

CHAPTER III

GOD ALONE TEACHES US TO PRAY

(continued)

Since it is true, as St. Paul expressly declares, that it is not we ourselves who pray but *the Holy Spirit who prays in us*,¹ and that our prayer is good only in so far as he informs it, let us see what are the essential qualities of that prayer of which the Holy Spirit is the author and let us compare such a prayer with our own, so that we may see whether the latter derives from him or from ourselves. Here we have great need of instruction, here we have a new and cogent reason to say to God: Lord, teach us to pray, not in our own way but under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

What other prayer could be inspired by the Holy Spirit than a prayer which is *attentive, humble, reverent, loving, entirely confident and persevering*. If our prayer has not these qualities the Spirit of God does not acknowledge it to be his and hence it neither deserves to be heard nor can it be granted. Let us say a word about each of these qualities.

That a prayer addressed to God, whether to pay him homage or to plead with him for our highest interests, must be attentive to the point of keeping all our powers concentrated on that one object, is an assertion that none will contradict and that raises no difficulty.

Nevertheless, how few there are who pray, or even make an attempt to pray, attentively. I do not speak of young people, whose restless senses and lively imaginations offer them some

¹ Rom. 8: 26.

excuse for they are hardly capable of sustained concentration. At this age it is much indeed that there should be the intention to be recollected, that from time to time their attention should be recalled, so that as often as sense or imagination wanders they return quietly to their prayer. It is altogether another matter at an age when we have mastery over ourselves, and can fix our attention as we wish on any subject. That then in our prayers we should be the victims of an extreme and almost continual wandering of the mind, that this should happen not once in a way but habitually, that we should not think seriously about such an irregularity, that we should make no effort to discipline our mind, that we should have no bad conscience about it: all this indeed is unpardonable and it is only too common.

I will not here enquire into the cause of all this. I am considering the thing in itself, and I maintain that it is a shocking abuse to pray in this way and the chief source of the other abuses which bring discredit and dishonour on the Christian church. I maintain that it is a grievous offence against God, which makes us in a sense more guilty than if we did not pray at all. I maintain further that such inattention, which is only too visible in our bearing, scandalizes our neighbour, hinders him from praying and often discourages him from visiting our churches, where it is less easy for him to be recollected than it is at home. All this needs no proof and if faith is not quite extinct in those who have to reproach themselves with this fault, nothing more is needed to awaken the most lively and well-founded sense of alarm.

You would not dare to put forward the excuse of children and say that you are not master of your senses. But you are not, you say, master of your imagination, and it has not the power to withdraw your mind from the affairs which are your habitual occupation and which obsess you during your prayer. So it is that you pretend to justify your wandering thoughts. Yet you do condemn the curious glances that you cast all

about you and the unnecessary, sometimes most unsuitable, words you permit yourself to utter.

But let me ask you this: when you pray do you seriously wish to be attentive? Is it your first care to recollect yourself and think what you are going to do. If you do not begin by this, if, on entering the church, or even on your way to it, you do not prepare yourself for so holy an action, your excuses are vain and you are responsible for your distractions.

Your imagination runs away with you, you say? Yes, when you are in God's presence; but everywhere else you know well enough how to control it at need. If you are asking a favour or discussing some interesting subject or speaking with important people, you are entirely absorbed in what you are saying and hearing. Act in the same way when you are speaking with God; I do not ask any more. Is that expecting too much? Does God deserve less attention than men? And is what we have to say to him of less importance?

Some visible object catches your attention and keeps it fixed when you are speaking to men, you say. Then you can have no faith when you are speaking to God, for if you had a single spark of faith, would it not light up in his presence before the Holy Tabernacle where Jesus Christ personally dwells and especially during the awful Sacrifice. The celebration of so great a mystery and our august ceremonies are surely sufficient to make an impression on you and hold your attention.

Your business affairs keep coming into your mind and you cannot keep the thought of them away. But why? It is because they interest you more than the business of your salvation, for the mind of man is so constituted that it dwells most on what most affects him. So that if religion really held the first place in your heart, there would be no room for anything else when you were fulfilling your duties, and all thought of worldly business would be, as it were, suspended. If it should assail your heart you would certainly repel it, and it would distress

you to be occupied with it against your will during the time consecrated to God. This would be sufficient to free you from blame, because attention springs from the heart and one is attentive when one has the will to be so. I mention this in passing, for the sake of those good souls who are disturbed and grieved on account of involuntary distractions, sometimes even bad thoughts and temptations, which come to them during prayer.

God has his own reasons for permitting them and this is not the place to explain all this. But there are two things which should reassure such persons: first, their habitual recollection, which means that they only rarely give way to such distractions; secondly, their sincere desire to be rid of them and their grief at finding themselves thus overcome.

Another characteristic of the prayer formed in us by the Holy Spirit is that it is humble and reverent.

The very idea of prayer involves that of reverence and humility. He who prays is a creature; it is God to whom he prays. What is God compared with the creature? What is the creature compared with God? . . . This thought alone ought to fill us with the deepest humility; how much greater will this humility be when we remember that we are sinners and that God is infinitely holy; that we are guilty and that the God whom we have offended is also our judge. With what reverential awe should we not draw near to him. Is it not rather to be feared that we shall carry this too far and lack courage to approach God at all?

If you do not feel this, if you do not approach God with a profound sense of your own nothingness; if you, while the pure and holy beings in heaven cover their faces with their wings in his presence, if you, a sinner, are not struck by a holy fear, you should mistrust your prayer. It will not be the fruit of grace but of habit or human respect or any other thing but religious principle. Tell me seriously how you pray. What is your attitude and what is your general air and bearing? Can

there be seen anything of the respect and submission that you ought to be feeling? Would you behave so, I will not say before an earthly king, but before someone whose rank was superior to your own? How well we behave then! Eyes, face, the whole body, how they speak. By our whole bearing what honour we pay to our fellow creatures, especially if we are going to ask a favour, to express gratitude or to offer some excuse! Or again how differently we conduct ourselves on certain ceremonial occasions, designed to express the honour due to birth, position and office!

These are only externals, I know, and there is much pretence on such occasions, but why do we affect such attitudes? Why does the world condemn any failure there? Surely it is because the appearance is accepted as the expression of real sentiments. Since you do not assume even these outward signs of reverence towards God, is it not clear that neither your mind nor your heart is moved by reverence, and that you are not aware either who you are or to whom you are speaking? For what is prayer unless it is an act of homage, and how can that be an act of homage fit for God which a man would consider an incivility or an insult?

The third characteristic of prayer is that it is *loving*.

God desires to be loved as much as he is respected and the Holy Spirit, who is the eternal love of the Father and the Son, inspires no prayer that is not a prayer for love and a prayer which leads to love. It is love, or at least the desire to love, which must inspire the Christian to pray; love must be the final aim, if it is not the subject of his prayer, and the increase of love must be its fruit. Even when the fear of God's judgments is the determining motive of a sinner or a righteous man, his ultimate object must be the attainment of God's love. If love counts for nothing, either as motive or as aim, it cannot be a prayer inspired by the Holy Spirit.

This takes us back to what I said before: it is the heart that prays and therefore loves or aspires to love.