

## PRAYER WITHOUT WORDS - Lecture 1

Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662): “All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

Cardinal Robert Sarah, *The Power of Silence*: “As long as a man has not come to recognize the great silence of God in the depths of his heart and to understand this mysterious place of the Eternal *in his flesh*, he cannot get to a true spiritual and human transformation. The true sound of silence is here: we cannot hear the Word if we have not been previously transformed by God's silence.”

From the Desert Fathers

“The victory over all the afflictions that befall you is to keep silence.”

“Whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes”

“Meditate on the Gospels and the other Scriptures, and if an alien thought arises within you, never look at it but always look upwards, and the Lord will come at once to your help.”

John Cassian [365 - 435] – *italics mine LH*

“... such a union that *our breathing* and our thinking and our talking will be 'God' ”

“When our thoughts slip away from spiritual contemplation and run here and there, we turn to ourselves as though coming from a sleep of forgetfulness. We wake up and *look for the formula by which to revive* our vanished spiritual thinking. The looking is a delay for us and before we have even found it we lapse a second time and before a contemplative gaze opens up and what our heart wishes for is vanished.”

“The reason for this confusion is quite evident. It is that we had nothing settled, *no special formula* which we could hold constantly before our eyes, *one to which the wandering mind could return after many wanderings and travels*, one that the mind could enter, as into a haven of peace after long shipwreck.”

“Hence our anxiety to find a *formula* which will enable us to think of God and to hold incessantly to that thought so that, as we keep it in view, we may have *something to return to immediately* whenever we find that we have somehow slipped away from it. It will be there for us to take up once more without wasting time in searches or in painful detours.”

“The soul must grab fiercely onto this *formula* so that after saying it over and over again, after meditating upon it without pause, it has the strength to reject and to refuse all the abundant riches of thought. *Grasping the poverty of this little verse* it will come all the more easily to that first of all the gospel beatitudes, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.”

## PRAYER WITHOUT WORDS - Lecture 2

### ST. JOHN CLIMACUS (579 – 649)

At age 16 he joined Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai. Renowned for his prayer, fasting and austerity. He spent 40 years in a cell in the desert. Then elected Abbott. Much sought after for his spiritual guidance. His writings, especially *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* [Mahwah, NJ, 1982], outlines 30 steps of spiritual discipline on the way to God.

### DEATH

“No one who has acquired the remembrance of death will ever be able to sin.” 134

“a perfect sense of death is free from fear.” 133

“a man who has heard himself sentenced to death will not worry about the way theaters are run” 143/144

### SILENCE

“Talkativeness is the throne of vainglory” 158

“Intelligent silence is the mother of prayer” 158

“you should be silent when ridiculed. Accept patiently these spiritual cauterizations, or rather, purifying flames” 118

### THE BODY IN PRAYER

“The effort of bodily prayer can help those not yet granted real prayer of the heart. I am referring to the stretching out of the hands, the beating of the breast, the sincere raising of the eyes heavenward, deep sighs and constant prostrations” 184

### CONTEMPLATION

“One can be held back and distracted by the singing of psalms in a congregation. This does not happen when one is solitary” 278

“Fight always with your thoughts and *call them back when they wander away*. God does not demand of those under obedience that their thoughts be totally undistracted when they pray. And do not lose heart when your thoughts are stolen away. Just remain calm and *constantly call your mind back*” 112

“Draw in inseparably *with your breathing* the phrase which says, ‘He who perseveres to the end will be saved’ (Mt 10.22)” 117

“Let the remembrance of *Jesus* be present *with your every breath*” 270

“let the remembrance of death and the concise Jesus Prayer go to sleep with you and get up with you, for nothing helps you as these do when you are asleep” 178

“When a man has found the Lord, he no longer has to use words when he is praying, for the Spirit Himself will intercede for him with groans that cannot be uttered” 279

“Do not form sensory images during prayer, for distraction will certainly follow” 279

## PRAYER WITHOUT WORDS - Lecture 3

### EVAGRIUS PONTIKOS (345 - 399), *On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts*

A disciple of the Cappadocian Fathers, he was ordained Reader by St Basil the Great and Deacon by St Gregory of Nazianzos, and he accompanied the latter to the Council of Constantinople in 381 (the second Ecumenical Council). Evagrius was never ordained priest. After a brief stay in Jerusalem, he went in 383 to Egypt, where he spent the remaining sixteen years of his life. He drew upon the living experience of the Desert Fathers of Egypt, mainly Copts. John Cassian was his disciple.

Evagrius' teaching focuses on the need to control the passions, resist the devil, and to refrain from forming images or ideas of God during prayer.

The quotations below are from his work *Chapters on Prayer*. There are 153 of these and they allude to the number of fish caught by the Apostles in John 21: 11. Some, but not all, of these numbered texts are quoted here only in part. [*Italics mine LH*]

4. When Moses tried to draw near to the burning bush he was forbidden to approach until he had loosed his sandals from his feet (cf. Exod. 3: 5) If, then, you wish to behold and commune with Him who is beyond sense-perception and beyond concept, *you must free yourself from every impassioned thought.*

11. Try to *make your intellect deaf and dumb during prayer*: you will then be able to pray.

16. Prayer is the remedy for gloom and despondency.

22. Those who store up grievances and rancor in themselves are like people who draw water and pour it into a cask full of holes.

32. Often when I have prayed I have asked for what I thought was good, and persisted in my petition, stupidly importuning the will of God, and *not leaving it to Him to arrange things as He knows is best for me.* But when I have obtained what I asked for, I have been very sorry that I did not ask for the will of God to be done; because the thing turned out not to be as I had thought.

36. Prayer is the ascent of the intellect to God.

44. If your intellect is still distracted during prayer, you do not yet know what it is to pray as a monk; but your prayer is still worldly, embellishing the outer tabernacle.

56. One who has attained dispassion has not necessarily achieved pure prayer. For he may still be occupied with thoughts which, though dispassionate, distract him and keep him far from God.

57. When the intellect no longer dallies with dispassionate thoughts about various things, it has not necessarily reached the realm of prayer: for it may still be contemplating the inner essences of these things. And though such contemplation is dispassionate, yet since it is of created things, *it impresses their forms upon the intellect and keeps it away from God.*

61. If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.

64. While all else produces thoughts, ideas and speculations in the intellect through changes in the body, the Lord does the opposite: by entering the intellect. He fills it with whatever knowledge He wishes: and through the intellect *He calms the uncontrolled impulses in the body.*

67. When you are praying, *do not shape within yourself any image of the Deity*, and do not let your intellect be stamped with the impress of any form: but approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner, and then you will understand.

68. Be on your guard against the tricks of the demons. While you are praying purely and calmly, sometimes they suddenly bring before you some strange and alien form, making you imagine in your conceit that the Deity is there. They are trying to persuade you that the object suddenly

disclosed to you is the Deity, whereas the Deity does not possess quantity and form.

69. When the jealous demon fails to stir up our memory during prayer, he disturbs the soul-body temperament, so as to form some strange fantasy in the intellect. Since your intellect is usually preoccupied with thoughts it is easily diverted: instead of pursuing immaterial and formless knowledge, it is deceived, mistaking smoke for light.

70. Stand on guard and *protect your intellect from thoughts while you pray*. Then your intellect will complete its prayer and continue in the tranquillity that is natural to it. In this way He who has compassion on the ignorant will come to you, and you will receive the blessed gift of prayer.

71. You cannot attain pure prayer while entangled in material things and agitated by constant cares. For *prayer means the shedding of thoughts*.

73. When the intellect attains *prayer that is pure and free from passion*, the demons attack no longer with sinister thoughts but with thoughts of what is good. For they suggest to it an illusion of God's glory in a form pleasing to the senses, so as to make it think that it has realized the final aim of prayer. A man who possesses spiritual knowledge has said that this illusion results from the passion of self-esteem and from the demon's touch on a certain area of the brain.

84. Prayer is the energy which accords with the dignity of the intellect; it is the intellect's true and highest activity.

88. 'And He spoke a parable to them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to lose heart.' So do not lose heart and despair because you have not yet received the gift of prayer. You will receive it later.

114. *Never try to see a form or shape during prayer.*

116. *Self-esteem* is the start of illusions in the intellect. Under its impulse, the intellect *attempts to enclose the Deity in shapes and forms*.

117. I shall say again what I have said elsewhere: blessed is the intellect that is completely *free from forms during prayer*.

118. Blessed is the intellect that, undistracted in its prayer, acquires an ever greater longing for God.

119. Blessed is the intellect that during prayer is free from materiality and stripped of all possessions.

120. Blessed is the intellect that has acquired complete *freedom from sensations during prayer*.

125. A monk is one who regards himself as linked with every man, through always seeing himself in each.

133. If you are praying to overcome some thought, and it subsides easily, examine carefully how this has come about; otherwise you may be deluded into attributing the cause to yourself.

134. There are times when the demons suggest thoughts to you and then urge you to rebut them with prayer; whereupon they withdraw of their own accord, so as to deceive you into imagining that you have begun to overcome such thoughts and to rout the demons.

## PRAYER WITHOUT WORDS - Lecture 4

### ST. THEOPHAN THE RECLUSE [1815 – 1894]

Born central Russia, studied at the Kiev Theological Academy. He took monastic vows, at the Kiev Caves Lavra (monastery). Spent years abroad in Jerusalem, Constantinople, Mount Athos. He was appointed dean of the Theological Academy of St. Petersburg; then Bishop. After seven years he resigned and retired to a monastery where he spent his remaining 28 years in prayer and silence. He read and replied to many letters every day. These were collected and published. Quotations from *The Art of Prayer, an Orthodox Anthology*, compiled by Igumen Charlton of Valamo (London 1966). *Italics mine LH.*

### PRAYER IN THE HEART

“In order to keep the mind on one thing by means of a short prayer, it is necessary to preserve attention and so lead it into the heart; for so long as the mind remains in the head, where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But *when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul and body into one point there.* This concentration of all human life in one place is immediately reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of future warmth.

The question now arises whether this warmth is spiritual. No, it is *not* spiritual. It is ordinary physical warmth. But since it keeps the attention of the mind in the heart, and thus helps the development there of the spiritual movements described earlier, it is called spiritual – provided however, that it is not accompanied by sensual pleasure, however slight, but keeps the soul and body in sober mood.” 94 – 95

“*Mistakes occur chiefly from the attention being in the head and not in the heart.* He who keeps his attention in the heart is safe. Safer still is he who at all times clings to God in contrition, and prays to be delivered from illusion.” 97

“*The most important thing in prayer is to stand before the Lord in reverence and fear, with the mind in the heart* 128

### THE JESUS PRAYER

“Stand with the mind in the heart before the Lord and pray to Him: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.'” 113

“One can recite the Jesus Prayer *with the mind in the heart* without movement of the tongue. This is better than oral prayer. Use oral prayer as a support to inner prayer. Sometimes it is required to strengthen inner prayer.” 100

“Hold *no intermediate image* between the mind and the Lord when practising the Jesus Prayer. The words pronounced are merely a help, and are not essential. The principal thing is to *stand before the Lord with the mind in the heart.*” 100

“If you truly wish to put your thoughts to shame, to be serenely silent, and to live in the effortless enjoyment of a sober and quiet heart, *let the Jesus Prayer cleave to your breathing,* and in a few days you will see all this realized.” 103

“There is a technique suggested by one of the early Fathers, *rhythmic breathing in time with the Jesus Prayer* in place of the use of a rosary.” 103

“The Jesus Prayer is not some talisman. Its power comes from faith in the Lord, and from a deep union of the mind and heart with Him. With such a disposition, the invocation of the Lord's Name becomes very effective in many ways. But a mere repetition of the words does not signify anything.” 99

“... thoughts continue to jostle in your head like mosquitoes. To stop this jostling, you must *bind the mind with one thought*, or the thought of One only. An aid to this is *a short prayer*, which helps the mind to become simple and united.” 97

### BRING YOUR THOUGHTS BACK

“Make yourself a rule always to be with the Lord, keeping your mind in the heart, and do not let your thoughts wander; *as often as they stray, turn them back again and keep them at home in the closet of your heart*, and delight in converse with the Lord.” 119

### BEWARE

“For yourself, act always in great humility and with the utmost simplicity, not ascribing any success to yourself. Know that true success is achieved within, unconsciously, and happens as imperceptibly as the growth of the human body. Therefore when you hear an inner voice saying 'Ah! Here it is!' you should realize that this is the voice of the enemy, showing you a mirage rather than the reality. This is the beginning of self-deception.” 116

“Every struggle in the soul's training, whether physical or mental, that is not accompanied by suffering, that does not require the utmost effort, will not bear fruit.” 117

“Prayer according to the rule is one thing, and this state of prayer is another. The way to it is to attain the habit of the constant remembrance of God, of the last hour and the judgement that follows it. Accustom yourself to this, and all will go well.” 122

“Beware lest in ceaselessly remembering God you forget also to kindle fear, and awe, and the desire to fall down as dust before the face of God – our most merciful Father, but also our dread Judge. Frequent recollection of God without reverence blunts the feeling of the fear of God, and thereby deprives us of the saving influence which this sense of fear – and it alone – can produce in our spiritual life.” 123

### EXPECT TROUBLE IN LIFE

“Make the following a rule – first of all, anticipate trouble at every moment and when it comes encounter it as something expected. Secondly, when something happens that conflicts with your will and is on the point of irritating or upsetting you, *hasten to bring your attention into your heart* and strive with all you might to prevent such feelings from arising: steel yourself against them and pray. If you succeed in preventing feelings of irritation and disturbance from arising within you, then you are finished with your trouble, for these feelings are its starting point....

In the third place, put out of your mind all expectations that the nature of things will change, and resign yourself to life-long friction.” 228 - 229

## PRAYER WITHOUT WORDS - Lecture 5

### FEEDBACK

I would welcome your feedback this on this Lenten course. To do so, please email me at: louis.hughes@dominicans.ie. Your comments will be seen only by myself. Thank you. Fr. Louis

### THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWNING

Author unknown, internal evidence suggests a clerical author late 14<sup>th</sup> c East Midlands, England. Quotations from *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, (Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth 1961). *Italics mind LH*

#### UNKNOWNING

“When you first begin, you find only darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing. You don't know what this means except that in your will you feel a simple steadfast intention reaching out towards God.” 61

“By ‘darkness’ I mean ‘a lack of knowing’ .... A cloud of unknowing between you and your God” 66

“Yes, let him think what he will; he will always find that a cloud of unknowing is between him and God.” 144

“Try to suppress all knowledge and feeling of anything less than God, and trample it down deep under the cloud of forgetting. You must understand that in this business you are to forget not only all other things than yourself ... but to forget also yourself, and even the things you have done for the sake of God.” 110

#### LOVE NOT KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

*“To the ... intellect, God ... is forever unknowable, but ... to love, he is completely knowable” 63*

*“He may well be loved, but not thought. By love he can be caught and held, by thinking never.” 68*

*“Love may reach up to God himself even in this life – but not knowledge.” 73*

“Even if a man is deeply versed in the understanding and knowledge of all spiritual things ever created, he can never by such understanding come to know an uncreated spiritual thing ... which is none else than God!” 145

“This I may say about those sounds and sweetnesses that come to us through the windows of our intellect, and which may be good or evil. Practise continually this blind, devout, eager outgoing of *love* that I speak about, and then I have no doubt it will be quite capable of telling you about them itself.” 118

#### PRAYER WORD

“A naked intention directed to God, and himself alone, is wholly sufficient. If you want this intention summed up in a word, to retain it more easily, *take a short word, preferably of one syllable*, to do so” 69

“We must therefore pray in the height, depth, length, and breadth of our spirits. Not in many words, but in *a little word of one syllable.*” 106

“Though your natural *mind can now find 'nothing' to feed on*, for it thinks you are doing no thing, *go on doing this no thing*, and do it for the love of God.” 142

## TWO MODERN TEACHERS OF CONTEMPLATION

John Main OSB (1926 - 1982)

1. Silently, interiorly begin to say a *single word*.
2. We recommend the prayer-phrase '*maranatha*'. Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it. gently but continuously.
3. *Do not think or imagine* anything - spiritual or otherwise. If *thoughts and images* come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so *keep returning* to simply saying the word.
4. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes

Thomas Keating OCSO (1923 – 2018)

“Once you have picked a suitable time and place and a chair or a posture that is relatively comfortable, and closed your eyes, choose a sacred word that expresses your intention of opening and surrendering to God and introduce it on the level of your imagination. Do not form it with your lips or vocal chords. Let it be a single word of one or two syllables with which you feel at ease. Gently place it in your awareness each time you recognize you are thinking about some other thought.” 36