

Minutes With The Master

On Prayer and Meditation

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The Retreat lecture was over. As the Sodalists filed reverently out of the chapel one of them seemed more than a little agitated. As soon as she got outside the door, she could control herself no longer. “Did you ever hear the like,” she said, turning to her neighbour indignantly, “did you ever hear the like?... He just puts the material before us and we meditate on it afterwards! What does he think we are? Meditate! Sure I can’t even concentrate.” Many people share this good lady’s misconception concerning meditation. The word fills them with dread: there is an icy chill in its every syllable. It brings to their minds pictures of contemplative monks, cowed and silent, pacing austere corridors, wrapped in the deepest thought, or of nuns, hushed in prayer, bowed low before the Blessed Sacrament. We are very apt to feel that meditation is utterly beyond us ordinary folk who live in the busy world where dishes have to be washed, meals prepared and a thousand and one other tasks attended to — not to mention the harmless amusements that it is our right to enjoy. But, please pardon me for saying so, this is a nonsensical notion! Of course you can meditate! You do meditate — many times a day!

Let us suppose for a moment — a thing that sometimes can happen — a friend makes an insulting remark about you in the company of others and you overhear it. You blush, scarlet, suddenly catch your breath but pretend that you have noticed nothing! But you are wounded to the quick. Later on in the day, when you are alone, what happens? You begin to meditate! Subject of your meditation? Insult of Mrs. Jones. Your mind works something like this. First, you recall the scene. How vividly it comes back to your mind: all the people that were there, the subject of the conversation, the expression on good Mrs. Jones’s dear face. You hear again the nasty remark she made about you, you recall the very words she used, the sarcastic inflection of her beautiful voice... you see again the reactions of her hearers... amusement, distaste, laughter. Perhaps you find by this time that you are grinding your teeth or clenching your fists or, maybe, that your cheeks are getting hot! But you have taken the first step in any meditation, recalling the scene or subject we have to think upon. Was it so extraordinarily difficult?

Now for stage number two. You begin to reflect. “Wasn’t that a very mean thing for Mrs. Jones to say?... I wouldn’t mind so much if it was even true... I’ve been so kind to her... I really thought she was a good friend of mine... How disloyal of her... and before all those people too: before George and Mr. Murphy... What will they think about me now?... They will probably think -it is true... Of course, I shouldn’t be surprised. I should have known that woman was like that... You can’t make a silk purse... I think I’ll go and tell Mr. Murphy that it is completely untrue; that Jones said it because she is a jealous old cat... (Your meditation is warming up now!) No, I won’t... I’ll just ignore the whole thing.”

Now you are entering on the third and final stage of a meditation: you resolve. You end your train of thought by saying to yourself: “Yes, I’ll ignore the whole thing, but the next time I meet Mrs. Jones I’ll cut her dead!”

...You have made a perfect meditation — without even knowing it! But, alas, you did not make it of a very fruitful subject. You probably do feel awed when spiritual authors tell you that “meditation consists in exercising the three faculties of the soul, memory, understanding and will.” You are hardly to be blamed if you imagine such a thing is beyond you. But all they mean by this technical language is that you should “recall some subject to your mind, reflect upon it and resolve about it”.

Now, let us take a more fruitful subject for meditation, one more apt to produce holy thoughts and good resolutions and so draw us closer to Our Lord. Let us choose Herod’s insult to Christ.

Recall the scene: see the dissolute king leaning forward on his throne, the dissipated courtiers watching on; Our Lord, dignified and silent. Listen to the words... the sniggers... Watch the fool’s garment being thrown on His shoulders... the coarse, ribald laughter.

Next, reflect on the scene: many thoughts must surely crowd into your mind... Ponder them quietly. What a judge! Dissolute, immoral, unjust. What a Prisoner! God made man... innocent, spotless, sensitive, refined, yet dignified, majestic, calm, controlled, complete master of the situation, “and He answered not a word.” What a sentence! A fool’s garment for a God all wise. Many, many other thoughts must come to you as you ponder the scene. The more personal to you, the better.

Lastly, resolve: This resolution will flow from your thoughtful consideration; it will be the outcome of your reflection. Perhaps it may be to bear insults silently in order to be more like your suffering Master... or to refrain from mocking others because in mocking them, you mock Christ Himself. Whatsoever you do to the least of these, My brethren, you do unto Me.

Is it so very difficult to do this? Surely not! Of course you can meditate.

[What is said in the following pages applies, of course, to members of the various Sodalities within the Church. But it also applies to everyone within the Church since we are ALL called to become Holy, and everyone of us needs to be actively involved in the building up of the Body of Christ in our parishes and Dioceses. To do this, we MUST undertake a commitment to regular (daily) prayer.]

“STILL, IT’S NOT SO EASY!”

It is a consoling thing to remember that praying itself is not so hard. It is the most natural thing in the world. It’s the making it every day that costs. If you are a Sodalist or a member of some other organisation that prescribes about a quarter of an hour’s mental prayer daily you may be inclined to disagree with these first few pages and protest: “but still, it’s not so easy!” The answer to that is, I think, that to do anything every day is difficult. Take learning the piano for example. You may be musical and anxious to become a great pianist. You start with enthusiasm and high resolve.

After a while daily practice palls; you become bored and tempted to give the whole thing up. If you are to get anywhere, you must survive that period of boredom. For it is a law of life that no pursuit yields us full enjoyment unless we conquer a period of tedium that comes after the feeling of novelty has worn thin.

You can’t capture the rapture of music until you have overcome the boredom of scales. Golf is torture till you have mastered the strokes. Acting gives no thrill till lines have been learned and

actions rehearsed. It is the same with prayer. We cannot succeed unless we practise it day after day. Then we cannot do without it.

“But I Can’t Get Time.”

You will never get time for anything. Time just flows on remorselessly. You must make time to do the things you want to do. What happens on a day when you are almost completely free from school or office and have a few little jobs to do? Bedtime arrives and you find yourself saying: “Gosh, I got nothing done to-day!” It is a very strange fact, but it is true, isn’t it? What’s the reason? You had plenty of time but you just didn’t make the time to do the jobs you should have done. On, a very busy day, if you want to buy a new dress or change a book in the library or do something else you are very anxious to do, you will get it done. You make the time! So it is with our prayer. If we consider it really important, we will make time for it. And is your day, honestly, so very crowded? Are there not many idle moments, many quarter-hours spent dawdling over newspapers, drinking coffee, gossiping over the phone, beautifying yourself, or just doing nothing, sprawling in an arm-chair, hardly listening to the radio at your elbow?

Making time for prayer means making a definite time. No use yawning lazily in the morning and saying: “I will make my mental prayer to-day.” You won’t unless you fix a definite time... before going out to work, at the lunch break, at five-thirty, before setting out for the pictures or dressing for the dance. That little word “before” is vitally important! Fix your time for prayer before some event rather than after it. Above all, don’t wait till the very end of the day. You will hear yourself saying: “I’m so very tired to-night.” “I’ve done enough praying for one day.” “I have to get up very early to-morrow.” “Sure, I’ll make it in bed!” There is nothing like warm blankets and soft pillows for soothing little qualms of conscience.

If you are a Sodalist or belong to some other organization that binds you by rule to make daily mental prayer, I would like you now to be fearlessly honest with yourself. Please avoid all pious humbug. Answer the following questions truthfully to yourself and you will get some idea of how you stand in this question of daily prayer.

- (a) Does your mental prayer present no problem to you because you just don’t bother about it at all?
- (b) Do you do it now and again but don’t worry whether you do it or not?
- (c) Are you anxious to do it every day but find that it drops out very often? Fairly often?
- (d) Do you do it every day, but find it very hard and feel that it is not much use or worth the trouble?

If you must answer yes to one of these questions, then I would ask you to make a firm resolution to make your mental prayer faithfully every day. What I have said and what I am going to say, I hope, may help you in your effort.

But first, you must resolve to try hard and continue, to try after failure.

THE REASON WHY...

“Why all this fuss about this rule about daily prayer?” you may be tempted to ask somewhat impatiently. “. Why are Directors and writers always harping on it? We know its Important!” But the sad truth of the matter is that, although we admit in theory that daily prayer is vital, in practice,

it does not always appear that this conviction is really deep, strong and true. It would be well worth your while to ponder prayerfully that very fundamental question: "Why is prayer so important?"

Most of us are fairly normal people. We mix with the crowd; play with our companions, experience, more or less, the same joys and sorrows as others. Without much fuss, we manage to get along all right; we follow the others who have gone before us. Living this carefree life, it can come as a terrible shock to me to realise that I can't just follow other people into Heaven. By my own deliberate personal co-operation with God's grace, I must merit it for myself. I can also lose it. And there is no dodging the issue: one day I shall be either in Heaven or in Hell. Either... or... there is no third destiny for me. When this rather appalling thought comes to us, well may we feel afraid and ask anxiously:

"How can I make sure of saving my soul? I am so weak. The glamour of the world and sin are so alluring. Evil often entices me."

If you do fifteen minutes prayer every day, you need have no fear: you can be sure of saving your soul.

This is not just a pious thought thrown out to buttress your resolution to keep your rule about daily mental prayer. It is sound common sense. You cannot go far wrong if you go down on your knees for a quarter of an hour every day. You may fall into sin, yes, but if you are faithful to your prayer, you will see the error of your ways and God will grant you grace to repent and return to Him. "You will give up," says Saint Alphonsus Ligouri, "either your prayer or your sin." Saint Robert Bellarmine, a Doctor of the Church, one of the greatest theologians, a man who weighed all his words carefully and was never given to uttering pious extravagances, says, with the deepest conviction:

"I will guarantee the eternal salvation of any soul who does fifteen minutes prayer a day."

In the Likeness of Christ.

But mental prayer does a lot more for us than get us into Heaven. It helps us to become daily more Christ like. Did you ever notice how people who spend a lot of time together often grow rather alike in various ways? Especially is this the case if they know each other intimately and grow to love each other dearly. They come to think about things in much the same way. You will hear them using the same expressions, the same words. Sometimes, even, you will detect one of them developing, unconsciously perhaps, a gesture or mannerism of the other. Knowledge of another leads to love and love leads to imitation. In our daily prayer, we spend our time with Christ. We accompany Him again through the scenes of His Childhood, the labours of his Public Life, the sorrows of His Passion, the joys of His Resurrection. We learn to know Him more intimately to love Him more ardently. For to know Him is to love Him, so great is the captivating charm of His Personality. So, almost without knowing it, we begin to imitate Him. Our lives gradually become transformed into the likeness of His. We commence to shed his fragrance everywhere we go.

Furthermore, daily mental prayer keeps fresh in our mind the thought that we work in a Sodality for God and that the task we do is a spiritual one. Its success will depend on God's grace given to ourselves and granted to others because of our prayers. "The man who does not pray," says an eminent Jesuit writer of long ago, "even though he be very active, cannot do much for God. At best, he only works for God. But the man who prays achieves great things, because God works through him." The work of a Sodality in which every member makes their daily mental prayer cannot but

achieve great things for God. The work of a Sodality in which any member does not, cannot but be somewhat marred.

When we neglect our mental prayer, we tend to forget that our work is a spiritual one. We allow a human element into Sodality activities that tends to rob them of their effectiveness. We think more of ourselves than of souls and God's glory.

We oppose Miss X's plan, not because it is unsound, but because she did not co-operate with ours. We don't turn up at the Club on our night because Tom was absent on his. Because we were not elected to the Council, we criticise everything it attempts to do. If we were faithful to our daily prayer, the spiritual motive for our work would be uppermost in our minds; we would check these petty personal jealousies, curb our all too human outburst of spite. We would think more of souls and less of ourselves, and so the work of the Sodality would prosper and spread and a harvest of souls, yes, a harvest, would be reaped. If all is not well in a Sodality, it is almost certain that the rule about daily mental prayer is not being observed.

DIFFICULTIES THAT DISCOURAGE.

Quite a number of people become discouraged about their prayer because they do not judge their efforts correctly. Let us suppose, just for a moment, that you are an angel in Heaven. As you look down on the earth, you see two people going into the Church to pray. They are both good Sodalists who make their mental prayer every day. The judgement of the Recording Angel on their efforts will help you never to misjudge your own prayer. For the views of Heaven and Earth are often very different.

Jill is in splendid form and settles down immediately to the subject of her meditation. The altar, the flowers, the sunshine streaming through the stain-glass windows, the flickering of the sanctuary lamp, make her feel happy and joyous. Holy thoughts flow into her mind, she becomes absorbed in the Gospel scene, she ponders and is swept away into the world of the spiritual. Warm feelings spring up within her. She feels her love for Our Lord to be as tender as her love for her own brother or father or friend. She finds she is speaking intimately and freely to Our Lord in the tabernacle and feels that He is listening attentively and lovingly. Calm and motionless, no distraction mars her prayer. She can almost see the veil of Eternity stir and hear the beat of angels' wings. She looks at her watch: "Goodness! A quarter of an hour gone, I seem to be here only about five minutes!"

Dryness and Distraction.

Jack just can't settle down to prayer. The altar and flowers and sunshine make no impression on him. They look as they always look. A fly is buzzing in a pale shaft of light. Distracted, he watches it idly. He pulls himself away from the distraction and tries to pray again. He says a short ejaculation for help and tries to recall the Gospel scene. "Time must be up now," he thinks, and takes a look at his watch. Only five minutes gone and it seems almost an hour. He tries again to pray but nothing happens, he feels dull and lifeless, even a little drowsy. Disconnected pictures of yesterday's football match swim into his mind... he is out in the open... the stands are cheering... he is winning the game... running for the goal...

Again, he pulls himself up, sets his teeth and tries to pray once more. He speaks to Our Lord in the tabernacle, but it doesn't seem very real, words don't come easily. He makes a dry act of Faith in the Real Presence. Another look at the watch... time surely must be up by now... only ten minutes gone! Back again to his prayer the devil whispers in his ear: "You might as well go now; time is

nearly up anyway; call it a day!” He half rises, turns to go, but pulls himself back, forces himself to stay and battles on against his dryness and distractions, praying humbly: “Lord, please teach me to pray.” Quarter of an hour over at last. Thank God! But he does not go. He kneels on for a minute more to conquer his impatience and to prove to God that he wants to do his best. He genuflects, leaves the Church, barely restraining himself from running up the aisle!

Now, Jill probably feels elated and very satisfied with her prayer. Perhaps she may even feel a little proud of herself and maybe thinks she is rather holy. The devil, of course, is whispering in her ear: “What a good girl am I!” Jack, on the other hand, does not feel so pleased. He probably thinks that his effort has not been so successful. To him the devil is saying: “Not so good, Jack, my boy! Hardly worth all the effort, is it? You’ll never make much of a fist of the praying! Might as well give it up!

But the Recording Angel views things in a completely different light. Under Jill’s name in the Heavenly Books, he writes: “merit for daily meditation faithfully performed.” But because it was so easy for her, he inscribes no special commendation for difficulties overcome. Indeed this judicious and most wise Spirit may have deducted marks and written in red the reason why: “slight tendency to pride!”

But Jack’s page is a page of glory. “Merit for daily meditation faithfully done. Bonus for persevering in spite of continued dryness. Bonus for fighting against continued distractions. Special commendation for distinguished service in the face of the enemy by prolonging prayer in face of desolation and of temptation to shorten it. Most unselfish act of worship of Almighty God.” He may well add a special note that Jack is worthy to receive great graces and spiritual gifts in the near future.

Spiritual Principles.

We must not judge the success of our efforts at prayer by our feeling or emotions. If we do, we shall make grave mistakes. We shall be tempted to give up when we find the going difficult, thinking our prayer is valueless. Countless souls have been deluded by the devil in this manner. It is fatal to forget that we go down on our knees to adore and praise God, not to experience personal spiritual delights. Prayer is mainly a matter of faith, not solely a question of feeling. We ourselves get very little out of dry distracted prayer, devoid of all feelings of tenderness or devotion — at least not in the natural order. But we gain tremendous merit. For we give to God a marvellous, unselfish tribute of our loyalty and love. We prove to Him our sincerity and our selfless devotion to Him and to His Cause. It is important to remember well these spiritual principles. If we do, we will remember, when our prayer is pleasant and easy, to ask ourselves how will we fare when difficulties arise, and to pray for grace to remain steady under fire. (When we are under fire, let us remind ourselves that the storm will pass and calm return.) Should the devil tempt us to run away, let us finish out our time of prayer and then prolong it just for a minute or two. In doing this — to use the vivid phrase of Saint Ignatius — we completely “knock out the devil”! We do even more. We Imitate our Divine Master. For in the darkness and pain of His Gethsemane the scripture tells us that “being in an agony, He prayed the longer.”

“BUT I FEEL SO INSINCERE!”

Whenever we say to another, things we know to be untrue we cannot escape a feeling of guilt. We may try to excuse ourselves by saying that convention sanctions such conduct or courtesy calls for it. But in our heart of hearts, we feel uneasy and disturbed. We can never be really happy when we

are playing a part, pretending to be what we know we are not. Quite a number of people feel, unconsciously perhaps and in the depths of their being, that prayer forces them to take up a false position, to be insincere with God. They would be afraid to express this thought in words. Indeed, they fly from it like poison, for to them it seems, almost like blasphemy. But because they are honest, sincere, humble people, they cannot help feeling it and so, when they pray, they become a little uneasy, slightly disturbed, faintly perplexed. Sometimes even, because of this, they begin to avoid prayer.

What's the reason for this uneasy feeling? It is this: a false practice of piety has accustomed them to use words that are archaic and extravagant and to make protestations that are exaggerated and which they knew they do not mean. But their early training, the pious manuals they read lead them to believe that this is the way all true prayer must be made. So they tell themselves that they must be wrong, try to suppress their feelings of revulsion and continue to do their best. But the feeling of insincerity persists! Why? Because they are not wrong! Their feelings are true! Their instincts are right. There is no need whatsoever to pray in such a fashion!

Parchment Prayer.

Prayer is a personal matter. According to Saint Theresa, it is "loving converse with God." The Cure of Ars was once asked for a definition of faith. His reply was: "It is speaking to God as if he were our fellow-man." When we are speaking with a friend we love, we do not run to a library to look for a guide to polite conversation. We avoid the rhetoric of the parchment address. We use the simple ordinary language of every day, not the conventions of centuries long past. Even so, many pious manuals were written generations ago. The language old-fashioned and artificial. There is not the slightest obligation for us to use it. There is no need whatsoever for us to punctuate our prayers with "Vouchsafe" and "Deign" and other words to us mysterious! Besides, many of these pious manuals — I do not say all, mind you — print prayers that are over-elaborated, artificial and unreal. We should be reverent always at our prayer, yes; but reverence does not imply abstract verbiage!

The Gospel Prayers.

Take out your New Testament for a moment. Skim through it and pick out the prayers various people — honest, ordinary people like yourself — made to Our Lord in sore distress and need. You will find no fine phrases, no learned abstractions, and no grandiose rhetoric. You will meet simple everyday language, coming straight from the human heart, beautiful because spontaneous, moving because natural and sincere.

"Lord, he whom You love is sick."

"Remember me when You come into Your Kingdom."

"Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You."

"My Lord and my God!"

Then you have that most moving prayer of Magdalene when she met Jesus in the garden outside the tomb — just one word — "Rabboni!" Master! These prayers we know pleased Our Lord. He answered them. You could not do better than read through all your New Testament and make out a list of all these prayers. There are far many more than the ones I have quoted above. Discover them for yourself if you do this, you will find that they will fill and satisfy the longing of your soul.

Honesty Always.

Besides the words used in many prayer books, the thoughts expressed cause us some uneasiness. The lofty protestations of love can make us feel a little uncomfortable. We know in our heart of hearts, for instance, that we are not willing to die a thousand deaths for Jesus — even though our prayer book bids us say so. Far better, tell Our Lord, in your own words, that you are terrified, even for Him — of suffering, that you feel mean and ashamed of this and that you want Him to help you. Never say what you do not mean when you are on your knees. Make that a rule of all your prayer. If you would not die rather than sin again, don't pretend you would. Ask God, instead, to give you the grace that you may prefer to die rather than sin again. Don't protest to God that you are a hero when you know yourself you are a coward. Admit your cowardice to Him and beg Him to make you a hero. If we pray like that, our prayers will have the true ring of sincerity. Never for a moment will we have that uneasy feeling that we do not mean what we are saying, that we are not being quite honest with God.

Holiness Frightens Me!

Most of us feel, I suppose, that we should tell God in our prayer that we really want to be holy. If we really do, then we should do so, and thank God for giving us the grace of such a holy desire. If we don't, then, perhaps, we could make the words of Blessed [since 1992, Saint] Claude de la Colombiere our own. For they form a prayer that is utterly sincere and perfectly natural. This is the way he spoke to God on that subject:

“My God, I have no desire for great holiness; perhaps I have even a dread of it. But if, in your mercy, you will change me, give me courage to detach myself from the world; at least, let me put no obstacle in the way. You know what means to take so as to win my heart. These means are in Your Hands, You are the Master. Holiness frightens me; you can cure me of this false and foolish fear and make all easy for me that seem so difficult. You alone can do this.”

Such a prayer surely proves that when we pray we needn't be insincere!

“THOSE DISTRACTIONS!”

Perhaps the greatest cause of discouragement in prayer is distractions. Everybody experiences them to a greater or lesser degree. Some people become so plagued with them that they grow exasperated and impatient. “It's no use praying,” they say to themselves, “I will never succeed.” With such a conclusion the devil is, of course, delighted! If these people realised that distractions are almost inevitable and knew the reasons why they come, they would not be so easily disheartened. The devil is most anxious that we remain oblivious to the reasons why distractions come. His best work is often done, you know, not by putting things into our minds but by keeping things out! That is why it will be well worth while now to recall the reasons why our minds wander.

The worst kind of distractions are what theologians call voluntary distractions. But we need not pause to delay over these. It is most unlikely that you suffer from them if you are trying your best to pray. They don't just come into your mind. You bring them in yourself. Deliberately and consciously, you turn your mind to matters not pertaining to prayer. You are quite aware that you are doing this and yet continue to do so. It is like going into the presence of a great personage and then deliberately turning your back on him to talk to someone else about some unnecessary matter: Such a mode of behaviour with God is, of course, most reprehensible. It is irreverent. But our distractions rarely spring from ill will. They come from our human weakness. We don't bring them into our mind; they come, unwanted, into our poor heads! These kind of distractions the theologians call

involuntary. They are involuntary, that is, unwanted; we do not will them. They are not sinful but they do disturb our prayer. Why do they come?

The Tumult of Things.

You read a lot of books and magazines? You go to the pictures and the theatre? You play games and go dancing?

You have business worries, family anxieties and personal problems? How then, can you expect to banish in a flash thoughts that occupy your mind almost all your waking hours? Is it reasonable to think that by walking into a church, by sprinkling yourself with holy water, you can leave them all outside the door? Surely not! It is foolish to expect to pass from the tumult of things into uninterrupted converse with God by merely falling on our knees. Distractions are inevitable. The art of true prayer is not having any distractions but in dealing with the ones you must have, successfully.

Besides, we are weaker than we think. We cannot keep our minds on any problem or subject without becoming distracted. When we think of God and holy things, it becomes even more difficult. We cannot see, touch or feel Him. We have no vivid pictures of Him in our imaginations on which to fix our thoughts. It is very presumptuous to think that we can pass a whole quarter of an hour in prayer without a single distraction. Without the help of the Holy Ghost, Saint Paul tells us, we cannot even say "Lord, Jesus"! If we realise our human weakness we will appeal more for Divine help. God will not withhold it — of that you may be sure. But the devil does not want us to ask for and receive this help from heaven. That is why he is so anxious to have you think that you should be able to pray well by your own efforts!

Partly to Blame.

Sometimes, of course, we are partly to blame for the distractions that come. Not that we want them to come. We don't help ourselves sufficiently to pray. And remember the old proverb: God helps those who help themselves. Our efforts at prayer lack method, we don't set about it in an orderly fashion. We neglect to take even elementary precautions to secure even moderate attention of mind. What can we do to help ourselves?

Prepare!

Suppose you want to write a good letter to a friend. How do you set about it? Do you take a pen in hand when you come home from a dance with the music of the band still ringing in your ears? If you do, you will write a scrappy, chaotic letter that you will end by tearing up. But you don't. You choose a quiet evening when you have little else to do. You retire to a quiet room. You collect your writing materials. You fill your pen. You jot down in rough the things you want to say. Then you start writing. You find that you can write easily, your thoughts flow smoothly. You are never stuck for news or at a loss for word or phrase. You have learned from the past that when you don't make such preparation before writing you find yourself sucking your pen in a few moments and gazing dreamily into space. If we don't prepare our prayers, much the same thing happens.

How to Prepare.

The first thing you must do is decide what you are going to meditate on. Don't wait until you are about to kneel down to come to this conclusion. Know beforehand. Let us say you have chosen the Annunciation for the subject of your consideration. Read over the account of it in your New

Testament. (An excellent time to do this is the previous night, last thing before going to sleep.) If the mystery is very long, divide it up into three parts:

1, before the Annunciation; 2, during the Annunciation; 3, after the Annunciation.

Then decide how you will ponder on the mystery. A very simple method is to consider the persons, words and actions. That is all the preparation you have to make. If you make it, your prayer will have shape and form; it will proceed with order and method; distractions will have less chance of taking you unawares.

Having prepared your material for prayer on the Annunciation, your meditation, in practice, would follow lines something like these

(a) Persons: Only one, Mary. I look at her, notice her appearance, her eyes, hands, et cetera, her attitude of tranquil recollection. I look within at her thoughts and affections.

(b) Words: There are none. The thought may strike me: silence is often the setting for the communication of God's greatest graces. I may think to myself: does God ever get a chance to speak to me in times of silence is there ever an oasis of silence in my flurried day?

(c) Actions: There are none.

Your next point would be the actual Annunciation itself.

Here, as well as watching the persons and actions, you would listen to the words of Our Lady and the angel Gabriel, pondering them, one by one, quietly in your mind. No need to hurry through the whole mystery in a quarter of an hour. Pause. Here you find it easy to reflect and pray. If you find yourself talking to Our Lady, or the Angel Gabriel, speak out what is in your mind and heart and forget about the little plan you have drawn up for the moment. Draw as much fruit as possible from whatever appeals to you. We should not glide through our prayers like a ship running against time but proceed slowly like a dredger plunging into the deep for treasure. If we follow such a method, we will find the number of our distractions will be fewer.

But still some will certainly come. Anxieties, problems, future events will enter our minds. Temptations even may molest us. Speak to God about them. Ask him for health for your sick parents and grace to be resigned to His will should He wish to take them to Himself. If your distractions are silly ones, ask God to cure you of your frivolity and silly ways! Thus, your prayer becomes intimate, personal, beautiful, and sincere. Distractions from God are the only ones that should worry you. Distractions from the subject matter of your meditation don't count. Turn your distractions into prayer. Then distractions are no longer distractions. But what about my neat little plan for a meditation on the Annunciation? Well, God, in His Providence, has directed the conversation along different lines! Your conversation has taken a different turn from the one you had planned. But that doesn't matter! You are still talking to God. That does matter. That is prayer!

A Word about Temptation.

A type of distraction, which we definitely do not want and which can come to us during our prayer to disturb us, is temptation. It comes straight from the devil without the slightest fault on our part. Often these temptations will be against Holy Purity and they will be strong, sometimes even hideous. There is little chance that aided by God's grace, you will yield to them. But that is not what the devil is after. All he wants to do is to disturb your prayer. He wants you to become alarmed and agitated, utterly appalled at the awful evil that is presented to you, to become scrupulous and

terrified that such thoughts should come to you at such a holy time. No thought is too bad for him to suggest, no image too obscene for him to evoke. If we panic, he has won. Let the storm rage; turn your mind quietly from it back to God or to Our Lady. Let the temptation serve as an incentive to more fervent prayer, not as a motive for panic and alarm. Then you will find that it will vanish quickly. Satan never plays a losing game for long. Remember, too, that the devil is like a dog chained to a kennel. He can only bark at you but never bite unless you go and put your ankle into his mouth. If you don't do this, there is no reason for fear. You are a fool if you allow his barking to alarm you!

Bodily Posture.

A further help in your battle against distractions is a reverent bodily posture. The devil is very anxious to persuade us that this makes no difference to our prayer. He always remembers and wants us to forget that we are half animals and that whatever our bodies do affects our souls. When you want to work hard, you clear the decks for action; you clean away the rubbish on your table and sit up straight in your chair. This helps you to fix your mind on the work to be done. If you lounge in an armchair, your attention will wander. This is an ordinary psychological principle that we put into practice daily, almost automatically. But we can forget to apply it to our prayer. If we take up a lazy bodily posture, distractions will — even though we don't want them — come floating into our minds. We have left the door wide open. That is why the saints have always insisted that when we pray we should always assume, not a strained or unnatural posture, but a reverent one. There is no need when we kneel to pray to stiffen and tense our whole frame, to clasp our hands tightly together or dig our knuckles into our temples! A reverent posture is not one of frigid immobility. It is possible, even most desirable, that we be relaxed as well as reverent.

Into God's Presence.

If only we realised that it is to God we are speaking when we pray! Then, I think, our posture would take care of itself. For how could we kneel in a slovenly, lazy fashion or sprawl in bench or chair once we realised we were in the presence of Our Lord and our God? Our conversation with Him, too, would cease to be a mechanical meaningless formula of words. Instead, it would become more earnest, sincere, intimate and satisfying. Isn't it always easy and pleasant to speak to one who loves us and whom we know is listening sympathetically? Yes, if only we could develop a greater awareness of God's Presence, our prayer would improve tremendously. Distractions would be less powerful; they would not come so readily nor remain so long unchecked. Rarely would they steal our minds away to worlds of dreams and fancy for the entire time of our prayer. For we would realise quickly that they were taking us away from God and so would leave them to hasten back to Him. That is why all the great spiritual writers have always insisted that we should never begin to pray without first recalling the fact of God's presence. The language they have used telling you to do this may have frightened you a bit. Such phrases as "Putting yourself in the presence of God," "making an act of God's Presence." may have sounded meaningless to you or struck you as rather strange; mysterious or mystical. But to recall God's Presence to mind is really quite a simple matter. You can learn to do it easily and almost naturally. But it is of vital importance for success in prayer.

It's So Easy to Forget.

Why is it so important? For the very simple reason that we can forget all about God's presence so easily! If a blind man is told that he is in the presence of a great personage he will behave with respect. But because he is blind and cannot see that person, he easily forgets he is present and,

having forgotten he is present, ceases to behave with reverence. It is much the same, Saint Francis de Sales tells us, with ourselves. Because we cannot see God, even though faith tells of His presence, we easily forget about it and behave as if God were very far from us. As the blind man has to be reminded that he is standing before a great person, so must we remind ourselves as we go to pray that we are going into the presence of God. How are we to do this? It is really quite simple. Saint Francis de Sales has outlined four easy ways.

God Is Everywhere.

God is everywhere. Quietly recall this fact. Then make a firm act of faith in it. Don't try to use your imagination and to picture God everywhere. If you do, you won't succeed and will only give yourself a headache! No, just accept the fact and make a firm act of belief in it. Calmly and tranquilly, without strain or fuss, say to your-self some words like those of Saint Francis: "O my heart, O my heart, God is truly here." This you can say whether you are kneeling by your bedside or an armchair in the drawing-room, whether walking along crowded streets or journeying in a bus through heavy traffic or while alone in the countryside under a starlit sky. God is everywhere. The world is filled with his grandeur. This thought has inspired great poetry. If we use it, it will inspire fervent prayer.

Heart of Your Heart.

The second way to recall God's presence is to think that not only is God everywhere but that He dwells within you in a very special manner. He is in your heart and in the depths of your spirit which he quickens and animates by His divine presence. "He is there," as Saint Francis de Sales says so strikingly, "as the heart of your heart, the spirit of your spirit." But do not try to imagine Him there, still less try to feel that He is there. Simply recall the fact. Make an act of faith in it. Then speak to the sweet Guest within your soul. He is the God of your heart. "In Him we live, move and have our being."

"Who Art in Heaven."

In the prayer Our Lord taught us, the very first words direct our attention to the fact of God's presence: "Our Father, Who art in Heaven." We consider God as He is in Heaven, looking down on us as we pray. He gazes upon us, observes our actions and listens to our words. But He looks upon us — and let us always remember this — not with the eyes of a suspicious warder but with the tender gaze of a loving Father. Once again, this truth is a fact. We have it on the word of Christ Himself. If we recall it before we pray, will it not surely give an impetus to our efforts?

The Real Presence.

The everyday phrases we use to describe the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Eucharist can sometimes be misleading. We speak of "the Blessed Sacrament," "the Real Presence"; we say, "We are going to make a visit to the Church." Such phrases, of course, are accurate and we use them because we do not wish to parade our intimate affection for Jesus really present there, with His very Flesh and Blood, His Soul and Divinity. But they are apt to make us forget that when we enter a church we are not merely going into a place but are visiting a Person; we are calling upon Our Lord and Our King, Our Master and Friend. This truth we know and have accepted, probably from our earliest childhood. Indeed, we are prepared to die for it. But if we do not recall it to our minds, if we do not stir up our belief in the Presence of Jesus, this truth will not vitalize our prayer. We will concentrate our attention on the tabernacle, the stain-glass, the sanctuary lamp, or the statues. Who

would think of visiting a friend's house and of spending most of the time admiring the furniture and fittings without hardly ever speaking a word to their host? Do not we act sometimes in such a way when we visit Jesus in the church?

Before Saint Ignatius ever entered a church he would pause for just a moment and recall where he was going, then would he enter joyfully into the presence of his Lord and Master. Such a simple act of recollection might well bring about a complete transformation of our prayer when we make it before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Our genuflection would become an act of personal adoration instead of an automatic (and sometimes ungainly!) movement of our limbs. Almost immediately, we would find ourselves speaking to Our Lord and our prayer flowing easily.

If we wish to improve our prayer, we should always commence it by making use of one of these four ways of putting ourselves in the presence of God. However, we should not try to make use of them all together, but only one at a time, and that briefly and simply.

BEWARE OF SELFISH PRAYER?

Everybody will admit that selfishness spoils a character and makes a person, no matter how beautiful or outwardly charming they may seem, unlovable and unpopular. But few people seem to realise that selfishness can insinuate itself into our prayer and make it very imperfect. It enters by the path of excessive introspection.

People nowadays are becoming more and more preoccupied about themselves. Self-analysis has become almost a fashion. Pause for a moment at the colourful display at any news-stall. Pick up one of the bright magazines and skim through its pages. Almost certainly, you will find some article telling you to turn your gaze in upon yourself. You will be told to ask yourself: "Have I got Personality?" "Do I possess Poise?" "Can I make friends?" "Am I aware of my phobias?" "Am I a good hostess?" and so on and so forth. Nor is it unknown for some glamorous lady, probably thrice divorced, to have the impertinence to ask you: "Are you making a success of your marriage?" All this popular writing reflects a common modern trend. It is the tendency to turn our eyes in on ourselves rather than out upon the world about us and, especially, up towards our God who has made us. All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, are influenced by this current fashion. We examine ourselves often; too easily, we become preoccupied about our appearance, our character, our personality, our health. If we do not watch our step, we can become very self-centred. Now, not for one moment do I mean to suggest that self-examination is a bad thing. It is not. The person who never considers himself usually ends up by never considering anyone else either. The unreflective soul can be quite a menace, blithely wounding the feelings of others without even being aware of it himself! Self-examination is necessary. It is a good thing. But, as has often been said, you can have too much of a good thing. "Some people," Chesterton once said, "are always pulling themselves up by the roots to see if they are growing." That is happening quite a lot today.

There is quite a danger that this tendency to be over-preoccupied about ourselves can affect our prayer. When it does, dissatisfaction and discouragement result. If we spend our meditation time scraping our souls, dissecting our motives, analysing our every action, we will end up dispirited and tensed. Our prayer should not have that effect. After all, we go to it to pull ourselves together, not to tear ourselves apart! It should be for us a source of encouragement and inspiration. We should arise from it spiritually refreshed, stronger and more ready to meet the trials of life with a little more serenity and good-humour and a lot more confidence in God.

Circling Round Ourselves.

An example, perhaps, will help to show how some people center their prayer upon themselves rather than upon God. They decide, let us say, to meditate on the Gospel scene which describes Our Lord healing a leper. They read the incident in the New Testament. They begin to reflect. Almost immediately, they turn in upon themselves: "I have not got leprosy, thank God... but sin is moral leprosy... have I got sin on my soul? Did I confess that sin? I did but I am in danger of falling again... because of my laziness, my frivolous companions, my bad temper... I must avoid these faults (little thought of asking God's grace!)... I shall do this and I shall do that..." and so the meditation continues, ever circling around that little "I"! This is only an example, of course, and it is slightly exaggerated. But it does mirror the pattern of our prayer from time to time, doesn't it?

What is the result of such an approach to prayer? Surely, it must be rather gloomy? We have spent all our time with ourselves and not with God. "If we seek ourselves," Thomas à Kempis remarks somewhat grimly, "we shall find ourselves — but to our own ruin." We have not escaped from our own pettiness into the bracing companionship of Our Lord. We have gained no new knowledge of Christ, nor no renewal of love for Him. One of the effects of our prayer should be that our lives become more Christ like. But how can we become like Christ if we do not know what Christ is like? We can only learn that by looking upon Him when we pray, not by looking on ourselves. It is true, of course, that the spiritual writers on meditation tell us that when we have meditated upon some scene we "should reflect upon ourselves." What most people do, however, is to take the briefest of glances at Christ and then a prolonged gaze at themselves! The procedure should be reversed.

Copy the Model.

What does an artist do when he is painting a portrait? He keeps his eyes fixed on the person he is painting, watches their every feature, studies their expression and works on his canvas, sometimes almost without seeming to look at it. So he manages to reproduce the living image of his model. What happens if he hardly ever glances at the person he wishes to paint and spends all his time gazing at the canvas, grumbling about its poor material, its many flaws? No picture will be painted and probably he will end up throwing his brushes into the air and pulling out his hair! The aim of our prayer is to produce the likeness of Christ in our souls so that it may shine forth in our everyday actions. If we are to succeed, we must gaze upon our Model, Jesus Christ.

Look Upon Jesus.

Let us take the scene of Christ healing the leper and meditate upon it in a different way, forgetting about ourselves. Let us look upon Our Lord, what of His actions, listen to His words, trying to divine the thoughts in His mind, the emotions of His Sacred Heart. See the leper approach Our Lord, his appalling state, his piteous appeal: "If You will, You can make me clean." Watch the face of Our Lord, the tenderness of His expression, revealing the love of His Heart which is "moved with compassion." Observe His actions... gentle, kindly, inspired by delicacy of thought... He stretches forth His hand and touches him. No other man would have dared touch this stricken wretch or even approach him... all this Jesus knows and so He touches him to show His love, to give him confidence... So we can continue our meditation, keeping our eyes on Jesus. Should we turn in on ourselves for a moment and see the leprosy of sin on our own soul we will not be depressed but rather filled with confidence to turn to Our Lord and to make the prayer of the leper our own: "If You will, You can make me clean."

The Result.

The results of a meditation made in this way are refreshing. If we stay looking upon Jesus we cannot but be captivated by the charm of His Personality, encouraged by His kindness.

Surely, we cannot but feel our hearts grow warm within us, becoming enkindled with a love for Him that will urge us to do something for Him. We will be in a better position, too, to make our lives more Christ like. By looking upon Jesus, we learn to know Him. In the various circumstances of our lives, we will be able to say to ourselves: "Well, I know what He would think about this." We shall also be inspired to imitate Him. For knowledge leads to love, and love to imitation. That is why Saint Ignatius always recommends us to pray before we start a meditation on the life of Our Lord for the grace "to know Him more intimately, to love Him more prudently so as to follow Him more closely." Saint Paul gave the same advice to the Hebrews when they were hard pressed: "Let us run by patience to the fight proposed to us: looking upon Jesus, Who having joy set before Him endured the cross... think diligently on Him, that you be not wearied, fainting in your minds" (Hebrews 12:1-3). If we stay with Jesus in our prayer, we will find it easy enough to follow His own exhortation to pray always and not to faint. Without Him, we can do nothing.

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