

37. “The unfathomable riches of Christ” (Ep 3:8)

I am happy to learn of your resolve to make a retreat. Nothing is more important for you at this moment than to introduce mental prayer into your life. In so doing, you are entering on a magnificent and awesome adventure, about which only love can give you some idea. In the course of this adventure, you will encounter the greatest joys and the harshest trials. “Joys and trials”: these words are too weak. You will discover the very meaning of your life, and if you play the game without cheating—which involves giving Christ total power over you—you will know the unique plenitude that only the greatest love can bring.

To come back to your letter and your request, “Would you be willing to guide me?” While I do not hesitate to say “Yes,” I did ruminate at some length over the advice to give you. Should I begin by telling you about the different forms and methods of mental prayer? Should I speak to you of the prime movers of prayer: praise, adoration, repentance, and petition? My own reflection (and even more, the experience of those I have watched set out with a sure compass on the path of mental prayer) has provided me with the subject matter for this first letter.

Do you want to learn how to pray? Then seek to know Christ. I am not speaking of a purely intellectual knowledge, but of a knowledge in faith and love. And first of all, you must believe firmly that Christ is not a figure lost in the mists of history. He is a living person, *The Living Person*, who stands at your door and knocks, as he himself has said.

This is the Christ you must seek to understand—the Christ who is reaching out to you to form a personal relationship with you. You must strive to know what he thinks and wants of you, and what his sentiments are towards you. There is only one way to keep you from going astray in speculation or in illusions. It is to grab hold of your Gospel and never let it go, and then seek untiringly. Little by little, the true face of Christ will reveal itself to you with increasing clarity, and with the help of his grace (for he is in even a greater hurry to make himself known than you are to know him) you will discover “*the unfathomable riches*” of his love, about which St. Paul speaks (cf. Ep 3:8).

When mental prayer is understood in this way, the problem is already solved (indeed, it is often badly stated) as to whether mental prayer should be meditation. If meditation is defined as a rigorous method, then it is not a requisite, although it may be useful to certain temperaments. If meditation is conceived as an intellectual exercise unrelated to love, then it must be avoided as a truncated and dangerous form of mental prayer. “Woe to the knowledge that is not impelled to love.” But if meditation is understood to be the eager search for the knowledge of Christ, that love demands and constantly inspires (because the one who loves untiringly seeks to know more in order to love more), then “Yes!”, a thousands times “Yes!”, mental prayer must be meditation.

I am sure that many Christians are discouraged from persevering in mental prayer because they do not succeed in loving Christ. If they don’t love him, it is because they are not trying to know him. One does not love a shadow, or somebody one does not know. Only the discovery of Christ’s astounding love for us can make love and prayer well up in our hearts.

In counseling you to begin by seeking to know Christ, I have the sense of toeing the line of divine pedagogy. Isn’t that the way God went about drawing the apostles and

disciples to himself? Jesus came to them, offering them his wonderful friendship. They saw him, touched him and heard him. They were conquered and gave themselves to him. Then, one day, Christ left them after saying these disconcerting words: *"It is much better for you that I go"* (Jn 16:7).

It is true, nonetheless, that Christ's friendship was the decisive experience of their lives. The same applies to the life of mental prayer. It is meant to lead Christians to a very lofty union with God. But it can have no better starting point, or firmer support, than the knowledge of the unbelievable love, both human and divine, that Christ is offering us.