

## PRAYER

Each of us has arrived at a different stage in prayer-life; some will be beginners, some will have travelled further along the road of meditation, while others may at times have reached the heights of contemplation; but there is a sense in which we are all beginners, for every time we enter the private room of mental prayer we start on the same step of the stairway of prayer. In the twenty-second chapter of her *Life*, which is an account of her development in prayer, St Teresa of Avila affirms that even those who have reached the heights of contemplation must keep their feet on the ground, meaning, that they must bear constantly in mind that our ascent to God is achieved entirely through our Lord's sacred humanity. That is the foundation of the life of prayer. St Catherine of Siena too, in her *Dialogue*, XXII writes: 'My sublimity stooped to the earth of your humanity and together they made a bridge and remade the road. And why? So that you might indeed come to the joy of the angels. But it would be no use my Son's having become your bridge to life if you do not use it.' The first movement of the soul in prayer – and this is particularly so each time we begin a new period of private prayer – is to focus the mind upon our Lord's Incarnation and all that followed from it, that is upon the whole gospel-story.

1. The best definition of prayer we possess is that given by the eighth century Bishop John of Damascus. 'Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God.' This definition has persisted in Catechisms of the Church until the present day, and still survives in the recently published *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Four centuries before John Damascene, John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople, wrote this about prayer. 'You should not think of prayer as being a matter of words. It is a desire for God, an indescribable devotion, not of human origin, but the gift of God's grace.' In the nineteenth century, we find St Thérèse of Lisieux saying the same thing. 'For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned towards heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love.' There must be many spiritual authors from whom we could quote similar sayings; and this is to be expected, for they are all living within the biblical tradition, which presents exactly the same concept of what we might call 'raw' prayer. In the book of Psalms, for example, we read: *To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in heaven* (Ps 123:1); and *My eyes are ever towards the Lord* (Ps 25:15); and *My eyes are turned towards you, O God, my Lord; in you I seek refuge; do not leave me defenceless* (Ps 141:8).

Apart from the Psalms there is the impressive scene where Moses, becoming a bit the worse for the wear, had to be helped by two others to hold his hands up in prayer so that the Amalekites might be defeated: *Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set* (Exodus 17:11-12).

More than a millennium later we discover our Lord expressing intense prayer by these same upward gestures. *Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me'* (Jn 11:41). Thereupon he raised Lazarus from the dead. And Jesus made the same gesture when, having concluded the long discourse at table with the Twelve, he began his great priestly prayer, which is recorded in John 17. John tells us that, *After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven. And this happened*

also when he fed the multitude. *Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves* (Mt 14:19). This is example is of particular interest, because today we continue to make use of this ancient symbolism in the first Eucharist Prayer of the Mass, when, just before the Consecration, the priest raises his eyes to heaven just as our Lord did when he fed the multitude at the Sea of Galilee.

2. If we think of the essence of prayer in this way, as the raising up of our mind and heart, of our inner self to God, rather than as the saying of prayers, we become aware of the important fact that prayer cannot be disconnected from life in general. Prayer could be described as a kind of epiphenomenon upon the way we live, the reflective or thoughtful dimension of our way of life. But this reflection in turn reacts upon our lives and directs them. As we live, so shall we pray and as we pray, so shall we live. All of this follows from the fact that the goal of life is the same as the goal of prayer, viz., union with God through perfect love, and that love is proved not so much by directing our words as by directing our will to God.

The Children of Israel had already come to know that the goal of prayer is to come into God's presence, to find union with him. *Your face, Lord do I seek. Do not hide your face from me* (Ps 27:8-9); *One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the presence of the Lord, all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple* (Ps 27:4); *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?* (Ps 42:1-2). Centuries later the question, 'When shall I come and behold the face of God?' receives its answer from St John who, now enjoying the fullness of knowledge given by Christ, wrote, *When he is revealed, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is* (1 Jn 3:2).

And the ancient people of God had learned also the fundamental truth about the connection between prayer and life, that true prayer, and hence genuine union, with God has to be founded upon a life obedient to God's Law. *Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts* (Ps 24: 3-4). The gospel finally and decisively confirms this truth. At the end of his series of visions, St John speaks of the joy of the heavenly city into which the redeemed, at the end of life's prayerful journey, will enter and see the face of God. *Nothing unclean may come into it; no one who does what is loathsome or false, but only those who are listed in the Lamb's book of life* Rev 21: 27), and of the Church triumphant he writes, *His bride is ready, and she has been able to dress herself in dazzling white linen, because her linen is made of the good deeds of the saints* (Rev 19: 8).. The same thought is expressed in the previous quotation from St John's letters; he said that those who see God will do so because they *will be like him*.

Progress in prayer thus runs in parallel with progress in sanctification. St John of the Cross, the great doctor of mystical theology – that is teacher of prayer - tells us that we must begin the ascent of the mountain of the Lord by entering the dark night of the senses, that is by pursuing an appropriate style of asceticism; and St Teresa of Avila, his friend and collaborator, wrote this. 'If we cherished no attachment no earthly things, and if all our cares and all our intercourse were centred in heaven, I believe there is no doubt that this blessing would be given very speedily' (*Life*, chapter XI). By 'this blessing' she means union with God. In the fourth century St John

Chrysostom, too, affirmed that genuine prayer rests upon a good life. 'To set about this prayer, paint the house of your soul with modesty and lowliness and make it splendid with the light of justice. Adorn it with the beaten gold of good works and, for walls and stones, embellish it assiduously with faith and generosity.'

A definition of the essence of prayer and these observations about the relation between prayer and life in general are important, but some guidance how to set about praying is also needful. How does prayer work? Someone once said that, when faced with the problem of how to operate a piece of machinery, we should when all else fails, read the instructions. The instructions how to lead our lives and how to pray have been clearly set out in *The Catechism of The Catholic Church*. Let us take a look at what the CCC tells us about prayer, and let us begin beginning with the entry on 'Prayer' in the Index. That entry alone is most instructive. Under 'Prayer' we find approximately 80 sub-headings. It is clear from this that, when thinking about prayer, we must take note that there are many modes of prayer and that, while there are principles that always apply to prayer, how we set about practising different forms of prayer will vary, because the several forms of prayer, although all sharing in the same ultimate goal, union with God, have different proximate objectives.

3. Let us begin with liturgical prayer. The word 'liturgy' is often misunderstood, being taken to mean a formal, fixed style of prayer. It may well possess such a style, but the word is a transliteration of the Greek *leitourgia* which means the common work, which it was the duty of the citizens of a Greek city state to carry out. This would include taking part in both civic and religious celebrations and duties. The Index lists 'ecclesial prayer' as one of the forms of prayer, and this is what we mean by the liturgical worship of the Church, the fundamental purpose of which is to bear witness to mankind's primary obligation to offer thanksgiving and praise and adoration to God, the Creator. This *leitourgia*, this public responsibility, is linked with the Commandment, *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy* (Exod 20:8); and the Christian *leitourgia* is celebrated principally by the assembling of the faithful on the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath, to offer the supreme act of thanksgiving that is the Eucharist.

As well as bearing public witness to mankind's fundamental obligation this act of worship is also a manifestation of the solidarity of the human race. The individual's supreme act of worship is the worship he or she offers as a member of the one Body, whose Head is our Lord Jesus Christ. The Sunday liturgy of the Christian Church is thus an adumbration of the consummation of all our earthly love of each other as an overflow, as it were, of the final union of the whole Body of Christ with God the Father.

What has been said about the liturgy of the Eucharist applies also to the celebration of the Divine Office, for the Divine Office is the official public prayer of the Church, for it continues throughout the whole week the Church's public witness to mankind's primary obligation to give thanks and adoration to its Creator. It follows from this that the Divine Office ought ideally to be recited by a congregation in public. The *General Instruction* prefixed to the Divine office, Vol. I states: 'The liturgy of the Hours, like the other liturgical services, is not a private function, but pertains to the whole body of the Church. Its ecclesial celebration is best seen and especially recommended when it is performed together with the bishop surrounded by his priests

and ministers by the local Church' (20). The *General Instruction* goes on to state that communities within the Church ought wherever possible to celebrate the Divine Office corporately.

Most notable amongst the communities who accept the responsibility of celebrating the Divine Office on behalf of the whole Church are the monastic orders. About half a century ago you would have seen on the desks in the choirs of monasteries the enormous volumes containing the Divine Office - you could hardly lift them. But it was not just the monastic orders who were obliged to maintain this public worship of the Church; the obligation of praying the Divine Office lies upon all ordained ministers of the Church; and as these cannot be expected to carry about such enormous tomes, the Divine Office has to be, if not reduced in content, at least printed and bound in a tractable form. That is how we got the Breviary – the short Divine Office.

Not only was an adaptation required in the form of the books containing the Divine Office, but a change came about in its manner of recitation; this is where problems and dangers arise. As it was no longer always convenient for those obliged to pray the Divine Office to pray corporately, the Breviary was often said privately; but those who pray the Office in this way are reminded, again by the *General Instruction*, that they are performing a public act. 'Whoever prays the psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours does not say them in his own name so much as in the name of the whole body of Christ, in fact in the person of Christ himself. In the Divine Office, however, even someone saying the Hour alone is not praying the psalms privately but in the name of the Church' (108).

Confusion may arise, because the content of the Divine Office provides so much that acts as a stimulus to private mental prayer, so that whilst celebrating the Divine Office we may find ourselves tempted to stand aside, as it were, and set off on a private path of mental prayer. The *CCC* takes account of this problem. In n.1177 it describes how the texts of the Divine Office can move us to mental prayer: 'The hymns and litanies of the Liturgy of the Hours integrate the prayer of the psalms into the age of the Church, expressing the symbolism of the time of day, the liturgical season or the feast being celebrated. Moreover, the reading of the Word of God at each Hour and the readings from the Fathers and spiritual masters at certain Hours, reveal more deeply the meaning of the mystery being celebrated, assist in understanding the psalms, and prepare for silent prayer. The *lectio divina*, where the Word of God is so read and meditated that it becomes prayer, is thus rooted in the liturgical celebration.' The *General Instruction* to the Divine Office too takes account of this fact. In n.100 we read: 'In the Liturgy of the Hours, the Church for the most part prays with those beautiful songs composed under the influence of the Spirit of God by the sacred authors of the O.T. From the beginning they have the power to raise men's minds to God, to evoke in them holy and wholesome thoughts, to help them to give thanks in times of favour, and to bring consolation and constancy in adversity'; and in n.101 it continues: 'It is not surprising if, though all Christians agree in having the highest regard for the psalms, difficulty sometimes arises when a person tries to make these songs his own in prayer'.

The conclusion we must draw is that private or mental prayer has to be distinguished from liturgical or ecclesial prayer, whether in the Eucharist or in the Divine Office..

Both ecclesial and private prayer are necessary for the spiritual growth of the ordained ministers of the Church, as indeed for all Christians, and neither form of prayer can replace the other. In August 1948 Fr Alphonsus, a monk at Sancta Maria Abbey, Nunraw told me that his spiritual life would collapse if he was not able to fit in half an hour's mental prayer before the Divine Office began at 3.30 a.m. His experience is not unique, I am sure; for their individual spiritual growth, all Christians must practice private, mental prayer as well as assisting at the Church's liturgical celebrations.

4. The theme of mental prayer has already been implicitly introduced, for the descriptions of prayer as an upward surge of the heart and mind rather than as forms of words, which were cited earlier, although applicable to liturgical prayer, turn our minds more immediately to think of private, mental prayer; and it is in respect of individual prayer that most people feel that they need guidance. We must frequently remind ourselves, however, that ecclesial prayer and private prayer are not in competition but are mutually supportive.

The complementary that exists between the two forms of prayer corresponds to the twofold sense in which we speak of redemption. The Church constantly reminds us that redemption is the re-creation of the whole human race, and it is therefore as one body that the union of men and women with God is consummated, when the Church, the Bride of Christ becomes perfectly united with her heavenly Bridegroom. But it is true also, that there is a union of each member with Christ, and the ability to sustain that union depends upon the individual's faithfulness to Christ in actions and in prayer. Just as the liturgical prayer of the Church cannot replace private prayer, so the fact that the corporate union of mankind with God is the ultimate purpose of redemption does not rule out the need for the union of each soul with God through Christ. St Peter gives a hint of this fact in his letter, 1 Peter 2:4-5. *'Set yourselves close to him so that you too may be living stones making a spiritual house.'* The individual's keeping close to Christ is the cement that binds together the stones making up the house that is the body of Christ, and a necessary means of maintaining and strengthening that closeness is mental prayer. How do we set about the practise of mental prayer?

We search first of all, as is to be expected, in the Gospels, and we find that our Lord not only gave a model for vocal prayer – The Lord's Prayer - but also advice on how to set about praying. He said: *'When you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place'* (Matthew 6: 6). This saying about private prayer was said within the context of the need to avoid all self-advertisement when doing good works; but it has a wider significance, which makes clear that this form of prayer is best carried out in solitude. Solitude, that is being cut off from all distraction, is the first requirement for effective mental prayer.

For some people solitude will mean being physically away from others, literally shut up in one's bedroom or study. One of the members of a meditation group in my last parish used to escape from her home and spend fifteen minutes sitting in her car in the parking lot outside the university before going into work. Each one has to find the way that fits into his normal life. This is important, for our prayer-life ought not to become a penitential burden, something the value of which, we think, will be in direct proportion to the difficulty or pain we encounter in doing it. Grace perfects nature but it ought also to seek for support from nature. We should therefore find a slot in our

daily program where it is convenient for us to pray. I once advised a scrupulous old lady who was worried because she found that her mind wandered when she tried to pray simply to mull over the Gospel she had heard last Sunday when she put her feet up, as was her custom, and drank a glass of sherry before lunch. What is important, however, is that having found the best time to meditate we stick to it, and that during that period we become truly alone, totally detached from every possible distraction.

St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the eleventh century, describes this entering into solitude in order to practise mental prayer. 'Come now, insignificant man, leave behind for a time your preoccupations; seclude yourself for a while from your disquieting thought. Turn aside now from heavy cares and disregard your wearisome tasks. Attend for a while to God and rest for a time in him. Enter the inner chamber of your mind; shut out all except God and whatever is of aid in your seeking him. Speak now, my whole heart speak now to God; I seek your countenance; your countenance, O Lord, do I seek' (*Proslogion*).

Having withdrawn and shut the door of our room – metaphorically at least – we then begin to practise mental prayer; but before we consider what this entails, we ought to take note that *being alone* and spending a period of time totally disconnected from all material interest is itself worth-while and significant, even although it may happen, that when we have achieved genuine solitude, intending to give ourselves over to mental prayer, we experience only dryness of spirit. There is just a blank; we are conscious of nothing; thinking about nothing; feeling nothing; God himself seems to have vanished; and we are tempted to say, 'What's the use, I may as well give it all up!' But it is of great use because the mere act of becoming detached and devoting a period of time exclusively to God is an act of faith, which is the other face of the coin of love, for it is an unspoken acknowledgement that God is love and that nothing in this world is dearer to me than God. Time, wasted as it were, seeking the presence of God, even if we experience nothing during that time, is time well spent. We may feel nothing, but we will almost certainly discover later that our life has been affected. Great tranquillity in the rest of the day often follows periods of apparently sterile mental prayer.

Now, when we have gone into our private room, shut the door and dispelled all mundane preoccupations, what happens next? Do we become instantly filled with a supernatural feeling of exaltation? 'No'. Before we examine what really does happen when we embark upon a period of mental prayer, it would be wise to consider how Christian mental prayer differs from all that is usually called mysticism.

5. Many decades ago, in a dogmatic theology class in faculty of divinity at the University of Edinburgh, a celebrated character, Prof. G.T. Thomson, who was probably the last genuine Calvinist the Church of Scotland was asked what he thought about mysticism. He reacted immediately. 'Mysticism!' he exclaimed, 'begins in mist, centres in I and ends in schism.' And then he went on. 'But if you mean the kind of thing that Teresa of Avila was writing about – that's different; there's a real first-class saint for you.'

Nature mysticism and the kind of prayer it recommends is totally opposed to the Christian view of man's relation with God. It is pantheistic, that is it sees human nature and divine nature as a homogeneous continuum of being. Men may have to

grow towards fulfilment, which may well be described as seeking union with supreme being, but that union is not with a being who transcends human nature; it would be better described as self-realization. Natural mysticism does indeed 'centre in I'.

The mystical theology of St Teresa of Avila and of all Christian spiritual writers in contrast to natural mysticism, has for its fundamental premise the transcendence of God, on his being wholly other than all created beings, visible and invisible; and the human intellect cannot penetrate into the being of God. There is, however, the mysterious fact, that all creation bears the imprint of the Word of God, and that man in particular bears that imprint: he is made in God's image. He is thus able to reflect God back to himself, so to speak, and this potential is what arouses in him a restlessness, a desire to know and even to see God.

And there is a complication; the gulf that separates God from man has become widened by Original Sin. In its state of original righteousness mankind walked in companionship with God, but now before that relationship of union with God can be restored mankind must be thoroughly re-created. Our Faith teaches us that this will happen, but not earth. Whilst we are in our mortal state, although freed from the knot of Original Sin, we are still working off its hangover – concupiscence. This working-off is what is happening as we grow in grace, and seeking to foster this growth is what we are doing when we go into our private room, shut the door, and turn to mental prayer.

Let us now look at what the *Catechism* tells us about Christian mysticism, that is about mental prayer. Part Four of the *CCC* is devoted to the subject of Christian prayer, and section 1, chapter 3, article 1, entitled 'Expressions of Prayer', gives three subtitles, 'Vocal prayer; Meditation; Contemplative prayer.' While contemplation is the goal at which the worshipper aims, he must be humble enough to accept the fact that he has to move towards it step by step. This is where St Teresa's observation about the Incarnation being the foundation of our prayer-life is important. She wrote to one of her confessors: 'I can see clearly that if we are to please him and he is to grant us great favours, that this should be done through his most sacred humanity. Very many times have I learned this by experience: the Lord has told it me. I have clearly seen that this is the door that we must enter if we wish his sovereign Majesty to show us great secrets' (*Life*, XXII).

The *Catechism* begins the above-mentioned section saying the very same. 'Through his Word God speaks to man. By words, mental or vocal, our prayer takes flesh.' No sharp distinction is made between vocal prayer and meditation. Once again we find that St Teresa has something helpful to say on this point. She had been exhorting her nuns not to be content with the mere recitation of prayers but to reflect on the meaning of what they were saying. She writes: 'You will say at once that this is meditation, and that you are not capable of it, and do not even wish to practise it, but are content with vocal prayer. You are right to say that what we have described is mental prayer; but I assure you that I cannot distinguish it from vocal prayer faithfully recited with a realization of who it is that we are addressing' (*The Way of Perfection*, chapter 24).

On 'Meditation' the *Catechism* begins: 'Meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and

respond to what the Lord is asking. The required attentiveness is difficult to sustain.’ St Teresa, in her *Life*, (XI) likens this phase in meditation to laboriously drawing water up out of a well in a bucket, in order to water the garden of the soul, and the text of the *Catechism* goes on to mention how we use books, chiefly the Gospels, and the scriptures in general and other spiritual writings to help us mediate profitably. And so vocal prayer overlaps with meditation, and meditation in turn overlaps with what we call *lectio divina*.

The *Catechism* ends its entry on ‘Meditation’ with these words. ‘Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion and desire. This mobilisation of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *lectio divina* or the rosary. This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him.’

And so we find that the *Catechism* teaches that mental prayer, the dialogue between the individual believer and the Lord, is a quest comprising several stages, all, of which are good and necessary; and it even includes the stage which seems to approach the end of the quest, that is contemplation. St Teresa likewise considers mental prayer to be a composite activity which includes the contemplative stage, and to denote mental prayer, especially in its final stage, she uses the term *oración mental*. She writes, ‘Contemplative prayer in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us’ (*Life*, VIII).

St Teresa of Avila makes it clear that the early stages of prayer, which she likens to the labour of watering the soul’s garden with water drawn by bucket from a well, are good and necessary; it would be presumptuous for us to try to move directly into contemplative union with God; we must begin by working with our imagination and minds. In chapter XII of her *Life* she writes: ‘In this first stage of devotion we can do a certain amount for ourselves’. But in chapter XIII she makes it clear also that it would be wrong to remain for ever at the level of prayer which relies upon imagination and understanding, ‘Returning, then, to those who can make use of their reasoning powers, I advise them not to spend all their time in doing so; their method of prayer is most meritorious, but, enjoying it as they do, they fail to realize, that they ought to have a kind of Sunday – that is to say, a period of rest from their labours.’ This period of rest from labour she describes as the prayer of quiet, and when we have reached that stage we are well on our way towards contemplation, which she describes as that ‘close sharing between friends’. Then, also in chapter XIII, in an almost throw-away remark, she makes an important statement. ‘This method’ - that is the method of applying the imagination and understanding to the content of the gospel - ‘should be the beginning, the middle and the end of prayer for all of us; it is a most excellent and safe road until the Lord leads us to other methods, which are supernatural.’ When she says that we are led into the state of true contemplation by ‘supernatural’ means, she is affirming that to gain this entry into this state we must first leave behind all that has to do with the senses or with reasoning. Entry into to this higher stage of prayer, although demanding our industrious preparation, is not achieved by our own efforts, and we may not force our way into it; it is given us as a gift from him into whose company we long to come. The soul has to do nothing

except, as St Teresa says, 'to go softly and make no noise. By noise, I mean going about with understanding in search of many words and reflections' (XV).

To sum up what has been said about the relationship of our effort in prayer to what is God's gift, I quote St Bonaventure, who was writing three hundred years earlier than St Teresa. Speaking of our passing over into this 'close sharing between friends', to use Teresa's phrase, St Bonaventure writes: 'If this pass-over is to be perfect, we must set aside all discursive operations of the intellect and turn the very apex of our souls to God to be entirely transformed by him. If you want to understand how this happens, ask it of grace, not of learning' ask it of desire, not of understanding; ask it of earnest prayer, not of attentive reading; ask it of God, not of man.'

Bonaventure speaks of 'the very apex of the soul', that is of something in us which transcends all of our faculties, something which sustains our faculties. Thus the heights of prayer are only reached when the operation of the discursive intellect is transcended, because union with God is the union not of our intellect or imagination, neither of which can cope with the reality of God, but of our wills with his. This transforming union of the 'apex of the soul' is what the anonymous fourteenth century English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* calls a 'naked intention of love'.

This naked intention of love, brings with it, it is true, the final reward of complete peace of soul, perfect bliss, but we must not become impatient. The reward comes at the end; it comes fully only in the world to come; and the great spiritual writers warn us that, although we must believe that in the end God will reward us, if we allow the desire for this ineffable consolation to become the immediate goal of prayer, we will lose everything. The only road towards heavenly bliss is the way of the Cross. And so the immediate goal of every stage in prayer must be to obtain the spirit of self-sacrifice, the desire to do God's will, whatever that demands of us. When our hearts have become perfectly in tune with God's love, and our minds totally devoid of any thought of our consolation, when we have learned to obey his commands in a spirit of joy, then we are truly in union with God.

St Teresa of Avila wrote: 'Let thy will be in every way fulfilled, and may it never please thy Majesty that a gift so precious as thy love be given to people who serve Thee solely to obtain consolations. 'It must be carefully noted – and I say this because I know it by experience – that the soul which begins to walk resolutely in this way of mental prayer and to persuade itself to set little store by consolations and tenderness in devotion, and neither to be elated when the Lord gives them nor disconsolate when he withholds them, has already travelled a great part of its journey. However often it may stumble, it need not fear a relapse, for its building has begun on a firm foundation. Yes, love for God does not consist in shedding tears, in enjoying those consolations and that tenderness which for the most part we desire and in which we find comfort, but in serving Him with righteousness, fortitude of soul and humility.' Then she adds what could be interpreted as a snide dig at some of the holy men she knew: 'As for poor women like myself, who are weak and lack fortitude, I think it fitting that we should be led by means of favours: this is the way in which God is leading me now, so that I may be able to suffer certain trials which it has pleased his Majesty to give me. But when I hear servants of God, men of weight, learning and intelligence, making such a fuss because God is not giving them devotion, it revolts me to listen to them' (*Life*, XI).

Yes, if we need a bit of help along the way when things are going badly, the Lord will give us something to console us, but to obtain such consolations must never become the goal of our prayer.

Finally, St John of the Cross. 'I would, then, that I could convince spiritual persons that this road to God consists not in a multiplicity of meditations nor in ways or methods of such, not in consolations, although these things may in their own way be necessary to beginners, but that it consists in the one thing that is needful, which is the ability to deny oneself truly, according to that which is without and to that which is within, giving oneself up to suffering for Christ's sake, and to total annihilation. For the soul that practises this suffering and annihilation will achieve all that those other exercises can achieve, and that can be found in them, and even more. And if a soul be found wanting in this exercise, which is the sum and root of the virtues, all its other methods are so much beating about the bush, and profiting not at all, although its meditations and communications may be as lofty as those of the angels. For progress comes not save through the imitation of Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chapter VII. 8).

6. The question about when it is appropriate for the worshipper to move on to the prayer that is in no need of images and intellectual reflection, when indeed it would be hindered by such activities, has been discussed at length by many spiritual writers. St John of the Cross, the most systematic spiritual writer of all, begins chapter 13 of Part II of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* with these words. 'It will be opportune to point out in this chapter when one ought to discontinue discursive meditation (work through images, forms, and figures) so that the practice will not be abandoned sooner or later than required by the spirit. At the proper time one should abandon this imaginative meditation so that the journey to God may not be hindered, but, so that there is no regression, one should not abandon it before the due time.' In chapter 13 of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* St John of the Cross discusses this question fully. I would like now to leave the great masters and make a small contribution of my own. What I wrote cannot compare in profundity with the masters quoted so far, and yet the images I now use may be helpful.

When we begin to pray we are putting our foot upon the first step of a stairway. That first step is the concentration of mind and imagination upon the facts of the story of salvation, focussed in the sacred humanity of our Lord. We mount slowly up the stairway, improving day by day our grasp of the mysteries of our faith and learning how to obey and serve our Lord better. This mounting a stairway is achieved by meditation on the Gospels, the Scriptures in general and of spiritual writings. This activity is what is usually called *lectio divina*, reading that aims at acquiring not just information, but knowledge that brings us gradually into the presence of Christ. It is prayerful reading.

Ascending the stairway, we reach a landing when we come to rest. This restful stage on our ascent is what St Teresa calls the 'prayer of quiet' when we are able to cease from effort and experience our Lord giving us a spirit of devotion. On this landing, where we rest and 'make no noise' as St Teresa puts it, is the door of the room which is the sanctuary of the presence of God the Father. It is our Lord who has led us up to this restful stage on our journey. As he said, '*I am the way, and the truth and the*

life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14: 6). Having led us through meditation upon the story of salvation to the entrance to the Holy of Holies, his function as Mediator is accomplished, and he now stands alongside us as our elder brother, supporting us by his Holy Spirit as we anticipate the joy of moving into the Father's presence. There is a saying of our Lord, scarcely ever quoted, which sums this up: 'I do not say that I shall pray to the Father for you, because the Father himself loves you for having loved me and believing that I came from God' (John 16:26-27). This is the penultimate stage of contemplative prayer, when images and mental concepts, even images of our Lord himself, no longer serve any purpose, for our hearts are now being directed towards the Father, whom no man has seen. We have been brought by God the Son to the entrance into the inner sanctuary of God the Father. But we may not just barge into that sanctuary; we knock at the door and wait.

In Revelation 3: 20 St John expresses this thought of waiting for a door to be opened into God's presence – but he puts things the other way round. *I am standing at the door knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him.* It is God who knocks at the door of our heart and asks us to invite him to come in and sup with us. This second way of speaking affirms that it is not only we who wish to come into God's presence, but that he too longs for our company. The book of Proverbs tells us that the Wisdom of God was '*at play everywhere in the world, delighting to be with the sons of men*' (Proverbs 8: 31). And there is the touching scene in Bethany when our Lord made it clear that it was Mary's and Martha's company he needed, as his passion approached, much more than the elaborate meal that Martha was preparing for him. This is the supreme sign of God's love for us: that he enjoys our company, for he hates nothing that he has made.

The 'close sharing between friends', as St Teresa describes the state of contemplation, is thus a state that not only we desire to enjoy, but one that our God the Father himself desires. Our awareness of being in the presence of One who is equally desirous of being in our presence is the final contemplative resting place of our souls in mental prayer. Not until the consummation of all things in the day of resurrection, when we shall see God *as he really is*, will our joy be complete, but even on this earth we are sometimes granted an earnest of this vision, but through the smoked glass of faith – to us St Paul's imagery.. Every time we engage in a period of mental prayer it is possible to reach this state of contemplation – so long as we have the patience to move through the necessary stages that lead up to it.

7. You may have been wondering why I have never so far mentioned St Ignatius of Loyola, whose *Spiritual Exercises* have, more than any other writing, stimulated a resurgence in devotional life in the Church since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The reason why I have kept him up my sleeve until now is not because I think him inferior to the writers I have quoted, but because, in the *Exercises*, he has encapsulated all that the earlier spiritual writers wrote in a method through which we can put their teaching into practice

In the Introduction to the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius speaks of the necessity of beginning with repentance; but at meditation we must not linger too long over examination of conscience and begin to wallow in our guilt. St Teresa – whom I can never leave out of things – insists that whilst the bread of repentance must always be at hand during the feast of prayer, we must never fill ourselves up with it so that we

are unable to enjoy the rest of the meal. Being in a penitent state, St Ignatius advises that we then begin meditation with a preparatory prayer, in which we ask our Lord for the grace to direct our thoughts, activities and deeds to the service of his divine majesty.

Then comes the first preliminary which he calls 'An imaginative representation of the place', by which he means concentration on the subject matter of our spiritual reading, which will often contain a physical background in which the characters engage in conversation and action. This act of imagination is usually called 'composition of place'. It is as though we are in a theatre and our eyes are held within the rectangle of the stage setting. This brings home to us the fact that the Son of God truly came down to earth, and it also helps us concentrate on all that is happening and being said within that theatrical frame.

Then come the 'second preliminary' – a prayer, asking for what we want. This prayer will vary according to the subject matter of the object of meditation. The prayer suggested as an ending to the rosary is exactly the kind of prayer Ignatius had in mind. 'Grant that meditating of these mysteries of the holy Rosary, we may both imitate what they contain, and obtain what they promise.' It is also the thought expressed by St Paul in 2 Cor 3:18: 'As we contemplate his glory we are transformed into his own likeness, and ourselves increase in glory.'

Now it is time to settle down to meditate upon the subject already introduced in the first preliminary. Ignatius uses the term 'considerations' for this activity. It is an application of the imagination and understanding. He writes: 'The understanding is to be used to think about all this (i.e. the details of the subject we have chosen), and the will as described above.' The will is included because the goal of understanding is to lead us to conform our lives with the will of God. It is obvious that our understanding will be nourished by much more than our present reading of the scripture passage chosen or our recalling of its contents to mind; we will draw upon the insights and thoughts we have acquired by all the spiritual reading and study we have done on the subject in the past. Engaging in regular *lectio divina* is a way in which we learn to 'pray without ceasing'. And it is worth reminding ourselves that, because we have begun meditation with a prayer for the assistance of the Holy Spirit, we can trust our inspired imagination to taste the full flavour of the incident or teaching upon which we meditate.

The period of 'consideration', which is really a continuation of the preliminary act of composing the place, merges into what Ignatius calls 'colloquy', which he defines as 'the kind of talk friends have with one another, or perhaps the way a servant speaks to his master, asking for some kindness or apologising for some failure, or telling him about some matter of business and asking for his advice'. In these colloquies we may be speaking to our Lord or to any of the characters in the narrative. This phase in meditation is our stepping into the scene ourselves and becoming part of the action.

It is after we have spent a little time in this way that it is wise for us to keep quiet and realize that it is our Lord's wish to lead us into the presence of the Father. In reaching that point our action is merely to desire this end and to have faith, that is to look to God our Father to lead us further. What happens in this final phase of mental prayer is experienced by each one in his own particular fashion, and is something that eludes

description. When we have spent sufficient time in meditation we will find that our Lord gives us a hint that it is time for us to get on now with our daily work. The we can then round off our time of prayer very simply as we began, in vocal prayer, with an *Our Father*, a *Hail Mary* and a *Glory be to the Father*.

8. St Teresa of Avila, in chapter IX of her *Life*, describes how she used to meditate, and her method is an excellent example of the Ignatian method of mental prayer. She tells us that long before she became a nun she had practised meditation. 'My method of prayer was this' she writes. 'As I could not reason with my mind, I would try to make pictures of Christ inwardly; and I used to think I felt better when I dwelt on those parts of his life when he was most alone. It seemed to me that his being alone and afflicted, like a person in need, made it possible for me to approach him. I had many simple thoughts of this kind. I was particularly attached to the prayer in the Garden, where I would go to keep him company. I would think of the sweat and the affliction he endured there. I wished I could have wiped the sweat from his face, but I remembered that I never dared to resolve to do so, for the gravity of my sins stood in the way. I used to remain with him there for as long as my thoughts permitted it.'

This incident upon which St Teresa liked to meditate is the first sorrowful mystery of the rosary. The subjects for meditation which St Ignatius offers in his *Spiritual Exercises* could all be used as we use the mysteries of the rosary, and the rosary provides perfect material for mental prayer. Meditation on the mysteries of the rosary is the best model for what we call '*lectio divina*', and so when we read the scriptures or other spiritual writings in this way we are extending the kind of prayer in which we engage when praying the rosary. So doing, our spiritual reading (*lectio divina*) becomes sacramental, for it does not merely tell us about Christ and God the Father but brings us into his presence.

This essay contains the substance of two talks, given at St Mary's Retreat House, Kinnoull to a Permanent Diaconate Conference, on 3 August 2006 by Father Ronald Walls.