



Christian Proficiency

- Father Anthony Holder

Martin Thornton's book, *Christian Proficiency* is regarded as an Anglo-Catholic spirituality classic which, although written for the British setting, is capable of speaking to Christians everywhere. It is addressed particularly to lay persons, who are neither in the beginning or advanced stages of their prayer lives, but need to move towards being more proficient in their spirituality. The book describes, through pastoral and practical means, what this level of spirituality of a Christian life looks like and how one might develop and achieve it. Thornton believes that acquisition of a mature or proficient spirituality takes place through possessing a Rule based on scripture reading, prayer, confession, meditation, the sacraments, and with the help of a competent confessor or spiritual director.

Thornton highlights the use of the word "proficiency" as it relates to being Christian in a number of circumstances. He acknowledges that "proficiency" is not readily applied to spiritual life or religion but it was used by medieval writers on spirituality to differentiate persons who were neither in the infancy nor matured stages of their Christian life. He identifies the nature and characteristics of a Christian as one who is re-created by his incorporation into the human nature of Christ through baptism. Thus, a baptized individual is always a Christian even when she is inefficient in her spirituality and Christianity. Thornton stresses that one's faith, prayer and life is centered in the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Church and that importance is given to the unity of the Godhead, the divinity and humanity of Christ and the unity of Christ and the Church.

A second major point about "proficiency" lies in its achievement by developing a discipline of spirituality and Rule of prayer in one's life. A rule generates order and structure in one's life leading to a mature relationship with God. However, Thornton warns against lengthy Rules that can inhibit a wholesome pattern of life. Thornton cites that the essentials of the Anglican approach to having a proficient spiritual life are found in the Book of Common Prayer, in the Mass (Eucharist), Daily Office, and Private Prayer." Private Prayer is divided into three main features – "mental prayer," (increasing our knowledge, love and communion with God in Christ); "colloquy," or 'saying our prayers,' which is sub-divided into petition, self-examination, confession, intercession, thanksgiving and adoration; and "recollection," (periodic acts of prayer as a means of being in God's presence on a regular basis).

Nevertheless, Thornton adds another dimension to proficiency pointing out that although one's spiritual life is expected to be efficient, the focus is not on the individual but the Body of Christ, of which each member is dependent on and responsible to the whole. The purpose and accomplishment is not merely the salvation of the individual, but the incorporation of the whole world into Christ. The author is concerned with the spiritual lives of those who may never experience proficient spirituality and with ordinary Christians and how they may become efficient in their essential work as members of the Body of Christ.

Thornton outlines the steps as to what a proficient seeking spiritual direction should do and the crucial nature of his or her relation to the spiritual director. He stresses that the spiritual direction relationship is personal, reciprocal and supportive of each other. In addition, he offers aids, including theological and devotional reading that can be advantageous to the proficient. He mentions the dangers of aridity, scrupulosity and distraction, preoccupation with evangelism and symbolism and cites knowledge, prayer and spiritual direction as factors that can be used to defeat such dangers.

Although *Christian Proficiency* was written for the laity, it is a good resource for the clergy as well. It offers faithful lay people a theological and practical introduction to fundamental elements of the spiritual life. It also provides clergy who were once familiar with this kind of spiritual structure and have lost it along the way to recreate it in their lives. Having a balanced rule and spiritual direction can prevent the proficient from "a good deal of dull learning" and unstructured pattern of life.