

# Theory 4

## MENTAL PRAYER

### Objective – Be able to explain:

- I. What mental prayer is.
- II. How to do mental prayer according to the 3 R's.
- III. How to establish a daily habit of mental prayer.
- IV. How to overcome obstacles.

### 1. Definition of Mental Prayer (Meditation or Discursive Meditation)

- a. Mental Prayer is to turn your attention to God and *think* about what He has said or done;
  - i. To understand the supernatural truth;
  - ii. Love God for this truth;
  - iii. Apply this truth to your life;
  - iv. Form a resolution based on this truth that we will put into practice with the assistance of grace.

### 2. The Purpose and Transformational Power of Mental Prayer with a Resolution

- a. John of the Cross (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2, 14, 2) says:
  - i. “The purpose of discursive meditation on divine subjects is the acquisition of knowledge and love of God.”
  - ii. “Through many particular acts - this loving knowledge of God reaches the point at which a habit is formed in the soul.”
- b. Mental Prayer with a Resolution should change us to become more like God.
  - i. We will change if, with the help of God's grace, we practice the truth that God impressed upon us during our meditation.
    1. We will not change if we don't.
    2. In fact, we will get worse, because fallen human nature tends toward sin, not virtue, without effort and God's grace.

St. Francis de Sales on the importance of a resolution:

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The most important thing of all is that you cling firmly to the resolutions you have taken in meditation so as to practice them carefully. That is the great fruit of meditation, without which it is often not only useless but harmful. Why so? Because the virtues upon which we have meditated but not practiced sometimes puff us up so much in mind and heart that we think we are already what we are resolved to be which no doubt is the case if our resolutions are solid and ardent. But when, on the contrary, they are not practiced, they are useless and dangerous.

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(*Introduction to the Devout Life*, II Chap 8)

### 3. Teresa of Avila gives us three simple steps for Mental prayer – the 3R's

- a. Recall the indwelling of the Father, Son and Spirit
  - b. Begin with Vocal Prayer:
    - i. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you pray
    - ii. Begin with an Our Father, Hail Mary or any prayer of your choice
    - iii. Or just speak to God from the heart
1. **Read or listen to** something from the Word of God found in Scripture, Tradition (the writings of the Saints) or the Magisterium (the teaching of the Church).
    - a. As soon as something strikes you – stop reading.
  2. **Reflect or think** about what struck you.
    - a. To understand the supernatural truth;
    - b. Love God for this truth;
    - c. Then apply that truth to your life;
      - i. Am I living this or not?
      - ii. If I am not living this,
      - iii. What habitual or root vice(s) are preventing me?
        1. Pride, vanity, envy, sloth, anger, greed, gluttony, lust, etc.
      - iv. What occasions of sin, what circumstances prompt me to fall into this vice or sin?
      - v. It is essential to learn two things by the double reflection on the Word of God and one's life:
        1. Learn about God
        2. Learn about oneself
          - a. One's dominant habitual sins;
          - b. The occasions that lead to those sins
  3. **Resolve or Resolution**
    - a. Choose something practical and concrete to remember or to do that day based on your meditation to stop a vice and practice the conquering virtue.
    - b. Examples of Resolutions
      1. Today, I will listen more than I speak.
      2. I will not gossip about so-and-so today, but only speak when I can say something positive about someone else.
      3. I complain too much. I will offer 3 things I am grateful for throughout the day today rather than complain.
      4. Today, whenever I feel anxious, I will pray; "Jesus, I Trust in You."

### 4. Mental Prayer and a Resolution Heal the Wounded Soul

- a. We have a soul which is comprised of three powers:
  - i. The Intellect, the Feelings, and the Will.
- b. Here is how the soul was designed by God to work:

- i. The intellect perceives or becomes aware of reality through the five senses, the imagination, or the memory.
  - 1. The intellect then presents its perception of reality to the feelings
    - a. as “this is right and good for me”
    - b. or “this is wrong and bad for me.”
- ii. The feelings respond to what the intellect presented with,
  - 1. “I like this,” prompting the will to choose it;
  - 2. or “I dislike that,” prompting the will to avoid it.
- iii. The will chooses the apparent good; and avoids the evil
- c. This is how the powers of the soul were meant to work.
  - i. Thinking should inform our feelings which prompt our choices.
    - 1. Thinking should rule our lives, not feeling.
    - 2. Feelings are meant to be good servants
    - 3. but if left in charge they become very bad masters.
- d. Original Sin has wounded the three powers of our soul
  - i. The intellect has been darkened, so that we suffer from ignorance, confusion, and intellectual laziness.
    - 1. It takes a lot of effort to really think things through.
    - 2. It’s easier to feel.
    - 3. So, we let the intellect go to sleep and let our feelings determine behavior.
  - ii. We let feelings rule our life.
    - 1. We are ruled by likes and dislikes.
    - 2. That might be ok except for the fact that, because of Original Sin,
      - a. we tend to like what is bad for us
      - b. and dislike what is good for us.
  - iii. Our willpower has been weakened.
    - 1. Even when we know what we should do we find it really hard to just do it.
  - iv. So this is our problem, after Original Sin...disordered feelings are causing us to choose, say, and do things that are bad for us.
  - v. But that does not mean feelings are bad. They are a necessary power of the soul.
    - 1. Remember how the soul works:
      - a. Thinking should tell our feelings what to like and dislike.
      - b. Then feelings prompt the will
      - c. The will chooses what is good for us and avoids what is bad for us.
  - vi. That is why we have to get our feelings in order.
  - vii. We do so by exercising our intellect and our will through mental prayer and a resolution
- e. We can change the way we feel by thinking and by acting
  - i. First, we can change the way we *feel* by how we *Think*
    - 1. Let’s say, for instance, you really dislike someone. Your bad feelings for him are making it really hard.
    - 2. Begin with your thinking.

- a. Think and talk about his good points, his virtues, and maybe especially the gifts he has that you don't.
    - b. If you think and talk about the person in those terms long enough, you'll be constantly reminded of how much there is to appreciate about this person, and you'll actually begin to appreciate him and it'll be easier to treat him charitably.
    - c. In this way - Thinking changes feeling.
  - ii. Use this strategy to avoid evil.
    - 1. Say you want to gossip about someone
    - 2. You can picture in your head how awkward it'll be if what you've been saying gets back to them.
    - 3. Or you can use St. James' image, about how a small flame – gossip – can burn down a whole forest of good.
    - 4. Whatever image works to help you realize how deadly gossip is, use that, focus on that, picture that.
    - 5. And eventually your desire to gossip will fade.
  - iii. If we think about the pleasing aspects of what's good and the displeasing aspects of what's bad our desires will change, prompting the right action.
  - iv. This is why "Thinking" in Mental Prayer is necessary for our transformation.
  
- f. We can also change the way we feel by how we act
  - i. Most people don't start out liking exercise,
    - 1. but if they make the choice to exercise when they don't feel like it and if they keep at it, they begin to like it and they start to look forward to their morning run.
    - 2. Their feelings toward exercise change
  - ii. People usually don't start out enjoying prayer,
    - 1. but if they make the choice to pray anyway, when they don't feel like it, and if they keep at it day after day, they get to the point where they can't do without it.
    - 2. Their feelings toward prayer change
  - iii. The same goes for abstaining from bad behavior.
    - 1. If you have a bad temper, you'll want to say horrible things when you get angry.
    - 2. But if you resist the urge to lash out and choose to hold your tongue, the anger will fade and the desire to be undisturbed by others will grow.
  
- g. Use the principle of Check and Command
  - i. When the wrong emotion begins to take over, like anger - check it, like a hockey player – checking an opponent into the boards.
    - 1. Check the anger that is getting out of control – stop it.
    - 2. Then command the right response.
  
- h. If you do the right thing, over and over,
  - i. even if you don't feel like it
  - ii. eventually you begin to like it

iii. it becomes pleasing to the emotions and then we have a good habit.

**5. Establishing the Habit of Daily Mental Prayer** - If possible, try to pick a specific time and place to pray each day and stick to it. Generalities are useless.

**a. When should we pray?**

- i. Early in the morning is ideal (or late afternoon)
- ii. If you leave it to the end of the day the devil will set traps.

**b. Where should we pray?**

- i. Go into your room, shut the door, and speak to your Father in secret. (Matt. 6)
- ii. Solitude and Silence.
- iii. Create a special place at Home.
- iv. Best place is in the Presence of the Eucharist.

**c. How long should we pray?**

- i. St. Francis de Sales, St. Theresa of Avila, and Venerable Fulton Sheen all recommended that laity should meditate for 30 minutes a day.
- ii. If this is too intimidating, then start at 15 minutes a day. I have found that it is easier to expand your time once the habit is formed than it is to form a habit if the initial goal is too high.
- iii. Try the 30-minute goal first before deciding that this time allotment is too much. Don't sell yourself short.
- iv. The over-riding question is: How much time is necessary for an intimate loving conversation?
- v. Don't leave off too soon.

**6. Why we pray and the fruits of Mental Prayer**

- a. First, because our Lord left us His example. He prays at His baptism (Lk 3:21); before He sends out His apostles (Lk 6:12); after healing the crowds (Mk 1:35); before walking on water (Mt 14:23). He is not too busy!
- b. Second, He commands it. (*When* you pray, go into your inner room, shut the door and pray to your Father who sees in secret...Mt 6:6).
- c. Third, this is how we change the fallen desires of the heart. We sin because we desire actions that are harmful to us. Meditation is how our desires are purified. Once purified, Satan's power over us through temptation is weakened, and we begin to choose that which is good more easily, promptly, and joyfully.
- d. Fourth, we are made for God; hence, we are made for prayer.
- e. Fifth, deepens conviction of faith and prompts conversion of heart.

**7. Overcoming common obstacles to Mental Prayer**

- a. I am too busy. I don't have time to pray.**

- i. CCC 2742 “We have not been commanded to work, to keep watch and to fast constantly, but it has been laid down that we are to pray without ceasing.” Evagrius, cf. 1 Thess. 5:17
- ii. Luke 5:12-16 shows that Jesus was not too busy to pray.
- iii. The problem is not a lack of time; the problem lies in wrong priorities.
  - 1. No one ever died of hunger because of not having enough time to eat.
  - 2. One always makes time for what is important.
  - 3. What is most important to me? My use of time reflects my priorities.

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***“I have so much to do that I cannot afford not to pray.” ~Mother Teresa***

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*“It is never true to say that we have no time to meditate; the less one thinks of God, the less time there will always be for God. The time we have for anything depends on how much we value it...For it does not require much time to make us saints; it requires only much love.” ~Venerable Fulton Sheen*

**b. I don’t know what to read.**

- i. Read a book written for spiritual meditation. These works stir the heart and aid us in asking, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” cf. CCC 2706.
  - 1. The Gospels and the Psalms.
  - 2. *In Conversation with God* by Fr. Francis Fernandez;
  - 3. *Searching for and Maintaining Peace* by Fr. Jacques Philippe (actually, all of his books are excellent!);
  - 4. *Divine Intimacy* by Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen;
  - 5. Listen to or read the transcript from The Daily Rosary Meditations

**c. What if nothing strikes me when I’m reading?**

- i. Then read just a paragraph, stop, then re-read the paragraph slowly.
- ii. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you receive His insights.
- iii. Circle any word or phrase that offers you any divine information or insight.
  - 1. After circling a point or two, you will have something on which to reflect.

**d. I have trouble forming a resolution.**

- i. Another method is to simply recall your meditation throughout the day. Take something from your prayer—i.e. a phrase or word that struck you—and repeat it throughout the day.

**e. My mind wanders. I get distracted.**

- i. A common difficulty in prayer is distractions. It is normal to be distracted.
  - 1. We should not be surprised or discouraged over this.
- ii. As St. Teresa of Avila herself said that without a book written for spiritual reading on her lap, she found meditation almost impossible.
- iii. When our mind wanders off, simply, peacefully and gently bring your attention back to God. Go back to a point that struck you.

- iv. Or move on and read to another point that strikes you
- v. Keep a notepad with you.
- vi. The distractions you experience in prayer may be God's way of asking you to attend to or pray for something or someone in prayer.
- vii. Even if we were to spend an entire prayer period bringing our distracted attention constantly back to God it would not matter. That prayer is undoubtedly very pleasing to God.
- viii. It is wrong to think we can achieve absolute concentration for the entire duration of prayer. Distractions do not prevent God's work in your soul.
- ix. Distractions are weaknesses and only become sinful when we choose it. Nevertheless, confessing this in the sacrament of reconciliation may be a helpful way to overcome them due to God's grace.
- x. Practice abandonment and trust
  - 1. 1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all your worries upon him because he cares for you."
  - 2. Jesus to Catherine of Sienna: "You think about me; I will think about you."
- xi. Do not be discouraged. God will bless your efforts and help you grow.

**f. I am not very good at Mental Prayer. It doesn't feel like it's working.**

- i. What matters in prayer is not what we do but what God does in us.
- ii. God always achieves His goal, even when we don't see or feel it.
- iii. The essential act of prayer is to place ourselves in God's presence & remain.
  - 1. We cannot sit before a fire without becoming warm.
  - 2. Likewise, if our prayer consists simply in standing before God without doing anything, without thinking anything or feeling anything, but a readiness, trust and abandonment, then we allow God to act in our soul and we could do nothing better.
  - 3. One must be less concerned about doing things in prayer and more concerned about being open to God's action.
    - a. If we are looking for results then I dare say we are in it for ourselves not for the love of Him. cf. CCC 2732
    - b. Mental prayer may be challenging but with God's grace it is always fruitful.