

**MENTAL PRAYER
OF SIMPLE ATTENTION IN
ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
AND COMTEMPLATION IN
ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS
(3/3)**

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**II. Advice of St. John of the Cross
on the spiritual direction to be given
to people journeying towards contemplation.**

(In this second part of the article, numbers between brackets refer to the subdivisions of stanza three of "Burning fire of love" - Llama de amor viva, found in the complete works of St. John of the Cross, cf Bibliography, 2)

In the "Burning fire of love", 3, 27-67, St. John of the Cross makes a long digression from his main topic, in order to attack those who opposed persons living in the state of contemplation. He especially addresses the spiritual director to show him what to do and what to avoid in order to prevent wasting time in advising the most advanced in mental prayer.

This digression contains in summary, doctrine found in John of the Cross's other books, letters and poems. This doctrine has similarities with the mental prayer of simple attention of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

11. Leave aside half-hearted methods. (31)

St. John of the Cross begins by reminding us of an important principle in the soul's search for God. It is as follows: "Although the soul seeks God, God seeks the soul of the beloved much more". God's wish to communicate with the soul ensures that mental prayer is primarily God's work; he is the principal agent and the beloved is the blind one being led where otherwise he could not go (28).

For St. John of the Cross, contemplation is a way of approaching God in God's way, which is better "than other half-hearted ways, which are no use except for beginners", by which he means reasoned and imaginative meditation: "these half-hearted methods are only reasonings and efforts of the imagination, in which the soul gets nowhere, and accumulates no wealth" (29-31).

St. John of the Cross does not discard beginners' meditation, because beginners need acts and exercises involving reasoning and imagination. Such souls need material to meditate on and they need to make interior acts and enjoy the taste and savour of spiritual things (32).

Once the soul has been weaned, by God's placing it in a state of contemplation, acts of reasoning in meditation cease, and the nectar and early sensitive fervour cannot thrive on reasoning as they did at the beginning. In this state, God is the agent and the soul is the recipient. God gives the soul spiritual benefits in contemplation, which are knowl-

edge and love together, in other words, loving knowledge, without the soul's using acts and natural reasoning. (32).

Therefore the soul in this state of contemplation, should act in a different way than when it meditated. If previously it was given material for meditation and did in fact meditate, now it has not to seek such material and it must **cease meditating**. If the soul continues searching, not only will it fail to obtain refreshment and satisfaction, but it will become dried up instead. God is secretly giving the soul the gift of peace and quiet. This is lost when the soul wishes to carry on with activity. In this state, it should not perform exercises, such as acts, nor attempt to obtain relish or fervour. In this state, God goes along quietly, secretly placing wisdom and loving knowledge in the soul, **without the need for acts**. The soul should just remain simply in this loving recognition, like someone opening his eyes to the recognition of love. (33).

12. Simple loving knowledge.

Rather insistently St. John of the Cross says that the soul should remain in this "simple loving knowledge, without personal effort and without acts dependent on nature". In order to receive this loving knowledge of God, the soul should be bereft of natural actions, should be unencumbered, be at ease, rest and peace; be serene in a Godlike manner. The soul must not be confined by anything, whether it be fears, pleasure or reasoning. It should avoid all noise and remain in profound silence in order to hear the delicate voice of God, for it is in conditions of solitude that God speaks to the soul. (34) It should forget even loving reminders of God, in order to remain free for what the Lord wishes at that time. Pure contemplation consists in receiving. (35).

Using natural powers is nothing more than gathering straw to burn soil with; on the other hand, God calls the soul to the desert of solitude, in order to enjoy the liberty and leisure of the sons of God. The more quickly and readily it reaches this tranquil leisure, the more abundantly it finds its spirit being filled with that divine wisdom which is loving, tranquil, silent, solitary, peaceful, sweet and intoxicating to the soul; that wisdom by which it is taken over and by which it is grasped tenderly and softly without its knowing by whom, where or how (38).

The fruits obtained will appear in time. One of the fruits which the soul can obtain is a feeling of alienation and detachment from all things, together with a desire for solitude, a weariness of all creatures of the world, and a gentle breathing of love and of spiritual life (39).

The benefits which this silent communication and contemplation leave imprinted on the soul are beyond price, they are anointings, which, because they are administered in secret, are all the more gentle, are administered by the Holy Spirit, and fill the soul with riches, gifts and spiritual graces which "God" awards "in his own manner" (40).

In order to reach the life of the spirit, which is contemplation, one must have passed through the negation and silence of the senses and of reason; this is what is called "recollection" (44).

13. Recollection

The action of God takes place in contemplation. The latter presupposes recollection, which means the cessation of the operation of the senses and of reasoning proper to the soul; the termination of the operation of one's powers. Quiet recollection is the aim of every spiritual person. Using one's natural powers makes one lose solitude and interior recollection and makes one forfeit the supreme work which God performs in the soul. (45)

To remain in this state of contemplation, the soul must place itself in solitude and leisure, detached from every particular awareness, whether it comes from above or from

below; it must be empty in its absolute rejection of any creature living in poverty of the spirit; it must renounce all temporal things in order to will and surrender itself to things spiritual (46).

In the same way as the sun shines through a gap when we uncover it, so God enters the soul which is empty and fills it with divine treasures. God is like the sun communicating himself to the soul. Once the soul empties itself, it is God who decides what then fills it. He will build supernaturally in each soul the palace of his desires. (47).

14. Without particular acts (48).

Not to understand clearly is a sign of progress. If one did understand clearly, one would not make progress. The soul must go forward believing, but not understanding; it is by faith, not through fear, that one is united with God; thus God reaches the soul which fails to understand rather than the soul which does understand. (48).

In contemplation, by which God pours out himself into the soul, it is not necessary to have distinct knowledge, or for the soul to make acts of intelligence, for it is God who, in an act communicates to it, at the same time, light and love. The will loves in general, without any distinction of any specific matter being considered. (49)

Although the soul ceases to make acts of love concerning specific aspects of knowledge of God, God himself makes those acts through that knowledge, secretly intoxicating the soul with infused love, so those acts become most sweet to the soul. The soul tastes sweetness in a general outpouring, which is obscurely and secretly greater than all other things. (50).

God has had to offer great help to these souls to reach as far as this; he is glad that they have reached this solitude and this abandonment of their powers and actions, so that he is able to speak to their heart, which is what he always wishes, for he is the one who takes our hand; he is the one who now reigns in our soul with an abundance of peace and rest. (54).

It is regrettable when the soul, anxious to consume and savour a morsel of particular knowledge, prevents God from consuming the soul itself, for this is what God does in the solitude where the soul has been placed, for he absorbs the soul within himself by means of special solitary unctions. (63)

III. Some comments.

1. When De La Salle speaks of simple attention and when John of the Cross speaks of contemplation, we could say that they are talking about the same thing. They use different words for the same truths. The same is not the case when De La Salle speaks about mental prayer or meditation and when John of the Cross speaks about meditation. Detailed investigation of the meaning of meditation in the two authors would be enlightening. The nature of De La Salle's mental prayer is predominantly, perhaps completely, affective, which means to say that in it, one gives more time to affectionate utterances and resolutions than to reasoning and reflections. To prevent these affectionate utterances becoming sentimental, they should be based on Scripture. When St. John of the Cross speaks of meditation, he does not mention the heart or affection; he speaks rather of reasoning, reflection and imagination.

2. De La Salle leads the soul to more and more simple forms, but in order to reach such simplicity, one needs a long preparation by mortification, recollection and fidelity to God. In this, he agrees with St. John of the Cross, who gives a very profound meaning to "recollection". It does not mean avoidance of looking this way and that; it means solitude and the emptying of the heart and affections, or the nakedness

of the spirit which is needed in order to enjoy the benefits of contemplation.

3. Both De La Salle and John of the Cross accord a great deal to faith. De La Salle seems to give greater emphasis to the use of certain extracts from Holy Scripture, as a basis for faith. But when one reaches contemplation, reasoned reflection on Scripture ceases, and prayer becomes more intimate, deep and simple. John of the Cross often repeats that one must go to God not knowing or understanding, rather than knowing and understanding, in order to insist on the importance of faith in contemplation. Faith is the sure and only way leading to contemplation and guiding the soul during it.

4. To reach simple attention, De La Salle takes short steps and leads the beginner little by little. Once simple attention is reached, he gives only brief advice. His doctrine on simple attention is insufficiently developed. On the other hand, for St. John of the Cross, it is beginners who are left on one side, his strong point being "loving knowledge" in contemplation. He describes in detail what is to be done and what is to be avoided during contemplation; he gives reasons to prove his point. His doctrine in this matter is much more developed than De La Salle's.

5. St. John of the Cross describes the graduation from meditation to contemplation elsewhere (2nd Ascent, 13-15), when he considers certain fruits produced in the soul. This means that St. John of the Cross wants to know whether the person who says he has reached contemplation shows the signs which should be in the soul at that time. De La Salle, like a teacher, concentrates more on what the soul is doing at the time of mental prayer. He thus leads away from a state of "numerous reflections" to "few short reflections continued over a period", then progresses to "simple attention". One arrives at simple attention almost without realising it.

IV. Conclusion.

The "expressions used" to describe the conditions and fruits of mental prayer of simple attention do not appear to show a direct dependence of De La Salle on John of the Cross. To investigate this, a more detailed study of vocabulary and expressions would be necessary. If De La Salle had read John of the Cross, he assimilated it very well, since he was able to say similar things whilst using his own vocabulary and phrasing. Nevertheless, their important "ideas" in describing contemplation, the conditions for practising it and the fruits obtained from contemplation, show doctrinal similarities. Therefore, a comparative study should be based more on the ideas than on quotations or expressions common to both writers.

V. Bibliography.

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