

89. *Meditation before a portrait*

Do you remember the page of the Bible where Moses is tending his sheep on the slopes of Horeb, and stops before a bush that is burning without being consumed? He trembles with a sacred fear. Then he steps forward to observe the prodigy, but a voice rises from the flames that stops him in his tracks: *“Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground”* (Ex 3:5).

Prayer is a sacred place, the holy ground where God dwells. There he waits for man, speaks to him, and embraces him with his strong and tender love.

Since prayer is God’s activity even more than man’s, it is at least partly beyond the scope of rational inquiry. It is a mystery. However, we are certainly permitted to seek to understand prayer better. That is even one of the loftiest goals of the human intellect. But to succeed, we must renounce all hope of wresting its ultimate secret. Rather, we must follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and advance humbly, in our bare feet.

I cannot hope to convince you of the importance of prayer, as long as you persist in being an “old rationalist,” refusing to rise above the level of philosophy.

At your next visit, I shall show you a painting of Benedict-Joseph Labre, the beggar saint. Perhaps this picture will be more convincing than my arguments. It has always made a deep impression on me. I find it extraordinarily moving. It represents the saint at prayer, his arms folded, his head slightly bowed, and his eyelids lowered. There is a feeling of intense recollection. Benedict-Joseph Labre is a total stranger to the world around him. He is completely centered within himself, with the doors of his senses carefully closed. What is going on within this private sanctuary? Obviously, that is beyond the reach of our eyes.

Even so, looking at this picture, we can glimpse the saint’s secret. There is an indefinable halo of tenderness and humility that envelopes his person, and a light that seems to illumine his face from within. There can be no doubt that this man’s heart is experiencing something very important and enviable. We are impelled to kneel before Benedict-Joseph at prayer, because we are certain that the God that lives in his soul is speaking words to him that make him blessed, words very sweet to hear.

This picture taught me much more about prayer than reading many books. Perhaps it will speak to you, too.