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“The Holy Hour”

One of the best decisions I made in 1991, next to entering the seminary, was to pray a daily Holy Hour. It was my first semester at St. John Vianney in Miami and someone gave me a cassette tape of a [talk](#) by the late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. In it, Sheen spoke of the absolute and essential nature of his own daily Eucharistic Holy Hour (not generally exposition, but adoration of Christ in the Tabernacle). As I listened to this great orator speak of this time as the *sine qua non* from which his wisdom flowed, I was inspired by the Holy Spirit at that moment to embrace the same daily habit. Sheen also has written of this in his autobiography *Treasures in Clay*, which I highly recommend. In it he wrote:

I keep up the Holy Hour to grow more and more into His likeness... Looking at the Eucharistic Lord for an hour transforms the heart in a mysterious way as the face of Moses was transformed after his companionship with God on the mountain. [...] The Holy Hour is not a devotion; it is a sharing in the work of redemption. “Could you not watch one hour with Me?” Not for an hour of activity did He plead, but for an hour of companionship. [...] The purpose of the Holy Hour is to encourage deep personal encounter with Christ. The holy and glorious God is constantly inviting us to come to Him, to hold converse with Him and to ask such things as we need and to experience what a blessing there is in fellowship with Him. One of the by-products of the Holy Hour was the sensitiveness to the Eucharistic Presence of Our Divine Lord.

I must admit that I didn't really know what I was doing/or even supposed to do during the hour – nonetheless I embraced this daily discipline. Like they say in the rooms of A.A., “fake it till you make it.” The analogy of sunbathing has always spoken to me as a Floridian. By doing nothing but sitting in the sun exposed to the warmth of its rays we are literally transformed. How much more so as we sit in the presence of our God incarnate, Jesus Christ present in the Tabernacle, that the rays of His Grace transform us imperceptibly yet significantly as we sit in His presence day in and day out. We walk out of the chapel not with a suntan, but with the transforming radiance of becoming more like Christ the Light of the World. We know that the saints *radiate Christ* – as do we when we spend time in His presence.

Or another analogy that speaks to my heart is that of a son spending time with his father. Imperceptibly the son picks up the traits and habits (for good or ill) of his dad – the way he walks, talks, crosses his legs, etc. Thus, we begin to imitate Christ the more we spend time with Him in the intimacy of prayer. As the years have gone by, I have learned more about the spiritual life, *lectio divina*, meditation, and a love of silent contemplative prayer, and thus the holy hour has become even more fruitful. However, in the early years, and even still in the periods of dryness or

distraction, growth is always occurring as I soak in the Son and sit on the lap of my Father. There are days that subjectively the prayer could be better, but I also believe that objectively it is always efficacious even when we “feel” nothing. St. Thérèse gives us some comfort by reminding us of the Father’s delight when we simply fall asleep in His arms – who doesn’t love it when a baby falls asleep as you rock it? However, our aim is not to show up just in order to get a good nap, but to grow in relationship with the god who loves us.

I do not have a perfect attendance award for the daily holy hour, but it is a major priority in my life and I definitely have a winning percentage. Again, Fulton Sheen has given me great inspiration from his daily devotion of being in the presence of Christ in the Tabernacle – even to the point of sitting right outside of the Church if it were locked (personal example). That is not to say that one couldn’t pray elsewhere like in one’s room or out in nature, but Archbishop Sheen among others’ preference is to try, as far as possible, to pray in the presence of the Lord in the Tabernacle. Think of our Jewish brothers and sisters who pray at the Western Wall just because it is the closest they can get to where the Holy of Holies once was – that is devotion. How much more so for us when Jesus is waiting for us in the Tabernacle! Those days that I don’t get there, I can feel a void in my life and make a resolve for next day to better prioritize that beautiful time of intimacy with the God who loves me.

Statistical data likewise proves the Holy Hour to be of great benefit. Msgr. Steven Rossetti’s research has “demonstrated the broad positive effects of prayer in a priest’s life. As the priest’s time in private prayer increased, they were less emotionally exhausted, less depressed, less lonely, less likely to be obese, better able to deal with stress, had an increased sense of inner peace, reported being happier as priests and had a stronger relationship to God. These increases were consistent up to an hour of daily private prayer” (*Why Priests are Happy*, p. 11). It should be no real surprise that priests who take the time for personal prayer of up to an hour a day truly experience greater peace and satisfaction in their vocation and in their ministry. The Rossetti study further shows that satisfaction did not increase with multiple hours spent in prayer – so no need to pray 3 daily holy hours as diocesan priests (except on retreat). While that might be a wonderful pious thought, it is not our particular vocation – we are not monks or hermits. I get the occasional complaint from pastors regarding the overzealous pray-er who is neglecting pastoral duties with an over-extended prayer life. Stay balanced brothers, and remember who you are and what your vocation is all about. *Nosce te ipsum!* All that being said, my encouragement is for you to begin the habit now of a daily holy hour, or at least begin building up to that. And what is the fruit of such a spiritual discipline?

- an increased sensitivity to the promptings of the Holy Spirit since our spiritual senses are used to listening to God in silence;
- deeper insight into the Word of God which is made manifest in our preaching and teaching. As St. Vincent de Paul wrote: “Only by praying does one touch people’s hearts when one proclaims the Gospel” (ref. by Pope Francis, 14 October 2017);
- a calmer heart and well-ordered mind because we learn to rest in God. John 15 comes to mind about remaining in His love. This deep place of intimacy is where we turn to the Father for healing, comfort, and strength;

- we will find in the holy hour an intimate place of being known by the Other. This is all about our relationship with God, the most important relationship in our lives – and in a particular way as celibate men;
- it is the place where we can acknowledge our grief, suffering, and pain in order to be healed (e.g. ARRR);
- Finally, prayer is also the place in which our hearts grow and we fall more and more in love with God and His holy people. “The fruit of prayer is love,” as Mother Teresa so often would say. Do not gauge the “success” of our daily prayer by what happens in that time, but by how we are acting when not in prayer (cf. 1 Cor. 13).

Likewise, Pope Francis recently shared his thoughts on the fruit of our daily prayer time adoring Our Lord:

One who adores, who takes up the living wellspring of love cannot but be left, so to speak, “contaminated”. And he begins to behave with others as the Lord does with him: he becomes more merciful, more understanding, more willing; he overcomes his own rigidity and opens himself to others (“Welcoming Means Putting Things into Perspective,” 14 October 2017, *L’Oss. Romano*, 12).

I believe this daily time, whether in the form of one continuous hour or broken up through the day, to be indispensable for our active and pastoral lifestyle. We will not do it perfectly, and sometimes it will get “filled up” by catching up with a couple “hours” of the Divine Office (which is of course a promise we make and is not optional!) and/or writing our next two homilies or talks, but my goal is to have at least half of the time for true silent prayer. There may even be days we might miss it, but if it is not a daily goal, or a recognized need, it will not make it into our schedule (e.g. importance of scheduling and finding the time that works best, and also remaining flexible). In fact, a good way to stay accountable is to let loved ones know that this is part of your daily routine, so whether you are visiting family, travelling, or with friends on vacation, it remains a part of your daily routine (examples from my life).

Silence is so important for our hearts and souls. Silence is a dialogue in which we listen for the voice of God and allow Him to be present to us in the noisiness of our lives (remember to turn the phone to airplane mode!). The Holy Father said this about spending silent moments with Jesus:

From this mysterious silence of God springs his Word which resonates in our heart. Jesus himself teaches us how it is truly possible to “be” with the Father and he shows us this with his prayer. The Gospels show us Jesus who withdraws to secluded places to pray; seeing his intimate relationship with God, the disciples feel the desire to be able to take part in it and they ask him: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk. 11:1). [He continued later in the talk] Do we have this longing? Does each of us have the wish to be born anew in order to meet the Lord? Do you have this wish? Indeed, one can easily lose it because, due to so many activities, so many projects to implement, in the end we are short of time and we lose sight of what is fundamental: the inner life of the heart, our spiritual life, our life which is the encounter with the Lord in prayer” (“Prayer is a Personal Relationship with God,” 15 November 2017, *L’Oss. Romano*, 3 and 8).

Back on December 1st I was speaking with Bishop Estévez about writing this talk and he shared with me that it was the anniversary of Brother Charles de Foucauld's death (12/1/1916), who was killed while adoring the Blessed Sacrament. The bishop went on to say: "I owe great gratitude in my priestly life to the Jesu Caritas Fraternity for when I was invited to join, I began the practice of one hour of daily adoration and a monthly dessert day. These two charisms have had a huge impact on my journey. Needless to say what the fraternity has meant." I share this with Bishop Estévez' permission, and I do so that we might draw inspiration from his example and the witness of so many saints of yesterday and today who have made prayer a priority in their lives. When Archbishop Sheen would preach priest retreats, he would state at the beginning that the only outcome of the retreat that he desired for them was to take on the practice of a daily holy hour.

For Christmas, I gave you a book about seven habits of highly effective people, because I want you to soar as leaders and shepherds of the communities entrusted to your care, but you will only do so if you are grounded in prayer. I beg you to make good New Year's resolutions flowing from your retreats to draw ever closer to the Lord on a daily basis. And so, today I offer you the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Priests: daily Mass, praying the Liturgy of the Hours, offering a holy hour, having devotion to the Blessed Mother, monthly spiritual direction, an annual retreat, and staying in fraternity with your brother priests. By forming these habits now, I assure you that you will be "highly effective" and that these daily, monthly, and annual spiritual habits will greatly enrich your personal and pastoral life "for our good and the good of all of His Holy Church!"