

CONVERSATION WITH GOD

By Robert Nash, S. J.

1. A COMMON LANGUAGE

The first essential for conversation is a common language. If you are travelling with a stranger in a train he may have many interesting things to say, and you, no doubt, would like to talk too, or perhaps, in quite exceptional circumstances you would be willing even to listen. But you are both up against a stone wall. He speaks German only, and you English only. After a few attempts to communicate by smiles and signs, you give up the effort, which, plainly, is useless, and you bury yourself once more in the pages of your book.

Prayer is conversation with God. It is the meeting place between God and the soul. To Him the soul addresses itself:

“Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.” Perhaps we too often want to monopolize the conversation. We are so anxiously concerned to “get in” a self-imposed programme of prayers that there may be a danger lest we speak with our lips only, and our hearts remain far from God. There can be a subtle pride in the feeling of satisfaction that we have said five rosaries and made the Stations three times, and added on the Thirty Days’ Prayer and a few novenas for good measure.

Listen Too

God forbid we should breathe a syllable against such excellent ways of prayer! Our point is that there may be a mistake here. With *too many* vocal prayers, especially if they tend to develop into parrot prayers, we can become preoccupied with ourselves, to the exclusion of God. God is, of course, anxious to speak, but we will not allow Him! “Mental” prayer is remedy for this tendency to monopolize the conversation.

At the same time our contribution to the conversation is of great importance. Hence the soul adds: “I will speak to my Lord whereas I am but dust and ashes.” Prayer is an audience with God, in which, with infinite condescension He deigns to address the soul, and the soul is emboldened by so much divine courtesy to speak to Him.

Face to Face

This double aspect of prayer is excellently illustrated in the story of Moses. By God’s command he climbed up Mount Sinai. As he walked a cloud began to envelop him round about. After a while he lifted his eyes to see where next to place his foot, and he stood, transfixed and overawed. A ray, of light had penetrated through the cloud and God’s servant was aware that it came from His Face. He fell on his knees, joined his hands, bowed his head low, and remained there on the mountain for full forty days and forty nights. He was admitted to a marvellous intimacy with God in this conversation. “The Lord spoke to Moses, face to face, as a man is wont to speak to his friend.”

During that time Moses “neither ate bread nor drank water”. He was oblivious of all save the one overwhelming fact that he was face to face with God. This tremendous truth absorbed him. The trivialities of the small world down at the foot of the mountain seemed so utterly insignificant now, by comparison. When he came back to his people the Israelites his face was “horned”, luminous with the reflection of the divine light which had shone upon it during that long period. He had to wear a veil else no one could endure the brilliance.

Fifteen minutes’ mental prayer a day is an invitation to you, to enter with Moses into the cloud. There you too must kneel in God’s Presence. There He will speak to you. There you have the ineffable privilege of addressing Him as one friend to another.

Climb the Mountain

All of us probably realize that the mountain is a stiff climb and the temperature of the high altitudes bleak and uninviting. The temptation is often strong to believe we are getting nowhere with our mental prayer. The cloud folds itself around us sure enough, but the ray of light fails to appear. We are stumbling in a land of fog and rain and blinding snow.

Better have sense and return to the comfort of the snug valley and leave this wild chase after mental prayer.

We shall talk about this temptation later. For the moment we must put down a full-stop. This only we will add—that love is the common language between God and the soul. It can be expressed in English or French or Chinese, but fundamentally it remains the same in every translation. In this conversation, God multiplies assurances and proofs of the love He bears the soul. And the poor soul tries to stammer out its acts of love, painfully conscious of their shortcomings.

It is love which beckons to the soul and encourages it to undertake the difficult ascent. It is love which strengthens the wearying footsteps and sustains the faltering heart. It is love that holds the soul up here where all seems so desolate, almost as desolate as Calvary, whither He climbed too, praying all the while.

2. A COMMON INTEREST

Conversation will soon be very boring if you discover that your companion can speak only of sport and you of the forthcoming exam. So much depends for you and for others on the results that you can think of little else. But he shows not even the mildest interest and wants to tell you all about the big match played last week or coming off next Saturday.

You have nothing much in common and you decide, wisely enough, to close down.

But what an enormous difference if you find a point of contact. Suppose your companion has just returned from America. At once you prick up your ears. America— does he perhaps know So and So, who one time used to live in Fifth Avenue, New York. He does. They are very good friends, and So and So and his family were down at the boat to see him off. This is wonderful, for the man in question is your brother. This is almost too good to be true.

Conversation thus sparked off, catches on without difficulty. You have a thousand questions to ask. Time simply flies and when you reach your destination you look in amazement at the name on the station. You glance at your watch, incredulous. You part on the platform but you exchange addresses and you exact a solemn promise that he will call to your house before he goes back to America.

It was the subject of common interest which made all the difference between a dull forced effort to keep the talk going and the eager spontaneous flow of talk which you found absorbing. Wouldn't it be rather wonderful if something like this were to happen in our mental prayer? This is a conversation with God, and if He and we were deeply interested in the same things, our complaints about dryness and futility ought to die a natural death. If we can find out what He is interested in, and if a like interest be awakened in ourselves, then our mental prayer should no longer be stilted and irksome. It should develop into a more easy, informal relationship, full of reverence indeed but at the same time approaching close to "holy familiarity with God".

Now what is God interested in most of all? Suppose you take your stand this evening at a bus queue in any Street of the city. Look around you. On every side you see a seething mass of humanity. A policeman on point duty; the different buses pulling up and disgorging passengers—an old woman who must climb out slowly and delays those impatient behind her, a pair of lovers who must, perforce, unjoin hands for a few seconds—then the bus takes on another group from your queue and passes. A little boy in ragged clothes wants to sell you an evening paper. The shops are still open and prospective buyers stare in at the windows or loiter in the entrances.

Gaze Into Soul

Now Jesus Christ watches those crowds as you do. He is, indeed, deeply concerned about their material affairs—their state of health, the job they are after, the sickness in the family, what you will. But, far and above all these, the supreme interest in His mind is the soul of each of those thousands of persons. For in each that is what He discerns. His gaze penetrates below the ragged coat of the newsboy and sees his immortal soul. He reads the secrets of hearts like the pages of an open book. If in a soul He sees mortal sin, the sight is revolting and causes Him acute agony. If he sees a soul radiant with the light of divine grace, living with divine life; the sight fills Him with joy.

But the one point to note is that the soul, its state, its presence, its future destiny, is the interest that absorbs Him. So true is this that if we were to ask Him to summarize all His teaching, He would probably repeat His momentous question:

“What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”

If we can talk about the souls of men, then, to Jesus in our prayer; if when we are invited to a conversation with Him, we have developed an interest in the salvation and sanctification of souls, we shall assuredly have found a subject of common interest and the conversation cannot but flow freely. Other subjects need not be excluded, but this one must always dominate. Indeed all others are worth discussing and considering, only in so far as they affect the welfare of the souls of man.

3. OVER THE WALL

A child aged three was toddling along the road, clinging firmly to father's right hand. A high wall skirted the pathway - and they heard the strains of a band playing on the other side. But the child was anxious to see as well as hear, and so Daddy took him in his strong arms and lifted him up high. From this point of vantage he can enjoy a perfect view and he proceeds to dilate on the wonders he sees, for the benefit of anyone who is willing to listen.

Something like this happens, at least from time to time, in the soul's conversation with God in prayer. A glimpse is granted of, the relative importance of the temporal and the eternal. The heavenly Father lifts the soul and allows it to see what things God has prepared for those who love Him. There is a revelation, a new heaven and a new earth. On the other side of the wall is eternity. From even this fleeting glimpse the soul recognizes, with a clarity quite impossible to express, that nothing is worthy of consideration except getting there.

An Earnest Desire

The child gave signs to the father that it was anxious to be lifted up and see over the wall. The soul, too, must prove to God and to itself that it is in earnest in desiring to develop an interest in souls. This may well mean that it suppress or even sacrifice wholly, alien interests.

Apart from sin, the soul can cling to a thousand things which dim its powers of spiritual vision. The world is all around us, and nothing is easier than to allow it to push its wares and press them upon us with such persistence, that they end by assuming in our eyes an importance which they do not possess in actual fact.

I could not help overhearing a conversation in a bus lately. Two girls were talking and for some fifteen minutes their discussion turned on films, dances, dress, and holidays. Admittedly all four topics have their importance, but one got the impression that the girls thought of almost nothing else. If the impression was correct you can safely conclude that their prayer was superficial. They had no desire to see over the wall for the simple reason that they did not even suspect what was there. They were preoccupied with trifles, and, if you had seen the other side, you could feel nothing for them but compassion for their loss. It was calamitous to be satisfied with so little, or fail to realize that there was so much more.

Trespassers Prosecuted

What all this resolves itself into is that there is no chance of growth in prayer without a spirit of self-sacrifice. There are many trespassers in the soul which is God's property and they must be ruthlessly prosecuted. The soul is God's temple and like the Master, the soul must expel all intruders—the buyers and sellers who turn the house of God into a den of traffic.

Lent is an invitation to penance. What are we to give up and what are we to take up? The question may not be limited to the lenten season. The hard saying of Our Lord holds for the twelve months of every year: “Unless a man renounce *everything that he possesses*, he cannot be My disciple.” This renunciation demands that we lay the axe to the root by controlling our desires for anything in which God may not share fully in order to succeed, it will often be necessary to go without, even in those things which are lawful.

It is noteworthy that Our Lord, immediately after He had laid down this condition which human nature in us finds so hard, proceeded at once to tell us about the Good Shepherd and the Prodigal Son. Mental prayer is not meant to be a

struggle all the time. There are delights too, and these God grants with a lavish hand, when they are for the soul's benefit.

When once the soul has tasted them it realises that any sacrifice is a small price to pay for such inundation of joy. We need encouragement. People who give us a lop-sided view of the difficulties and trials of prayer are like a doctor displaying for his patient the knife to be used for the operation, and the knife only.

4. A PATTERN

The Gospel according to St. Mark lies open before me. Here is the 35th verse of his first chapter: "And rising very early, going out, He (Our Lord) went into a desert place, and there He prayed." Long ago God ordered Moses to build a tabernacle according to a pattern; here is God's Son giving us a perfect pattern for our mental prayer.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways of making our prayer is simply to summon up before our mind's eye some scene in the life of Christ. Then put yourself into that scene. Look and observe what is going on, who are there, what they are saying and doing, and speak to them just exactly as if you were actually present.

Let's try it with this verse from St. Mark. The first detail to notice is the time chosen by Our Lord for prayer. It was early morning. If you read the preceding verses you will find that He had had a toilsome day yesterday. But no long sleep for Him next morning. He is up "very early" and at His prayer.

The Best Time

Hence the importance of the precise period during, which you make your time of mental prayer. No hard and fast rule can be laid down; you must experiment and try to discover the time when you seem to do best. It may be in the stillness of night, or on your way home from work in the evening. It is noteworthy, at the same time, that the founders of the Religious Orders have consistently assigned the early morning as the time of prayer.

Our blessed Lord is just as particular about the place for His prayer. "Going out, He went into a desert place." He did not, indeed, seek this solitude because it was in some way necessary for Him, as though He wanted to avoid distractions. In His case there could be no possible distraction because He always saw the Face of His Father in the beauty and glory of the Beatific Vision. He was as intimately united with His Father in the crowded streets as in the trackless deserts.

But we are very different. St. Teresa calls that restless imagination of ours "the fool of the house". For us it is imperative to leave nothing to chance where our prayer is concerned. Hence Our Lord seeks solitude for our instruction and example. We live such a noisy whirlpool existence; the world about us seems to have developed a cult of noise. We *must* escape if we want to pray well. If escape is genuinely impossible, then a loving God will compensate in His own way. But normally we must choose our place of prayer with the care we employ in selecting a site for a new building.

A Desert Place

That is why an enclosed retreat is beyond all praise. In your ordinary prayer, you may find some quiet church or convent chapel, or you may find tranquillity in your room at home. Anyhow, look for the spot where you are free of noise and noisy people. "Going out, He went into a desert place."

"There He prayed." It is significant that "Simon and they that were with him," missed Him. Perhaps *they* were not up so early! They knew where to look for Him and we are permitted to imagine them, standing and watching their Master as He still continues to kneel and they wait for Him to finish. With them we can form a picture of the praying Christ. We can observe the position He takes up; probably He knelt, but whatever the position was, we can be certain it indicated deep reverence.

Perhaps our failures in prayer might be attributed to the position we assume. If we know that by sitting down we shall soon be drowsy, we should not sit. "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent bears it away."

Look again and this time note the obvious humility of the praying Christ. As man he prays on behalf of us sinners, and as our mediator with His Father and our Father. By his example He teaches you and me to imitate the humility of the publican who struck his breast and exclaimed: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Finally, as we watch, we may admire the perseverance of His prayer. His apostles have come to fetch Him; they warn Him “all seek Thee.” But, as again in Gethsemani, He prayed the longer.”

What a wealth there is of thought in that one verse of St. Mark, material for several conversations with God.

5. LIGHT AND SHADE

On Holy Thursday night our Lord was kneeling in prayer. Presently He falls flat on His face. A sweat breaks out through the pores of His body. It is not natural sweat merely. It is mixed with blood and it saturates His clothes and from them falls in drops to the ground.

Praying in Christ

It ought not to be difficult, in our prayer, to come here in spirit and kneel down beside Him. From the many thoughts which might suggest themselves, let us select one or two. First, our prayer, here or anywhere else, now or at any other time, is to be made not only with Christ but in Christ. We form part of His Mystical Body, and this implies,—among other magnificent truths—that it is His Will and intention to *prolong*, to *continue*, in us, the prayer He made in his life here on earth. He would employ us, use our faculties, our minds, hearts, wills, and bodies, as the instruments by means of which He would go on praying right up to the end of time.

Christ Lives In Me

Hence St. Paul wrote that inspiring if somewhat startling sentence: “I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me.” He repeats this over and over again. When, then, we kneel for our mental prayer—or for any prayer at all—it is the Will of Our Lord to pray through us. The prayer is not so much ours as His. Why don’t we think more of this stunning fact and work out its implications?

At once it becomes clear that if in Gethsemani His prayer was filled with sorrow, with loneliness, with apparent failure, then *His* prayer *in us* must, at least sometimes, take on the same characteristics. Here is the answer to those of us who experience nothing in our prayer but weariness and desolation. Here is the proof that our prayer can be real and efficacious when we seem to ourselves to spend the time wondering if the clock is stopped.

St. Teresa, wonderful ‘woman of prayer that she was, tells, us—and God bless her for it—that at times she felt such weariness in her mental prayer that she would shake the hourglass to make the sand pass the more quickly from one section to the other. She had to try to resist that urge, but she did not, always succeed. For us the urge will be to fiddle with our wrist-watch and look at it every few minutes to make sure we don’t remain too long!

‘What would St. Ignatius tell us? When you are inclined to shorten your prayer, do the very opposite. You want to clip off five minutes; add on five extra instead! This is sound psychology. Try it. In the few extra minutes a generous God often rewards the soul with many lights and graces.

Keep On Doing Your Best

At the same time, it is vitally necessary to insist that, if weariness is no indication of failure, so, on the other hand, sweetness and delight and consolation do not necessarily mean that we are making the best possible prayer. Two people might come for their prayer into the same church. One is filled with all sorts of spiritual happiness. God seems so very near. His love is experienced so vividly. Some word from His lips fills the soul with enthusiasm, or ardent desires to sacrifice one’s all for Him. Splendid, this, and it is His gift, to be accepted with humility and gratitude.

To that soul St. Ignatius would say: “Remember all this will change; perhaps in a day or an hour you will have lost these grand feelings. Do not be surprised, and above all, do not abandon prayer. Consolation is God’s gift. If he withdraws it, go on just the same, doing your poor best.”

The other person in that church kneels also to pray. He tries a book. It seems dry. He remembers what he heard about scenes in Our Lord’s Life. He can recall not one of them definitely this evening. Or if he can, he cannot steady that

wretched imagination of his. He shifts from one knee to the other; perhaps he sits up in the hope of doing better; he shuts his eyes to aid concentration. Nothing seems to help. Mental prayer is a mirage. He decides to give it up. “And (Jesus), being in an agony, prayed the longer.” Was *His* prayer a mirage in Gethsemani? Is His prayer *in you* a mirage because, like Him, you find it hard?

God In Her

A girl of eighteen was kneeling in prayer in a church. A hardened sinner, years from the sacraments, stumbled in too, unable to say why. A priest walked down the aisle. “Father, will you hear my confession? It’s that girl—can’t you see God in her.....?” He was right; God *was* in her, the Son of God, continuing His prayer with that girl as His instrument. What marvels of grace He can do through His instrument if only it will allow Him!

6. DISTRACTIONS

St. Aloysius declared officially by the Church the special patron of youth. One reason for this is that it seems certain he never lost his baptismal innocence, though he was assailed by fierce temptations against purity. He died a Jesuit student when he was just beginning his twenty-fourth year.

We mention him here because we want to tell you how he handled his distractions in prayer. He used to propose to himself to make one entire hour (not just fifteen minutes!) without a single distraction. He would remain motionless all that time, in the same position, and, if even towards the end of the hour, he had some slight distraction, he would begin all over again. By this heroic perseverance he gained wonderful self-mastery, a control over his imagination so complete that there came a day when he found it difficult not to keep thinking of God. Once, in an illness, the doctor advised him to try to ease strain by thinking less about God. He tried, but found it impossible. It was far easier to remember God’s continual presence than to forget it.

Should you and I adopt his method of dealing with our distractions? A general answer would be hard to give. It *is* conceivable that in a given case some violence of the kind would be the tight remedy. Once when St. Francis of Assisi was at prayer, his eyes wandered contentedly to a little cup he had carved in his leisure moments, so that he paid hardly any attention to the psalms he was saying. Suddenly he realised his distraction, and in his zeal seized the beaker that had taken his thoughts from God and threw it into the fire.

A Priceless Treasure

Whenever we think of their methods it must at least be clear that the saints were determined to become men of prayer. They realised, not merely believed, that prayer is a treasure of great price, worth the selling of anything else. It may well be that what is wrong with our prayer is just that it lacks that holy violence which faces distractions with the determination of a pugilist in the ring.

Another way of dealing with distractions may be just as effective. Why not make our distractions themselves a prayer? Suppose a mother is sitting at the fire, with her little son on her knee. She is telling him a story— incidentally, our excellent mothers should often tell the gripping stories of the Gospel. Halfway through, the child gets a distraction. People start cheering loudly in the street below. The child’s natural curiosity is aroused. He forgets all about the grand story, clambers down from mother’s knee, and pulls her over to the window.

Could you imagine any mother who would object or be offended that her wonderful tale is dismissed thus summarily? Why, she cares only for the contentment of her child and she is quite happy to try to answer his questions about the persons gathered below. The child has had a distraction during the conversation with mother, and they turn the distraction itself into subject-matter for discussion.

During your prayer your mind wanders, perhaps, to someone you met in the office today. Why not pray with your whole heart for him or her? You begin to think of the good news you received in a letter this morning. Why not lift up your heart in an act of joyous gratitude to God? Your approaching holidays loom pleasantly before your mind. Can’t you

ask God to bless them, and Mary to share all your relaxations? Can't you pray against accidents, can't you go on to pray for some poor person or persons killed in a car smash?

A Common. Interest

What we have to try to understand is that when Our Lord assures us He loves us He is not speaking the language of mere rhetoric. *He means just what He says.* Now one of the delights of friendship is that your friend and you can talk to each other about any subject under the sun. The fact that that subject interests you makes it interesting at once for your friend also.

Do you imagine the divine Friend is not interested in your holiday, in the mistake you made in your accounts, in the worry you have about your son in England, in the physical pain you have begun to feel, in everything and everyone, in fact, who interests or distracts you? Do we forget that we are, not only God's children, 'but God's *little* children, and what little child ever found it difficult to speak to a parent who loves it, even, or especially, about its "distractions?"

7. "PRAY LIKE THIS"

A workman used to visit the church every evening. He would spend hours there, kneeling or sitting quietly. The priest became interested and talked to him about his prayer. *How* did he pray? He never used a book or beads, did not make the Way of the Cross very often. So what? "Father," he answered, "the only instruction I got on prayer which really helped me was given me by a holy priest when I was quite young. 'My son,' he told me, 'when you want to pray, all you have to do is to bring before your mind some scene in the gospel, look, at the persons in it, hear what they are saying, watch what they are doing. Then speak, now to one of them, then to another, exactly as you would do if you were actually present there.' I have told many about this simple method, Father. It has helped myself enormously and I know that the others have advanced much more than I by praying like this."

Follow Mary

St. Luke tells the story of Our Lady's Visitation in his first chapter. "Mary," he writes in verse 39, "rising up in those days, went into the hill country with haste.....and entered into the house of Zachary and saluted Elizabeth."

Let me try, first of all, to see Our Lady. She has been talking to the angel; the stupendous mystery of the Incarnation has taken place, she is carrying the Son of God in her womb. One might suggest that all Mary's natural longings would tell her to stay where she was. Surely her "mental prayer" must have been filled with consolation as she realised more and more clearly what had happened. Should she not remain on in her prayer, enjoying the delights of contemplation? Possibly, probably even, this would be her natural attraction. But there was work of charity to do and Mary rose from her knees and proceeded to do it.

She went "with haste." Goaded by the Holy Spirit she would brook no delay. And the task called for physical endurance. Mary must travel across the "hill country." The roads were bad, if they were there at all, but difficulties would not deter Our Lady when there was good to do.

As you look now from Mary to yourself, do you see anything alike in her and her child? Can you find something to say to her, in these precise circumstances, something, perhaps, to ask from her? Before reading on just pause for a while and try to answer this query, and, having found what you should say, say it quite simply.

From Prayer to Action

We, like Mary, must pray; that is why these pages are being written. We, also imitating Mary, must pass from prayer to active work for the neighbour. And there must be no dawdling, no hanging back. There is urgency about the tasks to be done; God's enemies are alert and the apostle must be up and doing too. Like Mary, we will go "with haste" wherever we can do something to build up the Church of God, to lead souls to Him, to reclaim the lapsed or strengthen the faltering or inspire the good to greater holiness. Often the toils of the apostolate will demand a heavy enough toll. Mary had to make

the difficult journey across the hill country, and every true apostolate, to be fruitful, must be nurtured on sacrifice.

It ought not be difficult, watching Our Lady like this, to talk to her simply along these lines. Look at her praying, and beg her to teach us to pray. See her leaving prayer and setting off to visit Elizabeth; note the details given by the evangelist; apply them to ourselves, asking Mary to infuse into our hearts that zeal, the overflow of our life of prayer, which must characterize every true sodalist.

8. GATHERED TOGETHER

Prayer has been well called a secret weapon. Community prayer will call down graces of conversion on souls in sin, here and everywhere. It will obtain courage for our sorely-tried fellow-Catholics and Christians who are enduring hunger, imprisonment and torture at the hands of the communists. It will be an act of love and loyalty to Christ Our King, to Mary, Our Queen, a protest that when His rights are ignored and His commandments scoffed at, here at least, He is praised, revered, and served. The power of this weapon can scarcely be over-stated. It is for each of us to learn to use it well, to co-operate in our vast family throughout the entire world, in offering unceasing prayer to God.

There Am I

But there is something more. Our Lord has promised that where one or two gather together in His Name, He will be there too, in the midst of them. What, then, when, not one or two, but many are so gathered? He is praying with us. We are members of His Mystical Body. What that means is that with Him and with each other, we form between us one great organism, a new Body of Christ, whose members are joined with Him as their head, and with each other in a manner real and intimate.

In this Mystical Body, then, Our Lord continues to pray. Just as He employed His lips and tongue, His mind and heart to pray in His lifetime, so does He still employ *us*. We are His members and He would prolong *His* prayer with us as His instruments. When we kneel to pray He wills to take possession of our faculties and employ them for the praise and glory of His Father. Through us and in us and with us, *He* begs for the needs of the human race; *He* expresses sorrow for man's sin, through us and through our words; *He* offers, through us, those prayers as an act of devotion and reparation for the millions who never breathe a prayer. You recall His astounding words: "*I in them, and Thou, Father, in Me, that they may be made perfect in one.*"

As we know, there - is a widespread and zealous effort to develop the liturgical movement throughout the Church. Hence we have Dialogue Masses, our Easter Vigil, our writers and preachers explaining what the movement implies and how we should foster it. Briefly, it aims at developing that community spirit in our devotional life which we have been describing. It is mighty encouragement to realize we are not alone but members of God's great family. But the union between Him and us, and between ourselves, is immensely more close than that between our earthly parents and their children. In God's family all are one, one person, one single unit, all vivified by one and the same divine life. Assuredly we are distinct from God and from each other. But we are united too, all of us "in Christ", as St. Paul never tires of telling us.

A Harmony

Our prayer, then, is like a symphony. Each of us must contribute what we can to augment and perfect the harmony. Our part may be insignificant, a note here and a note there, scarcely audible, scarcely noticed in the midst of the brilliant performances of the professionalists. But the small note is observed and treasured by the One Who has the principal part. Perhaps no one else has heard or bothered to try to listen; perhaps we ourselves are rather confused and ashamed that it is so unworthy of the occasion. Perhaps a feeling of envy steals into our hearts for those who can do so much better.

All wrong. What He looks for and what He values, is not what we do so much as the amount of love that goes into the doing.

9. LORD, TEACH US

St. Luke seems to have made a special study of Our Lord as Man of Prayer. In his eleventh chapter He gives us a picture of the Master surrounded by His disciples. Christ has been on His knees and they stand around, rather in awe, as they watch Him “making His mental prayer”. They do not dare disturb Him. They wait till He has ceased and only then present their request. Would He not initiate them into this sacred science? What He has just been doing could He not teach them to do also? Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.

Lord

Every single word of that request will repay careful attention. First of all, they were wise in directing it to Him, rather than to any other. *Lord*, teach us. At school we appreciated a teacher who was at once dedicated to his work and at the same time highly competent in the art of imparting knowledge. The disciples are at school this morning. We are permitted to join them. We, too, will be wise to consult this Teacher. He is dedicated; no task is ‘more congenial to Him than to induct His pupils’ into the marvels of the life of prayer. Dedicated, yes, and competent, too, as none other can be. For this Teacher sees the Face of His Father in the glory of the Beatific Vision, and prayer, as we have been saying all along, is conversation with God.

Who better qualified, then, than the “Lord” to teach us to pray? Good books can help us; learned and saintly writers and preachers can do much to guide and inspire; but, in the last analysis, it is to Him we must come Who knows about prayer all there is to know, Whose knowledge is the result of direct experience, Who longs to unveil the secrets of prayer and possesses the gift of imparting what He knows and inspiring His pupils with the longing to learn more.

Teach

Then they asked Him to *teach* prayer. We would be presumptuous if we imagined that we could, so to say; stumble into prayer and make a success of it. There is much we can learn, through our own industry, about how to improve our vocal prayers. Just as a language has its grammar and syntax which we must master if we are to become proficient, so prayer has its rules, its conditions for success, its trials and difficulties, its joys and rewards. Much of these can be learned, and our progress in prayer will be proportionate to the diligence with which we apply ourselves to study.

True, as we have said, the divine Teacher can dispense with much of the grind of the grammar and give us in a flash more than we ever could hope for from our own efforts. But we must not presume on this. Ordinarily He teaches only those who are prepared to work hard.

Us

“Lord,” they said, “teach *us* to pray.” In this school it is not only the geniuses who can win distinctions and high marks. No one is so dull-witted that he cannot learn. Indeed it not infrequently happens that it is the “foolish things of the world” who advance most in this divine science. A condition for entering this school is to become “as little children.” Prayer will always remain a sealed book to the “wise and prudent” as long as they fail to understand that their approach is wrong.

To Pray

Finally, the disciple asked Him to teach them *to pray*. He proposed to them the model of all prayer, the Our Father. Try to stand near them and look at Our Lord and at them as one sublime phrase follows the other. They’ must~ have been rooted to the ground, lost in admiration, inflamed with love. There is a method of praying whereby we dwell on each word of a prayer like the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Creed. These everyday prayers contain a wealth of thought which we too often gloss over.

A priest visited an old woman in her last illness. Did she pray much, he asked. “Yes, Father. I pray all the time.” “Did she, perhaps, say several rosaries, with so many hours on her hands.” ““Oh no, Father. I only say the Our Father. But not

all of it. I never can get through it. It is so full of meaning. Just think how wonderful it is that He really is Our Father—God, Father of us, and we, all of us, really His Children.

She went on from there, pouring out exquisite ideas about this prayer taught by the Master Himself. “Lord, teach us to pray.” That poor woman was not an “intellectual” in any sense. She was just one of the “little children” frequenting the school. If you were to visit the school and talk about the pupils to the Teacher, I think he would point her out and tell you she was amongst the most distinguished in the whole class.

10. SELF-CONTROL

The mind is fed by the senses. What we look at, what we say, what we read, what we hear, all combine to make an impression, more or less lasting, on our thoughts. The senses are like windows to the soul. What they allow to come in and what they refuse to admit will fashion the soul in a definite mould.

Suppose you are sitting by the window reading, in a room, overlooking the street in front of your house. A salesman appears, opens the gate, smiles ingratiatingly and begins to display his wares. You are not interested and you have no intention of standing up and allowing him in. When he sees you are adamant he goes away. Ten minutes later one of your best friends moves into the picture. You look up from your book slightly irritated, but at once your expression changes. You are genuinely delighted. You have not seen him for five years, you didn’t even know he was home. All this runs through your mind as you rush to the door to welcome him.

If we are to pray well it is necessary to exercise the same discrimination with the different callers to our mind. A dissipated soul will never enter into the depths of intimacy with God in prayer which is the ideal for the sons and daughters of God. If I allow my eyes to wander where they will; if I stare at everything along the street as I travel in the bus; if I read whatever appeals to me, irrespective of whether it is going to prove injurious or not; if, in a word, I throw the windows wide open and permit any chance impression to come in, it is clear that the images thus formed are bound to affect my prayer adversely.

If I am a chatter-box, always ready to pour out talk for the mere sake of exercising my vocal powers, I am once more throwing one picture after another on the screen of my imagination, and the result must be confusion and an inability to concentrate when I seek God in my fifteen-minute conversation.

If I listen to every scrap of news, if I gather up every rumour and broadcast it in my turn, if I am curious and do not stop short at deliberately overhearing a private conversation—perhaps on the phone—I am, once more, ruining my chances of developing my life of prayer.

Be on guard

Because the senses are so important you will find that the saints—that is, the people who prayed best—are adamant in insisting on the need for self-control. Every founder or foundress of the Religious Orders enjoins on the members periods of silence, in some cases, indeed, this silence is almost absolute. Likewise, they teach the necessity of guarding the eyes and the ears—“most diligently”, is St. Ignatius’ phrase. The same saint wrote a whole set of rules designed to show us how to place a guard over our senses and work for the habit of self-control. These he called “Rules of Modesty”. He spent several long months composing them; he prayed much and said Mass often in order to find light to write them aright. He gave a severe penance, more than once, to some sons of his who treated their observance lightly.

In saying all this, we are not forgetting that, for the most part, you are men and women living in the world. Nobody would expect from you the same uncompromising habit of self-control which one should find in the members of an Order. At the same time, it is true, and must be emphasised, that for want of self-control prayer grows inert and languishes. It flourishes, as a rule, according to the violence necessary to deny ourselves a look, a word, an opportunity to satisfy an inordinate curiosity to hear.

The approaches to the mind must thus be guarded. Moreover, we can do much to control the mind itself, to compel it to think along definite lines. Other lines will present themselves but we can lay down the law and say *no*. St. Teresa told us

that the imagination is the fool of the house. The wise man says it is like the wheel of a cart, always whirling here there and everywhere. It is not enough to banish thoughts that are positively evil or dangerous. Thoughts which are merely useless, which make us day-dreamers, we must learn to deny. We can learn.

Some of what is written on this page was suggested in a hotel the other day. A woman was sitting there at the window, gazing vacantly into the street, waiting for anything that might present itself, in order to try to satisfy the hunger of her mind. If you wish to pray well you will undertake a vigorous campaign against this *laissez-faire* attitude. It is responsible for stifling, in many souls, the life of intimacy with God.

11. WHAT YOU READ.

For seventeen years St. Teresa never dared to go to make her mental prayer without a book. She was raised to a high degree of contemplation; she describes sublime states of prayer and clearly she is speaking from personal experience. Despite all this she felt the need of a good book near her. Even though she might not actually use it, it was a comfort and she felt it was there to turn to if she felt dryness—as she often did.

People who pray well recommend us to read each night a portion of such a book and quietly turn over in our minds as we go to bed the thoughts so garnered. When we awake, they advise us to train ourselves to turn our first thoughts once more to what we have read. A practice such as this calls for self-discipline, which is excellent and necessary preparation for prayer.

Do not easily reject the suggestion on the plea that it is too much to expect. Intimacy with God in prayer is worth any price. Now, if we were deadly in earnest about growing in prayer, could we not place near our bed a good spiritual book? For a start, let me recommend the *Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas a Kempis. What is to prevent you from reading a page of that golden little volume every night before you retire? Read it slowly and let the message sink in. Hold on to any one thought and reflect quietly on it. Train yourself to recall it when you waken.

Leave the book open after you have read your chapter. It will be lying there in the morning, a reminder to you to recall what it told you. If you have forgotten, take another look and try to hold that thought as you prepare for, I hope, your Mass and Holy Communion.

Cultivate

The number of good Catholics who have, never read a spiritual book is lamentably large. The taste has to be cultivated systematically. When once you have begun to appreciate good spiritual books the difficulty will be to read anything else. You will be genuinely surprised that you could have found pleasure in browsing over so much which passes for literature. I have known a man who regretted bitterly that so many years of his life had passed before he discovered this goldmine—regular spiritual reading.

From the point of view of our fifteen-minute mental prayer, the function of regular spiritual reading is to give us a background for our meditations. How can we possibly plunge deep into prayer and union with God unless we have some effective antidote against the thousand distractions which abound? A steady stream of sound spiritual reading will act like an injection. It will keep our prayer-life vigorous and healthy, even in the uncongenial atmosphere where many of us have to live.

Make believe or real

I feel sorry for young people ‘when I see them worshipping at the shrines of Hollywood “stars”. The real stars are the saints who shine in real glory in God’s real heaven. There is nothing artificial, no make-believe, no make-up, about them. They are real heroes and the story of their lives, all true, all fact, grips you in a way that make the tinsel and cardboard of Hollywood cut a poor figure indeed. If once you get to know the saints you will never look again at a Hollywood star, except, perhaps, in pity or amusement. They perform mere antics; the saints do the deeds worthy of men and women who are children of God.

When you have read about some of the saints, pass on to books which deal with the doctrine which made them saints. Read books on prayer, on grace, on the Mass, and, of course, on Our Lady. There are veritable treasures at your elbow, waiting to be explored. And the principal reason we urge you to explore is that “the thoughts that absorb you are the thoughts that mould you”. Feed your mind on the best and you will see the happy results on your fifteen-minutes’ conversation with God.

12. HERE ENDETH...

Throughout this pamphlet we have kept in view the fact that prayer is conversation with God. It is, therefore, an immense privilege, not unlike what Moses enjoyed when the cloud folded itself around him on Sinai and he spoke to God face to face, as friend speaks to friend.

If the conversation between God and the soul is to be a success two things at least are required. We must have a common language, and the language of prayer is, above all, love. Only love will ensure that we keep faithful to our daily tryst, where God awaits us and, in His turn, speaks also the language of love. Not only must there be a common language, but a common interest, too. Every interest, in the mind of Our Lord, is secondary to the all-important interest of the souls of all men. We, then, who would pray must, -like Him, be zealous for souls. And this zeal is inculcated in our sodality rules.

It is easy to allow ourselves to become preoccupied with trivialities which absorb our powers and make them less alert to appreciate the value and importance of the souls of men. The Master will lift the soul up, like a father lifts his child to see over a wall. What the soul glimpses in prayer whets its appetite for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. But it must show the divine Master that it *wants* to see and *realize*, and this is done especially by the habit of self-sacrifice.

A direction

Our Lord not only commands us to pray. He goes through His own prayer before our very eyes to give us a perfect object lesson. We found Him, if you remember, “rising very early, and, going out, He went into a desert place, and there He prayed.” We followed Him in spirit and found that that simple sentence is packed with matter for our own prayerful reflections. It serves as a perfect pattern for us in prayer.

Not only does He teach prayer, not only does He show us how to pray by His example, but Our Lord designs actually to continue *in us* His own very prayer. This wonderful truth should sustain us when our efforts seemingly are getting us nowhere. *His* prayer in Gethsemani was made in bleak desolation and darkness. Why should His prayer *in us* not be the same?

From there we went on to discuss distractions, recommending, among other things, the habit of trying to take hold of the distraction itself and turn it into a prayer. We are dealing in prayer with our best Friend. Everything, no matter how trivial, which interests us, interests Him too. Surely friends can talk about the things which interest either of them?

We took a glance at our corporate strength. What a colossal power that is! “Where one or two are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them.” That led on to a few words about liturgical prayer, that great symphony in the Church in which each of us has a part.

When all this is said and done it is only a divine Master Who is qualified to teach this divine science. “Lord, teach us to pray”. We saw how wise that request was, and how aptly it fits in our own case.

Then we considered the vital need of denying ourselves, subjecting our eyes, ears, and tongue, to a careful discipline. Why? There are many reasons but the one concerning us here is that a dissipated soul will never learn what immense treasures are waiting to be discovered in intimacy with God in prayer. We urged you strongly to read good spiritual books regularly, because “the thoughts that absorb you are the thoughts that mould you”. Such good reading is bound to freshen up our prayer and stimulate us to continue on our journey of exploration.

For prayer can progress indefinitely. This stands to reason since it is conversation with God, “Who reaches from end to end mightily and disposes all things sweetly”.

Nihil Obstat:

BERNARD O'CONNOR,
Diocesan Censor.

Imprimatur:

* DANIEL MANNIX,
Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.

15-5-1963.
