

# Prayer isn't escapism



During the State of the Union and various other news obsessions we've collectively experienced recently, I've been finishing a book manuscript. The topic is not as addictive as our national reality TV show, though. It's a devotional on mystic saints. So, you can imagine, the temptation is to escape to my prayer and writing, abandoning the concerns the rest of you are stuck with on your ever-buzzing phones.

Of course, that's not quite how it works. The saints and other holy people who had mystical experiences knew too much to escape into these times of prayer. On the other hand, there was Mother Teresa, who wasn't living a life of swooning prayer but knew too much about Jesus to abandon him and the poorest of the poor. Feelings are feelings, and people are too miserable for the pray-er not to be drawn to quench the thirst of the suffering Jesus in the poor with pure love.

The more I read and pray with the mystics, the more I think about a phrase that was popular in the past decade or so: "Love is love." There are a few problems that immediately come to mind. The first is knowing that quiet suffering is all around us. And second, we tend to have a pop-song concept of love. Also: I want to know what love is. I want God to show me.

One of the first books that got me wanting to read more about the saints who lived a deep, mystical prayer life was, well, anything by Father Thomas Dubay, SM. It's one of my regrets that I never found a way to interview him before he died. He has a sentence in his book "Fire Within" about how the saints knew how to love. When we think of saints, maybe we think of religious priests and nuns on the model of St. Francis. We think of St. Monica, too, or the parents of St. Thérèse of

Lisieux. When we do, we start to realize that there is variety to sanctity and it's not the exclusive reserve of any vocational state in life.

I share all this because I am on a deadline and I'm loath to write another column on the barbarism of letting babies who survive abortions die – or the fact that unborn children who are recognized by their mothers as human lives are no longer recognized as human lives when murdered in a homicide in New York State, as we just saw happen in recent weeks. I will say this, though: We can and must do better. And the only way we really are going to be better is by becoming contemplatives in the world.

We've got to pray. We simply have to. And why wouldn't we? Look at the cross. That's been the gateway to a deeper encounter in prayer for someone like a St. Gertrude now and again. It could be for all of us, too. Looking at Jesus on the cross reminds us who we are called to be. As St. Bernard puts it in another place: How can we not love Love himself? When you are drawn into this wondrous love, you see things different. You see people differently. You see Jesus everywhere. Prayer draws us together as the Body of Christ that we are as the Church. Forget about civil conversations. This is the stuff of transformation!

The next time you're tempted to get upset about politics or money or other troubles, think of Love himself and remember your baptism. It has both a calming effect and radicalizes our lives. There's so much more love to know and give. It's all about getting people to heaven. And only love – gratuitous love for others like the Father, Son and Holy Spirit show us – is going to get us there. That's not easy every day, but that's why this prayer business isn't escapism, but how we come to really live. Don't fall for the distractions. And pray!

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