

47. *His prayer is my prayer*

It makes me very sad to be in the presence people who would like to pray, and have a secret nostalgia for prayer, but have lost hope and given it up. Some of them carry this nostalgia around inside of them throughout their lives. They remind me of boys who have lost their sense of direction, and can't find their way back to their fathers house.

I remember an old priest who told me, "I have never known how to pray." I think of so many men and women who have said to me: "I don't know how to practice mental prayer," "What's the use of continuing, since I can't even get started?" and "Have I ever really prayed?"

Are you going to join the ranks of these people who have become discouraged with mental prayer?

Understand that it is not so much a question of "practicing" mental prayer, as of "making contact" within yourself with a prayer that is already there, full-fledged and in progress. Christian prayer is not so much the work of man, as the work of God within man. Since the day of your baptism, and providing you are in the state of grace, prayer inhabits you. Not, of course, at the level of consciousness, or at the level of feelings or ideas, but deep-down in the innermost reaches of your being, in the interior chamber where the Holy Spirit dwells. Don't you know that you are a *"temple of the Holy Spirit"* (cf. I Cor 6:19), and that this Spirit comes to succor you in your weakness? St. Paul assures us that he intercedes for you, and within you, with ineffable groans, and that his intercession coincides with God's desires (cf. Rm 8:26-27).

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. That is why his prayer within you is essentially a filial call, a cry of tender affection. St. Paul affirms, *"God has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of his Son who cries out 'Abba!'"* (Gal 4:6). Now "Abba!" was the colloquial cry of joy and love uttered by little children as they threw their arms around their father: "Abba, dearest Daddy!"

Are you going to ask me, "Why are you exhorting me to practice mental prayer if it is already within me, ready-made and unceasing, and since it is not my business, but that of the Holy Spirit?"

Yes, it is within you like the flame of an oil lamp. But this flame needs to be fed with oil, or it will flicker and go out. The oil that nourishes the prayer of the Spirit within you is your love for God.

By love for God, I do not mean some vague religious emotion or mediocre feeling, but the cleaving of our innermost will to the will and action of the Spirit of the Lord within us.

This adherence varies greatly from one Christian to another. In one individual, it may be implicit, poor and hesitant. In a saint, it is lucid, firm, fervent and inspired by intense faith and charity.

The quality of our prayer is measured by the quality of our adherence to the prayer-activity of the Holy Spirit within us.

It is essential to devote sufficient time to mental prayer because in our everyday life, under the influence of worries, pleasures, and sorrows, our interior adherence to God quickly slackens and declines. When we come to mental prayer, we are in a state of dispersion, like a band of sparrows scattered on trees and in surrounding bushes. We must regroup our faculties and recollect ourselves. That takes time. But then our adherence is made firmer in the measure that our faith intensifies in the presence of God within us, and in the measure that our love for him is actualized.

Perhaps the day will come when there will be no need to devote a specific time to mental prayer. The day will surely come when this profound union with the prayer of the Spirit of Christ within us will remain actual, alive and uninterrupted. Our occupational activities will not disturb it any more. When that happens, the Spirit will carry us along and vivify us, whether we are walking, or working, or talking. Even when we are sleeping—the bride in the Song of Songs cries out, *“I was sleeping, but my heart kept vigil”* (5:2).

That is the unceasing prayer that Christ recommended to his disciples: *“He told them a parable on the necessity of praying always and not losing heart”* (Lk 18:1). St. Paul transmitted the same advice to the Thessalonians: *“Rejoice always, never cease praying, render constant thanks”* (I Th 5: 16-18).

For those who attain to this continual interior mental prayer, the prayer of the Holy Spirit is no longer an ember under the ashes, but a flame that consumes the whole person. A saint is a living prayer.

Now, do you understand what I was saying to you at the beginning of my letter? It is not so much a matter of “practicing” mental prayer, as of “joining yourself” by an act of faith to the prayer of Christ’s Spirit within you. You must do this and persist with patience, courage and unshakable hope. One day, I am sure, you will be able to write to me, based on your own personal experience:

“Christ is my life. Not only does he pray with me, but also ‘in’ and ‘through’ me. His prayer is my prayer. There are not two prayers side by side, but one prayer which is at once both his and mine.”