

**The Inner Thirst**  
**by Fr. Patrick Younge OFM**

**A series of talks on prayer**

**The Inner Thirst**

*Teach us to seek you, and reveal yourself to us as we seek,  
 For unless you instruct us we cannot seek you,  
 And unless you reveal yourself we cannot find you.  
 Let us seek you in desiring you,  
 Let us desire you in seeking you.  
 Let us find you in loving you,  
 Let us love you in finding you. Amen*

*(Prayer, The Proslogion of St Anselm of Canterbury)*

**Desire:**

Thirst and hunger poetically describe a deeply felt longing in the human heart, though we are adept at suppressing it. There is a need for ultimate meaning, relevance, or purpose. It is a craving for the secret of things. This seeking and yearning is as old as the human spirit itself and as modern as the present day. Even though the enthusiasms of youth enthral and engage they soon give way to the slimmed down realities of maturity. And our ideals, once so bright and pressing, dim and fade, nothing seems to last or truly satisfy. But the desire for meaning and purpose persists. Without addressing this, and anchoring it, there is a sense of pointlessness and drift, a sense of sadness, illusiveness and loss.

**We seek solutions:**

This quest for meaning and purpose can lead in different directions according to our lights and circumstances, but to really satisfy us, it must be an inward journey. When all is said and done, the only solution to this sense of unassuaged longing, the only true anchor against the aimlessness that haunts the lives of human beings, is Love. Human beings want to love and be loved. It is a fact that when we analyse the motives of our actions we realise that everything in life is done in terms of love, and in reference to love. We seek it consciously and unconsciously, day and night, in youth and in age, in our work and in our play, in our successes and in our failures, in our good deeds and in our bad! When the hope of love dies, living dies. (In the *Purgatorio* (CantoXVII) it is Vigil who teaches Dante about love as the deepest spring of human action for better and for worse, when he says: "Love is the seed in you of every virtue and of all acts deserving punishment.")

The origin and cause of this sought-after love beats at the very heart of reality. It is a Divine Personified Love, the highest form of love conceivable. The Lord God is the font of this love, and the author of its very nature. By His own graciousness He allows Himself to be accessible to us. He reaches out to us. It is this Divine love we were created to share and participate in, the creature communing with the Creator. Sharing in Divine Love is the ultimate home of the human heart. It is what makes everything worthwhile, it gives dignity to life, induces contentment, bestows true freedom of spirit; it inspires enduring virtue and heroism even to death. It is true rest. *When, through His gracious gift, we recognise the primacy of His love, accept It, and surrender to it, a dignified sense of self begins to become a happy reality. It is the start of a journey of personal transformation that helps us to face reality with optimism, joy and peace. In loosing ourselves to this Love we surprisingly find others, and our true selves.*

Our first step, then, on discovering Love is *to open our hearts unreservedly to its very personal source*, to put aside our prejudices, our sense of self-sufficiency and self-preoccupation and gaze on the awesome humility and kindly generosity of God. The heart-jolting enlightenment that God 'knows me' and 'loves me', and indeed all His creation, is a life-changing experience. This realization is true enlightenment. We now "*know*" that He bathes us in the glow of His

tenderness and invests us with an incomparable dignity. He desires to unite Himself to us: "*I have loved you with an everlasting love, so I am constant in my affection for you.*" (Jer 31:3). His unflinching love for us, pursues us, seeks us, as if His own happiness were incomplete without us. When our own fragile soul, illumined by this moving truth, looks into itself, it finds an immense void that nothing but the infinity of God can fill and cries out with St Augustine: "*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts find no rest until they rest in you*" (St Augustine, Confessions, Bk 1, n.1). In a similar vein the Psalmist reflects on his parched need: "*Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you my God.*" (Ps 42, 1), and again: "*O God, you are my God for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting, like a dry weary land without water*" (Ps 63, 1).

### But where is He to be found?

Where is His face to be seen whom the soul seeks? Saint John instructs us: "*No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known*" (Jn 1: 18). Jesus is the key to our quest. He reveals the God of Love to us. He is the Word made flesh, the very expression of the Father's heart. As our word expresses who we are, the Divine Word, Jesus, expresses who the Father is. He reveals the Father by who he is, by what he says and what he does. All this is pre-eminently expressed in the Gospels. It is a comforting realization that God has revealed himself to us as a living Person, and not merely as a forbidding collection of commandments and regulations; a cold contract of obligations and rights which the observance of "Law" entails. Rather, this Gospel revelation implies a warm communion of persons. This greatly determines how we relate to Him!

### The Four Gospels:

In their simplicity, and in their drama, the four Gospels present a testimony of God entering human history, human life, and relating to us. They are forever modern, moving and communicative. When we listen and meditate on them, the presence of Christ is sensed to be really close. They are rightly called Holy Gospels, Good News. For they convince us that God has time for weak, fragile human beings, and surprisingly not just the good, but everybody, especially the outcast – because theirs is the greater need.

On reading the Gospel account of the life and times of Jesus there is real engaging with the events, with the world in which he lived. It is depicted in strong, clear, and authentic colours - Priests and Doctors of the Law, Pharisees and Publicans, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick – all are drawn vividly to the memorable events, which constitute the encounter with Jesus. Hence a story from the gospel is not something that we can sit down and listen to in a detached way, with our legs crossed, as it were. It is something through which we are summoned to stand up.

Over time we build up a living picture of Jesus from our consideration of each scene and episode in the Gospel. We let these echo in our hearts, from the Annunciation to his Nativity, from the Nativity to his coming of age at the Pasch in Jerusalem, from the beginning of his Public Ministry through to His death and Resurrection. From prayerfully considering these events we have a deepening familiarity with Him. This ever-increasing knowledge and acquaintance leads to love, and love leads to loyalty, and loyalty is the essence of discipleship. This is an important foundation and cementing of our enduring relationship with him. This is the territory of the education of the heart, an important constituent of the lifeblood of prayerfulness.

When Jesus began his public ministry:

On that memorable day long ago, opening his public ministry, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the kingdom of God and saying, *'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand'* (Mk 1:14-15). The kingdom of the Father was His central message. The kingdom was at hand, the reign, or rule of the Father had begun in a unique way, and it was present in Him and through Him. It is salvation, liberation, offered to us. He knew that his mission was making the kingdom present, the rule of the Father, - not territorially, but *within* one. Simply put, He wished the will of God to be the will of humankind. How he saw his task is vividly portrayed in Luke's introduction to Jesus' ministry:

*"He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it is written,  
 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
 Because he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor.  
 He has sent me to proclaim release to captives  
 And recovering of sight to the blind,  
 To set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."  
 And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down;  
 And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them,  
 "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk 4:16-21)*

Jesus stood before the people in Nazareth at the synagogue and declared that he was fulfilling these very words. In this Proclamation Jesus declares that his mission is to our locked up and parched neediness. Subsequently, in the same vein, He invites us to ease our spiritual hunger and thirst in Him, to find in him the source of our comforting: *"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink"* (Jn 7:37). Throwing his arms wide he says: *"Come to me all you who labour and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest"* (Matt 11:28). He invites us to open the barriers: *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens I shall come to him and eat with him and he with me"* (Rev 3:20). And when we do respond to His invitation, when we come searching for the Christ of the Gospels, we find there a living and loving person waiting for us as he proclaims his very self to be the Way, the Truth and the Life. He invites us to receive Him, and thus become Kingdom people. To be embraced by Him all we have to do is to want it!

Jesus' Love:

As we are attentive to the Gospels we realise that we are not recalling the memory of someone long since dead and gone, but are *experiencing now someone who lives, and loves*. Surprisingly it is from the more difficult, and sometimes discouraging, teaching of Jesus himself that we can understand in some real way the love that he has for each one of us, and me personally! He teaches us to love our enemies and to do good even to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who abuse us, to offer the other cheek to whoever strikes me, not to withhold my shirt from the one who steals my coat, to give to those who beg from me, and to act towards others as we would like them to act towards us (Lk 6:27-31). If Jesus teaches this kind of radical, far-reaching, even extreme way of loving, then we can be sure that this is the way that he loves us; that he loves me!

He goes on to say: *"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return"* (Lk 6:32-35). These words of Jesus tell us how he loves and, in particular, how he loves each one of us: completely and generously even when we do not love him, when we are selfish and sinful. Jesus, as the Son and the Revelation of the Father, shows forth in himself the qualities of the Father's love: *"He is kind to*

*the ungrateful and the selfish*" (Lk 6:35). Jesus is merciful in love just as the Father is (see Lk 6:36).

"*Judge not, and you will not be judged,*" Jesus teaches (Lk 6:37). So I can clearly expect him not to judge me; if he teaches me not to judge others, then I can be sure he does not judge me. "*Do not condemn others, and you will not be condemned*" (Lk 6:37), I know, then, that Jesus in his love for me does not condemn me no matter what my behaviour has been, no matter what bad attitudes I have had. "*Forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you*" (Lk 6:37-38). Jesus teaches generous forgiveness and, more generally, generosity in everything; he teaches me to forgive and to give, to be a forgiver and a giver. I can be certain, therefore, that he forgives me. Strangely, I now find that the impossible demands that I listened to Christ make of me previously, now become easy and desirable when I recognize these qualities in Him. This is the power of his transforming grace!

#### What is Love?

Fundamental to all these Kingdom values is love! But what, I might ask, is love, how can we describe it? The inspired Saint Paul gives us the answer. He writes: "*Love is patient and kind. Love is never jealous. It is not boastful. Love is not puffed up with pride. It is not bad mannered. Love does not insist on having its own way. Love does not take offence. It does not hold grudges. Love takes no pleasure in what is wrong; it rejoices in what is right and true. Love stands ready always to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to bear all things*" (1Cor. 13:4-7). I can take Paul's descriptive definition of love and use it to better understand how Jesus loves me. Jesus is patient and kind. He is never jealous. He is not boastful. He is not puffed up with pride. He is not bad mannered. Jesus does not insist on having his own way. He does not take offence. He does not hold grudges. Jesus takes no pleasure in what is wrong; he rejoices in what is right and true. He stands ready always to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to bear all things. This is the *quality* of Jesus' love for me. This is *how* he loves me. What is more, in his love for me, he sends me his Holy Spirit, who is Love. The Holy Spirit is the source of our energy to love, even to want to love.

Jesus did not rest at just proclaiming ideals but, he "*went about, doing good*"; he championed the outcast, brought healing to the afflicted, and received and pardoned sinners. The kingdom of God, the consolation of the new age in Jesus, is granted generously to the weak and despised – to those who suffer, weep, and sorrow. Of course, as is to be expected, the message that God's love reached especially to sinners caused a great stir, in fact it represented the great pre-Easter scandal. The words and conduct of Jesus demonstrated that God had acknowledged the poor and sinners. Jesus' ministry is God's time of grace and pardon and mercy. He did not come to call the "righteous" about whom Pharisaic Judaism revolved, but sinners. He dared to declare "sinners" closer to God than they! All this was comfort to those poor people years ago; it is still Good News for us today.

Prayer:

*Almighty God, open our minds  
That we may know the hope  
To which you have called us,  
How rich are the wonderful blessings  
You have promised us  
And how great is your power  
At work in us who believe. (Eph 1:19-20)*

### **Jesus' death and resurrection**

*Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,  
For all the benefits and blessings  
Which thou hast given to me,  
For all the pains and insults  
Which thou hast borne for me,  
O most merciful friend, Brother, and Redeemer;  
May I know thee more clearly,  
Love thee more dearly,  
And follow thee more nearly. Amen.*

*(Prayer of St Richard of Chichester + 1255)*

On our prayerful journey into the life and love of Christ his death and resurrection must be the focus of particular attention. Not alone is it important to appreciate the life of Jesus, but it is also important to understand the meaning of his death. Jesus lived - and died. His selfless life is the key to explaining his selfless death. Loving service is the key to understanding Jesus' death in what otherwise could be seen as an inexplicable mystery. He had lived for mankind a life of service, and holding nothing back he gave his life for us. *"For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mk 10:45). His selfless and heroic life culminated in his selfless and heroic death!

The message of Jesus, in word and deed, is ever "service". He had come as the caring physician, the friend of the outcast. His warm concern for the "poor", the little ones, brought him into conflict with those whose understanding of God was different from his. Because he would not brand anyone an outcast, not even notorious sinners; because he put doing right before ritual preoccupations, because he placed people above observances, he was classed as a breaker of the Law, as one who did not do the will of God. Nevertheless, he remained faithful to the Father he knew and loved, and that faithfulness ultimately brought him to the Cross.

### **Jesus is the very expression of the Father**

We must never forget that Jesus had been sent to display the limitless love of *the Father* for mankind – "the Father and I are one". Jesus manifested the Father's love through his own loving concern for and service of all. (His 'meat' was to do the Father's will, and the Father's will is always 'perfect love'. In whatever circumstances we find ourselves 'perfect love' is what He asks!) Nothing could turn him away from that way of love. He would lay down his life in the task – even when it meant that life itself was crushed from him *by those who could not understand his service of love*. Jesus did not seek the path of suffering – witness the Gethsemane prayer – but he did not flinch at the threat of it, for he knew that in his total faithfulness to love lay the destruction of evil. *For evil is finally helpless before a love that will never cry: "enough!"* This is what the Father is saying through Jesus' heroic action – love is stronger than death! Death has not got the final word! Jesus, the Father's Word, the Father's intimate self-expression, gives the most powerful proof of love possible. Father and Son were prepared to go to any lengths to save us from ourselves. Jesus will

save us though it will cost him his life. And it did. Humankind has been shown the way of freedom and can win to freedom in the same way (by dying to self through “service” for love). Already as head of humanity, and through his solidarity with all mankind, Jesus has won the victory over death and evil for all. He is the Saviour of the world!

Jesus showed his “greater love” by dying for the principles he believed in, principles he so earnestly hoped and wanted his disciples to believe in and embrace. He knew his death would awaken them to the seriousness of his demands and would inspire them to be faithful to his ideals. They, in turn, would display to the world the true face of the Father, as He had done. It was the Father who inspired Jesus himself. It was the Father Jesus was revealing. Somehow, we must, each in God’s time and in God’s way, make this revealing victory our own.

### He is Risen:

It is the central affirmation of the New Testament that Jesus’ life did not end with his death on the Cross. The entire body of New Testament scripture is centred and based on the fact that Jesus conquered death, that he was raised from the dead and is glorified, and that he was seen and touched by his incredulous disciples. Paul (1Cor 15: 5-8) states that Christ appeared to Cephas, to the other witnesses listed, and to Paul himself. The word he used can be rendered “*he showed himself*”. It means that the risen Christ manifested himself as present so that Paul, and the others, can say, “*I have seen the Lord*”. It was their constant meeting with the risen Lord that convinced them of its reality. The Apostles ultimately gave their lives for this testimony, including Paul.

Because he was raised from the dead, Jesus holds decisive significance for us. Because of the fact of his resurrection we know that meaningless death – and meaningless life – now has meaning. Jesus died with a cry on his lips: “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Mk 15:34). The sequel, his victorious resurrection, was to show that God had never abandoned Jesus. We have the assurance that he will not abandon us. Because: “*God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life*” (Jn 3:16).

Jesus’ lifestyle of service, even to the point of giving his life, had prepared him for his death. His resurrection was the vindication of all he stood for, proof that he was right. The Resurrection underlines Jesus’ communion with the Father which death could not interrupt. If God *gave his only Son to us and raised him*, then the resurrection of Jesus underlines that God is indeed the *God of humankind who holds out to all of us, the promise of life beyond death. God didn’t give his Son for some limited time or limited purpose; he gave him totally and forever.* In other words, the Resurrection of Jesus is not only something that happened to him - it reaches to us, and not only as it concerns our future resurrection. Already, as risen Lord, Jesus himself is present to us and with us in our daily striving to give reality to the Kingdom. He is Emmanuel – God with us. “*I am with you always even to the end of the world*” (Matt 28:20).

### Our Mission: The Kingdom here and now.

Jesus’ practice of frequent intensive prayer and his attitude towards ‘the poor’ is our model of everyday behaviour. He sets a very high standard; he makes demands. What he looks for is a kingdom of mutual selfless service: “*Anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all*”. (Mk 10:42-5) Jesus preached the kingdom, the beginning of the reign of God not just when we die, but here and now.

The Spirit of Jesus is the liberator of our present condition because he seeks to transform it. In our prayerful awareness it becomes crystal clear that it is up to us to give expression to this goodness, if Christ is to be real in our lives and in the world. We feel impelled to allow his Spirit to breathe in us. This is the fruit of our developing closeness to the Lord. We do this by imitating his focus, his prayerfulness, and his zeal. Indeed, He made only two fundamental demands (a) He asked for personal conversion, to forsake our selfishness i.e. to love God without conditions – with

our whole heart and soul and mind, and (b) to practice radical equality – to love our neighbour as ourselves - i.e. he postulated a restructuring of the human world. This entails a fundamental interior revolution. The good news of the Kingdom understood in this way is a stiff challenge to oneself personally and to all social order based on power and self-interest. But the direction is there, the energy and power. We are encouraged when we reflect that Jesus' teaching bore rich fruit in the communities of his first followers – and in countless witnesses up to our own times. This revolution is expected of us too! It is what is meant when we say daily "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!*"

*The Ascension.*

The Ascension of Jesus is often viewed as a strange event, and so not dwelt upon. However, it is nothing more than the completion of the Resurrection victory. What it signifies is the drawing to a close of Jesus' earthly ministry, and His return to the Father with the now glorified body He took to be one like us. When scripture tells us that He ascended – "went up" and was "taken from their sight", it does not mean to suggest that He went off into outer space, but, rather, that He now inhabits a different dimension. He is no longer localised by time and space – present to a relative few in Palestine at a particular time as in his earthly ministry – but is now, glorified, and is present to all, everywhere, always. There is a question, which may be asked, as Jesus is no longer encountered in his visible form, why did he not remain visibly among us? The answer is: "*It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Councillor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you*" (Jn 16:7).

*Prayer:*

*Reveal yourself to us, Lord;  
Love us and help us  
To accept your commands and obey them  
And so show our love for you.  
Lord Jesus Christ, true vine,  
Grant that we may remain in you  
So that we bear much fruit  
And glorify your Father. (Jn 15:5-8)*

### **The Holy Trinity**

*Come thou, Holy Spirit,*

*Restore the lives, which without thee are dead.  
Kindle the hearts, which without thee are cold and dull.  
Enlighten the minds, which without thee are dark and blind.  
Fill the Church, which without thee is an empty shrine, and teach us to pray. Amen.*

(Prayer from: 'New Every Morning')

### The Trinity

God's chosen people, the Jews, were surrounded by people given to idolatry, with the result that they themselves occasionally turned from the worship of the one true God to the worship of many Gods, as practised by their neighbours. To safeguard them against this error, God, through His prophets, continued to insist on the idea of His own oneness or unity. This is characteristic of the Old Testament. It is only in the New Testament, under the light of His gospel, that Christ revealed the mystery of the Trinity to us. He divulged the secrets of God's inner life. Had he not revealed it to us, our reason would never lead us to the fact that in the one God are three persons, distinct, but equal in all things – one divinity, three persons. To know and love God, to have a meaningful prayer life, then, we are invited to enter into a relationship of deep personal intensity with Him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Without this Trinitarian awareness our prayer life would be the poorer. Of course the Holy Trinity will remain a mystery, but the revelation of the nature of God helps us to relate to the Divinity in a more focused way. By knowing and opening ourselves to the persons of the Trinity we are more enriched and engaged with the mystery of God. Through the gifts of His love poured out we can love what we only faintly understand. When we desire to know Him he will progressively reveal what is nourishing for us. The unfolding of this knowledge begins with a loving attachment to the humanity of Christ, which is nourished and tended by the Holy Spirit. Gradually the Spirit of Jesus leads us to deep awareness and a zealous love of the Father, the Creator and Lord of all things.

### The Holy Spirit

It is here that we direct our attention to "the gift" of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the dynamo that enables us to be spiritually alive, aware, invigorated and transformed into Christ to the glory of God the Father. The Holy Spirit is the farmer of our inner selves; it is the Spirit who sows the seed of faith and nourishes its growth, who kindles and blows into fire prayerfulness in us. Who, when we do not know how to pray as we ought, cries out in us: 'Abba, Father'.

Jesus promised us the Councillor: "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Councillor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you" (Jn 16:7). We must not think that the Holy Spirit takes the place of an absent Jesus. Jesus has not gone away, as it were, to heaven and the Holy Spirit has taken his place. Rather, the Holy Spirit reminds us that Jesus is now glorified and consequently He transcends time and space. As we already said, He is now present everywhere, to everyone, always. The Spirit within us brings us into *closer* contact with the glorified Christ than his human form could bring about. The Lord can now penetrate us more profoundly and be more widely present in the world. Hence it is not "clinging" to his human form, as Magdalene wished to do, but rather it is the reception of his Spirit, which now guarantees his presence. We could put it this way: that first God came in the flesh, and that was Christ, and then God came in the Spirit, and that is the Holy Spirit, none other than the Spirit of Christ. The attentive heart leads us to him, not the easy gaze of the eyes. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8).

### The Forgotten Spirit

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit is elusive to the minds of most people. There is truth in the saying that He is the Forgotten Guest of the soul, which he inhabits since our baptism. This is sad because the Spirit is the very dynamism of Love at the heart of the Godhead, and is the source and wellspring of all love and godliness in us. This ignorance of the Holy Spirit is not a recent phenomenon it has been there from the beginning of the Church. St Paul on one of his missionary journeys arrived in Ephesus and encountered a group of enthusiastic Christians. He asked them: "Was the Holy Spirit given to you, when you learned to believe? Why, they said, nobody even

mentioned to us the existence of a Holy Spirit. What baptism, then, did you receive? Paul asked; and they said, John's baptism. So Paul told them, John baptized to bring people to repentance; but he bade people to have faith in one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus. On hearing this, they received baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus; and when Paul laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came down on them, and they spoke with tongues, and prophesied. In all, these men were twelve in number" (Acts 19: 2-7).

There is no doubt that when we honour the Father or the Son, because of their unity in divinity, we also pay homage to the Holy Spirit. Any honour given to one person of the Trinity is of necessity given to all three, as all three possess one and the same divine nature. But it is God's will that we should honour not only His unity of divine nature but also His trinity of persons, otherwise Jesus would never have revealed the mystery of the inner life of God to us. Hence, we should know, acknowledge and honour the Holy Spirit explicitly, just as we do the Father and the Son.

### The Spirit eludes the Senses

One of the reasons why devotion to the Holy Spirit is difficult for us is because it does not appeal to the senses; it is not easy to form a concept, an idea, of the Spirit. One is thrown immediately into the realms of deep faith and of the intellect - reasoning. Having an earthly father, we can easily attribute appropriate ideas of him to God, our heavenly Father. It is also relatively easy to form a concept of Christ the beloved Son from our experience of sonship, and from what the gospels tell us about Jesus. These two conceptions are, one could say, within the range of nature. They come to us at once. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, has never been seen, has never been incarnate, never manifest except in the exercising of His power, His actions, His effects. Nevertheless, Jesus speaking solemnly at the Last Supper emphasises the importance of the Holy Spirit. He is called by different names, the Paraclete, the Helper, the Comforter, the Councillor, the Advocate, whom He will send. He speaks of Him in Personal terms. The Holy Spirit is a person not just a force, or a function. The descriptions we have of the Holy Spirit, to aid our groping minds, are in symbolic terms. These images are suggestive of the different functions the Holy Spirit fulfils - like the dove, tongues of fire, wind blowing, and water welling up. We accept the intellectual truths these symbols convey to us about the Spirit, but because our senses are not involved we often fail to engage personally and emotionally with the Lord and Giver of life. He is indeed all Light in Himself, but darkness to us; He is all fullness in Himself, but emptiness to us!

Nevertheless, in the absence of aids that help our senses we must concentrate on these truths that are revealed about the Holy Spirit. By earnestly praying and by focusing our minds, our intellects, on the truths revealed about the Holy Spirit He will enlighten us with formative insights and warm our hearts. As Jesus says, if a father on earth fulfils the prayers of his own sons, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Lk 11:13). Praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit is so important that a variation of the Our Father exists, used by many Fathers of the Church. In place of the invocation "Thy kingdom come," it reads "Thy Spirit descend upon us and purify us" (See Gregory of Nyssa, Homily on the Lords Prayer, 111,6).

### The Holy Spirit in the Trinity

The Holy Spirit is the mutual love between the Father and the Son. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father. They contemplate each other; love each other; unite in a love so powerful, so strong, and so perfect that it forms between them a living bond. They give themselves in a love so infinite that their love can express itself in nothing less than a person, who is love. That person is the Holy Spirit, God, the Spirit of God. Love at such a stage does not speak; does not express itself by words; it expresses itself as we do in some ineffable moments, by that which indicates the very exhaustion of our giving; namely a sigh, or a breath – and that is why the third person of the Blessed Trinity is called the Holy Spirit, or breath.

Jesus and the Father send me their Holy Spirit, as promised long ago, and in my case beginning with my baptism. When the Spirit dwells in my heart, he catches me up in Jesus' love for the Father and in the Father's love for Jesus. He takes me right into the interior life of God, into the community life of love of the Three Divine Persons. I am caught up into the Trinity. The Holy Spirit relates me to Jesus and the Father; because he is their mutual love, he relates me to them in love. I can go to the Father without fear, in love, because his Spirit lives in me. I can come to Jesus in trust and in love because the Spirit of Jesus dwells in my heart. The gift of love, the gift that the Father and Jesus give me in my heart through their Spirit, empowers me to love, raises me up and enriches my capacity to love. This gift of love enables me to enter into contemplation, to look with the eyes of faith at the Lord, to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus – because contemplation is knowledge through love. When we realise the centrality of the Holy Spirit in the Blessed Trinity we have no difficulty in abandoning ourselves to His loving influence.

### Our need of Prayer

At the outset of our reflections we mentioned the *Desire* or *Restlessness* we feel at the heart of our being. Initially this manifests itself to our consciousness in an obscure pull towards something more in life – something more than what actually is: something beyond the status quo. Upon deeper reflection, however, we discover that this quest is not actually a desire for some 'thing' at all. It is rather the manifestation of a mysterious yearning for some 'One', for Him-Who-Is: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This 'something more' which irresistibly draws us is ultimately consummated in the fullness of transformation in Christ.

Our first impression is that this searching is of our own doing, something that we initiate and pursue of ourselves. But in truth this insatiable yearning is a response to God who has first chosen us and who has first made His home in us (Jn 15: 4, 16). We are drawn irresistible to Him solely because He has first sought us out in a most personal and intimate love. "This is the love I mean: not our love for God, but God's love for us ... because He loved us first" (1Jn 4:10, 19).

One of the areas where this restlessness becomes manifest is in the desire for deeper personal prayer – indeed for a genuine prayer-life. This is because underlying all forms of authentic prayer is a loving encounter with God in faith. All prayer tends towards a communion with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We experience Him directly and immediately only in love, no matter how much we know about God: His goodness, His forgiveness, His mercy, and His justice. This faith filled experience of love is prayer. Praying is ultimately "remaining loving one's Beloved": A loving communion between the soul and the Holy Trinity. This is what our quest has really been about!

This is what the heart has been seeking all along. We will gradually explore this path more fully.

### Prayer entails growth, struggle:

We will bear in mind that in prayer the soul searching deeply for God must undergo intense storms and persevere in being led along solitary and obscure paths. It is above all in prayer that we are given the strength to pass through trials and tribulations, the inner poverty that is our lot this side of the Resurrection.

Authentic prayer is often experienced as a wrestling with God as well as with oneself. Transforming communion with God is fraught with tension. Besides our deepest desire for Him, there is also present within us formidable self-centeredness, drawing us to close in upon ourselves. At one and the same time, we experience both our self struggling with God against sin in us, and our self struggling against His transforming love. We simultaneously both crave God and resist Him (Rom 7:14-25; Rom 8:18-39; Ph 3:5-16; 2 Co 12:7-10).

Yet, however effective our resistance may seem, it is inevitably God's persistent love that prevails. We cannot but end up like Jacob who finally adored the One he had wrestled with (Gen 32:26-30); or like Jeremiah who in utter exhaustion abandoned himself to the very One he could not successfully resist (Jer 1:4-10; 20:7-9).

*Prayer:*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and help us  
For we are weak and have no words  
To say to God.  
Pray to Him for us in a way  
That no words can express  
So that He who sees into our hearts  
And knows our thoughts  
May hear our prayers. (Rom 8:26-27)*

### **Why Pray: God's Goodness and Generosity.**

*Most high,  
Glorious God  
Enlighten the darkness of my heart  
And give me, Lord,  
A correct faith,  
A certain hope,  
A perfect charity, sense and knowledge,  
So that I may carry out your holy and true command. Amen.*

*(Prayer of St Francis before the Crucifix)*

One day a rich young man ran up to Jesus and said, "Good Master, What must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus answered, "Why call me good? One is Good – God." One is Good – God. Everything that is, is of God. Therefore everything that is, is good and of his goodness. To be is good!

At every moment He is sharing, He is allowing us to participate in, His being and His goodness – “In Him we live and move and have our being.” This is indeed a fundamental reason why we should pray. This constant gift, the gift of ourselves and of all there is demands a response, a response of overwhelming and stunned gratitude –“If you but knew the gift of God!”

But it does not end there. That is only the beginning. For we have been baptized into Christ. In some mysterious way, we are Christ – “I live, now, not I, but Christ lives in me.” We are in some way far beyond our comprehension, one with Christ, the very Son of God. We are the Son, to the Father, in the Holy Spirit. This is why Saint Paul declares: “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit prays within us, crying ‘Abba – Father’.” If we pray in mind and heart it is just to be in harmony with our deepest being as baptized, Christed persons. This is why we must pray – to be in harmony with who we really are, and who we are called to be.

Christ crossed the boundaries of time and space, dimensions that we are limited by, and his message, in summary, is this: “I no longer call you servants, but friends. I make known to you all that the Father has made known to me.” We are invited into the inner life of the Divine Trinity, to share in the inner communications of God. For this he prayed: “That they might be one, Father, as you in me and I in you – that they might be one in us.” To this we are called – to hear the inner secrets of God, to hear of a love beyond telling and respond to it: “Even if a mother would forsake her child, yet I will never forsake you.” “How I would have longed to gather you as a mother hen gathers her chicks beneath her wings ...” This is why we should pray. We cannot be true to who we are; we cannot be whole, if we do not pray, and pray without ceasing. (Cf. *Challenges in Prayer*, Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O., *Ways of Prayer series, Vol. 1. Dominican Publications, 1982pp. 8-11*)

#### We are always “On the Way”, growing in prayer:

The spiritual life, like all life, involves growth and change. We are always “on the Way”! No matter how deep our experience of God is, we are always just beginning to know the Lord. As Job, the most Godly of men, says at the end of his long and severe testing: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but only now does my eye see you” (Job 42:5).

Job goes through what John of the Cross calls the Dark Night of the Senses and of the Spirit, his world collapses. There is the erosion of the traditional values that had made his life meaningful and his faith secure. To continue to encounter God as his world collapses will require much more of Job than his simple faith. Even “the proficient” that prays in depth must grow, and at times that growth will entail a “shaking of the foundations”.

Knowing that growth and change is the reality of a soul “on the way”, we desire to deepen our prayer and our knowledge of prayer. We desire to continue to grow deeper into the Lord. We will therefore try to describe the life of prayer and, in broad strokes, consider the way the Lord seems to work, and the type of responses he seems to desire, in the lives of those to whom he chooses to reveal himself. We discern that there are general guidelines and principles that are common to all. Ours is a faith in search of understanding with a view to responding more wholeheartedly.

Having described our task we must readily concede that each person is unique and has a privileged relationship with the Lord. No director, and no textbook, can tell us how we must grow. Prayer is experienced and is utterly personal. There is no single method of prayer and no one way to encounter God. As Basil Pennington puts it, “Pray as you can, don’t pray as you can’t”.

Four centuries ago, St John of the Cross, one of the great spiritual directors, wrote that the three major enemies to interior growth are the Devil, Oneself, and the Spiritual Director (The Living Flame of Love, Stanza III par 29-63). While he discusses the danger from the Devil and from

Oneself in about two paragraphs each, he spends some thirty paragraphs on the danger from the spiritual director. Why? His point is, very simply, that most directors over direct. They try to mould their directees according to their own formation. For St John, as for every wise director, his role is not to mould a person according to some pre-conceived pattern, but to help individuals interpret their own experience. The good director helps persons to be free to follow the Lord in whatever way He chooses to lead them. The title "Spiritual Director" is perhaps not the best term for this purpose; rather a more appropriate word would be the "co-discerner".

#### The 'Presence' attracts us to Pray:

The awareness of our desire to pray is, we realize on reflection, itself a clear sign of the Lord's presence. We cannot reach out to Him unless He first draws us, after all He is totally 'Other'. But since He is our Lord, since He cares more for us than we do for ourselves, he would never plant this desire in us merely to frustrate us. He would never lead us to seek something that was impossible. St John describes a beautiful episode in his Gospel where John the Baptist was standing with two of his disciples when Jesus passed by; they experience His irresistible magnetic attraction by his very presence, and are captivated by his invitation. The text tells us that John looked towards Jesus and said, 'There is the lamb of God!' When the two disciples heard what he said, they followed Jesus.

*"Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, "What do you want?"*

*They answered, "Rabbi," - which means teacher - 'where do you live?'*

*'Come and see' he replies; so they went and saw where he lived,*

*And stayed with him the rest of that day. It was about the tenth hour." (Jn 1:38-39)*

St John notes that it was about the tenth hour, four in the afternoon. It suggests that the day's journey is over. The searching soul has found it's home with the Lord. What is important thereafter is to spend time with Him. It was four in the afternoon, an indelible hour in their minds!

Prayer is a gift that the Lord offers us. Strangely it is not in looking for the gift of prayer that you will find it. You will find and receive the gift of prayer, and always more fully, not by seeking to pray but by seeking Jesus. It is in seeking Jesus that I learn from him how to pray, to enter into loving interpersonal relationship with him, to keep my eyes fixed on him, to accept his love and to love him in return, to listen to his voice and to walk in his Spirit.

#### A definition of Prayer:

So what, then, is prayer? Those of us old enough to have been reared on the Maynooth Catechism (and its equivalents) learned to define prayer in the following manner: "Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God, to adore and praise Him, to thank Him for His favours, to beg His grace and blessings, and to obtain pardon for our sins."

#### The emphasis must be on God's initiative:

This was an easy definition to memorize – clear and brief. It was helpful in that it taught us that prayer entailed effort on our part, it involved both mind and heart, and that God in a certain sense is beyond our ordinary experience, the Sacred 'Other'. But it does lack a certain balance that needs to be rectified. The idea of "raising the mind and heart to God" implies that prayer is for the most part a matter of our own efforts – that God is simply there, while we, in Prayer find ways and means to pull ourselves up to Him. The definition tends to overstress our own efforts and activity. This stress is very Western and very ancient it is called Pelagianism, or Semi-Pelagianism. It is to follow the theologian Pelagius in overestimating our ability to encounter God by our own efforts and to neglect, or downplay, the primacy of God's grace.

There is an infinite chasm between God and humankind; no matter how hard we try we cannot come to God by our own steam, we cannot leap across infinity. We cannot even take the first step in coming to God. God graciously comes to us. He alone can leap the infinite gulf

between Creator and creature; this is what He did at the Incarnation, and what He does in the life of everyone who prays. When I look at my own prayer life I notice a lot of Pelagianism in it. I am in the driving-seat most of the time! St Paul too was aware of this tendency when he comments on the change in his spiritual life, "It is not longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me!"

Perhaps a better approach would be to define Prayer as an *OPENING* of the mind and heart to God. This is better because the idea of 'opening' is suggestive of receptivity; it is an act of responsiveness to an initiative by 'The Other' who is the dominant partner. For the Christian, then, prayer is a personal encounter with God in love. More than that, it is an encounter, which depends almost entirely on His grace, since He is God. Other words can describe this 'openness' – 'Listening', 'Hearing', 'being Attentive' - all serve to convey the point we are making. Of course we understand that prayer is a dialogue, it is a personal encounter with Love, in love. When we communicate with someone we love we listen and we speak, in greater or lesser degrees. But the point of God's initiative had to be emphasised because it is often forgotten. This realization does deeply affect our attitude and outlook in prayer. It tempers our brashness!

This awareness of a personal encounter, and the consequent attitude of humble receptivity, is in marked contrast to Zen and Yoga and their derivatives - systems that have found popularity in the West in recent times. Their prayer systems depend totally on the efforts of the individual to arrive at a state of tranquillity that fosters enlightenment. There is no encounter with the 'Personal Other'. The primary objective of Christian prayerfulness is union with God who is a Person – it is a communion of persons. However, we often make use of methods of disciplining mind and body that are associated with Zen and Yoga, to foster the tranquillity that predisposes us for this inter-Personal communion with God. These are a means to an end, rather than being an end in themselves.

#### God's initiative is out of love:

God does not need anyone else. God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the perfect community. The Divine Persons need nothing else for their completion. Rather, it is as though the Three Persons say to one another, "Our community life is so good, why don't we create other persons and invite them into this life? If God invites us into the community life of the Trinity then God desires a relationship of mutuality with us. In the Gospel of St John Jesus tells his disciples (and through them us): "I do not call you servants any longer ... but I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (Jn15: 15). This desire of God to reach out to us is experienced by us as a profound desire to respond. It is the Holy Spirit in us crying out "Abba" Father.

#### Of course Prayer demands effort on our part:

Even though it is always God who reaches across infinity to us and even though our effort is itself impossible without the sustaining grace of God. Our response involves both our head and our heart. The understanding plays an important role in prayer, since we cannot love what we do not know. Our love is linked to our knowledge. At the same time prayer is not confined to reasoning or speculation about God. As we grow in knowledge and insight from different sources our wills, or hearts, are touched even more profoundly than our understanding. We can love profoundly even that which we only barely understand. Love is greater than knowledge. We love God even when we do not understand Him. This is the Franciscan way!

In a healthy prayer life we find ourselves moved to make acts of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, reparation and petition. We could summarize all these as: worship and petition. This is a wider field than mere petition for personal needs only, which was often the predominant prayer when we were young and thoughtless. As we mature in faith and prayer, and as the Spirit prompts, we notice that our acts of worship: adoration, thanksgiving, praise and reparation, expand dramatically, they also simplify. Likewise our petitions tend to become more universal in their scope - though we do not underestimate the importance of petitioning for particular needs. We engage in it confidently in obedience to the Lords command, and always in conformity with His will.

*Prayer:  
 You alone, Spirit of God,  
 Reach the depths of everything,  
 Even the depths of God.  
 Come and stay with us  
 That we may receive your gifts  
 And so judge truly  
 The value of all things. (1Cor 2:10-15)*

### **The Prayer of Petition and Making Intercession:**

*Holy Jesus, give me the gift and spirit of prayer;  
 And do thou by thy gracious intercession supply my  
 Ignorance, and passionate desires, and imperfect  
 Choices; procuring and giving me such returns of  
 Favour which may support my needs, and serve the  
 Ends of religion and the Spirit, which thy wisdom  
 Chooses, and thy passion hath purchased, and thy  
 Grace loves to bestow upon thy saints and servants. Amen.*

*(Prayer of Jeremy Taylor 1613 – 1667)*

### **The most common form of prayer:**

The prayer of petition, also known as supplication or, when it is on behalf of others, intercession, has always been part of prayer, and indeed may be the most common and instinctual prayer that men and women offer. It is asking of God for something that is desired. There are records of people of all religions and civilizations asking their Gods for rain, for success in war, for the healing of the sick, for the blessing of a new ruler and indeed for the satisfaction of just about every conceivable need. It is in some way or other almost an invariable part of liturgical worship and some of the liturgical acts are devoted almost entirely to petitionary and intercessory prayer: the litany, the prayers of the faithful at Mass and in the Prayer of the Church.

There has been a tendency among some teachers of the devotional life to regard petitionary prayer as the 'lowest' form of prayer, as something which should not occupy too large a place in the life of prayer. This is largely because it is seen as that part of prayer that gives the most opportunity for selfish asking in one's own interest. For mature pray – ers, however, this selfish motive can be largely discounted. It remains true, however, that this most basic form of prayer occupies a large place in the life of praying people and therefore should be appreciated and reflected upon.

In Biblical tradition it has a long history: Abraham interceded for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses interceded for the children of Israel and for his sister Miriam when she grew jealous of Moses and was made a leper. We find this form of prayer in the Psalms, and it formed part of Jesus' prayers as recorded in the gospels, as well as being a feature of some of the healing

miracles. Jesus prayed on behalf of the disciples and, in the garden of Gethsemane he is recorded as asking that the cup of suffering might pass from him.

What does need to be pointed out is that prayer in the biblical tradition has always been presented as an activity that did not limit the freedom of God; it was not like a magical incantation that made, or forced, God to do something. It was thought of as a communication between the believer and God, which accepted the liberty and the integrity of both God and the individual.

#### The value of Petition / Intercession:

Back in the early 1960's Professor Glen Hinson of the Southern Baptist Seminary took a class of his students out to Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky for a visit – a rather unusual, indeed courageous thing for a Southern Baptist to do in those pre-ecumenical days. Thomas Merton known as Fr Louis was assigned to receive the visitors and show them around the Monastery. After the tour of the monastery, and many questions later, one of the students asked Merton: *“What’s a smart guy like you doing holed up in a place like this?”* Father Louis’s answer was simple and powerful: *“I believe in the power of intercessory prayer.”* It is a prayer Jesus asked us to make, not once but on many occasions. In the Gospel the Lord says: *“If you have faith, even as small as a mustard seed, and say to this mountain, ‘Move!’ it will move.”* And again we hear: *“Ask and you shall receive.”* The Lord’s Word is simple and straightforward. So there are two elements in intercession: Firstly, Believing in it ... *“If you have faith”*, and secondly, doing it ... *“Ask...”*

Asking God for what we need is itself homage rendered to Him; it is an act of confidence that honours Him. **The reasons for prayer of petition / intercession** are on the one hand, **the love God bears His children** – ‘goodness tends to communicate itself’, and on the other, **the sore need we have of His help** – whether in the order of nature or in the order of grace. We are steeped in poverty!

Sometimes our faith is weak and, presumptuously, we think that because God knows everything He is aware of all that is necessary and useful for us, and so we leave everything up to Him. We do little or nothing. St Thomas answers that no doubt, out of pure liberality, God does bestow upon us innumerable benefits unasked for and unsought, but that there are some which He will grant only at our request, and this for our own good, namely, that we should place our confidence in Him and come to acknowledge Him as the source and origin of all our goods. When we pray, we cherish the hope of being heard and we are less exposed to forget God. As it is, we forget Him all too often; what would it be, if we should never feel the need of recurring to Him in our distress. Furthermore, God owes us nothing by right. Everything is His gift! Petition and intercession is a humble acknowledging of this fact.

#### Strengthen our belief in Intercessory Prayer by prayer and meditation:

How can we increase our belief in Intercessory prayer? First of all, we can pray for it. We could learn from the sincere faith of the anguished father in Mark’s gospel who so longed for some respite for his child: The distraught father brought his afflicted son to Jesus. The boy was trebly afflicted: unable to speak being dumb, unable to control himself emotionally falling to the ground and foaming at the mouth, and given to self destructive behaviour, often casting himself into fire and water. The father in desperation says to Jesus: “If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.” And Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible to him who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe, help my unbelief!” We adopt his urgent prayer. We know the longing to be healed, to be consoled, comforted, forgiven, to have a saviour. Yet we experience the undertow of doubt. We can only cry out, asking the Lord to channel our forces on every level into a steady stream of faith and confidence.

Secondly we can assist and strengthen this prayer by scripture meditation. The Sacred text is filled with examples of prayer being heard. In response to needs, great and small, God, sometimes feigning reluctance, reaches out and generously fulfils. We should allow these texts to comfort and instruct us by their pure and simple narrative.

Two moving examples of “Asking and receiving” that leave a profound memory as a result of meditation on them is the experience of Mary at the wedding at Cana in Galilee and the moving encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. Both women are filled with deep conviction and approach Jesus with trust and confidence. At Cana Jesus was not expecting to begin his public ministry but on encountering such faith by Mary the conditions ripened there and then. Her words to the servants “*Do whatever He tells you*” were the incarnation of Jesus teaching: It is not those who hear the word of God who are blessed but who do it. Mary was such a blessed one. The Canaanite woman’s sheer good-humoured persistence that spirals into a type of crescendo until he

gives her what she wants astounded Jesus. Her faith was richly rewarded. It is interesting how many of these healing requests involve dependants, the truly helpless.

If ever there was a repeat case of “*I believe, help my unbelief*”, it was Peter as he sinks into the Sea of Galilee. Seeing Jesus coming across the water Peter in his exuberance cries out impetuously: “Lord, if it is you, let me come to you on the water. “Come!” said Jesus. Peter immediately following his heart entered the water. But then realizing what he had done the human fear dragged back the surge of faith. He began to sink. He was back to his old self and his old limits. But all was not lost. There was still enough faith to cry out: “*Lord, save me!*” “*Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.*” The Lord reached out and took charge of him. “*Ask and you shall receive.*” We hope and pray that the Lord will ‘take hold, take charge of us’ in our more fragile moments when we are moved to think or even exclaim, “*I believe, help my unbelief*”.

#### How can prayer change things?

Rather than thinking of God in Medieval Scholastic terms as being static and immutable, all perfect and unchanging it is more helpful and comforting to think of God as dynamic - ever creative, ever changing. His creating is constant and excitingly mysterious. At every moment God is bringing forth and sustaining Creation in being and each of us in particular. He shares with us His dynamic energy. In many ways the thankful heart has experienced this creativity in our own lives. In the Book of Genesis God gives to human beings the task of being stewards of Creation, of directing His energy in a creative and hopefully constructive way. **We participate in this creative process partly by our prayer.** Our participation in His dynamism is the source and energy behind our prayer of intercession; it inspires it and invests it with great power – all the power of God: “*Ask and You shall receive. Knock and it will be opened.*” Having this understanding of the power of the prayer of petition and intercession gives us great confidence in its meaning and effectiveness.

#### Answered Prayer:

For many years the whole Church prayed intensely and constantly for the conversion of Russia and all it symbolised regarding the persecution of the Church in its sphere of influence. The Church there was called the Church of silence. We hoped our prayer would alleviate at least some suffering there. Now, in our own time, these prayers have been answered in the most spectacular ways. And the Christian faith is experiencing resurgence in the former Soviet Union. Yet few people ever allude to this miracle of grace with Praise and Thanksgiving.

Because God knows each of us individually, and loves each of us as if we were the only one to love, he always hears our prayer. We recall that the very hairs of our head are numbered, and that not a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father knowing, yet how much more precious are we than many sparrows! So we can be confident of very loving personal care and attention. But God heeds the deepest aspirations and yearnings of the heart rather than the facile expression of our lips. He answers our prayer with our long-term good in mind. His viewpoint is, so to speak, from a higher mountain viewing a more distant horizon – our eternal good, whereas we are pre-

occupied with the here and now. Like a wise parent he knows that not everything that we request is for our ultimate good. In fact they say that our worst fate would be to have all our prayers answered! We have to be spared from our own folly! It is wise to remember that “No” can be the most affirmative answer to our beseeching. It takes grace, wisdom and usually considerable time before we can freely and confidently say: “*Thy will be done.*”

### How do we pray constantly?

The realization, as we mentioned above, that God heeds the deepest aspirations in the very depths of our hearts, answers another question for us. It is the question of how to pray always, as scripture invites us to do. So many things crowd our lives and demand our attention. We must be about our Father’s business. How can we pray constantly, always making intercession? Through our habitual desire we remain in communion with the Son in his always seeking to do the things that please the Father, the concerns of our hearts are before him and he will respond to them. The Holy Spirit of love in the Son, in who we live and move and have our being, cries out ‘Abba’, Father. And the Father knows what is expressed in these sighs, which are too deep for words. In this way our intercession is placed in the very heart of God habitually. Our intention is always to be in union with God and never to be separated from him so he knows our inmost thoughts because we invite him into our innermost selves.

The Gospels point to this. Two Maries, both great women of prayer, give the example. At Cana, of which we have spoken above, Mary made no particular request. She simply made known her state of soul, her concern: “They have no wine.” The other Mary, who sat at the Master’s feet in the past, when her hour of need arrived and a great concern pressed on her heart, the very life of her brother Lazarus, she but articulated the concern of her heart: “He whom you love is sick.” Her concern stood before the Lord and received a complete response, one beyond her expectation, but wholly in accord with it. Such prayer presupposes having sat at the Lord’s feet listening to Him in the Gospels and through such intimacy, being able to place complete trust in Him – even to death and four days in the tomb.

### The Faithful ask our Prayers:

In their faith and humility the people of God often ask us to intercede for them in their needs and worries. This is a praiseworthy and ancient practise. To justify it we have only to cite the beautiful episodes in the Gospel already mentioned and also reflect where the Centurion sent others to Jesus on his behalf to beg Him to heal his sick servant (Lk 7:2 f.). The Centurion’s faith, trust, and courtesy profoundly moved Jesus. If ever we doubt the worthwhileness of praying for the needs of others, of being intermediaries, we should meditate on this episode to dispel any misgivings. Of course all Christian intercession ultimately seeks to graft itself on to Christ’s own prayer of intercession through whom all our prayers are made to the Father (Heb 7:25). He, after all, is the only Mediator between God and humankind.

All Christian intercession ultimately seeks to graft itself on to Christ’s own prayer of intercession, through whom all our prayers are made to the Father (Heb 7:25). He is the only Mediator between God and human kind. When we take the concerns of others into our hearts the Lord sees them in our habitual communion with Him, and most especially when we are in deepest communion with him in silent contemplation, and he responds to them. This is why contemplative prayer, even though it is not thinking of particular needs but is dwelling lovingly in the deep places of God, is a most powerful intercessory prayer. In that intimate embrace, God sees and responds to all the desires that are lodged in our hearts. Intercessory prayer is not a question of a lot of prayers; it is a question of a lot of love. He or she who loves much accomplishes much when that love is coupled with strong faith.

### *Prayer*

*Help us, Lord, to pray on every occasion*

*As your Spirit leads.*

*Help us to be alert*

*And pray always for your people  
And for all those who make known  
The secrets of the Gospel. Amen. (Eph 6:18-19).*

**Attraction and Resistance in Prayer:**

*Keep me, O Lord, while I tarry on this earth,  
In a daily serious seeking after thee and in a believing  
Affectionate walking with thee;  
That when thou comest, I may be found not hiding my talent,  
Nor yet asleep with my lamp unfurnished;  
But waiting and longing for my Lord,  
My glorious God, forever and ever. Amen.*

*(A Prayer by Richard Baxter (1615-1691))*

Our deepest desire is for union with God, the perfect community of Father, Word and Holy Spirit, and thus union with all persons in that perfect community. We have noted that at times we feel the strength of that desire.

Strangely, however, there is also something in us that prevents us from moving towards the desire of our hearts. We all recognize that something gets in the way of attaining our desire. The resistance is easy to understand when we do not have a positive image of God. However, even those who have positive experiences of God still are disconcerted by a reluctance to follow up on these experiences. Even after a period of intense closeness to God, for example, we find ourselves unaccountably reluctant to engage in prayer the very next day!

Among the sources of such resistance can be a lack of serious focus due to immaturity, discouragement, flagging will power, over-work, being slow to disengage from the things we enjoy doing, failure to resolutely confront the sources of distraction, fear of losing control of our lives to God (as though control was in our power), fear of the consequences of getting close to God ("What will God ask of me?"), a divided heart, a settled comfortable mediocrity, weariness with 'trying' to pray. Whatever the source the resistance is real enough. St Paul seems to have experienced this frustration of resistance. In his Letter to the Romans he says: "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*" (Rom 7:15) and goes on to say: "*In fact, this seems to be the rule, that every single time I want to do good it is something evil that comes to hand. In my inmost self I dearly love God's Law, but I can see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law, which my reason dictates. This is what makes me a prisoner of that law of sin, which lives inside my body. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?*" (Rom 7: 21-24).

We can resonate with this passage. We feel the deep desire for God that responds to the magnetic pull of God's desire for us, and yet we seem to do everything possible to demagnetise our hearts. We let ourselves become inordinately attached to things that do not, and cannot, fulfil our deepest yearnings. Everything becomes more important than the "pearl of great price". These attachments are weaknesses that keep us from what we most deeply want. But precisely because they are habits of behaviour we feel disinclined to do anything about them. Hence, Paul's cry of seeming hopelessness: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?" But Paul answers his own question, or perhaps it is answered for him. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ Our Lord!" (Rom 7: 25). Once we recognize our ingrained resistances to the alluring beauty of God, we cast ourselves on "the higher power" as the programme of Alcoholics anonymous puts it. We are not powerless. The very God who has made us for unity with the Trinity and with all persons makes it possible for us to attain that union in spite of our resistances. God gives the grace to look towards God, and then, as it were, the magnetic pull of God draws us up from our despair.

But one time through the struggle is not the end of it. We will, it seems, carry our resistances to union with God with us to the grave. We wish that it could be over and done with in one fell swoop. But usually it is not to be. Again Paul gives us an example. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians he notes that *“a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated”* (2 Cor 12:7). We do not know what the thorn in the flesh was, but we can interpret it for our purposes as the continuance of the resistance to the pull of God towards union. Paul goes on: *“Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’* (v 8-9). In other words, we must continually rely on our “higher power”, which has made us for union and will not let us rest until we reach it.

God wants and values our wounded personal love:

Recognizing our inbuilt lukewarmness we can feel hypocritical and unworthy. “It is difficult for us to believe that God, the infinite God, really wants our time, our love, our attention, when we so often experience ourselves as so unlovable, so undesirable. And yet it is so. It is *the* reason why he created us. Anything we are able to do he can easily get someone else to do – no doubt about it; anything, *but one thing*. There is one thing that we can do for God that no other person can ever do. And it is for this that he, as it were, dreamed through all eternity of bringing us into existence and now sustains us in existence. We alone can give him our personal love. It is for this he created us and keeps us in existence. He wants us to spend time loving him (just being with him in love), wasting time with him, pouring out our precious life’s time on him” (Cf. Challenges in Prayer, Op. Cit.). Everything God has given us is his gift, except the free decisions of our will. Our decision to love him is the highest and most worthy decision we can make. It honours him immeasurably when we want to do so, and decide to do so. When we persevere in trying to do so we experience deep joy and peace. We experience the joyful rest of the returned prodigal son who belatedly discovered the true depth of his Father’s love.

An investment policy: We must build a solid prayer life.

To date we have been mentioning some basic ideas about God’s relation to us and our relation to God. From what we have been saying we recognise God’s great love for us and our attraction to Him. We also acknowledge our inherent weakness and our dependence on His help. We cannot just sit back and let life unfold, willy-nilly. God expects us to play our part, to prudently use the intellect he has given us to understand the nature of the soul’s unfolding journey to Him. Although each person is unique before God, there are general principles that we all can study and follow, always being guided by the masters of the Spiritual life.

Recent History of spiritual Formation:

As we well know the past forty years have been a time of dramatic ferment in the Church, with radical change suddenly overtaking many stable institutions and practices. Formation in prayer has not been exempt from this turbulence.

For generations, beginners in prayer had been nurtured on Meditation books and other aids to mental prayer. Most Religious and Seminarians learned to pray by gathering in Chapel for the daily reading of a meditation. Mental Prayer, as it was called, had a well-defined structure: Preparatory acts, the reading of the text, personal reflection on the reading, and a concluding colloquy. Learning the ropes of Mental Prayer entailed becoming familiar with this general structure. As they were led through the various phases there were appropriate pauses for them to reflect personally on what they had heard. Even the colloquies, or personal conversations with the Lord, which concluded the exercise were often read aloud to the group. It was a general pattern that sustained many for the following fifty years of their lives.

However, in the Post Conciliar world many questioned the fruitfulness of this traditional method. It was seen as too rigid and impersonal in a Spirit led world. How could the Holy Spirit be bound by such repetitive, detailed, uninspiring and mechanical structures? Furthermore, aspirants

were not used to such programmed and organized thinking. They came from an academic world where 'learning by heart' was abandoned and education by 'discovery' was fostered. Grammar, spelling and learning tables had died the death. Consequently many formators lost their self-confidence and virtually abandoned their formation role in prayer at this time. This was unfortunate. Many candidates were left to sink or swim with the cost of many tragic drownings!

Our story does not end there. Soon enough the rejection of the methods of the Manuals led to a search for new and better methods and techniques. A fascination with the Orient brought to light Yoga, Zen and Transcendental meditation. There was a gradual institutionalising of Charismatic prayer and the formulation of methods of Centering Prayer. The implication of all this being that it was not method itself that was at fault, but that the old formats were found wanting. They were often weak on scripture, negative, cumbersome and devotionally uninspiring in the optimistic Post-Conciliar world of the day.

There has been a return to appreciating the merits of methods or techniques, learning from the shortcomings of the past. We always bear in mind that there is no fail-safe method that suits everybody, nor can we turn God on and off like a tap. Also it is worth remembering that there is no quick and painless way to prayerfulness. The journey takes time, labour and uncertainty.

### Three Basic stages of Interior Growth

On reflection, we can see that there are three essential stages of growth in any solid interior life. These stages may vary in duration and intensity and variety of experience. This is as it should be, since the Lord of love encounters each one of us in our uniqueness. Nevertheless, it is the same Lord we all encounter, and he is constant and faithful and true to his own nature. It is because of *His* consistency that we can speak of common patterns of growth; it is this fact that makes spiritual direction and the writings of the great spiritual authors meaningful for our own unique encounter with the Lord. What, then, are the three basic stages of interior growth? They correspond to the stages of growth in any human love relationship: (1) Getting to Know the Lord and Oneself. (2) From Knowing to Loving. (3) From Loving to Truly Loving. We will treat each of these stages of growth in due course.

*Prayer:*

*Father, may our love grow deeper and deeper  
With true knowledge and discernment,  
So that we may always choose the best  
And be free from fault and blame  
On the day when Jesus Christ will come in glory. (Phil 1:9-10)*

### **Getting to know the Lord and Oneself.**

(Object: Knowledge)

*Lord Jesus, you have taught us  
That love is the fulfilling of the law.  
Teach us now what love really is,  
How much it costs,  
How far it leads,  
How deep it digs into our selfish selves.  
Then give us the courage  
And the generosity to accept*

*What this means today and tomorrow  
And in the whole future way of our lives. Amen.  
(A Prayer by Fr Michael Hollings).*

We cannot really love what we do not know; there is no such thing as genuine love at first sight. There is such a thing as attraction, infatuation at first sight, but for that initial attraction to blossom into genuine love there must be a lengthy process of getting to know the other. With the Lord, as with human beings, true love is grounded on a real knowledge, gradually acquired, of Him and of ourselves. He could circumvent this, but it would seem He does not! "And eternal life is this to know You the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (Jn. 17:3). This is not just knowledge about God but rather a knowledge that will awaken, develop, and perfect a life of love for God. Even Saul of Tarsus, so dramatically enlightened, had to spend a long time in the Arabian desert discovering who this lover was who had captured him on the road to Damascus.

This first stage in getting to know the Lord (and ourselves) involves two factors: (a) Purifying the Soul of all that blocks love, and the self-discipline this entails, and (b) Meditation or Discursive Prayer. Purifying self-discipline will be a life-long task demanding sensitivity of conscience and strength of will. The stage of Meditation will last for a varying degree of time depending on our personal history. In any event it will eventually come to an end. We are not meant to spend our entire lives merely getting to know the Lord; we gradually progress from head to heart!

(a) The Active Purification of the Soul and its discipline:

St Francis does not leave us with a specific systematic programme of asceticism, or mortification, whereby we are disposed to union with God. Rather, he left us with nothing other than the force of his own example in following the Crucified Lord. In the matter of inner purification, apart from essentials, it is left to the dedication of the brothers and sisters themselves, under the guidance of the Spirit and a prudent director. Fired by love, detachment and joy, they advance deeper into the love that is the Gospel Christ. The lack of a detailed ascetical programme in the spiritual bequest of St Francis and St Clare does not mean a trivializing of its importance. It was taken for granted that whoever was prompted to follow this way of life would do so wholehearted in body and spirit. And in so doing would be inspired by the characteristics of the spirituality of our Order – an imitation of the poor, humble and crucified Lord who, in filial loyalty, did the Father's will.

Although St Clare does not leave us a detailed programme either she does leave us directives on how we are to go about creating the conditions for a fruitful prayer life. In the Tenth Chapter of the Rule she is quite explicit in her admonitions to the Abbess and Sisters: "... that the sisters be on their guard against pride, vainglory, envy, greed, worldly care and anxiety, detraction and murmuring, dissention and division. Let them be ever zealous to preserve among themselves the unity of mutual love, which is the bond of perfection ... Let them devote themselves to what they must desire above all else: the Spirit of the Lord and His holy manner of working, to pray always to Him with a pure heart, and to have humility, patience in difficulty and weakness, and to love those who persecute, blame and accuse us".

Before long, however, it became necessary to give instruction. In the twenty-five injunctions of St Bonaventure to Beginners in Religion we read: "Endeavour as far as human weakness allows to cleanse yourself entirely from all vices and evil concupiscence, so that having purged out the old leaven, one wholly of malice and wickedness, you may walk in the newness of life and so follow Christ, for unless you first sunder the bonds of iniquity, your soul will be weighed down with darkness and unable to rise to heavenly things" (Second Injunction). He continues in the same vein: "Rid yourself of all attachment from without so that you may be able to be bound in spirit wholly to the Lord" (Third Injunction) (from the Opera Omnia). Seraphic mortification is performed in a positive manner. It is not so much 'to eradicate' as 'to liberate' in order to love Christ. It looks more to Jesus than to self. For the contemplative it is not good to be so self aware as to be self-fixated, thinking that if only I could get rid of all my imperfections I would be perfect. We can

sometimes be so preoccupied with getting ourselves in order that we forget the object of the exercise, the love of the Lord. In this matter we should look more to Jesus than to self, and let him do the healing. He has said so: *“It is the sick that need the physician”*. We come to the hem of his garment! Or as the Psalm counsels: *“Cast yourself upon the Lord, and he will support you”*.

#### Mortification is unpopular:

There is no doubt that the need to be self-purified is difficult for modern people to accept at all. The expectation and emphasis is on a religion of fellowship and camaraderie – no pain, no penance. What is the point of making things difficult? People ask. However, if we have the privilege of knowing our own true spiritual poverty we know the answer to this question. The gospel knows nothing of such a painless faith. The grain of wheat must die before bringing forth a rich harvest. In Baptism, the old man must be crucified, that we may rise to a new life in Christ (Jn 12:24; Lk 18:29-30; Rom 6:6). It is not a popular position, and it never has been, but it is the only way.

#### Influence of an imbalance in Resurrection emphasis:

Allied to this rejection of mortification is an over optimistic view of human nature arising from an imbalanced focus on Resurrection Theology. Fr. Earnest Larkin, O.Carm. in an interestingly argued thesis in the post-Conciliar theological magazine *Concilium*, contrasts “Cross-orientated spirituality” with “Resurrection-oriented spirituality” of today, and opts unequivocally for the latter.

- Cross-orientated spirituality is marked by prayer, solitude, and withdrawal; whereas Resurrection-oriented spirituality is positive and outgoing;
- The former emphasises dying with Christ on the Cross; the latter, living with Christ Risen;
- The former lays stress on purification from sin, and from all that dissipates the mind and entangles the heart; the latter on commitment, grace and charity;
- The former is preoccupied with total abnegation of self-centeredness; the latter with total commitment to Christ, justice and peace;
- The former aims at contemplative union with God; the latter’s concern is the redemption of the world.

Of course this is an exaggerated presentation of the reality. But it gives a flavour of what has been happening. There must be the proper blending of the two elements of the Paschal mystery. Easter comes along only after Good Friday. Let us face the fundamental fact. Mortification in the final analysis is a participation in the redemptive work of Christ. No age may hold itself free of this sharing in the cross of Christ, whatever errors have been made in the past in accent and emphasis.

The call of Christ demands radical degrees of renunciation: renunciation of property (Lk 14:33), and of self (Lk 9:23). St Paul gives us in detail a paradigm of various levels of mortification: first, curbing of one’s inordinate appetites (Col 3:5; Rom8: 13); secondly, crucifixion of the flesh (Ga 5:24); leading to death and burial with Christ (Col 3:3; Rom 6:4). All this is a prelude to rising with Christ and living the life of the risen Lord. To reach the climax of “co-risen with Christ”, we have first to be “co-grafted” “co-buried” and “co-crucified” those untranslatable compounds which Paul coined to express the truth of the Paschal Mystery (*cf. Ernest Larkin, O.Carm: “Asceticism in Modern Life.” Concilium, Vol. 9 (1966), pp. 100-108*).

#### St John of the Cross and St Ignatius Loyola.

Two works that the Church has recognised as perennial classics are: ‘The Ascent of Mount Carmel’ by St John of the Cross, and ‘The Spiritual Exercises’ by Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Both were contemplatives of a very high order. Both of them stress the long process of purification that precedes true Godly union.

#### St John of the Cross:

It is striking that John of the Cross, whose name has become virtually synonymous with Christian mysticism, should present a doctrine on the foundations of prayer very similar to that of

Ignatius. He speaks of Active Purification and Passive Purification. Active Purification refers to what we must do to dispose ourselves to encounter God, whereas Passive Purification refers to what God does to purify us. Saint John treats of this active purification of the soul in the Ascent of Mount Carmel, a fitting title, as mountain climbing is an arduous and demanding task. He deals with the Passive Purification in the work The Dark Night of the Soul.

A basic assumption behind Active Purification is that knowledge of self and knowledge of God go hand in hand. If we are 'unreal' about ourselves we will be more immature about 'knowing' and relating to God. A deeply real, or experiential, relationship between the soul and God rests on a foundation of truth. We are trying to be true, to be real, in the presence of loving Truth itself. This is by no means as easy as we might think because of the many masks we wear, often unconsciously. We cling to our illusions and our ignorance about ourselves and often dismiss with tears the truth when we are presented with it. (St Teresa has an important discussion on the continuing need for self-knowledge, no matter how advanced our state of prayer in The Interior Castle, First Mansions, Chapter 2).

For Saint John of the Cross, our desires are the root of our lack of freedom. The active purification consists in recognising and uprooting these desires. By desires John means those, which, have not been tamed by the overmastering Spirit of God's love. We can only love truly when we are free of pride, ambition, lust, attachment, affection, inclination, idle fantasy, the will for something, and other self-centred desires natural to sinful creatures. These stem from a divided heart whose appetites are indulged. Our love is not centred and integrated; this is the root problem for many of us. From our Franciscan Treasury we readily say: "My God and My All", when in fact what we really mean is "My God and 60% of my All", or maybe even less! To be free *for* God, one must be free *from* all conflicting natural desires. Coming to this freedom to love, this purification, is a gradual process, and one that requires a great deal of enlightenment, and help or grace, from the Lord. Jesus said it long ago:

*"No man can serve two masters; for he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon" (Mt 6:24; Lk 6:13).*

In Matthews's gospel, this passage is followed by Jesus' beautiful command to be free from all worry and anxiety, like the birds of the air, like the lilies of the field. This is precisely the point John of the Cross is making – to be free to love is to be free from all desire, all anxiety.

### Saint Ignatius Loyola:

Saint Ignatius Loyola, a practical, methodical man of decision and action, sees his Spiritual Exercises as intended to free us from any inordinate attachment, from any desire that blocks love and loving service. What St Ignatius calls Exercises are what we call techniques for positively disposing ourselves to encounter God. The means he proposes are Meditative prayer on the Life of the Lord Jesus; the Practice of Penance; and the Examination of Conscience. We will speak of Meditative prayer shortly. For the moment we will dwell on Penance and the Examination of Conscience.

### Penance:

As we mentioned, Penance is a modern taboo word. It is repressive in the popular mind – "Why bring suffering on oneself?" But in the days of Sts Francis and Clare, and in those of Sts Teresa, John and Ignatius, and for long thereafter, penance played a very prominent part in spirituality. Although it was often practiced to excess, all the saints have recognized that there is no genuine holiness, no solid spirituality, without penance and mortification.

The first thing to stress is that it is never an end in itself; it is always a means to an end and should be appropriate to the circumstances. Saint Ignatius states that the legitimate reasons for doing penance are: (a) To make satisfaction for our sins; (b) To help overcome our selfish

inclinations (what John of the Cross terms 'our desires'); (c) and as a form of prayer, "to obtain some grace or gift that one earnestly desires".

- (a) Penance as a means of making satisfaction for our sins is clear enough to anybody who has loved and has hurt the one loved. We need to make amends, to show our sorrow for wounding love.
- (b) Penance as a means to overcome our selfish inclinations, or desires, has a long history. We act against the inclination we wish to correct. If the sapling leans to the east, then pull to the west to rectify it. The will is strengthened and the unruly passions are brought under control. The penance is a means and must be proportioned to the end sought.
- (c) Penance as a form of prayer. We don't often think of penance in this way. Ignatius view of this prayer is deeply incarnational. Our bodily acts of penance are an outward expression of our inner attitude. Sometimes when the spirit finds prayer hardest, the body by its acts can express what the heart cannot.

### Examination of Conscience:

The Examen is another vehicle proposed by St Ignatius for disposing ourselves to encounter God. It makes us aware of our inordinate attachments with a view to eradicating them. It is a topic that he advises every retreat director to include in a retreat!

### The General and the Particular Examen:

St Ignatius speaks of two examinations of conscience, the General and the Particular. In the General examen we glance over our lives in general with the help of the Holy Spirit and become aware of our general application to the Gospel life. We open ourselves to His healing power in our lives. Thus the stress is not so much on our efforts but on God's healing touch without which we can do nothing. This exercise has been included in the Night Prayer of the universal Church.

In the Particular Examen we devote some prayerful quality time each day to examining the particular weaknesses, or strengths, that most influence our growth. Sometimes we are discouraged at the extent of the work that is needed, and how slow we are to improve. Sometimes the effect of grace encourages us. When we let the healing love of God rest on our failures, or improvements, we gain comfort and confidence. Furthermore, when we make progress in one area we also make progress on a much wider field. All we need to be assured of is the sincerity of our efforts; we leave the judgement of results to God. This work demands faith and patience.

It is sometimes said that this approach to the interior life is too negative and too introspective. Are we not focused too much on ourselves? This is a valid question and we have to be mindful of it. The contemplative comes to find God and is in danger of becoming too self-analytical and scrupulous. A genuine self-knowledge – a sensitive conscience is, however, a necessary means to a true encounter with God in love.

What we seek, then, in Active Purification is a true knowledge of ourselves and a deeper sensitivity of conscience. It is by no means the whole of Christian Spirituality, but it is an essential foundation for our life with God. The other foundation is laid in our prayer life itself. It is to the laying of this second foundation that we now turn in our continuing exploration of the early stages of the road to God

*Prayer*

*Grant, Lord, that we keep on  
 Building ourselves up  
 On our most sacred faith  
 Praying in the power of the Holy Spirit  
 And keeping ourselves in your love  
 As we wait for our Lord Jesus Christ  
 In his mercy  
 To give us eternal life. (Jude 20:21).*

### **The Meditative Prayer of Beginners – Starting out:**

*Almighty God, give us wisdom to perceive thee,  
 Intellect to understand thee, diligence to seek thee,  
 Patience to wait for thee, eyes to behold thee,  
 A heart to meditate upon thee, and life to proclaim thee,  
 Through the power of the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.  
 (Prayer attributed to St Benedict (480-543))*

At the start many find the constant exercise of meditation very difficult. But as beginners in Prayer we must realise that the foundation we lay down, through the Spirit and our hard efforts, will influence our spiritual life for many years to come. As we idealistically start out our dedicated attention to get to know the Gospel Christ, the insights and experiences we are gifted with, will colour our relationship with the Lord very profoundly. It is here that we encounter the Lord face to face. Consequently, it will affect our attitude to many aspects of life, and not just prayer. When we experience moments of light and consolation we never forget it. One gifted insight, one moment of intense conviction, can stay with us our life. Despite our mediocrity and unworthiness once we are convinced that God accepts us and loves us wholeheartedly we are changed. It is for this kind of reason that this foundational meditation period in our lives is so important and should be seriously attended to.

### **Learning to know the Lord:**

The first stage of a genuine interior life is learning to know the Lord. St Ignatius and St John of The Cross refer to the prayer of beginners as Meditation. Meditation or Discursive Prayer, as it is sometimes called, means this – taking time to learn who this God is whom we are drawn to love, who I am in relation to him and what it means to be loved by Him. We can learn this from a consideration of Creation – since nature, other persons, and we ourselves are all signposts, which point to their maker. *“For all that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed it to them. His invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made” (Rom 1:19-20).* For the Christian, however, the primary revelation of the Father is Jesus, the Lord. Hence the scriptures are the privileged way of coming to know God in and through Christ.

Meditation is the use of our understanding to discover, to ponder, the personality of God, particularly as revealed in the New Testament. We get to know him more fully in order that we may love him more deeply, and follow him more faithfully. We may say that meditation in itself is not strictly prayer, but because love depends on knowledge, meditation on scripture, ruminating on it, is an essential first step to genuine prayer. It leads us to it. It inspires the heart with motives to pray. It is very much part of the divine intimacy, like the nectar and the pollen are to the bee making the honey! Thus it is the principle activity of beginners when they come to seek the Lord. In fact we will find that as we persevere in the scriptural adventure we warm to the encounter, and prayer easily arises in our hearts. For those brought up in the Christian faith this familiarity with Christ begins long before a formal life of prayer takes place – the person of Christ is familiar from family prayer, Sunday homilies, retreats, schooling, Iconography etc.

However, those who begin to be serious about a life of prayer normally need a deeper grounding in the knowledge of the Lord, a more systematic searching of the Scriptures. For some who come to pray there has been very little of Christian formation and for others they need to make their knowledge properly their own. Gradually, as we meditate, the bits and pieces of our knowledge of scripture and of the Lord become one seamless whole, and our love takes on a sharper focus.

Formal meditation is the normal means of growth in prayer and sanctity, and cannot be wilfully neglected without harm, especially in the case of beginners for whom it is life-giving nourishment. Its daily practice is strongly recommended to all clergy and religious in Canon Law and in the General Constitutions of the Poor Sisters (cf. Can 276.5, 663,3; GG.CC art.73, 1). The sisters are urged to devote one hour and a half each day to this exercise.

Meditation books have traditionally recommended a structure of prayer for beginners. While details may vary, it essentially involves three stages: Remote preparation, the immediate preparation and the Actual meditation itself.

#### Remote Preparation:

Setting out on the meditation experience we are wide open to many competing claims for our attention, therefore we must make remote preparations to safeguard the integrity of our exercise. Some time prior to the exercise we should prepare the selected piece of scripture, consulting a commentary if necessary to clarify the meaning and context of our subject. This remote preparation, along with our daily spiritual reading, plays an important role in opening and sensitising the mind to the things of God. (Good spiritual reading is that which not merely informs us, but which moves the will. The purpose of spiritual reading is to inspire us to act, to seek the Lord and commit ourselves to his service. Thus, good biographies of the Saints, and of great contemporary men and women of God, are excellent Spiritual reading). Without this remote preparation, we will be missing an opportunity to open ourselves to God. We will be coming to pray too casually, leaving things to chance, and missing valuable opportunities. Our enthusiasm should be at its optimum at his point in time!

The concept of a *remote preparation* for meditation also entails a period of unwinding or disengagement from demanding work, of whatever nature, in order that the period of prayer would not be dominated by our former preoccupations. Otherwise we will find it very difficult to achieve the habit of attentiveness that disposes us to encounter the Lord deeply, to hear His voice (cf. 1Kgs 19:11-13).

#### The Immediate Preparation:

It is said of St Stephen Harding the Cistercian monk that as he dipped his fingers in the font he left all his concerns there and entered the church completely free of them. We could try the same. Very consciously we come into the divine presence. At the very beginning of the meditation proper, we should take some time to become aware of whose presence we are in – ‘The Adoramus Te’, a prayer of adoration, focuses the mind effectively. As we implied in the *remote preparation* we are not pure spirits, Angels; rather we are embodied souls - spirit and flesh. So

when it comes to creating conditions for 'quiet' we have to take our bodies into consideration. We have to constructively use whatever means help to furnish a relaxed body - spirit.

After we adore the Lord and place ourselves in his presence we engage in this simple and quick relaxation exercise. Sit in a relaxed position on a straight chair or seat, and keep your spinal cord straight without bending or slouching. Rest your hands on your lap. Close your eyes and begin to breathe slowly and with awareness. Relax each member of your body as you surrender to the presence of the living God within you. Start releasing any physical tension as you concentrate first on your forehead, then your face, your throat, your neck, your shoulders and relax them. As you

move down your entire body let go of any tenseness, limb by limb ... you are becoming totally relaxed. Remember why you can afford to be relaxed. The Trinity is within you and around you, covering you with an infinite love. "Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Breathe deeply and enjoy the loving presence of God who sustains you in His love for you. This is an effective help in coming to quiet.

This is what we do when we are ready to begin to pray. A short prayer of Adoration helps to localise our attention in coming before the Lord reverently and attentively, as His holiness demands. The remote and immediate preparation for prayer is an important discipline for beginners. The goal is to come to prayer prepared to hear the Lord, and be reverently attentive to his word, not exhausted and preoccupied!

#### The Actual Meditation itself:

This is the third stage in the structure of Prayer for beginners, the actual prayer itself. This is what we have called Meditation, or Discursive prayer, and have described it as the use of our reason and imagination to come to know God more fully. We do this in order to love him more ardently and follow him more faithfully. Reasoning is logical – it considers causes and draws conclusions step by step. It sees links between events or actions. Imagination, on the other hand, enters into, or gets the feel of, an experience. All of us are endowed with reason and imagination, and both faculties help us to know reality in different, but complimentary ways. It often happens that one faculty is more dominant in one person than another. Artists are said to be more imaginative, whereas scientists are deemed to be more rational. It is also said that women are more imaginative than men etc. The important point here is that people vary greatly in the mix of reasoning and imagination, which they bring to the interpretation of their experience. This is an important insight for beginners in prayer. We can come to know the Lord via our reasoning, or via our imagination, or more likely via a very personal blend of the two. We should employ whichever medium we find most helpful.

(Actually, in the history of spirituality there has never been any one terminology universally accepted by all authors on prayer. Most use the word "Meditation" more or less as we use it here. Whatever the words chosen, the same essential points about the beginnings of prayer are found in all Christian masters of prayer. St Ignatius in his 'Exercises' calls the use of our understanding and the reasoning faculty Meditation, and the use of the Imagination he calls Contemplation. Whereas, St John of the Cross and St Teresa allow the word Meditation to cover both understanding and imagination. They reserve Contemplation for a later stage of prayer when God takes over and we are more passive or receptive. We will accept St Ignatius' usage for the moment).

Meditation, or Discursive prayer, is a reflective searching of the scriptures to discover what God reveals of himself in the person of Jesus, and to learn by analogy how he is speaking in the events of one's own life. Jesus is the revelation of the Father for us who are flesh and blood. It is by studying his life, his values, his attitudes, and his ways of dealing with people, that we learn who God is for us, and are moved to elicit sentiments of prayerful devotion.

Likewise, Imagination, or as St Ignatius calls it Contemplation, involves entering imaginatively into the incident we are considering – being present to the event, seeing it happen as if we were participants ourselves. We make our own the attitudes and feelings of the participants

with whom we identify. We know how they feel because we feel with them. We seek to relive particularly the life of our Lord. This is a very affective way of engaging the scriptures, and is very characteristic of the Franciscan tradition.

### The Colloquy in our Prayer:

In experiencing with the Lord the concrete situations of His life, like the Samaritan woman at the well, we come to discover how he is working and living in our lives. We meet him at our well! It is a personal encounter, a personal involvement, with the Lord of the Gospel that moves us to expressions of love, which is prayer. It is part of the whole *process* by which we encounter God in love. That is why traditional manuals of prayer recommend that right from the beginning, we end our prayer with a colloquy or conversation with the Lord. At first, the colloquy will be somewhat stilted and awkward. But as we get to know the Lord better, it will become more spontaneous and natural. Gradually the colloquy will become the substance of our prayer, as knowledge gives way to love. Then there will be less and less need for Meditation or contemplation. Our primary need will be to be with the Lord, whom we have come to know and love – and that is the essence of prayer.

Some passages in the Gospel are much more suited to Meditation – the Beatitudes, Jesus' discussion of divorce with the Pharisees. Other passages – such as the raising of Lazarus, or the Annunciation, are ideally suited to the imagination. Many passages, such as the Woman at the Well, can be fruitfully prayed in either way – depending on needs and temperament. Sometimes directors were afraid of the Imagination (St Ignatius' Contemplation), and preferred to keep the focus on Meditation. As a result many creative types found prayer very difficult, and felt unable to Meditate fruitfully. The fear of the Imagination stemmed from the belief that it was too carnal, too physical and likely to lead to temptation and idle fantasy, distractions. But the imagination is an integral part of the creative human person; many great saints were richly imaginative people and greatly benefited from this gift. God himself is infinite in his wonder and beauty, any creative ideas that we can have stemming from his attributes have a true basis in that reality. Indeed grace builds on nature; it does not destroy it. So a disciplined imagination will lead us into deeper insight and wonder by God's grace. What we must do is to channel and discipline our imagination and our other faculties, not to stifle them. We channel and discipline our imagination by keeping it gently focused on the particular loving encounter at hand, and when we do find it wandering we calmly refocus our attention.

### Forming Resolutions:

The forming of resolutions ends the Meditation and help us to put our prayer into action; they ensure that our prayer makes a difference. They help to mould the mind of Christ Jesus in us. They affect metanoia in our lives. We end our meditation with a prayer of thanksgiving for the graces received.

### Prayer evolves:

Prayer is part of our conscious life and like any aspect of life it changes, evolves. There is evolution even within what we may call the beginners state of prayer. There may be an initial infatuation with the Lord - sometimes called first fervour – but this passes. As we continue to seek the Lord to whom we are drawn, emotion gives way to a more sober knowledge experienced through the ups and downs of life in community. Every practitioner of prayer must learn, as the Apostles did, that God is a very different Saviour from what they naturally expect. The sons of Zebedee sought glory and he offered them the cross. Peter wanted to remain on Tabor, but Jesus led him to Calvary. The God they learned to love was far different from the God they wanted to love! So it must be with us. Coming to know the Lord is different for another reason. God does not speak with a voice that we can hear with our bodily ears. For this reason beginners find the work of Meditation or Discursive prayer, laborious, even tedious at times. Despite their sincere efforts, their attention span is short in seeking to know the invisible God. But as they gradually discover the riches of the scriptures, and the God who is there revealing himself, their perseverance and

patience will bear fruit. The time will come when it is easy and joyous to pray. The Gospels become, not a series of isolated events and themes, but a portrait of a whole and very real person, Jesus Our Lord. We begin to discover, in him, the face of God for us. It will seem to us, at this point, that we have truly learned to pray. The truth, however, is that we are only beginning to discover what the Spirit has to teach us of God – but it is a very good beginning.

“Jesus says; ‘I am the Way’; ‘Come to Me’; ‘Follow Me’ and in mental prayer - Meditation initially, then Affective Prayer and Acquired Contemplation or Interior Recollection, and hopefully and ultimately Infused Contemplation – we most completely come to Him, place ourselves as disciples and friends in His company, surrendering our minds to His mind, our Wills to His will, and our hearts to His heart” (cf ‘Love him Totally’, Vol IV, John Bosco O’Byrne, p.228).

### Distractions and Dryness in Prayer:

Distractions are a hazard for beginners in Meditation and can be the cause of a lot of frustration. Provided we are not slothful or careless, we must expect this kind of static when we are exercising the creative and imaginative part of our minds. There is no creative activity on this earth, which people engage in, that is not peppered with extraneous thoughts. Pop-ups will occur, to use computer jargon. The secret is to calmly put them aside, and return our focus to the matter on hand and the intruders will fade away.

Dryness in prayer can be very disheartening to beginners. This inner dying begins early in the interior life. Should we think God has forsaken us? St Teresa, ever practical, tells us to look to the flowers (the virtues) in the Garden of the Lord (the soul) for the evidence of sincerity in our lives. If they are alive and flourishing, then our prayer is healthy despite the dryness. The dryness is not due to our negligence. God is hidden, not absent. We should persevere - we are being tempered and strengthened. We are being taught that we are not in charge, but all is His gift.

### A Method of Meditation:

In my own case the structure for Mental Prayer was simply modelled on the word AMOR, the Latin for love. Each letter denoted a step in the exercise: A for adoration, M for meditation, O for oration or prayer, and R for resolution. One dwelt on each letter, or phase, for as long as it was fruitful. It helped utilize the two ‘half hour’ periods allotted to meditation. Gradually, during the Novitiate, one grew competent in using this method to one’s advantage and through grace arrived at affective prayer without too much trauma and to the threshold of the Prayer of simplicity. Then I seemed to slowly arrive at a standstill, a grand aridity. A fog of considerable density descended. I had come to the end of the known map, as far as I was concerned. It was like waking up and realizing that the train had stopped in the dead of night. The silence woke me! It was not a tranquil silence. There seemed to be no way ahead for me in this territory. Even worse, I couldn’t even formulate what the problem was. Looking back now to that time, I realize that the periods of mental prayer were whiled away, endured. I was truly in the doldrums, still in the water, and alone. I was parched for guidance, but didn’t know it. Of this we will speak later.

*Prayer:*

*Almighty Father, grant us  
To grow in knowledge of you,  
To be strong in power,  
To be patient in enduring all,  
To be joyful in thanking you  
For making us sharers in your kingdom of light. Amen (Col 1: 10-12).*

### **From Knowing to Loving.**

(Objective: Experience)

*Take my will and make it thine  
 It shall be no longer mine.  
 Take my heart: it is thine own!  
 It shall be thy royal throne.  
 Take my love; my Lord I pour  
 At thy feet its treasure store.  
 Take myself, and I will be  
 Ever, only, all for thee. Amen*

*(Prayer of Frances R. Havergal, 1836-1879)*

### Past suspicion of Contemplative Prayer:

There are many sincere people anxious to learn about a deeper inner life, about contemplative prayer. The official ministers of the Church are all too often unable to say anything about it with the kind of conviction that comes from experience. The reason for this is that cultivation of contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition had been generally disregarded in seminaries, religious life, and on parish level. Most modern manuals of spirituality until well into the twentieth century presented only schemas of discursive meditation. This was due to a deep-rooted fear of false mysticism and the excesses it could lead to.

For example in 1574, Everard Mercurian, the Father General of the Jesuits, in a directive to the Spanish province of the Society, forbade the practice of affective prayer and the application of the five senses – part of the Exercises of St Ignatius that prepared one for contemplation. This prohibition was repeated in 1578. This emphasis on the importance of Discursive Meditation continued to grow throughout the Society in the succeeding centuries. When we consider the influence the Jesuits had on the Counter Reformation, and on the many new congregations of men and women who adopted the Jesuit Constitutions in the succeeding centuries, we realise why Contemplative Prayer had such a low priority in the Church. St Ignatius did not intend this limitation, but it became the prevalent attitude in the Church until quite recently. With this understanding in mind let us go forward and treat of Affective Prayer.

### Affective Prayer:

Sooner or later the one who engages faithfully in Discursive Meditation moves into a Second Stage of Prayer, namely Affective Prayer. Affective Prayer is where devout affections, aspirations of love, predominate – those acts of the will whereby we express to God our love and our desire of glorifying Him. In proportion as convictions grow and take root in the soul, less time is required to reflect on them, and greater play is allowed to the affections. The more the soul loves God the more prolonged are our acts of love, adoration, appreciation, and gratefulness. Other sentiments also arise spontaneously – sentiments of shame and remorse at the realization of our infidelities, ardent desires to become better, and confident petitions to obtain the necessary strength in this regard. There is a felt zeal for God's glory, which makes us pray for the great interests of the Church and for the welfare of all God's pilgrim people.

### From Knowing to Loving:

This phase of prayer could be characterized as moving from Knowing to Loving. The centre of the relationship between the one who prays and the Lord gradually moves from 'the knowing head' to 'the loving heart'. Prayer becomes much more affective and much less discursive. There is no dramatic difference between Meditation / Discursive Prayer and Affective Prayer, it is really a

more simplified meditation in which *love* predominates. For this reason the transition to Affective Prayer is usually gradual and more or less easy, although this varies with individuals.

One does not arrive suddenly at this stage of prayer. There is a period of gradual transition when to a greater or lesser extent considerations and affections intermingle. Eventually, simple affections come to predominate. Always one is open to the activity of the Spirit attentively and peacefully. It is a honeymoon period of prayer, a time of consolation and joy. It is a time of encouragement when we feel we are making progress.

#### When to move on:

It is important to recognize when we must relinquish Discursive for Affective prayer. To do so prematurely would be to open ourselves to distractions and aridity. On the other hand, to do so too late would be a loss. We relinquish Discursive Prayer for Affective Prayer when we find it difficult to draw profit for it, and are attracted to Affective Prayer. We leave discursive prayer when we find that our convictions are so deeply rooted that it takes but a moment to recall them - what some authors call 'remembering', and when the heart easily tends towards the Lord. Nevertheless, if we sometimes find discursive prayer still rewarding relish it. Engage in it as long as it is productive. It will be to ones advantage in the long run.

#### Affective Prayer is more Fruitful:

According to all spiritual masters Affective prayer is more fruitful than Discursive prayer because it is chiefly by acts of the will that we give glory to God and attract virtue to ourselves. We should not force the affections, neither should we be anxious to pass from one to the other over quickly, but rather linger for as long as beneficial. Affections should be deep-seated rather than numerous. The heart will instinctively determine the pace of affective expression.

To nurture this love we meditate frequently on the great truths of our faith that we have mentioned above in our introduction to these reflections – The love the Father has shown by giving us His Son, the humility of God as revealed in the Passion, the Indwelling of the most Holy Trinity, our incorporation into Christ, the activity of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Lectio Divina and spiritual reading also furnish the wherewithal for affective prayer. Sts Francis and Clare were so versed in scripture that it formed a vast reservoir for their exclamations of heart. On our part the affections should never be forced but arise spontaneously from an enthused and pure heart. Prayer leads to a closer and more abiding union with God where we find spiritual consolation. As St. Bonaventure points out, "the best way to arrive at a knowledge of God is to taste the sweetness of His love; this is a far better way, worthier, and more gratifying than the way of intellectual research" (Sent. 1,III, dist. 35,a. 1, q.2.). Because Affective Prayer is essentially an operation of the will, it serves to deepen the union of the soul with God by acts of love, and so we grow in virtue. The decision of our will is the only offering we can make to God that is not already His prior gift. Side by side with these joys there are at times trials, such as aridity, which we shall talk about shortly.

#### Evaluating our Prayer:

The value, or worth, of our Affective Prayer cannot be measured by the intensity or the frequency of the sensible consolations that are experienced. It must be judged by the increasing evangelical quality of our lives. This means that the fruits of Affective Prayer should be a more intense practice of the Christian virtues, an increasing purity of intention, a spirit of selflessness and detachment, an increase in charity, and the faithful and joyful fulfilment of our Franciscan/Poor Clare commitments. To believe that one is saintly because one loves prayer and especially the comforts of prayer is to forget that perfection lies in the one who does the will of God.

#### The Director and Directee:

This Second Stage in the development of the Inner Life of Prayer is an easy one for the spiritual director, since prayer is spontaneous and joyful for the directee, and not as difficult as Discursive prayer. There are only two things that the director has to tell the directee at this time: The first: that it is alright (in fact, good and proper) to let go of meditative prayer and simply to be present in love to the Lord. Praying, after all, is not 'thinking' but 'loving', not the ruminations of the intellect but an exercise of the will. The whole purpose of the getting-to-know of Meditative prayer is to lay a solid foundation for love. The second point that has to be made is not as consoling or pleasant: This honeymoon will not last forever. While it seems as if we have really reached the ecstasy of perfect love, in truth we are just starting out. As in every marriage (and friendship), the honeymoon period will eventually come to an end, because what looks like true love contains a great deal of self-love. I love you, yes; but to a large extent this is because you fulfil 'me'. We now have to come to terms with the ordinary days (and years) that do not always make us feel good and fulfilled. We have to learn to love the other generously and unselfishly in the unpredictability of reality as it unfolds.

We must be careful that if we are easily stimulated to movements of affection in our prayer that we do not consider ourselves to be more advanced than we really are. We often indulge habits of behaviour in our treatment of one another that are inconsistent with the prayerful elevation we feel we have reached! True progress in the spiritual life consists in letting Him, live, love, pray, serve and suffer in us, so that we can say with St Paul: "It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me". There will be times when instead of advancing forward, as we would see it, we have to revert to Gospel mediation. This we should do if we find it is helpful. In the Seventh Mansions of the Interior Castle Chapter 4. St Teresa states that it is sometimes necessary to return to lower states of prayer even after having experienced mystical contemplation. When we are incapable of affective prayer because of aridity we should, in dark faith, cast ourselves on the Lord and He will support us.

#### An inspiring example of Affective prayer:

*"Looking up to heaven, and raising his hands, Francis prayed with intense fervour and devotion saying, 'My God and My All'. And he sobbed out these words with so many tears, and kept repeating them with such devout persistence that until Matins he said nothing but 'My God and My All' ... He called upon the Lord in order that God, without whom human weakness can achieve nothing, should by his compassion and almighty power, supply, assist and accomplish what he himself would not be capable of doing. And that is why he said: 'My God and My All' (The Little Flowers of St Francis, Omnibus, part 2, p.1, 303).*

#### Affective Prayer passes into the Prayer of Simplicity:

Generally speaking the rule of growth in prayer is that it becomes ever more simple. Indeed, our Affective Prayer becomes more and more simple. We lessen the number and the variety of affections and intensify a certain few of them. Eventually, we find that one of these affections becomes the predominant sentiment and recurs continually in our hearts and minds. Thus one is led gradually to the Prayer of Simplicity. It consists in a simple view, regard, or loving thought, directed towards some divine object or truth. It causes us to simplify all: reasoning and affections in prayer, and even our whole life, which is lived in an intuitive awareness of God's loving presence without having to analyse it. It is also known as the prayer of Simple Regard, Simple View of Faith. We can see that the process of simplification consists in the diminution and then the absence of reasoning, which is soon replaced by an intuitive intellectual gaze (however vague) and comfort in God's presence. This Prayer of Simplicity already constitutes acquired Contemplation, and it prepares for Infused Contemplation those who are generous enough for it. One is rendered more and more docile to the action of God's Spirit in the unfolding of our daily lives.

#### Distractions and aridity:

In this kind of prayer we are exposed to distractions and to aridity, just as in affective prayer. However, we humbly and calmly strive to remain in God's presence and in submission to his will. Distractions may try to prevent the mind from concentrating on God, but the will remains united to Him despite the wanderings of the imagination. One takes no notice of the imagination and it will calm down when it receives no fuss or attention. To engage the distraction 'in combat' would be to take the will away from its loving focus.

#### A Unity of Purpose:

The great advantage of this prayer is that it gives to our whole life a unity of purpose. It becomes a protracted act of the virtue of religion (giving God His rightful due), an act of thanksgiving and of love. The prayer of simplicity is acquired contemplation and it constitutes an excellent preparation for infused contemplation and at times leads to it.

#### The link bond between Affective prayer and that of Quite is Simplicity:

'There is certain continuity between simplified Affective Prayer, which one may acquire through a spirit of faith, and *Quietude* or infused prayer, produced by the gifts of the Holy Spirit with the co-operation of the soul. There is an essential difference between the two, since the one is *acquired* and the other *infused*; but there is a bond of union, a link between them, that is, the Prayer of Simplicity, which begins by a simple view of faith and ends' when it pleases God, by the Holy Spirit's laying hold of the soul'.

*Prayer:*

*Teach us, O God*

*To love one another,*

*For love comes from you,*

*And whoever loves*

*Is your child and knows you. Amen. (1Jn 4:7)*

#### **From Loving to Truly Loving.**

(Objective: Transformation)

*O Lord take away all coldness,*

*All wanderings of the thoughts,*

*And fix our souls upon thee and thy love,*

*O merciful Lord and Saviour,*

*In this our hour of prayerfulness. Amen*

*(A Prayer by Edward W. Benson, 1829-1896)*

#### The Stonewall in maturity:

After journeying through Discursive Prayer/ Meditation and after experiencing long periods of Affective Prayer, which is the refinement of Discursive Prayer and the prayer of simplicity, many experience the advent of an encroaching darkness. In the absence of direction they feel confused and at a loss to understand what is happening. They feel that they have failed God, or that God has withdrawn from them. Consequently, many people in their maturity judge that they are going nowhere in their spiritual life. They feel empty and dry, dark. Thinking they are the only ones in this predicament they don't talk about it, or can't describe what the problem is exactly, and so they fail to find a solution. They do not understand what has happened to them; all they can say is that

they cannot pray. They settle into an unsatisfying form of piety that leaves them unenthused and uncertain about their relation to God.

There is a general ignorance of the inner path after the comforting days of simplified Affective prayer. Most devotional books seem to stop there, in the Mediterranean of the Spirit. But life marches on. If unguided it enters a wide-open territory of routine and blandness; we find ourselves on the high sea, or in a vast featureless desert with no signposts to direct us. To comfort ourselves we too readily accept the suggestion that the 'higher life' is for the gifted few – for others, not me! We so constantly underestimate ourselves that it is inconceivable that I might be one of those 'others'. And yet, in God's loving eyes, each one of us is that special 'other' called to deep intimacy!

Indeed, it is not easy to come across helpful direction, either through a person or in print, on the experience of the inner life in maturity. However, we shall try to address some aspects of this experience in order to realise what is happening. Hopefully, this will lead to understanding, affirmation and tranquillity. First of all we must realise that the dryness or darkness is not a sign of God's absence but utter closeness. Secondly, we must know that the darkness or dryness is part of God's plan, it is to be expected. Its function is to purify us of everything than is not Him! Consequently, it is a constructive purifying darkness or dryness as opposed to that destructive dryness of our own negligence and lukewarmness.

#### God comes Close:

God in Himself is essentially indescribable, being utterly beyond our power of comprehension. He is not unknowable, however, for he can be reached, known, and 'oned with' by love. This ability to love him and know him would be impossibly without his prior love for us, and the revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. That we are able to approach him is due to his grace or free gift. We have followed the path of prayer through Meditation and on through Affective prayer, but now our prayer has dried up completely and one is bewildered that it is so. The senses, the feelings, the creative imagination, have nothing to offer!

What is happening is that God is responding and has come so near that the normal apparatus of the mind cannot interpret the experience. God's majesty is beyond the capacity of the human mind to apprehend. It is swamped by the strength of the signal it receives. The result is that at this stage there is very real suffering on the part of the soul, who wants nothing but God, but can only feel desolation and dismay at what is happening to it. We must, however, be calm and rest, beyond concepts, beyond images, in the all embracing presence of His love, our will emptied into His will.

This stage of wanting and not perceiving has a further significance in that it serves to strip the soul of everything that would intrude between it and God. For though the soul might think it has given 'all' over to God, it has still to learn that there is much yet to be surrendered. God must be loved not primarily among other things, but for Himself alone; all in between has to go – attachments, fantasies, desires, imaginations, comforts, even the presumed accessibility of God. This is the *night of the senses* and is due to the loving action of God who is taking control. This night lasts as long as God wills, and as long as the soul needs purging. It is sometimes accompanied by, and sometimes followed by a *night of the spirit* in which the soul undergoes further purification, becoming aware of its utter unworthiness and nothingness, often accompanied by deep trials of faith, hope and love, till it is clearly resolved to serve and love God wholly and solely for himself, and not for His consolations.

It is not, however, all unrelieved darkness and dereliction. There are moments of light. Yet sometimes the soul loses patience, and turns back, seeking refuge in the effort of meditation or reading, anything to avoid the seeming unproductive darkness. This is the crisis hour in the life of prayer. For those who persevere, however, the soul becomes more sure of God. Until eventually

there is the experience of the touch of God such that it never knew before as it rests at God's disposal in bliss or darkness in the *Prayer of Quiet*.

### Unpredictable Periodic Dryness, we are to 'let go':

Before dryness becomes the normative pattern of our prayer there is usually a lengthy period of alternating consolation and dryness. The well is not continually dry. Sometimes there is abundant water of consolation, and at other times everything is dry. The difficult part of it is that we do not seem able to control or even predict the pattern. When we expect to feel the Divine Presence like at the Easter Vigil, we feel nothing. When we don't expect any fervour we are suddenly enraptured! What is God doing? St Ignatius says, He is teaching us that He is Lord and not we. The alternating, or unpredictable, rhythm of consolation and dryness is His way of teaching us to let Him be the Lord of the relationship, to give Him the complete freedom to come and go in our lives as He wishes. This dryness, this "waiting" on Him can be frustrating – however we begin to realize that we cannot expect to turn the Lord on and off at will. Mysteriously, and without our realizing it, he is changing our attitude. Precisely by means of the dryness of the well, the inactivity of our feelings, which seems so frustrating to us, we are being taught to 'let go'.

We tend to identify prayer with 'feeling' something. Particularly today, if individuals do not feel devotion their enthusiasm for prayer often cools. Even those who have some depth to their relationship with the Lord describe their dry times as unfruitful, as unproductive. They are surprised to hear that probably their dry hours are their best prayer. The reason is because at these times prayer is likely to be unselfish, 'God-centred', provided we persevere despite the dryness. We are learning, as St Teresa puts it, 'to seek the God of consolations and not the consolations of God'.

### A lesson: Surrendering to the Potter

It is always helpful to remember that the call of God is not so much to do something, as to allow something to be done in us! As we grow, we do less and less and God does more and more, until He is doing everything. The problem and the challenge of the one who prays is ultimately not 'to do', but 'to surrender'. The real block we erect to growth is: the cost of giving up our self-determination, letting go of our lives.

The most beautiful Biblical image of this experience of 'letting go' is the story of the potter and his clay in Jeremiah 18:1-6. The image of the potter and the clay perfectly expresses the reason for the dryness of the well of consolation. The Lord is the potter and we are the clay, we must learn to let him be the 'Potter Lord':

*"The word that was addressed to Jeremiah by Yahweh,  
'Get up and make your way down to the potter's house;  
There I shall let you hear what I have to say'. So I went  
Down to the potter's house; and there he was, working at the wheel.  
And whenever the vessel he was making came out wrong,  
As happens with the clay handled by potters, he would  
Start afresh and work it into another vessel, as potters do.  
Then this word of Yahweh was addressed to me, House of Israel,  
Can not I do to you what this potter does? – It is Yahweh who speaks.  
Yes, as the clay in the potter's hand, so you are in mine, House of Israel."*(Jer 18:1-6)

### Prolonged Dryness – The Potter moulds and transforms:

Jeremiah's brief and simple image of the Potter and the clay gives us light and guidance for the next stage of the inner journey. Once we have learned, by God's grace, to accept the fact that He is the Potter and we the clay, that consolation and devotion are purely in His hands - His gift, what happens to our prayer life? It would be wonderful to say that we have reached our goal and are ready to possess or be possessed by God fully. But the truth of the matter is that we are really just beginning the journey of transformation!

We come to realise that the Lord is not teaching us that He is Lord in order to assert His authority – anxious that we would be subservient. Rather, the reason for our loving surrender to God is that we desire to be able to love as we are loved - totally, and only the Lord can effect in us this transformation, which this demands. The clay cannot fashion, or transform, itself so we are the clay in the hands of the Divine Potter, to be fashioned into a loving and life-giving spirit after the model of Jesus our Brother. Sometimes we voice the fear that God's will might break us, that what He asks of us might be too hard to bear. And yet, the clay is never broken by anything the potter may do to it – unless the clay has become hard and rigid, by sin and selfishness. As we begin to realise what we really are and what we might be, the remoulding which is necessary for transformation, while painful, is no longer threatening. As we grow we even desire the Cross because we have glimpsed the glory to which it leads, we experience the longing to become one with Him, which the Lord has planted deep within us. We do not come to this depth of desire overnight. It is, in fact, the fruit of many years of purifying prayer in the lives of those who pray faithfully.

The prolonged darkness, or dryness, of the mind and the feelings that is a kind of anaesthesia of the interior life can be wearying, as we do not understand it. We feel somehow that we have lost God, precisely when we have learned to desire Him greatly. Moreover, we rarely find someone who really understands us. When this prolonged dryness comes to transform and 'divinize' us we are like terrified children who take for disaster what is really salvation. This is perhaps the most crucial moment in the whole journey of the inner life. St John of the Cross calls it the '*night of sense*' and says that it is '*common and happens to many*' who give themselves to the life of prayer' (*Dark Night, Bk 1. Ch. VIII, # 1*). However, St John also says that not many successfully traverse this night to emerge into the divine light of a new day. It is not God's grace that is lacking but our generosity, courage and openness to God, which are limited.

### A Recap:

Let us recall the situation of the person at this stage of the spiritual journey. Our prayer has moved from head to the heart i.e., from knowing to loving; then after a honeymoon period when the waters of devotion flowed freely, we have experienced a lengthy period of alternating consolation and dryness, where the Lord was teaching us that consolation is a free gift of God, not to be achieved by our own efforts and timetable. Now that we have learned to 'let go' and 'to let the Lord be the Boss' we find ourselves experiencing an almost continuous dryness. God seems to be totally absent, despite a great desire to encounter Him. It is as if God has seduced us only to turn away at the last moment. But this dryness, this darkness is in fact '*contemplation*'. He the Majesty of Eternity is right up against us. He who is fullness in Himself appears as emptiness to us. He who is light to Himself appears as darkness to us. This is where the direction and guidance of masters of prayer becomes crucial to our understanding and growth.

### *Prayer*

*Teach us, Good Shepherd,  
To hear your voice  
As you call us by name  
And lead us out.*

*May we know your voice  
And follow you  
As you go before us. Amen (Jn 10:3-4).*

### **The Dark Night:**

*May God be pleased to give me His divine light  
That I may say something worthwhile about this subject,  
For in a night so dark and a matter so difficult to treat  
And expound Your enlightenment is very necessary.  
We make our prayer through Christ Our Lord. Amen.  
(Prayer by St John of the Cross)*

Fortunately, one of the great masters of the Spiritual Life has left us clear and succinct guidelines for life in the interior desert, which he calls the Dark Night. The soul has two parts according to St John, the *sensory* and the *spiritual*. He treats of the sensory night first as it the most common. He has set down in a few brief chapters the classic description of this desert experience (the '*Dark Night*') and gives authoritative guidelines by which we should act. His short discussion is one of the most important in the whole literature of prayer (*The Dark Night of the Soul, Book. I, Chapters VIII – X, pp. 311-318, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez.*).

St John first explains what is happening in this night (*Chapter VIII*); then he gives three signs by which we recognize that our dryness is really the dark night and not due to some natural causes (*Chapter IX*); finally, he tells us how we should act in the face of this experience (*Chapter X*). As many people are helped by what St John has to say we will examine each of these points in turn.

#### (a) What is happening in the Dark Night?

St John begins Chapter VIII of the Dark Night by saying that this Night ... is Contemplation. The darkness is not because God is so far away, but because He is so close! Up to now we were content to know God by means of our senses – thoughts, images and feelings, but in reality it is impossible for the infinite God to be captured by our finite minds and ways of thinking. Now, when everything suddenly becomes dark, when our ordinary ways of knowing are blinded, it is because the light of God has suddenly been revealed and we are blinded. This is what St John means by contemplation: an immediate experience of God as He is in Himself, as contrasted with indirect experience of Him through our thoughts and feelings. This experience is beyond thoughts, beyond words because all our activities inevitably distort and render indirect the reality of God in Himself.

Since we never even suspected that there was any other way of knowing and loving except through our own thoughts and feelings, this is a profoundly disturbing and disorientating experience – so we naturally fear that everything is lost. But just the opposite is really true. God is closer than ever! Here we begin to discover a reason for the dryness and the darkness we

experience. We mentioned that the alternation of consolation and dryness teaches us to 'let go', 'float free', and to allow God to truly be the Lord of the encounter we seek. Now, as the dryness and the darkness become more a constant pattern of our prayer, we discover that it is much more than God's way of asserting His sovereignty. The darkness is actually 'contemplation', a whole new way of praying in which we truly become the clay in the hands of the Potter. It is dark because it is totally beyond our natural capacities. Yet, it is precisely in this dark prayer that we are transformed, made divine. Our hearts are stretched, made deeper, so that they may be able to hold the Infinite God. God is stretching our finite hearts by means of His direct, dark presence to our souls. For us it seems to be just 'waiting', and a painful waiting at that, because we are being stretched by hands that we cannot see with our natural faculties. Very enlightened and careful discernment is necessary in order to distinguish depression, dissipation, boredom, moodiness, laziness and mediocrity from the authentic, God-influenced night of sense.

(b) Three signs of the Genuine Dark Night:

The three universal signs and conditions whereby a spiritual person can discern whether he/she is travelling this road of night and purgation of sense are these: (1) aridity across the board, (2) a certain interior anxiety and (3) the irresistible drawing into a more contemplative stance during prayer.

(1) The first sign that the dryness is the result of genuine purgation, and not due to sin or negligence, is that while "a soul finds no pleasure or consolation in the things of God, neither does it find it in anything created." It is not the dissatisfaction of a malcontent but a realization that everything passes and in 'God alone is my soul at rest'.

(2) This *"lack of enjoyment in things above or below might proceed from some indisposition of melancholy humour (sickness), which sometimes makes it impossible for the soul to take pleasure in anything."* He suggests a second sign which should characterize the Dark Night:

*"The memory is ordinarily centred upon God, with painful care and solicitude, thinking that it is not serving God, but is backsliding, because it finds itself without sweetness in the things of God."* The key phrase here is *"with painful care and solicitude."* God seems far away and I seem unworthy of His love, but I am drawn to Him nonetheless, like a magnet. I am miserable with Him and even more miserable without Him. I can't find Him, yet I desperately need to find Him!

St John says that if the dark dryness is due to our negligence or to sickness, we will not experience this *"painful care and solicitude"* to find the Lord. Why? If we are negligent we will not feel solicitous to find Him, but eager to escape His threatening presence. If we are sick we won't feel anything at all. Our desire for God will be, as it were, anaesthetized. Thus our very "Pain and Solicitude" are a sign, contrary to what we would naturally think, that the God we seek is truly at work in us drawing us to Himself.

(3) The third sign St John gives to discern genuine dark contemplation is the inability to 'meditate'. In the 'Dark Night' he speaks of *"the powerlessness, in spite of one's efforts, to meditate and make use of the imagination, the interior sense, as was one's previous custom. At this time God does not communicate Himself through the senses as He did before, by means of discursive analysis and synthesis of ideas, but begins to communicate Himself through pure spirit, by an act of simple contemplation, in which there is no discursive succession of thought"* (*The Dark Night, Bk. I, Ch. IX, # 8*). Here the work of the senses is at an end. Now our understanding and imagination seem simply useless to our prayer, whether for 'knowing' or for 'remembering'. This third sign is particularly helpful when pray-ers experiencing the Dark Night, feel they should 'begin all over again' – return to meditation that they gave up long ago!

If the three signs we have described characterize our prayer, we can feel confident that our experience is a genuine dark night of prayer whereby God is effecting a divine transformation in us. What a strange world we have entered, where loss is gain and darkness light.

### (c) What should we do?

What then is our part in a prayer that seems so totally beyond our comprehension? First of all we should have a good director who can help discern the authenticity of our prayer. As regards our prayer itself, St John says that we should simply forget about any attempt to reason or meditate when we come to pray, *“since this is not the time for it, but ... allow the soul to remain in peace and quietness, although it may seem clear to them that they are doing nothing and are wasting their time ... The truth is that they will be doing quite sufficient if they have patience and persevere in prayer without making any effort ... contenting themselves with merely a peaceful and loving attentiveness towards God, and in being without anxiety.”*

We should even be content *“simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste and feel Him. All the desires disquiet the soul and distract it from the peaceful quiet and sweet idleness of contemplation which is being communicated to it”* (*The Dark Night, Ch. X, # 4, p. 317*).

This absence is not capriciousness or cruelty on the part of the Lord. We need Him to be absent to our natural ways of knowing and loving so that we can give them up for a better way – the divine way. We must learn to *“do nothing gracefully”* so that the Lord, our Love, will be free to stretch our hearts and our minds to embrace infinity. If we believe that this is what is happening, then we can be *graceful “without anxiety”*, as St John of the Cross says. We can learn to be at home in the dark because we are sure, in faith, that the Potter is truly shaping the clay. Then our dryness is no longer desolation because we are not anxious, fearful, or troubled by the dark. In fact, we come to love the dark because we realize that the Light is very close, and that our experience of darkness is the only sure way to the eternal vision we so greatly desire. Nor should we rush the Potter, since we begin to realize that the vessel He is shaping is intended to last for eternity.

### The Dry Darkness is Purgatory:

Once it dawns on us that our life of prayer is really the beginning of eternal life, and that the transformation that God is working in us is truly the foundation of an eternity of loving Him, we begin to see the dryness from quite a different perspective. Furthermore, we realize that this dry darkness is really Purgatory. Purgatory is purification and transformation – sooner or later we have to be made divine if we are going to love as we are loved, if not in this life, then certainly after death (*Cf. Dark Night, Bk 2, Ch VI, # 6*). What, then, if some, drawn by grace, should choose to begin to live eternity now? It would seem to follow that this would first mean living purgatory now. Since we can only know and love God as He is, and that entails purgation.

Instead of complaining about the dark, which we do, we should realize that it is a much more secure situation, because in the dark prayer there is nothing to gratify our self-seeking and to deflect us from Centering wholly on the Lord rather than on self. I am more secure in the dark; more secure from myself, and all in me that would spoil love.

The experience of dryness or darkness, then, becomes more and more the normal, constant pattern of our prayer. John of the Cross tells us that this is not a sign of failure. Contrary to our natural ways of judging things, it is a good and healthy sign of real interior growth. God is Infinite Light consequently He is beyond our ability to conceive of Him. Such awesome brightness is darkness to our finite minds. But the heart can love more than what the head can know! Now that

we are close to God who is Infinite Light, we will experience Him as darkness for as long as we live. We know that the darkness is not really darkness that God is not really absent, but that we lack the eyes to see Him, the tongue to taste what is really there. God is not absent; He is closer than He has ever been, but we are blind. It is this dark contemplation, which is in us, that is working our healing.

For some time it will appear that we are doing nothing at prayer, and in one sense we are right: we are indeed doing nothing at the natural level of sense and intellect and feeling, the level at which we have always lived and the only level we know. But it is important that we just '*waste time gracefully*'. It is perhaps the hardest thing we have ever learned to do, and not everyone can adjust to this apparent vacuum. Many fill the void with their 'own' activities, novenas, meditations or extra apostolic works. They find the uncertainty, the letting go, too much to accept; they have many possessions! But we must let go of everything and give Him a free hand in our lives!

### *Prayer*

*Fill us, O God, with Courage  
And draw us together in love,  
So that we may have all the riches  
And assurance of true understanding  
Until we really know the mystery of Christ  
In whom are hidden the treasures  
Of wisdom and understanding. Amen. (Col 2: 2-3).*

### The Night of Spirit:

*O my Lord, I am in a dry land,  
All dried up and cracked  
By the violence of the north wind and the cold;  
But as thou seest, I ask for nothing more;  
Thou wilt send me both dew and warmth when it pleaseth thee. Amen.  
(Prayer of St Jane de Chantal 1572-1641)*

### The Fiery Log:

St John of the Cross distinguishes or recognises two aspects of the Dark night. He treats of the Night of the Senses, which is 'common to many' and the Night of the Spirit, which is 'the lot of the few'. Both 'nights' are the infused contemplation working its purification in us. St John uses the image of a log on a fire to describe what is happening to the soul. As the fire of God's love addresses the log its effects are felt deeper and deeper. At first the fire chars and blackens the surface of the wood, and this corresponds to the darkening of the senses and faculties (Cf. *Dark Night,, Bk. II, Ch. X John of the Cross*). But as the heat penetrates deeper and deeper into the heart of the log, the same fire, which affected the charring of the surface, now begins to transform the very substance of the wood, until the log is incandescent and the wood becomes glowing fire. The image describes beautifully the divinisation of the soul affected by the penetrating fire of infused contemplation.

Why does St John say that the Night of Sense is common and comes to many who are serious about prayer, whereas the Night of the Spirit is the lot of the few? The reason why so few in this life pass from the Night of Sense to the Night of the Spirit must be sought in our response to the fire of contemplation working in us. When the log begins to be charred and blackened, when the cracks and knotholes all begin to be magnified by the fires work the log appears far uglier than before, its faults are plain to see. If the log could think it would say to itself: This is a disaster! My desire to become fire was a terrible mistake. I am worse off than when I started. It would seek to escape from the fire before everything was lost.

Similarly, the closer the soul comes to the light of God, the darker its own darkness appears by contrast. It feels that it is getting worse and moving further from God, because all the hidden cracks and worms are seen in stark contrast to the holiness of God. The soul can lose its nerve, get discouraged, and fear the pain of divine fire. It can abort the transformation God is seeking to accomplish, especially if it is not open to a good director who can interpret what is really happening. As we are free it is possible to say 'enough!' St John says that most do this and as a result few are penetrated fully by the fire of God in this life. We are charred and blackened but not enough to catch fire. We are aware of our weaknesses and need but we resign ourselves to live with them rather than cast ourselves on transforming mercy. We are suspended between heaven and earth.

### How can we respond gracefully?

Very few pass this critical point easily. We are all in this sad suspended state at least for a time. How can we respond gracefully? How can we fully co-operate with the Lord working in us, so that the charring of the wood may gradually give way to the incandescence of the divine fire in us? St John advises us to do two things. (1). To have a good director and trust the Lord to speak through him or her, i.e. to live in faith that we are on the right road, despite temptations to think otherwise. (2). To abandon all attempts to meditate or to reach God ourselves and simple "to allow the soul to remain in rest and quietude, even though it may seem very obvious that we are doing nothing and wasting time .... Through patience and perseverance in prayer we will be doing a great deal without activity on our part" (*Dark Night, Bk 1, Ch X, # 4, p.317*).

The problem is that this situation becomes the normal pattern of our prayer life for a long period of time. The darkness and the doing nothing begin to wear on our nerves, and we begin to doubt whether God is really working in the darkness. Are we perhaps deceiving ourselves? Even the director seems not to be much help to us at this time, because we begin to think that he is being too optimistic. Perhaps he does not understand our real selfishness, our real situation before God. The real problem is, as the darkness becomes more and more the usual pattern of our prayer, we feel that we are getting worse and that God is farther away from us than ever.

One of the principle flowers in the garden of the Lord is an awareness of our own sinfulness. But now we feel that this painful awareness is an ugly weed rather than a flower and that the Lord of the garden could never take His delight in such a place. St John points out that this is one of the greatest sufferings of the soul that advances into the depths of the Dark Night. Any encouraging word from the director seems clearly contradictory to what the soul actually feels, and thus must be mistaken (*Dark Night, Bk. 2, Ch. VII, # 3, pp. 344-345, K and R*).

### Surrendering even our sinfulness:

This sense of misery is clearly a case of desolation, anxiety, turmoil, loss of faith, hope, love, and peace. St Ignatius tells us that such desolation can never be the voice of God for one who is seeking Him. Thus the cardinal principle is never to make or change a decision at such times. We should never trust our judgement of what God is doing, or how we stand before Him, when that judgement is formed in desolation. We must simply hang on by our teeth and continue to call upon the name of the Lord until the desolation passes. Perhaps the true root of our anguish is the difficulty we have in really letting go of ourselves. This trial is part of the whole process of allowing the Lord to be more and more the Lord of our lives. The work of our purification is wholly God's work, and my contribution is to give Him full freedom to accomplish His transformation in me. If the soul in darkness can begin to realize that this is what is happening, it can see that its painful experience of sinfulness and separation from God in an entirely new way. My sinfulness is to be surrendered to the Lord, not to be anguished over as if there were something I could do about it if only I could find the right formula, or as if my inability to do anything about it is an occasion for despair. It is the last dark part of myself that I place, perhaps out of desperation, wholly in the transforming hands of the Lord.

### Two Clouds: Unknowing and Forgetting:

The author of the '*Cloud of Unknowing*' has some very helpful positive guidance to offer the soul in this state of desolate darkness. The title of the book is his description of such a soul vis-à-vis God: The Lord we seek is enveloped in a Cloud of unknowing which the mind of the pray-er cannot penetrate. All our thoughts and images of God fall short of the reality. Hence, as we draw closer, or are drawn closer, to the All Holy, nothing we can think or say seems to have any value in imaging or expressing our experience. All the words of our favourite prayers, which previously enabled us "*to remember with joy*", now seem like ashes in our mouths. What can we do? How should we respond in the face of an experience beyond thoughts and words? The author of the Cloud says, in essence, that when this becomes our experience in prayer we must respond by accepting the '*Cloud*

*of Unknowing*' above us and by fashioning a '*Cloud of Forgetting*' beneath us. These two Clouds, one of which we passively experience and the other which we labour to produce, comprise the whole doctrine on Contemplative prayer of the '*Cloud of Unknowing*'. The author reveals himself as a consummate teacher, matching utter simplicity to rare depth of insight. Towards the beginning of the book he summarizes its contents in this way:

*"This is what you are to do (when the Lord leads you to this more passive, darker form of prayer): lift your heart up to the Lord, with a gentle stirring of love desiring Him for his own sake and not for*

*His gifts. Centre all your attention and desire on Him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart. Do all in your power to forget everything else, keeping your thoughts and desires free from any of God's creatures or their affairs whether in general or in particular. Perhaps this will seem like an irresponsible attitude, but I tell you, let them all be; pay no attention to them. What I am describing here is the contemplative work of the spirit. It is this which gives God the greatest delight ... Your fellow men are marvellously enriched by this work of yours, even if you may not fully understand how.”(The Cloud, Ch. 3, p.48, Johnson, Image Ed.)*

#### When to Waste Time Gracefully:

We could scarcely express more clearly what I meant earlier in saying we must learn to waste time gracefully. We must centre totally on God Himself, “for His own sake and not for His gifts”, and we must “do all in our power to forget everything else”. The problem is not in understanding the doctrine of *the Cloud* but in accepting it – it seems irresponsible! (We must note, however, that the author of *The Cloud* is speaking here of one who can no longer meditate as she could before. This is one of the main signs he gives that the pray-er is ready for the doctrine of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. He is not recommending Centering Prayer to beginners; he says, in fact, that his little book should not be given to them. But when God provides a “*Cloud of Unknowing*”, then the pray-er must learn to view things from a very different, divine perspective.).

Let us ask what precisely must we bury beneath this ‘*Cloud of Forgetting*’? The author of the “*Cloud*” says:

*“Assuming that you have done your best to amend your life according to the laws of the Church, and assuming that the Lord himself has led you to passivity, contemplation, if the memory of your past sins or the temptation to new ones should plague your mind, forming an obstacle between you and God ... try to bury the thought of these deeds beneath the thick Cloud of Forgetting just as if neither you nor anyone else had ever done them. If they persist in returning, you must persist in rejecting them. In short, as often as they rise up you must put them down.”(The Cloud, Ch. 31, pp. 87-88).*

Our sinful past must be buried under this ‘*Cloud of Forgetting*’; as we mentioned earlier, even this sinfulness must be wholly entrusted to the Lord. Many pious, elderly people are tormented in old age by worry about their past. Their eyes should be wholly focused on the merciful Lord and all such concerns should be buried beneath this ‘*Cloud of Forgetting*’. So, too, should all speculation about God and His works, all seeking for insights and deeper understanding.

*“This is why I urge you to dismiss every clever or subtle thought, no matter how holy or valuable. Cover it over with a thick Cloud of Forgetting because in this life only love can touch God as he is in himself, never knowledge. As long as we live in these mortal bodies the keenness of our intellect remains dulled by material limitations whenever it deals with spiritual realities and most especially God.” (The Cloud of Unknowing, Ch, 8, pp. 59-60).*

We should no longer seek to labour with our intellect and imagination once our prayer becomes contemplative. The author of *The Cloud* says we should even dismiss such insights if they come spontaneously. It is, probably, our mind seeking to insert itself into the contemplative work, these insights will usually fade.

#### Forgetting All except God:

We must empty our minds of everything except God:

*“Reject the knowledge and experience of everything less than God, treading it all down beneath the Cloud of Forgetting. And now also you must learn to forget not only every creature and its deeds but yourself as well, along with whatever you may have accomplished in God’s*

*service. For a true lover not only cherishes his beloved more than himself but in a certain sense he becomes oblivious of himself on account of the one he loves" (The Cloud, Ch. 43, p. 102).*

For the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and for *St John of the Cross*, we should never seek to empty our minds; to forget every creature, unless and until it is clear that God is leading us to contemplation. This is, until the three signs of the Dark Night are verified in our prayer experience. Until that time, meditation and reflection – on the Gospels, on our own sinful situation, on the needs of the brethren, are not only proper but also necessary in our prayer. We must not leap into the *Cloud of Forgetting* on our own initiative! When St John's three signs are verified, however, *The Cloud of Forgetting* is the only appropriate response to what the Lord is doing in us. We must embrace the darkness and positively co-operate with the work of the Spirit in us. This is painful and laborious work, but it is rewarding. As the author of *the Cloud* says:

*"The labour, of course, is in the unrelenting struggle to banish the countless distracting thoughts that plague our minds and to restrain them beneath that Cloud of Forgetting which I spoke of earlier. This is the suffering. All the struggle is on man's side in the effort he must make to prepare himself for God's action, which is the awakening of love and which he alone can do. But persevere in doing your part and I promise you that God will not fail to do His."*  
(*The Cloud*, Ch. 26, p. 83).

From time to time the Lord lets us begin to realize *"how wonderfully is a man's love transformed by the interior experience of this nothingness and this nowhere... He who patiently abides in this darkness will be comforted and feel a confidence about his destiny, for gradually he will see his past sins healed by grace. The pain continues, yet he knows it will end, for even now it grows less intense"* (*The Cloud*, Ch. 69, p. 137). However, it is important to realize that once it begins we live in this darkness all our lives (Cf. *The Cloud*, Ch 28, p.85; Also Ch.69 ad fin, p. 138).

Like St John of the Cross, the author of *The Cloud* identifies this dark journey with Purgatory. Yet, this identification is not really as gloomy or as frightening as it might seem at first. Purgatory, after all, is not an end but a means of transformation and eternal life. To discover that prayer beyond the beginnings is purgatory is to discover that it is not (at least not yet) Heaven, as we had hoped and expected. But it is also to discover that it is not Hell! As the author of *'the Cloud'* puts it:

*"Slowly he begins to realize that the sufferings he endures is not really Hell at all, but his purgatory"* (*The Cloud* Ch. 69, p.137).

Gradually we no longer fear the dark, so what is there that we could possibly fear? Everything is safe in the gentle, healing hands of the Lord, our Love. In one of his most beautiful chapters, the author of *'the Cloud'* says:

*"For the love of God, then, be careful and do not imprudently strain yourself in this work. Rely more on joyful enthusiasm than on sheer brute force... avoid all unnatural compulsion and learn to love joyfully with a sweet and gentle disposition of body and soul. Wait with gracious and modest courtesy for the Lord's initiative"* (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, Ch. 46, pp.106-107).

This joyful enthusiasm, this waiting with gracious and modest courtesy, is, I suspect, characteristic of Purgatory itself, and is the guarantee of Purgatory's ending. That is why Purgatory is not Hell, whether we live it here or hereafter!

Almighty Father, grant us  
 To grow in knowledge of you,  
 To be strong in your power'  
 To be patient in enduring all,  
 To be joyful in thanking you  
 For making us sharers  
 In your kingdom of light. Amen. (Col 1:10-12).

### **The Disposition of Holy Abandonment**

(Learning to "float" in the dark)

May the grace of the Holy Spirit fill us.  
 May the true faith ever dwell within us.  
 May the Faithful example be ever our guide.  
 In the Temple of Christ may we always abide.  
 The Eternal Trinity may we always seek.  
 Our hope in Jesus may we ever keep.  
 Relief on the poor may we gladly bestow.  
 In the path of God's will may we constantly go. Amen.

*(Prayer from: Religious Sons of Connacht, Dr. Hyde.)*

There comes a time on the vast Ocean of God's love when swimming, our strenuous efforts in prayer are useless. We find that we get nowhere. The disposition required of us is that of trusting abandonment to the swell on the Ocean of His great love. This is a graphic description of our present prayer attitude. What we are concerned about in all our reflections is letting God become the absolute Lord of our lives. This is the real goal of our interiority. The image of floating, the trusting abandonment of floating, in prayer seems to capture the goal towards which the purifying process is leading us. The floater yields to the flow of the water and savours fully where she is. She is going someplace, but that is the concern of a greater force - the current, which

carries her. Her major decision is to trust the tidal swell. If she trusts, she can relax and surrender herself totally to Providential Love, and live fully the present moment.

God wants total Abandonment:

The whole experience of the Dark Night, or The Cloud of Unknowing, appears to be the Lord's way of trying to make floaters out of swimmers. He, it seems, definitely wishes us to abandon ourselves to floating. He wants us to have as our goal our total surrender to the flow of His tide. Our floating is not directionless. He is leading us. But, that is His goal. He would like us to trust Him enough to relax, to leave the goal wholly to Him. Only those who are totally secure in their love can live thus fully the present moment. This freedom of spirit and joy in the gifts of the present moment, which characterize the floater, corresponds closely to the advice that John of the Cross gives to souls experiencing the Dark Night. He says: *"Through patience and perseverance in prayer, they will be doing a great deal without activity on their part. Content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without desire to taste or feel Him"* (*Dark Night, Bk 1, Ch X, # 4, K and R p.317*). When the Dark Night is a new experience, this advice is very difficult to understand. During all our prayer lives we have been accustomed to travel towards God by efforts of our own faculties. When John tells us we will now travel faster by simply floating – doing nothing and desiring nothing – it is difficult even to imagine how he could be correct. If we do accept his advice, it is not because we are convinced of its reasonableness, but because we find ourselves exhausted by our own efforts and are incapable of doing anything else.

When we 'float' – being attentive in faith – almost inevitably there will be moments of self-doubt when we wonder whether our whole prayer life may be an illusion, or whether, perhaps, we are just 'lazy'. In our better moments, though, we know by experience that we are right to float, and we realize that the doubts are due to the fact that we now live in the Cloud of Unknowing, in the darkness of faith where we cannot possibly see with our natural faculties what God is doing. We are filled with a new confidence, dark but strong. A confident trust that God is God, that He loves us more than we love ourselves, and that He is truly working in us to bring to perfection the work He has begun in us. We begin by desiring to do great things for God, but we discover, by the darkness of the Cloud of Unknowing, that *"He who is Mighty"* does all the great things for us, as He did for Mary (Lk 1:49).

What happens when we float? We befriend the dark:

What happens when we discover and accept the meaning of floating free, of leaving everything to God? It would be nice to say that this discovery means the end of darkness. But that is not true, because the darkness of prayer is not simply due to our reluctance to float. In a deeper sense, it is 'dark' because our minds simply cannot grasp God in this life. As long as we are in the body, our ways of knowing and feeling are embodied ways, finite ways, ways that can never adequately embrace the infinite God.

While we do not escape the darkness once we learn to float free in the sea of God, something very important does happen to our ways of knowing and judging. To our surprise we discover that we are at home in the dark, we no longer fear the darkness, which caused us such inner turmoil and anxiety in the past. It is not that we are satisfied with this dark cloud of unknowing; our desire for the light that is God grows with every passing day. But it is not an anxious desire. We are secure in the darkness, obscurely but strongly confident that we are in the hands of God who cares for us totally and will work His will in us if only we continue to trust. Darkness is no longer a threat, but a promise and a cause for joy. While we cannot yet see God in Himself, we do begin to see the world and ourselves through God's eyes. The interior life is not a question of seeing extraordinary things, but rather seeing ordinary things with the eyes of God.

The Resurrection in our life:

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were shattered, in the deepest darkness, by the Lord's death. But all the while He was among them, though they did not recognize Him. Their healing was very gradual, as God's ways often seems to be. They invited the stranger, who had enkindled

something in their hearts, to stay with them. Their invitation, freely and insistently offered, was the one thing He greatly desired and the only thing they could contribute to the miracle of His return to them. He would never force Himself on them, just as He will never force Himself on us. Eventually their eyes were opened and they recognised Him (Lk 24:30-31). What a moment that must have been! It is difficult even to imagine how they felt unless we have known both their sense of loss and the wonder of the Lord's return.

Can we ever feel that way about the Lord? Only if we, too, have loved and apparently lost Him as they did. This is precisely the meaning of the Dark Night! Absence does make the heart grow fonder, for those who have truly come to share His loving presence. It is in absence that we come to realize how completely the Lord has come to be at the very centre of our lives, and how totally we have come to depend on Him. When He returns to us He is, mysteriously, the same Lord we have long known, and yet He is totally different. When at last the anguished absence of the dark night comes to an end in our personal Easter experience we are face to face with the beauty 'ever ancient yet ever new', of which Augustine spoke. This 'return' often happens suddenly and without warning. In fact, it seems that it happens when we have all but given up hope of ever knowing the Lord's loving touch again. Yet the very darkness, which seems so hopeless, has been working on the soul without the person ever guessing it.

John enumerates the following benefits that the dark night accomplishes in the soul whom the Lord leads into it: the knowledge of oneself and one's misery; a greater respect and courtesy in communing with God; a knowledge of the greatness and excellence of God; spiritual humility; the love of neighbours; submission and obedience to direction (Dark Night, Bk.1, Ch. XII, K and R, pp.320ff.). All these characteristics or fruits of the genuine Dark Night are the opposite of the pride, which gives birth to discouragement and despair. The Dark Night is a dangerous time when we are prey to temptations that play on our vanity and self-pity. But if we hang on blindly we will find the Lord far stronger than Satan.

The darkest moments are said to be just before dawn, and when the dawn suddenly breaks upon the heart the whole long night will seem a small price to pay for the wondrous joy of the new day. When the darkness is deep we will have very little sense that anything good is happening in us. But from time to time the Lord will lift the veil and then we will be able to see and appreciate what has been done in the dark of contemplation – glimpses of a growing humility, fraternal love, obedience – and this not due to our own efforts. This will be a cause for some joy, but also a realization that we are far from perfect, far from floating free. But we are no longer writing the script of our lives.

But did we not say earlier that this darkness would normally be the lifetime experience of the mature pray-er? Is there not a contradiction, or at least a paradox, here? Paradox, Yes! Contradiction, no! If we cast our minds back to the events of the first Easter Day, we notice a common pattern to all of the Lord's appearances. Once He had convinced the disciples that it was really He, once their doubts had been transformed into that beautiful "disbelief for sheer joy," (Lk24: 41) He quickly disappeared from their sight. Mary Magdalene was the first to encounter the risen Lord. She was overcome with joy when she encountered Him. She had lost Him once and now she would never let Him go again! But Jesus had other ideas. The meaning of the resurrection, once Mary truly grasped it, was that she no longer had to cling to Him out of fear of losing Him. If He is truly risen as He said, then He is Lord. Death and darkness have been conquered, and we need never fear losing Him again. To truly possess the Lord is to be so secure in His love that we need not cling to Him ever again. The experience of the Resurrection means that we need never again fear the darkness or even death. Jesus is 'Lord'; He transcends time and space and is present to everybody everywhere always! For those who have experienced the purgatory of the Dark Night, there comes a peace – rooted not in ourselves, but in the Lord who has loved us unto death and has risen in Glory – a peace that the world cannot take away. Of course this great comfort is not for ourselves alone, we must, like Magdalene, 'tell the brethren' and share the 'Good News' that the Lord has risen. Ours is now a less self-centred loving, it is purer and more God centred than our earlier stages of prayer. We have learned to seek the God of

consolations and not the consolations of God. We have moved imperceptibly from loving (for the fulfilment it gives) to truly loving (simply because God is God).

Such a change in our prayer cannot but effect a comparable change in our lives. We realise how all our generous and apostolic actions have been tainted by subtle vanities, seeking constant recognition and approval, by a need to prove our own worth, and perhaps our superiority to others, by a desire to find joy and fulfilment in others' dependence on us. The very fire, which illumines our own darkness also gradually burns out of us all these impurities, in our prayer and in our work for the Lord.

Why Abandonment is the only way:

Why is Holy Abandonment the only way? Because it seems clearly the way of Jesus who asserts emphatically: "By himself the Son can do nothing; He can only do what he sees the Father doing: and whatever the Father does, the Son does too" (Jn 5:19). "...I have come from Heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of Him who sent me" (Jn 6: 37-38). The picture of Jesus from numerous statements in the Gospels is one of being given totally to the Father's will – of one who has discovered fully the lesson of the dark night.

Jesus was like us in every way but without sin (Heb 4:15). This factor makes our journey more troublesome. It is sin in us that makes the process of divinisation slow and difficult. But the goal is the same: To abide in Him, to keep His commandments, to be His friends "because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father" (Jn 15:15). It is this total identification which the Dark cloud of unknowing is effecting in us – an identification which is not only interior and mystical but which extends to the most active moments of our lives, our ministry. "The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me" (Gal 2:20).

Our attachments slow us on the journey to abandonment. At first it is attachment to family, possessions, to our honour, the type that St John of the Cross mentions in Book 1 of the Ascent of Mount Carmel. These are the object of the active purification of the soul. But there are deeper attachments, more subtle and harder to root out, which we begin to discover only when we are already committed to the Lord: the attachment to my own ideas of how God should be working in me and through me, the deeper vanity which is disguised as zeal. These are the inordinate desires, which the active purification alone (our own ascetical efforts) cannot root out; John discusses them in the first seven chapters of the Dark Night of the Soul, because only the dark night, the experience of 'the dry well' can burn them out.

When there are glimpses of light in the darkness we realise that the dry darkness is doing its work. But it is painfully slow and we feel that perhaps we are drifting farther away from Jesus' own "passion for God". But we are not; we are actually closer to our goal, but much more aware of the immense distance to be traversed. This would be discouraging but for one beautiful realization: Even the distance and the traversing of the distance are the Lord's responsibility! We cannot worry about it because it is not ours to remedy. True Abandonment, true floating, actively, unreservedly, unrestrictedly, allows the will of the Lord to become her own will. This is the activity in our prayer of inactivity. We place everything, literally everything, is in His hands.

*Prayer*

*Lord Jesus Christ, help us  
To live in union with you  
To keep our roots deep in you,  
To build our lives on you,  
To strengthen our faith in you  
And be filled with thanksgiving.  
Through Christ our Lord. Amen. (Col 12:6-7).*

### **Centering Prayer – Prayer of Quiet**

*You are beauty,  
 You are gentleness.  
 You are our protector,  
 You are our guardian and defender.  
 You are courage,  
 You are our haven and our hope.  
 You are our faith,  
 Our great consolation.  
 You are our eternal life,  
 Great and wonderful Lord,  
 God almighty,*

*Merciful saviour (St Francis, 1182-1226).*

### **The sore need for a technique of Contemplative Prayer:**

Up to very recently one rarely come across anybody who has been taught in their formative days a simple method for facilitating entry into contemplative prayer. This situation is sad. Especially in the face of the fact that St Teresa of Avila had taught that those who were faithful to prayer could expect in a relatively short time – six months or a year – to be led into a prayer of quiet. Dom Marmion OSB believed that by the end of his/her novitiate, a religious was usually ready for contemplative prayer. One of the signs that St John of the Cross pointed to as an indication that one is ready for contemplative prayer is that active meditation no longer works, an experience very many devout people had, and do have. Faced with this experience, and with no one showing them how to move on to contemplative prayer, many gave up regular prayer. A faithful few plug on, sometimes for years, making painful meditations that are anything but refreshing. Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising that Christians seeking help to enter into the quiet, inner experience of God get little help from where they should expect to find it.

Faced with many people seeking inner experiences from Eastern gurus in the United States and with many even travelling to ashrams in India, the Church woke up to the fact that something had to be done about its impoverished situation on this level. It was not that Christianity hadn't got a mystical contemplative tradition; rather it was that people were unaware of it - it was a hidden treasure.

### **The Cistercians of St Joseph's Abbey:**

In the mid 1970s it was the monks of the Cistercian Monastery of St. Joseph, at Spencer, Massachusetts, in the United States, under the leadership of their Abbot Thomas Keating, who confronted the problem of finding a way to present the Christian tradition of Contemplative prayer

in an attractive format to modern pray-ers. When Abbot Keating presented this challenge to his community Fr William Meninger was inspired to take it seriously. Basing himself on *The Cloud of Unknowing*, he put together a method that he called the “*Prayer of the Cloud*” and started teaching it to priests in the retreat house of the Monastery. He put his talks on tape and they proved immensely popular. Later Fr Basil Pennington from the same Abbey joined him in his efforts. Fr Basil since those days has published a lot of work on what is now termed ‘*Centering Prayer*’, a title inspired by the late Thomas Merton and suggested by a group of Provincials, men and women, of various congregations attending one of Fr Basil’s earliest retreats on the subject. This work on “*Centering Prayer*” through publications and workshops has proved to be immensely helpful and popular. The drought was being addressed. The Spirit was renewing the face of the earth!

### The use of Technique:

Some find the mention of ‘technique’ somewhat jarring when it comes to contemplative prayer! Is not the Spirit paramount especially here? The Spirit is paramount always – our ‘method’ or ‘technique’ is merely to dispose us to the Spirit, to facilitate receptivity. The experience in the East is no different. If a person desiring to seek the experience of God in deep meditation goes to one of the many swamis or gurus in pursuit of inner peace, he or she would be quickly taught a simple method to pursue this goal. “*Sit this way. Hold your hands in this fashion. Breathe thus. Say this word in this manner. Do this twice a day for so long.*” In a short time this creates the condition that leads to awareness. For the Christian some further clarification is needed of which we will speak later. Nevertheless, do we have, in our Christian tradition, simple methods or ‘techniques’ for entering into contemplative prayer? The answer is: ‘Yes, we certainly do!’

### The Prayer of the Cloud:

The one I have chosen is drawn from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which is indeed a popular book in our time. The author is an unknown Englishman of the fourteenth century. At the time of the author’s writing there was a vibrant spirituality alive and widespread in the Christian West. The swell had begun with the Gregorian reform in the eleventh century and the ensuing monastic revival. Unfortunately it would soon ebb with the onslaught of the Reformation and the overzealous work of a defensive Inquisition. Contemplation would be sent to hide fearfully in the corners of a few convents and monasteries. It would surface again and return under the impulsion of the mighty winds of a New Pentecost in our own time.

This simple method of entering into contemplative prayer has been aptly called *Centering Prayer*. Thomas Merton, as we have already mentioned, has inspired the name. In his writings he stressed that the only way to come into contact with the living God is to go to one’s centre and from there to pass into God. This is the way the author of *The Cloud* would lead us, although his imagery is somewhat different.

If one reads *The Cloud* on ones own, as perhaps many of you have, one is not likely effectively to draw from the text the simple technique that we offer here. This is not to be wondered at. One will have the same experience reading books on *The Jesus Prayer*. As the eastern spiritual fathers will tell you – no spiritual guide would seek to teach this method of prayer by a mere book. It is meant to be handed on personally – by tradition. The writings are but to support the learner in his/her experience and help him/her to place the practice in the full context of his/her life. Simply reading the work will not usually teach the method, it is implicit rather than explicit in the work. With this understanding in mind we shall try to spell out the “technique” of *The Cloud* in a concrete manner, adding some practical advice and explanation. To do this we shall sum up the method in three rules. But first let us say a word about relaxation and posture.

### Posture and Relaxation:

For most Westerners the best posture for prayer is to be comfortably settled in a good firm seat – one that gives strong support to the back. The author of *The Cloud* says, “Simply sit relaxed and quiet ...” It is most important that the body should be relaxed. Sitting securely is sacramental

of what is to take place in our prayer. In Centering Prayer we settle in God, let ourselves go, let him fully support us, rest us, refresh us. It is good too if we close our eyes during this prayer, the more we can gently eliminate outside disturbances the better. The 'place' for Centering should be a suitable place, as the physical set-up and the bodily movement to go there reinforce the sense of passing now from the frenetic activities of the day to a deeper state of prayerful rest and divine refreshment.

Three Rules for Centering Prayer, the prayer of quiet:

Rule One:

*At the beginning of the prayer we take a minute or two to quieten down and then move in faith to God dwelling in our depths; and at the end of the prayer we take several minutes to come out, mentally saying the Our Father.*

Once we are settled down on our seat and relaxed, we enter into a short period of silence. Sixty seconds or so to compose ourselves: to relax our head, neck, shoulders, and body in general. Better to take a little more time than less. Then we move in faith to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwelling in creative love in the depths of our being. This is the whole essence of the prayer. "Centre all your attention and desire on Him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart" (The Cloud, Ch.3). Faith moving towards its Object in hope and love – this is the whole of the Christian life. All the rest of the method is simply a means to enable us to abide quietly in this centre, and to allow our whole being to share in this refreshing contact with its Source, the All Lovable and All Desirable.

The Inner Presence:

When we go to our inner depths we find not only the image of God, but God Himself, sustaining us in His creative love. We go to our centre and pass from there into the presence of God. Yet there is still something even more wonderful here for the Christian. We have been baptized into Christ. We are in some very real, though mysterious way Christ, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). As we go to the depths we realize in faith our identity with Christ the Son. And even now, with Him and in Him, we come forth from the Father in the eternal generation, and return to the Father in that perfect love which is the Holy Spirit. What prayer, what intimacy! Our faith tells us it is so. It is part of that whole reality that Revelation has opened up to us. And it is for us to take possession of it. We have been made sharers of the divine nature by baptism. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have but to enter into what is ours, what we truly are. And that is what we do in this prayer. In a movement of faith that includes hope and love, we go to the centre and turn ourselves over to God in a simple "being there," in a presence that is perfect and complete adoration, response, love, an "Amen" to that movement that we are in the Son to the Father. That is what St Paul was talking about when he said, "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself prays for us ..." (Rom. 8:26).

Psychic calming:

We need to train our minds to become calm for this inner encounter. John Main in his book *Word into Silence* tells how the Indian mystic Sri Ramakrishna, who lived in Bengal in the nineteenth century, used to describe the mind as a mighty tree filled with monkeys, all swinging from branch to branch and all in an incessant riot of chatter and movement. When we begin to meditate we recognize that as a wonderfully apt description of the constant whirl going on in our mind. Prayer is not a matter of adding to this confusion by trying to shout it down and covering it with another lot of chatter. Our task is to bring this entire mobile and distracted mind to stillness, silence and concentration, to bring it, that is, into its proper service. This is the aim given us by the Psalmist: 'Be still and know that I am God'.

A technique that Fr George Maloney SJ proposes in his book 'Centering Prayer' is to picture the mind as a large building of 20 floors. See the elevator approach the 20<sup>th</sup> floor; the door opens and you enter into the elevator. Push the button to reach the bottom or 'the still point' where God and you commune. Count down mentally as in your mind's eye you pass the various floors. Stop at each number, each floor of your consciousness, and tell yourself that you are becoming more

relaxed, mentally. "19 I am relaxed all over ... 18 I am going down deeper into my inner self ... 16 I am letting go of my fears and worries...15 ... I am letting go of my life ... 10 God is coming to meet me, I feel weightless like floating on water ...7 I am getting closer to God ... 1 I am getting closer to Him, my Strength ... 0 I am totally relaxed and at peace in His presence: "*My Lord and My God.*"

Coming out of Contemplation:

In this prayer we go very deep into ourselves. That is why it is prescribed that we take several minutes coming out of this encounter. The Our Father is suggested as a helpful instrument to draw our attention back to the surface of the mind. We gently let the successive phrases come to mind entering into them. This helps to raise our consciousness and lets our contemplative prayer flow into the rest of our lives.

*Rule Two:*

*After resting for a bit in the centre in faith-filled love, we take up a single, simple word that expresses this response and begin to let it repeat itself within.*

After a brief experience of silence at our centre, and to facilitate our continued abiding quietly in love we take up a single, simple word that expresses for us our faith-love movement to that centre. The author of *The Cloud* suggests such a word as God or love. The word should be meaningful for us; it should come from our own experience (C. Ch 7). Then we let the word repeat itself within us, we let it find its own pace – it may even fuz into silence. The subtle thing here is effortlessness. The word is a sign of our intention to open ourselves interiorly to the mystery of God's enveloping presence. The word we have chosen expresses the movement of our whole being towards God who is present within us. For example, when we join our hands, palms together and fingers pointing upwards, it is meant to express the movement of our body and soul towards God. All our faculties are gathered together and pointed towards God by this gesture. That is what the sacred word is trying to say. It is a pointer. But it points one's whole being to God. The focusing process that the sacred word serves is not to bring a particular face, object, or symbol into focus in the imagination, but to focus our intention. Intention is the most important factor in any contemplative prayer practice, but especially Centering Prayer, in which our only activity consists in maintaining our intention to consent to God's presence and action during the time of prayer. The actual work of Centering Prayer is lovingly consenting to God's Presence.

*Rule Three:*

*Whenever in the course of the prayer we become aware of anything else, we simply return to the prayer word.*

In this prayer we go below the thoughts and images offered by the mind and imagination. But at times they will grab at our attention and try to draw it away from the restful Presence. But if at the moment of awareness of these thoughts we simply, gently return to our prayer word the thought or image with its attendant tension will be released and flow out of our lives. We can see how pure this prayer is; we die to self and go to God himself abiding in our depths. It is a very pure act of faith. If we are faithful to this form of prayer we discern the maturing in our lives the fruits of the Spirit: Love, Joy, peace, patience, benignity, kindness, and gentleness. In this prayer we experience not alone our oneness with God in Christ, but also our oneness with all the rest of the Body of Christ, and indeed with all Creation.

*Prayer:*

*May our hope of seeing you, Lord,  
Fill our hearts with joy  
That no one can take away. Amen. (Jn 16:22)*

**Jesus, Our teacher of Prayer**

*Prayer of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)*

*Give us O Lord a steadfast heart,  
Which no unworthy affection may drag downwards;  
Give us an unconquered heart,*

*Which no tribulation can wear out;  
 Give us an upright heart,  
 Which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside.  
 Bestow upon us also, O Lord our God,  
 Understanding to know thee,  
 Diligence to seek thee,  
 Wisdom to find thee,  
 And a faithfulness that may finally embrace thee;  
 Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Some of the disciples of Jesus had been familiar with John the Baptist and they knew that John had taught his disciples to pray. They came to Jesus and mentioned this fact. They now wanted Him to teach them to pray in his particular way. A rabbi, or a religious teacher, would usually teach his disciples to pray – inspired by the tenor of his teaching. As John's preaching had to do with 'repentance' it would be expected that the prayers he taught would have that thrust to them: 'repentance', 'personal conversion', and 'renewal'. The disciples wanted Jesus to grace them with inspiring prayers that would be characteristic of his 'way'. They wanted him to give them His spiritual badge of distinction.

Prayer marked Jesus' life:

Jesus was indeed a prayerful man – a man whose life was marked by prayer. As a devout Jew this was to be expected. Morning and evening prayer, prayer at meals, weekly service in the Synagogue, the Sabbath observance, the pilgrimages – these are all part of the rich heritage we have received from our Jewish forebears and which were a part of the everyday life of Joseph and Mary and their Son, Jesus. But when Jesus reached the appropriate age and struck out on his own as a teaching rabbi, prayer marked his life even more strongly. Indeed, nothing in the gospels reveals better the absolute necessity of prayer than the place it holds in the life of Jesus. Jesus always taught by example as well as by word.

Jesus prayed before all significant moments:

Jesus began his teaching mission with forty days in solitude. The gospels emphasize the temptations and combat with the evil one, but we may be sure that he who "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness" and reminded his adversary that "you must worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone," spent this time in worship and communion with the Father. The gospels are more explicit in describing his prayer before the more decisive moments of his mission. He spent "the whole night in prayer to God" before he selected his chosen twelve from among his disciples. He led three of them, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain to pray before he manifested to them his transfiguring glory and illumined them with the light of Tabor to strengthen them for his forthcoming Passion. It was these same three he invited, rather unsuccessfully, to share his deepest experience in prayer in Gethsemane before the dramatic consummation of his mission unfolded.

As the Evangelist Luke has especially brought out, prayer marked all the most significant moments of his life. It was "while Jesus was at prayer after his own baptism that heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you' " (Matt 3:16-17). It was "when he was praying alone in the presence of his disciples" that he put the question to them, "Who do you say I am?" and evoked Peter's great confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt 16:15-17). It was the Father who taught this to Peter in response to Jesus' prayer.

Jesus was clearly conscious of his teaching mission, of giving us an example. Before his greatest miracle, prior to and prefiguring his own resurrection, the raising up of Lazarus, Jesus prayed: "Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I know indeed that you always hear me, but I speak for the sake of all those who stand around me ..." (Jn 11:41-42). Jesus knew the Father to be the source of all the power and goodness that flowed through him and surrounded his ministry, and he praised and thanked Him for this. "Filled with joy by the Holy Spirit, he said, 'I bless you

Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do'."

When his works were done and his energies spent, Jesus felt the need to go apart for refreshing prayer. After his first great day of wonders in Capernaum, he "went up to a lonely place and prayed there." And when he fed five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, he sent the crowds away and "went up into the hills by himself to pray." When the apostles returned, enthusiastic but weary, from their first mission, he sought to take them apart "where they could be by themselves."

If the very Son of God prayed to the Father in the accomplishment of his works, how much more ought we, adopted children of God as we are, sanctify our works with heartfelt, confident, imploring prayer!

Jesus' prayer was intimate, simple and direct:

Jesus' prayer was marked by intimacy, simplicity and directness. Jesus reflected his intimate relationship with God by his practice of regularly addressing Him as Abba (Mk 14:36). This address was in Jesus' time a familiar and familial designation of one's earthly father. This usage in prayer was unconventional and unusual. Because He really knew the Father he could dare to call him Abba. And because he really expected his disciples to get to know God, he wanted them, too, to address prayer to God in the same manner. This is clearly present in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer: "When you pray, say Father (i.e. Abba)" (Lk11: 1-2). We know that early Christians followed this practice and prayed in this manner from the epistles - to the Galatians 4:6: "The proof that you are sons is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts: the Spirit that cries: 'Abba, Father.' And to the Romans 8:15: "The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out, 'Abba, Father!' ". They rightly recognised in Jesus' use of the title 'Abba' evidence of his experience of deep union and familiarity with God. They recognized that He knew God as no one had ever known him. And they were thankfully conscious of the fact that they had been brought to look at God through his eyes. They, too, had been led to *know* God.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were undoubtedly, upright decent people. But they did not really know God. The attitude is expressed forcefully in the parable of The Talents: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man" (Mt 25:24; cf Lk 19:21). Their God was a God of Justice who dealt with humankind according to the principles of strict justice. Giving no more and no less than what was their due; a God who was pleased with the righteous and valued their good works; a God, on the other hand, who had little time for the "sinner", little feeling for "the rabble who know not the Law" (cf Jn 7:49).

But Jesus knew God as Abba. He set out to demolish an oppressive notion of God. He manifested God as caring and forbearing. How well he succeeded is finely caught in the admirable tenderness of the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Every aspect of this portrait is arresting, moving, and reassuring. It serves to prove, once and for all, that He is not merely a God of Justice, but much more. He is a God of a justice that is administered with boundless compassionate love, which is in fact mercy. When God came to speak his final word of revelation the last syllable of that Word was 'Love nailed to a Cross' (c.f. St Francis, R.n.B. Ch 23, v 9ff).

We witness the simplicity and directness of Jesus' prayer when again and again he raised his eyes to heaven and cried, "Father," whether in joy of raising his friend or in the anguish of his own bitter agony. He was aware of the power of such prayer and fully confident: "Do you think I cannot ask *my Father* and He will promptly send more than twelve legions of angels to defend me." Something in him did want to pray for his own deliverance, for things to be the way, humanly speaking, seemed best. "What shall I say? *Father*, save me from this hour?" But such prayer was always conditional. "*Father*, if you are willing, take this cup away from me." In the end his prayer was, "*Father*, glorify your name." "Let your will be done, not mine," And with greatest confidence he concluded his life thus: "*Father*, into your hands I commend my spirit."

### Jesus as mediator:

Jesus was conscious of the importance of praying for others, of his mediatorial role. He prayed for his apostles and especially for Peter. "I have prayed for you, Simon." But he prayed "not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe," all Christian people. And he prayed, too, for those who would not believe. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." He prayed that we might receive the Holy Spirit, who would make his teaching efficacious in us: "'I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth ... the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.'" And He is still our mediator: "For there is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus..." (1Tim 2:5).

"Lord, teach us to pray."

It was when they were moved by Jesus' example that his disciples asked for explicit teaching on prayer: "Now as he was in a certain place praying, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'" And Jesus responded with that formula which we have come to call the "Lord's Prayer," or the "Our Father." It is much more than a formula; it is a whole school of prayer.

Every kind of prayer is taught in it, and all the attitudes of prayer. There is the prayer of intimacy, of praise, of submission, of petition, of contrition and reparation. We learn our own true being, as sons and daughters of the Father, as one with the only Son and in solidarity with all the other children of the Father. We touch upon all our basic needs, but in the context of the wisdom of conditional prayer, for "your Father knows what you need before you ask him." It looks to the present (symbolised by 'daily bread'), past (symbolised by our trespasses) and future (symbolised by temptation). Furthermore, we are constantly stretched out beyond our own immediate needs to the needs of all, of the entire kingdom, now and unto the consummation. As children of the Father through baptism the mind, the attitude, of the Son is truly formed in us.

It is a prayer that can lead us to deepest contemplation. One day an elderly nun asked St Teresa of Avila how she might become a true contemplative. That great teacher of prayer replied: "Sister, say the 'Our Father,' but take an hour at it." In response to Jesus' prayer we have received the Advocate to teach us. Sitting in the school of the Lord's Prayer, we will indeed learn everything there is to learn about prayer.

Attitudes in prayer:

More than content, Jesus was concerned with our attitude in prayer. Indeed the whole gamut of life is the content of our prayer, for we are admonished to "stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man." It is our attitude in prayer that makes all prayer, and makes our times of explicit prayer, true, efficacious and pleasing to God.

For our divine Teacher, the attitude that attracted his severest criticism and most undermines true prayer is hypocrisy. The hollowness of ostentation in prayer characteristic of some in Jesus' time warranted him to counsel going to the privacy of one's room to pray. This is not a literal necessity but an admonition that serves to underline his point concerning sincerity in prayer. There are times when we have to, and should, pray in public, but we should do so with the proper dispositions. Of course we should not restrict ourselves to public or formal prayer. We will not be able to pray with any real depth or sincerity at such times if we have not prayed to our Father in secret. We will not be habitually in 'the presence' of the Lord unless we devote some particular intense private time to Him. This is where personal intimacy is developed – eyeball-to-eyeball as it were! The exclusive practise of Formal Prayer can be a way of avoiding the personal 'gaze' of the Lord. This can be due to a sense of guilt, which should be addressed. (C.f. *Sadhana*, Ex 36, p. 138:

*“Imagine you see Jesus standing before you - He is looking at you - All you have to do is to see him looking at you. St Teresa adds two important words to the formula: “Lovingly and humbly.” One of St Teresa’s nuns who practised this prayer for hours on end said she always experienced dryness in prayer. When she was asked what she did in prayer, she replied: “I just allow myself to be loved.”).*

There is another admonition of the Lord that we should give attention to, and that is the vain repetition of prayers. We must understand this properly. The Lord is not against the use of repetitious prayers, such as the Rosary, ejaculations, or even the use of the prayer word or mantra. The charge is against vain repetition, meaningless rattling on, and quantity instead of quality. Indeed, in that poignant little parable about the persistent widow, where our Lord doesn’t hesitate to depict himself as a hard-hearted judge, and in that other story of the importunate friend who comes in the night, our Lord praises persistent repetitive asking: “persistence will be enough to make him get up ... ask ... seek ... knock!”

As we grow we want our whole life to be a prayer as was the life of Jesus. His goodness and love within us brings forth the fruits of His Spirit. These will be evident in the changing nature of our outlook and our behaviour. We will grow in personal tranquillity, in tolerance, in reverence and in loving service of others – “by their fruits you shall know them.” We become more aware of our need of Him and of our dependence on him to transform us. As we have seen this is not a simple journey. There will be storms and arid experiences, tensions and personal incompatibilities. But, with support and guidance we come to terms with the fact that we have our treasure in ‘earthenware vessels’; that we are not angelic, but ensouled bodies.

*Prayer:*

*Open our minds to see your light*

*So that we may know the hope*

*To which you have called us*

*And to know the rich blessings you promise us*

*And to know how great is your power*

*At work in those who believe. Amen (Eph 1:16-19).*

### **Mary, our teacher of prayer.**

*O Virgin Mary, to us be given*

*A sight of thy glorious household in heaven:*

*Obtain for us, too, a glimpse of the Trinity*

*And the grace of patience in face of enmity. Amen.*

*(Prayer to the Virgin Mary from Dr. Sheehan’s Cno Coilleadh)*

There is no one who knows us as well as God; after all he is making us! He knows us inside out, upside and down; he knows all our hopes and aspirations, our deepest needs. And he has in his own beautiful way responded to all of them. Not the least of these thoughtful caring gifts is the almost unbelievable gift of a Mother – his own Mother. Mary is our Mother as truly as any mother can ever be. Being profoundly one with Christ our head she received us in the indescribable pains of Calvary. And she cares for us in obedience to a most loving command, the only command her Divine Son gave her, his most precious death-wish: *“Mother, behold your son.”*

It is natural for a child to learn to pray at its mother’s knee. Indeed, if prayer is not learned there it will be an altogether different struggle to learn how to pray. We turn to Mary to acquire a deeper understanding of what we learned there. If we have not been so blessed as to have knelt in such a school of prayer, we can turn to her to compensate us in the most profitable way possible.

### Mary's Example: Awe, humility and Reverence:

Mary teaches us to pray just as any mother does – by example. In the Gospel scene where we first encounter Mary she gives us a first and very important lesson: awe, humility and reverence in God's presence. Gabriel, with a message of heavenly sublimity, suddenly confronts a frightened maiden. One of God's mightiest spirits, stands before her and speaks things unheard of:

*'Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'*  
*She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself*  
*What this greeting could mean.' (Lk 1: 28-30)*

The divine intervention in Mary's life was stunning enough, but what was as amazing to her was the content of the salutation. The greeting "*Full of grace*" or "*So highly favoured, the Lord is with you*" is an unprecedented greeting and indicates the unique position Mary occupies in God's eyes. The greeting indicates a true mystical encounter the awareness of which deeply disturbs Mary (the word for 'disturbed' in the Greek it is very strong). She realises that she is in the presence of God's Word. In her humility she is awestruck. She exhibits a holy fear before the divine favour present in this very personalized greeting. She also knows from her Scriptures that the lot of those who have encountered God's Word changes. So she 'asked her self ('considered in her mind') what this greeting could mean'. However, Gabriel dispels any need for lack of confidence, or fear, and gives her encouragement: *'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour.'* This repetition of the good standing of Mary in God's eyes encourages and strengthens her for what is to follow. A reverent and prayerful encounter with God's word always strengthens and encourages in moments of apprehension and discouragement. The Angel continues:

*" You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High.*

*The Lord will give Him the throne of his Ancestor David. He will rule over the House of Jacob forever And his reign will have no end."*

### To know in order to assent:

Mary seeks clarification in her puzzlement. Knowledge leads to a loving response:

*'How can this be, since I have no husband?' (Lk 1:34).*

Up to this point in her life Mary has happily followed her own convictions. Living a devout and dedicated life she prayerfully discerned her choices before God. Now she feels that the Divine power means to change her present state. She realizes that her own personal life is becoming more complex. She gives up any plans she may have had for herself and looks for guidance as to what is to be. She looks for clarification. She is not contesting the announcement or doubting it. She is simply remarking that motherhood "according to the flesh" is difficult to reconcile with the choice she has made "*according to the Spirit*". Wise discernment and guidance is always important. This is another lesson Mary teaches us: the desire to know God's will in order to say a complete 'Yes' to it.

In prayer we seek to know what God wants of us, to understand his love and its call in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Hearing that call, our prayer then is, "*How?*" In each day's journey along the path, "*How?*" how are we to walk to be worthy of who we are and of that to which we are called? We seek clarification of what is demanded in order to carry out what is expected. Our journey, no less than Mary's, is absolutely unique. We are the products of a unique love, called to a unique greatness and beauty. Only the Divine Designer, the Creator Spirit, knows the fullness of that to which we are called and the way thereto:

*“The things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard, Things beyond the mind of the human person, all that God Has prepared for those who love Him. These are the very Things that God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for The Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the Depths of God. (1 Cor. 2:9-10).*

Mary has full confidence in the Spirit and leaves herself in God’s hands. There was no hesitation to believe. She wanted to do what was asked of her. All she sought was to know the way so she could respond as God wanted: *“How shall this come about?”* The Angel responded to Mary’s enquiry. She is told:

*“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High Will cover you with its shadow” (Lk 1:35).*

Ultimately, to the sincere seeker, this is always God’s answer. He will accomplish in us all that he wants of us. We have only to assent. God made us. But he not only made us; he reverences us. He knows that the greatest thing he gives us is our freedom. For herein lies our power to love – the one thing he wants of us. So he completely respects our freedom. He will never force His way into our lives. In prayer God gives us the grace to will and to do what he reveals to us is to be done. On the practical level this presupposes a pattern of fidelity in small things that will facilitate a generous response to the Spirit in the more challenging things of life. By his grace and with his gift of freedom we come to be able to say with Mary, the all-holy one:

*“I am the servant of the Lord, Let what you have said be done to me” (Lk 1:38).*

#### Mary’s Fiat, Abandonment:

The phrase: *“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord”* is followed immediately by the words *“Let it be done to me according to your word”*. It is the expression of a wish that what she has just assented to should now come to pass. Mary has already willingly entered into what has been announced, and now she wishes that it should become a reality.

The example of Mary’s consent, or *‘Fiat’*, is a key attitude, and important grace in the contemplative life – the Spirit life. *‘Let it be done’*, *‘Let God act as God wills’*; it is letting God invade my life. It is letting God love me on His terms! Contemplation, the inner life, is not about *‘I do this’*, *‘I do that’*, but allowing God to act in me. It is about letting the barriers down. It is about abandonment. *‘Doing’*, *‘Getting things done’*, is very characteristic of our western way of life. However, it takes the calm of experience to just *‘let things happen in the spiritual life’*, *‘to be’* – to come to the realization that we cannot do everything, or anything, in a sense – this is growth. We must learn not to fight against the potter, but be moulded by his knowing, skilful hands. Our habit of regular contemplation – of *‘sitting and being there’* consolidates us in the practice of *‘letting go’*.

#### Mary the first of the new faith:

Mary’s faith before the unfolding mystery of God’s self-revelation was total. Her personal prayerful experience of God altered and developed on a monumental scale, yet she remained balanced and steadfast in faith. By contrast the slightest interior storm, the hint of a personal crisis, or the first weariness of aridity is usually enough to send us scurrying for consolation and comfort! Mary, on the other hand, prayerfully exhibited heroic endurance and steadfastness in what must have been the greatest interior turmoil, especially considering her sheltered circumstances.

Mary had been educated in the Old Testament. In a sense, we can say that she was the summit of the Old and the beginning of the New. She had been reared in that religious tradition in

which God seemed far away, aloof in his infinite majesty. When Moses approached the burning bush, God called to him: *“Come no nearer. Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your father”* (Ex 3:5-6). Later, when the time for the covenant had come, the people had to prepare themselves for two days: then *“at daybreak on the third day there were peals of thunder on the mountain and lightening flashes, a dense cloud, and a loud trumpet blast, and inside the camp all the people trembled”* (Ex 19:16). This majesty of God was so tremendous that no human being could survive seeing God. Even Moses, who asked to see the face of God, was denied the privilege: *“You cannot see my face, for man cannot see me and live”* (Ex 33:20). Reverence for God’s grandeur was such that not even his name might be pronounced it was substituted by the name Adonai.

Mary had been reared in this reverence for the awesome majesty of God. Her parents and teachers imbued her with a deep respect for the unassailable greatness of God and his infinite distance above our lowly human condition. Eagerly she had drunk in this sacred instruction. And yet it is with Mary that the New Testament begins. From now on God is no longer infinitely remote in his tremendous majesty, but very close in his human helplessness, and it is in the person of Mary that this change comes about. Think of the utter transformation of faith demanded when God becomes man! The very structure of faith is altered. Zealous herself in the Old Testament way of belief, Mary had to help this little child in all those things that a mother does. We lament that so many certainties have vanished. Think of Mary and the changes she had to experience! Yet she did not complain, but quietly, graciously, made the transition. The Jews had expected a messiah born of man and adopted by God. Actually, God sent a messiah born of God and become man. And Mary was the first to absorb this turning upside down of the Jewish faith tradition. The Old Testament had stressed that the whole universe was too small for God; yet God was contained in the little infant of Bethlehem and in the man Jesus – the New Testament emphasizes this. In Mary these two apparently contradictory insistences meet, and her faith was deep enough to encompass both. This is a lesson worth pondering on when we are tempted to self-pity, and grow cold in dedication to prayer.

#### The awareness of the Indwelling:

After her consent to divine motherhood Mary’s attentiveness – her waiting on God was very special. It was an intimate communion that ‘till then was unique. She is the God bearer, her greatest title. Mary waited for the Messiah’s coming not only like any faithful Jew waiting for the ‘Promised Messiah’ like Simeon and Anna, but with a special attentiveness, because she now possessed the object of their faith! The Hope of Israel was not just in her thoughts, prayers and dreams, as was the case before, but now he was within her very self! She was waiting to see him born a human person, to see his face, to present him to a waiting world. It was a singular type of waiting, a unique Advent experience. Meditating on Mary’s extraordinary privilege awakens us to what we also are gifted with through our Baptism by having the Trinitarian indwelling in our hearts, and when we receive the Eucharist. Are we not God bearers too? This great mystery, this awesome gift of divinity within us, calls for the deepest contemplation.

#### Through prayer we are transformed and we transform others:

Through prayer we are transformed and we transform others whom we encounter. We see this clearly in Mary after the Annunciation. She is one to whom a great secret has been confided. She carries this secret in her heart and cannot share it abroad – even Joseph wanted to put her away ‘quietly’. It is certainly a joyful secret, but at the same time it is a great burden tinged with apprehension. In this solitude, thoughtful and perturbed, Mary takes the road to Judea to help and share with her devout cousin Elizabeth. For Mary the journey is not just a charitable compassionate visit but is one of inner growth and self-discovery. It is a passage from fear to confidence. With the given assurance of the help of the Holy Spirit confidence and strength envelop Mary’s entire person. By the time she arrives at her cousin’s house she has evolved a more mature awareness of what is happening to her and in her. Having experienced the power of

God she now enjoys the marvellous fruits of this encounter, and her confidence and joy are evident in her meeting with her cousin who also is caught up in the jubilation of the occasion: “the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy,” and Elizabeth prophesied. It is important to realize that one can have a deep contemplative experience not alone when one is in quiet solitude but when one is celebrating faith in community e.g. Profession, faith sharing, shared prayer.

In these circumstances we also learn from Mary another form of prayer, that fuller and more selfless mode of thanksgiving that is praise:

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my saviour;  
Because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid.”*

The words of the Magnificat are words of joy, of confidence and elation. They are expressions of enthusiasm at what God has asked of her and is doing within her, with her full co-operation. The Magnificat is the Gospel song *par excellence*. In it there is God’s greatness, God’s praise and our littleness and His strength. The Gospel is already fact for Mary and Good News for Elizabeth too. She gives a perfect Gospel response. She returns praise to its source. Mary proclaims hope – the dawn of hope and the victory of hope to a humanity swamped in a sea of suffering and injustice. Mary can take this stance because she has tasted salvation. She has experienced Yahweh as Saviour of her life.

#### Our Magnificat:

We, for our part, cannot know the God of the Gospels unless we, too, have experienced salvation. These considerations from the Gospel suggest these thoughts: ‘Since you, O Lord, are the God of my salvation, how can I sing the hymn of my Magnificat?’ What personal experience of salvation reveals you to me as the Lord of all, the God of the Gospel, who changes my life, charges me with hope? Makes me capable of seeing reality in the light of the kingdom, and puts me firmly on the side of goodness, right and truth?

Let us place ourselves before Mary’s prayer and ask ourselves what could our Magnificat be? What words would we use? To what events would we allude? What marvels has the Lord worked for us that gives us grounds for praising Him?

Each of us should take courage and open our hearts to discover the high points of God’s intervention in our lives. Let us think of the weave of our lives as they unfolded, those spiritual encounters that filled us with joy and faith, from our Baptism right up to this present moment. The cross roads in our lives, the chance meetings that proved to be decisive, the directives that led us to this very place. All these reveal the God who saves us, the God ‘who has filled the hungry with good things.’

#### *Prayer:*

*O God, by your power working in us,  
You are able to do so much more  
Than we can ever ask for or think of.  
To you be glory in the Church  
And in Christ Jesus for all time,  
Forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-21).*

