MENTAL PRAYER: EITHER/OR

"WITHEROUT MENTAL PRAYER one becomes either a brute or a demon." In these few words the great Teresa of Avila has summed up the dignity and necessity of mental prayer. And she does not speak in mystical hyperbole: these words are a penetrating insight of the reality, the facts. Either a man prays or he betrays his very nature.

A brute or a demon. Let us consider these two possibilities. Of all animals perhaps a cat would serve best as an illustration: a black alley cat on the prowl. Its whole life is ordered to a gratification of sense. Constantly in search of this gratification, its explorations are limited to the dreary world of the gutter: a self-enclosed world, where a scrap of discarded fish supplies for a banquet; a world of conflict, where existence itself is endangered in spawning other lives as dreary as its own. Yet this inhuman limitation does not bother the cat, for in all this the cat operates according to its nature. But is this a life for man? No, you will say; and yet St. Teresa gives this life as one alternative if man does not pray.

The other choice is the demon’s life and this, by far, is the more frightening of the two. A demon is an angelic creature whose nature far exceeds that of man; an intelligent being with a greater capacity for knowledge than all of God’s creatures. But a being who has frustrated the very reason of his existence. The cat at least pursues its limited sphere of action in accord with the inner principles of its nature; the demon is chained eternally to the scraping existence of torture and self-hatred. Once captured by his God-given splendor and having chosen himself above all things, even above his Creator, he sits forever contemplating his twisted visage in the love-less, ice-encrusted cliffs of Hell. Even the animals are able to look beyond themselves for gratification; the demon is left to himself in more and more unendurable isolation.

And these are the alternatives open to man if he does not practice mental prayer—if he does not live a truly human life. Of all God’s creatures man and man alone is so made that he
shares the animality of the brutes and the intelligence of the angel. So delicately have these two extremes been united to form man's unique nature that to veer to left or right is to descend to the suffocating depths of animal sensuality or to the airless heights of intellectual pride. Brute or demon: without mental prayer, there are no other possibilities!

That St. Teresa wrote with a superhuman wisdom concerning man and mental prayer becomes clear when we consider what man really is, and the nature of mental prayer.

What makes man to be man, and thus different from every other being, is his soul; this is not to say that man is a soul imprisoned in a body, for in man matter and spirit are so perfectly united that they form one being, neither body nor soul, but man. Yet it is because of the spiritual nature of man's soul that he is able to rise above sense knowledge and appetite to the level of thought and volition. Because man can think and will, because he can see beneath the sensible, choose his own goals and determine how to go about attaining those goals, man dominates material reality. The psalmist describes this dominion when he says: "And thou hast made him a little less than the Angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honor; thou hast given him power over the works of thy hands, thou hast placed all things under his feet: all sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea: whatever moves on the paths of the seas" (Ps. 8:6-9). The marvel of man is that while depending upon his body for contact with the earthly reality which surrounds him, he can live according to the dictates of his reason, his noblest faculty, and he need not be a slave to the whims of lower appetites. He is indeed something awesome. There is no end to what man can know; there is no limit to his love; and it is in knowing and loving that man attains his perfection. When his animal passions are under control of reason, when reality is faced as it is, then man lives a truly human life.

But is this the whole picture? A consideration of man according to the principles of his created nature shows him to be something great and magnificent; but to consider man as he should be according to the plans which God envisioned when He made him is breathtaking. For here we have more than a thinking animal; here is the very image of the Triune God, a being which mirrors the perfection of Divinity Itself in its very structure. "Let us make man to our Image and likeness" (Gen., 1, 26). It is precisely because he can know and love that man is the only
material being made to the image of the Godhead; not merely a
reflection of one or other of the Divine Perfections, man is the
looking-glass of the Infinite.

What does this mean for us? Put simply, it means that God
has placed in us a likeness of His own interior life, the life of
knowledge and love which is the Trinity. The Father in knowing
Himself speaks eternally the Word Who is His Son; the mutual
knowledge of Father and Son erupts with splendor into an Eter­
nal Love, the very Spirit of Love Itself. This is the Essence of
the living God: in knowing Himself God must speak the Word;
and because this Word is God, Infinitely Good and Perfect, Eter­
nal Love is the Person Who embraces the Infinite Knower and
the Infinite Known.

Since he has the capability to know and love, the static im­
age of Divine Activity is present in every man. But it is in the
dynamic state of actually knowing and loving that the image is
perfected. And because any image is more perfect as it more
closely resembles the original, it is in the knowing and loving of
What God knows and loves, i.e., Himself, that we bring to per­
fection the divine image implanted in our nature.

This likeness of God in our souls wrought in the very act of
creation, thanks to the generosity of God’s Infinite Love, is in
the present economy of salvation raised to an even more brilliant
and striking perfection. For by sanctifying grace man not only
is the image of the Divine, he shares in the Divine Life Itself.
Lifted far above his own proper capacities, man can now hope to
share eternally in God’s very knowing and loving. From all eter­
nity it has been the Divine plan that the destiny of man would
exceede his already magnificent nature; for man has been called
to share intimately in the Family Life of God. Moreover, with the
free gift of grace, the virtues of Faith, Hope and Love are also
given; these enable our intellects and wills to delve into the mys­
teries for which they were created. This is the ultimate perfec­
tion of the image within us, knowing God in the light of super­
natural Faith, loving Him with His own Love, Charity, and being
sustained in this Faith and Love by the Hope of sharing this di­
vine Life for eternity.

Thus, with an understanding of the perfection to which man
has been ordained, the role of mental prayer becomes evident.
For “Mental prayer is nothing else than an intimate friendship, a
frequent heart-to-heart conversation with Him Whom we know
loves us” (St. Teresa, Life, viii). It is as simple as that; it is
speaking to God in the darkness of Faith, loving Him with His own love. Mental prayer is the dynamic aspect of our being, the divine image in action in our souls.

When a man realizes by Faith that God loves him, he is impelled to return love, and the expression of this love is mental prayer. To consider our helplessness, our nature wounded by sin, and to draw forth a cry of Hope in the goodness of God—this is prayer. To talk with God about ourselves, to tell him about our studies, our families, our problems; to speak about these things in the assurance of Faith—this is prayer. To talk with Him about His Divine Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ—this is prayer. How often we go in search of a friend to share the joyous news of success or to unload the sadness of failure. Yet, united in that friendship which is Charity, the love of God, we are sure that He is interested just as our friends are interested, and even more so. To become intimate with God, to expose willingly our hearts to Him—this is Mental prayer.

St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that “prayer properly denotes the ascent to God” (Summa Theol., II-II, q. 83, a. 17, ad 2). And in the same place he teaches us that “the person who prays should approach God to Whom he prays: this is signified in the word prayer, because prayer is the raising up of one's mind to God.”

Of course, conversation with God can be either about ourselves or about Himself. When we consider the Goodness and the Love of God, we cannot help but express our affection for Him. But because man is literally dazzled and blinded by the lofty perfections of the Divine, God became man, and now man can talk to Man. From the moment of the Incarnation, our prayer, our considerations, our friendly discussions find their most natural expression is speaking with Christ. In his brilliant treatise on prayer St. Thomas makes this most clear when he tells us: “Such is the weakness of the human mind that it needs a guiding hand, not only to knowledge, but also to love of Divine things by means of certain sensible objects known to us. Chief among these is the humanity of Christ... those things which regard Christ's humanity are the chief incentives to devotion,” for they lead us to divinity Itself with a gentle guidance (Summa Theol., II-II, q. 82, a. 3, ad 2). To talk with Christ is the essence of mental prayer. The more we talk with Him, the more we will love Him; and the more we grow in love, the more we grow in knowledge. Mental prayer embraces us in a circle, an ever widening circle of total happiness.
But why Christ in mental prayer? Why must our knowledge and love be directed to Him? The answer to this, as St. Thomas indicates is a divine response to our weakness. The Son of God Himself assumed human flesh, becoming true man, yet forsaking nothing of Divinity so that He might show us how to become more like God. “God was made man, that man might be made God” (St. Augustine, de Temp., xiii). The Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ is the bridge spanning the chasm between human nature and divinity; no man can cross to the Infinite God except by this bridge.

Christ is the perfect and eternal Image of the Father; He and He alone can show us the Way to the Father. He told us, “I am the Way” (John, 14:6), and He never spoke without profound depths of meaning. There is no other way to God for us; and so in mental prayer we must go to Christ. We have to ask Him to show us the way and it is from Him that we will learn how to make perfect the image of God within ourselves. We must talk with Christ—this is mental prayer.

Obviously, then, prayer is not a mere examination of conscience, an analyses of our faults and virtues. All this is certainly necessary if we are to imitate Christ. But Christ is our Friend. He loves us and because He loves us, He enjoys our company. He is interested in our failings and He wants us to tell Him all about them. But we are more than a tally sheet of failings, and Christ is interested in every detail of our lives. All the things that come up in the course of a conversation with friends should also be brought up in conversation with Him Who loves us more than any other friend we have. And as we grow accustomed to speaking with Him, we will find that He will tell us more about Himself. And this is the important thing, to learn about Christ. That is why we must not harp on our own failings constantly. After all, He knows all about them; He died to save us from them.

We must always remember, moreover, that we can only reach Christ by Faith; by Faith we know that it is only united to Him that we can become like Him. And we can become like Him only if we know about Him. Thus we must let Him tell us about Himself. By reading the Gospels, we do get the bare outlines of the life of Christ on earth, but it is in prayerful consideration of His life that Charity will enflame us and lead us constantly to a livelier faith, a deeper knowledge. We know that Christ still loves us—we have daily proof of it in the Eucharist—and by considering this love we grow in love for Him and we will thank him, tell
Him how sorry we are that He had to suffer for us, ask Him for the helps we need to become like Him. To speak to Christ in this manner—this is prayer.

But, again, conversation is a mutual affair. It is between two persons, between Christ and the soul. If we speak to Christ, He will speak to us. He always speaks to us and we can know what He says by Faith. The sword of Faith, when it is made sharper by the heat of love, cuts through the knotted threads of every event in our lives. That is why it should be easy to talk to Him about the ordinary happenings of our daily life. In these events He has been speaking to us, giving us opportunities of coming closer to Him. Sickness, weariness, even the death of those we love; success in school, social events, the love of our friends; in all the rainbow variety of our lives Jesus is speaking to us, helping us to share in some way in His own life. And we should want to respond to Him. This then is the perfection to which we tend, union with Christ through loving conversation with Him, Who speaks to us and to Whom we speak in return.

Christ is Man and He knows that we cannot spend twenty-four hours a day on our knees. He knows that we must work, that we must take time to relax. It is only reasonable that He should know all these things: as God, He created us; as Man, He did all these things Himself. That is why He managed to get a few hours away from the crowds every so often, to rest. But in doing so, He also gave us an example, and taught us a very important lesson. He showed us that to pray is to rest. St. Augustine emphasizes our need for this kind of relaxation: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O Lord.” If we do not set time apart for a more or less formal period of conversation with Him, then we are open to the danger of forgetting the truly magnificent destiny to which we have been called. And what is far worse, we run the danger of living like the brute or the demon. We were made for greater things.

All that is left for us to discover is to learn how to relax with Him. Certainly if one is going to talk to a friend he does not prepare a formal speech. It is necessary, however, to have something to talk about. And there is so much to talk about with Christ. Perhaps a few minutes consideration of some event in His own life, His birth or death; or maybe about some trouble at home or in school or at work. If talking over these aspects of His and our lives does not come easily at first, then a few minutes in reading the Scriptures will provide material for a real conversa-
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We know that He wants us to talk with Him; He will not be slow in giving us food for conversation.

Moreover, words are not necessary, for in mental prayer we speak the language of love. In the beginning words may help. And on this point St. Thomas tells us that "the voice is used . . . in order to excite interior devotion, whereby the mind of the person praying is raised to God"; he goes on to say, however, that "if they [words] distract or in any way impede the mind we should abstain from using them" (Summa Theol., II-II, q. 83, a. 12).

Our whole life is really a preparation for these few minutes each day in intimate conversation with the Friend Who loves us so much. That is why in these few minutes we should not dwell on ourselves in the sense of searching out our faults or trying to see what progress we have made in virtue each day. These things have their proper place. But we should face the fact that such investigation is an intellectual exercise. Christ wants our love, and once we have given this to Him, He will help us with the virtues. He told us: "Without Me you can do nothing" (John, 15:5). We should be willing to accept this with all our hearts. And having accepted it, we leave the way open for Him to help us. Prayer will not stop us from trying to be virtuous; it will put us in contact with the source of all virtue. Our Lord wants us to come to Him, to walk with Him along the way. He will soon enough show us how to keep up the pace of holiness.

Of course it is quite possible and even probable that we will find it difficult to put out of our minds the activities of the outside world. Our imaginations are ever active and distractions will tempt us to put off our conversation till another time. This would be tragic. Even if we spend our few minutes only trying to talk to Christ, trying to express our love for Him, He will be satisfied, He will understand. All that He asks is that we try. And if we persevere Christ will overcome our distractions and even show us how to turn them into matter for prayer. He said: "I have conquered the world" (John, 16:33).

The importance of mental prayer can never be over-emphasized. It keeps us from the sense enclosed life of the cat; it protects us from the self-consuming pride of the demon. It is the one thing necessary; the image of God placed in us at creation is perfected thru mental prayer. And because Christ is the eternal Image of the Father, in becoming like Him we are perfecting His Image within ourselves. A dynamic union with Christ through
the exercise of the virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity is for us on earth the only way of maintaining our likeness to Him. Mental prayer, conversation with Christ, is the source of this union with Christ; it is by talking to Him that we will learn how we can live the life of man, of man who is meant to live the life of God.

St. Teresa was no fool. She spoke with the Wisdom of the Holy Spirit when she said: “Without mental prayer one becomes either a brute or a demon.” But having seen what these words imply, we are prepared to understand the closing phrases of this sentence: “Give me the greatest sinner: if he makes only a quarter of an hour meditation every day, he will be converted; if he perseveres, he is sure of eternal happiness.”

—James Linus Dolan, O.P.