

2. In the house of the Lord

Stephen and Sylvia, a childless couple, both physicians, came to see me before leaving for the remote bushland where the two of them, alone except for the company of two missionaries, are to dedicate themselves to a completely new Christian community. They know it will be hard, and that in order to persevere they will need to pray a great deal. So they came to ask me to speak to them one last time about mental prayer, to give them essential advice on it. And as they left me, they insisted that I put into writing for them what I had just said.

My dear friends, for centuries the roads and bypaths of Judea witnessed, several times a year, unending streams of men, women, and children on their way to Jerusalem.

The slopes of the Judean mountains were steep, shade was rare, the sun beat down relentlessly, but nothing could discourage these devout Jews from going to the holy mountain.

The sentiments that guided them, that sustained their courage, are known to us. We find them echoed in the many Psalms they sang as they walked, their pilgrim hymns.

*"How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!
My soul yearns and pines
for the courts of the Lord.
My heart and my flesh
cry out for the living God....
I had rather lie at the threshold of
the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked." (Ps 84: 2,3,11)
"I rejoiced because they said to me,
'We will go up to the house of the Lord.' "(Ps 122:1)*

Once back home, when the hour of prayer arrived, wherever they were—in the house or in the fields—they turned towards Jerusalem to praise the Almighty.

There can be only one explanation for such a passionate love of their capital, such dedication to their Temple, such fidelity over the centuries. Jerusalem was much more than the capital of the kingdom. It was the City of the Lord, and the Temple was his house where they were always sure of finding him.

It was the desire to find God, to encounter him—the most basic aspiration of every religious person—that set in motion these throngs of believers, these seekers after God whose fervor is revealed in the Psalms.

Christ came. He manifested his love for Jerusalem, and his respect for the Father's House. At the same time, he declared that the Temple had lost its meaning, and would soon disappear. At the hour of his death on the Cross, the veil of the Holy of Holies was torn, as if indeed to signify that this temple was now desacralized. It would be replaced by a new, imperishable temple, “rebuilt in three days,” the temple of his body, of his Mystical Body. There alone would men and women henceforth be able to find God.

But everyone who enters this temple becomes in their turn the dwelling place of God. Jesus has assured us of this: *“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).

This is an astonishing revelation. Did God desert the Temple in order to come and dwell in the souls of his faithful? Yes. St. Paul says so explicitly: *“Are you not aware that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”* (1 Cor 3:16). *“You are the temple of the living God”* (2 Cor 6:16).

This word “temple” is not very meaningful for us. But under the pen of the Apostle trained from childhood to venerate and love the Temple of Jerusalem, it assumed its full meaning. In these texts the word translated by “temple” would be more aptly rendered by “holy of holies,” the heart of the Temple, the locus of the divine presence.

And so God is within us, within the very heart of our being: present, living, loving and acting. It is there that he calls us. It is there that he is waiting for us, to unite us to himself.

God is there, but we're not. Our existence is spent outside ourselves, or at least on the periphery of our being, in the zone of sensations, emotions, imaginings, discussions; in that noisy and anxiety-ridden suburb of the soul. And if we happen to think of God, to yearn to encounter him, we go out of ourselves. We seek him on the outside, forgetting that he is right there within us.

We do not know the paths of our soul that will lead us into the subterranean and luminous chamber where God dwells. Or else, if we do know them, we lack the courage that impelled the fervent Jews to follow the roads to the Holy City. Is it a more arduous undertaking to reach the center of ourselves than it was for the Jews to go to Jerusalem?

Mental prayer means getting away from the tumultuous suburb of our being of which I just spoke. It is to recollect, to gather up all our faculties and plunge into the arid night that leads to the depths of our soul. Once on the threshold of the sanctuary, we need only to be silent and attentive. It is not a matter of spiritual sensation, of interior experience. It is a matter of *faith*: it means believing in the Presence. It means adoring the living Trinity in silence. It means offering and opening ourselves up to the overflowing life of the Triune God. It means cleaving to, and communing in, the eternal act of the Trinity.

Little by little, year by year, the core of our spiritual being will be refined by grace and become more sensible to the breathing of God, of the Spirit of love, within us. Little by little, we shall be divinized and our external life will become the manifestation, the epiphany of our interior life. We shall be holy because in our innermost being we shall be closely united to God All-Holy. We shall be fruitful, and rivers of living water will flow from us because we shall be joined to the very Well-spring of Life.

Dear friends, this is the “essential advice” that you ask of me. May it guide you safely to the hour of mental prayer in your remote bushland. I shall sum it up in a few words: to engage in mental prayer is to go on a pilgrimage to the sanctuary within, and there to adore the true God.

And if you want your whole life to become one long prayer, a life in God's presence, a life with God; if you want to become souls of prayer, you must, throughout the day, enter often within yourselves to adore the God who is expecting you there. It need not be for long. An instant's plunge inward, and then you can return to your tasks, your conversations; but you will return rejuvenated, refreshed, renewed.

In 17th-century France there lived a humble Carmelite lay brother, Lawrence of the Resurrection, who was well advanced in the spiritual life. He liked to tell those who came to him for advice, that there was no more effective way of attaining to a life of continual mental prayer, and hence a high degree of sanctity, than faithfulness to this practice. Hear his words: "During our work and our other activities, even when we are engaged in spiritual reading and writing, I say, even more—during our external devotions and vocal prayers—we must stop briefly, as often as we can, to adore God deep within our heart, to delight in him even if only in passing and as if by stealth."

*"O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell,
the tenting-place of your glory"* (Ps 26:8).

When the Jews recited this Psalm, they thought of the Temple of Jerusalem. The Christian, for his part, thinks of his baptized soul.