

THE PRAYER OF PERFECTION.

MYSTICAL writers define mental prayer to be "the elevation of the spirit into God." It is the *Sursum corda* of the ancient Church, the *oratio pura* of the solitaries of the desert. Its practice was enjoined in the first age of Christianity. The primitive monks constantly affirmed that "the supreme degree of all perfection consists in the perfection of prayer"; seeing that, more than any other religious exercise, interior prayer strips the mind of images and forms, denudes it of individual and secular interest and lifts it up out of the bondage of self into the free love of God. Castian, Scholasticus, Nilus, Benedict, Bernard, Aquinas, and most of the great doctors agree on this point. But the established practice of interpreting the gradual ascent in terms borrowed from the life of prayer characterized pre-eminently the ascetic writers of the first half of the seventeenth century, particularly those of Spain.

The schemes of mental prayer set forth in the several mystical writings of that period vary considerably. Castaniza's classification is one of the simplest. He notes two states of prayer—meditation and contemplation. Meditation is a *seeking*, contemplation a *seeing* of God. Balthazar Alvarez, of the Society of Jesus, distinguishes the prayer of supplication, of meditation, and of silence. Santa Teresa enumerates four degrees—mental prayer, the prayer of quiet, the prayer of union, and ecstatic prayer. Other divisions are often amazingly cumbrous, the writers having fallen into the patent error of identifying their fleeting experiences with the fixed law of spiritual progress.

In general, however, the ascetic theologians of the Counter Reformation associate the several states of mental prayer with the chief powers of the rational nature—the understanding, the will, and the affections.

Christian mysticism has always been in bondage to the psychology of Plotinus. A more exact discrimination of the powers of the soul in their nature and exercise would, by bringing the mystical creed into stricter harmony with the ordinary experience of mankind, make it more generally intelligible.

Plotinus taught that the two soul-relations—the sensitive and the rational natures—meet in the act of representation; and that the powers of the superior soul flow into an unmingled unity in the realization of God. That *clearness of the soul* in which the Deity has His dwelling is variously named: it is called the apex, the supreme point of the spirit, the summit of the mind, the essence of the soul, the ground, the depth and centre of the spirit, the stable foundation of the soul, the entire state, etc. Tauler says of it, “The ground or centre of the soul is so high and glorious a thing that it cannot properly be named, even as no adequate name can be found for the Infinite and Almighty God. In this ground lies the image of the Holy Trinity”; the Divine image in which man was created at first, to which he has been restored through grace.

According to the Plotinist, therefore, mental prayer, as it marks the ascent to God, has this office committed to it, to elevate the sense-life into the life of reason, and to plunge the life of reason into the life of God. This dual task is accomplished by inward recollection,

“When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home,”

and by the practice of the presence of God.

Mental prayer, as has just been said, is commonly defined with reference to the faculties of the superior soul. It is described in the first instance as the *prayer of discourse*,

afterwards as the *prayer of good acts*, and finally as the *prayer of infused aspirations*.¹

I. Meditation, or discursive prayer, lies within that region in which the understanding operates. Contemplationists do not agree as to the place which petition, whether for oneself or for others, should hold in relation to those who follow the inward way. Some plainly declare that "the prayer of supplication is to be forbidden to contemplatives: it is not for interior souls." Others are content to admit its legitimacy, but solely as an initial exercise, to be departed from as soon as may be. Others again recognize it only when it has been carried up into the prayer of silence, in which prayer the soul presents itself to God in quietness, framing no definite request, but disposing itself in a tacit consent of love before the Sovereign Will.

Even in its higher reaches meditation is the least perfect degree of internal prayer. The aspirant directs his mind to the consideration of one or more of the mysteries of the faith, in order that by "a serious and exact search into the several points and circumstances of it he may extract motives of good affections." At first, the thought of sin, of death, and of judgment, should be allowed to engross the mind. Such themes give birth to repentance. Afterwards, the consideration of the love of God, the remembrance of the passion of Christ, the anticipation of future glory, quicken faith. Repentance is the purgation of the soul, faith its illumination. Discursive prayer generates motives of contrition and affiance. These work in the mind until, on the one hand, the recognition of inbred evil, together with the recollection of the Divine purity, produce hatred of sin and a vehement longing to escape from its

¹ This is the scheme of Austin Baker, whose numerous treatises on the Interior Life were epitomized by Serenus Cresse in *Sancta Sophia*, published in 1657.

thrall; and on the other hand, our understandings are settled in pure faith. "Faith," says Aquinas, "has this property, to elevate the soul to God, and free it from all creatures." Castaniza adds, "So long as there are discourses in our understanding, images in our memory, joys or tenderness in our will, these powers have for their object not pure God but sensible things." And Gerson frames in more scriptural terms a similar remark. He says, "Though I have spent forty years in reading and prayer, yet I could never find anything more efficacious or compendious for attaining to mystical theology than that our spirit should become like a young child and beggar in the presence of God."

The aim of meditation, therefore, is to raise us to simpler representations and more general conceptions, to enable us increasingly to regard the sacred mysteries in their inward meaning, rather than in their relations and circumstances; so that by a gradual abstraction from things created we may learn to apprehend God in the singleness of His perfections. Thus faith becomes "pure without representations or likeness, simple without reasonings, and universal without distinctions."

According to the theologians one ought not to continue long in this state of prayer. "An internal soul," says Francesca Lopaz of Valenza, "ought to act rather with the affection of the will than with the toil of the intellect." As soon as it has been found that the will has become "so well affected that it is rendered facile in producing good affections and impulses," one should pass on to the prayer of good acts.

II. The prayer of good acts concerns the will. Such acts are efficacious in proportion as they are simple. Their use is "to empty us of ourselves"; little by little God takes possession of a surrendered soul, until at last "all is

yielded up to the Author of all, and God reigns supreme over our nothingness."

Meditation must now be wholly laid aside. Even the passion of Christ must not be dwelt upon. It is necessary that we should purge the mind of those images and forms which come up from the lower soul, that so we may gather our impulses into "direct piercing intents." It was probably round this point that the Quietist controversy gathered. The ground of debate was ostensibly the doctrine of pure love. But the orthodoxy of Rome is always practical, and a shrewd observer writing in those days from Italy relates that vast numbers of good Catholics were beginning to follow the inward way, and adds significantly, "If these persons were observed to become more strict in their lives, more retired and serious in their mental devotions, yet there appeared less zeal in their whole deportment as to the exterior parts of the religion of that Church. They were not so assiduous at mass, nor so earnest to procure masses to be said for their friends; nor were they so frequently either at confessions or at processions; so that the trade of those who live by these things was sensibly sunk."

In 1687 Molinos' sixty-eight propositions were condemned. In 1689 Antonio de Rojas' *Life of the Spirit Approved* was placed on the Index. In 1699 certain propositions found in Fénelon's *Maximes des Saints* were declared to be erroneous. The formal ground of condemnation may be inferred from the following sentences: "It is necessary that a man should annihilate his native powers: this is life eternal." "To wish to exert one's personal activity is to offend God." "He who has given up his free-will to God ought to have no care about anything, neither hell nor paradise; nor ought he even to have any desire for his own perfection; hope of his own salvation ought to be driven away." Mystics

claim an extraordinary licence of speech, and it would not be difficult to collect from various sources a multitude of citations which stand in need of interpretation as much as these do. For instance, Benet Canfield, author of that famous book, known in England as *The Bright Starre*, goes to the brink of pannihilism. Pure love, he holds, is won when "the man himself, and all other things—meditation, knowledge, desire, prayer, and the practice of a holy life—are cast asleep and are made nothing." But a more careful and just statement of a doctrine, which is as old as Christian mysticism, is presented by Father John Evangelist of Balduke, a Flemish Capuchin, author of a very remarkable treatise entitled *The Kingdom of God in the Soul*. He affirms that abnegation consists of three successive acts, (a) From all creatures; (b) From oneself; (c) From the gifts of God. "Pure love to God," he continues, "consists in this that a man deny absolutely all created things, and reason, and deliver up himself wholly unto God without intending thereby any merit, comfort, profit or any other benefit, temporal or spiritual . . . This love is pure, for it beholdeth God only in Himself." The essential error of the doctrine of pure love, as mystically understood, is that such love, by the renunciation of all joy, tenderness, longing, ceases to be love, and becomes indifference.

In the prayer of good acts the internal working may for a time be helped by speech. The author of *The Clowde of Unknowynge* gives this counsel: "Take thee a sharp, strong cry of prayer—one word is better than two, and if that word be short, such a word as 'Sin' or 'God,' it is well." Francis of Assisi used to spend whole nights repeating only these words, *Deus meus et omnia*. Didacus Martinez, the Apostle of Peru, used sometimes to utter six hundred times a day the single phrase, *Deo gratias*. It is related of Brother Masseus, of the Order of St. Francis, that for a

considerable time he did nothing but ejaculate U, U, U (one of the letters of the alphabet); this he said was an aspiration given to him by God. Sooner or later, however, in the experience of the proficient vocal prayer ceases to be helpful. Gregory López, "incarnate seraph and deified man," as Molinos terms him, continued for three years in the use of an ejaculation, *Thy will be done in time and in eternity*, "repeating it as often as he breathed." But at the end of that time "God Almighty discovered to him that infinite treasure of the pure and continued act of faith and love, with silence and resignation." From that hour during thirty-six remaining years his prayer was in inward silence—silence of word, of thought, and of feeling.

It is by the reduction of distinct acts of recollection to one all-absorbing act that the contemplative enters into the prayer of interior silence. In this mode of prayer the soul, having a bare and obscure faith that God is indeed present to and in her, presents herself before Him, and with all love and humility, continues in His presence, yielding herself unreservedly to His will, without self-interest or concern.

III. The prayer of silence prepares for the prayer of infused aspirations. In the cessation of self-activity God takes possession of the yielded soul, initiating and ruling its proper movements, and from time to time substituting His own operation in the place of personal activity. For in this last degree of prayer there are two modes. In the former the soul still acts, but it acts in dependence on the movements of grace. The latter is in pure passivity.

(1) In this prayer the mind is free from all intuition of images; it is undistinguished by any succession of words or acts of perception, but is uttered internally in "a soft and delicate whisper," which is made known "by an inflamed intention of the mind," by an unutterable excess of affection and inconceivable quickness and alacrity of spirit,

and by blind elevations of the will which engulf it more and more profoundly in God. Now also the soul loses all remembrance of herself, and of created things, and all that she retains of God is a remembrance that He can neither be seen nor comprehended. All creatures, therefore, being removed, and no distinct image of God received, there remains in the soul and mind, as it were, a mere emptiness, and this *nothing* is worth more than all creatures, for it is all that we can know of God in this life.

Now the soul has entered the Divine darkness, wherein lie many aridities, and especially that great desolation which mystical writers call "hell." For in introversion it is with the soul as it would appear to the natural eye were the atmosphere of this earth withdrawn. Where the direct ray fell there would be unshadowed brightness, but beyond the straight lines of light there would be unrelieved obscurity. The soul which has reached this stage in its upward progress is denuded of all secondary knowledge of God. Hence, when the Divine Presence is obscured there is no remedy in reflection, representation, or remembrance, seeing that all the energies of the soul have been concentrated in one direct act of adherence to God.

When the spiritual vision becomes attempered to the ineffable ray the soul sees the Divine darkness to be most excellent and dazzling in brightness. When she begins to perceive this, she has come into the state of perfection—"a blessed state of a perfect denudation of spirit, an absolute internal solitude, a transcending and forgetfulness of all created things, and especially of oneself, a heavenly-mindedness and fixed attention to God only, and this even in the midst of employments to others never so distractive, and finally an experimental knowledge of all the infinite perfections of God, and a strict application of one's spirit by love, above knowledge, joined with a fruition and repose in

Him in the whole extent of one's will, so that the soul becomes after an inexpressible manner a partaker of the Divine nature ; yea, one spirit, one will, one love with Him, being in a sort deified, and enjoying as much of heaven here as mortality is capable of."

(2) Within this state of perfection there are unions of ecstasies which are purely passive. These unions are seldom granted to any one who has not reached full maturity. For the way is long and tedious, and there are many degrees of attainment to be won. But Catharine of Siena and some others were in their younger years favoured with a passive union. Such unions are usually brief. Seuse says they last but a moment ; Bernard judges that they seldom continue longer than a quarter of an hour. Yet they are very fruitful in the graces of the Spirit. Some of the consequences which flow from passive union are, a most clear assurance of Christian verity imparted to the soul, a penetrating insight into the scope and purpose of Holy Scripture, a marvellous purity conferred on the affections and the will, the entire subjugation of the imagination and other internal senses by the superior soul, and finally the obliteration of distinction in the singleness of approaching perfection.

Henry of Herph preserves an account which one Roger, a devout Franciscan, gave of himself, saying that a hundred times in matins he was in spirit drawn upward to a more high knowledge of Divine secrets, all which "tracts" he forcibly resisted, being assured that if he had given his soul free scope he would have been so deeply engulfed in the abyss of the Divine incomprehensibility, and so wholly drawn out of himself, that he should never have been able to have retired himself alive from such a contemplation.

A devout student of the New Testament with some understanding of the method of interior prayer might follow with general approval the mystical doctrine of the gradual

ascent of the soul to God, as it was defined by the contemplationists of the seventeenth century. He would concur with them in marking as the first, second, and third stages of progress a lively apprehension, a resolved acceptance, and a hearty repose in the love of God. He would understand something of what they meant to express by "obscure faith," "blind elevations of the will," and "mute adherence." He would possibly be able to sympathize with them in their desolations and darkness. He would assuredly be familiar with the interior operation of God in will and affections. And he would doubtless recognize those Divine surprises which enlighten and gladden the uplifted soul. But he would perhaps be offended with some of the terms employed. He would speak less of the native image of God in the soul, and more of the gift of the Holy Spirit. He would accept the mystical formula of renunciation and adherence—"All for all"—but he would deny that anything which belongs to original nature ought to be coerced or nullified. He would dwell more in the illuminated regions of consciousness and penetrate less often to those rayless depths where the dispositions originate and the principles of being are, that "intellectual heaven, where there is no sun nor moon, but God and the Lamb are the light of it." These and other differences he would be careful to mark, but he would be able nevertheless to observe the legitimate experience of his mystical brother: "As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man."

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