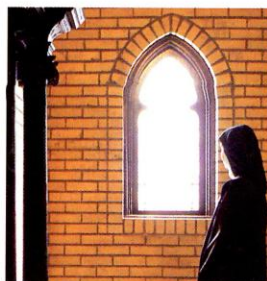


Theological Reflections

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Mental Prayer as the Means to Sanctity and Sanity

It seems worthwhile to look at mental prayer as closely as we can so that we might better appreciate what a treasure it really is and, appreciating its value might engage in what some saints, like St. Teresa of Avila, have said is absolutely necessary to achieve sanctity: *No mental prayer, no holiness*. And I would add it is necessary not only to achieve sanctity, but sometimes even to preserve one's sanity.

Mental prayer is the prayer in which the sentiments we express are our own and not those of someone else. Thus understood, it is actually the heart and substance of all prayer worthy of the name, because even when, as generally happens, the words we use in vocal prayer are those of someone else—of the psalmist, or even of Christ or the Church—we must still somehow make these words our own, appropriate them, and identify ourselves with what we are saying.

However, the prayer of which we are here speaking is something more refined. It is that form of prayer in which we ourselves, under the impulse of grace, make up the words we use as expressions of what is already in our hearts. The degree of this internal expression of our sentiments is a matter of taste or temperament. In essence, however, mental prayer is interior prayer. We

interiorly vocalize what is inside of us in such language as we may use to tell God what is in our hearts.

All prayer from the highest raptures of mysticism to the lowly fingering of the beads is a conversation with the invisible world of God, His angels and the saints. As conversation, it is therefore a communion of mind with mind, and of spirit with the spirit world that is unseen by the senses, but ever so seen by the eyes of faith.

In mental prayer this conversation has certain qualities that make it distinctive. The conversation with the invisible world is *my* conversation. The conversation is spontaneous. It arises by a kind of heavenly instinct in words and terms of thought that are quite unrehearsed. In mental prayer we are not exactly making a speech to God. Moreover, the conversation is a real dialogue between myself speaking and my invisible Auditor listening.

Mental prayer is not, if it is for real, a monologue. It presumes that as I pray mentally I am both active and passive, both talker and hearer. It is a two-way process, from us to the real world of faith, where God and those in His glory abide, and from Him and them back to us who so desperately need their guidance and inspiration. Needless to say, we should give God a chance to talk back. The art of listening in prayer is a fine art.

Finally, conversation in mental prayer is to be an experience. In it we are to be, as it were, immersed in what we are doing and involved in our whole being, depending on the degree of intensity we put into prayer and especially on the grace that God gives us when we are in contact with Him and with those who behold Him face to face

Mental prayer, we might say, is *total* prayer where the whole of us and not only part of us is consciously and deliberately conversing with God and His friends in glory. You may do other things thoughtlessly or casually but you do not pray mentally without realizing what you are about. We might compare it with the intense conversation we sometimes have with some person about matters that deeply concern either or both of us.

Again the depth of this intimacy in mental prayer depends mainly on God's grace. But it also depends on us, so much so that we can safely say if we do not more often pray this way the fault is our own. Why our fault? Because being lost in conversation with God in prayer has to be merited. This means it has to be worked at; it means making the effort to concentrate on whom we are speaking with when we pray rather than on ourselves as doing the praying even when as so often happens, the object of our prayer is our own grave needs. ☪