

## 97. God's rest

You are perplexed because you feel inclined to rest during mental prayer whereas, until now, you had the sense of engaging in intense activity of mind and heart. You wonder whether it is a temptation to indifference.

Do you not perhaps have, along with so many of our contemporaries, a rather low esteem of repose, reserving your enthusiasm for action? Of course, distinctions must be made. There are many kinds of repose. But to suspect all repose *a priori* is a serious error. If certain kinds of rest are nothing but sloth and indolence, there are others—and they deserve respect—addressed to nurturing and renewing strength for the sake of more effective action.

There are nobler types of rest, as well. Read the Epistle of the Hebrews (Heb 4, *passim*). It gives us “good news,” the promise of entering into God’s rest. It is reserved for the people of God, and therefore offered to each of its members. The author of the Epistle concludes: “*Let us strive to enter into that rest*” (Heb 4:11).

The expressions “God’s rest” is a very ancient one. In the Bible, it is used to designate the Promised Land. To enter into this land is to accede to God’s rest. But the Promised Land is only an image, and a very imperfect one, of God’s true rest to which we are invited. And that is Heaven. Like the Promised Land, Heaven must be laboriously conquered. Does this mean that we must renounce seeking God’s rest, before entering the Homeland? No. On the road, we are provided with divine stopping places: hours and places of rest. Didn’t Jesus Christ say: “*Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you....learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest*” (Mt 11:28-29)?

We can, indeed we must, seek God’s rest. We must strive to enter into it, as the Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts us to do. But let us delve even more deeply into this Biblical notion of God’s rest. The expression “God’s rest” must not be understood only as the rest that God offers us. It is also the rest that God himself enjoys. Let me explain.

It is true that we think more readily of God’s intense activity, than of his rest. We are less surprised to hear Christ say, “*My Father is at work until now, and I am at work as well*” (Jn 5:17), than we are to read these words: “*God’s rest*” (Heb 4:10). Reflection on love can help us to interpret these words correctly.

At first sight, because love is a reaching out, a desire, it seems contrary to rest. But reaching out and desire are not the whole of love. They are impelled toward a goal: communion. In communion, love becomes repose. This repose is not the exhaustion of the reaching out and the desire, but their unfolding in calm, joyous ecstasy.

This is true even within the life of the Triune God. The Father and the Son love each other with an infinite love. They reach out to one another with immense, irrepressible mutual desire, are united, and rest “*in the unity of the holy Spirit.*” That is why the Holy Spirit has been called “Repose” by the Church Fathers. Indeed, this Repose of the Father and the Son is not the extinction of their love. In it, this love finds consummation and fulfillment in infinite, external exultation.

If all love aspires to rest, and finds fulfillment in it, how can we attain to God’s spiritual rest here on earth? I’d like to give you some insight into the answer.

The love relationship between the Christian and Christ is, like all love, first of all a matter of reaching out and desire. It tends towards its perfect fulfillment, repose in close-

ness with the beloved. The Book of Revelation says so in concrete terms: *“Here I stand, knocking at the door. If anyone hears me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and have supper with him, and he with me”* (Rv 3:20). In John’s Gospel, Christ expresses the same truth in less concrete but stronger and terser terms: *“you in me, and I in you”* (Jn 14:20). So we see that already here on earth, Jesus Christ wants to give us a foretaste of God’s rest, by uniting us to himself.

Anyone who faithfully practices mental prayer cannot fail to experience this, at least at times. As a proof of this, the spiritual writers speak to us of a form of mental prayer called “prayer of quietude,” prayer of rest. Listen to what one of these writers has to say:

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“When the soul presents itself for mental prayer, even if it comes with the intention of concentrating on some specific subject, it at once finds itself—without knowing how—recollected within itself, with a sweet sense of Our Lord’s presence. It is true that this sentiment is not very distinct. But its sweetness persuades the soul that the One it loves is near and comes to express God’s love, and it must therefore think only of enjoying the happiness offered to it”

(Father Joseph Picot de Clorivière, S.J.).\*

\* French Jesuit, 1735-1826.

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And in the measure that the Christian succeeds in praying without ceasing, in accordance with Christ’s command, he can very well live without ever leaving God’s rest, even amid a life of feverish activity.

Let us go farther still. This Christ toward whom we are reaching out, and whom we desire, is not content to welcome us into his close friendship. He wants to sweep us up into the arms of the Father, in an incoercible surge of love.

And so the soul that is malleable in God’s hands is introduced into the intimacy, the communion of love, between the Father and the Son. This communion is the Holy Spirit. For Tradition has given these names to the Holy Spirit: Repose, Feast, Jubilation and eternal Acclamation of the love of the Father and of the Son.

You may well answer: “You are making me dizzy. I’m a long way off from that kind of holiness.” I agree, but isn’t the repose that you experience in your mental prayer already a first step on the road to “God’s Rest”?