

# Your progress in mental prayer

By Joe Tremblay

## **St. Bernard on Meditation:**

"Meditation purifies the source from which it comes, the mind. It controls affections, guides our acts, corrects excesses, rules our conduct, introduces order and dignity into our lives; it bestows understanding of things divine and human.

It brings clarity where there is confusion, binds what is torn apart, gathers what is scattered, investigates what is hidden, seeks out the truth, weighs what has the appearance of truth, and shows up what is pretense and falsehood.

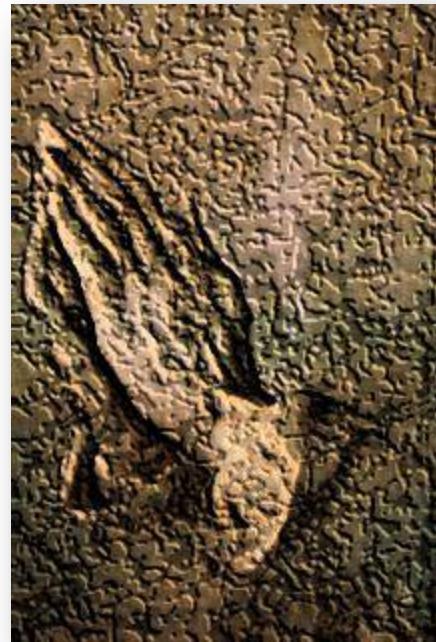
It plans future action and reviews the past, so that nothing remains in the mind that has not been corrected or that stands in need of correction.

When affairs are prospering it anticipates the onset of adversity, and when adversity comes it seems not to feel it, in this it displays in turn prudence and fortitude."

## **Introduction: Getting the Big Picture**

Bishop Fulton Sheen once said that vocal prayer is like approaching God on foot, meditation or mental prayer is like going to God on horseback and contemplation is like flying to God on a jet! For all intense and purposes, contemplation, as taught by the Saints, is a mystical union with God that he initiates on the supernatural level. It is a kind of spiritual ecstasy that not even all of the Saints enjoyed. To put it yet another way: Meditation is like watching a Passion play; witnessing the scenes as they unfold...from a distance. However, contemplation is like being in the play whereby the mystic has an affective union with our Lord's sufferings. This is why St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Sienna and St. Padre Pio bore the stigmata of Christ in their own flesh. It is a calling from God and not something a Christian can willfully choose for oneself.

This particular post is *not* concerned with contemplation in the mystical sense, that which is reserved for a few, but rather on meditation (interchangeable with mental prayer); a spiritual exercise in which every Christian can practice in order to draw closer to God. In spiritual terms, it is like summing a mountain, the heights from which we see the big picture of life and God's plan for us.



In 1919, James Cardinal Gibbons, in pastoral letter to Catholics in America, wrote the following: "Instructed by His example [Jesus Christ], the Church deals with men as they really are, recognizing both the capacities for good—and the inclinations to evil that are in every human being. Exaggeration in either direction is an error." Those who practice meditation on a daily basis have a much better chance of enjoying a moral and spiritual 20/20 vision. Indeed, in drawing closer to Christ through this spiritual exercise we come to know the nature of life and death, good and evil, happiness and misery for what they really are. To think with Christ and to live his life is the goal of meditation. No doubt, without exaggeration, prayer well-done is the most important thing in life. It will have a ripple effect as big as eternity itself. And as for those who deliberately neglect it, they will struggle to enter through that narrow gate.

### **Mental Prayer: Mission and Vocation:**

God has assigned to every person a purpose and a mission to fulfill. It can even be said that life on earth is our way of working out how we will spend eternity. In other words, our days on earth are a kind of probation. Every day is precious; every moment has infinite value. To make the best of it, to live life to the full and to possess it more abundantly, we have to know the Source behind it all. We have to talk to the Lord on daily a basis.

With that said, listening to God is every bit as important in prayer as speaking to him, perhaps even more important. In the book of Isaiah the prophet says, "Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear." And to be sure, in order to advance along the path of life we have to have open our ears. We have to listen to his voice in silence. After all, silence is the language of God. The prophet Elijah was told to look for God at Mount Sinai. He looked but didn't find the Lord in the drama of the earthquake or in the blazing fire, rather, he found his Divine Friend in the quiet breeze- the quiet breeze symbolizing the whisper of God.

Pope Benedict XVI once said that no great mission can fully ripen without meditation, tranquility, and self-denial. It can also be said that one's vocation in life cannot reach its full potential without mental prayer or meditation. Psalm 127 says it best: "Unless the LORD build the house, they labor in vain who build."

### **What Mental Prayer is Not:**

Unlike yoga or other Eastern spiritual practices, meditation, in a Catholic context, cannot be reduced to a technique. It is not like a gadget in which certain buttons are pushed so as to get a result. Neither can it be said that mental prayer is simply a methodology in which certain steps are carried out in order to produce a certain effect. No. Christian meditation is deeply personal in that it largely depends on the spiritual and moral disposition of the Christian towards God. For instance, the person who is addicted to pornography or practicing contraception will not draw the same fruit from mental prayer as one who is faithful to the moral law. Holy desire, a repentant heart, the capacity to love and a virtuous life determines how much we get out of mental prayer. Having said that, there are common principles of mental prayer which guide us along the way. The ones we will consider have been practiced among the Saints throughout the centuries. Faithfully and consistently

applied, these principles of mental prayer will, as Fr. Edward Leen said, “prepare the soul for the action of the Blessed Eucharist.” The union between the soul and Christ is but the happy result.

### **Three Important Principles:**

Meditation is nothing other than thinking about Christ, an aspect of his life or some spiritual truth. When a diamond specialist examines a diamond, he looks at all of its facets and sides. Shimmering different colors from each angle, the diamond reveals something new about itself as it is manually rotated under the light. Mental prayer essentially does the same thing. It considers some aspect of Christ's life or spiritual truth by looking at it and studying it. It then submits the many aspects of our life as we know it- with all of its disappointments and promises –to the Light of Christ so that the good and the bad may be seen for what they really are.

Nevertheless, the starting point or even the primary reason to meditate is not focus on the self but rather to immerse oneself in the life of Christ. It is only after his words and actions are considered do I move on to the contents of my own life. As such, the Christian who meditates accordingly has, within his possession, an unshakable standard by which to measure his life by. Incidentally, this leads us to the three principles or signposts of mental prayer:

a) *Considerations*: A consideration is a mental act in which the subject matter is “considered,” thought about or meditated on. The subject matter can be any part of Christ’s life, a Scripture passage or a spiritual truth taken up by a Saint. Of course, the most common expression of these spiritual considerations is when the rosary is prayed or when one reads Scripture. Again, like a diamond specialist, the one who meditates on the life of Christ should use the imagination by placing oneself in the scene or by asking questions or by drawing parallels to previously read Scripture passages. Don’t just think about it and move on. Study the mystery or spiritual truth at hand. Probe it! Delve into it! Ask God questions! Whatever you do, do not be passive.

As it pertains to spiritual reading, the content should be relatively short. One reads not only to learn but to assimilate and retain the truths at hand.

b) *Admiration*: Meditation or spiritual reading has love for its purpose; not just knowledge. This is why it is important that the content of our meditation should lead us to admire Christ in a new and an inspiring way. This point cannot be overstated. Too many theologians or intellectual types within the Church become satisfied with mere knowledge. The more they know, the better off they are...so they think. No. As the spiritual classic, *Imitation of Christ*, reminds us: “It is better to love the Holy Trinity than to know how to define it.” Although meditation is a vehicle of learning- aided by the Spirit’s gifts of knowledge, understanding and wisdom –still, the greatest of all virtues is love.

c) *Resolution*: The inspiration to love God and neighbor must have some concrete application or else it will not take hold in our lives. Resolutions must accompany my meditation or spiritual reading. The question we should ask ourselves is this: In practical terms, how can I act on these spiritual considerations today? Meditation without a resolution

is like a soul without a body. It is nothing but a good thought or intention. Therefore, resolutions are the means through which spiritual truths become incarnate in our actions.

### **Meditation: Its Historical Importance**

The three principles mentioned above are general guidelines on how to have a productive meditation. Of course, there are other factors to consider such as the preparation phase. Nevertheless, if the Christian can manage to get the basics down, he or she will make progress in the spiritual life.

The Desert Fathers (early Christians who went out into the desert to pray) said that meditation accommodates each of the three faculties of the soul. And the three faculties or parts of the soul are the following: the intellect- for seeing or perceiving God's truth and goodness; the will- for obeying God's will and carrying out his plan; and the memory- for remembering God's truth and goodness. But with each purpose there is a corresponding vice. Due to our fallen human nature, the intellect can be burdened with ignorance; the will, with laziness; and the memory, with forgetfulness. Meditation, according to the Desert Fathers, shores-up the three parts of the soul by allowing the intellect to soak in the truth of God, the will to be inspired by and to act on God's love and the memory to recall the goodness God has bestowed on the individual. With this, the Christian possesses a lasting awareness that God is near and ready to act on his behalf. Indeed, the real and living truth is more deeply impressed on the mind that God is a real person! The Deity is not just an impersonal divine presence or energy source.

One of the setbacks of today's entertainment culture and technological society is that it is easy to lose the awareness of God's presence. This is the key to becoming a Saint. Part of the reason why monasteries were storehouses of renewal, learning and progress in the Middle Ages was because the monk's had exercised a constant awareness of God's presence. To better understand the *Word of God*, and therefore to be enlightened by *Him*, is to better understand how the universe was created and ordered through *Him*. From this holy quietude was borne many of Western Civilization's greatest institutions. This is why St. Benedict in Italy, St. Patrick in Ireland and St. Boniface in Germany were responsible for civilizing barbaric tribes known for their cruelty and human sacrifices. More than their pagan predecessors, Christians also understood human nature. Due to their efforts, human dignity was resurrected from the mire of pagan barbarism. Human rights and charities for every known infirmity became a social reality.

### **Personal Benefits of Meditation:**

As stated previously, the goal of mental prayer is to think with the mind of Christ. Fr. Edward Leen wrote about this spiritual benefit by saying, "The final end of prayer, considered as a potent means for the development of God's life in the soul, is to emancipate us from natural habits or thought and affection and elevate us to a supernatural manner of thinking and willing, to change our natural outlook on life and things and to make it supernatural. The function of prayer aims at bridging over this infinite gulf; it aims at enabling us to enter into the mind of God and from that point of vantage to contemplate all created things and the mysteries of Faith."

With the mind of Christ, therefore, we can more easily detect our own sinfulness and the ulterior motives which often accompany our good deeds. Self-knowledge is intensified so that self-love can be brought to the fore. The words of Christ are then palpably felt: "Without me, you can do nothing." Far from feeling denigrated, the Christian, distrusting himself completely, is now in the position to put total trust in Christ. To be sure, a deep sense of peace and a feeling of liberation is but the happy result of acquiring this supernatural way of thinking. But first, the disease of self-love, as Fr. Leen puts it, needs to be weeded out of the garden. "Prayer," he continues, "properly carried out, will have as its effect the gradual revelation to the soul of this disease of self-love which so intimately penetrates the very fibers of its being as to pass unobserved by the person that does not lead an interior life."

One Benedictine said this about meditating on Scripture: "First comes the Word of God that addresses me, strikes me, challenges me, wounds me, and judges me, but also heals and frees me." Oh! It is a common mistake to think that the meeting with God in His Word is only one of consolation and inspiration. What the Lord told the prophet Jeremiah with regard to his mission can also be applied to what he does with each soul: "This day I set you over nations and over kingdoms, to root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant." As the Benedictine motto goes: "Pruned...and it grows again." The more self-love is diminished, the more Christ can act in the soul.

Meditation also ushers in sacrifice and self-denial which is but the substance of every virtue. It not only eradicates selfish motives but it increases our capacity to love. Again, to borrow from the wisdom of Fr. Edward Leen, an Irish priest whose writings flourished during the 1930's: "Prayer is a means to the acquisition and cultivation of the spirit of sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Now, when God finds this disposition in the soul, He hastens to communicate to it a participation more and more abundant of that Divine life of which the soul of Jesus is a limitless ocean."

All of the benefits of mental prayer lend themselves towards a greater awareness of God's presence in our daily lives. It enables us to live life to the full. And probably the most important fruit of mental prayer is that it prepares us, or should I say- "acclimates" us, to what we hope to enjoy as the beatific vision in heaven. As Fr. Leen said, "Anything 'unsaintly' is forever excluded from the presence of God, and it could no more exist there than could a dry twig in a blazing furnace." Hence, the life of glory in heaven is but the continuation of the life of grace on earth. Meditation is one very important instrument which secures this transition!