

# Learning to Pray

Mother Mary Clare SLG

SLG PRESS  
Convent of the Incarnation  
Fairacres Oxford



© THE SISTERS OF THE LOVE OF GOD 1970

Fourteenth Impression 1990

ISBN 0 7283 0047 8

ISSN 0307-1405

This article was originally a paper read at Conference for Roman Catholic Novices at Spode House, January 1970

## **Introduction**

Prayer is the gateway to the vision of God for which we were created. It is the means of free and conscious intercourse between the creature and his Creator and it expresses the union between the two. It is the art of spiritual living and will be incomplete if it includes only the art of the presence of God without the necessary complement of the practice of the presence of man.

Some words from the Collects for the Third and Seventh Sunday after Trinity (BCP) can be taken as signposts to the general theme of learning to pray:

‘O Lord, we beseech thee mercifully to hear us, and grant that we to whom *thou hast given a hearty desire to pray ...*’ and ‘Lord of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things, *graft* in our hearts the love of thy Name, *increase* in us true religion, *nourish* us with all goodness and of thy great mercy *keep* us in the same ... through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.’

These well known prayers from the liturgy after Trinity should bring us up sharp with the awareness that this *hearty desire to pray* is not something we can take for granted, and that the very fact of praying at all is a God-given gift which is derived from our incorporation into Christ’s prayer, which he must increase and nourish so that we may be kept by the Holy Spirit in perseverance and stability in order to progress in prayer.

In fact, we must have the right dispositions and attitudes of body, mind and spirit in order to pray.

## **Why pray?**

My first point is to turn the title of this paper into a challenging question. Do we really desire to pray? We must always be aware of the increasing pressure of our present day humanistic, if not promiscuous society, which will say, ‘Why pray at all? Would it not be better to meet and serve Christ in my brother and bring the Church as a whole, and the Religious Life in particular, into the suffering world by a deeply God-centred and consecrated activity?’ Many would surely say that this alone is what makes prayer relevant today.

## **Prayer as part of redemptive action**

Therefore, first and foremost we must try to dispel this entirely false dichotomy between prayer as a purely Godward or personal activity on the one hand, and on the other as a compassionate involvement with the world’s pain, insecurity and frustration which would seem to make ‘prayer’ in the old traditional sense irrelevant. No one has expressed the truth of the real activity of praying better than Thomas Merton in an article which he was in the process of revising just before he died and which is as true for all committed Christians as for monks and nuns. He writes:

This age that by its very nature is a time of crisis and of revolution and of struggle, calls for the special searching and questioning which is the work of the monk in his silence, his meditation and his prayer. For the monk searches not only his own heart, but plunges deep into the heart of the world of which he remains a part although he seems to have ‘left it’.

This touches very deeply the whole concept of the coinherence of mankind and of the cosmic unity into which prayer leads us and of which silence is a necessary accompaniment. Merton continues:

In reality the monk withdraws from the world only in order to listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depths. The way of prayer is not a subtle escape from the Christian economy of the Incarnation and Redemption. It is a special way of following Christ, of sharing in his passion and resurrection and in his redemption of the world.

This is precisely the monk's [the Christian's] chief service to the world, this silence, this questioning, this listening, this humble and courageous exposure to what the world ignores about itself both good and evil. The monk [the Christian] who is truly a man of prayer, and who seriously faces the challenge of his vocation in all its depth, is by that very fact exposed to the emptiness, to the lack of authenticity, to the quest for fidelity and truth and to the lostness of modern man.

Thomas Merton has here immediately broadened our perspective of prayer, and helped us to see that when we pray we are being united with our Lord in his own redemptive action. We are, moreover, being drawn into the great cosmic battle against evil which is to bring into the here and now of our daily lives the fruits of Christ's victorious passion.

Seen in this light it would seem strange that we all find it difficult to recognise the urgency of prayer, and yet this is no modern problem. In the Gospel story we see the disciples at the foot of the mount of Transfiguration full of apostolic zeal and awareness that they had been commissioned by the Lord to preach the good news of the Kingdom and heal the sick as well as to cast our devils. But when it came to the crunch, the boy was still helpless and was still possessed by strange forces both spiritual and psychic which they were unable to dispel or heal. The occasion was one of tragedy drawing out the sympathy of the beholders and heightened because of the expectations of the parents and the disappointment of the disciples themselves at their own incapacity.

On this occasion it was not compassionate involvement that was lacking but the dynamic power of their prayer: 'This kind goeth not out except by prayer and fasting'. The disciples had been given the divine compassion and doubtless they had tried to carry out the Lord's wish with all of the concentration and force of their natural human energy, but this had been of no avail. In fact what was needed was the transforming power of prayer.

### **Prayer must be God's activity in us**

The prayer they had to learn was something more than carrying out a command, or seeking the intervention of divine power as a magical act. In the case of our Lord, his prayer was the complete expression of the union of his human will and energy with his Father's. In Jesus, God's activity was central, operating in and through the divine humanity un-let and unhindered. Despite our feeble efforts to pray we are constantly confronted by our own imperfect and often very self-expressive human faculties which get in the way of that simple and complete co-operation with the Spirit of God which is the essence of prayer. It is the prayer of the 'just man made perfect', that is of power.

There is another Gospel saying of our Lord about prayer which it is of value to remember in this context for it is often misunderstood: ‘Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name that will I do’. We, in our misplaced optimism, which we all too often confuse with the theological virtue of faith, thinking that all we have to do is make our prayer with the concluding invocation, ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord’, and then all will be well and God will give us the answer we want. If it does not we often get confused and dispirited, like the rich young man who could not rise up to the challenge of total commitment, and we tend to say, ‘There, I knew it wouldn’t work’, and then we wipe of prayer as another of those religious techniques which may have had their part to play in years gone by but not in this scientific computer-wonderland of the nineteen-seventies.

The first lesson we have to learn about prayer therefore is that it is God’s activity in us and not a self-activated process of our own.

*Look well, O soul, upon thyself  
 Lest spiritual ambition  
 Should mislead and blind thee  
 To thy essential task –  
     To wait in quietness  
     To knock and persevere in humble faith.  
 Knock thou in love, nor fail to keep thy place before the door  
 That when Christ wills – and not before –  
 He shall open unto thee the treasures of his love.*

*Grant me humility of soul  
 That I may grow in penitence  
 Dependent on the Holy Spirit’s light.*

### **Purity of heart – conversion of life**

The desert fathers, those great masters of the spiritual life, knew all about the essential condition of learning to pray. They called it ‘purity of heart’, without which there can be no true *metanoia* or conversion, for we only pray if our hearts are truly pure in the sense of our Lord’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’.

*Most loving Lord, hold thou me fast to live by thee  
 In all occasions of my life,  
 In the busyness of consciousness and where the physical doth sleep.  
 Keep thou my heart united to thyself  
 To be a temple of the Holy Ghost  
 That he may show me of thyself  
 And be the power of my soul  
 To be more fully one with thee.*

*Still thou the inmost depths of memory and will  
 That all my thinking may return  
 To know that thou dost hold my heart.  
 Cleanse thou the complex patterns of unconsciousness  
 That nothing should control the will  
 Or turn my heart from loving thee,  
 From serving thee in spirit and in truth,*

*That every thought and action of the day  
May be controlled and rendered to thy praise,  
Determining both thought and action to thy will,  
That while I sleep my heart may wake  
Rendering unto thee my love  
To glorify thy name,  
That all that is not wholly reconciled to thee  
May be resolved and rectified by love  
The flame which is the knowledge of thyself.*

The above quotations are from *The Face of Love* by Gilbert Shaw, one of the greatest of our Anglican spiritual directors. What he is saying in twentieth century language is what was said by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by Walter Hilton in *The Scale of Perfection* and by Father Baker OSB in *Holy Wisdom*: that there is only one way to learn to pray, and that is by first entering into the cell of self-knowledge and being ready to open all the avenues of our human faculties to the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit.

When the time for prayer comes we all know what it means when our mind, memory and imagination separately and all together seem to be in a state of confusion and over-activity, our bodies are restless and taut, and it is hard to be still for half an hour. We will think about this more in detail later, but for the moment let us take the word of St Simeon the New Theologian of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and absorb his teaching when he says:

Where there is deep humility [purity of heart] thither comes the Holy Spirit; when the grace of the worshipful Spirit comes, then man under its influence is filled with all purity. Then he sees God and God too looks on him.

This entering into the cell of self-knowledge brings us first of all up against the fact that prayer and daily life are indivisible: I must learn to pray as I am, and accept myself as I am and not as the ideal praying man that perhaps I would like to imagine myself to be. In other words, we must grow to understand ourselves and realise it is at the time when our natural passions are most active, our minds most distracted, that we must grow to accept ourselves as real persons, and offer ourselves to God in prayer at this point of tension.

At the beginning of our learning to pray, therefore, we must relate prayer to conversion of life. One is relatively useful without the other; and prayer, which is the fruit of true conversion, is an activity, an adventure and sometimes a dangerous one because at times it brings neither peace nor comfort, but challenge, conflict and new responsibility.

This is why so many old ways of prayer and books about prayer and meditation may seem to have ‘gone dead on us’, because subconsciously at least when we were using them we were hoping to get something for ourselves from prayer, at worst a sense of security and at best a growing sensible realisation and knowledge of God; instead of grasping that the essential heart of prayer is the throwing away of ourselves in complete self-oblation to God, so that he can do with us what he wills. Any form of prayer which does not stimulate love to give all soon becomes dry and sterile, a formal duty or even a mantra as in some forms of non-Christian prayer.

In this great tradition of Christian prayer, true prayer is the naked standing before God as a creature before our Creator and as a penitent before our Saviour.

This brings with it a growing awareness of the Majesty of God and a growing realisation of our utter nothingness before him. This is why all the great Saints have genuinely believed themselves to be the greatest of sinners.

‘My God, if you insist, make me know you’, exclaimed Pascal: and how often that is a reflection of our own inner longing for God as we gradually waken to the fact that without him we are nothing. When this happens, instead of thinking that everything must have gone wrong with our prayer, we must believe it is a real sign of growth in stability and maturity and cause for great thanksgiving when we are prepared to make that leap of faith at the call of God into a way of prayer that may seem dark and meaningless but which in effect, is an invitation of love to greater intimacy, though we ourselves may be aware of nothing except our inability to formulate our deepest longings.

Here we must be childlike and believe that God does know the inner secrets of our hearts and that there is no need for us to formulate them in words. At the same time we should have our times of prayer in which we must do something. If formal meditation is impossible at this time, and it probably will be, we must just try to make some simple, short and if possible spontaneous acts of faith, hope, love, thanksgiving and offering, in order to anchor ourselves and not drift on the one hand into self-centred depression, or on the other in the opposite direction, into a *wrong* form of what St Teresa of Avila called the prayer of quiet. That great woman, Saint and Doctor of the Church, constantly reminded her nuns that there is no true way of prayer except through growing union with our Lord Incarnate, and this is not incompatible with the darkness of the senses and the spirit at which I have just hinted, and which must come to all of us if we are earnest in prayer, and which, is of course, what the great books of St John of the Cross on mystical prayer are all about.

### **Use of creative faculties in early stages of prayer**

In the early stages of what in the old days would have been called formal meditation it is perfectly right that we should use our natural creative gifts as part of our learning to pray, provided that they are seen as a means to an end and not an end in themselves for our natural enjoyment. For example, some may be encouraged by their love of poetry to express their desire for God in prayer, writing prose or verse. Another with artistic gifts may have the opportunity to learn to paint in order more particularly to direct art and prayer into unity. Others may find real inspiration in using reproductions of the old masters to relate the beauty of visual form to biblical and other spiritual writings in order to stimulate their affective acts of prayer.

### **The night of faith**

But all of this must be seen as a stage of the way by which the Holy Spirit leads us into the night of faith and begins to strip the soul of all dependency on natural aids to prayer. We must be ready to give up these prayerful activities and lay ourselves open to a deeper degree of purification of the faculties – a stage when it will largely seem to us that we are doing nothing – to prepare us for the transition from activity to passivity in prayer as God’s way of preparing us to *be* rather than make acts of love.

We are being led to perceive things as a whole in relation to their final end and the will of God, and this is an enrichment both of knowledge and of energy. It is an enrichment of knowledge as our eyes are opened to see things as they are in the sight of God and in their true effect as they are related to others: and it is an enrichment of energy as our prayer is directed to one end, namely, that all may be reconciled to God in the judgement, so that the energising life and love of God is condensed into one

channel and therefore its generating power is increased. Instead of dissipating our knowledge and the energy of God's healing power by passing feverishly from one point to another and trying to work our ways and means, we lift up all into the will and purpose of God.

I would like to draw your attention to a quotation from the spiritual letters of Dom John Chapman, one time Abbot of Downside. He underlines what I have tried to state that some form of night of the senses is common to everyone and that the widespread assumption that prayer will bring much sensible consolation is extremely misleading. Dom Chapman advises one of his penitents:

We must aim at being in the desert, and not at any consciousness of God's grace. One is inclined to say, 'I am so weak I cannot go on like this', but God knows best. Make up your mind once and for all that dryness is best and you will find you are frightened of having anything else.

In other words, which perhaps some of us understand more easily, we might say that the agony of frustration which many learners of prayer feel and which I certainly tend to feel when confronted with the very many paperback books bearing such a title as 'How to Pray' is analogous to the sort of anguish a thirsty man feels if given an extract from a chemistry textbook on water and its properties when all he is longing for is a glass of water to drink.

If instead of following our formal meditations, our schemes and techniques which we have all, at one time or another, had to practice, and rightly so, we could realise the inner meaning of such words as 'Jesus is prayer', I believe much of this thirst and our own sense of hopelessness and inability to pray would be quenched with the living water of God's love whether we were aware of it or not. Something that has got rather lost sight of in much of our current thinking about prayer is just this need, and it is expressed in the hymn, 'Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love'.

To set us raying, many of us need to relate our desire for God, and what God is and what he does in Jesus, as expressed in our 'private prayer' with our participation in the Eucharist and Office where we are all drawn into and become part of the mighty redemptive acts of God. One of the dangers of the past has been the dichotomy between private and Eucharistic prayer, whereas in reality they complement each other. One of the unspeakable benefits which religious all share, and in which equally all Christians can participate if they will, is the constant hearing of the 'old, old story' through the words and actions of the Office and Eucharist, if only we would wake up and listen. Listening in prayer is very important, and we shall think more about it later.

### **False mysticism**

We must in these days take the responsibility of learning to pray seriously, because many, especially from among the younger generation, are looking for forms of non-Christian transcendental experience. A number of you may no doubt be in close contact with those working amongst drug addicts or even with those experimenting with drugs in their craving for experience beyond that of our normal physical or mental life. It is a modern form of misunderstood and false mysticism and mysticality, always likely to be stimulated by a promiscuous society such as ours today, and it also manifests in the unhealthy curiosity and speculation about the supranormal – I am not saying the spiritual. Hence the expanding interest in magic and psychic



experience of one kind or another, an indication of which is the fact that radio and television think nothing of putting on programmes dealing with witchcraft and exorcism of places and people as documentaries that will both evoke universal interest and at times almost be taken for granted.

### **Prayer brings in the power of God**

We must see all this against the background of the inalienable purposes of God and the eternal mysteries of the faith, and realise that the world will not be brought back to an acknowledgement of the power of Christ unless we, who represent the praying heart of the Church, have indeed prayed back the cross and its message of love into the centre of Christian witness. 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me'. By the generosity of our self-oblation as we give ourselves to be living witnesses of the principles of sacrifice and as we seek in prayer to be drawn into deeper union with our Lord in his passion, we shall be giving ourselves to be participators in his continuous intercession to draw us and all men into unity and into knowledge of himself.

Prayer as union with God is the primary means of bringing the power of the love of God to expose, judge and correct the misuse of power: in the words of St John of the Cross, 'To put love in where love is not'. Through the act of God in taking the manhood into the Godhead, the whole energy of man has been redirected into his perfect offering, and the spiritual powers that would enslave man have been overcome. It is not through forcing the human will but through drawing it to recognise and cooperate with the power of God expressed in love that we in the faithful following of our various vocations bear witness to the power of redeeming love. It is through our lives offered in union with Christ's intercessory prayer that the energy of God is both generated and set free for the reversal of evil.

What has been said so far may be summed up as follows

- The Holy Spirit is the initiator of all prayer which is a gift from God.
- We must be prepared to pay the cost of having the ground of our soul prepared for God's action. Think of the parable of the sower in this context.
- This preparation will entail long periods when our faith and fidelity will be tested to the utmost both in prayer and in daily life, for we cannot separate the two.
- All our prayer activities must be seen as means and not as ends in themselves, because they are to lead us to the familiar friendship with Jesus which Thomas a Kempis expresses to the full in chapter 7 of Book Two of *The Imitation of Christ*.
- If you truly desire a life of prayer, the way to get it is by praying.

As Thomas Merton tells us:

In prayer we discover what we already have through the indwelling Spirit of God and incorporation through baptism into Christ. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.

## **Prayer – a love affair with God**

Graciously look upon me, O Holy Spirit of God, and give me for my hallowing, thoughts that pass into prayer, prayer that passes into love and love that passes into life with thee forever.

Eric Milner-White, late Dean of York Minster

Prayer is essentially a love affair with God, not schemes or techniques or ways of prayer, but the most direct open approach of each of one us as a person to God our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier – beyond all methods or ideas. Therefore we should implore the Holy Spirit to teach us, for as St Paul reminds us, he prays within us – he is our director. We must be confident that he will bring us to the desired goal if we are prepared to pay the cost because God's love is always drawing us to himself. He draws: we respond – 'Draw us, we will run after thee'; 'We love him because he first loved us'.

Above everything else let us be clear that what we are seeking in prayer is God himself; not thoughts about him nor about ourselves in relation to him. Years ago I read a life of a Carmelite nun; I cannot remember her name, but she was Prioress of the Dijon Convent just before Elizabeth of the Trinity went there. She says about prayer:

In coming to prayer you must put yourself in the presence not of something but of Someone; you have confrontation not with an idea, you are face to face with a living being who listens to you, speaks to you and prepares to give you everything. In fact you stand *face au Dieu vivant*.

To stand before the living God, what an adventure; to stand before the living God not in a vague way in a place we call heaven, but in the here and now of our moment to moment living, by, and with and in Christ, as we are made part of his prayer and his offering to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Father Benson SSJE, the founder of the Mission Priests of St John the Evangelist says, 'The soul in its littleness looks upon God in his greatness and loves him; and God in his greatness looks upon the soul in its littleness and loves it'.

Prayer, then, is a love affair and that entails *dialogue*. There is always a danger that we may seem to have so many prayerful obligations to fulfil that this aspect gets overlaid. Even the Eucharist and the daily Office can at times become very much a duty to be performed.

We have to turn that boredom into love and sacrificial offering. And perhaps all the countless opportunities of learning the lessons of praying love may be thought of as equivalent to the interminable letters and phone calls that happen before any sort of permanent relationship is established in the initial stages of a love affair between a man and a woman. The important thing is that these times of communication must not be mistaken for the engagement itself, or for the final oblation of each to the other in the fullness of love.

## **Listening prayer**

When one really loves, words become less important and listening brings deeper awareness and greater sensitivity to the meaning of love. This is what I meant above by listening prayer. It is part of the great necessity there is to deepen our silence,

certainly interiorly, and possibly exteriorly also, and it marks the transition from the more active forms of prayer such as meditation or affective prayer to the quieter and more receptive contemplative prayer.

In First Corinthians, chapter two, St Paul says, 'These are the things that God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God'. To hear these 'deep' things we need to be still and listen. The positive aspect of silence cannot be too much stressed for it is little understood. As the Rule of the Sisters of the Love of God reminds us the spirit of silence must be faithfully cultivated,

For it prepares the way for the union of the soul with the will of God and is an offering of the perpetual reverence to his majesty... it should be remembered that silence must cover all the levels of the conscious life; there must be an outward silence of speech and movement, a silence of the mind for the overcoming of vain imaginations and distractions and a silence of the soul in the surrender of the will to be still and know that God is God, leading to a silence of spirit which is the preparation for the fullness of contemplation.

The Rule is then very practical, and tells us that silence can be broken not only by speech and hurried unrecollected movement, but also by idle curiosity, for it is in stillness that all our being is trained for deeper recollection.

Probably that word 'recollection' is one about which we have all had difficulty from time to time. We tend to think that we should try to have the conscious awareness of God continually in our minds, and this is, of course, impossible if we are to do our work conscientiously and thoughtfully. Obviously recollection should mean rather that we should have a lively sense of really *realising* what it is we are doing wherever we are, whether at the Eucharist, teaching attending classes ourselves, looking after others; all our activity is directed to the one centre, God, out of which and into which all our prayer and loving service flows. In other words recollection is a sensitive awareness that everything we think or touch has God as its centre. As Lubienska de Lenval says somewhere, 'Monastic silence is not content with exorcising noise; it submits the body and soul to the rhythm of the spirit'.

### **Attentive silence**

What does this mean in relation to our prayer? A relationship can be stunted and actually become very boring if one or other participant keeps up a continuous monologue. If prayer is a relationship with God let us not be afraid of being silent, for it is in silence that God will reveal to us the riches of his love, for as we shall see shortly, it must be a listening attentive silence or otherwise prayer time may become a sleep time! To quote again from Thomas Merton:

The religious in his silence, his meditation and prayer searches not only his own heart but plunges deep into the heart of the world of which he remains a part although he seems to have left it... He withdraws in order to listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depths.

This is the real meaning of intercession: not telling God in your own words of the needs and sorrows of the world, but through your own silent attentive spirit focussing the love of God where the need is greatest.

Silence, therefore, is the doorway through which we pass to a deeper understanding of Christ's prayer for the world, and we must not be afraid to feel within ourselves some of those violent passions and fears which we believe prayer will bring to Christ's reconciliation. As Christians we must not try to escape the burden of sharing in the sorrows of mankind. 'No man is an island', as John Donne reminds us, and today the whole principal of coinherence, or which the novels of Charles Williams are vivid examples, bring this truth home to us in a very realistic and inescapable way. This kind of prayer is both costly and a privilege, for as we learn to see our part in this burden of man's sin, something of the prayer of Christ is re-enacted in us. As Fr Maurice Villain SM says in a meditation on the High Priestly Prayer of Christ, we must be 'the welcoming milieu in which this prayer can continue to reverberate'. Can we therefore afford to neglect either silence or listening which are both instruments to enable our Lord to pray freely in us?

We cannot have this silence if we are keeping ourselves on the top level, not necessarily of busyness, because busyness may be what God wills for us, but if we lose the dimension of being in Christ's prayer and reconciliation.

Listening is a real ingredient of silence. In the modern rush of the world today we all know how difficult it is when we stop talking to get back 'into the silence' as we say. Our mind continues to work and fastens on to the trivialities, our emotions play up in some way or another, our will is struggling for or against some aspect of self. The silence we need to aim at as a starting point is something which seems to be a contradiction, for we must be on the one hand completely alert and on the other equally relaxed and at rest.

Before I leave this question of 'listening silence' may I quote one of my favourite prayers from Michel Quoist in his well-known book *Prayers of Life*:

*I have just hung up; why did he telephone?  
I don't know ... Oh! I get it ...  
I talked a lot and listened very little.*

*Forgive me, Lord, it was a monologue and not a dialogue.  
I explained my idea and I did not get his;  
Since I didn't listen, I learned nothing.  
Since I didn't listen, I didn't help.  
Since I didn't listen, we didn't communicate.*

*Forgive me, Lord, for we were connected,  
And now we are cut off.*

'Forgive me, Lord, for we were connected, and not we are cut off'. It is not only our own personal relationship with God that will be diminished by lack of silence, but perhaps our failure or over-talkativeness will have cut off direction between God and someone else. This is part of the cost and challenge of coinherence. Our dissipation of mind, our inability and lack of courage to face ourself or to be vulnerable to others, or to endure perseveringly in prayer is, as Kierkegaard tells us, 'the battlefield in which we conquer by letting God conquer'. Let us remember when prayer seems dead and lifeless that this is the moment when, by keeping our attention Godward, either by prayerful reading of the Bible, or by short but sincere affective

acts, or even by the sheer offering of our will to be united with his, God may not only give us his grace in ways we cannot know, but, even more important, use our offering for others.

### **Relaxation as preparation for prayer**

If we keep our attention in prayer directed Godward, let this be a relaxed reflection, a 'brooding prayer' as it has sometimes been called, not a concentration of the mind which can produce strain in many ways and which the kindly author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* warned us against when he said over-concentration in prayer 'might hurt your poor heads!'

If we are straining in our prayer or putting a wrong emphasis on our own activity in prayer this will probably manifest itself by pressure on our nerves from which can come lack of charity. There is often need for increased watchfulness when we are making some special spiritual effort as during Lent or before or after the great festivals. We are intent on our prayer but there is too much emphasis on our own effort and on concentration, rather than on consecrated attention to God.

It is well to realise the importance of the rhythm of activity and rest, of taking and assimilating in every stage of the spiritual life, and to grasp the fact that this is an essential rhythm of life. A tired mind will never meditate with true understanding; an overstrained emotion and desire will fail to be truly attentive to God and will seek relief in the vain imagination of its own heart or will fall back into the impotence of the sense of its own inadequacy or frustration.

Today through psychology we know something more than we did about the interaction of body and soul which together make the whole man and which work together in the actual process we call prayer. This is why I tried to emphasise that each of our faculties must be purified and unified in order that we may be ready for the Holy Spirit to bring our prayer to fruition.

There was a time, especially perhaps in the religious life, when we were too afraid of being natural, and so relaxation as a form of preparation for prayer would not have been thought of, at least not in those terms. Rather, I am sure, we of the older generation were trained to kneel upright with folded hands and maintain a uniform deportment throughout our times of prayer. This, I have no doubt is a very necessary stage that most of us need to go through at one time or another. But I think it is equally true to say that most novices today have to learn, not only to *live* with the tensions and fears both mental and physical with which they enter, but also learn to *use* them and let them become transformed by the corporate life of the community in the deepening of their prayer life in Christ. This is very important because we do communicate anxiety and tension to one another without knowing it. So in learning to pray there is a real need to know how to deal with our probably over tensed-up bodies. Sometime ago a Roman Catholic psychiatrist showed us how to relax as a preparation for prayer especially in the relating of prayer to our breathing. *Christian Yoga* by Dom Dechanet is a very useful book on this subject of relating relaxation to prayer and suggesting also how there may be great varieties of postures in prayer according to our natural temperaments. Some may pray best standing, others kneeling or prostrate on the floor or sitting quietly relaxed in a chair with hands on the knees and head held upright.

At one stage you would have seen our psychiatrist friend teaching us to breathe lying on the floor in order to help us draw together all the various levels of our physical nature into one unity, and also to illustrate how the natural rhythms of our life vitally affect the way each one of us prays.

## **Rhythm prayer**

This leads us on to what our Orthodox brethren would call ‘learning to pray always’ and indeed this relation of prayer to our breathing seems to bring us naturally to the rhythmical recitation of the name of Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, or just the word ‘God’ or the recitation of the Gloria or the Sanctus or some phrase from the Our Father. Here again each one of us must find her own rhythm and interpretation of St Paul’s injunction to ‘pray always’. But I am sure that this gentle breathing out of the holy name or its equivalent is the real way to prevent our prayer becoming ‘departmentalised’, if I may use such a word.

We will not go into the question of liturgy here, although of course it is the source of all our prayer, and all our private prayer must flow from it and into it, but I am sure it is the continuing prayer of the heart which goes on throughout the day almost unconsciously once the habit has been established that brings our life into a unity and is perhaps the answer to the age long difficulty of the Marthas understanding the Marys and vice versa.

## **The use of time**

My next point is about the use of time, that illusive commodity, for this too is a real part of learning to pray. The Christian has always accepted the purpose of time, for it is in time that God is magnified through the praise of his creatures and the conformity of their ways to his. It is in time that all that is evil and rebels against or falls short of the divine purpose is being overcome through the prayer that is *in Christo*. We as religious share in the common lot of mankind who say, that there is no time for this or for that, and yet since we are children of time as well as of eternity, we must come to terms with it. It is a fact that event while I am talking to you what was the future this morning has caught up with us and is now the present. The past is past and we can do nothing about it except leave it to the mercy of God, but in the sanctification of the present moment past and future can become part of our Lord’s oblation and satisfaction. There is one book at least on spirituality which can never be outdated and that is de Caussade’s *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, for there he shows us exactly what it means to live in the present, from moment to moment sanctifying the daily steps in time which is true prayer.

For most of us there comes a time when we have to live largely on ‘borrowed time’ in the worldly sense of those words. So let us once again use some words from Michel Quoist from *Prayers of Life*:

*I am not asking you tonight, Lord, for time to do this and then that  
But your grace to do conscientiously, in the time that you give me, what you want me to do.*

I have quoted above Thomas Merton as saying that in prayer we discover that everything has been given us in Christ. In the same context he gives us this very necessary warning:

The trouble is that we aren’t taking time to experience what we already possess.

If we really want to pray we shall have to give time to learning its lessons. We are free to love, it is true, and every moment of the day is God’s good time, but we must be realistic and give ourselves time in order to realise what we truly are seeking.

Perhaps we all tend to worry too much about ourselves in prayer, when all we need to do is to be full of gratitude, praise and thanksgiving that Jesus can and will pray in us if we will let him.

### **What holds us back?**

The basic question we should ask ourselves is, I suggest, if we are aware that our prayer is not developing, what is holding me back? Am I making compromises somehow, somewhere, in daily life? Am I substituting activity for growth?

*The breakthrough into the riches of Christ which we already possess, so that they become living realities in our life is only accomplished by the complete acceptance of the cross at that point of demand where it will probably ask most of us.* There are no short cuts to prayer unless God himself gives us the gift of infused contemplation. It is at the foot of the cross that true prayer begins and will grow most richly and quickly as we learn to say *yes* to what God asks of us.

I should like to stress towards the end of this necessarily compressed and generalised consideration of learning to pray, that it is with intention that I have not tried to sketch the well trodden paths of ascetic preparation for prayer known traditionally as the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways, at least under those names.

I am sure it is true today, that men and women who are really desirous to pray are being led into a simpler and less formulated way of contemplative prayer more quickly than the old ways of meditation generally encouraged when the mind and the imagination played a large part in reflective consideration. But having so said, I think it is equally important that we should not lean over backwards and say that no structures are needed and that we can pass into contemplative prayer at will.

### **Definition of contemplation**

We run into confusion at the start by using the word ‘contemplation’/ There is a natural contemplation of the artistic or reflective character who temperamentally finds formulated meditation in prayer very difficult and therefore desires merely ‘to be quiet’. But this is a very different thing from infused contemplation which is a gift of God and which he bestows when and to whom he wills. The first undoubted truth about contemplative prayer upon which all masters of the spiritual life agree is that God gives his gifts when, where and how he chooses. He can as easily give the gift of contemplation to a busy housewife as to a cloistered nun.

In contemplate God acts alone in absolute freedom. The awareness, because it is an awareness, of contemplation, may come suddenly in the middle of some other exercise of prayer or even when the mind is occupied with other things. God, as it were, takes over, and the experience of union that follows is wholly his operation and may go as suddenly as it came – ‘the Lord gave, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord’. But the soul is left in no doubt that it has been visited by God and also that the whole experience is God’s act and nothing of her own endeavouring. She can no more command that presence than she can delay its withdrawal. She can only adore, and know herself to be a great sinner.

### **Result of contemplation**

The result of such visitation is a deeper penitence in the soul, a joyous rising up to accomplish God’s will and a readiness to suffer for him. Progress in this contemplative way is best gauged by our willingness to suffer, but the soul can rarely tell at this point where or how far she may be on the road. Indeed, it is better as I have

said before, not to try to know, but only to learn to obey and to give ever more generously in self-sacrifice.

More than this I think it would be unwise to say about contemplation at this point lest we should become self-conscious and wonder where we go from there. I would reiterate for us all that our minds, at least when we begin our prayer, must not be left *in vacuo*, and even if meditative thought or affective acts seem meaningless we must at least as a result of our participation in the Liturgy and the Divine Office, of our reading and studying the scriptures and the works of the spiritual masters, have a 'store-cupboard' of material on which we can brood and by which our wills will be stimulated to be more truly conformed to God's will and so to manifest in our lives in Christ's love and compassion one to another. As I have said so often, and this is the crucial test, prayer must overflow into life, and the life must be seen to be transformed by the prayer.

### **The end of man – union with God in love**

We must always remember that the prayer in itself is not the end of man's search, though it is an essential means to his union with God in love. Man was made for union with God, and God himself is the goal of the journey. Prayer may indeed be the starting of man's search and must be carried out, as we have already seen, through the dependence of a complete simplicity 'costing not less than everything', to quote TS Eliot's words in the poem 'Little Gidding'. We must see this adventure of prayer not as a great good for ourselves but principally as an invitation from our Lord who desires our ever-increasing union with him. We are to advance from glory to glory.

The ultimate danger would be if we ever reached the point in prayer of saying, I have gone so far and that is enough. As in the case of the Church of Laodicea without sense of sin or of grace misused or neglected there would grow a lukewarmness which could truly prevent us from going the whole way and make us stop short of that true conversion without which there can be no true union. That indeed would be not so much a Lucifer-like willed decision but much more a culpable indecision.

There must be no half-committal, no uncertainty of hesitation between self-possession and being God-possessed, no playing safe in our Christian commitment, for it has been well said that prayer is not an easy way of getting what we want but a difficult way of becoming what God wants us to be. In prayer, as in all Christian living, we have to take genuine risks, yet the blessed assurance is always ours that if we are faithful, if we harness our energies and keep our perspective right, the goal of the love of God is unlimited.

Contemplation, the life of the spirit, becomes more and more the inspiration of action, and through the long training of a life lived under the holy vows and in the power of prayer and true community unity, the vision grows clearer and all our acts and thoughts do become more worshipful, more charged with the sense of the power and presence of God, until such time as this life *in via* is over and there will no be no longer any need of prayer for, as St John says, 'We shall see him as he is'.

### **Why pray?**

I feel we can most rightly conclude with the question with which we began, 'Why should we pray?' I do not think it is an oversimplification if I should give you the answer in one sentence: *so that we can take our part in the underlying spiritual conflict*. This I feel is a wholly relevant answer, because you are religious being trained to give your Christian witness now in this time and age.



### **The underlying spiritual conflict**

Each one of us when first taken into Christ by Baptism was pledged to fight manfully under Christ's banner. Think for a while of this great conflict, the warfare of the Lord. Enlarge your minds, reach out beyond the things that are obvious and remember that this conflict is a conflict of spirit although we see it being fought out in the arena of history. The spirit world holds the origin of those things we know by observation. The forms of evil are sufficiently clear before our eyes, sufficiently insistent in the pain they bring into our lives and into the lives of those we love, but Evil itself is a far stronger force, a power in the spirit world in direct revolt against God.

In this great conflict in the eternal order, the kingdom of God is that which is steadfast, sure, unshakeable and realised for each one of us by prayer. The presence of evil – that is the aggressor. Where it began is not for us to know. How it began we cannot understand. What we know is that there is eternal holiness above and beyond all time and the kingdom of God whose law is love and holiness, and against that there arises somewhere in the spirit world the presence of evil, the spirit of revolt.

The conflict may seem long drawn out but the ultimate victory of the kingdom of God is certain. We are so held in temporal conditions that we are apt to forget the eternal security of the city of God, the absolute certainty of the glorious end that shall be.

Here surely is the spirit of the Christian calling: in the warfare of God obedience is the weapon of the world's Redeemer, the sovereignty of God is that for which he stands. Our vocation is first for Christ and then to give our lives in the service of redeeming love, so to let the Holy Spirit perfect Christ within us that we shall effectively carry on his great work insofar as he entrusts it to our care. But there needs must be the perfecting of the Christ life within: it is he who is to be prayer in us, patience in us, to be compassion and fortitude in us, to intercede in us, to be the love of God in us, the love that inspires and keeps us unflagging and generous in our response. He is the first and one and only true sacrifice. We cannot go where he has not gone or do what he has not done. Only there where he is already can we in him triumph. Only in proportion as we are impregnated with his spirit shall we learn something of the vision he continually saw.

Meanwhile we must learn to give ourselves with generous hearts to the warfare to which we are pledged, the particular form of warfare to which by vocation we are called. Is not our lifelong study the growing up into Christ that Christ may be formed in us, more and more in possession, filling up our narrowness with his fullness, supporting us with his strength, inflaming our hearts with his own love for us, not for ourselves alone, but for those greater purposes, the spirit warfare of God against the insurgent powers of evil in the world. To quote Fr Gilbert Shaw once again:

*Increase, O Lord, the number who are called  
To seek and give both time and quietude  
For the work of prayer and penitence  
In this age of dark confusion.*