

Little Catechism

Of the

Life of Prayer

Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, OCD

CENSURA ORDINIS

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Preface by Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, OCD

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This "little catechism," published for the first time in the Review Vita Carmelitana, was welcomed with real joy by many who found in it light and comfort. This could not be otherwise, since it contains the substance of teachings which, for about four centuries, the Teresian Reform of the Carmelite Order has offered as guide for the life of prayer. They are the teachings of St. Teresa of Jesus and of St. John of the Cross, gathered together and developed by their followers, and enriched by long and continuous experience. These teachings that have remained until now almost entirely hidden within the walls of the Cloister are now put within the reach of all by these pages. This "little catechism" is, in fact, an exposition of the Teresian idea and method of mental prayer, an idea and method too little known, and yet whose beneficent influence has been verified so many times.

Readers of Vita Carmelitana have often expressed their desire of seeing a collected edition of the lessons published in the Review; to satisfy this desire we have prepared this present edition. We have thought it advisable to introduce into the text some slight modifications which will render it more adaptable to the conditions of persons living in the world, but this has in no way altered the substance.

May our Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus, the great Teacher of the life of prayer, obtain an abundance of divine blessings for all the readers of this little booklet which proposes to offer the substantial bread "of her heavenly doctrine."

Chapter 1: Prayer in the Contemplative Life

1. What is the Christian life?

The Christian life is a life lived in conformity with the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to which we should direct all our actions to the glory of God, by loving Him and observing His holy laws. The Christian therefore lives “for God.”

2. What is the contemplative life?

The contemplative life is a form of Christian life in which one endeavors to live not only “for God,” but also “with God.” It is not restricted to religious, but can also be lived perfectly in the world. It is wholly concentrated on the quest for divine intimacy and for that reason multiplies, during the day, the so-called “spiritual exercises.” These are especially exercises of prayer, which should be accompanied by exercises of mortification because, as St. Teresa, the great Teacher of the contemplative life, says: “prayer and too comfortable a life do not go together.”

3. What place does prayer hold in the contemplative life?

Prayer occupies the first place in the contemplative life, and practically, the contemplative life is a life of prayer. Hence contemplative Orders devote much time to prayer. In the Rule of Carmel, an eminently contemplative Order, the central precept is that of continual prayer: “Each one of you is to stay in his cell or nearby, pondering the Lord’s law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers.” In fact Carmelite religious dedicate much time to prayer: they make mental prayer twice daily, they assist at Holy Mass, recite the Divine Office, and apply themselves to the presence of God during the day, not to speak of private exercises of devotion.

4. What is prayer?

Prayer is conversation with God in which we manifest to Him the desires of our hearts.

5. What is vocal prayer?

Vocal prayer is that in which we recite a formula which expresses our desires; as for example the Our Father, taught us by Jesus, in which we make seven petitions to God. We recite this formula with the intention of honoring God. Often we do not think in a distinct way of the sense of the words we are pronouncing, but this does not hinder our prayer from being true prayer, provided the soul remains turned toward God with the desire of honoring Him. With a similar desire of honoring the Saints, prayer may also be directed to them.

6. What is mental prayer?

Mental prayer consists in talking to God "with the heart," no longer with prepared or memorized formulas, but in a spontaneous manner.

7. What do we say to God in mental prayer?

In this prayer we may also manifest to God all the desires of our heart; however, according to the teachings of St. Teresa of Jesus, a contemplative soul will prefer to tell Him that she loves Him, or that at least she desires to love Him.

8. Why speak to God especially of love?

We speak to God of love because love is the substance of the contemplative life. According to St. Teresa contemplative souls ought to become great friends, intimate friends of our Lord; and it is love precisely, that makes friendship flourish and leads to intimacy. Moreover, St. Teresa wishes that when we apply ourselves to prayer, we become convinced that God is inviting us to love Him, and that we ought to respond to His invitation.

9. Is it also necessary "to think" in prayer?

It is not possible to love without having some thought of the object loved. To love God, it is necessary to think of Him. Nevertheless the thought of God may vary a great deal, depending on circumstances. It may be a somewhat prolonged reflection on God's love for us, but it may also be a simple remembrance of the Lord's loveliness and of His goodness. In prayer we think only in order to love, to nourish love. St Teresa says in fact that prayer consists "not in thinking much, but in loving much."

10. What is love?

There is a sensible love and there is a love of the will. Sensible love consists in a feeling that draws us affectionately toward someone and makes us experience pleasure in that person's company or in the remembrance of the same. Love of the will consists in wishing a person well, by free choice and determination of our will. When afterwards this love takes full possession of the soul, then it wants to belong to the person loved and deliberately to consecrate its entire life to that person.

11. Which of these is true love?

Love of the will, because the will is what is most personal in us. Our liberty resides in the will, and it is precisely with this that we give ourselves to God. For this reason He asks of man exactly the "gift of his will." It is in this full consecration to God that the total giving of self on the part of a human being consists. Sensible love is a complement of quite secondary importance. However, to experience this does not depend on us, whereas it does depend on us to love with the will.

12. Why do we naturally desire sensible love?

We desire it for its sweetness and because it provides comfort and consolation, It is precisely for this reason that in sensible love often seek ourselves, while with the

love of the will we seek God. Thus He often takes sensible love away from us, to make us walk more resolutely with the will alone.

13. With which love should we love God in prayer?

Certainly with the love of the will, this being more important. If sensible love happens to be added to this, then instead of seeking our pleasure in it, we should profit by its aid to strengthen our will in giving ourselves to God. When sensible love is lacking we should continue with the will alone.

14. How can I spend a whole hour in this loving conversation with our Lord?

In the beginning of the life of prayer, many people encounter great difficulties and experience tedium or else they are conscious of being very distracted. It is necessary therefore for them to understand that "to make prayer" is something that "is learned." Exactly in order to teach this, the Carmelite theologians who have made a study of the life of prayer, have devised their "method of mental prayer."

Chapter 2: The Method of Mental Prayer

1. What is meant by a method of mental prayer?

A method of mental prayer is a practical guide for walking quickly in the way of prayer. In fact it indicates the various acts that should be made in order to make better progress.

2. Does the Carmelite Order have a method of mental prayer?

Yes, we find a method of prayer in the Carmelite Order from the beginning of the Teresian Reform. It is explained in the two oldest Instructions for Novices, in the Spanish one of 1591, and in the Italian one of 1605.

3. What is the origin of this method?

This method has its immediate origin in the teachings of St. Teresa of Jesus and of St. John of the Cross. It was given its definitive and concrete form, however, by their disciples.

We shall give a general explanation of this method, then take up its various parts in the following lessons.

4. How many parts does our method of mental prayer distinguish?

We usually distinguish six or seven parts or acts in the exercise of mental prayer, that is: the preparation - reading - meditation (with the loving colloquy) - the thanksgiving - the offering - and the petition.

5. Don't so many distinctions perhaps make the method too complicated?

This division into parts does not complicate the practice of mental prayer. In fact the first two are not yet prayer, but constitute only a sort of entrance door; the last three parts, then, are purely complementary and optional, that is they may be omitted as soon as we no longer need them. Prayer is therefore substantially

reduced to meditation, accompanied by an intimate conversation with our Lord (a loving colloquy).

6. What is the best way to understand the Carmelite method of prayer?

In order to understand the Carmelite method of prayer one must keep in mind the idea of mental prayer as it is presented by St. Teresa; that is to say, that prayer consists in an intimate conversation with our Lord, in which we speak to Him especially of love, responding to His invitation to love Him. The various parts of prayer have as their purpose to lead us gently to this loving conversation with Him.

7. How does the preparation serve this purpose?

The preparation ought to serve to bring us close to our Lord; for we cannot in fact speak intimately with anyone if we are not near the person. We ought therefore to place ourselves in the presence of God with lively faith and in the humble attitude of a soul that knows itself to be a child of God.

8. What is the purpose of reading?

Reading serves to provide a subject for loving conversation with our Lord, a conversation that can be nourished by the consideration of all the mysteries of our holy faith and of the various gifts and graces we have received from the Lord; in fact in everything in which God's love is manifested toward us. But since it is not possible to speak of all these matters at the same time, we may select for our reading the subject with which we wish to be occupied and make our consideration easier, following the explanations and reflections of a book.

9. Why meditate?

The meditation or personal reflection that we make on the divine gift or on the mystery that we have selected in our reading, serves a double purpose: the one intellectual, the other affective. The intellectual purpose is to understand better God's love for us, as it is manifested in the mystery or in the divine gift that we

are considering, and thus to be ever more convinced of the loving invitation addressed by God to our soul. The affective purpose consists in moving the will to the exercise of love and to its manifestation by responding to the divine invitation. Meditation becomes therefore the immediate preparation for loving conversation with our Lord.

10. How does one pass from meditation to the loving colloquy?

This transition should not be made at a precise, almost mathematically determined moment, but in a wholly spontaneous way. By making our reflections in the presence of God, and thus seeing more clearly how much God loves us, we easily feel moved to speak lovingly to Him. On the other hand, the reflections that we were making before to ourselves, we continue for some time conversing with our Lord, and this serves to give us a keener realization of His love. Finally we leave behind all considerations in order to abandon ourselves fully to the exercise of love and its manifestation, and thus we pass to the loving colloquy. In this conversation we tell God and repeat in a thousand ways that we love Him, that we desire to love Him more and to prove our love to Him.

11. Is this colloquy important?

This colloquy is most important; it is the central part of prayer. It effects directly the concept that St. Teresa had of mental prayer, which she considered an intimate conversation with our Lord, and in which one responds to His love. For that reason, the soul may occupy itself during much of the time of prayer and even for the whole hour.

12. What is the purpose of the last three parts of prayer?

The last three parts or acts of prayer, that is the thanksgiving, offering, and petition, serve to prolong more easily our loving conversation with our Lord. They are in fact only more definite acts of affection, or rather various ways of manifesting our love.

13. What should be our attitude in these parts?

In our thanksgiving we manifest to our Lord our humble gratitude for the gifts we have received from Him. In the offering, moved by loving gratitude, we also wish to give something to the Lord. In the petition or request, humbly convinced of our poverty and weakness and desirous nevertheless of really loving our Lord, we implore His aid that we may succeed and be faithful to the resolutions formed in the offering. These acts are therefore a prolongation of the loving colloquy, flowing spontaneously from the meditation.

14. Should one observe a definite order in following these acts of prayer?

The order indicated above is the most logical, but in prayer one may use great liberty: we may follow these parts in the order that appears the most spontaneous. On the other hand, we may take up any one part several times. This applies also to meditation and the loving colloquy which may also be frequently alternated.

15. Are the last parts necessary?

No, these acts are optional. In fact whoever can occupy himself sufficiently in the loving colloquy without having recourse to these acts may do so without delay. But in the beginning of the life of prayer, the attention is often aided by a certain variety of acts; in this case it would be well to have recourse to them.

Chapter 3: Preparation and Reading

1. Are there different kinds of preparation for prayer?

Carmelite authors often distinguish a two-fold preparation: the “proximate” preparation by which we place ourselves in immediate contact with God to begin an intimate conversation with Him, and the “remote” preparation by which we dispose our faculties to recollect themselves easily in God.

2. What is required so that the faculties may be disposed to recollect themselves?

For this it is necessary that the faculties be not excessively absorbed by creatures and that their tendency to occupy themselves with God be cultivated. To procure these conditions the two elements that constitute the remote preparation are useful. The first element, since it treats of removing an obstacle, is “negative;” the second, directed to procuring a quality, is “positive.”

3. What is the negative element of the remote preparation?

The negative element of the remote preparation is the avoidance of distraction of the mind and attachments of the heart. For the practice of the love of God to be easy, one needs to have a free heart; this requires a great detachment from creatures. Whoever wishes to love God greatly ought to reserve for Him the vigor and tenderness of his affections and not squander them on persons and things which easily captivate an unguarded heart. Moreover, liberty of spirit is not attained without great mortification of the senses which are windows opened upon earthly things, and of the memory which with its recollections carries the mind back into the world; thus the mind itself ought to avoid useless thoughts. It is necessary therefore to watch over the heart and the mind.

4. What is the positive element of the remote preparation?

The positive element of the remote preparation is the exercise of the presence of God, which we endeavor to render as continuous as possible. With this holy exercise which recollects the thought and will in God, we preserve a certain contact with God, even among the most material occupations, and we converse with Him often during the day. Fidelity to this practice, therefore, creates a certain facility in speaking with God, as also in putting ourselves in a more personal contact with Him: in this consists the proximate preparation.

5. What spiritual attitude is most helpful in facilitating contact with God?

The attitude of a humble confidence, which places us before God in a more suitable relationship. God is indeed our Father and wants us to act with Him as helpless children. We shall awaken in ourselves the sense of our poverty by the remembrance of our many faults which reveal our misery. Far, however, from shutting ourselves up at the sight of our littleness, we will seek refuge in the arms of Jesus, Who has taught us: "Without Me you can do nothing," thus spurring ourselves on to have recourse to Him. For this reason St. Teresa invites us to examine our consciences at the beginning of prayer, to recite the Confiteor, and then to seek the company of Jesus.

6. What is the most practical way to put oneself in touch with God?

Whichever form of the "presence of God" is most helpful for a given person, provided that it is exercised with particular application and earnestness. Nevertheless two forms seem especially conducive to prayer: placing oneself in the presence of the Most Holy Eucharist, and recollecting oneself in one's own interior, giving attention to the Three divine Persons who dwell in the soul in grace and Who offer Themselves to it to be known and loved. Then, to begin the colloquy with "God present," the soul will recall the subject chosen in its reading.

7. When should this reading be done?

Preferably before beginning prayer, but if that is not possible, it may be made at the beginning of prayer itself. On the other hand, in religious communities, it is customary to read aloud for a short time at the beginning of mental prayer.

[Translator's note: This custom of having one book read aloud to all for a short time is no longer followed by all religious communities.]

8. What is the use of this reading "in common?"

It serves the purpose of offering a subject for meditation to those who might otherwise be prevented from making a preparation. There is, however, no obligation to make use of the points that are read. In fact, one ordinarily goes to prayer with the subject prepared beforehand by the reading made individually. But if the points read in common attract one more than the subject chosen, the theme may be changed then and there with the greatest liberty.

9. Should the reading always serve to prepare a subject of meditation?

Such is its principal purpose, and this distinguishes it from the so-called "spiritual reading," which has a broader scope: to instruct us in spiritual matters. The reading we speak of here serves, instead, to offer us at the moment, a truth that we will penetrate with reflection, in order to draw from it a deeper conviction of God's love for us.

Nevertheless, for a soul who cannot make prayer in a meditative form, but who has reached the prayer that St. Teresa calls the "prayer of recollection" or even a more advanced form of prayer, reading no longer serves to provide a subject, but rather helps to recollect the soul, disposing it sweetly to enjoy repose in God in prayer.

10. What books should we prefer to select for this reading?

When it is a question of finding a subject for meditation, we may use, besides the books that offer suitable "collections" of meditations, all spiritual books that

reveal the many manifestations of God's love. It would be well, however, to make use of standard, well-known books.

When it is a matter of just recollecting the mind, every written work that inspires an intense love of God may be used. The writings of the Saints belong to this category.

The selection of books, therefore, depends directly on the purpose of the reading; but the culture and spiritual state of the person should also influence this choice. Books that are too advanced, either intellectually or spiritually, will be little understood and will necessarily cause aridity.

11. May we also take our reading from the "lives of the Saints?"

Not even these are excluded, especially since many people feel inspired more by the example of the Saints who lived the spiritual doctrine, than by a speculative exposition of the same.

We should take care, however, not to read out of curiosity and not to prolong the reading unnecessarily. For this reason it is not suitable to read a "new" life as a preparation for meditation because this would excite the imagination too much. It is better to be satisfied if possible with some biographical sketch of a person previously studied.

12. How should we read?

First of all, we should read with attention, since the purpose of reading is "to find" a subject of conversation with our Lord. For this reason we should also read with a certain slowness, otherwise the subjects adopted will pass unnoticed; in addition we should read with "devotion and recollection" because these good dispositions emphasize the "search" for something useful for the soul and render it more attentive and more receptive to good ideas. We will then be able to select fruitful themes more easily and also to prepare in some way the affections we wish to express and the resolutions we want to make.

We should do all this without being too much "attached" to it, since this is not the purpose of such reading, but rather to help us simply according to our needs.

We may add further that reading, if it is made in common, should be short, so as not to annoy those who do not make use of it, and these may be many.

13. May we resume our reading during prayer?

This is not excluded, and may even be recommended on some particular occasions. St. Teresa, in fact, never went to prayer without taking a book with her. We may sometimes find ourselves so distracted that the most practical way of getting back to our Lord will be to turn the mind to some good thought with reading. Likewise in meditation and in remaining with our Lord, when it becomes difficult to maintain our attention because of a little fatigue, it is often advisable to keep before our eyes the subject chosen for meditation; this is an external aid for our attention.

We must be on our guard however not to transform prayer into mere reading. It ought to remain at least a meditative reading, in which we pause from time to time to make affections and resolutions. Then reading itself becomes an instrument of our conversation with God.

Chapter 4: Meditation and Colloquy

1. Is meditation always treated in the same way by Carmelite authors?

Some differences can be noted among Carmelite authors in the manner of presenting meditation, but in substance they are all in accord. Some speak of it without distinguishing the various elements; others distinguish the meditative reflection from the loving colloquy to which reflection leads, and they call this colloquy "contemplation." And lastly others, in the same meditative part, distinguish the representation from the reflection. Those who do not explicitly classify these various elements, still make some allusion to them.

We may affirm therefore that for the most part, the Carmelite authors distinguish three elements in meditation: 1) representation, the work of the imagination; 2) reflection, the work of the intellect; and 3) the colloquy, the work principally of the will.

2. In what does representation consist?

It is an activity of the imagination with which we form "within ourselves," that is to say, without having the objects before us, a sort of picture or representation of the mystery on which we wish to meditate, or as the case may be, of the material objects by means of which our reflection is raised to God.

3. What purpose should the representation serve?

Its purpose is to facilitate the work of reflection, which naturally depends on the representations of the imagination. Indeed it is much easier to think of the scourging with a picture of it before us. The picture has the advantage of holding the fantasy in check in some way, since the latter, without an object on which to fasten, easily wanders, while the stability of the imaginative faculty in its turn helps that of the intellectual faculty.

4. Is representation always necessary?

Carmelite authors do not insist much on this element of meditation, but rather indicate in what way it may be useful. This usefulness is evident when it is a matter of considering the life of Christ or of the Saints. Even in the consideration of the more abstract mysteries as for example the divine attributes, the intellect can start out from the consideration of sensible things represented by the imagination. Thus we may rise from the beauties of nature to God the supreme beauty.

Regarding this element of meditation Carmelite theologians distinguish various aptitudes to be found in those who meditate. Some persons have a lively imagination, capable of representing things with ease; others, on the contrary, feel almost incapable of forming any image whatsoever. The former will do well to use their facility of representation, while the latter will profit by knowing that this is not an exercise to be made at any cost. Imaginative representations, to be useful, do not have to be very detailed; a rather vague representation may serve the purpose.

5. How should the representations be made?

We may indicate three rules:

1) We must certainly give this exercise our earnest attention, otherwise we will accomplish nothing worthwhile. However, it is not desirable to excite the imagination too much, by making almost "life-like" the subject on which we wish to meditate. Those persons especially who have too vivid an imagination should try to proceed with great simplicity, otherwise the imagination could lead them into deception and make them believe that it is a matter of "visions."

2) As regards the "perfection" of the representation, it is not advisable to wish to picture its details. Carmelite authors have noted, on the contrary, that a somewhat sketchy representation may suffice for a person endowed with little imagination. Nevertheless a certain concreteness helps to fix one's thought more easily. Carmelite authors never speak of what is called "application of the senses."

3) There is no need to spend much time forming representations; a few moments will suffice, but, of course, we may keep it before us during the whole time of meditation. If we are able to do this, it will also help us to avoid distractions.

Let us conclude by saying that, without being actually necessary, the representation is often useful, and those who find it helpful do well not to deprive themselves of its aid. On the other hand those who might find it somewhat of an obstacle may omit it and begin immediately with the reflection.

6. Is the reflection or "consideration" important?

Reflection is the first of the directly constituent elements of meditation, and it appropriately suggests a certain discursive work of the intellect. It is certain, however, that even this element ought to be subordinate to the following one that is to the loving conversation with God, which has its foundation and stimulus in meditation.

7. Should much time be given to this work of the intellect?

Its subordination to the loving conversation indicates that it should last only long enough to lead to this conversation, that is, until it produces in the mind an actual conviction of being loved by God and being invited to love Him in return. It would be a mistake however, to believe that the reflection should be interrupted or laid aside as soon as we feel some pious affection. This could quickly vanish and leave us empty. On the contrary we must continue to reflect a good deal until the will is so enkindled with love as to be able to remain at least for some time in its loving attention.

8. Should this reflection be made "methodically?"

It can be. Even St. Teresa, following other contemporary authors in this, counsels in the meditation on the Passion of Jesus, to consider: "Who is suffering? Why? With what dispositions?" However, we need not be so organized in the manner of linking the topics of reflection together: we may without detriment pass freely

from one thought to another, provided that in the end we come to a better understanding of the love of God, which is manifested in the mystery meditated.

9. What should those do who “cannot meditate?”

For those persons who, because of a certain fickleness of imagination and thought, have very great difficulty in dwelling on a definite idea in order to examine it with somewhat orderly reflections, St. Teresa teaches another way of controlling thoughts that excite love. It consists in reciting very slowly a vocal prayer full of meaning, pausing to consider attentively the sense of the words and taking the opportunity to form some reflections and to express affections.

10. When does the loving colloquy begin?

It may begin as soon as we have formed within us the lively conviction that we ought to respond with love to the love of God. It all depends on the facility with which we can place ourselves in such a necessary disposition. This facility then, can be acquired with practice.

11. What do we say in this colloquy?

We mainly make known to God our desire to love Him and to prove our love; taking our theme from a particular mystery, we refer to it in a thousand ways and our colloquy thus assumes the most varied forms. Besides, our love may be expressed not only to the most holy Trinity, but to Jesus directly and to our Lady. We may also speak affectionately with the Saints.

12. How should this colloquy be made?

It can be made in various ways. We may express our affection with words pronounced vocally, or in a purely “interior” way, that is with expressions of the heart and will. These expressions may be brief and follow one another with a certain frequency, or else they may be rather prolonged, repeating them only at fairly long intervals; it might even be enough — and this is the best thing — — to remain lovingly in our Lord’s company.

13. Should this conversation be continuous?

We may reply in the affirmative meaning that we should remain in the Lord's company, but not in the sense that we ought to be "speaking" continually. Carmelite authors even teach expressly that this conversation ought not to be too verbose and excited, but rather peaceful and oftentimes interrupted, as if to permit one to be attentive to God's answer.

14. Does God speak in this colloquy?

If we were the only ones to speak, ours would not be a "colloquy;" whereas St. Teresa has taught that God does speak when we pray from our heart. We ought not believe, however, that He makes His voice heard in an audible way. God replies by sending graces of light and love which make us understand His ways better, and they inspire our minds with fervor to embrace them with greater generosity.

Therefore to listen means to accept these graces and to strive to profit by them.

15. Why does this colloquy happen to be called "contemplation?"

Because when we are speaking with God and listening to Him, we do not continue to reason as in meditation, but we give our attention in a general manner to the mystery we have pondered in the meditation itself, or else we simply gaze at Jesus or our heavenly Father with Whom we are speaking. In this simple regard is verified the traditional idea of "contemplation:" the simple gaze that penetrates truth. And since in this colloquy God is accustomed to communicate His light, so under this aspect there is verified in some way what in a fuller sense pertains to true contemplation, namely an infusion of heavenly light.

16. How long should this colloquy be prolonged?

There are no limits to it; it may even occupy the entire time of prayer. Rather the simplification of prayer consists really in making reflections less frequently in

order to make more room for the affections and also in having these gradually take a more quiet form with prolonged acts. For beginners, however, it is not easy to remain so long in this simple expression of our love, therefore we may have recourse to the last acts of prayer, that is to say, to thanksgiving, to oblation, and to petition.

17. Why do we thank God?

Many motives urge us to express our own gratitude to God. From Him we have received so much, even personally, both in the natural and supernatural order! Having been born of Catholic parents and baptized without delay, having been brought up in the true religion, and especially having received a vocation to the priesthood or religious state, all these are gratuitous gifts of our Lord, for which we can never sufficiently thank Him. Besides, how many graces does the Lord continually lavish upon us! The very prayer that we are making is an invitation from Him to penetrate more deeply into our vocation. We should show Him our gratitude for everything. Let us add further the goodness of our Lord towards the persons whom we have at heart: parents, friends, benefactors, persons confided to our care! Finally we can thank not only our Lord, but also the Blessed Virgin and the Saints for their intercession on our behalf.

18. What can we "offer to God?"

Having received everything from the Lord, it is praiseworthy on our part to offer ourselves entirely to Him, declaring that we wish to employ all our powers in His service. Religious, then, who have consecrated their whole life to God by their holy profession, may opportunely renew it. We must not, however, be content with these general offerings which, because of their indefiniteness do not always exercise a great influence on our conduct. It is well to settle on some particular resolution and to offer to the Lord the will to practice a definite virtue, to struggle generously against a temptation, or to accept with all our heart some trial or suffering. These particular resolutions put prayer into closer contact with daily life. For that reason it is advisable for everyone to end prayer with a practical resolution, even if we do not make the so-called "oblation."

19. For whom should we pray?

Our great poverty urges us to have continual recourse to prayer. Jesus, having taught that “without Him we can do nothing,” added: “Ask and you shall receive, knock and it shall be opened to you.” Spiritual progress, therefore, depends very much on prayer which for that reason we make with earnestness and confidence. Moreover, we should also pray for others, for their temporal and spiritual needs, especially for their salvation and sanctification. We should interest ourselves not only in particular souls, but in the whole people of God, in religious Orders, in our spiritual family, in Holy Church. Since we know, however, that persons more pleasing to our Lord are more powerful over His Heart, and being desirous of obtaining much, we will strive to render ourselves acceptable to Him by a life detached from the world and directed solely towards the quest for intimacy with Him. In this way we shall realize the ideal proposed by St. Teresa to her daughters: to become intimate friends of our Lord, Who makes use of this friendship to bestow divine graces on the world.

Chapter 5: Difficulties in Prayer

1. What are the principal difficulties encountered in prayer?

Since prayer consists in raising the mind to God, that is to say, in thinking of Him and loving Him, the difficulties in prayer have their source in all that hinders or renders more arduous this double application of the mind. With respect to knowledge we meet with “distractions,” with respect to the affections, “aridity.”

2. What is meant by “distractions?”

By distractions we mean the intrusion, in prayer, of thoughts incompatible with it, which lead us to occupy ourselves with other things. The appearance of extraneous thoughts and those contrary to the recollection of the mind in God may occur in two ways: voluntarily and involuntarily. There is a great difference between the two.

3. What is meant by a voluntary distraction?

A voluntary distraction is the provoked admission of or consent to thoughts that turn the mind away from the divine subject with which we are occupied. A willful distraction suspends or at least interrupts prayer. Doing this without a sufficient motive renders us guilty of irreverence toward our Lord. Therefore a voluntary distraction during prayer is more than a difficulty, it is an infidelity. If on the contrary the distracting thought that presents itself to the mind is not provoked or accepted, the distraction is described as involuntary.

4. What are the causes of involuntary distractions?

We must recognize a two-fold cause: the first is “occasional,” the second “natural.” The first is made up of sense impressions; the second of the innate tendencies of nature, that spontaneously generate images and thoughts. According to their source, therefore, we may distinguish distractions as “exterior” and “interior.”

5. Is it possible to avoid distractions in prayer?

We may to a great extent avoid exterior distractions by keeping a careful guard over the senses, and especially by selecting a retired place for prayer, as our Lord Jesus Christ counsels in the Holy Gospel. Above all we may avoid many distractions caused by the eyes by keeping them closed, or else fixing them on some religious object or on our meditation book. It is much more difficult, however, to avoid interior distractions.

6. Whence comes this special difficulty with interior distractions?

The particular difficulty of avoiding interior distractions derives from the spontaneity of our natural inclinations that are like the intimate depth of our being. They manifest themselves with the easy appearance of images and thoughts concerning things we love, or else fear. When our attention is fixed on the subject of our meditation, the interior world of spontaneous inclinations remains more or less in the background, but as soon as our attention lessens these inclinations tend to awaken. Then there unite in our consciousness thoughts and memories that may even be greatly opposed to the act of prayer.

7. Is it possible to counteract interior distractions?

Yes, it is possible, at least to a certain degree, to provide a remedy for them, either directly or indirectly. The way to resist these distractions directly is to bring the attention back to the pious subject that we were considering, or simply to God, making an act of faith and of love. The indirect way is to intensify our spiritual life; and as this becomes more profound, it acquires new energy that will sustain the mind's adherence to God, resisting the natural distracting tendencies. Obviously such a result will not be accomplished very quickly, but will be the fruit of long application to the spiritual life.

8. Are interior distractions sometimes "inevitable?"

They may be, simply because they are so instinctive. Especially when we have difficulty in fixing our attention, can interior distractions be very strong,

insistent, and annoying. This difficulty may sometimes have its source in an accidental cause, or from an habitual disposition, as happens with certain very temperamental persons. If, however, we continue to experience displeasure in seeing ourselves distracted and do what we can to remain attentive to God, these painful distractions, far from being harmful, will become an instrument of moral purification and are an occasion of supernatural merit.

9. What is meant by aridity?

Aridity is the withdrawal of the comfort we often experience in the spiritual life, especially at the beginning of a conversion to a better life. In fact when we become aware of possessing a more intense spiritual life, we experience a certain joy, for it is a psychological law that man rejoices when he knows he possesses a great good. An intense spiritual life, however, does not lie in this consolation, because true devotion consists solely in the promptness of the will in the service of God.

10. Is aridity an evil?

The moral nature of actual aridity depends upon the cause that produces it. If one sustains in the will the decision to give oneself wholly to our Lord when consolation disappears, then aridity, far from being an evil, may be the occasion of good. If instead, aridity comes from a weakening of the will, then it indicates a regression in the spiritual life.

11. Is aridity sometimes culpable?

Yes, certainly, when it has its origin in our infidelity. This may be greater or lesser. The person called by God to a generous and mortified life, who after having corresponded for some time becomes less generous and turns to the pursuit of small human satisfactions, is no longer faithful to our Lord's call, but loses his first fervor and remains weakened in will. Much more unfaithful, however, is the one who falls into tepidity, committing deliberate venial sins. Naturally in such a case it is not possible to express one's own love for God with

strength, simply because one's vigor is lost; and this accounts for the aridity. The only way to remedy this is to correct oneself and return to one's former generosity.

12. May aridity sometimes come from causes independent of one's own will?

Without doubt; in fact the very circumstances in which human life develops are often occasions of aridity. They can cause a feeling of uneasiness that deprives us of every comfort in our spiritual exercises. Physical fatigue and sleepiness, indispositions, misfortunes, painful and absorbing preoccupations, slight offenses and misunderstandings are so many occasions of heaviness, enervation and depression that put the soul in a painful state, depriving it of every peaceful and tranquil joy. In this form of aridity we must have patience, knowing that in enduring this trial for the love of God we are offering Him a most acceptable sacrifice that proves the genuineness of our love.

13. May aridity also come from God?

Certainly, and even in the preceding case it must be said that the aridity comes from God, since all circumstances of life are regulated by Divine Providence. But sometimes the suppression of comfort that is experienced in prayer is more directly the work of God, and particularly when He Himself makes it impossible for us to meditate with the aid of the imagination and to make sensible acts of love as we did before. This is a very common phenomenon that occurs almost always after a period of fervent application to the life of prayer. St. John of the Cross teaches that with this kind of aridity the Lord invites us to a more simple form of prayer which he calls "initial contemplation."

14. How should we act in this aridity?

We are not obliged to persist in wanting to continue our meditation, as we often think we are obliged to do; instead we should leave it aside simply and apply ourselves to remaining quietly in the presence of God, attentive to Him with a simple regard of faith and desirous of pleasing Him, cost what it may. Little by

little this glance of faith will become easier, more loving, and from a state of painful aridity we shall gradually pass to a peaceful repose in God.

15. How can we know if the aridity comes from God?

From the fact that, notwithstanding the aridity, we persevere in the practice of virtue and the exercises of devotion, even though experiencing nothing but disgust for them. Naturally, since the exercise of the virtues is much more difficult at this time, we will be less successful in it; but our repeated efforts show that the will has remained resolute. Such aridity, therefore, does not proceed from any culpability of the will, but is the work of our Lord.

16. What purpose does God have in sending aridity?

By this trial God intends to deliver us from childish dependence on sensible consolations in order to bring us to the purer and more solid plane of the will. In fact, no longer finding help for our spiritual life in the beautiful imaginings and sweet emotions of former times (when everything was going well), we are now constrained to cling with the will to the exercise of faith and love. Since this is precisely the will of God, the action of grace comes to the help of the effort of the creature who will undoubtedly make great progress in the spiritual life, which will become more substantial than before. Besides being a trial, the aridity sent by our Lord is therefore a very great grace, to which, far from letting it discourage us, we should strive to correspond with generosity.

Chapter 6: The Presence of God

1. What is the presence of God?

The presence of God is an exercise of the spiritual life meant to keep the soul in contact with God during the various daily occupations. It is, one might say, mental prayer prolonged during the entire day. Like mental prayer, it is composed of a double element: thought and affection. It is a matter of thinking of God and of keeping the affections orientated toward Him.

2. What is the principal element of the presence of God?

The principal element is not thought, as many believe, but affection, as in mental prayer. Thought serves to direct the heart, or rather the will, toward God, but then with the will we unite ourselves more intimately to our Lord, directing to Him all our actions. Moreover, it is easier to remain longer in contact with God by means of the will than by the intellect.

3. What is the cause of this difference?

The difference in the application of the intellect and of the will comes from the fact that it is practically impossible to think of God uninterruptedly, because oftentimes our occupations demand all our attention and it is not possible to think of two different things at the same time. On the other hand, even when the intellect is entirely occupied in the work that is being done, the heart can remain orientated toward our Lord, because even work, no matter how distracting, can always be done for Him: to accomplish His will and to glorify Him.

4. How can we more easily keep our heart turned toward God?

We can do this by directly feeding the affections with loving acts such as: ejaculatory prayers, pious invocations, the offering of our actions, asking for aid, or by means of short conversations with God in which we manifest to Him our

love and confidence. However, this will not be possible if the thought of God is not often recalled to our minds.

5. How should we frequently recall the thought of God?

There are various methods; or rather the different “forms” of the exercise of the presence of God are usually distinguished according to the methods used for recalling the thought of God to mind. Thus we may distinguish the “external,” the “imaginary,” and the “intellectual” practice of the presence of God.

6. What is the “external” practice of the presence of God?

It consists in making use of an external object in order to think frequently of our Lord. A Crucifix that we always carry with us, keeping it before us at work, kissing it, and venerating it, will keep alive the memory of our Lord Jesus Crucified and will offer occasions of speaking affectionately with Him. So also the remembrance of the Eucharistic presence, either in the chapel of our own house or in a nearby Church, to which we return continually in thought, can help us greatly to keep in contact with our Lord and to converse with Him. The same may be said of pious images and such.

7. In what does the “imaginative” practice of the presence of God consist?

It consists in representing to ourselves with the imagination our Lord, our Lady, or some Saint as very near to us and who accompanies us everywhere. We often turn to them with brief spontaneous words or with one or other of the various acts of love which we have indicated. Not everyone, however, will succeed in practicing the presence of God in this way, since it requires a lively imagination and the ability to control it.

8. Are not such imaginings perhaps untrue?

By no means; in fact if the most Sacred Humanity of Christ, or our Lady, or the Saints are not physically present to us, nevertheless they are spiritually present, because the Blessed Virgin and the Saints see us in the divine Essence which they

contemplate and are thus in relation with us, and because the Humanity of Christ exercises an even physical influence upon us in the communication of grace. We can best represent this “spiritual” relation by imagining we are in the company of our Lord and the Saints.

9. Can we also exercise the presence of God by turning to the Saints?

Obviously; because even the remembrance of our Lady and the Saints helps us to direct our hearts and actions to our Lord, and in the orientation of the will consists the most substantial element of the presence of God.

10. What is the “intellectual” practice of the presence of God?

The “intellectual” practice of the presence of God consists in calling to mind the remembrance of God by means of some element of our faith. We may remember, for example, the continual presence of the most Holy Trinity in our heart, seeking to please our divine Guests. Or we may consider our duties as manifestations of the divine will, uniting ourselves continually to this divine will. The supernatural light of faith makes us “see” all circumstances of life arranged by Divine Providence and invites us to repeat to our heavenly Father: “I am content with everything.” Or, knowing we are always under the watchful eye of God, we seek to do everything in the way that can render it most pleasing to Him.

11. What is the best way to practice the presence of God?

It is the one that suits us best, and this is not determined theoretically or by reasoning but by experience. Nevertheless, in the practice of the presence of God we do not have to attach ourselves in an exclusive way to a definite form but may very well vary it according to circumstances. Usually, however, we will prefer one particular form, choosing that which has proved most useful to us. Hence here too, we may use a holy liberty.

12. Can the exercise of the presence of God be united to the most ordinary actions and even to those that are for recreation?

Undoubtedly; for in this exercise we will find the most practical way to sanctify such actions. In eating we can raise our heart to God, and instead of seeking satisfaction in food, we eat with holy indifference for the purpose of restoring our strength and of taking up again with greater resoluteness the service of God. St. Paul teaches us: "Whether you eat or whether you drink, do all for the Glory of God." Indeed the very same may be said of recreation or relaxation which we offer to our Lord with the intention of acquiring new energy to work for His glory. We should also have the same intention for our rest, making an explicit offering of it to our Lord before going to bed. Thus the exercise of the presence of God will enable us to live both day and night an intense life of love.