

7. *An invention of love*

“How is it that after fifteen years of regular mental prayer, I now find it so dull, so apparently ineffective, devoid of light and joy?”

To answer your question, I passed in review the explanations that spiritual writers have given for aridity in mental prayer. These include a life of faith that is insufficiently nourished by reading and meditation (especially the reading and meditation of the Word of God), and a tepid life of charity resulting from a failure to deliberately mortify one’s inclinations, attachments, and passions. It can also be the result of a failure to discipline one’s imagination and thinking.

But I am focusing more on another explanation. Without claiming, of course, that it is the correct one, I would like you to reflect on it at some length.

I wonder if you are not the victim of both routine and proficiency. When you decided to practice mental prayer, you were aware of your ignorance, and so you sought advice and read articles or books on the subject. I remember your eagerness to learn. As a result, each period of mental prayer was a victory over inexperience, apathy, and distractions. Or at least a courageous struggle.

Since then, you have acquired experience and proficiency. You know that it is very useful to prepare your mental prayer and to begin it well, and so you never fail to do these things. You struggle against distractions, but without tension, like an experienced man who knows that they are often permitted by God. You speak to the Lord, but you also know how to be silent, having discovered the price of silence in mental prayer. You are suffering because you no longer experience (as you once did) those sudden bursts of light and love, but you have learned that “aridity” has its place in every spiritual life that is advancing.

Have you not become a “professional” in mental prayer, who knows the rules of the art very well and applies them? We say of an artisan that he has a skillful hand. Speaking of a practitioner, a pianist, or a preacher, we say: he is a professional. That is certainly very im-

portant. But it is not enough, especially in man-to-man relations. I am thinking now of professors, writers, preachers, etc.

And it is certainly even less adequate in the relations between man and woman, within the home. I picture a young husband who has been taught that it is not good to improvise his evening conversations with his spouse. Armed with this advice, he comes home from the office and questions his wife on her day, her tasks, her encounters, and on the development of their newborn baby. For his part, he does not fail to tell her about the salient facts relating to his life at work. Then he suggests that they spend the evening reading together the book he has just bought. And yet, for all these sound ideas and praiseworthy efforts, the evening may turn out to be disappointing for them both, each one remaining solitary and bored, continuing his or her interior monologue, or perhaps escaping into some reverie.

The reason is that, in the domain of married life, it is not simply a matter of knowing the theory or of having acquired certain skills. Two living beings are never today what they were yesterday. They must set out each day toward their mutual encounter by unknown paths, and try to guess what is going on deep within the other's life. They must seek what can gain the other's attention, interest, and affection, and avoid for the moment whatever annoys or bores, while they search for the magnet that can establish communion between them. And then sometimes the miracle happens! A genuine exchange in depth, in which two hearts and souls commune. Words are found that are wonderfully suited to enhance the exchange—unless silence achieves it better.

It is not enough to be well-versed in psychology, to know by heart the code of good relations between husband and wife. There is the need to invent every conversation, every evening together, so that it may be a real encounter. Now, it is hard and tiresome to invent. Or more precisely, it demands a young, vibrant love that is never resigned to mediocrity in conversations, but is impatient for closer communion, spurred by hope. It is love that elicits inventiveness, and reciprocal inventiveness enriches love.

What is true of married life is true also of mental prayer, because it, too, is a person-to-person encounter. Mental prayer deteriorates when savoir-faire takes the place of inventiveness. I wonder if this

might not be the case with you. Indeed, it is very useful to know and to put into practice—as you are doing—the rules that men and women of prayer have taught us. But if the faculty of inventiveness does not come into play, then in spite of all this knowledge, mental prayer will remain polished, superficial, and artificial. It will not culminate in a communion of the soul with God.

You will tell me that a man who loves his wife can guess by signs imperceptible to anyone else—a certain smile, a gleam in her eye, a slight quiver of her face or hand—what brings joy to her heart.

But with God? Faith teaches us what pleases him. True, faith does not suffice to inform us as to what pleases him here and now, what he wants from this particular half hour of mental prayer. Is he expecting us to pause and reflect on a certain facet of his thought, or on one of his perfections? Does he want from us a particular attitude of soul, such as praise or repentance, adoration or filial trust? Does he want a change in an attitude which raises up a barrier between him and ourselves?

By what sign can we understand what God wants? It may be a quality of silence or peace, following anxiety (I am using the word in its etymological sense of absence of interior calm), or perhaps an impression of fulfillment. We sometimes have the feeling of having found a good attitude of soul. As I write this, a memory from my distant childhood comes to mind (forgive the laughable comparison): I see a billiard table, billiard balls on the table, and holes with numbers on them: 10, 100, 500, 1,000. The trick was to place the balls in the holes with the largest numbers. The balls rolled and gained momentum. One ball would approach a hole and then move away from it, and finally fall into another, quivering for a few instants and finally settling down, its calm restored.

So when we have trouble getting our mental prayer started, it is a good idea to “try” successively some thoughts or attitudes of soul that have helped us to pray during an earlier period of mental prayer. If none of these awakens a response or a feeling of peace in us, we will remain unstable, as it were, more or less anxious. We have to keep searching, knowing that our very effort is already pleasing to God.

On the other hand, if peace settles in our soul, if we have the impression of being in the truth, then we can stop searching. We have found what God wanted of us. There is the need only to gently penetrate deeper into the thought, or to strengthen our attitude. Thanks to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, little by little we shall become better able to discern what pleases God.

Even if we remain in uncertainty, we are on the right path, provided our mental prayer is governed by the will to respond to God's expectations. Let us search gropingly, but always peacefully, conversing with God as a son talks with his Father.

The thing to remember out of this long letter is that each of your times of mental prayer must be an invention of love—I mean an invention in the sense of discovery—a discovery of what is pleasing to God. The memory of what yesterday's mental prayer was like, or the mere knowledge of an art of praying, will not teach you what today's mental prayer must be. You have to search with the flexibility of a fully awakened, industrious, hopeful soul.