

# AT PRAYER

Bede Jarrett, O. P.

## INTRODUCTION

In these pages are gathered together from Father Bede Jarrett's Meditations for Lay-folk some thoughts which will help us to understand and practise prayer better and better; an urgent need for all, because nothing is more important in our daily lives than prayer.

Prayer is as necessary for the supernatural life of the soul as the air we breathe is for the life of the body. When we pray, we most truly live. To pray in union with the prayer of Christ is to co-operate gloriously with the divine power that rules creation. Prayer is more powerful than wealth or knowledge—a greater force than all the material forces of the world combined; for prayer is a supernatural force: its efficacy comes from God, from the infinite merits of Christ. Prayer can obtain what only God can give—grace, pardon, the love of God, and eternal life which is the very end and purpose of the divine plan.

Especially in our own sad days is prayer needed when so many perils threaten the peace and unity of the world. Prayer will remind us that we live not only under the rule of the princes of this world, but under the government of the infinitely wise God who only permits evil in order to bring about ultimate good and whose will it is that we should be one with Him through Christ in sincere, humble, confiding, persevering prayer. Pope Pius XI in a letter addressed to the world invites all to work and pray more insistently for the triumph of God's Kingdom. The prayer of a humble soul, he says, is a more powerful influence than the wisdom of philosophers and statesmen because it keeps alive in the world the idea of God.

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## THE UPRAISING OF THE MIND

### I. Prayer must be Intelligent

Prayer has been defined to be the raising up of the mind and heart to God; but it would be more descriptive, and perhaps more accurate, to say that it is the raising up of the heart through the mind to God; for it is a commonplace of conversion that knowledge precedes love. It is true, of course, that the opposite statement would be equally valid, for I cannot know anyone till I am in love (i.e. in sympathy) with them. But though this is so, I must still begin by having some rudimentary knowledge of the existence of that which I love; that is to say, I must at least know of a thing before I can love it. Since, then, prayer means getting into communication with God, it is clear that I have always, consciously or not, to get into my mind some truth about God. Let us suppose a mother is praying to God to save her son from peril. She really has convinced herself (either deliberately or simply, without realizing what she is doing) of two quite definite things: firstly, that God is certainly able to help her; and, secondly, that He can be affected by her loneliness and desolation of heart. In other words, she is holding to two dogmatic truths—the omnipotence and mercy of God. And whenever we analyse prayer, our own or another's, we shall find that at the back of it lies some truth about God which we or they have accepted; and it is only because of that particular truth that we turn to that particular prayer. Thus, again, we often praise God because of His greatness, etc.; i.e., we first believe Him to be great and then praise Him for it; but belief, in any case, comes first. Unless I believed in His mercy or His power or His justice or beauty, or one or other of His many attributes, I should never turn to Him at all.

### II. Prayer Based on Faith

Notice that in all this the word "belief" is used, for our real knowledge of God as He is in Himself comes to us only by faith. Reason can (says the Council of the Vatican) prove the existence of God; but it is at least possible that my reason never has proved it. My reason may never feel convinced by its own reasoning. In any case the real knowledge of God as a supernatural power, with the full heights and depths of His Divine life, cannot obviously be attained to by the reason, except in so far as it is illumined by supernatural light; and it is just this supernatural light that we call faith. It is a vision. No doubt it is true, as Cardinal Newman has admirably phrased it, that the act of faith is partly an

act of will. There must be the wish to believe at the back of me, a movement of the grace of God. All the arguments in the world cannot prove the supernatural status of the Church, for arguments are obviously rational, whereas the supernatural transcends reason. Ultimately, therefore, the mind that says, "I believe," does so because its reason shows that the Church is eminently credible; and its will takes the one further step ("the leap in the dark"), and, under the direct interference of God, completes the act by asserting: "I must believe." Yet in spite of the fact that this act of will is essential, the gift of faith is still in its purpose and in its effect an enlightenment, an apocalypse, a revelation. This vision is an entrance into the kingdom of truth, for it tells us about God and the soul, this life and the after-life. We become as little children in implicit obedience, and gain also the clear sight of a child. Prayer, then, is based on the knowledge of God, therefore on revelation, therefore on faith.

### III. Living Faith will move me to Pray

Consequently when I look at my prayers I must see what part faith or the Creed plays in them. I must get my faith quite clear, or at least as clear as I can, before I can settle down to pray. Before the Crib, or before the Tabernacle, I must begin by making myself conscious of what exactly I believe. I must go over in my mind the significance of the Incarnation; why did He come? what purpose had He in coming? what was He going to effect? what motive had He in coming? etc. I fix upon one single point and try to see really what I know about it. He came, for example, to redeem me. Yes, but what does Redemption mean? It is a common word, frequently on my lips; do I realize what it implies? . . . and so on. This is the only way to pray. Perhaps I begin at once in prayer by thanking or asking or praising; then I find I have nothing more to say; I am used up. Really I have begun all wrong; I have begun in the middle. Let me start always by some act of faith, and then go on quite slowly. Notice the liturgical prayers of the Church. They begin generally in some such fashion as this: "O God, who by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ," etc., i.e., they begin from some dogmatic truth. So, again, Our Lord's own prayer, "Our Father who art in Heaven." This, too, is a piece of information which faith alone makes known to me. If I leave faith aside, no wonder my prayers are dull, monotonous, a bore to me. But, then, I shall have to learn all about my faith? Certainly: I must go back to my catechism. I shall find prayer growing easier as my knowledge of God increases. The two run parallel, prayer and faith; the absence of either, or their disuse, paralyses the practice of the other.

## THE UPRAISING OF THE HEART

### I. Knowledge and Love Intermingled

The first act of prayer is knowledge, the second is love; for I must always remember that the ultimate purpose of prayer, as of all spiritual life, is to get into union with God. For that end was I created, and to that end I must turn all and every supernatural enlightenment. Love is always the end of acquaintanceship with that which is perfect. I know my friends—with a deep and true knowledge, and the knowledge does not remain as though separated off in some separate compartment, having no influence upon life. I know their kindness, generosity, loyalty; and this makes my love itself without any deliberate act on my part increase also very considerably. Just as, again, the more I see the beauty of a thing or a person, the more I am attracted by it. The word "attracted" is very appropriate, for it shows what has happened: the thing or person, in consequence of the increasing evidence of its beauty, actually draws me to it: it does not come into me, but leads me to it. Thus theologians who describe the Beatific Vision of eternal bliss tell us that the real act of possession is an act of intellect; but that once we have with our minds seen God, we cannot help loving Him. Really, no doubt, the reason is that the division of mind from heart is purely artificial; they are both mere functions of the same indivisible soul, which, when once it knows what is lovable, loves it by the same energy. The very appearance of beauty produces its own effect. In prayer, then, we begin by contemplating some fixed mystery or truth, and our heart then burns within us.

### II. Prayer not a Science but a Life

In other words, prayer is not an abstract science or art, but a handicraft of life. It is no use for me to set out in order, however elaborately, article after article of belief: the Mediaevals said: "God taketh not delight in logic"—that is, there is no prayer, no union with God, in merely tabulating our knowledge of Him and describing it accurately, and

remembering it in great detail. All that would be possible without prayer; prayer means that the heart, too, has been touched. The Psalmist sang: "From my heart broke the good word"; and, again, "a flame burst forth." It is not prayer, therefore, when I merely weave theological patterns out of the truths of faith; but it is prayer when, contemplating God as revealed to me, I find Him to be so lovable that my heart longs for His company and for the return of His sympathy. Nor should this be difficult. Any scene in the life of my Divine Master, as recorded in the Gospels, must, as I study it, make more and more evident to me His mercy, His gentleness with sinners who are conscious of their sin, His meekness and humbleness of heart; and as these become more and more evident, surely my love will follow. So also the mere contemplation of any article of the Creed must certainly light up the depths of the mysteries of God at least sufficiently to let us see how really beautiful they must be. The mind explores all these wonderful things only to draw the heart more deeply after it. The mind lights up the loveliness within, and the heart is aflame with the vision disclosed. No one can gaze for long at something which is genuinely beautiful without being caught up in the rapture which the spell of its loveliness must cast.

### III. Prayer need not be Emotional

While, then, I recognize that faith in prayer is intended to lead me on to love, this does not mean that I must wait for a great flame to burst forth. This is, indeed, a matter about which I must be most careful, for I may discourage myself or be led astray by delaying for too long or rushing too impetuously along. By "love," "rapture," "ablaze," nothing more is meant than an inclination to follow God's commandments and live as faith prescribes. It has nothing to do with feelings, emotions. It does not mean that I do not pray if I do not feel love for God in the same way as I feel love for my friends, or that I must go on working out the particular mystery or article of belief until my whole being is stirred and raised to a white-heat of devotion. I am only a beggar, and cannot be a chooser; I must be content with the crumbs that fall from the table of God. No physical delight or appreciation of God's nearness to me is needed, nor is it in any way a sign that my prayer is fruitful; for this may depend rather upon digestion than upon the love of God; in fact the very absence of it may make prayer, bravely persisted in, all the more pleasing in the sight of the Most High. Here, then, the upraising of heart that should follow upon the heels of faith may be unfelt, even unconscious. It is shown rather in the day's work than in the moment's emotions. "If you love Me, keep My commandments. . . . Not he that saith to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' but he that doth the will of My Father, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven." These are the proofs of our genuineness in prayer. Anyway, I must be satisfied with what is given me, nor should I seek to say much. The prayer in the Garden was but the repetition between long silences of one single petition. By faith, then, is His beauty unveiled; and the vision of this beauty sets my heart on fire with love.

## THE METHOD OF PRAYER

### I. Friendly Converse with God

The whole doctrine of prayer from its practical standpoint can be summed up by saying that it is talking to God as a friend talks with a friend. That is, indeed, the best test of my prayers. Should I venture to talk to anyone I was fond of in the way I talk to God? We read in Scripture of God walking and talking with Adam in the cool of the evening, and we say to ourselves: "That is perfect prayer." What does it matter in what shape God appeared, or whether He appeared at all! At least imagination grasps what the sacred author intended. Or, again, when we find it written of Enoch that he walked with God till God took him," we say that our ideal of prayer could not be better described. Or lastly, for the quotations could be multiplied to any extent, when we first come across this wonderful sentence, are we not immediately conscious of what is meant: "God spoke to Moses, face to face, as a man is wont to speak to his friend." Now here we have in a very brief epitome all that, from a practical point of view, we need to know about prayer. It is simply the converse between my soul and God, to be carried on in precisely the same fashion of language and the same pregnant silences that characterize my own talks with my friends. These must be the models by which I individually test the value and the sincerity of my prayers. Nothing else will do, nor will anything else for long hold or attract me. Prayers will ultimately bore me unless I carefully follow out these directions. First, then, the matter of prayer is originated by the mind out of the articles of faith, and the result is that the heart leaps up to love God in consequence, and this love itself is expressed in the simple language and silences of friendship.

## II. As Simple and Natural as Talking

Now this "talking as a friend" involves certain consequences. It involves a view of prayer that should make it very much more easy for me. For example, prayer must be perfectly natural. I must speak to God in my own language, or else I cannot hope to pray frequently nor well. I may in my life ape the thoughts and style of another, but only for a while, since I soon wear his garments threadbare or show occasionally the real clothing that is beneath. My conversation with friends is perfectly easy. I have no character to keep up with them; they know me too well to be taken in by what I do not mean, and will not be at all impressed by any pose. So with them I lay all that aside, and appear as they know me to be. I say exactly what I think in the language that is most spontaneous and natural to me. Let me see, then, that the same naturalness is to be seen in my prayers. If my temperament is emotional, my prayers should be emotional; but if by temperament I am very matter-of-fact, what good would there be in my attempting to use the rapturous language of ecstasy? The sooner I learn that I cannot fit myself in to another's prayers, the better for my own peace of soul. They will either be too large or too small; in any case will only hamper my movements. Just as ready-made boots do not fit, so neither do ready-made prayers: the former blister the feet, the latter blister the soul. My prayers should therefore be my own, and I should ask only for what I honestly want. It is a mockery to ask God to take me to Himself if I cannot really say that I want to go; and it is a lie to speak of myself as the greatest sinner in the world if I know that I certainly am not.

## III. Prayer has its Silences

Quite honestly, then, I will speak to God in prayer as a friend speaks with a friend. That at least will be my ideal, and I shall do nothing deliberately that conflicts with it. Am I, therefore, to cast aside all my prayer-books? Not at all. It is true that as far as possible I should endeavour to do without them, for surely my needs, my reasons for thankfulness, and the motives that I have for praising God, should supply me with abundance of material for talking to Him. But undoubtedly from time to time I do find myself strangely silent; perhaps I am really only very tired. Still, it is helpful always to have a book, provided that we realize it to be merely a model and not the only way. Yet even here, at these times when our hearts can say nothing from sheer weariness, or from whatever other cause, we should still keep to our test and use the privilege of friendship. For surely one chief way in which friends differ from acquaintances is that we can be silent with friends, but allow no pause in the conversation when we are with an acquaintance: should this last happen, we grow uncomfortable and cast about for something to talk about, but to be in the friend's presence is joy enough. Conscious of each other, we are content; walking side by side, we may say never a word, "make" no conversation; or sit, as on either side of the fireplace sit old cronies, speaking not at all, yet happy. For silence expresses things too large to be packed into language; and out of the fulness of the heart the mouth most often cannot speak. Hence, when I come to Communion, or make a visit to my Friend and find I have nothing to say, let me say nothing, be silent, wait for Him to speak; at least be glad that I am near Him.

## DISTRACTIONS

### I. Distractions to be Expected

It is a constant source of annoyance to find how full of distraction our best prayers become. Hardly have I settled down to my devotions, made the sign of the Cross, and put myself in the presence of God, than I begin to find myself overwhelmed by endless thoughts which have no connection with my prayers. I suddenly wake to discover that my mind has been wandering along, considering all the businesses of my life, my anxieties, my hopes and ambitions. As soon as I am conscious of this, I go back to my prayers and endeavour once again to get into conversation with God. Nor shall I find, unless I am rather unusual, that even now I am really any more safe than when I began; probably the whole time I am on my knees my mind is practically occupied with the troublesome task of disengaging itself from thoughts that it has no desire to consider. At Mass or Holy Communion it is possible that I have longer intervals of devout contemplation; but even during these sacred moments souls that are really longing to love God with fervour and generosity are not seldom absolutely overborne by the inrush of distractions.

All this is troublesome and distressing to me, but that is all; troublesome and distressing to me, but not sinful: for sin implies a determination and deliberation that are here obviously absent. The only harmful result can be when I am

so wearied by my incessant struggles, so impatient at the apparent emptiness of all my prayers, that I finally in sheer disgust give up the whole attempt, in the thought that I was not meant by God for this kind of exercise.

## II Distractions not necessarily Sinful

Now though it is exceedingly troublesome to have to wage war thus endlessly throughout all my praying time, it is certainly not at all to be unexpected. From a purely natural point of view, from the physical aspect of it, it seems certain that once I put myself in a state of quietness and have no very definite movement to catch and hold my attention, all the deeper and noisier interests of my life will at once spring into renewed activity. I have silenced the outward clash and clamour of existence, and the persistent inward battle-cries are bound to make themselves heard. I may have paid no attention to them, but they were there all the time; much as I lose the consciousness of the ticking of the clock, and only the ensuing silence reminds me that all the time it was really heard, but not attended to. Much in the same fashion, merely entering into church or kneeling quietly in my room, I am in reality allowing the repeating echo of my anxieties to be heard: all the interests of the day and the deeper mental impressions have been stored by that subconscious memory which never forgets. There is, then, nothing unexpected in all this, for it is the release of perfectly natural energies; and, what is more important, there is nothing sinful, for sin implies wilfulness. Now it is clear that whatever direct wilfulness there is, whatever will there is, consists in the effort with which I endeavour to get back to my prayers; for the whole trouble of distractions is that they come of themselves, and involve no effort whatever. Distractions, therefore, are not ordinarily sinful, and only become so when, grown conscious of their presence, we deliberately pursue them.

## III. Be Patient with Distractions

When, then, do distractions come to us from the evil one, if they are not sinful? To this we may best make answer by saying that they do not all come from the evil one, but arise quite simply from purely natural reasons such as we have already described; and they can be only indirectly traced to the devil in the sense that the weakness of our mind is due to the effects of sin, original and actual sin. But of course every way of assault comes to the hands of the spirit of evil; and these may quite easily make use of distractions which are not in themselves sinful: for the effect of all these troublesome interruptions of prayer on souls timid and impatient is to make them inclined to give up prayer. They are a great source of discouragement, and whatever tends to depress the human spirit is the very best ally that the devil can have. He counts on all this, and hopes that my impatience under them may do me a great deal of harm and spoil my efforts at a close union with God. My meditations, grown dull with distractions, will be omitted, my prayers become more seldom; and the food of the soul being denied it, the soul must starve. I have therefore to be patient under the cross and continue my devotions unflinching; all the more persistently because of my very distractions, for my need of God's strength is greater. One good way of getting rid of distractions is, as soon as I am aware of them, to pray for that person or matter which causes them; if, despite this, the same trouble continues, I must resign myself to the good hands of God, nor lose hope in my efforts after faith and love.

## THE "OUR FATHER"

### I. Prayer more Important than Prayers

One day the Apostles made this request to Our Lord: "Teach us how to pray." Now so many questions must have been put to Him that have not been recorded, that we are very grateful that this has been set down, for it gives us His whole answer. But before coming to His words, let us just notice this, that the Apostles do not ask to be taught prayers, but prayer. They do not say, "Teach us some prayers," but, "Teach us how to pray," which is obviously of infinitely more importance. It was just this view of things that Our Lord Himself insisted on, for He does not reply to them by telling them to use a particular form of prayer. His words were, "Thus shalt thou pray," not, "This is what you must pray." That is, He simply confirms their own attitude, implied in their very particular question: He answers them that the particular words He was using were meant merely as a model. Prayers may be most beautiful and most touching, but they are useless unless they are really intended. To repeat words is not all that is meant by prayer. The Apostles had numberless prayers in the Sacred Scriptures, such as David and the Prophets had composed under the

inspiration of God; but they felt it was not prayers, but the attitude of the soul in prayer, which it was most important they should discover. Not, therefore, was their request, "Teach us a new prayer," but, "Teach us how to pray." And Our Lord's answer endorsed their supposition; not "This" but "Thus" shalt thou pray, not "in these words," but "in this fashion."

## II. A Perfect Scheme of Prayer

This distinction is of great importance for us to realize. Our Lord never intended that we should merely learn by heart the Our Father and recite it day and night. No doubt it is very beautiful and very simple, and can be learnt quite easily by anyone who cares to use it. But that is not the purpose (though it is one purpose) of His gift of it to us. He evidently desires that we should take it to pieces, study its composition, and make it the model of our conversation with Him and the Father. Obviously it is impossible for this to be done in this book, for it would require a great number of meditations to work through the whole and find the meaning of each carefully (because divinely) intended phrase. Moreover, the real benefit would be lost, for the true value would only be appreciated when we had done it for ourselves. I must study it carefully, petition by petition, noting the distinct meaning of the words, the arrangement of the order, and the gradual development of the ideas of fatherhood, etc.

## III. It meets our Daily Needs

But this much may perhaps be set down, on the understanding that we may use another's remarks on condition that we judge and reject them if they do not touch the personal note which dominates the harmony of our own lives. First, then, it is worthy of comment to observe how easy and conversational the Lord's Prayer is. There are no appeals to God, as though He required forms of address different from anyone else. Indeed, this prayer is little else than a series of remarks made by a child to its father. The very want of connection between each petition, the staccato notes that mark off phrase from phrase, seem to suggest that it should be said very slowly, pausing after each group of notes to let their meaning and harmony echo to the base of the soul. Then, again, it is also worthy of comment that the child does not at once think of itself or its needs, but turns instinctively to the excellence and greatness of its Father: "Hallowed be Thy Name." Without request or words of thanks, it raises its voice in praise, desirous only that this praise should evermore increase till the valleys of earth echo as gloriously with His greatness as do the hills of the heavenly country. Only when this is done does it turn to its own needs and venture to plead for their contentment; and even so, it makes no request for luxuries or high spiritual favours. Bread only does it require, its urgent, instant, daily need; and it does not soar above such an unromantic view of the life of the soul as supposes it only not to be led into temptation, but delivered from evil. Lord, teach me also how to pray!

## CONTEMPLATION

### I. Contemplation is for All

The particular form of prayer that is here recommended, namely contemplation, will no doubt sound too ideal, too far up in the clouds to be of any practical use to the ordinary individual. It has been so shut out from our ordinary notions of the sanctity required from men and women that the result has been that it is relegated in most people's minds to the cloister. Contemplation! Oh, yes; monks and nuns may contemplate, but not lay folk! That is the tyranny of a prejudice which is based on a misconception; for contemplation is an essential to all those who would "live godly in Christ Jesus." Prayer is too often robbed of all its effects, is reduced to hard and fast rules, is mapped out and labelled and regimented till it hardly seems at all to be the language of the heart. It becomes instead (and the elaborate instructions of so many books on mental prayer amply bear out this view) a highly artificial science, where notices meet us at every step, burly policemen in the guise of the theologians bar our passage, and definite and well-ordered paths, macadamized and straight and uninteresting, stretch out in military fashion to the skyline. All adventure has gone, all the personal touches, and all the contemplation. We are too worried and harassed to think of God. The instructions are so detailed and insistent that we forget what we are trying to learn. As a consequence we get bored, and so no doubt does God.

## II. The Enraptured Gazing on God

But to contemplate is perfectly simple; to contemplate is to gaze. The Egyptian statues seem crystallized contemplation: they sit so silently after the fashion of the changeless East, with their hands upon their knees and their eyes fixed at a dead level, gazing far out into the even desert. The statues, too, of Buddha, despite their gesture and their corpulency, and the self-satisfied air they usually suggest, have about them the sense of restfulness. They are still and contemplative. Even the writhing figure of the Crucified, stripped of all accidental dignity and composure, yet by its hushed and brooding inertness speaks of deep-souled peace; and we are sure that the prayer of our Master on the hill-side by the lake or in the garden of Mount Olivet, for all its agony and its oppression at the near thought of death, was the still prayer of contemplation, the gazing with questioning yet patient eyes upon the infinite being of God. This surely is prayer—an upraising of the heart through the mind, a speech with God such as friend with friend, or such as lover has with beloved when the mere sight and presence is enough to make glad the heart. It is prayer; but surely it is a far easier and more natural form than the over-busy and irritating attitude I try to take up towards my soul. "Martha, Martha, one thing is necessary; Mary has chosen the better part."

## III. Faith leads to Contemplation

To achieve this I must begin by faith. It is only by true knowledge that I shall be led to gaze on God; it is only by an accurate acquaintance with Eternal Truth and Beauty that I shall be able to appreciate all that contemplation means. My mind, lit up by the truth of Revelation which the Church has taught me, is fixed upon some mystery or portion of a mystery. I try to think out the deep meaning of it, then reach the further end of all my knowledge, and wait before the Truth. It will appear to me at first dimly, looming out from the darkness, where my own ignorance must leave it. Slowly, as I gaze, the details, unguessed, unnoticed, will appear, emerging against the more shadowed background. Across the distance steals, perhaps, the fragrance of God; I can even hear the whisper of His voice. Gradually I find that there are inner meanings to all these sanctities of God, which come to those only who patiently await the unfolding of the seed of the Kingdom. All this is contemplation: not preludes nor composition, nor colloquies, but the bare, naked truth, clearing in outline to the soul that is content to watch in silence at the feet of Christ. By faith, then, I learn from the Church the truths of God. These I understand in the sense in which she explains them. Then with deep trust I watch and listen for the Voice of God.

## SILENCE

### I. Every Soul needs Silence

Silence is no less necessary for those out of the cloister than for those within. For religious, monks and nuns, it must of course be more rigorous, more material, if such an expression be allowed for that of which the essence is the absence of matter; but for those who live in, but not of, the world, it must be no less faithfully kept. Nay, rather because of the very rush and tumult of life, the need for it in the souls of those whose business it is to pass their days close to the humming and whirling machinery of existence is far more pressing and urgent. Even physically for such as have their time fully occupied, crowded with incident and crossed with the lives of so many others, there seems a recognized need for a break from time to time for perfect rest. The necessity of a sabbath, or a day of rest, betokens how human nature cries for a lessening of the tension at least every now and then. We men, whose lives are filled up with such activities that the whole being is riveted in fixed attention on our work, require moments, not simply of relaxation for amusement but also for mere and sheer silence. To be serious is even easier than to be amused, and requires far less effort than to be amusing; hence our very pleasures take their tithe of our energy and do not of themselves re-create the soul. For this re-creation, as for creation itself, silence must precede speech; and out of the stillness alone, as of old, can leap the word.

### II. Silence, the Mother of Thought

The soul, then, like the body, has need of silence, which is the necessary condition for recollection and contemplation. Such a silence as this means also the actual cessation of all distracting sights, sounds, perceptions; it supposes as part of its essence a really physical silence (a contradiction in words, but not in ideas) as required for a

few minutes daily, or at least from time to time during the week: for silence is the mother of thought. To talk is to expound, and to expound requires premeditated matter, and to meditate requires silence. Am I not conscious very often how much I need this silence? Does it flash in upon me during my conversation that I am frequently making use of expressions and arguments which I cannot really justify and which do not seem fully to contain and bear out the construction I put upon them? I must admit that a very great deal that I pretend to take for granted has only a vague significance, hazy and incomplete. There is much that I dread being questioned about. Does not my soul loathe many of my crowded and jaded hours? My vapid and empty conversations—my endless gossip, the baldness of my ideas, the imitative nature of my remarks, the dull and platitudinous moralizing in which I so frequently indulge at the expense of others—repeatedly show, even from a human point of view, the need I have of thought, and therefore first of silence. Otherwise we become mere gramophones, grinding out the records composed by the labours of others.

### III. Our Silence is God's Opportunity

I must be silent, therefore, that I may speak. But this after all is the lowest reason that can be urged; there is at least one other that is more commanding. I must be silent indeed that I may speak, but silent also that I may listen. If I am always talking, how can I hear what others are saying; above all, how can I hear the voice of God? He will make no effort to out-shout my own words, nor the clamour of life that I deliberately pursue: His is the still small voice that is heard only when the whirlwind has passed. Now it is of supreme importance to me to hear what God has to say, far more important than His hearing what I have to say; and just as in prayer it may well happen that I reproach God with never giving me His whispered counsel or comfort and yet never with my own persistent speech allow Him opportunity to "get in a word edgeways," so that it may well happen in life that I make no efforts to catch His voice. It is the still waters that are ruffled by the slightest breath of wind, and it is only the silent souls that hear the slightest whisper of God. Yet the loss of all this to me! what marvelous opportunities perhaps came in my way, what needed advice, wisdom, love, were thrown away upon me! for I was so disturbed, fussy, noisy, that the Divine Word passed me by unheeded, deafened by the tumult of earthly things. Let me learn silence in my life, for God does not shout.

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