Praying Always

Tucked away in a corner of the university campus where I work is a beautiful seminary library with an unassuming little cart of free materials—donated books and pamphlets not deemed worthy of a place on the shelves. Most of them are just quaint, like the 1970s and 80s pamphlets on then-current issues like liturgical dance or the Cold War. But every once in a while, you can find a hidden treasure on that cart. I found one recently, and I’d like to share it with you.

The treasure was as unassuming as the cart: a worn paperback whose green cover with white text were “totally 80s,” as we used to say, and whose title—*Glimpses*—didn’t give much of a glimpse into its topic. But I recognized the author: Benedictine monk Dom Hubert van Zeller, who writes beautifully on the spiritual life. So I picked it up,and it has been my go-to chapel reading ever since.

The book’s first essay, “Living to God,” begins: “Prayer is more than the spiritual exercise which gives it its name. It is the Godward life of man. It is that which shapes a man’s attitude towards everything that happens.” *Godward life*. Am I living a Godward life, in which prayer shapes my attitude toward everything?

A little later: “True prayer moves through and in the life God sends me, through and in the action God wants of me. My life, my prayer, my action: these things are one, and each is measured by the quality of the love which binds them.” He adds: “Prayer is not a substitute for action, action is not a substitute for prayer. Neither is to be seen in isolation. If I get love in prayer right, I get love in action right. God is love and God is not divided.” *My prayer, my life, my action*. Are these things one? How can they be better unified?

As van Zeller makes so clear, the unity of life, prayer, and action comes from the inside. Actions—even great, helpful, and heroic actions—aren’t enough by themselves. “To live for God is more than to act for God. Christian practice, Catholic action, religious observance. However worthy the outward expression, the essential condition is the inward spirit. The thrust of life in God is the thrust of grace.” *The essential condition is the inward spirit*. When I’m doing noble work, is my spirit in the right place, responsive to God’s grace?

“Prayer does not detach a man from life but shows him how to live it. Prayer is not an activity apart from life but the primary activity of it. Prayer is not my articulation of truth but God’s articulation of truth in me.” *God’s articulation of truth in me.* Am I open enough to God’s guidance to allow Him to articulate His truth—to me, and through me to others?

This treasure, this message from a holy monk to all of us in the “trenches,” is so inspiring and challenging, and at the same time it’s so reassuring. With the demands of family, work, and other obligations—especially for those working in high-intensity fields like health care—striving to unify our lives, prayers, and actions in love is not easy; maybe it’s not even possible without a lot of grace. But with God’s grace it *is* possible. Even when our personal and professional responsibilities don’t allow a lot of down time to devote exclusively to contemplation, the good news is that this life of prayer “through and in the action God wants of me” is a realistic goal for all of us. As van Zeller says, it’s “not an elitist prerogative; it is living the life God calls all men to live.”