

school of Christ Jesus, our Master, what must be each day his intimate and silent prayer.

### C. Meditated reading

Mental prayer is what the beginner wants to learn, and what we must teach him.

It may be that he is already captivated by a sweet and powerful grace to which we can entrust him; for when that comes, everything is simple for him, if not easy, in this exchange of friendship.

But if he feels no supernatural support how could we send him out alone to that intimate converse with God, so simple in its definition but in practice so complex. His love for God is indeed a living one, but his faculties are quite unable to occupy themselves, alone, with subjects so far above him and which, as yet, he badly understands. He is not yet grounded in the truths of faith, or at least is incapable of dwelling on them at length in the presence of the Master; and so he lapses into vague dreaminess or inertia, and the good will of his earlier days gives way to discouragement.

But here is a means suggested by Saint Teresa, one that she herself used a great deal: meditated reading.

Speaking of a soul who cannot form considerations in mental prayer, Teresa writes:

Reading is none the less necessary for him, however little it may be, as a substitute for the mental prayer which he is unable to practise. I mean that if he is obliged to spend a great deal of time in prayer without this aid it will be impossible for him to persist in it for long.<sup>17</sup>

One can select a book with meditations already developed, ready made affections, resolutions to hand, the whole prayer well planned—impersonal it is true, but still one can make it one's own with the necessary adaptation to one's needs.

The book to be chosen for meditated reading is not the book

<sup>17</sup> *Life*, iv; Peers, I, 24.

that is simply instructive or devotional, nor even the interesting book that holds one's attention, but the book that suggests and provokes reflection, arouses the affections, or better still, that awakens the soul and keeps it in the presence of God.

Simply reading is not meditated reading. Meditated reading must be interrupted for deeper reflections in the presence of God, to express to Him our love, to enter into conversation with Him. It will be short or prolonged according to need and will be resumed only when one falls again into dreaminess or inertia.

If the reading should distract from God by stimulating the thoughts and affections excessively, then it fails in its purpose, as reading here has only one purpose, the facilitating of mental prayer. Its sole function is to furnish a subject of conversation with God, to establish a bond for union with Him. Reading is in the service of that exchange of friendship with God which is the essential act of mental prayer; from this, it must never be allowed to distract. To this end, the soul must ceaselessly bring it back.

Meditated reading will normally be the form of mental prayer for the novice in spiritual ways. The contemplative, too, will return to it in the hours of physical or moral fatigue, to sustain or relax his faculties; or again, to detach them from the too lively or obsessing preoccupations that prevent recollection. Let us hear the painful and conclusive experiences of Saint Teresa on this point: "I myself spent over fourteen years without ever being able to meditate except while reading," she writes.<sup>18</sup>

In the book of her *Life*, she tells us precisely the place given to meditated reading during her eighteen years of aridities:

During all these years, except after communicating, I never dared to begin to pray without a book. . . . With this help, which was a companionship to me and a shield with which I could parry the blows of my many thoughts, I felt comforted. For it was not usual with me

<sup>18</sup> *Way of Perfection*, xvii; Peers, II, 69.

to suffer from aridity: this only came when I had no book, whereupon my soul would at once become disturbed and my thoughts would begin to wander. As soon as I started to read they began to collect themselves and the book acted like a bait to my soul. Often the mere fact that I had it by me was sufficient. Sometimes I read a little, sometimes a great deal, according to the favor which the Lord showed me.<sup>19</sup>

These confidences of Saint Teresa show us the importance of meditated reading in the development of her life of mental prayer. And so we cannot but be astonished at the mistrust of it that exists in certain quarters where they oblige the novices to endure the inevitable dryness of beginners in an almost complete obscurity and without the help of reading to get out of the void into which their inexperience, or even their lack of knowledge, has let them fall. The danger of laziness accompanying the reading does not justify that mistrust. Reading is, in fact, too solid a support for the beginner, and a shield too precious, for anyone to deprive him of it through fear that sometimes he may not know how to use it, or may use it badly.

#### D. Meditation

When the faculties are strengthened and nourished enough to do without a support, the soul can enter upon mental prayer in its most traditional form, which is meditation.

Meditation consists in making reflections or considerations on a subject chosen in advance, to arrive at a fruitful conviction or resolution. It can be guided by various methods, all of which include a prelude on the presence of God and humility; the body of meditation, in which convictions are formed by way of reflection; and a conclusion in which sentiments and petitions are expressed, and precise resolutions are made.

There are books of these well arranged meditations that provide models adapted to the needs of various souls. Works explaining the methods of discursive prayer, or giving meditations with the reflections to be made, affections to be formed,

<sup>19</sup> *Life*, iv; Peers, I, 24.

acts to be produced, have been numerous in every epoch. Already, Saint Teresa knew some that were "excellent both as to their teaching and as to the way in which they plan the beginning and the end of the time of prayer."<sup>20</sup> She writes:

For those with orderly minds, and for souls who practise prayer and can be a great deal in their own company, many books have been written, and these are so good and are the work of such competent people. . . .<sup>21</sup>

And others have followed. In the reformed Carmel, certain masters elaborated for the novices methods that indicated the different acts to be produced during mental prayer. The school of French spirituality multiplied books for meditation for the use of priests, religious, and cultured persons of the world. These developed, in a style of classic purity, pious and reasonable considerations that have formed generations of strong and moderate souls, as inimical to the good that creates a stir, as to the evil that gives scandal.

For our modern minds, more intuitive than discursive, more avid for the living and the concrete than for long processes of reasoning, these methods and books became outmoded in short time. And so we are happy to say that Saint Teresa speaks of meditation with temperate praise and an impersonal tone lacking in enthusiasm. This is because she too is one of those souls who have never been able to reason during mental prayer and whose "intellect hinders rather than helps them."<sup>22</sup>

This inability puts us in sympathy with her, and makes it easy for us to agree with her opinions. First, here is the praise:

There is no need to tell anyone who is capable of practising prayer in this way, and has already formed the habit of doing so, that by this good road the Lord will bring her to the harbour of light. If she begins so well, her end will be good also; and all who can walk along this road will walk restfully and securely, for one always walks restfully when the understanding is kept in restraint.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Way of Perfection*, xix; Peers, II, 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*; 76.

<sup>22</sup> *Life*, xiii; Peers, I, 78.

<sup>23</sup> *Way of Perfection*, xix; Peers, II, 77.

The praise is sincere; but anyone accustomed to the vibrating enthusiasm of Teresa will find it without warmth, reasonable and moderated, like the meditation it commends.

Moreover, a danger threatens those whose understanding is too active:

Returning, then, to those who can make use of their reasoning powers, I advise them not to spend all their time in doing so; their method of prayer is most meritorious, but, enjoying it as they do, they fail to realize that they ought to have a kind of Sunday—that is to say, a period of rest from their labour. To stop working, they think, would be a loss of time, whereas my view is that this loss is a great gain; let them imagine themselves, as I have suggested, in the presence of Christ, and let them remain in converse with Him, and delighting in Him, without wearying their minds or fatiguing themselves by composing speeches to Him, but laying their needs before Him and acknowledging how right He is not to allow us to be in His presence.<sup>24</sup>

Saint Teresa had associated with the intellectuals and knew well their tendencies. The danger for them is that their facility in speculating on revealed truth, the satisfaction and intellectual profit that they draw from it, may fetter them and make them forget that mental prayer is an exchange of friendship with God.<sup>25</sup>

And so the Saint never tires of recalling this truth to “those who use their intellects a great deal and from one subject can extract many ideas and conceptions.”<sup>26</sup> These especially must keep in mind her teaching in the *Interior Castle*:

I only want you to be warned that, if you would progress a long way on this road and ascend to the Mansions of your desire, the important thing is not to think much, but to love much.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Life*, xiii; Peers, I, 78.

<sup>25</sup> “I have come across some people who believe that the whole thing consists in thought; and thus, if they are able to think a great deal about God, however much the effort may cost them, they immediately imagine they are spiritually minded; while, if they become distracted, and their efforts to think of good things fail, they at once become greatly discouraged and suppose themselves to be lost” (*Foundations* v; Peers, I, 19).

<sup>26</sup> *Life*, xiii; Peers, I, 78.

<sup>27</sup> IV Mansions, i; Peers, II, 233. The Saint says the same thing in the *Book of the Foundations* (Cf. Peers, I, 20): The soul’s profit, then, consists not in thinking much but in loving much.

Besides, whatever may be the consolations that come through meditation, one must have no illusions as to their value; they are

like water running all over the ground. This cannot be drunk directly from the source; and its course is never free from clogging impurities, so that it is neither so pure nor so clean as the other. I should not say that this prayer I have been describing, which comes from reasoning with the intellect, is living water—I mean so far as my understanding of it goes.<sup>28</sup>

Meditation—which is a good beginning<sup>29</sup>—does not, however, satisfy Saint Teresa. If we had to sum up her grievances, or rather fears, on this subject, we would say that she is afraid that meditation may detain souls in intellectual activity for itself and not orientate them sufficiently to God, the source of living water.<sup>30</sup>

But has the saint a way of mental prayer to recommend to beginners?

<sup>28</sup> *Way of Perfection*, xix; Peers, II, 80.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*; 77.

<sup>30</sup> According to the testimony of P. José de Jesús-María Quiroga (died in 1629), the methods of mental prayer that were taught to the novices of Carmel at the beginning of the XVII century, shortly after the death of Saint John of the Cross, did not avoid these dangers. In his work on the gift that Saint John of the Cross had for guiding souls, this Father writes:

"When the teaching and influence of our saintly Father John of the Cross ceased, other masters came who taught the discursive and assiduous operations of the soul rather than the very simple spiritual acts which permit one to receive the divine operation and the effects of the divine influence by which perfection is obtained. These masters wrought a very different work in their disciples; these came out from mental prayer with tired heads and rarely gave evidence of enlightened minds. And, since during the novitiate, they did not learn how one must enter into contemplation when ripe for this kind of mental prayer, they left their school of formation without knowing the principal part of their vocation—and they remained all their life without knowing it—working in mental prayer with natural forces, without giving place to the divine operation which introduces perfection into the soul." *Obras del Místico Doctor San Juan de la Cruz*, edición crítica de Toledo, III, 569.