

Foxholes

Whether or not it is always and everywhere true that “*there are no atheists in foxholes,*” we all understand the sentiment of this old saying. Men in combat situations, facing the horrors and carnage of battle, and their own mortality, may turn to God in desperation, frightened by bombs and bullets into a kind of faith. I suppose a prayer of a person in such a situation would be something like the following: “*God, if you are real and you can hear me, I ask you to save me from this situation. If you save me, I will turn my life around and I will go to Church thereafter. Please! Please save me!*”

Such a “foxhole prayer” is, of course, borne of the urgent awareness that all other layers of protection and security have been stripped away. The soldier is facing an extreme, mortal threat, thereby turning his full attention to God with whom, some days earlier, he only had a casual or part-time relationship.

It’s sad to think that we need such extreme prodding in order to come to an awareness of our dire need for God in our lives . . . our need for a savior. I have never been in such an extreme situation. But there have been moments in life where it felt like everything was spinning out of control and a sense of desperation set in. Then too, my prayer seemed to become more urgent and frequent: My usual suite of resources was not nearly enough to contend.

Spiritual masters and mystics have been known to guide students into contemplation of such realities as our impoverishment before God. The following are a couple of examples:

“Woe to those who do not realize their own misery! And yet greater woe to those who love this miserable and corruptible life. . . As long as we have this frail body of ours, we can never be without sin or live without weariness and sorrow, (Imitation of Christ, Thomas ‘a Kempis)’”

“Anyone who saw and experienced himself as he really and truly is would have no difficulty being humble, for two things would become clear to him. In the first place he would see clearly the degradation, misery, and weakness of the human condition arising from original sin. . . In the second place, he would recognize the transcendent

goodness of God as he is in himself and his superabundant love for man, (Cloud of Unknowing).”

Of course, these examples do not exactly correlate to the example of extreme fear which motivates the foxhole prayer. The similarity is only in the sense of urgency and the level of wretchedness and vulnerability. Herein, the mystics propose an everyday way of accessing this profound sense of creatureliness and dependence which is routinely covered over in this life by things which make us feel powerful or self-sufficient or otherwise stronger than we really are.



Augustine suggests this in his famous “Confessions” when he says the following:

“I was carrying about with me my soul all broken and bleeding and not wanting to be carried by me; yet I did not know where to put it down. There was no rest for it anywhere---not in pleasant groves, not in games and singing, not in sweet smelling gardens, not in fine banquets, not in the pleasures of the bed, not in the reading of books, nor in poetry. I loathed everything . . . my god was an empty fantasy, a creation of my own error, (Book IV, chapter 7).”

Only some form of regular contemplation or reflective prayer can enable us to strip away the illusions of our supposed self-sufficiency and our perceived command over our lives. It is not a self-condemnation nor a self-loathing which seeks this sort of knowledge: It is all serves recognize the deep level of our need with respect to our high calling in Christ Jesus.