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## **“Like Parched Land” (Ps 143:6)**

### **Letter 76**

**Fr. Henri Caffarel**

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My dear Father, why do you ask me whether, during mental prayer, we can surrender without scruples to our desire for union with God? Isn't the answer to be found in our breviary? For the breviary makes us put on the desire for God which burned in the Psalmist's heart, and found expressions in such poignant accents:

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“My soul thirsts for you like parched land” (Ps 143:6).

“O God, you are my God whom I seek;  
for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts  
like the earth, parched, lifeless and without  
water.

Thus have I gazed toward you in the sanctuary  
to see your power and your glory...” (Ps 63:2-3).

“As the hind longs for the running waters,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.

Athirst is my soul for God, the living  
God.

When shall I go and behold the face of  
God?” (Ps 42:2-3).

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Theology also answers your question. It is the law (I was going to say the “biological” law) of the theological virtues, implanted by baptism deep in man's heart, to strain with all their dynamism toward their object, God. Faith aspires to an ever more perfect knowledge of the Lord, and charity yearns for an ever-closer union of love with him. And

so grace, when it takes possession of a man, fills him with ravenous hunger and unquenchable thirst. The more grace grows within the soul, the more intense the hunger and thirst become.

And yet, I can't help thinking that you know these answers from Scripture and theology as well as I do. So you must be expecting something else from me. Am I mistaken in assuming that you are divided? That you wonder whether you should yield to the desire for God that inhabits you, or whether it isn't more perfect to yearn only for his glory?

Everyone who is progressing in the paths of prayer must face this choice sometime. Hesitancy in surrendering to the desire for union with God then stems from the sense that this desire is not totally pure. There is a fervent hope that this glimpse of God, which gives so much happiness, will be manifested again. But doesn't this desire contain more greed than generosity, more self-love than self-giving? One begins to wonder whether he must not resist it, so as to serve God with a disinterested love, free of self-seeking. Meanwhile, the desire is so tenacious and powerful that it wells up again and again.

There is no need to fear this desire. Rather, one should rejoice over it as a sure sign of the presence of the living God in the soul. The point is not to eliminate it, but to purify it. Anyway, God takes charge of this purification. The trek, through the desert and the darkness, will be so long that no self-love can survive it. On the other hand, the desire for God will grow deep within the soul. This time it will be wholly spiritual and pure, since it comes from God, is directed toward God, and is solely for the glory of God.

Does this mean that we must first reach a high degree of purification before we can dare confide to the Lord, during mental prayer, our irrepressible need to know him, love him, and be united to him? Of course not! A child should be simple and direct with his Father. He needs only to disavow any ambiguities in his desires.

We should not be afraid to express to God during mental prayer our desire for union with him. That is, provided that we are not merely sentimental *yearners* for him who scorn this action, but are indeed zealous *servants* of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In closing, allow me to copy for you a passage from the writings from St. Angela of Foligno. Once you have understood the distinctions I have just made, there is no danger of misinterpreting what she really meant.

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The wise soul is not content to know God superficially, through reflection. It wants to know him in truth, savor his sovereign goodness and experience his infinity. Such a soul does not see God as merely a possession to be acquired, but as the supreme Good. It then loves him because of his goodness, and, loving him, it desires to possess him.

And God, in his great goodness, gives himself to the soul. Sensing this, the soul delights in his sweetness. Thus participating in the one who is sovereign love, the soul is enraptured with tenderness, and is united to God....But the soul cannot attain such a lofty knowledge through its own

efforts, through Scripture, through learning, or any created means, although these things can help and dispose toward it. Divine light and grace are needed for this.

Now, to obtain this favor quickly and surely, and to obtain it from God, the supreme Good, the supreme Light, the supreme Love, I know of no better way than devout, pure, unceasing petition. This is a petition that is both humble and vehement; a petition that is not uttered merely with the lips, but that springs from the mind, from the heart, from all the corporeal and spiritual faculties; a petition that wrests grace through its immense desire.