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Simple Graces

Poems for Meditation and Prayer

*Selected and Introduced by
Gretchen L. Schwenker and
Mathew J. Kessler, C.Ss.R.*

Preface by Bishop Robert Morneau



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Introduction, Continuing Your Prayer With Poetry, and Brief Biographies of Poets by
Gretchen L. Schwenker and Mathew J. Kessler

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Introduction

And the Word became flesh.

JOHN 1:14



WITH THESE POETIC WORDS, the Scriptures announce that God, the origin of life, took on physical human life as Jesus of Nazareth. In the streets of Jerusalem and the shores of the sea of Galilee, God's kingdom was revealed as Jesus shared meals, forgave, healed, and invited. His death by crucifixion led to his resurrection and God's victory over the silence and isolation of death. God's kingdom continues to come when men and women forgive, reconcile, and work for peace amid discord and injustice, but to live in this way requires more than goodwill.

In a society in which many voices compete for our time, talent, and treasure, human needs and wants can become ends in themselves. Yet amid all the accumulation and accomplishment, a hunger remains. After many years, people realize their spiritual anxiety can be quieted only by something beyond, yet within reach

of, each of them. This is when we feel the call or invitation to probe deeper into the Mystery of life.

Poetry expresses human stories in their essence, which may be why it can open our hearts to God. Poets tell stories about citizens who find community in a time of loss and about justice in the face of poverty. Poets gather joy, beauty, sorrow, and bitterness and communicate their overall mystery in the fewest words possible.

Poets don't pull punches or shade the truth. They write about war, lost opportunities, peace, and courage. They teach about honesty, hard work, and sacrificing for a greater good. Most important, poets remind us we are connected to each other, to nature, and to God.

A poem's message is often not immediately evident, and absorbing it may require you to keep a calm mind as the day's demands hammer on. But after meditating on a poem, you will find the images staying with you throughout the day. Memorize the poem, and the lines will be with you long after you put the book away.

There is no correct order in which to pray and meditate on these poems; only your soul can say what is most important to you at any moment. These poems are for those who want to go beyond the formula of familiar prayers and let the flow and images of poems challenge

them to listen in a new way. And this *will* happen—a good poem often holds opposites in tension, like the words in John’s Gospel, “And the Word became flesh.”



When should you use these poems? Read one at night before bed or to finish your morning prayers. Meditate on a poem before Mass. Take this book on vacation or on a hike through the woods; take it to work and reflect on a poem during lunch. Follow your feelings, and you will soon find a poem that will make a difference to you, that will become like an old friend, calling you back to its company again and again.

How can you use a poem as a meditation or prayer? Read one aloud, slowly. Read it again, aloud, and a few minutes later do the same. Slow down as you read it; let the message of each line build on the previous lines. Let the message of each stanza build on the next. Listen for the message beneath or behind the written and spoken words, and be sensitive to the placement of those words. Poems use imagery—sometimes symbolic and other times direct—and the significance of the poem can lie within the meter and phrasing.

Group readings can open the meaning of a poem in a way that enriches everyone. Participants actively

listen to each reading, letting the image or phrase sink into their hearts. After several moments of quiet, someone may share what they heard and relate it to an event or insight about faith, justice, or a loving act. Poetry is often easier to understand when we read it ourselves, but when we listen to someone else read a poem we grow as we reach beyond ourselves to listen.

When one enters the words of a poem, there is a loss of control as contradictions come together: a place of rest in a world of change, a persecutor as a promoter of justice, a man of great wealth with an empty heart.

The poets in this book carry their experiences of life into their writings. They reflect on the struggles and joys of life and, in many instances, plainly express their faith. Others tuck their spirituality into the edges and corners of their work. A few shed light on the harshness that can happen in the world, for God is revealed as much in suffering as in glorious depictions of nature.

May this book give men and women the chance to hear the stirrings of their hearts put into words. It is our hope that this practice can help each person connect with the Mystery that is beyond us, yet within reach.

GRETCHEN L. SCHWENKER
MATHEW J. KESSLER

Faith and Grace



Initiation

Whoever you are, go out into the evening,
leaving your room, of which you know each bit;
your house is the last before the infinite,
whoever you are.

Then with your eyes that wearily
scarce lift themselves from the worn-out door-stone
slowly you raise a shadowy black tree
and fix it on the sky: slender, alone.

And you have made the world (and it shall grow
and ripen as a word, unspoken, still).

When you have grasped its meaning with your will,
then tenderly your eyes will let it go...

RAINER MARIA RILKE

The Annunciation

The angel and the girl are met.
Earth was the only meeting place.
For the embodied never yet
Travelled beyond the shore of space.
The eternal spirits in freedom go.

See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,
Each reflects the other's face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there. He's come to her
From far beyond the farthest star,
Feathered through time. Immediacy
Of strangest strangeness is the bliss
That from their limbs all movement takes.
Yet the increasing rapture brings
So great a wonder that it makes
Each feather tremble on his wings.

Outside the window footsteps fall
Into the ordinary day
And with the sun along the wall
Pursue their unreturning way.
Sound's perpetual roundabout
Rolls its numbered octaves out
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune.

But through the endless afternoon
These neither speak nor movement make,
But stare into their deepening trance
As if their gaze would never break.

EDWIN MUIR

Advent

We have tested and tasted too much, lover—
Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
But here in the Advent-darkened room
Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea
Of penance will charm back the luxury
Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
The knowledge we stole but could not use.

And the newness that was in every stale thing
When we looked at it as children: the spirit-shocking
Wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill
Or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking
Of an old fool will awake for us and bring
You and me to the yard gate to watch the whins
And the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins.

O after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching
For the difference that sets an old phrase burning—
We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among decent men too
Who barrow dung in gardens under trees,
Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.
Won't we be rich, my love and I, and please
God we shall not ask for reason's payment,
The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges
Nor analyse God's breath in common statement.
We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages
Of pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour—
And Christ comes with a January flower.

PATRICK KAVANAGH

We Are Rivers Running to Thy Sea

Lord, we are rivers running to Thy sea,
Our waves and ripples all derived from Thee:
A nothing we should have, a nothing be,
Except for Thee.

Sweet are the waters of Thy shoreless sea,
Make sweet our waters that make haste to Thee;
Pour in Thy sweetness, that ourselves may be
Sweetness to Thee.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

This World is not Conclusion

This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –
It beckons, and it baffles –
Philosophy – don't know –
And through a Riddle, at the last –
Sagacity, must go –
To guess it, puzzles scholars –
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown –
Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
Blushes, if any see –
Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
And asks a Vane, the way –
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
Strong Hallelujahs roll –
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul –

EMILY DICKINSON

This Trackless Solitude

Deep in the soul the acres lie
of virgin lands, of sacred wood
where waits the Spirit. Each soul bears
this trackless solitude.

The Voice invites, implores in vain
the fearful and the unaware;
but she who heeds and enters in
finds ultimate wisdom there.

The Spirit lights the way for her;
bramble and brush are pushed apart.
He lures her into wilderness
but to rejoice her heart.

Beneath the glistening foliage
the fruit of love hangs always near,
the one immortal fruit: *He is*
or, tasted: *He is here*.

Love leads and she surrenders to
His will, His waylessness of grace.
She speaks no word save His, nor moves
until He marks the place.

Hence all her paths are mystery,
presaging a divine unknown.
Her only light is in the creed
that she is not alone.

The soul that wanders, Spirit led,
becomes, in His transforming shade,
the secret that she was, in God,
before the world was made.

JESSICA POWERS