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INSTITUTE OF THE BROTHERS
OF CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION

CIRCULAR
OF
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SUPERIOR GENERAL

“PRAY, THEREFORE!...”

(Mt 9, 38)

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“PRAY, THEREFORE! ...”

(Mt 9, 38)

“Pray constantly...”

(1 Th 5, 17)

“Prayer is coming back”. We hear it said almost everywhere.

Groups of all kinds are springing up informally where we would least expect them: in universities, in suburbia, in cities and villages, and sometimes their members do nothing but pray for hours. These people are not monks but businessmen, workers, men and women from all walks of life who may have spent years without giving a thought to God but who have now found a taste for prayer. They spend a great deal of time in prayer, praying in public and praying with their whole being, with their body as well as with their heart and mind.

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^s Sophisticated observers dismissed all this as a fad, but in fact it is a lasting phenomenon whose signs are apparent everywhere. We have only to open our eyes

and our heart to perceive them: monasteries welcoming more and more guests in search of silence and prayer, retreat centres multiplying and attracting numerous groups, "prayer camps" responding to the enthusiasm of the young, book after book on the subject of prayer, and magazines dealing exclusively with the topic. There is a striking resurgence of popular piety as well: pilgrimages are attracting large crowds, local devotions are being renewed, and hidden streams of faith at the very depths of our being are rising to the surface.

Who could have believed all this fifteen years ago? Is it a sign of the Pentecost that John XXIII invoked upon the Church? Is it a preview of the religious twenty first century announced some years ago by the seers and thinkers of our times when nothing seemed to foreshadow it?

Explanations, of course, are not lacking: the consumer society does not meet the deeper aspirations of man who therefore exploits any chink or aperture into the world of the spiritual; secularized society provokes a reaction to mysticism; the secular world has desiccated the heart but man's nimble intellect is in constant quest of an answer to its problems; young people themselves, who seem taken up with the noise and din, aspire to interiority and choose places of silence where they can discover the depths of their being by discovering the God who dwells within them. After the unbridled rule of materialism and rationalism, man seeks revenge in the feelings of his heart.

The dangers of going astray in this new enthusiasm undoubtedly exist, and while they are exaggerated by

some and minimized by others, they should never pass unnoticed: all religiosity is by no means a road to christian faith, to authentic prayer. There are false approaches centring on man himself and not on God; worse still, there are others that are dissolved in the anonymity of nature or nothingness. Discernment is therefore essential.

Meanwhile, an astonishing truth confronts us: prayer is coming back and many of our contemporaries are thirsting for it. They long for spontaneous prayer as well as prolonged meditation; for prayer of the senses, with its gestures and demonstrative attitudes, as well as tranquil prayer which prevails over dryness and aridity; for traditional prayer with its set phrasing and archaic rites as well as modern prayer in modern dress. The former arises, perhaps, as an unforeseen result of the turmoil in the 1960's, when new modes better suited to certain temperaments, provoked a reaction. In any case, the wide variety of forms allows ample choice without authorizing anyone to pose as a doctor of prayer, or to claim a particular method of prayer as the only valid one.

The breath of the Holy Spirit has affected our own Congregation, where many Brothers have experienced a renewal especially in mental prayer and the Holy Eucharist; many communities have restored to the Office, whether recited or sung, and to the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, that intense communion with God which should never have been abandoned.

Examples could easily be multiplied: Brothers who have found anew the taste for private prayer in the quiet

of their room in the stir of their classroom and office; for the prayer of the hour which so simply recalls our intimacy with God; for the rosary that prayer of the poor; Brothers who feed on the Word of God which they ponder in their heart at dawn and dusk, and through the day; Brothers who gather at night with student boarders in adoration, praise, thanksgiving and petition before the Blessed Sacrament, alert to the special needs of the young; Brothers who find the special presence of Christ in their community oratory where they love to pause, however briefly between two lessons, before or after a session in catechetics, in preparation for a difficult or important meeting; Brothers who spend some time at night before the Blessed Sacrament, when all their work and meetings are over, so that Christ may bless the labours of the day and all who shared them; Brothers who cheerfully take part, sometimes a key part, in various prayer groups; Brothers who make the traditional "Exercises" of St. Ignatius, or who reserve a few days of their vacations for "Schools of prayer", "spiritual renewal" or "formation seminars" in addition to the demands of the annual retreat; Brothers who really help their students to pray and who, with the co-operation of the young, promote groups that are accessible to all. Their inventiveness to foster and develop this desire for God, for the presence of God and for his Holy Word finds more and more expressions and outlets.

Like so many others who have been docile to this new inspiration, have I too felt an interior conversion at the very depths of my being, an appeal of the heart which urges me to a closer union with God? It is for

each one of us to ask himself: to what degree have I been affected by this surge of renewal in prayer? Have I been bathed in this river of life referred to by Ezechiel (Ez 47, 1-12) or have I let it flow by without even touching my feet?

Have I at least been conscious of the startling changes in the Church of to-day? Undoubtedly so, if I have taken heed of the signs of the times, but hardly so, if I keep wrapped up in my own problems, preoccupied with my own inadequacies and ailments, reliving my old routines and resisting any call to change and renewal; hardly so, if I judge myself too sinful for any close union with God, for any real conversion after all the aborted efforts of the past. And meanwhile, there lies the whole history of Israel assuring me that God takes delight in making the aged and the barren fertile, in choosing repentant sinners for his bosom friends.

The Spirit passes... we must not close the portals of our hearts and communities to the fresh breeze that is sweeping over the Church. Rather, we must open wide our doors and windows so that the post-conciliar spring may burst into life within us. For how could we remain like barren deserts when others are transformed into burgeoning oases?

The facts should lead us to reflection. They are a personal invitation to deepen our union with God, and a joint invitation to appraise the quality of our prayer. The most authoritative voices in the Church encourages us in this pursuit: Vatican Council II in *Perfectae Caritatis*, Paul VI in *Evangelica Testificatio* (nn. 42-49),

John Paul II in his numerous addresses to religious and in his recent apostolic exhortation *Redemptionis Donum* (March 25, 1984). In addition we have the document of SCRIS on "*The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*" which re-emphasises "the teachings of the Church on Religious Life" (nn. 28-30). All of these voices continually remind us that "without prayer, religious life has no meaning. It is cut off from its source, empties itself of its substance and can no longer attain its end". (John Paul II in Washington, October 7, 1979). To neglect or abandon prayer is to stunt the growth of the spirit and to blight all apostolic fruitfulness; it is to weaken the vitality of our religious community which thrives on the prayer of its members.

With so many exhortations of this kind, do we not feel obliged to reflect on the topic of prayer? The more so in view of the General Chapter of 1982 which determined that our basic orientation for the years ahead was the spiritual renewal of our Brothers and our communities.

At the very outset of these reflections, I have a sense both of deep joy and of helplessness. Of deep joy since to speak of prayer is to speak of something we live each day, something dearest to our heart; and of helplessness since the topic is so vast. Where, for example, do we begin when there is as much to say? And what kind of order can be imposed on a theme of such abundance?

In all religious libraries, including that of my community were I too take stock of its volumes, treatises on prayer abound. This letter is not meant to replace

them any more than the earlier circulars on the subject since the foundation of the Congregation, circulars indeed which merit our re-reading (*Circulars* 27, 68, 90, 104, 106, 147, 227, 243). All of them bear witness to the importance and difficulty of prayer; if our Superiors General deem it necessary to address the subject so frequently, it shows that none of us can take it for granted.

Prayer is a boundless theme which discourages any attempt to be exhaustive and thus allows a wider latitude. In these pages, then, I shall limit myself to the practice and experience of prayer, omitting all reference to the theory and basing my remarks on two established facts:

— prayer is easy; we have been formed to it from our earliest days;

— prayer is difficult; we need real strength of soul to measure up to long, painful and arduous struggles.

We are led to ask: what kind of model do we find in Jesus? In turning to him, we are sure to learn many lessons to our own advantage.

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PRAYER IS EASY

Early formation to Prayer

Long before our entrance into religious life, we all had some experience of prayer. We were awakened to it in our families where we breathed in

our faith unquestioningly as easily as we inhaled the air. Prayer came as naturally as play, so that morning and evening prayers, the daily rosary and Sunday mass were all taken for granted, while many of us recall the family coming together in prayer before retiring to bed. And it was no trivial witness, on these occasions, to see the head of the family, whose authority and kindness we revered, kneeling with us in homage before Almighty God.

Life followed the rhythm of the liturgical calendar with the great feasts of Christmas and Easter, of All Saints, Candlemas and Corpus Christi, the popular feasts of Our Lady, the first Fridays, the Forty Hours, and the celebrations of May, the month of Mary. In addition came those events that marked the history of our family: baptism, first communion, the profession of faith, confirmation and marriage. The joy they brought was both human and religious; and so, of course, was our grief when death did its work and we took part in the burial of a loved one. Almighty God, Christ, Mary and the saints were part and parcel of our daily lives, of the homes in which we lived. A crucifix, for example, adorned most of the rooms, while a picture or a statue of the Blessed Virgin held a special place of honour. Though piety may have been somewhat sociological, Christmas was a truly Christian feast, Lent trained us to sacrifice in preparation for the joys of Easter, and religious processions led to a public acclamation of our faith.

A similar atmosphere prevailed at school where we generously took part in such movements as the Eucha-

ristic Crusade, in daily visits to be Blessed Sacrament, and in the common practice of sacramental confession on the eve of the great liturgical feasts.

There were no pernicious disputes about prayer in such Christian surroundings, for prayer was not a matter of reason but of conviction, of spiritual intuition, of the experience of the heart. Nobody theorized about it, everybody practised it, and no one threw it aside. This was easy prayer, born of the life it nourished and from which it took its growth.

From these early days we retain positive dispositions to prayer since nobody easily escapes the years of childhood and youth. So we often find ourselves praying as we prayed in that distant past, with the same attraction, the same simplicity, the same determination to pay respect and attention to God.

In the houses of formation, where many of us spent a considerable time, there was no appeal to conversion to find the hidden pearl, but rather an invitation to deepen what we practised, to make it really our own, to proceed from received prayer to prayer we really willed. Our novitiate formation was a powerful help in this respect, though it followed the same lines and limited itself to the bent of our heart for God. It was as if the novice was naturally alerted and drawn to God. Grace had preconditioned him; he had felt the goodness of God and had known how God's presence gave feelings of goodness, joy and fulfillment. He had received a share of the most bounteous gift: that of prayer. He lived in the closest union with God, and spoke with Him as with a friend...

Today, perhaps, we may be inclined to criticize our prayer of the past. We look upon it as more sociological than truly personal, as an obligation rather than a free expression, something out of tune with our inmost hearts, something rather superficial. It was more a question of reciting ready-made formulas from a variety of sources than of living in the presence of God, of sharing an engagement with the God of life.

We should not, however, be too severe with ourselves or with our parents, teachers, priests and friends, for we so easily run the risk of confusing prayer—that marvellous spiritual reality—with contingent forms that vary with the seasons and the times. The truth we cling to is that we learned to pray more by example and practice than by theory.

Over the course of the years we learned to live a simple kind of life with God, a life not dependent on words or emotions, but one which breathed an atmosphere where prayer could bloom like a flower from its seedling. Following the great traditions of the Bible and the Church, the principal acts of our day (rising, our meals, our family life, our work, our going to rest) with the days of the week and the months of the year were all made holy by the remembrance of God, were all offered to Him, as a spiritual sacrifice of pleasant fragrance. Our life unfolded beneath the eye of God, and never strayed far from His side. He was no stranger; on the contrary, He was everywhere. For some, his presence brought a hint of fear, but the majority moved in great simplicity, in that childlike spirit of prayer which Jesus so strikingly exemplified

during his days in Palestine. Prayer was less an act than a state of soul; less a segment of time than a continuous disposition.

The Blossoming of Our Prayer

This ease and spontaneity in prayer are enduring values, which can still be ours today.

Are we not consecrated to God? Have we not given Him all that we are and all that we have? The impulse of our heart is to live each moment for Him, to make of our whole life a prayer. The various activities that make up our days find their unity and cohesion in our act of oblation to God through our baptism and religious profession. As long as we do not revoke this offering—and which religious could do so?—by claiming it and enjoying it for ourselves, all our activity is prayer, and life itself is prayer. More or less consciously, no doubt, but none the less quite truly. Prayer flows outward into Christian action, and Christian action sustains our prayer; the prayer/action dichotomy is abolished, and the pendulum swinging from “only action” to “only prayer” proves a mere delusion.

This abiding awareness of our life in God is particularly evident in the privileged moments of encounter prescribed by the Rule or chosen of our own volition. Such moments become a need of the heart, the imperious call of love; a time of rest, to which the soul aspires, in rapt communion with the Master; the one outstanding engagement it yearns for to express to Him its love. The soul alternately pours itself out and gathers itself

in. It pours itself out, since love must needs express itself as it wells up and overflows, embracing everything, without shame or timidity in a language all its own. And it gathers itself in, quietened or "hushed" as St. John of the Cross would put it, all peace and tranquillity, as it awaits the arrival of the Beloved.

Prayer is this alternating movement, this interior coming and going of the man who speaks with the conviction that God is listening, and of the man who keeps silent to catch the voice of God. It is speech and silence; speech received in the silence of the Trinity, and silence alert and receptive to the Word of God.

At first, prayer may strike us as the cry of wounded man pleading for help in his agony; or as the humble plea for pardon after another relapse; or again as jubilant gratitude, as exultant praise of Him who is the Fullness of Being which reaches its perfection in wonderment and adoration. Prayer is an outpouring of sorrow or joy, a cry of the human heart which can no longer contain its tears or its song. Then comes the moment when we recognize that God was there even before we spoke, that it was He who placed the words of prayer on our lips; when we realise that prayer is grace, the gift of his prevenient love. The soul is now hushed, in silent expectation of Him who is the host. The roles are now inverted, for the plea now heard is the plea of God whom so many reject despite his words: "My son, give me your heart!", or the cry of the suffering Saviour: "I thirst". At this stage, prayer becomes welcome silence, simple presence before the Almighty Presence, self-abandonment into the arms of God.

It consists in reposing there before God, in loving Him, and above all, in consenting to be the object of His love, in letting His gentleness reach into our heart, His light to irradiate our soul and His peace to suffuse our being. Without doing or saying anything, we remain quietly in His company, happy to be with Him whether we feel overwhelmed by love or merely seem unnoticed. Like a child fully aware that he is his father's joy, we too are assured of being the joy of God.

Unfortunately, we often complicate things. We think that we pray—and pray well—because we multiply our declarations of love, because we experience sensible consolations and spend long periods without distraction before the Blessed Sacrament.

Meanwhile, Father de la Mennais advises us “in praying to God, not to make violent efforts in quest to lofty thoughts”, but “to follow the lure of His grace when he beckons and draws us, and to go to Him with the simplicity of a child led easily by the hand” (*Mémorial*, p. 18; *Avis Spirituels*, XII). It is all a question of living in the mist, in the shadow of the Spirit, of being gradually enveloped in His dew, impregnated by Him who gives birth to praise, adoration, thanksgiving and supplication in our hearts and on our lips.

We can learn so much from the advice that Father de la Mennais gave to children on retreat—and is not the Kingdom of Heaven for such as these?—: “Put yourself in spirit at the feet of Jesus; do not say anything; do not weary your soul in useless formulas; tell him what you would tell your friend or father;

show him the wounds of your soul so he may heal them, your troubles and sorrows so he may guide and console you; tell him, quite humbly and simply, of your weaknesses, your failures and faults... in short, let your faith make Jesus so present to you that you think you see him, and that you treat him as you would have treated him had you seen or spoken with him when he was on earth". (*Sermon I - to the children*, p. 186).

This prayer is made easier by the Spirit who "prays in us" (Rm 8, 15). We have only to share in his "ineffable groanings" to the Father with the sentiments of the Son who opens up our heart to him. It is there that he speaks of love in the divine inexhaustible language which flows from the heart of the Father and is expressed in a substantial Word. That Word is incarnated in Jesus who repeats it to us in human terms. Prayer is Jesus who comes to us, who knocks on the door of our heart and awaits the answer his Breath will inspire if only we bid him welcome. For our welcome, prior to being our own choice, is really the gift of God: "If you but knew the gift of God!" (Jn 4, 10). We are all Samaritan women carrying within us the source of living waters that eagerly seek an outlet; it is the source that whispered to Ignatius of Antioch: "Come now to the Father...".

Such are the worshippers that the Father seeks, worshippers who pray "in the Spirit and in Truth" (Jn 4, 23). In them He hears the irresistible voice of His Beloved Son, who, in fact, is the only one who knows how to pray, because only "the Son knows the Father" (Mt 11, 27). To be heard by the Father, our

prayer must therefore be fused to his; our supplication must join with his, our thanksgiving merge with his eucharistic sacrifice so "that we be but one voice with him" (Jean-Marie de la Mennais, *Sermons* IV, p. 1470). Prayer of the poor, humble prayer that touches the heart of the Father because it is the prayer of Jesus: "Everything that you ask the Father in my name, He will grant you". Prayer that tends to permeate all our life and is gradually subsumed in a single action and a single word: love... It is the love of the Father for His son: "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Lk 4, 22), and the love that the Son returns to his Father: "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you" (Jn 21, 17). "You ask how we can pray at all times? Ask rather how we can love at all times, for prayer is only love, and love is the most beautiful and perfect of prayers" (Jean-Marie de la Mennais, *Sermons*, p. 1478).

Have we not all experienced those happy and blessed hours when prayer flowed within us like a living spring?

PRAYER IS DIFFICULT

Only little by little did we discover that prayer could be difficult, that it did not always flow spontaneously, that it involved a struggle at several different levels.

Before Prayer

There are struggles even before prayer, and the first are those *intellectual struggles* on which the others very often depend. There are numerous theories, for example,

which question the need of consecrating time to God. Prayer is seen as useless, inefficacious, a loss of time. What really matters is the fight against injustice, the liberation of the poor and the freedom of peoples. It is a bourgeois luxury to consecrate to prayer time that could be devoted to teaching the ignorant, to catechetics, Catholic action and spiritual formation. It is an escape into the unreal, a sign that we have not understood what is really at stake, the dilemmas with which the Church is confronted. Love of our neighbour has priority over the love of God, and even replaces it.

Life itself, moreover, is really prayer. To dedicate oneself to the poor is to pray, to give one's time to apostolic activities is to pray. The duties of one's calling are prayer. Far better to keep an open door for the young, who need our understanding and love, than to retire devoutly to the chapel for quiet prayer. We must be a good neighbour to our brothers, as Jesus himself reminds us, and spring to their help even when our schedule calls us to prayer. Indeed, was it not St. Vincent de Paul who urged his sisters to "leave God for God"? And does not Jesus reveal himself more vividly in his suffering brethren than in the sweetness of prayer?

Most of these implications, no doubt, are dated and play like a scratched record. Yet they still persist in some minds, for it takes time to exorcise such demons! Especially when they enjoy the support of well-known authors, when they chime in with our own feelings, play along with our bent, and help to soothe our conscience. The apostle who gives time to prayer is choosing the

easy way out. How much more demanding it is to live closely with his students, his door open to them twenty four hours a day, to give his weekends to the education and development of the poor and exploited, to the work of apostolic and spiritual formation, etc..., etc...

It is true that we should remain close to our students, devoting ourselves earnestly to their Christian formation, introducing them to the use of the media, opening their minds to social and political awareness, and teaching them to judge all things in the light of faith. It is also true that there is a danger of succumbing to a whimsical form of mysticism that leads to the dereliction of duty, to the neglect of our difficult tasks of direction, education of prayer.

But why seek opposition between obligations that are really complementary? Why should my activities not nourish my prayer and why should prayer not make my active life more fruitful? Why, after all, do we devote ourselves to education if not to open the human heart to Christ and to spread the kingdom of God? But who could presume to achieve such objectives by merely human efforts? Is it not the grace of God sought and bestowed in prayer? Did not Jesus himself refuse to establish the reign of God by temporal means? Did he not make the worship of God alone his rule of life? (Mt 4, 8. 10). Everything in spiritual tradition, all the testimony of past and modern apostles vigorously repeat the affirmation of Christ: "Without me you can do nothing". "A pause of true adoration has more value and more spiritual fruitfulness than the most intense activity, no matter how apostolic" (John Paul II to Superiors

General, Nov. 1978). A wise balance, then, should and must be found between apostolic commitments to our neighbour and the commitment of prayer to God. "We must not forget the Lord of work in the name of work for the Lord" (John Paul II).

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A second combat to be fought concerns the time we should allot to God. The *Rule of Life* prescribes the minimum requirement of morning and evening prayer which, as experience illustrate, is able to form saints if we remain truly faithful to their spirit and practice. Unfortunately, experience also shows that the time reserved for prayer is the time most vulnerable to encroachments. Sometimes it withers away, emasculated by late risings and evening meetings, by television programmes, useless conversation and all kinds of squandered hours.

More often still, it is adversely affected by the different activities that consume our days. There is so much to do in our schools and so few to do it! Responsibilities build up over the years and there seems no effective way of sharing them. Indeed, apostolic zeal itself appears to be on our side, for how can we remain insensitive to the many urgent appeals for our help, our charity and competence? And so the time reserved for prayer is whittled away without bothering us unduly.

How strange that religious, who have given up their lives to God, should reach a point of no longer meeting Him at close quarters or of meeting Him at all. How

strange that in our zeal to reveal Him to others, we so seldom stop to contemplate Him, listen to His words, follow His advice, learn to know Him, better in order to use the time reserved for Him to engage in our favorite activities or undertake new commitments? Should we not rather reverse the process, spending more time with Him precisely as the range of our responsibilities grows wider?

Is the prevailing imbalance the main reason, perhaps, for the comparative barrenness of so many of our apostolic activities? They cannot give of God because they are neither born of nor feed on God. From beginning to end they remain entirely human with exclusively human qualities: finiteness, sinfulness and death. Thus, they can convey only disappointment. God alone can make them vitalizing agents, bearing the fruits of eternal life, because only in Him do they find their proper source and fulfillment. The work of the apostolate is not a purely natural work, but the grace of God and the fruit of the Holy Spirit. To bring men to God, we must be on close terms with Him, for nobody can reveal God except him to whom God has revealed Himself, above all during the hours of prayer.

To spend time for God is to save time for men. Hence, those who seek the advice of truly spiritual men are by no means mistaken since the counsel of the saints is no merely human voice but the voice of God, humble and almighty at one and the same time. With a single word it can change the human heart.

How can we describe the sadness of a life where God is no longer the first to be served? Must He be satisfied

with the fragments of a day which is devoted to other clients, with a few minutes snatched from our studies, our corrections or those endless meetings?

Should we not re-order our priorities and ensure that the time for our meeting with God, a generous allocation of time, be given first preference? We must be resolute and persevering in prayer since the Word of God needs time to penetrate and permeate our being. The Word of God works gently and without haste, like oil that slowly spreads and carries comfort, like a lamp that slowly disperses the shades of night. God cannot be subjected to a time clock, nor choose to reveal Himself to the beat of a chronometer anymore than we can reveal our deepest selves in short and casual contacts. It takes time, often a whole afternoon, a full day and even longer...

Are we prepared to make time for God? generously, and of our own free will? If not, we shall never learn to pray. Today especially, when so many obligations press upon us, we need to plan some time for clearing our minds before giving ourselves up to prayer. Little by little, we shall undoubtedly acquire a taste for the practice, for just as our appetite is sharpened by eating, so our appetite for prayer is sharpened by praying. Before long, we discover that prolonged prayer, be it only painful and silent presence before God, the repetition of simple formulas, or a single word repeated over and over again, gives access to depths that could never otherwise be sounded. We then realise that the time we give to God is returned a hundredfold. The days, of course, will grow no longer, but because prayer

views all things at their true value and sees them in their proper perspective, because our passions are firmly controlled and our minds made clearer, work becomes more productive; the most complex problems are more sharply perceived and, therefore, more speedily resolved. The same amount of work is accomplished in far less time. With God's help, whatever we do in obedience—that duty which occasionally seems so onerous—finds its true equilibrium and even its happy outcome. At any rate, it ceases to worry us, no longer torments us or distracts us from the Essential, but rather finds its proper place in God.

For these reasons we should consecrate some time, a great deal of time, to God, a time of silent presence which, little by little, gives way to a time of revelation and then of colloquy. Our heart will there find its peace, our intellect its enlightenment and our whole being its rebirth. Prayer becomes our resting place.

* * *

During Prayer

Quite frequently, *prayer itself can be a struggle* and for a number of different reasons.

I come to prayer preoccupied with the last task on hand, the last article I was reading, or the discussion I had to share in; and now, I find all kinds of arguments justifying my view point, although they eluded me before!

It is difficult, as well, to detach my mind from the last person I met, from a troublesome student, or from

an unexpected setback which leaves me humiliated and confused.

In addition, there are those inexhaustible reservoirs of fancies and remembrances that seem to take an evil pleasure by playing with my mind at prayer, for my imagination and memory never run short of material.

In short, my heart and mind are full to overflowing. How can there be room for God? a time when I can be His alone?

The question calls for discernment in distinguishing the nature of my distractions.

There are those that arise from "concern for the Lord", from the duties of my state which can be transformed into prayer, simply by withdrawing from them to give myself up to adoration and praise, and then presenting them to the Father, to Christ. They cease to be distractions and become the substance of my prayer. I offer to God all those worries that harrass me, the problems that weigh me down, and I beg for His guidance; through them, I learn to listen to his will, I pass them over to his care; and in so doing, I gradually find that peace of heart which is given to the child who says "Yes" to God, and who knows that "if the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the labourers labour" (Ps 127, 1).

Secondly, there are distractions arising from "the cares of the world", in other words from my self-centredness, and here a distinct cut is imperative. I have to begin by quietening down, perhaps by taking a position where I feel relaxed and at ease, and then by

recollecting myself, "whistling my dogs" to their kennel so that their antics no longer steal my attention from God who wants my undivided heart and soul. "But when you pray", says Jesus, "go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret" (Mt 6, 6).

This is a hard struggle which can come at the beginning, the middle or the end, or which indeed can run through the whole of our prayer. Man is not always master of his memory, and his imagination, like the court jester, is difficult to control and subdue.

But the heart at least is turned to God after whom it aspires; and that is the one important fact. We must not worry unduly about the rest, or spend needless time in trying to tame our rebellious faculties. What really matters is the disposition of the will, the yielding of our will to God, the self-surrender of our own being which yearns, for a quarter of an hour, half an hour, an hour or more, to be exclusively with Almighty God. We are not responsible for those images, memories and ideas that buzz around like flies distracting our heart from close communion with the Lord. So, even if our heart upbraids us, "before God we will pacify our heart, for God is bigger than our heart and he knows everything" (1 Jn 3, 20).

* * *

Difficulty in prayer also *arises from its regularity*. "Boredom one day was born of repetition"... The repetition of the same acts at the same time day after day can lead to routine, a cause of boredom and

disenchantment. So, while we should go to prayer as though to a privileged meeting or festal occasion, some approach it as a duty, a matter of conscience, a prescription of the Rule or another slot on the timetable. The body goes along but the heart is elsewhere. Prayer becomes another obligation performed without joy, with some degree of boredom, a victim of mere habit.

And yet this very regularity should give stronger proof of our love, like the love of a mother who gives herself to her monotonous daily tasks, the love of a father who works each day for his family, the love of a teacher who regularly devotes his time and energies to his students. Endurance and perseverance are the signs of deep and abiding love, quite different from that which blooms in early ardours, passionate and all demanding, but untried and transitory. The first is the love of husband and wife who have spent years together and who can now commune without words, by a look, a smile, by merely being with each other. Their simplest gestures speak louder than the burning declarations of their youth.

* * *

The hardest struggle of all is *the struggle of faith*.

Often, it seems, God fails to turn up for the appointments I have at prayer time. There is no sign of his presence; He does not say a word, and my prayer is no more than a monologue. I seem to be up against a wall of silence, to be passing through a dark, empty and endless tunnel, to be wasting my time. Months and years go by, and nothing seems to happen; I feel no

closer to God. Day follows day in dreary repetition: and I feel lost in the night when my lonely cry raises not even an echo. Heaven is deaf to my prayer.

In such circumstances, I tend to give up the fight. Losing all hope, I pray less often, giving less and less of my time as the days pass by. After all, why should I try to grapple with God? He is beyond my strength, and if He chooses not to yield to me, there is nothing I can do. It seems He will have nothing to do with me and is content to let me go unnoticed. I am the innocent victim of His whims, so I leave Him to His humors and go my own way. Those he looks upon with love are indeed blessed; but I am not of their number so I console myself by shirking his company. Job, I know, reacted with passionate outbursts, but I am made quite differently; I rather say nothing and go my own way.

The memory of past favours only aggravates my lassitude and sense of desertion. Whatever have I done to God, who till now accepted me as his friend? I feel like the psalmist in exile rueful of his earlier days when he led rejoicing crowds to the temple.

Aridity and dryness become unbearable for me, and I shudder at the prospect of a desert journey, fearing to die of thirst... Experiences of this kind are a real stumbling block for many: "I have tried everything, but nothing helps. I feel just as empty, just as dry. I find nothing to say and hear no voice addressing me. I have read books and fallen back on well-known prayers but still have no taste for communion with God. Even the Gospel has lost its flavour. How, in circumstances

like mine, can prayer have any meaning? How can I avoid retreating, and finally renouncing the struggle?" So doubt and discouragement take over from boredom, and the chapel sees me pursuing the policy of the empty chair...

But what if God were only waiting for this impoverishment to replenish and fill your soul? What if you stood before him like an open and empty vessel that His grace could so easily fill? More aptly still, what if God found His joy in the simple presence of His child who has put everything else aside to be there with his Lord, spending long hours of the night in His company, oblivious of all self-satisfaction and any prospect of reward, but resilient in unquestioning faith and tireless in pursuit of Him who is so elusive? What if He stripped you of the comfort of His presence to convince you of your absolute dependence on Him and to lead you to utter resignation to His will, that resignation which is the heart of the prayer of his Son?

"God does not answer", you say, while in fact his reply has been given beforehand: "The Father himself loves you" (Jn 16, 27). Your relationship with Him has already been made clear: "Your Father knows what you need" (Lk 12, 30). How, then, can we fail to repeat to ourselves the words that were spoken to Augustine: "You would not be looking for me unless you had already found me"? But faith alone can hear this answer, and the light of faith is darkness, its certitude beyond empirical proof. These truths give us an invitation to go to our prayer completely emptied of self where God alone matters, a God we hardly hear,

an inexpressible God whom we draw to in silence. In this way, we shall discover the depth of prayer, for all the spiritual writers assure us that the anguished yearning for a God who keeps His distance, and who no longer rewards us with the sense of His presence, is the most beautiful prayer of all. It is a prayer that recaptures the spirit of the psalmist: "God, you are my God; for you I seek, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh pines for you, in a dry weary land without water" (Ps 63, 2).

To measure up to such struggles, we must have sound theological principles on God, faith and prayer. This calls for serious preparation in the houses of formation to enable the Brothers to understand these states of soul whenever they pass through them, to welcome them in faith and live through them courageously. Apostles must be armed not with techniques but with convictions derived from the best spiritual authors. "A deep spiritual and doctrinal culture, associated with a humble search, will help the Brothers to find God in prayer" (*Directory* 82).

* * *

At times, in fact, God not only withdraws the feeling of his presence but also seems to take pleasure in testing those He loves. He refuses to answer their call and leaves them burdened with physical, moral and, above all, spiritual hardships. Their soul lives on the brink of despair and would easily topple over if the remembrance of the abandoned and agonizing Saviour did not sustain its courage. In Him it finds the grace of perseverance and fidelity.

These, in fact, are *mystical trials reserved* by the Father for those privileged souls whom He forms in the image of His well-beloved Son whose paschal mysteries they re-live. Purified as his choice instruments in the salvation of mankind, they offer themselves as willing victims into the hands of the Father. And sharing in the passion and death of Jesus, they become for him "another human race in whom he relives the whole mystery of his life" with the joy of Christmas and Easter as well as the dereliction of Gethsemani and the darkness of Golgotha. And, at the very core of their anguish, they have that mysterious experience of "excruciating joy" in being one with the crucified Christ whose passion and death held the secret of the Resurrection and the gift of the Paraclete. "Such an ideal surpasses human understanding and strength! It is only possible through intense moments of silent and ardent contemplation of the Lord Jesus" (John Paul II to religious, Paris, May 31, 1980).

More than ever before, it is time to turn to Jesus and to contemplate him in prayer. Did Jesus experience easy prayer and difficult prayer? And was Jesus tempted to put all prayer aside when his mission proved so demanding and when trials came hurrying in upon him? How did Jesus give himself up to prayer?

* * *

JESUS IN PRAYER

The question deserves a double answer, one relating to the facts and circumstances, and the other to the content of Jesus' prayer.

What Jesus did

Each of the evangelists mentions that Jesus prayed, and each points out some characteristics of his prayer. They show him "taken into the desert by the Spirit" (Mk 1, 12), "rising before dawn, and going to a lonely place to pray" (Mk 1, 35), going apart after a day of preaching (Lk 5, 16), climbing the mountain alone (Mt 14, 23), and seeking refuge in the Garden of Olives (Mk 14, 32).

St. Luke, the evangelist of prayer, observes how Jesus spent time in prayer at all the important stages of his life, where his mission reached a critical point. It is in "his Father's house" that we must search for him in his boyhood (Lk 2, 49). Before setting out on his public life, he spent forty days in the desert finding nourishment not in bread but in the word of God. At his baptism, the opening of his mission, the communion between the Father and himself was so perfect that the heavens were opened in answer to his prayer, the Holy Spirit came down upon him, and the voice of the Father resounded. It was after a night "in prayer to God" that he chose the twelve (Lk 6, 12-13), an expression which once again suggests the intimate communion between himself and the Father, and the relationship of prayer to his essentially ecclesial mission. Later, his transfiguration occurred during prayer (Lk 9, 19) as he

brought strength to the wavering faith of the apostles at the prediction of his ignominious death. He prayed before multiplying the bread (Lk 9, 16), that sign of the future eucharist, when St. John shows him at prayer throughout the evening. And he prayed during his final struggle with Satan in Gethsemani and on the cross (cf. *Directory* 75).

At these decisive moments, the apostles (Lk 9, 18) or the three privileged disciples bore witness to his prayer. Little by little they came to understand the unique and special bonds between God and their master, and, as though in awe of the mystery of Christ's identity, they reveal it to us in restrained and quiet terms. They do not speak of the Jewish prayer of Jesus, of prayer in the temple, synagogue or family; instead they try to indicate, with reserve and delicacy, the distinctive traits of his personal prayer where the Mystery of his Person is revealed, that Mystery which slowly dawned on them in the wake of different events and circumstances. They were so taken up by his example that "one day, somewhere, when he had finished praying, one of his disciples asked him: 'Lord, teach us to pray'" (Lk 11, 1). Before teaching them how to pray, Jesus gave them his perfect example.

* * *

What Jesus said

The Gospels keep record of seven short prayers of Jesus (Mt 11, 25; Jn 11, 41; Jn 12, 27-28; Mk 14, 36; Lk 23, 34; Mt 27, 46; Lk 23, 46) and of another

which is quite prolonged (Jn 17). What strikes us at once is the invocation of God as Father. In the presence of the Almighty, Jesus sees himself as the Son. There is no evidence of timidity or fear, but only of profound reverence which leads to worship and adoration, and of the simplicity and childlike love which impels him to call upon God as "Abba!". His total trust and confidence are rooted in the assurance "that his hairs are all numbered" (Lk 12, 7), that if he asks for a fish, the Father will not hand him a scorpion (Lk 11, 12), that if the Father clothes the lilies of the fields and feeds the birds of the air without any effort on their part (Mt 6, 26-28), how much more readily will He take care of him in whom He is so well pleased!

These references clearly teach us the basic attitude of Jesus in prayer, the attitude of a son. It is so striking at the decisive moments of his life and mission that the apostles, in their astonishment, take note of the Aramaic word that a child uses in loving familiarity with his father: "Abba!"; not simply "Father", but "Dad" or "Daddy!". Till this moment, the word had never been used in prayer, for no Jew would have dared address Yahweh, the Lord, in this way; the word is all the more surprising on the lips of Jesus. But how adroitly it reveals the true nature of his prayer, the unique relationship he has with God, a relationship which makes a prayer of his whole life as it unfolds beneath his Father's loving eye. This sonship with the Father is the very heart of Jesus' life, giving unity and coherence to all he says and does. And this is what the epistle to the Hebrews wishes to emphasise, when it attributes to Jesus on the threshold of his earthly exis-

tence: "Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body thou hast prepared for me... Then I said, "Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God" (Hb 10, 5-7).

* * *

The first prayer of Jesus in the Gospel is a prayer of *blessing* (Mt 11, 25-27). The seventy two disciples are returning from their first mission where the Good News they had received with selfless heart had performed marvels of grace. Jesus, the Son who "knows the Father" and who is the recipient "of his favours" (Mt 3, 17), exults in the Holy Spirit and is filled with joy that his own experience is now extended to his "little ones", those who have kept their faith in his words. These are now made the confidants of God's revelation, and by a most gratifying experience, they are vividly aware of the fatherhood of God in his boundless gifts of kindness, peace and joy...

Sing, then O lord, your prayer of blessing, for this is the prelude of the marvels wrought throughout history by those who seek no grandeur and let your Spirit work. May your heart rejoice as this apostolic mission keeps renewing itself in the classrooms of those Brothers who have been formed by your word and, in their turn, become the Word revealing the love of the Father for their pupils!

The prayer of thanksgiving is specially impressive at the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11, 41). It is a curious prayer that raises thanks before any favour has been received; and the aim is not to sway the benefactor but

rather to seek a manifestation of his glory. It is a prayer that expresses the perfect communion between the Father and the Son: "I know that you always answer me", and the Father's witness to the mission of the Son: "So that all may believe that you have sent me". In this event, we see salvation in its truest meaning; man's liberation from death. Before long, Jesus will snatch from the jaws of death not one man but all humanity, and not for a certain period of time but for all eternity, not for trials and suffering, but for knowledge of the joy of God. How aptly, then, does Jesus give thanks at the prospect of so great a redemption!

But it is especially during the Passion that we see Jesus in prayer. His prayer then is a *heartfelt cry*: a piteous cry of supplication in the Garden of Gethsemani (Jn 11, 41; Mk 14, 36), a loud cry of despair on the cross (Mt 27, 46), and a cry of subdued submission as he yields up his spirit into the hands of the Father (Lk 23, 46). His prayer embraces and subsumes the laments of the persecuted prophets and the cry of all the weak under the tyranny of the powerful; the cry that rises from the abyss of human distress, the cry of martyrs, of prisoners in every jail; the cry of children snatched from their parents, and the cry of man's despair in the desert where no echo is ever heard. Even God keeps silent! Even God is deaf to the cry of his little one, of his Well-Beloved Son!

This prayer rings out like the primal cry of one in revolt against the apparent violation of nature, like the cry of a child making its entrance into the world. The occasion, after all, is one of rebirth, of new life for all.

Who has not known those painful hours when all human help seems worthless, when God seems to ask the impossible, and sacrifice goes beyond our endurance? Little by little, however, we are led to perceive God's goodness in his sternly demanding will: "You, in your love, know what is good for me". It may be a case of physical suffering which goes on relentlessly sometimes for years, or of moral suffering from family trials or apostolic disappointments, or of spiritual suffering when God persists in hiding. Night of the soul for myself and for the Church, for my province or the whole Congregation — what else is it but the Garden of Olives, the mockery and derision of the crowds, the cross of Golgotha?

It is also the time for forgiveness, the hallmark of the genuine disciple: "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they do" (Lk 23, 34), the time for absolute trust in the goodness of God despite all contrary appearances (Mt 14, 36), the time when communion with the Father is perfected: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23, 46).

Jesus was able to live through those painful hours because he knew, even as he hung on the cross, that the Father loved him and that He loved his very tormentors with the same love. With him and in him, we will be able to follow his example.

The long prayer in *John 17* defies all analysis and we have to come back to it in endless meditation. It takes up the themes of praise, thanksgiving and supplication already referred to, but adds the note of

intercession. Jesus prayed for his apostles: "I pray for them... Keep in your name those you have given me... Consecrate them in truth" (Jn 17, 11-17); and he prayed for all who would follow them: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word" (Jn 17, 20). For all of them he expresses the same wish: "Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given me, may be with me where I am" (Jn 17, 24). This long prayer illustrates yet again the Father's intimacy with the Son, and the Son's desire to share it with his disciples. He makes fervent supplications for he knows the violent assaults that await them and their inadequacy to face them alone.

The Epistle to the Hebrews shows Jesus similar overtures to the Father and interceding for mankind on whose behalf he shed his precious blood (Hb 7, 25). And now that he is enthroned in glory, himself the object of adoration, praise and thanksgiving, his prayer arises in ardent supplication that justice be appeased and the mercy of the Father prevail (cf. *Directory* 76).

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Each of us can pursue, at leisure, this contemplation of Jesus in prayer. Our aim, at this stage, is to indicate a few practical lessons for our own lives.

Jesus gave time to prayer. The time that Jesus gave to prayer could easily be a matter of surprise. If anybody could dispense with prayer, would it not be he, God's

own Son, supremely confident of his Father's support? Why, then, does he pass so many hours, even whole nights in prayer, when his mission is so pressing and has a span of only three years? Jesus knows that to listen effectively to men, he must first give ear to God; he knows that, prior to his self-effacing mission, he must receive the unction of the Holy Spirit. It is a lesson recalled by our Rule of Life: "The meetings of the apostle with men are truly authentic in the measure that they stem from meetings with God and return to Him" (*Directory* 111).

* * *

Jesus prepared for prayer, choosing suitable conditions, going apart from others at dawn or dusk, taking time out from his usual round of work, and creating a desert place for prayer. This "prayer space" could be equally the scene of forlorn and disconsolate experience or of real consolation. Jesus could just as well enjoy "the favour of the Father" and transfiguration in the Spirit as be subjected to various temptations and "experience fear and anguish" (Mk 14, 33). He welcomed both as expressions of the Father's will and persevered in "the prayer of dawn" as well as "the prayer of night", in easy prayer as well as prayer that proved difficult. He even seems to pray more insistently during his Passion than at any other time.

The interior climate of our prayer does not depend on us, and the Evil One can be very resourceful in affecting it; for our prayer as for that of Jesus, the desert can be a place of consolation or of hard trial.

Our sole responsibility is to choose conditions favourable to prayer: silence, solitude, "a healthy mental and physical hygiene... a climate of interiority which helps discipline the imagination and the feelings" (*Directory* 79) and which reserves the most favourable time, morning and evening, for prayer. If we wish to pray, it is obvious that we need to take some elementary precautions. After all, there is internal logic to the spiritual life and there are laws that cannot be broken with impunity. How can I meditate in the morning, for example, if I do not respect the solemn silence of the night, or if I use my radio, as soon as I awake, to listen to the daily news (cf. *Directory* 81)? How can I be recollected during the day if I remain tied to wordly media? Formerly, "the prayer of the hour" brought us back systematically to God; today the "hourly news" takes us systematically into the midst of the world. How can all these voices fail to drown out "the voice of the Beloved" who is calling us to his side (Ct 2, 10)? We have to make a choice.

Good material conditions are also important, and in this respect, the installation of community oratories is a praiseworthy initiative. Canon Law and the Rule recommend the use of an oratory (*Constitutions* 39), and a suitable oratory should be a major objective in all our houses.

* * *

Jesus prayed in the Spirit. The Spirit rested on him, dwelt within him and kept him in loving dialogue with the Father. It is in the Spirit that he knew himself

to be the Well-Beloved Son, that he heard the Father describe him as such, and that he learned his mission from heaven.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit makes us sons of God and leads us to be dependent, humble, full of trust, as dutiful sons should be. At the same time he incites us to that filial prayer which is replete with respect and love, and which is docile to the will of the Father. This disposition to prayer was given to us at our baptism, but too often it has grown lethargic and dispirited. The Holy Spirit joins forces with us to arouse and vitalize it, to endow us with the simplicity of a child who is happy in his father's company, "keeping his commandments" (Jn 15, 10), receiving everything from his hands, and giving to his father the joy of extending his love, for as Jesus himself reminds us: "There is more joy in giving than in receiving". He makes us sensitive to the presence of the Trinity within us, leads us to the innermost depths of our being where they choose to abide, and inspires us the words that are pleasing to the Father. It is the Spirit who guides us to understand and live the petition of Jesus: "Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am" (Jn 17, 24). And, from his childhood (Lk 2, 49) to his death (23, 46), where else is Jesus if not "with his Father"? Where "does he live", if not "in his love" (Jn 15, 10)? The Father, par excellence, is the "place" of his prayer. He invites us to join him there, so that we may live with him and find our rest in his bosom. "The King", says the spouse in the Canticle of Canticles (Ct 1, 4), "has brought me into his chambers", in the "kingdom that

he has prepared for him since the foundation of the world" (Mt 25, 34). Unhappily, too many disciples of Jesus give voice to the Lord's Prayer without immersing themselves in the religion of Jesus, without living as sons of the Father and "remaining in his love".

* * *

Because the Spirit made his abode in Jesus, *his whole life was a prayer*. And yet, though never separated from the Father in whatever he did, he loved to go apart to pray. As the Son, he needed these heart to heart talks with his Father to breathe in the Father's love, and to give the Father the joy of conversing with the Son. Whatever he said or did for the rest of the day was the substantial expression of this love lived in the solitude of prayer: "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise" (Jn 5, 19). "What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has bidden me" (Jn 12, 50). With him, prayer and action were mutually dependent; contemplation and action, far from being opposed, gave support to each other, with prayer and life enmeshing in a single reality.

If we look at Jesus leading his life of Sonship, we become vividly aware that growth in our own spiritual life is essentially linked to these heart to heart exchanges with God where, like Jesus, we place ourselves at the disposition of the Father, allowing ourselves to be enveloped in his love. Our life, then, becomes the counterpart of the life of Jesus, unreservedly "turned to

the Father" (cf. Jn 1, 1; 1, 18). Like him, we are made contemplatives in action, men of action in contemplative prayer, especially at the more important and difficult stages of our experience. When serious decisions must be made, it is wise "to spend the night in prayer"; when the assaults of Satan are vigorous and menacing, it is imperative to stay close to God (cf. *Directory* 94).

Though lack of evidence prevents us from tracing the evolution of Jesus' prayer or the stages of its development, it is easy to notice how he passes from blessing and thanksgiving to absolute submission to the Father and utter conformity with his will. Prayer and life join in a single unity producing pure and perfect prayer.

To achieve such an objective, we must be prepared to suffer as Jesus suffered and as Jacob suffered. The latter was injured in the thigh and had to limp, the former was pierced through the heart and died in ignominy. It is impossible to emerge unscathed from any struggle with God! But Jacob-Israel is the father of the twelve tribes, and Jesus, the new Israel is the head of the Church, the Spouse without blemish or wrinkle whom he gained with his blood (Eph 5, 25-27). The struggle bore fruit since it was resolved in total submission to the will of God, or rather in the union of the Son's will to the will of God, or rather in the union of the Son's will with the Father's: "Everything that I do, it is the Father who does it". "It is not I who act, but the Father who acts in me" (cf. Jn 5, 19).

Prayer commits us, as it committed Jesus, ever more earnestly to the service of man in obedience to the

Father. By praise, adoration and thanksgiving, it will guide us along the road of self-renunciation to the final and total immolation of our being. It will lead us to the silence of abandonment to God, and climax in the most heart-rending cry that man could utter: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mt 27, 46), before reposing in the most peaceful resignation a dying man could render: "Father, into your hand I commend my life" (Lk 23, 46).

Prayer is never more human than in this state of desolation. And to reach the heights of true prayer, we all need to pass by the valley of the bitter poverty of sin. How, otherwise, can we make this cry to God: "Where are you, my God? I seek you at dawn and my soul thirsts for you". Is it not at the moment that Jesus, the man of prayer, becomes "sin for us" (2 Co 5, 51) that he is received into the bosom of the Father?

This should remind us that it is never too late to pray. It suggests, on the contrary, that only when we are convinced, perhaps by some sad and painful experience, of our inability to live in union with God, that we draw nearer to Him with our prayer finding its proper outlet and truest expression.

If I have not yet succeeded in prayer, or if, in spite of all my efforts and methods, success is slipping away, if I am conscious of my tragic situation as a sinner and my impotence to attain Almighty God, perhaps it is the ideal moment to surrender myself to the Holy Spirit who alone can teach me to pray as a son of God. Perhaps, too, it is the moment to stop clinging to my

self-will, and to yield to that of the Father, to give myself over into his hands. The more deprived and sinful I am, the more ready I am to receive the Holy Spirit and to offer with him the prayer of the children of God, a prayer that needs no artifice, no intricate language, a simple plea that rises from the very depths of my being. I have no need of facades; the Father who is "rich and merciful" (Ep 2, 4) will see me as I am, and will lean over to me in my misery.

* * *

CONCLUSION

We have dealt in these pages especially with personal prayer. Other occasions will allow us to reflect on community prayer, the Divine Office, Holy Mass and spiritual reading... Despite their limitations and brevity, it is my hope that these remarks will help each Brother to meet the wishes of the General Chapter in becoming a truly spiritual man. Simple honesty assures us that prayer does not always hold the pride of place it deserves among us. In accord with our motto: *God Alone!*, let us guarantee the place it deserves.

For many of us, the major difficulty, perhaps, is that of turning from the "religious level" where we know some measure of fear, or the "moral level" where we pray through the demands of duty and our Rule of Life, or the "sociological level" where we conform with the spirit of the community, to the really "spiritual level". Here, it is no longer we who go to God with religious triumphs, however genuine they may be; it is

rather God who comes to us and whom we welcome in his love.

For us it a pressing obligation since we are called to be spiritual masters for our pupils, masters of prayer. They expect us to be men who have more respect for what we are than for what we have, men who will help them escape the dangers of a materialistic world. "It is the most urgent 'contestation' that religious must oppose to a society where efficiency has become an idol, on whose altar it is not rare to see the sacrifice of human dignity itself" (John Paul II to Superiors General, November 1978). Our pupils know that success in life is less important than a life well-lived. The latter is the outcome of a love whose vital sign is prayer, for prayer both reveals and prospers the reign of love. If we are what we should be, "specialists in prayer" (John Paul II to the religious of Manila, Feb. 17, 1981), and if we keep on to the end of that road where the Son precedes us, to the total commitment of our will into the hands of God, we shall the more easily enable the young to discover this love for themselves.

Brothers, let there be no further delay in answering the appeal of the General Chapter. Let us find anew the paths of prayer if we have left them; let us continue on our pilgrimage if we have been true to them. There is no time for idleness or vain distraction; we must proceed, if God so grants His grace, with gigantic steps across deserts and oases, fully conscious that prayer is not a matter of sentiment, but of consent, of accepting with all our heart whatever plans He has in store for

us. It is a journey we can make with Christ, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit; and he will lead us to the Father. And then our life will find its focal point: the Father; our life will be a prolonged prayer, will savour the presence of God. We can then present God more easily to those we live with, the Brothers of our community, our pupils, our colleagues and acquaintances.

The Blessed Virgin, who taught Jesus to pray, will also be our teacher. She is the model of contemplative life; the Gospel depicts her listening to the word of God and meditating it in her heart (Lk 2, 19; 2, 51); and it later shows her standing silent at the foot of the cross, perfectly resigned to the will of God as she shares the redeeming sacrifice of her Son (Jn 19, 25). From her we will learn the prayer that is pleasing to the Father.

Prayer and life in the Holy Spirit, as the Rule proposes them to us, will thus immerse us in the currents of grace that the Lord is sending his Church today. Our Rule of Life, in determining set times for our meetings with God and thus urging us each day to conversion, will make prayerful men of us, will transform us into prayer. Our "spiritually weary world" (John Paul II) has no greater need.

Brother BERNARD GAUDEUL,
Superior General

Mont-Tremblant (Canada)
On the Feast of the Blessed Trinity,
June 17, 1984.

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