

“THINKING IN THE HEART”

A Meditation

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Books Are Not Enough

IN the course of life book-learning will give but little help in the trials and needs and all the ills that we are heirs to, but experience of a little daily interior prayer will leave an impress and a memory which will give strength. Interior prayer, meditation, is an experience of the soul. It does something to us and we react to it. Vocal prayer and the reading of books may exercise the mind only, and leave the heart and deeper parts of us unmoved. To savour God interiorly in mental prayer gives consolation, strength, and courage when books and book-learning fail us.

Each Day Has A Cross-Roads

Within each one of us there is a recurring crisis. The crisis is the effect of the sin of Adam and Eve. Our inheritance from the Fall is a darkness of the intellect, a weakening of the will, and a strong inclination to evil. There is the downward pull of the old Adam and there is also another force within us aspiring to higher things. Each day we stand at a cross-roads where we must make a decision. Shall we surrender to the weakness of our own nature, or shall we say and act “no” to its promptings? One book in the Old Testament devotes itself to that problem. It is the book of Job whose experience proved to him that life on earth is a warfare. In the New Testament, St. Paul in his epistles tells us of the two forces within him pulling against each other, the call of the spirit and the drag of the flesh. The same story is found in the life of every saint. The saints are the great people of earth because they mastered themselves. The path to holiness for them, and for you and me, is that of interior or mental prayer. In overcoming our passions and building up the weak points in our characters it is the soul, and not the intellect, that must be exercised.

We Do Not Grow By The Intellect Alone

Cardinal Newman, who was an intellectual of the first order, assures us that no man can make himself a better person by the intellect alone. In a memorable passage in his lectures on “The Idea of a University”, he writes:

“Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk, then may you hope, with such a delicate instrument as the human intellect, to curb those giants, the passion and the pride of man.” In a fine address to the youth of the world Pope Pius XII pleaded with them “not to have religion in the intellect alone but above all in the heart.”

Thinking in the heart brings one nearer to God than reading or saying prayers which are often mechanical, meriting the rebuke of Christ: “Those people honour Me with their lips while their hearts are far from Me.”

The quickest flight to God is an act of mental, wordless prayer, and it can be made any time, anywhere. In a flash we are in His presence where we can consult Him. In mental prayer we raise our souls to God Who is the Senior Partner in the association of God and me. This is a most fruitful thought, namely, that God is in all we think, and say, and do, for He is a Partner. God and I are partners in my striving for personal holiness, consequently God never forgets me, and I can never become insignificant in His eyes. No matter what happens to me, I really mean so much to Him that if I withhold my love He misses it sadly. It is in mental prayer that I learn how important I am to God, and how highly He thinks of the partnership of God and me. A saint once revealed after death the greatest bliss of Heaven, when she said: “I am so loved.” Another saint cried out in amazement on his death-bed: “How He loves me!” We can never really understand from reading books or listening to sermons, that God loves us completely. This truth must come from our hearts.

The Door Opens From Within

To capture the individual for God it is essential that God should capture the individual first and that is best done through mental prayer. Interior prayer is the way to digest for ourselves what we hear and read. In meditation we

examine the inner man who is growing within us and who is directing our lives. The picture “The Light of the World,” painted by Holman Hunt, shows Christ in a garden at midnight. In His left hand He is holding a lantern and His right hand is knocking on a heavily panelled door. When the painting was unveiled, an art critic remarked: “Mr. Hunt, you have not finished your work. There is no handle on that door.”

“That,” said the artist, “is the door to the human heart—it can be opened only from the inside.”

Modern man is frustrated because he refuses to open the door of his heart to God. In the lovely words of St. John, Christ pleads that we open the door to admit Him: “Behold I stand at the gate and knock. If any man shall hear My voice, and open to Me the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me” (Apoc. 3: 20). What more intimate picture could the Evangelist paint than that of Christ sitting and supping with us! The latch is on our side and not on God’s, for God breaks down no doors if we bar His entrance. Sometimes we even run away from Him, like chicks in flight from a mother hen: “How often would I have gathered together thy children, as a hen doth gather her chicks under her wings, and thou wouldst not” (Matt. 23: 37) . Why do we behave so? It is hard to understand. But some men love darkness rather than light. Our prayer should be that of the man born blind: “Lord, that I may see!” I need to see myself and my life in the light of eternity.

Alone On The Silent Hills

Frequently during His public life Christ spent the night in prayer. Many a time He invited His apostles to come apart for a while and to think things over. When the pressure of missionary work, with the bitter trials of its disappointments, weighed upon Him, and the littleness of His fellows lay heavy upon Him, He went up alone to the hills. There among the strong, silent hills He found balm for His depressed spirit and fresh strength to continue His labours. Before and after a heavy programme of preaching He sought the companionship of His Father on the hills.

In mental prayer we can go up into the hills and learn to know ourselves. Unless we find time for meditation we shall never know the state of our spiritual health, we shall never know ourselves. To counter the mass-regimentation of this age of queues and drafts, and the communistic philosophy which does not recognise the individual, and scoffs at the dignity of a created soul, we should practise the advice of the Greeks: “Know thyself,” and follow the wisdom of the saints: “Attend to thyself.” There is no place for self-deception in the training to look in upon oneself.

Watch Yourself Go By

*“Iust stand aside and watch yourself go by;
Think of yourself as ‘he’ instead of ‘I’.
Pick flaws; find faults; forget the man is you,
And strive to make your estimate ring true.
The fault of others then will dwarf and shrink,
Love’s chain grown stronger by one mighty link,
When you with ‘he’ as substitute for ‘I’
Have stood aside and watched yourself go by:’*

Christ showed by His example the inward way that leads to His Kingdom, and to the discovery of the true potentialities of one’s soul. In His eyes the inside of a man was much more important than the outside. The health of a plant, of an animal, and of a child flows from within.

*“It is not what you say that counts,
Or merely what you do, ‘
Tis not the furbelow and flounce,
It’s the inside of you:’*

Poor poetry, indeed, but words worth remembering for their message.

To Pause and Think

In mental prayer we retire from the fuss and noise of the world around us and learn to savour God interiorly. Through self-questioning we prepare the soil of our hearts for the seeds of holiness of life. Meditation helps us to

catch a glimpse of the beauty of God and like St. Augustine we sigh:

“O beauty of beauties, too late have I loved Thee.”

Pauses are the best things in life. It is foolish to rely too much on anyone, to lean exclusively on a particular friend. God alone is the only One to depend upon absolutely. He will never fail us. Adolescents are in danger of being dominated by the gang, accepting the gang standards, and following the gang like sheep. Hero-worship is also a danger, for one's personality can be warped, crushed, and absorbed by too much hero-worship. In meditation we pause awhile in our enthusiasm to probe into the motives behind our thoughts, words, and actions. The printed word can also become a tyrant. I have appealed to generations of school children to shy at words as a young horse does when something unusual crosses his path. The trainer gently brings the horse back again and again until fear is replaced by understanding.

Every human being builds his own character; no one else can do it for him. The temple of life and mind can be built by none other than the inward dweller. The function of a parent, teacher, or priest is to stimulate, to inspire, to guide, not to mould and make. Home, school, and Church present the truth, the religious truth, the scientific truth, the literary truth and we grow in the truth in the measure that we do the truth. We learn to live by living, and another cannot live for us. The power that makes for moral integrity is within us and we alone can free it unto accomplishment.

Periods of Silence

We are called to build better persons out of ourselves. The great creations in life were planned and executed in silence. From the beginning holiness of life has prospered most in periods of silence. Living is a giving, giving what one knows, giving what one is. The quality of inwardness must be first practised before we can give of our best. What is within us vitalizes, freshens, and fertilizes our thoughts, our words, and our actions. Our lives will bear fruit in proportion to what is within us. Each one of us gives what he is. We cannot kindle in another a spark of the fire which Christ came on earth to enkindle, unless within our own breasts a fire is burning. Christ says of His life: “I have come to cast fire upon earth, and what will I but that it be enkindled.”

A man grows from within. A man's moral strength is within him. No man can fail who possesses courage within. No one became a better person by leaning on others. Character is built on doing the homely, everyday duties as well as we can. Courage counts most in life, courage to make the best of what is here and not whine for more, courage to fight oneself, and to lick oneself by attacking the weaknesses in one's character. That courage will thrive in the silence of mental prayer.

The Blight of Externalism

One of my professors at the Catholic University, Washington, D.C., supplied the preface to a book of mine whose title is “Building Character From Within”. He wrote: “We are living in the midst of circumstances that conspire greatly to impede the development of the quality of inwardness. Externals dominate our existence and cause us to live outside of ourselves. At an ever-increasing tempo, things are happening all around us, distracting us, over-stimulating us, leaving us scant time and little inclination to pay attention to the things that are happening inside of ourselves.”

The same Professor Johnson, Dean of the Faculty of Education, looks over the schools of the United States and here is his pregnant comment: “The blight of externalism has spread to our schools and means of education. We have put our faith in devices and techniques and mechanized our routine. We have developed better methods of testing and of evaluating our educational product only to turn about and make a fetish of the Test and the quantitative standard. Only now are we beginning to awaken to the fact that true education is always a human process, and that the achievement of immediate and more or less external objectives is not necessarily a guarantee that those deep and profound changes have been wrought in the heart and soul of the learner that are of the real essence of true education.”

That criticism is true also of Australian schools. Teaching school can never be like working on the assembly line in an automobile factory. The quantitative standard concerns itself with the visible, and what it cannot measure, tabulate, or tag is minimized in value, or just ignored.

An Inner Strength Faces the Difficult

Externalism as a goal will hold us as long as we are interested, but it has not within it the power to call us to continued effort even though we are bored. Nothing lasts unless it flows from a perennial source within us, as a river trickles from its source in the hills, gathers strength and continues flowing to the sea because its source does not dry up. A man will continue to do the unpleasant tasks and difficult duties as long as there is an inner source of power to draw upon. The quality of inwardness alone can save us, because it sends us back upon ourselves; like the prodigal son we return to ourselves:

“And returning to himself, he said: ‘How many hired servants in my father’s house abound with bread, and I here perish with hunger? I will arise, and will go to my father, and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee; I am not now worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.’ And rising he came to his father. And when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and running to him, fell upon his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him: ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee. I am not now worthy to be called thy son.’”

“And the father said to his servants: ‘Bring forth quickly the first robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat and make merry. Because this my son was dead, and is come to life again: was lost and is found.’ And they began to make merry” (St. Luke XV, 17-24) .

This joyous reception by God of the prodigal son awaits all who think in the heart, all who return to themselves. So many of us are just half-alive, lacking earnestness in God’s service, because we do not pause awhile to look in upon ourselves.

Only The Silent Hear

When the London children were evacuated to the country during the blitz they could not sleep because of the quietness. Modern man lives amid a roar of voices becoming louder and louder. He dreads silence, silence around him, silence in his heart, because it is in the silence that fear begins to claw, the fear of failure and the fear of death. The Russians have a proverb: “The pig sees nothing of the sky,” for he never lifts his head from the constant search for something to eat and to drink. So it is for man in today’s world. Materialism provides so much to scramble for, so much to compete for, that man may go through life with his eyes on the ground, never lifting them to the eternal hills where Jesus Christ awaits an invitation to come to him and to abide in his heart. Man’s ears are deafened by the screaming high gears of progress so that they hear not the calm of His voice; man’s eyes that should see Him in so many guises are dazzled by the glitter of and the glare of the neon, and man’s feet that should tread so surely on the way that is Christ, are led away into so many dead-ending bypaths.

In the silence of a quiet moment we can have Christ our friend with us. We know He liked the quiet of the House of Bethany, not as a setting for preaching or for working miracles, but just to be in the company of His friends. We can feel the Presence of Christ within us if we go apart from the din of daily life and in silence listen to His voice.

Silence is not a Vacuum

This quiet and silent moment is not a vacuum into which rush foolish flights of the imagination, useless recollections of the past, worries about the future; in a word, building castles in the air is not the interior recollection wherein one chats and lives with Christ. The first station of the Way of the Cross asks us to meditate on the silence of Jesus during His Passion. He has no word for Herod, few for Pilate, and seven short ones from the Cross. Though His tongue was silent His thoughts spoke unceasingly to His Eternal Father. The practice of His life on earth of being in constant touch with His Eternal Father continued throughout the silence of His Passion.

Eternal silence does not mean leaving a blank within us, into which worldly considerations crowd. No, the silence of the lips is but a condition, necessary no doubt, for an ardent chat with Christ within us. We must banish creatures, put away all that may distract us, and turn towards Him praying earnestly:

“Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.”

The Understanding Heart of Solomon

When Solomon, a young man of seventeen, sat upon the throne of His father David, the Lord appeared to him, saying: "Ask what thou wilt that I should give thee." Solomon said: "O Lord God, Thou hast made Thy servant King instead of David my father. And I am but a child. Give, therefore, to thy servant an understanding heart, to judge Thy people and discern between good and evil." And the Lord said to Solomon: "Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life or riches, nor the lives of thy enemies, but hast asked for thyself wisdom to discern judgment, behold, I have given thee a wise and understanding heart; insomuch that there had been no one like thee before thee, nor shall arise after thee. Yea, and the things also which thou didst not ask, I have given thee: to wit, riches and glory, so that no one hath been like thee among the Kings in all days here before."

As God promised, Solomon became not only the wisest, but the most powerful and magnificent of the Kings of Israel. Solomon taught his people:

"Refuse not wisdom, and she will keep thee. Take possession of wisdom, acquire prudence; lay hold of her and she will raise thee up; through her thou wilt receive honour and when thou hast embraced her she will heap favours upon thy head and put upon thee a crown of glory."

On these words of wisdom St. Jerome comments: "Truly he who meditates day and night on the law of the Lord becomes with years more teachable, more formed through experience, wiser through the passage of time, and in his old age he gathers the sweetest fruits of his former labours."

What a blessing to earn is peace and confidence in one's old age! The body weakens with the years' burdens but the spirit grows in wisdom through thinking in the heart. If we could put the ideal of a happy and contented old age in a convincing manner to modern youth, vocations to the religious life would grow because such a life guarantees a peaceful close. As true wisdom consists in showing God by our actions that we love Him, consequently, the life of a good priest and of a holy religious is wise indeed.

"Teach the Hearts of Thy Faithful"

The Collect for Pentecost Sunday, the official prayer of the Church to the Holy Spirit, says:

"O God, Who on this day didst teach the hearts of Thy faithful people by the light of Thy Holy Spirit, grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things and ever rejoice in His holy consolation." In the Mass for Pentecost Sunday the Church gives us the most beautiful and most essential of all ejaculatory prayers, because from the Holy Ghost, that "sweet Guest of our soul," flows all our supernatural life. The Church prays:

"Come, O Holy Spirit, and fill the hearts of Thy faithful, and kindle in them the fire of Thy love."

Wisdom, and its peace of mind and serenity of soul is within the heart. The secret of sanctity and happiness is found in thinking in the heart. If every day during five minutes, we silence our imagination, close our eyes to things of sense, and our ears to earthy sounds in order to enter into ourselves, and there in the sanctuary of our baptised soul, which is the Temple of the Holy Ghost, we speak to our Divine Guest, saying:

«O Holy Spirit, soul of my soul, I adore Thee

Enlighten, guide, strengthen. and console me.

Tell me what I should do; give me Thy orders.

I promise to be submissive in all that

Thou desirest of me.

I accept all that Thou allowest to happen to me.

Grant only to me to know Thy Will."

If we do this each day, we shall pass our lives happily, serene and consoled, even in the midst of pains, because grace will be in proportion to our trials, giving us strength to bear them. And should we live to an old age, we shall be at peace within and confidently await death full of merit. Cardinal Mercier assures us that "this submission to the Holy Spirit is the secret of sanctity."

The prophet says: "I will lead her into solitude and there I will speak to her heart." The practice of silence is essential if we would become holy. But it is a silence of the tongue and outward senses that we may speak more to Him within us. Thinking in the heart will make us His instruments and all we do, pray, suffer, and love, we do

“through Him and with Him and in Him: “What a challenging motto for life these words of the Canon propose! “PER IPSUM, ET CUM IPSO, ET IN IPSO!”

Each time the soul returns to herself she finds Jesus there. What an all-embracing philosophy of living is contained in acts of the Presence of God within us 1 We hear often these days of “Co-existence:’ That in the spiritual order is unthinkable, God and His enemy cannot reside in the same soul. We must choose God or Satan; we cannot plan a coexistence of God’s Will and the world’s ways.

Acts of the Presence of God

Jesus Christ, our model, kept His Eternal Father constantly in His thoughts. As a Babe lying on the straw at Bethlehem, as a Boy bending over the carpenter’s bench at Nazareth, as a Man walking the roads of Judea, and as a hanging on the Cross, Christ had His Eternal Father’s Will in His heart. No work or pain could wrench His mind from God the Father Whose Will He was on earth to do. His was the perfect life, at peace within, and to the world outside always cheerful. And the secret of it was: “For I do always the things that please Him” (St. John 8: 29).

Only mortal sin destroys the union of Christ and us. Whether we think of it or not we are incorporated with Christ Who is within us. What a pity we waste such a lever of holiness! To become holy then think of Him Who abides with us. St. Teresa warns us that “all sins are committed because we do not think of God as really present within us but imagine Him as very far away.” We sin because we do not keep ourselves in His Presence through a whispered word of love, or a thought of Him Whom we carry about with us. Because of our Guest within we must be careful without, watching our senses lest they insult Him.

“He Will tell us the Answer’—Pope St. Pius X

St. Pius X learned as Pope to live constantly in the Presence of God. He was a man of our own times who could apply to himself the guiding principle of St. Paul: “And I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Gal. 2: 20). Frequently during a conversation St. Pius X would stop for a moment to say: “Let us reflect that God is watching our every thought and word.”

His secretary, friend, and confidant for the eleven years of his reign, Cardinal Merry del Val, says of him: “In all his activities the Servant of God was led by supernatural reasoning which showed that he was always in the Presence of God. In the more important matters he would look at the crucifix and exclaim: ‘He will tell us the answer.’”

Before the most difficult decision of his Pontificate, his refusal to compromise with the French Government even though it meant a total loss of Church property and revenue, St. Pius X spent the whole night prostrate before the Tomb of the First Vicar on earth, St. Peter, begging light and strength.

Even in solemn diplomatic audiences, when many non-Catholics attended, St. Pius X recalled to the distinguished gathering the simple fact of the Presence of God.

In the coat of arms adopted by St. Alphonsus M. Liguori for his Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer there is the all-seeing eye of God to remind the Redemptorists that acts of the Presence of God are a fruitful source of holiness of life.

Thinking in the heart is really an exercise of the Presence of God within us. Let us conclude this meditation by saying a prayer by Cardinal Newman.

“May He support us all the day long, till the shades lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then in His mercy may He give us a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at last. Amen.”

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