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“Whiffs of prayer”

Letter 86

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

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Don't imagine that you are one of a kind. Many others go through the same experiences as you. A physician-friend of mine said to me recently, “Often when I am driving my car, or am between patients, I feel impelled to pray. At such times, I look forward to the moment when I can enter a church. But when at last I am there, the prayer that I had thought was ready to well up is gone from my mind.” Many a mother has confided to me that her periods of mental prayer remain desperately dry, but that she can pray without any difficulty while cleaning the house or preparing the meals.

Several explanations can probably be given for this common occurrence. Before proposing a good explanation, I invite you to broaden and deepen your perspective.

The Blessed Trinity lives within us. According to Christ's promise to his Apostles, *“Anyone who loves me will be true to my word, and my Father will love him; we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him”* (Jn 14:23).

The Trinity is not within us the way, for example, that a host is in a ciborium. Rather, it is present in the way that fire is present in the log it is consuming, or the way that the soul lives in the body. I make these comparisons to help you understand that, in prayer, we are united to the very life of the Triune God. Our innermost being, that most secret area of ourselves (and the one we know least), shares in the Trinitarian life. Superficial as we may be, we sometimes receive, from this center of our soul, messages, mysterious admonitions and invitations to recollection. To be recollected means to redirect our attention away from our external concerns, and to become receptive to interior realities.

If we accept the invitation, put everything else aside, and listen attentively, our innermost life often comes to the surface of our consciousness. More precisely, we penetrate into this interior world that we—perennially distracted beings—neglect to cultivate.

“But,” you may point out, “it is precisely when I am answering what I think is a call from God, and turn to mental prayer, that I don't perceive anything or feel any need to pray. In short, I feel that I'm bored.”

Is the reason, perhaps, that your intellect is striving to produce ideas, and your heart is laboring to produce feelings, at a time when you should be totally immobile and receptive? Please understand that, in order to know and love God more, it is often better to be receptive than active. Think of those ponds that are fed from within. The same is true of your soul. Your intellect is there within you, capable of receiving the light of the Word. If it is open, then, the light will shine forth from within its center and spread through it. Ready your heart likewise, to receive from within the Trinitarian love. This is the charity that wants to fill and dilate it, so that it can overflow onto others.

I am not saying that we must always adopt this passive attitude during mental prayer. I even refrain from advising it to beginners. It is proper for them to fill the pond by drawing from outside, by nourishing their minds and hearts with the Word of God. That's the way to begin and to continue, perhaps for many long years. It's necessary as long as infused contemplation, as the theologians call it, has not welled up from within.

Even so, we must be alert. This infused contemplation does not offer our intellect distinct ideas, and does not necessarily arouse expressible sentiments. It runs the risk, at least in the early stages, of passing unnoticed.

It is precisely because this contemplation is divine, that it overflows and foils our human modes of thinking and loving.

Have I wondered from my subject? Not at all. These "whiffs of prayer," that come when you are not trying to pray, are probably an invitation to a greater passivity before God, to greater interior flexibility and docility. In this way, the Holy Spirit can communicate his divine impulses to your pacified and receptive soul, and initiate you into infused contemplation.

So learn not to seek on the outside, what is within you. Stop trying to produce what you are meant to receive.