

INTRODUCTION



Once, after Socrates had described with great eloquence the ideal way human beings should live and the ideal society in which they would be able to live as perfectly as possible, his disciple, Glaucon, objected. He did not believe such a “City of God” existed anywhere on earth. Socrates answered, “Whether such a city exists in heaven or ever will exist on earth, the wise man will live after the manner of that city, having nothing to do with any other, and in so looking upon it, will set his own house in order.”¹

Most of us, living in the modern world of today, would heartily agree that our world is not quite yet that “City of God.” Have you ever yielded to the temptation of thinking that perhaps in the past there was a time and a place in which you could have more easily become a fulfilled human being? Would that time be the Middle Ages when all of Europe was Christian and faith seemingly permeated all facets of human life? Or perhaps upon reading scripture, you picture yourself living in the first Christian community of Jerusalem, sharing everything in common with your brothers and sisters in Christ? Or, with a holy nostalgia, do

you find yourself among the great charismatic Christians who left everything in order to build a “City of God” in the deserts of Egypt and Syria in the fourth century? Do you dream of a future time and place, on this earth or in heaven, where Utopia will finally be reached and you will be one of the chosen?

Whether you dream of the future or idealize the past, one thing is sure: You are ignoring the present situation and moment in time. St. Paul calls out to us, “Well, now is the favorable time; this is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). He tells us to wake up from our sleep (Rom 13:11) and start living lives befitting human beings and Christians. He quotes from Isaiah 26:19 and Isaiah 60:1:

Wake up from your sleep,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.
(Eph 5:14)

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU

When Jesus began to announce the Good News of salvation, he told his listeners about the in-breaking of the heavenly Father’s tender love for each individual. He called this love relationship between God and human individuals “the kingdom of God.” And he himself was to make this relationship possible as individuals turned their lives over to him.

But such a new creation, a rebirth to become children of God, could come about only through a repentance, a *metanoia* or complete change of vision, of inner direction, of motivation, of values to authentic, human fulfillment and meaningfulness.

Jesus stressed in his preaching and still stresses to all of us today the importance of being vigilant, attentive, alert, and awake in this present moment, for right now the kingdom of God is being accomplished among us and within us. He comes to give us abundant life (Jn 10:10), life that

will never perish but will be eternal. But this, for Jesus, is not a life that awaits us hereafter in an unending series of *now* moments. Eternal life is not an infinite number but is a quality that even now is to be experienced. It is a knowledge that affects the whole person, that becomes synonymous with love.

And eternal life is this:
to know you,
the only true God,
and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (Jn 17:3)

A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Only a human person, of all God's material creatures, has the ability to stand on the mountaintop of his or her consciousness and ask the *why* and *where* of human existence. Why have I been created? Where is my life going? Where should it be going? How can I find purpose in my life? These are questions we cannot stop asking ourselves. The answers that we formulate and that guide our living determine the degree of our integration as whole and truly *alive* persons.

Jesus comes into human existence in order to set us free from the bondage that cripples us and prevents us from being integrated individuals (Lk 4:18; Jn 8:31–32). He still walks among us, establishing the kingdom of God by healing us of all our physical, psychological, and spiritual sicknesses, fears, anxieties, isolation, and sinful darkness (Mt 4:23–24; Mt 9:35).

We become free and healthy as whole persons to the degree that in intense consciousness of our true selves and inner awareness of our *I-ness* we freely and responsibly take our life in each moment's choices and determine to live according to the fullness of potentiality that God has put into us and into that momentary event. Through creative work done to build a better world according to the mind of God and out of love for him and our fellow neighbor,

through transcendent, loving service for others, by forgetting self and living out of love to bring happiness to as many persons as we can, we grow into a life of meaningfulness.

The poet Robinson Jeffers shows how such “conscious” living transcends the number of years that one lives. It is dependent on rising beyond time to live eternally:

But young or old, few years or many,
signified less than nothing
To him who had climbed the tower beyond
time, consciously. . . .²

MEN INTOXICATED WITH GOD

In the fourth century of Christianity, groups of men and women literally moved into the deserts of Egypt and Syria, and there they sought to climb “the tower beyond time, consciously.” Under the power of the Spirit of Jesus Risen they stripped their lives of everything superfluous and self-centered in order to live as consciously as possible in the presence of God out of love for him who loved them infinitely in Christ Jesus.

They answered literally the call of Christ to leave all and follow him. They truly experienced the hidden treasure and were willing to sell all to obtain it. As a result, their lives showed the struggle involved in this process.³ Thomas Merton writes of their goal:

. . . not to leave society but to transcend it; not to withdraw from the fellowship with other men, but to renounce the appearance of the myth of union in diversion in order to attain to union on a higher and more spiritual level—the level of the Mystical Body of Christ.⁴

Pseudo-Macarius in his *Spiritual Homilies* describes them as “men intoxicated with God.” Impelled by the same Holy Spirit that drove Jesus into the desert, they sought to pray always, as St. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians “to pray incessantly” (1 Thes 5:17). They strove to push their mind into their

“heart,” the deepest level of consciousness. There, in faith, hope, and love, they experienced the indwelling Trinity. There, God was establishing his kingdom. He reigned progressively more and more as the desert hermits strove vigilantly to bring every thought and imagination under captivity and into obedience to Jesus Christ (2 Cor 10:5).

These athletes of God subjected themselves to austere discipline (*ascesis*), not because they were masochists or hated the body, but because they knew their inner dignity as children of God and temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 1 Cor 6:19). Fasting, vigils throughout the night, humble works of charity, striving to reach the inner poverty of spirit that they called humility, all such attempts were seen as means of reaching a state of integration that they referred to as *apatheia* (a passionless passion or the complete absence of selfishness in their human choices).

HESYCHASM

More positively they strove to reach a state of integration of all their body, soul, and spirit relationships that they called *hesychia*. This is a Greek word that means *rest* or *tranquility*. When such Christian warriors had conquered all bias toward themselves and Jesus became “all in all” in every conscious choice of thought, word, or action, the index of the degree of their “incorporation” into Christ was measured by the love, peace, and joy that they habitually experienced.

This is an Eastern Christian type of spirituality that grew out of the experiences of the desert Fathers. It is a synthesis of the Christian life centered around what Eastern Christians in general considered to be the main goal of the spiritual life: How to obey the commandments of Jesus Christ by living as consciously as possible in the loving presence of the indwelling Trinity so as to pray always. Many Westerners have understood *hesychasm* merely to refer to the psychosomatic techniques that developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on Mount Athos in

the use of the Jesus Prayer. This prayer, which through the centuries became fixed with the words: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," is a mere summary of a free use of any ejaculation that served as a *mantra* to center attention upon Jesus Christ.

It would be an error to limit this hesychastic spirituality to a mere technique. It embraces, on the contrary, a summary of the entire Christian life: a patristic and biblical anthropology of God's creative and redemptive orders, sin, grace, and the mysteries of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who extends his healing power through his Word and sacraments by means of his church. The most representative literary source of hesychasm is found in the *Philokalia*, a collection of the writings of the hesychastic Fathers from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries.

NEED FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Today a great many Western Christians are turning to the Far Eastern and Eastern Christian religions in an attempt to rediscover the element of mysticism and direct experience with God that has always been a genuine element in Christian prayer. The hesychastic Fathers were most insistent that an individual, eager for greater immanent union with God, submit himself or herself to the direction of a holy and learned spiritual director.

Deeper prayer cannot be obtained unless there is a deep, inner silence and stillness. Part of that stillness comes from stilling our mental activity and waiting humbly in deep faith that the immanently dwelling God will speak. To pass beyond the superficial levels of our controlled consciousness in order to pass into the innermost core of our being, great discipline is required. An experienced spiritual guide can help us acquire such discipline. But, above all, a director can provide the necessary prudence and discernment of spirits. As one passes through layers of psychic experiences, dangers appear. Repressed material that has been drowned in the unconscious can rise threateningly to

disturb the one seeking greater union with God. Flashes and lights, psychic powers of telepathy, communing with the dead can come forth. The demonic within us can rear its many ugly heads. What is reality, what is hallucination? A guide who has done battle with the enemies of the interior world is most necessary. Psychic powers can be dangerous and evil can enter and manipulate a person seeking honestly to attain a greater oneness with God.

One aim of this book is a humble attempt to offer spiritual direction to those who have advanced somewhat beyond discursive, mental prayer and have begun to take the first steps in contemplation. Everywhere I go in America, I meet with the same question from Christians who have begun to pray scripture in a contemplative way and to find inspiration from the mystical writers of both the East and the West: "Where can I find proper spiritual direction?" This book is not a panacea for all the problems of contemplatives. It is offered as a help, especially to those who have read the *Philokalia* and are in need of an interpretation and an adaptation of the universal, Christian elements that should be found in the prayer life of all Christians, both of Western and Eastern churches.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING

Taking the classics of Christian mysticism literally or failing to transcend the cultural elements that form the backdrop of the times in which the ancient writers lived can be a source of danger to modern Christian readers. Examples can easily be seen in the writings of the fathers of the desert who fled from society and strove to have as little contact as possible with human beings, and in the writings of St. John of the Cross. St. Isaac of Nineveh writes, "He is a monk, who stays outside the world and is ever praying to God, so that he may gain future blessings."⁵ Platonism and Stoicism had become the philosophical carriers to articulate a form of Christian life for such monks of the desert. Great dangers could befall those in the twentieth century who

seek to imitate such a Christianity without a demythologizing attempt to sift the cultural aspects (not always very Christian!) from the truths that are always applicable in all centuries and in all cultures.

St. John of the Cross received his Christianity through the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. His spirituality was of a vertical relation between himself as an *I* relating to God as a *Thou*, heading for a mystical marriage that did not concern itself with starving millions or the threat of a nuclear destruction of the universe.

PRAYER OF THE HEART

This is also a positive book of teaching on deeper prayer. The jumping-off point will be the hesychastic spirituality as presented in the writings of the Eastern Christian writers. These writers present us with a vision of the Christian called to pray always. From Holy Scripture they work out a spirituality of awareness, of an ever-increasing consciousness of the indwelling presence of the Holy Trinity. The Old and New Testaments and the best traditions in Eastern Christianity speak of the *heart* in prayer to refer to the whole person—emotions, body, imagination, intellect, and will—meeting God. Such prayer has been described by the Eastern fathers as putting the “mind in the heart” as one prays. Such a spirituality that has as its aim a total integration of the human person as he or she meets God in prayer and learns completely to surrender to his loving presence has been called *hesychasm*. The model for the Eastern *hesychast* has always been Mary, the mother of God, as she prays, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word.”

Hesychia is that state in which Christians, through grace and their own intense asceticism, reintegrate their whole being into a single *ego* that is then placed completely under the influence of God dwelling within them. *Hesychia* is that state of integrated *ego-hood*. It is total healing in order to become the glory of God, human beings living fully, wrote St. Irenaeus in the second century.

It is more than a contemplative form of prayer that supercedes the use of discursive powers of imagination, intellect, and will, the use of words, images, and feelings to communicate with God. The prayer of the heart is a way of life that is built upon a rigorous asceticism of constant control of the thoughts by vigilant attention to the presence of the indwelling God, fasting, and cultivation of *penthos*, which is an abiding sense of sorrow for sin. It is an abiding state of conscious awareness of immanent union with the loving community of the indwelling Trinity, combined with an equally vivid awareness of one's own individuality through the love experienced by the triune Persons. It is centered chiefly around a short prayer that becomes synchronized with the breathing and aids the pray-er to enter intimately throughout the day and night into the loving presence of Jesus.

PROCEDURE

In order, therefore, to present a book on the prayer of the heart or on how to pray constantly, I would like to follow this procedure. Each chapter will develop an essential area in spirituality of the prayer of the heart or *hesychasm*. The teaching of the Eastern fathers who wrote about such prayer will be given. I will attempt to interpret what they were teaching by separating the limiting cultural "baggage" from the kernel of truth. Then I will give an application that will, hopefully, bring such spiritual teaching into your life.

Beyond any procedure, my aim in writing this book is to challenge you to enter into your "heart," into the deepest area of your consciousness and there to live your life "in Christ Jesus," a phrase that St. Paul never tires of using. This living Person dwells within you, giving you his Spirit and his power to love the Father with his own love and to love one another as he loves you. When you call upon his name incessantly, Jesus the Lord will continually reveal the Father to you. Jesus is always saying in the depths of your

heart, "And I have revealed you (Father) to them and I will keep on revealing you so that the mighty love you have for me may be in them and I in them" (Jn 17:26).

My hope is that by reading this book you will experience a bit more of that amazing, almighty, tender, humble, loving Father, Son, and Spirit dwelling within you, and you will be able in the recreating power of that love to go out into your modern world and love others with God's very love within you.

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