

A Balanced Life of Prayer

By Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O.

Foreword by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.

Foreword

On Trinity Sunday, 1951, Thomas Merton, or Father Louis as he was known in the monastery, having lived the Cistercian life for nearly a decade, was named Master of the Scholastics by Dom James Fox, the first to be so designated in the history of Gethsemani. This appointment followed the completion of the Annual Visitation on May 5 by the Father Immediate, Dom Louis de Gonzague le Pennuen, Abbot of Gethsemani's Motherhouse of Melleray in Brittany (France). With twenty-six temporary professed choir monks in formation, it became necessary to have a Father Master appointed to attend this "flock" within the community of Gethsemani.

Father Louis had been giving conferences to the novices since his ordination on the Feast of the Ascension in 1949, so when these novices made temporary vows, they moved out of the novitiate and became more identified with the solemnly professed choir monks. Father Louis's responsibility was to look after these fledgling monks, give them individual spiritual direction, and monitor their monastic and theological training. At that time the choir monks were automatically destined for the priesthood, so all the studies necessary for their ministry would have to be provided by competent monks of the Gethsemani community.

When Merton became Master of the Scholastics (or Students), he plunged into the task with great enthusiasm, as can be seen from

his journals of that period (*The Sign of Jonas*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), and in the letters that have more recently been published, especially his letters on religious renewal and spiritual direction (*The School of Charity*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) where he often writes of his spiritual flock and something of the blessings as well as the burdens involved in the task.

One of the recently rediscovered works written during this period, "A Balanced Life of Prayer," was obviously based on some of his conferences to the novices and junior professed, in which he mapped out a general program of monastic life and prayer, applicable to both monks and those dedicated to the spiritual journey among the laity. It was published as a pamphlet and dedicated "in respectful gratitude to Rev. Father Paul Philippe, O.P." (Trappist, Ky.: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1951). Father Philippe had been invited to Gethsemani to give conferences on the Christian life of prayer. One of his strong emphases was that Cistercian monks should be trained within the Cistercian tradition, and that the Cistercian Fathers (and Mothers) be made available to young monks in formation.

Father Louis, with enormous energy and great ability with languages, was providentially prepared to undertake such a ministry. He had already been giving conferences to the novices for two years using the four "Cistercian evangelists," Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St.-Thierry, Gueric of Igny and Aelred of Rievaulx, among others. Merton, more than anyone before him, used the Migne Patrology texts of the Cistercian tradition as a preparation for his classes. Since he kept very complete notes of these conferences on monastic orientation, we have copies of his working notebooks which he had mimeographed for the sake of the young monks, and which he circulated to other English-speaking monasteries, especially the daughterhouses of Gethsemani. It was the earliest beginnings of what would develop later as "Cistercian Studies." (Cistercian Publications has contracted with the Merton Legacy Trust to bring out twelve volumes of Merton's Monastic Orientation Notes.)

"A Balanced Life of Prayer" was well-received and became very popular when it first appeared in late 1951, but for several decades it has been totally inaccessible. Following the suggestion of my golden jubilarian confrere, Brother Nivard Stanton, who incidentally was one of Merton's first students in 1951, it was decided to reissue this early work in *The Merton Annual*. We are grateful to the trustees of the Merton

Legacy Trust for approving this reprint, and to the editors of *The Merton Annual* for making it available again after all these years.

The work is divided into four parts beginning with "The Object of the Life of Prayer" where Merton quotes Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians: "Pray without ceasing." This was taken up by the earliest monastic tradition of the Desert Fathers with Cassian in particular. Merton compared praying with breathing: "Prayer is as important for the life of the soul as breathing is for the life of the body." That is why we are instructed in the Gospel of Luke "to pray always and never give up." Merton relied here as elsewhere on John's basic text: "God first loved us." His entire prayer life can be considered a response to God's initiative.

Merton is practical in his approach to a life of prayer, and in the second part points out the obstacles and ways in which they may be overcome. He sees prayer as a spiritual activity of the highest order, engaging mind, soul and will. I will resist giving a commentary on Merton's own commentary on these obstacles, since they are spelled out so clearly in the following pages.

A word should be said about the third part of this pamphlet which deals with the subject of "Public Prayer and Sacrifice." Merton quotes extensively from Pope Pius XII's encyclicals *Mediator Dei* and *Menti Nostrae*, where the Christian is encouraged to pray with the entire Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, in public worship, especially the Eucharist. But really the entire sacramental life of the Church must be embraced by the Christian. This does not mean that there should be a rift between public and private prayer in the life of the Christian or the monk. Ideally one should complement the other. Merton would have more to say on this subject later on in his monastic life, especially in his monograph on "Action and Contemplation in St. Bernard of Clairvaux." (See *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980.)

The final section on "Mental Prayer and Contemplation" continues and develops this line of thought, which would occupy Merton's attention for years to come. Although he became a champion of the contemplative life and encouraged it in monks who were disposed for this kind of quiet resting in God, he also believed in the need for prayer in community, and for the monk this meant the Divine Office and the Eucharist. He saw liturgical prayer and mental or contemplative prayer as complementary, not opposed to each other.

Dedicated in respectful gratitude to
Rev. Father Paul Philippe, O.P.

A BALANCED LIFE OF PRAYER¹

1—The Object of the Life of Prayer

St. Paul told the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (I Thess. 5:17). At first that sounds rather hard, especially when we reflect that this is not a counsel but a commandment which cannot be ignored. And yet it is really quite simple. It is just as if Our Lord told us “You must keep on breathing, or else you will die.” The only difference is this: breathing is instinctive, prayer is not. But by rights prayer ought to be just as instinctive as breathing.

Prayer is as important for the life of the soul as breathing is for the life of the body. That is why the Gospel tells us “we ought always to pray and never to give up” (Luke 18:1).

If Adam had never fallen, prayer would have been second nature to us. But Christ, the New Adam, has raised up the whole human race to a heavenly life, restoring to man the grace which Adam lost and endowing our souls with the theological virtues and Gifts of the Holy Ghost which are the “organs” or faculties of our new supernatural being. By means of these faculties we can learn gradually to inhale and exhale in a manner that is inexpressibly wonderful because it is divine. For then we shall constantly be breathing with the very “breath” of God, that is to say we shall receive into our souls the “spiration” of the Holy Spirit, and we shall mystically “breathe” this Divine Spirit of Love back into God, since the Father and the Son, dwelling within us, “breathe” forth their mutual love in our souls. Their love for us becomes our love for them.

We are united to God as St. Bernard says, by the bond which unites the Father and the Son, Let us take courage then, and sing with

¹ Editor’s Note: This text is published as it originally appeared. I have made no changes in the text. I have respected the integrity of Merton’s writing and have avoided trying to make his language more gender inclusive. M.D.

the Psalmist: “I opened my mouth and gasped for breath because I longed for thy commandments” *Aperui os meum et attraxi spiritum, quia mandata tua desiderabam* (Psalm 118:131). It is theologically correct to apply this line to the thought we have just expressed, because the ardent desire to do the will of God is what draws the “breath” of the Holy Spirit of Love to enliven our souls.

It is by prayer that we lay open our souls to God and seek to “breathe” His life. The supreme object of prayer is the fulfilment of God’s Will.

A Practical Ideal

Someone will protest that this ideal is all very well for Carmelite Nuns and Cistercians, but what does it have to do with Laymen absorbed in business? With politicians, and with men of war?

They are the ones who most of all need to pray. The chaos of modern society is the result of our godlessness. The disintegration of our world is the corruption of a dead body that has lost the life of prayer.

The light of God enlightens every man who comes into this world. What does that mean? It means that there never was and never will be a man born who was not designed, by God, to become a saint. His plan for each human soul is sanctity, beatitude, union with God in heaven, perfect vision, perfect love, perfect happiness. This fulfilment exceeds everything that is due to nature or imaginable by nature. “No eye has ever seen and no ear has ever heard the things that God has prepared for those who love Him, and it has not even entered into the heart of man to imagine what they are like” (I Corinthians 2:9).

Why is it that men do not become saints? Not because God does not give them the grace to do so, but because they neglect the grace He gives them. In order to become saints, they have only to desire sanctity with an efficacious desire that embraces the God-given means to that end. The first and most fundamental expression of this desire is: *prayer*.

His Holiness Pope Pius XII has insisted on this in a recent document which will rank among the most important to have proceeded from the Holy See in our times. *Menti Nostrae* (Sept 23, 1950) is addressed primarily to the Catholic Priesthood but its teachings can also

be applied, with only slight modification, to all Christians. An important section of this letter of the Holy Father once again reproves the "heresy of action" which is one of the characteristic evils of our time. His Holiness defines the "heresy of action" as the activity "which is not based on the help of grace and *does not make constant use of the means, necessary to the pursuit of sanctity, given us by Christ.*"

One of the most important of these means is prayer.

Sanctity Should Be Normal

A life of sanctity and even in some sense a life of contemplation ought to be the normal development of our baptismal vocation. Let no one think such a claim is exaggerated. Pope Pius XII says explicitly in his Encyclical *Mediator Dei* that: "*The ideal of the Christian life is that each one be united to God in the closest and most intimate manner.*" The context explains that this is the whole reason for the complex liturgical life of the Catholic Church. At the beginning of *Menti Nostrae* His Holiness also points out that perfect charity which embraces all the virtues and constitutes sanctity or Christian perfection, ought to be the object of the constant striving of every man. The Holy Father says: "In whatever circumstances a man is placed he should direct his intentions and his actions toward this end." This is a sweeping statement. It allows of no exceptions. It includes everyone, from the cloistered nun to the busy housewife, the priest, the lawyer, the doctor, the mechanic, the farmer. No one is excepted. No moment of man's life is excluded from this law. At all times, no matter where we are and what we are doing, our intentions should be at least virtually directed toward the perfect union of love with God, and all our actions should be carrying us forward, in some way or other, toward that end. This does not mean that we can no longer lead ordinary lives. But our work, our duties and all our interests must be transfigured by a supernatural intention, divinized by charity so that even our most common and routine actions can become a sacrifice of praise to God.

There is only one way in which this can be done: *by a life of prayer.*

2—Obstacles to the Life of Prayer— How to Overcome Them

There are many obstacles to the life of prayer. One of the most important of these is *ignorance*. So many people do not really know what prayer is.

They know that when they were children their mothers taught them to kneel down and recite some words before going to bed. They vaguely remember that something in their nature told them instinctively that this was a good and fitting thing to do. Yet later on they forgot to do it any more.

At other times they wander into a church and hear groups of people saying the Rosary together or reciting other vocal prayers. It seems to be a good thing. But yet the meaning of it all does not quite register, as the saying goes.

What is the trouble? Prayer cannot properly be understood if we see only the surface, the accidentals. The essence of prayer does not consist in kneeling down or assuming some other position, nor does it even consist in reciting certain set forms of words. Still less is the value of prayer measured by the amount of time you spend on your knees or by the number of words you recite.

There are two popular definitions of prayer. One that it is a "lifting of the mind and heart to God" and the other that it is "asking God for things that are for our good." Both of these really come to the same thing. We cannot ask God intelligently for anything unless we lift our minds and hearts to Him and we cannot raise our souls to Him without asking Him at least to hear us and to receive our prayer!

Intelligence and Love

First of all, prayer is a spiritual activity. This activity engages the highest faculties of our soul, our mind and our will. To be valid, prayer must be intelligent and it must be an act of sincere love. Already we can see that prayer is one of the most perfect actions a man can perform. When we pray properly we are exercising our intelligence and we are working with our will. This cannot be done without interior discipline. The more we practice prayer the stronger do these higher faculties become, and so they regain their lost control over the passions which are the root of all prejudice and of all error. Thus, in the natural order alone, the true practice of prayer would be sufficient to elevate and purify the soul to some extent. But this presupposes that prayer is really *prayer* and not pious automatism, or mere exterior formalism, or, worse still, an act of blind superstition. These dangers must all be obviated by the constant striving for *intelligent attention* and for a sincere, earnest and fervent *intention* of the will.

One of the greatest works a man can perform is to devote his life to the constant purification of the thought and love which go to make up his interior life. In so doing, he offers the best that is in him to God. And besides, since man's body and soul form a single vital unit, a reasonable person, we cannot elevate our minds and hearts to God without also at the same time consecrating to Him our bodies and the work of our hands. What is more, when our work belongs to God it consecrates to Him everything that we work with. Thus the man of prayer not only sanctifies himself but sanctifies everything around him, and makes the whole world resound with the praise of its Creator.

Divine Grace

So far we have considered only the human agent at work in prayer. We have spoken as if prayer were an act man performed all by himself and as if God were a distant and silent listener. Actually, this is not enough. The prayer of a Christian must be strictly supernatural. That is to say it must be a *divine* activity produced in us, with our free cooperation, by God's grace. St. Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit not only teaches us how to pray but actually prays in our souls with movements of desire that are like deep, unheard sighs in the secret places of the soul. These cries of the Divine Spirit in the depths of our being are rendered in the familiar Douay translation of the Bible by a rather baffling expression: "For we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit Himself asketh for us with unspeakable groanings" (Romans, 8:26). Some who do not grasp the import of this quaint turn of phrase never recognize in themselves the sweet and profound inspirations of love and desire with which Divine grace touches their souls and awakens them to pray.

If prayer proceeds from grace, that is from the divine power that floods our souls when they become Temples of God and shine with the light of His presence, grace must also make use of other instruments or faculties. These "faculties" are the infused virtues, especially the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Faith is a habit which elevates our intelligence in a mysterious manner to a level far above our own nature so that we can grasp the mysteries which God alone reveals because He alone contemplates their infinite intelligibility. Hope and love endow our wills with supernatural power and make us cling to God with our whole being, so that we become "one spirit" with Him (I Cor. 6:17).

The amazing consequence of all this is that as soon as the soul is inspired to pray, *it can be morally certain of the presence and action of God within itself.*

St. Paul assures us that we cannot even call upon the Name of Jesus with meritorious sentiments of love and trust unless the Holy Spirit inspires us to do so. Now the Holy Spirit is present wherever He acts, and in any case this inspiration is only attributed to the Holy Spirit, being, in actual fact, common to the Three Divine Persons. Hence no matter how terrible your state may seem to be, no matter how bitterly you are attacked by temptations, and no matter how perturbed your imagination may be with dark thoughts and terrifying images, no matter what may have been your past sins, you could not call upon the Redeemer with love and faith unless God were at work within you, pouring grace into your soul and moving you to pray. It follows that at such a time, God is making Himself intimately present to you in the operation of His grace. If you turn to Him and receive the love He offers you, you have placed your foot upon the narrow path that leads straight upward to the summit of sanctity. But you must be prepared to continue the long journey and to overcome many obstacles before you reach the goal.

Nevertheless, remember that you could not begin to love God unless God had first loved you. St. John tells us so explicitly: "In this is charity: not as though we had loved God, but because He hath first loved us and sent His Son to be a propitiation for our sins" (I John, 4:10).

The Parable of The Sower

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus compares this good beginning to the sowing of a seed. Many men feel the impulse to pray. There is no man who reaches the age of reason and does not at some time or other feel impelled to turn to God. But many reject this inspiration. No doubt a large number fail to go on with prayer because they have no idea what it is all about. The vast majority of mankind is plunged in almost total ignorance of the things of God. That is why Jesus said that some of the seed fell by the wayside, and was snatched up by birds—the devils carry it away. This is the trouble with minds that are blinded by prejudice or superstition or else held in complete captivity by falsity and attachment to sin.

At other times, the inspirations of grace and the seed of the divine word fall upon souls that are like rock. They are to some extent willing to receive God's truth. They at least expose their minds to some book or some radio sermon. They consider it for a moment and find that it has a certain appeal. But they do not allow the seed to take root. Why is this? Because they weigh God's truth in the balance of purely natural considerations. They will listen to a sermon if it is well-preached and they will read a book if it is a best-seller. But the trouble is they listen to any good speaker and they read all the best sellers. They accept, with complete indifference, all kinds of contradictory doctrines provided they happen to be in fashion at the moment. Ours is a society in which the Truth is only sometimes fashionable.

But the greatest tragedy is that of men who are capable of leading lives of prayer but never do so. They are intelligent. They have good will and they lead good and even religious lives. It may be that they even consecrate themselves to God. But they do not take the trouble to develop their supernatural "talents." They do not cultivate the good ground of their soul. It becomes overgrown with thorns and weeds and the seed of God's word is choked to death by business, pleasures and all the cares and anxieties which preoccupy the children of this world.

Asceticism

It is hard work to keep our souls clear of these weeds. But we are obliged to do so if we wish to preserve the divine life within us and bear fruit for the glory of God in lives of prayer.

Our most important work in life is the job of keeping our souls and their faculties clear and unobstructed so that they can always, under all circumstances, respond to God's grace. Our life of prayer must always, at the same time, be a life of sacrifice. Otherwise our prayer will easily degenerate into routine and formalism. Thought will give place to mere habit, attention will be lost in distractions, love will cool and turn into indifference.

However, if we seek to overcome all these defects by a mere violent application of our will, by the multiplication of more prayers, by longer periods of prayer coupled with mental exertion we shall not do much to remedy matters.

It is very necessary for religious people to be on their guard against sentimentality. Some people do not know the difference be-

tween sentimentality and love, or the distinction between love and charity. Love is a movement of the will toward an object that is at least apparently good. Love is objective and concrete. Charity is supernatural love, prompted by divine grace and terminating in God Himself, who is the Infinite Good. Charity too is supremely concrete and objective. *Sentimentality* on the other hand is a weak, superficial emotion in which the will is not really directed to a definite object but rather rebounds from the object, and turns inward upon itself in order to feast on feelings and imagination.

When this definition of sentimentality is understood, we can see that it is an extremely dangerous thing. Sentimentality makes human love selfish, insipid and maudlin. It tends to destroy charity at its very roots. Sentimentality is essentially ego-centric and therefore futile, but charity, which is the very essence of spiritual life and of perfection, involves the complete gift of ourselves to the Infinite God. The sentimental mind gradually succumbs to a vicious inclination to substitute the *imaginary* for the *real*. Religious sentimentalism pretends to love God, pretends to pray, but actually exhausts the soul in futile emotions and in the cult of sweet interior feelings without any real self-sacrifice, humility, or consideration for one's neighbor.

Balance and Freedom

Intelligence and love are the hall-marks of true spirituality. Intelligence brings order and balance into everything we do. Our first concern should be to make use of the best means to liberate all our capacities to pray, to give ourselves room to develop. A life of prayer must, like every other life, receive constant and sufficient nourishment. It must have room to expand and grow. It must be rich, deep, spontaneous and, in the best sense, free. But freedom is incompatible with anarchy. It requires direction. For all these elements we can do no better than consult the mind of the Church herself.

The Modern Popes have constantly insisted on the need for *balance* and *fullness* in the Catholic's life of prayer. The word "catholic" means "universal," "all-embracing." *Catholic prayer should then allow full expression to every genuine religious need of the human soul.*

Now every man is at the same time an individual person and a member of society. He is therefore instinctively impelled to worship God both as an individual and as a member of society. Furthermore, he belongs to more than one society. The Church has never sought

to force men into a mould. The Church is practically the only Body in the world today that has a complete awareness of and respect for the dignity of the human person as well as a full understanding of the needs of particular local and national groups. A balanced life of prayer must therefore be one in which a man is able:

(1) To pray to God in the universally valid public prayer of the Mystical Body of Christ, a prayer based on the eternal truths of dogma and centered in the supremely efficacious redemptive action of the Liturgical Mysteries;

(2) To pray to God publicly according to the needs and the situation of a particular time, race, nation, region, and so forth;

(3) To arrive at the most intimately personal communion with God in the solitude of his own heart.

The first need is satisfied by the *Liturgy*, above all by the *Holy Mass*. The second need is satisfied by *non-liturgical* devotions, both public and private (for instance devotions to St. Anne, in Quebec; pilgrimages to St. James of Compostella in the Middle Ages; devotion to Our Lady of Fatima in the twentieth century, etc.). The third need, which is usually the least recognized, demands to be satisfied by *mental prayer, contemplation* and a life of sustained personal union with God.

A Dangerous Error

Pius XII has characterized as "false, insidious and pernicious" the error of those who taught that there was no place in the life of prayer for what they called "subjective piety" (groups 2 and especially 3 above). This error wanted to make us believe that the *only* kind of prayer worthy of consideration was liturgical public prayer, and that one could not reconcile this public prayer with individual asceticism and contemplation. Pius XII says: "Unquestionably liturgical prayer is *superior in excellence* to private prayers but this does *not at all imply contrast or incompatibility* between these two kinds of prayer." (*Mediator Dei*)

3—Public Prayer and Sacrifice

Pope Pius XII reminds us, in *Mediator Dei*, that man has a fundamental duty to orientate his entire being and his life to God. This orientation is obligatory not only for each individual but for every level of human society and for mankind at large. Personal life, family life, civic

life, and every aspect of human existence is bound by the natural law to be centered upon God the Creator of all life and the source and guarantee of all order. Failure to obey this law, which is implanted in us as one of the deepest needs of human nature, results in the terror and carnage of a time like our own.

This orientation of man to God means three things: the acknowledgment of His supreme authority, the submissive acceptance of His Truth and complete obedience to His divine Law. Now although these obligations are binding upon us by our very nature, nature alone does not adequately fulfil them. This is because all men are now living, in actual fact, in a supernatural order in which these obligations exceed the capacities of our nature. The mission of the Church on earth is to bring all men and all human society to a life centered in God. This she does by her teaching authority, by her judiciary power and above all by her work of sanctification. This is centered in the public prayer and the Sacramental Life of the Church which finds its highest expression in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Transformation in Christ

As Pius XII says, the orientation of mankind to God is fully achieved only when "Christ lives and thrives as it were in the hearts of men and when men's hearts are fashioned and expanded as though by Christ." (*Mediator Dei*) This implies something more than the adaptation of men's minds to the doctrine of Christ, for Christianity is more than a doctrine. The fullest expression of the ideal proposed to us by the Church is nothing less than mystical *transformation* in Christ. The chief means of this transformation is Christ's Holy Sacrifice.

When they declare that we must strive after the most intimate union with God and orientate our whole lives towards Him, the Encyclicals of Pius XII are not proposing a vague ideal. The meaning of this terminology is quite precise and the means to arrive at this end are well defined. The foundation of the life of prayer is *active participation* in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Some people think that "active participation" in the Mass means busily leafing through a missal in order to follow the priest at the altar. It is quite true that the use of a missal should normally be a great *help* towards this active participation. But neither the use of a missal nor participation in a dialogue-Mass constitutes the essence of true active participation in the Holy Sacrifice.

There are two ways in which we actively participate in a sacrifice: as *priests* and as *victims*. Only the Sacrament of Holy Orders can give us the power to share in the strict sense in the priesthood of Christ at Mass. The priest consecrates the Sacred Species in the Person of Christ, acting as an instrument of God, because his soul is marked with an indelible character conforming it to the soul of Christ as priest. But all the faithful are priests in a broad sense because their *baptismal character* conforms them to Christ and they are able to offer the Holy Sacrifice by uniting their intentions with those of the priest.

Besides participating in the Mass as priests we have not only the privilege but the *obligation* of participating in it as victims. This, says Pius XII, is necessary if the sacrifice is to have its full effect. (*Mediator Dei*) In *Menti Nostrae* the Holy Father insists, in the strongest terms, that the priest has a special obligation to unite himself with Christ as victim and offer himself to the heavenly Father in union with Jesus on the altar.

This conformity with Christ as priest and victim is the very essence of liturgical contemplation. Without it, liturgy is an empty form or at best an academic and social function. What does this conformity mean in practice? The very heart of the Liturgical year is Holy Week, when the Church celebrates the institution of the Holy Mysteries and the Redemptive Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. All through Holy Week the liturgy resounds with the words of St. Paul: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus . . . Who emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant . . . and humbled Himself becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the Cross" (Philippians 2:5-8). These words are a concise expression of what it means to participate actively in the sacrifice of Christ. This participation means *conforming our minds and hearts* ("Let this mind be in you") to the obedience and the humility and the total self-oblation of our Divine Redeemer in His death on the Cross for love of us. Active participation in the liturgy is therefore not mere artistic appreciation of the prayers and chant and ceremonies; it is the gift of ourselves in union with the Sacrifice on the Altar, in an act which involves the practice of the highest virtues and above all of perfect charity. Mass is the early Christian *Agape* or feast of love. We know that we have truly taken active part in it not when we have savored the beautiful prayers but when we come forth from the Church inspired with deep contrition for our sins, filled with the resolution to lead new lives for love of Christ and above all united to our neigh-

bors in sincere and unselfish love. Pius XII says, in clear and simple words: "All the elements of the liturgy would have us reproduce in our hearts the likeness of the Divine Redeemer through the mystery of the Cross." (*Mediator Dei*)

Humility and Obedience

The orientation of the faithful to God means, in actual practice, that they must all make the Mass the most important thing in their lives and direct their strivings in the most concrete possible way to union with the Crucified Savior. Pius XII says this most explicitly in *Menti Nostrae*. The priest "must orient his life towards that sacrifice in which he must needs offer and immolate himself with Christ." In an earlier paragraph, Pope Pius XII explained just what was the essence of this self-immolation, from an ascetic point of view. Our immolation is above all a sacrifice of our *will*. This is not merely a blind renunciation of liberty, but an enlightened and glorious obedience guided by humility and therefore perfectly conformed to Truth. The Holy Father says: "The spirit of humility illumined by faith, disposes the soul to immolation of the will by means of obedience." (*Menti Nostrae*) It is in this way above all that we reproduce in our souls the likeness of the Redeemer who for our sakes "became obedient unto death."

Thought and Sacrifice

The most effective way of participating in the Liturgy is to follow as intelligently as we can the deep dogmatic meaning of the prayers and rites in order that our hearts may share the dispositions which liturgical prayer is meant to arouse. These dispositions are none other than those of Christ Himself. For Catholic Doctrine teaches that the prayer of the Church is the prayer of Christ. As Pope Pius XII says in *Mediator Dei*, "Through His Spirit in us, Christ entertreats the Father." This is merely an echo of St. Paul. It is quite clear then that we should make every effort to understand the liturgy in order that we might "make our own those sentiments in which we are elevated to heaven." (*Mediator Dei*)

It may require effort to enter into the beauties of the liturgy. The prayers of the Missal form the matter for real and serious study. But

anyone who undertakes this effort will find himself richly rewarded. The theological content of the Missal, made up as it is of the most beautiful texts of Sacred Scripture and the liturgical compositions of the Church, is one of the greatest treasures we have on earth. To pray with the Church, in the Liturgy, is a guarantee that our prayer is *intelligent* and that our hearts will be protected against the menace of sentimentality. The Liturgy is *never sentimental*. Always calm, objective and serene, it meditates upon the Mysteries of Faith with clear-sighted objectivity. Liturgical prayer is a true school of enlightenment and order. And yet this prayer which by its universality is adapted to all men of every race and century, nevertheless permits each individual to give expression to his deepest personal needs and to arrive at the most intimate contact with God in the secret depths of his own soul. Thus the Liturgy, far from being cold, enkindles in us the purest and most powerful of loves, and strengthens the soul with a charity that will sooner or later effect our complete transformation in Christ.

Non-liturgical Devotions

It should not be necessary to add that there are other forms of devotion which play an integral part in Catholic life. These devotions are non-liturgical. They do not form part of the official public prayer of the Church. Nevertheless everyone knows that the Rosary, for instance, is almost as characteristically Catholic as the Mass itself!

For this reason it would be quite wrong to suppose that non-liturgical devotions are merely an expedient which the Church tolerates in order to satisfy the spiritual needs of those who cannot enter more fully into the meaning of the Liturgy. We cannot believe that the Liturgy alone dispenses a man from these other, simpler devotions which generally attach themselves to some particular aspect or phase of Catholic life. A truly balanced life of prayer demands a certain element of non-liturgical devotion. The Rosary did not exist in the time of the Church Fathers, yet nevertheless they had an intense and simple devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is proved by their writings in her honor and by the dogmatic declarations of the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.). There has always existed devotion to our Lady outside the Liturgy, but this devotion takes different forms in different ages.

Non-liturgical devotions are extremely numerous. Some of them are only temporary. Others, like the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross

and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament have finally entered into the permanent heritage of Catholic piety.

The use of non-liturgical devotions must be marked at the same time with *freedom* and with *discretion*. The faithful must be allowed freely to follow their attraction to any devotion approved by Ecclesiastical Superiors. On the other hand, we must take care to test the spiritual value of our attractions to *new devotions* and to restrain a vain and curious multiplication of devotional practices, at the expense of a deep interior life.

In a balanced spiritual life, one or two well established non-liturgical devotions (especially the Rosary) will always play a part. Besides these, the individual will feel attracted to a few particular saints, to the special use of certain prayers and pious practices. This attraction ought to be marked by order and moderation. We must at all costs avoid levity and superficiality in our devotions.

It is to be noticed that the Holy See has issued special warnings, in our time, against the superstitious credulity with which some of the faithful rush to the scene of so-called "apparitions" and "miracles." The true Catholic sense will prompt us to accept all unusual manifestations of the "supernatural" with discreet reserve.

4—Mental Prayer and Contemplation

From what has been said about the Liturgy, it is clear that a fully active participation in the Mass implies some sort of "mental power." Of course, liturgical prayer is essentially vocal prayer. But the vocal prayers of the liturgy are meant to stimulate acts of thought and affection in our hearts which turn into mental prayer and even into contemplation. When the priest leaves the altar, and when the communicant returns from the communion rail, the soul should find itself aflame with light and love, and the normal effect of Holy Communion should be a period of deep absorption in the transforming action of the Blessed Sacrament.

As St. Benedict foresaw, in his great monastic rule (6th century) liturgical prayer tends to prolong itself in private contemplation. But this contemplative effect will be less powerful if we do not understand the message of the liturgical texts. Hence, mental prayer also plays an important part in preparing us for the liturgy. The beginner in the spiritual life ought assiduously to meditate on the prayers of the Missal

and above all on the Gospels and Epistles of the various feasts and Sundays. For here he will absorb the word of God which is the true seed of contemplation. Therefore Pius XII says that mental prayer is "the best means of preparation before and thanksgiving after Mass (and communion)." (*Menti Nostrae*)

In this particular passage the Holy Father was not referring especially to meditation on the liturgy. He was insisting on the immense importance of mental prayer as such. His remarks are addressed to priests, but they apply to all Christians, though perhaps with somewhat less urgency.

Pius XII insists that without meditation we cannot acquire perfect dominion over ourselves and our senses, we cannot purify our hearts and live true lives of virtue and we cannot generously and faithfully carry out our duties as priests (or as religious or even active Christians). So great is the importance of mental prayer that the Holy Father insists upon it in the strongest possible terms. Here are his words:

"IT MUST THEREFORE BE SAID WITHOUT RESERVATION THAT NO OTHER MEANS HAS THE UNIQUE EFFICACY OF MEDITATION AND IN CONSEQUENCE ITS DAILY PRACTICE CAN IN NO WISE BE SUBSTITUTED FOR." (*Menti Nostrae*)

This declaration is addressed to priests but applies with equal force to all clerics and religious to whom meditation is recommended by the law of the Church. The Catholic layman will also do well to take it to heart.

Everyone should read the passage in the Autobiography of St. Theresa of Avila in which she describes the benefits of mental prayer (*Life, ch. 8*). She says, among other things, that when a person takes up the practice of meditation, "if that soul perseveres notwithstanding the sins, temptations and falls of a thousand kinds into which the devil leads it, the Lord, I am certain, will bring it to the harbor of salvation."

Now this is not like the specious claims that are sometimes put forth for the recitation of this or that "efficacious prayer." St. Theresa's words have a solid foundation not only in theology but in plain common sense. The true practice of mental prayer fulfils all the conditions that we laid down at the beginning of this essay. It raises the mind to God in thought, unites the heart to Him in love, purifies the whole soul by the action of grace and the theological virtues, enables it to overcome all deliberate sin and disposes it proximately for the gift of mystical contemplation.

What is meditation? St. Thomas and St. Bernard describe mental prayer (*consideratio*) as the "quest for truth" (*inquisitio veritatis*). Intellectual study is also a quest for truth. But if mental prayer is study and nothing more it will not be of very great profit to the soul. The distinctive element of mental prayer is that it is a search that *springs from love and ends in greater love*. St. Albert the Great points out that "the contemplation of philosophers seeks nothing but the perfection of the one contemplating and it goes no further than the intellect. But the contemplation of the saints is *fired by the love of the One contemplated, that is God*. Therefore it does not come to an end in an act of intelligence but passes on to the will by love." His great disciple, St. Thomas Aquinas, remarks tersely that for this very reason the contemplative's knowledge of the highest truth is a knowledge arrived at, at least on this earth, by the light of burning love: *per ardorem caritatis datur cognitio veritatis* (Commentary on St. John's Gospel, ch. 5).

The mind and will must work together in mental prayer. But they must not seek proficiency in meditation merely for its own sake alone. The Christian contemplative is not interested in simply becoming a disciplined adept, who can confront the evils of life with supreme indifference because he knows how to recollect himself and hold his mind above them. The only function of mental prayer for a Catholic is union with God through Jesus Christ. Now when we look closely at this function we find that the object of mental prayer and the object of liturgical prayer are ultimately one and the same thing: "Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus." It is perfect conformity with Christ's obedience, love and self-oblation in order that through His Sacrifice we may be united to the Father. Hence the fruits of a good meditation will be much the same as the fruits of active participation in the Sacrifice of the Mass.

The peculiar value of meditation is that it is more *personal* and *private* and therefore allows us to develop in the way that is demanded by our own personal needs, our temperament, character, our work, our surroundings and all the rest.

It is a shame that meditation is sometimes a dreary and stereotyped "exercise." Above all at the time of mental prayer the soul should be allowed all freedom for spontaneous and personal communion with God. Meditation is best practiced in an atmosphere of silence and peace. Solitude is a great help in mental prayer. But each individual ought to find the time and place that is best for him or her. Without prejudice to the schedule prescribed by a religious rule, we can reserve

one of our free intervals for the practice of solitary communion with God under the conditions most favorable for our own souls. Many who simply fall asleep when they make their meditation sitting together in chapel would profit greatly by learning to commune with God out under the sky, or alone in their room. It is of course quite obvious that the most fruitful moments of mental prayer will come to us in our private visits to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament when the chapel is quiet and we are practically alone with Him.

But these factors are external and accidental. The great benefit of mental prayer is that it brings us quickly into communion with the Three Divine Persons dwelling in the depths of our souls. This is the proximate end that we should aim at in all our mental prayer: a vital and loving awareness of the presence of God. We should reflect on these words of St. John of the Cross: "Oh thou soul, most beautiful of creatures, who so ardently longest to know the place where thy Beloved is, that thou mayest seek Him and be united to Him, *thou art thyself that very tabernacle where He dwells*, the secret chamber of His retreat where He is hidden!" (Spiritual Canticle)

The Sacraments, working *ex opere operato*, are the normal means by which this secret presence of God is conferred upon the soul and gains greater possession of our being. Nevertheless, if God comes to dwell in us as in His temple it is above all in order that He may be known and worshipped there. It is a tragedy that so few know how to take advantage of the graces conferred upon them by the Sacraments in order to retire within their hearts and rest in silent adoration of their Divine Guest. Jesus gave us Holy Communion not only in order to refresh and nourish our souls from time to time, but in order that He might feast with us in our hearts in a perpetual banquet of the Spirit. And in this banquet there is no weariness because spiritual joys, unlike those of sense, increase our hunger while we taste of them. This is exactly the opposite to the pleasures of sense which nauseate us when we take our fill. Jesus tells us in the *Apocalypse* of His desire for this intimate and silent communion with souls who give themselves to Him in lives of prayer: "Behold I stand at the gate and knock. If any man shall hear my voice and open to me, I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with me" (Apoc. 3:20).

The ways of mental prayer do not always lead us through sweetness and consolation. On the contrary, in order to raise us above our nature and enable us to taste the pure joys of mystical union, the Holy

Spirit purifies the soul and detaches our weak human senses from interior consolation. The secret of progress in mental prayer lies above all in the humble acceptance of spiritual dryness and interior trial. But here we are close to the heart of the matter, because in mental prayer, more than any other, the way to perfection is the way of the Cross.

The End

Ex Parte Ordinis—

*Nihil Obstat—*fr M. Paul Bourne, O.C.S.O.

fr M. Maurice Molloy, O.C.S.O.

Censores deputati.

Imprimi Potest

fr M. Dominique Nogues, O.C.S.O.

Abbas Generalis

*

Imprimatur:

† JOHN A. FLOERSH,
Archbishop of Louisville
July 30th, 1951

*This pamphlet is published by
The Cistercian Monks of the Strict Observance
(Trappists)*

*Copyright 1951 by the Abbey of Gethsemani
Trappist, Kentucky*