



REST

the gentle art of doing nothing

Br. Nicholas Bartoli, SSJE

THERE IS WITHIN US ALL A VERY SACRED PLACE, a gift of stillness, light, and love central to our being. We could call it our “heart” or “soul” or “the indwelling of Christ.” It’s at once a point of utter nothingness, and the point which gives birth to all things in heaven and on earth. It’s a place capable of holding both incredible beauty and terrible pain. It’s the place where Christ is born, and from whence we can share Christ’s love and compassion in the world. It’s God’s eternal Kingdom within us and our common inheritance as children of light. Against all reason, it’s the place God chooses to call home, and so it’s our home, too.

However, it very often seems difficult to even visit this place, let alone claim it as our inheritance and home. We sense its existence most often in a feeling of restlessness, the nagging feeling that there’s something we’ve forgotten or have missed. (The most important spiritual truths often feel like remembering, like a restoration of something lost.) When we start feeling restless or hopeless, we recall our desire for something more: a desire to awaken to God’s loving presence, and to dwell in the sacred place within us that is our deepest truth.

As hard as it can be to describe this place, we can become more receptive to it. And the way is truly very simple. I can sum it up in just one word: rest.

Now, this rest is subtler than just taking a break from *doing stuff*, although it can include that. Of this particular kind of rest, Julian of Norwich writes: “For He is the Very Rest. / God wishes to be known, / And it pleases Him that / We rest in Him; / For all that is beneath Him / Will never satisfy us. / Therefore no soul is rested / Til it is emptied of all things / That are made. / When, for love of Him, / It is emptied, / The soul can / Receive His deep rest.”

Imagine this rest like a well, boundless in depth, filled with the profound stillness of the Holy One. From those still waters arise the light and love of Christ. In prayer, with the help of Jesus, we sometimes draw from these waters, tasting

eternal life and sensing God's presence. God's greatest wish for us is that we simply would let ourselves *fall in*. (In my experience, God is even willing to give us a *push* now and then!) Yet a part of us remains wary of the depths, and so we cling to the lip of the well as if our life depended on it. Which is ironic, since the life God wants for us depends on exactly the reverse: our letting go.

In our daily lives, we tend to expend an awful amount of effort and energy on not letting go. We constantly try to prove our worth by accomplishing things and being very busy. Or we spend a lot of energy judging other people, trying to prove our righteousness by focusing on the splinter in our neighbor's eye. Or our effort can be spent jumping from one distraction to the next, avoiding any stillness. This last tactic is especially dangerous in our current culture of distraction, as technology promises to keep us endlessly (mindlessly) entertained — our attention held captive.

But God's invitation remains the same: Just rest. It's so simple and so transformative. The radical practice of rest can help us to recognize in ourselves the very patterns of effort that consume our energy and our lives. It can help us to let go of these useless strategies and this relentless striving. Rest takes us to the lip of the well, and helps us to fall into God's generous grace.

Incorporating the practice of rest into our prayer life means doing *less*, trusting in Jesus, and letting *God* do all the work. Catherine of Siena writes, "The sun hears the fields talking about / effort / and the sun / smiles, / and whispers / to me, / 'Why don't the fields just rest, for / I am willing to do / everything / to help them / grow?' / Rest, my dears, in / prayer."

There are specific forms of prayer that lend themselves to practicing this kind of rest. Centering prayer, for example, is a type of contemplative prayer in which the practice consists simply of consenting to rest in God's presence. David Frenette, in his book on centering prayer writes that this kind of resting, "... is a resting of your being in the Being of God. With this very subtle resting, your mind, heart, and bodily awareness can also rest and just be in the source [of all things]: God's indwelling presence... you gradually learn a new freedom; you discover a new peace, a peace that passes all understanding and serves you by giving you a ground, a center in the busyness of life."

Rest is something we can practice anytime, not just in formal times of prayer. We can practice it when we're driving, when we're waiting in line, when we're out for a walk, when we're at work, when we're cooking or cleaning, anytime really.

When we practice rest, we learn a new way of relating to life, just as it is and such as it is. It's a practice requiring the minimal amount of effort imaginable, like letting a leaf gently fall from your hand. It's the cultivation of an open and

spacious attitude toward ourselves, the world, and God.

When we let ourselves rest, we realize God's being within us, and we awaken to the truth that we are *already* the peace and joy of the risen Christ. When we let ourselves rest in the blessed stillness of our heavenly Father, we become the hands and feet of Jesus on earth, sharing the light and love of Christ in a world desperately in need of just this.

Our prayer, then, is as simple as the practice itself. Please, Lord Jesus Christ, help your beloved servants rest. Please, Lord, grant us rest.

Br. Nicholas Bartoli was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, and is an initially-professed member of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist. His ministries include spiritual direction, preaching, teaching contemplative prayer, and leading retreats and workshops for individuals, groups, and parishes. He currently welcomes guests at the monastery at Emery House in West Newbury, Massachusetts.

Nicholas holds a B.S. in computer science and applied mathematics from Polytechnic University, an M.S. in Environmental Studies from the University of Montana, and an M.S. in somatic counseling psychology from Naropa University. He also has completed two years of an M.Div. program at the Iliff School of Theology. After serving for two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Fiji, Nicholas worked in a number of fields: as a high school teacher, IT professional in the nonprofit sector, environmental analyst with Environmental Protection Agency, modern dancer, yoga instructor, massage therapist, and, most recently before joining the Society, a psychotherapist in private practice.

Nicholas' interests include contemplative prayer and meditation, nondual theology, writing poetry, and interfaith dialogue.

QUOTES *to ponder*

“Be still and know that I am God.”
– *Psalm 46:10*

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”
– *Matthew 11:28*

“True restfulness, though, is a form of awareness, a way of being in life. It is living ordinary life with a sense of ease, gratitude, appreciation, peace and prayer. We are restful when ordinary life is enough.”
– Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God*

“Rest is synonymous with grace, which is never seized by force but always taken hold of freely by faith.”
– John Koessler, *The Radical Pursuit of Rest*

“When we trust God by taking our hands off our work, what we give up through Sabbath ultimately benefits those around us.”
– Shelly Miller, *Rhythms of Rest: Finding the Spirit of Sabbath in a Busy World*

“Rest makes us better workers and better worshipers.”
– Jacqueline Crowe

PRACTICES *to try*

To find inner rest, often we must first create outer rest. Each day, set aside a period of time (even if it's only five minutes) in which you will simply be, not do. Find a quiet space, free from distraction. You might find it helpful to light a candle. Settle yourself comfortably and allow yourself to rest in that spot. Become aware of your breath. Trust that God will do the rest.

Various kinds of contemplative prayer may be helpful to explore. Centering prayer, in particular, focuses most especially on simply resting in God's presence. Centering prayer begins with your intention to consent or accept God's presence. The basic instructions are:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence.
2. In a comfortable, alert posture settle into stillness, open to God's presence.
3. When distracted by thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, or any kind of experience use the sacred word to gently return to simply being in God's presence.

For more information on centering prayer, see the "further resources" section below.

QUESTIONS *to consider*

What strategies do you recognize in yourself for avoiding stillness and rest? What distractions do you turn to? What keeps you from times of rest?

Have you had times in your past when you have tasted the stillness within that contemplatives describe as resting in God? What conditions helped bring you to that place of encounter and awareness? How might you draw near to that inner place again, wherever and however you find yourself in life today?

RESOURCES *to explore*

David Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God*

Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*

Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*

<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/category/category/centering-prayer>

A PRAYER *for rest*

O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Brothers of SSJE are a community of men giving our whole selves over to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rooted in the ancient monastic traditions of prayer and community life, and critically engaged with contemporary culture, we seek to know and share an authentic experience of God's love and mercy. We live a common life shaped by worship, prayer, and our Rule of Life.

We invite you to learn more at www.SSJE.org

