

# Life of the Spirit

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MIND, WILL AND FEELING IN PRAYER

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If we consider objectively the question of whether in practice meditation should be the proximate or remote preparation for prayer, what are we to say? In deciding, two factors should be taken into consideration:

(i) In practice when following formal meditation it is difficult, frequently impossible, to decide such questions as: When should I begin to make acts and for how long? Am I using my imagination enough or too freely? Am I thinking too much or too little? When I cannot think at all what shall I do? This last question is the nodal point of the whole problem. Most of us find it possible to pray when it is quite impossible to think. At morning prayer simple ideas in the form of acts can be elicited by the will, whereas constructive thinking often cannot. We have control of the one, too little control of the other. For this reason formal meditation imposes such a strain on average Catholics (and not least on overworked religious sisters) that they give it up in despair, either because they cannot think or else because they want to pray; often it is both. 'Meditation', writes Father Baker, 'in which discourse is employed, is little more than philosophical contemplation of God, delaying the fixing of the heart and affections on God, which are only acceptable to him'. (*Holy Wisdom*, p. 343.)

(ii) Definite advantages accrue from dividing meditation and prayer into two separate exercises:

First, our prayer, even when it is vocal prayer, is more likely to develop normally. We notice this with those brought up to use the ordinary means to devotion such as the Rosary, the Way of the Cross, the Holy Hour, Prayer-books, etc. Indeed this kind of simple, direct mental-prayer fed by instruction from the pulpit would seem to be the normal method of the Church.

Secondly, if spiritual reading is done prayerfully, kneeling, at a time when the mind is alert, and if 'we think of divine things'—to quote St Francis of Sales—'not to learn but to make ourselves love them', we shall reap great fruit from our subsequent prayer. I am not suggesting we should deliberately recall and use our spiritual reading at time of prayer; that is unnecessary: we cannot help using our knowledge of God when we turn to love him. What we learn about him through spiritual reading and in other ways

becomes an integral part of our attitude of mind and indeed of our very selves.

Turning now to vocal or interior prayer, one of two reasons prompts the choice of a method of prayer: I may choose *objectively*, that is, the prayer which is best in itself, such as the *Our Father* or an act of worship; or I may choose *subjectively*, that is, the prayer I want or feel like. In the former are two factors—understanding and will, but predominantly will; in the latter three factors—understanding, will and sentiment, of which the chief is sentiment: it is *congenial* prayer. The former is called by Father Baker ‘The Prayer of Immediate Acts’, the latter ‘The Prayer of Sensible Affections’. It will be seen at once that these two kinds of mental prayer are not essentially vocal or exterior prayer because they do not use fixed, uniform acts; nor are they meditation beginning with a formal or an informal mental *discursus*: the emphasis is not on the mind but on the will in the former and the affections in the latter.

(1) *The Prayer of Immediate Acts*

Meditation is said to be thinking about God till we want to pray to him. The Prayer of Immediate Acts is praying to God whether we want to or not. It differs from vocal or exterior prayer in two ways:

(i) By reason of a brief, preliminary use of the understanding.

(ii) The acts are spontaneous, following no set form.

‘The exercise’ (of this prayer) says Father Baker, ‘is performed chiefly by the superior will, but not without some use of the imagination and understanding; for, in making the act, the understanding must use the sensible image of the thing in which the act consists. Still, there is no formal discourse or reasoning; there is merely the apprehension of the matter by the understanding, and the main part of the work is done by the will, which produces an efficacious act towards God. . . .’

‘The acts may consist of any good matter which can be referred to God or his love and service, such as matter for resignation, patience, obedience, humility, sorrow for sins and purpose of amendment, or of avoiding the occasions of them, or the exercise of charity. Such matter the soul forms into an act, intending to do the thing or suffer it for God. There are other acts which refer to God immediately without reference to the soul herself, as when she congratulates God on being what he is, and wishes or wills that all should love him and serve him, and other such acts of good-will and benevolence towards God. These acts are called immediate acts’. (*Inner Life of Dame Gertrude More*, Chapter X.)

Although the Prayer of Immediate Acts is praying in the way we *ought* rather than in the way we *want*, this prayer can and does produce in the soul an ardent desire for prayer. The superior will can decree not only the nature of the act but also the manner of

its expression—whether or not it shall be expressed by the whole person, that is, uttered by the lips and symbolically interpreted by bodily gesture in the form of prostrations, inclinations, genuflections, etc. 'By means of such actions', says St Augustine, 'a person does stir himself to pray and lament more humbly and with greater fervour.' (*Loco cit.*) The Prayer of Immediate Acts was largely the prayer of St Dominic, who would genuflect and prostrate his body hundreds of times before the altar or the crucifix. Saint Margaret of Hungary, O.P.<sup>1</sup> is another striking example. In practice, for ordinary people this means (a) that we pray regularly and for a definite period each day whether we want to or not, (b) we use some ordered approach such as the A.C.T.S., and (c) we dispose our body to help and interpret our prayer, for example, by joining the hands, closing the eyes, bowing the head, kneeling upright or standing, outstretching the arms. Those unacquainted with the influence of body over mind in prayer are invited to make the following simple experiment. Recite the Creed twice—the first time standing with the arms folded; then a second time kneeling with the arms outstretched, and eyes closed.

(2) *The Prayer of Sensible Affections.*

This prayer should be studied very carefully, as it is perhaps the most popular approach of all. Father Baker tells us, in his study on the prayer of Dame Gertrude More, that it is suited especially for beginners in the spiritual life. It is 'sensible', he says, 'because the prayer is exercised chiefly in the emotions and senses; *affection*, as distinguished from the understanding, working by the imagination and sensible images.

'Now, there are some dispositions that are naturally more affectionate towards God and rational creatures; and if they have either of the propensities to seek God, interiorly or exteriorly, they can easily exercise their sensible affections towards him, and without seeking reasons for it. Indeed they have a kind of loathing for seeking reasons, as they are already well-disposed to love God. Nevertheless, at first they scarcely know how to exercise or employ their sensible affections on God, through the very abundance of it. Many of them are incapable of meditation or immediate acts. . . . And the souls that have such an abundance of affection must exercise it in some way or other. And though they have the habit of affection, they often do not know how to use it, either through want of experience or because they are not just at the moment in the humour for it. For such affectionate dispositions are very subject to sudden changes of feeling—sometimes brought about by an internal cause, as some slight indisposition, or by an external cause, as change in the weather, or a trifling discomfort or annoyance. At such times these souls fall into great aridity, obscurity, and distress, and they are unable to help themselves with meditation.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Margaret Princess of Hungary*, by S.M.C. (Blackfriars, Oxford).

'This was often the case with Dame Gertrude, and for the above-mentioned reason. And her remedy, which was a good one and may be recommended to others, was this: she gathered out of books examples for the exercise of sensible affections, and she made other acts of the same kind, as suggested themselves to her; for example: 'O my God, when shall I love thee as thou deservest to be loved?' 'O that I were free from myself, that I might love thee!' 'When shall I be united to thee?' 'When shall I love thee with all my heart and soul?' The acts which suggested themselves to her were the most profitable, but in default of these she made use of what she could get out of books, which seemed suitable to her spiritual inclination.

'During the periods of aridity and depression, when nature refuses to help or concur in the exercise, the soul should adhere to her exercise of affections, even though they are produced without pleasure or light, unless she can see how to do better. And God will accept her goodwill, and will promote her spiritual welfare in the way he sees best'. (*Inner Life of Dame Gertrude More*. Chapter X.)

Many young people prefer this approach to God; though it is precisely here they may be wrongly directed. The reason for this preference is twofold:

(1) Some beginners in the spiritual life are expansive, generous, affectionate by nature, and can hardly be helped by any other method. They need the spontaneous approach of love, rightly ordered.

(2) Others have a religious disposition, mainly due to the influence of a good Catholic mother during the formative years of early childhood. It is then that the child's instinctive emotions, especially of love, are grouped round the central figure of our Lord. They have been brought up with Christ further back than they can remember. He is woven into the texture of their lives. They would as lief seek motives for loving their own mother as kneel and solemnly inquire into the reasons for loving him. He is their Friend of friends, accepted.

Many souls drawn to our Lord in this traditionally Catholic way do, in fact, 'loathe seeking reasons'. St Teresa of Avila had them in mind when she wrote:

'Address him sometimes as a Father, or as a Brother, or again as a Master or as your Bridegroom: sometimes in one way and sometimes in another, for he will teach you what he wishes you to do. Do not be foolish: remind him that he has promised to be your Bridegroom, and treat him as if he were'. (*Way of Perfection*. Chapter XXVIII.)

Similar advice is given by St Jane Frances of Chantal:

'I strongly recommend to you, my dear daughters, the prayer of the heart, that is, that which is not made with the understand-

ing but with the heart. It is made in this way: when we are humbled before God and placed in his presence, let us not force our brain to make considerations, but use our affections, arousing them as much as possible; and if we cannot arouse them by interior words, we must use vocal'. (*Conference 33.*)

Two principal dangers beset these souls, especially when a naturally affectionate temperament reinforces a well formed religious disposition. Prayer may become:

Either—*too emotional.*

Or—*capricious and unstable.*

Such souls are apt to swing dangerously from one extreme to the other, and to be overwhelmed at times by 'great aridity, obscurity and distress'.

Taking these in order, let us listen once again to Father Baker:

(1) 'The difference between sensible affections and sensible devotions lies in this—that the latter is wholly confined to the sensible nature, and the intellective soul is, as it were, drowned in it, so that she is little, if at all, spiritually enlightened as regards herself, but is rather wholly darkened. But Dame Gertrude made but a brief halt in her sensible nature, which after having produced a little devotion towards God after this fashion, she presently was carried up into the intellective soul, in which the rest of her recollection was exercised without further use of her sensible nature. The latter provided her with a step whereby to ascend into the spirit'. . . . (*loco cit.*)

In a word, this means that souls who follow this method should use their sensible attraction as a means, and not as an end. They should love God and not their prayer.

(2) Speaking of the measures to be taken during the different times of emotional reaction, Fr Baker says:

'When nature refuses to help or concur in the exercise, the soul should adhere to the exercise of affections, even though they are produced without pleasure or light, unless she can see how to do better'. (*Ibidem.*)

He stresses the advantage, in such an emergency, of selecting suitable acts from a prayer book.