

35. *The arid garden*

You write: “My mental prayer is arid, and it seems that my life is no longer bearing fruit as it did at the start of my priestly ministry. But I cannot understand the reason why.” Your letter reached me here in the rural rectory where I am spending a short vacation. I have been reading and rereading it in my darkened room, the shutters closed because of the torrid sun outside. And the vegetable garden under my window is in a sorry state: Everything is burned to a crisp. My pastor friend laments that he will have no vegetables this year. A good heavy rain is needed. But day after day passes, and the sky remains implacably blue.

Is this not perhaps what is also lacking in your soul? Rain, the rain that is the Word of God? The comparison did not originate with me, but with Isaiah:

*“For just as from the heavens
the rain and the snow come down
And do not return there
till they have watered the earth,
making it fertile and fruitful,
Giving seed to him who sows
and bread to him who eats,
So shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth;
It shall not return to me void,
but shall do my will,
achieving the end for which I sent it.”*

(Is 55:10-11)

Although the farmer can do nothing to obtain the rain he needs, you have only to will it and the word of God will make your life fruitful. God’s word can never fail us. We are the ones who fail God’s word.

Your decision to give up your mediation of Scripture over the past few months makes me wonder—and makes me ask you—whether you have the requisite esteem for the word of God.

You tell me that you are no longer able to meditate. If you defined the word “meditate” in its fundamental sense of “reflecting on,” reflecting on God’s word, delving into its underlying meaning, you could no longer claim that you are unqualified to meditate. Of course, you still have to put it into practice, and with greater perseverance since your active and overburdened life does not lend itself to meditation.

True, you assure me that you strive to create silence within you, to hollow out a void within yourself. And I understand that you do so in order to make room for God. But aren’t you making a mistake about this? Silence has no value in its own right. What mat-

ters is not to silence the noises within one's soul, but to listen to God's word, the "*word of life*" (Ph 2:16), the "*message of salvation*" (Ac 13:26), to "*listen to the word,*" (Mk 4:20), to "*retain it*" (Lk 8:15"), to "*be true*" to it (Jn: 8:51; 14:23). It is the word which, penetrating into the soul, will eliminate the noise and create silence.

It is not a matter of first creating an interior void, either. Fr. Plé writes perceptively:

"We see the error of many who think that to place oneself in the presence of God consists simply in making a void within one's soul of all earthly concerns. All extraneous thoughts are hastily suppressed, somewhat the way a policeman quickly evacuates a room through which a public figure will soon pass, and whom the policeman precedes and protects. Then, assuming one can empty one's head and heart, one awaits a "feeling" of the presence of God. Nothing happens, except perhaps the illusion of it."

I am well aware that spiritual writers recommend mental prayer of silence and emptiness, during which one must stop talking, reasoning, and acting. St. John of the Cross describes this mental prayer in a very compelling way: "Attention simply and solely fixed on one's object—the way someone opens his eyes to look out with love." But this passive, contemplative mental prayer is a gift from God. One cannot attain to it by one's own efforts. If it is not given to us, we have better things to do than to groan, await it idly, and watch for its coming or its return.

There is no wind? Then grasp the oars if you want to get out into the open sea. God is not talking to you in the depths of your heart? Listen to him in the Scriptures. Seek his word, chew it, masticate it; in a word, meditate.

So you see, prayer is God's word, not in its movement from God to man, but in its return from man to God. It is the word of God coming back to God, having achieved its mission, "*the end for which it was sent out,*" as Isaiah tells us.

When you are nourished with the word of God, everything within you, like a garden after the rain, will turn green again and grow. Life, the life of God, the theological life, will spring up again. *Faith* will dwell in your soul: faith—that alert, eager knowledge, filled with wonder, of the mystery of God and his love, a knowledge that is always young because it is renewed every day. And because love calls out to love, *charity* will spring up in its turn, the more fervent in proportion to the vitality of your faith. And the *hope* of knowing and loving God more and more, of seeing his Kingdom come upon earth, will be the stimulus to your mental prayer, and indeed to everything you do.