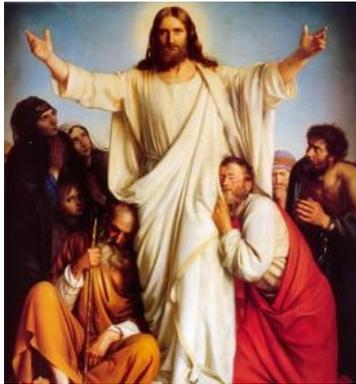


What does it mean to have a “personal relationship with Christ?”

spiritualdirection.com by Fr. John Bartunek



Dear Father John, what does it mean to have a “personal relationship with Christ?” I pray regularly (rosary, Liturgy of the Hours, etc) and go to mass regularly, however, I don’t know that “personal relationship” would describe my understanding and experience of God. Am I missing something?

Maybe, but maybe not. Let’s start answering your question with a question: When you “pray and go to Mass regularly,” why do you do it? Take a moment to answer that question for yourself before you continue reading... Why do you carve time out of your busy schedule to pray and worship God the Father through Jesus Christ in union with the Holy Spirit? Most likely, your personal answer fits into one of the following three generic answers.

Falling into Routine

First, we can pray and worship out of routine. It’s like punching our spiritual time-clock. We have always gone to Mass and always prayed, ever since we were kids, and we feel a kind of comfortable inertia in continuing to do so. We have a vague sense that one ought to do such things, and we have a vague sense that if we fail to do them we will feel guilty for some reason, and we don’t want to add an uncomfortable guilty feeling to our already over-stressed emotional world. So we keep going through the motions of being a Catholic. Just as it would strike an American citizen as somehow incongruent not to celebrate the Fourth of July, it strikes a cultural Catholic as somehow incongruent not to engage in some basic spiritual practices. If you “say your prayers” just because doing so has become part of your internal comfort zone, you may have fallen into what theologians call spiritual routine.

When I was in eighth grade I remember sleeping over at a friend’s house. As we went down to the basement to go to bed, his parents were sitting on the couch watching television, the wife cuddling against the husband, who had his arm around her. They looked like a happy couple. Two months later they were divorced. I asked my friend how they could be so happy together, and then get divorced. My friend told me that they just kept up appearances for the kids’ sake, but there was no love in it. That’s falling into routine.

Fright School

Second, we can pray and worship out of fear. This can be akin to superstition. We have the idea in our heads that if we stop going to Mass, praying the Rosary, or making our morning offering, God will become angry, punish us, make our lives miserable, and maybe even send us to Hell. In this case, our spiritual commitments (prayer and worship) are like paying taxes to a tyrant, or being extorted by a strong-man: if we pay our dues, the Boss won't bother us.

In ancient pagan religions, proper worship depended on following formulae perfectly. A priest had to offer an elaborate ceremony with perfect execution, or the god would not be pleased and it would go to waste. If during the ceremony the priest sneezed, for example, he would have to start all over again. In this religious vision, people are not children of a loving Father, but slaves of angry, fickle, and aloof deities.

Connected by Conviction

Third, we can pray and worship out of conviction. The word "conviction" comes from the same word that gives us "convinced." Religious conviction is an internal state of assurance with regard to religious truth. The primary reason a convinced Christian prays and worships is because they sincerely believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, our Lord and Savior, Creator and Redeemer, and that he deserves our praise and we need his grace. If our spiritual life flows from conviction, then the actual activity we engage in during our times of prayer is conscious: we pay attention to the meaning of the words, we search the Scriptures for wisdom and guidance, we lift our hearts to God in thanksgiving and adoration, and we strive to conform how we live to what we discover in prayer – to what God wants for us (God's will). In this case, our faith actually connects our mind and heart to God during our prayer. We are not just going through motions, and not just paying our dues; we are actually encountering the God who speaks to his beloved children through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The Bible Reminds Us

Praying and worshipping mainly out of conviction (as opposed to routine or fear), is what it means to have a "personal relationship with Christ." On the one hand, we know that he knows us and is interested in our life ("I no longer call you slaves... I have called you friends... It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go out and bear fruit..." (John 15:15-16). Or, as St Paul put it, "I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). And on the other hand, we put forth our own effort to follow his example and teaching, as a way to stay close to him, accept his invitation to become a disciple, and participate in his great project of building up the Church for the glory of God and the salvation of souls: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments..." (John 14:15). Christianity is about

knowing, loving, and following a person, Jesus Christ. The essence of our religion is a personal relationship of faith, hope and love.

The Pope Hits the Nail on the Head

As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI put it in his inaugural homily: “The Church as a whole and all her Pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance... There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him... If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. “Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation” (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, 24 April 2005).

Of course, we are all on our way to spiritual perfection, and so sometimes we fall into routine – at least, on the surface of our minds we can fall into routine; our conviction still exists, but it’s submerged under distraction or anxiety. That prayer is still valuable, and still pleasing to God – the remote motivation is right on target. But the more we can keep our convictions fresh, strong, and vibrant, the better. Likewise, I may find myself crawling out of bed on Sunday to get ready for Mass just because I know that missing Mass is a mortal sin, and I really don’t want to go to Hell. Some Christian faith and conviction is still present even in that slavish motivation. God can work with that. Yet, the more we understand what Mass really is, the more we will see obeying the precept to attend Mass as a joy, a relief, a mysterious encounter with eternity, and an opportunity to please God and build up his Kingdom. When we pray and worship out of conviction, we connect better with Christ, and his grace has more room to work in our souls.

Having a “personal relationship with Christ” doesn’t mean regularly having visions of him sitting on the easy chair in the living room or hearing him give us directions while we’re looking for the right exit off the Interstate. Rather, it simply means gradually learning to live our Christianity more and more from heart to heart.