

Concerning the Prayer of Faith (III)

by Eduardo Benlloch, SM

Today, I am offering this final installment in my series of spiritual reflections on what can be called a Marianist style of meditation. I will focus on the fruits or results flowing from this style of meditation. As the starting point to lead into this subject, I ask this question: what do I expect from my daily meditation?

- Is it to come to a specific decision?
- Is it to correct a definite point of my behavior from one day to the next?
- Is it to come to a slow but progressive transformation of my whole self?

Meditation Guide

Father Simler, whom I admire, wrote an admirable work about meditation in general, which was eventually translated into English and Spanish.¹ This work served as the initiation into meditation for many past generations of Marianists because it was an obligatory reading for study and practice in our novitiates. But I know for a fact, through direct testimonies, that this work also served as an introduction to prayer for some seminarians and other persons who came to know it, buy it, and practice it (even in such remote regions as the Canary Islands).

This book deals extensively with the good results of meditation, and it literally says, among its qualities: “Meditation must be precise, that is, determined, particular, and to the point. Mark out what is to be done, the time, place, manner, means, etc.”²

In another place it talks about the way to conclude a meditation, observing that one must make a firm resolution. “A firm purpose which applies to all the resolutions already taken, but

¹ Joseph J. Simler, SM, *Guide of the Man of Good Will in the Exercise of Mental Prayer* (Dayton, OH: n.s., 1887).

² *Ibid.*, § 263, 1.

principally to the one on which you are going to concentrate all the forces of nature and grace, and one which you will renew until a satisfactory result has been obtained.”³

I would like to make two very brief comments concerning this last declaration.

- It suggests that there is an action of grace during meditation and also afterward, in daily life.
- It also suggests a person cannot change immediately; rather, he or she must continue persevering until reaching a satisfactory result.

This leads me to raise another question. How do we approach and practice our daily meditation—as an activity that generates moral energy or as an experience of God which is affecting me more deeply every time?

Generating Moral Energy

It has been said at times that Ignatian spirituality generates moral energy. In this approach, meditation would serve to impel and strengthen human efforts. The effort would come from those who always need a renewed vitality to correct their many defects and to rise to perfection. This purpose may appear distant, making it necessary for men and women to meditate in order to find new motivation and new strength.

Therefore, meditation is necessary to maintain one’s will and to direct it to identification with the divine will. This task is very extensive, and it must be achieved little by little to avoid discouragement. Thus, decisions must be very specific and measurable. If I am achieving these small steps, then I will continue to improve. It could be said, metaphorically, that meditation may be seen as daily training which allows one to lift the bar of perfection to be able to jump a little higher every day.

³ Ibid., § 253, 3.

If this perspective on meditation becomes exclusive, then there is a serious danger of discouragement or decline when we see how little we advance or even how we regress, because there is undoubtedly a basic drawback, especially because we see the origin of our sanctification in a willful perfectionism.

Experience of God

This is a different way of directing my daily meditation. There is an action of God in my life. Meditation would be a privileged and fruitful moment to realize this action of God. God is giving me life.

Father Chaminade offers some very strong declarations in his writing on “Meditation on Faith and on the Presence of God,” where he talks about growing in faith. He says:

We must insist that faith is a supernatural gift, and as such, any increase of faith is not directly due to our own perseverance in repeating acts of faith and in performing our actions in a spirit of faith. It is not our own efforts or our own actions that increase our faith, but the Spirit of God operating within us; we are merely collaborators.⁴

And following this, he specifies it is the Holy Spirit, which we received at Baptism together with the infused virtue of faith, that is always operating in us. Therefore, in meditation we try to have an experience of this close and intimate God, who is acting in us. We try to contemplate God in silence and with a pure heart, and we let ourselves be flooded with this contemplation. In this perspective of our meditation, also metaphorically, as in the song, “I want to be, dear Lord, as clay in the potter’s hands. Take my life, make it new, I want to be a new vessel.” This is undoubtedly a good starting point. My sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, and it begins with the grace of Baptism and with my vocation as a Marianist. I thank God continuously for this gift. I rejoice in it when I feel it in my prayer, and I am renewed. This is life; divine life!

⁴ *Marianist Origins: An Anthology of Basic Documents for Formation in Marianist Identity*, published under the direction of Quentin Hakenewerth, SM (Rome: n.s., 1990), p. 208. “Mental Prayer of Faith and of the Presence of God,” doc. 24.

It could be objected that, if this perspective becomes exclusive, we run the risk of remaining somewhat inactive, without any effort on our part. I think we have before us a classic case of favoring one perspective—without losing the necessary balance—and we need actively to collaborate on our part, in order to let ourselves be conformed to Christ through the action of God’s grace. And the first result of our daily meditation would be the slow but progressive transformation of our whole self.

Acting by Motives of Faith

Let’s suppose we decide to examine all we have done on any given day. We would be surprised to realize how many daily actions are more or less routine. Oftentimes we act almost mechanically, carried on by habit. At other times we have a vague consciousness of our obligations, duties, and requirements of our commitments. We probably will find other much less noble motives for what we do. We have done this or that other thing to look good; we have striven for some other things because of some secret pride, or we have not done something because of unmentionable selfishness.

But, have we done anything moved by a conscious and luminous faith, for the love of God and of our neighbor? Are we truly being transformed into Christ? These are questions which I leave here, almost as an introduction to a certain recommendation by Father Chaminade, about the attitude of a person who meditates daily, and about the results this person expects from prayer. In a letter to Mlle de Lamourous, dated May 27, 1796, Chaminade said: “One must remain in the presence of God in deepest recollection. The disposition of one’s soul in this recollection is that of a simple feeling of faith, or hope, or charity, or resignation to God’s will. Then finish the meditation by asking God to grant the grace of remaining the whole day in recollection and of acting only for reasons of faith.”

A person acting only for reasons of faith is truly a saint.

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