvenience, a little \textit{soma} is taken, a dream medication – a cure-all. Leisure time is for amusements, not for work and absolutely not
for thinking. Sex is sterile and devoid of intimacy. What use is there for forging such deep physical and emotional connections if marriage and family, trivial and primitive traditions to be sure, have faded out of existence? When the Savage, a love-child and supposedly uncivilized man, enters into the New World, he is initially smitten with its comparative convenience and cleanliness. However, as someone who was exposed to ideas of religion, beauty, and suffering, the world order eventually strikes him as preposterous and undesirable. The Savage questions why things like Shakespeare are prohibited. The Controller responds:

Because it’s old; that’s the chief reason. We haven’t any use for old things here. Even when they’re beautiful? Particularly when they’re beautiful. Beauty’s attractive, and we don’t want people to be attracted by old things. We want them to like the new ones.29

The Controller further details how the current world order came into being. He recalls an almost decade-long war which made people long for peace, at any cost. He says, “People were ready to have even their appetites controlled then. Anything for quiet life. We’ve gone on controlling ever since. It hasn’t be very good for truth, of course. But it’s been very good for happiness. One can’t have something for nothing. Happiness has got to be paid for.”30 The Savage points out the absurdities of life when people are not allowed to think intelligently and when they are controlled by divvying out pleasure in pill form when the slightest disturbance to the human mind occurs. He declares,

You got rid of them. Yes, that’s just like you. Getting rid of everything unpleasant instead of learning to put up with it. Whether tis better in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them...But you don’t do either. Neither suffer nor oppose. You just abolish the slings and arrows. It’s too easy.31

He further criticizes, “What you need...is something with tears for a change. Nothing costs enough here.”32 In the end, the Savage decides that he cannot live in such a world, where
inconveniences and sufferings are regarded as the worst kind of abominations. He concludes, “But I don’t want comfort. I want God. I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin… I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.”

Technology is intrinsically tied up with culture. Postman warns that the Huxleyan prophecy is more likely to come true than the Orwellian one. Huxley predicted that culture would become “a burlesque.” People would imprison themselves by means of their love of “technologies that undo their capacities to think.” Books disappear because people no longer want to read. People are overwhelmed with a sea of information which fosters passivity and egoism. Truth is rendered obsolete by an overwhelming attitude of irrelevance. Huxley predicted, with much trepidation, that culture would become infused with inconsequentials, “preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.” People would be manipulated and ordered by pleasure, not pain. People self-destruct because of their love of things.

The future of Huxley’s *Brave New World* is rapidly closing in. American culture “is engaged in the world’s most ambitious experiment to accommodate itself to the technological distractions made possible by the electric plug.” Postman asserts that the difficulty with Huxley’s prophecy is man’s indifference to the havoc that technology is wreaking until it is too late. It is not a disaster which is hinted at in the works of most philosophers or revolutionaries because it requires man to complain against excessive amusements, jovialness, and laughter. Moreover, because man is not vigilant about the ideology which is being produced by the desire to medicate life’s problems with technological distractions, culture itself shifts and evolves without man taking note. Postman chastises, “To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for
social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple.\textsuperscript{41} He realizes that any hope for improvement and recovery will be severely counter-culture and therefore, difficult and perhaps futile. Still, once the danger has been realized, man must strive to effect change so that society will not collapse inward on itself due to amusement gluttony. Fasts from television and other such distractions may prove useful, but in and of themselves, they are not sufficient to carry out the task.\textsuperscript{42} Postman concludes that it will be a race between technology and education, somewhat like the race between chemotherapy and radiation treatments and the actual cancer.\textsuperscript{43} Now that man has identified the problem (“that we watch”), he can also work towards the solution (“how we watch”).\textsuperscript{44}

Teacher, novelist, poet, essayist, and farmer, Wendell Berry is a man who has consistently preached and pursued a life of simplicity, reverence, and genuine fellowship with the local community. Of particular importance to him is the prudent use of technology for only what is necessary. What is necessary is not determined by contemporary trends or standards. Rather, taking into account the purpose for which man is undertaking a task and the means necessary for him to accomplish this task, particular situations can be evaluated to decide how much (or how little) technology should be used.\textsuperscript{45} Berry cites nine standards by which he judges technological innovations. Some may be impractical, but it is important to consider them so that we can begin to make similar evaluations in our own use of technology. First, “the new tool should be cheaper than the one it replaces.”\textsuperscript{46} The quality of the work should be “clearly and demonstrably better” than the one it replaces.\textsuperscript{47} In terms of size and energy, it should be at least as small as and as least as efficient as the
one it replaces. If possible it should use an alternative, “green” form of energy. It should be fixable by the average, intelligent man, given the right tools. The original purchase and any necessary replacement part purchases should be available from the community in which one lives, preferably from a locally-owned business which can perform maintenance and repairs in-house. Lastly, “it should not replace or disrupt anything good that already exists, and this includes family and community relationships.” The latter stipulation is the one which is most pressing in man’s struggle to pray in a technological age.

In his 1987 essay entitled “Why I am not going to buy a computer,” Berry identifies several reasons using a computer is not necessary, and in some ways, contrary, to the things he for which he would use it. First, he believes that too much of contemporary life is dependent upon the energy industry. By choosing not to use a computer, he is choosing to weaken the hold that “strip-mined coal” has on his life. He also realizes that in purchasing a computer for the purpose of critiquing a society which thoughtlessly denigrates nature, he would be behaving as a hypocrite. To this end, Berry also offers that he only writes during daylight hours so that he does not require artificial lighting. Second, the propaganda which surrounds the manufacture and sale of computers, among other technologies, does not address the concerns about society that are most important to Berry. He writes, “I do not see that computers are bringing us one step nearer to anything that does matter to me: peace, economic justice, ecological health, political honesty, family and community stability, good work.” Third, the costs incurred by the purchase and use of a computer are not deemed worth what one sacrifices for the sake of convenience. Berry argues that while monetary costs are significant, he would also be abandoning his “old model.” His Royal standard typewriter and the process of working in tandem with his
wife, whose opinion and insights he deeply values, would be discarded as well. The latter, in particular, is something which he is unwilling to sacrifice for the ease which the computer may provide. Lastly, he argues that his writing will not necessarily improve though technology claims to have done so. Berry challenges, “When somebody has used a computer to write work that is demonstrably better than Dante’s, and when this better is demonstrably attributable to the use of a computer, then I will speak of computers with a more respectful tone of voice, though I still will not buy one.” While it is almost impossible for the younger generation to imagine such an existence, indeed it would be a detriment to go to these extreme measures, especially for students, Berry’s awareness of the technology, its benefits, and alternative processes is something that everyone should consider.

IV. Competing Interpretations of Man

The contemporary age, which places such a significant emphasis on technology in all aspects of culture and life, has ushered in a new era and created a new identity for man. As was mentioned previously, a purely scientific-materialist worldview demands that man acknowledge that his creation and evolution, as a species, was accidental, not deliberate. There was no master designer or benevolent creator. Man is the product of a series of chance events and random mutations. Man exists as an individual, not a communal, being. Though arguments could be made for an inherent relationality among men, most who espouse this scientific-materialist worldview believe that man is naturally competitive and concerned with self-preservation. Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” attributes to man a nature pre-disposed to aggressiveness and self-concern because that is how he perpetuates
the existence and growth of the species. Man, at his most basic level, is ruled by “selfish genes.”

Furthermore, the man that exists as a result of an extreme scientific-materialist worldview is a combination of biological processes. Indeed, the Human Genome Project (HGP) has mapped out the DNA for all of humanity. They can tell you exactly what you are made of, biologically and chemically, to the minutest details. The danger here is that because this has been accomplished, which is surely a triumph for those working in the medical profession especially, it is often mistaken for the “end all” of what can be known about the human being. In a scientific-materialist worldview, man’s emotions are also a product of chemical and biological reactions. Man does not “fall in love”; rather, his experience of attraction and love, if it can be called love when the will is not involved, are a cacophony of spikes in his dopamine, oxytocin, and testosterone levels. Human consciousness and the spirit have been branded mythological by the scientific community. Because they cannot be empirically verified, they are excluded from the realm of possibility.

Moreover, the technological worldview has added to the attack on man's dignity. In the early 1900s, Frederick W. Taylor proposed a new system of management which would increase profits and wages, lower hours, and improve working conditions within the industrial workplace. The scientific management system was founded on “time and motion studies” and relieved the individual workers from the burden of having to think for themselves and assess which was the best way to accomplish a task. Individual judgment was replaced by “laws, rules, and principles of the ‘science’ of their job.” The Taylor System, which was not intended for anything but the industrial workplace, was applied in
many different worlds – the military, the legal profession, at home, church and in schools and universities. In warfare, men are used as pieces of a strategic game, as bodies that are disposable and perform a specific task. Something akin to this has taken place within the realm of civil society. In the Taylor System and the ensuing revolution, man is reduced to less than the machines he operates. Man is subject to techniques and technology. Society is at its prime when its men are thus occupied.

In contrast to the scientific and philosophical views of man, Christianity presents man as a human person whose inherent and incomparable dignity is a result of his relationship to Christ and the Trinitarian God. The first story of creation in Genesis hints at the source of man’s worth: “Then God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’... God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them” (1:26-27). Man’s dignity as a human person is fixed in his creation in the image and likeness of God; it is fulfilled in man’s vocation to divine beatitude. St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians also adds insight to the origin of man’s dignity, he writes: “He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (1:15). Man is created in Christ, who is the face of the unseen Creator. Christ is the image of God for man, and he restores the image of man to the way God intended it, without sin, and by the grace of God.63

Because man is in the image and likeness of God, he is a person, created for a communion of love. This is a distinctly Christian notion. In his essay “Concerning the notion of person in theology” then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger argues, following Etienne Gilson’s lead, that the concept of the person developed in human thought as a result of the contributions that Christianity made. The converging worlds of philosophy and faith,
specifically, faith inspired by revelation in Scripture, provided the flourishing environment which made possible the emergence of an understanding of the human person that is preserved in contemporary theology. By asking, and seeking to answer, the questions “Who is God?” and “Who is Christ?”, Christianity guided the exploration of the concept of the person and expanded upon the original limitations and categories which previously constrained man’s understanding of the person.

Ratzinger asserts, along with Hans urs von Balthasar, that man exists as a human person in relationship to an other. Balthasar often gives the example of a child whose whole being exists because of and in a relationship with his mother. The relationality is life-giving and necessary to the child’s survival. Relationality is rooted in the nature of God’s being. The three persons – Father, Son, and Spirit – exist only as relation. The Father is the Father because of the Son and the Spirit; the Son is the Son because of the Father and the Spirit; the Spirit is the Spirit because of the Father and the Son. Ratzinger writes that “in God, person is the pure relativity of being toward the other; it does not lie on the level of substance – the substance is one – but on the level of dialogical reality, of relativity toward the other.” Relation is intrinsic to the very nature of the person; it is not and cannot be somehow added after the fact. The structure of the relationship of persons within the Trinity is mirrored in man’s relationship with others and with God. By allowing his person and his relationships to be sacramental of the Trinity, man “truly comes to himself and into the fullness of his own, because he enters into unity with the one to whom he is related.”

Christ, a single person with two natures – human and divine – and the “second” person of the Trinity, is the unique mediator of the person. Personhood understood in God is transposed in Christ; personhood in Christ is then transposed in man. Christ is the
turning point of revelation. Ratzinger asserts, “What is disclosed in Christ, whom faith certainly presents as unique, is not only a speculative exception; what is disclosed in truth is what the riddle of the human person really intends.”

He identifies two points which direct the understanding of the person in Christ. First, it is in the nature of man’s spirit to see itself and see the other – to exist in relation. The spirit is retroscendent. The spirit does not solely exist; it reflects and acts back on itself. It exists “doubly” because it is more than mere being, it knows and possesses itself. The spirit is also able to reflect on, and in some sense, know, God – the Other. This latter ability means that the more the person is and is with himself, the more he can go forth from himself, the more he can be with the other. It is one of the paradoxes of Christianity: the more man can go out of himself and be with the other, the more man is himself.

Second, Christ’s two natures do not negate or destroy the one person he is – the Logos. Ratzinger posits that “in Christ, in the man who is completely with God, human existence is not canceled, but comes to its highest possibility, which consists in transcending itself into the absolute and in the integration of its relativity into the absoluteness of divine love.”

V. Preserving the Dignity of the Human Person

The dignity of the human person is fulfilled in his vocation to enter into the divine life and love of God, who is a communion of persons. In the Beatitudes, Jesus preaches that charity is the heart of Christianity, and he teaches the actions and attitudes associated with the Christian life (Mt 5:3-10). He gives hope to his followers, those true disciples who have resolved to take up their cross and follow Christ, in the paradoxical promises which contrast the earthly life and the life in the Kingdom of God. These promises are realizable by the grace of God. They are not meant to maliciously tease or torment man with what he
desires but cannot attain. When man seeks to live the life outlined in the Beatitudes, which was done most perfectly by Christ, he is fulfilling his natural desire for happiness. This desire for happiness was bestowed upon man by God, so that man might be drawn to God — "the One alone who can fulfill" his desire. Further, the telos of each human person and the whole of mankind, which are one and the same, are revealed in the Beatitudes. Man's proper end is God. God calls man to "the Kingdom, the vision of God, participation in the divine nature, eternal life, filiation, and rest in God." 

Not only does Christ become the image of God for man, he also is the image of man for man. Christ is the archetype of humanity. Man is his best self when he most perfectly imitates the image and likeness of God, the Creator, for it was in the Creator's image and likeness that man was formed. Scripture refers to Christ as the New Adam, the perfection of humanity as it was intended from the beginning. St. Paul writes:

So, too, it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being," the last Adam a life-giving spirit. But the spiritual was not first; rather the natural and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, earthly; the second man, from heaven... Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one (1 Cor 15:45-47, 49).

The biblical Adam, the first man, could not be the archetype of humanity because he chose something else over God. Original sin stands in the way of Adam's perfection. His sin was that he rejected God; he ceased to desire God. Because of Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection, the failings of man's first parents have been redeemed. All of mankind can now come to perfection but only, in and through Christ. Man is not destroyed by being "made new" in the person of Christ; Christ is the God-man and as such, the dignity of humanity is preserved because Christ is both perfectly God and perfectly man. Had Christ not approved or desired the human form, he would have chosen another way to redeem
man, but he did not. Christ chose to humble himself, by becoming man, so that he might offer hope and salvation to the world.

Man’s position in the universe is a unique one. He stands out among all of God’s creation as the one who is called “to bless God for the food and the life he receives from Him. He alone is to respond to God’s blessing with his blessing.” Man’s nature is inscribed with this predisposition to worship God because it is the natural response to encountering the presence of God and realizing the gift of life which God has bestowed on man. Man has a natural desire for God, which can only be satiated by God, though man often tries to fulfill his longings with other objects, things, and persons. Man’s dignity is affirmed in light of his ability to bless God. Man is first and foremost, “homo adorans.” Schmemann asserts that man’s primary defining characteristic is that of the priest: “He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God – and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him.” Man’s dignity is affirmed in the very nature of his being, as the only one of God’s creatures who is called to worship God and enter into his divine life.

VI. Laying the Foundation for Prayer

Prayer is inscribed in the very nature of man as a natural response to God and the manifestation of God in the world. Man must know who he is in relationship to God so that communication, or prayer, is possible. It requires preparation and form. Prayer, to be most effective, must be disciplined to something higher than feeling and spontaneity so that when man does not feel like praying or cannot remember how it feels to pray, he can still pray. When left to the devices of inner longing alone, prayer ceases to found itself on
solid ground and leaves everything to chance. In order for prayer to inform man’s life with the will of God, it must be deliberate – a focused choice and a determined effort.

Unless, time is set aside at particular moments during the day for prayer, man will never learn to pray without ceasing. Guardini suggests that man pray: “in the morning, before starting the tasks of the day, and in the evening before retiring. In addition everyone should do what he thinks right, what he is able to do, and what suits his routine.” Most important to the success of a life of prayer is adopting “the right attitude, both outwardly and inwardly: collectedness at the beginning, and discipline during prayer are essential, as is the right choice of words and texts, the learning of old-established forms of prayer, such as contemplation, the Rosary and others.”

Man is fighting against a fallen nature; the things that are most natural to him are often the things with which he struggles the most. Man knows that he needs God, so he seeks him out. However, man, though he knows what his relationship ought to be with God, he sometimes seeks to avoid and resist God. This is especially true in man's prayer life. It is by being obedient to God and surrendering to this obligation to one's spiritual life that man “experiences the truth and finds consolation and happiness. Yet he evades prayer as much as possible.” Guardini's insights are startlingly accurate for contemporary man, who frequently occupies his time, free or not, with the mindless distractions perpetuated by the electric plug. The truth about man and his struggle against original sin are timeless. Regardless of technological advancements, man will always battle with God and the self, each vying for supremacy in his heart. Man cannot stand whole, with a foot in each camp. He must choose God or the selfish desires of his ego.
A general would not march into battle without a plan and the knowledge that casualties will be had, despite the best of preparation. So too, man must realize that prayer requires a certain preparation, which will inevitably require him to sacrifice other perceived goods for the sake of the mission. Saint Augustine famously wrote that “our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”\(^8^8\) Man’s preparation for prayer involves identifying the restlessness in his mind and heart, separating himself from it so that he can compose himself, and focusing his attention on the task at hand.\(^8^9\) Key to man’s success in prayer is honesty. Man must be honest with himself about setting aside the distractions that fill his life and reorienting his time to prayer and to furthering his relationship with God through prayer.\(^9^0\) Guardini writes that “no sooner has he started to pray than, conjured up by his inner unrest, all sorts of other things clamor for attention… All these suddenly appear most important, and prayer seems a sheer waste of time. But no sooner has he stopped praying than there is plenty of time, and he fritters it away with useless activities.”\(^9^1\) Contemporary man is always connected. There is always another message to reply to, another call to return, another feed or site to check – the list goes on endlessly. This is a false illusion. Once this farce is overcome, man has reached the proper preparatory state of composure and concentration, necessary for prayer.\(^9^2\)

Man, before praying, must achieve “collectedness.” To collect the self means that man is “gathering together”\(^9^3\) and uniting all the fragmented and divided portions of himself so that he may direct all his heart, all his soul, all his mind, and all his strength(Mk 12:30) to a single, unified act of devotion. Man should have a fixed point that anchors and centers all of his movements, much like the hub of a wheel; it is the point of departure and the point of return for all that man is and does. In the mid-twentieth century, Guardini
criticizes that “modern man” lacks this order and center, even more so than men of earlier ages. How much further has man have sunk along the path of chaos and cacophony, in the fifty years following this observation? To collect the self also means “to awaken.” He is the student who, because he has gotten a good night’s rest, eaten breakfast, and prepared for the day’s reading, is able to engage and participate in that which demands his attention. This collectedness is marked by a state of “quietness and inner alertness.” Guardini argues, “Collectedness is not an isolated condition but the mind’s right and proper state, the state which enables man to establish the right relationship to men and things.”

Collectedness is so vital to the prayer life that even if man spends all his attempts at prayer pursuing this proper state, his time has been used well. Guardini assures us, “Collectedness itself is prayer.”

VII. Praying

Man is called to prayer because it is the most natural response to God, who has created man out of nothing as pure gift and who has descended in the form of a creature to sanctify man and make eternal life possible for all of mankind. It is in and through the act of prayer that God’s presence is made present to man. Guardini writes, “To approach this divine reality is thus the prime task and toil of prayer; the second task is to hold firm in the holy presence and to comply with its exacting demands.” Prayer, while a natural response to God, is difficult for most men. It must be a direct effort of man’s will, and he must devote himself to the practice of prayer, even when it seems as though it is pointless and does not evoke any emotion or create a personal experience. Prayer is something which man does, not something which is done unto him. Persevering in prayer is a true test of man’s faith.
through prayer, even through droughts of emotion and experience, are indicative of how important the relationship truly is.

God is holy. It is the preeminent attribute which Scripture ascribes to God; it is the attribute from which all others flow. Holiness is the distinguishing factor between God and all of his creation, precisely because it “proclaims itself as God’s inmost essential being.” When man enters into the presence of God, it is God’s holiness which is most apparent to man and that to which man responds. Prayer is man’s “just and meet” response to God’s holiness; prayer is only possible because God is holy. Man always stands in relationship to God as: the creature, the response, the Beloved. Prayer is man’s acknowledgement that this is true. Man, in prayer, recognizes who he is as the Beloved of God, who is Love – the deepest and truest desire of man’s being. In some ways, prayer is an expression of God’s divine and holy presence in man himself. The seeds of love which God planted in man’s being, at the moment of his creation, cannot help but respond and call out to the presence of God when man is at prayer.

In light of God’s presence, man has two instinctive reactions: a turning away from God and a turning to God. Struck by the sheer magnitude of the revelation that God is holy, man realizes with a startling clarity that he is filled with sin and guilt. Man is not holy. It is this awareness of sin and guilt which impels man to turn away from God or to entreat God to depart from him, as Peter did. Prayer begins with this: “Man recognizes that he is selfish, unjust, deficient and impure. He acknowledges his own wrongdoings and tries to assess them... He recognizes that sin...is contumacy before God’s holiness; that it is, therefore, not only wicked but unholy. He admits it and sides with God against himself.” This requires humility but does not leave man without hope. Tangled up with man’s
acknowledgement of his sinfulness in the presence of God is man's yearning for union with God.\textsuperscript{110} Guardini asserts, “If the knowledge of our sinfulness...leads us to humility and truth, then we may say: ‘It is true that by my sins I have forfeited the right of being in the presence of God, but where else shall I be if I cannot be with Him?’”\textsuperscript{111} Holiness, which sends man away from God because of his sinfulness, also calls man to God in love. Holiness “rejects man so that he may find true humility and the new way. When he has done this – however insufficiently – it calls him anew.”\textsuperscript{112}

All prayer is founded upon man’s repentance and God’s call to love. It manifests itself in three ways primarily: adoration or worship, petition, and thanksgiving. Adoration is man’s surrender to God because God is worthy of this gift of self. Man has realized that God is “not only reality but truth; not only power but also goodness; not only dominion but infinite merit and the meaning of meaning.”\textsuperscript{113} If God were anyone but Love, submission to him in adoration would be an attack on the dignity of man. Because God only desires, and does not force, man to love him, man’s surrender is a free expression of love. Guardini asserts that “in the act of adoration it is not only the body which is bowed down, but the person as a whole, and this can be done only voluntarily and with dignity. This unity of being and meaning in God renders this possible.”\textsuperscript{114} In adoration, God transforms man to someone purer and greater than he was before because he recognizes and honors God who is greater than man.\textsuperscript{115} Adoration ranks higher than petition because it is through worship that man receives truth. Truth is that which provides comfort to man during the trials of life. It is also that which orders man’s life so that he can identify and separate illusion from reality. Truth mends man on a spiritual level so that he may truly be made new.\textsuperscript{116}
Man’s adoration of God is not necessary for God. It is necessary for man. When man praises God, it is “a form of the purest and truest prayer.” Scripture, especially the Psalms, are filled with prayers of adoration, glorifying the majesty and splendor of God. The Psalms were the prayer of the people of Israel, and they are meant to be prayed by all Christians. Psalm 148, in particular, draws attention to man’s capacity alone of all creation, to praise God in this manner. The Psalm is “an inspired poetic rendering of the idea that the sun and the moon and all created things are a mirror of God’s glory because, being His creation, they reflect something of His nature. In so doing they praise Him by their very existence. They themselves know nothing of it...” Man, however, is able to realize that he is in a position to sing the praises of his Creator and that he should do so. Man is conscious of his lowliness and God’s glory. He alone has been endowed with the ability to speak and sing the praises to which the rest of creation cannot verbalize but by their very being, contribute. Man is “the spokesman of creation.”

Petition comes most easily to man, especially to those who have not fostered a diligent regimen of prayer. It is to the omnipotent, loving God that man offers his prayers of need, as the child turns to his mother for help and comfort. Jesus taught his disciples to turn to the Heavenly Father and ask him, “simply and trustingly,” for what is required each day because he knows what is needed before man even asks. Petition is not just a request for assistance; it is the acknowledgment that man is nothing without God and receives everything from him. It is by the grace of God that man is and experiences any of the joys or sorrows of life. Guardini clarifies that “all this may be called grace in a wider sense, because he [man] receives as a free favour what he can neither claim nor enforce.” Thus, because petition is, at heart, man’s recognition that everything that is exists by God’s
grace, his prayer should be continuous. It should not be merely in times of anguish but throughout all times. Petition is a “constant appeal to His creative might and sanctifying grace.” It must always be God’s will that is desired, not man’s will because God is Love. Prayer must be confident that all man’s needs and desires will be dispensed with according to the extent to which they are in harmony with the law of love.

Thanksgiving is petition that has been answered. Like petition, thanksgiving is natural. It flows forth from a grateful heart as man’s rejoinder to the sanctifying grace of God. Further, thanksgiving asserts that man has acknowledged with his mind and felt with his heart that life is a gift. As such, it should not be taken for granted. Thanksgiving safeguards against this careless attitude. It is how man can guarantee that he does not taken anything in life for granted. For man, existence consists of “a double arc, one part of which ascends from us to God, and the other – the more important – descends from God to us. Prayer is the continuous call by man for the descending arc, and thanksgiving is the completion of the arc from man to God.” Man must also remember to include God in prayers of thanksgiving as the thing for which thanks is being given. For true love entails a sense of wonder and awe at the fact that the other exists as he is and that he exists at all. Man cannot rationalize this, nor can he understand it as more than a mere glance at something mysterious. This mystery is made consummate in God who is the source of all love because he is Love.

Although prayer has been segmented into divisions for the sake of clarity in this section, we must remember that prayer is a unity. The “parts” of adoration, petition, and thanksgiving belong together as a whole. Man’s prayer would be incomplete without any one of the three. It might even be impossible for man to pray if he were not aware of
how he stands before God. Guardini argues that if man were only conscious of his
sinfulness and not that he belongs to God, man would despair and prayer would be an
immeasurably difficult task. If man, in yearning for union with God, rendered his
unworthiness obsolete, he would not possess the humility necessary to approach God in
prayer. If man could not stand in awe of the glory of God, his omnipotence would
overshadow his love and the gift of his grace. If man cannot stand in awe of God’s holiness,
adoration would denigrate into “unseemly flattery.” Adoration, petition, thanksgiving,
and the foundations upon which prayer is founded are necessary elements to man’s living
relationship with God. This relationship is only conceivable because of God’s revelation in
Christ and the timeless call for man to return to God.

VIII. The Need for Silence

Ironic though it may seem, a brief examination of music tells us a good deal about
silence. Music and silence work together toward both speaking and hearing. Josef Pieper
argues that their opposites – noise and absolute silence – however, do not allow for the
possibility which speaking and hearing permit, of mutual understanding. Indeed, music
fosters the attentive silence required for actual communication when one takes his turn at
listening and the other takes his turn at talking. Most people consider music in terms of
the noise it makes, not the silences which create the rhythm by an alternation of sound and
silence. Man’s life shares a similar dynamic with music. Merton argues that “if we strive
to be happy by filling all the silences of life with sound, productive by turning all life’s
leisure into work, and real by turning all our being into doing, we will only succeed in
producing a hell on earth.” Like good music, man’s life needs to be a beautiful tension of
sound and silence, for it is in the silences that God is found and his blessing is bestowed
upon man. Merton asserts, "If we have no silence, God is not heard in our music. If we have no rest, God does not bless our work. If we twist our lives out of shape in order to fill every corner of them with action and experience, God will silently withdraw from our hearts and leave us empty."\textsuperscript{136}

Silence is often conceived of as only relevant to contemplatives or monks and nuns who live in cloisters away from the distractions of the world. However, because contemplation and action are intrinsically interdependent, silence is a necessary good for every Christian, indeed every man. Because man has been created in and for love, his proper response to God is that of self-surrender in love. Balthasar argues that prayer is the most deliberate and clear way in which man can respond to God in a way that is fitting. He posits that prayer is “the act in which one makes the most fundamental attempt to answer with selflessness and thereby shows that one has understood the divine proclamation.”\textsuperscript{137} He further distinguishes that though prayer and action are both necessary aspects of the Christian’s life, prayer is greater. Jesus, teaching in the house of Martha and Mary declared that Mary, who sat at his feet and contemplated him, had chosen the higher good, while Martha, whose actions were by no means contemptible, settled for a lesser good. Balthasar asserts, “Whoever does not come to know the face of God in contemplation will not recognize him in action, even when it reveals itself to him in the face of the oppressed and humiliated.”\textsuperscript{138} In order to contemplate the mystery of God’s love revealed in Christ, crucified and risen, man must withdraw from the distractions and noise of the world and reflect and pray in silence.

To this end, silence and solitude, of the exterior and physical variety, are a means to the overall Christian mission to love God and to love one’s neighbor. Merton posits, “We do
not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good.”\textsuperscript{139} He continues that this mission into the desolate wilderness is an end which is a means to the one end articulated in the precepts of charity.\textsuperscript{140} It is advisable to seek out a physical location where man can exist, for a time, undisturbed and free from the ties to the world in sound, sight, presence, and thought.\textsuperscript{141} This place need not be grand; it must provide contentment and consistency, a place man can grow to love and desire to return to often.\textsuperscript{142} It should serve man as an appropriate setting for meditation. The goal of contemplation is “to bring your will into the presence of its object which is God.”\textsuperscript{143} The ends of prayer, as described previously, and contemplation do not stand in opposition. They share the same goal: “to teach man how to work himself free of created things and temporal concerns, in which he finds only confusion and sorrow, and enter into a conscious and loving contact with God in which he is disposed to receive from God the help he knows he needs so badly, and to pay to God the praise and honor and thanksgiving and love which it has now become his joy to give.”\textsuperscript{144} God desires man return to him. In silence, man can most diligently enter into meaningful and heartfelt prayer and communion with his Creator. In silence, God makes himself present to man.

The dynamic of contemplation and action in the life of man should mirror that of the tension between sound and silence in music. Both contemplation and action must be properly ordered in man’s life, so that there is a deliberate and “wise alternation of activity and rest.”\textsuperscript{145} It is not the quantity of action or contemplation which determines what is necessary; it is the quality of each which determines how man should moderate the time he devotes to contemplation and to action.\textsuperscript{146} Man can neither live in a state of constant
motion nor in a state of perpetual inaction. It is often more of a struggle for man to "sit back for awhile and do nothing. And for man who has let himself be drawn completely out of himself by his activity, nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest, doing nothing at all. The very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act he can perform."\textsuperscript{147} In order to understand how man should order contemplation and action in his life, he should look to how this tension is resolved in eternity. Merton asserts that in eternity "rest and action will not alternate, they will be one. Everything will be at once empty and full. But only if we have discovered how to combine emptiness and fullness, good will and indifferent results, mistakes and successes, work and rest, suffering and joy, in such a way that all things work together for our good and the glory of God."\textsuperscript{148}

Achieving a silence and solitude conducive to such contemplation is rare for contemporary man. Distractions have always called man aware from prayer throughout the ages. However, this particular age in which we live is adept at and prides itself on the numerous ways it can provide man with distractions. According to Merton, bad distractions, if a distinction can be made between good and bad distractions, are ones which draw man away from God and which direct his will to something other than God.\textsuperscript{149} These distractions usually appear in the guise of projects which need to be completed and things which require our immediate attention. They can be distinguished by an absence of the peace which permeates man's prayer.\textsuperscript{150} Living in a world which glorifies in distractions, man must cling fast to the "memory of His unfailing presence...the surest anchor for our minds and hearts in the storm of distraction and temptation by which we must be purified."\textsuperscript{151} The Eucharist is a remembrance of God, and so for Catholics, it is the
life of man’s spiritual life, that which quite literally brings man into communion with God in love.

Because silence and solitude serve to bring man into contact with God through prayer, silence also helps to preserve man’s dignity. The Trinity is a communion of persons who exist in love for one another, yet there is still space within the Trinity so that the Father does not collapse into the Son and the Son does not morph into the Spirit. Likewise, solitude fosters man’s personality, and it is only with true love that man can “penetrate the secrets and the solitude of the beloved by allowing him to keep his secrets to himself and remain in his own solitude.”152 By respecting the other’s “interior loneliness,” man forges a friendship which causes both men to grow in likeness to God and therefore, each other. Merton asserts that “if I respect my brother’s solitude, I will know his solitude by the reflection that it casts, through charity, upon the solitude of my own soul.”153 Solitude and silence make manifest the distinct persons that co-exist. Man needs to be able to separate himself from men so that he can distinguish between what is his and what is not his. If man cannot do this, he also cannot make a gift of himself or his talents, nor can he receive a gift of his neighbor and his neighbor’s talents. When the lines between individual persons are dissolved, man can no longer love.154 This is a true tragedy because love is the form by and for which man was created. Man cannot identify what belongs to him, and so he often tries to possess that which is not his to possess.155 This confusion causes man to hide behind the things which are not his, hoping against hope that no one will discover his secret unworthiness. True solitude is inspired by love. It desires only to possess that which has been given to it for its own, nothing more.156 Merton argues, “The true solitary must recognize that he is obliged to love other men and even all things created by God: this
obligation is not a painful and unpleasant duty, and that it was never supposed to be bitter... He must not fear that love will destroy his solitude. Love is his solitude.”

Silence is a metaphysical reality which is tied up with the foundational reality of love. The man who loves God seeks God’s glory above all other things. Man, if he loves God, is consoled only by the glory of God. Because of this, man knows that the only acceptable consolation he can offer to his neighbor is in the love of God. God’s glory is transcendent and is revealed in silence. For the man who loves God, silence is a small price to pay for the glorious revelation of the divine beauty. Because God is the ever-greater, God's silence, through which he “speaks” to man, is more profound than man’s. Merton argues that it is in man’s silent prayer that the most good is done for conversion of souls. St. Francis of Assisi famously said, “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words when necessary.” The man who loves God also loves silence “because he fears to lose his sense of discernment. He fears the noise that takes the sharp edge off every experience of reality.”

The man who does not love God loves noise, and he struggles to be alone in silence because it is there that he is confronted by the emptiness of his soul. He who fails to recognize the necessary relationship between love and silence tries to dominate the silence of his neighbor by absorbing it into his noise. True love never seeks to dominate the beloved. The man who loves noise “cannot know the silence of God, Who is Charity, Who cannot destroy what He loves, Who is bound, by His own law of Charity, to give life to all those whom He draws into His own silence.” He lives in an illusory world because silence is real. All that he loves – noise, busyness, numerous tasks – is a fiction. God is real. His presence and thoughts are manifest in the world’s silence, in its immeasurable “fullness, depth, and breadth.” The man who loves noise babbles meaningless words and
incoherent sentences, effectively drowning out the words of Christ, “who lives and speaks in silence...in the depths of our hearts.” Conversely, the man who loves God knows that his life must be infused with silence because it forms and strengthens his spiritual life. Merton argues that silence creeps into man's moral consciousness and his storehouse of virtues, creating and preserving them. The silence which fosters charity and helps man to grow in virtue is a silence that has its origin in God. The man who loves God seeks out silence in his life. It is when man's life is founded upon this silence that man lives in the hope of Christ, who lives in man. Merton adds, "It awakens the silence of Christ in the hearts of those who hear us, so that they themselves fall silent and begin to wonder and to listen."

IX. Acts of Asceticism

Because man is called to communion with God, all aspects of his life should be striving toward this by means of union with Christ. In some mysterious way, when man accepts God in faith and love, he comes to share in Jesus' sonship and divine nature, albeit imperfectly. This union with Christ necessarily includes man's union with the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross. By sharing in the Cross, man is preparing himself for sharing in the divine life of love. It is necessary so that man can become who he was meant to be. Merton writes:

Souls are like wax waiting for a seal. By themselves they have no special identity. Their destiny is to be softened and prepared in this life, by God's will, to receive, at their death, the seal of their own degree of likeness to God in Christ. Therefore if you spend your life trying to escape from the heat of the fire that is meant to soften and prepare you to become your true self, and if you try to keep your substance from melting in the fire – as if your true identity were to be hard wax – the seal will fall upon you at last and crush you. You will not be able to take your own true name and countenance, and you will be destroyed by the event that was meant to be your fulfillment.
The Cross is the fire by which man grows in love and becomes more and more himself. Man cannot “live in Christ” without living in the “mystery of the Cross.”\textsuperscript{174} The Cross is essential to the glory of God. Thus, man cannot hope to be raised and enter into the circumincession of the Trinity without participating in the Cross. Man wants to live without ever having to die, but to receive the life of Christ means that man has to die to receive new life.\textsuperscript{175}

Moreover, the Cross, inconceivable though it was in its ugliness, provides the logos for suffering for the sake of holiness and suffering for the sake of another in love. It is through the Cross that man can consecrate his suffering to God so God can make it holy suffering, which is without sin. Suffering is objective, not subjective. Its difficulty is “not essential to it except in so far as our weak and fallen nature comes into conflict with the divine will.”\textsuperscript{176} Sacrifice is “objectively sacred,” and it “not only conveys an idea but effects a divine and religious transformation in the worshipper, thus consecrating and uniting him more closely to God.”\textsuperscript{177} Though the old adage compelling Christians to “offer it up” is somewhat trite, what is revealed is a great truth. In offering up or consecrating his sufferings, man is giving himself entirely to God: the good, the bad, the ugly.\textsuperscript{178} This total offering of the self is what God has desired all along. God does not relish in man’s pain; rather, he desires that man, in his pain and suffering, offer himself to God. It is not only in moments of health and prosperity that God desires man, because, if we are honest, even in those best moments, man still falls short. It is only by the grace of God who is merciful that man is made worthy at all.

It is also through the Cross that man is given divine strength to persevere in the face of seemingly unbearable trials and tribulations. However, this is not usually given until
man comes to terms with his incredible weakness and inability to accomplish what God desires on his own. It is then that man is able to realize divine strength as the true gift it is. Knowledge of the Cross opens man’s mind and heart to the person of Christ and thus, the glory of God:

To know the Cross is not merely to know our own sufferings. For the Cross is the sign of salvation, and no man is saved by his own sufferings. To know the Cross is to know that we are saved by the sufferings of Christ; more, it is to know the love of Christ Who underwent suffering and death in order to save us. It is, then, to know Christ. For to know His love is not merely to know the story of His love, but to experience in our spirit that we are loved by Him, and that in His love the Father manifests His own love for us, through His spirit poured forth into our hearts. To know all this is to understand something of the Cross, that is: to know Christ.

Holy suffering is not meant to tear man asunder by the many sacrifices it requires. It is meant to bring man in closer communion with God. Therefore, to truly know and experience suffering, in light of the Cross, is to encounter the person of Christ, who suffered and died for all of mankind.

Furthermore, holy suffering should be joyful. Man should not be resentful nor poor-tempered. If man is bitter and bad-tempered, it is a result of his punishing only his body. Asceticism is more than just the body experiencing suffering. Asceticism involves the whole person: body, mind, and soul. The flesh must often be subdued and experience suffering, but it is because this is good for both the body and the soul that it is done. Merton asserts, “For the good of the body is not found in the body alone but in the good of the whole person.” Man, who was made in the image and likeness of God, has both a body and a soul. God, the source of all, revealed himself to man so that he might be redeemed. However, “it is not His plan to lure the soul out of the body, but to sanctify the two together, divinizing the whole man.” Disorder in the body often points to a more serious disorder in the mind or soul. Take Jesus’ examples of fulfilling the law in the Gospel
of Matthew (5:17-48). The spirit of the law is higher than the letter. The body often follows the letter of the law, but it is much easier and better for the body if the soul also follows the spirit of the law. The laws exist so that man can be who God created him to be. They exist so that man can honor and love God through his obedience to the laws.

Through the practice of asceticism, man becomes more like his true self; he becomes more able to love the way God loves. Merton posits, "Asceticism is utterly useless if it turns us into freaks."  Suffering, in order to be holy, must be sincere and infused with charity. It must be patient. It must not be preoccupied with hatred or revenge. Its timeframe is not important, nor is its origin. The way man suffers is directly linked to the way man loves. True love is “patient”; “it is not jealous”; “it does not brood over injury” (1 Cor 13). Because we have encountered God through the crucified and risen Christ, we know that God is Love. He does not desire man to suffer without meaning, or perhaps more aptly, he does not desire man to suffer uselessly. God’s love is meant to be returned. Indeed, all genuine is love is meant to be requited. It follows that Christian renunciation, in union with the Christian life as a whole, is perfected in “the total offering of ourselves to God in union with the sacrifice of Christ.” Asceticism helps man to fulfill his purpose. It is by acts of sacrifice and self-denial that man begins to make himself worthy to be offered to God as an oblation. According to Merton, self-denial “is the first step to a transformation of our entire being in which, according to the plan of God, even our bodies will live in the light of His divine glory and be transformed in Him together with our souls.” This transformation that man undergoes is a transformation in love which helps him grow in the way of love of the Trinity.

X. Discernment
It is a failing of religious catechesis and formation, especially within the family, that
discernment is branded as necessary only for those who are considering taking vows as a
consecrated religious. It is also a failing that the process of discernment, through objective
and indifferent prayer and with the aid of a spiritual director, has been abandoned in favor
of a subjective, emotional practice. Discernment is a necessary part of the spiritual life of
all Christians. At its heart, discernment is meant to align man’s will with God’s will. This is
difficult. Merton argues that how man handles this struggle to will what God wills is
indicative of the depth of his own love and obedience: “He diminishes his love and his
obedience by making an adjustment between God’s will and his own, and so the will of God
comes to have, for him, a variety of values: richer when it is more pleasing to him, poorer
when it offers less immediate satisfaction, valueless when it demands a sacrifice of his own
selfish interests.” It is the mark of a holy man who can will what God wills. This is by
no means something which once achieved has been done so forever. It is something which
requires continual attention to the process of discernment. It requires man to perpetually
make an offering of himself and his life for God. This is the mark of pure love. To truly love
God, and thus, to truly will what God wills, means that man must give himself to God
without knowing what is required. Once this gift has been given, if it has truly been given,
it cannot be taken back. Merton asserts that “it is not always necessary to find out what
God wills in order to will it...But if we are to will what He wills we must begin to know
something of what He wills. We must at least desire to know what He wills.” This desire
to know what God wills for us, and the love which compels man to do whatever it is that
God asks, is clearly embodied by Jesus’ agony in the garden (Mt 26:36-46).
Every Christian who prays the Lord’s Prayer should recognize that in praying it, he is offering himself, or at least saying words which imply that he is offering himself, to do whatever God wills him to do. Man’s vocation is to love. His vocation is to “bear witness to the truth of Christ by laying down our lives at His bidding.” Bearing witness to truth means that man must live by truth. According to Merton, “It takes intrepid courage to live according to the truth, and there is something of martyrdom in every truly Christian life, if we take martyrdom in its original sense as a ‘testimony’ to the truth, sealed in our sufferings and in our blood.” By aligning his will to God’s will, man is not only becoming the person God intended him to be because God is forming him. Man participates in God’s work and is a co-creator with God of his new being and life. It is not just one man who can serve as a vessel for God’s grace; other men are called to be arbiters of God’s will and love for their neighbors. No man is an island. All of humankind is dependent upon one another. Merton argues, “I cannot work out God’s will in my own life unless I also consciously help other men to work out His will in theirs. His will, then, is our sanctification, our transformation in Christ, our deeper and fuller integration with other men. And this integration results not in the absorption and disappearance of our own personality, but in its affirmation and perfection.” Man was created for a communion of love. God has thus created all men, so too, he desires to call all men back to himself and to one another. This is what St. Paul means when he writes of the Body of Christ.

Man’s prayer of discernment must be modeled after Jesus’ prayer to the Father. Though Jesus lives in perfect communion with the Father, his prayer indicates that Jesus’ obedience is always a gift. It is always freely willed by Jesus for the Father. For man, although he has been adopted into Jesus’ sonship, it is not as easy to pray and to discern the
will of God. Although man is inclined to think that he has understood God's will personally through an emotional reaction, true discernment requires a more objective and unemotional approach. Von Speyr asserts, “The prayer of the choice of vocation presupposes complete nakedness: ‘Just as I am, Lord, and as I can become through you, I wish to serve you. But what I can become through you lies in your hand alone, so much so that nothing of what I was formerly matters to me anymore; all that I am and have is at your disposal.’” Because the act which follows the prayer is a rational one which must be deliberately willed, the prayer too must be guided by man’s reason. Von Speyr suggests that “at this time of decision a person should withdraw from the world interiorly and, better still, exteriorly as well. He should try to gain a certain distance from things, to cast off the husks of everyday which have enveloped him until now. And this distance must be prayerful.” Objective and indifferent prayer is the means by which man can overcome his narrow confines of selfish desires and be opened up to receive the self-sacrificial love of Christ on the Cross and to return this love to God and to his neighbors. Von Speyr concludes:

The one purpose of this whole objectifying process through prayer is that God may act freely. He alone has the last word. The person’s deliberate detachment from himself should show whether he is ready to give up controlling his own prayer, that is, whether he knows what prayer really is: doing the Father’s will. The prayer of choice ultimately draws its life from the Son’s prayer of mission in the Trinity. When he offers himself to the Father, ready to accept his mission to bring the world back to the Father, this offer is completely objective. He lets the Father’s answer take its effect in him. He is only a vessel to receive it... If someone who prays has taken up the Lord’s yes, he is free to follow his path into discipleship in obedience, just as the Son was free to go along the way of his earthly mission in obedience to the Father. Certainly one can say that the Son, in his eternal deliberation, saw urgent reasons for offering himself to the Father, but it is also possible that, in considering the plan of redemption, he perceived reasons against it. After having weighed these arguments for and against and having decided in favor of the plan, he offers it all to the Father for him to choose.

It is the ultimate act of love to let someone choose for you. It demonstrates a respect and desire to please the other no matter what sacrifices it may entail. It is also a mark of the
strength of the bond of love when two people desire the same thing. This is the kind of love which the persons of the Trinity share, and it is the kind of love God desires with man.

XI. Conclusion

In the life of the contemporary Christian, the practical and theoretical are too often divided by a lack of understanding or man-made constructs which are present in all other aspects of society. The staples of the spiritual life – i.e. prayer, asceticism, and discernment – are isolated from man’s life as a whole unity. This separation is perpetuated by the contemporary worldview, which has elevated science and technological progress above all else. Christians especially, but all men too, need to reclaim their role in the world, so that their dignity as human persons can be preserved in spite of a dark alternative which reduces men to animals or processes which are not unique and are entirely repeatable.

Education is essential to achieving this goal. Neil Postman argues that it will be a race between technology and education. However, education alone is not enough. We must have the courage to be counter-cultural, to go against the tides of popularity for the sake of a greater good, like Wendell Berry. Such courage begins in small ways, but like any grassroots movement, it has the potential to effect great change within society. This should not be a new struggle for the Christian, for his life is an effort to live out those seemingly-contradictory demands of a man who was brutally murdered by the Romans at the request of his own people. Christians need to be Christians for the world. They must be the salt and the light. They must pray the way Jesus taught us. They must also offer prayers especially for an increased respect for the dignity of the person. They must practice a meaningful asceticism. They must prayerfully and actively discern the will of God for themselves. They must love.
Man has been created in God’s image. His fulfillment is love – eternal life with God. All that man does must be guided by the principles of divine love as they have been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the image of God for man and who is the archetype of humanity. When man’s life has been thus infused with the love of Christ and grace of God, all his actions are, at their root, acts of love for God. Prayer is a response of love to Love. Asceticism is an act of love, a vicarious suffering offered up for the love of another. Discernment is ultimately man’s desire and effort to be open to and do whatever God asks him because he loves him. This love is by no means a superficial or easy love. It is a love which demands integrity and self-sacrifice. The depths of this love long for eternity and for solemn vows. This kind of love also demands truth. Love should not have to be counter-cultural. Society should not be threatened by love unless there is something desperately wrong with the foundations upon which the society is established. This is the problem that we face today. We have lost an awareness of the sacramentality of the world in which we live and that everything that exists is a gift. We have lost a sense of who we are, where we are going, and what we must do to get there. We no longer speak of truth; indeed, we may have completely forgotten what it means that truth is real. The Christian, from the beginning, has been called to be a light of God’s love and truth in the world. In order for the Christian to be able to effect change in society, to show people what it means to love and to know truth, he must unapologetically be a Christian. Though he will be formed by his contemporary age, he must remember that he belongs to an eternal order, which is guided by divine love. It was for this and this alone that he, and all of mankind, was created.
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