



Choosing the Better Part

Brother Hervé Zamor, Superior general

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INTRODUCTION

Our new Rule of life is the Chapter document par excellence: much time has been consecrated to it before, during and after the 2024 Chapter. We have therefore decided to make it the main focus of our animation for the next six years. *“Inspired by the Gospel and the intuition of the Founders, then passed on and enriched through the living tradition of the Institute, the Rule of Life is for each Brother a sure guide along the way he has chosen”* (RL 2024, 12)¹. We are thus called upon to read it frequently, to study it and to meditate on it, to assimilate its riches and its spirit.

The year 2024-2025 is consecrated to reading, studying and meditating the chapter on prayer life. Such is the standpoint from which the theme of this year and the various animation propositions already received must be understood.

My predecessors have abundantly dealt with this important subject². What they said is still valid and belongs to the spiritual legacy of the Institute. The simple objective of this circular is to urge us to make our personal and community prayer an authentic way of life. Indeed, such is the invitation of the last General Chapter when it asserts: *“We are called before all else to listen to Jesus. This supposes*

¹ This remark applies equally for the circular as a whole since it concerns the new Rule of Life approved by the 2024 General Chapter. When a quotation comes from the Constitutions, a whole number is quoted, for example 12. When a quotation refers to the Directory, it is a number followed by a decimal place, for example 12.1.

² Brother Bernard Gaudeul: circulars 272, 273 and 276; Brother Jose Antonio Obeso: circular 298; Brother Yannick Houssay: circular 308.

the spiritual renewal required to meet him in praying, reading and meditating on the Word of God” (GC 2024, n° 20).

Mary, Martha’s and Lazarus’ sister, is an evangelical character who invites us to sit at the Lord’s feet to listen to him. Such is *choosing the better part* (Lk 10:42). This is our primary vocation, the only thing that is necessary. If prayer does not sustain the breath of our spiritual life, we risk suffocating in the midst of thousands of daily affairs. Fidelity to everyday encounters with the Lord is a grace to ask for.

This reflection is addressed primarily to the Brothers. Lay people are also invited to take note. It can help them better understand the place of prayer in their Christian and Mennaisian lives. Deepening our understanding of such a subject together is a great way to forge bonds of brotherhood and strengthen our sense of belonging. It is a magnificent synodal experience that will certainly open our ears and our hearts: each one listening to the others, and all listening to the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 14:17).

“*Choosing the better part*” comprises three chapters. The first one develops the desire that dwells in every person’s heart to meet the Lord. In the second chapter, we learn to pray through the Master’s own life, example and teaching. The last chapter suggests adopting Mary’s, Martha’s and Lazarus’ sister’s attitude, if we wish to listen to Jesus and enter into his intimacy.

It is my ardent wish that this circular letter be read either personally or in community, as a group or as a fraternity. May it really help us start afresh from Christ and meet him, particularly in meditation and lectio divina! May it be an occasion to share among ourselves about our prayer life! May it encourage us to lend each other mutual support to reach God and accomplish his will!

May we *choose the better part*, that of sitting daily at the feet of the Master, listening to him! Such is the secret for the Word to take root, grow and bear fruit in our life as much as one hundred, sixty or

thirty percent (Mt 13:23). This is the way to become living images³ of Jesus in our different life and mission settings.

³ John Mary de la Mennais, S II, 632.

CHAPTER I

MEETING THE LORD

On the Way

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector” (Lk 18:9-10).

Whether Pharisee or tax collector, man is a pilgrim in search of God. He wishes to go up to the temple to pray (Lk 18:10). Like a dry land or a thirsting deer, his soul yearns for living Water (Ps 62:2, Ps 41:2, Jn 4:14). Is this not the basic truth which Saint Augustine confesses when he asserts: *“You, Lord, urge us to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for you, and our heart is without rest until it rests in you?”*⁴ Thus, guided by the Spirit and walking in the footsteps of Jesus, we look for God in truth in our prayer life and at the heart of our actions (RL 2024, 70). At the example of Bartimaeus who spared no effort to meet Jesus (Mk 10:46-52), let’s be beggars who dare knock at the door of God’s heart with faith, humility and perseverance. This is where he wishes to quench our thirst.

In this ascent to the temple, Jesus invites us to choose the better part, that of the tax collector if we wish to allow ourselves to be *“configured to Christ through an obedient listening to the Word of God and living a sacramental life which gradually unify”* our whole being (RL 2024, 70). It's the way to live love better and better, *“as the most beautiful and perfect of prayers”*⁵.

⁴ Saint Augustine, The Confessions, Book 1, 1.1.

⁵ John Mary de la Mennais, S II, 176.

I- In the Manner of the Pharisee

“The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get’” (Lk 18:11-12).

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus, like a good teacher, begins by warning us, through his depiction of the Pharisee, against attitudes that could interfere with our meeting the Lord, so as to encourage us *to choose the better part*, that of the tax collector.

1- Standing up

The Pharisee stands and prays by himself (Lk 18:11). In everyday life, standing shows respect and politeness. For instance, when an important person visits, the assembly rises. Social conventions call for this. However, in God’s presence, one removes one’s shoes for the place where one stands is holy (Ex 3:5).

For the Pharisee, standing conveys confidence in his own ability. He behaves as if he were the master of the temple. He is the center of attention. He prays without taking into account the One he is addressing. His prayer is a monologue showing off his Jewish religious duties. He wishes to be seen and praised. His attitude is contrary to the Lord’s teaching about the true disciple’s prayer:

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Mt 6:5-6).

The prayer that makes us righteous is the one we address to the Father in all confidence and humility, in the most secret of our room. This has nothing to do with the attitude of those who make a show of their devotion. Prayer is *“this alternation, this inward and outward*

movement of the man who speaks, sure that God hears him, and of the man who is silent, listening to his God. It is word and silence, word received in the silence of the triune God, silence welcoming the Word of God"⁶. Conversation with the Lord is a grace: we are not worthy of such a gift and we stutter at every other word, but Jesus, the Son, opens us the door to this tête-à-tête with our Father.

Praying the Lord in the silence, in the secret of one's heart, and listening to him in the light breeze of his Word, these are the recommendations of the Master to the disciple who wishes to learn *"to live in familiar and constant companionship with the Father, through his Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit"* (RL 2024, 71). This is the condition for the Word of God to take flesh in us, at the example of the Virgin Mary. This is the way to travel if we wish to stand humbly before the Lord to speak and listen to him.

2- In keeping with his merits

The Pharisee blesses the Lord for what he is not and for what he does. He is neither a thief, nor unjust, nor adulterous. He is different from this tax collector who is a public sinner. He fasts twice a week and pays the tithe. The truth is, he presents a good logbook to the Lord and prays according to his merits. But he forgoes the most important commandment: the love of God and of neighbour. Shouldn't this be the motivation for all true prayer? On this topic, the apostle John is very clear: *"If a man says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"* (1 Jn 4:20).

The authentic measure of our prayer is not our merits but our ability to seek reconciliation with our brothers (Mt 5:23-24). It is both what we ask for and what we commit ourselves to when we say the Our Father (Mt 5:12). In other words, the more we meet our Father in prayer, the more we acknowledge our brothers and the more we

⁶ Brother Bernard Gaudeul, *Mais priez donc*, Circular 272, p. 14.

turn to them with humility and trust to offer them forgiveness and seek forgiveness for our own faults (RL 2024, 77).

Only a heart at peace and reconciled with others can present an offering pleasing to the Lord. Such is the miracle that prayer accomplishes in our life. Unlike the Pharisee, we no longer rely on our own merits, but we learn increasingly to surrender to Providence. All that we are and do comes from God. We no longer boast of our achievements, but we receive everything from God's hands as a gift from his abounding love. This encounter with the Lord is a call to acknowledge the magnitude of his Providence. Where our merits no longer count, God's grace abounds (Rom 5:20).

3- Fasting

The Pharisee fasts twice a week. What should motivate his asceticism? To be more attentive to God and neighbour, especially the poor. Is not the fasting that pleases the Lord loosening the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free, sharing your food with the hungry, welcoming the poor, shielding the widow and the orphan (Is 58:6-7)? On such conditions will God hear our cries and admit us in his presence (Is 58:9) Otherwise, our worship is empty: we honour him with our words, but our heart is really far away from him (Mk 7:6-7).

As for prayer, Jesus warns us against the temptation of showing off. He invites us to anoint our head and wash our face when we fast so that our privation will only be known by our Father who sees in the secret of our heart.

Acting in secret is taking the inner trip which our Rule of Life invites us to take if we wish to free ourselves from the obstacles which prevent us from hearing the voice of God, and travel the road of a constant conversion of the heart. We thus become more apt at being intimate with our Lord and at giving ourself freely to others (RL 2024, 81).

What fasting are we called to today so as to be more attentive to God and neighbour? Our Rule of life helps us discern the asceticism that the Lord expects of us:

“Everything that promotes self-control enables the Brother to attain, little by little, the inner liberation that the Lord asks of him: the daily effort to rise punctually; to pray authentically; to respect the community timetable; to be silent; to seek physical, psychological and spiritual well-being; to ensure appropriate use of information and communication technologies; to know and accept one’s limits; to resist the constant temptations of comfort and selfishness; to ensure moderation in the use of tobacco and alcohol, and even abstention from them” (RL 2024, 81.1).

4- Pay tithes

The Pharisee gives one-tenth of what he earns. In this way, he recognizes that God is the source and the Master of all the goods he manages. He supports the cult in the temple and helps the poorest. This makes him a faithful Jew obeying the Law. By paying tithes, many Pharisees thought they were fulfilling their obligation to love God and neighbour (Lk 11:42). In doing so, they overlooked what was important and made a mistake. What is important for the Lord is not what we give but what that gift means for us. With her two coins, the widow of the Gospel gave more than all the others for she gave all that she had, all that she had to live on (Mk 11:41-44). This is the very logic of love: to love without measure.

For Teresa of the Child Jesus, prayer is an impulse of the heart, a cry of love in distress as in joy. It consists in being there, before the Lord, loving him, but especially allowing oneself to be loved by him, opening our heart to his kindness and his light.

Are we ready to give up everything to love the Lord? This is expressed in the quality of the time and presence we offer him. How do we prepare to meet him? Do we arrive early, on time or late? For

where our treasure is, there our heart is also (Mt 6:21). What is our investment when it comes to being there for the Lord? Ten, thirty, fifty or one hundred percent? Happy are we if we give him the offering of the widow rather than the tithes of all that we have! Let's dare offer him all that we are and he will give a hundredfold. This is the holy land where he awaits us for the meeting.

II- In the Manner of the Tax Collector

"But the tax collector stood at a distance, unwilling even to lift up his eyes to heaven. Instead, he beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner!'" (Lk 18:13).

The evangelist Luke presents the tax collector as the person who *chose the best part* of his relationship with the Lord. His prayer was answered: he became a righteous man (Lk 18:14). This is an invitation for us to imitate him.

1- Standing at a distance

Once in the temple, the publican keeps his distance from the Lord. By this attitude, he testifies to his unworthiness to approach the One who is the Holy One par excellence. Humble, he is sure of only one thing: he is a sinner seeking the Lord's mercy. He is the centurion who does not feel worthy to receive the Lord into his home (Mt 8:8). Like a little dog, he is ready to eat the crumbs that fall from his Master's table (Mt 15:27). He reaches behind him to touch the fringe of his cloak (Mt 9:20-21).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that *"humility is the disposition to receive freely the gift of prayer"* and that *"man is a beggar of God"* (CCC, no. 2559). This is how Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, small and weak, chose to use the Lord's arms to get to heaven: *"The elevator that should lift me up to Heaven is your arms, O Jesus! For that, I don't need to grow; on the contrary, I need to remain small, and become smaller and smaller"*.⁷ So she is ready to present herself

⁷ Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, *Histoire d'une âme*, p. 238

to her Spouse empty-handed. The Lord is never indifferent to the cries of the weak (Ps 68:34). When the poor call, he hears and saves them from all their anguish (Ps 33:7). God's heart always leans toward his humble servant.

The gateway to prayer is humility which teaches us to open our hands and hearts to meet the Lord. This is the way to imitate his gentleness and listen to his Word. It's the best way for the Master to teach us to pray, and for the Son to introduce us into the intimacy of the Father. Without this humble attitude, we will lack the simplicity of a child who knows he is poor and accepts to be led by the hand. Happy are we if we enter into a relationship with God through the door of humility! It will teach us to be supple and docile in the Lord's hands, open and available to the action of his grace.

2- With eyes downcast

The tax collector doesn't even dare raise his eyes to heaven. This attitude of recollection expresses his abandonment and trust in the Lord. Like a child, he throws himself into his Father's arms, sure of being welcomed and forgiven. He alone is able to save him from sin (Job 22:29). Like the prodigal son, as he enters into himself, he discovers the goodness and mercy of his Father, ready to welcome him as he is, to slay the fatted calf and clothe him in the most beautiful cloak (Lk 15:17-25).

For Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, *"it is trust and nothing but trust that must lead us to Love"*⁸. Through this path, *"the source of grace overflows into our lives, the Gospel becomes flesh in us and transforms us into channels of mercy for our brothers and sisters"*⁹. If we abandon ourselves into the hands of a Father who loves us without limits, we can be sure that his plan of love and fulfilment will be realized in our lives. Only prayer can help us to live out our daily reality, with all its trials and sufferings, in full confidence in God, who responds to us as he did to his Son.

⁸ Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, Oeuvres completes, p. 553.

⁹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation : C'est la confiance, n° 2.

Trust is the cornerstone of all true prayer which aims to bring us into the Son's intimacy with the Father (RL 2024, 70). It's what brings us closer to Jesus, to the point of laying our head on his breast, following the example of the beloved disciple (Jn 13:25). It's what enables us to recognize the Lord when he prepares bread and fish for us over an ember fire (Jn 21:9). It's what drives us to walk towards him on the troubled waters of our lives, and to call out to him for help when we lose our footing (Mt 14:22-33). It's what makes us knock persistently at the door of God's heart, following the example of the blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46-52).

Rooted in trust in God, we can ask, explain and tell our Father anything. Whatever our situation, he continues to love us and to be faithful. He is always near the door of our heart, waiting for us to open it. There's no better way to pray than to place ourselves, like Mary, with closed eyes, in the Lord's hands (Lk 1:38).

3- Striking one's breast

The tax collector prays to the Lord by beating his chest. His gesture expresses his contrition (Jer 31:19). Acknowledging his faults is also accompanied by a bodily movement. It's a way for him to match his words to his deeds, to bring his body and heart closer together. It also reflects his desire to open himself ever more to the One who stands at the door and knocks (Rev 3:20).

The tax collector's gesture is a prayer. By involving his body, he engages his whole being: his mind, his will and his heart. It shakes his attitudes and life choices. It awakens him from his slumber and urges him to choose God alone. In so doing, this tax collector wishes to leave the rudder of his life to the One who is its author.

In the spiritual tradition, thanks to the mystery of the Incarnation, praying with our bodies is a place of encounter with the Lord. Thus, the Russian pilgrim learned to pray by repeating the same invocation an infinite number of times, to the rhythm of his breathing: *"Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"*. This vocal prayer, also known as the prayer of the heart or of Jesus, gradually

becomes part of his breath. It is the oxygen of his life. *“I gaze upon him, and he gazes upon me”*, said the peasant of Ars as he prayed before the tabernacle. The light of Jesus' gaze illuminates the eyes of our heart, and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and compassion. It's only in the listening and silence of adoration, kneeling before the Lord, that we can experience the living fire of the Spirit that gives strength to our witness and mission. Moses' most characteristic way of praying is intercession. This is why Scripture usually depicts him with his hands stretched upwards, towards God, almost as if to make his person a bridge between heaven and earth. This must be the spiritual experience of every disciple of Christ: meeting him with his body. This is what the author of Saint John's first epistle affirms: *“What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have contemplated and our hands have touched, concerning the Word of life, we proclaim to you”* (1 Jn 1:1).

4- Begging the Lord's mercy

The publican beats his chest, saying: *“My God, show favour to the sinner that I am!”* *“Presenting himself ‘empty-handed’, bare-hearted and acknowledging himself to be a sinner, this tax collector shows us all the conditions necessary to receive the Lord's forgiveness”*¹⁰. He is the lost sheep that is precious in the eyes of the Good Shepherd. Didn't the Good Shepherd leave the ninety-nine others in the desert to go and look for him (Lk 15:4)? He is the prodigal son whom the Father welcomes by preparing the fatted calf (Lk 15:23).

Knowing how to beg for God's mercy means recognizing that it's impossible for us to meet him without his help. We don't know how to pray properly. What's more, it's the Holy Spirit who comes to the rescue of our weakness, interceding for us with inexpressible groans (Rom 8:26). It is he who teaches us to cry out: Abba! (Ga 4:6) It is the Lord who trains his disciples in filial prayer (Mt 6:9-14, Lk 11:1-4). It is

¹⁰ Pope Francis, General audience, Wednesday, June 1, 2016.

the Church who, through the liturgy and the sacraments, continues to teach us to pray.

Following the example of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Jn 4:5-42), let's dare to ask Jesus for living water. Without prayer, everything collapses and our life lacks oxygen. Prayer is the rudder that guides us to Jesus. It spreads light and warmth around us. It is the breath of our faith. It is the oil that keeps us on our toes while we await the coming of our Lord.

To be a beggar of prayer is to learn to open up, to put our time at God's disposal, and to wait for him to help us enter into a genuine dialogue with him. It means knowing how to welcome the Holy Spirit, who *“becomes the strength of our ‘weak’ prayer, the light of our ‘extinguished’ prayer and the fire of our ‘dry’ prayer”*¹¹.

In conclusion, let us make our own the recommendations of Father Porphyry of Kasvsokalyvia, monk of Mount Athos, to the thousands of pilgrims of all confessions and conditions who visited him:

*“Pray to God with open hands; this is the secret of the saints. As soon as they opened their hands, God's grace visited them. The Fathers of the Church used the monological prayer, the most effective in their eyes: ‘Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me’. The key to the spiritual life is prayer. No one can teach it, not books, not the spiritual father, not anyone else. The only teacher is God's grace. If I tell you that honey is sweet, that it's liquid, that it's like this and like that, you won't understand it unless you taste it yourself. The same is true of prayer”*¹².

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “La prière est un don », a chapter from the book : Pape François, Pape Benoît XVI, Une seule Église, p. 108.

¹² Alain Durel, Prier avec les moines du mont Athos, p. 45.

Choosing a fruitful prayer

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Lk 18:14).

The evangelist Luke suggests two ways of praying. The Pharisee exalts himself before the Lord, but returns home as he was before. The publican, on the other hand, lowers himself and returns home having become a righteous man. *Choosing the better part* means learning to pray to the Lord like the tax collector! Praying to God with humility and knowing how to beg for his mercy is the secret to making our prayer fruitful and transforming us every day!

CHAPTER II

AT THE MASTER'S SCHOOL

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). Indeed, it is by contemplating his Master at prayer that the disciple desires to pray. Jesus is the Way in which the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray. Without him, we can do nothing (Jn 15:5). In this apprenticeship, he is both our teacher and our model. Through his life, he teaches us to live intimately with the Father. By his example, he trains us to make our lives a permanent quest for God alone.

To put us in the Master's school, we have as a biblical icon the passage from the evangelist Luke where Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the Our Father (11:1-4). Why such a choice? Firstly, Jesus teaches us to pray by praying. Secondly, he proposes a content for our prayer. For Tertullian and Saint Augustine, the Our Father is the summary of the Gospel and of all prayers. Then, whether communal or personal, vocal or interior, our prayer has access to the Father if we pray through, with and in the Son. Finally, in the Our Father, the Lord introduces the apostles, and with them all of us Christians, to what can be considered the *"model of all prayer"*¹³.

The Lord's Prayer is therefore a true path to intimacy with our Father as it teaches us to turn to God with filial trust. *"The words of this prayer that we utter take us by the hand; at certain moments, they restore the taste, they awaken even the sleepest of hearts, they reawaken feelings whose memory we had lost, and lead us by the hand towards the experience of God"*¹⁴.

¹³ "Teach us to pray", Document prepared by the Dicastery for Evangelization, Year of Prayer.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Vocal Prayer, Wednesday, April 21, 2021.

The methodological approach of this chapter uses the metaphor of the heart, whose normal functioning is based on a double movement: diastole and systole. In the former, the atria open, while in the latter they contract. If we apply this to our prayer life, we can say that diastole turns us first to the Father, while systole sends us back to our own needs. These are the two essential pillars of any true prayer.

I- At the Rhythm of the Diastole

The diastolic movement leads us to turn towards our Father, his Name, his Kingdom and his Will. It is the very nature of love that leads us to be concerned first and foremost with the One we love. In so doing, we learn, like Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, *to choose the better part*.

1- Our Father, who are in heaven

When we pray to the Father, it is first and foremost the child in us who, moved by the Holy Spirit (Gal 4:6), confidently addresses the One who gives him life, movement and being (Acts 17:28). It is the Son, the first-born of a multitude of brothers (Rom 8:29), who reveals his identity to us, provided we belong to those “little ones” who are ready to welcome him (Mt 11:25-27). To pray to him is to enter into his mystery as Father, as revealed to us by the Son. This gives rise to two fundamental dispositions in us: to want to be like him, and to choose to return to the state of children (Mt 18:3). It is therefore a call to convert to the Son's trust and to the Father's goodness, who makes his sun rise on the wicked and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Mt 5:45).

There is no shortage of guides to help us grow in our filial relationship. In proposing the path of spiritual childhood, Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus invites us to abandon ourselves fearlessly into the arms of our Father. Saint Charles de Foucauld advises us to often place ourselves in his hands with infinite trust. John Mary de la Mennais

recommends that we throw ourselves with closed eyes into the arms of Providence.

To hold our soul even and silent, like a little child against its mother (Ps 130:2), is the best prayer to express our filial trust in a good and merciful Father! And this secret is revealed to the little ones.

2- Hallowed be your Name

This is the first request we make to our Father through his Son Jesus. It expresses a desire and an expectation in which both God and man are involved. Thus, we are chosen in Christ to be holy, immaculate before God, in love (Eph 1:4). Baptism sanctifies us by the Name of Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:11). Saint Cyprian reminds us of the importance of prayer, so that the Father's Name may be sanctified in us and through us. If our life conforms to our baptism, we bless God. However, if it contradicts him, we curse him. Only Christ can teach us how to sanctify the Father's Name, for he always intercedes with him so that this work of sanctification is carried out in us and for us (Jn 17:11.17-19). Good news: all we have to do is unite our prayers with his.

The way the Church shows us how to respond to our call to holiness is through prayer. Saint John of the Cross recommends that we always be in God's presence: *“Strive to live in continual prayer, without abandoning it in the midst of bodily exercises. Whether you eat, drink [...], speak, deal with secular people, or do anything else, keep up a constant desire for God, raise your affections to him”*¹⁵. However, this prayer is only possible if there are moments of encounter with the Lord in solitude and silence. For Saint Teresa of Avila, it's *“an intimate friendship in which we often converse alone with the God we know we love”*¹⁶. Do we have those moments when we place ourselves in the Lord's presence in silence, when we dwell with him, and let ourselves be looked at by him? Do we know how to ask him to burn with the fire of his heart all the dross that tarnishes

¹⁵ Saint John of the Cross, Advice to a religious to attain perfection, 9b.

¹⁶ Saint Teresa of Avila, Book of Life 8, 5.

his likeness in our lives? It's in this spirit that, faithful to the spiritual heritage of Saint Teresa of Calcutta, the Missionaries of Charity devote an hour to adoration every day.

Exalting the name of our God and prostrating ourselves before him in a silence charged with adoring presence (Ps 98:9), this is our path of prayer, so that his Name may be sanctified in us and through us. A grace to ask the Father through his Son!

3- Your Kingdom come

With this invocation, we express our expectation of Christ's coming. He has already come, and he will come again. This is the meaning of our prayer: "*Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus*" (1 Cor 16:22). But "*the Kingdom of God is also justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" (Rom 14:17). For this to become a reality in our hearts, we are called to wage a hard battle between the desires of the flesh and those of the Spirit (Gal 5:16-25). And yet, it is a very humble reality, comparable to a mustard seed that grows and overtakes all the trees, or to a leaven that makes all the dough rise (Mt 13:31-32). Welcoming the Kingdom in the person of Christ comes at a cost: we have to sell everything we own to buy the field where this treasure is hidden (Mt 13:44). This is the condition for being salt and light (Mt 5:13-16) or for entering through the narrow gate (Mt 7:12-14).

To hasten the coming of the Kingdom, the apostle Paul shows us the way: to become one with Christ. "*I live, but it is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me*" (Gal 2:20). Where can we train ourselves to achieve this total configuration to Jesus? Through prayer, which is fundamentally listening to the Word of God, the Word makes its dwelling in us. It is here that the Father, through the power of the Spirit, "*strengthens the inner man in us, and Christ dwells in our hearts through faith, so that we are rooted and grounded in love*" (Eph 3:16-17). Received in silence, the Word we read and meditate on "*spreads like dew in our hearts*"¹⁷. Like a mustard seed, it grows and fills our

¹⁷ John Mary de la Mennais, S I, 485.

whole life. Are we faithful to the thirty minutes of prayer as our hidden treasure and precious pearl? This spiritual exercise *“must not be cut short under any pretext whatsoever, for of all exercises it is the most necessary”* (RL 2024, 71). It's the secret to establishing the Kingdom of God in our hearts and around us.

Opening our hearts and listening to the Word of the Lord (Ps 94:7-8) is a whole life program for us who want to become one with Christ. There is no other way for the Kingdom to be established in our hearts and in the places where we live. Like rain, the Word of God does not return without watering the earth, fertilizing it and making it germinate, giving seed to the sower and bread to the hungry (Is 55:10).

4- Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

This third request is for the Father's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. What is that will? God wants *“all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Tim 2:3-4). He wants us *“to love one another as he has loved us”* (Jn 13:34). The Son reveals to us the mystery of his will (Eph 1:11). He came into the world to bring it about (Heb 10:7). He always does what pleases his Father (Jn 8:29), even if he has to die on the cross (Lk 22:42). To imitate the Son in learning obedience (Heb 5:8), we are invited to unite our will with his. This is the way to share in his Kingdom (Mt 7:21).

For Jesus, prayer is the place where he discerns the Father's will and draws the strength to carry it out. Before the twelve Apostles were chosen, he prayed all night (Lk 6:12-16). In Gethsemane, he abandons himself to the Father's will (Mt 26:39).

Through her Fiat (Lk 1:38) and her intercession at Cana (Jn 2:1-11), Mary teaches us to discern and carry out the Father's will. Listening to and putting into practice the Word of her Son leads us to Jesus so that we can know him better, conform to him and become more like him.

To learn to commune with God's will, John Mary de la Mennais invites us to open our desire to that of the Father. That's what he

advises us to do in this prayer, which we can take up again when we're struggling on the road of obedience:

“My God, may your will always be mine! I have only one desire: never to put up the slightest resistance to what you ask of me. I surrender myself entirely to you: do whatever you please with this poor creature”¹⁸.

If we want to do what pleases the Lord, following Jesus' example, Ignatius of Loyola suggests we offer him our freedom, our memory, our intelligence, our entire will, everything we have and everything we possess. In this way, we will fulfil the purpose for which we were created: to praise, venerate and serve God.

To learn from the Lord to do his will (Ps 143:10) and to offer him our availability (Ps 39:8-9) is to choose to imitate the Son, who always does what pleases his Father (Jn 8:29). *“If a grain of wheat falls to the ground and does not die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”* (Jn 12:24). A beautiful path of life and resurrection for us, with the Lord's help!

II- At the Rhythm of the Systole

The systolic movement urges us to ask the Father for what we need to deepen our filial relationship, sanctify his name, hasten the coming of his kingdom and carry out his will every day. If we, who are evil, know how to give good things to our children, how much more will our Father give good things to those who ask him (Mt 7:11)! He knows our real needs better than we do, and he is ready to meet them. Let us dare to knock with faith and perseverance at the door of his heart. If we seek his Kingdom first, the rest will be given to us in abundance (Mt 6:33).

¹⁸ John Mary de la Mennais, GC 1, 159.

1- Give us this day our daily bread

When we ask our Father to give us our daily bread, we are expressing our trust in his goodness and Providence (Mt 6:25-34). In no way does this commit us to passivity (2 Thess 3: 6-13). In other words, according to Saint Ignatius of Loyola, we pray as if everything depended on God, and we work as if everything depended on us. The bread we ask of our Father belongs to everyone. It's a call to share material and spiritual goods.

This request also brings us back to another, deeper hunger, that of the Word (Mt 4:4). Without this daily bread, we risk faltering along the way (Mt 15:32-39). Spiritual anaemia threatens us, and our health is in danger. Saint Augustine tells us where to find this indispensable nourishment:

“The Eucharist is our daily bread. The virtue proper to this divine food is a power of union: it unites us to the Body of the Saviour and makes us its members so that we become what we receive ... This daily bread is still in the readings you hear every day in Church, in the hymns that are sung and that you sing. All this is necessary for our pilgrimage”¹⁹.

How regularly do we take part in the Eucharist? What is the quality of our participation? It is in this sacrament that we find inspiration and nourishment, that we renew our consecration and join in Christ's offering (RL 2024, 76).

Another bread that nourishes our prayer life is the Liturgy of the Hours. It is the altar where our hearts prepare for a personal encounter with the Lord. It teaches us to pray by putting on our lips the Word of God which we use to converse with him. It introduces us to the official prayer of the Church, which tirelessly offers God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips confessing his name (RV 2024,

¹⁹ Saint Augustine, Sermons 57, 7, 7: PL 38, 389.

73). It gives rhythm to our lives by listening to the Word of God and praying the psalms. Are we faithful to the community prayer times set out in our Rule of Life? Eating together can whet the appetite of those who are ill or suffering from anorexia.

Another nourishment for our prayer life is spiritual reading. Our Rule of Life asks us to devote at least two hours a week to it. It recommends that we give priority to deepening our knowledge of the Scriptures and the principal documents of the Church and the Institute (RL 2024, 74). Based on their experience in the life of prayer, many prayer leaders see spiritual reading as a distant preparation for prayer. Nourishing our intelligence, heart and memory with spiritual content creates the conditions for fruitful listening to the Word of God.

Another source of nourishment is the daily *lectio vitae*, which *“opens the Brother to the presence of God and to his calls. It enables him to grasp the resistance he opposes to the action of the Spirit. It helps him to unify his life and makes him available to the Lord who acts within him”* (RL 2024, 73.1). Are we careful to perform this spiritual exercise at the end of evening adoration, or during the moment of silence left after the reading of the Word of God during the celebration of Vespers? It's a wonderful tool for growing closer to the Lord.

2- Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

By imploring the Father's forgiveness, we also commit ourselves to forgiving those who have offended us. What a daring commitment when we know the depth of our misery! But it's the way of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), fully confident in the Father's mercy. By taking the path of forgiveness, we want from the bottom of our hearts to imitate his love, his perfection, his holiness (Mt 5:48, Lk 6:36). Only a heart open to the action of the Holy Spirit transforms the wound into compassion, and heals the memory by converting the offense into intercession. Anyone who forgives even his enemies (Mt 5:43-44)

and up to seventy times seven (Mt 18:21-22) has reached the pinnacle of prayer. This is the spiritual testament Jesus leaves us from the summit of the cross (Lk 23:34).

Giving and forgiving are two complementary faces of mercy. This is the golden rule we must strive to implement when offering forgiveness to those who have offended us. This is what Pope Francis encourages us to do:

“To give and forgive is to try to reproduce in our lives a small reflection of the perfection of God who gives and forgives in superabundance ... The measure we use to forgive will be applied to forgive us. The measure we use to give will be applied in heaven to reward us. It is not in our interest to forget this”²⁰.

Charity covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet 4:8). So, to heal the wounds of our offenses against our neighbour, the Church invites us to practice corporal works of mercy: *“Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome strangers, assist the sick, visit prisoners, bury the dead”²¹.*

“For the conversion of his heart to God, the Brother, states our Rule of Life, frequently has recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation prepared by a daily review of life... With humility and trust, the Brother reaches out to his fellow Brothers to offer them forgiveness or to apologize for his faults in order to strengthen the bonds of fraternal charity” (RL 2024, 77). Do we regularly use these two means mentioned in our charter to move towards the summit of prayer, which is mutual forgiveness?

Blessed are we if we forgive and do it up to seventy times seven (Mt 18:22), for we shall obtain mercy (Mt 5:7). This is the true prayer that pleases God (Ps 50:19).

²⁰ Pope Francis, Gaudete et Exultate, n° 81.

²¹ Pope Francis, Misericordiae Vultus, n° 15.

3- Do not let us enter into temptation

When we beg the Father not to lead us into temptation, we're asking him to help us avoid the path that leads to sin. We want to fight the good fight between the desires of the flesh (Ga 5:19-21) and those of the Spirit (Ga 5:22-23). In other words, we call on the spirit of discernment and strength. Only the Holy Spirit can help us discern between the trial necessary for our spiritual growth (Ga 5:16) and the temptation that leads to sin and death (Jas 1:14-15). For Jesus, prayer is the effective means of resisting temptation (Mt 4:1-11, Mt 26:36-44).

Our prayer life is fraught with difficulties. The first is distractions. They come in all shapes and sizes. Chasing them away isn't the solution: we just throw one out the door and another enters through the window. Distractions reveal what our heart is attached to. That's where the battle lies: humbly renewing our attachment to the Lord and asking him to set us free to love and serve him. Where our treasure is, there our heart will be too (Mt 6:21). Isn't the lamp of the body the eye (Mt 6:22)? If we are not vigilant about what we look at, listen to and see, the battle against distractions in prayer is already lost. Vigilance of the heart requires sobriety in the use of information and communication technologies, the capacity for silence, and resistance to the constant temptation of comfort and selfishness (RL 2024, 81.1).

Another difficulty is dryness. We want to pray, but our hearts are dry. We find no taste for it. We've lost our appetite for the realities above. If this is due to our lack of rootedness in Christ, like the Word fallen on rock (Mk 4:5), we ask the Lord for the grace of conversion. May he warm our hearts (Lk 24:32)! May he give us living water to drink (Jn 4:15)!

On the road to prayer, there are many temptations. The most frequent is our lack of faith. We don't believe that the Lord is there, waiting for us, listening to us and answering our prayers. United with the Apostles, let us ask him to increase our faith (Lk 17:5-6). Let us be the friend who comes to wake his neighbour in the middle of the night

to ask for bread (Lk 11, 5-8). Let us imitate the widow who pesters the judge until justice is done (Lk 18, 1-8). Let us learn from the Virgin Mary that nothing is impossible for God (Lk 1:37).

Another temptation is called *acedia*. It's a form of depression caused by lax asceticism, reduced heart alertness and overwork. It is the greatest obstacle to the life of prayer. Its manifestations are numerous. It pushes us to want to move all the time and change places. It gives rise to a general, vague dissatisfaction. It distracts us from the regularity and constancy necessary to the life of prayer. God may sometimes allow such a trial to a soul seeking him in order to strengthen its faith and abandonment to Providence. Saint John of the Cross would speak of the dark night.

To combat *acedia*, the spiritual fathers propose several remedies. Evagrius recommends weeping as a sign of our powerlessness to go to God without his help. John Cassian suggests a short prayer taken from the Word of God, to be repeated as often as possible; for example, "*God, come to my aid! Lord, come quickly to my aid*" (Ps 69:2). Isaac the Syrian advises us to stick to our life of prayer and work at all costs, with patience and regularity. Saint John Climacus encourages fraternal community life. For him, it's the antidote to *acedia*.

On three occasions, the apostle Paul prayed to the Lord to remove the thorn in his side, the messenger of Satan whose mission was to slap him in the face to prevent him from overestimating himself. "*My grace is sufficient for you*", Christ replied (2 Cor 12:7-10). A fine invitation to learn to count on the Lord's help in our moments of temptation and trial!

4- But deliver us from evil

With this invocation, we ask our Father to deliver us from all that distances us from him. He alone can free us from evil, with the help of his Son Jesus, who continues to intercede for us: "*I do not pray that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from evil*" (Jn 17:15). This evil has a name and a face: he's called the Devil, the

one who opposes God and his plan of salvation. It was through him that sin and death entered the world. But he has been definitively defeated by the blood of Christ's cross.

The ongoing battle against the Devil, who is the prince of evil and of this world (Jn 14:30), can only be waged through fasting and prayer (Mk 9:29). Jesus himself celebrates our victories. Indeed, he rejoiced when his disciples reported that even demons were subject to them (Lk 10:17-18). What's more, the more we strive to belong to the Lord without reservation, the more we will overcome evil. In other words, the progress of goodness, spiritual maturation and the growth of love are the best counterweight to the prince of this world. Saint Paul encourages us to overcome "*evil with good*" (Rom 12:21). The author of the letter to the Hebrews exhorts us to resist to the point of blood in our struggle against sin (Hb 12:4). The martyrs of yesterday and today bear witness to this. From now on, they are called sons of God (Mt 5:9): they have won the victory over evil. Happy are we if we follow in their footsteps!

CHAPTER III

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Lk 10:38-42).

In this passage, the evangelist Luke reminds us that listening to Jesus must be at the centre of our daily activities. This is the better part we are called to choose, following the example of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Without prayer, our consecrated life loses contact with its source and is emptied of its substance. *“A constant danger for apostolic workers,”* rightly points out Pope John Paul II, *“is to become so overwhelmed by their own activities for the Lord that they forget the Lord of all activity. It will therefore be necessary for them to become ever more aware of the importance of prayer in their lives”*²².

²² Pope John Paul II, Message to the American Religious Sisters, May 7, 1980.

Mary sits at the Lord's feet and listens to his Word. Weren't we introduced to this form of prayer in the novitiate and during our first years of consecrated life? Where do we stand today? Was it just a parenthesis in our journey, or has it become the source that gives meaning and life to “*all our activities for the Lord*”?

For John Mary de la Mennais, prayer meant being there in silence at the feet of Jesus, and speaking to him as to a friend:

*“Place yourself in spirit at the feet of Jesus Christ; don't make phrases, don't tire your mind with vain formulas. Tell him what you would tell a friend, a father; reveal to him the wounds of your soul so that he may heal them, your embarrassments and your sorrows so that he may enlighten and console you; even tell him with humble simplicity your weaknesses, your infidelities, your faults...”*²³.

The aim of this chapter is to provide us with some tools drawn from the method of prayer proposed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola²⁴, so that we can better listen to the Word of the Lord, following the example of Mary of Bethany. This is the secret of continuing to choose *the better part*. Perhaps it will help us never to cut short our meditation, the most necessary spiritual exercise for our growth.

I- Before Listening

Like all encounters, prayer requires preparation. Going to pray means setting out to meet someone: the Lord. If we have an appointment with someone important, we think about it several days in advance. We read the documents, get informed and make sure everything is ready for the day. All these preparations are aimed at a single objective: a better listening experience. All the more so for a personal encounter with the Lord!

²³ John Mary de la Mennais, S I, 265.

²⁴ Bethy Oudot, Jalons pour prier : À l'écoute de Saint Ignace de Loyola, Éditions Vie Chrétienne, 2012.

1- Distant preparation

At this stage, the Rule of Life sets the framework: “*The Brothers devote thirty minutes each morning*” to listening to the Word of God (RL 2024, 70). The time and duration are already set. The community's oratory is the quiet place for recollection. It has to be a beautiful, well-decorated space, where you feel welcome and happy to stay. If it's too hot or too cold, we'll go reluctantly, out of obligation, or our place will remain empty. When we enter the oratory, everyone must say that it's the most important place in the community. Is ours?

In the evening, before going to bed, it's a good idea to choose the Word of God that will support our meditation: the text of the day's liturgy or another that speaks to us. It's a simple preparation: read the chosen passage calmly once, twice or three times, and let it resonate within us for a few minutes. Then, select two or three points for the morning prayer: a phrase from the Gospel, an idea, a word of Jesus, an attitude of a character... This preparation is also accompanied by the asceticism of silence and sobriety in the use of information and communication technologies. To fall asleep with the Word of God on our lips and in our hearts is to put on our best garment for the encounter with the Lord.

2- Immediate preparation

The celebration of Lauds in community is already preparing us for prayer. Like rain, it waters the soil of our hearts so that the Word can germinate, grow and bear fruit.

First of all, we begin with a gesture of faith that marks the beginning of our prayer: a sign of the cross in full awareness, a bow, a glance at the tabernacle or the cross in the oratory. It's up to each of us to find our own liturgy to begin this important encounter. Then we choose a comfortable, respectful attitude that helps us listen to the Lord. Involving our bodies in prayer is fundamental. Then we calm ourselves by controlling the rhythm of our breathing. We let the Lord's peace dwell in us. We become silent to make ourselves present to God. This is the gateway to prayer. If we fail to do so, we run the

risk of going round in circles and not finding our meeting place. This is what transforms our prayer into a genuine encounter with the Lord.

II- While Listening

The model for our listening to the Lord is the attitude of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. In this way, we sit at the feet of our Master, listening to him, looking at him and conversing with him. Our presence expresses our love and attachment to him.

1- Preparatory prayer

Ignatius of Loyola suggests we begin our meeting with the preparatory prayer, which *“consists in asking God our Lord for his grace so that all our intentions, actions and activities may be purely ordered to the service and praise of his divine Majesty”*²⁵. So we express to the Lord our desire to be there for him freely, to know and love him more. We can also ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds, warm our hearts and mobilize our wills so that this time of prayer is totally dedicated to listening to the Lord, opening our hearts to let the Word of the Lord make its home there.

Preparatory prayer is important. It situates us in the right attitude towards the Lord. It adjusts us to His will, as we are so often self-interested in prayer. In this first step, we decentralize ourselves to listen to the One our heart loves and seeks. We are at his feet for him because he is our God. We seek nothing more than to do what he asks of us.

2- Place composition

Place composition involves our bodies. It's a matter of *“seeing, with the eyes of the imagination, the material place where that which I wish to contemplate is to be found; as, for example, a temple or a mountain where Jesus Christ or Our Lady is to be found”*²⁶. What does this mean? We mentally visualize the space where the episode we've

²⁵ Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises, n°46.

²⁶ Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises, n°47.

chosen to meditate on takes place. Thanks to this concrete point of entry, we open our hearts to listening to the Lord. This mental representation can be based on real images of the Holy Land, Lake Tiberias, Mount Tabor, synagogues, towns and villages where Christ preached. Paintings, sculptures and stained-glass windows in our churches can also help us picture the scene. When we meditate on an invisible reality, such as God's tenderness, we are invited to use symbolic images such as a father or mother with their child...

Let's suppose we're doing our meditation from the Gospel passage that guides our reflection in this chapter (Lk 10:38-42). We take the time to see Martha welcoming Jesus into her home, and Mary listening to him, seated at his feet. We let their dialogue resonate in our hearts. All this contemplation unfolds peacefully, without tension, in the peace of the Lord.

The composition of the room gives space to our prayer. It contributes to inner silence. It does not aim at historical reconstitution. Rather, it is symbolic: we become pilgrims who want to see, touch and walk in the footsteps of Jesus. In so doing, we build a bridge between the Word of the Lord and who we are.

3- The expected grace

At this stage, we express the grace we wish to receive from the Lord. It may come from the text we are meditating on: Mary's attitude of listening (Lk 10:39), or Jesus' words: "*Only one thing is necessary; Mary has chosen the best part...*". (Lk 10:42). It can also present our current needs, our sorrows and joys of the moment. Whether directed at us or at the Lord, more general or more specific, it expresses what we expect from him.

Asking for grace means putting ourselves in a position to receive God's Word, Spirit and light. In this way, we recognize in faith that everything comes from him, and we accept our created condition. It also forces us to sort and prioritize our desires. Gradually, the Holy Spirit will help us adjust our requests to God's desires. It's a fine exercise in discernment.

In the whole spiritual tradition, the Lord wants us to formulate our requests to him. “*What do you want me to do for you?*” (Mk 10:51) he asks the blind Bartimaeus. “*Rabbouni, that I may see again*”, Bartimaeus replies. Jesus asks us the same question every day. We don't ask in order to inform God of our needs, but rather to educate ourselves in his desire.

4- The heart of meditation

“The whole life of the Brother is listening to the Word, which transfigures and gives life. In the privileged time of meditation, the Brother seeks Christ by meditating on the Word of God and contemplating its mysteries” (RL 2024, 71). It is in response to this call that we devote time to listening to the Lord. This spiritual exercise, which must involve our whole being, is acquired progressively, like an athlete who trains daily, following and respecting the wise advice of his coach. It can be laborious at first, but as time goes by, we all find our own rhythm and the teaching method that suits us best.

The structured presentation that follows is in no way intended to divide our whole into parts, but rather to offer pointers for those of us who wish to deepen our listening to the Lord, while *choosing the better part*.

4.1- Applying our memory

After the preparatory prayer, the composition of place and the formulation of the grace we expect from the Lord, we enter the heart of the meditation. As a preamble, we reread the text we prepared the evening before. Then we begin to apply our memory to the first point chosen for our meditation. In fact, the idea is to let everything that this theme reminds us of rise up within us, and how it relates to our own history. In other words, it may evoke other passages of Scripture, other gestures of Jesus, or very precise facts from our personal history: childhood, vocation, wounds, joys, sorrows, graces already received from the Lord... In silence, we peacefully welcome all that our memory offers us, but without wishing to draw up an exhaustive

inventory. The Lord will certainly join us on the road to Emmaus to help us remember all the events of his life and ours (Lk 24:13-24).

The evening before, the first point of reference for our prayer is - for example - Mary's attitude as she sits at the Lord's feet, listening to his Word. By exercising our memory, this passage takes us back to the Virgin Mary welcoming the angel Gabriel into her home in Nazareth. It also evokes Jesus' response to the woman who praised his mother: "*Blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it*" (Lk 11:28). It takes us back to the first time we heard the Lord's call...

When nothing else stands out in our memory, we move on to the next step: exercising our intelligence. But it could also be that the thirty minutes of prayer have come to an end. If so, we give thanks to God and conclude our listening to the Lord with a vocal prayer: the Our Father, the Ave Maria, the Angelus or any other prayer. And this applies to all the other stages.

4.2-Exercise our intelligence

At this stage, we are invited to exercise our intelligence to understand what the Lord expects of us and to discern his will. In this way, we identify our resistances, frailties, fears and struggles. In silence, we let the Word of God illuminate our minds, without haste or anxiety. In his own time, the Lord, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, will interpret the Scriptures for us (Lk 24:27).

Mary, seated at the Lord's feet, listens to his Word. By allowing ourselves to be questioned by this passage, we can discover the quality of our soil when it comes to listening to the Master. Sometimes we are the stones where the Word dries up, sometimes the brambles that choke it, sometimes the good soil that bears fruit a hundred to one (Lk 8:4-21).

When we've completed our exploration, it's a sign that we're ready to move our hearts and wills to be more available to his service.

4.3- Moving our heart and our will

The aim of this stage is to move our heart and will to better love and serve the Lord. Listening to the Word challenges us, touches us and affects us. It invites us to make concrete commitments. It is not those who say “*Lord, Lord*” who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but rather those who do his will (Mt 7:21). It's impossible for this meditation to leave us indifferent. It should arouse in our hearts gratitude to the Lord, or the decision to renew our fidelity in a particular area of our lives, or the request for conversion. In silence, we open ourselves to his love. Were not the hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus burning as the Risen Lord explained to them all that concerned him in the Scriptures (Lk 24:13-35)?

Mary, seated at the Lord's feet, listens to his Word. On an emotional level, several feelings can arise in us. We are no better than our fathers: our heart is closed and refuses to listen to Jesus (Ps 94:7-8). It is slow to believe, like that of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:25). It's like that of Martha's and Lazarus' sister, and it knows how to *choose the better part* (Lk 10:42).

When we reach our Emmaus, it's time to invite the Lord to stay with us (Lk 24:29). This is the next step if we're nearing the end of our time of prayer. If not, we take the second point we chose the evening before, and begin again to apply our memory, exercise our intelligence and move our heart and will.

4.4- Conversing with the Lord

“The colloquy is done, properly speaking, as a friend speaks to his friend or a servant to his master. Sometimes we ask for some grace, sometimes we accuse ourselves of some bad deed, sometimes we share our personal affairs and ask for advice about them”²⁷. In reality, it's a simple, familiar and respectful conversation with the Lord, after listening to him for a long time. At the end of the prayer, we tell him what's on our minds. It may be a request for forgiveness, thanksgiving for a discovery, a commitment, a promise, a concern, a

²⁷ Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises, n° 54.

fear, a dread... In this prayer, we address the Father, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, a saint or one of the people contemplated (Peter, John the Baptist, Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus...). The colloquium doesn't need to be long: one word is enough.

As already indicated, we recommend concluding this time of prayer with a vocal prayer: the Our Father, the Ave Maria, the Angelus or any other formula that allows me to pray to the Lord with the Church.

III- After Listening

After listening to the Lord, it's good to revisit our encounter with him. *"For a quarter of an hour,"* recommends Ignatius of Loyola, *"I'll see how things went during contemplation or meditation."*²⁸ This is an important exercise if we are to progress in our life of union with the Lord. That's why it's a good idea to have a notebook dedicated to this rereading, and to be faithful to it. It's not a question of writing everything down, but rather of keeping in mind a few traces of his passages in our lives.

Rereading our prayer allows us to take the Lord's visits seriously, to identify his gifts with precision so that we can respond to them in our daily lives. It helps us to identify our spiritual history which includes our slavery in Egypt, our desert, our golden calves and our promised land. In so doing, we gradually discover our life as a holy story in which the Lord joins us on the road. Such rereading is a distant preparation for spiritual guidance.

How do we revisit our prayer? First of all, we note in two or three words the overall impression. For example, the time was long or short or normal. We were dry or, on the contrary, we had a lot to say to the Lord. Next, we evaluate the pedagogy we used: remote and immediate preparation, preparatory prayer, composition of place, expected grace, oration, colloquy... Finally, we retain some of

²⁸ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, n° 77.

the fruits of this spiritual exercise: peace, joy, strength, confidence, light received, disgust, fear, revolt...

Rereading our prayer is the best way to gradually unify our prayer and our life.

IV- Listening Differently

On the path of meditation, in his own time, the Lord will give us signs and invite us sometimes to go further, sometimes to stop for a while, sometimes to deepen an aspect of our relationship with him, sometimes to contemplate him. It's up to us to be attentive to his calls and to respond to them with the help of his grace! In other words, he will ask us to learn to listen to him in a different way. Among the many invitations he could give us, let's remember three: to savour, to repeat and to contemplate.

1- Savour

For Ignatius of Loyola, savouring is about quality, not quantity: *"It is not knowing much that satisfies the soul, but feeling and tasting things inwardly"*²⁹. So, like an excellent dish, he advises us to take a little at a time: a word, a verb, an expression, an attitude, a phrase, and to savour it slowly, calmly. Listened to, received and welcomed, it takes time for the Word to give off its full fragrance. This requires us to be truly receptive, to avoid rambling and flitting from one phrase to another as if we were scrolling through a text on our computer screen or cell phone. In doing so, we swallow the Word, but we don't savour it. As a result, it doesn't have time to really nourish us. Knowing how to taste means keeping the right flavour in our mouths for as long as possible. It's not a taste to invent, a flavour to seek out, but an aroma to welcome and dwell in. Nor is it an end in itself, but an indication from the Lord.

This inner taste can be expressed in many different ways. A particular passage awakens in us a sense of wonder, gratitude and

²⁹ Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises, n° 2,4.

recognition. We like a particular character and identify with him or her. We feel at home in the presence of the Lord. Like Peter, we want to pitch our tent (Mt 17:4). There are also more painful expressions. We feel compassion when we meditate on the painful mysteries of Christ's life. We regret our sins when we contemplate God's infinite love for us.

What we savour is not God, but a sign that his Word is shaping and transforming us from within. It's the bread the Lord offers us for our journey. It is the milk he gives us until we become adults able to digest more solid food (Hb 5:13-24).

2- Repeat

To repeat means to deepen an invitation from the Lord. What does this mean? In rereading the previous meditations, we identify passages that have marked us, either by the time we have devoted to them, or by the taste we have found in them, or by the resistance we have put up against them. These verses may come from different texts. The evening before, we decide to make them the content of our prayer.

We begin our listening to the Lord in the usual way. When we come to the actual meditation, we take the first verse we've chosen and go deeper into its content, applying our memory, exercising our intelligence and mobilizing our heart. But we don't try to repeat what we've already experienced. We ruminate and savour this Word, letting the Lord instruct us. We repeat the same dynamic with the other verses. We always conclude the time of prayer with a vocal prayer that puts us in communion with the Church.

The prayer of repetition allows us to refine our listening to the Lord and to leave time for his Word to take flesh in us. It helps us stay with him. It evangelizes our feelings. It helps us build our house on the rock that is Christ.

3- Contemplate

Contemplation means learning to see Christ himself, to listen to his words and watch his actions. More than a method of prayer, it's a way of listening to the Master. This style of prayer is suited to a gospel scene with characters to observe or hear.

After the introductory stages of the meditation, we fix our gaze on the figures in the Gospel scene. We try to get to know them better: they have a name, a character, a history with Jesus. We contemplate them with all the weight of their humanity, in silence and tranquility. We immerse ourselves in what we see. Why not take part in the Gospel scene by getting into the boat with the disciples (Mt 8:23-27), by kneeling at the manger in Bethlehem with Mary and the Magi (Mt 2:11), by allowing ourselves to be like the paralytic lowered before Jesus on a stretcher (Lk 5:18-20)? All this should help us to share what these people saw, understood and touched about the mystery of Jesus.

Then we try to listen to the dialogue narrated in the Gospel text. We welcome the words we hear as if they were addressed to us, or as if we were speaking them. *"Son of David, have mercy on me"* (Lk 10:48). *"Zacchaeus, come down quickly: today I must stay in your house"* (Lk 19:5). *"Stretch out your hand"* (Mk 5:3). We let the different tones they communicate resonate within us: joy, sadness, anger, fear...

Then we look at the actions and gestures of these people. They express something about God or themselves. As a result, they also reveal to us what the Lord can accomplish in our lives if we are open and available to him. It's a call for us to repeat the attitudes in the Gospel scene that call out to us: letting Jesus wash our feet (Jn 13:4-5), serving the good wine at Cana (Jn 2:7-9), casting the net to the right of the boat (Jn 21:5-6), beating our breasts like the publican praying in the temple (Lk 18:13)...

Finally, there's a time for colloquy, when we express to the Lord what's in our hearts: a thanksgiving, a confession of faith, a request

for forgiveness or healing, an act of abandonment or trust. We can also dialogue with one of the characters in the Gospel scene. We can congratulate them on their boldness and faith, or ask them to intercede for us with Jesus. This time of contemplation also ends with a vocal prayer.

Contemplating Christ gradually imprints his features on us. In this way, we learn to love what he loved, and despise what he hated - in other words, to be his living image³⁰.

³⁰ John Mary de la Mennais, S II, 631-632.

MARY, A MODEL OF LISTENING TO THE WORD

“The Brothers express their love and devotion for the Blessed Virgin Mary, model of listening to the Word. In the Scriptures, they meditate on her role in salvation history, and, in the liturgy, they relive with her the mysteries of her Son's life.

They entrust to her maternal care their religious and apostolic life. They do this, in particular, through the daily recitation of the rosary, a traditional prayer of the Institute” (RL 2024, 75).

At the Annunciation, through the voice of the angel Gabriel, Mary listens and welcomes the Word of the Lord. By her yes, her availability and her obedience, she gives us Jesus Christ. In so doing, she shows us the way for our lives to bear fruit. Listening to God's messenger, she also learns that Elizabeth is expecting a child. She immediately sets off to serve her. Mary is not only the servant, but also the one who believes in the fulfillment of what the Lord has said to her. An extraordinary marvel: on her lips, the Word that is heard, welcomed, shared and believed becomes praise to the Lord.

Matthew describes the Virgin as the one who adores and contemplates her Son in the manger of Bethlehem in the company of the Magi (Mt 2:11). For the evangelist Luke, Mary treasures and ponders in her heart the whole mystery of Jesus' life (Lk 2:19, 51). She is happy because she listens to the Word of God and puts it into

practice (Lk 11:27-28). In prayer, she accompanies the first steps of the nascent Church, waiting for the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). For the apostle John, Mary teaches us to always do what her Son asks of us (Jn 2:5). This is the secret of welcoming her as our Mother at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:25-27).

May we listen to, keep and put into practice the Word of the Lord, following Mary's example! May she help us to ponder over it, savour it and make it our daily bread! May she teach us to do whatever her Son asks of us!

God alone in time!
God alone in eternity!

Brother Hervé Zamor, s.g.

November 15, 2024

In memory of Saint Albert the Great.