

sipated, tormenting my heart" (Job 17:11): many also study, and by a most laborious occupation fill themselves with vanity, not being able to resist curiosity: but there are few who meditate to inflame their heart with holy heavenly love. In fine, thoughts and study may be upon any subject, but meditation, in our present sense, has reference only to those objects whose consideration tends to make us good and devout. So that meditation is no other thing than an attentive thought, voluntarily reiterated or entertained in the mind, to excite the will to holy and salutary affections and resolutions' (*Ibid.*)

Such meditation is not only the immediate preparation for one kind of mental prayer which goes by the same name 'Meditation'; it is also, generally speaking—that is, outside the specified time of prayer—the application of our practical intelligence to God's revelation with a view to the practice of virtue. We cannot love what we do not know: meditation is learning, ruminating upon, reflecting upon God and divine things, that we may be roused to his loving service; it is 'chewing the cud' of divine things in God's presence as we go through our day.

Meditation, as the immediate preliminary of mental prayer, may be defined as a mental process by which the intellect, applying itself to some particular subject-matter appertaining to God and the spiritual life, passes from one consideration to another.

This mental process or *discursus* is twofold:

(1) *Properly-so-called* by which the intellect extracts or logically deduces one consideration from another. For example:

Our Lady gave birth to a child—Jesus Christ who is God and man.

She is therefore the Mother of God.

God seeks rest and shelter in the arms of his Mother.

She is the Mother, too, of the sacred Humanity.

This baby in her arms will be washed, fed, moulded in character by its Mother.

The personality of Mary was in fact impressed upon the sacred Humanity; and many of our Lord's fine human qualities shown forth in the Gospel narrative were the reflected characteristics of his Mother.

The woman at the edge of the crowd voiced this truth: 'Blessed is the womb that bore thee', she cried, 'and the breasts that suckled thee'.—You had a wonderful Mother!

Such a *discursus* is Meditation properly-so-called or *formal*.

(2) A *discursus* or discourse *not-properly-so-called* by which the intellect forms one consideration after another regardless of strict logical sequence. What Father Vincent McNabb calls 'loitering amidst divine realities and principles', wandering now here, now there, in astonishment at the magnificence of God's world or our blessed Lord's Incarnation. This is often called *Informal Medi-*

tation. It is what others, for example St Bernard, would call pondering the word of God with prayerful relish.

At the conclusion of an article in which he discusses whether the ceremonial observances in the Old Testament—Deuteronomy 14 (cf. v. 7)—are reasonable, St Thomas writes: 'The animal that chews the cud and has a divided hoof, is clean in signification. Because division of the hoof is a figure of the two Testaments. . . . While chewing the cud signifies meditation on the Scriptures and a sound understanding thereof; and whoever lacks either of these is spiritually unclean' (S.T. 1-2; 102:6.)

And again, St Augustine: 'We exhort you, beloved, that what by hearing you store, so to speak, in the stomach of your memory, that by again revolving and meditating, you in a manner ruminate' (*In Ps. CXXI.*)

Some idea of the extent to which the Saints ruminated upon the Word of God may be gathered from their writings. One is often puzzled to find that busy men like St Francis of Sales, St Bernard and St Augustine had such a grasp of Scripture. Their quotations are apposite and they have a genius for revealing at a stroke unexpected and fascinating depths of spiritual meaning.

The secret of this knowledge is passed on to us by Cassian, who was the 'Father of Saints', and whose Conferences were the spiritual food of the early Middle Ages. He writes in his XIVth Conference: 'We must read unremittingly and commit the holy Scriptures to memory. This continual meditation will produce a double fruit. First of all, when our minds are occupied with these holy readings, they will necessarily be freed from all bad thoughts; and secondly, if while labouring to learn the Scriptures off by heart, we do not always understand them, later on, when disengaged from exterior things we meditate upon them in the silence of the night, we shall penetrate into them more deeply, and discover hidden meanings that we had not been able to grasp during the day, and that God reveals even sometimes during sleep.

'When this study has renewed our heart, the holy Scripture will appear to us under quite a new aspect, and its beauty will go on increasing in proportion as we make progress; for the holy Scripture is understood by each according to his dispositions. It seems earthly to the carnal, and divine to the spiritual; so that they who at first saw it enveloped only in profound obscurity cannot afterwards sufficiently admire its splendour, nor bear, undazzled, its great light' (Chaps. X & XI.)

Thomas Vallgornera, O.P., describes this rumination under another figure. 'Meditation', he writes, 'is like the bodily eye which moves up and down, and left to right. So the mind's eye in meditation moves this way and that; sometimes to look upwards to God and eternal things, sometimes downwards to death, hell, pain and punishment, sometimes to the right and the things to be done, sometimes to the left and the things to be avoided' (*Mystica*

Theologica Divi Thomæ: Disp. 6. Art. 1). Vallgornera seems to have in mind the phrase of Isaias: 'Meditabor ut columba' (cf. 38: 14).

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Meditation is necessary for all. St Thomas shows this clearly in many places. (cf. the *Summa Theologica*: Part I. Q. 84 a. 7; Q. 85 a. 1; Q. 87 a. 2 2nd obj.; Q. 88 a. 1. 2. 3; 2-2 Q. 82 a. 3; 2-2. Q. 180 a. 4).

St Augustine commenting on *Psalms* 38 v. 4: 'My heart grew hot within me: and in my meditation a fire shall flame out', says that 'prayer is tepid until it is heated by meditation'. And St Jerome calls Meditation, 'the sister of reading, the nurse of prayer, and the directress of one's work' (*Soror lectionis, nutrix orationis, directrix operis.*)

Meditation, therefore, as a mental process in some way preparatory to prayer, is necessary for all.

As we have seen, the word itself is ambiguous: strictly speaking, it means the mental process which disposes the soul proximately or remotely for prayer; it is thinking about God for the purpose of loving him. But sometimes the word meditation is used to describe the whole exercise of that kind of mental prayer which begins with meditation as a means to discursive acts.

Taking Meditation in the former sense, all seem to be agreed that it is necessary. Differences of opinion arise only on the question whether in practice it should be the *immediate* or the *remote* preparation for prayer. This is, of course, in no way a dichotomous division—that is to say, it is not either one or the other. There are many intermediary stages. But the question to be decided is this: generally speaking, in which direction should the emphasis lie? In other words, when I kneel down to pray in the morning should I prepare myself by formal and fixed points of meditation or even by informal meditation; or is it enough (or preferable) to make this meditation at some other time, in the form of prayerful spiritual reading, and to use a simple, direct approach to God in time of prayer?

Before discussing this problem more objectively it is vital to point out that there are, for or against, what might almost be called schools of thought, centering round various religious orders. A steadying factor, however, is the knowledge that the rules and constitutions of these orders have been approved by the Church, and, faithfully observed, are an infallible means to personal sanctification. Although we may hold, therefore, that a particular approach to prayer is best in itself, it is impossible to deny that other approaches may be better in certain definite circumstances of life. There are exceptions, but we have in mind chiefly the normal, average religious. It is quite wrong and sometimes mischievous for religious, inside or outside such groupings, to try and change the spirit and tradition of an order.

It is not difficult to see the wisdom of the Church in this matter. Take, for instance, the congregations of Teaching Religious, Brothers and Sisters, whose time is spent for the most part supervising the secular education of children. We have to admit that their lives lack the homogeneity which characterises the more monastic institutions. Teaching Religious are not called upon to live what they teach. They are not by vocation theologians or lecturers in ascetics, nor do they live round the *Opus Dei*. They are concerned with Geography, Algebra, Literature, Science and preparing youthful minds for immediate, urgent examinations. It is only to be expected that time should be set aside in such harassing conditions of life for deliberate mental readjustment, safeguarded by formal meditation. Harm may be done by discouraging strict, formal meditation when by rule religious are not given, apart from this, adequate time or opportunity for spiritual reading. They are more likely indirectly to conserve the spirit of prayer through formal meditation, even though it never become more than a careful and relished spiritual reading, than would be the case if they applied themselves to a simpler approach to prayer to the total neglect of spiritual study. Nevertheless, formal meditation, like spiritual reading, should be ordered to prayer, and if *de facto* it is not, then some other time should be set aside for prayer.

Two suggestions follow from these remarks:

(1) Where formal meditation is obligatory, a simpler and more direct approach to God should be encouraged at some other convenient time. This is seldom difficult, opportunity usually being provided by rule. As there are many degrees of insistence on formal meditation, ranging from a rigid adherence to a set, traditional form, to the 'points-if-you-need-them' method, this suggestion must remain elastic.

(2) Some religious rules provide only a short period, outside morning and evening meditation, for spiritual reading. In these circumstances, if formal meditation is not of obligation it should only be discarded after a corresponding individual insistence on spiritual reading as remote preparation for prayer.

THE BEGINNING OF THE WAY

By

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

I—PIERS PLOWMAN.

IF there be any need to defend the introduction of William Langland into a treatise on English mysticism and the spiritual life we may refer the reader to Christopher Dawson's brilliant essay in *The English Way*. 'This popular tradition of English religion', he writes of Fox, Bunyan and Blake, 'which was divorced from Catholic unity and even from the national unity after the 17th century already exists in its purest and most unadulterated form