

Life of the Spirit

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VOCAL AND MENTAL PRAYER

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PRAYER is the uplifting of the human personality to God. We not only uplift our minds by submission through Faith to his revealed truth, and our wills in acknowledgment of his divine sovereignty, *but also our bodies*. In prayer the whole man 'empties himself' in union with our Saviour to the glory of God. (Phil. 2; 7-11.)

'*But also our bodies.*' 'The antithesis of mind is body,' writes Father Vincent McNabb, and therefore 'the antithesis to mental prayer should be bodily prayer. But by a figure of speech the whole range of non-mental prayer is called after its chief part, vocal prayer. It would be incorrect to think that the other forms of bodily prayer are neither greatly practised in the Church nor greatly valued. The Church, like her divine Spouse, "knows what is in man" too well to neglect any object or function whereby the impact of the world may be deadened and a new force added to the world of unseen realities. Even as the Church in her sacred ceremonies sanctions and uses the five outward senses as avenues of approach for divine ideas, so also does she make use of all the communicative organs of the body as channels of intercourse and intercession with God. To her the body of man is . . . a life partner of the soul, and, in the sacramental dispensation, a divinely ordained channel of grace. In active recognition of this principle, the Church uses many forms of bodily prayer. . . . She signs the forehead, lips, and heart. She bows the head. She strews ashes upon the brow. In the solemn worship of the Mass bodily prayer of almost every form is pressed into the service of her emotions or petitions. The eyes of the priest are raised towards heaven or cast down on the Sacred Host, his hands are now outstretched, now joined together, now laid gently upon the altar beside the host. And on days of solemn fast and intercession her sacred ministers cast themselves upon the ground, and there, with their face to the dust, acknowledge their own sins and the sins of the people. What the Church thinks well to do, her children may well imitate, if not in public, at least in private, when the spirit of bodily prayer stirs their hearts'. (*The Science of Prayer*, p. 50.)

Prayer becomes vocal, that is, exterior or 'bodily', from three causes:

(1) When it is made in common. If public prayer is to ascend as one voice to God it must have vocal and exterior expression. There is no other means of uniting the prayer of the faithful except through outward signs.

(2) In private prayer, in order to excite devotion or to express its overflow. St Augustine says: 'When people are praying their bodily attitudes are those of suppliants: they bend the knee, stretch out their hands, even prostrate on the ground or perform similar visible actions. But God knows their invisible wills and their hearts' intentions; nor does he need those external signs, for example, that a person should stretch out his hands. Yet by means of such actions a person does stir himself to pray and to lament more humbly and with greater fervour. I do not know how it is but though such bodily actions can only be due to mental acts that precede, it is yet a fact that by the repetition of such visible, external actions, the interior visible movement that produced them is thereby increased, and those affections, which had to precede if those actions were to be performed, grow by the very fact that they were so performed'. (*De Cura pro Mortuis*. cf. also *Summa Theol.* 2. 2; 83; 12.)

This same truth was expressed by St Francis of Sales as follows: 'We sometimes begin to eat to get an appetite, but the appetite being excited, we continue to eat to content it'. (*Treatise on the Love of God*. Bk. 6, Ch. 3.)

(3) In token of the complete offering of soul and body. 'So that man may serve God with all that he has from God, that is to say, not only with his mind, but also with his body'.

Exterior vocal prayer is the elevation of the mind and will to God, in so far as it expresses on the one hand an inward attention to prayer and on the other the intention to pray which persists as long as the exterior signs of word and gesture continue. This will perhaps be more clearly understood through the following division. Three kinds of attention are possible in exterior vocal prayer whereby it may be said to be mental prayer:

(a) *Attention to the correct articulation of the words, etc.* For example, in the Divine Office, the Rosary, and the words and rubrics of the Mass. Religious Sisters, and others, who have little Latin are sometimes obliged by rule to recite the Divine Office; Cantors at liturgical services cannot always follow the meaning of the words they sing when busy with the chant. These and many others should bear in mind that they are offering to God an attentive and meritorious prayer. Cardinal Cajetan, commenting on this form of attention, remarks: 'He who thinks it more in keeping with his lack of competence to attend merely to the accurate recital of the words, and perseveres in this form of attention, should use it only as a means to God; for if he is, in this way, disposed to better things, God may have mercy on him and give him a higher kind of attention'. (*Commentary on S.T.* 2-2; 83; 13.)

This means he should recite the words accurately, not for the sake of accuracy, or mere liturgical perfection, but for God's sake.

(b) *Attention to the meaning of the words.* Not only to the meaning of the words, but also to the meaning of the words *plus* their ceremonial forms. Let us examine this second kind of attention in its relation to private *vocal* prayer purely and simply.

Private vocal prayer—that is, 'saying prayers'—is of two kinds: the vocal prayer we say 'out loud' with the voice, and the vocal prayer we say 'to ourselves' in the aural imagination (cf. *S.T.* I; 34; 1). Both these kinds of private prayer consist of a repetition of words expressing certain ideas, as, for example, when we read a prayer-book. The set, stereotyped words or acts limit and circumscribe the ideas so that when we say a particular vocal prayer we give expression to a thought, as, for example, in the Our Father. We see at once that although the words circumscribe the prayer, they are also a kind of gateway. Words can increase in number; they can also deepen in meaning—become fuller, more spacious, pregnant with a thousand associations, the synthesis of every thought and deed of a loving heart, of a mind informed by God's truth and of a life surrendered to God's will. The words, 'Our Father', would mean one thing to the Christian neophyte and another, though not a different thing, say, to a St Francis of Assisi. Or to take a more homely example, is there not something unforgettable in the simple words, 'Holy Mary, Mother of God', heard from the lips of an old and devoted client of our Lady?

For this reason vocal prayer leads many souls to contemplation. It isn't what they say, but the meaning released by what they say, which floods their souls. Simple prayer like the idea is fecund. But it is not the thinker *qua* thinker who finds its content, but the lover; just as it is the great thinker who is lost in the process of thinking about God but only the great lover who is lost in the thought of God. It is the God we lovingly know and serve whom we find in prayer. (Cf. *Holy Wisdom*—Baker, p. 347.) 'He that hath my commandments and keepeth them; he it is that loveth me. And he that loveth me shall be loved by my Father: and I will love him and will manifest myself to him.' (John 14: 21.) (Cf. *Way of Perfection*, Chapter XVI. Also with reference to the importance of vocal prayer—*Scale of Perfection*—Hilton, pp. 40-1; *Treatise on Heroic Virtue*—Benedict XIV, Vol. 1, p. 240 seq.)

(c) *The attention to the end or purpose of prayer.*¹ This attention explains the influence of vocal prayer, especially exterior vocal prayer, on many souls. Usually at prayer we try to keep our minds

¹This attention becomes prayer in virtue of the effective intention to offer it to God. Prayer need not, however, be attentive throughout. A right intention formulated at the beginning of prayer (if not afterwards withdrawn) renders the whole prayer meritorious. For this reason we recite the Morning Offering which makes the actions of the day meritorious, even when the mind is pre-occupied with other things.

on what we are saying, but in this prayer words become the *vehicle of attention* quite irrespective of their meaning. For example, who has failed to notice the facility with which the Rosary takes devout souls into contemplation. They finger beads mechanically, mutter prayers subconsciously in an ordered and rhythmic repetition: their minds are taken to God through these things. The technique of the Rosary does not interfere with their attention to God but safeguards and stimulates it.

Father Baker tells us that the 'Ancients', that is, the Fathers of the Desert, however learned they might be, began their spiritual course with vocal prayer which consisted of the psalter recited at least once a day. Through this vocal prayer they were led to contemplation. They had many other helps—perfect solitude, silence, recollection, freedom from worldly cares, and the faithful practice of mortification; but the fact remains that they passed straight from vocal to contemplative prayer. When unable to contemplate, they returned to vocal prayer.

We often read of the numberless *Paters*, *Aves*, and aspirations recited daily by the saints and holy people, as, for instance, Father William Doyle in our own time. We may have smiled tolerantly at 'ejaculations' counted by their thousand; we may even have condemned such 'parrot-like' repetition as useless, unreasonable, and degrading. If so, were we not forgetting that these vocal prayers provide a medium or vehicle for contact-with-God and often lead to contemplation? Those who pray with this attention do not seek the *meaning* of the words but their *purpose*—divine wisdom itself. 'Moreover', says St Thomas, 'this attention whereby the mind is fixed on God, is sometimes so strong that the mind forgets all other things.' (*S.T.* 2-2; 83; 13) Cardinal Cajetan adds this remark in his commentary: 'He who strives as he recites the whole of Divine Office to rest in loving-attention to God and divine things fully satisfies his obligation'.

All this must not lead us to the false conclusion that we pray always and necessarily with one or other of these attentions. It would be more correct to say that we use all three but with varying degrees of emphasis on one or the other according to our manner of prayer and the measure of our spiritual progress. This will be clear to anyone who reflects for a moment on the way he recites the Rosary.

'It cannot be denied,' says Father Baker, 'that for those whom vocal prayer, accompanied by some exercise of virtue (for without the latter no kind of prayer will be efficacious), is sufficient to bring to contemplation, no way is easier or more secure; none less injurious to head and health or less exposed to delusions.' But he ends on this note of warning: 'Few souls attain to contemplation or spiritual prayer, without the help of some purely mental prayer, seriously and industriously pursued'. (*Inner Life of Dame Gertrude More*, Chapter VIII.)