

meditation, that we meet dryness wherever we turn . . . that we are, in fact, on tiptoe reaching over the cupboard-top, and cannot grasp our object—God. Suppose all this—then the signal light is certainly at ‘Go’. Yes, go ahead, happy souls, in darkness unseeing, in dryness unfeeling, in loneliness unknowing. This is indeed the time for courage and perseverance, which the rich days of meditation and joy have been fertilising, because now is the time for the seed of prayer, being sown in good ground, to die that it may yield fruit; the Word must go that the Spirit may come, to ‘teach you all things’. Many of us will want to turn back, many good men will encourage us to do so, but we must go on just the same, confidently surrendering, willing to drop into space on the faith that God’s love intangibly supports us. Now and again our finger-tips touch heaven: most of the time, the cupboard is very tall, very dark, nakedly unyielding. But all the same, the deep knowledge is there that all things are worth while, if we but keep on tiptoe, until God gives us the spiritual stature sufficient to unite us to himself.



## MEDITATION OR MENTAL PRAYER?

BY

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**I**T is consoling at times to reflect that whereas men have prayed to God from their earliest origins, it is only comparatively recently that they have probed and analysed the structure and development of prayer. Consoling, because of the vast and ever growing literature on the subject which, if anything, becomes more remote and obscure.

In the recently published Paternoster Series (Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1s. 6d. each), four of the six booklets are directly concerned with prayer—all are reprints—and are written by well-known writers. *The Path of Prayer*, by Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P., might be called ‘prayer meditated’. The book is familiar to many. Written in the form of a diary—the diary of Sir Lawrence Shipley—it gives traditional doctrine

on prayer based on St Thomas. The style does not suffer from the slightly forbidding literary artifice, and the unexpected, epigrammatic turns of phrase usually throw new light on some point or other. *Contemplative Prayer*, by Père de la Taille, seems out of place in a series of this sort. His preface will scare off not a few well-intentioned readers. 'We assume as known', he writes, 'the descriptions of the fact of mysticism which have been left us by such masters as Denys, St Gregory, St Bernard, St Catherine of Genoa, St Ignatius, St Teresa, St John of the Cross, St Francis de Sales, St Alphonsus Liguori, as well as St Thomas's principles concerning religious knowledge, etc.' It reads like a paper to be delivered to some congress of Mystical Studies. But it may well be that this little series has very high aims. *The One Thing Necessary*, by Fr Bruno S. James, is down to earth again, written for the 'types' he met as a Chaplain to the Forces, and they were lucky to have such an exponent of spiritual things. This is a good little book: sincere, without any of the 'talking down' or hearty Army slang that often mars such efforts.

*Delight in the Lord*, by Fr Daniel Considine, s.j., has long been a favourite. Yet one wonders whether it is always a wise practice to publish abroad advice given to a particular soul or community. The author presumably knew how his advice would be received, and what the reactions were likely to be. Advice to scrupulous or pusillanimous souls stresses things that to others need soft-peddalling. An instance of this over-informal approach occurs on page 36, where he is speaking of our Lord paying no attention to the Canaanite woman at first and then granting her request. He goes on: 'What does this teach us? that God is not always to be taken at his word'. In or out of its context, that still remains an unfortunate expression. He sees our Lord inviting Peter to walk on the water though Peter 'was simply wanting to show off' and our Lord knew it but 'was pleased with that spontaneous, boyish request'. Of course it is all in illustration of sound advice, but . . .

*Fifty Meditations on the Passion*, by Archbishop Goodier, s.j. This booklet contains points and divisions for meditation written for a certain religious in Lent 1909 and is bound therefore to have an esoteric ring. This is heightened further by cryptic references to stories and saints' lives, thus: '2. The

Martyr and Rat'. But to those with the keys who need such systematised meditation it will be invaluable.

Speaking of the need for systematised meditation brings us to the last of these pamphlets (which is No. 1 of the series): *A Map of Prayer*, by Fr R. H. J. Steuart, S.J. The author's aim is essentially practical: to help those with difficulties in prayer. He is not concerned with elaborate classifications therefore. Even so, it is perhaps risky to say that 'little attention will be paid to terminology'. And it is in fact with regard to what might be considered a point of terminology that questions arise. Wouldn't it be much better to lay aside the division of prayer so common and, it appears, if one might say so, so misleading? It has been suggested in the past that the more correct terms would be vocal prayer and mental prayer. There are obvious objections to this. In his *Memorabilia*, Fr Bertrand Wilberforce, O.P., who was considered an authority on such matters, points out that 'the distinction has a right meaning, for though all prayer must be mental to be prayer at all, some prayer is vocal also, some merely mental without any form of words or sound of words, and, further than this, prayer may be made with blind elevation of the will to God without any express internal words or definite thoughts'. (*Memorabilia*, p. 144.)

Where does meditation come in? Either as a kind of mental prayer or merely as a preparation for prayer, depending on how you define meditation. As Fr Steuart defines it, it seems to be a preparation for prayer rather than actual prayer itself. Thus he tells us that it is systematised thinking and has for its object the accumulation of knowledge of God and religious truths to serve as a foundation and supply motives for the rest of our spiritual activity. He repeats later that its object 'is primarily the acquisition of well grounded motives for the more perfect service of God', and therefore 'it is clear that when we feel that we have, at least for the present, a practical sufficiency of motives, this exercise begins to lose much of its utility and may even become an actual hindrance to progress'. (p. 10.) This, it must be admitted, is prayer in a wider sense than we normally understand by the term. 'Thinking', says Fr Wilberforce, 'exercising the mind, reasoning, discoursing to oneself about a sacred truth, or meditation on a subject is *not*

*itself prayer*, but only a *preparation for prayer, an incitement to pray*, for prayer is only immediately exercised by the will or affections adhering to and being united to God. (ibid., p. 143.)

Again, 'The only profitable attention to prayer is that of the heart, taking the heart as the seat of love. The attention of the mind only is nothing, otherwise study of holy things would be prayer' (ibid. 149). Fr Steuart is aware of the danger and insists that it should never be a predominantly intellectual exercise. It is for this reason that he approves of St Ignatius's 'application of the senses' as combating 'the tendency to make of meditation a purely speculative occupation'. . . . 'it advances upon the cool calculation of methodical meditation'. (p. 9.)

One feels that Fr Steuart was ill at ease about the whole thing. In the introduction and at least twice elsewhere he labours the point that souls are not to be tied down; it would be cruel. St Ignatius does not bind them; St John of the Cross condemns those who would bind them; but Fr Steuart is only trying to help them in a practical way; it is not for him to decide whether 'there are souls who have to find their perfection in the way of methodical meditation and will never pass to anything further, for to all who will respond to grace is offered the free gift of the way of contemplation'. (p. 18.)

Fr Steuart had a deep experiential knowledge of prayer, as this booklet shows, but it reveals too, I think, a certain amount of hesitancy—lack of assurance—as to the exact analysis of prayer. He does not seem to be convinced by his own arguments. To use a favourite distinction of Fr Vincent McNabb's, he shows us the craft rather than the science of prayer.

In the beginning, commenting on Damascene's definition of prayer, he says: 'The raising of the mind: that is, thought of God. Not so much by way of reasoning about Him as by an *attention* to Him'. (p. 1.) That is mental prayer. If meditation is to partake of the nature of prayer it must prepare for and assist this attention.

'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.' (*Meditations for Layfolk*. By Fr Bede Jarret, o.p. p. 175.)