

## THE EXERCISE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN PRAYER

I—THE PRESENCE OF THE BLESSED TRINITY<sup>1</sup>

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HE most important truth for our interior life is an ever more exact knowledge of the God who dwells in us. His goodness, his providence, his justice, and all his attributes seem to grow beneath our gaze, when we consider them in the light of the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption; now we know these only by revelation.

But we receive the greatest light from our knowledge of the Blessed Trinity. There is but one true God. This God who is in us entirely is the God one in nature and three in Persons. This assertion confounds us. This living Trinity, which we are accustomed to represent in I know not what distant heaven where he unveils his splendour for the angels and saints, this adorable Trinity is in us, it lives in us. In me, at this moment, as at all the other instants of my life, God the Father in knowing himself begets his Son and gives to him his whole divine nature so as to make him his equal, consubstantial with himself. In me, at this moment, God the Father and God the Son love each other, and from the infinite torrents of this love which they have for each other proceeds the Person of the Holy Spirit. This takes place within me, at each moment; and I am not aware of it. *Vere Dominus est in loco isto et ego nesciebam* (Gen. 28, 16). How this truth, which I cannot doubt, excites my soul to admiration, to respect, and above all to renewed adoration!

But as yet I am only on the threshold of this new world. This God living in me calls me to share in his happiness, to enter as an adopted son, under the auspices of the only begotten Son, into that movement of life which, in the bosom of the Trinity, bears the Son by love into the bosom of the Father. To give me this unique hope, to assure to me this divine inheritance, the Son becomes like to me and delivers himself up for me. It is the same Son who now, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, dwells within me; he wishes to prepare me for the heavenly delights of a divine life whose happiness I shall one day share with him; already he unceasingly bestows on me the life of grace, which is a participation in the divine life which he lives himself. Before God who, *present in me*, thus fills me with his gratuitous gifts, some in hope, the others already realised, it is no longer simply adoration which rises from my heart, it is absolute confidence and total abandonment, it is that gratitude which leads to love.

Yes, it is to a reciprocal *love* that God leads me in revealing to my *Faith* the august mystery of his life in three Persons, in elevating my *hope* to a confident expectation of a beatifying participation in his

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own life. And he does not consider this love as belonging only to the beatitude of heaven: he wishes to see it realised here below. Present in me, *he gives himself to me* to prove to me that he loves me, and to incite me to love him in return.

We touch here upon the central mystery of our interior life. Let us try to understand a little better this *gift* of himself which God bestows on us in *dwelling* in our souls in virtue of sanctifying grace and charity.

*Si quis diligit me. . . Pater meus diligit eum et ad eum veniemus, et mansionem apud eum faciemus* (John 14, 23). Let us note these last words: God will make his abode *with us*.

To be *with* anyone is not only to be physically present in his house. Tourists may visit an historic castle; the owner lives there in a few rooms reserved for himself; a guide shows the visitors round. May one say that this anonymous crowd is received by the master of the castle? Certainly not! To be received by anyone is to be welcomed by him as an intimate guest, on whom he lavishes every comfort, whom he does not leave by himself, to whom he opens his heart in intimate and friendly converse, with whom he shares all his possessions so that during his stay the guest may use them as his own.

It is in this way that God understands his coming to us and our reception of him. His presence in us, that altogether spiritual presence of God living and acting in us, is not only a kind of physical juxtaposition; it is not merely the strict dependence which results from the fact that he is the First Cause. On God's side it denotes *personal relations with us*, a giving of himself to us. In the sanctuary of our souls we dwell with God; we are with him and as his guests he admits us to the enjoyment of his possessions and of himself. He dwells with us and he awaits from us the free abandonment of all that we have and which comes to us from his liberality. As he gives himself to us by love, it is also by love that he wishes us to give ourselves to him.

In heaven the veil will be removed and we shall *see* and fully enjoy this divine guest of our souls. But already we *know* by faith that he is with us, and that we possess him truly for he gives himself to us; this certitude which our faith imparts authorises confidence, dilates the soul and fills it with sweetness, giving it peace and security.

God sometimes goes further than this, even during our earthly sojourn, and permits certain very pure souls, souls entirely given up to him and treated by him with an absolutely gratuitous predilection, to be *conscious* of this intimate presence and of this love. The soul does not only *know*, she *experiences* God present in her, and she *rejoices* in the God of love. Drawing aside the veil, the interior Master, silent and enveloped in the shadows of faith for us, replies to the loving transports of these hearts in a way which they can feel. Happy the souls whom the divine Master thus treats! Before the infinite horizons which are thus opened up to our life of intimacy

with God, who would not feel his courage renewed and his gratitude increased towards that God present in us, not only by the necessity of his nature, but by a gratuitous gift of himself which, inspired by his infinite love, urges us, in our turn, to an ever increasing and limitless love of him.

Let us strive henceforth to live these splendid realities which our faith reveals. Let us make an effort to keep ever in mind that God dwells in us, that he loves us, and that we ought to love him and treat him as our Guest. We must recall that mortal sin expels God from our souls, not that it hinders his physical presence, but because, if I may say so, it forces him back on himself, and he withdraws his love and his gift of himself in charity. Venial sin, though it does not cast out the divine Guest, draws our souls away from him to run after the trifles which displease him and constitute such a lack of respect as sometimes to appear a real insult. Tepidity, finally, is an inexcusable attitude, since it places us before God, whom we know by faith to be within us, in an attitude of *indifference*, to such an extent that we acquire the habit of thinking and acting as if God were not the loving Guest of our souls, ceaselessly engaged in bestowing new favours upon us.

To conclude by practice, let us see how, at the commencement of our prayer we may utilise this great thought of the presence of God such as we now understand it.

Having recollected ourselves, that is, having subdued our wandering imagination and set in order all the faculties of our soul, we address ourselves to God, saying: 'My God, I believe that you are present everywhere, I believe that you are in this place where I am now praying to you. I know that all the objects which surround me, which my senses perceive, are, despite appearances, less real than you, O eternal God. I know, I believe that you are within me, that you are there entirely, with all your perfections, with your Triune life of which I am the unworthy tabernacle. I know that my whole being, all my existence is dependent on your creative will, as effect on its cause, as the ray on the luminous orb, as the sound on the lips which utter it. O my God, on whom I absolutely depend, I acknowledge my nothingness and I adore you. If at least I were only nothingness! But I am a sinner. I have even used your gifts to offend you. At the very moment when I received them, I used them to displease and insult you. Pardon, my God! I am unworthy of pardon, but your infinite mercy, your love ever active towards me, reanimates my confidence. The pardon which you now grant me is to me a new motive of praise in union with all creatures, who are likewise recipients of your favours; it affords me above all a new motive of love, divine Guest to whom I turn, grief-stricken by my lapses, but resolved to abandon myself to your love. At least I desire to remain in your presence during my prayer, that Presence which I have so often forgotten and slighted. You have patiently waited for me, O my God, here I am; deign to keep me recollected, conscious of you

during my prayer; for without this grace I cannot even pray as I ought. I acknowledge this total dependence gladly since it binds me to you more closely.'

We see by this example—which is only an example, not a model—how we ought to connect the preparatory acts of prayer (adoration, contrition, petition, etc.) to the initial act by which we recall the presence of God. It is desirable that during the whole time of our prayer we remain thus in the presence of God. To succeed in this the best means is to use the points of prayer, not as subjects of personal reflection but as themes for loving converse with God, finding therein motives of praise, love, petition, etc. When a distraction arises, instead of returning directly to the *subject* of prayer, it will be more profitable for the soul to turn first to *God* present in it and loved by it, to ask his pardon and to begin again the interrupted colloquy, then only should we introduce anew the subject of prayer into this converse, so as to sustain and renew the first fervour and to profit by it.

## II—THE PRESENCE OF OUR LORD

However beautiful and true may be the doctrine explained above, we meet souls to whom this seeking of God in prayer by an effort of the reason and by naked faith, in sacrificing the imagination almost completely, would be a hard and arid exercise. If they could only find their God less spiritualized, nearer to their daily life of sense! Let these souls not be discouraged. To respond to this desire, to this very human need, they can place themselves in the presence of the Man-God, of Jesus, who was and who is a man like ourselves. It remains for us to see how and in what manner we may place ourselves in the presence of Jesus. We ought to understand this practice well: for our piety would indeed be suspect if it pretended to attain God directly without passing through the unique Mediator; and in placing ourselves in the presence of Jesus we shall bring to our spiritual life an element of variety well calculated to sustain our fervour.

We have often seen the following counsel laid down by different methods of prayer: represent to yourself Jesus as man standing before you, or at your side: prostrate before him to adore him and to speak to him *as if* he were really close to you. . . . Is this exercise of the *imagination* legitimate? We may profitably examine it more closely, so as to lay the foundations of our interior life on solid realities and on a safe doctrine. Far from losing anything our piety shall gain thereby.

If the divine nature of the Word is everywhere, because he is God, his *humanity* is not everywhere. It was the error of the Protestant Ubiquists to have sought and held inaccurate doctrines on this head regarding the real presence of Jesus in the holy Eucharist. In fact, Jesus as man, is present only in heaven and in the blessed Sacrament. To localise him elsewhere, as if he were there physically, is a pure exercise of the imagination.

But here is something which is not imagination: from the height of heaven as from the depth of our tabernacles, Jesus does not cease to behold us and to act upon our souls. Let us study these two truths successively.

As man Jesus knows us individually, he knows all our acts, all our sentiments, all our thoughts. The Church has recently stated that it would be temerity to doubt this. But how are we to conceive that the human understanding of Jesus knows all things at once?

To understand this we must recall the conditions under which our own human knowledge develops. This becomes more and more perfect according to the measure in which our accumulated notions are multiplied, and above all, according as the *ensemble* of our ideas becomes subordinated to one dominant thought. In what, for example, did the military genius of a Foch consist, if not in keeping his attention fixed on the almost infinitesimal number of problems of modern warfare, and in solving them all by *one* directing idea? Was it not the philosophical genius of St Thomas which reduced all the philosophical problems to a few first principles which solved them all? And God himself, who knows all things that exist actually and potentially, has but *one* Idea which is his Word.

Now it is precisely this divine knowledge realised in one idea that God imparts to his elect in heaven. They know all things *in Verbo*, in a representation of the divine order which clarifies for them all the multiple conceptions of human knowledge. We may remark in passing that it is thus that the saints in heaven know us, and hear the prayers which we address to them. Because nothing is wanting to their happiness, they know everything which it would interest them to know, and when we address ourselves to them and beg their intercession, we are certain that they are actually attentive to our prayers or to our praises: they know them all *in Verbo* (cf. St Thomas, *Sent.* IV, dist. 45. q. 3; et *S. Theol.*, Suppl., q. 62, art. 1). How useful this truth will be when we wish 'to place ourselves in the presence' of the saints during prayer, and above all in the presence of Mary.

In this way, *in Verbo*, the glorified soul of Jesus knows all that it wishes to know, all that concerns it in its role of Redeemer and King of all. Even when we are not praying to him Jesus does not cease to behold us with his understanding, seeing *in Verbo* all our ways, all our sentiments, all our free acts, all our interior life.

Let us accustom ourselves to dwell beneath this divine gaze, to read therein the sentiments of the heart of the Beloved: *intuitus eum, dilexit eum* (Mark 10, 21). Let us submit to his penetrating and healthy influence: *Conversus Dominus respexit Petrum*. (Luke 22, 61). We should remember this: when we speak to Jesus, he hears and understands us as perfectly, indeed more perfectly, than does a friend to whom, for example, we confide intimate secrets by means of a telephone, the good functioning and security of which we are assured. In this we find an analogy; Jesus in his humanity is not

locally beside us, but between his soul and ours there exists a communication assured by the infallible knowledge of God.

Moreover this divine Friend who hears us so well and knows us so intimately is able to act powerfully in our favour and does not cease to do so. This is the second aspect of our relations with Jesus, in his humanity. Let us understand thoroughly in what manner he acts upon us.

The life of grace is in us. This life is a participation in the divine life of the God one in nature and three in Person. But before being given to us in part this divine life was first communicated in its totality to the sanctified soul of Jesus: it is the source whence we receive all grace: *De plenitudine ejus nos omnes accepimus* (John 1, 16).

Let us again take a comparison to help us to understand this great truth. The light which inundates the countryside on a beautiful spring day, the heat which bathes the whole plain and ripens its harvests, depends entirely on the luminous and caloric source which is the sun; material objects appropriate it to themselves; they become luminous and hot; but by participation and by matter borrowed from the solar source. Thus all divine life, all the life of grace is at first gathered up and as it were condensed in the humanity of Jesus; but his action expands subsequently to us all. As the sun, without being itself present on the earth, acts nevertheless on earthly objects, so Jesus, whose humanity (outside the time of holy Communion) is not in immediate contact with us, acts ceaselessly upon us, giving us sanctifying grace, and the actual graces which constitute our supernatural life: his *virtual* presence as theologians call it, designating by this term the continual action which Jesus exercises upon our souls.

To sum up: Jesus *sees* us: Jesus *acts* upon us: our relations with Jesus are now established in truth.

From heaven and from the tabernacle whence he resides, Jesus does not cease to vivify me supernaturally by a very real influence. From this point of view I am united to him by a continual dependence, analogous to that which joins my whole being to the creative will of God. Jesus as man, makes me participate in his life of grace, in this sense it is 'no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me', because he extends the life of grace which he lives himself unto me, a distant member, for I belong to him, to his mystic body. On the other hand Jesus is perfectly cognisant of this power, the result which it obtains, my acquiescence, my resistance, my sorrows, my joys, my praise, my prayer.

We see now how, by the reality of these relations which, though mysterious for me, unite me to him, I can turn towards him at the beginning of my prayer, adore him in the unity of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, address myself to him as my God, and yet know that as man he understands me completely. My imagination may picture him to itself as history represents him or in the glory of his heavenly

triumph, using for this the Gospels or the tableaux of the Apocalypse. I know that in his humanity he is not in me (except at the moment of holy Communion), nor even near me, but, in order to express to myself the certitude of his action upon me and the knowledge which he has of me, I may (without being the dupe of this representation) *represent him* to myself as man, as before me or near to me, so as to be more recollected and to converse with him. . . .

To put myself in the presence of God, or to put myself in the presence of Jesus, which is preferable? The question is hardly reasonable, since in both cases one is simply in the presence of God. The better thing here is to vary the methods and let each one decide for himself according to the attractions of grace and his own temperament. Souls who are governed by cold reason usually prefer the first method; those in whom sensibility and imagination predominate—and these are the greater majority—almost always incline towards the second.

They will find therein a precious aid to meditation on the Gospel, the usual subject of our prayer. The Gospel narratives will be the frequent theme of their conversations with Jesus; they will read them with him, in his presence, and they will begin their prayer somewhat in the following manner: 'My Jesus, you see me and are listening to me now. All my thoughts, all my affections and, alas! all my faults are known to you. You do not cease, nevertheless, to be my benefactor, and at this moment the graces which emanate from you enkindle and enlighten my soul. Grant me the grace to re-live with you this scene of your gospel, this word which you uttered formerly in Judea or Galilee. When you said or did this you already knew me, you thought of me; you willed that this detail should be consigned to your written gospel, and by the concurrence of innumerable providential circumstances you have arranged that it should be before me at this moment, so that I may re-live this souvenir before you, with you. Behold me, Jesus, I wish to follow in thought each of your gestures, each of your words, to understand as well as I can the sentiments of your heart which then dictated your conduct, to learn the lesson which you will thus give me, and moreover, to find in the merits which you acquired at that instant of your earthly life the strength to accomplish generously your will for me such as it appears to me in the light of your example and of your teaching. . . . It is evident that this approach to the gospel will provide endless subjects for mental prayer, easy, fruitful and ever fresh.

Each one's piety will discover analogous applications when meditating on the Sacred Heart or before the blessed Sacrament, and in the latter case we are also certain of the physical and local proximity of Jesus. In the Eucharistic presence is precisely the place for us to fix our attention on a practical consequence which unites together all the considerations we have already made on the exercise of the presence of God.

Souls who strive to live as far as possible under the influence of

the divine presence, whether in their daily actions, or above all in their vocal and mental prayers, complain that they succeed only imperfectly, and that frequently, perhaps even during the greater part of the day, they live through routine, without the power to keep their souls turned towards their divine guest. To strain one's self serves no purpose, and the violent tension may prove harmful. And still this forgetfulness of God, even though involuntary, disconcerts their good will. Such oblivion is painful to the loving heart, who longs to know how to repair it.

Now this reparation is possible thanks to our eucharistic Lord. And in this way: in as much as he is God, Jesus is equal to his Father and cannot adore him. But as man he is able to abase himself before him and before the entire Trinity, to adore it, to thank it, to pray, to ask pardon for us, to praise it, etc. This he did during the whole course of his mortal life; he continues to do so, whether in heaven or in the blessed Eucharist, and he does so for us: *Semper vivens ad interpellandum pro nobis* (Heb. 7, 25).

Now at the moment of holy Communion, Jesus, in his living humanity, comes to us under the sacramental species. He finds *within us* the Triune God whom we leave there, even in spite of ourselves, isolated and as it were abandoned, without anyone to adore him or even to think of him. During these precious instants when Jesus as man dwells in us, the adoration and the other sentiments of the Sacred Heart towards God are expressed by him *in our hearts*, and he addresses them to the holy Trinity, likewise present in our heart. It is like a visit of Jesus to God present in us; our soul is the place of this meeting; the temple wherein Jesus performs his duties towards God.

In these fugitive but precious moments let us know how to be silent, let us be content to unite ourselves to the sentiments which the heart of Jesus expresses *in us*, and which, as the head of a body whose members we are, he expresses *for us*, in our name. This perfect adoration, this infinite love of Jesus absorbs all our feeble efforts, and realises all the desires of our good will, often so weak. By Jesus, by us also who are united to him, God is adored and loved in us as much as he merits to be, as much as he is in heaven.

That which we have done at the moment of holy Communion in the morning, we can do during the whole course of the day. When we think of our forgetfulness, our unconscious indifference, or even our faults, let us remember that Jesus on our altars is in an abiding attitude of adoration; he is no longer in us, but nevertheless he adores for us. We can then offer to God all the sentiments which flow from the soul and heart of Jesus, and which he addresses to the true God wherever he is to be found, and then to the true God *present in us*. We cannot think without a salutary emotion that, although we disregard and neglect the divine Guest of our souls, Jesus substitutes himself for us, and each day and each hour takes our place and



accomplishes our duties, as formerly nailed to the Cross he expiated, instead of us, the sins we had committed.

We shall now perhaps be led to *adore God as he is present in Jesus*. Here is how we may do so.

We do not doubt that God is in us as in his temple: but what an unworthy dwelling for his majesty, all destroyed by past sins and the bad habits which they have left behind, all filled with passions, overrun by the senses unhindered by any barrier, and by a crowd of thoughts and imaginations of every kind; beside this temple Jeremias could sit and weep. When I remember it I am ashamed to appear in the presence of this God whom I lodge in so pitiable a fashion. And I may well fear that he will not receive me when I present myself to him in such attire! Can I not find for God a temple more worthy of him?

We see how this thought leads us on to the saints, to those on earth, and especially to those in heaven. Their soul is for God a temple more or less vast, more or less rich, but always pure and brilliantly beautiful. God is pleased to dwell there; there he ceaselessly receives homage and praise worthy of him, there too he continually manifests his glory by the profusion of his gifts. It is in the souls of the saints, where he resides as truly as he does in my own, that God is really treated as God, and there I may adore and praise him. I unite my adoration and my praise to that which rises continually from the soul of the saint in whom I contemplate him. My contribution will be like the drop of water which disappears in the chalice of precious wine.

From the souls of the saints my gaze rises to that of my Immaculate Mother, the 'Ark of the Covenant' in which God dwells, and above all towards the heart of Jesus, 'Tabernacle of the most High'. These are temples truly worthy of God. I congratulate him therein. I adore him and unite myself to the homage which Mary and Jesus offer him. I thank him for all he has done and still does in them. I am permitted to act thus, for all the treasures of Jesus and Mary and of the elect are mine also in virtue of the right which the communion of saints bestows on me.

If I live by these truths in bringing my faith to bear on them, and in re-animating my charity by them, they shall appear even more clear and radiant, they will become the sustenance, nay more, the leaven of my prayer. The presence of the invisible God, vivid and real to my faith, though a little abstract to my weak spirit and perhaps arid for my poor heart, will become, thanks to Jesus, Mary and the saints, a truth more accessible to my imagination, more touching for my sensibility, more fruitful for my prayer and for my whole spiritual life.

The above notes do not constitute an exhaustive theological study; they aim rather at giving a practical orientation, a good grasp of the vital importance for souls of prayer and of the dogma of the Presence