

Life of the Spirit

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SIMPLE STEPS TOWARDS MENTAL PRAYER

BY

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TAND on tiptoe and you will reach Heaven', says St Francis of Sales, and perhaps that is a good description for us to begin with in thinking about prayer. Because the raising of the mind and heart to God so often gives us that insecure sense of being on tiptoe, reaching over the top of that high cupboard in the hall; we are quite sure it is there, that thing we are looking for, only we cannot quite see—and we cannot quite reach—and perhaps that little extra of the tiptoe will get our fingers onto it. There! We felt it! Just the merest touch, and now it has gone again! Silly of us to try, really; everyone said we were fools and should not do it; much better give it up before we strain ourselves or overbalance—or shall we have one more try?

That chatty paragraph is to get you started off, so that you will not realise how dreadfully humdrum the rest is going to be. It must be so, partly on account of the person writing, partly because the majority of people in the world are humdrum, until they understand that they have missed the point of living. The point is, by prayer, to turn the humdrum into the holy; the missing generally comes from lethargy or even fear of what it may mean to advance in spirituality. It is easier and safer, we think, not to delve too deeply into these matters; they are not for us; with Francis Thompson we see the attraction, and each echo:

'Yet was I sore adread

Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.'

What nonsense this is! Do you see why? Because he is All.

So, remaining quite ordinary in our daily humdrum round,

when, where, and how do we pray? The first two queries need occupy little time, for we take the Gospel very literally here. We must begin now and pray always. There is no exaggeration; there is not even a 'but', and, therefore, please do not put one in. Face up to it, now and always. And that rather answers the 'where' as well as the 'when', especially if we recall the dictum of that early spiritually-minded man—Cassian, was it not?—who maintained: 'He prays but little and but badly, who only prays when on his knees'. There are differences of method, degree, and situation, but the 'always and everywhere' remains unchanged.

How to pray? Do not laugh at or ignore the truism—the only way to learn to pray is to pray. This hard plain fact is skated over by some. Do not forget, either, that we shall not be praying properly until we do not know that we are praying. Both these phrases must be considered, and then practised. Be quite sure of this, prayer we shall not learn from books or people; we shall only come to know from hours of dull, knee-aching waste-of-time prayer, alone by ourselves. Books may help; the experience of others may encourage; advice may clear the air; but from the beginning to the end it is the actual getting down to pray by the individual which is the only real schooling. Then, under the grace of God, it is the being faithful through stone walls, over precipices, in dry darkness; it is trust in emptiness, love in desolation, peace in suffering. Above all it is humility in failure, for God's economy is based on failure, so that only by failing in prayer shall we succeed.

If we are thoroughly law-abiding (good citizens, that is), we go into the House of God by the main door of prayer. On doing so, we may be inclined to think that there is not very much of interest on the ground floor. The chief utensil displayed is labelled 'vocal prayer', and though most of us glance at it in a half-hearted way, the more eager are looking for better gifts, while the lazy are too idle to try their hand even at this, particularly when they find that there is quite a lot of drudgery and repetition required. Nevertheless, there is nothing more important than beginning correctly and learning the hard way, though it may seem tiresome. Now, when the Apostles saw the attractiveness of our Lord's prayer-time, they asked him to teach them to pray. He did so; and the

instructions they left behind for us to follow were: 'Say: "Our Father" . . .' It is important to stress this, as vocal prayer can be despised by good people, probably because it is misunderstood. We all, normally, begin at some time: 'God bless Mummie and Daddie'. Very soon we are saying: 'God bless me, and Mummie and Daddie—Oh! And don't forget Bingo, my teddy bear', which, if you come to look at it, is already a tendency towards prayer which is more than vocal. We are starting to bring our minds into it, to think; and this is natural, even from the Catechism definition. But thinking is the embryo of definition. Surely, then, this will be a comfort to those who imagine that they are stuck at vocal prayer, who fear the term 'mental prayer', who cannot get beyond what might be called 'Garden of the Soul spirituality', that is, set vocal prayers, recited or read from a book. It is necessary to understand that even here on the ground floor mental prayer begins, for vocal prayer implies a degree of mental prayer. Though I am not suggesting that the two are the same, this idea of one growing upon the other can be dwelt upon by those especially who live in the world. The mind is normally engaged on outside, mundane thoughts and cares; some use of vocal prayer curbs 'the restless little butterfly of the mind', giving it a tangible reality to supply the place of the worldly tangibles which otherwise crowd in upon our prayers. What is more, if we keep ahead through this ground floor, we find that in the centre it develops into a lift, open to *all* and carrying us up to *all* the other floors in God's House of Prayer. Thus we can quite safely say that no one ever entirely puts aside vocal prayer as finished for him or her in this life. And the best examples we can give of this fact are the last prayer of our Lord, 'Father, into thy hands', and such glories as the *Magnificat* of our Lady, or even the *Canticle of the Sun* from St Francis.

But note this carefully: if vocal prayer forms a lift, we can get into it or refuse to get into it; having got in, we can, as it were, refuse to push the button, so that the lift never works. Or, having gone up, we can refuse to get out at the next floor, but push the button and come down again. For the general teaching is that the stage after vocal prayer is meditation, and we can refuse any great degree of this exercise, if we wish. It is a development of vocal prayer, but comes into a new

category. Given a glass of wine, we can gulp it down, holding our noses, or sip it, enjoying the tasting. So, we can gabble through the 'Our Father', or, like St Teresa, get stuck at the beauty and meaning of the first words, turning them over in our minds again and again. There is nothing very difficult in it. There is nothing very rigid. If one person is helped by dividing the Passion into sections, making points and resolutions, well and good. Another will prefer to read a passage from the Gospel and sit digesting it. A third may be wrapped up in the consideration of the humility of our Lady, or the mercy of Jesus to Mary Magdalen, or the glory of the Resurrection. If a person can draw something from any of these, by any method, or by no method, he is not wasting his time, or God's. Provided one thing! Prayer is not a theological exercise, nor is it a scriptural study. 'The object of meditation is to arrive at loving', says Dom John Chapman. So long as thinking about these passages of the Gospel, these virtues of our Lady, so long as that kindles a spark of love in our hearts and leads to an act of love, that long is it useful. After that, we must pass on to something else, another consideration if it helps, or just to continue simply loving. There may be a day when everything makes us love; another when our toes are cold, our heads ache, we are liverish, and the water was not hot . . . then we must just sit or kneel, giving God our restless pain. We have vocal prayer to fall back on; we have the rosary, where meditation spreads out indefinitely, or can be cut down to the merest glance at God. Some can say the rosary at all times, others are never at ease with it; this one likes doing the Stations, another cannot bear them; another dips into the Gospel for balm. Here we have 'the freedom of the children of God', because we should approach God in our own way and not in someone else's. There are a few, very few, fairly safe rules, like the fact that most people must go through a stage of meditation, which may last a long or short time. But beyond that, the method is an individual and simple approach to God by use of mind and heart, most particularly of heart, since this is certainly true . . . love is the means of our union with God in this world. It is quite natural, then, as in human friendship, that there should be a growth; it is unnatural to say that such growth is not meant for us, for dwarfs are freaks. And, of course, if we are

growing, we may also grow out of our method, as a plant which is too big has to be repotted; left to twine its roots inside, it will never flourish; given room, it will expand. But repotting needs courage.

Before considering that, one other thought. Meditation may be all right when we are getting down to a fixed period laid aside for prayer. What about the rest of the day—nine-tenths, very often? When we try to pray, all these hours come crowding in. What about that? Quite simple: prayer-time must push out into the world to prevent the world pushing into prayer-time, because attack is the best form of defence. Logically, then, the day must be planned to fit prayer-time, not *vice versa*. It is a big reversal of our normal policy, but it can be done. And from that point, we can take our prayer with us always, learning to be recollected and to live in the presence of God. To start and to continue, no method is too childish; a man carrying his rosary loose in his pocket can say it on the bus or train, in the street, in the cinema or fish queue—sanctifying himself and the unconscious crowds around him. Another may prefer to make an ejaculation each time he opens a door, goes upstairs, or puts in a full stop on the typewriter. In factories I know, some bless the name of Jesus each time it is taken in vain around them, turning even sin to sanctity. It is in this way that we canalise our thoughts to God, spreading peace and prayer through all our lives, as we take God to places where he is most neglected. For this purpose, nothing is more simple or more sure than the rosary, ready to hand in a pocket, where the fingers may slip automatically to the beads as soon as they have no other job to do, be it when we are strap-hanging in a crowded Underground, or sitting waiting for the kick-off. But this is vocal prayer again—not mental? You miss the point! These are only little methods, outside the fixed times of prayer, helping us to build up what must become a general atmosphere of God-love in our life. To help this background, it is wise each day to read for a short while from some spiritual book which appeals to us, thus gaining food for meditation; perhaps, also, if possible, we can lay aside ten minutes in which to sit, relaxed, quiet, alone, in God's presence. Many will say at once that such action in a busy life means instant drowsiness and no prayer. I will only quote Péguy as an answer:

'Nothing is so beautiful as a child going to sleep while he is saying his prayers, says God . . .

Under the wing of his Guardian Angel.

And laughs happily as he watches the Angels and begins to go to sleep:

And is already mixing his prayers together and no longer knows what they are all about:

And sticks words of 'Our Father' among the words of 'Hail Mary', all in a jumble . . .'

How often our prayer may be a mere battle of the eyelids (it was with St Teresa of Lisieux). Do not worry about that, and above all, do not give up your prayer-time for that reason.

But supposing we remain faithful to prayerful meditation and try to be recollected during the day, living a generally good life, seeking God with a single mind . . . then at some time or other our prayer will be modified, because the meditations, the thinking parts, gradually get less, while the acts, the loving parts, grow. We find a series of forced acts are the main portion of our prayer, and this is often hard.

We have somewhere in this period to take our courage in both hands and get out of the lift at the next floor. It is difficult; it needs courage; it may have to be done unaided, even hindered. For the lift attendant, who is the spiritual director, is often keener to come down to the lower floor, where he personally feels more secure. Do not be misled. Be absolutely sure that God asks from you generosity and love; he will do the rest.

What, then, is the difficulty? Simply this: that only when the lift has left us do we realise that we are being stranded on a floor which has no floor. We have the awful sensation of stepping out into mid-air. In other words, our tangible feelings, the mental pictures of meditation, joy in saying the rosary or other prayers—all these are gone. We are left clutching frantically at any familiar object, unable to understand. We are lost; surely we have gone wrong? We try meditating, and it doesn't work. We try the rosary and the Stations; they just dry us up. What then? Will a dose of salts do any good? It might; it is worth trying. But if not?

Suppose that we are really trying to love God, that we desire him 'in spirit and in truth', that we can get nothing from

meditation, that we meet dryness wherever we turn . . . that we are, in fact, on tiptoe reaching over the cupboard-top, and cannot grasp our object—God. Suppose all this—then the signal light is certainly at ‘Go’. Yes, go ahead, happy souls, in darkness unseeing, in dryness unfeeling, in loneliness unknowing. This is indeed the time for courage and perseverance, which the rich days of meditation and joy have been fertilising, because now is the time for the seed of prayer, being sown in good ground, to die that it may yield fruit; the Word must go that the Spirit may come, to ‘teach you all things’. Many of us will want to turn back, many good men will encourage us to do so, but we must go on just the same, confidently surrendering, willing to drop into space on the faith that God’s love intangibly supports us. Now and again our finger-tips touch heaven: most of the time, the cupboard is very tall, very dark, nakedly unyielding. But all the same, the deep knowledge is there that all things are worth while, if we but keep on tiptoe, until God gives us the spiritual stature sufficient to unite us to himself.



MEDITATION OR MENTAL PRAYER?

BY

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IT is consoling at times to reflect that whereas men have prayed to God from their earliest origins, it is only comparatively recently that they have probed and analysed the structure and development of prayer. Consoling, because of the vast and ever growing literature on the subject which, if anything, becomes more remote and obscure.

In the recently published Paternoster Series (Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1s. 6d. each), four of the six booklets are directly concerned with prayer—all are reprints—and are written by well-known writers. *The Path of Prayer*, by Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P., might be called ‘prayer meditated’. The book is familiar to many. Written in the form of a diary—the diary of Sir Lawrence Shipley—it gives traditional doctrine