

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B:

July 21, 2024

*“Come away by yourselves... and rest a while.”*

Last week we watched the Twelve as they were sent out, two by two, on their first missionary journey by Our Lord to preach the Gospel. And what a journey that must have been for them, given the wild constraints that Jesus put upon them: *“take nothing for the journey but a walking stick – no food, no traveling bag, no money in their belts. They were to wear sandals but not take along a second tunic.”* (St. Mark 6. 8-9) As we said, this rule was only for their first journey, and to teach them in the quickest, most expeditious fashion one lesson: trust – that *God will provide* for all their needs. As Fr. Breen points out: *“... as they [the Twelve] had proven God’s providential care in this extreme case, they would not be disposed to doubt of it in the future.”* (1)

Now, the Twelve having finished their mission and joyfully returned to Jesus, the Lord says to them: *“Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.”* (St. Mark 6. 31) Setting aside the inconvenient fact that Jesus’ wish for them will be thwarted (at least, this time) by the yearning crowds, let me ask a question. Have you ever thought of putting yourself in the place of the good Apostles in this particular passage of Scripture? That is to say, could it be that Jesus wants each and every one of us, at least for fifteen or twenty minutes a day, to *“come away... and rest a while”* with Him? In fact, we might take as our model in this adventure St. John the Apostle who dared to rest his head on the bosom of Our Lord at the Last Supper. This is a kind of prayer in which words can be used or not. This kind of prayer is usually called *mental prayer* or *contemplation*: I prefer the use of the term ‘mental prayer’ because ‘contemplation’ usually sounds far too academic and monastic. I want to make the case for mental prayer today. And I want to make the case that mental prayer is for everyone – not just for the clergy and religious. Here goes, let’s see if I can convince anyone!

First of all we need to define terms. Let us understand immediately that the Church’s greatest prayer is found in the Sacred Liturgy, that is to say, in the Holy Mass. Thus, if we look at the document pertaining to the Liturgy at the Second Vatican Council we read:

... the Liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all Her power flows. For the goal of Apostolic endeavour is that all who are made sons of God by faith and Baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord’s Supper. (2)

This is our prayer, and the Church’s prayer in, shall we say, Her *official* capacity. Prayer at Holy Mass, however, obviously does not exhaust our experience of prayer. This becomes obvious by the following statement from the Document on the Liturgy which is both startling and insightful: *“The spiritual life... is not limited solely to participation in the Liturgy.”* (3) The Council Fathers go on to explain:

The Christian is indeed called to pray with others, but he must also enter into his room to pray to his Father in secret; furthermore, according to the teaching of the Apostle, he must pray without ceasing. We also learn from the same Apostle that we must always carry around in our bodies the dying of Jesus, so that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our mortal Flesh. (4)

In short, we who are part of the People of God, are called to both Liturgical and to that prayer which Jesus describes in the Gospel where we *“go to our room, praying to our Father in secret, then, our Father, Who see what no man sees, will repay us.”* (cf. St. Matthew 6. 6)

In private prayer we see the distinction between vocal and mental prayer. It has been my experience, both in my own personal life and as a pastor of souls, that most people think of prayer usually in terms of *vocal* prayers, i.e., those prayers we learned as children, the Our Father, the Hail Mary and Glory Be. If one is middle-aged or older, perhaps one was taught as a child to learn the Apostles’ Creed, the Act of Contrition; perhaps one learned the Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity. Now, interestingly, these *vocal prayers* can become *mental prayers* the moment one places oneself in front of the Lord Jesus, or our Heavenly Father, perhaps the Holy Spirit, Our Lady or your patron Saint, and then slowly go through the prayer phrase by phrase, turning the words over in your mind and in your heart. A great and ancient hymn of the Church used in solemn celebrations, unfortunately not too-well-known today, the Te Deum, ends with these words: *“In Te, Domine, speravi, non confundar in aeternam: In Thee, O Lord, have I hoped; let me never be confounded.”* That phrase alone ought to give a man at least five or ten minutes of good meditation with his Lord. Or how about this line from a very old prayer: *“Lord, help me know the shortness of time and the length of eternity?”*

Why do we need this kind of prayer that is called *mental prayer*? Very simply because without it we never become *intimate friends* with the Lord. Without this prayer we are always standing, as it were, outside the gate, looking in, never quite touching the hands and fingers of Jesus. Think for just a moment. Think of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, of that magnificent fresco where we see the finger of Adam touching the finger of God – life and light are being given to our first Parent by that simple touch. Have you ever had the feeling, in your life of faith, either when you receive Holy Communion or when you listen to the readings at Holy Mass, that there’s something not quite there? That, if only you could just move – only a fraction of a fraction of an inch – you might just have *something* – *what is it?* That *something* is really *Someone* quietly whispering in your ear, just as He whispered into the ears of the Twelve so many years ago: *“Come away by yourselves and rest a while.”*

You see, what we have forgotten in this busy, noisy world, is that, when we are in the state of sanctifying Grace, (given to us at Baptism and renewed every time we go to Holy Communion or restored to us when we have lost Grace through sin when we receive absolution) the Trinity lives within us. Listen to the amazing, startling words of St. Theresa of Avila: "We need no wings to go in search of Him but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon Him present within us." (5) And let us be absolutely certain about this point: "The presence of God in the castle [i.e., the soul] is not a symbol, a creation of the imagination. It is a reality. God truly dwells there; of this, Saint Theresa is certain." (6)

What would you do if you suddenly realized that, inside of you, that is, that your soul, was a Temple? But, isn't that what the Apostle St. Paul teaches: "*Know you not that you are Temples of God, and the Spirit of God dwells within You?*" (1 Cor. 3. 16)

So, if you decide to practice this mental prayer, how to start? Very simply. There once was a brilliant and holy man who had a wild name, Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange: he was an adviser to several popes, a professor at the great Dominican college, the Angelicum, in Rome, and a consultant to the Holy Office. This man gives a wonderful idea about mental prayer, calling it simply a *conversation* with the Lord (or, with Our Lady or Whomsoever you wish to address in prayer): Listen:

As soon as a man ceases to be outwardly occupied, to talk with his fellow man as soon as he is alone, even in the noisy streets of a great city, he begins to carry on a conversation with himself. If he is young, he often thinks of his future; if he is old, he thinks of the past, and his happy or unhappy experience of life makes him usually judge persons and events very differently. (7)

In simple language, Father is simply pointing out the fact that most of us, all of us (?) when we are alone, talk to ourselves. Then he points out – and this is what is incredible *because it's so simple!* – "The interior life is precisely an elevation and a transformation of the intimate conversation that everyone has with himself as soon as it tends to become a conversation with God." (8)

So, when we sit down to pray, whether we pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament, which is the best, or whether we "*go to our room in secret,*" mental prayer is simply a conversation, a heart-to-heart talk with Our Father, with the Lord Jesus, with the Spirit, with Our Lady, with our Patron Saint in whatever words we wish, or even without words. Mental prayer, in the words of Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, is a "simple conversation." Thus, we must speak with the "simplicity of a child." In that prayer we "state [our] case of soul before Him... and only use that express what [we] really are." (9) Our prayer oftentimes can be a simple loving glance, a raising of the heart and mind to the Lord Jesus.

There are really very few rules about this prayer, really only one rule, and that is this: we must make the decision to do our prayer *daily*, for a set time, usually for beginners fifteen to twenty minutes is more than enough, and, if one can, early in the morning before one's day gets out-of-hand, as it were. The immediate objection is that my day is already too full, now I am to add another thing which takes twenty minutes more?! The amazing thing about mental prayer is that it has the

miraculous ability to stretch one's time! I know this from personal experience, but the saints speak on this, as well:

This truth was well expressed by one of our great bishops, over-burdened as he was with work, when he replied to a statesman, himself hard-pressed with his affairs, who asked him the secret of his constant serenity and of the astonishing results of his enterprises. 'To all our occupations, my dear friend,' said the Bishop, 'add half an hour of meditation very morning. Not only will you get through all your business, but you will find time for still more.' (10)

I remember when the idea of mental prayer was first given to me. All of the reasons, especially the idea of *resting with the Lord* sounded wonderful, but the worry about my over-burdened schedule was a concern. When I was told that, if I added mental prayer to my schedule there would be *more time and more energy*, that just seemed impossible, absurd. Well, all I can say is, try it, and see if I am wrong.

Fr. Chautard also draws from the great St. Ignatius using a haunting question: "*Quo vadam, et ad quid?*" that is, *Where am I going and for what, or to what end?*" This reminds me of the haunting song which is sung to Jesus near the end of the rock Opera *Godspel*: "Where are You going, where are You going? Will You take me with you?"

There are times in our too-busy lives that we simply need, we simply must sit back and ask ourselves the question: where are we going, and to what end? Is our Faith all that it should be? And if not, why not? Is our prayer what it should be? And if not, why not? The Blessed Trinity lives within us! We are Temples of God – how often do we speak, converse with the Living God within us? Are our lives wracked with meaningless worry, or, worse still, are our lives filled with meaninglessness? What is the answer to these questions? Jesus gives us the answer to these questions if we would but listen: "*Come away by yourselves and rest a while!*"

1. Fr. A. E. Breen, *A Harmonized Exposition of the Four Gospels*, vol. 2 of 4, Rochester, N.Y., 1908, pg. 513
2. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* # 10
3. *Ibid.*, # 12
4. *Ibid.*
5. Fr. P. Marie-Eugène, O.C.D., *I Want to See God*, vol. 1 of 2, Christian Classics, Allen, Texas, 1953, pg. 17
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 18
7. Fr. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, vol. 1 of 2, Tan Books, Rockford, Ill., 1989, pgs. 40-41
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 43
9. Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, O.C.S.O., *The Soul of the Apostolate*, Tan Books, 1974, pg. 201
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 33