

88. *I want to learn how to pray*

You say, “I would like to know how to pray.” Thank God for this wish! It can only come from him. Even so, you must ask yourself why you want to learn to pray.

An old French story will explain my thinking to you better than a long discourse.

In ancient times, there were many hermits living in the forests of the Vosges Mountains. One of them had a great reputation for holiness. Hunters claimed that they had seen wild animals—bears, wild boars, roe deer—gathered and as though recollected before the entrance of his cave, while he sang the Lord’s praises. The inhabitants of the valley were no longer surprised, when they noticed a strange glow in the sky at night above the mountain where the man of God lived.

Quite often, young men of the region asked him to take them in. Didn’t other hermits live with disciples whom they initiated into contemplation? But they all received the same negative answer. All but one. This privileged young man revealed the reason for his good fortune, shortly after his master’s death.

“When I was eighteen years old I presented myself, and requested the favor of dwelling close to him. When he asked me why, I answered, ‘Because I want to learn how to pray.’ These words kindled a gleam of tenderness in the old hermit’s eyes. Then he asked me, ‘and why do you want to learn to pray?’ ‘Because that is the loftiest knowledge.’ ‘I would like very much to take you in, but I can’t,’ he answered with some sadness.

“I returned to see him three years later. He received me with a father’s affection, and again asked me, ‘Why do you want to learn how to pray?’ ‘So I can become a saint.’ I was convinced that this time, he would accept me. Wasn’t this the loftiest conceivable reason? But once again he refused, and I left in despair.

“I went back to work in the fields. And yet the desire to pray haunted me more than ever, from morning until night. Sometimes I would weep, when I thought of the man who lived up there on the mountain, in intimate friendship with his God.

“One Christmas Eve, I suddenly got up. I was absolutely sure that this time, he would accept me. When I arrived, he was praying and didn’t notice me. I waited a long time. Gradually, my impatience quieted down. When he turned around, he didn’t seem at all surprised by my presence. I began to speak, without giving him time to ask any questions. ‘I want to learn how to pray *because I want to find God.*’ Then he opened his arms and welcomed me.”

To find God is the purpose of true prayer. It makes prayer irresistible. The Father cannot turn away from the child who is seeking him. The child finally understands that he must no longer run from the Father who is pursuing him.

What does it mean to find God? Grace gradually causes this need to mature in the Christian heart. Those who have found God would love to disclose their secret to us, but they are up against an impossible obstacle. Neither words nor concepts can express the intimacy of the soul with its God. They are reduced to assuring us that the path of prayer is not a blind alley. It opens up into a great meadow, and culminates in an ineffable, divine experience.