

Prayer

PRAYER IS A TOPIC I find difficult to address without sounding somewhat confessional. For one thing, it's personal; for another, no one—no one I know, at least—is satisfied with his prayer. One would think that years in religious life and as a priest would have made prayer easy and consoling. Why this is not so is not altogether clear to me. It seems unlikely, *pace* Mother Teresa, that anyone would experience the dark night of the soul for years at a time; if prayer is dry the reason is probably an unconscious conviction that if one keeps busy enough prayer need not be that important.

In the early days of my religious life, prayer was highly structured. The seminarians assembled in the chapel each morning and evening for a series of affective acts and litanies. There were also private prayers prescribed in detail: daily rosary and Stations of the Cross, a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, spiritual reading, examination of conscience. It was hard not to regard one's prayer as something to be gotten through. Even meditation was arranged. Before morning Mass there was a half hour of private prayer in the chapel, each seminarian pinpointed in his allotted place like a butterfly in a specimen case. We meditated on points that had been read out the evening before; the method was the Ignatian you-are-there approach to the mysteries of the faith. That approach has never worked for me, and I was ready for the new emphasis on Scripture, especially in the revised Divine Office and Mass, that came out of the Second Vatican Council. One novelty of the post-conciliar Church—preaching at weekday Masses—was at first distasteful to me, but now I like to mull the readings over for half an hour before Mass, letting my thoughts move naturally into prayer as I compose my homily. How reassuring to discover that this meditative reading of Scripture, known as *lectio divina*, has been honoured throughout the Church's history and still today features prominently in Archbishop Collins's spiritual guidance of the diocese. It originated in the early years of the monastic movement, and it is this traditional form of prayer that has given the Benedictine Order its eternal youth.

I have adopted another antique mode of prayer. There used to be bodily motion when people prayed. Consider Saint Dominic. According to *The Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic*, much of his prayer consisted of positioning the body: multiple genuflections, arms outstretched, kneeling, standing, prostrations. The posture was part of the prayer, and our modern practice of standing or kneeling is a feeble remnant of this vigorous, athletic approach. My posture of prayer appears as number nine in Saint Dominic's catalogue:

He would pray as he walked, and a fire was kindled in his meditation. . . . The brethren thought that in this kind of prayer the saint acquired the fulness of sacred Scripture and the very heart of the understanding of God's word, and also a power and boldness to preach fervently, and a hidden intimacy with the Holy Spirit to know hidden things.

Like Dominic I like to pace as I ponder and pray. May I experience the same effects!

The other technique that has helped me comes from Saint Teresa of Avila. She advises her nuns, and us with them, to pray by “thinking of what we are saying, understanding it, and realizing whom we are addressing, and who we are that dare address so great a Lord.”¹ This good advice is particularly apt for one who uses the set forms of prayer found in the Divine Office and the Liturgy. It applies equally well, of course, to those of us who use prayer books. For me, however, aside from the rosary, private prayer no longer comes to me in forms that once were so important—the acts of faith, hope and charity, the act of contrition, and so forth. I have come to realize that my spiritual needs are met by the prayers of the Divine Office and Mass. The Office consists mostly Psalms, and what a wealth of spirituality they contain! In their literal meaning they encompass all the attitudes of man before God: humility, praise, sorrow, gratitude, exaltation. But beyond that, the psalms have always been read by the Church as revealing the history of Jesus Christ, the history of the Church, and the history of the individual soul in its journey to God. In addition the Office contains prayers, hymns, and—in selections from the Fathers of the Church—instruction. The Office has artistic unity, which is provided in large part by antiphons and versicles, just as the parts of the Mass are linked by the responsorial Psalm, various acclamations, and the great Amen. What spiritual riches are found in the Mass: in the variety of the liturgical seasons, in the cycle of feasts, in the reading from the Bible, and in the solemn remembrance of the death and resurrection of Christ, not to mention the invocation of the saint and prayers for the souls in Purgatory. All we have to do is to follow Saint Teresa’s advice: “Mean what you say.”

Next week’s topic will be The Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic with an introduction by Father Simon Tugwell, O.P.

¹ *The Way of Perfection*, chap. 25