

20. "Abba, Father!"

In a recent letter, as you remember, I was searching for the essential element of mental prayer. Having determined that this essential element could not be the role assumed by the body, the intellect, or the emotions in prayer, I concluded that it lies in the will. That's true and it's also false. I am therefore writing to you again, to avoid misleading you.

It's true, in the sense that the person who prays can do nothing more or better than this act of the will, by which he or she turns toward God and surrenders to him. But the Christian's prayer is not only a human act. It is, first of all, an act on God's part. Obviously, God's intervention is more important than man's. This was implicit in my thinking as I wrote to you. Was it likewise implicit in your mind as you read the letter?

A poignant Biblical scene illustrates, in a very compelling way, what happens in Christian prayer. Manoh and his wife, after being visited by an angel of Yahweh, offered a sacrifice to the Lord in the angel's presence, on the altar in the fields (cf Jg 13: 19-20). They piled up the wood, set the kid on it, and lit the fire. Suddenly, the angel was as though sucked into the flames, and rose from earth into heaven.

A mysterious Being raises up the Christian's prayer, guides it, and carries it to the Father Almighty. This being is the Holy Spirit. St. Paul explains this wonderful teaching in the most explicit terms: "*The Spirit too helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groaning that cannot be expressed in speech*" (Rm 8:26).

This prayer of the Spirit within us makes our mental prayer so astonishingly great. We come to prayer tired in heart and mind, stammering trite things. No matter! From this dead wood, the Spirit brings forth a living flame.

It is impossible to grasp this prayer of the Spirit. And yet one word is understandable: *Abba, Father*. St. Paul tells us: "*Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, who cries out: 'Abba, Father'*" (cf. Gal 4:6). The substance of our prayer is the Son's burst of filial love for His Father, which the Holy Spirit inspires in our souls. Why, then, should we be surprised that our human prayer is pleasing to God?

So long as we are still apprentices in the realm of mental prayer, we are not habitually conscious of this prayer of the Holy Spirit. We do not hear His cry of 'Father! Father!', although it resounds in the depths of our soul. Our interior senses, still poorly trained, are unaware of this presence in the Spirit within us. But from time to time, with deep inner joy (and with increasing frequency as our spiritual sense become more refined), we have a presentiment of the throbbing life of the Spirit of Christ. "*The Spirit Himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God*" (Rm 8:16).

Understand this to mean that we discover within ourselves a burst of love for the Father, which we admit does not come from us. Prayer then is very simple. It consists in *consenting*, in *adhering* (two words filled with meaning for spiritual persons), to what is happening within us. It is simply a matter of surrendering ourselves to the prayer of the Holy Spirit, the way the oil in a lamp surrenders to the flame that sucks it in.

Very often, nothing reveals to us the mysterious activity of the Spirit. We must nonetheless consent and adhere to it. But we must do so in pure faith, and by that act of the will discussed in my last letter to you.

I cannot recommend this too highly to you. As you begin your mental prayer, make an explicit and vigorous act of faith in the Spirit of Christ, who wants to pray within you. And just as one signs a blank check, give Him your anticipated and unreserved agreement.