

PRAYER¹

Prayer is essentially an intimate conversation with God in which the soul seeks His presence, so that it may speak with Him in a friendly and affectionate way. It is a child talking with its Father, a friend conversing with his Friend. From its very nature, then, prayer is something intimate and interior. "For me," said St. Therese of the Child Jesus, "prayer is an uplifting of the heart, a glance toward heaven, a cry of gratitude and of love in times of sorrow as well as of joy." (St, 11). In this perspective we must understand the traditional definition of prayer: the raising of the mind to God, and not only the mind, but also, and especially, the heart. Prayer may be a silent movement of the mind, or simply a cry, a request, a colloquy; in these latter motions are verified the other aspects of prayer: a pious conversation with God, and a confident request for His graces.

Whatever form it takes, true prayer is not complicated or constrained; it is the breath of the soul that loves its God, the habitual attitude of the heart which tends toward God. The soul seeks Him, wants to live with Him, knows that every benefit, every help, comes from Him. Thus, spontaneously, without even thinking about it, the soul passes from the simple elevation toward God to the prayer of petition or to intimate colloquy, to arrive finally at the transport of the heart, the glance toward heaven. Prayer understood in this way is always possible, in all kinds of circumstances and in the midst of varying occupations; furthermore, for a soul who really loves God, it would be as impossible for it to interrupt prayer as it would be for it to stop breathing. We can thus understand how everyone, even those living in the world, can fulfill the words of the Gospel: "Pray always" (Lk 18:1). The one condition necessary is to have a heart capable of loving; the stronger and more vigorous this love is, the deeper and more continuous will the prayer be.

Although it may be a simple matter, it is not always easy to pray and to pray well. It is an art to be learned by studying the various forms and methods of prayer, or better still, by diligently applying ourselves to prayer itself. While the essence of prayer is always the interior movement, the elevation of the mind and heart to God, the forms of it differ: there is vocal prayer and mental prayer, discursive prayer and affective prayer, private prayer and liturgical prayer. We employ one or another of these, in conformity, with what is required by our duties. Thus, for example, all Christians are bound to certain vocal and liturgical prayers, such as morning and evening prayers, attendance at Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation; but after that we are free to choose, according to the particular attraction of the moment, special circumstances, or individual needs. All these forms are good and serve to nourish our love for God, provided that we really put ourselves in touch with

¹ This article is taken from "Divine Intimacy" by Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen OCD pp 437-429

Him. We should always be careful about this point, because it is the substance of prayer; and if this were lacking, the form would be useless, and God could say of us: "This people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me." (Mt 15:8).

However, a soul aspiring to divine intimacy will turn spontaneously toward a wholly interior form of prayer, a form which will facilitate an intimate contact with God, a silent, profound union. All forms of prayer will assume this special characteristic of interiority. Therefore, through vocal and liturgical prayer, as well as through mental prayer, the soul will make its way toward God and dispose itself for an ever-increasing intimacy with Him until God Himself, by means of the loving experience and the contemplative light, will introduce it into a prayer which is more profound and capable of immersing it in Him.

ST. TERESA'S WATER IMAGE OF PRAYER²

The saint uses water to represent the giftness of advanced prayer together with its progressive ease of effort. She distinguishes four ways of obtaining this favor. The garden of the soul, she says, can be watered in several manners. The first, drawing the water up from a well by use of a bucket, entails a great deal of human effort. The second way, cranking a water wheel and having the water run through an aqueduct, involves less exertion and yields more water. The third entails far less effort, for in it the water enters the garden as by an effluence from river or stream. The fourth and final way is the best of all: as by a gentle but abundant rainfall the Lord himself waters the garden, and the soul does not work at all. With this imagery the saint is obviously explaining how prayer grows beyond the more laborious activities of discursive meditation to a less active effort and more simple communing, until finally reaching the effortless contemplation of the transforming union.

² These words are taken from "Fire Within" by Thomas Dubay SM pp 78