

All My Liberty

Chapter 10: Vocal and Mental Prayer

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It would be a mistake to suppose that the theory and practice of prayer found in the Spiritual Exercises refer only to the time of retreat. They have universal application and contain the refined wisdom of one of the Church's greatest mystics on the subject of the soul's communication with God, from the lowliest type of vocal prayer to the highest form of contemplation.

Some of the rules and directives like the "Remote and Proximate Preparation" are useful for any kind of prayer at any time. Others like the familiar triad of prelude, points and colloquy are more pertinent to meditation. Still others, described in the Exercises as "The Three Methods of Prayer," are a supplement to ordinary meditation and though primarily intended to help beginners in the spiritual life, they can be profitably used by anyone else.

Preparation for Prayer

Since formal prayer is a supernatural activity which requires the grace of God, and grace depends in large measure on our dispositions, the better these dispositions as we begin to pray the more assurance there is that our prayer will be successful. St. Ignatius repeatedly directs the one giving the Exercises to attend to this preparation, which guarantees to make prayer not only externally satisfactory but spiritually efficacious. He says more about the remote preparation and less about the proximate because he assumes that the latter

is not so necessary if the former has been faithfully done.

The first requisite for deriving maximum profit from the Spiritual Exercises (or any form of prayer) is to have the exercitant "enter upon them with a large heart and liberality toward his Creator and Lord, and to offer Him his entire will and liberty, that His Divine Majesty may dispose of him and all he possesses according to His most holy will."

[1] The implicit attitude is generosity of spirit and a willingness to be guided by every light and inspiration that comes from God. Without this *submissiveness of will*, God will either not give us the graces we need or, if He gives them, they are sure to be resisted.

Besides the will, the mind must also be prepared *by segregation from worldly thoughts and cares*. "Ordinarily, the progress made in the Exercises will be greater, the more the exercitant withdraws from all friends and acquaintances and from all earthly concerns." [2] As a plea for the closed retreat, with perfect silence, it is impossible to improve on this statement of St. Ignatius. But the advantages given for seclusion can be equally adduced in favor of prayer at any time. The basic advantage is that by such withdrawal a person "gains no little merit before the Divine Majesty." Also the mind "is more free to use its natural powers to seek diligently what it so much desires." But most important is the need for proper dispositions to receive the grace of God, since "the more the soul is in solitude and seclusion, the more fit it renders itself to approach and be united with its Creator and Lord. And the more closely it is united with Him, the more it disposes itself to receive graces and gifts from the infinite goodness of God." [3]

A practical suggestion that refers to morning meditation has a solid foundation in human psychology. “After retiring, just before falling asleep, for the space of a Hail Mary, I will think of the hour when I have to arise, and why I am rising, and briefly sum up the exercise I have to go through.” After awaking, “I will not permit my thoughts to roam at random, but will turn my mind at once to the subject I am about to contemplate ... As I dress, I will think over these thoughts and others in keeping with the subject matter of the meditation.” [4] As a matter of common experience the latest impressions of the mind just before sleep are the most likely to run in the mind upon rising. But especially the first thoughts in the morning can start a mental pattern for the rest of the day. Properly controlled and directed, here on a definite subject for prayer, they bring vigor and momentum to the subsequent meditation that could not otherwise be secured.

The immediate preparation for prayer is a momentary concentration of forces, bearing first on myself and then on God. Regarding self, I should recall what I am about to do, “where I am going ... what I must do”; regarding God, I should become conscious “in whose presence I am.” Ignatius even suggests a small ritual: “I will stand for the space of an Our Father, a step or two before the place where I am to meditate or contemplate, and with my mind raised on high, consider that God our Lord beholds me. Then I will make an act of reverence or humility.”

[5] Apparently insignificant, this preliminary action along with reverent posture substantially contributes to more effective prayer. There is an influence of mind on body and vice versa: the sincerity of my internal sentiments appears in bodily form, and the body reinforces my internal sentiments.

Three Stages in Mental Prayer

A key to the proper understanding of St. Ignatius’ teaching on prayer is the triple division he makes in the spiritual faculties of man: his memory, understanding and will. These are the “three powers of the soul” which figure so prominently throughout the exercises and in one form or another enter into the body of every meditation. Another and more important feature is the stress on prayer of petition which introduces, ends and surrounds the Exercises like an atmosphere and gives them a quality distinctive of Ignatian spirituality.

As a person begins to meditate, he makes a request of God our Lord, “that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed solely to the praise and service of His Divine Majesty.” Unexpectedly, this preparatory prayer “must always be the same, without any alteration,” even where the rest of the meditation is completely changed.

The Preludes are related to the body of a meditation somewhat as an author’s preface introduces a book or a topic sentence the paragraph. They summarize in outline the contents of what follows.

On examination we find that some of the Exercises have two preludes and others three; but their function never changes. When three preludes are prescribed, the first is a review by the *memory*, when I “call to mind the history of the matter which I have to contemplate”; the second an image for the *mind* or “composition of place,” on which to focus attention; and the third an act of the *will*, “to ask for what I want,” as the special grace of this particular exercise.

Generally the operations of memory and intellectual-phantasy are fused into one, so that only two preludes are required. The first will differ according to the subject matter. "In meditation on visible matters such as the contemplation of Christ our Lord, who is visible, and the contemplation will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing I wish to contemplate is found," e.g., the temple or mountain where Christ is preaching. "In meditation on invisible things," like the virtues and sins, some phantasm must still be created by the imagination on which the mind can fix attention. It may be a figurative representation of the spiritual reality in the manner of Christ's parables (the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, the mercy of God represented by the Good Shepherd), or at least verbal expression in the interior senses, which somehow embodies the ideas that will form the structure of the meditation.

The last prelude is invariably an act of petition "to ask God our Lord for what I wish and desire."

Psychologically the preludes are indispensable. Unless I have something presented to the mind by the memory as a subject for prayer, I will have nothing to think about; with nothing prayerful in the mind to offer to the will, I will have nothing to petition for. Ordinarily the more definite the preludes the better, since they not only make the prayer get under way but keep it going by offering a specific object of attention (for the mind) and intention (for the will) to which I can always recur.

The Body of the Meditation or Contemplation elaborates on the preludes and follows the same sequence. Whatever the

points, or whether even definite points are had, the three powers of the soul must be used to derive full profit from mental prayer. The memory furnishes material for the mind, either to contemplate or reason about; and the mind submits the fruit of its intuition or conclusions to the will for appropriate affections.

While all three powers must be operative, not all are equally important. Better for the mind to have a new thought or derive a conclusion than for the memory (aided by the imagination) to parade a variety of objects before the mind. Most important is the function of the will by which I express my desires, hopes and fears to God, according to the good and bad things recognized by the mind.

Recognizing an objective value-difference in the three functions, there should be a parallel difference in using the historical (or imaginative) memory, the intellect and will. The least time and effort should be given to the memory. Thus in the first regular meditation of the Exercises, St. Ignatius instructs the retreatant "to apply the memory to the first sin, which was that of the angels, and then *immediately* to employ the understanding on the same by turning it over in the mind."

There is no prescription on how much time or effort should be given to the operations of the mind. This will depend a great deal on the character and temperament of the person praying. Ascetical writers distinguish two kinds of people in their approach to prayer. One class is naturally more analytic, given to reasoning and penetrating to the ultimate causes of things. Consistent with their temperament, they have the option of

dwelling on the discursive operations as much as they need to arouse the movements of the will. Other people are more spontaneously drawn to volition, either because their minds are not discursive or because their mental insights come in flashes and stimulate the will in repeated sequence. The relative emphasis on the use of the mind also depends on the kind of subject matter proposed for prayer. St. Ignatius has two principal forms, covered by the terms “meditation” and “application of the senses.” The former is more of an intellectual operation which busies itself in reasoning and is altogether of a higher order. It inquires into the causes of the mysteries and their effects. It investigates God’s attributes, His goodness, wisdom and love. The sense-application does not reason (or hardly so), but merely reposes in sense manifestations of sight, hearing and the rest.

Although active in both cases, the reasoning process becomes minimal in sense-application, either because “the mind is unfit for more profound speculation” or because “the soul is already so filled with devotion obtained from former penetration into the deeper mysteries” that the slightest stimulus from the internal senses can excite the spiritual appetite. [6]

An often-quoted passage of St. Ignatius declares, “It is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.” [7] This is not a platitude. He does not say that affection is better than mere knowledge, which no one would question. Rather he compares two kinds of apprehension of religious truth, both knowledge in their way; but the one is quantitative and the other qualitative. The one may be had by a learned theologian or scholar, the other lies open to

the pure of heart who can see God. They correspond to the notional and real assent of Cardinal Newman, where the same revealed truths in one case are merely adhered to, and in the other so deeply realized that they permeate the whole man and affect all his operations.

Running as a theme through the Exercises is the dominant role given to the will in every kind of prayer, as the logical terminus to the acts of memory and understanding. Naturally there are commanded acts of the will throughout the process, because unless I want to use my mind in spiritual reflection I will not do so. But the elicited acts of love and desire, of hope and petition are what technically constitutes formal prayer. For many reasons, a person should concentrate on these as much as he can.

Elicited acts of the will are normally of greater merit, as seen in the discussion of the Kingdom of Christ, because they involve greater voluntariety.

If too much time and energy is given to the use of the memory and intelligence, there may be “exhaustion” of the spiritual powers in the allotted time of prayer and consequently the will is not employed to its normal capacity.

Since the ultimate fruit of prayer is the love of God which terminates in generous service, unless the will be duly motivated in the time of formal prayer, the affections are lacking in necessary strength to carry one’s charity into constant, self-sacrificing effect. In this context St. Ignatius sets a hierarchy of emphasis among the three powers of the soul for their use in prayer. He instructs the retreatant “to bring to memory” the history or picture as the subject of meditation, “then in turn to

reason *more in particular* with the understanding, and thus in turn to move *still more* the affections by means of the will.” Once the will is deeply affected, it has only to command the other powers of mind and body and there follows a complete dedication to the service of God.

Colloquies or acts of the will should be made throughout, but especially at the close of prayer, according to Ignatius’ directives for every meditation of the retreat. “The colloquy is made properly by speaking as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master; at one time *asking* for some favor, at another blaming oneself for some evil committed, now informing him of one’s affairs, and *seeking* counsel in them. [8] To be noted is the characteristic Ignatian petition for grace which envelops the meditations, from the preludes at the beginning of the Exercises to the colloquy at the end.

Perhaps the outstanding (and most outspoken) authority on the subject was St. Alphonsus Liguori, patron of spiritual directors, who called the Spiritual Exercises the touchstone of a successful apostolate. He is writing on the importance of the prayer of petition:

What most afflicts me is to see preachers and confessors paying so little attention in speaking to their listeners and penitents of this kind of prayer. To what purpose, I ask, are sermons, meditations and the rest, except to produce spiritual harm, without prayer, when the Lord has declared that He does not will to give graces except to one who prays, “Ask and you shall receive.” Without prayer, speaking of the ordinary providence, all the meditations made, promises and resolutions taken, remain useless. For if we do not pray, we shall ever be unfaithful to the lights we

receive from God and the promises that we make. The reason is that actually to do good, to overcome temptation, to exercise virtue, in a word, entirely to keep the Divine precepts, it is not enough to receive lights and make reflections and resolutions; we still need the actual help of God. And the Lord does not grant this actual aid except to one who prays and prays with perseverance. [9]

The simplest proof for the need of asking for divine grace is the experience of those who pray. Their acquired strength of soul to resist temptation and grow in the love of God are an expression of the law of sanctity.

But Ignatian colloquies serve another function than to concentrate our requests of God. Fundamentally they are con-locutions, personal interchanges of thought and intention between the soul and her Creator. As such they transcend the immediate purpose of the Exercises and represent one of the easiest ways of fulfilling the injunction of praying always. As long as I engage in conscious dialogue with the invisible world, the material subject of my colloquy is secondary. It may be a sublime mystery like the Trinity or the hypostatic union, or only a trifle like the pattern for a veil that Teresa of Avila made the subject of so much prayer. What is most important is my active conversation with Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin or one of the saints, with whom I unite myself in will and aspiration and to whom I address the sentiments of my heart.

Colloquies embody a radical principle of Catholic theology, namely, the concept of mediation in the economy of grace. In all the critical meditations of the retreat, Ignatius urges the exercitant to make a triple colloquy, beginning with the Blessed Virgin and ending

with the eternal Father. Thus after the meditation on personal sin, I make a “colloquy to Our Lady that she may obtain for me grace from her Son and Lord for three things: that I may feel an interior knowledge of my sins...that I may feel the deordination of my actions in order to amend and order myself aright ... and to beg for a knowledge of the world, so that, abhorring it, I may put away from myself worldly and vain things.” Then a second colloquy to the Son, “that He may obtain for me from the Father the same grace.” And finally a petition to the Eternal Lord, “that He may grant the same requests to me.” Always the first colloquy is with Mary, whose dignity as mediatrix of graces is graphically professed when I begin by asking her to intercede with her divine Son for what I need. In like manner the mediation of Christ with His heavenly Father is duly recognized and the function of His human nature as the instrument of our salvation are properly conceived. This double accent on the mediatorial role of Mary with Jesus and of Christ with His Father was not accidental, as other writings of St. Ignatius clearly indicate. It was a spontaneous reaction against the Protestant de-emphasis of Mary’s place in the scheme of redemption and a restatement of the Church’s teaching on Christ’s humanity as the channel of grace in the Christian dispensation.

Three Methods of Prayer

Unless properly understood, the Three Methods of Prayer may suffer from one of two extremes: being neglected as a mere appendix, or identified with St. Ignatius’ whole doctrine on prayer. They are neither. Their aim was to supplement the basic method of prayer elaborated in the meditations and

contemplations of the Exercises, while including a number of points of asceticism that apply to every form of prayer.

Actually these methods are only to serve as models to the retreatants. “It must not be thought that other methods are excluded, which the Holy Spirit is accustomed to teach; which are commonly recognized by authorities on the spiritual life as conformable to sound doctrine, right reason and human psychology; or which anyone from personal experience has found useful for his own progress in virtue.” [10]

While immediately adapted to persons who are less proficient in the science of prayer, the Three Methods are by no means limited to such people, and everyone, no matter how advanced in the spiritual life, can use them to advantage.

The First Method is a practical reflection on the commandments of God and the Church, the capital sins, the three powers of the soul and the five senses. Not otherwise than in formal meditation, we have a preparatory prayer and a final colloquy. In between is the actual method. Going in sequence from one commandment or faculty to the next, I *briefly* consider whether and where I have been deficient. If there are defects, I ask for pardon and the grace to amend myself in the future. The general structure approximates the General Examen of Conscience, with its five points of gratitude, prayer for light and strength, examination, prayer for pardon and a purpose of amendment. But there are two important differences. The purpose is not so much to discover one’s sins in the immediate past as to arouse sentiments of humility and gratitude from reflecting on my infidelity to God and His merciful love towards me. Also

unlike a strict examination of conscience, the first method calls for meditation on the virtues, “in order to understand better the faults committed ... and acquire and retain the virtues” opposed to the contrary sins. To this end, as a person wishes to imitate, e.g., the Blessed Virgin in her use of the senses, “he should recommend himself to her in the preparatory prayer that she obtain for him this grace from her Son, and after the consideration of each sense say a Hail Mary.”

The Second Method differs from the first which looks primarily to moral or ascetical improvement. Primarily dogmatic, it seeks to deepen one’s understanding of the Catholic faith. The Spanish autograph describes it as a “contemplation on the meaning of each word of a prayer,” which may be the Apostles’ Creed, the Pater Noster, or any other formulary rich in doctrinal content.

Externally the method is simplicity itself, calling for meditation on each word or phrase in sequence, “as long as a person finds various meanings, comparisons, relish and consolation in the consideration of it.” But radically, it means concentrating all the forces at our command to obtain that conviction about the truths of revelation which forms the basis of Christian perfection. In the last century, the Vatican Council canonized the method by a solemn definition on how to penetrate into the mysteries of God:

If human reason, with faith as its guide, inquires earnestly, devoutly and circumspectly, it reaches, by God’s generosity, a most profitable understanding of mysteries. This is accomplished by finding similarity with truths which are naturally known, and by seeing the relationship of

mysteries with one another and with the final end of man. [11]

Here as elsewhere in the Exercises, St. Ignatius points up the value of depth and intensity over mere quantity, so that “if in contemplation on the Our Father, a person finds in one or two words abundant matter for thought, and much relish and consolation, he should not be anxious to go on, though the whole hour be taken up with what he has found.” [12] At least at the end of prayer, the mind should be directed away from the mystery or truth under reflection, and “turn to the person to whom the prayer is directed, asking for the virtues or graces that are seen to be most needed.” [13] By implication, therefore, all through the meditation on some truth of revelation, there was personal contact between the one praying and God or one of His saints in whose company the considerations were made.

The Third Method is a set of practical directives peculiarly suited to improving the recitation of vocal prayers. They are to develop “a habit of saying our vocal prayers with attention and devotion ... Hence this practice is very useful for those who are under obligation of reciting the canonical hours or other (non-liturgical) vocal prayers,” such as the Litanies and the Rosary. [14]

Practically, the method consists in correlating a rhythmic period of time, e.g., between breaths or longer if preferred, with reflection on some spiritual truth which may be only extrinsically connected with the words of the prayer. St. Ignatius suggests four possibilities: during a short “space of time, the attention is chiefly directed to the meaning of the word (or phrase being vocalized), to the person who is addressed, to our own lowliness, or the

difference between the dignity of the person and our own insignificance.”

Treating of the same subject, St. Thomas gives three ways of making vocal prayer attentive: “Pay attention to the words spoken, not to mispronounce them; or reflect on the meaning of the words themselves; or, what is most necessary, recognize the end for which the prayer is said, while directing the mind to God or to the intention for which we pray. Even ordinary people are capable of this latter method which, on occasion, makes the mind so intent upon God as to become oblivious of everything else.” [15] Except for the more technical terminology, this is substantially the teaching of the Exercises.

However implemented or applied, St. Ignatius’ third method is calculated to meet the most serious problem in vocal prayer – how to keep the mind from wandering. The solution he offers is realistic. As long as the mind is somehow alert to what it is doing, there is food for the will and the action is genuine prayer.

Chapter 10 **References**

[1] Annotation 5.

[2] Annotation 20.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Additions for the First Week*, nn. 1-2.

[5] *Ibid.*, num 3.

[6] *Monumenta Historica*, “Exercitia Spiritualia,” p. 1150.

[7] *Introductory Observations*, II.

[8] *Ibid.*, Colloquy.

[9] St. Alphonsus Liguori, *Opere Ascetiche*, Vol. II, Torino, 1877, p. 516.

[10] *Monumenta*, p. 1074.

[11] Denzinger, 1796.

[12] *Second Method of Prayer*, Rule 2.

[13] *Ibid.*, Note 2.

[14] *Monumenta*, p. 1174.

[15] St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 83, a. 13.

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