

21. *The mental prayer of the sinner*

I shall not deny that your letter deeply disturbed me. You wrote that, in my discussion of mental prayer, I seem to forget sinners. And you added: “No doubt because you do not deem them worthy of practicing it.” May God preserve me from such Pharisaism! Speaking as a sinner to his fellow sinners, to invite them to the act of conversion that is mental prayer. I am thinking only of them!

In any event, I reflected on my way of presenting mental prayer. It seems that in order to avoid the misunderstanding which you echoed, I should refer more often to that extraordinary page in St. Luke, the parable of the “the prodigal son.” Tortured by hunger, one day the poor fellow said to himself, *“I shall return to my father.”* “And the father, who went everyday to the spot where he could look down the road, caught sight of him in the distance. *“He ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him”* (Lk 15:20).

Now, that’s what mental prayer is: the privileged moment to become aware of our misery, and leave it behind by turning toward God. It is the meeting place between the Father and the child; the embrace of mercy with misery; the joyous feast of the prodigal’s return.

Try to understand. It is not the child who purifies and sanctifies himself, and then comes to his father. Rather, he approaches in his impurity, clothed in repulsive rags. It is the paternal forgiveness that purifies him, transforms him, and clothes him in the festive garment. To speak plainly, without imagery, God, not man, purifies and sanctifies the sinner.

“A clean heart create for me, O God” (Ps 51:12). It is a gift of God, a freely-given gift that man cannot merit. It is granted to him if he dares to believe in it. What counts in the eyes of the Lord is that man should have a lofty idea of his God, and not hesitate to believe in mercy. What is so serious in the Lord’s eyes is precisely that the elder son is scandalized by mercy, and sees it only as a lack of dignity, an insult to justice.

The race of the pharisees will never be able to understand. For them, it is man who sanctifies himself by his own efforts and moral feats. He then presents himself to God, worthy—as he now imagines—of talking with him, of being his intimate friend.

On the contrary, in the assembly of the saints, *“there will...be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent”* (Lk 15:7). The saints are filled with wonder at the spectacle of the mercy that gushes from the heart of God, every time a sinner comes before him who trusts and dares to believe in *“God’s folly”* (I Cor 1:25).

The sinner’s prayer consists in bringing his misery to God, so that mercy may submerge it. It is indeed the prayer of each and all of us. As St. John affirms, *“If we say, ‘We are free of the guilt of sin,’ we deceive ourselves; the truth is not to be found in us”* (I Jn 1:8; cf. 1 Jn 1:6, 10, 2:4, 4:20).