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A SERIES ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Sufferings in Prayer

(Part I)

Anyone who seriously undertakes a life of prayer - that is, who does not only pray occasionally or when going through great anguish - will realize that it is not always an easy path; rather, there are sufferings that can make prayer even wearisome for us. Therefore, we will have to fight against the laziness of our human nature, go through processes of purification and, of course, confront various temptations, which want to discourage us. It can even go so far as to make us doubt the meaning of prayer, because it would seem that God does not listen to it and that it does not bring us any satisfaction. Thus, the soul is in danger of throwing in the towel and abandoning these "tiring" dealings with God.

First of all, it should be said that a person must become accustomed to prayer. There may be stages in which we find it easy to pray and we take pleasure in that "coming home" we experience; stages in which we are granted religious feelings that fill us with joy. But, in the long run, it takes discipline and endurance to lead a regular prayer life. Certainly there are exceptions to this, and there may be people who generally find it easy to pray. But normally it is usually as we have just said.

The abbot of a Trappist monastery once said to me, "It is easier to summon monks for work than for prayer!"

And why is this so? It is because work, as long as we are not of a lazy temperament, corresponds more to our human nature in its sensational dimension. We can more easily see the fruits and see that we have done something productive. Prayer, on the other hand, and particularly silent prayer, often cannot show a visible result. We do it in faith and in the hope of being fruitful, and out of love for the Lord.

Moreover, prayer is related to our spiritual nature, and this requires a special formation, because it tends to wander and, as we saw in yesterday's meditation, allow itself to be distracted by external realities. Everything that touches our senses easily captivates us, and so we lose sight of the essential, which is simply to be close to the Lord.

The "sufferings in prayer" can be diverse and it is useful to analyze them carefully in order to apply the appropriate remedies for each case.

In the following guidelines, I start from the case of a person who has not voluntarily neglected prayer in order to indulge in a disorderly way in worldly pleasures. In such a situation, it is evident that the "sufferings" in his prayer would be nothing more than the consequence of his own negligence.

❖ Unintentional distractions

These are afflictions that accompany us as a consequence of our fallen nature. We are not usually guilty for having them and neither can they diminish the overall fruitfulness of prayer. Of course we must be attentive not to yield to all the offers that present themselves to our fantasy and memory. Again and again, with perseverance, we must refocus on the true object of our prayer. If we patiently endure distractions, the fruit will be that the soul will become more reflective and silent. Let us surrender all our distractions into God's hands. How much we would like to pray devoutly! We suffer for not being able to give all our attention to the Lord, even though He, more than anyone else, deserves it! But let us simply smile at our misery and accept it before the Lord. To Him we submit it, while we give our "yes" to our limitation and littleness. God will know how to reach us and bless us, in spite of our deplorable state. Let us simply tell Him that we love Him and that our heart belongs to Him...

❖ Dryness of feeling

It can happen that the inner joy and delight that we used to feel in prayer is withdrawn and, instead, a tormenting dryness appears. Perhaps God had conquered and attracted us at the beginning with the sweetness we used to experience. But now we no longer feel it, and then the soul wonders what is wrong with it. Some, especially when they are just at the beginning of the journey, may think that they have done something wrong, that God no longer loves them, etc... The state of the first infatuation is over, but the solidifying of a definitive love has not yet been reached. However beautiful and intoxicating falling in love may be, one is still tied to one's own feelings. That is why

God now guides the soul in another way, so that a strong and solid love matures within. This is where one must show the nobility of the soul, seeking God for His sake and not for the feelings that He grants us. At this point, we must beware of the temptation to replace prayer with something more productive, reasonable and practical. This is where fidelity is required! To the extent that we persevere in prayer and do not reduce it; but even increase it, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity will grow "in the dark" in our soul. This is where true love unfolds and we begin to mature on our journey!