

80. Desert prayers

Veronica is thirteen years old. Her mother taught her how to practice mental prayer very early in life, and she devotes ten or fifteen minutes to it each day. Last Sunday, in great distress, Veronica confided to me: "For the past week I have no longer experienced the presence of God."

My dear Veronica, I thought you would be glad to have in writing the advice I gave you the day before yesterday, especially since you have not yet recovered the presence of Christ in your daily mental prayer. For many months, he had been granting you the sense of his presence, and it felt very good. Now that this sense has been taken from you, you are all upset. I understand you, but don't worry. Don't tire yourself needlessly, trying to find out the reason for this change. Don't be too quick to think that it's your fault. Rather, strive to accept this trial willingly, good-naturedly, and with great patience. Little by little, you'll learn that these apparently sterile moments of mental prayer are very valuable. Christ's words to his disciples: "*It is much better for you that I go*" (Jn 16:7), will prove true for you also.

Your faith will emerge purer and stronger from this journey through the desert, where nothing grows and one never meets another human being. As long as Our Lord allowed you to sense his presence and his love, it was easy for you to cling to him, as the Apostles did when their risen Master appeared in their midst. But when no sensible sign comes to help your faith, it is forced to grow stronger and firmer. Remember Christ's words to Thomas: "*Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed*" (Jn 20:29).

I invite you to strive very quietly and peacefully, during your desert prayers, to believe that Jesus is there, loving his little girl with a very great love. Nothing can give him greater glory than this firm faith.

Your interior life will reap a second considerable benefit from your toilsome mental prayer. Since you have become a boarding student, hasn't your desire to be with your family grown with each passing day? And isn't your return home all the more joyous, for having been so eagerly anticipated?

The same holds true for your times of mental prayer devoid of joy. Your desire to find Christ once more, and be more closely united to his love, will be intensified. That's essential, because as your desire intensifies, it will hollow out your soul more deeply, and you'll be able to offer Christ far more room to live within you. His grace will be given more abundantly to you, in the measure that you are more empty of self, and more eager to receive him. This eagerness is the virtue of hope.

There's a third benefit, too. Your love for Christ, like metal in the furnace, is purified in these purgatorial times of mental prayer. Didn't you often go to mental prayer eager to find the joy you had experienced the day before? That might indicate that you were not going to mental prayer solely to please God, but also out of a certain self-love.

When we become aware of this, we should be the first to tell our Lord: "I want to get rid of this old self-love, and go to mental prayer, not for the joy it gives me, but only for

your glory. And so I beg you to keep me from finding joy in it, as long as necessary.” Even if we do not take the initiative, let us at least accept, patiently and peacefully, the denial to us of the joys of mental prayer.

Above all, don't be like those who spend their entire period of mental prayer eagerly watching for the return of joy. Such people make me think of children who hardly sleep a wink on Christmas Eve, because they're watching for the arrival of toys under the Christmas tree. I hope the day will come when you will even be happy when your mental prayer is devoid of joy. Then you'll know that you love Jesus a little more than you love yourself.

Wasn't I right, Veronica, in telling you that your desert prayers are very useful? In this kind of prayer, the three great virtues are purified and perfected: faith, hope and charity. These are precisely the virtues that put us in contact with our God, and initiate us into his own divine life.