



How to Pray

*By
Rev. Gabriel Diefenbach, O.F.M. Cap.*

*Edited and Adapted by the
Benedictine Monks of
Christ the King Abbey*

*“If any man thirst,
let him come to me and drink.”
St. John. 7:37*

*Christ the King Abbey
Cullman, Alabama*

“It is a great happiness for a soul to find a description of what she experiences; she clearly recognizes the path in which God has placed her. I say more, it is an immense advantage, in order to make progress in the various states of prayer, to know the line of conduct to be followed in each of them. As for myself, through the want of this knowledge, I have suffered much, and lost much precious time.”

- St. Teresa of Avila

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Preface

This booklet was compiled with the hope that it would be a source of light and encouragement to lead souls into a greater interior liberty, simplicity and loving intimacy with God. We pray that what follows will be of help, not only to priests and religious but also to all of the laity who earnestly and sincerely desire to advance in prayer.

The following conferences by Father Gabriel Diefenbach were taken from the 1954 proceedings of the *Sisters' Institute of Spirituality*. They form probably one of the best treatises on prayer ever written in so few pages. The footnotes and appendices are the work of the editors. Their intention has been to supplement the text and make things clearer whenever possible.

It may be well to give here the sane and sensible advice of Father Augustine Baker, "In reading spiritual books, if anything concerning prayer, or anything else, is treated of that the spiritual disciple understands not, let him pass it over and not unnecessarily trouble his own brains...Perhaps in time, after more reading, and especially after more experience in prayer he will come to understand it."

This booklet is intended to be something of a treasure chest of spiritual wisdom, to be often re-read so as to be put into daily practice. Interior souls who want to get closer to the good God will, we hope, find this to be more precious than all the glittering jewels and sparkling gold that the children of this world lose their souls to gain.

How to Pray

Rev. Gabriel Diefenbach, O.F.M. Cap.

I. Nature of Prayer

In this opening talk I want to make a few general observations on the nature of prayer. In the first place it may be said that prayer holds, or should hold, the first place in the Christian life. If there is any outstanding lesson to be pointed out to us from Our Lord's life it is surely this fact. Prayer was at the heart and center of His entire earthly life. In our own spiritual life the development of the various virtues and the increase in their intensity, depends so much upon a life of prayer. We know that divine charity, the love of God, is of the essence of the life of a child of God: one who is united to God, and must ever be laboring to advance in this loving union. And it is prayer and the life of prayer more than anything else that insures the development of divine charity.

Furthermore, all the virtues may be said to be *rooted* in charity. We might make a like observation concerning the Sacramental System. Wonderful graces are imbedded in the Sacraments but they do not come to full maturity in the soul. And this because we fail to bring the right dispositions that will permit the graces of the sacraments to flourish in the soul. Too weak are the sentiments of faith, humility, docility, confidence, etc., so that the sacramental effects are impeded. Now, it is prayer that stimulates and nourishes these dispositions so necessary for supernatural fruitfulness. That is why Abbot Marmion says that "perfection is only practically possible through a life of prayer." *And we know that in this day the interior life is not being pursued sufficiently, or rather, it is being neglected – disastrously in some instances – simply from the want of prayer and application to a prayer-life.* We know, too, that it would be something of an illusion to neglect one's duties or other obligations. Equally wrong would it be to push prayer aside under the plea of substituting so-called good works. The first and most necessary of all good works is prayer. Activism is a vice too, as

well as Quietism. It's a vice of our time, an illusion. Because where there is no contemplative element in one's life the Christian and Religious life must necessarily be superficial, as far as any supernatural fruitfulness is concerned.

So our activity then must flow from, and find its power and nourishment in, a life of prayer. A contemporary French writer has pointed out that "our Western world has completely lost the sense of prayer, in its restless and activist life. That is why there are so many mentally ill and eccentrics in our midst – people don't pray enough. There is a well of silence within themselves to which they have no access, a domain of peace they know not how to enter." Only prayer can fill this need, and can satisfy the silent longing and hunger of the human heart. Prayer is a psychological necessity of the soul: the soul must pray. We are weary with our own finiteness and we hunger for the Absolute Being of God. As St. Augustine puts it, "whichever way the soul of man turns, unless it turns toward You, O God, it is affixed to pain."

As to the nature of prayer there are two traditional definitions, one of a general kind, and the other a definition in the strict sense. The first defines prayer as an elevation of the mind and heart to God. The second gives the specific nature of prayer by defining it as the petition of proper or fitting things from God. There is a great deal in this definition. We are essentially suppliants in regard to God, and so we must beg Him for all graces. Then every petition must be 'fitting', that is, directed toward grace, sanctification and salvation. Otherwise they would not come under prayer, lacking fitness. And, we must back up our request with a corresponding action in our life. Our acts must conform to our words. What grounds have we for thinking we can address God so as to be heard? On the grounds of the merits of His Beloved Son. The Church expresses it in the little phrase – "Through Christ Our Lord."

Much more could be said here regarding further elements connected with these ideas of prayer, but I think it is better to get on toward the meditational form of prayer. In doing so we may consider prayer from another angle, that is, as a conversation of a child of God with its Heavenly Father, or with Christ or the Holy

Spirit.¹ Our Lord Himself has given us a perfect prayer in the “Our Father.” We address God as our Father, and speak with Him. It is then a form of conversation with Him. We speak to Him, He speaks to us; we make acts of love and praise, and petition and thanksgiving. He speaks to our souls by communicating graces, charity, virtue and hunger after holiness. According to the ordinary ways, progress in divine love practically depends on a life of prayer.

Prayer is no mere lip service, some formula we utter that has no reference to all our living and thinking the rest of the day – how we live during the day, what orientation of our will there is toward God, to do His Will, to correct our faults, to apply ourselves to the acquisition of virtue. In this sense we see that our entire life is bound up with our prayer-life. Living in and for God at all times – this is our prayer. Our prayer is what our Christian living is. It is the deliberate direction of all our activities toward the fulfillment of the First Commandment, to love God with all our being.

Now, in all its degrees, the very heart of prayer is the disposing of our will to the action of grace and the opening up of the human personality to the Divine action. All progress in prayer will consist in setting up and maintaining an ever more perfect mode of communication with God. How we live, what we do throughout the day has value insofar as it helps expand our whole being toward God, and causes us to live in Him. If we are to aim at progress in prayer, we have to support that aim with a correct notion of what prayer is. And precisely here is where so many fail.

In fact, we may even fear progress in prayer, and instead of laboring to dispose ourselves for it, we do all we can to hinder it. And why do we fear it? Because up to a certain point we wish to belong to ourselves, not wholly to God. Such a surrender we think would bind us too strictly, and so we fail in our disposition. With a number of souls, that which closes the door to progress is some trifling renunciation God is asking of them and which from want of courage and generosity they are loath to give Him.

¹ Although our Blessed Mother and the Saints are not referred to in the following, much of what is said can be applied to our relations with them, especially anything which promotes loving intimacy and simplicity.

Once a person is on the way of the spiritual life, its growth will be not only upward, to God, but outward, to a giving of oneself to one's neighbor. That is, in the way of serving, instructing, nursing, caring for, patiently bearing with others, etc. The spiritual life in its perfect norm is a mixed life of prayer and activity in which one serves others by works of charity and then goes apart to find new power and recollection and poise in God. The mixed life is a simplified life of love, finding fulfillment in works of charity.¹

In practice this is difficult of achievement. It is hard to engage in the active life without losing the fruits of prayer, and it is hard to have the spirit of prayer without allowing it to diminish one's activities. A balance must be striven for. It must be one's total life toward God that constitutes prayer in its deeper and wider sense. But I might say that the more active a life is, the more necessary it is that it be charged with prayer. One must get apart from these activities and from creatures, and withdraw for awhile to commune with God. The Holy Spirit is the cause of our spiritual life, and we have to keep in touch with Him always. But this is made especially possible by setting aside each day a period devoted to mental prayer, in which we think lovingly on our Divine Model and draw His Spirit into our soul.

Whereas vocal prayer begins with an expressed desire, meditation begins with a *consideration* of a truth or event of Our Lord's life, or a verse from Scripture. We may call mental prayer a heart to heart conversation with Christ, leading to a more intimate union and a deeper recollection. The late Abbot Chapman of Downside, England, had a very common sense suggestion: *pray as you can pray and don't try to pray as you can't*. This hits a point, because too many people try to pray contrary to their attraction in prayer, in a manner they once prayed, have been unwisely advised to pray, or attempt a method they have read about in some book. The soul has to find its own way of holding converse with God.

Two signs to discover one's attraction are:

¹ In the practical order, the most perfect and holiest life *for me* is the one to which God calls me. His Will alone is of importance. It alone gives value to our works.

1. *The Facility*, in praying the way one likes to pray. 2. *The Practical Effect* on daily living. In the first point it is a matter of following one's attraction, in the second, of the fruitfulness of the prayer, whether or not it begets fidelity to duties, carefulness in the practice of charity, greater patience in trials, etc.

Now let us come to meditation. Some people are afraid even of the word, imagining it implies hard thought and even original ideas. But it is much simpler than that. Meditation is a loving reflection designed to inflame the heart with love for God. There are two main elements: consideration and acts of the will. A truth of revelation, a verse from Scripture, a scene from Our Lord's life, is taken as a starting point for the consideration. A loving reflection on this should lead to acts of the will, such as, love, adoration, praise, thanksgiving, petition or whatever the soul feels drawn to. Meditation deepens our convictions and warms our heart with a love of these things, elevating our will to the Divine Will. It moves the heart to speak to God in a loving conversation. And this is the main point, the heart and center of meditation. This loving converse can be made in several ways, according to individual attraction. It can be made vocally, or interiorly by a movement of the will toward God – a looking upon Him Who is there¹. These loving conversations may be brief, following one another with occasional pauses, to be attentive to God's word to us. Or they may be prolonged and repeated at long intervals. Or one may be led simply to remain in the Divine Presence, in a loving attentiveness to God. *It is a matter of learning to follow the individual attraction of grace.* The real purpose of meditation is to bring the soul to an awareness of the presence of God, to bring it to a repose in Him, in a loving complacency in Him. This is where the Holy Spirit truly works His impressions of grace on the heart. Practical resolutions are sometimes made but they are not strictly necessary, so long as the will is elevated to God's Will and the general disposition to generosity in God's service is strengthened.

¹ It may be well to point out here that while God is present in all of His creation, He dwells in a very special manner in a soul that is in the state of grace. This is where He wants to be sought and where He lets Himself be found. "If anyone love Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him." (St. John, 14:23)

As we have said, prayer in all its forms is a mode of conversation between the soul of a child of God and its Heavenly Father. So it is not only the soul that speaks, but God also has a word to say. He speaks to the soul through the impressions of His grace. He inspires virtuous sentiments and detaches the heart from what is not Himself. Of course, it is His word that is the important one. But many souls are inclined to do all the talking themselves, and often hinder God's operation. "To be able to listen to Him rightly," says Abbot Marmion, "it is enough if the soul is filled with the dispositions of love, confidence, humility, etc." It is not necessary to follow a definite order in meditation. A loving conversation can alternate with a loving reflection, as the need may be at the time. Greater effort is naturally needed in the beginning when one is learning the practice of meditative prayer. At that time the soul needs to form for itself an idea of God and its relation with Him. It needs to deepen its knowledge of God and find matter for conversation with Him. *Herein lies the great value of continual spiritual reading, which keeps the mind attuned to thinking divinely.*

But let us point out here that these thoughts in meditation (the considering and the reflecting) do not yet constitute real prayer. They serve only as an introduction to prayer. Reasoning is not prayer.¹ Prayer only truly begins when the will begins to burn with

¹ The great Benedictine Cardinal, Francis Aiden Gasquet writes:

"I must confess that for some years I myself had a wrong notion of the real object of mental prayer and of how to secure the spiritual advantages which I felt should be derived from its exercise. Subsequent experience has taught me that to some extent this loss of precious time and grace was the consequence of misunderstanding the nature of the exercise itself. No doubt it was my own fault that for so long a period I had this wrong notion. What I thought was the chief thing to be aimed at was the mental exercise – the clear thinking out of the subject of meditation; and that the prayer came in merely as a conclusion – a sort of grace of thanksgiving after the intellectual meal. Looking back to those early years I recall the frequent failures and consequent disgust with myself at not being able to 'think out' clearly the subject which I had chosen for my morning meditation..."

I remember that it came upon me during a retreat almost as a revelation that I had been altogether on the wrong track in regard to my meditation, and that the sole purpose of mental prayer was to endeavor to draw nigh unto God, to bring Him practically into my life and to speak to Him in intimate converse. Oh! The precious opportunities wasted in formalities and preparations; in useless –

the love of God, when the heart yields itself up to God, to do His Will in everything. It is in the will that true prayer lies. The considerations are to lead to acts of the will. Not emotions, but loving acts of the will.

Now for a person consecrated to God by vows, who lives in unceasing touch with the Divine Will, who has been faithful in the practice of mental prayer, very little time may be needed to get the meditation under way. Sometimes a mere word from Scripture suffices, or a glance at a picture of a scene from Christ's life, or a few lines from a book like the *Imitation of Christ* will be all that is necessary to move the will to affective acts. So if one would pass all the time in merely reflecting, the prayer would be more or less fruitless, and become distasteful, full of weariness, and most discouraging. The first point then, is to avoid *excessive* reflections, and to use these only insofar as needed to bring the soul to a loving conversation with God, to lead the heart to rest in a repose of peace in the Divine Presence. Meditation tends to affective prayer, and theoretically should lead to contemplation, a simple spiritual prayer.

As a proximate disposition for prayer I might offer two rules here: (1) Pray slowly, gently, and without any hurry; (2) Pause at times to attend to the presence of God, or to any impressions of grace, or movements of loving peace in the heart. Sometimes there may be an inclination towards God, a desire to be united with Him, or an impression of inner calm. This is God speaking His Own language to the soul, and it is more sanctifying than our own words to Him. The perfect fruit of meditation is the *repose of peace* at the end of prayer. The continued experience of this leads the soul gradually to simpler, more contemplative prayer. The impressions of grace, and the good sentiments gained from meditation should

useless so far as their purpose was considered – cogitations and reflections upon religious subjects of all kinds. Afterwards I came to know that I was not alone in the wrong notions I had formed about the true nature and object of mental prayer. As in my own case I found other souls who had been for years struggling in vain to make profit out of their hours of meditation. They had not grasped the notion that the whole object of the exercise was by it to strengthen the sense of God's intimate and abiding presence in the soul and to speak to Him of their needs and plead with Him for their infidelities to His grace." (*Religio Religiosi*, 1923)

carry over into the entire day, giving vitality and supernatural fruitfulness to all exterior activity. Thus, meditation is no mere isolated act of the religious day, it must affect the whole day, so that the religious life becomes a simplified life of love overflowing in works of charity. The meditation period is the most important one of the entire day. We should see to it that the time be not curtailed to squeeze in unnecessary odds or ends. If anything, we should seek a longer period for mental prayer.

So meditation is not as complicated or difficult as some imagine. It is not a philosophical speculation. It is the reflection of the soul of a child of God that seeks through loving converse with Him to be united to Him, to see its duties, and to find a repose of peace in Him. From the outset we see that meditation is oriented toward contemplation. *But to reach the perfection of prayer one must go aside, must withdraw periodically from activities, and be occupied solely with God in mental prayer.*

Before closing this first lecture I might add a word on the preparation for prayer. The *remote* preparation is always the important one. How we live for God and in God all through the day, how we deny self, practice virtue and detachment, how we aim to find peace in the senses through mortification – this is the remote preparation. In other words, it is our total life toward God and in God that is the groundwork for true progress in our prayer-life. Everything we do during the day has value only insofar as it expands our personality to the influence of grace. We can't make ourselves holy, but God can, and wants to, *if we labor to remove obstacles*. Here is where the theory and practice of asceticism comes in. Ascetic practice should be related to our prayer-life, and dispose the soul for genuine progress in it.

II. Meditation

In this second lecture I wish to continue with the prayer of meditation. Each has to discover their own attraction in conversing with God and no one should be held down to any particular way. From want of proper guidance many believe there is no further prayer than vocal prayer or meditation. They give up when they meet with obstacles or difficulties in the time of prayer. So in this talk we will discuss several of these difficulties. In

passing we might say that where the remote preparation is neglected, the difficulties to progress in mental prayer will increase. Not trying to harmonize the whole day with one's prayer-life, not trying to eliminate habitual dissipation of mind and heart, a lack of generosity in mortification, etc., these militate against success in mental prayer. Lack of generosity exposes one to discouragement from the start, especially when dryness sets in. The following are the most common difficulties:

Distractions. This is common in all persons of prayer. Much depends on the immediate circumstances, preoccupations and activities of daily life, more than on our own will. Most of these are involuntary. The things that distract us are usually the things that weigh on us: trials, anxieties, business at hand, joys or sorrows or miseries, etc. We can speak to God about these. Or, quietly and peacefully keep bringing our heart and mind back to God. And if the entire period were spent in this, it would still be a good prayer. We wanted to pray and to be occupied with God. Besides, the quality of the prayer shows itself in the practical effects on our day.

When the distractions come from a general want of mortification of the senses, then, obviously, we have to correct ourselves before we can expect success in prayer. Ascetic practice is thus related to prayer all the way through. Progress in prayer is parallel to progress in self denial. As the soul gains control over the imagination, and directs the will to God in its activities, as it practices recollection and detachment, distractions will naturally be fewer. Some will find help in the use of a book, to get their meditation under way. Reading sets up an atmosphere of prayer. A few lines read slowly, more with the heart than the lips – enough to dispose the heart to peace – is best. That book is best which more quickly brings the heart to love God. This is the distinct advantage of private reading. More and more Religious Communities are doing away with the publicly read meditation. This shows sense and a true understanding of what prayer is. It doesn't presuppose that no one makes any advance in prayer, that no one gets past meditation, that all need precisely the same spiritual meat, or that all have the same malady. And it doesn't assume that everyone is led to acts of the will at the same moment, as in the case of publicly read meditational points. It is best that each one use his

own book, and pray by following his own attraction, the way the Holy Spirit leads him. Consequently, we strongly urge the dropping of publicly read meditations.

Aridity. Much could be said on the matter of dryness and aridity in mental prayer. In our usual prayer we experience either consolation or desolation in varying degrees. In aridity, the soul feels empty of all consoling elements, with no affections in the emotional or inferior powers of the soul. One then thinks he has no fervor because he can't 'feel' it. When one learns that aridity is a normal and healthy experience it should not cause any distress or worry. This should reassure the soul. Aridity is actually to be embraced since it makes our love for God so much more pure. Consoling elements in prayer are given more at the beginning, they are not the solid foundation of prayer. True prayer rests on the foundation of faith, which is above the senses. Besides, whatever the dryness, the prayer is tested by the fruits of daily living, as we explained above. We simply have to take what the Holy Spirit gives us from day to day in our mental prayer, and work with that. Beginners are apt to be deceived on this point, thinking that loss of consolation is loss of prayer and love of God. Where aridity is a result of infidelities and habitual imperfections, then one must correct these or the dryness will likely remain.

Sometimes aridity is a result of the operation of grace, leading the soul to a prayer of simplicity. *In any case, it would be a mistake to give up prayer, or to cut the time short, merely on account of dryness.* Aridity does not destroy prayer. Real prayer should be going on in the depth of the soul in faith. The prayer of Our Lord in the garden was a dry and arid one, full of weariness, yet it was infinitely powerful. Just to remain in the Divine Presence, in complete aridity, without being able to elicit an idea in the imagination or to stir up the will emotionally, this in itself is a great act of adoration of God. This is truly adoring the Divine Will, in an act of loving abandonment to Him, and is an act of pure worship, devoid of 'nature' but built on faith. It may be crucifying, but it can't lead us astray. The soul in fact grows strong at these times of aridity, provided it perseveres in its prayer. It is a deception to conclude that God has deserted one because a long period of dryness has set in. Let the soul remain quietly in peace, attentive to God and longing for Him in the will, if it can do

nothing else at this time. This is an act of submission and confidence. If we can't do anything else, we can at least be there, in our own helplessness and misery, abandoned to the Will of God, in self-abasement, in a bare act of faith. The impressions of our own nothingness that come to the soul at these arid sessions are profoundly good for it, increasing its humility and advancing it in real progress.

Suppose, then, we come to our meditation and are unable to do anything. A suggestion from Abbot Chapman may be of some help:

“Possibly the *best* kind of prayer is when we seem unable to do anything, *if then, we throw ourselves on God, and stay contentedly before Him; worried, anxious, tired, listless, but – above all and under it all – humbled and abandoned to His Will, contented with our own discontent.* If we can get ourselves accustomed to this attitude of soul, which is always possible, we have learned how to pray. We are never afraid of prayer and we can pray for any length of time – the longer the better, and at any time.”

So from what has been said there is no person who cannot find some way of conversing with God in prayer. In spite of involuntary distractions, aridity and dryness, there is no one who cannot form the intention, or have the will to do so. And God sees the prayer in the intention that we have of praying, of wanting to be united to Him, and remaining there in His presence, trying one way or another of occupying mind and heart with Him. *He looks at the depth of our will, and finds our prayer in the intention of our heart.* He sees us in the condition of the publican in the Temple, hardly daring to raise his eyes to heaven, and begging God to show mercy on him, the sinner. It is this cry of the heart that is true prayer, calling out to the abyss of the Divine Mercy. And God hears such prayer.

St. Francis de Sales used to say that prayer is not the work of the human mind, it is a special gift of the Holy Spirit. He gives to each soul its particular attraction in its manner of communicating with God. And the secret of progress lies in fidelity to the way He guides and moves and attracts the soul. This is the work of a director – to try to discover the way each soul is led by the Spirit. Probably no two persons pray in exactly the same manner.

What is desired, of course, is the *spirit of prayer*. This is not always the same as being able to say a number of prayers. It is not a collection of litanies, prayer-formulas and devotions that have accumulated over the years, and trying to “get them all in.” This may be all right for some people; to others it would be the ruin of devotion.¹ *Progress in the spiritual life is always progress toward simplicity. Progress in prayer is a progress toward simpler forms.* When St. Catherine of Siena once asked Our Lord why He gave Himself so abundantly to men in former times He replied: “My daughter, men were more simple and distrustful of themselves. They depended on Me, but now they are so self-confident, so concerned about what they themselves are doing and saying, they do not allow Me to work My will in them. They are incessantly repeating things, as if I were likely to forget anything. And they wish to say everything themselves and do everything in their own way.”

We may compare progress in prayer to the development of friendship and love. When two persons meet there are words of introduction. Silence would be embarrassing. When they meet again and again they are more at home in each other’s company. They are at ease, they say things without elaborate introduction, and launch right into a subject without more ado. When this ripens into love all they desire is to be in the presence of each other. Words are altogether superfluous. So too is the development of friendship and love with God through prayer. In the beginning more vocal prayer is required. Meditation is the growing of friendship. Contemplation, is the silence of lovers. The soul is drawn to remain in the Divine Presence in a loving complacency, a loving attentiveness to God. The important thing is *fidelity* to the practice of mental prayer, to make what use and success we can with meditation, ever following the attraction of grace, *ready to drop meditation when God urges us on to simpler prayer.*

At times meditation may be discouraging. Many are discouraged and seem unable to make any headway with their

¹ “The truly devout man does not burden himself with a great quantity of vocal prayers and practices which do not leave him time to breathe. He always preserves his liberty of spirit; he is neither scrupulous nor uneasy about himself, he goes on with simplicity and confidence.” (Fr. John Grou, S.J., *Manual for Interior Souls*)

prayer. They don't know what to do. They lose heart and are ready to drop mental prayer, or dream the time away waiting for the end of the prayer period. This is a fatal mistake. They need to be encouraged and instructed as to other forms, simpler and more affective modes of prayer, that they may come to with knowledge, perseverance and goodwill. To these souls meditation is a hindrance, because God is leading them to a change in their prayer. Their prayer is a kind of repose in God, a silent worshipful resting in the Divine Presence. A simple gaze of faith, a simple giving of oneself to God, without any particular thoughts or feelings about Him. They do not want thoughts *about* God, they want God Himself. God is infinitely incomprehensible and the only proximate means of union with God in this life is faith. When the soul in prayer finds no contact with God through the senses or the imagination or ideas – as in meditation – when it sees it can no longer converse with Him in this manner it simply rests in peace, in the darkness of faith. In such a state the soul remains recollected in God. It finds a certain contentment or satisfaction in staying there before Him. If the soul would attempt to make its prayer in some other manner at this time it would find it morally impossible to do so. It is repugnant for it to use the faculties in considerations and affections. When the action of grace invites the soul to this state it should remain in peace, in silent repose, lovingly attentive to God. This is the language of silent love. It rests in God, in pure faith, without reasonings, the will adhering to Him in faith. By fidelity to the practice of mental prayer the soul has been unconsciously preparing itself for this more simple form. It is a result of the constant orientation of the heart toward God, of one's total life in God. "True prayer" says St. Gregory, "is not in the sound of the voice, but in the desires of the heart. Not our words but our desires give power to our cries in God's hearing. If we ask for eternal life without desiring it from the bottom of our heart, our cry is a silence; but if without speaking we desire it from our heart – our very silence cries out."

There is a great hunger today among many souls, a hunger for a deeper spiritual life, a closer union with God. Too many of us have allowed ourselves to be caught up in a whirlwind of activities which we have convinced ourselves are of first importance. They often are not. We have put second things first. Absolute priority

should be given to our prayer-life. And the more we are engaged in external activities, the more necessary is it for us to find time for prayer.

Two points for disposing the heart for progress in mental prayer are: 1. To try always to have the disposition of will not to offend God deliberately. 2. To preserve custody of the heart, that no *inordinate* desire or attachment, however slight, be in the will. Such detachment of heart as is here required admits of various degrees, as does prayer itself. But the more thorough the detachment and liberty of heart, the greater the facility for advancing in the spirit of prayer.

III. Contemplation and Mysticism

My third lecture introduces us to the subject of contemplation and mysticism. It is a further development in the life of prayer. Few know much about this angle of prayer, and shy away from it as if it were not part of Theology or of the Christian life. Such ignorance concerning the very life-blood of sanctity is most harmful. Many are misled by the number of people who say they have visions and revelations. This of course is *not* mysticism; these phenomena belong more to the sense order than to the mystical order, they are communicated through channels of sense, *mystic prayer is not*. Thus their confusion leads them to avoid mysticism, thinking that people with revelations and visions are necessarily mystics. Most mystics who do not get beyond the first stages of contemplative prayer do not even know they are mystics. It sounds high in books and in the imagination, but in actual practice it is often quite crucifying. Abbot Butler, in his *Western Mysticism*, says, "It was the standard teaching of the Catholic Ages down to modern times that contemplation is the natural term of a spiritual life seriously lived. And is a thing to be desired, aspired to, aimed at." The Christian life goes straight on, in increasing union and love of God. And with it goes the development of prayer. Instructors in prayer and the religious life should know something of the whole course of the journey to God, otherwise they can easily mislead and cause others great spiritual harm.

When the Holy Spirit leads a soul a little further on in its prayer the soul will find a difficulty, almost an impossibility, in meditating. It can't seem to do anything as before in prayer. It thinks it has lost its prayer and spirituality. It cannot be forced to pray as it once could, rather it should observe the saying, "Pray as you can pray." Let us suppose that we have been faithful to mental prayer for some period of time. The time comes when the things we have continuously meditated on fail to move us, and we feel we have derived all the substance from them, all the stimulus we can for the will to love God. The affections begin to pall, there is a repugnance for consideration; in fact, we find ourselves more or less helpless to converse with God in the way of meditation. I am supposing the case in which God is drawing the soul onward to a simpler manner of communicating with Him. For as long as one can use his mind and imagination and emotions in prayer, he should do so. But when the times comes in which he can't, he just can't, and it's useless trying to get him to do so. But they *do* find a certain satisfaction, almost unfelt, in remaining alone with God. They are attracted to prayer, to being simply in the presence of God, not desiring to think about Him, or make particular acts, but to be united to Him as He is in Himself. They now experience dryness, aridity, and a painful anxiety about their spiritual life, and may think they have lost fervor. This is the entrance into simple contemplative prayer. But many souls are stopped at this stage, from lack of knowledge and direction.

Abbot Chapman found that many persons pass long years in this condition when they cannot meditate and yet are afraid to contemplate. They have tried methods, they have tried reading and pondering, and they have almost given up mental prayer in despair. *They feel that considerations are not prayer, and they want God, not thoughts about Him.* This is the essence of the beginning of contemplation. Since the Holy Spirit is leading that soul to contemplate, naturally it will be unable to meditate – *as prayer*. They are as able to think out a subject, to work out a sermon, as anyone else is; but they feel that such considerations are not prayer. We might say that contemplation is the use of the pure intellect without the imagination, and of the will without the emotions. Therefore, most people who are entering this stage don't know they are being introduced to contemplation. There are no

delightful feelings and the mind is helpless. It is a spiritual mode of communing with God, without the use of the senses, but rather as spirit to Spirit.

Now I will give the three classical signs which authors explain as showing the time for the cessation of Meditation and entrance into contemplation. This transition period, from meditation to contemplative prayer is most trying for souls because they do not know what is happening to them. And unless they find someone who does understand and can encourage them and instruct them how to cooperate with the action of grace at this time, they will suffer much, and lag behind in their progress in prayer. Now the cause of the impossibility in meditating is the imperceptible knowledge that God is infusing into the soul. St. John of the Cross says that “when a soul has in some degree been prepared by desire for God, by detachment from the world, God begins at once to introduce the soul into the state of contemplation, especially in the case of Religious, because these, having renounced the world, quickly fashion their senses and desires according to God. They are therefore to pass at once from meditation to contemplation. This passage takes place when the discursive acts of meditation fail, when sensible sweetness and first fervors cease, when the soul cannot make reflections as before, nor find any sensible comfort, but has fallen into aridity. Souls in this state are not to be forced to meditate, neither are they to strive after sweetness and fervor, for if they did so they would be hindering the principal agent who is God Himself, for He is now secretly and quietly infusing wisdom into the soul together with the loving knowledge of Himself without any separate and distinct acts.”

Here then are the signs of contemplation:

1. *The soul is unable to meditate.* It feels a repugnance in reflecting and centering the mind on anything definite. This is experienced generally only at prayer. Outside of prayer the faculties retain their customary use. Of course what is meant here is not the inability to meditate which results from voluntary distraction, neglect, fault or sin. There is question here of fervent souls in search of God.

2. *The soul finds no satisfaction in using the imagination or fixing it on any particular thing, earthly or heavenly.* No comfort is found either in the things of God or of nature. Aridity has set in, the senses, emotions, and imagination find no delight in anything. The soul is satisfied only in a general confused loving knowledge of God.
3. *The soul delights to be alone, in quiet, waiting lovingly upon God but without reflecting upon Him in any particular manner or even desiring to do so.* This is the decisive sign.

The happiness the soul feels in fixing its loving attention upon God causes it to seek silence and to be alone in the Divine Presence. While it performs its works and duties faithfully, its one desire is to be alone with God. And this last sign persists even in aridity. If this element were not present one would be idle, doing nothing. But this third sign shows the soul is well occupied, in a loving attentiveness to God. We might then define contemplation as the “Infused loving knowledge of God.”

The *beginning* of this contemplation is imperceptible to the person enjoying it because it is unfelt in the senses. It leaves them dry. The soul is puzzled by what is happening to it, and really needs direction at this point. Otherwise the soul will not know just how to correspond with this development in its prayer. Forcing a soul to meditate only increases its dryness and repugnance. The advice to be given here is that when the soul cannot meditate and these three signs are at hand, the soul should learn to remain in a loving attention to God, in the quiet of the mind, though it seems to be doing nothing. Thus little by little, will the repose of loving peace take possession of the soul. The real activity of the soul here is its assent to the divine operation of grace, its knowing how to cooperate with grace, with its new attraction in prayer, and to remain in the Divine Presence in a loving attention to God.

This same spiritual impression by which God is delicately absorbing the mind and inclining the will to a simple operation of love, also acts as an impediment to vocal prayer. If one begins to say some vocal prayer he will quickly find repugnance or weariness in it, slight or pronounced according to the strength of the interior prayer. He may be able with some effort to say the

words as words, but if he tries to think of their meaning, or arouse devotion by them, he will not succeed. The reason is that the attention cannot be fixed on two things at one time. In the case of contemplative prayer, it is the spiritual impression absorbing the mind in a loving attention that makes it impossible for the mind to think and be attentive to something else. The simpler activity of the soul's faculties checks their discursive use, and vice versa.

Of course, nothing is said here of vocal prayers of obligation, such as the Divine Office (for priests and religious) and certain prayers imposed upon members of Third Orders. These are said in conformity to the obligations assumed. But if one's new state brings a strong abstraction of mind due to the operation of interior prayer, a material recitation will generally be the only possible one. The attention cannot be centered on the meaning of the words for the heart is attentive rather to its own loving attraction.

Usually, a person led into this simple prayer will not know how to express its difficulty to a director. It won't know how to explain itself, except to say that it cannot meditate. Mystic prayer is mysterious, because of the unaccustomed use of the mind and will in its operation. But the director or confessor who knows this prayer will not easily be deceived.

When contemplative prayer becomes the usual prayer of the soul it tends to affect the entire day. *It leads to a simplification in the whole spiritual life and gives a marvelous unity to it.* The fundamental longing desire for God tends to pervade all the activities, so that the soul is not so much engaged in this or that work as it is occupied with the presence of God in every work.¹ Consequently, the mental prayer period will be an intensification of what the soul experiences all through the day.

¹ This simplification can also affect the manner in which one attends Mass. Although it is often said, "Don't pray at Mass but pray the Mass", this recommendation implies much more than merely following the text in the Missal. It means making the inner dispositions of Christ our own, namely, that of love, adoration, oblation, thanksgiving and petition. No one should feel guilty if they attend Mass or make their Thanksgiving without the aid of a Missal, Rosary, or prayer-book. These are only *means* to bring the soul into loving contact with God and are only useful insofar as they help one to pray with interior devotion.

As for those who have only touches of this prayer, at certain periods, but do not go on to the state of it, they will soon take up their meditation again. For some reason, perhaps want of courage or generosity, they never get into the state of contemplation, but sometimes meditate and sometimes can't. But those who go on in the way of simple prayer usually practice this prayer always when they come to mental prayer. With these the question of distractions is a curious one. Involuntary distractions annoy persons who meditate, because these distractions take them away from their prayer, from occupying their attention on God. But for contemplatives these involuntary distractions do not hinder their prayer, as long as they do not center their attention on them deliberately. Because these images and distractions occur in the imagination, and in contemplation the imagination is not used.

IV. Mystic Prayer

In this final lecture I will treat of several characteristics of mystic prayer, and points pertinent to the contemplative state. At the outset let us ask: What really characterizes contemplation?

The basic element of it is the element of *passivity*. This could be misleading, because in the early transitional stage the passivity is barely recognized directly, but only indirectly, through the efforts of the imagination during an attempted meditation. There is a twofold element in all contemplative or mystic prayer. A superior knowledge of God, which is indistinct, general, and can't be expressed in dogmatic formulas. And, secondly, a deep love in the will, not produced by reasoning, but infused. This loving knowledge gives the soul a lofty idea of the greatness and incomprehensibility of the Divine Being. And it has a power in it far greater than that coming from meditative prayer. It detaches the soul from all that is not God, and moves it to renounce itself with a strength not possessed before.

The mystic state is a hidden one. There are on the whole no external characteristics that can for certain determine the measure of its intensity. A question no doubt comes to our minds here regarding the desire for contemplative or mystic prayer. May it be lawfully desired? May we pray for it? May we aim at it?

Undoubtedly we may do so. It is the most powerful means of sanctification and union with God. It detaches the heart from all that is not God, and causes it to seek and love God with all its being. It increases the thirst for God and holiness, and it belongs to the progress and development of the prayer-life. So we may certainly desire this gift. But it is best not to specify just what kind of prayer we want from God. Rather ask for the grace of prayer, or for increase in prayer, or fidelity to prayer, leaving the gift and time to God Himself. What we must do is labor steadily to prepare and dispose ourselves for these further graces from God.

We have said that all progress in prayer consists in setting up an ever more perfect mode of communing with God, so not to desire contemplation would be the same as not to desire to advance in union with God. *This prayer is safe, there is no occasion for deception in it, as there is with the matter of visions and revelations.* These latter are not prayer, and consequently *are not to be requested from God*, as genuine prayer is. All the mystics and saints and spiritual writers encourage the desire to grow in the prayer-life.

Another question may be asked here: Is this prayer exceptional? Do many possess it? The beginnings of contemplative prayer are far more common than is generally thought¹. The more advanced degrees are naturally more rare as one goes up the scale. Surely there is no need for a ‘special’ vocation for progress in prayer. It is we ourselves who usually fail in our cooperation with God’s grace, and fail in the spirit of generosity. In other words we fall short in the matter of mortification. Many are not even taught to regard ascetic practice in its relation to progress in prayer. This is a mistake, and leads to an incomplete idea of asceticism, and throws mysticism out of focus also. All the soul can do is labor to achieve the perfection taught in the Gospels, in the way of self-denial, love of God, etc. It is God who gives the increase. Besides, as a child of God, possessed with the divine life, the Christian soul is radically capable of this prayer. Many, for various reasons will

¹ Father Diefenbach in his book *Common Mystic Prayer* (1947) writes: “Many good souls, many religious, perhaps most in cloistered orders, have this prayer, or could have it with proper instruction and direction – if at the same time they possessed a little courage and generosity.”

never come to it. Many will fail, as we have said, from want of proper instruction and encouragement, or generosity. Yet one meets this prayer in any state of life.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: In the case of religious, how far should a Novice Mistress go in her instructions on prayer?¹

She should instruct and train the novices in meditation and check up periodically as to their progress in it. Then explain more in private conferences and when they present difficulties in their meditation, advise them accordingly. Beyond this, they should be instructed that there are simpler forms of prayer, when grace leads the soul that way. It would be a mistake to let novices think there is no other prayer but meditation, when this is really elementary prayer. They should all be urged to aim at progress in prayer, to direct all they do toward it, and that God seeks ever closer union with them. For it is only in and through prayer the soul can come to taste the delight of God. The Novice Mistress should know enough about prayer to handle these general difficulties of beginners. Sometimes a novice already has a simpler form of prayer and may be definitely in the contemplative state. The Novice Mistress should know enough at least not to interfere with the working of grace in an individual soul. She can inform them that there are more spiritual forms of prayer without giving them the whole schematization of St. Teresa. Nor would it always be prudent to tell this or that soul who has contemplative prayer that she is a ‘mystic.’ This would scare the life out of her. The name need not be given – but the proper direction should be given, so the soul will know how to cooperate with the attraction of grace.

Question: What about reading mystical works?

Much depends on the type of book and who is reading the book. Strictly mystical treatises will be relished mainly only by

¹ Although these conferences were originally given to religious, what is said here applies just as well to the laity.

those to whom God gives a taste of contemplative prayer; to others it will not mean much, if anything – unless they are studying such works to acquire a science. Books dealing with revelations and visions are not really mystical works, since they do not treat of contemplation. These may be harmless, good to some souls sensible enough not to take these revelations as Gospel, but as a stimulant toward fervor and devotion. *Impressionable persons should not read these latter at all.*

It will often be an encouraging sign to the Novice Mistress to find a novice who really relishes a book of more interior forms of prayer. It very likely is a sign that the person needs that type of reading, and that it corresponds to the person's prayer and inner state of soul. If not, they would care little for this kind of reading, at least as a steady diet. Those who use meditation as mental prayer will get nothing out of reading a strictly mystical work.

One last point. Superiors must be careful not to create any extra difficulty in the way of the prayer-life of their subjects. They should beware of overworking them so that they consume all their time in external matters. They should have the opportunity for religious exercises, not to be got through hurriedly, as a matter of 'getting them in'. No real spiritual profit can be gleaned from this setup. We all are aware of the pressure of work to be done today, and the want of sufficient laborers in the field. But we will very likely never catch up, and the line must be drawn somewhere. Superiors should look mainly to the quality rather than quantity of apostolic works – and of spiritual exercises too. Hurry and flutter here is no good at all. You have then as your first duty to look after the prayer-life of your religious, and to give them a solid spiritual formation. You may help them yourselves from your own knowledge of prayer or direct them to the right reading. They must be encouraged to fidelity to prayer; they must be taught to aim at making progress in it, which means loving union with their Divine Spouse. For this sole reason He has led them into religious life, to draw these chosen hearts ever more intimately to His own. Friendship with Christ in the depth of the heart – this is the main thing in every religious' life, in every Christian's life. Our Lord has a special and jealous eye toward them, and longs to communicate His gifts – if only He can find the generosity and courage. It is part of the work of the Novice Mistresses to stimulate

this in the hearts of their charges. As we said in the beginning, whatever we do has value insofar as it opens up our personality to the operation of grace. Thus we must act and live so as always to dispose our hearts for the growth of grace. Anything that hinders our drawing closer to Christ is not good for us; whatever leads us nearer to Him is good for us.

Question: Does the mystical touch occur outside the mystic state?

Yes, God can give it to anyone at any time, and He has done so – for an immediate conversion or change of heart. He can give it to one in serious sin. If this happens, the soul is set in charity – but of course the sin must be submitted to the seal of confession. A mystical touch is only a transient prayer. The simple common mystic prayer I have been treating of is the prayer that is enjoyed ordinarily as the person's mental prayer. *It tends to pass over into the entire day as a kind of state, a spirit of continuous recollection.*

Question: Is the grace of contemplation infallibly given?

Not always, it depends as much on the Divine Will as it does on our own cooperation and fidelity to prayer. Though a great many have received a call to it, they have turned aside for various reasons, some of which I have already mentioned. But it is our obligation to do all in our power to prepare for this gift.

Question: What is the difference between the prayer of contemplation and Quietism?

Quietism is an error that does away with all activity on the part of the soul, even the action involved in desiring, even desiring union with God or virtue. Such complete suspension of all our faculties to inactivity leaves the soul void, and is a total deception. On the contrary, in contemplation there is activity of the highest kind, similar to that of heaven. It lies in giving the steady assent of our will and attention to the obscure loving knowledge of God that He is infusing into the soul. Although we may not *feel* that we are active, we can learn to perceive, when we reflect upon it, that we

are really active. To *want God intensely* is obviously an intense act of the will.

Question: Is the gift of prayer and of contemplation one and the same?

No. That would be limiting the notion of prayer to an unwarranted narrowness. There are people who have a grace of prayer, yet they are not contemplatives, though at times I believe they have touches of contemplation. May we not say this of so many people we see who spend hours in the Church over their Rosaries?¹

Question: What relation is there between prayers of obligation and contemplation?

Generally the prayers of obligation can be said without much difficulty, especially when they are prayers said in common. The real prayer in these instances goes on in the heart, whatever the lips are uttering. There are cases where such powerful infusions of mystic prayer impede all vocal prayer. St. Ignatius, for instance, had to be dispensed from the Divine Office for a period, because of his inner absorption in God. We are told of St. Gemma Galganni who could not get through one Hail Mary.

¹ The wonderful and salutary devotion of the Most Holy Rosary may also be subject to great simplification. The following advice might be of help to many to maintain interior devotion while praying the Rosary: Look upon the recitation of the vocal prayers, e.g. the Hail Marys, as simply the background music, as it were, allowing the heart to be free to pour forth itself in profound devotion to Our Lord or Our Blessed Mother. What was previously said concerning meditation, also applies to the meditation of the various mysteries of the Rosary. What is aimed at is not to discover novel or complex theological thoughts but to move the heart and will to simple yet sincere acts of love, sorrow, humility, gratitude, etc. Abbot Chapman gives the following advice, which may also be of help to many, "I should not worry about *how* to say the Rosary. The easiest thing is to have some simple thought in connection with each mystery; e.g. the first mystery: that our Lady simply gives herself up to God; or the last mystery: just Heaven; and so forth." The soul can then endeavor in all simplicity and sincerity to make the interior dispositions proper to each mystery its own.

Question: Is it possible to have a high degree of prayer and manifest external faults?

St. Teresa of Avila gives the answer in the sixth Mansion of her book, *The Interior Castle and Seven Mansions of the Soul*. She warns her nuns not to think that this or that person has not a high degree of prayer because they perceive certain external faults. God often allows their faults to keep them more humble. Often we find in communities persons who have no advanced prayer but who lead almost perfect external lives. On the other hand, some contemplatives disconcertingly manifest annoying imperfections, at least for a time. But perseverance in contemplation should correct these.

One parting suggestion: every religious house and Catholic home should, with proper guidance, be well supplied with a variety of *good* books on the spiritual life. The book one likes to read is the one generally that communicates the most good to the soul. We all differ in tastes, needs, temperament, and aspirations; and daily spiritual reading is a necessity for a good spiritual life. Therefore much of our reading should be of a spiritual nature.

Appendix A

A Historical Note

For the first fifteen hundred years Christian spirituality was unencumbered and free from all the methods and systems of prayer that became so popular after the Protestant Reformation. Spirituality was quite simple and souls who received the gift of contemplation did so naturally. They did not think it strange to be able to commune with God beyond all words or images nor did they believe themselves to be idle in such prayer. Unlike later generations they did not try to systematize the delicate workings of grace. They accepted them, and grew spiritually.

During the seventeenth century the Quietist heresy exaggerated certain aspects of the old teaching on contemplation. This caused a great stir among those who did not understand the ways of prayer, leading them to denounce as “Quietism” true contemplation. The writings of many orthodox spiritual masters, among them St. John of the Cross, were nearly condemned due to a misunderstanding of the real problems of the Quietist doctrines.

This led more than anything else to the persecution subsequently raised against simple forms of prayer. And the time was ripe for such a persecution. Shortly before this the Jansenists had introduced their harsh and severe notions of Christianity. They looked upon God as an unloving and unlovable taskmaster. Influenced by such a caricature of the loving Creator there was no room in their spirituality for intimacy with God. Though the doctrines of the Jansenists were condemned, the atmosphere they created lingered in the air for hundreds of years, *even to our own day*.

Due to these two influences of Quietism and Jansenism the old teachings on mysticism were locked in the basement, so to speak, for centuries and an effort was made to forget them entirely.

Abbot Cuthbert Butler in his book *Western Mysticism* (1926) relates:

“The movement of the past quarter of a century may be characterized as a great return to the ideas of antiquity and of the Middle Ages concerning contemplation and its place in the spiritual life. During the eighteenth century the idea had come to be accepted as well established, that, apart from special and unusual calls, the normal mental prayer for all was systematic discursive meditation according to fixed methods: *this was taken to be the lifelong exercise of mental prayer for those embarked on a spiritual life – priests, religious, nuns, devout layfolk.*

Contemplation was looked on as something extraordinary, almost identified with visions, revelations, raptures, even stigmatization and levitation, and other such psycho-physical phenomena. Thus contemplation and mystical theology had come to be regarded as wonderful, even miraculous, to be admired from a safe distance, and left alone as dangerous and full of pitfalls. Such was the common view, such the common practice, almost taken for granted at the end of the nineteenth century.”

This overemphasis on systematic and methodical forms of prayer had very harmful results, as Abbot Chapman describes:

“The doctrine which prevailed in practice, even in the religious orders, was that discursive meditation, with much movement of the imagination, was suitable to all (except a few extraordinary and favored souls), and even to enclosed nuns. It was said to be not only possible, but easy, for every one; and for three hundred years pious souls have been in the habit of supposing their failure in meditation to be a sad and rare phenomenon, due to their own wickedness and laziness, and a peculiarity too disedifying to be owned except in confession.”¹

The spiritual harm resulting from this is well described by the holy Spanish Dominican, Fr. Victorino Osende, O.P.:

“This doctrine made the field of the spiritual life so narrow and barren that souls were stifled and the most promising flowers and fruits of sanctity perished. It caused many to lead a sad and painful existence because they were forced to wage a violent interior struggle between their concepts of the spiritual life and the impulses of their heart, and even to resist God, who was drawing them to Himself. They yearned and sighed for a different atmosphere, for greater light, for another mode of life in which they would be able to give free expansion to their ardent desires for divine love. Others languished away in tepidity for lack of effective encouragement or altogether abandoned the interior life and their quest after perfection, discouraged by the impossibility of attaining it by their own efforts.”²

From the foregoing it should be obvious why a proper understanding of the ways of prayer is absolutely indispensable.

¹ Hastings *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, (article: Mysticism, Roman Catholic), 1927

² *Fruits of Contemplation*, 1953

Appendix B

A Treasury of Excerpts from Spiritual Writers Relating to Prayer

Prayer in General

“Believe me, my dear friends – believe an experience ripened by thirty years in the sacred ministry, I do here affirm that all deceptions, all spiritual deficiencies, all miseries, all falls, all faults, and even the most serious wanderings out of the right path, all proceed from this simple source – a want of constancy in prayer. Live the life of prayer; learn to bring everything, to change everything, into prayer – pains and trials and temptations of all kinds. Pray in calm, pray in storm; pray on waking, and pray during the daytime; going and coming, pray; tired out and distracted, pray; whatsoever your repugnance may be, pray. Pray that you may learn to pray. ‘Teach us, O Lord, how to pray’, ‘But I cannot pray.’ That is heresy. Yes, you can always pray. If you feel a disgust – nay, a horror of prayer, pray on; pray in spite of yourself, against yourself. Beg for the courage in prayer which our agonizing Savior merited for you by His pangs in Gethsemane and upon Calvary. Pray, for prayer is the strength which saves, the courage which perseveres, the mystic bridge cast over the abyss which joins the soul to God. ‘And being in an agony, He prayed the longer.’” (Fr. Gustave De Ravignan, S.J., † 1858)

“This I believe I may truly and confidently affirm, that without a diligent pursuit of interior prayer none will ever become truly spiritual or attain to any degree of perfection... We see sometimes Religious, and not a few priests, who by their vocation and tonsure profess sanctity, and assiduously read the Sacred Scriptures and books of piety; who often, if not daily, offer the most Holy Sacrifice; who have neither wives nor children, and are free of cares and solitudes which may distract them from continual attendance to divine things. Yet after all this, they are so devoid of devotion and the Spirit of God, so earnest in the love of secular vanities, that they seem to differ not one jot from secular persons wholly taken up with the world. The only cause of these disorders is that they do not seriously enter into their own hearts by exercises of introversion, but only esteem and regard the exterior.” (St. Robert Bellarmine)

“When once we see the force of prayer in our spiritual life we cannot easily neglect it. But if we do not see its value, if we regard it as only one of the exercises we have to go through, we shall probably not become what God intends us to be...Until we appreciate the position of prayer in our spiritual life we are not likely to deepen our abiding in our Lord; whereas, with prayer properly used there is no limit to the closeness with which our souls may abide in Him.” (Abbot Oswald Smith, O.S.B., *Retreat Conferences*, 1924)

The Indwelling of God in the Soul

“The Word, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is hidden essentially in the inmost center of the soul. Wherefore, the soul that would find Him through union of love must go forth and hide itself from all created things according to the will and enter within itself in deepest recollection, communing there with God in intimate and affectionate fellowship, esteeming all that is in the world as though it were not. Hence St. Augustine, speaking with God in the *Soliloquies*, said: ‘I found Thee not, O Lord, without, because I erred in seeking thee without when Thou were within.’ He is, then, hidden within the soul, and there the good contemplative must seek Him.” (St. John of the Cross)

“Those who can shut themselves up in this little heaven of the soul, where He dwells who has created Heaven and earth, may believe that they are walking in an excellent way, and that they shall not fail to drink of the water of the fountain, for in a little time they will make great progress.” (St. Teresa of Avila)

“What greater incentive to the practice of the interior life and recollection than such considerations, if we but made them pass into our lives! In comparison with them how weak and ineffectual are the many other motives so often put forward to urge us on in the spiritual life. The advantages of a life of recollection are praised, the dangers of dissipation are detailed, perhaps even some mention is made of a God everywhere present, who beholds our most secret thoughts, but we forget the God who in His infinite love deigns to stand in need of our friendship and who, in order the more easily to secure it, gives Himself to us in the intimacy of our souls, and makes of them His heaven – His living tabernacles. Not enough stress is laid on the fact that, though we cannot, whenever we wish, enjoy the company of the God-Man on our altars, it is, however, possible for us to withdraw, like St. Catherine of Siena, into ourselves to commune with the God of our hearts. We believe that no

consideration would be more conducive than this to a life of unceasing prayer and continuous converse with God.

Is not love of interior recollection and familiar intercourse with God a special characteristic of interior souls? If they have great devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, they are equally devoted to Jesus the Eternal Word, the Guest and life of their soul...But it is regrettable that, on account of the silence maintained on the dogma of the Abiding Presence within us, many souls take so long to attain to this very excellent practice of the devotion to God, the Guest of our heart, while others never arrive so far in all their spiritual life.” (Fr. Paul De Jaegher, S.J., *One with Jesus*, 1955)

“How many times have we not heard Christian souls express the longing to live in intimacy with God, to have with Him more than simple, formal and semi-official relations limited to occasional acts of devotion observed more to fulfill a command than to respond to a real need of love!

Often one asks: ‘What can I do to attain to this intimacy? What is the basis of a life of true union with God?’

Blessed are you if you desire divine intimacy! No grace could be more precious for you than this yearning to leave off formalism in order to live intensely our magnificent religion.

Never to drive God from one’s soul by grave sin is an essential but a negative task. The true Christian will wish to do more. Having sounded the depths of the gift of God, he sees that it consists not only in the presence of a certain *something* in his soul, and in the super-elevation of his powers of knowing and loving, but in the intimate presence of *Someone*, the Great Someone, of the Holy Trinity Itself. From this conviction he will advance to the realization that the logic of love requires him to cultivate this Divine Presence, to honor It, to make the most of It, to surround It with a positive devotion.

If among the best Christians many lack an interior spirit, it is because they do not sufficiently fathom the mystery of the Divine Indwelling. They lack faith and motivation.” (Fr. Raoul Plus, S.J., *Dust, Remember Thou Art Splendor*, 1941)

Vocal Prayer

“Vocal Prayer is a means of exciting internal devotion and it is by means of internal devotion that the mind is raised to God...Vocal prayer should be used to the extent that it is useful in stimulating devotion, but as soon as it distracts the mind or hinders its soaring it should be abandoned – a

point which happens especially with those whose mind is so sufficiently prepared for mental prayer as to have no need for vocal prayer.” (St. Thomas Aquinas)

“The first and essential condition of prayer properly so called is that it should proceed from the mind and heart. Mere lip service is not prayer at all, and is as useful to the soul as would be the turning of a ‘prayer-wheel’. In every form of prayer to God it is the mind that matters, it is the heart that counts. St. John Chrysostom says: ‘Although thou shouldst not kneel, nor strike thy breast, nor raise thine hands to heaven, thou wilt have made a good prayer if thine heart be glowing with love of God.’ Even vocal prayers, to be prayers at all, must be something more than words: they must have a devout and thinking mind behind them. Indeed it is the heart and mind that really are efficacious in God’s sight and are useful to the soul in bringing it into relation with Him, and the words are chiefly needed to concentrate our thoughts and keep our mind from wandering.

In our vocal prayers, although we make their sentiments and aspirations our own, we frequently feel that we are merely adopting the expressions of another. They leave our inward beings cold and our hearts unmoved, and in so far as this is so they do not imply the true outpouring of our inmost hearts and souls to God. In fact, it requires very little experience to prove to us that the intimate communion with God in mental prayer is almost essential to the proper raising of our minds to heavenly things during the time of our vocal prayer.” (Cardinal Gasquet, O.S.B., *Religio Religiosi*, 1923)

“I have not the courage to force myself to seek beautiful prayers in books; not knowing which to choose I act as children do who cannot read; I say quite simply to the good God what I want to tell Him, and He always understands me.

Prayer is like a mighty queen to whom the king’s audience is never denied and to whom he can refuse nothing. We can be heard without having to read any set formula adapted to the circumstance...For me prayer is an outburst of the heart, a glance upwards to Heaven, a cry of gratitude and love uttered in affliction or in gladness – or, in short, anything that raises the soul to God.” (St. Therese of Lisieux)

“If the style of the Church’s public prayer comes naturally to one, well and good; if not, then no attempt should be made to cast one’s prayers in such a style. ‘Vouchsafe,’ and other words of that sort, are best left unused...Through a wrong notion of Our Lord and of the correct attitude

before Him, some souls have great difficulty in ‘letting themselves go,’ and talking to Him quite naturally when at prayer. Now, it is true that reverence is essential when at prayer. But in private prayer we are in converse with a God Who is in love with us, and Who seeks so great an intimacy with us, and that with such ardor, that He gives us His own Body and Blood for our food, thus showing the intensity of His desire.” (Dom Eugene Boylan, O.C.S.O., *Difficulties in Mental Prayer*, 1948)

“We know by heart some set forms of prayer, others we find in books at our desire; this satisfies us when we have read them or recited them from memory; we think not of anything more being required. How grievously mistaken are we! With all these forms, however beautiful may be the sentiments they express, we do not know how to pray, and during most of the time we are not praying at all, or rather we are praying according to our own fancy, not as God wishes....

“*God,*” says Jesus Christ, “*is a Spirit, and they that adore Him, must adore Him in spirit and in truth.*” Prayer therefore is wholly a spiritual act, directed to Him Who is the Spirit of spirits, the Spirit Who sees all things and Who is, as St. Augustine says, more intimately present to our soul than its deepest depths. If we add to what is of the essence of prayer certain bodily postures, words, external marks of devotion; all these of themselves mean nothing, and are only pleasing to God inasmuch as they express the sentiments of the soul. It is, properly speaking, the heart that prays; it is to the voice of the heart that God lends an attentive ear. Whoever speaks of the heart means that which is most spiritual within us. It is indeed noteworthy that in Holy Scripture prayer is always attributed to the heart; it is moreover the heart that God teaches and it is the heart, when instructed how to pray, that afterwards enlightens the understanding.

If this be the case, and we cannot doubt that it is, why do we pray so much with the lips and so little with the heart? Why do we not draw our prayer from this source, instead of having recourse to our memory and our lips? Why in meditation is there so much mental labor expended in seeking for reflections and so little action of the will moving it to make acts of love?...But my heart says nothing to me, when I am in the presence of God; if I wish to enter into myself I find nothing but a void, dryness, distractions. To fill up my time, to excite feelings of devotion, to withdraw my mind from troublesome thoughts, I must absolutely make use of a book. What? Your heart says nothing? Certainly, so long as it is silent, you are not praying; but if it is dumb when left to itself, it is more so when your lips are uttering words. Do you not see that the high-flown sentiments that you borrow from books act only on your imagination;

that they are not your own, or rather only seem to be your own for the moment. You are reading them, and once the book is closed, you are just as dry, just as cold as you were before. Nevertheless I have prayed, say you, while reading or reciting these formulae. Your self-love thinks so, and is satisfied; but is God's judgment the same as yours? Is God equally satisfied? What does He care for words, He who listens only to the heart?

You ask me what is this voice of the heart. How can I tell you? And how could you understand me? The voice of the heart is love. Love God and your heart will always be speaking to Him; it will always be praying to Him. The germ of love is the germ of prayer; the development and the perfection of love are the development and perfection of prayer. If you do not understand this, you have never yet loved and never prayed. Beg of God to open you heart and light it up with one spark of His love; then will you begin to understand what it is to pray." (Fr. John Grou, S.J., †1803)

Intentions During Prayer

"People treat with God as they do with men, thinking they are not understood unless they go into detailed explanations of the things they require. They carefully get ready their intention, they have express forms for each and every act, they name separately each person they wish to pray for, and if the least detail escapes their memory they do not think that God can supply it. Souls of little faith, and who know not God, your intentions are present to Him before you open your mouth! He sees them as soon as they are formed in your heart; what need have you to torment yourselves in explaining them to Him? You desire all spiritual blessings as much for yourselves as for those in whom you take an interest. Is He ignorant of this, since He Himself inspires you with these desires? Do not then have any anxiety concerning this matter." (Fr. John Grou, S.J., †1803)

"As regards your intentions in prayer, there are many souls who find that great precision and nicety in specifying various intentions in prayer interferes with the *unity* of their prayer and is a cause of anxiety and distractions. For such souls the best thing is to specify these intentions from time to time, for example, once in the morning and then a *simple glance* of the soul is sufficient to recall them at the beginning of prayer. However, in all this, follow the *attraction of the Holy Spirit* with great peace, as all anxiety is the mortal enemy of that disposition which the Holy Spirit wishes to find in that soul which He calls to a great union with Him." (Abbot Columba Marmion, O.S.B., *Union with God*, 1934)

“Again, this simplification applies even in the matter of explicit intentions made in prayer. Some souls are reduced to such a loving simplicity in things spiritual as to dwell, so to say, in the very atmosphere of love. It is difficult for them to form particular intentions. There distaste for doing so may at first distress them, until they arrive at a truer understanding of prayer. The case comes to mind of a person who was long led to contemplation without suspecting it. This person was working against the call of grace for several years by forcing endless particular acts and devotions, not only in an effort to enkindle some feeling of fervor but especially with a view to liberating the soul of a deceased relative. This apparently was the subject of the prayer-life, and it was hindering progress if not causing distaste for prayer. When this person was instructed how to correspond with the action of the Holy Spirit, everything became clear and a new and simplified spiritual life began.

Such persons may think they are not helping departed relatives and friends without making explicit applications and intentions, but they must come to understand that their new way of prayer is the way of unceasing love, and is so vastly pleasing to the Heavenly Spouse, the infinitely generous Divine Lover, that He will grant all and more than they could obtain in particular intentions. For this God of all consolation, Who searches the reins and heart, is delighted to anticipate the intentions and requests of the loving soul.” (Fr. Gabriel Diefenbach, O.F.M. Cap., *Common Mystic Prayer*, 1947)

“She (St. Therese of Lisieux) did not waste time in explaining to God in detail her own intentions or those that had been recommended to her. She feared, she said, that she would never come to the end of her litany of intentions and again that she might forget some of them. Such litanies she considered useless complications, declaring ‘simple souls don’t need complicated means.’...

Sometimes, however, wishing to be charitable to a sister who had recommended an intention to her, ‘she very quickly addressed herself to God, but after that gave it no more thought.’

She did not specify to whom she destined the merits of her works: ‘I cannot force myself to say, ‘My God, this is for the Church ... give this to Peter, give that to Paul.’ ‘The good Lord knows well what to do with my merits. I have given Him everything in order to please Him.’ ‘When I pray for my brother missionaries, I do not offer my suffering but say simply, “My God, give them what I myself would like to receive.”’ (Rev. Francois Jamart, O.C.D., *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 1961)

“Once this principle is grasped, the difficulty experienced by souls whose intentions have not been realized in the terms requested – the difficulty of ‘unanswered’ prayer – virtually disappears. There is an instinctive understanding of the permissive will of God and of the limited vision of man. The soul now knows that the best thing it can do is let the Holy Spirit take over the direction of its affairs in general and in particular. The acknowledgement of divine dominion is itself a furtherance of the divine purpose.

Prayer-intentions accordingly, handed over to God with no conditions attached, assume a different part in the general action of prayer. Where the over-all petition is that God’s will may be done on earth as it is in heaven, the urgency of personal requests is lessened. The soul no longer feels that it must by one means or another catch the Holy Spirit’s attention; the feeling is rather that the Holy Spirit’s point of view must somehow be acquired. It now dawns upon the soul that this point of view can be acquired only by selfless prayer and love.

From this point onwards the whole focus of intention is altered: God’s intention in prayer is seen to matter, and one’s own not at all. The exact meaning of God’s intention may not be understood, but this inability on the soul’s part is not felt to be of consequence. All that now concerns the soul is the work of conforming the human will with the divine intention. What it all means can be left to God – either to explain or to leave unexplained.

The soul knows that whether it sees it or not, the ultimate explanation of God’s will is love. Love is the meaning of God’s hidden intentions, and it is love that draws the soul to waive its own intentions in favor of God’s.

This is why the mystics find themselves seldom asking God for things. It is not that they deliberately exclude the prayer of petition, but that their prayer of praise and trust assumes that the needs which they might be praying for are in fact being attended to. Such souls make specific requests when asked by their friends to do so, but they do not normally feel drawn to beg favors on their own account. They feel that to do this only diverts energy from a more direct worship of God.

There is nothing wrong about asking for what we need – indeed it is so right that our Lord tells us to do it, four clauses of the Our Father being prayers of petition – but we should avoid dictating to God the manner in which our need must be met. It must remain the prayer of petition and not turn into the prayer of particularization.

We must make an act of faith about the great value to God and to our own souls of that prayer which leaves Him an open field. The prayer which narrows to a pin-point request is likely to be inspired more by self

than by grace. The same kind of faith must cover those occasions when we feel we are not honoring our obligations with regard to our friends, not praying for them by name and even forgetting that we have promised them with our prayers. We must refuse to be stampeded by scruple in this matter.” (Fr. Hubert Van Zeller, O.S.B., *Approach to Prayer*, 1957)

Dryness and Difficulties

“To get mental prayer right, the rest of the spiritual life must be put right, so that apart from its own intrinsic importance, mental prayer is a valuable clinical thermometer for the health of our soul. Failure in prayer is often due to failure in one of the four ‘purities’ which are necessary to familiar friendship with Jesus. These are: purity of conscience, purity of heart, purity of mind, purity of action...When we have just told Jesus that we love Him with our whole heart, it is only if we are sincere that we can remain silently in that sentiment. Otherwise, we feel compelled to go on saying something, lest we should hear Him saying to us: ‘If you really loved Me you would not do so-and-so!’ That is one of the ways in which Our Lord moulds us to His Heart’s desire...”

Much of dissatisfaction with our attempt at prayer arises from the fact that we are really trying to please ourselves instead of trying to please God...A man can persist in blindness through many exercises but he cannot persist in any such infidelity and still persevere in the daily practice of mental prayer. One thing or the other must give way. No man can look God in the face every day and say ‘No’ to Him, and no man who has not a deliberate intention of saying ‘No’ to God, need be afraid to look Him in the face. We may be weak and fainthearted, but He is our Savior; He knows the clay of which we are made, and the Scripture tells us our sufficiency is from God.” (Dom Eugene Boylan, O.C.S.O., *Difficulties in Mental Prayer*, 1948)

“I should never wish for any other prayer than that which would cause me to grow in virtue. So I should consider that a good prayer, which was attended by many aridities, temptations, and desolations, that left me more humble. Can he be said not to pray, who is in the midst of such trials? On the contrary, if he offers them to God and bears them with conformity to His holy will, as he ought, this is prayer, and very often much better than he who wearies his brain with various reflections, and persuades himself that he has made a good prayer if he has squeezed out four tears.” (St. Teresa of Avila)

“The soul has no sooner crossed the threshold of the interior life, and by virtue of the consolations and the proved delights of God has no sooner in some measure detached itself from this world, than from time to time God hides himself from it. He gives it to taste of the bitter yet salutary medicine of desolation, that he may forthwith detach the soul from the self and from spiritual joys...Desolation, therefore, has an important place in the spiritual life; it is vital that we see it in its right perspective, to the end that, in desolation, we shall order our lives according to God’s Will...

If we make good use of our desolations and of our aridities, how quickly we shall begin to tread the path of perfection! How we shall profit from the inexhaustible treasure of these rich mines! Of loving souls it might be said that barrenness and desolation are a true nursery of virtue. In it God cultivates with great care humility, trust, love of the Cross, hate of ourselves, perfect love of God...

Moreover all these, whether they be the desolations of an hour, or the ordeals of several years, are the work of God performed secretly in us, which no reflection, no meditation, no resolution could secure us. It is God Himself working to give us true and profound humility, who frees us for ever from the tyranny of the self, and who once and for all rids us of the folly of pride and makes our own the gifts of the Savior...Humility is the elder sister of trust, therefore it is not astonishing to see the trust of generous souls grow rapidly in the soil of aridity and of desolation. Souls of poor spirituality lose the little trust they had. Accordingly God ordinarily spares them, sending them desolation but rarely. Yet for the loving soul that desires to manifest its love and its trust in Jesus, desolations are friends. They give it the ability to trust in Jesus which is its joy at those hours when everything conspires to fill it with distrust...

We are to love the God of consolations, and not the consolations of God. – How utterly we are deceived by this impression, known to us in spiritual aridity, of our inability to please Jesus, due to the fact that we grow spiritually numb and that we no longer know conscious love. As has already been shown, desolation permits us to perform countless acts...of profound humility, of blind trust, of love of suffering, of mortification of the self. It gives us, therefore, countless opportunities of pleasing Jesus and of bringing Him joy...

In particular it gives us the great advantage of being able to love Jesus with a pure and disinterested love. It is sadly true that in consolation we are tempted to love ourselves and in ourselves to put our trust. We are aware of the wings which consolation gives us, and upon them we rely. We are conscious of the joy of love and we all but forget to love God in our love of the dear delight which we have in His love. In

desolation it is far otherwise. Then, if we persist in our love, our love has no other goal than God. No longer do we love God for the sake of His gifts, of which we are no longer conscious: we love Him purely, for His own sake. In this way we detach ourselves from the consolations of God, that we may attach ourselves to the God of consolations.” (Fr. Paul De Jaegher, S.J., *The Virtue of Trust*, 1932)

“At the beginning of the spiritual life generally, although not invariably, God gives consolations at once more rich and vivid in that he desires to lead the soul to higher things. In this way he seeks to detach it from all those human joys that are negligible in comparison with the intimate joys of divine love. Subsequently, when He perceives the soul to be sufficiently detached from earthly consolations, He begins to deprive it of the conscious joys of the spirit. Gradually He takes from it the inclination and the pleasure which it feels in performing acts of virtue, acts of charity, acts of humility and mortification. He filches from it, too, the joys of prayer. Without exaggerating too greatly the change wrought in it, the soul begins to experience considerable difficulty in meditating, in praying, as before, by the use of the intellect. For this it feels a secret aversion.

Beneath the action of God its whole life is simplified. Its spiritual activity seems to grow strangely less. Whereas it loved formerly to express itself in prayer in varying sentiments of humility, of mortification, of trust, of self-denial, of love of God, it feels itself impelled to talk in all simplicity with God, or even to remain near Him in the simple and peaceable attitude of trusting love, like a child in the arms of its mother.” (Fr. Paul De Jaegher, S.J., *The Virtue of Trust*, 1932)

“One of the many snares to be met with in the spiritual life, one which is even encountered on the very threshold of sanctity, is too great a pre-occupation with self. Many generous souls, already advanced in the way of perfection, do not arrive at the summit, because they are too engrossed with themselves. They think too much about themselves, analyze their feelings too minutely, reproach themselves excessively for their failings and infidelities, are too anxious about their spiritual progress. Without doubt, this comes from their zeal for perfection, and also from their love for God, but this love is not sufficiently free from self-love. How much they would gain by thinking less of self and more of God! They should apply to themselves the words of Our Lord to St. Margaret Mary: “*Forget yourself entirely and I will think of you.*” The great art is to forget oneself entirely. This art the soul who seeks to live the life of Christ learns almost without being aware of it. Her great occupation is to

leave Jesus free to live once more in her: His joys, His sufferings, His hopes, His loves. At every moment she tries to see things from His standpoint. She forgets her individual interests and aims, in order to embrace the world-wide interests of Christ. She forgets herself quite naturally without adverting to it. There is no place in her spiritual life for an excessive anxiety concerning even her soul's interests. She does not look at herself, because she fixes her eyes on Christ. And this attitude of mind is infinitely precious, especially in regard to those fervent and privileged souls whom God loads with His special graces. Such souls are often tempted to turn their eyes on themselves, even while scarcely conscious of doing so, and to take a secret complacency in the gifts they have received." (Fr. Paul De Jaegher, S.J., *One with Jesus*, 1955)

Peace of Soul

"I very much wish that you could acquire calm and peace, and it is certainly an inspiration of the Holy Spirit that is urging you in this direction. Only do it *very gently and quietly* and don't be too distressed if you don't succeed straight away. The best means of acquiring this calm is an absolute resignation to God's holy will, there you will find the region of peace... You must not go back on the past, God does not wish it, except in a general way, just to humble yourself *before Him*, casting yourself at His feet as a poor sinner and asking His pardon. 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'

God would have us do all in our power to be in peace, in order to communicate Himself to our souls... You must be very careful to possess your soul in peace, as the Evil One will probably make great efforts to prevent your acquiring this spirit of prayer. As a general rule, you ought to regard as coming from the enemy any thought which agitates you, throws you into perplexity, which diminishes your confidence (in God) and narrows up your heart.

Place all your consolation in God, *not in the sense that you should reject all other joy*, but that no human consolation should be *necessary* for your peace." (Abbot Columba Marmion, *Union with God*, 1934)

"If the mind is accustomed to dissipate itself vainly in external things by continually sallying forth from itself, how can it return to itself at the time of prayer, and of that prayer in particular which demands a more recollected spirit?... On the pretext that it is necessary to think of what is to be said or done, how many useless and superfluous thoughts and reflections are made, for very often the very time which is lost in deliberation and self-consultation on trifles would be sufficient to carry

them out; and with regard to the most important acts which demand each its due time in execution, and of which we try to think all at once, we allow to rise in the soul a confusion of thoughts, a chaos of reflections which agitate, disquiet, and disturb all our interior, and so bear down the mind that it can no longer remember either God or itself, or what it should begin to do.

On the pretext of providing for the future, in order not to tempt God, as we say, how long do we not pile thought upon thought, reflection on reflection, plan on plan; we exhaust ourselves with anxious forebodings, in vexatious solicitude, and often in most useless precautions. For when the time comes, either things alter their aspect, or we ourselves change our ideas and feelings; therefore we take new steps, often entirely contrary to those which we had so uselessly thought and so vainly resolved on in advance...

Say to oneself in all circumstances: ‘such and such a thing is done, of what use is it to occupy myself with it any longer?’ As to those things which it remains to say or do, we will think of those in their proper time, and God will provide for all; sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof; will not tomorrow and the next day bring with them their particular graces? Let us then think only of the present and follow the order of God, let us leave the past to His mercy, the future to Providence; striving peaceably all the time and without anxiety, first of all for salvation, and secondly for other needful ends, let us leave our success entirely to God, casting on His paternal bosom all our vain anxieties, for our faith tells us, according to St. Peter, that He hath care of us.” (Fr. Jean De Caussade, S.J., †1751)

Contemplation

“No amount of exterior work is as pleasing to God, as useful to the Church and to souls as that loving contemplation, in which the soul allows God to act as He pleases in her. It is for that He has created her. ‘Mary has chosen the better part which shall not be taken away from her.’...Our activity is pleasing to God just in so far as it is the overflow of our union with Him...To allow God to act on us in prayer is neither laziness or inactivity. At such moments, deep down in the imperceptible depths of our soul, there is passing a *Divine* activity more precious than all our human activity. As the soul gets nearer to God, she becomes simpler and no words – no forms, can express nor formulate what she would say, but as the Church prays in her liturgy, ‘O God, to Whom every heart is open and to Whom every *will speaks*, and from Whom there is nothing hidden, purify our hearts by the infusion of the Holy

Spirit that we may perfectly love Thee, and worthily praise Thee.” (Abbot Columba Marmion, O.S.B., *Union with God*, 1934)

“Instead of the complicated and fatiguing exercise of the memory, the understanding, and the will, which faculties are applied now to one subject, now to another, in meditation, God often brings the soul into a simple prayer, in which the mind has no other object than a confused and general idea of God, which nourishes it without any effort, as infants are nourished by milk...He (God) detaches her from the multitude of practices which, like so many fetters, would now only hamper her and lead her away from her simplicity.” (Fr. John Grou, S.J., †1803)

“Abbot John Chapman, who had an exceptionally enlightened and learned mind in all matters of prayer has written that:

Most people who use contemplative prayer are unconscious of anything extraordinary, except (1) the curious inability to meditate, (2) the ease of remaining with God, and (3) sometimes an “experience” that God is there. But there is nothing that surprises or troubles the soul, it all seems quite commonplace and ordinary!

The Abbot then goes on to distinguish mystical states which are uncommon and ‘the other which is very common.’ Regarding this latter he continues:

But the ordinary contemplative prayer seems to get less ordinary as it develops. It gradually makes all our acts cease, and makes the soul in prayer receptive and passive, and absorbs the whole life outside prayer. But even then nothing *happens* – there is nothing to take hold of and say: ‘This is a mystical experience; this is a revelation of divine things.’ It is all so calm in progress that there is no landmark.

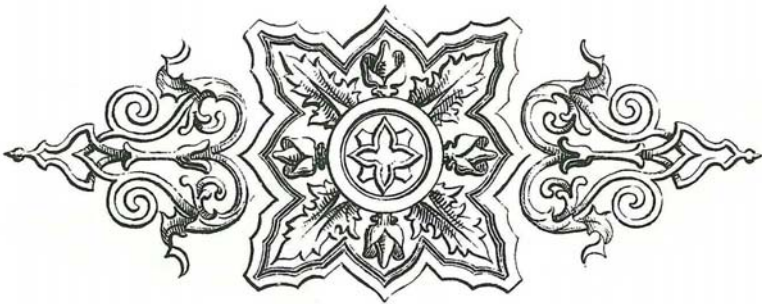
This ordinary contemplation is radically open to all, though indeed not all attain it...It cannot be denied that those who go on definitely for a permanent change encounter a very trying ordeal. As they lose the use of their faculties from a cause unknown to them, the change is naturally painful. They are wholly unaccustomed to this *sense-less* contact with God, which confuses and troubles them. What they need now is sympathetic understanding, instruction and encouragement....

A difficulty here is in inducing a person whom God is leading in this way, to give up his elementary notions of prayer. At least the desire to pray is present, and this of itself is prayer. Moreover, although the person may feel he does no more at times of prayer than he does the rest of the day, that too is all passed in the wish to be united to God. And yet it may seem ‘like an idiotic state, and feel like the completest waste of time, until it gradually becomes more vivid.’

The conduct to be observed by the soul is, that it make no effort of its own but yield to the attraction of grace, disposing itself more and more for this rest and tranquility. It should not force itself to meditate or to make deliberate acts, such as ejaculations and the saying of prayers, or the arousing of emotions of love. If it does it will succeed only in losing its peace and hindering the spiritual prayer God is now perfecting in it. If acts of love, or humility, or thanksgiving, or any others tend to come of themselves, let them come. These are not essential, for they are not the soul's prayer but rather accompaniments to it. The real prayer is an interior one, going on in the depth of the soul, in a steady desire of the heart to be lovingly attentive to God. Nor should the soul here occupy itself in trying to feel or understand the interior operation, because this cannot be apprehended. The soul should simply remain in peace and repose in the presence of God. The more it accustoms itself to this quiet and rest, free from all deliberate considerations, the more lovingly conscious it will become of God and the sooner it will grow in that knowledge and become established in the habit of contemplation.”
(Fr. Gabriel Diefenbach, O.F.M. Cap., *Common Mystic Prayer*, 1947)

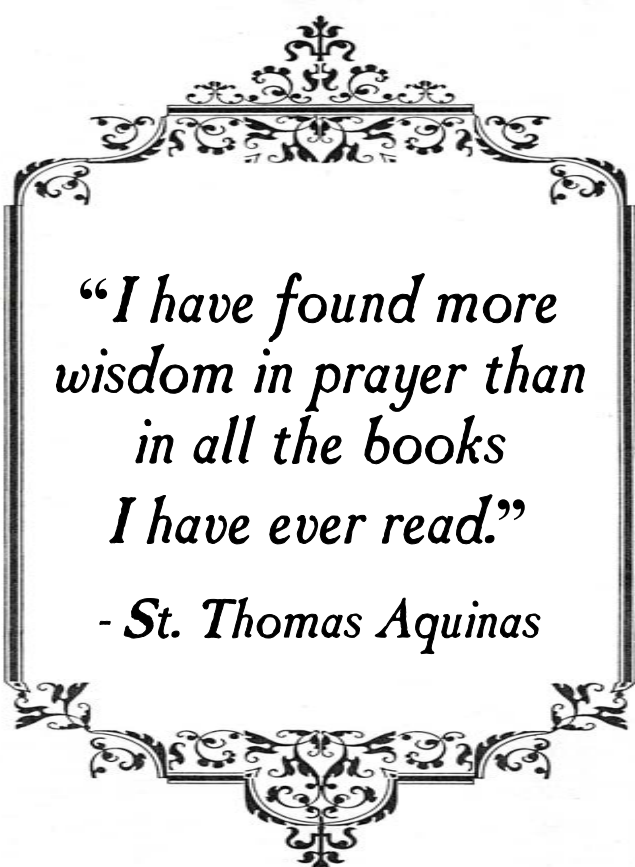
***“The blessed spirit of Prayer
rest upon us all. Amen.”***

- Fr. Augustine Baker, O.S.B., †1641



*“Strive to keep your heart in peace,
and do not let anything
that happens in this
world make you uneasy, for consider
that it must all come to an end.”*

- St. John of the Cross



*“I have found more
wisdom in prayer than
in all the books
I have ever read.”*

- St. Thomas Aquinas