

3. *Speak to Him*

A few weeks ago, I visited a Trappist Monastery. The Guest-Master welcomed me, and led me to the Prior's office through the long, bright halls, redolent of poverty and silence. I entered a room with white-washed walls, devoid of ornamentation and pictures, where a man of silence and serenity awaited me. His face was at once rugged and suffused with gentleness—a gentleness that did not speak to the senses but was completely spiritual, and that softened the sharp contours and hollows of his ascetical mask. In his glance, the candor of a child and the wisdom of old age mingled harmoniously. Our conversation took on a note of mutual trust. He was moved to speak of the day long ago which decided the course of his life.

As an adolescent he took part in the activities of a large Parisian church-related youth group. One Thursday during the winter, after a long afternoon of games, the curate talked about prayer to the older youths gathered in the small chapel. Our young man stayed on after his comrades, ostensibly to help the curate put things in order. Actually, he wanted to ask him something, but he scarcely knew how to go about it.

Finally, while sweeping the room—which was less embarrassing than a tête-à-tête—he blurted out, “you’re always telling us that we should pray, but you never teach us how to do it.” The priest answered, “That’s true! Do you want to know how to pray? Well, François, just go into the chapel and when you’re there, speak to Him.”

“That evening, I went to the chapel,” the old monk continued. “I must have stayed a long time, because I remember getting home late and being severely reprimanded. For the first time in my life, I had prayed. And I do believe that, ever since, I have never stopped speaking to Him.”

When he had finished making his disclosure, the Father Prior was silent. From a certain inflection in his voice, I understood that this memory from the distant past had an emotional impact on him, for it was the first link in a long intimacy with his God. The silence contin-

ued. I did not dare break it. I was sure he was speaking to Him. Most certainly, he was thanking Him for leading him, when he was a lad of fifteen, to the priest who had directed his steps in the paths of prayer.

The curate's advice was only apparently banal. He was really proving that he was an experienced man of prayer who, rather than engage in a long discourse, was content to answer the teen-ager eager to learn to pray, with three words: "Speak to Him." We do not converse with shadows. In order to talk to God, we must become aware of his presence. And to know what to say to him, our faith must wake up and start searching. The need to formulate words prevents us from being satisfied with flimsy impressions. It forces us to express precise thoughts, intentions, sentiments. The merits of such a method are great, if one can really call this simple advice a method.

Many Christians, when they go to mental prayer, allow themselves to be lulled into nebulous reveries, to pity themselves, and fall asleep in the sweet warmth of vague pious emotions. They never succeed in focusing their minds on anything, because they are incapable of concentration. If they would only listen and follow the curate's advice! But perhaps they would spurn it either out of pride or spiritual sloth, because they imagine they are further advanced in the paths of mental prayer, or because they refuse to make the necessary effort.

I thought I could give no better answer to your recent letter, than to relate my conversation with the Trappist monk. You, too, want to learn how to pray. Why don't you listen to the Parisian curate's advice, and put it into practice?

A day will come when you will no longer need any words for your mental prayer. If I dare say so, you will have attained proficiency in the trade. Or more precisely, grace will have advanced its work in you. But don't try to rush forward. For the moment, "Speak to Him."