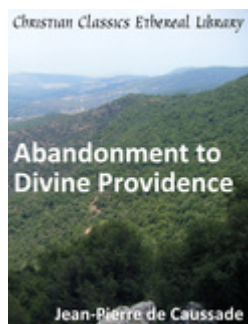


# The Sacrament of the Present Moment



*Abandonment to Divine Providence* is considered a spiritual classic. Thomas Merton was asked about the book's author, Jesuit priest, Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751). His reply was short, but telling. "He's a spiritual genius". Chalk my ignorance up to a Protestant vacuum when it comes to teaching about spiritual geniuses. His writing grew out of the Roman Catholic counter-reformation, concerned to correct the extremes of Quietism (spiritual passivity) and a more severe Asceticism (strict, prescribed practices as though the Kingdom of G\_d will come only through our diligence.)

Funny how these polarities reappear in different forms throughout the centuries isn't it? I'm more tempted toward the ascetic resolution myself, and I confess that sometimes my brand of evolutionary spirituality makes a person feel like she is responsible for the future in an absolute fashion. That's why I think I found this book such a breath of fresh air. My soul let down into Caussade's middle way. If you want a brief and brilliant introduction, check out my [friend's post](#), Anglican priest, Chris Dierkes. While you're on the site, read anything by him—speaking of emerging spiritual geniuses. (Chris rightly suggests that Caussade may have actually paved the way for evolutionary spirituality).

The book has another title, which hints at a spiritual resolution: *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*. (Maybe he paved the way as well for Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*?) Briefly, here are the main tenets of the practice, all of them intricately connected:

1. God is fully present, hidden in the ordinary details of a

life, any life. When the angel overshadowed Mary, even the angel was merely a shadow hiding the ever-present One. Occupy any given moment of the ordinary circumstances of our life with a heart abandoned to divine will, and God will weave a tapestry of beauty out of this holy commitment to the present moment. As Chris wrote in a response to an email I sent him: "each and every moment is pristine and potential exists for all relationship, from the smallest to the biggest, to have their influence over everything else". Mary's yes ("Let it be to me according to your will") is the prototypical example of self-abandonment



2. All the events and circumstances of our life is a word of God, no less than scripture. They are spoken especially for us and but once from all eternity. Therefore, learn to read each moment of your life as a word of God. There is no secret method or technique. Stop looking for it. Yes, learn meditation and contemplation. Read spiritual classics. Do sacred chant. Go on spiritual retreats. Find a spiritual director. But your life in each mundane detail, in the present moment, contains the hidden life of Christ. Caussade is suspicious of too much reading and of too much dependence on spiritual directors. He wants us to have firsthand knowledge, direct experience of the divine working through the sacrament of the present moment. When the moment is passed it is well and truly passed. No looking back. The moment that just passed, no matter how spiritually intoxicating, is "yesterday's will of God". (Walter Wink)



3. Learn to discern the divine impulse as it arises in your life, and have enough fluidity and openness of heart and routine, to be able to follow this impulse wherever it leads. If the impulse tells you to meditate, then meditate. If it tells you to stop meditating and go throw a Frisbee with your dog, follow it. If it tells you

make love, make love. (Of course, this is a constant impulse with our divine Lover).

4. Abandonment doesn't mean irresponsibility. It means learning the difference between your ego (early, evolutionary self, hell-bent on survival, sex, status, and sustenance, and your soul (that is here for love and the bliss of the divine life on Earth). Learn the difference between your chattering mind that keeps self-love and self-obsession in place, and divine wisdom—which comes to a quiet and contented mind. Abandon yourself (surrender) to the soul's impulse to enact the divine will. Engage the station of your life with as much integrity, and yes, duty, as possible. God works through responsible engagement with what is given you to do. (In a postmodern world this cannot mean submitting to an oppressive system. For example, women in abusive relationships do not have a "duty" to the marriage). Following an impulse for justice is a 21st century duty of every Christian.

5. Caussade identifies a helpful distinction between "the soul living in G\_d" and "G\_d living in the soul. Living in G\_d

describes the practices of purification: meditation, contemplation, lectio divina, Sabbath keeping, orderly life, etc. These are necessary in order to prepare the heart for divine self-abandonment, whereby one's whole life, lived fully, in the present moment, and aligned with the divine impulse, is one's practice. Caussade is clear that spiritual evolution involves the shift from momentary states of self-abandonment to stabilizing at a permanent stage of self-abandonment—a continuous abiding of our will in the divine will, and of our hearts in the divine heart. This stage of spiritual development is the space from which Paul wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me". (Galatians 2:19-20).



6. Providence never sleeps. Faith is a matter of radical trust that G\_d is working through all the circumstances of your life, whether "good" or "bad" by our judgment. Acceptance of that which you cannot change is one's cross to bear. Bear it with equanimity and faith. Remember, our response to suffering is rolled into the providential arrangement. Through self-abandoned souls, committed to loving G\_d and loving the world, divine providence weaves a tapestry of beauty that is beyond any of us to conceive. It can only emerge. It's like needlepoint art, says Caussade. The back of the needlepoint frame looks like a chaotic mess. The artist's role is to simply and faithfully tend to the next thread. The pattern that emerges on the other side is the divine pattern. We should not be attached to the outcome, the final image.



7. The way of abandonment is for everyone, not just the elite few. Caussade was way out in front when it came to the

ministry of the laity. Every person is able to cooperate with G\_d, according to his or her capacities, on a day-to-day basis. And every person's contribution is important, no matter, how humble. For many people, being dutiful to their station in life is their contribution to divine Providence.

"We must not follow any inspiration, which we believe we have received from G0d, before making certain that this inspiration is not diverting us from the duties of our state. These duties are the surest manifestation of God's plan, and nothing must be preferred to them. The moments employed in fulfilling these duties are the most precious and salutary for us by the very fact that they give us the undoubting assurance that we are accomplishing God's good pleasure." (See point 5 above for the same caveat that this cannot mean passive acquiescence to an oppressive status quo).



Caussade's language and outlook is traditional, reflecting his respect for authority, and his certainty about providential guidance. Yet there is indeed a genius in his orientation that my soul longs for. This providential outlook can seem anachronistic to modern ears.

Modernism obliterated deep purpose, even as it elevated the dignity of human freedom. The problem is that we were asked to exercise that freedom by taking action in a world void of ontological purpose. Yet this intuition of a higher or deeper guiding intelligence was never completely lost. Think of Gregory Bateson's "pattern that connects", or physicist David Bohm's "implicate order" or chemist Ilya Prigogine's research around "self-organization". They are describing, perhaps, the same deep mystery for modern ears.

The way to awaken this Mystery is to occupy the sacrament of the present moment, surrendering the regressive habits of the body/mind and rituals that keep us re-enacting yesterday's



will of God, in order to discern the sacred impulse that is coming through now and now and now... "Do not consider the former things. I am doing a new thing. It is springing forth now. Do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:18). As we learn to read the events of our lives as unrepeated words of G\_d a divine future spontaneously emerges that brings us one step closer to the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).