

46. Tradition of Prayer (Catechism n. 2650-2682)

n. 2650-2651 'Prayer cannot be reduced to the spontaneous outpouring of interior impulse: in order to pray, one must have the will to pray. Nor is it enough to know what the Scriptures reveal about prayer: one must also learn how to pray. Through a living transmission (Sacred Tradition) within "the believing and praying Church"(Vatican II, DV 8) the Holy Spirit teaches the children of God how to pray. The tradition of Christian prayer is one of the ways in which the tradition of faith takes shape and grows, especially through the contemplation and study of believers who treasure in their hearts the events and words of the economy of salvation, and through their profound grasp of the spiritual realities they experience.'

1

Spiritual Reading

'Yielding to Love' Chapter 16

'Reflective spiritual reading is an important aid to prayer. It helps to nourish our imagination and our mind, and so it helps to stimulate love. This in turn leads to a desire to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of God. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, has a special place here (see Catechism n. 2653). We come to know God by coming to know God's Son, Jesus. There is, however, an abundance of other writing that can also be a source of nourishment to our souls. It is important to remember that spiritual reading is not a substitute for prayer.

2

If we intend to take the reading into the times which we have set aside for prayer, we had best follow the advice offered by Father Marie-Eugène OCD in his book I want to see God:

"The book to be chosen for reflective reading is not the book that is simply instructive or devotional, nor even the interesting book that holds one's attention, but the book that suggests and provokes reflection, arouses the affections, or better still that awakens the soul and keeps it in the presence of God. Simply reading is not reflective reading. It must be interrupted for deeper reflections in the presence of God, to express to God our love, to enter into conversation with God. It will be short or prolonged according to need and will be resumed only when one falls again into dreaminess or inertia" (page 193).

3

A special kind of spiritual reading is often described by the traditional Latin formula lectio divina. What makes this kind of reading special is its long history in monastic tradition and our approach to it. We often read with our critical faculties on full alert, testing whether or not we agree with what we are reading and how it fits in with orthodox teaching or with other ideas with which we are familiar. In lectio divina we need our critical faculties to be involved, for we need to interpret and understand what we are reading. However, unlike other forms of spiritual reading, we choose a text that is of such standing that we can read it humbly, confidently and peacefully expecting to be nourished and wanting to learn as a disciple seeks to learn from a master. The Bible stands out in this category but there are other classical texts that we can use as well.

4

Another feature of lectio divina is that we do not pick and choose sections that might attract us or be of special interest to us. Rather, we commit ourselves to read the whole text for as long as it takes. Furthermore, our way of reading follows a well established method. We read until our heart is engaged and then we pause to meditate on whatever it is that has moved our heart and to allow ourselves to be taken by God into prayer-communion.

Spiritual reading has an especially important role to play in a culture that is bombarded with often trivial and inconsequential information. This bombardment harms the mind much as junk food harms the body. Spiritual writers recommend a regular diet of good reading as an antidote to distraction and so that we may bring to prayer an enriched mind and heart.

5

Some people find it useful to keep a journal of their responses to their reading. The time spent doing this can help deepen and clarify the movements of the Holy Spirit that were experienced during the reading. Furthermore, a perusal the following morning of what we have written can help induce in us a prayerful, reflective attitude with which to begin the day. If we read yesterday's journal before beginning today's spiritual reading we might decide to repeat yesterday's reading rather than go on to the next section. Spiritual reading is to help nurture our communion with God. It is not primarily a matter of accumulating further information.

6

Meditation (see Catechism n. 2705-2708)

Yielding to Love chapter 15

'Many people are helped to pray by entering imaginatively into a Gospel scene (see Catechism n. 2654). Some find this easier to do than others, but many are surprised to find that, with persistence, they are able to use their imagination better than they at first thought, and that by using their imagination in this way they find that they are less locked into thinking and more engaged at the level of the heart.

It may help you to find a quiet place, perhaps a chapel or a special prayer-corner that you have set aside in a room in your home or a favourite spot in the garden, provided it is free from external distractions. Remind yourself that you are in the presence of God and that Jesus is with you. Read slowly the gospel text that is the subject of your meditation. Read it aloud if you find this helps. As you read it allow your imagination to create the scene.

7

It is good to have read the passage before the time set aside for the meditation (perhaps the night before). At the time of the first reading ask God's Spirit to inspire you to ask for the grace that God wants to offer you in your prayer. It may be the grace to realise more deeply what Jesus has done for you. It may be the grace to see where you are like the people in the gospel scene and to plead with Jesus for his healing love. It may be to have the courage to do something that you know God is calling you to do. When you come to the time that you have set aside for meditation, recall this desire and ask God earnestly to give you this grace.

Now go through the scene slowly, using your imagination to enter into it, seeking to enter into the heart of each of the people in the scene, especially into the heart of Jesus. Pray to be open to the wonder of the way in which God is revealing God's presence and God's love in the scene, especially, of course, in Jesus. When your heart is moved to speak to Jesus, allow it to do so, for it is this conversation and loving communion that primarily constitutes prayer.

8

John's Gospel 5:1-9

In Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate was a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha.

It had five porticoes in which lay many invalids

– some blind, some lame, and some paralysed.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there

and knew that he had been there a long time,

he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'

The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one

to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up;

and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.'

Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.'

At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

9

• Now notice the sick man of whom the gospel passage speaks. Where in the crowd is he? ... How is he dressed? ... Is there anyone with him? ... Walk up to him and speak with him ... What do you say to him? ... His reply? ... Spend some time getting as many details of his life and his person as possible ... What sort of an impression does he make on you? ... What are your feelings while you converse with him?

• As you are speaking with him you notice that Jesus has entered this place ... Watch all his actions and movements ... Where does he go? ... How does he act? ... What do you think he is feeling?

• He is now coming up towards you and the sick man ... What are you feeling now?

11

The following is a guided meditation adapted from Anthony de Mello (Sadhana, Exercise 22).

• Imagine the pool ... The five porticoes (covered walkways) ... the surroundings ... What kind of place is it? ... Notice the architecture ... the weather.

• Now let the whole scene come to life. See the people near the pool. How many people are there? ... What sort of people? How are they dressed? ... What are they doing? ... What kind of illness are they suffering from? ... What are they saying?

• You are there. What are you doing there? ... Why have you come to this place? What are your feelings as you survey the scene and watch these people? ... What are you doing? ... Do you speak to anyone?

10

• You step aside when you realise that he wants to talk to the sick man. What is Jesus saying to the man? What does the man answer? ... Listen to the whole dialogue. Fill in the sketchy account of the gospel ... Dwell especially on Jesus' question: 'Do you want to be made well?'

• Now listen to Jesus' command as he tells the man to get up and walk. The first reaction of the man ... his attempt to get up ... the miracle! ... Notice the reactions of the man ... Notice Jesus' reaction ... and your own.

• Jesus now turns to you. He engages you in conversation. Talk to him about the miracle that has just taken place ... Is there any sickness that you are suffering from – physical, emotional, spiritual? ... Speak to Jesus about it ... What does Jesus have to say? ... Listen to his words to you: 'Do you want to be made well?' Do you really mean what you say when you ask to be cured? ... Are you ready to take the consequences of a cure?

12

- You have now arrived at a moment of grace. Do you have the faith that Jesus can cure you and that he means to cure you? ... Do you have the trust that this will happen as a result of the faith of the whole group here?
- Listen to his mighty words as he pronounces the words of healing over you, or lays his hands on you. What are you feeling? ... Are you certain that his words are going to have an effect on you, in fact have already had their effect on you, even though you may perceive nothing tangible at the moment? ... He knows the healing that you really need and is offering all the healing that the love of God can offer.
- Spend a while now in quiet prayer in the company of Jesus.

13

We might be meditating on the last supper and the intimacy between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple (John 13:23). We begin by watching the scene. We then think of ourselves as the Beloved Disciple. Finally we ask Jesus to guide us to reach out to others with the kind of intimate love that he has for us.

We might be meditating on the scene between Jesus and the leper (Mark 1:40-45). Firstly, we imagine the scene and allow our heart to go out to Jesus in whatever way we are moved. Then we enter the scene and put ourselves in the place of the leper, once again allowing our hearts to go out to Jesus as we enter into communion with him. Finally, we pray that Jesus will turn our hearts towards the outsiders to whom he may wish to send us, and pray to be instruments of his compassion.

We can reflect on any of the Gospel scenes in this way.

15

A simple variant on this form of imaginative exercise consists of three steps.

Firstly, we focus on a scene from the Gospels: we look at Jesus and allow our hearts to go out to him in wonder and loving adoration.

Secondly, we place ourselves in the scene and unite ourselves to him in communion.

Finally, we listen to him as he asks us to love others as he loves us, and we ask him to guide us to do to others as we have experienced him doing to us.

14

If we find meditation conducive to prayer, we would do well to heed the following advice from Saint Teresa of Avila:

‘There are people who work almost continually with the intellect, engaging in discursive thought and meditation. And they do well because nothing further has been given to them, although it would be good if they spent some time making acts of love, praising God, rejoicing in his goodness, that he is who he is, and in desiring God’s honour and glory. These acts should be made as far as possible, for they are great awakers of the will. Such people would be well advised when the Lord gives them these acts not to abandon them for the sake of finishing the usual meditation’ (Interior Castle IV.1.6).

16

Thinking and reflecting can be done in a prayerful way, and can help us to pray, but we need to remember that we can think about God from the outside, as it were, without being in communion with God – and prayer consists in the communion, not in the thinking. Teresa reminds us that what matters is our love:

‘Not everyone has the kind of imagination that makes meditating possible, but everyone is capable of loving ... Progress does not lie in thinking much but in loving much’ (Foundations 5.2).

She warns us never to leave the humanity of Jesus behind (Interior Castle VI.7.5-15).

Care only about moving quickly so as to see the Lord (Interior Castle III.2.8).

17

Teresa writes: ‘Since I could not reflect discursively with the intellect, I strove to picture Christ within me, and it did me greater good, in my opinion, to picture him in those scenes where I saw him more alone. It seemed to me that being alone and afflicted, as someone in need, He had to accept me. I had many simple thoughts like these. The scene of his prayer in the garden, especially, was a comfort to me. I strove to be his companion there. If I could, I thought of the sweat and agony He had undergone in that place. I desired to wipe away the sweat He so painfully experienced, but I recall that I never dared to actually do it, since my sins appeared to me so serious. I remained with him as long as my thoughts allowed me to, for there were many distractions that tormented me’ (Life 9.4). ‘It is good to reflect for a time ... but we must sometimes remain by his side with our minds hushed in silence. If we can, we should occupy ourselves in looking upon him who is looking at us. Keep him company. Talk with him. Pray to him. Humble yourself before him. Delight in him’ (Life 13.22).

19

The chief value of gospel meditation is precisely that it helps keep our focus on Jesus. It was not the discursive element in meditation that attracted Teresa, however. In fact she found herself unable to do it. When she reflected on a Gospel passage she was drawn to ‘move quickly so as to see the Lord’. It was not thinking about Jesus that attracted her. It was being in Jesus’ presence, being loved by him and loving him.

18

Anyone can learn the practice of Gospel meditation. The communion about which Teresa speaks comes, of course, from God. We should not try to force it. It ‘must come gently’ (Interior Castle II.1.10).

For our part we must be careful not to be so caught up in our thoughts that we fail to notice the gentle call into communion.

20

Teresa writes: 'I am not asking you now that you think about him, or that you draw out a lot of concepts, or make long and subtle reflections with your intellect. I am not asking you to do anything more than look at him. Who can keep you from turning the eyes of your soul towards the Lord? ... In the measure you desire him you will find him ... He never takes his eyes off you ... If you are experiencing trials or are sad, behold him on the way to the garden: what great affliction He bore in His soul. Having become suffering itself, He tells us about it and complains of it. Or behold Him bound to the column, filled with pain, with all His flesh torn in pieces by the great love He bears you.'

So much suffering: persecuted by some, spat on by others, denied by His friends, abandoned by them, with no one to defend Him, frozen from the cold, left so alone that you can console each other. Or behold Him burdened with the cross, for they didn't even let Him take a breath. He will look at you with those eyes so beautiful and compassionate, filled with tears. He will forget His sorrows so as to console you in yours, merely because you yourselves go to Him to be consoled, and you turn your head to look at Him.

21

Teresa suggests that an image of Jesus might help: 'You will find it very helpful if you can get an image or a picture of the Lord – one that you like – not to wear around your neck and never look at, but to use regularly whenever you talk to him. He will tell you what to say' (Way of Perfection 26.9).

The fruit of such meditations can extend over the entire day, especially if we can find a short phrase to capture the essential grace that we experienced during our time of prayer. This phrase can act as a mantra that we can carry on our breath as we go about our daily tasks. Teresa reminds us: 'You need never withdraw from this loving communion ... Go within yourself even during your ordinary occupations' (Way of Perfection 29.5).'

23

O Lord of the world, my true Spouse! Are you so in need, my Lord and my Love, that you would want to receive such poor company as mine, for I see by your expression that you have been consoled by me? Well then, how is it Lord that the angels leave You and that even Your Father does not console You? If it is true, Lord, that you want to endure everything for me, what is this that I suffer for You? Of what am I complaining? I am already ashamed, since I have seen You in such a condition. I desire to suffer, Lord, all the trials that come to me and esteem them as a great good enabling me to imitate You in something. Let us walk together, Lord. Wherever You go, I will go; whatever You suffer, I will suffer' (Way of Perfection 26.3, 5-6).

22

Prayer of the Church's Liturgy (n.2655)

Yielding to Love chapter 12

'Knowing how helpful prepared prayers can be, the Church offers us prayers that help us, as a community, celebrate the Mass and the various sacraments. We are also invited to join our Christian brothers and sisters in offering morning and evening prayer as well as prayer for other times of the day. This is sometimes called the Prayer of the Hours or the Divine Office. It is a structured form of prayer, which includes hymns, psalms, Scripture readings and prayers of petition.

In promulgating the new form of the Divine Office in 1970, Pope Paul VI wrote:

24

'Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of humankind joined to Christ himself. Each individual has his or her part in this prayer which is common to the one Body, and it thus becomes the voice of the Beloved Spouse of Christ, putting into words the wishes and desires of the whole Christian people and making intercession for the necessities common to all humankind. It obtains its unity from the heart of Christ himself. Our Redeemer, as he himself had entered into life through his prayer and sacrifice, wished that this should not cease throughout the ages in his Mystical Body, the Church, and so the official Prayer of the Church is at the same time the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father. Thus, when the Divine Office is said, our voices re-echo in Christ and his voice in us.'

25

In his commentary on the writings of Teresa, Father Marie-Eugène writes: 'Liturgical prayer, like every other prayer, is to be vivified by interior prayer. If the external movement that it imposes, the art that it cultivates, the sustained attention that it requires, should hinder or even destroy the contemplation that it is meant to serve, the devotion that it should stimulate, or the interior spirit that it wants to express, it would be mere external worship that God could not accept, according to the words of Scripture: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me' (Isaiah 29:13, quoted by Jesus in Mark 7:6). The beginner must learn to pray with the Church, to enter into the majestic beauty of her ceremonies, to penetrate their symbolism and delight in her liturgical texts. We must above all seek in liturgical prayer the movements of the soul of Christ in the Church, listening to the movements of his Spirit of Love, and so learn in the school of Jesus Christ our Master his daily intimate and silent prayer (I want to see God, page 191).'

26

Living in the present moment

All we have is the present moment. The future will be real, rather than imaginary, only when it is actually present. So if we are going to live a life of prayer it is essential that prayer permeate our present moment. The Catechism speaks of us living a life of faith, hope, and love.

We looked at these three 'theological' virtues in Lecture 30.

n. 2656. One enters into prayer as one enters into liturgy: by the narrow gate of faith. Through the signs of his presence, it is the Face of the Lord that we seek and desire; it is his Word that we want to hear and keep.

27

n. 2657 The Holy Spirit, who instructs us to celebrate the liturgy in expectation of Christ's return, teaches us to pray in hope. Conversely, the prayer of the Church and personal prayer nourish hope in us. The psalms especially, with their concrete and varied language, teach us to fix our hope in God: "I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry." (Psalm 40:2). As St. Paul prayed: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13).

28

n. 2658 "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us"(Romans 5:5). Prayer, formed by the liturgical life, draws everything into the love by which we are loved in Christ and which enables us to respond to him by loving as he has loved us. Love is the source of prayer; whoever draws from it reaches the summit of prayer. In the words of the Cure of Ars: 'I love you, O my God, and my only desire is to love you until the last breath of my life. I love you, O my infinitely lovable God, and I would rather die loving you, than live without loving you. I love you, Lord, and the only grace I ask is to love you eternally ... My God, if my tongue cannot say in every moment that I love you, I want my heart to repeat it to you as often as I draw breath.'

29

n. 2659 We learn to pray at certain moments by hearing the Word of the Lord and sharing in his Paschal mystery, but his Spirit is offered us at all times, in the events of each day, to make prayer spring up from us. Jesus' teaching about praying to our Father is in the same vein as his teaching about providence: time is in the Father's hands; it is in the present that we encounter him, not yesterday nor tomorrow, but today: "O that today you would listen to his voice! Harden not your hearts"(Psalm 95:7-8).

n. 2660 Prayer in the events of each day and each moment is one of the secrets of the kingdom revealed to "little children," to the servants of Christ, to the poor of the Beatitudes. It is right and good to pray so that the coming of the kingdom of justice and peace may influence the march of history, but it is just as important to bring the help of prayer into humble, everyday situations; all forms of prayer can be the leaven to which the Lord compares the kingdom (see Luke 13:20-21)

30

Prayer of Presence

Yielding to Love Chapter 18

'If we are faithful in preparing ourselves to receive the gift of prayer by applying ourselves, through meditation, to getting to know God better by getting to know God's Son, we will find that our meditative reflections tend to become simpler. This is the way with conversations between friends. It is also the way with God. Teresa writes: 'I am not asking you to do anything more than look at him. Who can keep you from turning the eyes of your soul towards the Lord? ... He never takes his eyes off you' (Way of Perfection 26.3). 'It is good to reflect for a time ... but we should not always weary ourselves in seeking these reflections, but just remain there in his presence with the intellect quiet. If we can, we should occupy ourselves in looking upon him who is looking at us. Keep him company. Talk with him. Pray to him. Humble ourselves before him. Delight in him' (Life 13.22).

31

Teresa speaks of God dwelling within the soul in her Life 40.6, and in her Spiritual Testimonies 14. In her The Way of Perfection we read: 'Speak with Him as with a Father, a Brother, a Lord and a Spouse ... He will teach you what you must do to please Him ... Remember how important it is for you to understand this truth – that the Lord is within us and that we should be there with Him ... The fire of Divine Love is the more readily enkindled in those who pray in this way; for they are so near the fire that, however small the blaze that has been fanned by the understanding, any small spark that flies out will cause them to burst into flame. When no hindrance comes from outside, they remain alone with their God and are ready to become enkindled (Way of Perfection 28).

32

There is nothing to hinder you and your Spouse from remaining alone together, when you desire to enter within yourself, to shut the door behind you and to dwell in that Paradise with your God ... Remember this is not a supernatural state. It is something you can do if you resolve to do it ... We may take a whole hour to say the 'Our Father' once, so long as we realise that we are with our Father, and what it is we are asking Him, and how willing He is, like any father, to grant it to us, and how He loves to be with us and comfort us. He has no wish for us to tire our brains by a great deal of talking (Way of Perfection 29).

33

This simple prayer of recollection can extend over the entire day. God can touch our hearts in this way when we pause during our spiritual reading, or when a particular phrase captures our attention during our vocal or liturgical prayer. Likewise in entering imaginatively into a gospel scene, we may be drawn just to be with God or with Jesus ...

Prayer is a gift from God that always catches us by surprise. However, it is a gift that God is certainly offering to us. Hence the call of Jesus and the advice of his saints, that we engage ourselves on a journey into prayer, a journey of reaching out towards God in order to welcome God and yield to God's love. In the prayer of simple awareness we have gone as far as we can go in active prayer.'

34

'Prayer Word' (Catechism 2666-2669)

Martin Laird has an excellent treatment of the 'Prayer Word' in his 'Into the Silent Land'(DLT 2006). It is a simple 'word' that your own soul is at home with (for example 'Jesus' or 'You are in me and I am in you'), spoken on the breath as we breath in and out. He speaks of ways in which, as prayer deepens, we deal with distractions. At the beginning the prayer word acts as a place of escape from distractions. Then later as a place from which we can gaze at the distraction without comment while staying in communion. Finally, the distraction is drawn up into the prayer and becomes part of the communion. Laird writes: 'All distractions have within them the silent depths we seek, the flowing vastness of presence that eludes every grasp of comprehension. Therefore distraction do not have to be got rid of for them to relax their grip and reveal their hidden treasure'(Laird page 75.9).

Chapter 17 of *Yielding to Love* is entitled 'Distraction and Emptiness'(145-155).

35