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Turning to God and Holiness in the Life of the Spirit

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SP458R – Assignment #2 – Essay

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In this essay, two related aspects in the life of the Holy Spirit are examined. These are the meaning and importance of: (1) turning to God and (2) holiness.

Turning to God

The writings of Simone Weil (1909-1943), Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1981), and Brother Lawrence (ca. 1610-1691) show that turning to God is dependent on God's regenerating work in a person through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Weil writes that no human being intervened in her life to turn her to God.¹ In fact, human relationships can cause a person's refusal to accept the Christian message – since people fear the illusion and error of human influence.² Never at any moment in her life had she consciously sought for God – rather, early in her life she realized that the question of God was a problem for which the data could not be obtained here below.³ In sum, Weil's turning to God suggests the effect of grace alone – a gift of God, and not any human achievement.⁴ Her view of life was always Christian, and she had the idea that she was born inside the Christian community".⁵ Her experience is reminiscent of what John writes in the fourth Gospel: “. . . children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, *but of God* [emphasis mine]”.⁶

¹ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (Attente de Dieu), trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Fontana Books, 1959), 28.

² Weil, *Waiting on God*, 28.

³ Weil, *Waiting on God*, 29.

⁴ In this context, one can see Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁵ Weil, *Waiting on God*, 32.

⁶ John 1:12-13 in *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 124.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux supports the idea of the divine initiative involved in a person's turning to God, seen in Weil's writing. This turning is the result of God first drawing the soul to himself. Thérèse confirms this in quoting the Lord who expressed that "no one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me" (Jn 6:44).⁷ Once a person is drawn by God, they can then in response turn to God and have the privilege to ask, seek, and knock – being reassured that they will receive, find, and have doors opened to them (Mt 7:7).⁸ Thérèse links being first drawn by God, and then a person turning to God, with a passage in the Cantic of Canticles, "Draw me after you . . . we will [then] exalt and rejoice in you; we will extol your love" (Song 1:4).⁹

Dostoyevsky, in writing about the life of Father Zossima, again shows how turning to God is the result of prior divine regeneration. Father Zossima recalls a distinct turning point in his life when, at eight years old, he suddenly understood for the first time what was read in church – and how he "was first moved by deep spiritual emotion" and for the first time "consciously received the first seed of the words of God in [his] soul".¹⁰ It is God who first has mercy on a person and then summons them to himself through the drawing of the Spirit – they then have the freedom to respond and to choose to turn to God.¹¹

Finally, the life of Brother Lawrence also reveals the initial divine intervention (regeneration) that occurs before a person can turn to God. He deeply recognized "that God had granted him an exceptional grace in his conversion . . . [that] he received an insight into

⁷ *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 133. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. Michael Day Cong (London: Burns and Oates, 1951), 179.

⁸ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 179. Note: The promise of Matthew 7:7 is also confirmed in John 14:13-14 and 16:23-24, which Thérèse of Lisieux notes on page 179.

⁹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 179. Note: By turning to God, Thérèse writes, "we are seeking to be closely united to the captivating object of our love" (page 179).

¹⁰ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, bk. 6, *The Russian Monk*, trans. David Magarshack (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982), 341.

¹¹ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 366.

the providence and power of God which was never erased from his soul”.¹² Thereafter, he turned to God and walked before him in faith, humility, love, and reverent fear.¹³

Holiness

From the writings of Weil, Thérèse of Lisieux, Dostoyevsky, and Brother Lawrence, holiness is understood both as a *definitive* sanctification and *progressive* sanctification.

Weil suggests that she understood the aspect of holiness definitively imputed to a person – without the expending of much energy. It is holiness acquired through the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer¹⁴ – not through human wisdom, strength, or effort. It is the holiness that comes through God’s grace in Christ. First Corinthians 1:30 supports this: “. . . you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is our righteousness, *holiness* and redemption” [emphasis mine].¹⁵ To illustrate, the following quotations imply that traits of holiness were definitively imparted. Weil writes that “as for the *spirit of poverty*, I do not remember any moment when it was not in me . . . From my earliest childhood I always had also the Christian idea of *love for one’s neighbour*, to which I gave the name *justice*”.¹⁶ Furthermore, she writes that “the idea of *purity*, with all that this word can imply for a Christian, took possession of me at the age of sixteen” [emphases mine].¹⁷

¹² Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. John J. Delaney (New York: Image Books, 1977), 35-36.

¹³ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 55.

¹⁴ Simone Weil saw herself as a believer. Note her comment in this respect: “Of course I knew quite well that my conception of life was Christian. That is why it never occurred to me that I could enter the Christian community. I had the idea that I was born inside” (from *Waiting on God*, page 32).

¹⁵ *The NIV Study Bible: News International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 2203. Note: Along these lines, W. Harold Mare offers a helpful exegesis on 1 Corinthians 1:30-31 in “1 Corinthians”, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 197.

¹⁶ Weil, *Waiting on God*, 31.

¹⁷ Weil, *Waiting on God*, 32. Note: Weil leaves the reader with an important clue regarding the meaning of holiness in one’s life when she writes: “For as to the spiritual direction of my soul, I think that God himself has taken it in hand from the start and still looks after it” (page 39).

In contrast to Weil, Thérèse of Lisieux shows the nature of progressive sanctification – the human responsibility in acquiring holiness.¹⁸ She describes practical aspects of developing holiness in the life of the Holy Spirit. For example, she writes of *childlike self-surrender*, as well as *gratitude*.¹⁹ She cautions “even among His own He finds so few surrendering themselves without reserve to the tenderness of His infinite love”.²⁰ The path to holiness is the way of *love* – this is what Thérèse came to see as her vocation.²¹ Growing in holiness also means *humility* – for example, “utter littleness”²² or being “little and frail in Your [God’s] presence”.²³ Finally, *abiding in Christ* contributes toward attaining holiness in the life of the Spirit. Expressive of her faith, she states that “surrendering myself with daring confidence, I shall simply stay gazing at my Sun until I die”,²⁴ or again “for as long as You [God] wish, I will stay with my eyes fixed on You”.²⁵

Dostoyevsky’s writing hints at *both* definitive and progressive sanctification in the life of the Spirit. Regarding the gift of holiness, in Father Zossima’s adolescent recollections, Dostoyevsky narrates how the young man almost never opened the Scriptures. Nevertheless, ironically he never parted from the Bible and always carried it about with him – “in truth, [he] was keeping the Book, without knowing it [himself]”.²⁶ On the other hand, Dostoyevsky also

¹⁸ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 178-180. Note: Two examples of the human factor in acquiring holiness are seen as follows: (1) “You know, my God, that my one desire has ever been to love You alone; Your glory has been my one ambition” (page 178); (2) “This is . . . what I ask. I want Jesus so to draw me into the flames of His love, so to make me one with Himself, that He may live and act in me” (page 179-180).

¹⁹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 183-184. Note: Jesus had said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3 NRSV). In relation to gratitude, Psalm 50:23 is instructive: “Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me” (NRSV).

²⁰ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 184.

²¹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 190. Note: The apostle Paul had exhorted: “Pursue love” (1 Cor 14:1 NRSV).

²² Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 194.

²³ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 194.

²⁴ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 194. Note: Thérèse’s words parallel what the author of Hebrews expressed – “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2 NRSV).

²⁵ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 195.

²⁶ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 347.

touches on progressive sanctification. For example, holiness, as a way of life in the Spirit, entails a *social conscience*. In this regard, Dostoyevsky writes that “every one of us is responsible for everyone else in every way” – including the natural environment.²⁷ His rationale is that everything is interconnected on earth.²⁸ Consequently, *egocentricity* has to die – “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24).²⁹ Moreover, to grow in holiness (wherein lies freedom of spirit and spiritual joy), three factors ought not to be overlooked: *obedience*, *fasting*, and *prayer*.³⁰ Growth in holiness through prayer is indicated in these words: “If your prayer is sincere, there will be every time you pray a new feeling containing an idea in it, an idea you did not know before, which will give you fresh courage; you will then understand that prayer is education [in holiness]”.³¹ Finally, as with Thérèse of Lisieux, *love* is an integral part of holiness in the life of the Spirit. Dostoyevsky counsels to love all men (even those in their sin), children (they help to “purify our hearts”), and all of God’s creation (including the animals) – for love is a teacher and loving humility is a powerful force.³²

Brother Lawrence’s writings offer rich insights for the praxis of holiness. The title of his book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, expresses the focus of his pursuit in holiness – a constant companionship with God fostered through on-going *prayer*. He writes that we

²⁷ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 339-340.

²⁸ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 376.

²⁹ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 334, 364. Note: Verse is quoted from NRSV.

³⁰ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 370.

³¹ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 375. Note: Saint Teresa of Avila also emphasizes prayer in the life of holiness. She writes “for though we are always in the presence of God, it seems to me that those who practise prayer are present in a special way”. An insightful comment suggesting the relationship between holiness and prayer is seen in the following words: “. . . how often I failed God through not having leaned on the strong pillar of prayer”. Taken from Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Avila by Herself*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1957), 61.

³² Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 375-376.

should establish ourselves in the presence of God by continually conversing with Him”.³³ Moreover, growing in holiness in the life of the Holy Spirit involves: *spiritual reading* and *meditation* (“we should feed our souls on lofty thoughts of God”³⁴), *self-surrender* (“we should surrender ourselves . . . entirely and with complete abandonment to God”³⁵), *perseverance* (“we must hold fast to our faith in those periods of spiritual aridity by which God tries our love for Him”³⁶), ongoing *repentance* (when we have stumbled, we simply acknowledge our fault [to God and go on]³⁷), *openness with God* (we speak to Him frankly³⁸), *discernment of spirits* (“our thoughts spoil everything, that the trouble begins with them . . . we must be careful to reject them as soon as we perceive they are not necessary”³⁹), *love* (“our only concern [is] to love”⁴⁰), *faith* (“the trust we put in God honours Him greatly and draws down on us great graces”⁴¹), and *hope* (“all things are possible to him . . . who hopes”⁴²).

³³ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 36. Note: In the Second Conversation (September 28, 1666), he stated “that in the beginning a persistent effort is needed to form the habit of continually talking with God and to refer all we do to Him but that after a little care His love brings us to it without any difficulty” (page 40). Also on page 42 he states: “. . . resume again our conversation with God wherein we attain our greatest well being”. Finally, in the Fourth Conversation (November 25, 1667), he states “that we might accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with Him, a conversation free of mystery and of the utmost simplicity” (page 48).

³⁴ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 36.

³⁵ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 36. Note: In the Third Conversation (November 22, 1666), he also states “that complete abandonment to God was the sure way, and one always had light to illumine the way” (page 47).

³⁶ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 37.

³⁷ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 40. Note: In the Second Conversation (September 28, 1666), he stated “he was very aware of his faults and was not dismayed by them, that he confessed them to God . . . that after doing so he returned in peace to his usual practice of love and adoration” (page 42). Later, in the Fourth Conversation (November 25, 1667), he states “that relying on the infinite merits of our Lord, we should, with complete confidence, ask for His grace regardless of our sins; that God never failed to grant us His grace at each action” (page 49).

³⁸ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 40.

³⁹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 43.

⁴⁰ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 43. Note: He also mentions “love which is the real end” (page 47).

⁴¹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 46. Later he states “that once and for all we must trust God” (page 50).

⁴² Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 50.

Finally, regarding the ultimate outcome of holiness – the state of perfection – Weil offers the view that we no longer live in ourselves, but Christ lives in us.⁴³ This is suggestive of the apostle Paul’s words in Galatians 2:20 – “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me”.⁴⁴ In this perfection, based on Christ’s indivisible unity, Weil suggests that Christ “becomes in a sense each one of us, as he is completely in each host”.⁴⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, Table 1 on the following page presents an overview (or synthesis) of the main concepts covered in this essay in relation to *turning to God* and *holiness* in the life of the Spirit.

⁴³ Weil, *Waiting on God*, 46.

⁴⁴ *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 253.

⁴⁵ Weil, *Waiting on God*, 46.

Table 1. Overview of Turning to God and Holiness in the Life of the Spirit

<u>Writer</u>	<u>Turning to God</u>	<u>Holiness</u> In the life of the Spirit <i>holiness</i> includes:
Simone Weil	<p><i>Turning to God</i></p> <p>occurs as a result of and after God's initial drawing of a person to himself through the Spirit.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justice • Love for neighbour • Purity • Spirit of poverty
Thérèse of Lisieux		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abiding in Christ • Childlike self-surrender • Gratitude • Humility • Love
Fyodor Dostoyevsky		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fasting • Lack of egocentricity • Love • Obedience • Prayer • Social conscience
Brother Lawrence		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discernment of spirits • Faith • Hope • Love • Meditation • Openness with God • Perseverance • Prayer • Repentance • Self-surrender • Spiritual reading

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