

Woman to Woman

Joanne Sullivan, SHCJ

BOOKSTORES are expanding their shelves with books on prayer, women praying and women's prayers. Biblical scholars have pursued exegesis into how women lived in the Hebrew, the Greco Roman and the early Christian societies. Many of us have turned to these writers for inspiration and insights into women's prayer.

I have been involved with seminars and classes using women's images of God and prayer, women in the scripture, and how women pray. I have explored feminine images of God, searching for a balance to the male-oriented, male dominating images around us. Yet, God is beyond all that we can know or imagine. I find myself seeking those images and qualities of God for which I have the greatest need at a particular time of my life.

There are those times when I return to the quiet prayer place, to the inner wonders of my woman's heart. I lay aside all the rhetoric, the exegesis, the books that tell me about prayer and go to the God of my heart, the God that speaks as lover in the Song of Songs, the intimate friend in Jeremiah, and the mother in Isaiah. God is that friend who is unafraid to challenge and gently confront me in truth. I continue to search for who God is and how God is present in my life. I look for those images of God that will integrate, comfort and express my insights.

Both the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and our SHCJ Constitutions have had an impact on my life. Within recent years I have taken both the Exercises and the Constitutions and attempted to weave them together with the life of Cornelia Connelly. When asked to write about women praying, and in particular how I as a woman within the Society pray, I found myself once again drawn to the Constitutions and Cornelia. During the days of Lent I turned to Cornelia, to the Constitutions, to that

image of God that again and again draws me into a life of intimacy and friendship with God. Call, the vows, accepted suffering were among the focus themes for prayer. What I share with the reader is the outline I used for this prayer and reflection.

The format is as follows: a focus, grace desired, text from the Constitutions, scripture, and Cornelia's words. As you pray, pray with Cornelia, woman to woman. Be with God as parent, as friend, as mother, sister or brother. Let your heart be your guide. Welcome the *shekinah* (the presence of God), the *ruah* (the spirit of God) into the fiber of your being. Go wherever the Spirit takes you.

Praying the Constitutions

I

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| Focus | God's call. This continuing personal call is at the heart of the Society's on-going life and mission. |
| Grace | I ask for the grace of an awareness that this call is a promise of closer union with God in God's saving work. |
| Text | This continuing personal call is at the heart of the Society's on-going life and mission. (C.48)
We take a firmer grasp of the hope God's call holds for us. (C.76)
Fidelity to God's call requires courage and generosity as we seek to promote the reign of justice and peace in the world. (C.26) |
| Scripture | Isaiah 43:2-3 Do not be afraid . . . I have called you
Isaiah 44:1-2 But now listen . . . Israel whom I have chosen
Isaiah 49:1 Yahweh called me before I was born
John 4:10 If you only knew the gift God offers you |
| Cornelia | Heaven must be won according to God's way upon us in particular and on each one in particular.
I will have no reserves with God.
We are engaged in the service of the same Lord, united in the same divine Spouse, working for the same end — formed and bound by the same Rule. |

II

Focus God's call through our vows.

Grace I ask for the grace that God's will becomes for me the only happiness and the only thing worth living for.

Text The love of Christ leads us to give God our hearts and lives as Christ gave his, without reserve and without recall. (C.19)

True friendship in community strengthens our love of God, sustains and supports us and teaches us to go out to others with the very love of Christ. (C.20)

The practice of obedience demands from all of us inner freedom. We seek this will of the Father, listening to God's word wherever it is spoken. Through our vow of obedience each of us freely offers her life with the Son to the Father. . . (C.34)

If we cling to anything it becomes our master; we want to hold fast to Christ alone. (C.24)

Scripture Col. 1:9-12 You should reach the fullest knowledge of God's will

John 4:34 My will is to do the will of him who sent me

Eph. 1:1-14 God chose us

Cornelia I unite myself to the Father. I belong all to God. There is nothing in the world that I would not leave to do his holy will and to satisfy him.

III

Focus Call to surrender to God's will for me now.

Grace I ask for a solitude of heart which unites me with Christ's sacrifice.

Text Like Cornelia, we bring a radical attachment to God alone and to God's purposes. (C.21)

We draw strength from the celebration of the Eucharist. (C.41)

We grow in the knowledge and love of Christ and learn to find him in all things by spending time with him. (C.40)

Scripture Phil. 2:3-11 He emptied himself

Phil 3:7-10 All I want is to know Christ . . .

Cornelia I will have no reserves with God.

The more we love God and the more perfectly we shall be in the joy and liberty of his children forgetting ourselves and rejoicing in [God].

It is God for his purpose who puts this will and action in me.

IV

Focus The way God is calling me now, he has been calling me all along, but now God calls me with new meaning.

Grace I ask that through the purifying events of life welcomed in faith and love God's purpose will be accomplished in me.

Text Each succeeding stage of life brings a new invitation to leave all, to follow Christ and to find the place where he dwells. (C.1)

Drawn by the Spirit . . . we share in the self emptying of the Son. (C.2)

Through our incorporation in a community of faith and service, God continues to enter our history. (C.7)

Scripture Jer. 1:4-8 Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

Mark 8:34-38 If a person wishes to come after me

Song of Songs 8:10 And under God's eyes, I found true peace.

Phil. 4:2-3 I appeal to Evodia and Syntyche . . . These women were a help to me . . . Their names are written in the book of life.

I found myself drawn to the Constitutions and to Cornelia

Cornelia

God alone with our cooperation can make us what we ought to be.

I am so afraid of having any reserves with God.

If you have been careful and zealous in answering the call of our Lord Jesus Christ, remember that it is not sufficient to have begun well, you must also persevere with courage and finish with resolution what you have so happily begun.

V

Focus

Accepted suffering: suffering is the cost of discipleship.

Grace

I ask in Christ to unite myself to the whole of humanity.

Text

So live that God's love may prevail.

In Christ we unite ourselves to the whole of humanity, especially the poor and suffering. (C.6)

By this consecration we join those in the church who press toward uncompromising acceptance of the gospel. (C.13)

We share in the self-emptying of the Son and in the mission which he joyfully accepted from the Father. (C.2)

Scripture

John 12:24 Unless a grain of wheat

Luke 9:23-26 If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let her renounce herself and take up her cross and follow me.

Cornelia

O God, help me to live, not I but Jesus in me, in his spirit of sacrifice and suffering with only God in view.

I wish to imitate thee, in thy patience in suffering outrages and injuries, and in thy courage to support all kinds of adversities.

VI

Focus

That to identify with Christ in his suffering is to identify with the poor and suffering in the world.

Grace

That I may help others to grow strong in faith so that we may all live truly human lives.

Text

In Christ we unite ourselves to the whole of humanity, especially to the poor and suffering. We act with the same

courageous zeal which she [Cornelia] taught us. (C.6)

Freely and irrevocably we surrender ourselves into the hands of God who consecrates us in community for the sake of the kingdom. By this consecration we join those in the church who press toward uncompromising acceptance of the gospel. (C.13)

Scripture

II Cor. 5:14-17 The love of Christ impels us . . .

Luke 9:51

He set his face for Jerusalem

Mark 8:31-38

Doctrine of the Cross

Cornelia

We will never know the value of suffering till we reach heaven.

Nourished from the well springs of this heavenly fountain and fed in the pasture of his divine love, we are to run with ardour in the way that he has pointed out, and to employ every effort to bring others to taste and to embrace the sweet yoke which he offers them

VII

Focus

My desire for God is at the root of how I perceive my life.

Grace

I desire to be with Christ in the way of simplicity, humility, and 'accepted suffering'.

Text

Love of Christ leads us to give him our hearts and lives as he gave his without reserve and without recall. (C.19)

We fix our hope in God and call attention to the fullness of life in the world to come. (C.22)

Scripture

Gal. 2:19-21 I have been crucified with Christ . . . I cannot bring myself to give up God's gift.

Phil. 3:9-14

All I want is to know Christ

Cornelia

I belong all to God.

God alone.

*As you
pray,
pray with
Cornelia,
woman
to woman*

Have I been watchful over my heart? Does it love him above all things?

VIII

Focus

Until Christ is formed in you.

Grace

I ask that I may be formed according to my vocation and in the spirit of the Society.

Text

Throughout our lives God continues to call and form us. (C.47)

We listen attentively to the Spirit in the stillness of a quiet heart and learn to recognize and respond to [her] in every person and situation. (C.40)

Our gradual transformation is the result of choices influenced by grace and repeated over a lifetime . . . This continuing personal call is at the heart of the Society's ongoing life and mission. (C.48)

Scripture

Eph. 4:16-24 Lay aside you former life

Phil. 3 I wish to know only Christ . . .

Jer. 31:21 Come home, virgin of Israel, Yahweh is creating something new on earth, and Woman sets out to find her Husband again.

John 4:8 If you only knew the gift God was offering

Cornelia

The invitation comes from God, and to God you must give your answer.

We are what God sees us and knows us to be, nothing more.

Contributors

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Agnes Dobson, SHCJ lives in the Chesterton Road community, London, England, and is currently training in therapeutic massage.

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Melinda Keane, SHCJ is a member of the new SHCJ community in Chad.

Margaret Mann, SHCJ, after a number of years in province administration, now lives and works in Newtown, Wales.

Rosemary C. McDonnough, a lay woman from the Philadelphia area, is a member of a group which meets for prayer at the Cornelia Connelly Center, Rosemont Philadelphia, USA.

Mary McManus, SHCJ has been teaching at St. Kizito's Community Girls Secondary School, Duduguru, Nigeria; she returns to the European province in the summer.

Catrina McPhail, a qualified midwife, is a novice in the European province, and a member of the community in Harcourt St., Dublin, Ireland.