

Faith of the Heart: The Prayer of Faith—A Communion of Knowledge and Love with God

by Richard Loehrlein, SM

A problem for the modern person is the question of “What is truth?” Familiar? It was just what the Roman procurator asked the accused Jew! Jesus had said to Pilate, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate answered, “What is truth?” (Jn 18:37-38). It is still a problem for people today.

The modern person believes in his or her own subjective experience of truth. It is too difficult to believe in any objective truths, especially where it concerns *God*. Because of this tendency, people speak of “the tendency of *subjectivity*” (believe in self). The only reality for her or him is what is *in the mind*. In order to reach the modern person, Karol Wojtyla (later to become Pope John Paul II), then a young priest living in Rome, studied the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross because he could then have a personal, subjective experience of the objective reality of God. He wanted *God to be in his mind*.

Christopher West studied the life of Pope John Paul II and his *Theology of the Body*. In the preface of his own study, *Theology of the Body Explained*, he details the life and studies of John Paul II. West tells us the young Wojtyla first encountered an emphasis on the lived experiences of the person in the writings of John of the Cross. Faith, he discovered, is the means of a “mystical marriage” with God. West writes, “personal experience does not trump the objective content of faith but confirms and affirms it, enabling the person to interiorize it and make it his own. This insight into faith as an *experiential* reality also provided an important foundation for Wojtyla's habilitation thesis,”¹ a paper that caused him to be accepted in university as a teacher. That thesis was on Max Scheler, a disciple of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the founder of phenomenology.

In his introduction to *William Joseph Chaminade: Writings on Mental Prayer*, Raymond Halter, SM, says there is a direct parallel between the method of mental prayer of faith of Father Chaminade and the mystical theology of divine marriage of St. John of the Cross. “We do not know if Father Chaminade ever read the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* by St. John of the Cross. It is remarkable, however, to see how they parallel each other: we must enter into prayer with a detachment that accepts only those insights which are of faith.”²

Father Chaminade's solution to finding the truth was this: "Unless you believe, you will not understand" (Retreat of 1818, tenth meditation). And as he explains, our faith experience is a subjective experience of the divine objective reality that is being revealed.

Father Chaminade was at work building a dam to block the influence of modern atheism on Christian people. He had formed the Sodality of Bordeaux in 1800, and now in 1818 he was developing a religious society of men consecrated to the Immaculate Virgin for the same purpose. In that tenth meditation he explained the meaning of "Unless you believe you will not understand."

What we have said concerning mental prayer, and what we have just remarked about faith, namely that their effect is to unite us to God even to the point of transforming us into God, sufficiently shows the relation existing between mental prayer and faith. Faith is the means by which we attain the end of mental prayer. Our text states that it is even a necessary means insofar as we consider union with God as knowledge and love. Unless you believe you will not understand. Here we have, without searching any further, the best way to make mental prayer.³

Father Chaminade was referring to what he had said in the ninth meditation about the two "lights of faith," (the light of reason—a human faith and the light of divine revelation) comparing the relative value of truth known from a "revelation from God" with that from the "studies of reason." First, Father Chaminade explained the difference between the "light of faith" and "faith." "Faith," he said, "is the *conviction* we have of a truth; the light of faith is the *motive* which produces this conviction."⁴

So, we need to appreciate that there is a difference between the "conviction" which is our faith, and "our motive" for being convinced of any truth, which he called "a light." Sometimes, people say, "Oh, the light just came on, and now I understand."

The light of reason is only an operation of the intelligence, a truthful conclusion drawn from sure principles by a process of reasoning. When the motive for belief (the light) is changed by new discoveries, then the truths are changed. So, one can question, "What is the truth?" We are never absolutely sure. As Father Chaminade said, "The light of human faith is reason, the word of some human person; hence its uncertainties and all

its imperfections.”⁵ According to Father Chaminade, “The light of faith, by its very nature, excels every other light.” “The light of divine faith, of the faith of God, is the very Word of God; it is the eternal production of the Word’s entire being; it is God’s Son; it is Jesus Christ inasmuch as he is God; therefore, Jesus Christ is called the Word, the Word of God.”⁶

He is the “light of faith,” our *motive for believing*. It is *on his authority* that we believe. That’s why he told Pilate, “this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

Father Chaminade further explained:

When the light of faith penetrates our soul, it is the Word of God who comes to dwell therein. This is not simply imagination. The Apostle, or rather the Holy Spirit by the mouth of the Apostle Paul, has revealed it to us: So that Christ may live in your hearts through faith (Eph 3:17).⁷

However, Father Chaminade explains in the tenth meditation that the light of faith which comes from God is *objective*, while the light of faith received by the human person is *subjective*, because it is that person’s subjective experience. Not everybody can see clearly. The mind, the heart, and the will of a person is particular to that person. Father Chaminade was speaking about “the capacity of a human person to receive this light.” How well they see and understand depends on many factors. This is one reason why spiritual authors speak of “purity of heart,” or “singleness of heart.” This is why Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8). Those whose hearts are not pure are blinded by the impurity. The capacity to see and understand the truth revealed by God will be limited to that person’s spiritual ability.

Father Chaminade explained, “But just as, in order to see well, it is necessary that our eyes be clear, healthy, and attentive, so too in order to perceive the light of faith, our understanding must be pure, healthy, and attentive, and this constitutes the entire method of mental prayer by faith.”⁸

As we practice this method, the understanding, the heart, and the will are purified by the action of Jesus himself! This is the whole purpose of the exercise: to grow in love with God! The prayer of “faith of the heart” is a communion of persons—between the person of Jesus and the human person. That is why Father Chaminade said that mental prayer is “at the same time the work of the human person and the work of God.”

In his ninth meditation Father Chaminade made clear that we “do not recognize Jesus Christ in our soul when we cause the light of faith to enter. It is not as man, such as he is in the Holy Eucharist, that he dwells in us, but as the Word of God.”

“But if we do not see him there, we feel all the qualities that he attributes to himself: I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). By the light of faith, and by the faith which this light produces in us, we come to know the truth of God; it animates us; it is our life; it shows us what we must do, the road we must follow.

If the light of faith is the Word of God, if because of it the adorable Word comes to live within us, then we understand that faith, the conviction resulting from the impression of this light, is precisely the union of Jesus Christ with us; a union which goes so far as to transform us into Jesus Christ. By faith we think as Jesus Christ thinks, it is Jesus Christ who unites himself to our heart. By faith our guided will acts only as Jesus Christ acts, it is Jesus Christ who unites himself to our will. Thus the new self is formed within us.⁹

So, Jesus, who is the “way, the truth, and the life” is known by his activity in our minds, in our hearts, and in our wills and develops us as the children of God. This is our *subjective, personal experience of the objective truth of God*. God lives in us.

Most recently, when the new Roman Missal was published, one of the new Eucharistic prayers (V 3), *Jesus, the Way to the Father*, reflected Father Chaminade’s teaching. The preface of this Eucharistic prayer states: “For by your Word you created the world and you govern all things in harmony. You gave us the same Word made flesh as Mediator, and he has spoken your words to us and called us to follow him. He is the way that leads to you, the truth that sets us free, the life that fills us with gladness.”¹⁰

Through this Word we come to know God with our minds, love God with our hearts, and grow in obedience with our wills. In another retreat in 1821 Father Chaminade made very clear that in the “mental prayer of faith, faith of the heart” we are developing a communion with Jesus. He was teaching the brothers three benefits for mental prayer:

1. Mental prayer is the duty and the homage of the Christian soul.
2. Mental prayer is the consolation of the religious soul.
3. Mental prayer is the strength of the religious soul.

As to the first point, he asks:

But are we positive that mental prayer is the surest way of attaining perfection? Consult God himself through the medium of his saints; they will all admit that mental prayer is the reason for their progress in the evangelical virtues. All true servants of Jesus Christ, men and women, will say the same. It is the common experience of all the centuries, and all the holy Fathers, all the masters of the spiritual life agree on this point. Would you brush aside such testimony? And consider that a good meditation is the work not only of man, but more so of God; the mind, the heart, all the faculties of the soul are, so to speak, plunged into God. This prompts the Fathers to say that *a good meditation is a true communion, a true union with Jesus Christ, although it is not sacramental*.¹¹

It is interesting that in the retreat of 1818, ninth meditation, Father Chaminade makes very clear that he is not teaching the methods of the mystical states of prayer:

Our judgment regarding our knowledge of things may be enlightened by various lights: there is the light of reason which is natural; the light of faith which is supernatural but ordinary; and extraordinary lights, such as that of revelations. Among them all, without a doubt, the light of faith is one which we should most esteem, desire, and seek after, whether it be on account of its necessity, or in view of its duration, or because of its excellence.¹²

And later in the same meditation he teaches:

These extraordinary lights are only for an instant, and not at all constant. The light of faith ought to enlighten all the moments of our existence and guide us in all our actions. Without mentioning that we receive it at Baptism, and that it sustains us at the hour of our death, showing us the gates of eternity, by it alone, during the time between these two limits, we ought to act in all things. It is the principle which should make us live: "The righteous man finds life through faith" (Gal 3:11).¹³

This is what Father Chaminade says about knowing the *truth*. As Christians we know that if you put your faith in Jesus, “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32), for Jesus is *the truth*. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1).

Father Chaminade wanted his disciples to come to a personal knowledge and love of God through the light of faith, not a “book” knowledge, but a communion of persons type of knowledge, a relationship of love. He called it the prayer of faith or “faith of the heart.” He knew it would develop a communion of life and of love in the person with Jesus Christ. All Christians, of all walks of life, with no extraordinary spiritual gifts, charismatic or mystical, are endowed with the supernatural gift of faith and with that faith can and *ought* to develop (and some do unconsciously) this personal friendship with God. And this friendship would motivate the person to spend more time in prayer, and grow in love for and service to their fellow creatures. Father Chaminade knew that if they persevered in it, Jesus himself would develop them in virtue. They would be saints!

(The emphasis in *italics* throughout belong to the author.)

Note

¹ Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's "Gospel of the Body"* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003), p. 55.

² Raymond Halter, SM, ed., *William Joseph Chaminade: Writings on Mental Prayer* (Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission, 1979), p. 20.

³ *Writings*, p. 204.

⁴ *Writings*, p. 203.

⁵ *Writings*, p. 203.

⁶ *Writings*, p. 203.

⁷ *Writings*, p. 203.

⁸ *Writings*, p. 205.

⁹ *Writings*, p. 203.

¹⁰ *The Roman Missal* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, Africa, 2011), p. 664.

¹¹ *Writings*, p. 245.

¹² *Writings*, p. 200.

¹³ *Writings*, p. 202.

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