

chapter SIX



the WAYS of PRAYER of BEGINNERS



When I first wrote Opening to God, I did not realize that the radio analogy also applies very well to Chapter 6—particularly if we think in terms of listening to classical music. Why? Because classical music is an acquired taste. It requires something like a “course” in music appreciation to be properly understood. And the same is true of God our Lord. We are not naturally attuned to him—although there is an obscure desire for his love (as St. Augustine says so beautifully) deep within every human being.

Thus the first step in a good prayer life (as in human courtship) is “getting to know” the person we are drawn to love. We cannot love what we do not know. But how do we get to know and appreciate this mysterious Lord? The tradition presents two methods, which Ignatius Loyola calls “meditation” and “contemplation.” The former uses the reasoning faculty, and the latter the imaginative

faculty. Both are good ways to get to know the person we are drawn to love. We have to experiment and see which works for us in coming to know Jesus (and thus the Father) in the scriptures. To help grasp the difference between them, after discussing the preparatory acts which can help us to come to prayer in the proper disposition, I use John, chapter 4 (the woman at the well) to illustrate concretely what it means to meditate and to contemplate.

When these methods have led the beginner to the solid knowledge that grounds true love, they have accomplished their purpose. Like John the Baptist, they can “decrease,” that love may increase. That will be the topic of the Epilogue.



THUS FAR IN THIS book, we have discussed what prayer is, how it may be said to be relevant, and irrelevant, to the life of man and woman in the world, and what role is played by techniques—both of coming to quiet and of purification—in disposing the soul to encounter God. One major question remains: What does the beginner do when he actually comes to pray? If experiential knowledge and love of God are, as we have said they are, the goal of a life of prayer, where does one go, what does one do, to encounter the Lord?

In a sense, as we have seen, one doesn't go anywhere or do anything. The Lord comes to us unexpectedly and at a time not of our choosing, as he came to Peter in a fishing boat, Matthew in a tax-collector's booth, Zacchaeus in a tree, Paul on a journey. We are, as C. S. Lewis expressed it beautifully in the title of his autobiography, "Surprised by Joy." There are no rules to govern such an event.

Still, we must do something. The first surprise encounter with the Lord is never a final, completely transforming revelation. As T. S. Eliot has put it, it is a drawing, a calling to

explore, to inquire, to search. Such a call demands a response from us. The call may come dramatically as it did with Paul, or it may come so imperceptibly that we cannot even say when it happened, as in the case of a person who has absorbed the faith right from childhood with the very air he or she breathed. However it happens, the time comes when we sense the Lord's call to know him, to become his friend. As I noted in the introduction, this book is written for all those who, in one way or another, have heard this call, and now find themselves asking: What is our response?

In Chapters 4 and 5 we have discussed two of the essential preconditions of any authentic response to God's drawing: coming to attentive quiet, and cleansing our lives of anything which would block or hinder our capacity to return love for love. But how do we actually respond to the word the Lord speaks to us? What do we say or do in prayer? The answer to this question is the topic of the present chapter.

We can begin with an analogy to the deepest form of human love, the marital love of a man and a woman for each other. Such a love takes many years to mature. We sometimes speak of love at first sight, but in the strictest sense there is no such thing. There can be attraction at first sight—a boy and a girl can sense something in each other which draws them together and makes them sense that this relationship promises to be different from any other they have experienced. But real love demands knowledge; we cannot love what we do not know. And so the boy finds himself wanting to know all about the girl to whom he is drawn. If the girl responds, they spend endless hours sharing with each other—their past, their hopes, their fears, their frustrations. They may even spend an evening alone together, and then, after the boy takes the girl home and returns to his own home, spend another hour on the telephone sharing what has happened in the half hour since they parted. It is exasperating to their fathers, who pay the telephone bills, and appears silly to any onlookers who are not themselves

suffering from the same disease. But it is not as foolish as it appears. We can only love what we know, and the boy and girl during courtship are seeking that mutual knowledge which alone grounds genuine love.

The same need is present in our prayer life, our love relationship with God. Genuine love of God also demands a time of courtship. Here, too, we can only love one whom we know. There is of course an important difference: God has known us before we were formed in our mother's womb (Jer 1:5). He knows our inmost being, better than we know ourselves. He "searches all hearts, and understands every plan and thought" (1 Chr 28:9). But, while he knows us fully, we do not know him. And before we can fully respond to his love freely poured out in us, we must come to know him.

Thus the first stage of a genuine interior life is learning to know the Lord. We saw in Chapter 5 that both Ignatius and John of the Cross refer to the prayer of beginners as meditation.¹ Meditation means precisely this—taking time to learn who this God is whom we are drawn to love, what he stands for, what he values, and what it would mean to be his friend. We can learn this from a consideration of creation, since nature, other persons and we ourselves are all signposts which point to their Maker, reflections which reveal the Artist who shaped them. Thus, every human being can come to know the Lord.² For the Christian, however, the primary revelation of the Father is Jesus Christ. Hence the scriptures, which were written that we, who have not known Jesus in the flesh, may believe in him, are the privileged way for Christians to come to know God in and through Jesus Christ.³

Meditation, then, is the use of our understanding to discover who God is—to learn to know him more fully in order that we may love him more deeply and follow him more faithfully. The principal sourcebook of Christian meditation is the scripture, in which God reveals himself to us. We may say that meditation is not fully prayer in the sense we have

defined it (a personal encounter with God in love)—but, because love depends on knowledge, meditation on the scripture is an essential first step to genuine prayer. Thus it is the principal activity of beginners when they come to pray.

It is important to note that this “meditation” on the scripture may start long before we begin a formal life of prayer. In a good Christian home, the values of the gospel and the person of Jesus Christ will be communicated in the very air the child breathes. In the Sunday liturgy—particularly in the new liturgy with its reading of the scripture over a three-year cycle, and its stress on the homily as an exposition of the scripture readings—that knowledge of God which grounds genuine love can be communicated gradually and very effectively. A good Christian schooling contributes much to the same end. Hence the “beginner” to whom this book is addressed may not really be a beginner. St. Augustine expressed this beautifully long ago, at the beginning of his *Confessions*. He confronts the mystery of knowledge and love, of the priority of knowing God over seeking (“imploring”) him, and he concludes: “My faith, Lord, cries to Thee, the faith that Thou hast given me, that Thou hast inbreathed in me, through the humanity of Thy Son and by the ministry of Thy preacher.”⁴

For some people, this diffuse sort of meditation may well suffice to ground a mature life of prayer. But in my experience, both as a pray-er and as a director of others, those who begin to be serious about a life of prayer normally need a deeper grounding in the knowledge of the Lord of Love, a more systematic searching of the scriptures, such as the meditation which occupies Augustine himself throughout much of the *Confessions*. For some who come to pray there has been very little of Christian formation. And for others, that which has been “inbreathed” into us during our formative years often needs to be made properly our own, and integrated into that coherent knowledge of the Lord of Love which Vatican I calls

“the connection of these mysteries (of faith) with one another and with man’s ultimate end.”⁵ Gradually, as we meditate, the bits and pieces of our knowledge of scripture and of the Lord become one seamless whole and our love takes on a sharper focus.

Meditation books have traditionally recommended a structure of prayer for beginners. While details may vary, it essentially involves three stages: the remote preparation, the immediate preparation, and the actual meditation itself. Let us assume that we choose to make our meditation in the morning. This is often the best time, before our minds are filled with the concerns and distractions of the day. In this case, the remote preparation—reading over the scripture passage we are going to pray about, and consulting one of the commentaries to clarify the context and the basic message of the passage which we have chosen—would take place the evening before. This remote preparation, along with our daily spiritual reading, plays a very important role in opening and sensitizing our minds to the things of God.⁶ Without this remote preparation, we will not be doing what we can to open ourselves to God. We will be coming to prayer too casually, taking God for granted. And it is unlikely that we will hear his word in this way.

The immediate preparation for prayer is what we do when we are ready to begin to pray. St. Ignatius recommends that we stand back from the place where we are going to pray, and take a moment to recall the passage or theme we are to pray about, and then recall what a wondrous thing it is that we seek to do. I have found a short prayer like the following very helpful: “Lord, I realize that you are truly present and anxious to teach me to pray. You care more for me than I care for myself. Help me to realize the wonder of your speaking to me, and to respond as generously as possible.” The purpose of this short prayer is that I may come before the Lord reverently and attentively, as his holiness demands.

The remote and immediate preparations for prayer are very important, especially for beginners. The form they take may vary, of course. Perhaps the best way for the beginner is to start with some such format as I have described. Then, with experience, one can adapt it to one's own temperament and needs. The goal is to come to prayer prepared to hear the Lord, and reverently attend to his word. To paraphrase St. Teresa, good preparation is whatever most helps us to pray well—whatever most moves us to love God.⁷

The third stage of the traditional schema of prayer is the actual prayer itself. This is what we have called meditation, and have described as the use of our understanding to come to know God more fully, in order that we may love him more ardently and follow him more faithfully. Actually, in the history of spirituality there has never been any one terminology universally accepted by all authors on prayer. Most use the word "meditation" more or less as we have used it above. Whatever the words chosen, the same essential points about the beginnings of prayer are found in all the Christian masters of prayer. But I have found it helpful to make a distinction here, between meditation and contemplation.⁸ The basis of the distinction is this: humanity is endowed with an understanding or reasoning faculty and with an imagination, and both faculties can be employed in coming to know someone or something better. Reasoning is more logical, more abstract; it considers causes and draws conclusions, often step by step. Imagination is more concrete, more specific; it sees a single event or situation in its concrete totality. Reason sees the logical links between events or actions ("The guitar is off-key; it must need tuning"), whereas imagination enters into, gets the feel of an actual experience ("What a strange feeling of desolation I get when I hear that guitar playing off-key!").

As we said, we humans are endowed with faculties both of reasoning and of imagination, and both faculties help us to know reality in different, but complementary, ways.

It often happens, though, that one faculty is dominant in a given person. Artists are often said to be more imaginative, and scientists to be more rational—although Bach or Mozart is much more “rational” than Brahms or Beethoven, and a creative scientist like Pasteur or Einstein must possess a strong imaginative faculty. Women are usually far more imaginative, as a whole, than men, who tend to be more logical. I have learned that Filipinos—and perhaps Southeast Asians in general—are generally far more imaginative than their more analytical American or Chinese friends. The important point here is that men and women, not only groups but individuals, vary greatly in the mix of reasoning and imagination which they bring to the interpretation of their experience.

This is an important insight for beginners in prayer. We can come to know the Lord via our reasoning or via our imagination, or, more likely, via a very personal blend of the two. This is the basis of the distinction I have suggested between meditation and contemplation. Meditation is the use of the understanding, the reasoning faculty, to come to know God’s revelation better, whereas contemplation is the use of the imagination to achieve the same end. Since both are good techniques for coming to know the Lord, and since some people will find one more helpful and some the other, let us discuss each more fully.

We can begin with meditation. And since, as we have said, the primary source of our knowledge of the Lord is scripture, let us take a passage from the Gospel of St. John as an illustrative example. A very beautiful passage is the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. Jesus has been journeying through Samaria, the region between Galilee and Judea, and has sat down to rest beside Jacob’s well. The disciples have gone into the nearby city of Sychar to buy food, so Jesus is alone at the well. A woman of the neighborhood comes to draw water at the well, and Jesus asks her for a drink. She is surprised that he would speak to a strange woman in

public, especially since the Jews and the Samaritans were enemies. She expresses her puzzlement at his request, and Jesus replies by referring to the far better water which he could give her. This leads into the famous dialogue about the water of eternal life—a dialogue which results in the conversion of the woman and of many of her townmates. It is a very human passage, and one which brings out the simplicity of the woman and the gentleness of Jesus. Let us see how we would meditate on the incident.

Recall that meditation means using our reasoning to come to know God better. Here it would mean reflecting on the behavior of Jesus in this very concrete situation, and on the words he speaks to the woman, to discover more of God's ways with us. Why does Jesus speak to a strange woman, particularly to one who has had five husbands and is now living with a man not her husband, and who must have had a rather low standing in her town? What does this say about the way God judges people, as contrasted with the judgments of men and women? What implications does this have for the way I should deal with people if I am truly to follow Christ? Again what does Jesus mean by living water?¹⁰ The woman misunderstands him. She thinks he has a secret source of natural water, but he very patiently uses her misunderstanding to teach her about the water of the Spirit. How deeply do I feel the desire for the living water of the Spirit? What in my life corresponds to the five and a half husbands of the Samaritan woman— i.e., what hinders me from truly encountering Christ in my life? How has the Lord used that very obstacle to reach out to me? It is often said that we become most aware of God when we are weakest and most aware of our sinfulness.¹¹ But not all sinners hear God's voice. What is there about the Samaritan woman's attitudes which makes her very sinfulness the basis for her encounter with Jesus?

The incident in John 4 is a rich and beautiful source of meditative prayer, and our reflections above have only scratched the surface of its treasure for the pray-er. But perhaps we have said enough to make clear what meditation is: a reflective searching of the scriptures to discover what God reveals of himself in the person of Jesus, and to learn by analogy how he is speaking in the events of one's own life. As Jesus tells Thomas, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me you would have known my Father also . . ." (Jn 14:6-7). Philip still does not understand, and he says, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." But Jesus insists that "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). This is the very heart of the Christian faith: "No one has ever seen God: the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Jesus is *the* revelation of the Father for humans of flesh and blood. It is by studying his life—his values, his attitudes, his ways of dealing with people—that we learn who God is for us.¹²

In meditation, however, we reflect not merely on the historical life of Jesus and the experience of the evangelists and apostles. We also reflect on how God reveals himself in our lives today. Jesus is the "firstborn of many brethren," and we are called to "have this mind among you, which is yours in Christ Jesus," to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ."¹³ Thus meditation is not merely a reflective historical study of a past figure—no matter how important we may consider that historical figure to be. It is an attempt to discover, by means of the life and teaching of Jesus, how God is revealing himself through Christ in the events of our lives today. Some of the questions we raised in our consideration of the Samaritan woman bring out this link between Jesus' life and our search for God today.

As we have described it, meditation is the use of our reasoning powers. We said earlier that there is another, equally

valid, way to come to know the Lord: contemplation. Contemplation, in the Ignatian beginner's sense, is more imaginative, and is often helpful for those who find difficult the type of analytic reasoning we have described as meditation. The story of the Samaritan woman can be useful here, since it lends itself as easily to contemplation as to meditation. Let us contrast the two approaches by seeing what it would mean to contemplate the incident at the well.

Contemplation involves imaginatively entering into the incident we are considering—being present at the event, seeing it happen as if we were actually participants ourselves. This is a much easier task for children of a visual culture such as ours. Movies and TV draw us into an event, a story, in a way which the printed word often cannot often duplicate.¹⁴ In fact, I have found it very helpful to explain contemplation by likening it to our experience of a movie. Why is it that we weep at a tragic movie? Surely not because a piece of film is running through a projector, or because certain shadows are appearing on a screen! This is what is actually happening at the time, but there is nothing to cry about in that. Why, then, do we cry? Because we ourselves have become imaginatively involved in the story: we relive it, in some way, ourselves. We make our own the attitudes and feelings of the actors with whom we identify. We know how they feel because we feel and experience with them. We come to experience a long-lasting sense of kinship with characters from our favorite movies. Somehow they become part of our lives.

Contemplation is like this. We bring our human powers of imagination to our prayer, and we seek to relive, not some movie, but the life of the Lord Jesus. In our example, we seek to be present at the well when Jesus meets the woman. Perhaps we are sitting beside him as she comes walking along the road. We notice his face (he is "weary"). We see what a woman looks like who has had five and a half husbands, and who is tired of having to come to the well day after day. We feel the heat of the

noonday sun in this semitropical land. We notice the shape of the stones in this ancient well, believed by tradition to date back more than a thousand years to Jacob. And then Jesus speaks to this strange woman. We hear his words, note the tone of his voice, observe the surprised look on the face of the woman. We listen, and look, as their dialogue unfolds—and we imagine how we would have reacted had we been in the woman's place. Perhaps we share her puzzlement at Jesus' reference to living water. Perhaps, if we are lucky, we find ourselves involved in the conversation, asking the Lord our own questions about eternal life, and asking the woman what the Lord really said to her. She tells the people of Sychar that he told her "everything I have ever done"—which goes far beyond the conversation actually recorded in the gospel. What would it mean to meet someone who tells *us* everything we have ever done? We may even, in our contemplation, find ourselves remaining at the well with Jesus, when the woman hurries off to town to tell the people—and we may learn by experience what it means to have him tell *us* everything we have ever done.

Like meditation, contemplation is not merely an imaginative reliving of the past. In experiencing with the Lord the concrete situations of his life, we come to discover how he is living and working in our lives. We too meet him sitting beside a well. We also recognize him in the breaking of the bread (Lk 24:35), and our imaginative reliving of the gospel event gives way to our own encounter with the Lord. This element of personal encounter, of personal involvement, is what makes both meditation and contemplation different from the knowledge that the theologian or the historian, as such, might have of the same gospel event. This *personal* knowledge is what makes meditation and contemplation properly prayer—i.e., part of the whole process by which we encounter God in love.

That is why the traditional manuals of prayer recommend that, right from the beginning, we end our prayer with a colloquy or conversation with the Lord. When we begin, the colloquy will be somewhat awkward and stilted, like a conversation with a stranger. But as we come to know God better, the colloquy will become more spontaneous and natural. Gradually the colloquy will become the substance of our prayer, as knowledge gives way to love. Then there will be less and less need for meditation or contemplation. Our primary need will be to be with the Lord, whom we have come to know and love—and that, as we have said, is the essence of prayer.

This makes clear the first important warning we must give concerning meditation and contemplation. They are the beginnings of a good prayer life, but reasoning and imagining are not ends in themselves. Prayer is not simply a lifetime process of understanding the gospel and making applications to our lives. Nor is it a lifetime of imaginative involvement in the events of Christ's life. Too much stress on speculation and analysis would lead to an abstract and sterile concern with the "logic" of the gospel. Too much stress on the imagination would lead to a false visionary kind of spirituality, which spent its time discovering what color of cloak Jesus was wearing at the well, or how old the woman was. Both would wrap us up too much in ourselves and our own thoughts, and not open us enough to the transforming power of God's word in our lives.

Another caution: fruitful meditation or contemplation is an art, and thus it is not so much taught as it is learned by experience. Although we use our own faculties of reasoning and imagination, the knowledge we seek is ultimately God's gift. We should be willing to experiment with the approaches I have described, and to discover what is most suited to our own temperament and to the gospel passage we are praying over. Some passages (such as Jesus' discussion with the