

METHODS OF MEDITATION

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'Put all thy heart's confidence in the Lord, on thy own skill relying never; wilt thou but keep him in thy thoughts wherever thou goest, he will show thee the straight path.' (PROVERBS 3, 4.)

WE live today in a world which has lost the ability to meditate. Such a generalization must exclude the individual souls who are trying to follow the advice of Proverbs, 'keep him in thy thoughts wherever thou goest', and those who have entered religion. But taken by and large it is a fair commentary on the present situation, as can be seen from the following extract from a broadcast talk, given some years ago by Bertrand Russell: 'As men grow more industrialized and regimented, the kind of delight which is common in children becomes impossible to adults, because they are always thinking of the "next thing" and cannot let themselves be absorbed in the moment. This habit of "thinking of the next thing" is more fatal to any kind of aesthetic excellence than any other habit of mind that can be imagined, and if art, in any important sense, is to survive, it will not be by the foundation of solemn academies, but by recapturing the capacity for wholehearted joys and sorrows which prudence and foresight have all but destroyed.'¹

This has a direct bearing upon the subject of meditation in the world today, because the tendency which he deplures has intensified since he spoke. As a result, a large proportion of the community has become 'soul-less', conditioned against grace, unaware of sin, of redemption, of God himself. Their thoughts are on sex or the cinema; their meditation on the Pools form each week. Yet, against this, there is the increasing clamour of those who believe and those who want to believe; the clamour once made by the Apostles to Christ, and now made to the priest: 'Father, teach us to pray', 'Father, how can I meditate, what do I do, how do I begin?', 'Father, is meditation possible in the strain and rush of life, when all my thought is on how to make both ends meet?'

It is with an eye on this situation, the situation of the ordinary

¹ Bertrand Russell. *Authority and the Individual*, p. 49.

person who wants desperately to know how to be quiet with God, that we must approach the question of meditation. If, therefore, some time is spent in considering old ways of prayer, do not think the point is being missed. It is necessary to see how the earlier centuries of the Church set about praying, so that we can understand that they too had to adapt themselves as the centuries went past. As each brief outline is presented, therefore, the thought provoked should be: 'How would this method or lack of method fit into modern society?' It must be a constructive question. If none of the categories apply to our situation, it is vital to amalgamate them, or simplify them, or build a new way to reach God. From the study of the basic and ancient ideas on meditative prayer, it is essential to come down to the immediate problem of Mr Brown of London Town or Miss Smith of Stafford who want guidance in their difficult task of fitting their material existence to a spiritual life, so that they grow in oneness with Christ, are incorporated into him.

Meditation is not a product of the counter-Reformation. It is an immediate consequence of God's creation of a rational animal called man. Considered loosely, the term 'meditation' can be co-extensive with mental prayer, though it is often used in a more restricted sense in these days. Tanqueray says that mental prayer is: 'a silent elevation and application of our mind and heart to God in order to offer him our homages and to promote his glory by our advancement in virtue'.² This definition, however, goes very little further than the general idea put forward in the Catechism. Perhaps it could be said that vocal prayer is excluded as such, but that all other forms, including ejaculations used to focus the mind on God, can be included provided the intellect and will are moved by their use to a deeper knowledge and love of God. In point of fact all prayer must take into consideration the make-up of man, and so it appeals directly to the intellect and will. It is therefore quite legitimate to turn to the Bible and to class under Meditation all those passages which were given to the Jewish people, albeit without a complicated system, to encourage them to a daily contemplation of the truth of God. For instance, how many times has this quotation been used for our methodical meditation:

² Tanqueray. *Spiritual Life*. Bk II, Pt I, p. 320.

The Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want
 He maketh me lie down in green pastures
 He leadeth me beside the waters of rest
 He restoreth my soul. (Psalm 22.)

This is no more than a mind picture, much more vivid to that shepherd people than to ourselves, waking the imagination, causing the intellect to think out the relation of shepherd to sheep and so of God to man, and finally rousing the will to love. 'He restoreth my soul.' This is but one instance. The Old Testament thrills through with meditations.

As for the New Testament . . . whole books have been written upon Christ as the master of prayer. He is direct and simple, or he can in the parables produce quite elaborate methods of enlightening and enlivening his disciples. No wonder the great Dominican, Fr Vincent McNabb, had a way of taking a parable and reading it through slowly to his congregation as the best possible sermon. Our Lord's method is generally the basic one for meditation. He paints a picture, or points to nature . . . consider the lilies of the field . . . then makes the application of the relation between God and his hearers . . . if God so clothes the grasses of the field . . . how much more you? . . . and finally he leaves them to ponder on a particular part of his doctrine, on this occasion faith. (Matt. 6, 28.)

After Christ, the early centuries of the Church seem to have continued a straightforward line of mental prayer, stimulated by readings from the letters of the Apostles, the Psalms and so on. Systematic meditation was not fully developed till the sixteenth century. How then did a religious of old go about meditation? The best single example we can take is that rocklike foundation, the rule of St Benedict. Here immediately there is an interesting fact which can escape notice. St Benedict made no provision for a special time for meditation as such. Three things are considered. The Divine office gets pride of place. It is to be virtually a prolonged contemplation as suggested in Psalm 118: *Quam diligo legem tuam Domine. Tota die meditatio mea est.* How I love thy law, O God. All day long I think on it. Secondly there is private prayer which should be 'short and pure, except it be perchance prolonged by the inspiration of divine grace'.³ But over and above these two, he says firmly: 'Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore

³ Rule, Ch. XX.

should the brethren be occupied at stated times in manual labour and at fixed hours in sacred reading.⁴ It is this sacred reading, *lectio divina*, which is the third type of prayer. It is essentially the meditation of the Benedictine rule. Speaking of it, Delatte says: 'By ordinance of the rule, the whole day was to be passed in the presence of God. The method was simple and easy. It was to forget-self and live in habitual recollection, to steep the soul assiduously in the very beauty of the mysteries of faith, to ponder on all aspects of the supernatural dispensation, under the inspiration of the spirit of God which alone can teach us to pray.'⁵ In a word, it was meditation without a system of preparation and points and resolutions. It was designed for two hours a day, and was for the use of all the monks, not special individuals.

The years passed by, with continued development in learning and material production. There began the modern tendency of 'busyness', against which St Bernard had to speak strongly to Pope Eugenius III: 'If you devote your whole life and all your knowledge to activity and nothing to meditation, how can I praise you?'⁶ He was only one of the saints and religious leaders who touched or wrote on the question of meditation. St Thomas takes us back to the basic principles which have been mentioned already, the co-ordination of the mind and heart of man, in his answer to the question: Whether meditation is the cause of devotion? He says: 'Devotion is an act of the will to the effect that man surrender himself readily to the service of God. Now every act of the will proceeds from some consideration since the object of the will is a good understood'. (II-II, 82, 3.)

From this statement, which is a summary of the purpose of meditation, it is possible to see that whatever system is used, or if system as such is ignored, the background to all meditative prayer is divided roughly as follows:

Preparation. This begins outside meditation. It is in fact a way of life, a method of trying to be recollected during the day by guarding against sin, training the mind to come continually back to God, and stressing the virtue of humility. Recollection is especially helpful in that it gives a person the ability to set aside a time for meditation, preferably also for preparation the night

⁴ Rule, Ch. XLVIII.

⁵ *Commentary on the Rule of S. Benedict*. Delatte, p. 306.

⁶ S. Bernard. *De Consideratione*.

before, and strengthens the control needed to get up betimes in the morning, without too much distraction. Its final purpose is to make possible a sense of the presence of God at all times, and more particularly at the beginning of the meditation proper.

Meditation. A virtue to be studied or a scene in the life of our Lord which has been chosen is reviewed in the mind, to promote a deeper knowledge of God. Looking into himself in regard to this lesson, the person asks strength from God, and towards the end is encouraged through an increased love to make some resolution for the future.

Conclusion. In reality, this part is a thanksgiving for the grace received in meditation, together with a demand that God should bless the day. If desired an ejaculation can be chosen to be used to help recollection or a thought likely to inspire devotion can be kept in the mind. This latter is often called, rather sentimentally, a spiritual bouquet.

The variations on this general theme are innumerable. But two schools have canalized the main difference of emphasis, others following more or less the same pattern. These schools are firstly the Ignatian and secondly the Sulpician.

St Ignatius: Whether or not it is a direct result of his army career, St Ignatius gave something of a military quality to his method of meditation. As an immediate preparation, there is to be a composition of place, not unlike a military reconnaissance and appreciation of the situation before battle. The object is to interest the imagination and mind by painting the scene vividly, thus preventing distractions. But St Ignatius is very practical all the way through, and for fear that there should be idle day-dreaming, this part as well as the rest must be focussed on the goal by asking God to grant the particular grace sought as the object of the meditation. The body of the meditation is the application of the same theme in turn to the memory, the understanding and the will. The memory gives an outline of the meditation, then the understanding dissects this, developing various points and applying them to itself in a practical way. The object of this exercise is to rouse the will in turn with affections, as they are called, which lead it to make some explicit resolution. Here again, he insists that the person must be practical, only making a resolution within his capacity, aided by the grace of God. Airy-fairy resolutions are useless, as they will never be kept. There

follows a few minutes of summing up, with a prayer to God, our Lady and the Saints, and a general resolution to train the will to a better meditation in the future.

On this method, it should be said that many have accused St Ignatius of making too much use of the will, and somewhat ignoring the person of Christ. This could seem to be so, especially in the earlier meditations, but as the person develops, following the lines of St Ignatius, the emphasis comes more and more towards the study of Christ and the incorporation in him. However, those who feel this criticism to be valid are often more at home with the method of St Sulpice.

St Sulpice: The ideas of Cardinal de Berulle are the basis for this way of meditating. They were enlarged by Frs Condren and Olier, but even then remained rather vague. The general plan was to desire union with the Incarnate Word based upon acts of adoration, communion and co-operation. Fr Tronson who followed in this school thought this inadequate, at any rate for beginners, though suitable for the more advanced. He therefore made it more of a system, while retaining the main theme of incorporation into Christ. As an outline, Fr Olier gave the following points: Adoration is 'having Jesus before our eyes'; this is to gaze upon his thoughts, words and actions, making him our model, in a spirit of humble adoration. From this follows Communion, 'Jesus in our hearts', uniting his virtue to ourselves in prayer. The result is Co-operation, 'Jesus in our hands', which implies the forming of resolutions for co-operating with him in producing his virtues in ourselves, with a special emphasis on the love of God, and the powerful working of his grace in the human soul. At the end of the meditation, there is the usual thanksgiving, prayer for grace in our resolution, and choice of a thought for the day. Furthermore, it is the custom to place everything in the hands of our Lady.

There are just two other methods that might be mentioned here, because they are much in line with the modern world.

Saint Francis of Sales. The chapters⁷ given by the Saint to meditation form only a part of his general work, but he is writing to Philothea, who personifies anyone desiring to love God. His ideas seem well adapted to those who live in the world. So,

in the first place, he wants each person to place himself in the presence of God. If it is helpful, he suggests using the creed or the Our Father, but urges everyone to accept the desire for mental prayer as more important than the saying of vocal prayers, other than those to which we are bound by rule of life. Alternative methods for becoming prayerful are to recall the presence of God in our hearts, to picture our Lord looking down upon us with a special loving care, or finally the use of the ordinary consideration as suggested by St Ignatius, with the emphasis on God made man, thinking of him as a friend beside us. There is to follow an invocation akin to the adoration of St Sulpice; the presentation in detail to the imagination of the mystery which is to be meditated upon springs from this, and is necessary, because like St Ignatius, St Francis believed in 'caging' the imagination, by some picture in order to concentrate the mind . . . at any rate in the case of beginners. He then goes on to use the understanding and the will, like the others insisting upon a practical resolution, and it is he who suggests the term 'spiritual bouquet'.

Gospel Enquiry. Finally, there has grown up a new system or method which seeks to bring meditation in some sense within the scope of all levels of piety and learning in the world today. I refer to the Gospel Enquiry method. It is quite likely that some will object that it is not meditation at all. We must not be biased. The method seeks to take a piece of Scripture each week, and to apply each member of a group to it under the principle of See, Judge and Act. Roughly, this follows the Ignatian method. They study the passage, get its setting in the Gospel, understand its meaning. Then they judge its application as Christ meant it, as it stands in the world today, and as it affects themselves. Finally, they take a concrete resolution of something to be done in their own lives. One person leads the discussion, having prepared beforehand with a priest, but the others too must prepare. Each should contribute something to the discussion. The effect is to give everyone something to think about during the week, and the benefit of a 'group meditation' is that points crop up differently in different minds, and an open discussion often impresses them more solidly than a private resolution. The passage selected and discussed can afterwards form a good meditation, and in this way, those who are afraid to begin by themselves can be schooled in the practice of meditative reading and prayer,

seeing that perfectly ordinary people under guidance of a priest can advance rapidly, if they are generous.

So much for the general consideration of methods. Whole books have been written on them, and these should be referred to, if more information is required. But here and now it is important to relate these ideas to modern prayer. Do we need a method today? Or will no method as mentioned really fill the bill, without adaptation of some kind? For we are face to face with the statement of Bertrand Russell and the opinions with which I began, namely, that the majority of mankind has lost the ability to meditate. The popular press, cinema, radio, television, the comic strip, the factory, the general speed of life . . . all these are factors contributing to give a synthetic food to the mind, conditioning it only for more synthetic food. It is more difficult than it used to be for the ordinary person to meditate. The remote preparation is dislocated in the noise of city life; even in the countryside, everyone is invaded with mechanization and form-filling, while the television aerial clings to the chimney of the farmhouse as well as that in Acacia Avenue. Even the housewife does not stay at home, but works to increase the pay-packet. The drain of energy which comes from working in an enclosed building makes the setting aside of half an hour for meditation in the evening a great strain, while early morning rising is often incompatible with family duties, late nights and office hours. Even in the priesthood, the apparent 'busyness' of life drives the set time for meditation into a corner of the day, and can, disastrously, drive it out altogether.

This problem must be faced. Meditation or mental prayer is vitally necessary today. It is perhaps more necessary than ever before, as a means of counteracting the insidious growth of godlessness. As a duty and as a sign of our own love of God, each one must do what he can to encourage the practice of mental prayer, and to make it a living possibility for ordinary people. To some extent it may be that synthetic meditations are used, along the lines of St Ignatius, because the human mind in the world today needs a sense of discipline which it may never meet, even in its schooling. At the same time, there is too much regimentation about, and many react against it. In order to make a fair balance, it must be made clear that the first essential is regularity. Day in and day out, time must be given to meditative prayer.

It is much wiser to be honest at the beginning. If half an hour theoretically set aside is in a practical way impossible, a regular and shorter time can be planned. The idea used always to be half an hour. Today that is frequently too long for every day of the week. If more people would cut out the theory, and get down to a simple but solid ten minutes each day, extended where possible but never falling short of that minimum, then the prayer-life of the world would go ahead. Can anyone honestly state that he cannot make ten minutes free in twenty-four hours?

The next point is that, especially in city life, an attack has to be started against the deadening, time-wasting elements in each day. In the ordinary course of events, few can given quiet time away from the world in which to make a remote preparation, unless they are religious. Very well then, remote preparation must be made in the midst of the world during the day. By being positive about this, it is possible to build a cocoon of prayer in a bus, in a crowded street, in the underground, at the factory bench. Throwing his hands up in horror, the master of the spiritual life may say this is no place to prepare a meditation. If it is not, at least it is the only place available, or there will be no peace of mind at meditation proper. Too strong a stress cannot be put on the urgency of using ten minutes on a bus, five minutes in a queue, the odd period at the end of the lunch-hour, those minutes while the eggs are boiling. They are the precious moments when, using them to turn to God, we bring recollection into our lives. The outer mind may still be conscious of distractions, getting off at the next stop, watching the clock for soft-boiled eggs, but deeper down, the soul can be working upon God. This is the point of concentration; the other worldly elements are only superficial. But in order to get to this stage, constant practice of recollection, interior silence, must be made. Otherwise the world will always crowd in, and then no wonder that our mad rush into church is not rewarded by peace, but by a continued stream of those thoughts which we carried in with us. It is impossible simply to throw off the world at the door of the church, as a snake does its skin. But if we have pushed the world away as we walked to work, if we said the Rosary on the bus, if we were recollected as we dressed and walked to Mass, then we were pouring oil on the rough waters of our spirit, calming our minds and hearts, ready for prayer proper. Of course we shall be a bit distracted.

Of course this is no substitute for deep prayer in church. But it is the counter-attack upon the world, the remote preparation for prayer, which makes prayer so much more real, so vital, that we can and will give it time in our lives.

For the meditation itself, each person must try and see. There are so many ways, but the object is always the same . . . to love God more. In the usual way, every soul begins with vocal prayer and at some stage must practise meditation. This is the common path of prayer. It is more commonly recognized today that progress can and should be made beyond formal meditation. There is no need to keep the soul to rigid points and set considerations. The imagination can become useless, the prayer develop into a quiet pressure towards God, without much, if any, feeling except dryness. Souls should not be discouraged in this pursuit of God, but freedom should be given for them to progress. We are not made to pattern. Each individual soul after going a certain way to God along the common path must go on, guided and yet alone. The guide can only understand if he himself is going on too. Mark that well! It would be a sad thing to hold back an ardent soul not through caution, but through personal refusal to proceed.

In this progress there are two dangers. It is possible to turn the meditation, particularly by points, into a mental exercise. This is not a study of theology. It is prayer. And the object of prayer is God. The tired soul seeks to rest in God, to stay to some extent anyhow in the present moment, and not to look ahead too much for the future. Life therefore must not be burdened by a prayer which goes into theological niceties. Nor must the outcome of prayer be such a series of resolutions that it is a nightmare. It is surely impossible to meditate each day, and to expect to make and keep an equal number of resolutions. Rather we are to increase our knowledge of our Lord and our love of him, not merely in a negative way by abolishing sin. There must be something, somebody, in our lives to take its place. This something is love, that somebody is God.

On the other hand, the objection to set meditation must be genuine and reasonable. There is no room for idle day-dreaming. If meditation has never been used and passed through, there is always a danger of self-deception. Laziness, lack of determination to try to meditate, may develop into a cosy reverie, which does nothing to forward our knowledge and love of God. Because it is

a danger when we are tired, mentally and physically, perhaps it should be a subject for examination occasionally. At the same time, it is not good to be among those who are no more nor less than scared by the word 'meditation'. Everyone can and does meditate, but on what subject . . . football, stocks and shares, the summer holidays? This is a form of meditation, but it is not rightly directed. Man must use his faculties to know, love and serve God. It is certain, therefore, that in all walks of life, meditation of some sort is most beneficial. St Francis of Sales says: 'You should strive, too, to accustom yourself to go easily from prayer to all such occupations as your calling or position lawfully require of you, even although such occupations may seem uncongenial to the affections and thoughts just before forming part of your prayer. Thus the lawyer should be able to go from meditation to his pleading, the tradesman to his business, the mistress of the family to the cares of her household and her wifely duties, so calmly, so gently as not to be in any way disturbed by so doing. In both you are fulfilling God's will, and you should be able to turn from one to the other in devout and humble spirit'.⁸

To sum up. There are many different methods of meditation, and meditation itself is only one part of the prayer-life of the soul in the Church. The essential is to give some time to prayer each day. This period may be aided by the *lectio divina* of St Benedict or by the points of St Ignatius or by general acts of the presence of God. Whatever way is used, it is necessary to spread it out into the day, so that some calmness is present in the soul at the time of prayer. Of the hundreds of books of meditations, none is better than the Gospel, and the central place in our thoughts should be given to Jesus Christ, that we may be gradually 'oned' with him. For this purpose, the daily Liturgy is admirably made up of psalms and passages from Scripture, so that it remains only to say once more: Put all thy heart's confidence in the Lord, on thy own skill relying never; wilt thou but keep him in thy thoughts wherever thou goest, he will show thee the straight path.