

4. *The advice of the old parish priest*

I recently met a Savoyard peasant who, in addition to his regular work, has assumed heavy responsibilities in agricultural organizations. I had been told of the rather extraordinary influence he had on others as a Christian. We met and talked to each other about our respective activities. When I spoke to him about the *Cahiers sur l'oraison*, his interest visibly doubled. Sensing that his reaction intrigued me, he volunteered to satisfy my curiosity.

“When I was young, I often served the Mass of our old pastor. He was a strange man, rough, surly, silent; a man we feared a little, and loved, or rather revered, very much. We hesitated to turn to him about ordinary matters of daily life, but when we were in trouble we went at once to consult him at his rectory, which was more austere than a monk’s cell.

“He spent hours on end in prayer at the church. One day, when I was about fourteen, I said to him, ‘Father, I’d like to know how to pray, too.’ My words must have had an extraordinary effect on him, because he smiled in a way that can’t be put into words—and he was man nobody had ever seen smiling.

“I have since speculated that he had been praying all his life that some day someone would ask him that question. He looked so happy, that I thought he was going to talk to me for a long time, right there in the sacristy filled with the vague scent of incense. Unfortunately, I can’t find words to describe his clear-eyed look, his look of intense purity. But I can at least give you his answer verbatim. It was very short: ‘When you go to God, lad, think very hard that he is there, and say to him, “Lord, I place myself at your service.”’ And then, in his ordinary surly tone, he continued, ‘Come now, hurry and put your cassock

away.' I later came to understand that his abrupt manner was really a form of bashfulness.

“That day, I learned how to pray. And it will soon be forty years that I have practiced mental prayer by playing myself at God’s service.”

Come now, admit this story is worth a whole conference on mental prayer, and dispense me from writing you at greater length today. But try to understand what it means to be at God’s service. It has far reaching implications. We must first give up our right to dispose of ourselves. We must surrender totally to God, entrusting ourselves to his discretionary power—and that includes our body, our intellect, our heart, our will, our very life—so that he may dispose of us as he pleases.

But what’s the use of trying to explain? Words are powerless to make one understand. Pray to the old pastor (who must not be surly any more, now that he has found the One whom he was seeking), that he may obtain for you the grace to be totally at God’s service.