

FIRST PART

ON PRAYER IN GENERAL

CHAPTER I

OF PRAYER AND ESPECIALLY OF VOCAL PRAYER

§ I.—NOTION OF PRAYER IN GENERAL.

In its widest sense, “prayer is an elevation of the soul to God.”¹ This formula, borrowed from St. John Damascene, has become classical.

The soul, therefore, leaves aside the useless thoughts, the nothings, the frivolities, which too often invade it; it abandons the thoughts which are good at another time, such as all questions of business, of work, of office; it raises itself above the earth and the things of earth; its mind and its affections ascend to heaven; they stop not even at the choirs of Angels and of Saints, unless indeed, our prayer is directly addressed to them; they ascend even to God, they rest in God, *ascensus mentis in Deum*. There, fixed in God, we look affectionately

¹ *Ascensus mentis in Deum*. St. John Dam., *De Fide Orth.*, l. iii, c. 24

at God,¹ we enter into *conversation with God*,² and God deigns to listen to us with love, as a father to his children, and to reply to us by granting us interior lights and affections.—Oh, to what a height does prayer raise the soul, and what an honour it is for a being sprung from nothing!

Prayer, in its widest sense, does four things: it adores, asks pardon, gives thanks, and begs for graces.

1^o.—It adores. By prayer we kneel before the infinite Majesty and perfections of God, making ourselves quite little, we contemplate, admire, believe, hope, have confidence, love, praise, rejoice in the glory which God finds in Himself and in His creatures, we are afflicted to see Him so little known and so much offended, desire to glorify Him and make Him glorified, and arm ourselves with a holy zeal. Or, considering God as its Creator and its sovereign Master, the devout soul adores Him, and subjects itself humbly to Him, it admires and blesses the ways of Providence, it resolves to obey, and even reaches to the height of abandoning itself with confidence and love into the hands of God.

2^o.—It asks pardon. Recalling all its years in the bitterness of a contrite and humbled heart, the soul confesses its faults before God, feels shame and confusion, expresses its repentance, appeals to

¹ *Oratio est namque mentis ad Deum affectuosa intentio.* St. Aug., *Serm.* ix. n. 3.

² *Oratio conversatio sermocinatioque cum Deo est.* St. Greg. Nyss. *Orat. I. de Orat. Dom.*—*Oratio colloqui est cum Deo.* St. Chrys., *Hom.* xxx. in *Gen.*

the Divine mercy, takes salutary resolutions, performs penance, and accepts willingly the austerities prescribed by the Rule and the crosses sent by Providence.

3°.—It traces up to God with thanksgiving all the general and particular benefits which it has received from Him. And often, while it overflows with sentiments of gratitude, struck by the Divine goodness and infinite charity of which all these benefits are the manifestation, it rises easily from gratitude to love, thus discharging the primary function of prayer.

4°.—Finally, the soul begs new graces, temporal and spiritual, for herself and for all who are dear to her, pleading in turn the cause of God Himself, of His Church, militant or suffering, of her own country, of the clergy and religious, especially of her own Order, of the just and of sinners, &c., &c.

To repeat, prayer is an elevation of the soul to God, to adore Him, to thank Him, to beg pardon and ask for graces.

Schram¹ makes a very just remark which he borrows from Suarez.² “Prayer can apply itself to any one of the acts we have just enumerated in preference to any of the others. Nay, more, vocal or mental prayer, however prolonged, may limit itself to a single one of these acts, because there is no obligation nor necessity to join them always together, and also because it may happen that more fruit, more fervour and devotion may be

¹ Schram, Ed. Vivès, 1874. *Theol. Myst.*, t. 1st § xxii. bis.

² Suarez, *De Relig.*, l. ii. c. 3.

derived from the continuous dwelling upon a single one than from dwelling upon them all at one time. In such a case we ought to confine ourselves to that one which is more profitable, without trying to go through them all in the one prayer.”

It must, however, be noted, that, if we confine ourselves to praising, to thanking God, and expressing our repentance for the past, we have indeed performed excellent acts of virtue, but we have not been praying, in the strictest sense of the word, for the first three functions belong to prayer only when taken in its widest sense. In its strictest sense, it consists in petition, and may be then defined with St. John Damascene: “The asking of seemly things from God,”¹ that is, things which may glorify God and do good to our soul, and hence which are conformable to the Divine good-pleasure. It is also defined: an act by which the intelligence as interpreter of the will expresses a desire of the soul and strives to induce God to grant it to us.

Prayer, considered as petition, consists entirely in expressing to God some desire in order that He may hear it favourably; a real desire is, therefore, its primary and essential condition; without this, we are merely moving the lips, going through a form of words which is not the expression of our will; and thus our prayer is only an appearance without reality. The way, then, to excite ourselves to pray, to put life and fervour into our prayer, and to make of it a cry which, breaking

¹ *Petitio decentium a Deo. De Fide Orth.*, l. iii. c. 24.

forth from the depths of the soul, penetrates even to heaven, is to conceive the real desire mentioned above, to excite it, to cherish it; for the fervour of our prayer will be in proportion to the strength of the desire we have to be heard; just as what we have but little at heart we ask for only in a half-hearted way, if even we ask it at all; so what we desire with our whole soul we ask for with words of fire, and plead for it before God with an eloquence that is very real.

§ II.—VOCAL PRAYER AND MENTAL PRAYER.

Leaving aside whatever belongs not to our present subject, we will confine ourselves to saying that prayer is divided into vocal and mental.

Vocal prayer is that which is made by using words or signs, or, perhaps, more exactly by using some approved form of words, which we read or recite; such as, the divine office, the beads, the Angelus, grace before and after meals, &c. Mental prayer is that which is made without employing either words or formulas of any kind.

A large share is given to the former in our daily exercises. The liturgical prayers are imposed by the laws of the Church; by our rules also we are enjoined certain vocal prayers; and others, like the beads, are in such constant use amongst the faithful generally, that a good religious would not wish to omit them. Vocal prayer is not to be despised, for, if well made, it pays to God the homage of our body as well as that of our soul. A heart full of

devotion pours itself out quite naturally in words and signs which express externally its interior sentiments; on the other hand, when there is need to excite such sentiments, these pious formulas fix the attention of the mind, and call forth the devotion of the heart. "It is for this reason," says St. Thomas,¹ "we must, in private prayer, make use of these words and signs *as far as they are useful* to arouse the mind interiorly; but if they *should end by distracting it* or causing it any hindrance, we must cease to make use of them, and this is the case especially of those whose mind is sufficiently prepared for devotion without these external expressions."

This last observation of St. Thomas shows to what extent each one ought to devote himself to vocal prayer, outside prayers of obligation or those prescribed by the rules. According to Schram,² for those who are not called to a more elevated prayer, vocal prayer well made may well suffice to enable them to lead a Christian and even a perfect life, especially if they are urged to this by a special movement from God—an impulse which may be recognised by its effects. . . . Nay more, St. Bonaventure recommends vocal prayers to the more devout, that they may have the good custom of ruminating them when their devotion flags.

St. Teresa knew several who from vocal prayer were raised by God to a very sublime degree of contemplation." "I know," says she, "a person

¹ 2, 2, q. 83, a. 12.

² Schram, *Theol. Myst.*, § 36.

who never being able to pray otherwise than vocally, was yet in possession of all the other degrees of prayer. . . . She came to me one day much afflicted at not being able to make mental prayer nor to apply herself to contemplation, finding herself reduced to saying only some vocal prayers. I asked her what they were, and I found that while saying continually the *Pater*, she used to enter into so high a contemplation that it was evident Our Lord raised her even to divine union; and her actions indeed showed it, for she lived a holy life. So I praised Our Lord and envied such a vocal prayer.”¹ That does not prevent the saint from strongly urging mental prayer upon her daughters, and even telling them that *they should make every effort* to arrive at mystical contemplation *if it is God’s will*.² Religious will generally derive more profit from practising mental prayer, all the more because a considerable part of their time is already devoted to the exercise of vocal prayer in common. At all events, it is better to recite fewer vocal prayers, and to say them with recollection and devotion, than to try to get through a great number hastily; neither should we take upon us so many as to end by being disgusted. And “if during vocal prayer,” says St. Francis of Sales,³ “you feel your heart drawn and invited to interior or mental prayer, refuse not to follow this attraction, but allow your thoughts to flow freely in that

¹ *Way of Perfection*, xxxi.

² *Ibid.*, xviii.

³ *Devout Life*, 2nd part, c. i. n. 8.

direction, and be not troubled at not having finished the vocal prayers which you had intended to say; for the mental prayer which you will make in their stead will be more agreeable to God and more useful to your soul." Vocal prayers of obligation, however, are always to be said.

§ III.—ATTENTION IN VOCAL PRAYERS.

We must not confine ourselves to reciting the words with our lips; it is necessary that we should raise to God our mind by attention, our heart by devotion, and our will by submission. "If any one," says St. Thomas, "is voluntarily distracted it is a sin, and that hinders the fruit of the prayer."¹ We must herein be all the more watchful over ourselves, because habit easily begets routine. It is not, however, *of obligation*, in fact it is morally impossible, that the attention of the mind be always actual. "It is sufficient," says M. Ribet,² "that the will perseveres, and the will to pray is suspended only by a distraction freely consented to."

Nay, more, according to St. Thomas,³ in order that *vocal* prayer be *meritorious* and obtain its effect, it is not necessary that the attention remains actual to the end; it suffices to have begun with an attention which is not afterwards retracted by any voluntary distraction. But prayer so made does

¹ S. Th., 2, 2. q. 83, a. 13, ad 3.

² M. Ribet, *Ascét. Chrét.*, c. xxv. 7.

³ S. Th., 2, 2. q. 83, a. 13

not nourish the soul with the sap of devotion. Some bring forward as an objection to this the words of St. Gregory¹: "God listens not to him who while praying listens not to himself." St. Thomas teaches that this holds good only when prayer is begun and continued without attention. According to this consoling doctrine, when we begin well, and afterwards in spite of us our mind wanders, the prayer, which we continue to say with this involuntary distraction, will not be entirely devoid of merit and effect. But then it must be admitted that if the soul could only keep herself more attentive the merit and fruit would be greater.

It is, therefore, of great importance to commence vocal prayer well, and to preserve always an actual attention. For this reason it is well to put oneself at first in the presence of God, in order to withdraw all the powers of the soul from exterior things, to recollect them within oneself, and to fix them upon God. It is also very useful to renew one's attention at certain fixed times. Further on² we will point out different ways of recollecting oneself. We might, if we liked, keep our eyes fixed upon the holy tabernacle, or look at a crucifix or some pious picture, represent to ourselves God in Heaven, or Our Lord in the Crib, at Nazareth, during the Passion, upon the cross, &c., and speak to Him *as if we saw Him*.

St. Teresa,³ treating of *vocal* prayer (or rather o

¹ S. Greg., l. 22, *Moral.*, c. 13.

² Cf. 2nd part, c. ii. § ii., p. 106.

³ St. Teresa. *Way*, xxix. and xxx.

vocal prayer meditated), and starting from the principle that God dwells in the just soul as in a magnificent palace and a little paradise, highly praises what she calls the prayer of active recollection.¹ We close our bodily eyes; and the soul, collecting together all her powers, enters into herself with God. She ceases not to look upon Him interiorly while the lips are reciting some pious prayer, and, knowing for certain that He is quite near, and that she has no need to cry out aloud, she speaks to Him lovingly and noiselessly as to her Father, her Brother, her Spouse, her Lord. Since God is ever within us the saint exhorts her daughters not to leave such an august companion alone; she wishes them to look at Him while speaking to Him; it is the means to excite attention, to inflame devotion, and to prepare the soul for a higher kind of prayer. She declares that she herself never knew what it was to pray with satisfaction until the day that God taught her to act in this way. This is a method which depends on our will, and though we had to spend six months or a whole year in acquiring it neither our time nor our trouble would be lost.

St. Ignatius ² teaches a manner of praying vocally which “consists in saying some prayer very slowly, leaving the space of a full breath

¹ See *St. Teresa's Own Words: or Instructions on the Prayer of Recollection*, a short treatise (pp. 39), by the Rt. Rev. James Chadwick, Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, published by Messrs. Burns & Oates.—*Trans.*

S. Ing., *Spir. Ex.*, 3rd. manner of prayer.

between each word. Let us apply this method as follows to the prayer :—Soul of Christ, sanctify me.

1°. Recollect yourself and ask yourself : What is it I am going to do ?

2°.—Beg the grace to derive much fruit from this exercise.

3°. Commence the prayer : Soul—of Christ—sanctify me. — Body—of Christ—save me.— Blood—of Christ—inebriate me : and so on.

During this time we think on the sense of the word we have just pronounced, or on the dignity of Him to whom we pray. on our own baseness, our miseries, or our needs.

This method is suitable for every one, for any time in the day, and may be practised during almost every kind of manual work. It is very useful for such as may have contracted a bad habit of reciting their vocal prayers too quickly ; but it is particularly recommended to religious.”

It is easy to understand that this method contributes much to excite attention and devotion ; it is already as it were a timid attempt at meditation.

CHAPTER II

MENTAL PRAYER—ITS OBJECT

§ I.—OF MENTAL PRAYER IN GENERAL.

MENTAL prayer in general is an interior and silent prayer, by which the soul raises itself to God without the aid of words or formulas, in order to discharge its duty towards Him and to become better.

There is ordinary mental prayer and mystical mental prayer; in other terms, active prayer and passive prayer.

Prayer, like every other meritorious act, requires God's grace and man's co-operation; but sometimes the soul's effort is more manifest, sometimes the divine action.

In active prayer the soul's effort predominates, God's action is less evident; the supernatural, though very real, remains latent.

In passive prayer God's action is stronger and goes so far as to reduce the soul to a certain passive state, more or less accentuated according to the degree of mystical union; and when this is well marked, the supernatural is plainly perceptible—almost palpable. This passive condition, however, interferes with only certain operations of the mind and of the senses; the soul, under God's action, remains free and capable of meriting even in the

state of ecstasy, and it is altogether occupied in contemplating and loving God, sometimes with a marvellous intensity.

Further on, we will speak of these mystical kinds of prayer; for the present, we shall confine ourselves to the ordinary kinds of mental prayer, after having made some general considerations applicable to both.

§ II.—OF ORDINARY MENTAL PRAYER.

Active prayer is a kind of mental prayer in which a person raises his mind to God by considerations or by a simple look, and his will by pious affections, petitions, and resolutions.

God gives His interior and hidden grace, and the soul endeavours to turn towards Him. According to the saying of St. Teresa, the soul in this stage is like a gardener, who, with much labour, draws the water up from the depths of the well to water his plants and flowers.

These efforts of the soul consist of two operations; one belongs to the thinking faculty which applies the imagination, the memory, the understanding to consider some truth or mystery, to turn it over and over, to convince itself of it and to penetrate it. This is what is called the consideration or the meditation. Later, it will concentrate the mind's attention upon God without the round-about ways and turmoil of reasonings, and this will be the simple look of contemplation. The other operation is dependent on the will, and makes us love, desire, ask the good proposed by the mind,

and make resolutions to arrive at it; this is prayer—mental prayer properly so called.

The considerations are not a mere speculative study; they are not made in order to learn or to know, but to inflame the heart, and set the will in motion. The mind's eye is fixed upon some truth in order to believe it, upon some virtue in order to love and seek it, upon some duty to fulfil it, upon moral evil to detest and fly from it, upon some danger to avoid it. In a word, meditation ought to lead to love and to action.

In the early stages of the spiritual life, considerations occupy a large place, because we have need to strengthen our faith; later on, in proportion as the practice of mental prayer and of virtue has penetrated the soul with profound convictions, considerations progressively diminish, and end by giving place to a simple thought, to a simple attentive look. On the other hand, affections, at first rare and wordy, go on increasing; they gain all the ground that considerations lose; they, too, are after a time simplified, becoming shorter and more numerous, and the soul ends by attaching itself to a few affections only, which suffice for its needs and its attractions.

§ III.—OF THE END OF MENTAL PRAYER.

All mental prayer, active or passive, whatever be its object, form or method, has for its end *to glorify God*, and in order to this, as we have already seen,¹ it may perform the four functions of

¹ C. i. § 1st, p. 2.

prayer, or some of the four, or only one, according to the attraction or need of the soul. But, in addition to this, and we beg our readers to pay special attention to this remark, it has always for its end *to make us better*.

We make mental prayer in order to be converted from evil to good, from good to better, from better to perfection, as we have promised. This constant and progressive conversion, or this tending to perfection, as it is now called, is the chief point of our rules, the object towards which should tend all our observances. All our spiritual exercises, without exception, are directed to this end, and have no other; but mental prayer, by its very nature and its divers acts, is pre-eminently the source of this transformation.

Those who are as yet only at the beginning of the spiritual life should propose to themselves as the result of their mental prayer, the extirpation of some sin or some defect, above all of their predominant vice; the victory over some temptation, the correction of some bad inclination, the governing of such and such a passion. When one evil is corrected they should turn their prayer against another for as long as may be necessary in order to triumph over it; and thus mental prayer well practised will purify their souls.

Those who are making spiritual progress should, without abandoning altogether this struggle against evil, employ their prayer chiefly in cultivating the virtues, especially the fundamental virtues, or those of which they have most need; above all,

the spirit of faith, humility, self-renunciation, obedience, recollection and the life of prayer, in order to arrive at perfect love.

Those who are already united to God in spirit, heart, and will, should employ their prayer in strengthening this union. They should love in order to develop holy charity; their prayer should consist chiefly of love, confidence, conformity and abandonment to the divine will, particularly amidst the crosses sent by Providence.

It is thus that our prayer will attain its end. Its principal object is not to instruct us, pious reading would suffice for that; it is rather to inflame the heart, that it may discharge better its duty towards God, and especially to conform our will to that of God, so that prayer may detach us from everything else, attach us to Him alone, and so transform our habits and our life.

During prayer, pious considerations replace our human thoughts with thoughts more divine; the entering into ourselves puts before us a mirror in which we contemplate our defects; affections and petitions unite us to God and draw down the grace which clothes us with strength from on High. We leave off this communing with God in a closer relation with Him. These are already so many fruits ripe and gathered for Heaven. But all this tends further to good resolutions, which as yet are only flowers, and should become fruits.

After prayer has ended, all is not yet done. It is not a drawer, from which we take out during half an hour convictions and affections, and then shut it

up for the rest of the day. Lights have been received, to which we should henceforth strive to conform our thoughts and conduct; we retire from prayer with a perfume of devotion which we must not allow to evaporate; we have made good resolutions and asked the help of God's grace to keep them; it now remains to put them in practice. In a word, mental prayer prepares us for action; a life of prayer calls for a life eminent in all virtues. Otherwise, mental prayer has not produced all its fruit; it has brought forth flowers in abundance; let us take care that these flowers, rich in promise, be not blasted by the icy breath of dissipation, routine, and tepidity.

CHAPTER III

ADVANTAGES AND NECESSITY OF MENTAL PRAYER

As we shall point out later on the happy effects of affective prayer and of contemplation, we shall here more especially keep in view those of meditation.

The tending to perfection, which sums up all our obligations, meets with obstacles in us, both on the part of the understanding and on the part of the will.

§ I.—ON THE PART OF THE UNDERSTANDING.

On the part of the understanding there is 1^o ignorance of the supernatural life. The remedy is the word of God which we can find in instructions and in pious reading. To listen attentively to the word of God or to read it carefully is already a beginning of meditation.

There is 2^o want of reflection, levity, routine, inadvertence to the truths of faith, that milder form of forgetfulness which makes such havoc even amongst us religious; a baneful pest, which dries up devotion and destroys the energy of the soul, and which St. Benedict exhorts us absolutely to avoid.¹ This is

¹ Reg. S. Ben., c. vii., 1st degree of humility.

why the earth is laid desolate, and even, alas! the cloister, the very home of sanctity; because no one thinks sufficiently in his heart. Hence it comes to pass that even amongst good souls, who live by grace, there are so many weak, so many slumbering. When we forget God and the things of God, we have still the eye of faith, but it is half closed by spiritual drowsiness. The end to be aimed at, the rocks to be avoided, the virtues to be practised,—everything is clouded over, nothing distinctly outlined. While faith sleeps, fear, hope, and love, which should carry us to God, slacken their course, and wander about aimlessly. Hope is without desire, charity without fervour; the other virtues lose their activity; torpor reigns everywhere; the sleep which deadens faith gains upon our whole supernatural life, and the enemy profits of it to sow cockle in the field of our soul. We sleep and we dream; and while our eyes are closed towards God, our imagination is taken up with a thousand foolish fancies as in a dream, our memory is filled with a thousand frivolous recollections, our intellect exhausts itself in useless thoughts and in the preoccupations of our work and office. We have been sleeping long enough and too long; “it is time for us to awake at last,” to “open our eyes to the deifying light, to act in a manner which may profit us for eternity,” and “by our progress in faith and in a good life, to dilate our hearts and to run in the way of the precepts and counsels.”¹

But what, then, can arouse us from this wretched

¹ Reg. S. Ben., prolog. passim.

sluggishness, if not the practice of mental prayer? Little by little, mental prayer well made will render our faith more lively, will strengthen our convictions, will penetrate us deeply with the things of God, will keep the supernatural always present to our mind. And then there will be no more forgetfulness, no more sleep. It will then be easy for us to live by faith, to fear, to hope, to love and to act as we ought, because the eye of our faith will be always open.

There is 3^o ignorance of ourselves. Self-love blinds us; humiliated by our many miseries and discouraged by the difficulty of remedying them, we prefer to shut our eyes. Hence, no longer seeing the faults we have to correct, and the enemies we have to combat, we either cease to fight, or merely beat the air. So also, if we hardly know the virtues we want, the weak points we should strengthen, our spiritual life will drift away aimlessly at the mercy of every passing impulse.

The remedy for this pest is the examination of conscience, especially the self-examination which is made during mental prayer. For, after showing us the ideal we should follow, mental prayer invites us to consider the reforms we have to make. Thus it is the torch which illumines our spiritual work, it is especially the school of humility. He who neglects mental prayer "has no horror of himself, because he feels not his miseries"¹; on the other hand, mental prayer enables us to put our finger upon the multitude of our faults, defects, and im-

¹ S. Bern., *De Consid.*, l. i. c. 2.

perfections, to see clearly how poor we are in virtues and merits, what pitiful creatures we are, when contrasted with the saints who are the glory of the Church and of the Cistercian Order, and above all to realise our nothingness and wretchedness before Him who is greatness and sanctity itself. Thus mental prayer becomes the grave of pride.

§ II.—ON THE PART OF THE WILL.

1^o.—The first obstacle to our progress is to be found in our affections; it is a certain weariness of God which makes us cold and languid in His service, while at the same time we are in a fever of anxiety for all which is not God. Sin has drawn us aside from our end and turned us towards the creature. The remedy is mental prayer, which detaches us from obstacles, and unites us to what helps us. It detaches us from sin, from perishable goods, from the world, above all, from ourselves; and it unites us to the one and only Good.

First, it detaches us from sin. "This it is," says Fr. Crasset, "which leads us down in spirit to hell, to behold our place there; which brings us to the grave-yard, to behold there our abode; to heaven, to behold there our throne; to the valley of Josaphat, there to behold our judge; to Bethlehem, there to see our Saviour; to Thabor, there to behold our love; to Calvary, there to contemplate our model."

It detaches us from perishable goods, such as riches, honours, bodily comfort, of all which things

it is so easy to make an ill use. It shows us the vanity of all that cannot satisfy a heart **hungering** after God, the inconstancy and frailty of all that passes away, the anxieties and dangers these false goods bring with them, and their utter worthlessness in comparison with what lasts for ever. And if it renders these things so contemptible in our eyes, it detaches us still more from them by teaching us to love God. "How empty appears the earth to him who contemplates heaven!" How its joys and honours lose all their charm once the soul has tasted God!

It detaches us from the world. It teaches us to make no account of the world's promises or threats, of its esteem or its contempt; for the world can neither make us happy nor virtuous; we are no better because it extols us to the clouds, nor any worse when it tramples us under foot. We are worth only just what we are worth in God's eyes. Mental prayer makes us dread the corruption of the world, the danger of its praises, the perfidiousness of its caresses, far more than its impotent fury. It makes us understand that God alone is to be considered; that no other's anger is to be feared, no other's esteem to be desired, that there is no other friendship on which the heart can securely rest.

Above all, it detaches us from ourselves. The grave of pride, as we have called it, it is also that of sensuality. "It substitutes the spirit for the flesh, the soul's delights for bodily pleasures. If there is any fact evident in the history of Christian and religious life, it is that the love of mortification

keeps pace in a soul with the love of mental prayer. This exercise also enriches with treasures of patience those who seriously give themselves to it. They bear pains and afflictions, whencesoever they may come, without a murmur, and even with joy." ¹

Finally, mental prayer unites us to God. Detached from all things, the soul is no longer held back by anything; it is so thoroughly emptied that God hastens to fill it with Himself, there to establish His Kingdom. What treasures, what a deliverance, what a happiness a soul enjoys, in proportion as the habit of mental prayer withdraws her from beneath the sway of her passions and subjects her to her good Master, first by fear, afterwards by hope, and lastly by love! A day comes when the heart is taken captive; then it is a mutual friendship, the sweetest intimacy. The soul knows God and His infinite charms, and this view enchants and inflames her; everywhere, in nature and in grace, in Our Lord's life, and in her own, she sees a thousand touching proofs of the mercies and of the love of Him who ravishes her heart. Notwithstanding her nothingness and her faults, she dares to raise towards a God so high and so holy the eyes of her heart and to ask for a return of affection, she loves God and is beloved by Him. God does not disdain to lower Himself even to her, and often she is astonished at the tenderness which her God manifests towards her. Oh, how consoling and strengthening are these precious but all-too-short moments! How superabundantly they compen-

¹ Fr. Chaignon, *Méd. rel.*, 1st. vol., p. 10.

sate for all past sufferings, and give courage to face new trials! Because the soul loves and wishes to be loved, she cannot endure that anything in her should offend the most pure eyes of her Well-Beloved, and so love watches with a jealous eye over the purity of the heart. What sacrifices would she not make to preserve or to bring back the visits of Him who is her all? The more we love the more we forget ourselves, and the more we leave ourselves in order to go to God. We seek God alone, and, therefore, we would think only of God, speak only of God, live all the day long only with God, spend ourselves and suffer for Him, and, after having employed all our energies in serving Him, still think we had done nothing. Now, mental prayer is the source whence springs this holy love: "My heart grew hot within me; and in my meditation a fire shall flame out." ¹

Louis of Blois thus describes this transformation of the soul by mental prayer:—"The soul, putting off everything human, and putting on what is divine, is, as it were, transformed and changed into God, as iron placed in the furnace receives the form of fire and is changed into fire. . . . So the soul was cold before, but now it has become all inflamed; it was in darkness before, but now it shines; it was hard before, but now it has become soft. Its entire being takes on a celestial aspect, because its essence is all penetrated by the divine essence." Now that the soul has found God it

¹ Ps. xxxviii., *Cor meum concaluit intra me et in meditatione meâ exardescet ignis.*

willingly renounces creatures. She possesses in fact, light, strength, peace, joy, liberty; for in finding God, she has found all good.

2°. The second obstacle which the will offers to our progress regards our resolutions; it is sluggishness, weakness, cowardice, inconstancy. The sole remedy for this evil is God's grace, without which we can do nothing, and with which we can do all things. Now, nowhere is it asked for so well as in mental prayer, when meditation has made us feel the need of it, and the heart is inflamed with holy affections; we have then the eloquence of a poor man who is sensible of his misery, and prayer, as a loud cry, bursts forth from the depths of the soul. Then it is that we gain more strength to do violence to God's mercy, who wants to be implored, who wishes to be constrained, who wills to be overcome by a kind of importunity on our part.¹

§ III.—WHAT THE SAINTS HAVE THOUGHT OF MENTAL PRAYER.

They have devoted to it long hours day and night, and no argument is equal to that. Many amongst them have praised it very highly in their writings.

St. Bonaventure, quoted or analysed by St. Peter of Alcantara,² makes the following poetic eulogy of it:—"If you would suffer with patience the adversities and miseries of this life, be a man of

¹ S. Greg., in Ps. pœnit., 6.

² St. Peter of Alc. *Treatise on Prayer*, 1st part, c. i.

prayer. If you would obtain courage and strength to conquer the temptations of the enemy, be a man of prayer. If you would mortify your own will with all its inclinations and appetites, be a man of prayer. If you would know the wiles of Satan and unmask his deceits, be a man of prayer. If you would live in joy and walk pleasantly in the ways of penance, be a man of prayer. If you would banish from your soul the troublesome flies of vain thoughts and cares, be a man of prayer. If you would nourish your soul with the very sap of devotion, and keep it always full of good thoughts and good desires, be a man of prayer. If you would strengthen and keep up your courage in the ways of God, be a man of prayer. In fine, if you would uproot all vices from your soul and plant all virtues in their place, be a man of prayer. It is in prayer that we receive the unction and grace of the Holy Ghost, who teaches all things. I say more : if you would raise yourself to the heights of contemplation and enjoy the sweet embraces of the Spouse, practise mental prayer. It is the way by which the soul is raised to the contemplation and enjoyment of heavenly things."

"In mental prayer," adds St. Peter of Alcantara,¹ "the soul is purified from its sins, nourished with charity, confirmed in faith, and strengthened in hope; the mind expands, the affections dilate, the heart is purified, truth becomes evident; temptation is conquered, sadness dispelled; the senses are renovated; the drooping powers revive;

¹ St. Peter of Alc. *Treatise on Prayer*, 1st part, c. i.

tepidity ceases; the rust of vices disappears. Out of mental prayer issue forth, like living sparks, those desires of heaven which the soul conceives when inflamed with the fire of divine love. Sublime is the excellence of mental prayer, great are its privileges; to mental prayer heaven is opened; to mental prayer heavenly secrets are manifested and the ear of God is ever attentive."

St. Teresa, who may be called the doctor of mental prayer, never ceases to urge her daughters to practise it and would have wished to lead them up to its heights. It is mental prayer that saved her. "There, nothing is to be feared, and everything that can be desired is to be found. Progress is slow, be it so. . . . But, at all events, we learn by degrees to know the road to heaven. . . . It is not in vain that we have chosen God for our friend. For, in my opinion, prayer is only a friendly intercourse in which the soul converses alone with Him by whom she knows that she is loved. . . . Oh, my Master, what an excellent friend Thou art in her regard! I have seen it clearly in my own case, and I know not why every one would not aspire to draw near to Thee by a friendship so intimate. Those who give up mental prayer I really pity, they serve God at their own cost. It is not so with those who practise mental prayer. This adorable master pays all their expenses. In exchange for a little trouble He gives them consolations which enable them to bear all crosses. . . . God grants such sublime graces, as He has given me, only to mental prayer.

If we close against Him this door, in vain would He seek to enter the soul to take his delight there and to flood her with joy, because He finds no way open." ¹ The demon seeks by every means to turn us away from prayer; "he well knows, the traitor, that a soul that perseveres in prayer is lost to him for ever; . . . you may believe me, she will arrive at the harbour of salvation." ² The saint relates that, during long years, "she was less absorbed by useful and holy reflexions than by the longing to hear the clock announcing the end of prayer-time"; she would have preferred the severest penance to the torment of having to recollect herself; "on entering the place of prayer, she was seized with a mortal sadness"; but "when she had conquered herself, she tasted more peace and delight than on certain other days when her inclination had led her to prayer." ³ She relates also how the demon tried to persuade her that her imperfections rendered her unworthy of giving so much time to prayer, and that she ought, like the others, to be satisfied with the time allotted to that exercise by the rule. "Where were my wits? What folly to fly the light, to stumble at every step in the dark! What a proud humility the demon knew how to suggest in order to induce me to abandon mental prayer, that pillar, that staff," of which I had so great a need! "In my opinion, it is the greatest danger I incurred in my whole life." ⁴ Let those, then, who have begun to walk

¹ *Life*, viii.

² *Ibid.*, xix.

³ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xix.

in this way "continue to advance always, no matter what obstacle presents itself, no matter what difficulty crops up, or what tribulation they must endure, however much they may be blamed and reviled, whatever faintheartedness they may feel on the road, whatever uncertainty they may experience as to their arriving at the goal, however apparent it may be in their case that they can never support so many labours; in fine, though they should die in consequence, though the whole world and all it contains were to perish with them, let them never stop advancing on this path." ¹

"Since mental prayer," says St. Francis of Sales, ² "brings our intellect to the light of God, and keeps our will exposed to the flames of divine love, there is nothing which can better dispel the darkness with which ignorance and error have obscured our intelligence, nor better purify our hearts from all our depraved affections. It is the water of benediction which should serve to wash away the iniquities of our souls, to refresh our hearts consumed by the thirst of our cupidity, and to nourish the first seeds which virtue has there planted, and which are good desires."

St. Philip Neri, with his uncompromising energy, says that "a religious without mental prayer is an animal without reason"; that is, that he ceases to live by faith, to walk by the spirit, in order to become the slave of his senses.

According to St. Liguori, ³ "as long as a soul

¹ *Way*, xxii.

² *Devout Life*, 2nd part, c. i.

³ *True Spouse*, xv. § 1.

gives herself to mental prayer you will behold her a model of modesty, of humility, of devotion, and of mortification; let her abandon mental prayer, and soon the modesty of her looks disappears, her pride will burst forth at the least word which offends. . . . She will scarcely think any longer of mortifying herself, on the contrary, you will behold her in love with vanities, amusements, and earthly pleasures. Why? The water of grace flows into her no longer, she wants life; she has abandoned mental prayer, the garden is parched up, and the evil grows daily worse"! "We see some," adds the holy doctor, "who recite the rosary, the office of the Blessed Virgin, and give themselves to other exterior practices of piety, and nevertheless continue to live in sin; but when any one constantly practises mental prayer it is impossible for him to continue to live in sin." He also goes so far as to declare mental prayer to be "morally necessary." It is especially indispensable for those who are tending to perfection, all the saints have arrived there by this way; it is the shortest road to it, according to St. Ignatius of Loyola.

This moral necessity, however, is incumbent only on souls that are not incapable of making mental prayer. Should there be found minds for whom this was really impossible, God would supply its place by pious reading and vocal prayer well made, and this would suffice to lead them even to perfection. But we must be very careful not to take difficulty for an impossibility, nor our own negligence for an excusing cause. When we know how to reflect upon

our work, our occupation, on a thousand temporal affairs, can it be possible that it is only on the things of heaven and our eternal interests that we cannot think? There is no need of fine phrases nor of lofty conceptions. It suffices to reflect on the things of God in oneself and for oneself alone as simply as one pleases. Books to aid us are not wanting, and it is a science which is acquired by study and practice. It may seem troublesome at first, but experience will make it easy.

We beg, therefore, our brethren in religion to make well the meditations prescribed by the rule, but not to be satisfied with that. As the members of a community have not all the same tastes nor the same aptitude, our constitutions impose only a minimum accessible to every one, and this is the measure indicated by St. Liguori: "The confessor at first should not prescribe more than half an hour, afterwards he can more or less increase the time according to the soul's spiritual progress."¹ Our constitutions expect that "when the Work of God,² which takes precedence of everything, is ended, the monks, during the hours not assigned to manual labour, should occupy themselves in prayer or spiritual reading." They advise us, with our Holy Father St. Benedict, "to apply ourselves frequently to prayer," and they permit every one, "outside the time of the common exercises, to give himself to prayer, if drawn to it by the inspiration of divine grace."³

¹ St. Lig., *Praxis*, 123.

² So the Divine Office is called by St. Benedict.—*Trans.*

³ Cons. O. C. R., 83, 84, 92.

Do you wish to know why our houses are no longer peopled with saints as they were in the heroic ages? We watch, we chant, we fast, we work pretty much as our Fathers did; but we are not to the same extent as they were men of prayer; they trampled the world under foot because their "conversation was in heaven."¹

The holy Abbot St. Antony spent the whole night in prayer, and complained that the day came too soon to interrupt his converse with God. St. Rose of Lima spent twelve hours in prayer daily. St. Francis Borgia used to spend eight hours in prayer, and to beg "as a favour yet another moment." St. Philip Neri passed whole nights in prayer. The Rev. Fr. Torres imposed on the religious whom he directed an hour's mental prayer in the morning, a second hour during the day, and half an hour in the evening, unless they were otherwise hindered. After quoting these examples, St. Liguori adds: "If this seems to you too much, I advise you to make at least one hour of mental prayer besides that made in common."² It is true we have many other pious exercises, but we are contemplatives by profession; "let us then allow no one to surpass us in the love of God since we more than others are obliged to love Him."³ The world, too, needs our prayers so badly!

Let us conclude with a counsel of St. Peter of Alcantara: "The servant of God should reserve

¹ Phil. iii. 20.

² St. Lig., *The True Spouse*, xv. § 2.
Id. *Serm. to Ordinandi*.

to himself certain moments, when, laying aside all occupations, even holy ones (the necessary permission being pre-supposed), he will devote himself exclusively to spiritual exercises, and give to his soul a more abundant spiritual nourishment which may repair the daily losses, and procure for him new strength to advance still more. And if this be true of ordinary days, how much more so of great feasts and of times of tribulation and trial? It is also advisable to do this after long journeys and certain affairs which distract and dissipate the heart; this is the true means to regain recollection of spirit.”¹

¹ St. Peter of Alcant., *Prayer and Medit.*, 2nd p., v., 5th counsel.

CHAPTER IV

THE ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS IN MENTAL PRAYER

ALTHOUGH the non-mystical kinds of mental prayer are accessible to all, with perhaps some very rare exceptions, yet account must first of all be taken of the will of God, who distributes His gifts as He pleases. Still there are divers elements of success that depend on our own will. Some of these regard the dispositions of our soul, others our monastic observances, others in fine mental prayer itself.

§ I.—DISPOSITIONS OF THE SOUL.

Let us put in the first place the degree of purity to which the soul has attained. There will always be a rather strict proportion between holiness of life and the degree of mental prayer one has arrived at. These two things run parallel, and give each other mutual support; they progress together or they fall away together. Meditation, for instance, produces little by little purity of heart, and this latter pre-disposes the soul to contemplation.

It is, therefore, of supreme importance to acquire the fourfold purity of the conscience, of the heart, of the intellect, and of the will.

1°. Purity of conscience, which is a state of aversion for venial sin. Some slight faults still escape the soul, but she is not satisfied to live in the habit of these faults, and to permit them to take root. She is watchful over herself, combats sin, detaches herself from it, conceives a profound horror of it, and, "loving cleanness of heart, she has the king for her friend."¹ On the other hand, if she is entangled in any affection for sin, she has no longer the same relish for God, and God has no longer the same liking for her; all these multiplied, ill-combated faults, like a thick and icy cloud, dim the eye of faith, cool holy affections, benumb the will and paralyse its good resolutions. After our falls we must hasten to confess them with humility, and to blot them out by a prompt repentance.

Nevertheless, "even in and after our sorrow for our sins," says St. Francis of Sales, "we should keep our peace of mind. . . . Put aside then all that gloomy, restless, peevish, and therefore proud depression." In consequence of a repentance full of trust in God, our very weaknesses, by humbling us, become a part of our remedy; and, according to the same saint, to rise constantly without ever being discouraged, without losing anything of our firm resolution to belong wholly to God, is the effect of heroic virtue. Such a soul pleases Our Lord very much and draws Him to her by her humility.

2°. Purity of heart. Our heart is pure when we love only God, or according to God. We must,

¹ Prov. xxii. 11.

therefore, banish thence every culpable affection, sever every tie of which the Divine Master is not the beginning and the end, and which is not regulated according to His will. As long as we are attached to anything created, we have no longer the same freedom to raise ourselves to God; the affections of the heart engross the thoughts and distract the mind; and then these thoughts and affections draw us far away from Our Lord towards the object of our love. If, on the contrary, the heart belongs to God alone, our thoughts and affections move at ease in prayer, as a fish does in water. The heart carries the soul to God, and then everything else becomes to it insipid; and, whilst it is making and multiplying acts of love, it holds the mind captive and keeps it steadily fixed upon God, like to a mother who, passionately loving her child, finds no difficulty in thinking of him, in gazing upon him for whole days together; in fact, to look upon him and to love him is her very life; and to sacrifice herself for him is her happiness.

3°. Purity of mind. This is the control we exercise over the working of our imagination, our memory, and our thoughts, in order to banish whatever sullies or endangers the soul, and even what merely dissipates or unduly engrosses it.

First, then, there are bad or dangerous thoughts, imaginations and memories; all, for instance, that is contrary to the holy virtue, to charity, to humility, &c.; all that recalls the real or imagined success, injuries, or praise we met with in the past; all that nourishes resentment, bitterness, or a too tender affection; whatever could attract and seduce

us, such as beauty and pleasure; in a word, whatever would stain the purity or trouble the peace of the soul.

There are also useless thoughts which distract the mind; idle at first, they soon become dangerous and culpable.

Finally, there are thoughts good in themselves, but which come at a wrong time, or absorb too much of our attention; they regard, for instance, our work, our office, our studies; but it is not now the time to attend to them; or, if it be, instead of admitting them only as far as duty requires, we allow them to invade, pre-occupy, or even wholly absorb us. Or they may be thoughts connected with virtue, but in such a way as to cause agitation and trouble, as happens in the case of scruples.

If we wish to become men of prayer we must regulate and discipline the mind; for whatever sullies, troubles, or distracts it can only be harmful to union with God. All this is an obstacle to recollection and attention, stifles devotion, paralyzes good resolutions, and causes a mutual coldness between God and the soul. God willingly communicates Himself to hearts that are pure, to minds that keep silence in order to listen to Him; He loves not to raise His voice in the midst of tumult; and an unmortified soul is exposed to the turmoil and noise of a thousand various thoughts. To abandon oneself habitually to every caprice of one's mind, and to aspire at the same time to become a man of prayer, is to desire the impos-

sible; you might just as reasonably select as your place of prayer the most crowded street of one of our great cities.

When our heart has been thoroughly purified, the disorder of our thoughts will cause us less trouble, it will hardly have any hold upon us. Meanwhile, we must ceaselessly watch and combat. St. Bernard¹ points out to us the means to gain the victory. "Place at the door of your memory a porter called the remembrance of your profession, and when your mind feels itself overwhelmed by weight of shameful thoughts, let it reproach itself in these terms: Come, now, ought you to think on such things, you who are a priest, you who are a cleric, you who are a monk? Does it become a servant of God, a friend of God, to dwell upon such thoughts were it only for an instant? So also at the door of your will, where carnal desires usually dwell like a family at home, place a sentinel named the memory of your heavenly country; for it has the power to expel evil desires *as one wedge drives out another*. . . . Finally, beside reason's couch you must post a guardian so inexorable that he spares no one, and this guardian is the remembrance of Hell." The memory of the Passion, and also that of benefits received are likewise excellent door-keepers; but the most vigilant will ever be the love of God.

4°. Purity of the will. Our will is pure when it no longer desires anything but the will of God. It is pure in its interior dispositions, when it is

¹ St. Bernard, *Serm. 32 de div.*

thoroughly resolved to submit to the laws of God and of His Church, to our rules, to the orders of superiors, to the guidance of Providence; in a word, when it is ready to do always what God wills, in the time and manner that He wills, and for the motives that please Him. God, thus being master of our will in its interior dispositions, will also be master of its external acts; the source will communicate its own purity to the stream.

We must, above all, take care to maintain our will in this habitual tendency, and when we must pass on to actions, especially if they flatter some passion, or if they are in harmony with some natural inclination, we must watch over our intentions to purify them and make them supernatural, and over our actions themselves lest they deviate from the straight path and end in self-love.

The purity of the will contributes to the success of mental prayer just as does purity of conscience, of which it is the source. Between the soul and God union of wills produces union of hearts and a holy familiarity; on the contrary, disagreement of wills breaks off this intimate union and replaces it by constraint and coldness. When the soul is ready to do whatever God wills, she has no difficulty in understanding what her duty is and in resolving to perform it; whilst any attachment to our own judgment and our own will blinds the eyes of the intellect, hinders good resolutions, and thus sterilizes mental prayer, which fails to attain its principal end if it does not break off this attachment.

To sum up, purity of conscience draws God to us; purity of mind contributes to recollection and attention; purity of heart to devotion; purity of will to efficacious resolutions. When a soul is thus purified she has God alone in the mind, God alone in the heart, God alone in the will; now that she has removed the obstacles she converses quite naturally with her Guest, and finds in her prayer great facility, real profit, and sometimes even delight.

We do not require this purification to be already accomplished, in order that the soul may enter upon the way of meditation and take its first steps with success; on the contrary, we are perfectly well aware that meditation is one of the great means to arrive at this purity. We merely mean to say that purity of life and mental prayer travel hand in hand, and lend each other a mutual support; and that the great preparation we must bring to mental prayer is steady progress in purifying our souls by prayer, by our penitential life, and other ordinary means. Happy we, should it please God to perfect this purification at some future day, in the crucible of passive purgation!

§ II.—OUR MONASTIC OBSERVANCES.

Enclosure cuts off the noises of the world, and favours solitude of heart and mind; our austerities, by detaching the soul from sensible pleasures, leave it free to raise itself to God; all our observances, when well kept, contribute to produce

that fourfold purity which is the sister of mental prayer. St. Bernard¹ in particular says that fasting "imparts devotion and confidence to prayer. And so we see how well fasting and prayer go together, according to what is written: 'When a brother is helped by a brother, both shall be consoled.'² Prayer obtains the strength to fast, and fasting merits the grace of prayer. Fasting strengthens prayer, prayer sanctifies fasting and offers it to the Lord." Two of our observances, silence, namely, and the good use of our free time, have a more intimate relation to mental prayer.

How can a religious neglect to observe silence and be also a man of prayer? Besides multiplying acts of disobedience, small scandals, and sins of the tongue, he shows by his talkativeness that God is not enough for him, that he knows not how to abide with himself and watch over his interior; by speaking, he is constantly labouring to empty himself of God, to lose the perfume of piety, to extinguish all devotion; by listening, to fill his soul with dissipation and to deliver it up to the demon of curiosity and levity. So St. John Climacus says that "much speaking dries up the tears of compunction, destroys the custody of the heart, renders meditation distracted, cools and freezes divine fervour, weakens or rather kills prayer. But, on the contrary, silence is the father of prayer, the master of contemplation,

¹ St. Bernard, *Serm. 4, on Lent.*

² Prov. xviii. 19.

. . . the guardian of divine fervour, the secret path by which the soul ascends to God, the lover of tears, etc." ¹

External silence of tongue and gesture is not sufficient, if the memory and imagination may prattle away and fill us with distractions. Our silence itself ought to be occupied with God, and, the more silent we are towards men, the more sustained ought to be our conversation with Him. Silence thus kept makes of our monasteries, in spite of numbers, a solitude as still as the desert, and of the heart of each religious a silent sanctuary, wherein is heard only the prayer which ascends to God and the voice of God lovingly answering the soul.

In like manner, the good use of our free time favours mental prayer. As soon as the bell announces the end of work, let us hasten, unless obedience withholds us, to the place of pious reading, as a hungry man betakes himself to a well-served table. For a fervent religious ought always to have a hunger for God, and during the free time to replenish himself with Him. Whether he prefers to pray or to employ the time in pious reading, he substitutes for the grosser thoughts of work thoughts more divine; if he had been somewhat dissipated, he now returns to God, and plunges once more into the supernatural, into holy thoughts and pious affections. By reading, he learns and acquires a treasure of safe and abundant spiritual knowledge, and thus, according to the

¹ *Ladder*, Degree 4 and 11.

expression attributed to St. Bernard,¹ he will have a substantial nourishment "to chew and ruminate, in order to extract its sap and penetrate with it even the inmost recesses of his heart. How, indeed, can we have holy thoughts, and how can we help making empty and useless meditations, if we be not first of all instructed by reading or sermons?" Thus pious reading is at once the great provider and the guide of our mental prayer.

§ III.—MENTAL PRAYER ITSELF.

Finally, there are elements of success which have reference to mental prayer itself.

1°. We must adopt that which suits our degree of progress.

It is the common teaching of the saints,² that to each of the three ways, purgative, illuminative, and unitive, corresponds a special kind of prayer. Beginners need meditation; those who have already made some progress will succeed better with affective prayer and derive more profit from it; to the most proficient the prayer of simplicity will be best suited, unless, indeed, God should raise them to mystical contemplation. Let us not conceive the silly ambition of rising at once to the higher kinds of prayer; we would resemble a child who would want to work with his father's tools although he can hardly lift them. David³ was unable to move in the gigantic armour of Saul; if he had

¹ *Scala claustral.*

² Rodriguez, *On Prayer*; c. vi. Suarez, *De Devot.*, ix., 3.

³ I Kings xvii. 38.

kept it on, it would only have encumbered him and led to his ruin ; he took it off, relied upon his sling, and triumphed. An opposite, and not less fatal mistake, consists in wishing to confine oneself to meditation for one's whole life ; for after some time it has produced its effect, and then becomes unprofitable ; to persist in it, therefore, would mean to be perpetually recommencing a work already done, a path already traversed. Let every one keep to the kind of prayer that suits him ; and, of course, in such a delicate matter the advice of a wise director is especially necessary.

2°. We should choose a subject suitable to our needs. To take up a book of meditations, even the very best, and to go through all its meditations one after another, whether they suit the state of our soul or not, is the very way often to make entirely useless meditations. In a good meditation-book there are remedies for all ills ; but no one in a pharmacy would think of taking the remedies in the order in which they are placed on the shelves—to-day the first bottle, to-morrow the second, then the third. There are tools for fashioning all the virtues ; the choice of them should be made according to the work and purpose we aim at accomplishing.

Now, (1), to every one it is profitable to foster or revive the general desire of perfection. (2). All again, except the most advanced, ought to come to a resolution which is particular and suited to their needs, as, for instance, the practical way to extirpate such a vice, to cultivate such a virtue.

These principles being laid down, beginners

having for their object to purge themselves from sin—*i.e.*, to repent, to atone, to correct themselves; and having to fight against temptations, passions, and evil inclinations; combat being their element, fear their main-spring, should, unless they be scrupulous, choose for their ordinary subjects of meditation the great truths of salvation, everything in fact which may excite this fear which is their motive power. The "*Maxims of Eternity*"¹ of St. Liguori, for instance, would be for them an excellent manual.

Those who are more advanced—the proficients—although they may not abandon the fight, have, however, for their principal object the acquisition of virtues, especially of faith and hope without forgetting obedience, humility, and self-denial. What sustains one in this long and rugged path is, first of all, the hope of eternal goods, and the example of Our Lord. These, then, should generally leave aside the great truths, unless, indeed, they meditate upon them under a new light, namely, in order to excite themselves to the practice of virtue, and should habitually choose such subjects as Heaven, divine grace, and glory, the value of efforts and sacrifices, the mysteries of Our Lord's life and death, the obligations of their state, vices, and virtues, &c.; then there will come a time when their attraction will be to meditate on the truths which are apt to inflame love. The greater number indeed of meditation-books seem written for proficients.

¹ More fully developed in his "*Preparation for Death.*" Centenary Ed. Vol. I.—*Trans.*

In the unitive way, God has been found, is possessed, and at times is enjoyed with delight. There remains still a struggle to be maintained, and progress to be made; but the ordinary state of the soul is that of a loving union with God. Fear has become more filial; hope, on the side of self-interest is often as it were unconscious; love it is which now rules; it is it which now has most power to move and most charm to occupy the soul. The time of prayer is now passed in simple and but little varied acts of loving union; the soul thinks upon God with less reasoning, it looks upon Him rather than reasons; and above all it makes acts of love, praise, admiration, humble adoration, devotion, self-abandonment, &c. The same love which makes our prayer an effusion of the heart before God, communicates at the same time to the conscience more delicacy, to the will more generosity, to the hand more energy. It becomes the main source whence spring affections and actions. Souls arrived at this point will find hardly any profit in meditation-books.

Jesus Christ being our all, the beginning, the way, and the goal, it is only right that He should be the chiefest object which occupies us in prayer. Some will meditate on His childhood, others on His hidden life, His divine Heart, the Holy Eucharist . . . , &c. St. Liguori advises meditation especially on the Passion. The particular mystery is of small consequence, provided that there Our Lord is found. St. Francis of Sales¹

¹ St. Francis of Sales, *The Devout Life*, 2nd p., c. i.

recommends "meditations made upon Our Lord's Life and Passion; looking upon Him by frequent meditations your whole soul will be filled with Him, you will learn His demeanour, and model your actions upon His; . . . you will learn, with the aid of His grace, to speak, act, and will like Him. . . . In all our prayers and actions the Saviour should be meditated, considered, sought after," that our soul may be nourished by the "bread which has come down from Heaven."

What we have just said is rather a direction than an invariable rule; there are certain feasts and certain circumstances which will determine differently the subject of our prayer.¹ Besides, account must be taken of our spiritual leanings; and, finally, according to St. Liguori,² "the good rule is to meditate by preference upon the truths and the mysteries which affect us more powerfully, and which procure for our soul the most abundant nourishment."

3^o. Beginners especially are advised to prepare the subject of the morning meditation, "to consecrate to it the last thoughts of the evening before and the first thoughts of the next morning. . . . According to the most renowned masters who have treated of mental prayer, the subject should be determined upon from the evening before, at least in its general lines, and the less that is left to accident and to mental effort at the time itself of meditation the more secure will be our prayer. . . . Negligence in preparing the points is men-

¹ Cf., and part, c. i., § 1. ² St. Lig., *True Spouse*, c. xv.

tioned as one of the causes which commonly produce aridity." 1

This preparation is indispensable when we have to make our mental prayer in the dark, but may still be fruitfully made, even when we are to use a light, because we shall thus bring to our prayer a mind full of the subject. It would, however, be too much to exact it for every meditation which we may make during free time. When treating of the prayer of simplicity we will point out who those are that may omit all preparation of this kind.

4^o. Another element of success, upon which St. Teresa strongly insists,² is a determined will to persevere in prayer in spite of temptations, troubles and aridity. For this the saint gives three reasons : God, who heaps His favours upon us, well deserves that we should give up to Him a little of our time. The demon fears nothing so much as strong and resolute souls; his cowardice prevents his attacking those who are on their guard, the more so as what he does to injure them turns to their profit and his own discomfiture; but if he finds a soul which has not a will determined to persevere, he never leaves it at peace, he agitates it by a thousand fears, and puts before its eyes numberless difficulties. Finally, we combat much more generously when we have a fixed resolution never to yield. To become, therefore, men of prayer, we must be armed with courage and constancy.

¹ Ribet, *Christian Asceticism*, p. xxxviii., 6.

² *Way*, c. xxiii.

CHAPTER V

CAUSES OF FAILURE IN MENTAL PRAYER

WE shall notice distractions, tepidity of the will, vagueness of resolutions, illusions, and indispositions.

§ I.—DISTRACTIONS.

Some there are which come from the enemy. Prayer is the great battle-field. "The war the enemy wages against us," says the holy Abbot Nilus, "has no other object than to make us abandon mental prayer; prayer is as odious and insupportable to Satan as it is salutary for us." He will let us apply ourselves to our fasts, our mortifications, to whatever may flatter pride, but he cannot endure mental prayer, whereby the soul, by humbling and transforming itself, glorifies God. He seeks to draw off elsewhere our thoughts and affections, to tire us out with a thousand frivolous memories, with dangerous or evil images, to overwhelm us with painful temptations; he disturbs, agitates us; then he will persuade us that we have no aptitude for mental prayer, that we are losing our time at it, that by it we offend God, and that it would be better to omit it entirely than to make it so ill. But to abandon it would be to fall completely into the snare; the

channel of grace being once cut off, our soul could only wither and die.

Many of these distractions come from ourselves.

Distractions due to levity.—If I deliberately give full liberty to my eyes to look, to my tongue to speak, to my ears to hear, will not distractions in crowds enter through my ill-guarded senses as through so many open doors? How can we restrain the imagination in prayer, if everywhere else we yield to its caprices? If we have the unfortunate habit of allowing our memory to drift about after everything it recalls, and our light, fickle, and impressionable mind to flutter away like a butterfly in all directions, after its every caprice, how can we become suddenly attentive in prayer after being thus continually dissipated? Instead of that, we are sure to reap then the crop of distractions which we have been sowing all the day long.

Distractions due to passion.—The heart draws the mind after it, and our thoughts of themselves follow after our affections, antipathies and passions. In the agitations caused by anger, jealousy, animosities, and other irregular affections, the soul, like a skiff tossed upon a stormy sea, no longer obeys the helm.

Distractions due to employments.—Manual work, studies, public offices, especially if we abandon ourselves to them without measure and with passion, are wont to recur to our minds and besiege us in the quiet time of prayer, sometimes with a vividness and clearness which are not to be found in the noise of action.

Distractions due to weakness.—It costs a great effort to keep one's mind attentive for any length of time; the truths of faith are supernatural, they demand a thousand sacrifices, and they offer at times so little attraction. At such times, in order to fix one's thoughts, a very strong will to please God and to advance in perfection would be necessary; and the poor soul is so weak!

Every distraction, whatever its source, is culpable, when deliberately entertained, or when voluntary in its cause; not so, however, if you have posited the cause, even recognised as such, with a sufficient motive, and if, moreover, when you perceive your mind to be wandering, you make an effort to bring it back to the subject.

We ought, therefore, to strive earnestly to remove the causes of distractions; for instance, to restrain our imagination and memory, to regulate our affections according to God, to lay aside at the door of our oratory all thoughts of our office, business, &c. However voluntary may have been their original cause, from the moment we retract our consent to it, they cease to be imputable to us on that head.

As for distractions actually adverted to, the sole remedy is to combat them, and for this three things are very useful. 1. To humble ourselves in God's presence; for humility is the remedy for all our ills. 2. Gently to bring back our mind to the subject of our prayer, a thousand times if necessary, for the most part despising the temptation, or, calling fervently upon God, without, however, being disturbed or troubled; for trouble, stirring the soul to

its very depths, only raises more mud; and besides, even though our whole prayer be passed in repelling distractions as often as they attack us, we shall nevertheless have pleased God, as did Abraham when he drove away the birds from his sacrifice.¹ 3. Not to expose ourselves to fresh ramblings by examining too minutely whence these distractions come, and whether we have consented to them. Generally speaking, it is better to defer this examination to another time.

Every distraction, well combated, far from injuring us, increases our merits and hastens our progress; how many acts of humility, patience, and resignation they make us practise! Every effort we make to return to God is a preference we give Him over the objects which draw away our thoughts, a victory gained over the demon, and new merit acquired for Heaven.

§ II.—WANT OF SINCERE DEVOTION AND OF STRONG RESOLUTIONS.

We are not here speaking of aridities, but of lukewarmness of the *will*, of spiritual sloth in mental prayer.

It costs an effort to establish one's soul in that fourfold purity which agrees so well with a life of prayer; it costs something to keep to regularity, silence, recollection, serious reading; it costs something to keep one's mind fixed on God, in spite of the distractions which beset us; it costs a great deal

¹ Gen. xv. 11.

to persevere in pious affections amidst the weariness of aridity, and to elicit from a heart plunged in desolation some dry and frigid acts and petitions: it costs a deal to submit oneself to God's will, and to form a resolution which lays the axe to the root of the evil. Hence it is that, like the sluggard, "we will and we will not."¹ A careless life has produced dissipation of mind, enervation of will, lukewarmness of heart. After having elicited some few affections in a half-hearted way, and without conviction, and formed some vague resolutions which aim at the cure of no evil, at the practice of no virtue, we make haste to quit prayer, to divert our mind in active work, and to forget our resolutions almost as soon as made. And we call that a prayer! Alas! how many such would be required to convert a soul! Or, to speak more correctly, the more we multiply such like prayers the more tepid we become; sloth sterilises piety, and converts the best of remedies into a dangerous poison.

Such persons have great need to shake off their torpor and to regain, with the help of prayer and spiritual direction, more courage, more energy, more soul and life. Above all, let them pray and pray again, let them, with loud cries, beg for this devotion, which no one can of himself attain to; for God makes "whomsoever He wills religious, and, if such had been His good pleasure, He could have made the ungodly Samaritans devout."² He

¹ Prov. xiii. 4.

² St. Amb., *in Luc.*, ix.

will listen willingly to a petition so well calculated to please Him. These souls should, moreover, co-operate with the divine action, and, with the aid of divine grace, neglect nothing needful in order to prepare themselves and to pray well; they have a particular need of understanding thoroughly the value of devotion, of appreciating the misery of their carelessness, and of re-awakening their fervour by means of fear, or hope, or love.

§ III.—ILLUSIONS IN MENTAL PRAYER.

We shall point out briefly some few of these illusions in order to avoid having to repeat ourselves.

It is an illusion to pretend to become a man of prayer with a lax conscience, a dissipated mind, a heart full of attachments, and a will enslaved to self.

It is an illusion for those who are employed in absorbing duties, to wish to pass directly from the tumult of business to the repose of mental prayer; it is generally necessary to take some little time to get rid of pre-occupations, to allow agitations to subside, and to regain the presence of God. Oh, how precious in our eyes should be the free time between manual work and the Divine Office!

It is an illusion, at least for a beginner, *not to choose his subject*, not to read it over attentively, on the pretext that there will be light and he can use a book. At the commencement of the spiritual

life, we have need of these precautions, and we are too hasty in thinking ourselves sufficiently advanced to leave them aside.

It is an illusion to want to enter at once on the body of our prayer, without first putting ourselves thoroughly in the presence of God, unless we are just after ending an exercise which has already made us recollected, or we belong to that class of persons who hardly ever lose the sense of the Divine Presence.

It is an illusion to quit too easily the subject we had prepared, not in obedience to the spirit of God who breatheth where He wills, but out of caprice and inconstancy.

It is an illusion to wish to leave off our method too soon, or to be a slave to it. Method is not perfection, it is not even prayer; it is a mere instrument to be used as long as it is serviceable, to be laid aside as soon as it ceases to be useful, much more so when it becomes harmful. Now, in the commencement method is at it were indispensable, a beginner is too much of a child to walk without leading strings; later on it will lose its usefulness; besides, the Holy Ghost has His own word to say in the matter, and is under no obligation to regulate His inspirations according to our method. When the prayer of simplicity or mystical contemplation is reached method might be an impediment.

It is an illusion to give *too much* time to considerations. Prayer then becomes a mere speculative study, a labour of the intellect; affections, petitions, resolutions, which are the main point, are

neglected; consequently, this exercise remains barren, and hardly any fault is corrected.

It is an illusion to give *too little* time to considerations, and to launch oneself at once wholly and solely into affections. In this way we run the risk of never having any well-grounded or thorough convictions, at least unless we supply this want by serious spiritual reading. And without reflections how long will our pious affections last? Let us, then, devote to considerations a suitable time; more is necessary in the beginning, less will be required in proportion as we advance, but it is only when we are sufficiently prepared for the prayer of simplicity, that they ought to be laid aside.

It is an illusion, when we have found devotion, to leave off too soon the acts which have procured it, and to pass on to others on the pretext of following out our method. "We must halt there as long as the pious affection lasts, even though it should occupy the whole time of our meditation; for, devotion being the end of this exercise, it would be an error to seek for elsewhere, with an uncertain hope, what we are certain of having already found."¹

It is an illusion to confine our prayer to one small corner of the day, and afterwards to think no more about it. No doubt it produces at the very time it is made a part of its effect; the mind is enlightened, affections and petitions are made, all which has its own value; but this pious exercise does

¹ St. Peter of Alcant., *On Prayer and Meditation*, 1st part, c. xii., 1st counsel.

not yield us all its fruit, unless it results in a practical resolution which corresponds to our needs, and which dwells in the memory in order to be put in practice. A prayer, which does not result in this, is like a remedy that is never applied, an instrument that is never used, a sword that remains in the scabbard.

In fine, it is an illusion to take scrupulosity for delicacy of conscience and its futile pre-occupations for a good prayer. On the contrary, this is one of the greatest obstacles to union with God; an obstacle, because it hinders tranquility of mind and attention to God; an obstacle, because it contracts the heart with sadness, stifles confidence and love, paralyses the will, inclines us to fly from God. Besides, what prayer can there be in a heart tossed about by scruples? Instead of adoring, it is examining its conscience; instead of thanking, it is probing its sores, it asks no pardon, it is too busy investigating its guilt, it begs for no grace, it is too much occupied in self-inspection. It has not then made any prayer, it was too busy with self to have any time to speak to God; or, if it has done so, it was a prayer without confidence, without any expanding of the heart; fear has banished the familiar intercourse of prayer, anxieties have destroyed calm and peace. Scrupulosity is not repentance, it is merely trouble; it is not delicacy of conscience, but its unhealthy counterfeit. Therefore, we must drive it away, by avoiding such subjects for meditation as are calculated to augment a fear already too much developed, by choosing such truths as are

most apt to strengthen our confidence, by leaving aside anxious, minute, and disquieting examinations, and especially by blind obedience to our superior or our director.

§ IV.—BODILY INDISPOSITIONS.

“ Sometimes,” says St. Francis de Sales,¹ “ disgust, sterility, dryness spring from bodily indisposition, as when through excessive watchings, labours and fasts, we are overwhelmed with drowsiness, lassitude, heaviness, and other such infirmities, which, although they depend on the body, do none the less inconvenience the mind on account of the close union which exists between body and soul. . . . The remedy, in this conjuncture, is to restore our corporal strength.”

The saints, however, sought for the fervor and delights of prayer in the midst of their austerities. Far from listening to the demon, “ who, assuming the rôle of our medical adviser, . . . pleads our constitution, and dins loudly into our ears the infirmities which religious observance, if kept, may engender ”²; we should, on the contrary, cling to our austerities as to the will of God, and keep our rules with a jealous care as our best inheritance and our true treasure. But as *indiscretion* in penitential exercises injures contemplation, if our body is exhausted and our mind inert, let us make known to our superiors our condition, and abide by what

¹ St. Francis de Sales, *The Devout Life*, 4th part, c. xv.

² Hug. of St. Victor, *De Claus*, l. i. c. ii.

they tell us to do. As to voluntary mortifications, let us subject them to the control of our superiors, and not undertake such as tend to ruin our health, to destroy our mental vigour, and render us heavy, inactive, without thought, or life in prayer. Voluntary austerities have their value, but prayer is a more desirable treasure; let us husband our strength in order to give ourselves up to the hard labour of a life of prayer, contemplation being our principal end.