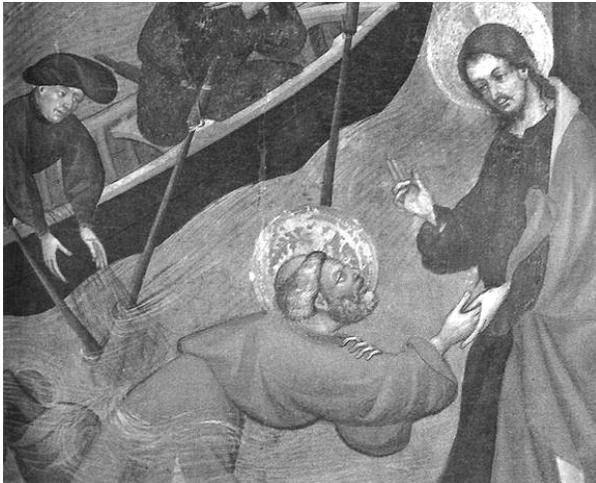


Ask Fr. Innocent

Question: With so much bad in the world today (war, COVID, bad economy, etc), how do we put our trust in God?



THIS IS A GREAT QUESTION because it gets to the heart of the Christian spiritual life and how Our Lord invites us to live - to *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart"*. (Proverbs 3:5)

First, it is helpful to acknowledge that the human experience of both "good" and "bad" has always been a reality for everyone and at all times. For some, life is mostly good all the time, while for others it can be one series of tragedies after another. There have been times when famines, plagues, and wars have wiped out entire families and civilizations, and times when civilizations have enjoyed relative prosperity for generations. For most of us, however, our lives are peppered with a mix of both good and bad, joy and sorrow. A modern philosopher recently commented, "If you think things are going well for you, just give it a little time." It sounds cynical, but it's true. Life is a mix of everything - good and bad, filled with joy and sorrow, love, loss and gain.

"With so much bad in the world" then, our life becomes a choice about how we are going to respond to this universal human experience. Our Christian Faith, informed by how Our Lord lived and taught His disciples, is clear. We are to trust God's will for us as it is manifested through the everyday circumstances and moments of our life.

Furthermore, whether life brings us what we perceive as "good or bad", we accept it all as a part of God's plan for us - with trust and gratitude. Consider the following words of Christ.

... take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? ... for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. (Matthew 6:31-34)

In this verse, the Lord admonishes us to trust Him to care for the necessities of life - food, drink, clothing, *"and all these things"*. He says that our life's greatest concerns should be filled with *"seeking the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness"*. Our life should not be filled with anxiety and fear about the future state of things and our wellbeing, *"for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself."* This does not mean that we don't care for the needs of our families and tend to our God-given responsibilities. It means that at the core of our being our concern is Him and our relationship to Him and the eternal Kingdom He has come to give us. When we do this, His care for every facet of our life becomes evident.

You are probably thinking "OK, Father, but that is easier said than done." And this is true, because "trust" is always built through relationships. That means WE have a part to play. It means that just as we build trust with others through being in relationship with them, we also build trust in God as we get to know Him through exercising our faith and participating in the relationship. Our focus on building our trust in God begins with us.

In broad terms then, "trusting God with all of our heart" begins with having a healthy spiritual life and trying to be closer to God. It means that we pursue God and His Kingdom through having a

daily prayer routine, reading the scriptures, and pushing ourselves to align with the ways and commandments of Christ. The words that we pray in our prayer corner reinforce our own desire to trust God and also ask for His help in doing so. One of the daily morning prayers we can pray entreats God for His help to accept all that we encounter:

O Lord, grant that I may meet all that this coming day brings me with spiritual tranquility. Grant that I may fully surrender myself to thy holy will. (Morning Prayer of the Optina Elders)

The scriptures we can read daily reinforce our need to reach out to Christ (strengthen the relationship) when our faith is lacking. In the Gospel story of Jesus walking on the water towards His disciples, Peter steps out onto the water with faith that the Lord will keep him afloat. With this faith in Christ, he does indeed walk on water. It's when Peter loses his focus and begins to have fear that he begins to sink and reaches out to the Lord to save him. This beautiful image tells the story of our own fear and lack of faith when circumstances look bleak, and Lord's constant presence and care for us. Scripture is full of these encouraging words that shape a mindset of trust in God.

Another way we work to build our trust in God is to give monetarily, knowing that the Lord sustains us and provides for every need. Imagine the faith of the widow who gave her last penny to the temple not knowing how she would pay for her next meal. Giving from the resources God has given us, especially when we put our own needs last and others first, is an exercise in faith and trust in God. It strengthens our trust in Him. *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."* (1 Peter 5 :7) This anxiety can even be a fear of running out of money if we give to others.

Finally, gratitude is one of the greatest spiritual practices we can offer to God to express our trust in His care for us. In those moments when life is good, it feels natural to be thankful to God, although even then we often forget to express it. When things happen that we perceive as "bad" or "undesirable" we may find ourselves even angry at

God, or at the very least crying out to Him, "Why me?". The *practice* of gratitude (that does not come without effort) is to express thankfulness and trust in God's will for everything - good, bad or ugly - because in every circumstance we are given an opportunity to respond to it in a Christian way and be shaped by it. For example, if life gives us a gift that brings us joy, we can respond to God with gratitude and exercise humility in the thought that we are undeserving. If life gives us the gift of hardship, we can respond to it with gratitude for the opportunity to exercise patience and endurance.

Putting our trust in God is a spiritual practice that is strengthened by our "stepping out onto the ice". The more we go out onto the frozen lake in the winter the more we realize that is safe to trust in its strength. If we begin to exercise our trust in God, forcefully, against our own rationalizing and doubts, we will begin to know without a doubt that we can trust in God's care completely - whether we are in peace or war, sickness or health, with money or without.

Trust in God doesn't come automatically, but it does come over time to all who practice it through building a deep and personal relationship with our loving God who cares more for us than we care for ourselves.

Fr. Innocent

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"The proud and self-willed do not want to surrender to God's will because they like their own way, and that is harmful for the soul... The proud man likes to be his own master, and does not see that man has not wisdom enough to guide himself without God. And I, when I lived in the world and as yet knew not the Lord and His Holy Spirit, nor how the Lord loves us—I relied on my own understanding. But when by the Holy Spirit I came to know our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, my soul submitted to God and now I accept every affliction that befalls me, and say to myself, 'The Lord looks down on me, what is there to fear?' (St. Silouan of Mt. Athos)