

Christian Devotion

"A man cannot be always defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it," wrote C. S. Lewis in the introduction to his book. *Reflections on the Psalms*. Some direction, then, for the enrichment of our devotional life, that we might feed on truth!

The title *Christian Devotion* deliberately avoids using the modern word 'spirituality'. Today, this word has come to be associated with 'feelings', 'feel-good feelings,' a self-regarding fulfilment or self-realization, and not sufficiently with the desire for God. It has become a word that is used and understood in a vague and self-regarding way about uplifting feelings. The dictionary is more precise in defining 'spirituality' as 'a distinctive approach to religion or prayer.' To deliberately use the word 'devotion' is to focus on this distinctiveness in the Christian approach to religion and prayer, where the focus is not on experiencing a 'feel-good factor,' but on living the dogma of the revealed Christian mystery in such a way that, instead of the mystery being assimilated to our mode of human understanding, it is allowed to effect "an interior transformation of the spirit that enables it to be experienced mystically" (V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 8).

'Devotion,' the Christian life,' 'mystical theology' (where 'theology' is the contemplation of God rather than an activity of the discursive reason alone), in all traditions the underlying implication is that, there is a constituent of human nature, which seeks relations with the ground and purpose of existence. As Job says, "There is a spirit in man." For the Christian, as for Job, this spirit is "the breath of the Almighty" (Job 32: 8), the Holy Spirit of God himself, and the activity the Spirit inspires is prayer. St. Paul says, "For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Prayer, however, in Christian theology and experience is more than pleading or petition; it is our whole relation to God, and devotion concerns the way in which prayer influences conduct, our behaviour and very manner of life.

Real prayer consists of three essential constituents, oral or bodily prayer; prayer of the mind and prayer of the heart or 'of the mind in the heart,' and if one or other constituent is absent it is not prayer at all. Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God; better perhaps to say, prayer is trying to raise the mind and heart to God. If we find that the mind is filled with thoughts that are holy, and if the heart is moved to want God and to want what he wants, then that is his doing and not ours. It is his gift. Our part in prayer is to try to raise the mind and heart to God, to spend time making the effort. St Francis de Sales said, "if five minutes is spent in prayer and three minutes of that time in overcoming distractions, that is true prayer" (*Introduction to the Devout Life*). Trying to pray is prayer and it is very good prayer. The will to try is also his gift.

The word 'awareness' is connected with the struggling of the mind to concentrate on God. We are trying to be aware of him, of his presence, of his closeness. The word 'desiring' or 'wanting,' explains the action of the heart as it struggles to want God. Very often we can desire God, want him, and the mind can be full of distractions. That 'desiring' of God can become very strong indeed; 'desiring' without being able to think about God, that too is excellent prayer.

So praying is trying to be aware of God, and being aware of him, to desire him, to want him, he, as St. Augustine said, "who hast made us for himself; so that our hearts are restless till they rest in him" (*Confessions*). As we desire him more and more, then we become increasingly more aware.

Care, however, must be taken not to seek mystical experience when we should be seeking repentance and conversion. This is the beginning of prayer, of our cry to God (cf. Mk. 1:15; Acts 20:21). 'Lord, make me what I should be, change me whatever the cost.' When we have said these dangerous words, we should be prepared for God to hear them. To come to God in a spirit of repentance is to come seeking a complete and radical renewal. It does not merely mean an acknowledgement and contrition for sins but more precisely a 'change of mind and heart.' The hope that God holds out to us is the power of the Gospel to do just this, that he might share his life with us.

To pray is to share in God's life, to participate in the life the Father lives with the Son in the Holy Spirit. That living experience and knowledge of God lies in the real and living circumstances of life in the world as we respond to the devotional fullness of life as it is, and not as we imagine it to be or would like it to be. It is not a flight of the alone to the Alone. We journey with fellow members of the Body of Christ. Here, in the communal worship of the whole Body, the Church, the Christian's life of prayer begins, as we join, "in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The Eucharist is a school, where we acquire something of the essence of prayer that becomes powerful in the realm of personal prayer, as it places our prayer in the larger context of the Church's prayer and where we are nourished in Word and Sacrament in the way of salvation so that we live in the power of the Risen Christ and according to his will.

That which is essential and common to all is a holy desire for a life of prayer, which is nothing less than a longing for God. St Augustine said, "The whole life of a Christian man is an holy desire. What you long for, as yet you do not see . . . by withholding the vision, God extends the longing, through the longing he extends the soul, by extending it He makes room in it . . . so brethren, let us long because we are to be filled... that is our life, to be exercised by longing" (De Doctrina Christiana).

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