

9. The practice of mental prayer

I am not going to talk to you about methods of mental prayer, as you have asked me to do. You will easily find them in any treatise on prayer. I want only to give you a little advice on your practice of mental prayer.

Don't look for anything original in this letter. I shall be content to present to you the classical advice that the spiritual writers give to those who have decided to practice mental prayer. But be sure not to see their counsels as recipes guaranteed to "work." Seek rather to grasp the spirit of what they are saying.

An image comes to mind that brings back memories long gone, of the time when I was young. We were runners, toeing the line, straining forward, all our muscles taut and ready to be released. The same holds true for mental prayer as for racing: it is important to get off to a good start. If we fail to do this, after five minutes we are quite surprised to find ourselves on a *prie-dieu*. While our body came to prayer, our thoughts have remained absorbed with secular concerns.

I strongly urge you, therefore, to take special care about your gestures and attitude when you begin your mental prayer. These include a well-made genuflection, which is an act of the soul as well as the body; the alert and vigorous attitude of a wide-awake man present to himself and to God; a sign of the cross, made slowly and filled with meaning. A certain deliberateness and calm are very important in breaking the tense and rapid rhythms of a busy and hurried life like yours. So are a few moments of silence. Like a foot on the brake, they will help to introduce you into the rhythms of mental prayer and effect the necessary rupture with your preceding activities. It may also be a good idea to recite a vocal prayer very slowly in a low voice.

Then become aware, not of the presence of God, so much as of God present. A living being, the Great Living Being, is there waiting for you. He sees you and loves you. He has his ideas about this prayer that is beginning, and he asks you to agree blindly with what he expects of it.

Watch over your interior attitudes even more than over your bodily attitudes. The fundamental attitudes of man vis-a-vis God are dependence and repentance.

Dependence: Not the vague submission of someone who must sometimes renounce one of his plans in order to do God's will, but a far more radical dependence—the dependence of the torrent (that annihilates itself if it cuts itself off from the wellspring), of the vine-shoot (that dries up and rots when it is separated from the vine stock), and of the human body (that is no longer a body but a corpse, when the bond that joined it to the soul is broken).

Repentance: The acute sign of our basic unworthiness in the presence of the Holiness of God. Like St. Peter, who suddenly prostrates himself before Christ: "*Leave me, Lord. I am a sinful man*" (Lk 5:8).

These two attitudes are important to smooth the paths of the Lord within you.

When your soul is thus disposed, ask for the grace of mental prayer. For, as I have already told you, mental prayer is a gift from God before it is an activity of man. Humbly call upon the Holy Spirit, for it is he who teaches us to pray.

You can then adopt the bodily posture you find most favorable for freedom of soul. When the body threatens to drag the soul down into its laxness or torpor, stay awake and alert. At other times, lest your body, in its fatigue or tenseness, demand attention the whole time, grant it a posture of rest and relaxation.

Once prepared in this way, mental prayer in the strict sense can begin. You should expect nothing less, than that God will take possession of you. The only means to this end is to galvanize the three great supernatural faculties of faith, hope and charity. These are called *theological* virtues, because the Lord gave them to us that we may come in contact, in communion, with him. They are supernatural dynamisms within us, ready to go into action the instant we come to God.

Exercise your faith. I do not ask you to speculate about God. Meditate on what he tells you about himself through Creation (in which everything speaks of his perfections), through the Bible, and above all through his Son, who became man for the sake of revealing to us the infinite love of the Father. It is the great merit of St. Bernard, of the

Franciscans of the 13th and 14th centuries, and of St. Ignatius of Loyola, to have reminded prayerful souls that Jesus Christ is, if we dare say so, *the* great subject of meditation.

The important thing is not to think a great deal, but to love much. Since faith has set charity in motion, exercise charity. Once again, I have used the term “exercise.” Make no mistake about it. I am not extolling an unbridled voluntarism. The exercise of faith and charity should be as natural and relaxed as breathing. The exercise of charity consists, not so much in calling forth emotions, fervors, and sentiments, as in cleaving with all your will to God himself, espousing his desires and his interests.

It is also the hallmark of love to aspire to union with the beloved—and to the happiness this union promises. Where God is concerned, this aspiration is called “hope.” I therefore urge you to exercise hope.

What I have just described is called “theological mental prayer.” It is sometimes slandered as if it were a rich man’s pastime. If we were to believe its detractors, it is suitable for monks, but not for those embroiled in the harsh combats of action. But take a note! We must also be concerned with efficacy, they say. We could respond that praise and adoration take precedence over action. Even on the level of efficacy, where they take their stand, mental prayer is easily defended. The Scholastics of an earlier age used to say, “One acts according to one’s being.” Since theological prayer is a prodigious renewal of our being, placing it once again in contact with its Creator, it multiplies our efficiency. We need only read the lives of the saints, such as St. Teresa of Avila’s, for example, to be convinced that this is so.

To extol theological mental prayer is not, however, to condemn what is known as “practical mental prayer.” Indeed, there is every reason to harmonize and combine them.

It is crystal clear that we need to reform our lives, and reflect on our affections, thoughts, and behavior, in order to correct them. That is precisely the purpose of “practical mental prayer.” Why should this not be the ordinary conclusion of a theological mental prayer? After contemplating God with the eyes of faith, we would turn our gaze on our own life. Charity, after renewing our intimacy with God, would impel us to serve him in our daily tasks. One of my friends never ends his men-

tal prayer without what he calls, “meditation on the agenda.” He thinks about his coming day, and presents it to the Lord. He enumerates the persons he is to meet, and his enumeration becomes an intercession.

When you have finished reading this letter, are you going to think that mental prayer is an exercise that is not simple at all, that is discouraging for those whose lives are already so complicated? Do not linger over this impression. The most vital acts appear complicated when we analyze them—going down a flight of stairs, breathing, loving. But for those who are adept at them, they are very simple indeed.

It is precisely the word “simplicity” that designates a form of mental prayer to which those who persevere attain: “the prayer of simplicity.” Father Grou describes it in this way:

“Instead of the complicated and fatiguing exercise of the memory, the understanding, and the will, which are at work in meditation, first on one subject and then on another, God often introduces the soul to a simple prayer in which the mind has no other object than a general vision of God; the heart, no other sentiment than a sweet and peaceful taste for God that nourishes the soul without effort, the way milk nourishes children. The soul is then so little aware of its operations, so subtle and delicate are they, that it has the sense of being idle, and plunged in a kind of sleep.”

I shall add a final comment before taking leave of you. Just as one cannot become a cabinetmaker, a musician, or a writer overnight, so, too, one does not become a man of prayer without a laborious apprenticeship. To be surprised at this, one must have a very poor idea of what prayer is. He must never have entered the confines of a monastery, and seeing young men who did not hesitate to leave everything in order to be initiated into prayer. He must have never en-

countered old monks, whose gentle, limped gaze discloses much about the secrets of their life of prayer.