

## A Christian's Attention to God

St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*\* (1608)

### II.1 The Necessity of Prayer

Prayer places our understanding in the brightness of Divine light and exposes our will to the warmth of heavenly love. Nothing can so effectually purify the mind from its ignorance or the will from its perverse affections. It is as a healing water which causes the roots of our good desires to send forth fresh shoots, which washes away the soul's imperfections, and allays the thirst of passion.

But especially I commend earnest mental prayer to you, more particularly such as bears upon the life and passion of our Lord. If you contemplate him frequently in meditation, your whole soul will be filled with him, you will grow in his likeness, and your actions will be modeled on his. He is the light of the world; therefore, in him, by him, and for him we shall be enlightened and illuminated; he is the tree beneath the shadow of which we must find rest; he is the living fountain of Jacob's well, wherein we may wash away every stain. Children learn to speak by hearing their mother talk, and stammering forth their childish sounds in imitation; and so if we cleave to the Savior in meditation, listening to his words, watching his actions and intentions, we shall learn in time, through his grace, to speak, act and will like himself.

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\* This selection is based upon an English translation in the public domain, edited and adapted with reference to the French text by Christopher O. Blum.

Believe me, Philothea, there is no way to God save through this door. Just as the glass of a mirror would give no reflection save for the metal behind it, so neither could we here below contemplate the Divinity, were it not united to the sacred humanity of our Savior, whose life and death are the best, sweetest and most profitable subjects that we can possibly select for meditation. It is not without meaning that the Savior calls himself the bread come down from heaven; just as we eat bread with all manner of other food, so we need to meditate and feed upon our dear Lord in every prayer and action.

Give an hour every day to meditation before dinner; if you can, let it be early in the morning, when your mind will be less cumbered, and fresh after the night's rest. Do not spend more than an hour thus, unless specially advised to do so by your spiritual father.

If you can make your meditation quietly in church, it will be well, and no one, father or mother, husband or wife, can object to an hour spent there, and very probably you could not secure a time so free from interruption at home.

Begin all prayer, whether mental or vocal, by an act of the presence of God. If you observe this rule strictly, you will soon see how useful it is.

It may help you to say the Creed, Lord's Prayer, and so on, in Latin, but you should also study them diligently in your own language, so as thoroughly to gather up the meaning of these holy words, which must be used fixing your thoughts steadily on their purport, not striving to say many words so much as seeking to say a few with your whole heart. One Our Father said devoutly is worth more than many prayers hurried over.

The rosary is a useful devotion when rightly used, and there are various little books to teach this. It is well, too, to say pious litanies and the other vocal prayers appointed for the Hours and found in manuals of devotion, but if you have a gift for mental prayer, let that always take the chief place, so that if, having made that, you are hindered by business

or any other cause from saying your wonted vocal prayers, do not be disturbed, but rest satisfied with saying the Lord's Prayer, the Angelic Salutation, and the Creed after your meditation.

If, while saying vocal prayers, your heart feels drawn to mental prayer, do not resist it, but calmly let your mind fall into that channel, without troubling because you have not finished your appointed vocal prayers. The mental prayer you have substituted for them is more acceptable to God, and more profitable to your soul. I should make an exception of the Church's Offices, if you are bound to say those by your vocation—in such a case these are your duty.

If it should happen that your morning goes by without the usual meditation, either owing to a pressure of business, or from any other cause, (which interruptions you should try to prevent as far as possible,) try to repair the loss in the afternoon, but not immediately after a meal, or you will perhaps be drowsy, which is bad both for your meditation and your health. But if you are unable all day to make up for the omission, you must remedy it as far as may be by momentary prayers, and by reading some spiritual book, together with an act of penitence for the neglect, together with a steadfast resolution to do better the next day.

## **II.2. A Short Method of Meditation**

It may be, Philothea, that you do not know how to practice mental prayer, for unfortunately it is now a thing much neglected. I will therefore give you a short and easy method for using it, until such time as you may read books written on the subject, and above all till practice teaches you how to use it more perfectly. And first of all, the preparation, which consists of two points: first, placing yourself in the presence of God;

and second, asking his aid. And in order to place yourself in the presence of God, I will suggest four chief considerations which you can use at first.

First, a lively earnest realization that his presence is universal; that is to say, that he is everywhere, and in all, and that there is no place, nothing in the world, devoid of his most holy presence, so that, even as birds on the wing meet the air continually, we, let us go where we will, meet with that presence always and everywhere. It is a truth which all are ready to grant, but all are not equally alive to its importance. A blind man when in the presence of his prince will preserve a reverential demeanor if told that the king is there, although unable to see him; but practically, what men do not see they easily forget, and so readily lapse into carelessness and irreverence. Just so, Philothea, we do not see our God, and although faith warns us that he is present, not beholding him with our mortal eyes, we are too apt to forget him, and act as though he were afar: for, while knowing perfectly that he is everywhere, if we do not think about it, it is much as though we knew it not. And therefore, before beginning to pray, it is needful always to rouse the soul to a steadfast remembrance and thought of the presence of God. This is what David meant when he exclaimed, "If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!" (Ps 139:8) And in like manner Jacob, who, beholding the ladder which went up to Heaven, cried out, "Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it" (Gen 28:16) meaning thereby that he had not thought of it; for assuredly he could not fail to know that God was everywhere and in all things. Therefore, when you make ready to pray, you must say with your whole heart, "God is indeed here."

The second way of placing yourself in this sacred presence is to call to mind that God is not only present in the place where you are, but that he is very specially present in your heart and mind, which he kindles and inspires with his holy presence, abiding there as

heart of your heart, spirit of your spirit. Just as the soul animates the whole body, and every member thereof, but abides especially in the heart, so God, while present everywhere, yet makes his special abode with our spirit. Dwell upon this thought until you have kindled a great reverence within your heart for God who is so closely present to you.

The third way is to dwell upon the thought of our Lord, who in his ascended humanity looks down upon all men, but most particularly on all Christians, because they are his children; above all, on those who pray, over whose doings he keeps watch. Nor is this any mere imagination, it is very truth, and although we see him not, he is looking down upon us. It was given to St. Stephen in the hour of martyrdom thus to behold him, and we may well say with the bride of the Song of Songs, “Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice” (Song 2:9).

The fourth way is simply to exercise your ordinary imagination, picturing the Savior to yourself in his sacred humanity as if he were beside you just as we are wont to think of our friends, and fancy that we see or hear them at our side. But when the blessed sacrament of the altar is there, then this presence is no longer imaginary, but most real; and the sacred species are but as a veil from behind which the present Savior beholds and considers us, although we cannot see him as he is.

Make use of one or other of these methods for placing yourself in the presence of God before you begin to pray; do not try to use them all at once, but take one at a time, and that briefly and simply.

### **II.3. Invocation**

Invocation is made as follows: your soul, having realized God’s presence, will prostrate itself with the utmost reverence, acknowledging its unworthiness to abide before

his sovereign majesty; and yet knowing that he of his goodness would have you come to him, you must ask of him grace to serve and worship him in this your meditation. You may use some such brief and earnest words as those of David: “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me” (Ps 51:11). “Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart” (Ps 119:34). “I am your servant, give me understanding” (Ps 119:125). Dwell too upon the thought of your guardian angel, and of the saints connected with the special mystery you are considering, as the Blessed Virgin, St. John, the Magdalene, and the good thief if you are meditating in the Passion, so that you may share in their devout feelings and intention—and in the same way with other subjects.

#### **II.4. Representing the Mystery**

Following upon these two ordinary points, there is a third, which is not necessary to all meditation, called by some the local representation, and by others the interior picture. It is simply kindling a vivid picture of the mystery to be meditated within your imagination, even as though you were actually beholding it. For instance, if you wish to meditate upon our Lord on his cross, you will place yourself in imagination on Mount Calvary, as though you saw and heard all that occurred there during the Passion; or you can imagine to yourself all that the Evangelists describe as taking place where you are. In the same way, when you meditate upon death, bring the circumstances that will attend your own vividly to mind, and so of hell, or any subjects which involve visible, tangible circumstances. When it is a question of such mysteries as God’s greatness, his attributes, the end of our creation, or other invisible things, you cannot make this use of your imagination. At most you may employ certain comparisons and similitudes, but these are not always opportune, and I

would have you follow a very simple method, and not weary your mind with striving after new inventions. Still, often this use of the imagination tends to concentrate the mind on the mystery we wish to meditate, and to prevent our thoughts from wandering hither and thither, just as when you shut a bird within a cage or fasten a hawk by its lures. Some people will tell you that it is better to confine yourself to mere abstract thought, and a simple mental and spiritual consideration of these mysteries, but this is too difficult for beginners; and until God calls you up higher, I would advise you, Philothea, to abide contentedly in the lowly valley I have pointed out.

## **II.5. Considerations**

After this exercise of the imagination, we come to that of the understanding: for meditations, properly so called, are certain considerations by which we raise the affections to God and heavenly things. Now meditation differs therein from study and ordinary methods of thought which have not the love of God or growth in holiness for their object, but some other end, such as the acquisition of learning or power of argument. So, when you have, as I said, limited the efforts of your mind within due bounds—whether by the imagination, if the subject be material, or by propositions, if it be a spiritual subject—you will begin to form reflections or considerations after the pattern of the meditations I have already sketched for you. And if your mind finds sufficient matter, light and fruit wherein to rest in any one consideration, dwell upon it, even as the bee, which hovers over one flower so long as it affords honey. But if you do not find wherewith to feed your mind, after a certain reasonable effort, then go on to another consideration, only be quiet and simple, and do not be eager or hurried.

## **II.6. Affections and Resolutions**

Meditation excites good desires in the will, or sensitive part of the soul—such as love of God and of our neighbor, a craving for the glory of paradise, zeal for the salvation of others, imitation of our Lord’s example, compassion, thanksgiving, fear of God’s wrath and of judgment, hatred of sin, trust in God’s goodness and mercy, shame for our past life; and in all such affections you should pour out your soul as much as possible. If you want help in this, turn to some simple book of devotions, the *Imitation of Christ*, the *Spiritual Combat*, or whatever you find most helpful.

But, Philothea, you must not stop short in general affections, without turning them into special resolutions for your own correction and amendment. For instance, meditating on our dear Lord’s first word from the cross, you will no doubt be roused to the desire of imitating him in forgiving and loving your enemies. But that is not enough, unless you bring it to some practical resolution, such as, “I will not be angered any more by the annoying things said of me by such or such a neighbor, nor by the slights offered me by such a one; but rather I will do such and such things in order to soften and conciliate them.” In this way, Philothea, you will soon correct your faults, whereas mere general resolutions would take but a slow and uncertain effect.

## **II.7. Conclusion and Spiritual Bouquet**

The meditation should be concluded by three acts, made with the utmost humility. First, an act of thanksgiving—thanking God for the affections and resolutions with which he has inspired you, and for the mercy and goodness he has made known to you in the mystery you have been meditating. Secondly, an act of oblation, by which you offer your affections and resolutions to God, in union with his own goodness and mercy, and the



death and merits of his Son. The third act is one of petition, in which you ask God to give you a share in the merits of his dear Son, and a blessing on your affections and resolutions, to the end that you may be able to put them in practice. You will further pray for the Church, and all her ministers, your relations, friends, and all others, using the Our Father as the most comprehensive and necessary of prayers.

Besides all this, I bid you gather a little bouquet of devotion, and what I mean is this. When walking in a beautiful garden most people are wont to gather a few flowers as they go, which they keep, and enjoy their scent during the day. So, when the mind explores some mystery in meditation, it is well to pick out one or more points that have specially arrested the attention and are most likely to be helpful to you through the day, and this should be done at once before quitting the subject of your meditation.