

8. The essential

You write: "I have been faithful to daily mental prayer for more than six months, but I am not sure of having had more than four or five good sessions of mental prayer. " What do you mean? That all of your mental prayer, outside those four or five sessions, failed to please the Lord? You don't know. That they did not give you personal satisfaction? I am willing to believe that. But does it follow that they were not good? I beg of you, don't fall into this trap that awaits all beginners, of judging your mental prayer according to fervor, recollection, beautiful ideas, or tangible results. The same is true of mental prayer as of the sacraments: its value and efficacy are of the supernatural order, and hence escape our human measurements.

If you had really grasped the essential element of mental prayer, you would not have become discouraged by what you call "the assault of distractions."

Mental prayer is a complex action. The whole of a man enters into it: body, soul, intellect, heart, and freedom. But it is important to clearly discern the essential, for when this is lacking, mental prayer loses all value.

Could it be the part played by the body? Obviously not. Otherwise, we would have to say that a paralytic cannot pray, because he cannot adopt proper physical attitudes for prayer. That would be absurd.

Does the essential consist in words? It is all too evident that words, in prayer as well as in human relations, can never be the essential.

Is the essential, sensitivity or fervor? That's very deceiving, for it takes such a trifle to perturb sensitivity: a worry, a sorrow, a joy, a passion, a toothache. Really, the value of our mental prayer cannot possibly be at the mercy of the slightest event, whether interior or exterior.

Or does it lie in reflections? Certainly meditation is important: knowledge of God elicits love for God. But if this were the essential of mental prayer, the person not well-endowed intellectually would be condemned to mediocre mental prayer, since perfection would be reserved to highly intelligent persons.

Or is attention to God essential? If it is, then you will sink into despair, since you are under the assault of “distractions.” For it is very often beyond our power to eliminate them. Our attention, like our sensitivity, is especially unstable. It is just as hard to keep our attention turned toward God, as it is to keep the needle of a compass fixed toward the north while we are walking.

Well then, what is left? The emotions—an ardent love, a lively trust, a deeply-felt gratitude? Now, it is true that our emotions, by comparison with our sensitivity and imagination, give evidence of a certain stability. Even so, we must admit they are in part beyond our control. We cannot command them. The heart’s fervor does not depend on our decision.

What, then, is the essential of prayer? It lies in the will. But don’t think of the will as the psychological mechanism through which we make decisions, or as that which constrains us to perform acts that displease us. In sound philosophical parlance, the will is the aptitude of our innermost being to freely turn toward a good, toward a person, or an ideal. Let us call it the aptitude to “commit ourselves,” to use a word dear to our generation. It is when our innermost being turns toward God, and surrenders itself to him freely and deliberately, that there is true prayer. This is so even if our sensitivity is dormant, our reflections meager, and our attention distracted. Our prayer is worth as much as this fundamental orientation and self giving.

Whereas our sensitivity, our attention, and even our emotions are fleeting and changing, our will is infinitely more stable and permanent. The agitations of sensitivity do not involve our will. The distractions of our imagination are not necessarily distractions of the will. I appeal to your own experience. During mental prayer, has it never happened that, suddenly aware of being carried away by distractions, you turned inward and recovered your calm and tenacious will oriented toward God, and eager to please him? In your will, nothing had changed.

To want to pray, is to pray. I am well aware that this formula has the gift of irritating those of our contemporaries who nurture the superstition of spontaneity. In their eyes, everything that we demand of ourselves is artificial, conventional, and false. But I know you well enough to realize that you are not inclined to such infantilism.

Ideally, of course, prayer that wells up from our innermost will should galvanize our whole being. In fact, nothing about us should remain a stranger to our prayer—any more than to our love. God wants all of us: *“You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength”* (Mk 12:30). That is why we must strive to banish parasitical noises and activities, collect ourselves, and gather ourselves up totally, so as to offer ourselves totally. But I repeat, it is fortunately not necessary that we succeed in doing this, for our mental prayer to be of good quality.

Anyone who wants to overcome distractions and agitation, must depend more on divine grace than on his own efforts. It is nonetheless true that it is good to know and to practice a few classical rules:

- An old-time writer (somewhat of a misogynist) taught: “Distractions in mental prayer are like women. Pay no attention to them and they will soon leave you alone!!”
- To be grieved for having been distracted is another way of being distracted.
- To include the thought that comes to mind in one’s agenda sometimes suffices to be rid of it: the telephone call that one must not fail to make during the day, etc.
- To choose the hour least favorable to distractions; for many this is the first hour of the day.
- to write out one’s prayer, to help the mind fix it’s attention when it is too agitated.
- To make of one’s distractions subjects of mental prayer: one’s grown son whose faith is wavering, etc.