

## A Canopy under which to pray.



I remember an incident, years back, where a man came to me for spiritual direction. He had been involved for several years in a Charismatic prayer-group and had experienced there powerful religious emotions. But now, to his surprise, those emotions had disappeared. When he tried to pray, he experienced mostly dryness and boredom. He felt that there was something wrong because his fiery emotions had disappeared. Here's how he expressed it: "Father, you've seen my bible, seen how most every line is highlighted with a bright color because the text spoke so deeply to me. Well, right now, I feel like pitching my bible through a window because none of that means anything to me anymore! What's wrong with me?"

The quick answer could have been: "God is wrong with you!" I pointed him towards the experience of Theresa of Avila who, after a season of deep fervor in prayer, experienced eighteen years of boredom and dryness. Today, I would have him read the journals of Mother Theresa who, like Theresa of Avila, after some initial fervor in prayer, experienced sixty years of dryness.

We nurse a naïve fantasy both about what constitutes prayer and how we might sustain ourselves in it. And what often lies at the center of this misguided notion is the belief that prayer is always meant to be full of fervor, interesting, warm, carrying spiritual insight, and carrying the sense that we are actually praying. Coupled with this notion is the equally misguided notion that the way to sustain feeling and fervor in prayer is through constant novelty and variety or through dogged concentration. Classical writers in spirituality assure us that, while this is often true during the early stages of our prayer lives, when we are neophytes at prayer and in the honeymoon stage of our spiritual lives, it becomes less and less true the deeper we advance in prayer and spirituality.

Much to the relief and consolation of anyone who has tried to sustain a prayer life over a long period of time, the great mystics tell us that once we are beyond the early, honeymoon, stage of prayer, the single greatest obstacle to sustaining a life of prayer is simple boredom and the sense that nothing meaningful is happening. But that doesn't mean that we are regressing in prayer. It often means the

opposite.

Here's a canopy under which to pray even as we struggle with boredom and the sense that nothing meaningful is happening: Imagine you have an aged mother who is confined to a retirement home. You're the dutiful daughter or son and, every night after work, for one hour, you stop and spend time with her, helping her with her evening meal, sharing the events of the day, and simply being with her as her daughter or son. I doubt that, save for a rare occasion, you will have many deeply emotive or even interesting conversations with her. On the surface your visits will seem mostly routine, dry, and dutiful. Most days you will be talking about trivial, everyday, things and you will be sneaking the occasional glance at the clock to see when your hour with her will be over. However, if you persevere in these regular visits with her, month after month, year after year, among everyone in the whole world you will grow to know your mother the most deeply and she will grow to know you most deeply because, as the mystics affirm, at a certain deep level of relationship the real connection between us takes place below the surface of our conversations. We begin to know each other through simple presence.

You can recognize this in its opposite: Notice how your mother relates to your siblings who visit her only very occasionally. During those rare, occasional visits there will be emotions, tears, and conversations beyond the weather and the trivia of everyday life. But that's because your mother sees these others so rarely.

Prayer is the same. If we pray only occasionally, we might well experience some pretty deep emotions in our prayer. However, if we pray faithfully every day, year in and year out, we can expect little excitement, lots of boredom, regular temptations to look at the clock during prayer ... but, a very deep, growing bond with our God.

Ron Rolheiser