

## NOVEMBER 20 FATHER BRANDEN GORDON

Would you consider yourself more of a dog person, or a cat person?

As for me, I've always been more of a dog person. For many years, I had a Cocker Spaniel named Benny. And although he could be absolutely insane at times, I really loved that dog.

Dogs have so many admirable qualities: loyalty, courage, playfulness, empathy. But one quality that really sets them apart is their watchfulness.

My dog Benny used to lie down at the top of the stairs during much of the day and look through the little window at the top of the front door, awaiting my mother's return from work. And when he would see her car pulling up in the driveway, he would quickly jump to his feet, his little nub-tail wagging furiously, as he tumbled down the stairs to greet her.

Benny never knew exactly when my mother would return, because sometimes she would have to run a few errands after work. He might not have known exactly when she would return, but he had faith that she would eventually return. And he never grew tired of keeping watch—of being watchful.

"You did not recognize the time of your visitation from God." Jesus' words in today's Gospel remind us of the importance of being watchful. And isn't the untiring watchfulness of a dog such a beautiful image of this virtue?

This concept of watchfulness was at the heart of Early Christian spirituality. Scattered throughout the writings of the Greek-

speaking mystics was the word "nepsis," which, translated, literally means sobriety. But the ancient Christian writers used nepsis in a spiritual sense to mean watchfulness, with respect to the experience of God's presence in prayer.

For the mystics, one need not wait for the end of the world to experience a divine visitation. Through a life of assiduous prayer and recollection, they had come to realize that a visitation from God can be experienced in the depths of one's heart, right here and right now.

"God, come to my assistance. Lord, make haste to help me. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The ancient mystics would repeat these, or some other short prayer, countless times throughout the day—sometimes aloud, sometimes silently. While at rest or while working. It didn't matter what they were doing; prayer was always on their lips and in their hearts.

This practice of constant prayer was a means of cultivating the virtue of nepsis—of being always watchful for a visitation from God—so that one would never miss those privileged moments of grace due to carelessness or inattention.

A more contemporary mystic, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, calls these divine visitations "spiritual consolations." He describes consolation as an interior movement of the soul, which causes it to be set ablaze with love of God. Ignatius says that these experiences can be so powerful that they can cause us to shed tears, whether out of sorrow for our sins or in response to the great

love that's revealed in the passion, death, and resurrection of our Savior.

These divine visitations that we can experience through prayer increase in us the virtues of faith, hope, and charity. They produce in us a profound joy that draws us more strongly to spiritual things. They quiet the faculties of the soul—the intellect, the imagination, and the appetites—giving us a preview of that perfect peace which, by God's mercy, we will experience someday in heaven.

In the life of Saint Philip Neri, we find an extraordinary example of a divine visitation—one which, for me, illustrates in a very visible, tangible way what we can all experience spiritually in prayer.

So it was a few days before Pentecost, in the year 1544, and Saint Philip was deep in prayer. He was asking the Holy Spirit for an increase in the spiritual gifts—wisdom, fortitude, and piety, just to name a few. Suddenly there appeared to Philip a globe of fire, which entered into his mouth and lodged itself into his chest, filling his entire body with the fiery heat of God's love.

Unable to bear this overwhelming heat, Philip exposed his chest and pressed it against the cool stone floor of the chapel, where he remained prostrate for quite some time. Once the heat had subsided, he arose from the ground, and his heart was filled with such joy that it caused his body to shake with a violent tremor. He put his hand to his chest, and he discovered that right near his heart he felt a swelling about the size of a man's fist.

Despite this abnormality, he felt no pain—neither at the moment of this miracle nor at any moment until his death a little over 50 years later. Well after his death, an investigation was done, and the cause of this mysterious swelling was discovered by the doctors who examined his bodily remains. They discovered that Philip's heart had been enlarged by the love of God to the point that two ribs had been broken and curved in the form of an arch to make room for it.

On that faithful day in 1544, God visited Philip, and God was able to enter into the depths of his heart because Philip was watchful—because Philip recognized the time of his visitation.

It's true that the Lord has already visited us 2,000 years ago in the Holy Land, and we believe that He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead at the Last Judgment. But there's another divine visitation that we can experience right here and right now through prayer.

So, turn to the dog. Consider its ways. Imitate its watchfulness, so that you may always recognize the time of your visitation from God.