

5. *Being present to God*

I share your impression that your spiritual life has now reached a plateau. After reflecting and praying, I came to the conclusion that that's the way things are going to be, as long as you do not make a larger place for prayer in your life. And by prayer, I mean essentially what is usually referred to as *mental prayer*. It used to be called "oraison," from the latin "*oratio*."

For the Romans, "*orare*" meant addressing a prayer to the gods, pleading a cause, and, in a derived sense, making a discourse. Mental prayer is a conversation of the soul with God. That is the way spiritual men and women have always understood it. Clement of Alexandria wrote, "I dare say that mental prayer is a conversation with God." For St. Benedict, it is "attending to God." For St. Teresa of Avila, mental prayer is "a friendly exchange in which one converses in a tête-à-tête with this God by whom one knows he is loved." For Dom Marmion, it is "a talk between the child of God and his heavenly Father, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

These words "conversation" and "talk" involve the risk, however, of encouraging a certain ambiguity, because they give one to believe that mental prayer consists essentially in speaking inwardly to God. Now, mental prayer is a vital action that involves our whole being.

There is an expression which, if it is given its true depth of meaning, could translate quite well the interior action of the man or woman who is praying: being present to God. To help you grasp my thought, allow me to call to mind an event that must have remained very vivid in your memory.

I had come to pay you a visit. As you opened the door, you informed me that your daughter Monica probably had meningitis, and you led me to her room plunged in semi-darkness. Your wife was sitting next to the little bed, silent, intensely attentive to her child's poor emaciated face. At times, she would gently push a lock of hair from Monica's forehead. When the child opened her eyes, she responded by smiling—the kind of smile that words cannot describe.

Whatever the mother did, whether she was tidying things up in the room or taking a hasty meal in the neighboring room, she remained intensely present to her daughter. Every fiber of her being, every second of her life, was directed toward Monica.

That's the way it is, or at least should be, with mental prayer. It should be a profound attention of the soul, an exchange that goes beyond words which, without neglecting to speak, consists of something very different—an attention, a presence to God of one's whole being, body and soul, of all one's keenly alert faculties.

Do I need to take more time to plead the cause of mental prayer with you? I have every reason to think that the cause is already won, that you are not among the many Christians who refuse to admit the need for it. I shall not hide from you that I have a bad conscience when I need to multiply arguments in order to invite the sons of God to come close to their Father, to open their hearts to his revelations, to live in his close friendship, to express their love and gratitude to him.

How strange that there is a need to insist, so that beings endowed with understanding may strive to know the Something that is most interesting of all. So that beings created for love may come to love the Something that is most lovable. So that free beings may place themselves at the Lord's service, rather than at the service of his vassals. So that beings created for Happiness may not be content with small pleasures.