



ON ST IGNATIUS' THREE WAYS OF PRAYING: JOIN MEDITATION to VOCAL PRAYER.

16 July 1876.

Prayer is the great source where religious life is nourished and St Augustine says clearly in his Rule “let our prayers be holier since they are more frequent.” This is why I would like to stress today a recommendation of St. Ignatius to which it is good to return from time to time whatever may be our degree of prayer.

Saint Ignatius proposes three kinds of prayer. The first consists in going back over the commandments of God to see how we keep them; looking at the seven capital sins to see what remains of them in us; on the use that we make of our senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. This is rather a time of reflection and preparation than a time of prayer. The saint then tells us that there is a second way to pray which consists in reciting our ordinary prayers slowly and with attention, thinking ahead of time about the One to whom we speak.

Thirdly, he stops at one of these prayers and suggests that we pronounce aloud each word of the prayer so that, in a certain period of time, our lips have pronounced each word, tasted each one and given it all our attention.

This is important for us in that each of the prayers: the Pater (Our Father), the Ave (Hail Mary), the Confiteor (I confess to you), and the psalms are recited often. It would be a shame if we arrived at the point of being mere prayer wheels, according to the expression of a Dominican. In Tibet, they say, they have invented little machines on which prayers have been inscribed and which the wind turns. As the wind turns the mills, those people imagine that their prayers are presented to God, and that this suffices. We must not become prayer wheels, that is, recite our prayers by habit, without knowing what we are saying. For it is in the measure that we pay attention to the Office, that we think of the meaning of the words we recite, that our prayer will impress on us the spirit of prayer that God gave King David in such an eminent degree.

For this reason, use the Third Way of prayer given by St Ignatius. Your forty-five minutes or half-hour of prayer will be well spent if you recite the Pater slowly, stopping at each word to savor and understand it. If you do this, your vocal prayers will be much holier.

You all know as well as I that, when St Teresa wanted to write a treatise on religious perfection, she simply took the seven requests in the Our Father and applied them to the interior life and the perfection of the soul. Her lovely book, *The Way of Perfection*, is just that. In the beginning, she tells her daughters: “They say it is difficult for women like you to make contemplative prayer. But if you have not great purity of conscience, if you are not filled with the sense of the grandeur of the One to whom you speak, you could not even recite a Pater or Ave as you should.”

To say the Our Father and the Hail Mary well, we need a habit of prayer, to know to whom we speak, to address God with respect, with faith and love. [We need] to understand what Our Lord has wished to put on our lips when he taught us to pray.

All the prayers of the Church have admirable life and meaning. Were you elevated to a very high and sublime state of prayer, I would still recommend that you sometimes take the third way of praying given by St. Ignatius in order to sanctify your vocal prayer. Do you want to have an idea of the esteem [the Church has for] vocal prayer? Recall that, for fifteen centuries, it was the only form of prayer in the great monasteries where so many saints were formed. Eleven thousand were counted, I believe, in the Benedictine Order. These saints were formed by vocal prayer accompanied by interior prayer such as St. Teresa understood it.

Likewise the solitaries in the desert did hardly anything other than recite the psalms alternating them with silence. Remember this line from St. Anthony: “The prayer of a religious is not perfect as long as he is aware that he is praying,” and you will understand the degree of contemplation these saints reached. They passed entire nights reciting three, six, a dozen psalms, some Lessons from Holy Scripture, reading then meditating and then starting all over again. The night was thus spent in vocal prayer, aided by this sublime oraison and marvelous contemplation. In the Rule of St. Benedict, there is no fixed time for prayer. No doubt, this great saint thought that religious life was prayer, and the long hours spent chanting and reciting the Office constituted a true prayer where one ‘meditated in his heart what his lips pronounced.’

I don’t know if this expression is found in the Rule of St. Benedict that I know less well than our own; but I like to find encouragement in the words of the Rule of St. Augustine about which Father Lacordaire said it is a “marvel of charity.” You recall how it begins: “Before all things, my dear Sisters, let God be loved and then our neighbor.” They tell of one saintly woman that couldn’t read these words without falling into ecstasy. It is, indeed, one of the most beautiful openings of any Rule that exists. Meditate wholeheartedly each word of this Rule and you will see how St. Augustine safeguards charity everywhere: charity in poverty, charity in the service of our neighbor, charity in warnings to the one who commits faults. Each page is burning with love from one end to the other. It is truly the triumph of God’s love in the first place, then the love of neighbor.

Consider this way of praying all the vocal prayers that you have habitually on your lips, from the Our Father to the Hail Mary to the Credo.... For those who recite the Divine Office, there is the O God, come to our assistance, the Glory be to the Father, the psalms, the hymns, all the beautiful prayers that the Church places on our lips and which would be too long to recount.

... If we who recite the Divine Office tried to meditate what we say and to grasp the meaning, we would end up understanding the psalms very well and being filled with their spirit.

... [A long part on the readings of the Office recounting the story and prayer of King David has been skipped.]

“God is just and will abandon me,” (II Kings, 11:11). You will never find such words in the psalms of David. On the contrary, what does he say? “I will pour out my soul before the Lord and he will save me... I shall weep before God and he will hear me...(Ps. 54: 17). Even if I should go down to the valley of death, I will still hope in the Lord,” (Ps. 22:4).

All these words which come from the lips of this penitent king saint are words expressing absolute confidence; yet, he was a great sinner. I want you to understand well the difference between David and Judas. Judas’ mentality was of despair, sadness, doubt and mistrust; David, of the Old Law and not knowing Jesus Christ and his immense gentleness, kept constant confidence, faith, love, abandon, submission and praise after his sin. He expected everything from God and gave himself totally to God. This is why I ask you to fill yourselves with the spirit of the psalms which is so admirably fitting for saints and interior souls.