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## A SERIES ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

### Preparation for Prayer

The best preparation for prayer, which at the same time is its very fruit, is the focus of our life on God. This means, in the first instance, living in a state of grace; that is, in conformity with the divine will.

Only under this condition can prayer be profoundly effective and can God penetrate our hearts. We will then become more and more capable of listening to God, of understanding Him and of seeking Him deeply. We will not have to begin each time by removing fundamental obstacles that impede the exchange with God.

Communication with God is a necessity of the soul.

Basically, one can always talk to the Lord by raising one's heart to Him. This also applies to people who live in the world. They can, for example, say short ejaculatory prayers, think of God, consciously dedicate their daily work to Him, etc. Although it should be as natural for us to talk to God as it is for a child to talk to their parents, it is not easy for us to lead a good and constant prayer life. To achieve this, silence will be of great help.

#### **Recollection and silence**

It is not for nothing that the masters of the spiritual life insist that recollection and silence are part of prayer. We tend to let ourselves be absorbed by the external activities of life, thus weakening our ability to concentrate on intellectual and spiritual content.

However, since the life of prayer does not consist so much in speaking as in listening and receiving, it is important to order one's thoughts and feelings, and to focus one's attention on God, on the words of Sacred Scripture, etc. Our fallen nature tends to disperse and it takes effort to enter into the recollection of the spirit, to direct the attention to a particular person or object.

Very close to one of the houses of our community in Germany is the Benedictine Monastery of Beuron. Before Holy Mass, the monks gather in silence and then enter the church together. This silence and this waiting before entering the Sacred Precincts, prepares the soul in a special way and focuses its attention on that which is to come. The silence in which the monks remain is clearly palpable throughout the temple and generates an atmosphere of spiritual attention. In direct contrast to this, we find all kinds of unnecessary talk in the Church, which destroys the holy silence.

In the epilogue to his book "The Power of Silence", Cardinal Sarah writes:

*"From time immemorial, silence has been considered a protective barrier of the innocent, a shield against temptations and a fruitful source of gathering. Silence favors prayer because it awakens good thoughts in our heart. According to St. Bernard, it helps the soul to think better of God and of the reality of heaven. For this simple reason, all the saints have ardently loved silence!"*

In addition, the serene repetition of certain prayers, such as the Holy Rosary or the ejaculatory prayers, help us to enter into this interior recollection and concentration, for through them the soul can focus on the one thing that is necessary (Lk 10:42), and the spirit, often scattered, learns to focus exclusively on God.

But even outside of a liturgical service or a sacred enclosure, we can foster attitudes that will be very favorable for prayer.

### **Contemplative moments**

In order to increase our capacity for recollection and to facilitate contemplation (which is that interior prayer in which God acts more and more as the 'giver', while we are the 'receivers' and listeners), it is important and advisable that we also take advantage of natural circumstances for recollection.

Thus, a precious piece of music, a beautiful landscape or other event can engage our senses, and our right reaction is to make room for this moment of recollection and immerse ourselves in the impression we receive in our soul, welcoming it as a gift. These experiences touch us more deeply than a mere description could; so that we can speak of a kind of "contemplation on a natural level".

In our capacity for wonder and amazement at the true values which hold God Himself at their very center, we are giving a response of love. Values such as the beauty of Creation can evoke in our souls a true awe and sometimes even a kind of rapture. Those moments are unforgettable!

For example, some time ago I was gifted with the experience of beholding a landscape that seemed ethereal: the trees in the forest covered with fresh snow and the shining sun that seemed to transfigure everything... These are unexpected gifts from the Lord, which invite us to praise and thank Him. At the same time, these moments prepare our soul to accept the supernatural gifts in a contemplative attitude.

Of particularly special value is the emotion we experience before the love of Jesus, before the Word of God, before Holy Communion, the liturgy or any other direct encounter with the love of God in its various forms of manifestation. These experiences awaken our capacity for wonder; a reverent and loving wonder. And if we acquire this contemplative attitude, becoming more receptive to God's gifts, it will spread to all areas of our life, so that we discover the presence of God on a deeper level. This is how prayer permeates our whole life!