

TEN AIDS TO MENTAL PRAYER

Don Jean-Baptiste Chautard, O.C.S.O. This comes from the book Soul of the Apostolate and was the favorite book of Pope St. Pius X. The good Pope said he left this Spiritual Masterpiece by his night stand so he could read it in his bed. Considering mental prayer is half of the Rosary and the Church declared a partial indulgence for those who spend time in pious mental prayer, you can understand why this is a great bonus.

Mental prayer is a furnace, in which the watch-fires of vigilance are constantly rekindled. Fidelity to mental prayer gives life to all our other pious exercises. By it, the soul will gradually acquire vigilance and a spirit of prayer, that is, a habit of ever more frequent recourse to God. Union with God in mental prayer will lead to intimate union with Him, even in the midst of our most absorbing occupations.

The soul, thus living in union with God, by custody of the heart, will draw down into itself, more and more, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the infused virtues, and perhaps God will call it to a higher degree of prayer.

Dom Vital Lehodey's splendid "Ways of Mental Prayer" (Paris, Lecoffre. Eng. Transl. Dublin, M. H. Gill) presents a clear and forceful summary of all the essentials of the ascent of the soul, through the various degrees of prayer, and gives rules by which we can ascertain whether a higher type of prayer is really a gift of God or the product of illusion.

Before speaking of affective prayer, the first degree of the comparatively advanced prayer to which God ordinarily only calls souls who have attained custody of the heart by means of meditation, Fr. Rigoleu points out in his fine book of "Spiritual Works" (Avignon, 1843, p. 17ff.) ten ways of conversing with God when, after a sincere attempt, one finds it morally impossible to make a set meditation upon a subject prepared the evening before.

We here summarize the suggestions of this holy writer:

FIRST WAY. Take some spiritual book (New Testament, Following of Christ), read a few lines, pausing long in between meditate a little on what you have read, trying to get the full meaning and to impress it on your mind. Draw some holy affection, love, contrition, etc., from the reading. Avoid reading or meditating too much. Every time you pause, remain as long as your mind finds it pleasant or useful to do so.

SECOND WAY. Take some text of Holy Scripture, or some vocal prayer, like the Pater, Ave, or Credo, and say it over, stopping at each word, drawing our various holy sentiments, upon which you may dwell as long as you like. At the end, ask God for some grace or virtue, depending on what has been the subject of your meditations.

Do not stop on any one word if it wearies or tires you. When you find no more matter for thought or affections, leave it and pass on quietly to the next. But when you feel yourself moved by some good sentiment, remain there as long as it lasts, without going to the trouble of passing on to something else. There is no necessity to be always making new acts; it is often quite enough to remain in the presence of God silently turning over in your mind the words you have already meditated upon, or savoring the affections they have aroused in your heart.

THIRD WAY. When the prepared subject-matter does not give you enough scope, or room for free action, make acts of faith, adoration, thanksgiving, hope, love, and so on, letting them range as wide and free as you please, pausing at each one to let it sink in.

FOURTH WAY. When meditation is impossible, and you are too helpless and dried-up to produce a single affection, tell Our Lord that it is your intention to make an act, for example, of contrition, every time you draw breath, or pass a bead of the rosary between your fingers, or say, vocally, some short prayer.

Renew this assurance of your intention, from time to time, and then, if God suggests some other good thought, receive it with humility, and dwell upon it.

FIFTH WAY. In time of trial or dryness, if you are completely barren and powerless to make any acts or to have any thoughts, abandon yourself generously to suffering, without anxiety, and without making any effort to avoid it, making no other acts except this self-abandonment into the hands of God to suffer this trial and all it may please Him to send.

Or else you may unite your prayer with Our Lord's Agony in the garden and His desolation upon the Cross. See yourself attached to the Cross with the Savior and stir yourself up to follow His example, and remain there suffering without flinching, until death.

SIXTH WAY. A survey of your own conscience. Admit your defects, passions, weaknesses, infirmities, helplessness, misery, nothingness. Adore God's judgments with regard to the state in which you find yourself. — Submit to His holy will. Bless Him both for His punishments and for the favors of His mercy. — Humble yourself before His sovereign Majesty. Sincerely confess your sins and infidelities to Him and ask Him to forgive you. Take back all your false judgments and errors. Detest all the wrongs you have done and resolve to correct yourself in the future.

This kind of prayer is very free and unhampered, and admits of all kinds of affections. It can be practiced at all times, especially in some unexpected trial, to submit to the punishments of God's justice, or as a means of regaining recollection after a lot of activity and distracting affairs.

SEVENTH WAY. Conjure up a vivid picture of the Last Things. Visualize yourself in agony, between time and eternity between your past life and the judgment of God. What would you wish to have done? How would you want to have lived? Think of the pain you will feel then. Call to mind your sins, your negligence, your abuse of grace. How would you like to have acted in this or that situation? Make up your mind to adopt a real, practical means of remedying those defects which give you reason for anxiety.

Visualize yourself dead, buried, rotting, forgotten by all. See yourself before the judgment-seat of Christ: in purgatory in hell. The more vivid the picture, the better will be your meditation. We all need this mystical death, to get the flesh out of our soul, and to rise again, that is, to get free from corruption and sin. We need to go through this purgatory, in order to arrive at the enjoyment of God in this life.

EIGHTH WAY. Apply your mind to Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament. Address yourself to Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, with all the respect that His Real Presence demands, unite yourself to Him and to all His operations in the Eucharist, where He is ceaselessly adoring, praising, and loving His Father, in the name of all men, and in the condition of a victim.

Realize His recollection, His hidden life, His utter privation of everything, obedience, humility, and soon. Stir yourself up to imitate them, and resolve to do so according as the occasions arise. Offer up Jesus to the Father, as the only Victim worthy of Him, and by Whom we can offer homage to Him, thank Him for His gifts, satisfy His justice, and oblige His mercy to help us.

Offer yourself to sacrifice your being, your life, your work. Offer up to Him some act of virtue you propose to perform, some mortification upon which you have resolved, with a view to self-conquest, and offer this for the same ends for which Our Lord immolates Himself in the Holy Sacraments. Make this offering with an ardent desire to add as much as possible to the glory He gives to His Father in this august mystery.

End with a spiritual Communion.

This is an excellent form of prayer, especially for your visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Get to know it well, because our happiness in this life depends on our union with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

NINTH WAY. This prayer is to be made in the Name of Jesus Christ. It will arouse our confidence in God, and help us to enter into the spirit and the sentiments of Our Lord.

Its foundation is the fact that we are united to the Son of God, and are His brothers, members of His Mystical Body; that He has made over to us all His merits, and left us the legacy of all the rewards owed Him by His Father for His labors and death. And this is what makes us capable of honoring God with a worship worthy of Him, and gives us the right to treat with God, and, as it were, to exact His graces of Him as though by justice. As creatures, we have not this right, still less as sinners, for there is an infinite disproportion between God and creatures, and infinite opposition between God and sinners. But because we are united to the Incarnate Word, and are His brothers, and His members, we are enabled to appear before God with confidence, and speak familiarly with Him and oblige Him to give us a favorable hearing, to grant our requests, and to grant us His graces, because of the alliance and union between us and His Son.

Hence, we are to appear before God either to adore, to praise, or to love Him, by Jesus Christ working in us as the Head in His members, lifting us up, by His spirit, to an entirely divine state, or else to ask some favor in virtue of the merits of His Son. And for that purpose we should remind Him of all that His well beloved Son has done for Him, His life and death, and His sufferings, the reward for which belongs to us because of the deed of gift by which he has made it over to us.

And this is the spirit in which we should recite the Divine Office.

TENTH WAY. Simple attention to the presence of God, and meditation.

Before starting out to meditate on the prepared topic, put yourself in the presence of God without making any other distinct thought, or stirring up in yourself any other sentiment except the respect and love for God which His presence inspires. — Be content to remain thus before God, in silence, in simple repose of the spirit as long as it satisfies you. After that, go on with your meditation in the usual way.

It is a good thing to begin all your prayers in this way, and worthwhile to return to it after every point. Relax in this simple awareness of God's presence. — It is a way to gain real interior re-collection. You

will develop the habit of centering your mind upon God and thus gradually pave die way for contemplation. But do not remain this way out of pure laziness or just to avoid the trouble of making a meditation.