Columns
Horizons
Spirituality

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by Colleen Gibson

Columnist

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At the outset of Lent, I chuckled when a friend sent me a clip about Ash Wednesday from the morning television program "Today," featuring the actor Mark Wahlberg. With ashes on his forehead, Wahlberg shared with the show's host about Lent. Scrawled across the bottom of the screen, the captioned title for the segment read "Mark Wahlberg's 40-Day Challenge."

Absurd as the notion of Lent as a 40-day challenge might seem — as if it were a fad diet or an exercise routine — the way many people approach the season isn't too far from the concept of challenge. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving can easily devolve into challenges to be mastered and tasks at which to excel.

Of course, that's not the purpose or the aim of Lent. We pray, fast and give freely so that we might more freely embrace and deepen our relationship with God. It is a challenge to simplify that is anything but simple. There is no mastering these practices (i.e., you can't "win" Lent), but only the invitation to wholeheartedly pursue them in these 40 days with the hope that the lasting effect and ongoing practice of them might transform our lives in the long run.

To that end, it is prayer that grounds the entire journey of Lent and the Christian life. Whether you are an apostle, a 14th-century mystic, or a 21st-century seeker, prayer roots our relationship with God; it is the focus of our fasting and the impetus of our giving. Without prayer none of this makes sense and yet, in the busy lives we lead, prayer is often the first thing to be cut short.

Perhaps this is because prayer at times can feel intangible. On a long journey, it feels like we need to be more active, like there must be something we can do. The reality, though, is that the best thing we can do is simply show up.

"Labour hard in this nothing and this nowhere," the 14th-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* writes to a spiritual novice seeking to learn how to pray. That is

the hard work of contemplation, of seeking union and finding that beyond anything else, you simply (or not so simply) need to show up to be united with God in prayer.

One night, early on in my candidacy as a Sister of St. Joseph, I found myself sitting in the small chapel in the local convent into which I had just moved. This was a regular occurrence. Making the transition into religious life was no small feat. As I navigated the newness of that moment, I held on to advice I had received from a spiritual director years earlier: show up every day.

That director didn't have this transition in mind when she offered the advice. In fact, her words were more about making a habit of prayer. "No matter what, show up to pray," I remember her telling me.

She wasn’t quoting *The Cloud of Unknowing* or Meister Eckhart but the core sentiment of her advice draws off the wisdom of these spiritual classics. To be present to God, she advised me, requires the removal of obstacles.

Now certainly, obstacles in prayer aren't easily removed. We can't simply will ourselves to pray or command God to appear. Our minds still wander and preoccupations can still intrude. What we can do is create a landscape that is conducive to prayer, a time and place ordered by regularity. Such a place is not devoid of character or free from distraction, but it is simplified by radical reliability. Create patterns. Show up in the same space at the same time everyday and you'll be amazed by what can happen.

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Confronting the distractions that often come in prayer, the late 14th-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* advises the one who wishes to show up in prayer to "do your best to pretend not to know that they [the distractions] are pressing so hard upon you." Such pretending can be hard though, and so the author has the novice imagine the distraction butting in "between you and your God." Like an unwelcome

interlocutor at a party, when all you really want to do is be with and talk to a dear friend, distractions in prayer may be swayed if you "try to look over their shoulders, as it were, searching for something else." Dispatching distraction with a spiritual cold shoulder, we can focus on the One we've shown up to see, the One for whom we long— God.

If looking past distraction doesn't work, the *Cloud* author offers another technique: admit defeat.

"Cower down before [your distractions] like a wretched coward overcome in battle." This dramatic response is the spiritual equivalent of throwing up your hands in surrender. It is an admission that prayer is not something we do on our own. In fact, it's not our doing at all. We show up and God does the rest.

As Meister Eckhart preached in the time preceding *The Cloud of Unknowing*, "Some simple people think that they will see God as if he were standing there and they here. It is not so. God and I, we are one. I accept God into me in knowing; I go into God in loving." That is to say: we are called into union with God by our very being.

Thus, "knowing God" is not a call to comprehensive knowledge but rather to open yourself completely to a God you cannot comprehend, to know that you do not and cannot know God totally and to be free in that.

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The same can be said of loving. One goes "into God in loving" as one returns to the source of Love, the Word, deep within them. This return is the call of all created beings. We come from a God who is love and are called to return to God by loving.

The "work" we set out to undertake in prayer is union with God. In a liturgical season like Lent, we strive to deepen our relationship with God through intentional prayer and action that draw us closer to the One who has made us in and for love.

Sometimes that love is conveyed in the smallest of words: Thanks. Love. Peace. Trust. You.

Focusing our prayer with these short, deceptively simple words grounds us in the moment and allows us to surrender to God, who longs to be with us in this moment.

“Short prayers pierce heaven,” the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* instructs the novice pray-er. Centuries later we might listen too to the wisdom of these insights. Keep it simple. For all the uncertainty we face, simple presence offers us the opportunity to break through to a deeper sense of knowing and being with God. That presence is far greater than any 40-day challenge, it is the work of a lifetime.

Choosing to pray in this way is a practice of simplicity and humility. God embraces us as we are, challenging us to go deeper, to give freely and to love abundantly. Centuries of practice show us that embracing that challenge — showing up and bearing all to God in loving union— is certainly worth undertaking … not only for our own being but for the life of the world.