

**Turning
to the
Mystics**



The Way of a Pilgrim

Session 4

with James Finley and Kirsan Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time together turning for guidance to the Christian mystic, the anonymous author of *The Way of a Pilgrim*.

We left off in the previous session with the pilgrim receiving guidance from the teacher on how to say the Jesus Prayer, along with the inner meaning of the prayer and its transformative effects on the Philokalia. Knowing specifically how the saying of the Jesus Prayer evokes and embodies the heart's ceaseless longing for God that echoes with God's ceaseless longing for the pilgrim and for each of us. That's the essence of the matter.

The monk, the teacher, ends his guidance in this way. The star sent me away with his blessing and told me that while learning the prayer I must always come back to him and tell him everything, making a very frank confession report. For the inward process could not go on properly and successfully without the guidance of a teacher. I'd like to reflect on this. On the inward guidance. Inward process, rather.

The inward process is the process in which we're transformed in engaging in a loving act that embodies the desire to be ever more like and one with what we love. For example, when two people fall in love, they sincerely give themselves to each other by speaking and listening and acting towards each other in ever more loving ways. That's an inward process that transforms them in love. It metamorphosizes their heart in love this way.

Likewise, another example is a teacher who loves teaching, who loves the students, who loves the subject matter, is given over in the sincerity of engaging in the act of teaching. In the ongoing sincere commitment to the act of teaching, they're transformed into a teacher this way. The same thing could be said about someone learning to be a poet or an artist or to learn to sing or to learn to dance or to learn ... It also applies to commitment to solitude or to silence.

There's a commitment to seek that which we love, to draw closer to it and be transformed by love into that which we love, by fidelity to an act in which we sincerely give our whole self over so we engage in it with all of our heart. The secret of the Jesus Prayer, this metamorphosis, is this ongoing engagement with one's whole heart that opens the heart up to God's heart given to us and the mercy of God revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. That's the essence of the interior guide of the process.

There's a saying in the Catholic tradition that grace builds on nature. It's true, that the grace of the Jesus Prayer, this theosis, this divinization, and to this unit of state of oneness with God is the gift of God. But it's also true the more we learn to stabilize in interior attitudes that are the most receptive and supple to that grace, the more effective the grace of God can be in our heart.

This builds on our nature being transformed in the desire for love, to be ever more receptively supple and receptive to love that it might deepen and grow in us. There's another reason too, here for the star is saying the person is to report everything. That is to say is that ontologically or ultimately speaking, God is being poured out and given away as the gift and the miracle of our very reality this way. If God would cease loving us in the present moment, we would cease to exist.

But this is God's oneness with us now emerging into our consciousness, and this requires going forth from our customary ways of thinking and assuming into God's ways of thinking. And because it's the ego that's being transcended must with God's grace make this choice, we're subject to self-deception is the thing. That's why it needs a teacher, but the teacher is someone who's been transformed into this oneness. That's what makes them the teacher.

The teacher is skilled or trained and listening for how to negotiate or find one's way to the obstacles or find one's way to the unexpected graces they give guidance out of the depth of their own maturation process in this very oneness that the pilgrim is being led into and guided like this.

What we're talking about is Teresa of Ávila, she talks about a state of absorption. Really, what the prayer is by giving oneself over to the prayer, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, by giving oneself over to the prayer with all one's heart for sustained prayer over time, it creates an absorbed state of a quiet, subtle oneness that one needs to find one's way and learn how to follow the light that shines in that oneness this way. That's the subtlety of the practice and of this process.

The pilgrim then shares with us his experience of following these guidelines this way. Of course, in doing so, just as the teacher guided him by sharing his experience, the pilgrim's guiding us because we can look for similarities in our experience of these phases that people go through in endlessly varied ways this way. The pilgrim says, "In church, I felt a glowing eagerness to take all the pains I could to learn unceasing interior prayer, and I prayed to God to come to my help." There's this initial honeymoon phase where it's just a glow, you can hardly wait to get started. And he's just sitting there with all his heart saying this Jesus Prayer.

"Then I began to ponder how I should manage to see my stars again, for counsel or confession since Lee was not given to remain for more than three days in the monastery guest house and there were no houses nearby." What he's talking about here is once you found the teacher, you see the importance of staying in touch with the teacher for the ongoing guidance because you're just a beginner this way.

When he is still living in the monastery, he has the teacher right there. But when he has to leave, he doesn't know where he is going to go. It's like when I was in the monastery, Thomas Merton was right there both twice a week speaking to the community, to the novices and then every other week for individual one-on-one spiritual guidance. The teacher was right there. The starts is right there, but he soon won't be. How am I going to keep in touch with the teacher this way?

And there's a note here for us too, maybe you're fortunate enough to have a contemplatively grounded spiritual director for your guide and you're so grateful for that guidance. But a lot of us on this path, we're not so fortunate this way. And so we friend this earlier when Merton was telling me about people living out in the world and I was going to be living out in the world this way. We do have the teacher. What is the teacher for us? Remember? Find the mother and she'll bring you the children.

The mother is the prayer itself. Prayer. It's in prayer that God teaches you the prayer. We also have the scriptures. And we also have the givens of our daily life, all the ways we're called

to give oneself in love and vulnerability and honesty and so on. And here's the thing also. Because the pilgrim is passing on to us these teachings in this text, we have the pilgrim that we have the text and hopefully would hope this is the hope really that in listening to these podcasts, then there's guidance in the podcasts.

In other words, the guidance is that that goes with truths of your own awakening heart. It offers insights and reassurances and guidance and so on in this ever so subtle transformative process. Whatever your particular practice might be, there's these underlying contemplative transforming patterns moving toward these unitive states of experiencing God's presence in our life.

However, I learned that there was a village between two and three miles from the monastery. I went there to look for a place to live and to my great happiness, God showed me the thing I needed. I think when we're on this path and we're sincere, God shows us things. Like there's providential, the serendipity of things that kind of fall across our path this way. A peasant hired me for the whole summer to look after his kitchen garden. And what is more gave me use of a little thatched hut in which I could live alone. God be praised. I had found a quiet place, and in this manner I took up my abode and began to learn the interior prayer and the way had been shown to go to see my stars from time to time.

What is our place? Our home is our place. And a lot of people, there's like a liturgy around this or a ritual around it, there may be a chair you sit in and maybe you'll surround yourself with a few sake like the scriptures are burning candle or an icon. This is the place that you go to. This is your place to sincerely give yourself over to God in the saying of the Jesus Prayer.

It's learning a deeper meaning, even what it means to be at home. It's like to be at home in the depths of God, in the midst of your own home this way, I think. For a week alone in my garden, I steadily set myself to learn to pray without ceasing exactly as the stars had explained. At first, things seemed to go very well, but then it tired me very much. I felt lazy and bored and overwhelmingly sleepy and the cloud of all sorts of other thoughts closed around me. I went in distress to my stars and told him the state I was in.

He greeted me in a friendly way and said, "My dear brother, it is the attack of the world of darkness upon you. To that world, nothing is worse than heartfelt prayer on our part. And it's in trying by every means to hinder you and to turn you aside from learning the prayer." I'd like to reflect on this.

You know what? What do we mean here by the powers of darkness? In one way I think we can understand it's psychologically in this sense. I think anytime we venture into a transformative process, there's that in us that sees our love for what we're seeking, but we're not necessarily ready for the price we have to pay to find it this way. And so the powers of darkness are innate patterns of lethargy, half-heartedness and so on. Even though they're myopic or claustrophobic, it's our comfort zone and we're not comfortable leaving our comfort zone even though the light is shining into our heart, it's infinitely less than what we'll put to rest the longings of our heart. Still, it

doesn't make it easy to do it.

And this is part of the path. Part of the path is anyone who's committed to a process, you just don't do it when you're in the mood, you just don't do it when the things are just right. There has to be a certain constancy in order to stay there long enough for it to take hold. Otherwise, we never stayed long enough for it to happen. We just touch on it. The Jesus Prayer is not a hobby. It's not something you take up out of curiosity, let's give this a try. If this doesn't work out let's take up skiing or something.

It's heartfelt. In other words, you're drawn to be faithful to it. And even though then you meet that which has to be taken into account and the resistance to it, and with God's grace, you gently go beyond the resistance and be faithful to it because the resistance will pass. The Buddhists say there are 10,000 worlds and I've traveled through them all. When we stay on this journey, all kinds of things happen inside and we find our way along this path that transforms us by God into the depths of God this way.

There's another way of looking at this also about the powers of darkness. And that is that in the Christian tradition, there's the uncreated persons of the Trinity, the divine relations of knowledge and love. And then from all eternity, God the Father eternally speaks the word and contemplates in the word created persons. That is persons that are destined to share in God's own life as perfectly as God shares in God's life in our eternal nothingness without God. And created persons are corporeal created persons that is with the body, that's us.

But there's also incorporeal created persons, our angels, angelic angels. And so also just like with us, there's a fall where we fall out of this grace and through the path we find our way back into the ways of grace. Likewise, in this mythic world of these angels, there's a fall. And so the powers of darkness include these hidden powers of darkness. And the one thing they try to stop us from doing is to love God this way.

And so by the powers of darkness and especially in this tradition, they mean this very seriously, not just the psychological part. They also mean there are angelic interior realms that we're actually entering in this prayer. And how do we navigate our way through these realms in these places? But all the same, the enemy only does what God sees fit to allow and no more than what is necessary for us.

It would appear that you need a further testing of your humility and that it is too soon, therefore, for your unmeasured zeal to approach the loftiest entrance to the heart. You might fall into spiritual covetousness. I will read you a little instruction from the Philokalia on the cure for this. Remedy, this bond. I'd like to reflect on this.

I think when we get started, we're very sincere. It's a gift to want this. But in the beginning we look towards this something that we're going to have. If I just keep praying hard enough and I do this right, I'll reach it. Once I reach it, I can get it. And if I get it then I can have it. But it's not for the having. It's a way of deeply accepting that God has us. That we belong to God. And so there's a kind of a sophomoric quality to our eagerness. It's a gift, but it needs to mature. What matures this desire is

the practice and love, and deep down it's humility.

It's through humility, which is the deep discernment of one's limitations, deeply accepted and resting in the deep acceptance of the limitations that the limitless love of God enters our heart this way. You can see the intimacy of this inward journey. It's a journey that's very engaging in a transformative way that when we started, there's no way to foresee this. You have to experientially get into the place where it's actually happening to you this way.

What does a person do about this? It's easy. You can say, "I get it, love. Got it. Humility." And you just can't sit down and try real hard to be more humble. That would be your ego trying to be a more humble ego. The teacher, this is the lineage opens, the Philokalia reads one of the fathers of the Philokalia, you turn to the teaching of Nikephoros, I'm not sure I'm pronouncing that correctly. One of the fathers of the Philokalia, and read if after a few attempts you do not succeed in reaching the realm of the heart in the way you have been taught, do what I'm about to say. And by God's help you'll find what you seek. The faculty of pronouncing words lies in the throat. Reject all other thoughts. You can do this if you will, and allow that faculty to repeat only the following words constantly.

Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me. Compel yourself to do it always. Like to reflect on this. Unexpected turn. Nothing that he's saying is not only is the eagerness immature, but it's in your head. You have this idea in your mind and we're trying to use the prayer to leave thought behind as the customary way of knowing. And one way you do that is to move from your head into your body. It's in the depths of the body. It's true the thoughts in your mind, but it's your throat that's saying the words, not your mind. You can be thinking prayer, but it's the throat that says it.

What your intention then is to let go of your mind and let the mind and the sense drop down and then transcend the mind by a more interior humble allowing of listening to your body saying the prayer. Your body is saying the words of the prayer. Now it's your bodily being that embodies the prayer in which the union with God occurs in your body. And I'd like to reflect on this, too.

One, you can see the implications of this in Yoga, too because in Yoga, it's the whole body to do the asanas, to do the postures very slowly. It's like the liturgy of the body. One prays with one's whole body this way. And also another way I felt this also when I was in the monastery chanting the Psalms. You chant the Psalms seven times a day. It was in Latin when I first entered. There's something about the rhythm of Gregorian chant that in a way you get into the rhythm of the music of the chant and the rhythmic music of the chant is the prayer.

Since you're praying the Psalms, God's own words are on your lips being carried along by the rhythm of the prayer. It's like a communal because they're all saying this together, chanting back and forth the verses of the Psalm. It's like this ancient liturgy of communal transformation to a musical sound of the rhythm of God's own words being spoken with your mouth this way.

This is a way then of understanding how we're semantically woven into God and God's semantically woven into us in ways that transcend closure and conceptual thoughts and so on this way. Remember earlier in the chapter the pilgrim said this is why it's so hard to find

teaching. People talk about the prayer, people talk around the prayer with a collection of prayer. But this requires mystical understanding and this is the mystical understanding. It's transconceptual realizations given by God as you're let out beyond the boundaries of your own abilities through this humility and in the groundedness of your body.

The teacher goes on. If you succeed for a time, then without doubt your heart will open in prayer. We know it from experience. And what's this mean if you succeed for a time? I think you're saying the prayer and the ordinariness of your devotional sincerity and all of a sudden unexpectedly you're in this flow for you and God mutually disappear as dualistically other than each other. That somehow you're literally resting and God's infinite mercy for you as the beloved and resting in the beloved, you're praying as the beloved in a oneness with God this way.

It may only last a moment, might only last a minute, but when you return to your customary way of saying that prayer, the very fact that happens is an encouraging moment. I tasted it. And if I just keep going that grace-unitive state might become more and more frequent, go longer and longer, go deeper and deeper and it kind of confirms that I'm on the path.

It's like he says because we know it by experience. See, it's not an opinion, it's not a theory. I know it, I know it, I know that I know it, and I know it because I've experienced this oneness for myself, which gives witness to the authenticity of my desire for this. See, I'm on my way en via, I'm on my way. There you have the teaching of the holy Fathers in such cases said my stars, and therefore you ought from today onward to carry out my directions with confidence and repeat the prayer of Jesus as often as possible.

See, do it with confidence because we can have confidence in the lineage. It goes down through the centuries because the lineage is given collectively by God to the hearts of seekers of God. And we're in this lineage together. Going all the way back to Jesus, spending whole nights in prayer this way. Now he's going to give him another step to deepen the path.

Here is a rosary, take it to start with. I want to talk about the rosary next. It's interesting. There's a Roman Catholic rosary in which you meditate on the joyful mysteries, as you say, the Hail Mary. And then you meditate on the sorrowful mysteries, and you meditate on the glorious mysteries. And so what happens when we say when we're holding the rosary, so it's more we're grounded in our body, it's a sacramental and you're holding the rosary in your hand and you're using the rosary to further have a bodily whole groundedness in the prayer like your whole body in the rosary.

It's interesting, the rosary's in all the world traditions, I think. The Muslims have prayer beads. The Buddhists have prayer beads this way. And here we see the rosary in the Orthodox tradition. The rosary has 33. There's different ones. It's made of cloth. They're made of knotted cloth. You count on the knots in the cloth. They also say that's why their rosary is silent unlike the beads that make a noise. It's silent like the prayer is silent. And also, there's 33 knots because Jesus lived for 33 years. Other versions have 50 knots, others have 100 knots.

He gives them a rosary to take out and then he says, "Take this rosary and start to say

the prayer 3000 times a day, whether you're standing or sitting, walking or lying down, continually repeat, Lord Jesus, have mercy on me. Say it quietly and without hurry, but without fail, exactly 3000 times a day without deliberately increasing or diminishing the number. God will help you." I'd like to reflect on this.

First of all, notice he has the rosary, but by saying it exactly 3000 times it's obedience. And so he's dying to his own will. It's a way of dying to his own will through the guidance of the teacher that's guiding him into the deeper surrender to the will of God to die to one's own will. Secondly, say it exactly 3000 times a day. Don't do it deliberately, more or less. That's obedience.

Even though you don't do it deliberately, you'll indeliberately say more or less because you'll lose count. And why will you lose count? Because you're just a human being. That's why. And that's a big part of the path. You stumble and fall this way and that and every time, what do you do when you lose count? You go back as best you can to where you left off because the love of God is incarnate and the sincerity of your frailty this way, you're being overtaken by God into God in the frailty of yourself.

That's why I like that saying St. Benedict was asked when he founded his monastery in the fifth century. What do you monks do in the monastery all day? And he said, "Fall down and get up. Fall down and get up. Fall down and get up." And so in a way, losing count is sometimes the most important, the most fruitful aspect of the practice. Because even though you lose count, God never does. And the constancy of God overtaking you and your inconsistencies is the gift of tears. It's the gift of this deep union that's taking place to this.

By this means you'll reach the unceasing activity of the heart. There's a certain kind of confidence in the teacher. I think it's because he senses the authenticity of the pilgrim's seeking is already well on his way. Has a long way to go, but already he's on the path. I gladly accepted this guidance and went home and began to carry out faithfully and exactly what my stars had bidden. For two days I found it rather difficult, but after that it became so easy and likable that as soon as I stopped, I felt a sort of need to go on saying the prayer of Jesus. I did it freely and willingly, not forcing myself to do it as before.

You know what's happening? See, this is the inward transformative process. The very thing that started out as a burden is a thing that becomes the lightest thing of all. And when he is not in the lightest thing of all, it's missing. And what's missing is the prayer. Because the prayer is incarnating the mercy of God that is now transforming him into itself in his heart. I think we'll end here. We'll end here. Meditation.

I invite you to sit straight and fold your hands and bow.

Bow. Slowly say the Lord's prayer together. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Mary, mother of contemplatives. Pray for us. The author of the way of a pilgrim. Pray for us. The enormous author, the cloud of unknowing, pray for us. Until next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. If you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.