

John Cassian: Unceasing Prayer

Text: Psalm 63:1-8

Rev. Dr. Jacque Franklin
3rd Sunday in Lent - March 7, 2010

“God can be sensed when we gaze with trembling hearts at that power of his which controls, guides, and rules everything, when we contemplate his immense knowledge and his knowing look which the secrets of the heart cannot evade.” John Cassian (360-435) Monk, writer, traveler.

John Cassian’s early education in the classics means he most likely was brought up in a genteel household. When he was in his 20s he left his native land (scholars are unsure of this land though some believe it to be modern day Romania) and family property with his friend Germanus and joined a monastery in Bethlehem. From there he and Germanus traveled to Egypt several times to live and learn from the famous ascetics of the region. They fled Egypt after 15 years due to theological controversies and he and Germanus went to Constantinople and Rome. Germanus had already become a priest and Cassian was ordained in Rome. Finally he went to Marseilles where he founded two monasteries. He composed three treatises (The Institutes of the Cenobites (Cenobites are monks or nuns in community) and the Remedies for the Eight Principal Vices, The Conferences, and On the Incarnation of Christ against Nestorius) He died sometime in the year 430.

There are no colorful extreme actions like our last two mystics, Origen and Evagrius Ponticus. But they did influence John Cassian deeply.

Bernard McGinn our James W White lecturer in April writes:

“(Cassian’s) writings were the most important links between Eastern and Western monasticism for over a millennium.” That would be Cassian’s claim to fame. So what were these writings about?

The Conferences

(Excerpts from 9 and 10 are included in the book assignment to be read for today.)

Composed in the form of conversations he and his friend Germanus recorded when they sought the teachings of the great Abba’s of the desert.

In Conference 9 it starts with,

“The blessed Isaac finally spoke these words:”

In the preface to the Conferences Cassian writes that the work was to gather ten conferences with the greatest fathers - anchorites or monks who live in solitude/ hermits, who dwelled in the desert of Skete -

He writes with utmost humility and respect for the desert fathers and warns the readers to be advised that...

“if perhaps (the reader) thinks that there are things in these books that are impossible or hard, he should not judge them by the standard of his own ability

but according to the dignity of the speakers, whose zeal and chosen orientation he should first mentally grasp, since those who have truly died to this world's life are bound by no love for kinsfolk nor by any ties of world deeds.”

In other words consider the person he is talking to...try to imagine being an anchorite, living in chosen solitude to discover spiritual enlightenment.

Cassian continues...

“If anyone wishes to give a true opinion and desires to see whether these things can be fulfilled, let him first hasten to seize upon their chosen orientation with similar zeal and by a similar way of life. Only then will he realize that what seemed beyond human capacity is not only possible but even most sweet. “

In his writings, Cassian valued and used holy scriptures as a basis for his writings and main themes.

For example...

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God - matt. 5:8

Commenting on this scripture, Cassian states,

“The entire goal of the monk and the perfection of the heart moves toward continual and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer.”

Purifying activity is unceasing prayer.

Pure and unceasing prayer was the essence of the monastic life.

To do that, the anchorites teach, we must withdraw into solitude.

Another example of his writing comes from 1 Corinthians. While still dwelling in the body we come to share some likeness of the future state when God will be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:18).

The goal of prayer is the loving union that binds the persons of the trinity.

Unity becomes whatever we breathe, think, speak is God.

To prepare for perfect prayer one must overcome their vices, be liberated from abstractions from all earthly concerns.

There are many kinds of prayer,

One recommendation to avoid distraction is the constant repetition of a single short verse.

“Be please O God to deliver me, O lord, make haste to help me! “

Scripture becomes a form of meditation and becomes food for the soul towards the highest stages of prayer.

Cassian's doctrine of the higher stages of prayer has its source in compunction, but finds its expression in unspeakable joy and inexpressible groans.

It cannot be communicated in words, because it takes place when the combined knowing powers of the soul pass beyond themselves (inwardly or outwardly) in a rapture of the mind or a rapture of the heart). Such prayer, he says, follows the model given by Jesus in Luke 5:16 22:44... (where Jesus withdraws to pray and in anguish prays until he sweats drops of blood).

“Prayer is not perfect in which the monk is conscious of himself or the fact that he is praying.”

Cassian was a lifetime monk. He was determined to bring the wisdom of the Egyptian monasticism to the west. His writings are directed to monks. He believed that Christian perfection was reserved for monasteries and that the church was meant to be a monastic institution. It was only due to the laxity of later ages that allowed the split between monasticism and laity.

Cassian became a spokesman for monks against Augustine’s late predestination teaching on grace that seemed to deny human freedom and the moral effort of asceticism. Cassian insists on the necessity of grace for the attainment of purity of heart and perfect charity.

It is hard to imagine the life and context of John Cassian.

People dying of the Plague before most medical intervention developed,
before psychotherapy;

the Roman Empire reaching it’s peak and then slowly losing power so that the civil infrastructure begins to collapse;

the church taking on more and more responsibility for education, art, civility;
theological controversy and political power bleeding into one another.

Through that context, Cassian gives us a peek into religious experience that is universal.

The purpose of rooting out the vices is not to become a perfect person, thereby earn your way into heaven.

It is to be less distracted and more attuned to the mystery of God in our midst.

I can’t count how many times I have heard, “yeah I’m spiritual but not religious”.

That statement is loaded.

It presumes that authority and tradition are against feeling, enthusiasm, and experience.

It presumes that to practice religion means being less spiritual.

It presumes that religion means to bow to the authority of another.

It presumes that authority and religion will kill or temper the experience of the holy.

So what then is religious experience?

All the ancient texts, beliefs, and rituals do not replace the experience of the divine.

Instead it provides the means to find it.

That is why we practice religion.

Mere ritual is ritual badly performed.

It takes true engagement in ritual and devotional practice to be in the condition to receive spiritual experience and truly appreciate and use it.

The work that one does in spiritual formation is important.

Author Amy Hollywood writes in an article called Spiritual but not Religious, "But it is through the grace of God that transformation occurs,"

The spiritual experience is mediated and immediate, ritualized and spontaneous.

She considers it Work and Grace entwined with love.

Many who consider themselves spiritual understand it in terms of being connected and tuned in with nature or spirit...something bigger than themselves.

However, being spiritual without a community is near impossible.

There is no purpose to the spirituality...even if it could be done without community.

Even the Abba's of the desert returned to share their experience with the monastery.

Cassian's religious writings and his monastic experiences are a gift to us in the 21st century. In fact, his influence can be felt in this city at the Benet Hill monastery, of St. Benedict, which is located in Black Forest and is where I am currently involved in their spiritual direction program. Benedict borrowed heavily from Cassian. And the result is this monastery that practices hospitality, teaches Spiritual formation, Spiritual direction, scripture and the ways of the religious.

In the midst of a conservative protestant town, in a cluttered, self focused age, there is an oasis of spirituality not against religion but because of it.

And we read this instruction from a man who takes his religious life seriously and believes that the goal is to unite with God for the benefit of the world not in spite of it. Cassian reminds us that to read scripture is not just to analyze or exegete. It's not just to understand the historical context of this piece. It is to get within the experience or the skin of others who came before us. Psalms especially help us to see people who struggle with their faith or lack thereof and express every human emotion. Cassian reminds us to feel the text, not just read it.

"We know God, love God, experience God when our experience and that of the Psalmist come together. When we have the same disposition in our heart with which each psalm is sung than become like the author grasping significance even beforehand. We anticipate the words that follow in the Psalm not from memorization but because our heart is at one with Psalmist who knows and experiences God."

Let us read Psalm 63.

We shall read it together.

O God you are my God,

I seek you,

My soul thirsts for you;

My flesh faints for you,
As in a dry and weary land
Where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
Beholding your power and glory,
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
My lips will praise you,
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast
And my mouth praises you
With joyful lips
When I think of you on my bed,
And meditate on you in the watches of the night;'
For you have been my help,
And in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy,
My soul clings to you;
Your right hand upholds me.

When worshipping with the sisters at their Benet Pines Sanctuary, I hear their clear pure voices singing the ancient psalms out of their life experience.

Pure adoration leaves the self behind.

McGinn writes at the end of his book:

“All the mystics presented here had only one reason for writing; to communicate to their contemporaries and to us, their successors, the message that God is near us, indeed, in our very midst. If we turn our attention toward God, if we call upon all our inner resources, God will reveal to us the divine presence in ways that can neither be imagined nor adequately described.”

Amen.