

WHEN YOU PRAY

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PRAYER is a lifting up of the mind and heart to God. Prayer is conversation with God. Prayer is the aspiration of the creature and the inspiration of the Creator. Prayer is the meeting-place between God and the soul.

There is a hunger in every man's heart for happiness, and prayer can satisfy this hunger. There is a yearning in every heart for love and prayer has the power of bringing the thirsting soul very close to the source of true love. The soul, sometimes even without knowing it, is seeking God, and in prayer He discloses Himself to her. Prayer teaches her that God is actually dwelling as a Guest within her. Prayer grows and becomes a loving attendant on this Guest. Even in the midst of the turmoil and business of daily life there develops in him who prays a tendency to seek God within, to speak to Him very often, indeed to be so impressed by a sense of the value of prayer that there arises between God and him a companionship, a holy intimacy, that becomes virtually uninterrupted. Prayer is loving familiarity with God.

Thoughts like these flow readily enough from the pens of the saints when they begin to write about prayer and try to explain to us what it is. But even when they have said much, it is easy to detect a feeling of dissatisfaction still. For the truth is that prayer has secrets to unfold which can be learned only by praying. Hence the insatiable desire on the part of those who pray themselves to make others pray too. The man who prays climbs high up into the mountain and there breathes deep draughts of the bracing air of the supernatural. From this point of vantage he looks back over the ground he has traversed. Below in the valleys he sees others still toiling. They are of the earth, earthly. They are sense bound. Their eyes are turned down towards the ground. Their hearts are weighted with a thousand anxieties. They are wedded to their money. They are eaten up with lust for power. Plans to better their earthly condition leave them restless day and night.

Now, when prayer begins to attain to its rightful place in a man's life, a whole new world opens out before him. The important things that engross the minds and hearts of the toilers in the valleys are now seen to be not so important after all. Here on the mountain the climber finds God, and with God a happiness and a peace of soul to which hitherto he has been a stranger, and with God a courage to endure not felt before, and with God rest from undue anxiety and a lessening of interest in many of the things that used to be so important. He has discovered paradise on earth through this life of prayer. What wonder is it, then, if he longs to call out to the whole world to lift up its eyes towards this mountain? What wonder is this forceful eloquence that comes so readily to his lips as he urges men to bestir themselves, to walk courageously the steep slopes of that mountain? What wonder the note of intense conviction that rings in his tone as he assures them that the intimacy with God which prayer gives is reward a thousand-fold for all the hardships to be encountered on the road?

To seek God in prayer is to plunge the soul into light. In many places in Holy Scripture you will come upon references to the fact that God is light. The chosen people of God in the Old Testament had been groping for long years and stumbling much in the darkness that covered the earth. And lo; at last there was vouchsafed to Isaias a glimpse of the Messiah Who was to come. Here is his exultant shout of joy: "The people that sat in darkness have seen a great *light*. To them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death *light* is risen." Wherefore, arise and be *enlightened*, O Jerusalem, for thy *light* is come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For behold darkness shall cover the earth and a mist the people, but upon thee the Lord shall rise and His glory shall be seen upon thee." When Our Lord comes, we are again reminded of this symbol of light. Light shone out in the midst of the darkness of the first Christmas night. Simeon took Mary's Son into his arms, and his eyes shone with joy as he recognised in Him "the light of the gentiles." Our Lord Himself proclaimed Himself to be the light of the world, and the evangelist knows Him to be the true light that enlightened every man that cometh into the world. St. John, who soars in prayer like the eagle high up into the blinding rays of the divinity, tells us that "God is light and in Him there is no darkness." And St. Paul writes to his disciple Timothy that God is He Who dwelleth in light inaccessible.

So when a man kneels down to pray he is seeking companionship with this God of light. Once more there is darkness

over the face of the earth, more especially, alas, in the evil days upon which we have fallen. To pray means to step out of that darkness to separate oneself at least in thought and desire from the pressure of external things and to bathe the soul deep in that ocean of light that is streaming down upon it from the countenance of Almighty God. "The light of Thy countenance is signed upon us; Thou hast given joy to my heart." A man going to pray is entering into a secret place apart in order to give his undivided attention to God, Whom he is going to meet there. "When you pray... . enter into your chamber, and, having shut the door, pray to your Father in secret, and your Father Who seeth in secret will reward you."

That is why the saints urge us to enter upon our prayer with much care, and, especially at the beginning, with conscious advertence to the Presence of God. That is why Holy Church places at the opening of her Divine Office the invitational prayer which is well calculated to steady the thoughts of the priest. It focuses his attention on the fundamental truth that prayer means stepping out of the darkness and plunging the soul into the light of God.

A Protestant went into a Catholic Church on Good Friday, and, noticing that the door of the tabernacle was open, he peered curiously inside. What was his surprise to find that the interior of the tabernacle was studded with precious stones. The discovery led ultimately, to his conversion. For he rightly argued that Catholics must be sincere in their belief of the Real Presence if they placed thus in the interior of the tabernacle stones of such value in a place where nobody could see them.

In some such way we may argue that the lives of men go far in the ways of prayer are a proof of the divinity of the Church. Holiness is a mark of the true Church, and holiness and prayer are so closely linked together that it is impossible to think of the one except as complementary to the other. The soul of a man who is holy is a tabernacle behind the door of which there is lived a life hidden, for the most part, from the eyes of others—so hidden indeed, that even its existence is not suspected by many who consider that they know the man intimately. For he guards that door jealously. Having shut the door, he prays to his Father in secret. But to himself that hidden interior life becomes so vivid and so real that the very reality of it seems at times to be overpowering. "When you pray... . enter into your chamber." In that secret place there is continuous prayer, and prayer means the words spoken there by the soul to God and the ineffable responses of God to the soul.

We are going to try reverently to open that door and look inside, and see and handle some of the treasures that enrich the interior of that place of prayer.

"God is light and in Him there is no darkness." You will find first of all, in the life of him who prays much, an intense preoccupation with God. That is the first light that breaks in upon his gaze as soon as he begins to turn his eyes inward and look into the hidden places of his own soul. The light of the Presence floods that interior temple; when you enter in, at once you are "drenched with His divinity." God's light surrounds the soul, pervades the atmosphere of the soul, seems, so to say, to saturate, to weave itself into the, very texture of the soul. Prayer teaches the man who gives himself to prayer much about the "allness" of God.

Learned men and saintly men have looked long and reverently into the wonders of the divinity, and they have tried to set forth in words what they have seen. Kneeling there in that blaze of light, the truth dawns upon the soul that in God is to be found every good that can be imagined and in a degree that is without limit. "One only is good, God." God is all-powerful. God is all-beautiful. God is infinite love. Name any perfection that can be named and then look into His divinity and see that it is there and in an infinite degree, in a manner so full, so comprehensive, that He is clearly seen to be the very source itself of that perfection. People and things are beautiful in so far, and only in so far, as they reflect His beauty. Our fellow-men are worthy of our love in so far, and only in so far, as they have drawn their lovable qualities from Him Who is infinitely lovable.

God is eternal, "alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, Who is and Who was and Who is to come." A thousand years in His sight are as yesterday. He was, before the foundations of the world were laid. He will be, when the sun has become extinct, when the last drop of ocean shall be dried up. Without beginning, without end, this wonderful God reaches from end to end mightily and disposes all things sweetly.

God is infinite wisdom, all things being naked and open to His eyes. Not a thought passes through the brain of any of

earth's teeming millions but He sees that thought. Not a word is uttered but He hears that word. He contains in His infinitude of knowledge not only every single deed and word and thought that has actually taken place, not only every single detail that is still to be in the centuries ahead, but with the same poise and clarity all those things that might have happened in other circumstances. Thus He knows exactly how the course of human nature would have run had Adam not sinned, had the Incarnation never taken place, had you or I been born in the Middle Ages or a thousand years hence. No wonder St. Paul is overpowered by it all, this infinite knowledge of this wonderful God. "O, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God!"

Then there is God's blinding sanctity. In His all-holy sight even the very angels are not pure. There is the infinitude of His mercy "patient and of much mercy and true." And side by side with this infinite mercy there is infinite justice. "Thou art just, O Lord, and Thy judgment is true." There is God's infinite power. That power has drawn the mighty universe forth from nothing. That power sustains at every moment the creation it has made. Did God for a single second cease to remember His creation at that same instant it would lapse into the nothingness from which it came. God's power governs the movements of the planets and ordains what shall be the course of the molecules in this sheet of paper from which we are reading.

This is the merest recital of a few of the attributes of God. How helpless one finds oneself in casting about for words that will even faintly express a little of the reality! Now prayer admits the soul to holy intimacy with this Being, this infinite God, this eternal, all-holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-beautiful, all-sufficient and all-sufficing God. No wonder that he is preoccupied with the thought of God's "allness." No wonder that as he kneels there in the light and contemplates God, the sight becomes almost paralysing in its effect upon the soul that prays and looks and tries to see.

It is not surprising if now the soul begins to show total disregard for many of the things which the world values very highly. Men have set their hearts upon money, and nothing is more common than to hear them bemoan their losses or rejoice at their gains. Men are jealous of their honour. They are quick to resent a snub or to vindicate an injustice. Men are tools of avarice, the slaves of human respect, the plaything of their whims or of the passions. "A thousand wants gnarr at the heels of man." They are disappointed and soured when their plans go wrong. They are indignant when their confidence is abused. They are eaten up with curiosity to know the future. They are, many of them, ruled by the impulse of the moment.

The man who has glimpsed the beauty of the divinity has little time for much of this. God's eternity, God's infinity, God's awful sanctity, God's vast ocean of love, God's "allness"—in the sight of this how trivial, how utterly unworthy of a moment's consideration are many of the tremendous trifles which engross the minds and the hearts of most of us. "God is light and in Him there is no darkness." The first precious stone to be set up in the interior of the tabernacle of the man who prays is thus a knowledge of God's greatness.

Hence follows a profound reverence for God, a deliberate preference for God and His interests, an entire lack of care about the opinions of men when these run counter to God, but a deep concern and a keen anxiety about God's point of view. "We ought to be resolved to displease the whole world rather than offend God." That was said by a man who prayed much—Blessed Claude de la Colombière. He acted consistently on that principle, for prayer had shown him clearly that only God mattered.

"God is light" and the light is next turned on the man himself who is kneeling in prayer. Presently another truth stands revealed—the terrifying contrast between God's "allness" and his own nothingness. Prayer teaches self-knowledge, and the light which thus shows a man to himself makes him strike his breast with a feeling of most genuine and heartfelt humility. Our Lord told His followers: "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." The same He would seem to say to a man embarking on the way of prayer. If at first that man was given a true knowledge of his vileness, he must needs stagger and despair under the weight of such a load. So a merciful God permits the reality to dawn upon him only by degrees. Even when communicated to him thus gradually, the light seems almost to shrivel him up. The sight of his utter worthlessness and nothingness must needs prove insupportable did not God's grace sustain him to look upon it.

What is he? Has he, perhaps, sinned grievously in the past? Where is he going to find words now that will express the unspeakable effrontery of mortal sin? A pigmy dictating to God! A creature defying his Creator! Insolence without parallel, that the thing made should scrape the mud off the earth and brazenly attempt to fling it into the face of God! The complacency of the slave who calmly tells his Lord and Master to mind His own business! Such a vaunting of independence in one so entirely dependent! Such an easy assumption of liberty to act in one bound by a thousand claims to obedience! Why has God not annihilated the sinner? Why has He tolerated his jeers and his taunts?

Tolerated them? But what must the sinner think and say when he begins to realise that not only has he been endured, but actually permitted to love God? Not only permitted to love Him, but even commanded? "*Thou shalt love*" When he deserved eternity in hell? When he had led other souls far from God into the ways of sin? "God is light," and when the light falls upon his sin and shows him sin in its true colours, the sinner, like Adam and Eve, would fain hide himself from the face of God, would crawl away from the light back into the shadows where his vileness and ingratitude and insufferable pride might perhaps more easily pass unnoticed. And even if he never sinned grievously, there is still that downward tendency which he sees in the light of prayer.

There is his sinfulness. Well he learns that there is no depth of depravity so low but he is quite capable of descending headlong into it. Well he understands that, once sunk in the gutter, in the gutter he would continue unless an all-merciful God reached down and lifted him up again. Well he knows that one thing only is preventing him from sinking thus—the sustaining grace of God. This innate craving for what degrades him, this insatiable curiosity to see and hear and think about what is evil, this haunting sense of his powerlessness to do anything good, of his readiness to embrace sin even in its most loathsome forms—all this he learns in the light of prayer, and he rises from his knees chastened in the school of a sobering humility.

Seeing himself in this light, recognising the baseness of his sin and his constant sinfulness, learning thus clearly that only God's mercy has saved him from hell, he now will surely show himself grateful. How? God tells him that what he does to the least of his brethren is done to God Himself. Here then his chance. Having been tolerated himself, he will surely show every tolerance towards others. Having been himself treated with such kindness and love, you must be prepared to see him a model of patience and forbearance. This would be but the barest justice, considering his record. But actually what happens? Why he finds himself overbearing in his manner, harsh in his words, cynical in his criticisms of others. He, being what he knows himself to be, dares to show himself full of arrogance, dictates haughtily to others, presumes to give himself superior airs, sneers when somebody makes a mistake, swells with indignation if his will be opposed even in a trifling matter, insists on imposing his own views, compels their acceptance, bristles all over at an imagined slight.

Such a catalogue of inherent meannesses! It is only through prayer that he comes, little by little, to see into the depths of his pride. It is only as the light gradually gains in strength That he is able to recognise how his whole life has been out of joint: "Often," writes Father Considine, "the best kind of prayer is to allow God to look into our souls."

Let the man but persevere in prayer and presently a change in his character begins to show itself. As he grows in self-knowledge, pride begins to give way to a very genuine and heartfelt contempt of self. For what can this thing be proud of, this corrupt human nature? In the clear light of prayer he sees very well that pride is indeed the "never-failing vice of fools." Recognising that nothing only God's grace has lifted him out of the mire, he considers, and very rightly, that any snubs or insult's, or even gross injustices, are all too good for him. They are a welcome exchange for the place he had deserved in hell. And if an all-merciful God has spared him, and instead of sweeping him off the face of the earth has drawn him into this holy intimacy with Himself, is not this only an additional motive for shame and confusion and self-contempt? "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" Now you will no longer find him loud in asserting his rights. Now he does not complain that he is forgotten or ignored. Now he does not expect you to wait on him and attend to his wants. On the contrary, he is genuinely confused that anybody should do him a service or show him any consideration. It is a matter for surprise to him to meet with even the mere civilities of ordinary life, so profoundly convinced is he that if men knew him as he sees himself to be they would not endure him.

But God knows him thus. God knows him even more intimately than he knows himself. And, knowing him thus, God still endures him. More than that: He still wants him for His friend. He is ready to trust him still. He is ready to reach down from the heights of His sanctity to this creature of the gutter! Yes, the man who prays begins to understand now why St. Ignatius said there was no vice he feared less than vainglory. He begins to fathom now the depths of heavenly wisdom contained in that word of a Kempis: "Consider yourself to have made *no* progress until you regard yourself as being the least of all." He is desperately in earnest as he strikes his breast and prays: "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." Humility, say the saints, is that virtue by which a man, from a most true knowledge of himself, grows contemptible in his own eyes. *Ex verissima sui cognitione sibi ipsi vilescit*. Just a creature not to be given any consideration at all, a nonentity not expecting to be noticed.

Here then are the first two precious stones you discover in the life of the man who gives himself much to prayer. Open the door of that tabernacle and look inside. You find in that life a deep reverence for God springing from the knowledge prayer has imparted to him of the "allness" of God.

Side by side with that reverence there is a most sincere and genuine contempt of self, for prayer has shed light too on his worthlessness and sinfulness, and now he is beginning to understand what he is.

It is very easy to illustrate these two traits in the lives of the saints. St. Francis was wont to spend long hours of the night plunged in prayer, and the thoughts that occupied him he would express in his well-known prayer: "Lord, Who art Thou and what am I?" It is an echo of the prayer of Augustine: "Lord, let me know Thee and know myself in order that I may love Thee and hate myself." In more modern times you have the shining example of St. Peter Claver. He signed his last vows as a Jesuit priest: Peter Claver, slave of the slaves forever. And that was no perfervid exaggeration. For forty years he made himself, quite literally, the slave of those poor down-trodden negro slaves. The full story has to be read elsewhere. Why did he wait on them thus except that he realised the "allness" of God? These poor outcasts of society have souls and he can contribute to God's glory by saving those souls. And why humble himself thus into the dust? Why take on himself the most humiliating labours and persevere on his course in spite of superhuman difficulties? Why, except that prayer had taught him his nothingness, and he rightly considered it an honour to be allowed to take up the place that he sincerely believed was one most suited for him. *Ex verissima sui cognitione sibi ipsi vilescit*.

If prayer had only these two lessons to teach us, discouragement would certainly ensue. The greatness of God would overawe us and the sense of our own miseries would crush us. But now a third light begins to appear. Notwithstanding the infinite chasm between us, it is true that that great God still desires union with our souls. "Abyss calleth upon abyss." The abyss of His "allness" reaches deep down, even to the abyss of man's nothingness, with the intent of raising man up out of the mire. God's design is nothing less than that man should become Godlike; more even than that, that he should actually be made to partake in the very life of God Himself.

It is at this stage that Jesus Christ begins especially to enter into the life of prayer. This plan of God is far too sublime for weak man to reach up to it of himself. Left to himself, he will continue to wallow in sin and sinfulness. But Our divine Lord appears in order to act as a bridge across that chasm that separates man from God. He is, first of all, the well-beloved Son of that Father. He is equal to the Father. Hence if He asks the Father for anything, the Father must surely be moved to grant it. At the Jordan the Father declared as much. "This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased."

Again, at the Transfiguration, the voice of the Father was heard proclaiming that Jesus Christ was in truth the very Son of the Eternal Father. There is no name more frequently on the lips of Christ than "Father." "Father, I confess to Thee." "Father, forgive them." "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit."

But, besides this, Jesus Christ is also a real Man, and the soul given to prayer begins to realise more and more that He is the greatest lover of mankind Who ever walked across the stage of time. A man stepping into the light that prayer is wont to shed sees very clearly that when Our Lord assures men of this love He is not speaking the language of metaphor. He is making a statement of a fact that is most literally true. The man of prayer understands well the import of the message of the Sacred Heart. "Behold this Heart on fire with love for men." His revelations at Paray were "a last effort" to arouse the world from its lethargy and stun all men into a realisation of the most stupendous fact that God-made-Man had

a Heart on fire with love for them.

If Jesus Christ loves thus, you would expect Him to be ready to help us in our many miseries. And that is just what happens. He is the well-beloved Son of the Father and He is the Friend and the Elder Brother of us. So He acts as a bridge between the Father and ourselves. He pleased the Father, and so He is heard by that Father. He turns towards us, and seems to ask Himself what He can do to enable us to reach up to the glorious plan the Father has made for us. What can Jesus Christ do in order that man may be fitted to enter into a sharing of the very life of God?

St. Paul supplies the answer. "In all things," he says, "you are made rich in Him, so that nothing is wanting to you in any grace." Nothing is wanting! Jesus Christ has accumulated a vast, infinite store of merits, through the life He lived, and especially through His Sacred Passion. All these He places most willingly at man's disposal. Through the Sacraments and through prayer the grace of Christ is communicated to the soul. The only measure of His giving is the soul's capacity to receive. In the proportion in which this most precious treasure flows into the soul in the same does the life of sin and sinfulness disappear. But something else happens. As this grace obtains more and more possession, the soul grows more and more in a new life. In the forcible expression of St. Paul, she becomes "a new creature."

Let not the man of prayer be confused any more when he comes into the light of God now. For now he kneels in that blaze of light clothed with the merits of Christ Who is the well-beloved Son of God. Now he is inflamed with the affections of that Sacred Heart of Christ Who loved the Father with such a pure and disinterested love. This is his debt to Christ, or, rather, it is an infinitesimally small portion of that debt. When the Father looks at him now, He sees him no longer in the rags of his sins and sinfulness. He is "made rich" in Christ, so that "nothing is wanting to him." The Father sees that he has become like Christ. He has grown into another well-beloved. He is, as it were, Christ over again.

Such a transformation! Just as a piece of iron when plunged into the flame comes out red hot, all aglow, so the soul which has been thus brought into this intimate contact with Jesus comes forth cleansed and purified of its former vices and inflamed with the affections of the Sacred Heart. And the change is not merely an external one. It is not only that the man has been cloaked over by the merits of Christ while retaining his sin and sinfulness in his heart. There is an entire interior transformation too. Indeed, in his soul, Christ reigns supreme. Again turn to the immortal St. Paul and you hear him cry out in ecstasy: "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me." That man now kneels in the sight of his God beautified with the beauty of Christ, loving the rather with Christ's love, burning with zeal for souls as Christ's Heart burned, hating sin with the very same hatred which Jesus ever showed towards it, craving for sinners and their return to God with the very intensity of Jesus Christ Himself.

Well might we think of the Father pointing him out, as He now looks on this man and sees this marvellous change wrought in him through the merits of the Son. Once again, as at the Jordan and at the Transfiguration, does he declare: "*This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased.*"

How helpless and hopeless is our condition without Christ! Crushed underneath a load of sin and sinfulness! But the nearness of Christ, the touch of Christ, quickens that languishing life. "No man cometh to the Father but through Me." Seeing himself enriched thus by His merits, the soul is emboldened to arise and go back to her Father. It is worth her while, after all, trying to reach that grand ideal of union with God if Christ has had compassion on her thus, if He had - destroyed her sins and her sinful past and has clothed her in a garment of such transcendent loveliness. "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me." "Not I"—no longer the "I" of selfishness and sin, but another, Christ Himself dwelling in me. When a man prays much, all this grows upon him. He understands better each day the debt he owes to this loving-intervention of Jesus Christ. "No man," writes Benson, "can walk three steps on the road to heaven unless Jesus Christ walks by his side." Very true. More true, however, if we say that he cannot walk even a single step. "Without Me, you can do *nothing*." But with Him, what a difference! "I can do all things in Him that strengtheneth me." Christ's grace has made access to God possible once more. When sin had usurped God's place in the soul, Christ came and destroyed the reign of sin. When heaven was lost irrevocably, Christ came and re-won heaven for mankind. If all men of all time had united in a great act of atonement to God for the insult offered Him by even a single mortal sin, all that they could do would be utterly inadequate. For God's offended majesty being infinite, only an infinite Being could make sufficient atonement.

And Christ did that, for He was very God and of very God. “Our sufficiency is from Him.”

This is much, but not even here does our debt end. For it is possible for man to undo all Christ’s magnificent work.

Mortal sin can expel the life of grace and enthrone the usurper once more in the soul, when even that base ingratitude is perpetrated, the way back to God always remains open— once more through the merits of Christ. Not only has He redeemed us, but He is ever ready to pardon when in our blindness we break again the bond of friendship with the Father. In the entire Gospel there is not a single instance to be found where Jesus treated a repentant sinner with harshness.

No wonder then that the third precious stone you find in the interior of that tabernacle is a burning personal love for Jesus Christ. The man of prayer discovers, a thousand times over the utter sincerity of this Friend. Christ redeems. Christ enriches the soul with His grace. Christ presents the soul “a new creature,” clothed with His merits, in the sight of the Father. Christ points to heaven which His labours have won for the soul. And, perhaps most astonishing of all, when the soul has rejected all this and thwarted it by sin, Christ pursues the soul, persuades the soul to return, assures the soul that pardon is hers for the asking. You would think that man must be in some way necessary to God’s happiness so eager is the Son to secure the salvation and the sanctification of the soul. Was there ever a saint who failed to realise this marvellous love of Jesus Christ? Open up the story of their lives and there you read on every page expressions that seem to our dull worldly minds to be extravagant and exaggerated. Personal attachment to Christ, deep affection for Him as for a most trustworthy Friend—that is the third characteristic of the man who gives himself in prayer.

“Thaw Thou my coldness

Which doth now obstruct Thy love,

*Curtailing its full measure.”**

For the man of prayer Christ is seen as infinite wealth to enrich his poverty. If he be a sinner, Christ is sinless and Christ is his intimate Friend. If he be weak, Christ is strong, and Christ is his Friend. If he be stained with the guilt of many crimes, Christ has in Himself the infinite sanctity of God, and Christ is his Friend.

The fire of Christ’s love to inflame his coldness, the mercy of Christ’s Heart to gather him, the patience of Christ’s eagerness for him to encourage him to begin again even when he has proved himself a traitor.

All this becomes reality to the man who prays. And is not such a Christ the Christ of the Gospel? It is hard to understand how some even of His friends insist on making almost a caricature of Him. They will stress His justice to such an extent that you would think He was only watching for an opportunity of sending the sinner to hell. The contrary is the truth. He reveals Himself as patient and abounding in mercy, ready to forgive even till seventy times seven times. No wonder that when the beauty of Him, the mercy of Him, the kindness of Him, the generosity of Him—no wonder that when all this and much more begins to become reality to the man who prays—that he is caught up in a fire of zeal, of enthusiasm for Jesus Christ.

“Who then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation? Or nakedness? Or fire? Or the sword? For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor any other thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” He is all. You might cover pages and fill volumes in the effort to express all that He means to the man of prayer, and at the end you have still not even grazed the surface of His loveliness.

Now comes the question: Why does prayer not mean all this to many more of us? Why is it that perhaps after years of effort in the work of developing a life of prayer, we still remain dry and inappreciative? We go through our prayers because we are convinced of the need we have of prayer. We are impelled by the strong statements of the saints about the power of this holy exercise. But there is no great zeal in us for prayer. Prayer is perhaps an irksome duty. Prayer tends to assume the appearance of a burthen which we would willingly lay aside if we dared.

We do not feel that awe-inspiring conviction of God’s greatness. We are not at all inclined to admit that we are

* *St. John of the Cross.*

ourselves so vile, and we are far indeed from thinking ourselves the worst sinners on the face of the earth. Our Lord's personal love—yes, here perhaps we are somewhat affected. But, yet, even here, the burning love of the saints for Him, their anxiety to make Him known and loved, their readiness to let go everything that life holds dear for Him—all this we call imprudent zeal. It does not appeal to us. We do not understand it. We can admire these three precious stones in the tabernacle, but we have no great keenness about setting them up within ourselves. A life of intimacy with God in prayer is all right—but from a distance.

Why should prayer seem so distasteful? Why should we show ourselves, many of us, very reluctant to set before ourselves a very high ideal in this matter of prayer? Why be content to settle down to the attitude of one who regards prayer as almost a nuisance, or, at least, of one who never hopes to find in prayer his greatest delight?

The answer is not far to seek. There is no denying that the world today has a most attractive program to set out before the eyes of a young man or woman facing life. You have every conceivable facility for having a good time. For many “a good time” is the be-all and end-all of life. What use is life if you cannot have it a succession of thrills? That mentality is common enough. Now comes the world offering to open up endless avenues of pleasure to the youthful explorer. There is thrill and excitement and pleasure to suit all tastes. The heart craves naturally for these, especially the young heart. And are they sins? No, you are told, sometimes with a suggestion of indignation even at the mention of the word. All the youth wants is enjoyment; there is every intention of stopping short at sin—at least mortal sin.

Gradually a false mentality is induced. The standard is lowered. Provided a pleasure is “not a sin,” the pleasure-seeker decides that there is no reason on earth why he should not reach out both hands and seize upon it. But a little thought shows clearly that such a mentality saps the life-blood of a deeply interior life of prayer. Even granting that you do keep free from sin (and the supposition is a large one), still, if you are not prepared to deny yourself, you may make up your mind that intimacy with God and the sweet familiarity with Him engendered by prayer are out of the question.

Prayer thus postulates a big act of trust in Our Lord's promises. You have to take up the knife and deliberately cut from out your life much that is merely pleasurable without being sin. It is the price of intimacy with Jesus. But let it be asserted, as a first axiom and with all possible forcefulness, that He never allows Himself to be outdone in generosity. No sooner do you begin to try to sacrifice yourself for Him than a new joy comes into your life by the side of which all that the world offered appears hollow and insipid. Many who will read this may perhaps refuse to believe it because it is not their experience. And it is not their experience because they have jibbed at the price to be paid.

Another cause of the repugnance we feel towards prayer is to be found in people who themselves pass for pious, religious folk. While the world is full of merriment, the servants of the Lord seem dull and uninteresting and gloomy and long-faced. Result? The youth turns away from such a person. Many who give themselves to prayer are very bad, advertisements for the joyousness that ought to be characteristic of holiness. It was a great friend of God who wrote: “A saint who is sad is a sad sort of saint.” Holiness should be attractive. Christ, in Whom resided the fullness of sanctity, was so attractive that all sorts and conditions of people followed Him everywhere, hanging on His words, forgetting even to take their food, and leaving Him not a moment to take His.

Prayer and the service of God are rendered repulsive, too, through much formalism. Go into a Church and watch those young boys or girls, yawning, bored, sprawling over the back of the benches. Let us not be too ready to condemn them. If the prayer is an unintelligible drawl or an ill-articulated jumble of words, whose fault is it if the people are soon wearied? Such a contrast with the catering of the world for worldly enjoyment! The world and its advocates leave nothing undone to push their wares, to deck them out in most attractive programs. But religious services, it seems, can be dashed off any old way. Prayer can be mumbled, prayer can be inaudible, prayer can be merest lip-service. Can we blame people who find such prayer uninteresting, deadening, extinguishing true devotion?

Here is a group of boys kneeling in the chapel. One of them is stumbling through a set of prayers amid innumerable disturbances. Some boys are still tramping in, the chapel door is banged and banged again, there is a regular barrage of coughs drowning the voice of the one who is reading, the words are absolutely meaningless both to him who reads and those who are united, supposedly, with him in the act of praying. Is it any wonder that, if this is what passes for prayer,

boys are bored with prayer in no time, and drop it promptly when they leave school? “This people honoureth Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me.”

On the other hand, enter a Church where the prayer is made to be a real prayer. You have an immediate response from the people. They have come here to pray, and they are frankly delighted when they can hear with ease what is being said. They need only a little encouragement to throw themselves heart and soul into the great act they are performing. A little more spontaneity, a little more care to be heard, a little more trouble to lay the axe to the roots of distractions—a little more, but what a vast improvement it would mean to our public prayers and our esteem for the great work of speaking to God in praise and petition! Formalism, routine—this is a canker worm which has eaten the heart out of our life of prayer. Carelessness about removing the causes of distraction at the actual time of prayer has often made the prayer a travesty of that holy exercise.

So if we are praying together, let us be in time, let us not begin till all are in their places and there is going to be no stampede up the Church, let us say the public prayers so that they can be heard and understood, let us take our time. Do this and see how prayer will grow into our lives and awaken in our hearts some of the convictions which were such dynamic truths in the lives of the men and women who gave themselves much to prayer. Of prayer, more than anything else, is it true that if it is worth doing at all it is worth doing properly.

Everybody who speaks to us or writes about prayer invariably stresses, as has been done in this little paper, the necessity of a spirit of self-denial if there is to be depth in our prayer. Perhaps the idea may cross our minds that this is a “hard saying.” After all, if the Lord is so concerned to establish this holy intimacy with us why does He make the way of approach so uninviting? A simple parable will help with the answer.

Suppose you are working at a piece of carpentry and that you catch your hand in a rusty nail. You give yourself a bad cut, and next morning when you examine the wound you find that the hand has swollen considerably and a quantity of poisonous matter has gathered during the night. It looks serious, and forthwith you go to the doctor. The poison is causing you much pain. You cannot use your hand. You cannot allow anybody else to touch it. The doctor decides that your only chance of escaping even more serious trouble is to have the hand lanced on the spot. Presently, an ugly knife is produced, and suddenly, when you are not expecting it, the doctor plunges it well into the centre of your swollen hand.

It is most painful, and the sight of that knife nearly made you ill. Nevertheless you now heave a sigh of relief. For, the moment the wound has been opened, out comes the poison. The operation was disagreeable, indeed, but how glad you are now to have had it! It is certainly worth the price to rid yourself of this poisonous matter.

In some such way your heart needs to be purified before it can live the life of intimate prayer and companionship with God. Christ is the way to the Father. “No man cometh to the Father but by Me.” The task of the soul, therefore, is to come in closest possible contact with the Heart of Christ. As we saw, there is a fund of pride and self-sufficiency in every one of us. Sin and selfishness in their myriad forms are like the swellings that surround the heart of that man who embarks on the way of prayer. He has to bring that heart of his in close contact with the Sacred Heart in order that virtue pass from Christ into him. But what happens? The Sacred Heart is surrounded with thorns, and the moment the contact is made these must necessarily pierce the heart that is swollen with pride, with sin and with selfishness. This is necessary if the poison is to be drawn off. It is painful, but it is certainly well worthwhile. And the closer the contact the more deeply those thorns will force themselves in, and, as a result, the greater will be the pain and the more thorough the cleansing.

That is why Jesus asks us to do hard things. It is not that He delights in seeing us suffer. It is not that sacrifice in itself is of any great value. But “there is no detour around the hill of Calvary.” The divine life can flow into the soul only in the measure in which the soul is emptied of selfishness and sin and sinfulness. And there is no weapon more effective to slay selfishness and sin and sinfulness than the sword of self-sacrifice. “If the grain of wheat die, it will bring forth much fruit.”

Finally, let it be said that there is no great enthusiasm in your present-day world, for all this doctrine about prayer. Visible results are our great goal. We estimate success by what we can see and touch. Materially minded as we are, our standards of value have altered sadly. More thought is given to what a man does than to the reason why he does it. More

applause is won by his conquests over others than by his conquest over himself.

Christ's standards are very different. Thirty years hidden away in despised Nazareth and only three in the public eye. Thirty years, as your modern efficient world would put it, "wasting time" in the midst of shavings and sawdust, doing very ordinary things which could be done just as well by any ordinary person.

It is not so much *what* we do that matters as *why* we do it. It is not so much what we *do* as what we *become* that is of value in God's eyes. His design for the soul is that it become transformed interiorly. The walls of selfishness and sin must be levelled. The poison of pride must be drawn off. Then there will ensue that "more abundant life" which flows into the soul from its close contact with Christ. And those walls begin to totter when you set yourself to pray. And that poison begins to escape according as you plunge in the knife of self-sacrifice. A very marvellous and beautifying work begins in the interior of the tabernacle, which is your own soul, when prayer begins to acquire the ascendancy.

If there is one lesson more than another to be learnt at Nazareth, it is the importance of prayer. If there is any course of action that condemns our modern rush and breathlessness, it is the course pursued by the Son of God for that thirty years of His hidden life. The work of the sanctification of an individual soul is of more importance in the eyes of God than the material welfare of the nation. And all the soul's sanctification comes from contact with Christ. And contact with Christ is made by prayer. That is why He is so exacting in laying down the conditions that will enable you to pray. Prayer is the life of true achievement. Prayer is the instrument best fitted to do God's work in the soul. Deep knowledge of God; sincere contempt of self; burning love for the Man-God—these are the three precious stones which beautify the life of him that prays. These are the interior adornment set up in the soul by the operation of grace which works within you when you pray.

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