

## Part One : Drawn by love

### 01. Prayer

Teresa of Jesus, a sixteenth century Carmelite, is acknowledged as one of the great teachers of prayer. She defines prayer as: 'friendly communication, and frequently solitary conversation, with God who we know loves us' (*Life*, 8.5). In another place she offers the following advice: 'It is for you to look at God; God never takes his eyes off you' (*Way of Perfection*, 26.3).

Prayer is essentially a personal response to God's mysterious presence. We each have to find our own unique way of responding to God's loving invitation to communion. We each have to find our own way of praying. At the same time there are some general principles that can guide us in our response, and we can learn much from the teaching of those, like Teresa, who have journeyed in prayer and who have given expression to what they have learned along the way.

John of the Cross, whom Teresa chose to help her in her Carmelite reform, writes: 'The language which God hears best is silent love' (*Maxims on Love*, n.53). Therese of Lisieux, a young Carmelite sister who died at the end of the nineteenth century, and who has been declared a Doctor of the Church for her role in bringing many people to an understanding of the essence of the Christian life, including prayer, writes: 'Prayer is a surge of the heart; a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy' (*Story of a Soul*).

Ruth Burrows, a contemporary English Carmelite, has this to say: 'True prayer is a giving of self to God, an opening of the self to God' (*Before the Living God*, page 101). In another work she writes: 'Prayer is our saying Yes to God who is bending to us, offering us love, inviting us to intimate friendship' (*Living in Mystery*, page 96). A Carmelite Magazine has the following statement:

'Prayer is a conversation, not an interview. Its purpose is friendship, not gain. It is a dialogue, not a monologue. It involves listening as well as talking. It requires silence as well as sound. God can talk to us by an earthquake, or by a gentle breeze. God can talk to us without the noise of words. God can talk to us equally well while we are talking to God ... God hears what we are saying. God hears what we are not saying. God hears what we are unable to say. And God answers in God's own way from within our thoughts and our words. God can bypass the ear and the imagination and the intellectual concept, and give us to understand God's meaning beyond the reach of words. God has no need to come in through the ear. God is already in our heart and knows its content.'

I have begun with statements from Carmelite women because of the wonderful contribution they continue to make in teaching us how to pray. However, everyone who has ever responded to God (including you the reader) has something to say on this most wonderful of subjects. Julian of Norwich writes: 'The best prayer is to rest in the goodness of God knowing that goodness can reach right down to our lowest depths of need.'

Anthony Bloom writes:

'Prayer is the search for God, encounter with God, and going beyond this encounter in communion ... It arises from the awareness that the world in which we live is not simply two dimensional, imprisoned in the categories of time and space, a flat world in which we meet only the surface of things, an opaque surface covering emptiness. Prayer is born of the discovery that the world has depths; that we are not only surrounded by visible things, but that we are also immersed in and penetrated by invisible things. And that this invisible world is both

the presence of God, the supreme, sublime reality, and our own deepest truth ... Living only in the visible world is living on the surface; it ignores or sets aside not only the existence of God but the depths of created being. It is condemning ourselves to perceiving only the world's surface ... The human heart is deep. When we have reached the fountainhead of a human being's life we discover that this itself springs from beyond. The human heart is open to the invisible. Not the invisible of depth psychology but the invisible infinite, God's creative word, God's Self.

'Returning to ourselves is thus not a synonym for introversion but for emerging beyond the limits of our limited selves. Saint John Chrysostom said "When you discover the door of your heart you discover the gate of heaven." This discovery of our own depths goes together with the recognition of the depths in others. Each has his or her own immensity. I use the word "immensity" on purpose. It means that the depth cannot be measured, not because it is too great for our measurements to reach it, but because its quality is not subject to measurement at all. The immensity of our vocation is to share the divine nature, and in discovering our own depths we discover God' (*Courage to pray*, pages 5-6).

Michael Leunig writes:

'Mornings and evenings. The traditional times for prayer and the singing of birds, times of graceful light whereby the heart may envisage its poetry and describe for us what it sees. But how do we find the mornings and evenings within? How do we establish and behold them and be affected by their gentle atmospheres and small miracles? How do we enter this healing twilight? The matter requires our imagination. In particular, it requires the aspect of our imagination we have come to know as prayer.

We pray. We imagine our way inwards and downwards, and there, with heartfelt thoughts or words we declare our fears and our yearnings; we call out for love and forgiveness; we proclaim our responsibility and gratitude. The struggling, grounded soul speaks to the higher spirit and thus we exist in the mornings and the evenings of the heart: thus we are affected and changed by the qualities we have created within ourselves. Might not prayer then be our most accessible means to inner reconciliation, a natural healing function in response to the pain of the divided self and the divided world? Might not prayerfulness be part of our survival instinct belonging more to the wilderness than to the church? And just as we have become somewhat alienated from nature and its cycles, could it be that we are also estranged from our instinctive capacity for prayer and need to understand it afresh from the example of the natural world?

The person contemplates the tree. The tree sends its roots beneath the surface, seeking nourishment in the dark soil: the rich "broken down" matter of life. As they reach down and search, the roots hold the tree firmly to the earth. Thus held and nourished, the tree grows upwards into the light, drinking the sun and air and expressing its truth: its branches and foliage, its flowers and fruit. Life swarms around and into it. Birds and insects teem within its embrace, carrying pollen and seed. They nest and breed and sing and buzz. They glorify the creation. The tree changes as it grows. It is torn by wind and lightning, scarred by frost and fire. Branches die and new ones emerge. The drama of existence has its way with the tree but still it grows; still its roots reach down into the darkness; still its branches flow with sap and reach upward and outward into the world.

A person kneels to contemplate a tree and to reflect upon the troubles and joys of life. The person imagines mornings and evenings in a great forest of prayers, swarming and teeming with life. The person is learning how to pray' (from *The Prayer Tree*).

Having shared these brief glimpses into our subject, let us examine at greater depth the origin of prayer. It was Saint Augustine who said: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you' (*Confessions* I.1). Prayer arises from our restlessness and our being drawn to respond to a mysterious Presence that impinges on our consciousness in the world around us and in our heart, the Presence we call 'God.' We know that our existence is not something we initiate. We sense that the same can be said of everything we experience. We sense a call to be in communion with the One who is the source of everything. Prayer is our response to that call. We sense that we are being called to a deeper communion with God. When we respond we find ourselves engaged in prayer.

## **02. God's 'word' to us**

God cannot be identified with anything of which we have immediate experience. This is not to say that God does not communicate with us, nor are we saying that we do not experience God. We do experience God, but only insofar as God is expressed and revealed in a limited way in everything that exists. Creation may be compared to the colour in a stained glass window. We would not see the colour if there were no light, but without the stained glass the light itself would be invisible. It is seen only insofar as it is picked up by and expressed in the stained glass. In Paul's words: God is 'understood and seen through the things that God has made' (Romans 1:20).

It is the universal presence of God that explains the inter-connection of all things. It is God who is creating everything that is, bringing it into existence moment by moment, energising everything and binding everything into a single universe through mutual love-attraction. We might speak of the gravity of grace drawing us into communion with God, and so into communion with everything.

When we experience movements of thought and feeling that engage our yearning for communion with God, the One for whom we long, the One who is the source of all that is, it is important to realise that it is our own thoughts and our own feelings that we directly experience. We experience God as the one who communicates with us in and through them. When we experience people and events around us that speak to us of God and engage our yearning for communion with God, it is important to realise that it is actual, limited people and events that we directly experience. We experience God as revealed to us in them, as the one who attracts us through them. When we read the words of the Bible written by the actual historical people who were inspired by God's Spirit, it is important to realise that it is their limited words that we directly experience. We experience God as the one inspiring their words.

The inner movements and the outer realities engage our yearning for God because they disclose something of the truth, reveal something of the beauty, and participate in something of the goodness of God; but while they participate in God they are not to be identified with God. 'God' is the name we give to the One whom we want to know and whom we come to know in part whenever we know anything. 'God' is the name we give to the One with whom we want to be-in-love, and whom we enjoy in part whenever we are in communion with anything. But God always transcends any knowledge or communion we have. What we come directly and immediately to know and love is a world that is made intelligible and lovable by God, and a self that yearns to know and to be in communion with this God. However, since both the world and the self exist by participating in the being of God, it is God whom we come to know and love in all these experiences.

John the evangelist reminds us that ‘No one has ever seen God’ (John 1:18). This truth is reiterated by all who have reflected on the nature of our religious experience, as is exemplified in the following sample quotations.

‘If you have understood something, then know that it is not God that you have understood. If you were able to understand, then you would understand something else, not God. If you thought you could understand God even partially, then you have deceived yourself with your own thoughts’ (Augustine, d.430, *Sermo 52*, vi, 16).

‘I have never seen you, Lord my God, I have never seen your face.’

(Anselm of Canterbury, d.1109, *Proslogion*, 1).

‘Nothing the intellect can grasp and nothing that desire can desire is God.’

(Meister Eckhart OP, d.1327, *Sermon 42*).

‘Since God is inaccessible, be careful not to concern yourself with all that your faculties can comprehend and your senses feel, so that you do not become satisfied with less and lose the lightness of soul suitable for going to God’ (John of the Cross, *Sayings of Light and Love*).

‘In divine communications, the soul experiences neither God nor God’s action, but only the movements produced within by that divine action’ (Marie Eugène OCD, *I want to see God*, page 353).

‘Everything we know about God should lead us to God, but when we stand before God we should leave all this knowledge behind, however true and rich it may be.’

(Anthony Bloom, *Courage to pray*, page 22).

Everything around us is created and sustained in existence by God. God is the ‘heart’ of all that exists, for creation is a participation in the very being of God. The closer we are in touch with anything that exists the closer we are in touch with God. We grow in union with God not by escaping from the world, but by penetrating to the heart, for God is at the heart of all God has made. In the New Testament we read: ‘All things came into being through God’s Word’ (John 1:3). ‘In God we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). ‘In God all things hold together’ (Colossians 1:17). At the same time, God is the ‘beyond’ of everything, for God is not identified with creation, but transcends it. The closer we come to the heart, the more we are taken beyond into mystery.

When we speak of creation as a “word” we are saying that God communicates with us and reveals God’s Self to us in creation. In the prologue to his Gospel John writes: ‘All things came into being through the word of God, and without this word not one thing came into being’ (John 1:3). Reflecting on the beauty of creation, Augustine writes:

‘But what is my God? I put my question to the earth.

It answered, “I am not God”, and all things on earth declared the same.

I asked the sea and the chasms of the deep and the living things that creep in them, but they answered, “We are not your God. Seek what is above us”.

I spoke to the winds that blow, and the air and all that lives in it replied,

“Anaximenes is wrong. I am not God”.

I asked the sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars, and they told me,

“Neither are we the God whom you seek”.

I spoke to all the things that are about me, all that come through the door of the senses,

and I said, “Since you are not my God tell me something of my God”.

Loud and clear they answered, “It is God who made us!”

I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things.

Their only answer was their beauty' (*Confessions* x.6).

The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, expresses this truth in his poem *God's Grandeur* (1887):

'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings'.

Teilhard de Chardin often gives expression to the mysterious attraction to God, which we experience in experiencing creation:

'The true union that you ought to seek with creatures that attract you is to be found not by going directly to them, but by converging with them on God, sought in and through them. It is not by making themselves more material, relying solely on physical contacts, but by making themselves more spiritual in the embrace of God, that things draw closer to one another.'

(*Writings in time of war*, page 143)

'By means of all created things the divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas we live steeped in its burning layers. "In him we live". As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place and we did not know it' (*The Divine Milieu*, page 89).

When we examine the various religious movements in the world, we came up against obvious distortions and projections. We observe human needs being projected and human pathology attempting to find an escape. However, for all their imperfections, at the heart of religion there is this constant attempt to respond to the attraction of the divine. This was recognised by Justin, an early Christian writer. In his second open letter to the Roman emperor in defence of Christianity, he values the wisdom found in the religious writers of Rome and attempts to present Christian wisdom as bringing this wisdom to its flowering:

'Whatever lawyers or philosophers uttered well,  
they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word.  
But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ,  
they often contradicted themselves.  
Whatever things were rightly said among people are the property of us Christians.  
For next to God we worship and love the Word  
who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God.  
The Word became human for our sakes,  
so that, sharing in our sufferings, he might also bring us healing.

For all the writers were able to see realities in an obscure way through the sowing of the Word implanted in them.

But the seed and the imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing, and quite another is the thing itself of which there is the participation and imitation according to the grace which is from him' (*II Apologia*, c.160AD).

We find a similar understanding in Irenaeus, a contemporary of Justin:

'The person who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God, and always acknowledging the same Word of God (although the Word has but now been manifested to us) and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God (although the Spirit has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times) will know that the Son of God descends even from the creation of the world to its end upon the human race simply as such, from whom those who believe God and follow God's Word receive that salvation which flows from God' (*Against Heresies* [c.180AD] IV,33.15)

This same Irenaeus has a wonderfully positive image for the various ways in which human beings give expression to the divine. He writes: 'God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation' (AH IV,14,2). To leap immediately over to modern times, let us listen to Pope Paul VI:

'The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest that is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable "seeds of the Word" and can constitute a true "preparation for the Gospel", to quote a felicitous term used by the Second Vatican Council and borrowed from Eusebius of Caesarea' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n.53)

While recognising in the various religions of the world a response to God's self-communication, it is the conviction of Christianity that God's self-communication reached its perfect human expression in Jesus of Nazareth. It was he who clarified for us in his person and in his teaching who God really is: a God of love. He also showed us how to respond to God in love.

In the prologue to his Gospel, John expresses it in this way:

'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the embrace of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:14,16-18).

This conviction is expressed again and again throughout the documents of the New Testament:

'In Christ the whole fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:14).

'Christ is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, who sustains all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:3).

Pope John-Paul II expresses it this way:

'In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made God's Self known in the fullest possible way. God has revealed to humankind who God is' (*Mission of the Redeemer*, n.5).

It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now that Jesus has been raised to fullness of life by his Father, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus – the Spirit of love which binds him to the Father – that fills all things, giving life wherever it is welcome. The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus' body, carrying out the will of God and bringing about on earth the reign of God's love. It is in a special way in and through the church that God speaks God's word and communicates God's Self to the world. We find this truth enunciated in the New Testament: 'God has put all things under the feet of Christ and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Since God is present in everything that we experience, the depth and intimacy of our communion with God depends on the depth and intimacy of our communion with the world to which we belong. Of special importance is our communion in love with those who have given themselves over to the attraction of grace and allowed God to permeate their being.

### **03. God's Indwelling Spirit**

We are created to be in communion with God. Grace draws us from the insecurity of our egoism towards God who is at the heart of our lives. When we respond to this divine invitation, we are drawn to share the life, the prayer-communion of Jesus himself. It is God who initiates prayer. It is God who draws us into ever more intimate communion. Transforming union happens as we allow ourselves to be drawn into divine communion by Jesus' own Spirit of love, the love he shares with the God he called 'Abba' (Father). Paul writes: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

To the Samaritan woman Jesus promised: 'The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). On a later occasion Jesus promised that rivers of life-giving water would flow from the heart of those who believe in him. John adds the following comment: 'Jesus was speaking of the Spirit which those who believe in him were to receive' (John 7:38-39). At the last supper we hear Jesus say:

'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them' (John 14:23).

'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:21,26).

That God dwells in those who open their hearts to receive God is a constantly recurring theme in the writings of the mystics. Theophan the recluse, a Russian monk, writes in *The Art of Prayer*:

'Descend with the mind into the heart, and there stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you. The prayer takes a firm and steadfast hold when a small fire begins to burn in the heart. Try not to quench this fire, and it will become established in such a way that the prayer repeats itself. Then you will have within you a small murmuring stream.'

John of the Cross writes:

'The Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is hidden in a person's innermost being' (*Spiritual Canticle* 1.6).

'God dwells in us and favours us with God's love. God says to us: "I am yours and for you. I am delighted to be what I am, so as to be yours and to give myself to you"' (*Living Flame* 3.6).

‘Enter within yourself and work in the presence of your Spouse, who is ever present loving you’ (*Maxims on Love* n.11).

‘O most beautiful of creatures, transcendent spirit. You long to know where your Beloved is and where you may find your Beloved so as to be united with him. The One you love dwells within you. You are yourself God’s tabernacle, God’s secret hiding place. Rejoice, exult, for all you could possibly desire, all your heart's longing is so close, so intimate as to be within you; you cannot *be* without God’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 1.7).

There is a danger here that we might think that because God is present in the centre of our being we might need to withdraw from the world to be in communion with God. We have already seen that God is at the heart of everything that exists. We cannot be in communion with God if we are out of touch with our own heart. In the same way to the extent that we cut ourselves off from the world we are cutting ourselves off from God. In the early years of the third century, Origen writes:

‘Praying without ceasing means uniting prayer with the works that it is our duty to perform and joining appropriate action to our prayer, since virtuous deeds and the fulfilment of what we are commanded to do are included as a part of prayer. If praying without ceasing means anything humanly possible, it can mean only this: that we call the whole life of a holy person a great synthesis of prayer. What we normally call prayer is only a small part of praying’ (*On Prayer* 12.2).

A fourteenth century German Dominican, Meister Eckhart, writes:

‘Many people withdraw from the crowd and wish always to be alone, finding peace in this and in being in church. Is this the best thing to do? No, it isn’t ... Those for whom things are right truly have God as their companion, and whoever has God truly as a companion is with God in all places, both on the street and among people, as well as in church or in the desert or in a monastic cell. No one can hinder the person who possesses God aright. Why is this so? It is so because such people possess God alone, keeping their gaze fixed upon God and thus all things become God for them. Such people bear God in all their deeds and in all the places where they go, and it is God alone who is the author of all their deeds. If we keep our eyes fixed on God alone, then truly God must work in us, and nothing, neither the crowd nor any place, can hinder him in this. And so nothing will be able to hinder us if we desire and seek God alone, and take pleasure in nothing else’ (*Talks of Instruction*).

While acknowledging the truth of this, we also acknowledge the special importance of interior communion with God and so of the inner journey of interior prayer. God is present at the heart of creation, but unless we are in touch with God at our own centre we will miss God’s presence in creation and we will find ourselves dissipated and distracted in the whirl of things and events that happen around us and to us. For only to the extent that we are centred in God can we avoid being lost among the flotsam and jetsam of this world.

The inner journey is not, in itself, more important than the outer journey. What is important is to be in communion with God as we journey. In all our experiences it is important that our heart be awake and sensitive to the divine presence. If I am cluttered inside, my communion with God will be disturbed. Hence the importance of interior prayer. Hence the focus of these reflections on our inner journey. Discovering God within and being sensitive to the movement of God’s Spirit in our minds and hearts makes possible a more intimate interior communion with God. It also makes possible a closer communion with God in our outer experiences.

A fourteenth century Rhineland mystic Johannes Tauler has this advice:

‘Each time you are granted the solemn moment of recollection, leave your outer forms of devotion to one side if they become a hindrance to you, for inner prayer is precious divine life. Concentrate upon what leads you most to love, for instance the life, the sufferings, the divine wounds of Christ, God’s essence, the Blessed Trinity, the power, the wisdom, the goodness of God, the good things which God has done for you. Whatever stirs you most, go with that, full of gratitude, into the ground of your soul, and wait for God there. Doing this with love enables us to receive God much more effectively than any outer spiritual exercise. The more inward something is, the better it is, for the external things derive their value from what is within. It is as if you had a good wine which was strong enough to change a whole ton of water into the best wine. It is the same with the life within, a single drop of which can lend our life of external devotion a higher value’ (*Sermon 39*).

We all know what it is like to be distracted, to be out of touch, to be lost. We know how easily we get caught up in the outer world, and lose or fail to find ourselves. If this is descriptive of our whole life, we are indeed in a desperate situation. It was Jesus who asked the question: ‘What is the point of winning the whole world, if you forfeit your life? Is there anything which is worth exchanging for life?’ (Mark 8:36-37). As individuals and as a culture we can be quite brilliant in our ability to discover, use, and even to a degree understand the external world. How good are we at coming to know and stay in touch with ourselves? Our deeds, our involvement, our engagement with the world and with other people are truly ours only when what we do comes from within.

To discover ourselves and to live authentic lives we must undertake an inner journey. We must be attuned to God’s Spirit. Many people give us advice on how to do this. The advice we receive can be quite conflicting and confusing. Teresa of Jesus gives her answer and it is simple, direct and uncompromising: she tells us that the way to make the inner journey is to pray. If we are praying, other things can help. If we are not praying, all the advice and all the methods in the world are at best a way of filling in time. At worst they are further ways of deceiving ourselves. Teresa tells us that if we want to get to know ourselves we must learn to pray, and she is an acknowledged master in showing us how to do it.

Jesus invites us to pray always (Luke 18:1). To enjoy such prayer we commit ourselves to make space in our lives to focus on God within. The purer our inner gaze and the more intimate our inner communion the more we will respond to God’s presence in the world as well as God’s Word (God’s self-communication) coming to us in and through every creature, every event and every encounter.

Constantly aided by God’s Word, especially by the Word-made-flesh, we focus on God’s Spirit and so on our life in the Spirit (our ‘spiritual life’): our listening to God within and our responding in love to God, our communion with God within our own being in the experience we call prayer. At the same time we do not forget that this focus allows the Spirit to tune our being ever more sensitively to God’s Word. When, through our communion with God’s inner Spirit, we experience an echo of God’s Word that comes to us from outside, we are vibrating to the divine harmony. We are giving ourselves over to the gravity of grace drawing us to the heart of the Father. We experience our heart in tune with the Heart of God.

Saint Augustine speaks of how he was searching outside himself. Then, through the grace of God, he became aware of the divine. His heart became engaged.

‘Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you!  
For you were within me and I outside; and I sought you outside

and in my ugliness I fell upon the lovely things you have made.  
You were with me but I was not with you.  
I was kept from you by those things,  
yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all.  
You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness.  
You sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness.  
You breathed fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and now pant for you.  
I tasted you and now hunger and thirst for you.  
You touched me and I have burned for your peace' (*Confessions* x.27).

To share in such a religious experience, we must respect our heart.

'Heed the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than it is.  
Your soul often forewarns you. It is better than seven watchmen in a tower.  
While you heed your heart, beg the Most High to guide you in the path of truth' (Sirach 37:13).  
'More than all else, keep watch over your own heart, since there are the wellsprings of life.'  
(Proverbs 4:23)

We are to listen humbly and attentively to others, listening for God's Word. But we must remember that God dwells within us and God respects our heart. When God speaks his Word to us, we will know, for the Spirit within will say Yes to what we hear.

We have to stop giving in to distraction. We have to stop being too busy, for we will end up destroying our heart. We have to stop heeding the many voices that call us without truly caring for us. We have to stop running away from our heart. Let us listen again to Augustine:

'Return to the heart! Why are you running away from yourselves?  
Why are you getting lost, outside yourselves, entering on deserted ways?  
You are wandering aimlessly. Come back! To where? To the Lord!  
It can be done without delay! Return immediately to your heart!  
Exiled from your own self you wander outside.  
You fail to know yourself, you who want to know the source of your existence.  
Come back! Return to the heart ... See there what you can learn about God,  
for the image of God is there. In your inner self dwells Christ.  
In your inner self you are being renewed after God's image' (*Tractates on John* 18.10.1).

If we are attentive to God's Spirit in our hearts, we will hear God's Word in creation.

The Irish poet, Joseph Plunkett, experienced in creation Christ, the Word-made-flesh.

'I see his blood upon the rose  
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,  
His body gleams amid eternal snows,  
His tears fall from the skies.  
I see his face in every flower;  
The thunder and the singing of the birds  
Are but his voice – and carved by his power  
Rocks are his written words.  
All pathways by his feet are worn,  
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,  
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,

His cross in every tree' (Joseph M. Plunkett, 1887-1916).

The French Jesuit palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin (d.1955) speaks in a similar vein:

'Raise me up, then, O matter, to those heights, through struggle and separation and death. Raise me up until at long last it becomes possible for me, in perfect chastity, to embrace the universe ... Now the earth can certainly clasp me in her giant arms. She can swell me with her life, or take me back into the dust. She can deck herself out for me with every charm, with every horror, with every mystery. She can intoxicate me with her perfume, her touch ... She can cast me to my knees in expectation of what is maturing in her breast ... But her enchantment can no longer do harm to me, since she has become for me the Body of Him who is and of Him who is to come' (last word of *The Divine Milieu*).

To know God's Word let us grow in our knowledge of Jesus. To experience God's Spirit let us accept Jesus' offer to share his prayer-communion with God.

Before focusing out attention on Jesus, on what he said and how he lived, let us reflect on the central importance of love in our lives, for Jesus revealed God as Love.

#### **04. Experiencing love: a sacred encounter**

I remember as a child asking why sometimes there was plenty of wet sand with which to build our castles, while at other times the water was up close to the grass where we had spread our picnic blanket. The tide was always on the move. The answer fascinated me. My eyes were directed away from the sea and the land to the moon, scarcely visible in the broad daylight. The earth and the moon, I was told, experience an attraction to each other. The sea being 'lighter' than the land could give in to this attraction more readily. What I was watching was the sea constantly swelling up towards the moon, the tides shifting as the earth turned on its axis. I know that had I thought in terms of attraction, I would have thought in terms of an attraction of the sea for the land. It would never have occurred to me to look up. Yet the fact is that the attraction of the sea and the land for each other is but an expression of something deeper shared by both: an attraction to something quite other, something beyond the grasp of either.

I remember a winter's night in 1956. I had been pondering for many months the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas on how creation participates in the being of God. This evening I was sitting, alone. The tree beside me had shed all its leaves. Its branches were silhouetted against the cold sky. I was overwhelmed by an experience of belonging: to the tree, to the sky, to the universe. At the same time I felt more starkly myself. I did not experience the belonging as a losing of myself in some kind of identification with the universe. I was not the tree; but we shared a yearning to grow together towards the mystery in which the whole of the universe is involved. The tree was reaching up to the heavens, and so was I. The memory of the peace of that communion keeps coming back to me, as does the yearning.

I remember experiencing my first deep friendship some months later. It was with a fellow student in the seminary where I, along with sixty or so other students, was preparing for the priesthood. I experienced the friendship as a love that caused me to feel whole as my heart and mind and spirit went out to him, and through him to everything and everyone around me. I thank God for the wise guidance of a spiritual director who approved of our friendship. We both knew that this was an expression of an attraction that embraced us both while drawing us beyond ourselves. It was an

experience of a love that was calling us to penetrate with our minds and hearts beyond ourselves and what we shared. This friendship was a grace that shaped my heart.

It also led me inwards, and I came to know what prayer could be. Each day, for many months, the morning hour of meditation would pass in timeless communion as somewhere in the depths of my being I knew that a mystery was being enacted in me of which I was much more than a spectator. I was, along with the whole of creation, yearning for deeper communion with God, but God was not 'outside'. God was at the heart of my being. I had only to be there at the heart to be with God.

With a wisdom beyond anything of which either of us were capable, my spiritual director advised us, after some months, to discontinue the closeness of our friendship. I assume that he was concerned that we were seeing too much of each other, with dangers to ourselves and to the community. Following such advice was not without pain, as you can imagine, but we knew that genuine love must be sensitive to others, and our obedience led to a deepening of prayer as well as to a fuller commitment to the community. The tide ebbed but the attraction to the moon continued.

Was it really love that I was experiencing? I believe so. I learned that love is being part of something that is other than myself, but in such a way that I become more fully my own distinct self in being in love. Love is not a melding into an obscure oneness in which distinctions are lost. The more love is pure, the more each of us is enabled to emerge in our precise difference. And the more we do this, the more profound and fulfilling the love-communion that is given and received.

Nothing is at rest. Everything is becoming. Love is an experience of our inter-connection, our communion with everything else that is also becoming. And what are we becoming? Our goal is not a loss of our unique self and personality. On the contrary, it is a fuller owning of oneself, but in communion, not in isolation. Love is the experience of that creative energy that impels us to grow, and to grow in communion with everything that is. The other remains other, but another to which and to whom we belong. And this is because everything we experience - the sea and the land, the moon and the world, my friend and I, and the leafless tree - everything is drawn towards the Other in whose being we all participate.

To love, then, is to commit oneself to be with others as they continue to grow towards the fullness of their unique individuality. This is not possible without a genuine self-love. Indeed, Paul claims that the whole of the Jewish law 'is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"' (Galatians 5:14; compare Mark 12:33). Loving oneself involves a recognition of the fact that I, whoever I am and whatever has happened to me, am capable, in some way and to some degree, of receiving love and of offering my unique self in love to others.

To love is to resist the temptation to think that we can grow by holding others back to be part of ourselves. There is no place for this holding back. Others are part of us, they do belong, but this belonging finds expression neither in the denial of difference nor in creating a dependency. No, we belong to each other because we are all involved in a journey of love, and we are meant to make the journey together, energising each other to become the unique person we are capable of being while sharing our uniqueness with each other.

Love is not something we find, or something we fall into. Love is something we create when we recognise our belonging, delight in the other, and commit ourselves to respect the mystery of our own being by daring the journey into our own heart, while we journey into the heart of the world and while we are with others in their becoming. When this commitment is mutual, love becomes that precious gift called friendship.

Who has not experienced the attraction of love? The pain we experience when love is denied or taken away is itself a witness to our natural and radical sense that we are made for loving. The slightest taste of true love engages that longing often in quite painful ways. We know that we are not meant to live in isolation. We are not self-contained. We are attracted outwards to ever more intimate communion with the world around us, and when we experience love (the word we use for this communion), we are attracted inwards to plumb the depths of the inner world which love discloses.

We sometimes find ourselves pursuing this attraction in ways that fail to make connection with the *outer* world. We sometimes find ourselves pursuing this attraction in ways that fail to make connection with the *inner* world. Sometimes we connect with neither. When this happens we are left feeling distracted, frustrated and out of touch, not to mention the hurt we can cause to others, however unwittingly. But when we pursue this attraction in ways that do connect, we experience a sense of belonging, a feeling of being partially satisfied and in touch. This is love, and the intimacy of the love varies according to the significance to us of the communion we experience.

Our experience of love never provides full satisfaction, for there are depths to our heart and to the world that remain to be explored. The inner well seems bottomless. Our yearning seems limitless. Our longing for love seems inexhaustible.

Love is communion with reality. The truer our love the more real and more complete our connection with ourselves and with the world around us. We must trust our longing for love. We fail in love because we have not been in touch with our own reality or the reality of another. We must learn from our failures, but we must not despair of discovering love. Experience teaches us also that it is not easy to stay in touch with our heart. We experience other distracting desires. Following them leads us into relationships that wear the mask of love but that prove destructive.

I have focused on our common human experience simply to demonstrate why it is that love, and our yearning for it, generates our primary energy for living. If we understand this we will be encouraged to be more creative in our loving, and more committed to purifying the springs of our yearning so that we will learn to love ‘with all our heart and mind and soul and strength’ (Mark 12:30). The more authentically we follow our most profound yearning for communion, the closer our connection with reality. This connection reaches its peak in the experience of love.

Let us now examine three key aspects of our yearning and of the reality with which we find ourselves in communion. Each of these aspects points to the existence of a transcendent and immanent God: transcendent, because we are not God, nor is any other object of our direct experience; immanent, because we and everything around us exist only because we participate in the being of God. Whether we realise it or not authentic human love necessarily involves communion with God. It is a sacred encounter.

Let us look first at our yearning for communion – the yearning that drives all our connections with reality. The fact that our yearning for love is sometimes partially satisfied gives us sufficient reason to conclude that our yearning is related to reality. However, we are never fully satisfied, for we long for a love that is unconditional, unrestricted, and complete. The reality that accounts for this yearning, is its ultimate object, and alone can fully satisfy it. It is the reality we call God. We can expect our communion with God (our prayer) to be an experience of love, an experience of being loved and of loving.

Coupled with our yearning for love is our experience of wanting to know. We keep learning to trust this desire too, as we discover more and more truth. Yet our desire to know, impelled by our desire to love, is also limitless. Partial knowledge always leaves us unsatisfied. We want a fully satisfying

explanation of reality. We want all our questions answered. That which alone can satisfy this yearning is the reality we call God. We can expect our experience of God to be an experience of truth.

When we shift our focus from our longing to the reality that we come to know and love, we realise that reality is not a compilation of discrete, unconnected, individual entities. Everything is in some way inter-connected. This realisation is consistent with our experience of love. The reality which accounts for the inter-connection of reality is the reality which we call God, for everything is inter-connected because everything participates in and is a partial expression of the being we call God. We can expect our communion with God to bring us to a more profound communion with the world and with our real selves.

Another dimension of all the objects that we know and love is that while they in fact exist, we have to look beyond them if we are to find a sufficient reason for their existing. Nothing we know and love is self-explanatory. Our consideration here is not on how things come into existence. Obviously trees have seeds and babies need parents. We are seeking a satisfactory explanation of actual present existence. We cannot look to other contingent beings to find sufficient grounds for how things exist, for, by definition, they too are not self-explanatory. The reality which provides the ultimate and fully satisfactory answer to why everything exists, and which, unlike everything else we know, does not require the existence of some further being to account for its existence, is the reality which we call God. God is the creating source, the sustaining ground and the final goal for all that we experience, including ourselves. We can expect our communion with God to bring us to a realisation that all we are and all we have, including our connections with reality, are gifts coming from the source of all existence. It is love, the love that is God, that sustains everything in being and that binds everything together.

There are many concepts of 'God' that are handed down in the intimacy of the family and in the public life of most cultures. These concepts arise from our desire to make sense of experience. Some concepts express true insight and stand up to careful investigation; others are the result of oversight, and express a misunderstanding that should, upon careful reflection, be rejected. If we find accurate and inaccurate concepts in all other areas of human thinking, we should not be surprised to find that concepts of 'God' not only vary from culture to culture and from person to person, but that they represent a mixture of insights and oversights, of understandings and misunderstandings. After all, our concepts of 'God' aim to express our most profound insights into what reality ultimately is.

People differ markedly in the meanings and values that they associate with the term 'God'. Because 'God' is not just another thing or the sum of all things, certain forms of Buddhism conceive of 'God' as a 'No-thing'. Because of the experience of relating to 'God' in personal ways, Jews, Hindus, Christians, Moslems and many others conceive of 'God' in personal terms. In recent centuries, every concept of 'God' has come under increasing suspicion. There was a time when the existence of lightning was taken as a clear sign of the existence of the sky-god Zeus, and when the powerful, irrational feelings that seem to take over our psyche were judged to be the result of the action of vengeful supernatural beings. For good reasons such misconceptions have been rejected. The rejection, however, has gone so far that today 'God' appears to some to be nothing more than a category invented to cover whatever we do not understand. With the methodical and cumulative acquisition of knowledge in many areas, some argue that the very idea of 'God' is a left-over from a now unacceptable naivety.

There is no doubt that certain conceptions of 'God' are clearly erroneous. People rightly reject a 'God' who is envisaged as an extra, existing outside our world and history and experience, who

controls things from the outside, as it were, and is directly responsible for whatever happens, intervening in our history at will, or in answer to prayer understood as a magical power. The history of religious practice, in earlier times and still in our own day, frequently reveals a 'God' who is glorified at the expense of humanity. Some people seem to feel the need to put humanity down in order to raise 'God' up. What is more, this 'God' seems in large measure to be a projection of human need and human wishful thinking, or human avoidance of the harshness of reality. Rather than face up to reality, we seem to want to invent the kind of 'God' to whom we can escape. Rather than face the here and now and do what we can about it, we seem to want to escape to a hereafter where everything will be as we wish things were here. There is no point in speaking of any 'God' who does not require of us that we face the whole truth of our real limits, but also of the real greatness of being human. Any serious inquiry about 'God' must be one which leads to a better understanding of and communion with our real selves and our real world.

We are rightly suspicious of a 'God' who serves to support vested interests. We still hear 'God' being used to support the ideology of military and economic victors over the vanquished. We still experience the rich and learned, and those in possession of power of all kinds, speaking and acting in the name of 'God', when they are seen to be propping up their own position. Such a 'God' is constantly being discredited and we have no desire here to carry on the charade. Who can take seriously a 'God' who supports apartheid, or patriarchy, or hypocritical piety, or a refusal to accept tried and tested facts in any sphere? The treatment meted out to Galileo in the name of 'God' is more common than we might dare to admit.

If there is value in talking about 'God' at all, it can only be about a 'God' in who everything participates, and therefore a 'God' who supports the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of everything that exists, a 'God' of truth and of justice.

Freud worked with people with seriously dysfunctional psyches. Some of their religious attitudes were little more than a jumble of infantile illusions. His findings alert us to the need to ask ourselves how free we are of such illusions? Let us be committed to name them as such when we are diligent or fortunate enough to discover them. A claim relating to 'God' is worthless if it fails to draw us on to maturity by clarifying our identity, deepening our intimacy and enlarging our capacity for generating the love that provides the only environment in which we and others can grow.

It is clear that all our concepts of 'God' are precisely *our* concepts. They enjoy, therefore, all the strengths of human intelligence and imagination; but they also necessarily suffer from all the weaknesses. In recent centuries, some have gone beyond criticising incorrect conceptions to reject any and every conception of 'God' as unnecessary, unhelpful and irrelevant to genuine human living and progress in knowledge. Others, while granting the need for constant refinement of our concepts of 'God', hold that the claim that 'God' exists cannot be written off simply as human projection and distortion. They hold that the claim is based on an authentic, if often unreflective, response to real human experience, and that there is a reality, albeit one upon which we cast our projections and which we distort. They see it as a fundamental and serious error to discard the real God along with our distorted concepts.

Does rejecting the many false conceptions of 'God' justify the rejection of a 'God' who, while transcending every limited being and the whole universe of limited beings, is immanent in everything: a 'God' who is the ultimate Reality in which everything real participates, the Being that is the reason for anything making sense, the One who is constantly sustaining, inspiring, informing and enlivening everything? Teilhard de Chardin spoke of 'God' as 'the heart and the beyond of everything.' Whatever errors are present in the ways in which 'God' is envisaged, the great religions

of the world are right to continue to speak of 'God' and to explore ways of relating to this ultimate Reality 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

The pursuit of truth in any field will suffer from fundamental distortions if 'God' is overlooked. Only within the perspective of ultimate Reality can we come to a proper understanding of ourselves and of our world, and to a proper way of living in it. The history of human involvement with 'God' has its negative face, as we have already indicated. False conceptions of 'God' continue to wreak havoc in the field of human thinking and human living. The distortions and their effects can scarcely be exaggerated. The positive face is that of the human beings we acknowledge and remember and revere as saints. And there are hosts of them in every country, in every culture, and in every generation. Nor can we overlook the sheer beauty with which we have all been enriched by those who have allowed themselves to be caught up in the quest for the divine, and have expressed their communion with 'God' in art of all kinds, and in particular in the art of loving.

Every experience of love is a limited communion with God. Every experience of love, therefore, is a sacred encounter when our heart/soul is awake and attentive to our communion with God. The experience of being awake and attentive to our communion with God is the experience we call prayer. Since God is love, we can expect prayer to engage us in a love-communion. This is how prayer was experienced by the fourteenth century English mystic, Julian of Norwich:

'Mercy is a sweet, gracious operation in love, mingled with plentiful pity, for mercy works, protecting us, and mercy works, turning everything to good for us. We speak of mercy, for love allows us to fail to a certain extent; and to the extent that we fail, we fall, and to the extent that we fall, we die. For we must necessarily die inasmuch as we fail to see and feel God, who is our life. Our failing is dreadful, our falling is shameful, and our dying is sorrowful. But yet in all this the sweet eye of pity is never turned away from us, and the operation of mercy does not cease ... Mercy is a property of compassion that belongs to motherhood in tender love ... Mercy works, protecting, enduring, vivifying and healing, and it is all of the tenderness of love; and grace works with mercy, raising, rewarding, endlessly exceeding what our love and labour deserve, distributing and displaying the vast plenty and generosity of God's royal dominion in his wonderful courtesy' (*Showings*, chapter 48).

She prays: 'God, of your goodness, give yourself to me, for you are in love with me' (chapter 77).

A work on mystical prayer from the same period includes the following:

'I tell you this: one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do' (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, page 60).

We conclude with the words of Teilhard de Chardin:

'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire' (*The Evolution of Chastity*, 1934, page 86).

We cannot harness these energies if we are not in communion with God, if we do not pray.

## **05. Sharing Jesus' Prayer**

God is drawing everyone into divine communion. Prayer is our response. As Saint Augustine says: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you (*Confessions* I.1). God' communications with us are communications of love engage our longing for communion.

God has been pouring God's Spirit of love out upon the world since the beginning of time, in every culture and to every person, and there have always been those who have listened and responded. Tragically, God's Self-communication is often not heard and distorted. We thank God for Jesus who listened and responded with all his mind and heart and soul and strength. He became for us God's focal Word, making sense of, giving perspective to, and perfecting all the many ways in which people of every culture have heard and responded to God's Self-communication. In the Prologue to John's Gospel we read:

'All things came into being through God's Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being ... The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the embrace of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:3,14,16,18).

The Spirit of God is always being poured out in the world, in every culture and to every person. Jesus' disciples looked on Jesus, his heart pierced on the cross, and opened their hearts to his response to God and to us: a response of love. They experienced the Spirit of love that unites Jesus to the God he called 'Abba'. It is this Spirit that brought healing and meaning to them in a way that transcended any previous religious experience and they found that the same was true for those of the non-Jewish world who opened their hearts to Jesus in the same way. In the words of the Second Vatican Council: 'All are called to union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, towards whom our whole life is directed' (*Lumen Gentium*, n.3).

It is our Christian belief that the risen Jesus, in eternal communion with his Father, is also in communion with us: 'If you love me, my Father will love you and we will come to you and make our home in you' (John 15:21). When we enter into prayer, therefore, we are responding to God's Word of love and we are not alone. We are with Jesus. He draws us to himself and takes us to the Father: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32).

Jesus not only shows us the way to God. He *is* the way (John 14:6), for it is our communion in love with him that opens us to God's love and draws us into God's embrace. In Paul's words, Jesus is the Yes to all God's promises (2 Corinthians 1:20). Jesus reveals God's faithful love to us by being himself the expression of it. Jesus *is* the way because he is the perfect human expression of God's Word and it is only by responding to God's Word that we can be in communion with God: 'No one can come to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

In his book 'One with Jesus', Paul de Jaeger SJ speaks of having 'a loving docility to the guest of one's heart' (page 56). He warns against having too great a preoccupation with ourselves and counsels us to keep our eyes on Jesus. He reminds us that it is not a matter of imitating Jesus from the outside, but rather of allowing grace to transform us:

'Formerly we encouraged ourselves in the practice of higher virtues by an imitation of Jesus, which I may well describe as an imitation from the outside. Jesus was our model, but outside of us, a model whose divine virtues we strove to reproduce somewhat after the fashion of a painter who copies his subject. Imitation after this fashion appears somewhat cold and dull. But now Jesus means something very different for us. To imitate Jesus is no longer to copy Jesus, but to be transformed into Jesus, to become Jesus. It is no longer to bring out in ourselves the features of the beloved Model, but to allow Christ to develop and reproduce himself in us. It is imitation from within. There is no question of merely becoming like Jesus, but of being one with Jesus' (page 50-51).

Jesus' disciples came to see that to know Jesus they needed to enter into his communion with God, into the Spirit that flowed between him and God. They came to a wonderful insight that God is communion in love. Of course we cannot see God or comprehend God, but this communion, this love that is God, is such that it is revealed to us in Word and Spirit. In Jesus the Word is made flesh. In Jesus the Spirit is experienced without reserve. To believe in Jesus is to be drawn into communion of love with Jesus and with his Father and with the Spirit that is their bond of love. It is this communion that brings salvation: salvation from all that holds us bound. We are liberated because of our sharing in divine communion. Since it is the one and only God who is communicating to us in the Word and in the Spirit, the experience of Jesus and of his disciples points to something in the mystery of God's transcendent being. We cannot comprehend God, but we can grow in the knowledge of God that comes with intimacy.

We are invited to keep our eyes fixed on the ways in which God has chosen to reveal God's presence and God's activity in our real history, especially in the history of Jesus. Jesus responded to God in intimate communion 'as the only son of a father' (John 1:14). When we pray we are being drawn into Jesus' own prayer. More than the other evangelists it is Luke who keeps reminding us of Jesus' prayer as the following references amply demonstrate (Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28-29; 10:21; 11:1-2; 18:1; 22:41-42; 23:34; 23:46). Watching Jesus praying, we are to remember that, through the gift to us of his Spirit, it is his prayer that is taking place in our hearts. Let us listen to Paul:

'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

'We are the aroma of Christ' (2 Corinthians 2:15).

'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

'The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God' (Romans 8:26-27).

Commenting on Paul's statement that we are the aroma of Christ, Augustine writes:

'When a prayer is sincerely uttered by a faithful heart, it rises as incense rises from a sacred altar. There is no scent more fragrant than that of the Lord. All who believe must possess this perfume' (*Discourse on Psalm 140*,4-6).

James McAuley, calls on Jesus, the Incarnate Word, to raise up people of prayer among us:

'Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,  
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives  
Among us, who walk within the fire  
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.  
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land:  
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand  
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense  
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.  
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,  
It works unseen like radium in the dark (from *Letter to John Dryden*).

Let us listen to the prayer of Jesuit palaeontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

‘Christ of glory, hidden power stirring in the heart of matter, glowing centre in which the unnumbered strands of the manifold are knit together; strength inexorable as the world and warm as life; you whose brow is of snow, whose eyes are of fire, whose feet are more dazzling than gold poured from the furnace; you whose hands hold captive the stars; you, the first and the last, the living, the dead, the reborn; you, who gather up into your superabundant oneness every delight, every taste, every energy, every phase of existence, to you my being cries out with a longing as vast as the universe: for you indeed are my Lord and my God’ (*Mass upon the altar of the world*).

Finally, a prayer of John Henry Newman (d.1890):

‘Dear Jesus, help me spread Your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood me with Your Spirit and Life. Penetrate and possess my being so utterly that all my life may be only a radiance of Yours. Shine through me and be so in me that every person I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul.’

Prayer, then, is the experience of yielding to a mysterious drawing into our own heart and into the heart of creation. We are responding to an invitation to enter more deeply into communion with God. Christian prayer is experienced as a sharing in Jesus’ prayer. It is essential, therefore, that we get to know Jesus ever more deeply, and the way to do this is to immerse ourselves in the Gospels where we can watch Jesus relating and listen to his teaching. Nothing can replace such a practice. As we get to know Jesus more this Gospel meditating will become simpler, but we never outgrow it, for it is Jesus who best reveals God to us, and best reveals us to ourselves.

Some people find this easier to enter imaginatively into a Gospel scene 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 bound into thoughts and more engaged at the level of the heart. Perhaps this way of praying is best explained by an example. The following is a guided meditation on John 5:1-9, adapted from Anthony de Mello (*Sadhana*, Exercise 22).

- Quieten yourself in preparation for the contemplation. Now imagine the pool ... The five porticoes (covered walk-ways) ... 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? ... What are they doing?
- 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? ...
- 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, out of the corner of your eye, 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? ...
- 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 asked to be cured? ... Are you ready to take all the consequences of a cure? ...
- 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 these words you have heard 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 all the healing that the love of God can offer.
- Spend a while now in quiet prayer in the company of Jesus.

A simple variant on this form of imaginative prayer is suggested by Jean-Jacques Olier (d.1657), the founder of the Company of Saint-Sulpice. It 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.

Let us imagine that we are focusing our prayer on the last supper and the intimacy between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple (John 13:23). We begin by watching the scene; we then relate to Jesus as the Beloved Disciple; finally we take the part of Jesus, asking him 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 identify with Jesus and pray that he will turn our hearts towards the outsiders to whom he may wish to send us, and pray to be instruments of his compassion.

Whatever form our prayer takes, we will find our prayer enriched by entering into communion with Jesus through meditating on his life and teaching as presented in the Gospels.

## 06. Longing for God

To this point we have been reminding ourselves that God is the heart and the beyond of everything. God draws us through creation, through people and most intimately through Jesus. God is also pouring God's Spirit into our hearts drawing us into the depths of our own being where God delights to commune with us. Since in prayer we experience the intimacy of communion with God we can expect to discover a God who is love and we can expect to discover ourselves as God sees us. We are encouraged in our prayer by knowing that it is Jesus himself who is sharing his own prayer with us, for he is the Way to the Father.

We are now ready to look more closely at the experience of prayer itself and we begin by stating that since God remains transcendent, we should not be surprised to discover that the primary experience of prayer is not one of rest in the possession of God, though, as we shall see, there are moments when we do have such an experience, however imperfectly. Our primary experience of prayer is longing. Perhaps the best way to reflect upon this truth is to listen to the prayers of longing found in the Scriptures and then to some of the great masters of prayer in the Christian tradition as they share their experience with us. Let us go first to the psalms, savouring their words in an attempt to pick up similar longings coming from our own heart:

'O GOD, all my longing is known to you; my sighing is not hidden from you' (Psalm 38:9).

'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, O God.

I thirst for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?'

(Psalm 42:1)

'O God, you are my God, I seek you, I thirst for you;

my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,

beholding your power and glory' (Psalm 63:1-2).

'I long, indeed I faint for the courts of the GOD;

my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God' (Psalm 84:2).

'Let the hearts of those who seek GOD rejoice.

Seek GOD and God's strength; seek God's presence continually' (Psalm 105:3-4).

'I stretch out my hands to you; I thirst for you like a parched land' (Psalm 143:6).

We find similar expressions of longing throughout the Scripture in both the New and the Old Testaments. The following examples will suffice for the present:

'I yearn for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you' (Isaiah 26:9).

'When you search for me, you will find me;

if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says your GOD ...

and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile' (Jeremiah 29:13-14).

'The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'

Let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'

Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen.

Come, Lord Jesus!' (Revelation 22:17, 20).

We find this sentiment of longing expressed again and again throughout the history of the Church. We will have to be content with a small sampling. Let us begin with Ignatius of Antioch writing

ahead to the community in Rome as he was being taken there under armed escort to be thrown to the lions for the sport of the populace. He is writing in the first years of the second century:

‘He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire ... Here is one who longs only to be God’s; do not delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the passion of my God. If any of you has God within himself, understand my longings, and feel for me, because you will know the forces by which I am constrained ... Here am I, yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for the things of this world, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, “Come to the Father”. There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love’ (*Letter to the Romans* 6,1-2).

Gregory of Nyssa (d.395) writes:

‘God wants the delay in pleasure to set fire to our desire, so that, together with this ardour, joy may also increase ... To find God means to seek God continually ... This is truly seeing God, when one is not sated in desiring God ... God is eternally sought ... The teaching which Scripture gives us is, I think, the following: the person who wants to see God will do so in the very fact of always following God. The contemplation of God’s face is an endless walking towards God ... There is only one way to grasp the power that transcends all intelligence: not to stop, but to keep always searching beyond what has already been grasped’ (*Homily 2 on the Canticle of Canticles*, 801).

The theme of longing appears often in the writings of Augustine (d.431):

‘I call upon you, God my Mercy, who made me and did not forget me when I forgot you. I call you to come into my soul, for, by inspiring me to long for you, you prepare me to receive you’ (*Confessions* 13.1).

‘Desire itself is your prayer, and if your desire is continuous your prayer is unceasing. For the apostle did not say in vain: Pray without ceasing. Is it possible that we should unceasingly bend the knee or prostrate our body or raise up our hands, that he should tell us: Pray without ceasing? There is a prayer that is unceasing. It is interior; it is desire. Whatever else you do, if you desire life that is eternal you do not cease to pray. If you do not wish to stop praying, do not stop desiring. Your unceasing desire is your uninterrupted voice. You will grow silent if you stop loving’ (*On Psalm 37:14*).

‘The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire. What you desire you cannot yet see. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when you do see, you may attain fulfilment ... By delaying the fulfilment of desire, God stretches the soul, and by this expansion he increases its capacity ... This is our life: to be exercised by desire. But we are exercised by holy desire only in so far as we have cut off our longings from the love of the world. We must empty that which is to be filled ... Let us stretch ourselves out towards God so that when God comes God may fill us. “We shall be like God, for we shall see God as God is”’ (*Treatise 4 on the First Letter of Saint John*).

Gregory the Great (d.604) included the following in his sermon in which he was commenting on a phrase from the Divine Office: “My heart is on fire; I desire to see my Lord. I look for God but cannot find.”

‘Because of the ardent love of her heart, Mary [of Magdala] continued seeking Jesus when she could not find him, even after the other disciples had gone away. In tears she kept searching, and, afire with love, she yearned for him. Thus it happened that she alone saw him. She had already sought and found nothing, but she continued seeking and so found the object of her love. While she was seeking, her longing grew stronger and stronger, until it was allayed in the embrace of Him whom she was seeking ... At first she did not recognise him, but then Jesus said to her: Mary! ... as if to say: “Now recognise the one who recognises you” ... Outwardly it was He who was the object of her search, but inwardly it was He who was teaching her to search for Him’ (*Homily 25*).

In his commentary on the Book of Job, Gregory writes:

‘The Bridegroom hides when he is sought, so that, not finding him, the Bride may seek him with a renewed ardour; and the bride is hampered in her search so that this delay may increase the capacity for God, and that she may find one day more fully what she was seeking’ (*Moralia V.6*).

In a conversation with God, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (d.1109) writes:

‘Come now, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in God. Enter into the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything save God and what can be of help in your quest for God and, having locked the door, seek God out. Speak now my whole heart, speak now to God: ‘I seek your face, O Lord, your face I seek ... What shall I do, most high God, what shall this exile do, tormented by love of you and yet cast off far from your face? I yearn to see you, I desire to come close to you, I long to find you, I am eager to seek you out and I do not see your face ... Look upon us, Lord; hear us, enlighten us, show yourself to us. Give yourself to us that it may be well with us, for without you it goes so ill for us. Have pity on our efforts and our strivings towards you, for we can avail nothing without you. Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you’ (*Proslogion* chapter 1).

Elsewhere he writes:

‘By you, O Lord, I have desire; by you let me have fulfilment. Cleave to God, O my soul, and never leave. Good Lord, do not reject me; I faint with hunger for your love; refresh me with it. Let me be filled with your love, rich in your affection, completely held in your care. Take me and possess me wholly, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit are alone blessed to ages of ages. Amen’ (from *Meditation on Human Redemption*).

We find similar sentiments in Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153).

‘If you find that it is good to cling close to God [Psalm 73:28], and if you are so filled with desire that you want to depart and to be with Christ [Philippians 1:23], with a desire that is intense, a thirst ever burning, an application that never flags, you will certainly meet the Word in the guise of a Bridegroom on whatever day he comes. At such an hour you will find yourself locked in the arms of Wisdom; you will experience how sweet divine love is as it flows into your heart. Your heart’s desire will be given to you, even while still a pilgrim on earth, though not in its fullness and only for a time, a short time ... And if you persist with prayers and tears,

he will return each time, but only to disappear soon again and not return unless he is sought for with all your heart.

‘And so, even in this body we can often enjoy the happiness of the Bridegroom’s presence, but it is a happiness that is never complete because the joy of the visit is followed by the pain of his departure. You are his beloved and you have no choice but to endure this state until the hour when you lay down the body’s weary weight, and, raised aloft on the wings of desire, you follow the One you love wherever he goes’ (*On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 32:2).

‘The psalmist says: ‘Seek God’s face always’ [Psalm 105:4]. Nor, I think, will we cease to seek God even when we have found God. It is not with steps of the feet that God is sought but with the heart’s desire; and when we happily find God our desire is not quenched but kindled. Does the consummation of joy bring about the consuming of desire? Rather it is oil poured upon the flames. So it is that joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search. Think, if you can, of this eagerness to see God as not caused by God’s absence, for God is always present; and think of the desire for God as without fear of failure, for grace is abundantly present’ (*On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 84,2).

Teresa of Jesus tells us that if we wish to grow in prayer we will need the eyes and the heart of an eagle. She warns beginners that great desires for God can mask illusions and pride. The answer is to be found in humility not in the blunting of desire: ‘Desire from me what you want to desire, because this is what I want: for all my good is in pleasing you’ (*17th Soliloquy*).

Similarly, John of the Cross:

‘God’s favours and visits are generally in accord with the intensity of the yearnings and ardours of love which precede them’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 13, 2).

‘God does not give grace and love except according to our desire and love. The more we desire and love, the more God gives’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 13,12).

‘Since we live with that driving force of a fathomless desire for union with God, any delay whatsoever is burdensome and disturbing’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 17,1).

‘The waters of inward delights do not spring from the earth. One must open toward heaven the mouth of desire, empty of all else that might fill it: “Open wide your mouth that I might fill it” [Psalm 81:10]’ (*Letter*, 18th November 1586).

John Donne (d.1631) is not one to neglect or ignore feelings:

‘To our bodies turn we then, that so  
weak men on love revealed may look;  
Love’s mysteries in souls do grow,  
but yet the body is his book’ (*Ecstasy*)

He pleads with God:

‘Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurped town to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
but is captived and proves weak or untrue.

Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto your enemy.  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me' (*Holy Sonnets v*).

To begin a life of prayer we must be attentive to the invitation of God whose Spirit is drawing us into the very centre of our being where God has made his home as in a temple. To persevere in prayer we must, with awakened and attentive heart, stay in touch with our longing for God, a longing that is itself a gift of grace. The pull of this longing will draw us into the heart of God.

### **07. Beginning to pray**

The following words of Blessed Marie-Eugène OCD (d.1967) are worth recalling as we begin to look more formally at different methods that might prove useful as we commit ourselves to a regular discipline of prayer:

'To turn towards God is already to pray, since prayer - a friendly conversation with God - is nothing else than the movement of grace which we experience as children of God who is our Father' (*I want to see God*, page 182).

We all experience moments of prayer. To develop the art of living in prayer we must want to stay in touch with God who dwells in the depths of our hearts. We must also desire that every feeling, thought, longing and action might have its source in this communion. We will need courage and determination to enlist all the energies of our mind, heart, soul and strength as we begin the inner journey in response to God's call, and we will need to learn perseverance and the patience not to be discouraged by distractions and darkness and a feeling of failure.

Teresa of Jesus urges us:

'Let us exert ourselves, for the love of the Lord. Let us abandon our reason and our fears into his hands. Let us forget this natural weakness that can take up so much of our attention ... Care only about moving quickly so as to see the Lord' (*Interior Castle*, III.2.8).

### **Reflective Spiritual Reading**

As a help to pray, let us look first to reflective spiritual reading. Knowledge stimulates love, which in turn stimulates a desire to know more deeply. This is nourished and sustained by good reading. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, has a special place here: we come to know God by coming to know God's Son, Jesus. But there is a plethora of other writings that can also be a source of nourishment to our souls. On the subject of choosing appropriate reading, Marie-Eugène has the following advice:

'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 us and keeps us 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' (*I want to see God*, page 193).

If there are times when we find that we can't seem to pray except with the help of a book, we might find some consolation in the following remark from Teresa of Jesus : 'I spent over fourteen years without ever being able to meditate except while reading' (*Way of Perfection*, 17).

### Prayer Formulas

Besides such reading, people often experience that they are helped to pray by repeating audibly a formula of prayer created by someone else. This can be a source of inspiration for us and can assist our communion with God. Therese of Lisieux tells us how she was helped in this way:

'Sometimes when I am in such a state of spiritual dryness that not a single good thought occurs to me, I say very slowly the "Our Father" or the "Hail Mary", and these prayers suffice to take me out of myself and wonderfully refresh me' (*Autobiography* x,163).

Marie-Eugène has the following advice:

'Neglect of vocal prayer, which often pleads the excuse of not being able to pray in this way, proceeds very frequently from secret pride or a form of passivity which is mere laziness. In this case, vocal prayer will be an energetic exercise in humility and simplicity, fruitful for us and pleasing to God ... Those especially will have recourse to vocal prayer more frequently and for a longer time who, not being familiar with purely intellectual activities, need a formula to sustain their thought, to arouse sentiments of devotion or take cognizance of them, and cannot give them their full force of prayer except by expressing them exteriorly' (*I want to see God*, page 185-186).

Another warning is in order. If saying prayers is really to be a prayer it is necessary that the words be not just rattled off. We must take the words first into our heart and if they find an echo there we must then pray them from our heart attentively.

Anthony Bloom has this caution: 'If we use "ready made" prayers (prayers made by others in suffering or in spontaneous enthusiasm) we must be careful not to lie to God under the pretext of offering prayers worthy of God' (*Courage to pray*, page 37). Teresa of Jesus has this to say of the most beautiful prayer formula, which we learnt from Jesus himself: 'If you are to recite the *Our Father* well, one thing is necessary: you must not leave the side of the Master who taught it to you' (*Way of Perfection*, 24).

### Liturgical Prayer

Communion with God can be helped also by Liturgical Prayer, the prayer of the assembled Christian community: the Mass, the celebration of the sacraments, and the Divine Office (The Prayer of the Church). In promulgating the new form of the Divine Office (1970), Paul VI wrote:

'Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of mankind 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 mankind. 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.’

The General Instruction on the Prayer of the Church reminds us of the following statements from the New Testament: ‘Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them’ (Hebrews 7:25); ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name I shall be there with them’ (Matthew 18:20). It includes the following:

‘The Fathers of the Church rightly heard in the Psalms Christ calling out to his Father or the Father speaking to the Son. They even recognised in them the voice of the Church, the apostles and the martyrs’ (n.109).

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).

#### Reviewing one’s day

Saint Ignatius of Loyola (d.1556), the founder of the Jesuits, is a good guide for those of us who are beginning to make a commitment to regular prayer of this kind. He insists on the importance of reviewing one’s day. He recommends that once or twice a day we set aside a short period to reflect on our life with a view to noticing where God has been moving us and how we have been responding to this movement. God is constantly speaking God’s Word to us and inspiring us through his Spirit. How attentive have I been, or how inattentive?

These few minutes of reflection, looking over the morning and then over the afternoon, schedule into our often busy and potentially very distracted lives the opportunity to note and relish moments of communion, which, because they were so fleeting, would otherwise leave no trace. It also provides the opportunity to note and express our sorrow for the times when we were inattentive. It is only perhaps upon reflection that we notice the gentle movements of grace which were there but which went unnoticed at the time.

The practice of this form of prayer makes us more sensitive to the action of God in our lives and we get to know God more intimately. We also become more sensitive to our habitual ways of responding to God, both positive and negative. We get to know ourselves better, always in the atmosphere of trusting prayer. You may find the following five steps helpful in structuring these moments of reflection.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Tetlow SJ, *Choosing Christ in the World*, page 140-141. Also D. Townsend SJ, *Finding God in a Busy Day* in *Review for Religious* 50 [Jan 1991] pages 43-63. B. Gallagher MSC in *Encounter* 48 (1988).

1. Whatever you are feeling and whatever is happening to you, place yourself trustingly in God's presence and search your memory for something, anything, however apparently insignificant, for which you can feel grateful. This will sometimes be difficult, but there will always be something. Find it, focus upon it, savour the moment and express your thanks to God. Can you say: 'Whatever you may do, I thank you'. Open your heart to receive the Giver of all gifts.
  2. Pray to God to be able to see your day in the light of faith. Ask Jesus to look into your eyes and show you what he sees. Ask his Spirit to reveal your soul to you, remembering the words of Jesus: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'. They will also see themselves as God sees them.
  3. Now, with Jesus, look back over the day at the places you have been, the activity you have been involved in, the people whom you have encountered. Ask God: 'Please show me *now* where you were then and what you were saying to me.' Our attention is on God, on waiting for God to reveal what God wants to show me. This is not a time for remembering what happened as though we were an outside observer. It is important to remember from the inside. Pray to recall the feelings, the movements of heart (or lack of them). We are not simply remembering, we are asking the Spirit of Jesus to shine gently in our hearts and to reveal how God was present in the moments of our day. Even when the surface of our lives is being whipped up by storms, there is an under-current drawing us into communion with God and 'guiding us along the right path.'
- You will recall moments when what Saint Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit will be apparent. You will recall moments of 'joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22). These are moments when you were in communion with God and were responding to God's love. Thank God for them. You will also recall moments when the fruits of the Spirit were absent. You may also recall moments when you rejected grace, when you sinned, when you followed a habitual line of self-gratification, neglecting the deep longing of your heart. These are moments when you were not in communion with God. Express your sorrow and open your heart to God's healing and forgiving mercy.
4. Take what you have learned into prayer. Sometimes we become aware of something quite significant, either positive or negative. Delay over it, savouring either your gratitude or your sorrow.
  5. Pray to be more alert to the grace that God is certainly offering you to continue listening attentively and to take steps to avoid the inattentive or sinful behaviour that you have observed. Finish the prayer with an act of longing and love, looking forward with expectation to the wonderful ways that God will be loving you in the time before the next reflection.

### Simply Being with God

In an earlier reflection we spoke of the central importance of meditating on the person and life of Jesus. As we get to know those we love, our relationships tend to become more simple. We don't have to continually go over the same ground. So it is with Jesus. We find ourselves with him, sharing his communion with God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart: opening yourself to the love you need* (Harper, San Francisco, 1991) pages 116-118, 129-132 and 203-204.

This can happen when we pause during our Spiritual Reading, or when a particular phrase touches our heart during our vocal or liturgical prayer or when we are reviewing our day. Let us look at the dynamic of this prayer of simply being with God.

1. As at the commencing of all extended periods of formal prayer, we might settle ourselves comfortably and set out to slow down the tapes playing in our head by closing our eyes, centring our attention on sensations that are coming to us – the sound of insects, birds, rain, wind or even traffic; the feel of the breeze on our face; the feel of the support given to our bodies by the chair or the floor – a symbol of God’s upholding us in his arms moment by moment.<sup>3</sup>
2. When we feel settled we move to the passage that we have chosen beforehand to lead into our prayer. This will be a short passage. We can move to other passages later in the prayer if we feel so inclined. We slowly read the chosen passage a couple of times.
3. We note the sentences or phrases that strike us. We take one of these and repeat it, relishing it.
4. When we are drawn to do so, we make a short prayer to God or to Jesus – ‘Father I thank you’, or ‘Father, what a wonderful Father you are’, or ‘Father, I love you’. As we make the short prayer we get in contact with and attend to the feeling in our heart as we utter the prayer. We then stay with that feeling until it begins to fade and our mind starts to get active. We then repeat the prayer. This may bring the feeling back and cut off the activity of the mind. We repeat this slowly until we are drawn to move to another short prayer and repeat the process.

What underlies this method of prayer are things we know:

- a. While the quality of a relationship depends on attitudes of the mind, the relationship becomes rooted in and is nourished by the heart.
  - b. Our mind needs to be slowed down if God is to deepen the communion of heart and so deepen our relationship. This method of prayer deliberately slows down our thinking.
  - c. When we leave our prayer in God’s hands as we do in this form of prayer, the Holy Spirit will guide us from one short prayer to another. When we experience ourselves drawn from one prayer to another we know in faith that it is the Spirit drawing us and so guiding our prayer as God’s Spirit sees is best for us.
5. When the time comes to end our period of formal prayer, we thank God for what God has done in us. This is often a real exercise in faith because, as the saints warn us, very often we can see no gain from our prayer. Knowing that God is continually taking the initiative in deepening the relationship between ourselves and God, we trust that God will make our prayer fruitful even though the fruits are not evident to us. The following statement by Georges LeFebvre OSB develops aspects of this simple prayer:

‘It does not matter what we see or feel, so we should not worry about it. What matters is our attitude, which we may or may not feel all the time, which results simply from paying attention to God’s presence, consenting to it. This consent is also a prayer. Consenting to God’s presence is agreeing that we depend on it for our very existence. It is agreeing no longer to belong to ourselves. It is an attitude of essential humility. It is also an act of absolute gratitude, believing in God’s love for us. Thanksgiving is the proper expression of an act of faith that goes far enough beyond itself to reach the whole of God’s love. Thanksgiving knows that it can never go far enough, because it can never measure the love of God. It is in thanksgiving that we can

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<sup>3</sup> See Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart*, pages 202-204.

best hold on to all that remains hidden from us. It is sure of God's love. It does not need signs or other reassurances. We should offer our heart to God just as it is, just as God sees it with grace at work in it. Prayer in its many forms is the realisation of belonging to God's love, to God's love for us. Prayer is to be no longer ourselves alone. It is to live in communion. It is to be involved with our whole being in the beyond that this communion opens to us. In this communion our assent to the mystery of God's love for us is taken up into this mystery and becomes part of it' (in *Courage to pray* [DLT 1973] 116-118).

Anthony Bloom tells the story of a very old woman who came to him complaining that she had never been given the experience of the presence of God.

'I advised her after breakfast to tidy her room and make it as pleasant as possible and sit down in a position where she could see the whole room, the window onto the garden, the icons with their little oil lamps. "When you have sat down, rest for a quarter of an hour in the presence of God, but take care not to pray. Be as quiet as you can, and, since you obviously can't do nothing, knit in the presence of the Lord and tell me what happens." After a few days she came back happily. She has felt the presence of God. I asked her curiously what had happened. She said she had done exactly what I had suggested. She sat down and looked about her quietly and peacefully, feeling she had the right to be inactive and not praying and for the first time for years, she said, she noticed that the room was peaceful and pleasant to be in. She looked at it and saw it for the first time. There was an encounter between her and the place she had lived in for many years without ever seeing.

Then she became aware of the peace and silence around her, a peace and silence accentuated by the ticking of the clock and the clicking of her needles on the arms of her chair. Gradually this silence, which had been outside her, came within her and enveloped her. The silence took her out of herself into a richer silence which was not just the absence of noise but rich in itself, and at its centre she found a Presence. And when she felt this Presence she was moved to pray, but from the depths of this silence, not in floods of words and a whirl of thoughts, but gently and quietly taking each word from the silence and offering it to God. Of its own accord her prayer had become the expression of her inner silence and part of the silence of God that she had felt.

This is a method easy for everyone to try. It means of course contending with the whirl of thoughts, the heart's hesitations, the body's restlessness and the giddiness of the will. There are many exercises based on ascetical practice and psychology. But even without these, simply letting go of ourselves before God into the depths of silence we are capable of will help us make great progress' (*Courage to Pray*, pages 44-45).

The following may also prove helpful. I have been unable to trace its source:

'Take time off each day to think and pray,  
to care how your life is going.  
Give your roots rain.

Take time with a friend to do nothing too important,  
but just to be together, to enjoy another person.  
Give your roots rain.

Take time to write a poem or grow a flower,  
to create something that is an expression of yourself.  
Give your roots rain.

Take time to play a sport, read a poem, pray a while,  
to grow in the different aspects of your life.  
Give your roots rain.

For in your roots you find who you are,  
and there, too, you find who God is,  
for God dwells with you always.  
Lord God, give my roots rain.’

Later we will be speaking of another and a more mysterious kind of stillness. Here we are speaking of the kind of stillness that we can bring about by an effort of our will. It is a matter of remembering that God is in our depths and of deciding to gather our faculties and focus within. To recollect oneself in this way will require discipline and persistence. However it is important to remember that it cannot be forced, ‘but must come gently’ (Teresa, *Interior Castle*, I .1). As soon as we find ourselves alone we should seek Jesus and converse with him. The idea is for the Prayer of Recollection to extend over the entire day, helped by little reminders. It can be helped also by Reflective Spiritual Reading, Vocal and Liturgical Prayer and by entering imaginatively into a Gospel scene.

Finally, a warning: because this kind of stillness is partly a matter of technique, we must beware of laziness here and of thinking that the peace and stillness that we manage to achieve is necessarily communion with God. To be prayer it is essential that the centred and stilled soul be alert and attentive to God.<sup>4</sup>

### **08. The teaching of Teresa of Jesus on the early stages of prayer**

We have just been looking at some ways of praying which may prove helpful as we set out on a life of commitment to prayer. Here we will be covering some of the same ground as we focus attention on the advice given to beginners by Teresa of Jesus.

Prayer, for Teresa, is essentially something very simple. She speaks of it as ‘an exercise of love’ (*Life* 7.12), as ‘an intimate sharing between friends ... taking time frequently to be alone with God who we know loves us’ (*Life* 8.5). She speaks of the soul, the heart, as ‘a paradise where the Lord finds delight’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.1). ‘In its centre take place very secret exchanges between God and the soul’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.3).

Like every other master of the art of prayer, Teresa teaches that to live authentic lives we must undertake an inner journey, a journey into the depths of our being. We must learn to pray. She sees that one basic reason for our neglect of prayer is our failure to realise that we are held in existence by a God of love and that we can only be ourselves by being in communion with God:

‘Since we do not prize ourselves and one another as creatures deserve, being made in the image of God, we do not understand the deep secrets that lie within’ (*Interior Castle* VII.1.1).

We find ourselves in discovering God, and we discover God in our heart. To discover God we must undertake a journey to our centre. This will enlighten us as to how to journey to the heart of the people and the world that are loved by God, and of which we are part. In prayer we learn to listen to the feelings, the images, the thoughts, the longings that we find in this inner world, and we learn to discern when these are coming from our connection with God and when they are arising from other forces that are resisting the attraction of grace. It is only when finally all our feelings, all our

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<sup>4</sup> see Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart*, pages 200-201 on being relaxed and alert.

thoughts, all our dreams, all our creative energy, all of loving comes from our own authentic centre, that is to say, from our communion with God, that we experience the full freedom of being ourselves.

There is nothing so personal or so demanding as prayer. We should not expect it to be otherwise. To enjoy profound communion with the Source of our being will require of us much discipline and detachment and a humble and alert listening to the movements of our heart that are being inspired by God. To enjoy communion with God we must set out in a determined way and persevere.

We are concerned here only with the advice that Teresa gives us as we begin our inner journey. In these early stages of prayer we are responding to grace, but we have not yet surrendered to love. Teresa guides us as to what *we* can do to progress in prayer. At a later stage we will listen to her as she speaks of what happens when we allow God's love to rule our lives.

Before we follow her as she guides us through the kinds of prayer-experiences that are typical of the early stages of our journey let us establish some basic principles.

Firstly, it is important not to forget that, since prayer is yielding to the attraction of grace and allowing ourselves to be drawn into loving communion with God, the best prayer is the prayer which God is offering. Let us gratefully accept and treasure whatever communion God is offering us now, for God knows our present capacity to respond.

Secondly, Teresa reminds us that the value or quality of our prayer is measured by the fruit which it produces in our lives: our obedience, our humility and especially our love: 'It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer' (*Interior Castle* IV.2.3).

Thirdly, we must constantly remind ourselves that God is offering us the intimacy of this communion. If we continue to respond to God's offer, we will enjoy this communion.

Fourthly, whatever happens we must not abandon prayer: 'Whatever wrong you who practise prayer might do, you must not abandon prayer' (*Life* 8.5). If we abandon it, we must start again:

'There is no other remedy for the evil of giving up prayer than to begin again' (*Interior Castle* II.1.10).

Fifthly, we should not expect the journey to be one of simple progression: 'There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it is not necessary often to return to the beginning' (*Life* 13.15).

Finally, while there is some value in studying prayer 'from the outside', we will only truly be helped to the extent that we are praying. If we are not praying, we can learn what God is doing in people's lives and we can get some idea of the intimate communion to which God is inviting us. However, we cannot really understand Teresa (or any other teacher of prayer) except to the extent that she helps to shed light on our own personal experience of prayer:

'As much as I desire to speak clearly about these matters of prayer, they will be really obscure for one who has not had experience' (*Life* 10.9).

With these basic principles in mind let us commence our examination of Teresa's advice to beginners in prayer. Using an image that was familiar in sixteenth century Spain, Teresa likens the soul to a castle. God dwells in the central chambers, drawing us into communion. She pictures the inner journey of prayer as one in which we penetrate from the outer rooms through to the centre, following the attraction of love inviting us to be at home there with God. She speaks in terms of a journey of seven stages. Our concern here is with her first three stages.

1. At the entrance to the outermost chambers, we are beginning to be open to God's grace and to take both prayer and the spiritual life seriously, but we are still basically self-centred. We still think in terms of what *we* want and what *we* can do and how *we* can respond to grace. We have not yet

surrendered to grace. Our love is still weak. We still have very little insight into sin or grace and so we have little self-knowledge or knowledge of God. We are spiritually quite anaemic.

To begin the journey we must turn away from serious sin. We must listen to our longing and resolutely open the gate of the castle. Teresa speaks of the absolute horror which people who are beginning to pray should have of living in sin, for it blocks out the light of God and leaves our souls lost in darkness. To move on we will need a resolute will to detach ourselves from whatever is cluttering up our lives and holding us back. This will vary from person to person and according to each one's state of life.

Teresa insists:

‘The gate of entry into the interior castle is prayer’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.7).

Once we decide to enter the castle we find ourselves in the first stage or outer chambers (called ‘mansions’ or ‘dwelling places’) of the castle. People who are at this first stage are still leading very distracted lives, caught up in the pursuit of trivial pleasures, concerned with their own reputation and honour. Their lives are rather superficial, with a lot of pretence. But

‘they have good desires and once in a while they entrust themselves to the Lord and reflect on who they are, though in a hurried way’ (*Interior Castle* I.1.8).

The light coming from God, who is in the innermost mansion in the centre, reaches these outer rooms, but is very dim and rarely can we either hear God speaking to us or experience ourselves responding to God.

In the early stages of a genuine prayer-life (indeed at every stage of the journey), Teresa would have us

‘set our eyes on Christ, our good’ (*Interior Castle* I.2.11).

This is why Gospel meditation (see the fifth reflection) is so important. Jesus will journey with us leading us to a deeper knowledge of the true God – a knowledge through love. He will also lead us to a deeper knowledge of our true selves (we will return to this in reflection ten). In Jesus we see what it means to be made in God's image and likeness. We see also who we are called to be. We see, by comparison, how sinful we are. This acts as a warning. It nurtures humility and safeguards us from thinking that any value we have comes from ourselves. It reinforces our longing to gaze on God, the sole source of all good. Teresa also insists that if we are serious about beginning the inner journey, we must be attentive to loving others.

2. Teresa has advice also for those who have passed through the gate into the second of her seven stages. She is speaking here of those who are committed to prayer and are beginning to be sensitive to God's word coming to them in the events of their life, through sermons and other people's sharing of their spiritual experiences, through spiritual reading and the joys and the trials of life. At this stage, however, we find that we are still not avoiding occasions of sin and we find ourselves slipping back.

She stresses the importance of trying to live a virtuous life in obedience to God's will as revealed to us through the ordinary means of God's providence. We must be genuine in wanting to resist temptation to sin. We must not be looking for consolations, but learn to embrace the cross. Teresa's advice includes a warning to be very careful not to be too self-reliant. This does not mean that we should be overly reliant on others and fail to appreciate the gift of God that we are, as well as the gifts that God has given us, but it does mean to keep alert to the truth that all we are and all we have is gift. We are to listen to Jesus reminding us to become like a child in recognising our dependence on God and relying on God's grace:

‘Trust in God’s mercy, not at all in yourself’ (*Interior Castle* II.1.10).

Teresa describes a method of prayer that is suitable at this stage (see *Way of Perfection* 26.1). She suggests that we examine our conscience and express sorrow for sin, and that we make the sign of the cross and remember that Jesus, our companion, is beside us. ‘Look on Him and reflect’. We cannot love what we do not know, and at this stage there is still a lot to discover about Jesus and about the values lived by the saints as well as the teachings of the Christian community. Teresa accepts the appropriateness of applying our mind at this stage, but has the following advice:

‘At this stage people 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 engaged for a while in making acts of love, praising God, rejoicing in God’s goodness, that God is who God is, and in desiring God’s honour and glory. These acts should be made as far as possible, for they are great awakeners of the will. Such souls 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).

Different temperaments need to find different ways to meditate. In every case she insists that what matters in prayer 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).

Teresa describes her prayer when she found that she was unable to engage her mind. There are close parallels here with the kind of imaginative entering into a Gospel scene described in an earlier reflection.

‘This is the method I then used. 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 at long as my thoughts allowed me to, for there were many distractions that tormented me’ (*Life* 9:4).

‘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.

‘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* 26:5-6).

3. In Teresa's scheme, the third stage of prayer is as far as we can go in response to grace while

'reason is still very much in control. Love has not yet reached the point of overwhelming reason' (*Interior Castle*, III.2.7).

She speaks of those who have won the battle faced in stage two of their inner journey

'through perseverance and the mercy of God. They have got through the first difficulties ... They long not to offend God, even guarding themselves against venial sins. They are fond of doing penance and setting aside periods for recollection. They spend their time well in carrying out works of charity towards their neighbours ... There is no reason why entrance into the final [the seventh] dwelling place should be denied these people, nor will the Lord deny them this entrance if they desire it, for such a desire is an excellent way to prepare oneself so that every favour may be granted' (*Interior Castle* III.1.1 and 5).

One of the trials that can be hardest to bear is that of distractions and lack of feeling in prayer. We will return to this subject in the next reflection. The trials of life, including the struggle with the disappointments of distractions, have brought these people to a high degree of self-knowledge and so to humility and fear of the Lord. The distress that accompanies this self-knowledge is a sign that those at this stage are still a long way from being perfect. Self-love needs more purifying (III.2). We are to be like the silk-worm, working to die to ourselves. We are to 'care only about moving quickly so as to see the Lord' (III.2.8). Teresa continues to insist on the importance of conforming our will to that of God: 'What matters is to strive to practise virtues, surrender one's will to God in everything, bring one's life into accord with what God ordains for it, and desire that God's will not ours be done' (III.2.6). 'Study diligently how to be prompt in obedience' (III.2.12).

She recommends a very simple form of prayer, the kind of prayer that we touched on earlier:

'Collect your faculties [memory, imagination, mind and will] together and enter within yourself to be with your God' (*Way of Perfection* 28.4).

'I am not asking you to do anything more than look at him. Who can keep you from turning your eyes towards the Lord? ... In the measure you desire him you will find him. God never takes his eyes off you' (*Way of Perfection* 26.3).

'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 ourselves before him. Delight in him' (*Life* 13.22).

'You need never withdraw from this loving communion ... Go within yourself even during your ordinary occupations' (*Way of Perfection*, 29.5).

It may not be at all easy to recollect oneself in this way and it will require discipline and persistence. However it is important to remember that recollection cannot be forced. 'but must come gently' (*Interior Castle* II,1). As soon as we find ourselves alone we should seek Jesus and converse with him. 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).

This Prayer of Recollection can extend over the entire day, helped by little reminders, by reflective spiritual reading, by vocal prayers, by participating in the liturgy and by meditation.

### **09. Distractions and a feeling of emptiness in prayer<sup>5</sup>**

When we set aside time to be in communion with God in prayer, we can find our imagination and our thoughts wandering off in all directions. We are distracted, recollection is disrupted and our heart, instead of being in communion with God and being attentive both to God’s action in us and to our response, tends to follow the distraction. If we are keen to be close to God in prayer we can find such distractions disturbing. This is especially true when they are habitual. A restless imagination and a mind over which we seem to have little control cause us to experience disappointment and a sense of helplessness. We feel empty. We feel that nothing is happening and that we are wasting our time. Then we are tempted to give prayer away and to do something that is more obviously productive.

Feelings have an important role in our lives, so we should expect them to play a role in our prayer. The way we look at things is a decisive factor in stimulating our feelings. Sometimes the connection is obvious, sometimes our mental attitudes are so habitual that it takes some work to uncover them. In ordinary circumstances, for example, if, while recalling our sins and the graciousness of God, we were to express our sorrow, we would expect to feel sorry. The thought gives rise to the feeling. Staying in touch with the feeling keeps us in an attitude of sorrow. In the same way, we might recall some wonderful way in which we have been graced and we express to God a sense of wonder and gratitude; we would expect to feel a sense of awe and of thanks.

However, things are not always as simple as that. Sometimes we are caught up, however unwittingly, in a mood that we cannot seem to shift. Negative ways of looking at things are dominating our consciousness and we seem powerless to change the way we feel. In these circumstances, we might realise that we have reason to be grateful and we might use words that give expression to gratitude, but we don’t feel grateful. It is when there is a disjunction between our conscious thoughts and intentions and our feelings that we need to remember that it is our intention, not our feelings, that ultimately count. A courageous person is one who acts courageously, however frightened he or she may feel. A loving person is one who intends to love and who acts in a loving way. This is true even if the mental attitude and intention do not flow into feeling because of some inhibiting factor.

The reason for focusing on feelings in this way here is to make the point that while feelings always indicate something that is important and that should not be ignored, they do not have to be followed and are not always good indicators of what is most important. Of greater significance are our intentions and what we actually do. We can love our enemy, meaning we can act towards him and in a way that respects him as a person and benefits him spiritually, even if our feelings are very confused or even quite negative in his regard. If we really want to be in communion with God we are in communion with God, even if our thoughts are drifting and with them our feelings.

We know that we need to be disciplined if we are going to remain alert and attentive, listening for God. We realise that there is no point spending our prayer time slumbering or dreaming our time

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<sup>5</sup> see Eugene Boylan, *Difficulties in mental prayer* (Dublin, Gill 1943) pages 55-57; Marie-Eugène OCD, *I want to see God* (Christian Classics, Maryland 1953) pages 234-249.

away. If we picture ourselves at prayer as a sailing boat, we know that it is the breath of the Spirit that moves us, but we know, too, that we must erect the sail and keep it trimmed. God won't force us. God waits for our Yes. If we think of ourselves at prayer as a field, we know that the water that irrigates the field of our soul has its origin in God, but we know, too, that we have a job to do: we have to lower the bucket into the well and draw it out.

When we are distracted our heart is not awake to God; we are not attending to our part in the prayer, and tend to feel that we are wasting our time. Teresa of Jesus speaks of 'the afflictions of many people who practise prayer, and their complaints of interior trials. They become depressed and their health declines. They even abandon prayer altogether' (*Interior Castle*, IV.1). She knew what it was like from personal experience: 'Whenever I entered the oratory I used to feel so depressed that I had to summon up all my courage to make myself pray at all' (*Life*, 8.7).

Eugene Boylan writes:

'Distractions may have their origin outside prayer, in some attachment, some unmortified curiosity, some morbid brooding over humiliations, for example' (page 55).

We cannot expect to be undistracted at prayer if our life outside prayer is dissipated and distracted. Living a generally reflective life will surely help provide the environment for less distracted prayer. We must also be attentive to resisting sin and living a virtuous life. How can we expect to be still and to look God in the face if in our behaviour we are acting in ways that we know are contrary to God's will? If we do not sincerely want to do the will of God, we will, however unconsciously, find ways of avoiding prayer, if only to avoid facing up to what we are doing.

Teresa writes:

'We must never have any confidence in ourselves - that would simply be folly. But most of all we must walk with special care and attention, and watch what progress we make in the virtues' (*Interior Castle*, V.4.9).

There is necessarily an organic link between our active life and our prayer.

'God invites each of us to be intimately united with God in prayerful contemplation of how loved we are, and, at the same time, to be moved by that love to enter into the Lord's work of building God's kingdom of justice, love and peace ... Real prayer leads to involvement; real involvement leads to prayer. Deeper spirituality impels to action; action impels to deeper spirituality. And the circle continues and deepens. The mystic becomes prophet, the prophet becomes mystic ... The person deepening in prayer and growing in faith is not called out of this world to be with God, but is more profoundly immersed in that world's heart.'<sup>6</sup>

Since God is the one who hears the cry of the poor, how can we expect to experience communion with God in prayer if we ourselves are deaf to that cry?

'Many will say to me: Lord! Lord! ... But I will say: I never knew you' (Matthew 7:22-23).

'I was hungry and you never gave me food' (Matthew 25:42).

How can we expect to experience communion with God in prayer if we know that we are using the time of prayer to escape from fulfilling our ordinary obligations?

How can we expect not to be distracted if we prefer doing good things for God to actually being in communion with God? If that is our attitude we will find ourselves fitting prayer in and the activity

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<sup>6</sup> Carrol P and Dyckman K 'Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet' (NY Paulist, 1981) page 79.

that we put aside for the time of prayer will necessarily dominate our consciousness during the prayer. We must want communion with God more than anything else.

Marie-Eugène has this warning for those of us who are compulsively committed to action and place it ahead of prayer. He exposes some of the subtle rationalisations that we employ to avoid prayer. We should not be surprised that when we fit prayer in it is our activities that dominate our consciousness rather than our union with God, with the result that we experience distractions.

‘Activism takes cover under numerous and often noble excuses: necessities of life, urgent duties of one’s state, fear lest a certain milieu win and dissipate people, joys to be had in generous action which opens up and enlarges one’s power, the aridity and apparently useless abjection of prayer, and above all a great pity for those around us whose misery is a constant appeal to our Christian charity’ (page 420).

The most valuable thing we can do is the will of God. If that means activity then let us be active. If that means taking time out to be in prayer, let us pray. If we find that we are inclined to put more value on activity than on prayer, we could well reflect on the following words of John of the Cross:

‘Let those who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they may not have reached a prayer as sublime as the prayer which we are describing here. They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labour, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 29.3).

Spiritual writers encourage the practice of turning to God for short bursts of prayer during the day. During our activities we might regularly repeat short prayers such as: ‘Sacred Heart of Jesus I place my trust in you’ or ‘Jesus, please teach me how to pray’ or ‘Lord, have mercy on me a sinner’. They also recommend setting aside some time to prepare the time of prayer. As in other areas of our life, preparation and expectation can help us be alert and expectant when the time of special communion with God comes. Spiritual reading can provide us with images that help focus attention and so assist our prayer (see reflection 7).

Some distractions are avoidable with appropriate discipline, but there are others over which, with the best will in the world, we have little or no control. Some avoidable distractions have their origin in failure to prepare for prayer. Eugene Boylan writes:

‘Distractions may be due to a failure to recollect oneself generously and completely at the beginning of the prayer’ (page 55).

John Cassian writes:

‘Before the time of prayer we must put ourselves in the state of mind we would wish to have in us when we actually pray. It is an inexorable fact that the condition of the soul at the time of prayer depends upon what shaped it beforehand’ (Conf 10, page 139).

We can help ourselves focus by having a special place that we associate with our formal prayer: a prayer-corner, for example, with an icon, a candle, a bible. We can find a chair in which we can be relaxed, but alert, for we do not want to fall asleep. We can find a position that is upright but still, in such a way that we don’t have to keep changing position.

We might find it helpful to spend a few moments focusing on our breathing. If we are attending to it, our attention will be diverted from what has been filling our attention prior to coming to prayer, matter that could easily distract. When we feel in touch with the rhythm of our breathing, we might focus our attention on various parts of our body that are experiencing tension. One can find a number of suggested ways of doing this. The aim is to relax our bodies while remaining alert and to let the relaxation seep into our mind.

Then we remember that God is present, here in this place. God is present dwelling in my heart. Jesus is here with me. We pray to him for the grace of being in the love-communion that he is offering us.

Now is the time to enter the prayer. It may be that I enter a Gospel scene as described in an earlier reflection. Or I might be drawn into a prayer of simple awareness and find myself attracted to use a mantra - a simple phrase repeated over and over again in rhythm with my breathing. As I think of Jesus I hear him say as I breathe in: 'I am in you,' and, as I breathe out: 'You are in me.' I am listening to him as he repeats these words to me over and over again.

However, even if we are living a generally reflective life and are genuinely wanting to do God's will, we can still be distracted in prayer. Sometimes we are just very tired. If it is in carrying out the will of God that we have become tired, God will accept our desire to be attentive to God and will love us as we are. That is the way it is with those who love each other.

Eugene Boylan writes:

'Distractions may be due to fatigue; for if the powers of the mind are hard at work all day, it is not easy for them to make the effort necessary to remain attentive to what may be a very difficult task. In this case, when the distracting work is of God's appointment and not due to our own self-seeking, we can only glory in our infirmities, and hope in God's grace' (page 55).

If, however, we are always too tired to focus, we need to examine our life-style and make some adjustments. Our state of health can also affect our ability to remain focused. Also some times of the day do not suit certain temperaments. We may have been unable to set aside time at the preferred time of the day and are attempting to make up for it at another time, but it is not working very well. God understands and takes our longing for what it is. The distractions don't hinder God from loving us, and if we want to respond we are responding.

Different temperaments tend to be more easily distracted than others, especially if we tend to worry or to be restless and excitable. We can pray only as we are. Whatever our circumstances, distractions are a very normal phenomenon.

Eugene Boylan writes:

'Distractions may be due to the natural instability of the mind, especially the imagination. It is a psychological law that one idea tends to call up another, according to the well-known principles of association and contrast, so that the very effort to make one idea clear may be the means of starting a distraction' (page 55).

Other unavoidable distractions flow from the nature of God with whom we are in communion. One reason for distractions is that our intellect is necessarily very limited in its ability to focus on truths about God. It quickly comes to its limit and then gives up or wanders off following the imagination. When this happens the heart tends also to follow and so to cease being moved in relation to God.

Eugene Boylan writes:

'Distractions may arise from the fact that the subject of our prayer, or the workings of God's grace, make no appeal to the imagination, to our natural tastes, or even to the more familiar part

of our intellectual powers. Here it is especially true that the imagination and its attendants seem to run riot, and any attempt to recall them will only draw away the attention from the real prayer, which is going on in the depths of the soul, in what one might call the “invisible light” of faith’ (page 56).

We must exercise discipline during our prayer time. Praying can be like trying to carry out a conversation with a friend whom we pass on the tarmac, as we are about to board a jet. We have only a few precious minutes and the roar of the engines make it almost impossible to converse. What a pity it would be if we spent those few moments complaining about the noise. It is possible, though not easy, to ignore the noise and focus on the person and share our hearts. If there is nothing we can do about the distraction, we must try not to let it bother us. Let us stay with God in the depths of our being. The ocean can be very disturbed on the surface and the waves can be moving in a different direction to the current. It is the current that matters and deep down the water can be calm. Let us stay deep and not come up to struggle with the surface distractions. The current of God’s love will carry us.

Whatever happens let us, whenever we can, continue to turn our heart towards God. In her prayer journal Catherine of Siena records the following words spoken to her by God:

‘Though you feel that I have withdrawn, do not turn away. Rather, persevere with humility and remain within the house of self-knowledge. There, with lively faith, wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, for me, the flame of love. How do you wait? Not lazily, but in watching and constant humble prayer. And your watching is not only physical but spiritual as well. Your mind’s eye never closes, but watches by the light of faith and with contempt tears out your heart’s wandering thoughts. Watch in love by my charity, knowing that I want only your sanctification’ (*Dialogue: The Bridge*, chapter 63).

We must not let distractions discourage us from praying. Eugene Boylan writes concerning distractions over which we have no control:

‘All we can do is to renew our attention to God according to the way in which we are praying. This should be done quietly, without vexation, or even without surprise at our own folly. If we could only realise how much this continual turning back to God shows God our real love and pleases God more than that rapt attention that has its roots in self-love, we should never be dissatisfied with our prayer on account of its numerous distractions. If prayer is a lifting up of the mind to God, then every time we turn away from distractions to renew our attention to God, we pray – and we pray in the teeth of difficulty and despite ourselves. What can be more pleasing to God? What more meritorious? We should be very greatly surprised if we could get a glimpse at the account book that the recording angel keeps, and see the different values that are set on our various attempts at prayer. The prayer that pleases us, and with which we were well satisfied, would often be quite low in his estimate, while the prayer that disgusted us, which was apparently made up of nothing but distractions, might be found to have won a very high degree of approval’ (page 56).

Teresa of Jesus writes:

‘One must never be depressed or afflicted because of aridity or unrest or distraction of the mind. If you would gain spiritual freedom and not be continually troubled, begin by not being afraid of the Cross and you will find that the Lord will help you to bear it. You will then advance happily and find profit in everything’ (*Life*, 11.17).

‘It is not good for us to be disturbed by our thoughts or to worry about them in the slightest. If they proceed from our many weaknesses, let us have patience and bear everything for the love of God’ (*Interior Castle*, IV.1.11).

Speaking in more general terms of the trials that occur in the life of a person committed to prayer, Julian of Norwich has this to say:

‘When we fall back into ourselves, through depression and spiritual blindness and our experience of spiritual and bodily pains, because of our frailty, God wants us to know that God has not forgotten us ... God wants us to accept our tarrying and our suffering as lightly as we are able, and to count them as nothing. For the more lightly we accept them, the less importance we ascribe to them because of our love, the less pain shall we experience from them and the more thanks shall we have for them ... If you be in so much pain, so much woe and so much unrest that it seems to you that you can think of nothing at all except the state you are in or what you are feeling, as soon as you can pass it over lightly and count it as nothing. Why? Because God wants to be known; and because if we knew God and loved God we would have patience and be at great rest, and all that God does would be a delight to us’ (*Showings*, chapter 64-65).

Above all we are to listen to Jesus as he pleads with us:

‘Trust in God still and trust in me’ (John 14:1).

Saint Paul assures us:

‘No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it’ (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In a well-known poem, Teresa writes:

‘Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing cause you to fear.  
All is passing. God never changes. Patience gains all.  
Whoever has God wants for nothing. God alone suffices’ (*Poesías*, 30).

John of the Cross has the same advice:

‘When something distasteful or unpleasant comes your way, remember Christ crucified and be silent. Live in faith and hope, even though you are in darkness, because it is in this darkness that God protects you. Cast your care upon God, for God watches over you and will not forget you. Do not think that God leaves you alone; that would be an affront to God’ (Pentecost 1590).

‘You have endured no tribulation, or penance, or trial to which there does not correspond a hundredfold of consolation and delight in this life’ (*Living Flame*, 2.23).

With her customary clarity and simplicity, Julian of Norwich writes:

‘I felt pain, and afterwards delight and joy. In the time of joy I could have said with Saint Paul: “Nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ”. And in the pain I could have said with Saint Peter: “Lord, save me, I am perishing”. This vision was shown to teach me to understand that some people profit by being comforted at one time, and at another to fail and to be left to themselves. God wishes us to know that God keeps us safe all the time, in sorrow and in joy. Our Lord gives joy freely as it pleases him, and sometimes he allows us to be in sorrow, and both come from his love’ (*Showings*, chapter 15).

Can the distraction become part of the prayer? Eugene Boylan writes:

‘Sometimes the mere return to God is sufficient to banish the distraction; but very often the same distracting thought keeps coming back, despite our attempts to get rid of it. One way of dealing with such obstinate intruders is to make them the subject of the prayer. With a little ingenuity, some relation can be found between the distracting idea and God. It may, perhaps, give us something to pray for; it may serve as a motive to praise God; it could be used as evidence of our need for God’s grace ... If all else fail, we can fall back upon the advice of the author of *The Cloud* for dealing with distractions, that we should endeavour to look over their shoulders as if we were looking at some object beyond them and above them, – which is God’ (page 57).

It is important not to give up setting aside periods for prayer even though it might seem to be a waste of time. We are to give God time to be with us even if we do not feel that we are with God. Eugene Boylan writes:

‘Another way of looking at prayer may help us when we feel we cannot pray at all. Let us regard the time of prayer as an appointment with God. If for God’s own wise reasons God decides not to keep the appointment, that is God’s will and, therefore, to be praised. For our part, by staying there, helpless, and almost hopeless, we are doing what God wants us to do, and we can confidently leave the result to God. These helpless half-hours spent fighting sleep and distraction, “getting nowhere”, as the phrase has it, have a providential part to play in our sanctification. Distractions that are not deliberate are a trial, not a fault; let us accept them, cheerfully and confidently. In his own good time, God will come and save us’ (page 57).

Teresa admits that she herself was ‘terribly oppressed by the turmoil of thoughts’ till she came to realise that ‘physical turmoil is no hindrance to my prayer. The tranquillity and love in my depths are quite unaffected’ (*Interior Castle*, IV.1). She advises:

‘Should you fall, be careful, be careful, for love of the Lord, not to be deceived into abandoning prayer ... Trust in the goodness of God which is greater than all the sins we can commit. God does not remember our ingratitude when we, recognising what we are, wish to return to God’s friendship ... Recall God’s words, and look at what God did in my case: I grew weary of offending God before God left off forgiving me. God never grows weary of giving, and God’s mercies can never be exhausted. Let us not grow weary of receiving’ (*Life* 19.15).

John of the Cross agrees:

‘There are many who desire to advance and persistently beseech God to bring them to this state of perfection. Yet when God wills to conduct them through the initial trials and mortification, as is necessary, they are unwilling to suffer them, and they shun them, flee from the narrow road of life, and seek the broad road of their own consolation, which is that of their own perdition; thus they do not allow God to begin to grant their petition. They are like useless containers, for although they desire to reach the state of the perfect, they do not want to be guided by the path of trials which lead to it. They hardly even begin to walk along this road by submitting to what is least, that is, to ordinary sufferings’ (*Living Flame* 2,27).

‘In tribulation, immediately draw near to God with confidence, and you will receive strength, enlightenment and instruction’ (*Sayings of light and love* n.63).

Teresa acknowledges that there are even times when it is best to ease off praying:

‘The suffering experienced in this state will demonstrate that you are not to blame yourself and that you must not be perturbed, for that only makes matters worse. Nor must you weary yourself by trying to put sense into something – namely, your mind – that for the moment is without any. Pray as best you can; indeed, don't pray at all, but try to rest your spirit as you do when you are ill, and busy yourself with some other virtuous action’ (*Way of Perfection*, 24).

The fruit of prayer is often experienced later. Therese of Lisieux writes:

‘Our Lord has no need of books or teachers to instruct us. He, the Teacher of teachers, instructs us without any noise of words. I have never heard him speak, yet I know he is within me. He is there, always guiding and inspiring me; and just when I need them, lights, hitherto unseen, break in. This is not as a rule during my prayers, but in the midst of my daily duties’ (*The Story of a Soul*, viii.131).

God’s longing is to love us. God is delighted when we put time aside to be with God and to open our hearts to receive this love and to respond. God knows our weakness and loves us as we are. If we want to be with God and are genuine in wanting our hearts to be alert to receive God’s Spirit, we may be disappointed because of various distractions and trials but we can be sure that God is delighted with us and that the rain of divine love is gently falling on the field of our hearts. No distraction on our part can hinder God from loving us. In any case we go to prayer not for ourselves but to praise, thank and love God. We are to trust that our good intentions are seen by God. Whatever our feelings, God is certainly loving us.