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“The invitation to silence”

Letter # 84

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer 1983

I shall not hide from you that I was somewhat disconcerted by the question you asked in your last letter: “When we do nothing at all during mental prayer, how can we be sure that this is really what God wants? I was going to answer: “It’s never God’s will that we do nothing during mental prayer, because all true mental prayer is essentially an activity.” But as I was not prepared to receive rash questions from you, I tried to figure out the exact meaning of your request. Tell me if I have understood you correctly.

There are times during mental prayer when we are absent in spirit. After a few minutes, we are surprised to find ourselves kneeling, and notice that our mind’s activity has not been interrupted. The interior film strip has continued to roll. At other times, after a good start in mental prayer, we catch ourselves thinking of all sorts of things foreign to our prayer, or else our mind seems to be floating on a cloud of peaceful lethargy. Are you referring to states of soul such as these? If so (but I doubt it), it is quite obvious that you need to regain control of your thoughts. You must turn your attention back to God, search for a faith-filled thought and dwell on it, make an effort to love God.

I am inclined to think that your question concerns moments when, during mental prayer, we no longer want to reflect on a specific subject, or even make distinct acts of adoration, praise, and love. These are moments when we feel impelled to interior immobility and silence. A certain anxiety, however, keeps us from surrendering unreservedly to this impulsion. Is this authentic mental prayer?

Here is my advice to you. If you sense that interior silence is more authentic, and that it absorbs you more deeply than words, then do not hesitate to opt for silence. Above all, reject the temptation to think that this means you are inactive. In the deepest recesses of your being, there is activity going on—delicate, subtle, very pure and scarcely perceptible because it is very spiritual. It is a turning toward God of your innermost self, an activity that is far more real and true than effervescing feelings or imaginings, than the most elating thoughts or sentiments. This activity is divine, elicited within you by the

Spirit of the Lord. These moments filled with silence (there are empty silences as well) are among the privileged moments of mental prayer.

But take heed! Do not try to bring on these moments. You cannot attain to this state of soul, or maintain yourself in it, through your own efforts. It is a matter of grace. When you do not feel this inclination to silence within yourself, simply go back to your former form of mental prayer. Think about God, speak to him, love him, and offer yourself to him. But be ready to quit all these activities, the instant the Holy Spirit invites you to silence once more.