
INTRODUCTION

As is well known, the chapters in this book constitute the concluding part of a larger work of St. Teresa titled The Way of Perfection. It has been thought advisable to include here a few points treated by her elsewhere in the complete work. These additional thoughts are intended to serve as an introduction to provide for the better understanding of the saint's commentary on the Our Father.

Oh Absolute Sovereign of the world! You are Supreme Omnipotence, Sovereign Goodness, Wisdom itself! You are without beginning and without end. Your works are limitless, your perfections infinite, and your intelligence is supreme! You are a fathomless abyss of marvels! Oh Beauty, containing all other beauty! Oh great God, you are Strength itself! Would that I possessed at this moment all the combined eloquence and wisdom of men! Then, in so far as it is possible here below, where knowledge is so limited, I

could strive to make known one of your innumerable perfections. The contemplation of these reveals to some extent the nature of him who is our Lord and our only Good.

Mental Prayer

My dear sisters, draw close to him; but realize and understand to whom you are about to speak or whom you are already addressing. Even after a thousand lives like our own, you would never understand how to act with this Lord, before whom the angels tremble. He rules the entire universe. He can do all. For him, to will is to accomplish. . . .

To understand these truths well is to practice mental prayer. If you wish to combine vocal prayer with this, that is perfectly suitable. But when you speak to God, do not direct your attention to other things. To do so would be to fail to understand mental prayer. . . . If one wishes to pray perfectly, one must strive wholeheartedly to be recollected.

Resolute Determination in Prayer

. . . I reiterate that it is very important to enter upon this way of prayer with the resolute determination to persevere in it. . . . Since we wish to devote to God certain times of prayer, let us give these to him with a

spirit that is generous and untrammelled with earthly thoughts. Let us give this time with the firm resolution never to take it back, no matter what trials, contradictions, or aridities may come. Reckon this time as something no longer belonging to us, but time for which we shall be held accountable on the score of justice, if we do not dedicate ourselves entirely to it. . . . God is ever attentive in order to repay us for our services to him. Do not fear that he will ever permit the least action to go unrewarded, even one so insignificant as the lifting of your eyes to heaven, in remembrance of him.

Satan's Fear of Valiant Souls

The second reason why we should resolutely devote ourselves to prayer is that Satan thereby has less chance to tempt us. He is most fearful of valiant souls. He knows from experience what harm they cause him. Everything Satan does to injure valiant souls profits them and their neighbor, and he comes away from the combat as the loser. Nevertheless, we ought not be negligent nor become less cautious. We must strive against traitors. If we are vigilant, they will not have the courage to attack us, because they are cowards. But if they notice that we are no longer alert, they can inflict great harm on us. As soon as they detect that a soul is vacillating, inconstant, and

not resolutely determined to persevere, they will torment it day and night without ceasing. They will suggest a thousand fears and conjure up endless difficulties. Experience has taught me this at great cost, and that is why I speak of it to you. And I add that no one can possibly appreciate fully how important this counsel is.

Heroic Courage of Resolute Persons

The third very important reason for determined devotedness to prayer is that a resolute person fights with greater courage. He then realizes that he must never retreat, no matter what the odds may be. Notice the soldier on the battlefield. He knows that if he loses, his life is at stake, and that if he does not die in the thick of the battle, he will be executed afterward. And thus he fights more unflinchingly and is determined to sell his life dearly, as the saying goes. He has no fear of wounds because he is intent upon gaining the victory, and he realizes that victory is the only means of saving his life.

Assurance of Success in Prayer

Furthermore, it is necessary to begin with the assurance that we shall succeed, unless we deliberately permit ourselves to be vanquished. Success is

absolutely certain. No matter how insignificant our gain may be, it will enrich us immeasurably. As I have previously stated and would like to repeat a thousand times, do not fear that our Lord will permit you to die of thirst after having invited you to drink of this fountain. Fear paralyzes to a great extent the ardor of those persons who have never had personal experience of our Lord's goodness, even though their faith assures them of it. I assure you that it is a great advantage to have known his friendship and to have experienced the tender care he bestows upon those who follow this way of prayer. . . .

Vocal Prayer

My dear sisters, again I address myself to those souls who can neither recollect themselves nor concentrate their minds in mental prayer, nor can they make a meditation. We must avoid the very mention of these words, for persons of that type are not interested in such things. In fact, there are many who seem to be frightened by the very term *mental prayer* or *contemplation*. . . .

I shall teach you how you ought to pray vocally. It is only right that you should understand what you say. Perhaps those who are incapable of centering their thoughts on God will likewise become wearied by long prayers. I shall not treat of long prayers, but

only of those every Christian is obliged to recite, namely, the Our Father, and the Hail Mary.

Proper Recitation of Vocal Prayers

When I recite the Creed, it seems only reasonable that I should advert to and understand what I believe. Likewise, when I recite the Our Father, it would be a mark of love to recall who this Father is, and who the Master is who taught us this prayer. If you should reply that it suffices to reflect upon this Master just once and for all, you might as well argue that it is sufficient to recite this prayer once in a lifetime. . . .

May God grant that we should be not unmindful of him when we recite this prayer. However, it sometimes happens that we do forget him, because of our frailty. . . . I have already stated that one cannot speak to God and to the world at the same time. Still, this is exactly what those do who recite their prayers while listening to the conversation of others, or who dwell on other thoughts without any effort to banish distractions. . . .

Solitude During Prayer

We should strive to seek solitude during prayer, in so far as we are able. And God grant that this may suffice to make us realize both the presence of him

who is with us and the answer that our Lord makes to our petitions. Do you think that he is silent, even though we cannot hear him? Assuredly not! He speaks to the heart when the heart entreats him.

Close Union With Jesus

It would be well for us to consider that our Lord has taught this prayer to each one of us, individually, and that he still teaches it to us at this very moment. The Master is never so distant that his disciple need raise his voice to be heard. On the contrary, he is very near. To enable you to recite the Our Father well, I should like to see you perfectly convinced of this truth, namely, that you must remain close to the Master who teaches it to you.

Relationship Between Vocal and Mental Prayer

You may again object that to pray thus would be meditation, and that you cannot, and consequently will not, pray except vocally. . . . I admit that you are right in calling this method mental prayer. But at the same time, I assure you that I do not understand how vocal prayer, when well-recited, can possibly be separated from mental prayer. We ought to realize to whom we are speaking. In fact, it is a duty to devote oneself with attention to prayer. God grant that all

these means may aid us in reciting the Our Father well, and that we do not finish it amidst distracting thoughts! From experience, I have discovered that the best remedy against distractions is to strive to concentrate my thoughts on him to whom I address my prayers. Be patient, then, and strive to become habituated to this method, which is so necessary. It is indispensable for the formation of real religious and, if I am not mistaken, even for the proper recitation of the prayers of true Christians.

Distinction Between Vocal Prayer, Mental Prayer, and Contemplation

Contemplation

Do not mistakenly believe that one draws only little profit from vocal prayer when it is well made. I assure you that it is quite possible for our Lord to raise you to perfect contemplation while you are reciting the Our Father or some other vocal prayer. And thus his Majesty shows that he hears one who prays in such a manner. This Sovereign Master speaks to the soul in return, suspends its understanding, checks its thoughts and, as it were, forms the very words before they are pronounced. And thus of oneself one cannot utter a single word without the greatest effort. The soul then realizes that the Master teaches it without

any sound of words. He suspends the activity of the faculties which, instead of gaining benefits, would only cause harm if they tried to act.

In this state, the faculties are filled with delight without knowing how they rejoice. The soul is inflamed with an increasing flow of love without perceiving how it loves. It knows that it enjoys the object of its love, but does not comprehend the nature of this enjoyment. Nevertheless, it realizes that the understanding of itself could never yearn for so ineffable a good. It realizes, too, that the will embraces the good without the soul's knowing how the will does this. If the soul can comprehend anything at all, its comprehension consists in the realization of the fact that nothing in the world could possibly merit this benefit. It is a gift of the Master of heaven and earth, who in the end bestows this gift in a manner worthy of him. This is contemplation. You can now understand wherein it differs from mental prayer.

Simplicity of Mental Prayer

Mental prayer, I repeat, consists in pondering over and seeking to understand what we say, in realizing to whom we speak, and who we are that we presume to address his Sovereign Majesty. To be preoccupied with these and similar considerations, such as the realization

of the little we do for the service of God and of the obligation we are under to serve him, is to make mental prayer. Therefore, do not imagine that it involves some very hidden mystery and do not be frightened by the term *mental prayer*.

To recite the Our Father, the Hail Mary, or any other prayer of your choice is vocal prayer. But realize how discordant it would be without mental prayer. The very words do not otherwise follow in proper sequence. In contemplation, which I just described, we can do nothing of ourselves. His Majesty does everything therein. It is his work, and it transcends the powers of our nature. . . . He alone can bestow upon you the gift of contemplation. He will not refuse it if you do not loiter on the way, and if you do not neglect anything necessary to reach your destination.

The Need for Recollection

Let us return now to the consideration of vocal prayer. We should recite vocal prayers in such a way that we may receive all the other kinds of prayer as well from God. But to pray properly, you know that you must at the outset examine your conscience, recite the Confiteor and make the Sign of the Cross. Immediately after, seek companionship, and how could you possibly do better than to seek the company

of the Master himself, who taught you the prayer you are to recite?

Method During Prayer

Picture our Lord near you. Consider the love and the humility with which he instructs you. Believe me, you ought to strive always to be ever near so faithful a Friend. If you accustom yourselves to consider him near you, and he sees you doing this with love, and striving to please him, you will be unable, so to speak, to dismiss him. He will never fail you. He will aid you in all your trials, and you will constantly be in his company. Do you think it an unimportant thing to have such a Friend near you?

The Need for Recollection

You who cannot develop thoughts with understanding nor fix your attention on a sacred mystery without distractions, accustom yourselves to this practice that I point out to you. I know that you can do it. During many years, I myself suffered from my inability to concentrate on any subject during prayer. And this is a terrible trial. Nevertheless, I know that our Lord never abandons us so completely as to refuse us his company if we humbly entreat him. If we do not acquire this favor within a year, let us strive several

years for it. Do not begrudge time so well spent. And who is there to hurry us? You can, I repeat, accustom yourselves to this practice. Strive to remain in the company of this true Master.

Simple Gazing on Jesus

I am not asking you at this time to fix your attention on him, nor to engage in discursive reasoning, nor to make subtle and learned considerations. All that I request is that you direct the glance of your soul to him. Who is there who can prevent the turning of your gaze toward our Lord, even if only for a moment? Is it conceivable that you can look upon the most hideous things and still not have the power to behold the most ineffable sight imaginable? If you do not find him beautiful, you need never look upon him again. He, however, looks upon you constantly. Although you have offended him by a thousand insults and indignities, he has been patient with you. Despite your faults, he has never ceased to fix his gaze upon you. Is it too much, then, to ask that you withdraw your gaze from exterior things to contemplate him sometimes? . . . He values your glance so highly that he will neglect no means to ingratiate himself with you.

Loving Study of Jesus

. . . Our Lord condescends to be subject to you, and wishes you to act as sovereign. He submits himself to your will. Are you joyful? Contemplate him then in his resurrection. You have nothing else to do but to think of the glory with which he rose from the sepulcher, and you will be filled with joy. What splendor, what beauty, what majesty, what glory, and what exultation in his triumph! How gloriously he comes forth from the field of battle where he won so great a kingdom, which is destined entirely for you. And at the same time, he gives himself to you with this kingdom. Is it, then, too much for you to raise your eyes occasionally toward this Master who has bestowed such bountiful gifts upon you?

Jesus in His Person

Are you pensive or sad? Behold your Lord then as he goes to the Garden of Olives. What overwhelming affliction fills his soul! He who is patience itself manifests and avows his sufferings! Or look upon him bound to the column, covered with wounds and his flesh torn to shreds. And this is the measure of his great love for you! In the midst of his anguish, see how he is cruelly treated by some, spat upon by others, denied and deserted by his friends without a

single person to plead his cause. He is stiff from the cold and so extremely lonely that he and you may well console each other.

Jesus, the Divine Model

Or, behold him bearing the cross, and not even given time to breathe. He will then turn to you with his beautiful and compassionate eyes filled with tears. He will even forget his sufferings to console you in yours, solely because you sought consolation from him and turned your gaze upon him. . . .

Observe the insupportable weariness that weighs upon him and realize how his sufferings surpass yours. No matter how great you may imagine your trials to be, and however painful they may appear, you will gain confidence in reflecting that they are but trifles compared with the sufferings of our Lord.

Perhaps you will say: if we had seen his Majesty with our bodily eyes when he lived on earth, we would follow your advice wholeheartedly, and we would fix our gaze upon him constantly. But I say: do not be deluded. Whoever does not make an effort now to behold our Lord within his soul, when this entails no great danger or sacrifice, he assuredly would not have been at the foot of the cross with Magdalene when the risk of death was involved.

Who can describe the sufferings of the glorious Virgin and this holy saint? . . . Indeed, their ordeal of suffering must have been terrible. Nevertheless, they were oblivious to their own sufferings because they personally beheld a spectacle of suffering more poignant by far than their own. So then, do not deceive yourselves into believing that you could have borne such trials if you cannot conquer the slight difficulties I mentioned. Perfect yourselves first of all in the small things so as to become capable of greater deeds.

Union With God

Again, I assure you that if you resolutely practice this method, you will reap benefits so great that it is really impossible for me to describe them. Therefore, remain close to this good Master. Keep the firm resolution to learn all that he teaches you. His Majesty will then see to it that you become his faithful disciples. This great God will never leave you unless you first abandon him. Meditate on the words that come from the divine lips. At the very outset, you will understand the love he has for you. And it is no small favor nor negligible joy for a disciple to see that he is loved by his Master.