

22. October 2022

A SERIES ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE  
"Prayer of the Heart"  
(Part III)

Whoever has been engaged in the prayer of the heart for a long time and practices it regularly, will experience the joy that this prayer really brings to the soul. It becomes easy for us to withdraw into that "inner cell" which has been formed through prayer, precisely at those times when noise gets in the way and we are most exposed to the danger of distraction. But even if our surroundings are not so noisy, we can gladly withdraw to this "inner cell" to be alone with the Lord. With the passing of time, it becomes natural to us. Of course, to get there, we will have to follow the impulses of grace and cultivate interior prayer. Thus, it becomes a good spiritual habit to withdraw to prayer, finding, through it, our home in the Lord.

Some spiritual masters speak of "automatic prayer," in that the Spirit of God Himself prays in us, so that we surprise ourselves by praying interiorly, without having begun it consciously and on our own initiative. It can happen, for example, that we wake up in the morning and are already praying, which is, of course, very comforting.

At the beginning we said that the prayer of the heart is a kind of "antechamber" to contemplation. Indeed it is, as long as it goes hand in hand with a serious spiritual journey.

Contemplation is a gift that God grants - according to His will - when the soul has taken the corresponding steps towards inner transformation. Although contemplation is always a free gift, we can prepare the ground for it with our cooperation. In contemplation, it is God Himself who acts directly in our soul, drawing it to Himself and molding it, with or without our active participation, as happens in other forms of prayer. But to invite God to work in us in this way through contemplation usually requires a long interior journey. In the end, it will always be up to Him to decide when He grants us contemplative prayer.

But the prayer of the heart is well suited to prepare the ground for it. As the masters of this prayer teach us, it helps to purify the heart, to order the thoughts and to center ourselves in God and in our own heart through the invocation of the Name of the Lord. It is then a matter of entering more deeply into the interior of the soul; there, God Himself makes His dwelling, as He promised (Jn 14:23); there, we can meet intimately with Him. The extraordinary simplicity of the prayer of the heart, which helps us to restrain and calm the external senses, allows the Holy Spirit to penetrate us to such a depth that His presence becomes perceptible to us. The fathers of prayer speak of a kind of inner warmth that arises in the heart when we practice intense and regular prayer of the heart.

If we frequently withdraw into our "inner cell," we will no longer allow ourselves to be so absorbed by the dynamics of the outside world in our daily lives, because, in the midst of our obligations, we will know how to cultivate interior prayer. When this happens, we acquire a contemplative attitude, which enables us to fulfill our tasks in the world and imbue each activity with prayer. Perhaps we can apply here a comparison that the Lord makes in the Gospel, when He says that His disciples are the light of the world (cf. Mt 5:14) and when He speaks of the yeast that leavens the whole batch of dough (cf. Mt 13:33).

If we refer to the prayer of the heart, we can say that this is the leaven that leavens everything.

Let us keep in mind that this prayer is constituted in such a way that it can be prayed practically at all times. In this manner, the Holy Spirit will pray in us and, through prayer, will take over the guidance of our inner life, which will also have repercussions on our daily tasks. Then the Holy Spirit will guide us with increasing ease to cultivate prayer and withdraw into the serenity of a heart increasingly penetrated by God and molded in His image and likeness. Here we will have reached the antechamber of contemplation, where we can wait patiently to see if God wants to draw us deeper into the mysteries of His love and into the interior "savoring" of His presence.

Also in the prayer of the heart we will have to go through stages of dryness and dispersion. There may even be phases in which the very prayer that we once loved so much becomes tedious, so that we are tempted to neglect it... This is when perseverance and fidelity must be put into practice, just as in the whole life of prayer and in the

following of Christ in general. God will lead us through interior deserts, which will serve to consolidate our faith.

Certainly there will be few who, living in the world and having their respective obligations to fulfill, can enter into a prayer as intense as that which the monks cultivate. But even if we cannot practice it with the same intensity, the prayer of the heart will produce excellent fruits, enriching our prayer life and deepening our relationship with God.

One last piece of advice to conclude: If we decide to incorporate the practice of the prayer of the heart into our lives, we must not neglect the recitation of the Rosary. This treasure that has been entrusted to us in the Catholic Church has a special value because of the closeness of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, our recommendation to practice the prayer of the heart is not "either/or"; rather, it is the addition of a valuable prayer taken from the rich treasure of the Universal Church.