

26. *The mental road of poverty*

Shall I dare tell you that I am delighted over the sense of total impotence and failure you experience in your mental prayer? Believe me, it is not hardness of heart on my part, but the conviction that this harsh trial holds great benefits for you.

You have abundant intellectual and material resources. You hold a position of authority. You are admired and feared, loved and obeyed. Many people and many things depend on you. And yet here is one area, the area of mental prayer, in which you are failing. You have made intense efforts to succeed, but to no avail. And you inform me in your letter that mental prayer is not for you, that you are giving it up.

I beg of you, agree to think it over some more before giving it up. This daily time of prayer seems intolerable to you. Does the cause lie perhaps in your secret refusal to admit that you can be indigent, powerless, and poor, even for a half hour a day? If you have no sooner begun your mental prayer, than you feel the urge to return to your professional activities, is it not because you are driven to prove to others (and first of all to yourself) that you are a “capable” man, creative and efficient? Be on your guard. I fear that you are yielding to an insidious, dangerous temptation, that threatens to throw you into the company of those whom Christ condemned: the rich. A rich man is a “somebody” who *can*, who *has* and who *is*.

You need mental prayer so very much! In your current life, dominated by success, mental prayer offers you the opportunity to discover your limitations, to experience the truest, most beneficial poverty, poverty of soul. Bless it for enabling you to rediscover your childhood, the time when you could not do much of anything, didn't possess anything, and, tiny and weak, were dependent upon others for everything. In the Kingdom of God, everyone is a child, defenseless, destitute, and poor.

You ought to read more of the Bible to discover the Beatitude of the poor, and meditate on it. I am not speaking only of the few lines in the Gospel, known as the Beatitudes. The whole of the Bible is the Beatitude of the poor. From the beginning to end, it sings their praises.

But we need to understand what we mean by these words “poverty” and “poor.” Their definition is to be found not in the dictionary, but in the sacred texts.

In the most ancient Scriptural texts, the Hebrew words designating the poor are concrete terms: “beggar,” “puny one,” “cripple.” They express the physical attitude of the poor. Over the centuries, these these words gradually took on religious meaning. They came to express an attitude of soul, rather than a physical or sociological reality. The person who humbly seeks God, turns to him, and fears and serves him, has been called the poor man. It is easy to see how, over the years, there has been a shift from one meaning to the other. Quite naturally, the Jew who had no money or work, who did not eat his fill, whom the powerful persecuted, turned to God since he could obtain no help from men.

Finally, during the last centuries before Jesus Christ, the poor, the “*anawim*,” were the devout Jews whether or not they were deprived of material possessions. Besides, the name “poor” suited them. They, too, were in need, and were hungry and thirsty. They hungered and thirsted for “the consolation of Israel,” for God. It is to them that Christ spoke on the mountain: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit...the afflicted...those who*

hunger..." (cf. Mt. 5:3-12). The most blessed one of all was Mary, because she was perfectly poor.

Now do you understand why you need mental prayer? For a half hour a day, it makes you a poor man. Choose to be blessed! Do you see why I say that your ineptness at mental prayer is a benefit? It helps you to discover and accept, not only your inability to pray, but even more fundamentally, your inability to save yourself by your own means. It forces you to adopt the attitude of a beggar, who trusts that everything will be given to him freely by God's inexhaustible love. Please persevere. Gradually, peace will replace your exasperation, and you will find that you can remain at the Lord's feet, happy to be poor. You will at last have discovered that to pray is to lay one's poverty before the eyes of God.

When you feel the need, make use of the prayers of the "poor" (often called "little ones," "the lowly," "the oppressed," "the miserable ones") that have been preserved for us in the Psalter.