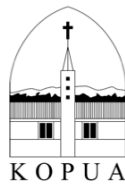


PERSONAL PRAYER

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INTRODUCTION

This book deals mainly with personal prayer. There is little in it about liturgy or public prayer. Common prayer and liturgy are obviously very important and an essential dimension of the Christian vocation. Since Vatican II this aspect of prayer has been very much stressed due to the Constitution on the Liturgy and many subsequent documents on the celebration of the Eucharist.

This book is really a collection of separate articles. When I started them I intended to have them published in some religious magazine but they now number thirty and there are enough to constitute a whole book. So I decided to publish all of them simultaneously in a single volume.

There may be some repetition in these pages. What ties them together is the fact that all of us have the Holy Spirit and he is guiding all of us to perfect love of God (Lum. Gen. N. 40). This love will be primarily affective. Affective love is expressed and nourished by prayer. Hence all of us are called to prayer which generates this love. If this affective love is genuine it will produce all the moral virtues as Paul teaches in I Cor. 13. Augustine teaches that if we love God we can do as we please because we will do only what pleases him. He is talking about affective love. This affective love will produce effective love.

Prayer is also essential because it obtains for us the grace that we need in order to lead the Christian life.

These fundamental truths about prayer will be developed at greater length in most of the chapters that follow.

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Note

Fr John Kelly died on the 17th November 2011 in his 82nd year. May he rest in peace.

1: THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

I will start this book on prayer by a long quote from the 'General Introduction to the Divine Office', issued by Rome. It is on the prayer of Jesus; it runs as follows.

THE PRAYER OF CHRIST

"Since he came to give the life of God to men and women, the Word, who is the radiant light, proceeding from the Father's glory, 'Christ Jesus, High Priest of the new and eternal covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven' (Vat. II. Sac. Conc. N.33). Thus in the heart of Christ the praise of God finds expression in human words of adoration, propitiation and intercession; the Head of renewed humanity and mediator with God prays to the Father in the name of and for the good of all humankind.

"The Son of God himself, who is one with his Father (Jn.10, 30), who, entering the world said, 'Here, I am! I am coming, O God, to obey your will' (Heb. 10, 9), deigned to show us how he prayed. Again and again the gospels tell us that he prayed; when his mission from the Father is revealed (Lk.3, 21ff); before he calls the apostles (Lk.6, 12); when he blesses God at the multiplication of the loaves (Mt.14, 19); when he is transfigured on the mountain (Lk. 9, 28ff); when he heals the deaf mute (Mk.7, 34); when he raises Lazarus from the dead (Jn. 11, 41ff); before he asks Peter's confession of faith (Lk. 9, 19); when he teaches his disciples to pray (Lk.11, 1ff); when the disciples return from their mission (Mt.11, 25ff); when he blesses little children (Mt.19, 13) and when he prays for Peter (Lk.22, 32).

"His daily activity was closely bound up with prayer, and may be said to have flowed from it; we see this when he went into the desert or hills to pray (Mk. 1, 35; 6, 46 etc.). We are also told that he rose early in the morning to pray (Mk.1, 35); that he even spent the night in prayer to God (Lk.6, 12), remaining even until the fourth watch (Mt. 14, 23).

"He too, as we well know, took part in the public prayers of the synagogue, when, as 'was his custom' (Lk.4, 16) he entered on the Sabbath - and in the prayers of the temple which he called 'a house of prayer'. He also said those private prayers which pious Jews were accustomed to say every day. He said the customary blessings over meals, as is expressly narrated in the multiplication of the loaves (Mt.14, 19); at the Last Supper (Mt. 26, 26), and at the meal at Emmaus (Lk.24, 30); he likewise sang the psalms with his disciples (Mt.26, 30).

"Even at the very end of his life, as his passion was approaching, (Jn.12, 27), at the Last Supper (Jn.17, 1-26), during his agony in the garden (Mt.26, 36ff) and on the cross (Lk.23, 34 etc.). The divine Master showed that prayer was what animated his messianic ministry and paschal sacrifice. 'During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty aloud and in silent tears to the One who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard' (Heb.5, 7), and by virtue of his perfect offering on the altar of the cross 'he has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom he is sanctifying' (Heb.10, 14). Now raised from the dead, he is living forever to intercede for us all' (Heb.7, 25)".

The foregoing is a summary of what we know about the prayer of Jesus. How we would love to know more about his communion with the Father all night (Lk.6, 12) or for most of the night (Mt.14, 23)! Did he often spend most of the night in prayer? Did he often rise before dawn and go off to a lonely place to pray? We do not know the answer to these questions but we know enough to draw some conclusions that can help us in our own prayer journey.

1: While he participated in public worship regularly (Lk.4, 16), he also prayed alone for long periods. He felt the need to enter into deep personal communion with his Father in lonely places, where both Son and Father could enjoy each others' company, with no disciples or followers around to interfere with these holy exchanges between them. He evidently did not consider public worship at the synagogue sufficient (Lk.4, 16).

2: He also shows that he was habitually in his Father's presence, because he often prays when he is about to work a miracle. We are justified in concluding that he walked habitually in communion with his Father. And he turns habitually to him in prayer that is often very brief.

We can observe three kinds of prayer that Jesus practised. He participated in the public prayer of the synagogue; he spent long periods alone at night in prayer and he often prays briefly during the course of his ministry, when the occasion calls for it.

In conclusion I would suggest that all three kinds of prayer, practised by Jesus, could profitably find a place in the lives of all his followers. Like Jesus, all of us are called to participate in community prayer. If, like him, we spend periods of time frequently in communion with the Father we will develop a loving relationship with God. I would suggest that we do this daily. We will also be enriched if we call on him often throughout the day.

2: PERSONAL PRAYER

'Personal prayer is essential for holiness'.

I once remarked to a Benedictine priest, 'I was edified when I saw you praying for a half hour in the church, morning and evening'. He replied, 'personal prayer is essential'. I am indebted to him for the quote, given above. His comment set me thinking, and after much reflection, I find that I wholly agree with him. I am convinced that personal prayer is essential for growth in holiness. This is the one point I wish to demonstrate in this chapter.

In order to arrive at conviction in this matter we need to ask ourselves in the first place - what is holiness? Fortunately, Vatican II leaves us in no doubt about this. The Document on the Church identifies holiness repeatedly with perfect love of God and of the neighbour for God's sake (L.G. 39-42). Furthermore, it teaches that all of us are called to holiness and that all have received the Holy Spirit to lead them to this perfect love.

Now love is both affective and effective. These two aspects of love are complementary. We can see both types of love at work in a good marriage in which both partners love one another deeply. This love will be shown affectively and effectively. Not only will they show affection for one another but they will also sacrifice themselves to please each other. Urged on by their affection, each will make many sacrifices to please the other.

Comparing the Christian's love of Christ to the relationship that exists between human lovers has a long history in the Church's writings. The Church Fathers, and notably St. Bernard, used the Song of Songs, which is a love song, as a means for describing loving union with God.

The Letter to the Ephesians (5, 21-33) likens a loving marriage to the relationship between Christ and the Church. Just as the spouses in such a marriage live in loving communion with one another, so Christ loves the Church and ideally the members of the Church should love him in return. This can be extended to the relationship that should prevail between the individual Christian and Christ. There should be loving communion between Jesus and each of his disciples. This love should be affective and effective. Both types of love are essential for a good marriage and also for holiness in the Christian life.

We all know that the heart of a successful marriage is the mutual affection of the partners for one another. This affection is especially nourished when husband and wife can spend time alone by themselves. They need to get away frequently from the crowd and in this way nourish their mutual love. It also occurs to me that St. Teresa's definition of prayer is most applicable to a loving marriage. She defines prayer as 'loving communion with the One whom we know loves us'.

Jesus had to go into the desert and into the hills, away from his disciples and the crowds, to enjoy this 'loving communion' with the Father. One can imagine how he returned from solitary prayer with renewed zeal, to carry out his Father's work.

I like very much St. Teresa's definition of prayer, given above. For John of the Cross prayer is above all a 'being with' the Lord. He, like Teresa, understands prayer in terms of 'loving communion with God'. Personal prayer is above all the place where this loving communion can be fostered. It is not so easy to nourish this communion when we are among a community of worshippers. I don't wish to be misunderstood. Community worship, and

especially the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, is also an important element in our vocation. By participating in the Eucharist we fulfil our ecclesial vocation. I think that most Christians understand the importance of the Eucharist. Hence it is not necessary to stress it. But do we understand the importance of personal prayer?

In addition to participating in common prayer we need to develop our personal communion with Jesus and it seems to me that unless, like Jesus, we spend a lot of time in personal prayer we will not grow in the love of God and in holiness as well as we should. Intimacy with Jesus is developed mainly in personal prayer.

Both types of prayer, ecclesial and personal, are essential to the Christian vocation which calls us to love God as perfectly as possible, both affectively and effectively.

What would happen to a marriage if the married couple were always involved with other people, perhaps in various social activities, and never had time by themselves to enjoy each others' company and build up their mutual affection? At the heart of a good marriage are these precious occasions when the couple take time off to nourish their personal love for each other.

So too, unless we can make quality time, as Jesus did, for developing a loving personal communion with Jesus and the Father, our love of God runs the risk of withering. The saints should be our models in this matter. They often spent hours in prayer to God. Surely they lived in 'loving communion with the One whom they knew loved them'.

In conclusion, holiness involves love of God and of the neighbour for God's sake. This love must be both affective and effective. The main means of fostering affective love is regular times for personal prayer. According as affective love grows so does the desire to please God, in all our desires, choices and actions. Without constantly nourishing our affective love our motivation for the good works we do is likely to be very imperfect. We are unlikely to be motivated by love of God but by lower motives.

3: PERSONAL PRAYER - OUR PRIMARY DUTY

This article is an effort to develop more fully what I said in the last article about personal prayer being essential for holiness. I might add that it is essential for living one's human and Christian vocation.

How can I demonstrate this? If the Spirit is in each human being leading him/her to perfect love of God and neighbour, it logically follows that the primary duty of a human being is to respond to the Spirit's guidance. Vatican II assures us that the Spirit is leading every human being to such love (L.G. 40). Hence we have no option except to respond to God's guidance. St. John tells us that we should love God because he has first loved us.

God's love urges him to knock at our doors (Rev. 3, 20) seeking entry into our hearts. St. Therese asserts that God doesn't want our good works; he wants our love. She means of course that he doesn't want good works without love. What kind of love is she talking about? Obviously she is speaking of affective love. Love must be affective and effective. But the affective love is much more fundamental than the effective love. It is possible to do external works of 'charity' without having affective love in our hearts. But it is impossible to have true affective love of God that will not manifest itself in all the virtues. This is what Paul meant when he said, love, namely affective love, is patient, kind, does not envy, seeks not its own advantage etc. Therefore, affective love is the indispensable foundation of the whole Christian life.

But how do we acquire affective love? We cannot acquire it or preserve it by our own efforts. It is definitely a gift from God. 'The love of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us' (Rom. 5, 5). God always takes the initiative in developing our affective love. However, he expects us to respond to his grace and love him in return. And if we love him in return he will grant us more grace. This is what Jesus is saying when he states, 'if anyone loves me they will keep my commandments and I and the Father will come to them and we will make our home in them' (Jn.14). Jesus is saying that affective love will urge us to keep God's commandments, and this will merit an even deeper friendship with Jesus and the Father.

But how do we love Jesus affectively?. There is only one way, the way of prayer, especially personal prayer alone with Jesus. The Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit dwell in our hearts. What are they doing? They love us and long for a return of love from us. This can only be done by fervent prayer. Just as Jesus often went off alone to pray and cultivate his affective love for his Father, so each human being is called to turn in love, worship and adoration to the God living in us who longs for all our love. My most important duty in life is to tune into what God is trying to accomplish in my heart. His whole agenda can be summed up in the fact that he wants to love me and desires a return of love from me.

Christianity is not primarily a code of ethics; it is not primarily a list of do's and don'ts. It is a question of responding in love to the one who first loves us. We can only do that in prayer. Prayer is the privileged place for developing an affective love for God. Without affective love our relationship with God will be very shallow. We may do a whole lot of good works but they may be done for very imperfect motives. If this is so they will not have much value in God's sight. St. Therese says, 'to do something very small with great love, (namely affective love), is of far more value than to do something much greater with less love'.

As we said above Christianity at its best doesn't consist primarily in doing a whole lot of good works but in personal intimacy with Jesus. We give ourselves, without reserve to Christ. We live not for ourselves but for him who died for us. All this love will have its source in the precious times that we spend in devout prayer, being loved by God and loving him in return. Being a Christian is an ongoing loving relationship with the living God. Prayer alone keeps this relationship alive.

If we fall in love and stay in love it will solve all our problems in the Christian life. God will never fail us. In human love either of the parties may be unfaithful. But in our relationship with God we alone can be unfaithful. If we neglect personal prayer we are neglecting him who dwells in our hearts and who always loves us. He is always knocking at our door, desiring our love.

In this article I am focusing largely on the interior dimension of charity. This is by far the most important aspect of the virtue. In our modern world, where we are constantly exposed to stimulation from things outside us, there is a danger that we will put all the focus on externals. We may identify love of God with external activity and neglect the more important interior dimension. I have focused on the interior dimension of love because I am convinced that this is the root of the whole Christian life. This root is watered and kept alive above all by personal loving communion in prayer with God. One could argue from this that personal prayer is the most important duty of a human being. If our personal prayer is authentic it will produce a harvest of virtues. If it doesn't do this it is not authentic. Something has gone wrong.

One might ask, what use is prayer unless one practises virtue? If we truly love God affectively we will want to sacrifice ourselves for all his interests. Indeed love feeds on self-sacrifice. Therese of Lisieux, because she was madly in love, was always making little sacrifices so as to please God. If love doesn't manifest itself in self-sacrifice it is not genuine. The fullness of love demands that it be constantly expressed in all kinds of virtuous external acts. Unless love is expressed in suitable external forms it will die. It must be interior and exterior. Both dimensions complement each other. However, as I pointed out already, the interior is the more important

In conclusion it can be argued very strongly that personal prayer, if it is genuine, is the root of the whole Christian life. If people lead lives of fervent personal prayer they will develop a deep personal affective love for God. Out of this love will spring up a desire to please God in every life situation and in all our desires, choices and external actions. This affective love will lead us to the Eucharist, to social concern and to sacrifice ourselves for other people.

4: PRAYING WITH GREAT LOVE

That prayer is best that is said with most affective love. But this raises an important question - how does one increase one's affective love at prayer? How do we know that our love is intense? Most people would probably judge the intensity of their love by the depth of feeling that accompanies it. If, due to beautiful music and a well performed liturgy, we experience intense feelings of devotion and love we may imagine that we have prayed with great love. I have heard people, who have had such experiences, say, 'the Spirit was certainly with me today'. Undoubtedly the Spirit was present, but does this mean that he is absent when we are utterly bored at prayer and completely devoid of feelings of devotion? Who has the greater love, the exuberant fervent participant or the one who struggles to pray amid dryness and aridity? Which calls for the greater love - to enthusiastically participate with strong feelings of devotion, or to drag oneself by strength of will to an exercise that gives one no pleasure? Presumably, both are trying to please God. The first participant, however, may well have mixed motives for going to prayer. The person, who perseveres in a boring exercise so as to please God, may possibly have purer motives than the other. There is certainly no self-seeking in the choice of the latter.

I still haven't answered the question that I raised above. How do we make sure that we pray with great love?

In order to pray with great love we must love God at all times, and not just during prayer time. If we are living for ourselves and not for God throughout the day we cannot switch over easily to living totally for God when we start praying. The depth of our love during prayer will be determined largely by the degree of charity practised during the rest of the day. The more habitually we practise unselfish love in all our desires and choices, the more likely we are to pray unselfishly, thinking only of pleasing God and not intent on our own pleasure.

At this point I would like to cite Therese of Lisieux. She says somewhere that 'love lives on sacrifice'. The more we are habitually willing to forego our own pleasure and self-interest so as to please God, the deeper our love for God will be. Therese was deeply in love; she manifested her love for God especially by making little sacrifices so as to please him. By doing this she constantly practised love. All habits take deeper root in our personality when they are constantly actualised. The more we exercise love the deeper it gets rooted in our hearts. Therese was always practising affective and effective love. She was living for the one she loved, and not for her own pleasure.

Some months after the death of Therese, her sister Celine was bothered as to how she could know whether or not she was living a life of love. One morning, as she was awake in bed, she heard a voice in her ear saying, 'you will know that you are committed to love if you are committed to suffering'. She recognised the voice of Therese. During her life Therese had an extraordinary desire to suffer out of love. This was what Jesus did on the cross. He has called all of us to take up our cross daily and follow him. Therese knew that God was not calling her to the heroism of the great martyrs. But she denied herself by constantly making little sacrifices so as to please God and save souls. This was part of her little way to God - always making little acts of love that were unselfish. She denied herself so as to please God.

Thus Therese answers the question we raised above - how can we pray with great love? In the first place we must remember that only God can increase our love and make it grow. But he only does this when we do our part. Our part is to gladly embrace the cross both in prayer and outside of prayer.

Another way of intensifying love is to focus all the energy we have on loving God. Jesus speaks of loving him with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. Those words have been given numerous interpretations. But the general thrust of his message is very clear. We are invited to love God with our whole being, with all our energy, our feelings, in our thinking and especially in our voluntary activity. He wants us totally focused on love. All other things, even ourselves, must be loved in God. This means loving all other things in accordance with his will. Love grows as we continue along this path without changing direction.

Aquinas points out the need to stay focused when he writes. "It is clear that the human heart strives the more intensely for any one thing, the more it is withdrawn from multiplicity. For this reason our heart is directed to the love of God all the more perfectly the more it withdraws its affections from temporal things. Increase in charity is proportionate to diminution of earthly desires. When love is perfect no earthly desire remains" (*De Perfectione Vitae Christianae*). I presume that by 'earthly desire' he means a selfish desire that is not in line with right reason or God's will.

Another image used to stress the need to stay focused on love is the following. When the heat of the sun is spread over a wide area it is not very warm. But, if with a magnifying glass we focus the heat on a fixed point it becomes very warm and can cause a fire. At a more scientific level focused heat creates the laser beam, which is so powerful that it can cut through steel. So likewise, if we focus all our energy on loving God we will love him very intensely in and out of prayer. If we spread out our love too much it will become very diluted.

Finally, the best prayer is the prayer practised with most love. We intensify our love for God by focusing all our affections on him inside and outside of prayer. This involves seeking to please God rather than ourselves at all times.

5: PRAYER NEEDS TO BE REGULATED

It should be fairly obvious that community prayer has got to be planned ahead of time, so as to get all the participants co-operating together in the liturgy. There has to be agreement regarding time, place and the various roles of the of different people etc.

But do we also need to structure and regulate our personal prayer? We certainly do! Let us learn once again from the example of a good marriage. The couple fall in love and long to commit themselves to this love for life. One who is truly in love will look forward to loving for life and will not fear to assume this privilege and duty. The safest and surest way to ensure that their love will endure is to get married. Marriage is a solemn public contract by which the partners promise to be faithful to each other for life. They take on serious obligations to one another. They bind themselves to love until death. But we may ask, 'shouldn't love be spontaneous? Surely love must not be imposed on us as a duty?' To answer this objection let us reflect for a moment on what really happens when two people fall in love.

Initially when they fall in love they seek each other out on every possible occasion and they cannot get enough of one another's company. At this stage rules for safeguarding love are unnecessary. However, the honeymoon doesn't last. If love is to endure the many temptations that it will encounter on the long journey of life, it must be protected by structures such as the marriage contract. In addition the couple will have to work hard at making their marriage a success. Each one will have to habitually forget his/her own interests and focus on those of the other. A good marriage demands constant self-denial. Self-sacrifice is needed so as to keep their priorities right - God first, family second and work third.

Initially, as we said above, when the couple first fall in love, there is little need for rules and structures, but later on these rules become essential. The husband will have to give plenty of time to his wife and family and not allow work to become too central in his life. Rules, structures and obligations all help the couple to overcome the many temptations that their marriage will meet over a lifetime.

LOVE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The Christian life is also a journey in love. Christians commit themselves to love Jesus again and again. The first commitment occurs in Baptism; a more mature commitment is made at Confirmation. These commitments involve duties and obligations. But our commitments do not terminate with confirmation. Indeed every time we receive the Eucharist Jesus gives himself wholly to us, and we in turn give ourselves wholly to him. Our previous commitments are renewed. This is the deepest meaning of Holy Communion. It ought to be a 'communion with One whom we know loves us' (St. Teresa's definition of prayer). Receiving Christ's body and blood involves a renewal of our commitment to love. We are renewing our covenant with Jesus and this involves obligations that bind us.

But let us examine more deeply the duty to love. Modern society questions the bond of marriage and the duties that it imposes. Many couples refuse to take on this obligation. They argue that love is impulsive and should be spontaneous. They prefer 'free love' which

does not impose obligations. Hence many unmarried couples live together, refusing to bind themselves by marriage vows.

The truth is that there is a close bond between law and love, between duty and love, properly understood. We must not fear to assume the obligation to love, whether it is a question of married love or of the love of God. Kierkegaard has pointed out that 'only when there is a duty to love is love forever guaranteed against any change; it is eternally set free in eternal independence; assured in eternal blessedness against any despair'.

This means that the more we love the more worried we are about the dangers that are likely to beset love. These dangers come, not from others, but from ourselves. We know well that love can be fickle. Tomorrow we may grow weary and love no more, or find something else to love besides God or our partner in marriage. Surely to follow this inclination would be an irreparable loss. Hence it makes a lot of sense to take on the obligation to love by taking vows, following rules and making covenants.

We have seen that personal prayer is what nourishes affective love. But regular personal prayer needs to be seen as a duty and obligation, an exercise to which we bind ourselves so as to safeguard ourselves from our own fickleness. Personal prayer will often be boring; we will often be tempted to omit it; we can find so many excuses for doing some other 'important work' at prayer time. To save ourselves from inconsistency in our practice of prayer we must motivate ourselves in an ongoing way to persevere in this greatest of all human activities. Having a rule of life by which we commit ourselves to daily practices of prayer, spiritual reading and self-denial will help us to persevere in these practices and keep alive our affective love of God.

We should never forget that love of God is proved mainly by suffering out of love. We suffer in this way when we persevere in prayer even though it brings us very little sensible consolation. This dry prayer can please God far more than a prayer full of sensible sweetness. Jesus didn't have much sensible consolation on the cross. Yet his love was never greater, though it was unfelt love. Love reigned supreme in his will, while his body writhed in pain.

In conclusion, personal prayer should not be an exercise that we take on when we feel like it and omit when we have no inclination to practise it. It is far too important to leave its practise at the mercy of our whims and feelings. We need to seriously commit ourselves to a daily routine of prayer so as to make sure that this supremely valuable exercise is very seldom omitted from our daily lives.

6: PRAYER NOURISHES AFFECTIVE LOVE

When a couple fall in love they are affectively attracted to one another. Love is essentially affective before it becomes effective. Strong affection produces the effects of love. We observe this everyday in mothers. The normal mother has a strong affective love for her child. This love urges her to sacrifice herself unreservedly for its good, as she understands it. Her affection generates the ceaseless care that she takes of the little one. Her love is affective and effective but the affection comes first. If she had no affection for the child, or if the child did not belong to her, she would not be so keen to sacrifice her time, energy and money for it. Deep affection is essential to keep effective love alive.

The same holds true in a successful marriage. In such a marriage the couple are in love and are blessed with a very strong affection for one another. The whole relationship rests on affective love. Their attachment to each other will affect their thoughts and desires all day as they go about their tasks. Their affection generates in them a desire for ongoing communion. They long to get their work finished and get back together so as to enjoy each other's company. Initially they cannot get enough of this delightful experience. Courtship is largely a question of enjoying each other's company until in the end they decide to commit themselves to one another in marriage for life.

It is affective love that lies at the root of everything in a successful marriage. It stimulates both parties to ever greater communion with one another until the wedding day arrives. But the wedding day is only a milestone on the journey. This affective love will have to be nourished for the rest of their lives. How is this achieved? There are a number of helps. They will have to spend time together in loving communion. The love of each spouse will have to become effective as well as affective. This means that each will have to prefer the other's interests to his/her own. In the words of Benedict XVI eros will have to grow into agape - a self-centred love will have to give way to an altruistic love. Preferring the other to oneself is shown by effective love but effective love also fosters affective love.

They will need time by themselves. They cannot effectively foster their affection for one another if they are always in the midst of a crowd, even if the crowd is one's own extended family. Marriage could scarcely survive without the couple having opportunities to be alone by themselves. The old theology books used to say that a married couple should live together, share a common table and a common bed. Through this communion of life mutual affection was kept alive.

The long description of married love, given above, is intended to demonstrate that affective love is also at the very heart of the Christian vocation. The Holy Spirit is leading us to love God with our whole heart (L.G. 40). We can interpret this as meaning that he is leading us to love God in the first place with all our affective love. Just as a marriage is dead if the partners have no affection for each other, so we are only Christians in name if we have little or no affective love for God in our hearts. The challenge facing us Christians is to fall in love and stay in love. How do we do this? God is drawing us by his Holy Spirit to the fullness of affective love. We must respond to his guidance. Affective love grows especially by prayer, which St. Teresa defines as 'loving communion with one whom we know loves us'.

Just as in marriage affective love and effective love complement one another, so too in Christian love both must be present.

Prayer is the activity that nourishes the affective dimension of love. I know of course that people often limit the meaning of 'prayer' to petitions, to asking God for the things we need. One could make petitions, without having any love of God in one's heart. But I'm speaking of prayer, not in the sense of making petitions, but as loving communion with One whom we know loves us. This kind of prayer helps us to stay in love and it will find its culmination in practising virtue out of love. From what I have written it should be obvious that fostering affective love lies at the very root of the Christian life.

But I would like to add that all prayer does not equally foster affective love. Just as a married couple must get away by themselves, away from the crowd, to nourish their mutual affection, so, I think, that a Christian needs to get away at times to be alone with Jesus so as to better nourish affective love. Common liturgical prayer is obviously important but personal prayer, alone with Jesus, is equally important. Jesus assisted at the common prayers in the synagogue (Lk. 4, 16), but he also went off to lonely places to be alone with his Father (Mk.1,35). He had to get away from his friends so as to nourish his loving relationship with his Father.

Modern saints, such as Ignatius, Teresa, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales etc. and the countless religious congregations that have been influenced by them have all introduced into their rules times for personal prayer as distinct from community prayer. This shows the importance that they attached to personal prayer.

To sum up: it seems that personal prayer is an essential element in fostering growth in love. It gives life to all our other activities and ensures that they are done in love. Without it the spiritual life could become empty formalism.

7: PRAYER AS COMMUNION WITH GOD

'Prayer is communion with one whom we know loves us'. (St. Teresa of Avila).

Like many words today used in spiritual books the word 'prayer' can have many meanings. It is often used to signify prayer of petition only, or it might be used for any good work done with a right intention. Thus people may claim that their whole life is a 'prayer'. In view of the different meanings that the word 'prayer' may have, it is necessary to state the sense in which I use it in this article. The definition of St. Teresa, cited above, appeals to me very strongly.

When we define prayer as 'communion' we cover all forms of prayer - so it seems to me. This definition pinpoints the common origin of all prayer and of all charity. Out of communion with God springs both affective and effective love. Communion with God is the root from which spring up all virtues and all good works. Loving communion with God gives life to the whole spiritual quest.

There are hundreds of books on prayer circulating in our time. They propose very many diverse forms of prayer, such as, vocal and mental prayer, discursive meditation, meditation wherein we repeat a sacred word(s) or mantras, sung prayer, hymns, psalms and spiritual canticles, public and private prayer, prayer of petition, praise, thanksgiving, adoration, liturgy, silent prayer, contemplative prayer in the sense of emptying the mind of all images, Jesuit contemplation, Carmelite contemplation, shared prayer, spiritual reading etc. etc. The list could be extended indefinitely. What are we trying to achieve when we use any of the above methods? No matter what form our prayer takes, we always have the same goal in view, namely, to express and nourish our affective love of God. We want to deepen our communion with God. All the above methods are so many different ways of entering into communion with God. The Holy Spirit can inspire us to practise a variety of prayer forms. As we advance, silence can become more important. Prayer may become more passive.

Public prayer, e. g. the mass, uses several of the prayer forms that I listed above. It contains vocal prayer and silences; often the prayers are sung. There are prayers of petition but also prayers of praise (Glory to God and the Preface), prayers of thanks and adoration (Holy, holy..). There are prayers of repentance at the beginning of Mass and at the 'Lamb of God'.

Most of the prayers are said by all present as a community; we use 1st person plural pronouns (we, us, our etc.). However, a few prayers use 1st person singular pronouns (I, me, my) e.g. Confiteor and 'Lord, I am not worthy'.

In practise both public and private prayer admit of very many different forms. But they all have one aim, namely, to bring the community or the individual into communion with God. This communion will be loving, adoring and humble; it will express itself in praise and thanks. 'Communion' embodies all these diverse forms of prayer. Hence when we define prayer as 'communion with God' we seem to include all forms of prayer.

In his commentary on St. John of the Cross, Iain Matthew points out that John understands prayer primarily as 'being with' the Beloved in faith. God is always present but prayer only takes place when by faith I am consciously present to him. 'Being with' Jesus or

God in faith is the essence of prayer. Being consciously with Jesus inclines us almost of necessity to pray. John is saying the same thing as Teresa when she defines prayer as 'communion' with the Beloved. Methods and diverse forms of prayer become largely irrelevant if the pray-er is consciously present in faith to Jesus who is always giving himself to us. It makes little sense to compare different techniques and methods. All techniques are good if they serve loving communion. Methods and techniques must be used and dropped with great freedom of spirit in so far as, and for as long as they help us to be in loving communion with the Lord. When they cease to be helpful then we should drop them and perhaps try something else e.g. sitting sometimes makes me drowsy. Then I need to get up and pray walking around. If words are getting burdensome then let us be silent for awhile.

Matthew gives several quotes where John of the Cross identifies prayer as 'being with' Christ. He also points out that Jesus chose twelve apostles 'in order that they might be with him' (Mk.3, 14). 'Being with Jesus' led them to love him, admire him and reflect on his teaching and do their best to implement it. Simply because they were with Jesus they were practising prayer and good works, without their even knowing it. Perhaps this was why Jesus was slow to teach them how to pray. When Jesus was with them and they were with him they were always praying. He did, however, eventually teach them and us how to pray (Lk.11, 1-13; Mt.6. 9-15).

Jesus is now invisible and he is no longer present in the flesh, as he was to the apostles. Hence we need to enter into communion with him by faith, using the methods that best help us to nourish loving communion. It is well to remember also that we need to relate to the Risen Jesus and his Father both as a community of believers and as individual believers. Allow me to invent some new terms! In the Eucharist we need to develop a 'we-thou' relationship with the Father because most of the prayers of the mass are in the first person plural and addressed to the Father. At other times, however, I need to cultivate an 'I-thou' relationship with God. Both are essential to a full prayer life. Liturgical worship and personal prayer are both important.

In conclusion, both Teresa and John of the Cross seem to have pinpointed the very essence of all spirituality by focusing our attention on remaining in loving communion with the Lord. If we do this faithfully and in a regular way every other element will fall into place in our Christian vocation.

8: PRAYER, A GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

When we pray, how far is our prayer God's work and how far is it our work? Someone said to me recently, 'why pray since prayer is a pure gift from God?' He seemed to imply that we couldn't do much about prayer since everything depended on God. He seemed to be looking for an excuse for not praying. Be that as it may, his objection raises an important question. How far is my prayer God's work, and how far is it mine?

Some verses in Scripture attribute prayer to God. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12, 3). 'We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words' (Rom. 8, 26). 'The Spirit himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God' (Rom. 8, 16). These quotes obviously attribute prayer in some sense to God.

However, in many places we are told simply to 'pray' - 'ask and you shall receive' (Lk. 11, 9). 'Anyone who lacks wisdom must ask God for it...it will be given' (James 1, 5). Many similar quotes could be given in which Scripture urges us to pray.

Romans (8, 16), quoted above, sees prayer as a co-operative effort in which our spirit co-operates with the Holy Spirit. St. Augustine describes Christ's role brilliantly as follows. 'Christ prays for us, prays in us and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest; he prays in us as our Head; he is prayed to by us as our God. Let us recognise, therefore, our voices in him and his voice in us' (Breviary, Vol.I, p. XXIV).

It seems to me that Lonergan offers the best explanation of how God and humans work together in carrying out all meritorious actions. He teaches that in all good works, and this includes prayer, God always takes the initiative. He offers us initial grace so as to get us started. Lonergan calls this grace 'operative grace'. If we respond to this initial grace and proceed to carry out the good work God gives us further grace to bring the work to completion. Lonergan calls this second grace 'co-operative grace' because God and humans work together. If we fail to respond to the initial 'operative grace' we get no 'co-operative grace'. There is no point in giving it to us since we are not tuned into the Spirit.

In our treatment of God's role in prayer we will follow Lonergan who seems to be in tune with biblical teaching, and he explains in a clear way how we co-operate with God in prayer and in all good works. God always takes the initiative in prayer even if we fail to realise this, being under the illusion that we ourselves initiate our prayers. The truth is that without Christ we can do nothing (Jn. 15, 5).

But one may object, what happens if God never takes the initiative, if he never urges us to pray? My response to this is to cite Vatican II, (L.G. N.40), which teaches that the Holy Spirit is leading all human beings to perfect love of God and neighbour. Therefore, he is leading each one to pray since love is expressed and nourished mainly in prayer. There can be no affective love of God without prayer. Such love is born in prayer, nourished in prayer, expressed in prayer. The Holy Spirit wouldn't be fulfilling his role in our regard if he didn't urge us to pray. This is how he leads us to perfect love of God.

It is impossible to doubt God's readiness to give us the grace necessary to pray when we recall all the proofs that God has given us of his love. The whole bible is the story of God's unflinching love for his people. 'He loved the world so much that he gave up for its

redemption his only begotten Son' (Jn. 3, 16). He is the good shepherd, who goes in search of the lost sheep and seeks diligently until he finds it (Lk. 15). 'He wants all people to be saved' (1 Tim. 2, 4). But they cannot be saved without God's help. Therefore, he offers them the necessary grace.

Scripture is full of exhortations to pray, to practice virtue, to love God and neighbour etc. but without God's grace we can do nothing. Unless God gives us the initial grace to fulfil all these precepts he would be asking us to do the impossible. He would be commanding us to pray and practise virtue, relying on our own strength, which is something that is beyond our power. Therefore, out of his great love for us, he gives us the grace we need to move forward. In Lonergan's terms he gives us the initial 'operative grace' to get started. If we respond he will follow up by giving us the grace to keep going, namely 'co-operative grace'.

God is truly the 'Hound of Heaven' who pursues us ceaselessly out of love. This is how St. John of the Cross speaks of God. 'If we are seeking God much more is the Beloved seeking us...so we must understand God's desire in all the good things he does for us... He wants 'to prepare us for further anointings so that we will be more like him in quality until we come to such purity that we merit union with God' - (Living Flame, 3, 27+). John is obviously speaking from his own experience but this experience merely confirms everything that the Bible tells us about God's love for us. God's love for each of us defies rational explanation. However, we are assured of his incredible love by the inspired Scriptures and the teaching of all the saints. Hence we have great reason to rejoice and be confident.

In conclusion there can be no doubt about God's love for us. He has given us Jesus and the Holy Spirit; all three divine persons dwell in our hearts and ceaselessly inspire us to love God and neighbour. They dwell in us for the sole purpose of being loved by us. They exercise their love for us largely by giving us all the help we need to return love for love. Among the many gifts they bestow on us is the great gift of prayer.

9: PRAYER FULFILS OUR DEEPEST HUMAN NEED

God made us that we might love him. He has given us the Holy Spirit to lead us to perfect love. There can be no doubt that the Holy Spirit is continually trying to do this within us. Prayer addresses our deepest human need. It unites us to God in faith and love. It follows that we are all obliged to pray

In this matter ancient philosophy has something to teach us. Aristotle asks, what is the ultimate purpose of human existence? Both he and Aquinas reckon that contemplation of the Supreme Good or God is a human being's highest achievement. Aquinas would stress that God's ultimate purpose in creating us was that we might, not just know him, but also love him. Both Aristotle and Aquinas come to their conclusion by reflecting on their own experience.

All of us know from our personal experience that we are never fully satisfied through enjoying the good things of this world. We are made for something more than the world is able to offer us. By nature we hunger for good without limits. Pleasure, honour, wealth, success etc. never fully satisfy us. This is because we are spiritual by nature and made for God and he alone can bring us ultimate fulfilment. Mere material things cannot satisfy the human spirit. We are created to know and love God. In this world this activity has to be practised in faith; in the next world faith will give way to vision. Here below prayer often makes heavy demands on our energy; in heaven it will always be effortless and delightful.

We have often pointed out in these articles that love is affective and effective. However, affective love comes first. It is impossible to exercise effective love if there is not some measure of affective love in the first place. If, however, affective love is strong it will generate effective love. Prayer is most important because it is the means by which we grow in affective love. Affective love is born in prayer; it is exercised and nourished in prayer; it grows in intensity through prayer. Without prayer it will slowly die. Therefore, we are justified in saying that prayer, understood as 'loving communion with one whom we know loves us', is a primary obligation for a human being.

Augustine points out that God has made us for himself and the human heart finds no rest until it rests in him. This rest in God is realised only imperfectly in this world by the practice of prayer. It will be experienced perfectly in the next world when God loves us in heaven and we love him in return with our whole being. In this world when we enter into loving communion with God in prayer we begin our great vocation of love which will endure for all eternity. All during our life on earth the Hound of Heaven is chasing us so that he may win our whole hearts.

John of the Cross assures us that even if we are seeking God he is seeking us much more ardently. 'He stands at the door and knocks and if we open the door he will come in and dine with us and we with him' (Rev. 3, 20). Indeed it is well to be aware that we may have to open a whole series of doors to the divine 'Knocker', as we surrender one after another the various attachments that enslave our hearts.

Ignatius of Loyola teaches that we are freed from our attachments by prayer; it is the Lord who sets us free. The fact that the Lord frees us through prayer is an added reason for devoting ourselves to prayer.

In the hymn that we sing at *Terce* every day we chant the words, 'Most Holy Trinity of love, for whom each human heart was made.' God had his own purpose in creating us. He made us for himself and he is pursuing us so as to take possession of our hearts. But God will not force his way in. He is gently and humbly knocking at the door (Rev. 3, 20) and he wants us to open the door freely. 'He has given us the Holy Spirit so that we might live not for ourselves but for him who died for us' (4th Euch. Prayer). This Holy Spirit is leading us to perfect love of God and neighbour for God's sake. All these quotes teach very clearly that the Hound of Heaven is constantly pursuing us but he will never force us to return his love.

The other side of the coin is that 'our true self' is made for God. We will never fulfil God's purpose in creating us unless we respond wholeheartedly to his initiative. As human beings we have a duty to love God with our whole hearts. This is the purpose for which we were created; God is leading us by his grace to practise this love. Hence we are not free to ignore this primary duty of human beings.

However, even though the human heart is made for God, we all experience, like Paul, a law in our members fighting against the law of our minds (Rom. 7, 23). To live consistently for God, rather than for ourselves, is beyond our unaided human power. It calls for constant self-sacrifice and this is beyond mere human strength. But the good news is that we do not have to rely on our own strength to achieve the impossible. "God helps us in our weakness" (Rom. 8, 26). We are delivered from our bondage through our Lord, Jesus Christ (Rom. 7, 25). We cannot live for God by our own power but the Holy Spirit enables us to live, not for ourselves, but for Christ. It is our responsibility to co-operate with the Spirit.

Conclusion: Prayer by which affective love is fostered is a primary value in our lives. It is also a primary duty for all human beings because it enables us to fulfil the purpose for which God created us. Prayer unites us to God and thereby fulfils our deepest human need.

I0: VARIOUS EXPRESSIONS OF LOVE - PRAISE etc.

Love is nourished by being expressed. It can be expressed in very many ways. People want to talk about what they love. Mothers love to speak about their children; they love to praise them and recount their great achievements. They will tell their friends what a wonderful boy their Johnnie is; how well he did at his exams, at sport etc. Even when their children go astray, they will make excuses for their behaviour. They will find reasons for praising them and they will tell you of all the good things that they do. Mothers hate the sins of their children but they still love the children.

When we come to express our love for God the same rules apply, except that there is no sin in God. When we want to express our love and appreciation of God we praise him as loudly as we can. We recount the many wonderful things that he has done. The word 'love' doesn't appear often in the psalms. However, the psalmist constantly praises God. Some psalms are totally devoted to praising God; other psalms contain petitions or may express repentance but even in these psalms there will often be some verses that simply praise God.

Furthermore, the psalmist often praises God indirectly by recounting the wonders God has done in creation and in freeing Israel from its enemies. If we love God we want to sing of God's goodness. The canticles in the New Testament, such as the songs of Zachary and of Mary, also praise God and recount the marvels God has done. Other New Testament canticles express love for Jesus by praising him and rejoice at the great deeds accomplished by Jesus while on earth. We also acclaim in song the glory and work of the Risen Christ.

In the 'Our Father' we start off by praising God. 'May your name be held blessed'. We praise God first; we next request that God's interests will be taken care of. Only then do we ask the Father to meet our own needs. The 'Hail Mary', which we pray so often, is predominantly a prayer in praise of Mary. We offer several filial compliments to our heavenly mother, and in this way express our love for her. Only then do we ask her to 'pray for us sinners'. Both in the 'Our Father' and in the 'Hail Mary' praise and petition are interwoven but praise always comes first.

Chanting the Divine Office is often described as 'singing the praises of God'. Indeed one of the major hours of the Office is called 'Lauds', a word derived from the Latin 'laus', which, translated, means 'praise'. This morning Office is called 'Lauds' because it focuses in a special way on the praises of God.

The hymns that we use in public worship are full of praise. They contain all kinds of beautiful expressions in praise of God. The fact that we sing these hymns enables us to enter into the praise of God more intensely than if we merely recited them. Augustine says that when we sing we pray twice over. Lovers like to sing about the Beloved even, if they do it more in musical sounds than in intelligible words.

Love urges us not only to praise those we love but also to find joy in them. Easter joy is expressed in musical alleluias. Aquinas calls joy a 'fruit of love'. Indeed love, praise and joy are inseparably interconnected.

Thanksgiving is also very closely related to praise and love. God has not only done marvels in creation, but he has also poured down blessings on all people and on me personally. Indeed God has loved all people in a personal way. Therefore, we have a duty to

praise and thank him for his goodness to us individually and collectively. Hence we say daily at the Preface of the mass, 'It is truly right and just always and everywhere to give thanks and praise'.

In a word, affective love, joy, praise and thanksgiving occur everywhere in the prayers we say and in the hymns we use; they are all connected.

But one might object and say, 'I cannot find joy in the Church's prayers; often I feel bored and find them a burden. Sometimes the music is poor. I often feel that I am not praying at all and there is little that I can do to derive any comfort from my prayers'.

This objection raises a very important point in regard to the quality of our prayer. By way of answer to this objection let us say firstly that everyone will sometimes feel off form at prayer for various reasons. On occasions like this we must remember that the basis of good prayer is not feeling the love of God but faith, which urges us to love God as best we can even if this means a dry arid love of the will. Such love is painful and does not bring much satisfaction to us.

However, the great spiritual masters insist that such love can please God more than a love (or a prayer) that brings me much pleasure. Ultimately the value of our prayer is always determined by the degree of charity that we bring to it. Perseverance in dry arid prayer for a long time demands great charity.

Love, praise, joy and thanks are all affective acts. They flow from our faith and come essentially from our wills. Sometimes they will be accompanied with satisfying feelings; often feeling will be absent while in faith we make dry, arid, affective acts of the will. This kind of love costs us more but it can be very pleasing to God. It is of vital importance in our life of prayer that we continue praying even when we find no sensible pleasure in it. Indeed perseverance in dry prayer is the best proof that we pray in order to please God, and not for our own satisfaction.

Finally from what we have said in this article loving affective communion with God is nourished and expressed by a wide variety of affective acts. In the article we mentioned especially praise, thanksgiving and joy as different ways of nourishing and expressing our love for God. There are also other affections that enter into our prayer, which I hope to deal with in another article.

11: THANKING GOD ALWAYS

"It is right and just, always and everywhere, to give you thanks and praise".
(Preface of the Mass).

"Gratitude is what brings us most grace. I have learned this from experience. Try it and you will see. I am content with whatever God gives me, and I show this in a thousand little ways" (St. Therese).

"When we show ourselves grateful for graces received we receive still greater graces. Ingratitude alone impedes our advance in the spiritual life" (St. Bernard). Bernard asks an urgent question, why is it that when we pray for our needs our prayer is not answered? We pray, he says, for good things, for charity, for humility and the other virtues; yet our prayer is not answered. Why? Our request is refused, he says, because we have been ungrateful in the past for graces received. God considers a grace lost when given to the ungrateful.

Nearly all the Prefaces of the Mass contain the following or similar words. "It is right and just, always and everywhere, to give you thanks and praise."

Scripture exhorts us repeatedly to give thanks. "For all things give thanks. This is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (I Thess. 5, 18). "Always be thankful" (Col. 3, 15). Thanksgiving is central to Paul's prayer. At the beginning of most of his letters he gives thanks to God for the faith of his converts. "Always and everywhere give thanks to God" (Ephes. 5, 20).

In Luke praise is often mentioned, which is a form of thanks. His gospel gives us three canticles of praise uttered by Mary, Zachary and Simeon, all under the influence of the Holy Spirit. In all cases the glory is given to God. Mary does not get proud because she is chosen to be God's mother, but God is praised and thanked.

How different was the behaviour of Herod! At a public meeting the people cried out, 'it is a god speaking, not a man'. At that moment the angel of the Lord struck him down because he had not given the glory to God (Acts 12, 21). His fault lay in glorying in his own greatness and not thanking God for everything.

Herod's fate serves as a warning to all of us not to appropriate to ourselves the glory due to God. It is so easy to take pride in our achievements and forget about God who has enabled us to accomplish everything of value that we have ever done. To take all the credit to ourselves is a kind of theft. Like Herod, we are stealing God's glory.

When Jesus cured the ten lepers and only one came back to give thanks, he complained, 'were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine? Is no one found to return and give glory to God except this stranger?' (Lk. 7, 11). Jesus wasn't seeking any recognition for himself; he simply desired that God should be glorified. In general glorifying and praising God is a favourite theme in Luke.

There is no doubt about the amount of praise and thanks that we constantly utter in our public prayers. However, these prayers can easily become a routine mouthing of words. Each of us needs to praise and thank God for our own personal lives, for all the graces, material and spiritual, that he has lavished upon us, and even for the crosses and trials that he has permitted. Faith assures us that these are graces in disguise.

THANKING GOD ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE

God is present in every situation in which I find myself and he is present in a saving, loving manner. He is endeavouring to redeem every situation. Indeed the most important reality in any situation is God's loving saving presence. We recognise this presence by thanking him always and everywhere. We cannot respond in faith and love to any set of circumstances without his enabling grace. He is offering us salvation and love at every moment. Even in the most painful circumstances the most important dimension of the situation is God's loving presence, He is present helping us to cope with evil, to forgive, to be patient and to respond lovingly. However, if we try to practise virtue, relying on our own strength, we will fail. Our faith defies the whole situation. But faith can be a dead letter unless we exercise it. We do that by prayer and thanks. If we pray and give thanks, as recommended by Paul (Phil. 4, 6+), the power of God will be released into the situation and "the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Thanksgiving is a great act of humility by which we testify to our total dependence on God. It is a powerful way of keeping faith alive and eliminating doubt. It is a way of exercising confidence in God's love for us. It is a way of saying to God, 'I believe that you are helping me in this situation, no matter how I feel'. Even though my feelings tell me otherwise I refuse to listen to them. If we listen to our feelings we begin doubting. St. James (1, 8) tells us that they who doubt get nothing from the Lord. Instead of listening to our feelings, let us thank God in faith for his loving presence. If we keep on asking, without thanks, it may indicate that we doubt as to whether the Lord is listening to us. Thanksgiving should always conclude our prayers of petition. The thankful person leaves everything in the hands of the good Lord. In this way we exercise great faith and confidence. The Lord always hears us and does what is best; therefore, he should always be thanked and praised. Often in prayer we try to make God do our will, and we imagine that he is not listening if he does not do it. But his ways are not our ways and we should adore him and thank him even when he does not do our will.

In always thanking God we are obeying Scripture which instructs us to "always be thankful" (Col. 3, 15) and "always and everywhere to give thanks to God" (Ephes. 5, 20).

12: HUMBLE PRAYER

Allow us to repeat once again that prayer is 'loving communion with God whom we know loves us'. But there are many dimensions to communion with God. It is true that God loves us and wants us to love him in return as we have pointed out repeatedly in previous articles. We have also compared our love for God and our prayer to the communion that is enjoyed by human lovers. Undoubtedly there is a great resemblance between human love and divine love as we are told in Ephesians. But there are also great differences.

There is a certain equality between two human lovers in that both are human and finite. When we love God in prayer, however, we human, finite mortals reach out to the infinite eternal God; the weak and the Almighty are united; humans become divine; the sinful and the all Holy become one. There is an infinite distance between the lovers.

The consequence of this infinite distance is that our communion with God needs to be understood, not only in terms of mutual love, but also in terms of awe and reverence. Who am I to stand before the Almighty God in prayer? By nature I am God's creature, fashioned out of nothing and God keeps me in being from moment to moment. Without God's help I can do nothing either in the natural or the supernatural order.

All this demands that when I pray I should acknowledge frequently my nothingness and God's greatness. I should show reverence and awe before the Almighty Creator in my words and in my body language. How appropriate it is that I reverently bow or genuflect before the incarnate God in the Holy Eucharist. I genuflect to my God; I am humble before the Almighty who holds me in being.

Before receiving Jesus in Holy Communion I humbly say, 'Lord, I am not worthy, say but the word and I shall be healed'. St. Benedict reminds us that we should approach God very humbly in prayer. He writes, 'whenever we want to ask a favour of a powerful person we only do so with humility and respect. How much more should we petition the Lord God of the universe with humility and sincere devotion' (R.B. ch.20).

Humility is the virtue by which humans subject themselves to the Almighty, the all holy, ever present God. We are miserable sinful creatures and very needy. Our most fundamental needs can only be met by God Almighty for whom 'each human heart was made'. Our hearts were made for God and will never rest until they rest in God.

God, on his side, longs to fill our hearts with his presence but God will only give himself to the humble. 'God resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble' (James 4, 6; I Pet. 5, 5-9). How frightening it would be for us if God resisted us because of our pride!

When seeking God in prayer we must never forget who we are and who God is. We must not forget that without God we are nothing. By reason of our creaturely state we are bound to subject ourselves wholly to the Creator but unfortunately we have not done this consistently. How many times have we sinned and thereby refused to be subject to God? Every time we sin we resemble Satan, who rebelled against God and said, 'I will not serve'. The fact that we have sinned is an added reason for approaching God in prayer with profound humility.

The gospels give us some wonderful examples of humble prayer. The prodigal son humbly returns to his father and confesses his sins. The father welcomes him back with open

arms. In similar fashion the tax collector, who begged for God's mercy, went home justified while the proud Pharisee did not. These two examples of the prodigal son and the tax collector seem to suggest that God always hears the prayers of the humble.

The Church tries to foster humility in our minds and hearts by providing us with prayers that express our sinfulness and general unworthiness. She teaches us to humbly confess our sins by reciting the 'Confiteor' as a preparation for the Eucharist. We also humbly acknowledge our sins when we say 'Lamb of God...' and 'Lord, I am not worthy..' The 'Our Father' and the 'Hail Mary', which are the prayers probably most used by Catholics, contain a humble confession of our sins and we implore our heavenly Father and Our Lady to have mercy on us and to pray for us.

If we internalise the prayers we so frequently say humility will take root in our hearts. By divine grace we will learn to approach God humbly and with reverence, realising that we have no right to his mercy.

While humble reverence is very important in our approach to God it must be accompanied by great confidence in his love and mercy. St. Benedict tells his monks 'never to despair of God's mercy' (R.B. 4, 74). If we know that God loves us there will be little danger of losing hope.

In our prayer there is a time to stress God's great love and mercy; there is a time to humbly acknowledge our sins and plead for forgiveness; there is a time to show our reverence for our Almighty Creator. There is even a time for fear of God which might sometimes be necessary to rouse us out of our negligence and indifference. As we said in a previous article there is also a time for praise, thanksgiving and joy. Affective love will generate all these diverse acts within us. If we truly love God all the other acts will flow from it as appropriate. If love is strong we will also find delight in recounting God's many graces and blessings to ourselves and to the world.

We have tried to show in this article that 'loving communion with God' demands from us not only love but also deep humility before our Creator. We express our humility in words and bodily gestures and by confessing our sins. Humble reverence is a very important ingredient in our life of prayer.

13: PRAYER IS ESSENTIALLY AN ACTIVITY OF THE WILL

We often misunderstand the quality of our prayer and that of others because we identify good prayer with feelings. Perhaps we misunderstand Scripture when it says, 'rejoice in the Lord always', and Jesus tells us to 'love God with our whole heart and soul' The prodigal son probably felt sorry as he confessed his sins. Do not all these quotes suggest that feelings are an essential element in prayer? The three words used, 'rejoice', 'love' and 'sorrow' suggest to me primarily three feelings. But how can I rejoice if I feel miserable? Must I feel sorry for my sins? Can I have sorrow in the will that is not felt? Can I have love without feeling? This is the basic question because all the other affections flow from love. Fortunately we can have unfelt love that is in the will only. Since other affective states flow from love they too can exist in the will only.

In speaking of prayer many people like to say that it must come from the heart. This is quite acceptable if the word 'heart' is properly understood, as equivalent to the will. I tend to avoid the word 'heart' because it is easily misunderstood. It is very often associated with feeling.

We are dealing with two problems when we try to understand clearly the essence of an act of love. The first problem is that we find it much easier to recognise our feelings than to identify unfelt acts of the will. We find it quite difficult to recognise an act of the will when perhaps our feelings are driving us in the opposite direction e.g. in temptation, our feelings and desires draw us in the wrong direction while our will struggles desperately in the opposite direction. In this situation I am often in doubt whether I consent or not. This then is the first problem. - it is not easy to recognise voluntary dispositions when feelings are absent or even opposed to the will.

The second problem we are dealing with is the poverty of the English language. We use the same word(s) for three distinct affective states. Again we will speak of love but what we say of love applies equally to hate, anger, fear, likes, dislikes and other affective states. We use the word 'love' for three distinct experiences.

- (a): For a feeling of love that is not willed e. g. I love alcohol but I never drink it.
This love is not voluntary
- (b): For a voluntary choice that brings me a feeling of satisfaction e.g. I love drinking whiskey. Here love of the will and the feeling of love are integrated in the single act of drinking whiskey.
- (c): Love can be an act of the will only, without feeling. We should resist lust out of love for chastity. St. Benedict urges us to 'love fasting'. But love of chastity and of fasting will probably be without feeling and be in the will only.

Since the word 'love' and the words used to designate other affective experiences can have three meanings communication is difficult and we can easily misunderstand what we hear and read.

In this article we are trying to identify the essence of prayer. We have said many times that prayer is 'loving communion with God'. This 'loving communion' can take two forms. Firstly, it may be a delightful experience wherein we feel great love for God. In this case our will and our feelings are perfectly integrated in a single act. This wonderful experience may be enhanced by beautiful music and hymns in a well performed liturgy. We feel the presence of the Spirit and we praise God with all our heart, will, soul, mind and strength.

Secondly, this 'loving communion' may also be in the will only without any pleasant feelings. I may be sick or irritated by bad liturgy or inappropriate noises or I may be in the 'dark night'. Prayer may be a real burden to me and brings no satisfaction. Yet I somehow manage to give my time as best I can to this unappetising food while I drop distractions and make occasional affective acts with a dry arid will.

Has this prayer any value? Francis de Sales teaches that this prayer is most pleasing to God, even though it gives me no pleasure. Indeed it might please God more than the first type of prayer mentioned above. That prayer is best in which there is most love of God. Perhaps it takes greater love to persevere in dry tasteless prayer than to continue in prayer in which one experiences great spiritual joy.

We wouldn't ever say after dissatisfying prayer, 'I felt the presence of the Spirit'. Yet the Spirit was truly present, empowering me to struggle on in spite of my distractions and aridity. Perhaps we could say that he is more present and gives more help in arid prayer than in delightful prayer. Perhaps we need more grace to persevere in aridity.

Prayerful affections of the will are the very essence of true prayer. These affections may or may not be accompanied by satisfying feelings. In practice it is very important to remember this. Mature pray-ers will continue praying no matter how they feel.

If we only give ourselves to God when we derive much comfort from it our love of God is very defective. Indeed, if this is how we behave, we probably love ourselves rather than God when we go to pray. A mature love of God will love him equally in sickness and in health; in good times and in bad times; in poverty and in riches; in delightful prayer and in dry arid prayer. Jesus loved his Father on both Tabor and on Calvary. Peter loved God on Tabor but fled from Calvary. Let us embrace God's will always, whether it pleases us or not!

Conclusion: Loving communion with God is essentially in the will. It may or it may not be integrated with pleasant feelings. If our love of God is deep we will give ourselves to him in prayer, so as to please God, even if we ourselves get little or no pleasure from the exercise.

14: PRAYER OF PETITION

The term 'prayer' has many meanings. In the foregoing articles we have understood 'prayer' mainly as loving communion with God, which is what St. Teresa and many others mean by 'prayer'. This loving communion would include prayer of petition but also praise, thanks, reverence, adoration etc.

Very frequently, however, in our Christian tradition, the word 'prayer' is understood mainly as prayer of petition. Very often in the gospels and in the writings of the Church Fathers 'prayer' is understood in this sense (See Lk. 11, 1-13; 18, 1-8). When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray he gave them the 'Our Father', which is a prayer of petition. St. James speaks frequently of prayer and he is always referring to prayer of petition (Jas. 1, 5-8; 4, 2; 5, 13).

Often in the gospels we are told to ask and we shall receive. We are assured repeatedly that our petitions will be answered. However, the New Testament requires that we fulfil certain conditions so that our prayers will be successful.

The Fathers of the Church also tend to see prayer as petition. St. John Damascene defines prayer as 'asking becoming things from God'. Aquinas treats at length of prayer, which he understands mainly as petition. In this article we will deal with prayer of petition under the following headings:

- Prayer of petition must be integrated with other forms of prayer
- The conditions necessary that our prayers may be answered.
- God never answers my prayers'.
- For what should we pray?

1: INTEGRATING PETITION WITH OTHER FORMS OF PRAYER

God doesn't exist merely to meet my needs and satisfy my whims. He is my Creator and a Father who loves me. Therefore my primary purpose in life is not to use God for my own ends but to worship, love, praise, thank him and serve him.

The mass is a wonderful model of prayer. It contains prayers of petition but also prayers of repentance, praise, thanks and adoration. In addition there are readings and a homily to instruct us in our relation with God. In the Eucharist also we offer ourselves wholly to God at the Offertory and especially when he gives himself to us in Holy Communion.

Petition then should be made in the context of loving worship of God. Our relationship with God should include more than asking for what we think we need. Our primary duty is to love and adore our Creator and Father.

2: CONDITIONS NECESSARY THAT OUR PRAYERS BE ANSWERED

First of all let us say, with Augustine, 'God would not ask us to pray unless he wished to grant our requests'. The Bible gives many conditions in various places. Aquinas sums up the conditions under the following four headings.

(a): The petition must be for oneself. Charity obliges us to pray for other people but often our prayer for others is not answered because they put obstacles in the way.

(b): We must pray for what is necessary for salvation. People often desire and pray for things that are not helpful for them. Paul prayed three times to have his 'sting in the flesh' removed but his prayer was not granted because it was not appropriate (2 Cor. 12, 7-11).

In this context Augustine says, 'When we pray God mercifully grants our requests and mercifully refuses to grant them'. He refuses our requests because he loves us. 'The Doctor knows what is best for the patient' (Aquinas).

(c): The third condition of Aquinas is that we pray devoutly (Latin 'pie'). He says the prayer should come from 'the root of charity'. To pray for something for selfish motives doesn't come from the root of charity. Also included under devotion is faith in God's power to help, and faith in his great love for us. Humility is always necessary; it helps me to recognise my helplessness and total dependence on God. Devotion also includes promptitude of will in the loving service of God.

(d): We must pray with perseverance. This is the message of Luke (11, 5-8; 18, 1+). We might ask, 'why doesn't God answer us immediately?' Because he loves us and wishes to train us. Ongoing prayer for something builds up in us a habit of prayer and love of God, which is often far more important than getting immediately what we ask for.

3: 'GOD DOESN'T ANSWER MY PRAYERS'

We are often tempted to make this complaint. But we must realise that if we doubt God's answer we show a very weak faith in his love for us. God loves us more than we love ourselves, and he always answers us and does what is best for us. Hence he should always be thanked. The answer to our petitions may be, 'No', or he may wish us to persevere in prayer for our own good. He will not grant things that are unhelpful for our salvation.

Again God often doesn't take away our problems, but he gives us inner light and strength to cope with them. He didn't take away Jesus' chalice of suffering but he sent an angel to comfort him (Lk. 22, 42+). He was given the strength to face the cross. This is often the answer to our prayers. It is important that we recognise God's answer and give him thanks. When we imagine that God hasn't heard our prayers we often fail to recognise the interior grace that he has given us.

4: FOR WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY?

The 'Our Father' shows us in order of priority what we should pray for. It is a guide for our affections as well as for our petitionary prayer. We approach God confidently as our Father. We pray in the first place for his interests, that his name may be blessed, his kingdom come and his will may be done. All petitionary prayer is subject to the condition that we desire primarily God's will and not our own will. The other petitions concern us and our neighbours. Praying the 'Our Father' is an excellent way of loving God, our neighbours and ourselves. This is the fulfilment of the law. What more do we need?

15: DOES GOD ANSWER OUR PRAYERS?

"Ask and you shall receive....everyone who asks receives" (Lk.11, 9ff).

In the Book of Genesis Abraham asks God to save Sodom and bargains at length with God. We know that his prayer was not heard, and Sodom was destroyed (Gen. 18, 20). In many places in the New Testament we are told to pray and that our prayer will be heard. At first sight this seems very simple, 'ask and you shall receive'.

In fact the New Testament teaching on prayer of petition is quite complex. Various conditions for being heard are laid down in different places. St. James says that we must pray with faith, for the one who doubts gets nothing from God (1,2-8). Other New Testament writers also demand faith. Jesus worked most of his miracles for those who had faith in him. John demands that we pray according to God's will (I Jn. 5, 14). James teaches that sometimes we do not receive because we ask in order to indulge our passions (Jas. 4, 3). Luke teaches that we must persevere in prayer (Lk. 11, 5ff; 18, 1-8).

Paul recommends that we pray with thanksgiving (Phil. 4, 6). St. Bernard, in Sermon 26 for various occasions, asks why we do not receive good things from God when we ask for them. He answers that God gave us many good things in the past and we failed to give him thanks for them; we have been ungrateful. He now gives us no more grace so as not to increase our sin of ingratitude. He acts in this way for our own good. Ingratitude alone, says Bernard, prevents our advance in holiness. St. Therese puts this positively when she teaches. 'Thanksgiving brings us most grace; try it and you will see'.

Scripture also teaches that the prayer of the just person pierces the heavens. Furthermore, God resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble. Sometimes, says Paul, we do not know how to pray as we ought but the Spirit in us supplies for our weakness and prays according to God's mind (Rom. 8, 26ff).

We can also learn from other Christian churches. They teach that prayer is more likely to be heard if we pray specifically rather than in a general way. Before praying they often ask God to show them how to pray in a given situation. Often they do not pray for all the world's needs but for the particular needs that the Lord wishes them to pray for. Sometimes the Lord can lay a 'burden' on people to pray for a particular need. Some, who take prayer seriously, find a prayer partner with whom they can pray. Some Anglican parishes have groups of intercessors. These practises are based on Matt. 18, 19ff.

All the above teaching from Scripture and the experience of many Christians show that many conditions can determine whether or not our prayer is answered. To complicate matters further God often grants favours to people who fail to fulfil the above conditions and he seems to bypass more deserving people! In the light of all this can we honestly say that God always hears our prayer? I am prepared to say that he always hears our prayers in so far as he always loves us and always does the most loving thing in our regard. We may not always obtain what we specifically ask for but, as a loving father, he will do what is best and most loving in our regard. We will try to illustrate this by the example of Jesus.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes concerning Jesus. "During his life on earth he offered up prayers and entreaties with loud cries and tears to the one who had the

power to save him out of death; he was heard for his godly fear." According to the gospels Jesus' prayed in Gethsemani. "Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me, but not my will but thy will be done" (Mk. 14, 36). At one level this prayer was not heard because Jesus had to go to the cross. At another level his prayer was heard because he was delivered out of death by his resurrection. Perhaps it was for this that he was praying in Gethsemani. Indeed it was impossible for him to avoid Calvary. Did he not become man so as to sacrifice himself on the cross? The point we wish to make is that at first sight he seems not to have been heard. But when we look at the matter more deeply in the light of faith, his prayer was certainly heard.

I suggest that our prayers are frequently heard, indeed always heard, but we do not recognise the answer. We often pray for temporal blessings, e.g. the cure of illness, success in examination or in business, relief from poverty etc. It seems at first sight that God doesn't answer our prayers because he doesn't give us the help that we sought. However, because he loves us he doesn't abandon us. Instead of removing our problem he gives us the grace to cope with it. In this way we grow in love through suffering and temptation. St. Therese, with great spiritual insight, exclaims, 'is not love in suffering God's greatest gift here below?' (*Novissima Verba*, July 11th 1897). I suggest that often this is God's answer to our prayer. He gives us more than we ask for if he gives us 'love in suffering'.

The only reason we were put on this earth is to love God. But love is at its best in suffering. Jesus' love was at its best on the cross. If 'love in suffering' is often God's answer to prayer, then we should have enough faith to recognise his grace and thank him for hearing our prayer. Ultimately the only thing that matters in this life is growth in the love of God. But love only grows in temptation and in suffering. I suggest that God often leaves us with our temptations and trials but he gives us the grace to cope with them. If we respond to his grace we grow in love. This growth will benefit us for all eternity, whereas, if he took away our suffering the opportunity for growth in love would be withdrawn. Instead of growth in divine love we would experience temporal wellbeing that would last for a brief time and then be no more.

To sum up, Scripture and experience teach that there are many conditions to be fulfilled so that prayer may be answered. God loves us as a father; he always listens to our petitions and gives the most loving response to them.

16: AQUINAS ON THE LORD'S PRAYER (S. Th, 2da 2dae, Q. 83, Art. 9).

In this chapter I offer the reader the thoughts of Aquinas on the Lord's Prayer.

"The Lord's prayer is a most perfect prayer because Augustine teaches, 'so as to pray correctly and appropriately we need ask for nothing else than what is in the Lord's Prayer. Because prayer interprets our desires in relation to God, we can only rightly pray for those things that it is right to desire' (and love)".

"In the Lord's Prayer not only do we ask for all the things that we can rightly desire, but we ask for them in the order in which they must be desired". In other words the Lord's Prayer gets our priorities right. This prayer not only instructs us as to what we should ask for, but it also instructs us regarding our affections. It teaches us how we should love and desire correctly.

"It is clear that we first desire the end. Next we desire those things that lead to the end". (If my end is to build a house, I first desire to build the house; next I desire to get the money to do so. I draw up the necessary contracts and buy building materials etc. I desire first the end and then the means to the end).

"Our end is God. Our affections reach out to God in two ways. Firstly we love and desire God's glory. Secondly we desire to enjoy his glory. The first petition is concerned with our love for God in himself. The second petition is concerned with loving ourselves and our neighbours in God", (namely, loving ourselves and our neighbours in the way that God wills.)

"Hence we make the first petition, 'may your name be blessed'. In these words we pray for God's glory. In the second petition, 'may your kingdom come', we pray that we may come to the glory of his kingdom.

"Something can help us to achieve the end in two ways, directly and indirectly. We are directly helped to achieve our end when something is useful for this purpose. Something can be useful in two ways. Firstly immediately and principally because by means of it we merit heaven by obeying God. Hence the petition, 'your will be done on earth as in heaven'.

"A thing can also be instrumental in helping us to attain our end. It helps us to attain heavenly glory. Hence we pray, 'give us today our daily bread'. We can understand this as the sacramental bread, whose daily use benefits us, as well as all the other sacraments. It can also be understood as bodily bread. 'Bread' can stand for all we need for bodily sustenance. The Eucharist is the principal sacrament, and bread is the principal bodily food. Matthew's gospel speaks of 'supersubstantial' bread. Jerome interprets this as the 'principal' bread.

"Indirectly we arrive at our end (heaven, charity, God) by the removal of obstacles. There are three obstacles on the journey to the end. Firstly, there is sin, which excludes us from the kingdom. Concerning this we read in St. Paul, 'fornicators, those who serve idols ... will not possess the kingdom of God' (1 Cor. 6, 9ff). Hence we pray, 'forgive us our sins'. Secondly, there is temptation, which prevents us from carrying out God's will. In relation to this we pray, 'lead us not into temptation'. We are not praying that we will not be tempted, but that we will not be overcome by temptation. Thirdly, there are every day

difficulties, which are obstacles to having sufficient to meet our needs. To overcome these difficulties we pray, 'deliver us from evil'".

In explaining the introduction to the Lord's Prayer, Aquinas writes:

"We do not pray to God so as to bend his will to our will, but in order that we may stir up in ourselves confidence in our prayer. This confidence is especially achieved by considering God's love for us by which he desires our good. Therefore, we say, 'Our Father'. To remind ourselves of his excellence and power we say, 'who art in heaven'".

The following points may also be helpful for us in appreciating the Lord's Prayer. Aquinas asks, "why pray, 'may your name be blessed' since God is always blessed and holy?" By way of answer he cites Augustine. "We do not pray that God's name may be holy, as if he were not holy, but that it be considered holy and sacred by us humans. Similarly, we do not pray that his kingdom will come, as if he didn't already reign. We pray that his kingdom may come in us and that he may reign in us. So also we pray that his will may be done by us on earth, as it is done by the angels in heaven."

"These three petitions will be perfectly accomplished in the next life. The other four petitions pertain to what is necessary for this present life".

In conclusion, we point out that the theology and spirituality of Aquinas are written mainly in the context of our ultimate end. The ultimate purpose of my life is to love God here and hereafter. This will bring happiness to us. That is why he often calls happiness or beatitude the ultimate end. But he also calls charity and God the ultimate end. In fact when we realise our ultimate end, God, love of God and happiness will be inseparably interconnected.

All human acts are morally good or bad in so far as they are compatible with our ultimate end or not. The whole spiritual life is a journey to attain ever more fully the ultimate purpose of our existence in this world and in the next.

To a large extent this is the vision that underlies the Summa Theologia, the most famous work of Aquinas. We can see in the above commentary on the 'Our Father' how he uses this vision to explain this prayer, given us by Jesus.

17: ATTENTION AT PRAYER

Probably most of us who try to pray worry about the quality of our attention. How often we find that we have been uttering words for a long time, and suddenly we realise that we have been paying very little attention to their meaning. We talk to God without paying much attention to him. Perhaps we are distracted by personal problems, family difficulties or by the business of the day. If we are praying as part of a group we can be distracted by many other things, such as the people around us, the quality of the liturgy, the singing etc.

Probably all of us are plagued by distractions. This raises the whole question of attention at prayer. What kind of attention is necessary so that our prayer can be considered genuine? Most of us probably know the answer to this question. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to hear what the experts say.

Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of attention.

Firstly, he speaks of ACTUAL ATTENTION.

This kind of attention is present when we are consciously attending to what we are doing. At prayer we may be attending to four things, namely, to articulating the words properly; attending to the meaning of the words; to the thing for which we are praying and finally and most important is attention to God. Aquinas cites with approval Hugh of St. Victor who says, 'sometimes we may be oblivious to all things except God'. Obviously this is attention at its best.

Secondly we often have only VIRTUAL ATTENTION to God during our prayer. What do we mean by 'virtual attention?' This is best explained by an example. Let us suppose that a mother comes to the Eucharist with her little child, intending to worship God. She has a good intention, but most of the time she is distracted, looking after the child. She remains during the mass, praying as best she can, but she is distracted from God most of the time. Her intention to worship God as best she can endures. The influence of the original intention keeps her at her prayers. She is not actually attending to her prayers most of the time but she has the virtual intention of praying and this suffices for good prayer.

Aquinas applies this intention also to charity. He teaches that we are bound to love God at all times, either actually or virtually. Obviously we cannot be conscious of God when involved in some complicated work but our underlying unconscious motive for undertaking the work can be the desire to please God. In this sense all our activity, whether it be prayer or everyday chores, should be carried out in love that is either actual or virtual.

Actual attention at prayer is the ideal but it is not always possible. Virtual attention means that we start off with the intention to pray. We do our best to stay actually attentive during prayer but we are often involuntarily distracted owing to human weakness. Provided we do our best to stay actually attentive this prayer is good and pleasing to God (Sts. Thomas and Basil).

But a distracted prayer doesn't nourish us spiritually. This is why St. Paul can say, 'I pray with my tongue but the mind is without nourishment' (I Cor. 14, 14).

Aquinas writes, 'the human mind, because of natural infirmity, cannot remain for a long time on high; the soul is forced back to earth by the weight of human weakness. So it

happens that when we mentally ascend to God in contemplation we quickly get distracted due to our infirmity' (S. Th. 2da 2dae Q. 83, Art 13).

If the saints are troubled by distraction we shouldn't be surprised if we have a similar problem.

However, actual attention remains the ideal. If we want to pray well we will take the necessary steps to make sure that we are not unnecessarily distracted. As Christians, our whole life should be orientated to actually or virtually loving and serving God.

18: PRAYING ALWAYS

'We should always pray and not give up' (Lk. 18, 1).
'Pray without ceasing' (1 Thess. 5, 17)

The Jerusalem Bible comments that this simple exhortation from Thessalonians has had an enormous influence on Christian spirituality. The early monks interpreted these words from Thessalonians literally, and had as their goal to pray always without ceasing. Sometimes they tried to do this by repeating a simple aspiration throughout the day such as, 'Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner'.

Many spiritual writers down the centuries ask the question, 'How can one pray without ceasing?' Do we have to be actually conscious of God all the time? Is this what Paul and Luke mean? To answer these questions we need to explore the meaning of the words 'praying always'. We need to ask ourselves, what do we mean by 'praying' in this context? What do we mean by 'always'?

We are setting ourselves an inhuman ideal if we think that we must be actually conscious of God every moment of our lives. We would probably go crazy if we seriously tried to do this always and everywhere. God doesn't command the impossible so we need to correctly understand what is meant by 'unceasing prayer'. So as to explain unceasing prayer we will have recourse to Aquinas since he is so reasonable.

He tells us that in explaining 'unceasing prayer' we must distinguish prayer from the cause of prayer. Charity, or the desire to please God, is the cause of prayer. If we sincerely want to please God we will give ourselves generously to prayer since this is the chief way of expressing and nourishing the love of God. We have discussed in another article how all our deliberate acts should proceed from a charity that is either actual or virtual. If all our actions proceed from charity in this manner we are always in union with God and in a sense always praying. None of us will achieve this goal perfectly in this life but it helps to have it before us as an ideal towards which we can strive.

The moral theologian, O'Callaghan, points out that the gospel sets before us many impossible ideals, such as to love God with our whole being, to leave all things and follow Jesus, to live always not for ourselves but for God etc. None of these ideals can be perfectly achieved in this life due to human weakness. Nevertheless, they serve the same function as a lighthouse, which helps the ship to enter harbour without mishap. These absolute commands of Jesus serve to direct us into the heavenly harbour. The counsel to 'pray unceasingly' is one such lighthouse to help us on our journey.

Aquinas also says that we can also 'pray always' by a continual desire. If we are addicted to something we have a continual desire for that thing, even though at times the desire may be unconscious. But it is none the less real and continual. In like manner we can have a continual desire to please God even though it is often unconscious.

Again 'praying always' may mean praying faithfully at fixed times. If we say that people 'always go to mass' we may mean that they are faithful to Sunday mass or we may mean that they go to daily mass. We certainly do not mean that they are at mass every moment of the day.

Aquinas offers still another possible meaning of 'praying always'. I can pray always if I get others to do the praying in my place. Thus a parish priest may pray always if he organises a roster for perpetual adoration.

From what we have said it seems that what is most important for 'unceasing prayer' is that we love God actually or virtually in all our voluntary activities. As we explained in a previous article we love God actually when we make a choice consciously motivated by the desire to please God. Often, however, even the saints were not consciously motivated by this desire in all that they did. They often acted out of good moral motives while being unconsciously motivated by charity. These actions were motivated not by actual charity but by virtual charity.

But this raises a further question - are there any other requirements for virtual love of God besides the fact that our choice proceeds from the unconscious desire to please God? Yes, we must attend to the moral quality of our choices. In order to virtually love God it is necessary, not only that our basic desire is to please God, but also we must also make morally good choices. Furthermore, these choices must be made with an upright intention. And we need to take account of the circumstances that surround our choices. Thus we need to perform good actions with a right intention in appropriate circumstances. If I do good, with a bad intention, I cannot call my choice a 'prayer'. Or if I spend an hour at prayer when duty calls me elsewhere I am acting inappropriately in the circumstances and my prayer has no value in God's eyes. In a word my choices need to be morally good, my intention upright and what I choose must be reasonable in the circumstances. If my actions have all these qualities they will be an extension of my charity and I can say that I am always praying.

To sum up, unceasing prayer differs little from unceasing charity. The more conscious my prayer and my charity are the better they will be. Hence the wisdom of trying to remain in God's presence as best we can. The habit of making short frequent aspirations can also help. However, much of our unceasing prayer and our unceasing charity will consist in acting in a morally upright manner at all times with God's grace to the best of our ability.

19: ACTIVE CONTEMPLATION

'Contemplation' has a number of meanings in current English. But I would like to discuss its meaning in spirituality. What do spiritual writers mean by 'contemplation', 'contemplative prayer' etc.?

I think that in Christian spirituality the various meanings of 'contemplation' can be reduced to two. There is the wider meaning of 'contemplation' that we find in the Fathers of the Church, and a narrower meaning of 'contemplation' associated with Sts. Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and others.

What is the difference between the two types of contemplative prayer?

'Contemplation' in the wide sense is concerned mainly with prayer, spiritual reading and reflections that stir up our love for God. In this 'contemplation' we use all our faculties so as to achieve closer union with God. Hence I am calling it 'active contemplation.'

'Contemplation in the narrower sense is a type of prayer wherein God does nearly all the work. We are led by the Spirit into quietude or passivity. We do not use our faculties to any great extent. We will devote a second article to this type of passive contemplation.

In this first article I wish to treat of 'contemplation' in the wide sense. Aquinas in his *Summa* devotes many pages to the contemplative and active life. He summarises the patristic teaching on contemplation. He quotes mainly Sts. Gregory the Great and Augustine in support of his doctrine. Other Fathers are also quoted but less frequently.

For Aquinas and the Fathers 'contemplation' means lovingly reflecting on God's word and on the mysteries of the faith. Love both motivates us to ponder on Christ and his love for us. All our faculties are used to enkindle in us the fire of charity. It is love of God or charity, says Aquinas, that moves us to contemplate, but the contemplation of divine things in turn increases and nourishes our love. The intellect, our thinking, our feelings and the affections of the will can all serve this type of contemplation. Indeed the imagination and the senses can be used to stir us up to deeper love of God. Ignatius of Loyola is in tune with the patristic doctrine of contemplation when he emphasises the use of the senses and imagination to stir us up to know, love and praise God all the more.

Much liturgical prayer is composed with a view to stirring up the feelings and affections of all the participants. When the Fathers talk about 'contemplation' they usually use the language of feeling. They use words like 'sweetness', 'delight', 'love', 'being loved', 'ardent desire', 'being inflamed with love', 'taste and see that the Lord is sweet'. 'Contemplation' seems to bring pleasure, joy and spiritual consolation.

As we said already the whole human person is involved in this type of contemplation. All of the faculties can make a contribution. What is outside us can also stimulate us to love God more. Gifted singers, good music, beautiful art, a well performed liturgy, can all contribute to the contemplative experience of those present at the Eucharist.

The church certainly intends to offer all the help possible to lead its members to 'full conscious active participation' in the liturgy. She promotes as best she can 'contemplation' among all the participants.

It should be noted that church documents often speak of 'contemplation' and they almost always speak of it in the active sense in which it was understood by the ancient Fathers

and Aquinas. In *Sacrum Concilium*, N.2, we are told that the church is 'eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation...in her... action is subordinate to contemplation'. This teaching occurs in the liturgical document of Vatican II. The Council obviously considered the liturgy an experience in 'contemplation'. I might observe that it only deserves to be called 'contemplation' if our minds and hearts are in harmony with what we are doing and saying.

Since the liturgy is for everyone, the whole church is contemplative and active. Hence every member is called to love God and to act out of love for God in daily life.

If we give 'contemplation' this active meaning and see it as an exercise in the affective love of God, we can say that everything that contributes to the love of God also contributes to contemplation. Spiritual reading, personal prayer, hymns, psalms, inspiring sermons, DVDs, CDs etc. can all rouse us up to greater knowledge and love of God which is what contemplation is all about.

In his treatment of contemplation Aquinas insists repeatedly that what gives value to all our activities, whether contemplative or active, is the degree of charity with which they are performed. Charity is what primarily determines the value of all that we do. Hence the value of our contemplation will depend on the degree of charity that inspires it. Therese of Lisieux tells us that to do something small, with great love, is more pleasing to God than doing something much greater with less love. However, contemplation, if it is genuine, should nourish our love for God and help it to grow. Indeed true contemplation is little more in practice than the exercise of our affective love for God.

We can also say that loving contemplation of God is the ultimate purpose of human existence. God made us to love him affectively and effectively in this world and in the next. It is prayerful contemplation that nourishes our affective love. Contemplation generates love and love in turn generates contemplation. That is why the Fathers tell us that contemplation starts in this life and will reach perfection in the life to come. We could express this in other words by saying that the vision of God and the love of God are inextricably interconnected in the happiness of heaven. In this world we see God in a dark manner. Hence our contemplation and the love that flows from it, are imperfect.

To sum up 'contemplation' is understood by the Fathers of the church and official church documents as loving communion with God. It is based on faith as it generates love. All our human faculties, intellect, will, imagination, feelings and our five senses can all make a contribution to this contemplation. The word of God, beauty, art, music can all help. 'Contemplation' can be a delightful activity.

20: PASSIVE CONTEMPLATION

I pointed out in the last article that the word 'contemplation' can have many meanings, but they can be reduced to two. Firstly, there is 'contemplation' as understood by the Church Fathers and official church documents in which we use all our faculties to unite ourselves to God. In this article I will reflect on a type of 'contemplation' in which we do not use all our faculties to achieve divine union. In this contemplation we are more passive.

Teresa of Avila speaks of a form of prayer that involves 'suspending the intellect, binding one's imagination...taking the words out of one's mouth. For even though we want to do so we can only speak with great difficulty' (Way of Perfection, C. 25). 'Without the noise of words the Divine Master is teaching us by suspending our faculties...we enjoy without understanding how we enjoy. The soul is enkindled with love and doesn't understand how it loves. It enjoys what it loves and doesn't know how...what I have described is perfect contemplation' (ibid c. 25). Elsewhere she calls this 'infused contemplation', a term not much used today. It is a form of prayer wherein one exercises one's faculties very little.

John of the Cross also speaks of 'contemplation' in this sense. He emphasises strongly that the entry into this kind of prayer is often through what he calls a 'Dark Night'. One usually starts on the prayer journey, using all one's faculties to unite oneself to God. Frequently, however, after a short time, perhaps a few years one enters into darkness and aridity and can no longer use one's faculties as formerly. But one remains deeply committed to God even though one has no feelings of love.

Union with God is an arid experience of the will and seems unreal. John assures us that a person in this state is entering into a more passive type of prayer, which he calls 'contemplation'. He is at one with Teresa in saying that in this type of prayer one cannot and must not use one's faculties to achieve union with God. However, John's special contribution to our understanding of prayer is to insist that one is progressing in contemplation in the midst of this darkness, aridity and bewilderment. According to John God is giving himself more fully to the pray-er, and one is blinded by God's light - hence the darkness. As far as I know John is quite original in stressing that people often enter into deeper prayer, that he calls 'contemplation', through a dark night of aridity.

The experience of many directors and of people committed to prayer demonstrates conclusively that John's 'Dark Night' is experienced, in varying degrees, by many people. But there are also many who are deeply committed to God who do not experience to a notable degree this Dark Night. No one seems to know why some experience it and others do not. Fr. Thomas Green, who was spiritual director to seminarians in the Philippines, testifies on a tape that some form of Dark Night was quite common amongst his clients.

It is important also to realise that the term 'Dark Night' is used in two senses by St. John of the Cross, and by many other writers. Firstly the word is used in the sense explained above. One's faculties cease in varying degrees to function in one's prayer life. Initially at least this plunges one into aridity and darkness - a 'Dark Night'. But John and other spiritual writers often use the term 'Dark Night' for any kind of suffering on our spiritual journey. John Paul II writes, 'physical, moral and spiritual suffering, like sickness, hunger, war, injustice, solitude, the lack of meaning in life, the very fragility of human existence, the seeming

absence of God etc. are all for the believer purifying experiences which might be called the night of faith'.

Whether night or suffering comes from development in our prayer life or from other sources it constitutes a challenge to our faith. In order to respond correctly to our suffering we must remain united to God in the darkness of faith. If we accept our night with faith and unfelt love we will turn our suffering into a sacrifice very pleasing to God.

It is also important to realise the difference between the aridity of one wholly committed to God and that of one, who is leading a selfish life. If we live for ourselves and give our hearts excessively to secular values we will become insensitive to the spiritual. It would be spiritually disastrous to imagine that aridity in this case is due to development in our prayer life. What is needed in this case is total conversion.

How does one respond to darkness? John of the Cross assures us that God is not absent. Indeed the opposite is true. He loves us so much that he gives us more help in time of suffering because we need it more. If we continue to serve him in faith and continue to pray as best we can we are giving the right response. However, if there is question of night that is due to development in prayer we will have to develop a new method of praying. We will have to abandon in varying degrees discursive meditation and using the imagination. We should not try to stir up feelings if they do not come easily. We need to learn to be still, which can be very difficult, because distractions crowd into our imaginations. The repetition of a sacred word (mantra) quietly and without trying to stir up feelings can help us to stay still and quieten our imaginations. This stillness allows God to do his work in us. 'Be still and know that I am God' (Ps. 46, 11).

To sum up, this second type of contemplation is predominantly passive, while the first type is largely active. In passive prayer we often imagine that we are doing nothing and only wasting our time. Great faith is often called for to persevere in this arid desert.

21: GENERAL REMARKS ABOUT CONTEMPLATION

In the former chapters I explained that 'contemplation' in the Christian tradition takes two main forms. Firstly, there is 'contemplation' as understood by the Fathers of the Church and official church documents. This contemplation is mainly active. When we contemplate in this way we use our faculties and feelings to the full. The second type of contemplation, which is mainly passive, is described especially in the writings of the two great Carmelite doctors. Many other spiritual writers, especially in recent centuries, also deal with passive contemplation.

In this third article I would like to add some further general remarks which, I hope, will throw more light on contemplation.

No one's prayer is wholly active or entirely passive. It is a matter of the predominance of one type of contemplation in one's prayer. Francis de Sales was dealing with a nun whose prayer seemed to be almost totally passive. She had no inclination to make any explicit acts in her prayer. So as to keep her on the right track he instructed her to at least recite the Creed every day. He rightly considered that we must never completely abandon vocal prayer.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who babble prayers unceasingly (Mt. 6). Such people need to learn to unite themselves to God in silence, at least sometimes. Surely the church, when it introduced periods of silence into public prayer, was indicating that silence is a dimension of union with God for everyone. In other words a certain amount of passive prayer is appropriate for everyone. I think that the silences are not intended primarily for personal reflection. If we use them for reflection we are no longer silent interiorly. I believe that silence, especially if it is interior, is food for our spirits. It builds us up spiritually in a hidden way.

THE BEST TYPE OF CONTEMPLATION

It was often assumed in the past that passive prayer was a 'higher' form of prayer than mere active contemplation. We used terminology like 'high prayer', 'advanced in prayer' etc. Various stages of growth in prayer were drawn up by spiritual writers. While granting that there was some validity in these descriptions of prayer it seems that we also need to keep our feet on the ground. Teresa of Avila says that 'if one's contemplation doesn't produce the fruits of virtue pay no attention to it'. We should remember also that it is love alone that gives value to our prayer. If Our Lady made one brief aspiration it would give more glory to God than hours of contemplation by a lesser saint. Where there is great love there is great prayer. Needless to say, love must not be identified with feelings of love. Our love is often greatest when, in the midst of temptation, we remain faithful to God. Jesus' love was at its best on the cross. The best prayer then is the prayer said with most love.

Only God knows who has the most love. However, there will probably be little love of God in one's life unless one gives oneself to prayer. Prayer and love are inextricably interconnected. Indeed prayer is largely the exercise of affective love. In prayer we develop loving intimacy with God and we also get the grace to live in union with him by a life of virtue.

It is possible to go through the motions of prayer, without having true authentic prayer. Jesus warns us not to heap up empty phrases as the pagans do for they think that they will be heard for their many words (Mt. 6, 7). Having issued this warning Jesus gives us the 'Our Father' to teach us how we ought to pray properly. If we internalise the 'Our Father' we will have genuine prayer.

THE ESSENCE OF PRAYER

We should go to prayer, intending to give ourselves wholly to God; this should be our primary intention. Let us formulate it in another way. We go to prayer in order to accomplish God's will for us. We desire to do his will so as to please him. This intention to please God endures throughout the prayer time unless we deliberately take our attention off God and focus it on something else that attracts us and gives us pleasure. Prayer ceases when we deliberately seek our own pleasure in place of what pleases God. In this case we abandon prayer and God so as to obtain pleasure for ourselves.

Hence it is essential to all prayer, whether vocal or contemplative, active or passive, to start out with a right intention and not deliberately indulge in distractions during our prayer. We can be tormented with distractions but so long as we drop them when we become aware of them, and return to God our prayer is good. So long as our will is directed to God, our prayer is good, no matter how we feel.

Many people suffer aridity for years and they are tempted to doubt the value of their prayer. It seems to be one long dark desert - a dark tunnel with no light at the end of it. Such people must continue the forty years journey in the desert and not lose hope. Dry unfeeling prayer of the will can be very pleasing to God. Francis de Sales writes somewhere, 'I prefer dry fruit'. He also says of such dry prayer, 'our affections should be strained through the fine point of the will'.

Perhaps we could sum up this article by saying that we must follow the Spirit's guidance. We must make sure that our wills are on God and that our prayer is nourishing our love of God. Growth in affective love is the goal and purpose of all prayer. This affective love, if truly present, will manifest itself in the practice of the virtues, practised so as to please the one we love.

22: SECULAR MEDITATION

Chapters 22, 23 and 24 will deal with types of passive contemplation that have appeared in the secular world and among religious people mainly in the last 50 years. These types of passive prayer are usually called 'meditation.' In this chapter and the following two chapters we will discuss this meditation from the secular, Buddhist and Christian angles.

Some years ago the leading article in 'Time Magazine' was on 'Meditation'. I don't usually waste time in reading 'Time', but I felt that I should read this article. In the article there were snippets on meditation from many different sources. There was very little reference to Christian meditation. The authors claimed that up to 10 million Americans were practising some form of meditation. Meditation is being offered in 'schools, hospitals, law firms, government buildings, corporate offices and prisons'. There were pictures of students, lawyers and prisoners, meditating, sitting cross-legged on the ground.

Meditation is being recommended by doctors to reduce stress. Doctors are embracing it because there is much scientific evidence that it has a therapeutic effect. Many scientific studies have been done that show conclusively its benefits for both bodily and mental health. 'For thirty years meditation research has told us that it works beautifully as an antidote to stress' (Daniel Goleman). Since stress can contribute to much mental and physical illness, meditation, by reducing stress, promotes health of mind and body.

Hilary Clinton talks about it; Al Gore and his wife are meditators. Gore says, 'we both believe in regular prayer and we often pray together. But meditation, as distinct from prayer, I highly recommend it'. William Johnston, in his book, 'Silent Music', tells us that businessmen in Japan have been practising meditation for generations so that they might have extra energy in the competitive world of business. They have practised secular meditation long before it was thought of in the Western world.

Before I read the article in 'Time' I assumed that it would be about religious meditation, meditation as a way of uniting oneself to God. In our Christian tradition meditation has always been understood as a method of prayer. Up to about 50 years ago 'meditation' was distinguished from 'contemplation' by some authorities, such as the Carmelite saints. 'Meditation' was associated with discursive thinking about religious truths. 'Contemplation' consisted more in relishing the truth, than in thinking about it. In 'contemplation' discursive thinking was abandoned and one remained simply in God's presence.

In modern Christian spirituality 'meditation', and 'contemplation' can have a variety of meanings. When I meet these two terms in my reading I always have to ask myself, what do they mean in this context?

But the 'meditation', practised by millions of people today is quite different from 'meditation' as understood in Christian spirituality. Firstly, it is not necessarily a religious exercise. People can practise this new 'meditation', without even believing in God. It is not even tied up with any definite religion. Many of the meditation techniques used have been taken over from Hinduism and Buddhism, but meditators, for the most part, do not subscribe to these religions. They use Eastern techniques, without embracing the religious and moral values of Hinduism and Buddhism. In other words meditation in the Western world is largely

secular. It usually takes no account of God, and is not necessarily oriented to leading a better moral life. Its primary orientation is to bodily and mental health. One's improved health might be used for either good or evil ends.

Secondly it is to be noted that 'meditation' today often refers to using techniques that suppress all discursive thinking. There are very many forms of secular meditation, but nearly all of them serve to suspend thinking about things. All forms of meditation tend to introduce the meditator into some measure of inner peace and tranquillity. They use techniques that lead to deep relaxation.

Rather than thinking about something the meditator focuses attention on something, without analysing it. When we think about something we break the object into its various parts. In meditation, however, we focus on something, without passing a series of judgements on it. Some meditators, e.g. in T.M. focus on saying the mantra (word); this is a common technique of meditation. Others focus on their breathing. Some focus on an image or on the 'third eye' (a point between the two eyes). As we said already focusing on something, without analysing it, leads us into deep inner silence.

Science has proved that, during meditation, the brain operates differently from when one is thinking. Meditation has been compared to gasoline; anyone can use it and it can be detached from Buddhism and Hinduism.

HOW DOES ONE EVALUATE SECULAR MEDITATION?

Its primary effect seems to be better health of mind and body. Meditators seem to have greater capacity to deal with the stress of modern life. It brings a higher quality of life to those who practise it. It is naturally good and promotes physical wellbeing. All the scientific evidence suggests that meditation is an important therapeutic tool for preventing and curing many illnesses. Medical experts reckon that 60% of illness is psychosomatic and caused by stress. Meditation, because it reduces stress, can contribute to preventing and curing many mental and bodily illnesses. Just as stress can be a contributory factor to a whole range of illnesses so likewise meditation can contribute to the cure or prevention of a wide range of physical and mental disorders.

Doubtless the improved health that one enjoys, due to meditation, can be used for either good or bad purposes. In the sight of God the value of meditation will be determined by whether we use it to promote his kingdom or not. Jesus came to bring us life in abundance. We only have this abundant life when we use all our resources of nature and grace in the service of God. The motivation and orientation of our meditation will determine its true value.

By way of conclusion let us ask, what can people devoted to the spiritual journey learn from secular meditation? We can learn to lay a good natural base for our spiritual life. Grace builds on nature. Therefore, we must be first integrated at the level of nature before we can serve God fully. It will be easier for the Spirit to operate in us if mind and heart are integrated. We have a duty as Christians to take possession of all our potential and put it at the service of love.

23: BUDDHIST MEDITATION

I spoke in the last article of 'secular meditation' because it is not necessarily oriented to moral values and to virtue. Often it is practised so that one may be more efficient in business or in politics. It could even be oriented to immoral goals.

Secular meditation differs a lot from Hindu and Buddhist meditation. I have not a great knowledge of these religions, and I hope that what I say is accurate.

In the Asian religions meditation is integrated with a whole philosophy of life. It is bound up with mystical experience and high moral values. Some Buddhists are very moral people and they stress compassion, which is one of the fruits of meditation. In the deep silence of meditation they are in contact with all being, and experience a certain communion with all creation.

We Christians love to relate to God as a living, loving person, a Father who loves and cares for us. The Dalai Lama says that he does not believe in a personal God. (Some Buddhists do believe in a personal God). Instead of the word 'God', many Buddhists use such words as 'ultimate reality', 'the sacred', 'the ground of our being'. These concepts differ a lot from the Christian idea of God as 'Our Father'. Many Hindus, e.g. Gandhi, pray and meditate. Furthermore some yogis and Hindu monks live extraordinary lives of prayer and self-denial. Often they spend their lives hidden away in caves in the Himalayas in north India. They seem to reach a high degree of self-realisation and perhaps union with God.

Buddhism and Hinduism have endured for two or three thousand years. Meditation has been practised faithfully by deeply committed monks even before the coming of Christ. Here in N.Z. we have about 40,000 Hindus and also about 40,000 Buddhists.

This raises a question for us Christians, what can we learn from these religions? This is not a new question. The Catholic Church has always tried to recognise the signs of the Spirit in secular and non-Christian philosophies and religions. Aquinas used the philosophy of a pagan, Aristotle, as a basis for explaining the whole of Christian theology and spirituality. Vatican II, in its document, 'The Church in the Modern World', strongly affirms the goodness of creation, science, culture and technology. It integrates these values with the theory and practise of Christianity. By assuming human nature Christ has taken all creation into himself and redeemed the whole cosmos. He has made all secular values in some sense sacred.

In the light of this thinking we need to ask ourselves, what can we learn from Hinduism and Buddhism that will enrich our Christian life? The secular meditators have secularised Hindu and Buddhist meditation. Perhaps we can Christianise this meditation. If Aquinas was alive today, he would be working on this challenge. In our modern global village it is a challenge that we cannot ignore. Since the Holy Spirit is working in all human beings (L. G. 40) it should not surprise us if he has revealed something to the Asians that he has not told us.

The first important lesson that we can learn is that meditation releases hidden potential in a human being. In the West we realise that the human psyche consists of the conscious mind with its faculties and activities; we experience these at the level of consciousness. Freud, who was an atheist, discovered many truths about the unconscious that were unknown before his time. Now we are happy to integrate his insights with our Christian spirituality. In like

manner, meditation, whether that of the Asian religions or secular, can be used to enrich our spiritual lives. Meditation, by suppressing conscious activity, allows new energy to flow from the unconscious into one's life. They explain this by saying that the 'deep-self' or unconscious is activated. We 'water the ground of our being' by silence and the self is realised. All meditation, whether secular, Asian or Christian, will produce the effects just mentioned.

Christians by using the meditation techniques of the Asians and the seculars can release the unused potential of the unconscious and put it at the service of moral virtue and the love of God and neighbour. This extra energy is not unlike money. Just as money can be used for building up God's kingdom or for self-indulgence, so the extra energy flowing from meditation can be used for good or evil. Buddhism and secular meditation have provided us with a new tool that we Christians can baptise and use in God's service.

As Christians we believe that the three divine persons dwell down in our unconscious. We do not usually recognise them when we reflect on our conscious experience. John of the Cross points out that they are 'hidden' in the substance of the soul. Christian meditators claim that, when we cultivate the ground of our being by meditation, we open our spirits up to the Spirit of God. Meditation creates the milieu wherein God's Spirit can touch our spirit.

All meditation, whether Christian or otherwise, serves to integrate the different levels of our personality. It integrates mind and heart, knowledge and love, internal and external. It helps us to live from our 'centre'. The Greek Fathers pointed out that the division between mind and heart was the primary obstacle to spiritual growth. But meditation serves to unite mind and heart. This is another way of saying that it sets us free and helps us to overcome disorderly affections. Ignatius of Loyola saw these as the fundamental obstacle to spiritual growth.

The Buddhists remind us that meditation is part of a philosophy of life and that it must be integrated with moral values. It would be possible for a Christian to practise meditation, without integrating it with a life of virtue and charity. If this happens, it is no more than secular meditation.

Many of the Asian techniques of meditation can be profitably used by Christians so as to enter into deep silence wherein the Holy Spirit speaks to our spirit. Meditation helps us to attain some degree of silence and tranquillity even in the heart of a noisy city where most people live in the modern world.

To sum up, the Asian masters can teach us how to be still, how to activate our hidden potential, how to integrate mind and heart and how to unite meditation with moral values. Meditation makes us more fully alive and a person, fully alive, is the glory of God (Irenaeus).

24: CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

In former articles on 'contemplation' I confined myself to the Christian tradition up to about 1950. I then wrote articles on secular meditation and 'Buddhist or Asian meditation'. It is probably true to say that up to about the middle of the 20th century most Christians assumed that they had nothing to learn from the traditions of meditation and contemplation that have existed among Hindus and Buddhists for nearly 3,000 years. However, Vatican II changed all this. The Council teaches that all people have the Holy Spirit (L.G. 40) and that all sincere people will be saved. In a short decree on non-Christian religions (*Nostra Aetate*), the church encourages prudent dialogue with non-Christian religions. She rejects nothing that is 'true, good and holy' in such religions. Hindus and Buddhists have been practising meditation for nearly three millennia. They have produced many saintly men and women who reached a very high degree of spiritual development. Mahatma Gandhi is one example among many. One of the questions for us Christians is - can the Asian masters help us to practise meditation and contemplation better?

Since about 1950 many Christians have tried to integrate what is best in Hinduism and Buddhism with Christian contemplation. Dechanet, Bede Griffiths, Abishiktananda, Francis Mahieu, William Johnston and Anthony de Mello have all made a huge contribution to the dialogue between East and West.

In this article, however, I wish to say a few words about two forms of Christian prayer that have been strongly influenced by Asian techniques of meditation. I refer first of all to 'Christian Meditation', which is a way of praying, started by John Main O.S.B. John Main learned to meditate from a Hindu in Malaya. He showed courage and practical wisdom in taking what was best in Hindu meditation and using it in a Christian context, just as Aquinas used Aristotle to enrich Christian theology and spirituality. 'Christian Meditation' is very similar to 'Centering Prayer', which was started in the U.S.A by Thomas Keating and others. Both methods consist of sitting still and repeating a mantra or sacred word until a deep inner peace and silence is induced. Both methods lead to inner stillness. Both claim that being interiorly still constitutes an excellent preparation for the Spirit to work in our hearts. Both techniques lead to this quietness and demand that we maintain this inner silence, as best we can, through the whole period of the meditation by the recitation of a mantra or sacred word.

Both insist that we practise this meditation morning and evening for at least twenty minutes. John Main says that thirty minutes is the optimum time; twenty minutes is the minimum.

There are some differences in the two techniques, but they are not significant; they are far outweighed by the similarities. Both 'Centering Prayer' and 'Christian Meditation' have spread throughout the Christian world in the past forty years.

These two types of prayer can be classified as 'contemplative prayer' in which we cease to use most of our faculties. I dealt briefly with this type of contemplation in a former article on the subject.

Are these two types of prayer identical with 'contemplation' as understood by John of the Cross? There are similarities and differences. John of the Cross, De Sales and other authorities say that we reach a stage in prayer where we must abandon thinking and feelings.

Both saints presuppose that initially we have practised discursive meditation, using our intellect, imagination and feelings. But in time many are led into simplicity and they must develop a new way of praying.

John Main and Keating on the other hand recommend their technique to everyone, no matter where they are on the prayer journey. All are invited to practise their type of prayer. They do not require any special inspiration. They claim that their 'meditation' is for everyone. However, they would require in addition to 'Centering Prayer' or 'Christian Meditation' other Christian practises such as the exercise of virtue and good works, the Eucharist, other forms of personal prayer and spiritual reading. In other words there is a time for communing with God in deep silence, without the noise of words. There is also a time for using our faculties and feelings in vocal prayer and spiritual reading. A healthy prayer life seems to demand a balanced blending of active and passive prayer. I think that this holds for everybody.

I would like to suggest that these two types of prayer can be very helpful for people who have been led into a kind of desert. Many pray-ers will tell you that their prayer is one long struggle with distractions. It consists of aridity and dropping distractions and this continues indefinitely. They cannot use their faculties to enkindle devotion. At the same time they find it difficult to stay simply in God's presence. For such people 'Centering Prayer' or 'Christian Meditation' provides a very simple technique for remaining in God's presence and being relatively free from distractions. In other words it will be much easier to persevere in arid distracted prayer if we adopt one of the two methods just mentioned and persevere in it. They complement John of the Cross, who simply advises us to stay in God's presence in a passive way. But he offers no technique for us to do this. Without a technique for maintaining quietude, passive prayer is difficult to practise.

We may ask if Main and Keating are justified in recommending their method of 'meditation' (contemplation) to everyone? Is it helpful for everybody? As far as I know Asian forms of meditation are offered to everyone who is willing to undertake the required discipline. I think that 'meditation' fulfils a human need and is therefore helpful at least at a natural level for everybody. I hope that this has become clear in the articles on secular and Buddhist meditation. Meditation is often recommended, in its secular form, by psychiatrists and contributes greatly to psychological health. It seems to be especially helpful to people who are over-active at the level of consciousness, and who never activate their deep-self. In other words people often suffer psychologically and spiritually when the conscious level of our psyche is overactive and the unconscious dimension ignored. Many scientific studies have demonstrated that meditation is therapeutic. It helps both bodily and mental health. It gives the deep-self a chance to come alive and thereby helps us physically, psychologically and spiritually. Many studies have shown that this is true. Everybody needs to preserve a proper balance between conscious and unconscious activity.

To sum up, there seems to be sufficient evidence to state that people who live in the modern over sensitised world will be greatly helped physically, psychologically and spiritually if they commit themselves to meditation as understood by Main and Keating. In deep inner silence they will open themselves up to the Holy Spirit.

25: CONTEMPLATION IN JOHN OF THE CROSS

In previous chapters I have already touched on John of the Cross. At this point I would like to develop what has already been said at greater length.

We must attune ourselves first to John's terminology. John assumes that we start the life of prayer by discursive meditation on the gospel and on Christian doctrine. By prayerful reflection on the gospels we stir up in our hearts love of Jesus and of the virtues. Discursive meditation leads to affective and effective love. This is the beginning of one's 'mental prayer'. To some extent this kind of meditation will always be necessary so as to live in union with God on our daily lives. We cannot live without a certain amount of thinking.

However, after a certain time, perhaps a few years, the power to discursively reflect on Christian truths dries up in varying degrees, and a person can find thinking about God utterly fruitless during personal prayer. The initial first fervour can gradually dry up and the pray-ers may imagine that they are going backwards. They may find themselves in an arid desert. It seems to them that they are doing nothing and that they are no longer praying. But if people retain their total commitment to loving and serving God, this dryness, says John, is due to advance in the life of prayer. The pray-er is blinded, says John, by the closeness of God, and is being called to remain simply in his presence in love. People in this state should remain still, making perhaps the occasional act of dry love. They must never force themselves to stir up feelings of devotion. They are being called to stay in stillness and simplicity with the Lord, making very few acts unless they are inspired to do so. De Sales, who says that he 'prefers dry fruit', recommends that 'one's acts be strained through the fine point of the will'.

Sitting still seems to pray-ers very much like idleness. It seems to them that they are doing nothing. Prayer seems to be one long distraction. Prayer seems to consist of dropping distractions and there seems to be very little relationship with God.

John of the Cross is not worried about how they feel provided they are totally committed to pleasing God inside and outside of prayer. John advises us to continue eating this unappetising food, assuring us that it is excellent prayer. We should not force ourselves back into discursive prayer but sit simply, loving the Lord. This sounds beautiful on paper but in practise it feels like a total waste of time. Sitting quietly, thinking of nothing, dropping distractions is very hard work, unless we have a technique for remaining still.

HOW PREVALENT IS THE DARK NIGHT?

Some form of Dark Night is widespread among those who take 'mental prayer' seriously. Most religious orders, founded in the last four or five hundred years, set aside in their daily timetable about one hour for mental prayer. Seminaries also recommend about an hour. It seems that the Jesuits and the Carmelites have drawn the church's attention to the great value of such prayer. The present Code of Canon Law also prescribes 'mental prayer' for clerics and religious (C.C. 276 and 263).

Among those, who faithfully practise mental prayer some form of 'Dark Night' is very common. Let us give a few examples. "My prayer is usually nothing but distractions...I can tell you plainly...that for about 20 years God has taken away from me all power of any prayer

of the understanding...that is meditation..." (Jane de Chantal, 'Spiritual Life p. 148). She tells her nuns - "don't say to priests, 'I do nothing at meditation'those who interfere little know what harm they do...it is enough to be with God in simplicity of heart" (ibid. p 173ff). Fr. Thomas Green has written a book, 'When the Well Runs Dry'. It is written out of his own experience and that of his clients. It is intended for people who cannot reflect in prayer and find it a dry arid experience. Nearly all John Chapman's letters of spiritual direction are addressed to such people. De Caussade's book, 'On Prayer', is also written for such people. Indeed in my view few people who continue in mental prayer for many years continue to use discursive meditation to any great extent. They just try to attend in love and simplicity to the Lord.

Recently I had contact with a group of third Order Carmelites, who are committed to a half-hour of mental prayer every day. Nearly all of them found their prayer arid, without feelings of devotion. One final example - "My profession retreat was like all the retreats that I have made since. It was a time of great dryness...it brought me no consolation, only complete dryness and a sense of desolation" (St. Therese, Autobiography, (Knox) p. 198).

As I said already, sitting in simplicity, loving God in dryness and making very few acts can be very hard work, unless we have a technique for remaining still. 'Be still and know that I am God' (Ps. 46).

HOW TO COPE WITH DRYNESS

It is at this point that I think that the Asian techniques for remaining still and coping with distractions can be very helpful. It is much easier to sit down, doing nothing in silent love, letting the Lord act, if we use the meditation techniques of John Main and Thomas Keating. They have integrated very successfully Asian techniques with Christian prayer, without sacrificing anything of their Christianity. They offer us methods for remaining still that are not difficult to practise. At times all of us will experience dryness if we persevere at regular mental prayer. Unfortunately many give up and abandon prayer when it becomes boring. Indeed the practise may be dying out in the modern church. What I am saying is that perseverance will be much easier if we adopt the methods of Main or Keating.

In conclusion many people, who practise mental prayer, often experience aridity, and have difficulty in persevering in an unappetising exercise. By adopting the methods of Main or Keating they would find it much easier to persevere in passive prayer. In a later article I will describe Main's method in detail.

26: THE DIVINE INDWELLING

Where is God? Since God is everywhere we can find him in all things by stirring up our faith. Although he is everywhere there is a special place of presence that I wish to discuss in this article, namely, his presence in our own hearts.

St. Teresa urgently asks the question, where must we seek God? She cites Augustine who says, that he sought God in many created things outside himself. Eventually, however, he found him within his own heart. Teresa recommends that we go to a solitary place, close our eyes and worship God in our own hearts. She calls this the 'prayer of recollection' because we withdraw our attention and affections from the world around us and focus them on God within us (Way of Perfection C. 28).

John of the Cross writes in a similar vein. "Why do you search outside when within yourself you possess riches, delights ...your Beloved whom you desire and seek?" He is within you, 'love him there adore him there' (Spiritual Cant. 1, 7). But John reminds us that there is one difficulty; 'he is hidden' within our hearts. Faith, however, overcomes this difficulty.

Francis de Sales also favours this method or prayer. I would like to suggest that this method of prayer is not an optional method, one amongst many that we are free to overlook, if we so wish. God has condescended to enter my heart and he wishes to inspire and guide me from within. Working from within he will be constantly nudging me and empowering me to return love for love. Hence I need to be in touch with him. John of the Cross assures us that God is seeking us much more than we are seeking him. "In some people", says John, "he dwells alone. In some he is pleased; in others he is displeased. He lives in some as in his own house, commanding and ruling everything. In others he is like a stranger in a strange house where he is not allowed to give orders or do anything."

"It is in the person in which less of one's own desires and pleasures dwell that he lives more alone, more pleased and though as more in his own house, ruling and governing it. In this person neither any desire...nor affection for created things dwells. In such a one God dwells secretly with a very close intimate embrace" (Living Flame, 4, 14).

I have given a lot of quotes so as to back up what I am saying with the authority of church doctors.

The divine indwelling and its implications for our life can scarcely be overemphasised. It is because he lives within us that the Spirit can teach us and empower us to practise virtue. But in this article I am more concerned with teasing out the implications of the divine indwelling for our life of prayer.

Vatican II (L.G. 40) tells us that we all have the Holy Spirit and he is leading us all to love God. The affective love of God, which is the root of all spirituality, is practised mainly in prayer. God stands at the door of the heart and knocks (Rev. 3, 20); he wants our love. If we 'love him in our heart and adore him' we give him what he most desires. "If people love me...I and the Father will come to them and make our home in them" (Jn.14, 23). God makes his home in us when he lavishes his love on us and we return his love and obey him.

God dwells within us and longs for our love. John of the Cross assures us that he is seeking us far more than we are seeking him. John says that each human being is an 'infinite capacity for God' (2 Ascent. 17,8). But 'nature loathes a vacuum'. Fortunately, God longs to fill this capacious vacuum. He lives within us, constantly offering us his love, knocking at our door. If we recollect ourselves and pray we open the door. A loving encounter ensues and God's purpose in creating us is fulfilled.

Not only does God long for union with us but by our very nature we too long for God whether we realise it or not. Deep down in every human being there is a desire for unlimited happiness, which can only be obtained by the total possession of God. Only God can fill our 'infinite capacity for God'. In Augustine's words, 'God has made us for himself and our hearts will not rest until they rest in him'.

When we pray we often try to find God in things outside us. Obviously this is commendable because it puts us in contact with God. But we must not forget that it is only because God is within us that we can recognise him outside us. From within he opens our eyes to his presence all around us. There is tremendous divine activity taking place in our own hearts as God tries to get possession of every corner of our being and our affections. Surely it is appropriate that we co-operate with the Lord's initiative and enter into communion with him at the level of the heart. Only I myself can do this. No one else can do it for me. I and I alone have the key to the door of my own heart. Unless I open the door of my own heart it will be forever closed. God will be left standing in the cold, knocking in vain, while I ignore him.

To sum up: God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) dwell in the depths of my being. They are not just sleeping within me. They are very active, in communion with one another and constantly inviting me to enter into communion with them. Unfortunately I do not always hear their gentle inspirations because my mind and heart are excessively focused on the world around me while I neglect the world within me. Surely it is very important for me to frequently take time off to attend lovingly to the inspirations of God within me, inviting me to the fullness of love. God dwells in our hearts. 'Let us love him there and adore him there'.

27: GRACE BUILDS ON NATURE

'Test yourselves to see that you are holding to the faith. Do you not realise that Christ is in you unless you fail to meet the test' (2 Cor. 13, 5). 'I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2, 20).

Very frequently in the New Testament we are told that Christ, the Spirit and the Father are within us. Indeed we often get the impression that Paul and others were consciously aware that God was in them. Most of us accept in faith that God is in us. John of the Cross tells us that God lives in us but 'he is hidden' and known only by faith.

This basic doctrine presents us with a huge challenge. As we saw in the last article God's presence is dynamic. He wishes to give himself to us at ever deeper levels, but we put all kinds of blockages in his way. We 'stifle the Spirit' (1 Thess. 5, 19). How do we co-operate with a hidden God whose presence we only dimly perceive? We know him only in a dark manner. Can we tune up our spirit so that God can use us for his purposes? My deep-self is a mystery to myself. God dwells down in the depths of my being; yet I do not clearly perceive him. That which gives me all my dignity, which is the greatest gift I possess, cannot be known clearly by me as I reflect on my experience.

What should I do so that I will be an 'instrument joined to God' (Ignatius of Loyola)? Is it possible to tune up my deep-self and my spirit so that I will more effectively co-operate with the Divine Spirit? How can I water the roots of my being so that I will bring forth much fruit?

We know a lot about the contents of the unconscious because they often manifest themselves at the level of consciousness as conscious experiences. I know that I have an intellect, a will, various habits (good and bad), inclinations, desires, likes and dislikes, various abilities etc. because all these, though unconscious at the present moment, will from time to time, manifest themselves at the level of consciousness and sometimes also externally in my speech and actions.

There are also other very basic realities, deep in my personality, that I only know by faith. Faith assures me that the Blessed Trinity lives in me. By faith I also know that I have a spiritual immortal soul. Some great philosophers (e.g. Aristotle, Bertrand Russell and others) did not recognise in human beings the presence of a spiritual immortal soul. This serves to remind us how limited the human intellect is in revealing to us our deepest identity.

Beyond what we know by reflection and faith there is a great deal that we do not know about the deep self and the contents of the unconscious. How much latent power lies unused in our depths, waiting to be tapped? How do we best tune up our deep-self so that God can work in us and through us? Most of our life's experiences, good and bad, lie buried in the unconscious. It is almost impossible to bring up to the conscious level most of our forgotten memories. Much of modern psychotherapy tries to resurrect painful experiences of the past that are buried deep in the unconscious and sometimes cause mental illness. Psychiatrists enjoy varying degrees of success in this area. Many modern psychologists and psychiatrists either do not believe in the spiritual soul or they ignore it. Once again we come up against the unfathomable mystery of the 'deep-self' that we know so imperfectly.

There is an axiom in spirituality, which teaches that 'grace builds on nature'. Hence it is important, when setting out on the spiritual journey, to understand our own nature and its potential. I must take account, not only of my consciousness and its activity but I must also understand as fully as possible my unconscious. Writers struggle to find words to describe the deeper levels of one's being. I think that the different words used complement each other. Each word serves to give a slightly different slant on the deep-self that other words do not give. Therefore, at this point I think it helpful for understanding our depths to offer the reader different words that try to describe it.

Freud speaks of the conscious and the unconscious levels of our minds or psyche.
Aquinas uses the terms 'accidents (faculties) that inhere in our substance or nature'.
Others speak of the 'deep-self' and 'superficial self'.
Keating and Main often speak of the 'center' and the periphery
Scripture often speaks of the 'heart', which, I think, is often equivalent to 'center'.
T.M. and others speak of the 'ground of one's being'.
Others talk of the 'roots of our being'. Roots differ from branches
Zen speaks of 'Buddha nature' because it has the capacity to bring about enlightenment, when it is properly cultivated.

The psyche or mind or self is often compared to an iceberg. We see clearly the top of the iceberg but we do not see clearly the huge mass of ice under the water. We would be greatly mistaken if we assumed that the iceberg consisted solely of the little bit of ice above the surface of the sea. In similar fashion if we pay all our attention to regulating the activities of the conscious mind and neglect what is below consciousness we are making a great mistake in our efforts to become fully human beings. If all our formation is intellectual and we ignore the formation of the spirit and deep self we are not giving ourselves a full human formation. We are not laying a proper foundation on which grace can build.

Since grace builds on nature we have a duty to become fully human so that we may become fully divine. We must water the roots of our being if we are to develop our full human potential. 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive' (St. Irenaeus), at the level of consciousness and at the level of the deep-self. We need to cultivate root and branches; spirit, soul and body. Integral human formation must not be merely intellectual; it must also include the heart and deep-self.

To sum up: grace builds on nature. Therefore, it is desirable that we develop our full human potential. We need to integrate with conscious activity the energies of the deep-self so as to be fully alive. The principle reason for becoming more human is that God may be able to use us more effectively to accomplish his purposes in our lives.

28: THE NEED TO WATER THE ROOTS

In the last article I pointed out that as a basis for prayer and the life of union with God we need in the first place to be fully human. Part of being fully human is that we find ways of cultivating the spirit and the deep-self. In this article I wish to demonstrate more fully the need to activate our hidden potential. It is very important to demonstrate conclusively how vital for spirituality is the development of the spirit and the heart.

In the West most of us tend to be over developed intellectually and under developed spiritually. The Greek Fathers taught that the purpose of human existence was that the Holy Spirit would rule our spirit, that our spirit would rule our soul or conscious self, and that our soul would rule our bodies. Unfortunately this goal cannot be realised if we stifle the Spirit of God (1 Thess. 5, 19) by not properly developing our own spirits.

Over emphasis on intellectual formation and excessive conscious activity serves to produce unbalanced human beings. At worst they become mentally ill because they haven't integrated the development of the deep-self with the development of the conscious mind. At another level people, who are very objective in dealing with others, may have little compassion for and communion with people. The head is highly developed; the heart is unformed. Because the Buddhists by meditation cultivate the deep-self and spirit they are committed to compassion, not only for humans, but for all creation.

There are two kinds of meditation. There is the active use of all our faculties, which we practice in managing the affairs of daily life. This involves active meditation. But there is also passive meditation in which we do not use all our faculties but immerse ourselves in deep silence. In this sense also we can speak of two kinds of prayer, active and passive. If we give ourselves excessively to conscious fervent prayers we can get mentally tired. Our brains and our nervous systems can only cope with a certain amount of fervour. Active prayer or meditation must be abandoned when we experience mental fatigue. However, if we switch to passive prayer, to practising the meditation of Main or Keating, we soon relax into silence and the strain disappears. A different part of the brain is now operating. 'A change is as good as a rest'. This seems to indicate the need to alternate active and passive contemplation in one's life of prayer. The passive contemplation waters the roots of our being and builds us up in spirit, mind and body.

In the U.S.A, Japan and elsewhere many scientific tests have been done which prove conclusively that meditation is therapeutic for body, mind and spirit. By 'meditation' here I mean techniques that lead us into deep inner silence. Various forms of meditation have been practised for over 2,000 years in Asia. This in itself is a strong indication of their value.

In the wake of Vatican II some Christians have embraced some of the Asian techniques so as to actualise more fully their human potential and put it at the service of Christ. Foremost in this field have been John Main and Thomas Keating, whom I have mentioned in other articles. Without surrendering one iota of the Gospel they have developed very successful forms of passive prayer that actualise the human unconscious and open it up to the Spirit of God. In my view they have integrated very successfully the essential wisdom of the East with Christian theory and practise.

John of the Cross, Francis de Sales and others insist often that we must sometimes sit passively before the Lord and allow him to act. But neither saint has given us a technique for doing this. It is very hard to be still if one has no technique to lead one into stillness. Main and Keating, inspired by Asian practises, offer us techniques, which enable us, without too much difficulty, to enter into deep silence. They help us to be still and let God act. This deep inner silence, in a mysterious way, that we do not fully understand, helps to build us up at every level of our personality. This silence is good for mental health in a culture that bombards its members non-stop with conscious sensations. Psychiatrists often recommend meditation to their clients as a remedy for mental illness. Even when there is no serious mental illness meditation will integrate human beings within themselves.

The medical profession tells us that up to 60% of illness is psychosomatic. If this is true it logically follows that the cure of this illness is also psychosomatic. Scientific studies have shown that meditators get fewer heart attacks and less cancer than non-meditators. Meditation can often remedy depression and reduce the effects of stress. Studies have also shown that the active mind produces alpha brain waves and is associated with left brain activity. Deep inner silence produces theta brain waves and is associated with right brain activity and with deep relaxation.

Ordinary consciousness involves constant activity of the imagination, intellect and will. Consciousness is altered in the deep silence of meditation. We passively will in the silence to let the deep-self 'unfold' of itself or 'actualise' itself. We use these terms, 'unfold' and 'actualise' to describe the indescribable. Something is happening in the deep silence but it is very difficult to perceive it and describe it. We simply stay still and let God act. Active volition is one type of willing; passive volition is another.

Meditation is a mysterious experience. Nothing seems to be happening in the depths of silence. Yet the tree is known by its fruits. The fruits of meditation are fully integrated people. It adds a new positive dimension to our lives. It makes us more fully alive and such people are the glory of God (Irenaeus). This should be the fruit of Christian Meditation.

However, meditation of itself will not make saints of people. The magazine 'Time' estimates that there are ten million people practising meditation in the U.S.A. Doubtless it makes them more fully human. But the vast majority seem to practise it for the sake of better health of mind and body. Such meditation is helpful but a Christian needs to put it at the service of charity and prayer. It is a good secular exercise that needs to be baptised. John Main and Thomas Keating have done this for us and they deserve our gratitude.

To sum up, we need to be fully human so that grace can operate in us. We will smother the Spirit if we do not realise as fully as possible our human potential. Experience and innumerable scientific studies have established beyond reasonable doubt that meditation, understood as entry into deep inner silence, is a powerful help in making us more full human beings. Because it makes us more human it makes us into more suitable instruments on which the Spirit can work. It opens us up to the Spirit of God.

29: TECHNIQUES OF PRAYER

Before we can speak meaningfully of techniques of prayer we need to remind ourselves once again of the nature of prayer. In this book we have adopted for the most part St. Teresa's definition of prayer as "loving communion with One whom we know loves us." If prayer is "loving communion" with God, it follows that techniques of prayer are all those factors that contribute to this loving communion. There are innumerable factors that can help our prayer in different ways. All of these can be called 'techniques of prayer' in the wide sense in so far as they help to unite us with God.

In earlier chapters of this book I pointed out that Christian contemplation has been traditionally understood in two main senses. One can speak of 'active contemplation' and 'passive contemplation.' The Fathers of the church and official church documents usually speak of contemplation in the active sense. John of the Cross and many others, especially in recent centuries, use the word 'contemplation' for a passive form of prayer.

Both types of contemplation require different techniques. There are some techniques suited to both types of contemplation. There are others, however, that are helpful only to active contemplation, while still others are more suited to passive contemplation.

TECHNIQUES USEFUL FOR BOTH TYPES OF CONTEMPLATION

All contemplation requires that we withdraw our attention and affections from ungodly things and that we direct them to God. We need interior peace so as to commune with God. Silence and solitude contribute greatly to this peace. Jesus often prayed in solitude. Freedom from disorderly attachments is also important. If we love some creature more than God we cannot give ourselves wholly to God, which is essential for genuine prayer.

It is also well to remember that everyone's prayer should be a rhythm of active and passive prayer, and types of prayer that are partly active and partly passive. On a scale from one to ten, where one stands for a very active type of prayer and ten stands for a very passive type of prayer, there can be varying degrees of more or less activity and passivity in a person's prayer. I think that this applies to everyone who takes prayer seriously. In practice one must follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Having said this, it can often be wrong to use certain techniques at a time when we are being led into deep passive prayer. A time comes for most people when discursive meditation needs to be abandoned because it is becoming a hindrance to one's communion with God. We must never try to force our feelings at prayer, if they do not come naturally during prayer. Singing psalms as we walk around, and spiritual reading are not compatible with passive prayer. In passive prayer we must stop using our faculties to a large extent and let God act. Hence it is desirable that the mind be utterly still and free from all thoughts even of sacred things. Jane de Chantal is very insistent that when we are called to passive prayer we must not reflect even on the mysteries of Christ.

Repetition of a short aspiration is a very common technique in the Christian tradition. It seems to be a mixture of active and passive prayer. Cassian recommends it; the 'Jesus

Prayer' is an example of such prayer. The Rosary contains a lot of repetition. Francis de Sales says that it is better to repeat a single aspiration one hundred times than to say one hundred different aspirations. Constant repetition will impress it on our hearts. Repeating an aspiration on a beads can also help.

TECHNIQUES OF ACTIVE CONTEMPLATION

We already pointed out that we use all our faculties in active contemplation. Ignatius of Loyola encourages us to use our senses and imagination. Even reading and study, used with discretion, can lead us to affective communion with God. Reflecting on gospel passages, on the sufferings of Jesus or on a particular virtue are so many techniques that can lead us to loving communion. Above all words lead us to such communion. When Jesus was asked for a method of prayer he told his apostles, "when you pray, say 'Our Father' etc." He gave them a technique - say definite words. When appropriate words are said slowly and with attention they will eventually generate affections in our hearts.

Words are very powerful. If I say to someone, 'I love you', both I myself and the person addressed can be deeply moved. In large measure the techniques for active contemplation resemble the techniques used by people who try to nourish love for each other. By speech we express our love and respect for the other. We praise them, thank them and find joy in their company. Body language is also important. All these dynamics help us to nourish our love for God, especially in active contemplation.

We express and nourish our love for God also by song, music, reverent bows, genuflections, prostrations etc. Personal prayer, alone with God in solitude, is a very effective way of fostering loving communion in one's heart. Jesus usually went off alone to pray; he didn't want his apostles around as he entered into loving communion with his Father.

TECHNIQUES FOR PASSIVE CONTEMPLATION

Passive prayer calls for a change of technique. In active prayer we use all our faculties. In passive prayer we try to be interiorly very still; we abandon inner discourse and we make every effort to relax and let God act in us. We try to be quiet externally and internally. Sitting still helps to induce inner stillness. Focusing on one's breath, on one's heart-beat, on various parts of the body, can lead to integration and peace of mind and body. The repetition of a mantra or sacred word empties the mind of all other content and prevents the operation of the analytic mind. This is necessary so as to allow God to act in us.

Inner silence is also the atmosphere in which the deep-self is actuated and this actuation serves, in some measure, to integrate body, mind and spirit.

In conclusion techniques are necessary to enter into loving communion with God. This communion must be realised, not just at the level of consciousness, but also at a deeper level where God dwells in the depths of our being. While all prayer unites our spirit with God's Spirit it seems that this happens in a special manner in passive prayer, wherein we remain still and let God act. "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46).

30: HOW TO MEDITATE

In former articles I have strongly emphasised that in my view both John Main and Thomas Keating have offered us forms of passive meditation or contemplation that can be profitably used by everybody. But I confined myself largely to theory. I have not spelt out in practical terms how one meditates. In this article I will try to offer the practical 'know-how'.

Meditation, says John Main, is the simplest exercise imaginable. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Sit still in a comfortable position. John Main recommends that we sit erect with a straight spine. There is a long tradition behind this recommendation. During meditation it is important to stay perfectly still and avoid all unnecessary bodily movement.

Next we close our eyes. In this way we blot out all the distractions that come through the eyes. Next we begin to say our mantra or word slowly and rhythmically. We continue to say it from the beginning to the end of the meditation (Main). The mantra or word recommended by Main is the Aramaic word 'ma-ra-na-tha'. Keating also recommends a sacred word (mantra). As far as I know he doesn't have any special preference for special words. We can use words like 'Jesus', 'Father', 'Abba', 'Saviour' etc. It is best to stick with the same word always and not change it. In this way it gets into our system. We must not try to stir up feelings or analyse the meaning of the word. We simply say it rhythmically, without feeling, from start to finish. Main is strong on this point. Keating, I think, will allow one to drop the word after inner silence has been reached. But if distractions occur we must resume saying it immediately. What is fundamental is that we reach deep inner silence and preserve it as far as possible all through the meditation. Main is convinced that the best way to achieve this is to say the mantra from start to finish. I think that he is right.

But we may ask, is it possible to maintain inner silence for a long time? I think that there is question most of the time, not of complete silence, but of a relative stillness. There will always be some distractions that usually make very little impression because of the general stillness of mind and body. If we were to measure inner silence on a scale from 1 to 10 I think that the silence experienced in meditation fluctuates most of the time from 7 to 10.

Both Keating and Main insist that meditation must be practised every morning and every evening for the rest of one's life. It is a discipline to which we commit ourselves. Without a serious commitment, to which we are always faithful, we will not experience the full benefits of meditation.

We may object and say, isn't it sufficient to meditate once a day? Why must we do it morning and evening? Experience seems to demonstrate that we only derive the full benefits from meditation if we do it daily morning and evening. Meditation resembles food and sleep. We need to practise it with a definite frequency. There is a question of both bodily and spiritual health. As I pointed out already, 'grace builds on nature'.

A certain amount of faith in the tradition, natural faith, is also necessary. At times we will be tempted to chuck up the meditation. It can be boring to persevere day after day; we can get tired and weary. This is when we need to have faith in the tradition that has endured for thousands of years. Perhaps we do not notice any benefits from particular meditations. I heard some people say, 'it does nothing for me'. Such temptations to give up must be

ruthlessly swept aside. Unless we persevere faithfully in the discipline its good effects will not be experienced.

The primary effect of meditation is a better integrated personality. We are transformed and changed. We are more fully human. We are more fully alive mentally and physically. Millions of people practise secular meditation so as to enjoy better health of mind and body. We can learn a lot from such people and from the Asian masters.

In Christian meditation we are seeking more than human development. We hope that grace will build on nature. If meditation makes us more human the Holy Spirit can work more effectively in us because there are fewer blockages in us to God's action.

The motivation underlying Christian Meditation is not primarily self-fulfilment but the desire for deeper union with God. This motivation should urge us to take on meditation and it should be maintained during its practise. This motivation changes a self-centred natural secular activity into a work of divine charity. We maintain the necessary discipline out of love for God. The love of God urges us to commit ourselves to meditation, and that same love enables us to continue. Christian meditation then is a way of living, not for oneself, but for God. I am convinced that Centering Prayer or Christian Meditation, if practised faithfully, will make a rich contribution to one's prayer life.

Everyone committed to prayer needs a rhythm of active and passive contemplation. The meditation we are considering in this article supplies the necessary passive dimension.

It is scarcely necessary to point out that this form of prayer should not be our sole form of prayer. In addition to passive meditation we need to be faithful to the other dimensions of the Christian life, such as the Eucharist, personal prayer, spiritual reading and the practise of virtue and good works.

Conclusion: In practise in order to derive the full benefits of meditation we must commit ourselves to meditate daily morning and evening for 20 to 30 minutes. During meditation we must faithfully repeat our mantra in so far as it is necessary to reach deep inner silence and preserve it. During meditation we must be perfectly still.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this book on prayer I would like to draw attention to the fact that prayer is the first and most important duty of any human being. It fulfils the main purpose for which human beings were created.

In order to develop this point we need to ask ourselves two questions.

- (1): What do we mean by prayer?
- (2): Why were human beings created?

We have defined prayer many times as loving communion with God. Why were human beings created? Aquinas points out innumerable times in his *Summa Theologica* that charity is the ultimate purpose of our lives as human beings. We were created ultimately to love God here and hereafter. Our 'ultimate purpose' must not be understood as a state we achieve only in heaven. Each of us has the duty to realise that purpose in the present moment. Aquinas constantly reminds us of our ultimate end and he sees all things in relation to that end. This is true also of Ignatius of Loyola as we will see later. Aquinas wants us to keep our eyes constantly on the ultimate goal of charity.

But charity or loving God is impossible without prayer. Genuine prayer by definition is 'loving communion with God.' In prayer we exercise affective love and if this grows strong it will produce a harvest of virtuous good works as Paul teaches in 1Cor. 13. Hence true prayer turns out to be the most practical activity that one can imagine. Prayer ensures that all things will be done in love. Activity without love, according to Paul, is sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. We should remember also that prayer, without good works, is not genuine prayer. Our affective love is proved above all, by sacrificing our own interests so as to please God. Affective and effective love complement and enrich one another.

Vatican II offers us another slant on our ultimate end. It teaches us that Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to lead us to the fullness of love or to our ultimate end (L. G. 40). Our ultimate end is primarily affective love, which is exercised in true prayer. We are justified in deducing that the Holy Spirit leads everyone to pray, and thereby leads us to loving communion with God. In this way we realise our ultimate end. Paul is saying the same thing when he tells us that 'the love of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us' (Rom. 5, 5). The Holy Spirit will lead us to both affective and effective love.

Another way of looking at our ultimate end is to point out that heaven starts here and reaches its perfection in the world to come. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines hell as the exclusion of oneself from communion with God and the saints. This obviously commences in this life and carries over into the next. We are justified in saying that heaven is the opposite. It is loving communion with God here and it reaches perfection in heaven. Genuine prayer, which is loving communion with God, is already the commencement of heaven.

In this context one is reminded of St. Therese, who once said, 'I don't know what extra happiness I will have in heaven since I already enjoy union with God.' She realised that

her heaven had already begun. While on earth she had already attained a high degree of charity which was her ultimate end.

We are reminded also of the words, 'This is eternal life knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent.' In John's gospel 'knowing God' means loving communion with God. 'Eternal life' is the experience of this communion whether here or hereafter. Prayer is the activity that nourishes, deepens and expresses this loving communion which is 'eternal life.'

Is it any wonder that Teresa of Calcutta teaches that prayer is the way to holiness? Why? Because holiness is identical with love and above all with affective love, which is the root from which all the virtues spring up in the Christian life.

If, due to persevering prayer, our affective love of God is strong and unshakeable every other element in the Christian life will fall into place. That is why Arrupe can assure us that if we fall in love and stay in love all our problems as Christians will be solved.

We saw above that the Holy Spirit is leading each one to the fullness of love. God has created in us a hunger for himself. 'The eye is not filled with seeing nor the ear with hearing.' John of the Cross teaches that the soul is an infinite capacity for God. We sing daily in the Divine Office that the human heart is made for the Blessed Trinity. Augustine assures us that the human heart is made for God and it does not rest until it rests in God. All these sources draw attention to our deepest need, our need for God.

But there is also the other side of the coin. Not only do we have a desperate need of God but, for some inexplicable reason, God wants to fill this need. He wants loving communion with us. He stands at the door and knocks (Rev. 3, 20). If by prayer we open the door he will come in and there will be loving communion between God and us. John of the Cross assures us that God is searching for us far more than we are searching for him. We respond to God especially by prayer and self-sacrifice.

Prayer, since it generates affective love, will urge us to live not for ourselves but for him who died for us. Out of love we will sacrifice ourselves so as to please God. Furthermore, the grace to do this comes from our prayer. This again leads us to the conclusion that prayer is the source of all holiness and of affective love.

In this whole context of realising our ultimate end by prayer I would like to draw attention to the teaching of Ignatius of Loyola. He reminds us that we are created to praise, reverence and serve God (namely, to love God). All other things are created to enable us to achieve this end of loving God. It logically follows that we must only use things to the extent that they will help us to attain this goal. We must rid ourselves of them in so far as they hinder us from loving God. If we are not sure whether they are a help or a hindrance we should remain indifferent to them.

Like Aquinas, Ignatius sees love of God as the ultimate goal, in the light of which all things must be evaluated. But this love of God is primarily affective and dependent on the practise of prayer. Ignatius prescribed long periods of prayer for the Jesuits. Most religious orders since his time have continued to stress in their constitutions the importance of personal mental prayer. Once again we are left with the conclusion that the most important activity of a human being on this earth is loving communion with God in prayer. Hence prayer is a supreme value.

To bring our subject to an end let us give the last word to St. Therese. One night she was sitting up awake in bed. Her sister, Celine, said to her, why aren't you sleeping? Therese

replied, 'I cannot sleep; I'm praying.' Celine asked, 'what are you saying to Jesus?' 'Nothing', says Therese, 'I'm just loving him.' She realised that prayer and love are one and the same activity. On the day before she died she was asked for some final advice on the spiritual life. The dying saint replied weakly, 'I have said everything. Love alone matters.' She might have said - 'prayer alone matters.'