



# 2014 AWARDS BY THE CATHOLIC PRESS ASSOCIATION



## Best Essay Prayer and Spirituality Honorable Mention

### Beneath the Heavens and Behind the Door

by Anthony Esolen

In those mysterious days after Jesus rose from the dead—when he appeared behind locked doors, or on a country road, or in a garden, and then vanished from sight—the hearts of the Apostles who had seen him must have yearned for another moment, another vision, another touch. Yet they were still in the world, as we are, and they had to eat. So one night Saint Peter decided to go fishing upon the Sea of Galilee, and several of the Apostles went with him.

They caught nothing, says Saint John. Maybe their hearts weren't in it. Then as morning approached, a man on shore called out to them, and advised them to cast their nets to the right of their boat. They did so, and the net caught a miraculous haul of fishes, one hundred and fifty-three in all. Then John, "that disciple whom Jesus loved," said to Peter, "It is the Lord." Peter girt a coat around his naked form and leapt into the sea, the sooner to see the Lord he loved.

#### Contemplation

It's doubtful that Peter was uttering prayers as he sat in the boat that night, and yet the Lord himself had commanded them all to pray constantly. But perhaps Peter really *was* praying, if we understand his prayer to be that exalted kind called *contemplation*, "to suffer things divine," as Jacques Maritain describes it. Maritain's wife Raissa had drunk deep of the well of contemplation, and Jacques, observing her for many years and learning from her wise and careful journals, set his thoughts on

contemplative prayer in a work of his old age, *The Peasant of the Garonne*. I take my direction here from them.

"Simon Peter," asked Jesus on that morning, "do you love me?" Yes, as dearly as Peter could love anyone; but that love brings light to our eyes: "We know through love," says Gregory the Great. Contemplation, says Maritain, quoting Père Lallemand, "is the exercise of the purest and most perfect charity. Love is its beginning, its exercise, and its end." Now there are men and women devoted most radically to the contemplation of divine things, but Saint Peter was no monk, and neither are most of us. How can we laymen especially, who sweat and toil in the world, fulfill the commandment to pray at all times?

#### Pray always

I used to believe that there were techniques I ought to employ, if only I could find a proficient teacher to show me which ones. I am still not adept in contemplation. But now I think I am beginning to see the answer, as through the haze of long neglect. The answer is given by and in love. Consider the example of Jesus. He spent three years among the crowds, teaching and healing, rebuking the stubborn and the hypocritical, comforting the poor, giving hope to all who believed and longed for the Kingdom of God, and celebrating with his friends the great feasts of the Jewish faith. He was a public man, in the world. But not always. Sometimes he fled from the crowds. He sought the mountains. He set out upon the sea. He did what

he has commanded us to do: go into our room, shut the door, and pray to the Father in secret.

That wasn't just so that we would avoid praying to be seen. For Jesus also says that if we love him, he will show himself to us. When we love deeply, we want sometimes to be alone with the beloved. In the prayer of love, we learn to listen, to praise without words, to make in silence the movement of the heart out from ourselves and toward God. We shut the door, says Maritain, and this we can do at any moment, even under the open skies. That is because the door is Jesus himself, "who encloses us in him when we are recollected" in contemplation.

## Loving to the end

"Be still and know that I am God," says the Lord. God knows how feeble we are. He knows that we must earn our bread, and that we grow weary with long recitals, and that our minds will wander even when we pray the rosary or kneel before the Sacrament at Mass. He does not demand any particular meditative regimen. He does not teach method. Love is reckless of such. Jesus does not ask Simon Peter, "Have you turned your eyes toward Jerusalem this morning?" He does not ask, "Have you tried to clear your mind of

all distractions?" Those things might be well and good, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient. He asks, "Simon Peter, do you love me?"

We can take the question two ways. In the ordinary sense of the words, Jesus is asking Peter if he feels a certain affection for him. But that hardly does justice to the mystery of the morning on that shore. I should take the question in an absolute sense: "Simon Peter, do you love me to the end? Is your love for me even a shadow of my love for you?" Peter, in an agony of guilt for his denial on the night Jesus was betrayed, affirms his devotion three times. In the quiet of that constant love, Peter prays without ceasing.

This is possible for us too. No degree in theology is necessary, nor a marble cloister. Jesus is the door to the true chamber of our heart: and he is the wide-flung portal of love, which is endless.

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