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PATERNOSTER SERIES : 8

A TREATISE ON
INTERIOR PRAYER

by

Dom Innocent Le Masson

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ON INTERIOR PRAYER



THE PATERNOSTER SERIES

No. 8

A Treatise
on Interior Prayer

*followed by a few counsels
on the same matter*

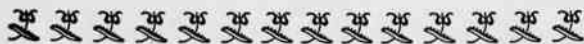
by

Dom Innocent Le Masson

Translated from the French by
THE PRIOR OF PARKMINSTER

TEMPLEGATE

SPRINGFIELD • ILLINOIS



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FOREWORD

DOM INNOCENT LE MASSON, born in the year 1628, entered the Charterhouse of Mont-Renaud at the age of nineteen ; and so rapid was the progress he made in religious perfection that, soon after profession, he was chosen to fulfil the important office of Vicar, usually reserved for an older man. Not many years afterwards the Community elected him as Prior, and the General Chapter of the Order appointed him Visitor of the Province of Picardy. Then, in 1675, he was chosen as Prior of the Grande Chartreuse, and thus became the Father General of the whole Carthusian Order. Less than five months later the Grande Chartreuse was burnt to the ground.

Within the space of twelve years the Father General rebuilt the Mother House of the Order in a style which still evokes to-day the admiration of those who visit it. Yet, in spite of all his manifold cares and occupations—in his days the Order numbered two hundred Houses—Dom Innocent Le Masson still found time to compose numerous works on various subjects. One of these is already known to the English public under the title of *Spiritual Reading for Every Day*, translated by the Reverend Kenelm Digby Best in the year 1879.

That work, composed of extracts from the *Imitation of Christ* and the *Introduction to the Devout Life* followed by reflections of the author, formed the first volume of his *Introduction to the Interior and Perfect Life*, composed between the years 1675 and 1703. The second volume comprised treatises on different spiritual subjects,

without any logical connection. The sixth of these treatises has now been translated into English under the title of *Interior Prayer*.

In the year 1695 Dom Le Masson re-wrote and enlarged this treatise for the benefit of the Nuns of the Order, to preserve them from the pernicious errors of Quietism, and this new work, praised and approved by Cardinals, Bishops and Doctors, was translated into Flemish two years later. The second volume of the *Introduction to the Interior and Perfect Life* was last published in French in the year 1911 by the Carthusian Press at Tournai, under the title *Avis Spirituels*. In that edition various titles and sub-titles were added, and the style was modernized. The present translation of the sixth treatise follows the text of the 1689 edition of Dom Le Masson, except that his short introduction has been omitted and the title has been simplified.

FR. BENEDICT WALLIS
Prior.

Saint Hugh's Charterhouse,
Horsham, Sussex.

INTERIOR PRAYER

A Treatise to render its practice easier

THE FIRST POINT

MANY imagine that there are great mysteries in the exercise of mental prayer. Some believe that it is only possible for those who have retired into solitude : others, thinking it is an art which can be made use of at pleasure once its secret has been discovered, encumber their mind with a quantity of reading and ideas. Both the one and the other, however, deceive themselves : for there is nothing so easy as prayer, nothing so possible for all kinds of people, whoever they may be ; nothing so far removed from all artifice.

It is this ignorance which leads to indiscretion ; whilst indiscretion produces repugnance, which it is necessary to try to destroy by instruction. The shortest and clearest is the best, seeing that long drawn-out discussions frequently only tire the mind in this matter, in which more practice is required than discussion, and in which incomparably more is learnt by the former than by the latter.

Hence the first foundation to be established is that prayer is not something which can be accomplished by human industry. For, according to the testimony of St. Paul¹, we know not how to pray, and we shall never know what the Holy Ghost does not teach us Himself.

The grace of meditation, as St. Francis de Sales says, cannot be acquired by any human labour. When it so pleases God, He gives it ; yet only to

¹Rom. viii. 26.

souls who are humble, and who continue to present themselves before Him with the intention of saying to Him the best they can, abandoning themselves for the rest to the dispositions of His Providence. By this grace of meditation is to be understood the facility of raising and uniting the soul to God, of making solid reflections, of conceiving good affections, and of expressing them before His Majesty in colloquies and affections springing from the abundance of the heart.

That being presupposed, it may easily be seen what an abuse it is to imitate the example of those who, preoccupied with a blind presumption, apply themselves to prayer as though it were some manual work which could be accomplished by effort and violence. They concentrate their attention, they are over-eager; and after they have tired their mind without having made any progress, they conceive an aversion for prayer, and go so far as to become completely disgusted with it. Instead of advancing, one only goes backward by all these over-eagernesses, since they are contrary to those dispositions which are necessary in order to draw profit from prayer. These dispositions are calm gentleness and suavity of spirit, and they spring from the knowledge of our own insufficiency and from true humility. For if we acknowledge the truth and are convinced that we are unable to pray as we ought, unless the Holy Ghost teaches us, we shall clearly see that over-eagerness is altogether useless. All that we have to do is to place ourselves in the presence of God with confidence, without eagerness for success, and remain there in all humility, expressing to His divine Majesty our affections and needs in tranquillity the best we may.

Listen to the thoughts of St. Francis de Sales,

from the 34th letter of the second book of his letters. "The unrest," he says, "which a soul has in prayer and which is joined with an over-eagerness to find some object which may arrest and satisfy the mind is sufficient of itself to prevent the soul from finding what it seeks. When we are seeking some object too eagerly, we can pass our hand and eyes over it a hundred times without noticing it. This fruitless and useless over-eagerness can only give rise to mental lassitude, from which springs coldness and torpor of soul. By avoiding over-eagerness, much is gained; for it is one of the greatest traitors that devotion and true virtue can meet with. It seems to enkindle our zeal, but only to render it cold; it only causes us to run in order to make us stumble: hence we should be on our guard against it on every occasion, but particularly in prayer. To help you in that, remember that the graces and favours of prayer are not waters of the earth, but of Heaven; and therefore all our efforts cannot obtain them. The truth is, we must dispose ourselves for them with a carefulness which is conscientious, whilst remaining humble and tranquil. We must hold our heart open to Heaven, and await its holy dew."

THE SECOND POINT

THE posture of the body in prayer should be becoming, modest, and unconstrained; that is to say, free from whatever would tire it too much, in order that the mind may be at liberty. The soul should likewise have its own, and when coming before God should bring faith, hope, and charity, the three virtues which compose its posture.

By faith, the soul should be persuaded that God is everywhere, and knows all things, and therefore knows all its necessities before it asks. But Divine Providence, which could very well provide for all its needs without the soul being under the necessity of asking for them, has ordained that it should lay them open in prayer, so that there may be petition; and also that the soul may render that submission which is due to God.

By hope, the soul should be penetrated with an immovable steadfastness, in the confidence that God will grant all the necessary aids in order to guide the actions of its mortal life according to His law and to arrive at life everlasting. Not that the soul merits of itself that He should grant all these blessings ; but because His Goodness, which is as faithful in its promises as it is infallible in its truths and incompatible with a lie, has promised them.

By charity, the soul should rest assured that God loves it with an eternal love, which is never diminished save under constraint. Thus the soul should fly to Him, so as to draw from Him the graces needed for the accomplishment of His law, to be preserved from the evil of separation from Him, and to advance more and more in the perfection of His love. All the absolute desires of the soul should be comprised under these three points, without any others save under the condition of the good pleasure of God.

In order to understand better this posture of the soul in prayer, we may say that it should be ready to reply to these three propositions as follows.

Where, o my soul, are you about to place yourself?—Before God, whom I believe to be more

present here than myself ; who knows all my needs, but who wills that I should ask them from Him.

What do you hope for from Him?—All the necessary help to please Him, and to come to Him.

Again, what do you desire?—Nothing more than His love, His fear and the happiness of being eternally united to Him.

If we feel that our conscience answers to us in this way on these questions, our soul is in the posture it should be in before God.

But remark that there is no need to form an idea of something corporal representing God in the imagination : on the contrary, if it forms one by itself, it must become accustomed to reject it as something which has no place in God, who is a pure spirit. Nevertheless, that should be done gently, little by little, so as not to fall into over-eagerness. Doubtless a spirit which is still gross and only accustomed to work on material and sensible objects, becomes astonished when the the use of its ideas is taken away from it all at once. But once it has been gently formed to this practice, it will realize that there is nothing more in conformity with its nature, and it will receive great joy therefrom.

In order to form it more easily to this practice, we may make use of this comparison. When you are in a room and you know that your friend is hidden behind the tapestry, do you need to form in your imagination an idea of his portrait in order to speak to him? Of course not ; you would consider such an application superfluous. You say to him whatever you like, without forming any new idea ; for it is sufficient to know for certain that he is present, and that he hears you.

Act the same in regard to God. Speak to Him freely. For He hears you ; and do not go to seek Him anywhere else than in the centre of your heart, since He is assuredly there. To see God in oneself, and to accustom oneself to find Him there ; to regard Him by faith, and not by fancy ; to speak to Him with confidence, as being in the centre of your heart, without going to the trouble of going outside to seek Him elsewhere : such is the way to learn soon to walk in spirit, to go to the truth, to render the presence of God easy and familiar, to use your mind according to the order of right reason ; to calm your imagination, when an indiscreet use stirs up tempests ; and to avoid many unnecessary fatigues for the mind. Such is the way to form yourself to raise up your mind and heart to God and to make acts of virtue as easily as shutting your eye ; and to become master of your heart, as far as it is possible to do so in this life.

As regards the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ, where we really have a body of which we can form an image, it is permissible to use one. However, it is better to become accustomed to regard all the mysteries of His life and death by faith, than to form in the mind some image of His person and actions. Whatever occupies the imagination should only be regarded in passing. Nevertheless, it is correct to use freedom of spirit in the matter : souls who are commencing need not reject the attraction they have to use their imagination in order to represent the Sacred Humanity of our Saviour. Hence they can use it freely : but this image should be simple, that is to say, without the encumbrance of many details ; and, as St. Francis de Sales tells us, should be used as a needle, to thread the affections in our heart.

THEN we should enter into conversation with God, without troubling about the composition of our words, nor making much account of the continuity of the conversation. To do so would be harmful for the affections, and it tends rather to study than to the production of that sincerity of a heart which comes to pour itself out before God.

The conversation should commence :

(1) By the acknowledgment of our own nothingness, and the adoration of His Majesty, which we consider so redoubtable that we would not have the hardihood to appear before It, if It had not the goodness to permit us to do so ;

(2) By sorrow for our sins ;

(3) By the intention of uniting our prayers to that of Jesus Christ ; and this we declare we wish to do because it is the will of God.

After that we begin to consider some point taken from a book of devout meditations, which we may even keep open before us, particularly when we are only commencing.

The way to behave in this conversation with God will be better understood by a familiar example than by a string of words. How does a beggar behave on presenting himself before some great prince in order to receive an alms, when his poverty is overloaded with sores, and he lacks the eloquence to speak gracefully? He throws himself down at the feet of the prince, uncovers his wounds, and says what he can to move him to compassion. If words fail him, he is content to show his sores and to remain persistently before the prince until the latter regards him. As soon as he perceives that the prince casts a glance at him, he begins once more to expose his needs, with

a fresh intensity of eagerness. But when the prince has thrown him a piece of money, joy fills him with words such as the abundance of his heart suggests, without affectation or the composition of a discourse. Those are the three steps which God generally observes in His communications with souls. Sometimes He desires to see them prostrate before Him, without regarding them or speaking to them, so as to exercise their patience and humility. Sometimes He regards them, and turns away immediately, so as to have the pleasure of seeing their resignation in the privation of a ray which had half-opened their heart, but which passed quickly, putting their fidelity once more to the trial. But at other times He speaks; and then the soul of a good lover takes confidence, when his well-beloved favours him with a word of His mouth¹.

Hence we say likewise that a faithful soul should imitate this beggar. It should cast itself in spirit before God, as another Lazarus, covered with sores, yet filled with desire to be satisfied with crumbs of bread which fall from His table. Let it uncover before Him its miseries and its needs. When, knowing well by faith that God understands better than itself what is most fitting for it, and being convinced by hope that He has the will to give the same; if words fail, the soul has only to persevere in remaining before God with patience and humility, and to be content to recommence from time to time exposing its needs with confidence. It was in this way that our beloved Lord and Master Jesus Christ acted during His prayer in the Garden, when, finding Himself sorrowful unto death, He employed the time of His prayer in repeating several times the same

¹Cant. v. 6.

words ; affording us an example of patience and resignation, and the manner of behaving ourselves when we are in the state of dryness as regards our words and affections.

If, by a glance from God, your affection becomes kindled to speak, I repeat to you once more : do not seek any composition in your conversation. Produce your affections just as they are, with the same simplicity, confidence and sincerity as a child uses towards his mother, throwing himself upon her breast when words fail him. For it is in the same way that we should cast ourselves, with respectful love, upon the adorable bosom of God, in order to rest there, to leave there all our cares and all our misgivings, and to quietly repeat our petitions, since He takes pleasure in being importuned, and in seeing us persuaded of the tenderness of His love.

No doubt you will be at a loss to know how you should act when considering the mysteries of the life, Passion, and death of the Son of God, and how you ought to produce different affections on these points ; but I will give you another quite common and ordinary example which will enable you to understand. Supposing you had as a friend a great prince who returns from a battle in which he has gained a great victory, after having suffered the greatest outrages, having been reduced to disguise himself and to pass for a miscreant ; and that this great combat, as well as this disguisement had only been undertaken by the prince to deliver you from misery and captivity. If, after the return of the prince, you went to see him in order to thank him, what would you say? You would make him what is called a compliment, the most moving you could, expressing your admiration for his charity, his

strength, his conduct, his brilliant deeds, and his acts of kindness towards you. You would declare to him his own acts of prowess in detail, expressing your gratitude for all that you owe to him. To that you would join the expression of your hopes in regard to all that you expect from him ; your regrets for having offended him, and for having been the cause of his sufferings ; your protestations of honouring him, loving him and serving him ; and you would produce other similar affections from your heart's abundance. If words failed you, the dispositions of your heart would remain the same as though they were expressed in words.

The prince would see clearly enough from your face and your gestures what you would like to say to him: but God, who sees the depth of our soul, sees there all that it wishes and all that it desires, without having need of our words to do so. Apply this thought and example to the mysteries of the life and death of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and put them into practice in His case.

In like manner, in the mysteries of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and those which followed it, go to Him as you would go to that great prince, after being told that he had mounted the throne, to assure him of your joy, to present your congratulations to him, to ask his protection, to present your needs to him, to give him a thousand salutations and a thousand praises, and to tell him that you hope for everything from him.

When considering Our Lord Jesus Christ as your Judge, do all that you would do, and say all that you would say to a judge having to judge a process of the greatest importance to you ; in which there is a question of your fortune and your

life, supposing that you want to implore him to render it in your favour.

When meditating on the actions and the glory of the Blessed Virgin and the saints, act as though you had to render a visit to some great nobles who are good friends of yours, to present your respects to them, to congratulate them upon their honour, to ask for their protection and the continuation of their goodwill; to declare to them your needs, to solicit their favour with the king, and respectfully to say to them whatever you wish. If words fail you, be convinced that they see in God, as in a mirror, all that you have the will and the desire to say to them.

There is no other mystery to seek in order to hold oneself and to occupy oneself in prayer. Therefore take this thought, and follow it up with a good will.

It is easy to understand from this how one ought to use the methods given by spiritual Fathers to practise meditation, and to form the affections on the circumstances considered therein. It is necessary to do so gently, and without over-eagerness: quite right, we should use them, but not be attached to them. If God draws you to some affections as soon as you are in His presence, you ought not to keep to the point of the meditation, but follow the affection: the more simple and tranquil it is, the better.

We must move simply, sincerely and without craft in order to draw near to God, to love Him, and to be united to Him. As the good St. Francis de Sales says: true love has scarcely any method.

If the soul finds itself dry in its considerations, it must reject discouragement as well as unrest, remaining with simplicity in the presence of God to accomplish there the task of the poor

beggar we have spoken of. For instance, the soul will say once : "My God! You know who I am ; I would like to have the happiness of talking to You, but I do not merit it. My foolishness teaches me well enough how great is my weakness, and how incapable my soul is of uniting itself to You. May Your holy will be accomplished ; so long as You grant me Your fear and Your holy love, it is sufficient for me." When this act has been formed, try to recall the mind to the consideration of some point of the meditation, with gentleness, sweetness, and without impatience. If, however, the mind remains dry, or strays again as before, recommence the same practice, forming some aspiration as devotion suggests, until meditation time has finished, which should last for at least half an hour each morning.

Finish prayer by affective acts of thanksgiving for all the benefits received from God, in general and in particular ; by a repetition of all the good resolutions made, and petitions both for the soul and the body; by the recommendation of friends and the souls in Purgatory, who should never be forgotten in all your prayers.

In order to form yourself better to this practice, never forget to bring to prayer this thought, as the same Saint tells us : we approach God and place ourselves in His presence for two principal reasons :

First, to render to God the honour and homage which we owe Him. This can be done without Him speaking to you, or you to Him ; for this duty is rendered by acknowledging that He is our God and we are His worthless creatures, and by remaining prostrate in spirit before Him, awaiting His commands. How many courtiers there are who go a hundred times into the king's

presence, not to speak to him, nor to hear him, but simply so as to be seen by him, and to show him by their constant attendance that they are his servants. This intention of presenting oneself before God only to declare and to vow our goodwill, our gratitude and our attachment to His service, is very excellent, very holy, very pure, and consequently very highly perfect.

The second reason why we present ourselves before God is to speak to Him, and to listen to Him speaking to us by His inspirations and interior impulses. Generally this is accompanied with a very delightful pleasure, since it is a good fortune for us to speak to so great a Lord ; and when He answers, He pours forth a thousand sweets and a thousand precious liqueurs, which give a great sweetness to the soul.

Now one of these two happinesses can never fail us in prayer. If we are able to speak to Our Lord, let us speak to Him, praise Him, pray to Him, listen to Him : if we are unable to speak to Him, because we are hoarse, let us remain in the room all the same, and show Him reverence ; He will see us there, He will accept our patience, and will favour our silence. Some other time we shall be quite surprised at Him taking us by the hand, accompanying us, and walking up and down a hundred times with us in the pathways of His garden of prayer. Even though He should never do so, let us be content that it is our duty to be one of His retinue, and that it is a great grace for us and too great an honour that He should suffer us in His presence. In this way we shall not make haste to speak to Him, since the other occasion, of being near Him, is no less useful for us, perhaps even much more so, even though it may be a little less to our liking. Hence, when

you come before Our Lord, speak to Him if you can, remain there, let Him see you, let Him hear the desire of your heart, as we have said, and do not bother yourself about anything else.

Here you have all that you have to practise, with patience, with confidence and with perseverance, in order to experience what God is accustomed to bring about in a soul which behaves before Him in this way. We have an example of this in St. Teresa, and in so many other good souls who still always experience it. Something more at length could be said on this dryness of soul, which the admirable wisdom of God makes use of as a stratagem, in order to render Himself Master of our hearts, to subdue them and reform them : but this will be on another occasion.

THE FOURTH POINT

IF, when producing the affections, the mind diverts itself to many thoughts, superfluous, bad, or ridiculous ; there is no need to be astonished, and still less to become troubled about it. That comes from our natural weakness, and the inconstancy of the human mind, to which is joined the malice of the devils, trying to trouble us and to throw us into impatience at the sight of the hundred follies the imagination is crowded with, or to make us give up through discouragement. When we are in this state we should think we are like those peasants who come to town to visit their masters, and who become confused after four or five words when they have begun

to make a compliment, without knowing any longer what they want to say. Their masters do not become angry for that : on the contrary, they laugh at it, and amuse themselves at hearing them gabbling. Just in the same way, God does not become annoyed with a soul which is distracted in prayer in spite of itself : on the contrary, He is moved to compassion by it, and takes pleasure in seeing it in that state, provided the soul grows gentle and humbles itself before Him, in the acknowledgment of its misery ; and that it should apply itself to keeping the mind more closely united to Him, as best it may.

If distractions come to you a hundred times, do not be more surprised at the hundreth time than at the first ; and when you notice them, gently place your mind once more in the presence of God, as though nothing had happened, without reflecting on the matter of your distractions. When flies sting, we are content to use our hand to drive them away, and we do not run after them to kill them. If after we have driven one away another comes, we do the same again, without being surprised. We should do the same with regard to distractions, and not run after them, for that would be time lost. That is to say, we ought not to reflect on them in order to reproach ourselves about them ; nor lament interiorly, which is only the result of impatience of heart ; nor make considerations, so as to try to stifle them, or prevent them returning : to do so is simply to run after flies. Let them fly ; then, in the meanwhile, let us go on to God, and proceed without dallying our time away. It doesn't matter if the mill-clapper makes a noise, says St. Teresa, so long as the mill does not cease to grind. That means to say that it doesn't matter if the

imagination makes a noise, so long as the will turns always on its centre, which is God ; that it remains attached to Him, and that it executes His orders.

When the mind sees itself weighed down with a crowd of thoughts, it can console itself with some idea, and lessen its regret by referring to itself the example of a man who finds himself in the open country whilst hail is falling on every side : let him do what he will, he cannot save himself from it, having nowhere to put himself under cover. So he must make up his mind to see the hail fall, and to bear it without worrying himself and without wasting time in reproaching himself that, if he had done this or that, he would not have fallen into this inconvenience. Rather, he should employ himself in sending up a few sighs to Heaven, to bless God in His works, remaining meanwhile in tranquillity and patience. You have only to apply this comparison to distractions in prayer, for which it is very suitable. Should you do nothing else during the whole of your hour than to bring back your heart quite gently and place it once more before Our Lord ; even if as often as you should replace it there it should turn away again ; your time would be very well employed, and you would be performing an exercise very pleasing to God.

THE FIFTH AND LAST POINT

FINALLY, in order to know that our prayer is good, it is necessary that its fruits should be visible ; for it is the tree from which they are inseparable. Gentleness, humility and the other virtues must accompany it, and be brought forth

by the accomplishment of the will of God in one's vocation. Hence, take it for certain that, even though you should be lifted high up in spirit during prayer, and that you should be as it were ravished to the third heaven ; if apart from that you should remain unchanged in your passions, obstinate in your judgment, cold and careless in esteeming and practising solid virtue, your contemplations would be but illusions, and your ravishments only phantoms. If, on the contrary, it happens that you are as dry as wood in prayer, without relish and without feeling, but that on the other hand you advance in the esteem and the practice of solid virtue, rest assured that your prayer is good, and remain at peace under the conduct of the excellent guide who has hidden the money in your sack, as the master of the hotel did to the brothers of Joseph, so as to give you an occasion of great surprise at seeing yourself so lovingly deceived to your own gain. You thought you were only carrying wheat, the weight of which tired you ; but you are carrying gold as well, which you will find with joy when the hour comes at which He will think fit to have His animals fed.

If He leads you by covered and dark ways, it is because He knows that they are the best for you, and the surest for that use of freedom which He has determined to always leave to your soul, which perhaps would be exposed to many dangers should it walk by other paths. God puts the cup of Joseph in your sack, without your seeing it ; but be of good courage, it is because He wants to lay hold of you in order to make you His prisoner, to serve you at His table, to surprise you by the sweet astonishment of recognizing Him, as Joseph did in regard to his brother Benjamin.

You will say to me : But what means is there of being at rest, if the goodness of prayer can only be known by progress in virtue? Often it seems that one goes back instead of advancing : would it not be presumption to think one is advancing? To this I answer you that God has willed to put a limit to our minds, and a measure to our knowledge, in order to preserve them in their entirety. This state of suspense in which He has placed us as regards what we are, and what we are worth in His sight, is that darkness with which the Psalmist says he has been surrounded : but it is only in order to afford us a means of drawing nearer to Him, and to serve as a shelter for our souls, so that they may come more fully under His influence. Let us humbly remain in this state of suspense, without philosophizing, since the hand of God places us there ; and let us repose in the strength of a confidence which presumes everything of His goodness. If we feel that our will becomes more and more encouraged to correct its defects, that it has no attachment to sin, however slight, and that it wholly desires to be more faithful than ever, let us remain at rest, since that is all that can be hoped for from poor miserable sinners such as we, the only thing we know how to do by ourselves being sin.

Let it be said, by way of conclusion, that the best means to make great progress in prayer, and to advance far in a short time, is the mortification of our passions. By applying ourselves thereto in the right way we save all the time divine Providence would have used to render us mortified.

Here you have in brief all that I consider most necessary in order to establish the foundations of a good way of praying. When they are put into

practice, they lead to more sublime knowledge. They are never so pure nor so assured as when they are gathered from the experiences God causes a good soul to have which is more anxious to do than to know.

Many points which should be remarked by advanced souls I refrain from expressing, so as not to trouble the mind at all by multiplicity of instructions, the shortest being the best in this matter. But I will put them separately for you, amongst the notes I will still give you on this same subject, so that it may be clearer for you. For in spiritual conferences it is very important not to give any occasion for trouble to the human mind, it being, as it is, so disposed to embarrass itself in its ideas.

A FEW COUNSELS

CONCERNING THE PRACTICE OF INTERIOR PRAYER,
THE LAST ONES RELATING PARTICULARLY TO
ADVANCED SOULS

1. It is necessary to be careful about the workings of the understanding, and not to allow it to take too much complacency in its speculations, which it readily follows when the door of some knowledge is open to it in prayer : but give place to the acts of the will when it is moved, since the only reason for knowing is to will. It loves these sort of complacencies, hence it is necessary to be cautious. To dwell on a speculation in order to take complacency in it, is to satisfy the natural curiosity of the mind ; it is studying rather than praying. To dwell on it by indiscretion is a fault which must be corrected. To think that when one has been convinced of a

truth which has stirred up the affections one should not cease continuing one's considerations, is to do the same as if one should continue to blow the fire after the candle has been lit : it only serves to put out the light which has been diffused in the soul in order to enlighten and enkindle the affections. Hence we should not allow more water to flow by the channel of the understanding than is necessary ; and as soon as it is ready to flow by the affections of the will, stop the channel of the understanding, so as to let it all flow by that of the will.

2. Many souls never put into execution the good resolutions they have made in prayer, through sheer negligence ; for they do not watch themselves, they do not study to do themselves a little violence, and they easily forget their resolutions. Others are full of desire for some virtues, even so far as to disturb themselves in order to obtain them. They make firm resolutions at prayer to practise them ; but when the occasion arrives, they succumb. Straightway they fall into grief, and, with confidence in themselves, make fresh intentions of doing marvels ; but when they meet the occasion, they fall again. The cause of their fall does not come from lack of desire, but it proceeds from pride and self-love, which gives them presumption in themselves ; and which only wishes for virtue because of the complacency they seek in it, and not purely for God.

He punishes the soul in this way, by leaving it to itself : but He does it more good by leaving it in its helplessness to accomplish its good intentions, than by giving it their fulfilment. For that would serve to nourish self-esteem and com-

placency in itself ; whereas its defect leads it to the knowledge of its helplessness to do good, and of the absolute need it has of being succoured by God in everything. Violent desire, grief, impatience and disgust are the infallible signs that the evil proceeds from this cause; the remedy is:—

Not to wish for virtue, except because it pleases God ; so that if He should desire that we should be without virtue, we would not desire to have it.

To be convinced of one's weakness, which is not apparent in the absence of objects, but which is evident enough when they are present ; and not to propose anything save through confidence in God. And this in such a way that it is the confidence which proposes rather than our spirit, which should be so enveloped in confidence that it should scarcely appear in its proposals.

When a soul is established in these dispositions, it will scarcely ever propose anything which it will not perform ; whilst its resolutions will be made without over-eagerness, with gentleness and resignation. But until it has arrived at that point, it will fall in proportion as it is farther removed from it. Nevertheless, let it not cease to make good resolutions ; but at least let it follow the way traced out for it by its fall. Instead of giving way to impatience and grief when it has failed, let it fly to humility before God, to gentleness, and to contempt of self. For when it has attained thereto, it will accomplish a great deal.

Discretion must also be used in order not to multiply resolutions too much ; since diversity alone is capable of disquieting a mind and a soul which are commencing. Not so many should be made at one time, so as to be less unfaithful in executing them. Even those who make

progress should remain within the bounds of a reasonable mediocrity. Supposing they should make only a general resolution, of applying themselves to watch over their actions in order to render them perfect in God's sight ; that would suffice, provided that they accomplish something every day. The counsel is sometimes even more useful to fervent and very timorous souls, whose mind is occupied too violently by details : although ordinarily a particular virtue should be taken, and one exercises and examines oneself upon that virtue. However, to avoid indiscretion and unrest, it is good to form one's ideas upon that of a gardener who gives his attention to cultivating one plant, but who does not neglect the others. He takes care of all, but he casts a glance sometimes upon this particular one, until it is in good condition, when he turns to another.

3. Many when making their resolutions fall into another great indiscretion, which comes from a want of self-knowledge. They propose points in a degree of perfection which is an excess, taking into account the misery of man ; for sometimes it is a question of a matter in which ordinarily they commit some fault all their life long, for example, in idle words, in some hastiness, and other such like weaknesses. They take matters so much to heart, and in such a general way, and they explain them so scrupulously, that they do violence to their mind, which is always agitated by anxiety and by fear. They often fall into the faults they fear, and commit more faults through the fear of failing than if they had proposed nothing at all. Hence it comes about that they are as it were discountenanced, that their behaviour seems to be always

constrained; and, finally, that sadness, chilling their heart, provokes them to disgust and negligence.

Let us, therefore, resolve nothing in excess, and let us be content to have recourse in good faith to moderate resolutions, in particular to correct some fault which we remark in ourselves, or to practise some act of virtue the best we can. Let us altogether reject any over-eager anxiety, and watch over ourselves with the gentleness of confidence in God, so as not to fall into these excesses, which are detrimental to nature and to the progress of virtue. One does not climb to the top of the mountain all at once; one must go there step by step. The exact practice of a virtue is not the work of a day, we have to climb the steps; to slip and to pick ourselves up again, before having arrived there; and to stand there firm and upright.

I knew a good soul who had taken so much to heart the moderation of her tongue, so as to say nothing but good, that it required nothing at all for her head to be quite upset, so great was the application of her mind and the contest of her thoughts, in doubt as to whether she had said enough, or whether she had said too much, or if it would not have been better to have said it in a different way, and so on. It was a continual strife which threw her into affliction, and which finally reduced her to being as if stupified. But God made known to her the indiscretion of her close attention; and being drawn back to the sweetness of confidence she learnt by experience that by casting her care and her desire upon the good pleasure of God and walking step by step, without so much foresight, with the resolution of doing what God should inspire her to do on the occasion,

and with confidence in His help, one advances a great deal ; whereas, by those other ways, one often wearies one's soul out without accomplishing anything. See how ignorance and self-love joined together cause many troubles, hinder the good instead of forwarding it, and discourages the soul instead of animating and consoling it.

4. Souls who are making progress in prayer, and who feel drawn to affections, should allow themselves to go to them without having recourse to reflections, save when they see that their will is altogether poured out : then they will quite gently take up their considerations. Considerations are only made in order to move the affections. Those who are drawn to affections, but make a difficulty about following their attraction because they have not made their considerations to begin with, are like those who, on finding themselves in a place, turn back again, because they have not come by the way they were told.

The secret in prayer is to follow the attraction in simplicity of heart. Nevertheless, so as not to give occasion to fickleness or indiscretion, it is necessary to bring some determined point on a subject, and to make ready to consider it, without leaving it too easily until one feels drawn in prayer to consider another point, or to make affections. For frequently a lively and restless mind would pass over everything in a moment; and only considering the points in the imagination, and not for the solidity of the reasoning, would also make affections only in the imagination, which would resemble the foolish flowers of trees from which no fruit is produced. Hence this is a means to give a lively imagination no occasion of following its fancy, and to keep it as near to

the reason as possible; without becoming astonished, however, should it escape. For in that case one can only do what we have said in the fourth place, and try to lead it back again gently and with patience.

5. What shall we say concerning the state of those elevated souls who find their spirit united to God as soon as they are in His presence, and their will all enkindled to make acts of love on the matter they have prepared; or whom even the simple remembrance of God holds attached to Him and in a certain suspension of act, in such a way that this remembrance occupies them entirely? Sometimes they enter into a mistrust of themselves, and fall into the fear of some illusion of the devil; and such indeed there may be in many, who think themselves to be what they are not. Sometimes also they are cast into doubt and scruples by persons who have less experience than is required to form a good judgment of these states.

That is why I say in simplicity of heart that, in case they are doubtful of it, they must convince themselves of a truth, namely that all these states do not constitute sanctity at all. That is to be found in fidelity to the accomplishment of the will of God. They are not to be desired, save with a great indifference; and they must be held very suspect of being only in the imagination if the soul has not first passed by the ways of ordinary prayer, of humility, abnegation, contempt of self, and of the stripping of self-will, and if it is not found to be well established there, or with a true resolution of so being.

It is necessary not to philosophize so much upon the manner by which they feel themselves drawn,

to see whether it is in accord with what certain devout persons have written about it : for the Spirit of God is not in the least attached to the manner ; and as to what these holy people have said about it, they have expressed their own particular experiences, which are not general rules. What they have said serves to console good souls ; since on seeing there the expression of certain things which they feel also in themselves, they are relieved from fear, and it strengthens them and serves for their guidance : but that does not give these states to those who have not got them.

It is necessary to behave in simplicity of spirit, without being punctilious about the acts, to know whether they should not be made at all, or whether they should be made : for when these kinds of precisions are proposed, they embarrass, occupy, and trouble the mind, making great mysteries where there are none at all.

These souls should present themselves before God with a detachment from everything and a pure intention of pleasing Him (this ought to be found in them if it is God who has put them in this state). They should dispose themselves to commence with meditation, in order to present themselves humbly before God, and as judging themselves unworthy of ascending any higher. But if they are drawn to affections and acts, they should allow themselves to go to them. If the remembrance of God and of His presence draws them higher, let them make just a little effort of one or two acts, for the same motive of humility and distrust of their unworthiness ; and then let them follow the attraction, pouring out their whole will in God, which will be a continued act of union. Yet as a greater assurance, it is fit to form from time to time a few desires, saying, for

instance : " O my God ! Your holy love. O my God ! rather death at once than to be separated from You. O my God ! humility ; " and other such like little ejaculations : after which they will cast themselves again into this great ocean, to continue to lose themselves therein.

O dear soul ! proceed then, in that too, in liberty of spirit. If the simple presence of God occupies you, remain in it ; if you feel yourself drawn to make acts, make them : make use of one or the other, and let your sole pretension be the faithful practice of the love of God. Fear not illusion nor deceptions, so long as you see your heart is humble and your spirit in indifference. It will indeed be in indifference if you are always ready to descend by the same degrees as the Spirit of God has caused you to ascend. If He draws you from meditation to affections without reasoning, that is a degree which He causes you to ascend. You must remain there, for reasoning is only made in order to arrive there. If He raises you from affections to the exercise of union, you must remain there tranquilly until He causes you to descend therefrom. Just the same, when it happens that after you have placed yourself in His presence you do not find yourself raised to union, descend willingly to affections ; if you find nothing in these affections, descend to consideration ; and finally, if you should be arid in the consideration, descend still willingly to the exercise of abjection, holding yourself humbled in His presence, with sweetness, with confidence, and with patience ; and thus you will be of those hearts which never break, since they bend before whatever God wills.

It must not be thought that these states last so long as never to suffer eclipse ; neither should you

be surprised when they arrive, but humble yourself and adore divine Providence which thus disposes matters in order to remove the occasion of forgetting what you are, or to punish some negligence, or, in fine, to prevent attachment. The Spirit of God is a spirit of liberty, not only for you, but also for Himself : that is why you must remain in indifference, so as to be ready to follow the paths which His liberty would keep you to ; and not to attach yourself to aught else than the will to mould all the actions of your life upon those of His well-beloved Son. To be attached to the desire of meditating by considerations, is desiring to take away from God the liberty of drawing you by other ways. To be attached to the desire of producing affections, without preceding considerations, is desiring to oblige Him to give you what depends upon His pure liberality alone. To be attached to the desire of producing no more acts, but to be lost in the thought and in the living faith of His presence, is desiring to take away from God the liberty of reducing you to the humble knowledge of yourself, to which you are brought back by the eclipse which He causes you to suffer sometimes in this state ; in fine, it is desiring to oblige God always to prepare feasts for you, and to sit down at table without having prayed.

Hence it is quite right that God should be free ; but He desires that we should be so likewise. However, we shall never be so unless our freedom is disposed to listen to His, and to regard its movement in order to follow it step by step.

From this you can understand still better what I wish to say to you, and which I repeat to you once more : it is necessary not to philosophize so much about these interior states, but advance in good faith, according as the spirit draws you.

If, after you have placed yourself in His presence, you only find yourself in a state to meditate by considerations, do it ; if the affections burst forth, or you have an habitual attraction to produce them by a single regard of your object, without it being necessary for you to meditate any longer ; let yourself follow them, and do not occupy yourself with considerations ; for that would be to stifle the fire which is lit. If, when producing your affections, you feel yourself drawn by profound thoughts, produced by faith, or rather, to put it better, which God produces by faith, about His greatness, His goodness, and His presence, which put you into the exercise of union ; allow yourself to dilate in it, and hold yourself there as long as God suffers you in it, but without attaching yourself in any way to it ; so that if God wants to use His liberty to put you back into meditation, let yours be always ready to follow it, as a child follows his mother.

Keep yourself from letting yourself be prejudiced by a great error, namely to esteem these states, such as they may be, as very great perfections. They are only their sign, but not their substance. Our greater or lesser perfection is not calculated by the measure of these states of the mind in its speculations, but only by that of being faithful to represent Jesus Christ in ourselves, by the true renunciation of our wills, by the mortification of our passions, by charitable mildness towards ourselves in order to bear with ourselves in our miseries, and towards our neighbour to bear with him in his weaknesses ; by humility, by patience, and by the other admirable virtues which make the saints, and not by these states of the mind in its speculations.

Those who have to walk in places where many difficult tracks are met with, would not walk well

and would often hurt themselves if they had their eyes always raised to look at the stars. The same would happen to us if we attached ourselves to speculation without taking care of our feet so as to walk straight and without falling. We walk during the night in this life, and on a road where, just as there are good movements to make, so there are false steps to avoid. Let us look therefore to our feet, I mean to say to our works, in order to render them perfect in God's sight ; and for the rest it should be sufficient for us to know that He regards us always with the eye of His protection, the same as the stars steadfastly regard our heads.

This is all I think I ought to say to you ; and what, it seems to me, is sufficient for you in order to learn to pray well. For by practising it, you will be disposed for the more extraordinary ways, in which God will instruct you by Himself concerning all the rest.

By way of conclusion I say that the prayer of abandonment to the good pleasure of God is the best of all, and the most sure. Now I call prayer of abandonment :

(1) that which is made without philosophizing too much about its name and about its qualities, since it is sufficient to know that all comes from God, and that all should be attributed to Him ;

(2) which only tends to abase oneself before God, in order to unite oneself to Him ;

(3) which is in indifference about being placed high or low, according to the place and position He will desire to give ;

(4) and which desires nothing save the consummation of His holy love. That contains virtually all the others, and all the others only increase in perfection in proportion as it is found in them.

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