

The Practice of Mental Prayer

by MATTIA DA SALÒ

Translated by Br Patrick Colbourne O.F.M.Cap.

There is general consensus among scholars that *The Practice of Mental Prayer* is Bellintani's ascetical masterpiece. What is more, it is also one of those works similar to *The Contempt of the World* by Innocent III, *The Dialogue of Divine Providence* by Catherine of Siena, *The Treatise on Purgatory* by Saint Catherine of Genoa, *The Spiritual Combat* by Scupoli that seems to epitomise a era of spiritual writings. In fact while it is regarded as one of the most ripe fruits of the Capuchin Italian sixteenth century and, perhaps, the most mature product of a particular kind of spirituality, on a broader scale it represents the pre-eminently apostolic aspect of the new Franciscan reform which seems to capture and fully exemplify its two outstanding characteristics: contemplative solitude and preaching the Gospel.

Bellintani's work, which is presented as a method and guide for mental prayer was generally accepted by popular piety as one of the most widely read and enjoyed ascetical works by the Christian community. This is substantiated by the number of editions which continued to be published into the seventeenth century and by translations into French, Latin and Spanish which in all numbered about fifty. What is more it was recommended by Saint Charles Borromeo, prescribed for Confraternities of Penance by the Archbishop of Avignon, Francesco M. Taugi, praised by the Spirituels of the day, used by prayer groups during the Forty Hours and flicked through by everyone.

In the author's mind the entire work is made up clearly and logically of four parts, following a broad design which, beginning from God's infinite and blessed essence and the benefits bestowed on man, reflects on the whole of the economy of salvation by means of the mystery of all the earthly events of Christ's life, the Church and its source of grace in the Sacraments, and then the universal eschatology in the fundamental truths of the last things, which are clearly spelt out in the New Testament. It resembles d gigantic round of frescoes in which the entire story of God's love for man is reviewed from the first instant of life in time to the vision of a blessed eternity at the end of time that exceeds our wildest dreams.

This vast vision which Bellintani conceived from the start was only brought to completion through successive stages that were developed side by side with the continual responsibilities of preaching and teaching and responsibilities in Italy and

beyond. Thus the first part, which concludes with Christ's burial, was published for the first time in Brescia in 1573 and was dedicated to the Bishop of that city, Domenico Bollani. This part consists of an important theoretical introduction concerning meditation, its value and usefulness and how it is practiced. It consists of eight little chapters followed by fifty two meditations or "practices". As Petrocchi wrote, this consists of "splendid pages for the study of sixteenth century piety" and the method of Capuchin affective prayer. Even though in a later edition in 1584 Bellintani revised this first part adding corrections and improving the theological development and structure of the treatment, we preferred to reproduce the first Brescian edition, since it is a better reflection of "the first fervour or discovery", and is more spontaneous and personal and, indeed, little known since scholars have referred to the second edition which was revised by the author and published in this century (fifty years ago) by the Capuchin Umile da Genova.

"The theological system of Mattia da Salò – to quote Petrocchi once again – is centered on the exertion which is applied when praying, on prayer as an exercise, on the importance of the intellect and the will in the practice of the acts of prayer in so far as the intellect is involved in understanding and thinking about the divine mysteries and the will stimulates emotions with regard to the circumstance in the mysteries which are being meditated upon by the intellect and the temperament of the person who is at prayer". However, the solid theological foundation is dealt with "briefly as an easy and useful method" because this spiritual book is intended to be "a practical instrument for carrying out mental prayer".

The question is raised of how virtues may be acquired through prayer and the whole problem of Christian "virtue" is discussed throughout the introduction since prayer is "the quickest way" to acquire virtue. The concrete example is Christ and the instructive model is the Our Father, which also exemplifies the order to be observed when praying. The Holy Spirit is the inner instructor. The method and written rules are the exterior tutor which the spiritual person sees as the way of submission to being taught by the Holy Spirit.

Rather than insisting on generic rules, Bellintani proposes to unfold all the acts of prayer individually and in an orderly fashion and to teach the practice of the exercise in a concrete manner, in a restrained and friendly manner suitable for the time of apprenticeship. Therefore he is not concerned with vocal prayer, but stresses the rules of mental prayer. He divides these into three parts:

1) Preparation: in general and in particular (remote and proximate), which consists in being on guard against sin, purification of the heart, repentance and making an effort to cultivate energetic attention; 2) meditation, which is the longest part, split

into various points to assist the mind in paying attention like eating so many mouthfuls of food that need to be chewed well one by one in order to extract flavour and taste in order to light the fire of emotion in the will; 3) action, by means of which once the will has been watered by holy meditation, this produces automatically, by the strength of the Holy Spirit, “emotions”, “acts”, or “operations” in which divine love abides. These emotions burst forth into acts which are produced by love, which is dynamically active and passive, active and passive at the same time, during which the soul is “drawn to God”, which stirs a deep desire to delight in the Divine will and to make all people honour God, in a intertwining and subsequent exchange of unspeakable delight which he calls “connection” and “disconnection”. It is here that mental prayer glides into contemplation and the pure act of love, and the state of union with God.

The shades of meaning in this teaching are so numerous that it is difficult to explain them in a short space of time. Bellintani, however, hurries on to deal with rules in well laid out exercises of meditation. By way of an example we have chosen some of these practices, really just a few, but a sufficient number so that the reader may grasp the whole dynamic and logic of this popular and influential “practice of mental prayer”.

CHAPTER ONE

[The Book’s Title]

4295 Flicking through the Scriptures and books by Saints, which deal with the fine and valuable virtue of holy prayer, I found that what they say and indeed could say could be summed up under two headings, namely, the praise and recommendation of the virtue of prayer, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a demonstration of how to perform it, so that by praising and recommending it our soul would be encouraged to embrace and carry out this divine work and how it would be done well following instruction.¹ As far as I could see, these two headings were well dealt with in the holy books, so that when I came to discussing prayer I could not easily say anything other than what had already been said and to repeat once more what was contained in these books appeared to be of little or no value.²

¹ *Intruito* in the text = *instruito*.

² Bellintani appears to have read and absorbed many texts.

In spite of all this, I too have been moved by fraternal charity,³ to want to write something about the holy virtue of prayer. Even though I can say nothing more than what has already been said, yet I wish and hope to speak about it profitably and do nothing more than extract the marrow out of these two topics by showing the reason why it makes so much sense to speak of prayer by recommending it, persuading people to take it on, explaining it and, likewise to summing up in a practical manner the many rules which have been set down for its proper performance.

4296 Because I wish to be brief when setting out the objective and will be more expansive concerning practice when stating the rules for mental prayer, it seems to me that I ought to call this book *The Practice of Mental Prayer*. I hope that this will serve to clarify all the other books that have dealt with prayer and extract the juice from them all and put it before the devout soul who wishes to practice this exercise of prayer which belongs to heaven more than to earth. So that this person may have the substance of what can be said about prayer and have it in brief, in a form that is easy and useful as I hope experience will prove when he make use of our little labours.⁴

[Scope of the Book]

4297 Perhaps at the beginning it might seem to those who are not expert and who are simple that what I have said is too restricted or somewhat obscure but whoever considers the work's objective will see clearly that it was both appropriate and necessary for me to be succinct, expressing points of view in few words and that the book be very easy and clear at this level.

It is of no little importance but rather really necessary to know the objective of books and to understand the area with which they deal if they are to be read with

³ In the Venice edition of 1584, published by Pietro Dusinelli, "revised, corrected, and in many places rewritten in a better way" by the author himself, mention is made of this motivation. "The thought [of fraternal charity] already moved me to write a little book, which I called *The Practice of Mental Prayer* and now I have been moved to add a second part because many people who have read and used the first part have insistently requested me to do this. Because the first part issued from my hands hurriedly without me having revised it maturely, when the first fervour of discovery had passed, at great pains I revised what I had written at first correcting many things...". Cf. Mattia da Salò, *Practica dell'orazione mentale*. Parte I. *Introduzione ed edizione critica* del p. Umile da Genova, Assisi 1932, 10.

⁴ Bellintani is aware of the practical importance of his book and already foresees a good prospect and acceptance of it. Its "practicality" lies in that it provides instruction which is "brief", "easy" and "useful".

profit and reach the objective that they wish to achieve because if they were to be read without such knowledge it would be like drawing a bow without looking at the target or brandishing a sword in the air.⁵

Therefore at the beginning I will give an example of how some books are written to delight the reader, as for the most part are those by poets, others to instruct, as those that deal with the rules and precepts of science, others to arouse the human soul for some kind of undertaking, as are spiritual books, which are written to inspire us towards virtue. In as much as a book should and must produce reactions of delight, instruction and motivation, it always aims at one in particular with the others added.

4298 With respect now to my book, as I do not aim to exclude any of these reactions, nor do I restrict myself to pursue any one of them specifically, my objective rather is to create a practical instrument for performing mental prayer,⁶ supply material that has been collected and systematised to enable acts to be performed while praying mentally.

This objective requires few words, but words which are weighty and full of meaning so that the one who is at prayer⁷ has a source where points are proposed which he can use during the meditation. They should be brief points, so that his mind is not dissipated, nor does he waste time in a lot of reading,⁸ and make it possible for the mind to have the space to develop itself through more experience and sensitivity as I will explain below at the appropriate when giving the method for using the practices. I wanted to say this now so that whoever is reading this will be overcome neither by wonder, nor fright or retreat from using this book.

[Excellence of the virtue of prayer]

4299 Taking up immediately what I promised, I shall demonstrate firstly the object of this discussion on prayer. I say that divine Scripture, the holy doctors who expound it, and the devout books that have gathered the marrow of both the Scriptures and the doctors praise, explain and highly recommend the outstanding

⁵ Note the effectiveness of the language, but also the extreme discipline required of the reader which is the result of his own experience.

⁶ This is the exact aim of Bellintani's little work: a book to be used "while" meditating.

⁷ *Orante* here but in the text *oratore*.

⁸ All of these are point and reflections that are rich in spiritual experience.

value of prayer to such an extent that there is hardly any other value that is more commended or recommended in these sacred writings.

It appears to me that I have undertaken this on good grounds for two reasons: one of these is the excellence of this most noble and powerful virtue by means of which a person who habitually rises himself up in praise and tries to move the human mind which has as its proper objective the pursuit of what is honourable deserves to be given this information. The other is the extreme need that everyone has of this most unique and special remedy for all that is evil in us

Although we wish to focus on the excellence of this virtue, we do place it in the highest level of virtues since this is reserved exclusively to the divine virtues which are commonly known as the theological virtues. Rather we place it on the second level, which includes the moral or cardinal virtues, that are adorned with special dignity and are most valuable.

This is easily seen, in the first place, by paying attention to how prayer gives honour to God, secondly, how we turn away from all evils through prayer, thirdly, how it is the quickest way which can be found for acquiring virtue which is the best way for us to advance and reach the heights of human perfection.⁹

a. [Prayer honours God]

4300 Leaving aside an infinite number of other considerations that cover the excellence of prayer and taking up only three of them, I say, firstly, that prayer gives God great honour because it is able to address Him with titles of honour and dignified names, which His majesty demands we should give Him, as is shown in the Holy Scriptures when it describes the prayers that were offered by saints, who, when at prayer, proclaimed His greatness, His providence, His justice, His goodness and mercy,. So just as a person who seeks a favour or gift from someone, begins by singing his praises, extolling his importance, his charity and readiness to help those who are in need of his assistance, so Christ, when He taught us how to pray, placed at the beginning of His prayer: *Our Father who art in heaven*,¹⁰ which are words that deal with God's goodness, His providence, His glory, His grandeur and His other sublime properties, because His goodness is too great for us miserable vermin to be worthy to call Him Father, even though He commanded it, and, indeed, He behaves towards us as a most merciful Father. Just as a father shows mercy to his children so

⁹ Note the theological clarity of the explanation and the ability to summarise.

¹⁰ Cf. Mt 6, 9 etc.

He shows mercy towards those who fear Him.¹¹ By calling Him Father we acknowledge the very vigilant care that He incessantly shows for us, as to His beloved family.

4302 The expression saying that He is in heaven, demonstrates His glory, the height of His majesty, the marvellous work He does in heaven by glorifying the saints, His infinite power that none can resist, His hidden presence in Christian minds, which are spiritual heavens, His continued and fruitful presence in His Holy Church, which, according to the teaching of the Gospel, is the kingdom of heaven, and in the same way all the other attributes and works that are ascribed to God are included in that mysterious introduction to the Our Father.

Thus the devout soul who comes to pray being willing and obligated to see in this the teaching of Christ who is the unique teacher of all virtue, especially prayer should model his prayers on the Our Father as a living example and, indeed, use it, at least for the many points it contains. If it begins by extolling God's majesty, he should make certain that the praise of God is at the beginning of his prayer.¹²

4302 Prayer really praises God because it makes known that God can and will help us, since no one asks someone for something unless he knows and hopes that he can give it. When praying, therefore, we presuppose that God by means of His inexhaustible treasures is able to rid us of evil, free us from all danger, help us in all our needs, enrich us with all sorts of riches, raise us to the height of true honours, satisfy us with special delights, and, in short, give us everything that we can legitimately request.

At the same time we presuppose that he wants to condescend to our prayers, both because he is generous and because He provides for all creatures when they use the resources that He decreed. Prayer is the resource that He determined for us. He also swore an oath to always hear what we ask.¹³

In a special way prayer should to be accompanied by faith. When Christ was asked to cast out a spirit from persons who were obsessed He questioned those who sought the favour, about if they believed that He could do it for them.¹⁴ Because we honour

¹¹ Ps 103, 17; Lk 1, 50.

¹² This is expressed clearly with great concepts taken from the holy Fathers and spiritual writers. It is interesting that it places praise of God as the first act of prayer, as insight which today is seen as important by many groups following renewal of the Spirit.

¹³ Cf. Mt 7, 7-11; Lk 11, 9-13.

¹⁴ Cf. Mt 9, 28 (the episode refers to blind men).

God by believing and confessing His greatness, when we pray we pay Him great honour.

4303 This virtue gives greater honour to God since the first thing that He asks is that He be given honour. This should be the principal motive of all good works, more than the good act itself in which the rational soul bargains with God Himself. Should whoever hopes to receive a favour from a man, recognising that it is a favour, repay that man by not giving him honour? It is usual for our acts to either give God honour or dishonour. However, if they do not honour Him they dishonour Him. Whoever wishes to be careful about giving dishonour needs to give honour. Thus our prayer would give God dishonour if we do not honour Him. A person who does not place the glory of God above everything else does not honour Him.¹⁵

Thus if prayer does not place the honour of the divine Majesty above everything else it dishonours it, and, in doing so, does it not run the risk of not being heard?

This is the sequence that the heavenly Master arranged when He placed *sia santificato il nome tuo (may Your name be held holy)* as the first of seven petitions.¹⁶ By intending that all the other six branches should come from this as from the root or trunk, He taught that there is no other reason why we should wish or pray other than that the kingdom of God might come, that His will should be done, that we be sustained by appropriate food for soul and body, that the debt for our sins should be forgiven, that our enemies should not prevail over us and that we should be freed from evil, so that God is honoured and that His name would be known together with the sanctity of His name.

4304 In addition to this prayer honours God because we adore and reverence the height of His Majesty, so that prayer is already a kind of praise, and, when praying a person generally kneels as a kind of external gesture proclaiming the divine greatness and our own wretchedness. Whoever prays within himself well is performing in spirit what is displayed externally in physical actions. Does not God applaud us when we humble ourselves when praying and when we recognise, admit and express our desolation? For, as the Lord says, only God's powers is great and to be honoured by men.¹⁷

¹⁵ We see here perhaps the influence of the Jesuit motto *omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam (all for the greater glory of God)*.

¹⁶ Mt 6, 9; Lk 11, 2.

¹⁷ Sir 3, 21.

Thus prayer honours God in a special way beyond what is part of all the other virtues in as far as by obeying God, approaching Him, being conformed to Him and manifesting Him and the like, it glorifies Him. This is the special excellence of this glorious virtue because it is rightly praised by the Holy Spirit in the Holy Scriptures.

CHAPTER TWO

b) [Prayer frees us from all evil]

4305 The great value of prayer, which is a sign of the manifest excellence to be found in it, and of the effect it has on us, is this: that there is no evil from which it cannot free us. Natural medicine and resources do not have sufficient strength for one of them to heal our infirmity and free us from all penalties and condemnation. Prayer, on the other hand, is so powerful that it alone can free us from all evil, whether externally this is inflicted by another or arises internally from within ourselves, or whether it pertains to the body or the soul, in the past or in the future, or in this life or even in the next.

Human remedies may suit the body, but only partially, since there are many bodily sufferings for which human vigour cannot provide and also the treatment for one need services that need and no other.

The most holy Sacraments of the Church, which are vessels full of divine grace and channels through which it is transfused into us, were designed by Christ to cure our sick souls, and although they have various effects, so that one differs from the other, at least in principle, they still confer grace itself.

4306 The virtues, whether given by God or acquired by ourselves, can, with the assistance of divine grace, by their nature, drive habits that are contrary to them out of our souls. However, one virtue cannot do everything for each one expels what is specifically contrary to it. The virtues also provide the capacity to the soul's faculties to perform good and correct acts. However, not all the faculties have the disposition or ability to respond to the one virtue. Nor will one virtue incline the faculty towards all kinds of virtuous activities or facilitate this. Each moves the faculty as it is designed to produce its appropriate activity.

On the other hand, holy prayer is enough in itself to achieve all that we need, as it draws on the infinite strength of the divine hand, which is able and willing to assist us in all need and to free us from all evil as appropriate.

Some remedies are designed for the body and some for the soul. All are different and manifold because one cannot achieve what the other can achieve. Only prayer can

work for everything; not because it excludes specific remedies whether natural or supernatural, but because, where these fail, it supplies for all and procures all. What stupendous strength prayer has!

It is therefore right that we say that prayer is a weapon which defends against all enemies. It is a medicine that cures all ills. It is a food that removes all weakness and makes us strong for every Christian undertaking. It is a garment which covers all our ugliness and adorns us with every beauty. To sum up everything, it is a key which opens the vault of divine treasure, removes our poverty, and indeed, enriches us with the highest and most abundant riches.¹⁷

c) [Prayer is the quickest way to acquire virtue]

4307 Finally let us consider the excellence of prayer in the effect it produces within us as the quickest way to acquire virtues, to gain profit through them and to become perfect.

All our wellbeing is tied up in the virtues, and so we should put all our efforts into acquiring them and consequently we should adopt the best means of obtaining them. There are two general ways to gain virtues. One way is by personally practising acts of virtue, so that by performing them we cultivate a routine of virtue in the soul that makes it easier for us to carry out similar acts and to also experience pleasure in doing so. The other way is asking God for them in persistent prayer, which, in fact, is asking for the kingdom of God as we do when we say *Venga il tuo ragnò (thy kingdom come)*¹⁸ because then God will rule within us in a very special way, when the soul is humbly subject to His influence, and does not make a move except as inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves us by way of His grace. Grace moves of its own accord because its indwelling is the very essence of the soul when there is no moving force but grace. It is dynamic in producing the infused virtues which are distributed throughout the faculties which it activates to perform good works.

4308 Thus the Holy Spirit moves our faculties by means of grace and the virtues and so holds sway within us. Therefore, when we pray for the kingdom of God to come within us we are asking for grace and the virtues. Both of these resources are good and should be acquired to such an extent that one does not lag behind the other. When we are recollected and in communion with God let us use the resource of prayer. When we are dealing with men let us use acts of virtue, fighting against our bad inclinations.

¹⁸ Mt 6, 10; Lk 11,2.

Nevertheless the resource of prayer is the easiest and the most perfect. First of all, because we perform acts of virtue badly if we do not firstly obtain God's grace in prayer as is evident in the experience of spiritual people who fight all day with their evil, natural and habitual inclinations and after many years think that they have done well if they have remained as they were. People like these while they have not made progress in virtue, have also not been drawn into acts of vice but have often fallen into some activity that is contrary to virtue which they have resisted through penance and diligence. They declare that they feel as brave in opposing vice and prevailing over it as they have warmly opened their hearts to God, imploring Him to give them strength and hold their hand so that they would not fall in the battle which they have to continually fight against themselves.

4309 While the warmth of prayer lasts, they find that they are as cautious and strong as if they were armed with heavenly virtues. Once this wears off, they feel that they have fallen once again into weakness and tepidity. Thus the degree to which they wish to be virtuous corresponds to the degree with which they implore God. This is why Christ taught us to say when praying to our heavenly Father: *Si fatta la volunta tua, qui in terra come si fa in Cielo (may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven)*.¹⁹ For doing God's will on earth means nothing more for us than observing His holy precepts and counsels, and this observance consists in acts of virtue, since nothing is an act of virtue that is not either commanded or advised by God.

When asking for the kingdom we pray for habits which are virtues that abide within us like motivating and dominant virtue. By adding this second petition we ask to be granted the favour of performing correct and holy acts, since the kingdom implies an overriding and dominant virtue. Doing God's will involves carrying out what that regulating virtue prepares and inclines us to do, in such a way that, by the request that we make, we ask that God will accept us as His servants and inscribe the laws of His kingdom on our hearts using the Holy Spirit's finger,²⁰ which indicates not only what has to be done, but inclines and moves towards doing it, because they are habits that produce choices, that is virtues which motivate us, as we have said.

4310 In the second petition we ask to be obedient to Him and to observe His laws because we know for certain that we do not have either enough intelligence or strength to accomplish this.

¹⁹ Mt 6, 10.

²⁰ Cf. 2 Cor 3, 3; Ger 31, 33.

The method that Christ taught is the best for acquiring virtue, and that is asking for the grace to perform acts which produce the virtues. This demonstrates that prayer is the best way to acquire virtue.

There is another way to show this and that is: what is more necessary than anything else if we are to become virtuous is that we have a burning desire for,²¹ and love of virtue, which is the root from which virtue blossoms and the spark which enkindles the flame of virtue and the preparatory disposition that introduces the essence of virtue and the initiator that always moves our mind to procure virtue. Is not prayer the most common and ordinary way to light up such a desire within ourselves? Sometimes we are effectively set aflame either when reading a devout book, especially the lives of the saints, or when listening to the word of God being preached, or when hearing spiritual discussions, or when personally witnessing the fragrant example of some good Christian. God can also light the flame Himself through an interior inspiration.²²

4311 Nonetheless by its very nature prayer produces this holy desire within us because it renders the soul more ready and inclined towards such a yearning through the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, and while contemplating the perfection of every virtue in Christ it is moved more effectively to imitate Him. If the fire of desire that has been enkindled by other means is not fuelled and augmented through prayer it will soon go out.²³

What is more we know from experience and logic also demonstrates that because of our frailty we fail when the time comes to exercise acts of virtue if we do not already possess a strong and resolute purpose, and this is rarely or never present without prayer. Even when it seems that we are performing virtues, I say that it will not last if we are not secluded on our knees in prayer at the time we make the resolution. For even the resolve to practice virtue is produced by means of prayer.

4312 I add in addition: virtue is imprinted on the soul because the will is its main faculty. However the acts which it is about to produce must be carried out firstly within the will itself since virtue resides where it has been born, like every other attribute. Interior acts can be carried out without external expression or

²¹ The theology of “desire” is reminiscent of St Augustine. It is strongly emphasised by Bellintani and, in general, by all Capuchin authors.

²² It for these reasons also that the *1536 Constitutions* n. 3 and *The Ordinances of Albacina* n. 28 insist on speaking about God and reading devout books etc.

²³ The reflection is important and it is the fruit of experience.

circumstances, in which case indeed they will not be very effective. Usually such acts will not happen anywhere else but during prayer. While the soul is enflamed by divine influence and is meditating on Christ's life and Passion which is a living example of all the virtues, it produces acts of virtue such as acts of humility, patience, mercy and the like by imaging within itself some circumstances which call for patience or something similar, and it immediately performs the acts within itself, even though such acts might not be all that demanding, because it is not very difficult to carry them out as there are no concrete circumstances, so to speak, of the affront on account of which patience should have been exercised. Nevertheless when many of such small acts are repeated the habit of the virtue will be formed little by little. What is more they are like a test of what should be done when the occasion demands it. This is like when someone has to do something which he has personally tried to do before.²⁴

4313 However, God's act of love and charity is not merely tested during prayer but is really carried out, when charity has been perfected. Because it carries all the virtues with it, as St Paul says,²⁵ charity is patient, kind, humble, faithful and all the other virtues that he attributes to it, and it follows clearly that prayer is the strongest way to acquire the virtues and to make great progress in putting them into practice.

In the end this is demonstrated by another reason. If the virtues are God's gift and if our efforts are weak, then it is necessary that we be equipped and armed from above, and God that confer His gifts and supernatural strength when He is asked to do so, and so prayer is the surest and quickest means of becoming virtuous, and this means of acquiring virtue is more pleasing to God because the virtues which have been conferred through prayer cannot easily be attributed to our own soul, as can those that have been acquired by our own efforts. There is nothing that is so detrimental to spiritual welfare than claiming God's gifts as our own.

4314 It is therefore clearly proven that prayer is the way to acquire the holy virtues and that it is more perfect than the external exercise of virtue. We can add to this the experience of the saints, especially those who were cut off and who possessed all the virtues perfectly exclusively by means of prayer. In addition to what I proposed above I wish to add that as prayer (so to speak) produces the virtues, it also produces their reward and perfection, raising them beyond their own specific

²⁴ This is a logical discussion and a method that was also used by Saint Philip Neri.

²⁵ ! Cor 13, 4-7.

objectives to the one who is supreme who is God, the precise and immediate objective of charity, but the ultimate and indirect object of the other virtues. This is how we determine their rank in relation to the noblest of all objectives.²⁶

From what we have said, the great excellence of prayer is clearly evident and on account of this it has been exalted so highly by the Holy Spirit. What remains is to see the need that we have for prayer.

CHAPTER THREE

[The necessity of the virtue of prayer]

4315 In addition to what has been said above regarding the excellence of prayer we may also investigate how necessary it is to us, given that we have said that it honours God, it alone frees us from all evil, and is the best means for acquiring virtue, all of which things are necessary for us. Nevertheless, taking a closer look, I now have to demonstrate our need of prayer which is the reason why prayer has been so extensively treated in Holy Scripture. I have discovered that our need is twofold: firstly we need to pray and then we neglect prayer. We²⁷ need to be convinced of both of these facts because God encourages us to do what is good for us although we set little value on it even though it is very good for us. Prayer is something that is very good for us and yet it is esteemed or practised by us very little. This is why God recommends and commands it so much.

Focusing on our need for prayer, I find that basically since prayer is what obtains favours from God we stand in need of it for those things that are either impossible or very difficult because of our weakness but which we still need to have or to carry out.

4316 Building on this basis I find that our soul and body, even though they were made perfectly by God at their own level, still, in spite of all of this, need something more both to maintain such perfection and to go beyond it to their ultimate perfection, which when they were created was not conferred on them but for which they were given the impulse to achieve. If they possessed this need in the state of

²⁶ The page could well serve as a commentary on the *1536 Constitutions* n. 41: “prayer is the spiritual teacher of the brothers”; *Const. 1532* n 41: “without doubt holy prayer is the main teacher and mother and nourishes every real virtue.”

²⁷ *Ne* in the text = *ci* here and in what follows.

happiness in which God placed them, how much greater is this need now in the state of wretchedness and unhappiness into which they have cast themselves?

The soul has an even greater need for nourishment and nutrition which is suitable and enjoyable than the body does for its own proper food. Precisely because of its present condition the soul's food is God and His gifts and graces in this life and in the next. Therefore, the soul is nourished when it is united with God and transformed into Him whether here on earth by means of grace or in heaven by means of glory. Because it needs to be united to God it goes in search of divine grace and the other gifts of God, which can all be called food for the soul, that go with it. The soul cannot have real life without these gifts, just as the body cannot survive without food. Thus the soul is in great need but cannot fill this need by itself; rather God is the one who gives it freely. Thus it is necessary that the soul turns to prayer, since God has promised to give it when requested.

4317 The body had its own needs, the first of which is food. Though it can go without other things in certain cases, places and situations, it cannot survive without food. This is what the body needs most of all. We also receive this from God, since it is He who makes the earth fertile and gives us the strength to work and the intelligence to produce. Once again we need to turn to God in prayer to receive this.

This is what the heavenly Master taught us to do when He wanted us to say in His prayer: *Danne oggi il nostro pane giornaliero*²⁸ (*Give us this day our daily bread*). Food for the soul as well as for the body is included in the word 'bread', since among all kinds of food 'bread' is the most basic and the things which provide nourishment and sustenance to the body and the soul are implied by that word. This petition, therefore begs that what is intrinsically necessary for mankind as required by his nature will be supplied.

4318 A person should do whatever he can to provide himself with bodily and spiritual food because St Paul says that whoever does not work should not eat.²⁹ Nevertheless, so that a person comes to know that his efforts will be in vain without God's hand, His Majesty wishes and commands that the person asks. Because this need is continuous and does not last for only a day or a year, this bread is called "daily",³⁰ which means day after day, and this teaches us that just as we have to

²⁸ Mt 6, 11; Lk 11, 3. In the text *giornale*.

²⁹ Cf 2 Tit 3, 10.

³⁰ In the text *giornale*.

work continually, doing whatever lies in our power to win our bread, so too we are to ask divine providence to give it every day.

Remember that when we ask for bread we are asking for everything that goes with it, such as divine inspiration, Scripture and doctrine, sermons, clergy, statutes, counsel, the sacraments and the like for the good of the soul and health, strength, work, success in business for the body and for general and particular works of mercy and the like. We find in all of this the basic need we have of prayer which comes from our intrinsic, constant and natural desires.

4319 We also have another great need that is not co-natural, but which is generated within us freely and spontaneously. This is the debt we own to God to suffer the pains of hell, purgatory and also of this life since we have offended Him by sinning. It is impossible for us to free ourselves from this by our own devices, whereas by praying we obtain remission from God who is our creditor. When we say the Our Father we say: *Rimettici i debiti nostri (Forgive us our sins)*³¹ the debt outlasts sin since the sin may have been forgiven and yet the obligation remains for us to suffer in this life or in purgatory. What is important here is the fault and its eternal punishment. Depending on whether the sin is mortal or venial, the debt involves the fault, eternal punishment, and temporal punishment in purgatory or on earth.

Then there is also another requirement in that we are continually being attacked by our enemies so as to trap us into sinning. Christ warned us about this when He set out the second petition: *E non ci indurre in tentazione (lead us not into temptation)*.³² Because we have many enemies who are strong, cunning, persistent and tireless it is impossible for us to overcome them without God's help. So we pray not to be allowed to fall into their hands, but rather be preserved by His grace and strengthened, because if we were to fall into their hands we would be lost if He did not help us.

4320 Finally, by means of the last request: *Ma liberaci dal male (Deliver us from evil)*³³ Christ warns us that left to ourselves we would fall into all kinds of evil if God did not support us. Evil includes all kinds of sufferings or painful experiences whether eternal or temporal; because of its very nature adversity is evil. However, often God ordains adversity for our wellbeing, which is mainly the case with a great variety of temporal evils. These can be classified as evil from two perspectives. Firstly, when

³¹ Mt 6, 12; Lk 11, 4.

³² Mt 6, 13; Lk 11, 4.

³³ Mt 6, 13.

by its very nature adversity deprives us of something good since evil is nothing else than the privation of what is good. For example, poverty is the deprivation of wealth; sickness of health; worry deprives us of peace mind. From this perspective tribulations are evil, just as temporal gains are always good in themselves because God has declared that whatever He has made or will make is good.

The other way of looking at trials is that often they are the occasion of sin which is real evil. Sometime they are evil because of the consequences attached to them, such as going to hell. Considered from the first point of view not all trials are always evil. God often permits them as a means to achieve good. Indeed, from the first point of view prosperity is good. From another point of view it is sometimes bad if it leads to pride or dissipates into lasciviousness or other sinfulness.

4321 Because the second perspective is more important than the first, things which were good in the first circumstances become evil in the second set of circumstances when temporal goods become absolutely evil. Other things which were evil under the first perspective, such as adversity, become good under the second perspective when they produce virtue and salvation and are absolutely good.

Therefore, let us ask God to free us from trials that are evil from a certain perspective and those that are evil under every perspective in so far as they are much more deserving of being classified as evil. With this petition, then, we ask that in His mercy God would free us from all kind tribulations.

This is the condition that we need to add when we pray to God. Free me from sickness or other trials if this is for our betterment as the words of the *Our Father* imply when asking God to free us from all evil. However, if it is better for us to fall ill, then such sickness would not be an evil and we should not pray to be free from it. But if becoming ill is not for our betterment, seeing that illness is an evil by its nature, let us pray to be freed from it all the more since in addition to it being evil by its nature as an affliction and privation of health, it could become an occasion of sins such as impatience and extreme anxiety.

4322 Because God can identify evil that has the above effects under the second perspective, it means that we shall not fall into the occasion of those sins when we make this petition and ask to be strengthened by prosperity on the one hand and, on the other, by adversity so that they will not lead or drag us down into any sin. Thus evil is a tribulation by its nature when it does not produce our betterment. Both tribulations and consolations are evil if they lead to sin. Thus we pray to be freed or preserved from sin. The punishment of hell is even and is always linked to sin. We pray to be freed from all these types of sin.

These then are our needs for which we have to pray incessantly. Firstly, the soul's natural and inner requirement of being in need of God and His gifts and the body's need for sustenance. Secondly, the soul's inner requirement, which does not belong to its essence but was acquired, and came as a consequence of sin, which placed us in God's debt with respect to eternal and temporal punishment. Thirdly, the exterior need that temptations of the Devil, the flesh and the world will not conquer. Fourthly, it includes the internal and external need to be free from all kind of evil as such. This includes all the good things which we need and the removal of all evil.

CHAPTER FOUR

[Why do we neglect prayer?]

4323 It is time now to consider our lack of prayer which is the reason why God and the saints insist so much on holy prayer. This omission comes about for two reasons. One is a lack of determination and the other is ignorance of how to pray.

Lack of determination causes us to do little or nothing. Ignorance of how pray causes us to omit prayer either with the excuse of not knowing how to pray or how to pray well. From this it follows that we have no taste for prayer or derive little benefit from praying. This makes us cold and negligent and we gradually let it slip away.

4324 Praising and recommending prayer repairs a lack of determination. Instruction remedies the lack of knowledge. The lack of determination or placing little value on praying comes about through not realising how precious, useful and worthy it is, or because we think it involves too much effort and we allow ourselves to be overcome by boredom and neglect. This is all the more true because the Devil regards prayer as the enemy, as something that saps all his strength and reveals all his tricks so that he never ceases to turn us away from praying. To achieve this he not only places all other kinds of occupations before us and tempts us interiorly, but also, when he finds no other way, he involves us in occupations that appear to be charitable and works of mercy, so that when we have lost the spirit of prayer, we leave aside the works of mercy too and involve ourselves in evil pursuits.³⁴ Perhaps we become occupied with temporal works and do not know how to set aside a little bit of time and do not realise that the work of prayer is more important than anything else or perhaps a person casts aside all Christian practices, or concern for his own salvation, or when recalling his serious sins prayer appears to be beyond him, or goes to confession

³⁴ This is a very keen observation which is made by one who has a deep understanding of the spiritual life.

only once a year, or thinks that praying is reserved to friars, priests and monks and is not for seculars, even though it is a requirement for all Christians, or thinks that a person who does not pray cannot be saved,³⁵ or he might think that study, preaching, helping the poor or some other similar Christian work is more pleasing to God so that if he is doing these things praying seems to be too much or because he is doing these things he has no more time left for prayer.

4325 These people should know that, according to the teaching of Saint Bernard and the experience of many saintly men, omitting prayer so blatantly in order to perform works of charity is a wishing to go beyond the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. Whoever practises charitable works to such an extent, no matter how good they may be, will contract so much impurity of soul that thousands of inordinate passions will enter the soul and, while he thinks that he is operating out of charity, he is motivated by human respect and will forfeit any fruit and, sometimes, even commit sin. In the end he will discover that he is very poor since he has stored up straw in his barn instead of gold or silver.³⁶

Therefore, we ought to firmly fix in our minds that it is impossible to be a good Christian if we do not pray. Those who are not sustained by prayer cannot persevere in being good Christians. Those who have no feeling for prayer cannot be called true spiritual persons. Whoever neglects prayer cannot really and properly practice virtue.

4326 Thus we can see that while there is a great variety among the saints with respect to the practice of other virtues and some retreat into the forest to practice abstinence, some remain among people to assist them, some were occupied with study, others with manual work, some governed other people, others obeyed them, some gave everything away and became poor, others kept their belongings and assisted the poor, and so on with other Christian virtues, but all were united in practising prayer which they regarded as a necessary and special practice in which they spent a great deal of time. Although they considered communicating with the world to be very fruitful, they still set aside a good amount of time to pray.

So if these things have been set down by way of an example for us we should always keep firmly in mind that if we wish to imitate them we must have holy prayer

³⁵ This is what is called the "democratic" approach to prayer.

³⁶ These are very practical reflections that also remind us of what Saint Francis said in ER 22, 20-21. 25 (*FAED* I, p. 80).

engraved upon our hearts and carried out in action in preference to all other pious activities and never (ordinarily) omit it to attend to any other good work.³⁷

(How nature and the Holy Spirit teach us how to pray)

4327 Let this be the remedy for not knowing how to pray.

Although nature instructs us in part how to pray, it is not sufficient. As we experience every day nature instructs us by teaching us instinctively how to form appropriate words and suitable gestures to obtain favours from men. Consequently we should adopt the same method with God. Because He pays greater attention to thoughts and the inner movements of the heart than he does to words or external gestures, what we show externally to men when we request something from them we ought to exhibit interiorly before God when we ask something of Him in prayer.

This natural approach is both a comprehensive basis and authentication of prayer. Since human actions are only one of a kind they require rules that cater for what is singular. Especially because when we pray we are treating with God, we have to know the rules that apply in His court, which are demanded, in the first place, because of His Majesty, in a similar way to knowing what rules are demanded in a court in which we have dealings with a high Prince. To achieve this we need higher instructions than can be gained from nature.

4328 Such instruction is of two kinds: we have the inner and secret instruction provided by the Holy Spirit who is the only teacher at this level;³⁸ and we have external and visible instruction. The first consists in the hidden discernment of the Holy Spirit that takes place within the soul by arousing the soul to pray and leading it to pray well. We have to ask the Spirit to do this for us by means of unfailing sighs as mentioned by Saint Paul.³⁹ This is made up of precepts and norms which come to us through Sacred Scripture and saintly men who have been enlightened by God and have become expert in this by way of their protracted practice of prayer and know how to pass exalted special doctrine to us.

We receive the initial teaching of the Holy Spirit by allowing ourselves to be moved by Him and by following His impulse and guidance. We receive subsequent instruction by reading the Sacred Books and following their advice while praying that they will teach us. However, although the Holy Spirit is the prime mover in all

³⁷ This is the primacy of prayer in the spiritual life and Christian holiness.

³⁸ Cf. 1 Jn 2, 20-27. The pages that follow contain rare theological intensity and clarity.

³⁹ Cf. Rom 8, 26.

our good works, He still seeks the cooperation of the person and it is necessary to know what He expects us to do by way of cooperating in the holy activity of prayer.

4329 There are three things that we should have: desire, entreaty, and performance. In the first place we must have a burning desire to pray and to know how to pray well. Such a desire makes us very prepared to receive the influence of the Holy Spirit that will foster prayer, both because this desire is like a fire that communicates warmth and light, and because God will not fail to enlighten those souls who have a great desire to do well and particularly to do well in prayer. Such a great desire will also force the soul to adopt the proper means of achieving what it wishes and to do all that it can to fulfil its desire, as we experience in our daily human activities.

Thus, whoever has a great desire to pray will study, practice and demand enlightenment and help from God and man to achieve this end. Where there is a persevering and ardent desire to practice prayer it is impossible that a person will not learn how to do it.⁴⁰

4330 Because it comes from desire, entreaty is the second thing that we should consider because it asks God to give us His grace, through calling upon His predestined providence since as we wish to have the grace to know how to pray and we need to implore His Majesty for it so that, like the other favours that may be obtained through prayer, it will be given to us as a special gift from God who bestows it. So do you want to know how to pray? Beg Christ to teach you how to pray and He will grant you the enlightenment of His Spirit which teach all truth.⁴¹

With respect to the third thing we should put into practice the little that we know about prayer, situating ourselves in prayer so that the Holy Spirit may find us readily disposed to receive His favours, and when we have the little that we know, in order not to permit the mind to wander off into vain thoughts, recite vocal prayers with as much attention as you can, often inserting the small acts of mental prayer that you know how to perform and also beg of God, in the same way as mentioned above, to enlighten you as to how to pray.

Many who have clung to these three methods have gained much in the heavenly practice of prayer.

⁴⁰ This is the Augustinian theology of “desire”. Cf. André DE BOVIS, *Le Christ et la prière selon saint Augustin dans les commentaires sur S. Jean* in *Mélanges Viller*, 180-193. Cf. *In epist. Ioannis ad Parthos* 4, 6: PL 35, 2008s.

⁴¹ Cf. Jn 16, 13.

CHAPTER FIVE

[The two methods of learning to pray: by enlightenment and by following rules]

4331 Although the instruction by the Holy Spirit is the main method, we should not dismiss the second method, indeed anyone who put it aside (when he could make use of it) would be tempting God, because anyone who does not make use of the means that His Majesty has ordained for reaching a goal is tempting God, and God has ordered the exterior means so that we might learn to pray by using it. If it had been other than this when the Apostles asked Christ: “teach us to pray”,⁴² He would have replied: “Wait for the Holy Spirit to teach you”. However, as we know, He gave them rules for praying.⁴³

The first hidden method is useful for those who cannot conveniently use the second method, but it is not for those who despising this method rely exclusively on the first method. It is useful to perfect the other method and both need to be used together without neglecting either one.

4332 God is also the main teacher of the second method both because the rules were written by God both in Sacred Scripture and in the various books. These sources declared or explained what was contained in Sacred Scripture or what the Holy Spirit revealed or taught. This was also because the rules that had been written down would not be understood well or have been useful if the Holy Spirit had not been the teacher behind them. Thus whoever despises the written rules that contain the method of praying well despises the teaching of the Holy Spirit, such a person who makes use of the rules exclusively or who relies on his own insights without the inner enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, thinks he knows how to pray.⁴⁴

Precepts concerning prayer may be set out in two ways: one is by using general rules which state how we are to think while praying, what benefits are to be gained by meditating, what should be asked for, what dispositions we should cultivate before praying, what are the conditions for praying well and the like. The second way is specific. It sets out the detailed method for praying. It embraces in one

⁴² Cf Lk 11, 1

⁴³ This is a most valuable observation which warns against temptations to spiritualism or a charismatic approach.

⁴⁴ This is another passage that is theologically and spiritually well balanced.

measure the whole procedure to be used when praying and sets out all the acts that have to be undertaken.

4333 Spiritual books are full of the first method. However, I have not yet seen the second method treated in a systematic manner. I say this because many have described how meditations should be done over the hours of the day, and on specific hours of the day, but they have not laid out the complete order and stages of the practice as you can see. Nonetheless the method is very important, especially for simple people, who do not know how to put it into practice successfully or to implement what they have learnt only in a general way. This is the method that I now intend to explain and clarify.⁴⁵

[Vocal and Mental Prayer]

4334 So that you will be able to understand more clearly I shall begin by the common and well known distinction of vocal and mental prayer. Vocal prayer is prayer that is spoken using the voice and mental prayer is that which takes place in the mind without the use of words.

There are two ways in which vocal prayer may be practised. The first way is by reciting a prayer such as the *Our Father* or the Psalms, and in this case the heart needs to pay attention to the words. The second way is by making up the words ourselves following a desire or a thought that is already in our minds, as when a person prays spontaneously for what he needs. Here the great need or desire dictates the words. It seems to me that by its nature this way is better than the first because it is closer to mental prayer since even in mental prayer an inner fervent impulse breaks out into words as we read with regard to the Seraphic Father, Saint Francis, who prayed throughout the entire night saying: “My Lord, who are you, and who am I”.⁴⁶

4335 Mental prayer can also be practised in two ways. The first method is to run the mind over a vocal prayer developing thoughts in the mind with the help of recalling the words of the prayer as, once again, the Seraphic Father did while saying the *Our Father* one time when he was travelling from Perugia to Assisi.⁴⁷ We consider this

⁴⁵ This is one of the reasons why Bellintani’s work was so popular.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Fioretti: III considerazione sulle Stimmate* (ed. B. Bughetti, Firenze 1926. 210-213; *FF* n. 1916). The example of Saint Francis is often quoted by spiritual authors such as E. van Herp, Cordoni and Giovanni da Fano etc.

⁴⁷ This event took place at Borgo San Sepolcero and is related by Celano in the *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 98 (FAED II, p. 312) and by saint Bonaventure. We do not know the

method to be more mental than vocal since it can be performed without using words. The second method is to produce interior acts without the assistance of material from a vocal or written prayer, but simply circulating acts of the mind or the will according to rules composed⁴⁸ by the person or as he is moved by the Holy Spirit.

Because this is the method which we are about to expound one should recognise that it is necessary, and not only useful, to have a method and rules in order to know how to pray mentally according to the second method mentioned above.

[The necessity of applying the rules of mental prayer]

4336 To explain this necessity I shall divide the people who wish to practice mental prayer into three categories. There are those who are completely new to these practices who do not know about devout books that advocate them and yet having a desire to practice it do not know where to begin. Although there are many rules in books they find it difficult to apply them. Without any doubt such as these would be pleased if, when they went to prayer, someone would tell them what to do, where to begin, how to proceed, how to end their prayer and advise them immediately and in detail what to do with these words: “Do this first and then this” leading them step by step. This is what this book intends to do as you will see in what follows.⁴⁹

The second category of person is one who is already practising mental prayer and has acquired a certain taste for it. Nevertheless he has become tired, and sometimes feels dry and finds all doors closed that would lead him to thoughts of God. Thus they are either locked out from mental prayer, or are impatiently knocking on the door without it ever being opened to them, or have become lethargic and have thrown themselves on the ground becoming lazy and idle leaving their hearts open to vane thoughts that are sometimes followed by impure thoughts and a disposition that experiences a tumult of natural passions and of bad habits that have not yet been completely overcome. This affects the mind so badly that it quickly abandons mental prayer and falls back, because when it feels the difficulty of the struggle it is left with little or no resistance.

actual source used by Bellintani as we could not find this event in either Bartolomeo da Pisa or Marco da Lisbona.

⁴⁸ *Perfisse* in the text = *prefisse*.

⁴⁹ This is simple, practical language that explains the title of the work: *The Practice of Mental Prayer*.

4337 How beneficial it would be for those souls to have something solid and methodical to keep them occupied spiritually and give them holy thoughts so that they could be revitalized little by little. Even if they were not as yet very enthusiastic at least they would be defended from the serious attacks of the enemy who arouses all his strength against those who pray as if prayer were a challenge thrown down to them to fight. They would then not have been afflicted with loss but rather with gain.

There are also some who are perfect (admittedly they are few) and this book is not really addressed to them since they have been accustomed to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for a long time and taught how to pray. These rules would not be hurtful to any of them since there is no one who is so perfect that as to not suffer from the loss of grace at sometime and at that time he will profit greatly by using a method, when God leaves him to their own strength and devices.⁵⁰

When the one who is proficient lacks the grace of devotion he may take two courses of action. Taking one course of action he may continue knocking on the door, going about, crying and upset until the door opens.⁵¹ The other course of action is to humbly collect his thoughts and keep his feet on the ground feeding on the pasture of oral prayer,⁵² trying to raise himself again by means of meditation, so that his mind does not wander elsewhere. Since all his former thoughts have vanished, he needs to be helped by his own ingenuity, systematically engaging in subjects of meditation, without continuing to knock on the door, as in the first course of action, so that it might open.

4338 Although one cannot lay down laws for the Holy Spirit, who leads the soul to use one means or another at different times, while the Spirit is inactive, while thinking that he has been abandoned. However when it is left up to us to take one course of action or the other, because the Holy Spirit is no longer indicating one course or another, I would always recommend the second rather than the first. I say this for three reasons. Firstly, sometimes when using the first course of action the soul becomes weary and begins to become afraid and abandons the holy impatience of knocking and pacing about, and falls down low becoming completely upset and unhappy. Secondly if one continues to persevere, it seems to me that it is more humble to take on some meditation, as might appear suitable to someone who is

⁵⁰ This concept is well emphasised already by Giovanni da Fano.

⁵¹ Cf. Mt 7, 7; Lk 11, 9.

⁵² This concept comes from Henry of Herp.

used to meditating, because a soul that was accustomed to fly, now needs to climb the ladder little by little. If one is not used to meditating he should regard himself as unworthy to enter and occupy himself exteriorly in what is pleasing to God. To the mind, which was previously completely wrapped in God and transformed, this is not a trifling humiliation since it forces him to return to the first steps of the spiritual life to learn the alphabet.⁵³

Thirdly, although both options have their merits because the mind is trying to do what pleases God, meditating, as experience shows, produces more immediate results, because one becomes tired of knocking for it produces neither light nor fervour and one runs the risk of shortening prayer and not returning to it very often. Whereas it is almost impossible that meditation will not produce a spark of enlightenment or warmth in the soul and so it will willingly persevere and return to prayer.

4339 We could add, as a fourth reason, that the first way might cause ill health, because becoming impatient over being away from God, so that the body, especially the head, might react when the soul make such a effort. Thinking that without grace it cannot achieve what it did before through grace, it falls into grave physical illness from which it follow either that it needs to abandon prayer to the soul's severe loss, or it is forced to return to the first type of meditation using the second way which we have just mentioned. In short the second way is easier and more fruitful than the first. Therefore it is very beneficial for those who are proficient to make use of a method and rules.

What is more is that it is not sufficient to have considered the general rules which teach how to practice mental prayer if we wish to approach the act of prayer. First of all because we find many different methods in books so that a person does not know which to chose. Furthermore not everyone knows how to apply a general rule to a particular case. Furthermore, it is difficult for us to remember clearly what is written in the books that we have read mainly because there are few who have read a spiritual book more than once, but once they have read it they do not take it up again since it is not as enjoyable as it was the first time.⁵⁴

⁵³ Note how the sound of the words "ladder" and "alphabet" which are used in a vast array of spiritual literature reveal a competent master of the spiritual life.

⁵⁴ Bellintani is very accurate in revealing the difficulties in a concrete way and he demonstrates that he has a good knowledge of what the simple and the ordinary people need.

In addition to this the rules are generally scattered everywhere and in different places so that a person cannot lay his hand on them when they are needed. Therefore it is good to have rules that are that are short and that can be readily put into practice. They are set out here with this in mind. So that they can be put into practice we supply the following information.

CHAPTER SIX

[The first practice in prayer: preparation]

4340 Each practice is divided into three parts, namely the prelude, the meditation and the action. This is because when a person wants to pray he should first prepare his soul and organize himself for the acts he has to perform and for the reception of the grace which God wishes to give him to assist him to perform these actions.

When the preparation is finished using the prelude the person begins to meditate on some holy mystery in the intellect which serves as a spark to kindle fire in the will. Once the will has been aroused by meditation, it bursts into actions that are the power behind prayer and these promote the third part that is called action.

So that you may understand this better, I shall explain these parts more clearly. Beginning from the first part you should understand that there are two preparations that have to be made for prayer. One precedes the time of prayer and the other takes place while at prayer and is immediate.

4341 The first aspires towards two things the first of which is at least being on guard against mortal sin since anyone who is not concerned about offending His Majesty, especially in something as serious as mortal sin, is not worthy of being admitted to the divine mysteries. However, if a person unfortunately falls, let him at least pull back and not fall willingly, but immediately feel sorry, or at least apologize, when he wishes to turn to prayer. The second of these things is that in his heart a person continually feels a desire to pray and this continually tugs at his soul and makes him feel a twinge in his heart⁵⁵.

4342 This desire has the following effects on us. First, it does not allow us to waste time on useless or unimportant things because such desire seeks to carry out necessary and works of charity promptly in order to attend⁵⁶ to the holy practice of prayer. Thus once the obstruction which is caused by things like these has been

⁵⁵ Cf. note 40.

⁵⁶ *Vacare* in the text = *attendere*.

removed the person immediately hurries to prayer, just as something that is weighty naturally falls towards the centre when not hindered by some obstacle.⁵⁷ This desire prompts us to carry out what Christ and St Paul said, that is that we ought to pray continuously without interruption,⁵⁸ since a person who prays when he can, always prays and when he is unable to pray wishes in his heart and in fact to be able to pray and clears away obstacles as far as he can.

What is more this desire holds the soul back from feeling a certain unproductive freedom and also from attachment to creatures, keeping the heart unsoiled so that it can become engaged in prayer so that whatever the need or charity that is associated with the activity, the soul remains raised above the earth by at least one leg and is not actually attached to it. This outcome is of great importance because it protects the soul from a thousand imperfections and from wasting time.

In addition to this, such desire means that when we go to pray we are drawn away from exterior vagaries and the spirit ascends to God more quickly and derives more abundant fruit from prayer. Therefore, to place the holy outbreak of this desire on the altar of your heart is no small gift from God.⁵⁹

4343 The first of these two things, which brings previous and remote preparation together, is only intended for those who are very involved in worldly matters, and do not want to completely dedicate themselves in the service of God, even though they want to live as good Christians. The second is intended for those who want to do nothing but serve God and have withdrawn from the world, something like religious or pious people, who live a religious life in secular garb.

Let the first kind of people beware not to disparage the second kind, but rather regard the latter state as the more perfect. If they do not appear to be ready for this, let them at least appreciate its value and go on praying that God will make them improve. However, let the second kind not judge the first kind but rather think that perhaps God sees a lot of good will and sincerity of heart in them or other hidden virtues which even if they do not perform many external good works they are still acceptable to His Majesty more than some who appear to be externally dedicated to God. Therefore let both of them undertake appropriate preparation. Even if they do not do this let them not cease praying, since in itself praying will provide preparation and will gradually dispose the soul to do what we have said above and

⁵⁷ This is a classical concept in spiritual literature.

⁵⁸ Cf. Lk 18, 1; 1 Thes 5, 17.

⁵⁹ This is traditional image that is contained in the *Constitutions of 1536* n 41.

what they seek. Since prayer can obtain everything from God we should not think that it cannot obtain what is closest to it, appropriate and necessary.

4344 There is a second act of preparation which should be undertaken when a person is going to pray. This also contains two things. One is to compose oneself for prayer and the second is to remove sin from one's conscience, when this is required, so that his prayer may be acceptable to God. The second thing is achieved through sorrow for sin and by seeking pardon. It is correct to do this when the sin is mortal or even a serious venial sin or when it greatly disturbs our conscience. If he does not experience having intense or great sorrow let him arouse as much sorrow as he can since at the right time during his prayer perfect contrition will be produced when the soul is enflamed. A person may not yet feel like performing this act of sorrow in his soul at the beginning, either because his soul is still afflicted by sin, or because he is afraid because he thinks that the mind might be distracted by that thought and this would stain him and be an impediment to the holy meditation which he is undertaking, or he intends to express sorrow for sin at the proper time during his prayer. Let him not be forced to express sorrow since prayer implies sorrow for sin not so much by creating a mood, but by the results it produces and it is better to experience this personally than to push ahead and provoke it.

4345 I encourage those who are undergoing⁶⁰ the above mentioned condition because of the disposition of their souls, if they are scrupulous or afraid, because of an imperfection into which they have fallen and dare not present themselves to God in prayer, and their conscience is so disturbed by their sin that they have no time to meditate on anything else or experience other emotions and those who are at least distressed, upset and confused.. I exhort these persons, then, to banish such a memory, sorrow and upset and to start and continue their prayer with holy and humble confidence, feeling sorry later at the right time and when they feel more secure, because when the heart's vessel is filled with God only that which is pleasing to God will enter it and there will be no room for scrupulous and upsetting sorrow but it will be set up only for what is holy and excellent.

Because of this you will see that in the practices I have not mentioned sorrow for sin in the preamble, bearing in mind that this is not required by everyone, nor expedient for everyone to do at the beginning of prayer. However, it is both sufficient and necessary for everyone to humble himself before God, recognising and professing that he is a sinner in a general way without coming to the actual

⁶⁰ *Promette* in the text = *permettre*.

consideration of a particular sin. We have placed such humility in the preamble of the practices as a required part of preparation.

4346 The first item in immediate preparation is what is described in the preamble. Thus there is no need to say anything else except that a person should do what is said there with these two stipulations: that all is done immediately and with emotion. These two stipulations demand that the mind carries out these actions with great vigour. If the mind is distracted or otherwise disposed so that it can not do this⁶¹ or has no sensitivity for it, do not waste time, but use the mouth to pronounce the sentiment whenever you have no sensitivity for something that the soul should do with feeling and go ahead. Nevertheless do it attentively, and if your mind is wandering too much, go back to using words, and do not go beyond what you can say attentively. With this in mind in some preambles I have the very words that can be used, since it is not necessary to use the preamble that is attached to the meditation, but you may use one that you choose, as I will indicate below.

[Second part of the exercise: meditation]

4347 With regard to the second part of the practice you should know that by its nature meditation produces these results. Firstly, it casts light on divine things and explicitly takes up the mysteries of our faith and interprets Scripture, because in meditation we gather the tasty flavour of such things and of theological matters and thus perfect⁶² theology in our intellect. Secondly, it occupies the mind with divine things and, consequently, takes it away from human or earthly matters. Anyone who tries it will know just how important this is.⁶³ Thirdly, the spirit experiences great delight, since holy things are like sugar that imparts sweetness, in addition to the common delight that goes along with every kind of truth both human and divine. This holy delight keeps a person praying and makes him come back to it willingly and this is also very important.

4348 From this and from the preceding result springs the fourth, which is gradually losing love for temporal things, because the experience demonstrates that when a person occupies himself exclusively with one thing, he places so much love there that he never knows how to think or speak about anything else and his heart remains fixed on that object. However once he is occupied in something else, he no longer has the same feeling for the former occupation, and while he concentrates on

⁶¹ *Ispedirsi* in the text = *sbrigharsi*.

⁶² *Perfice* in the text = *perfeziona*.

⁶³ *Lo prova* in the text = *ch'li prova*.

divine things his feeling for what the world can offer weakens since in that space of time he is not fed by such things and not eating causes him to lose his strength and whoever deprives himself completely of these things will derive more comfort and life from the spirit. While he is thinking about holy things he closes his eye to the senses and thus it follows that his appetite becomes weaker because what the eye does not see the heart does not miss.⁶⁴ Thus my dear people, while occupied in holy meditations you can, to your infinite gain, gradually lose love for the world if you want to.

Fifthly, meditation serves as kindling to light the emotions of the will, because, by meditating on some holy mystery, we shall always return to some effective reason that will move us to perform some virtuous action with feeling, for example, fearing, desiring, loving, rejoicing, thanking, hoping, repenting, imitating, sympathising or the like.

This is the main reason for which we meditate.⁶⁵

CHAPTER SEVEN

[Third part of the practice: action]

4349 One needs to know a few things about the emotive part of the practice which we have labelled action. Firstly, meditation yields many kinds of results. The first of these is that it sets the soul on fire with either love, or desire or hope or fear or the like. The second is that it makes the soul produce acts as a consequence of feeling love, hope, desire, or fear.

Secondly, you should be aware that all kinds of emotions and actions can be associated with almost every mystery. Nevertheless one mystery is more likely to do this than another. However, in the practices, I have selected only those which I thought were more suitable and fitting to give body and structure to the practice.

Nevertheless you should more readily use the emotions that appear to be more appropriate and suitable for you. In doing this you ought to be aware that, as we have said above, there are three categories of people: beginners, proficient and elite.⁶⁶ The first kind of people should practice and cultivate emotions of fear,

⁶⁴ Another example of “resplendent” and persuasive reflection.

⁶⁵ This is the Franciscan interpretation of affective prayer, as Bernardino da Balvano had already explained.

⁶⁶ This is the classical triple classification in the spiritual life.

sorrow, desire to amend their life and beg God to forgive them and help them to amend and when meditating on the Passion they should concentrate mainly on feeling compassion for Christ and grieving.

4350 The second class of persons should rouse themselves more to feel emotions of hope and desire to perform many good works and to make progress⁶⁷ along the Lord's road, and to beg His Majesty for this to happen by asking to become virtuous. When meditating on the Passion they should stimulate themselves to imitate Christ's virtues.

The prevailing emotion of the third kind of persons should be love, and the more love increases within the soul the more it ought to arouse the soul to desire to love and show it how little such love is evident. Thus by means of a burning desire this soul becomes excited and eager so that it utters ardent prayers in which it begs for the fire of love to consume it completely. When these kind of people meditate on the Passion, they should concentrate more on what was its motive rather than on the Passion itself, because its motive was love,⁶⁸

Although an individual is usually in one of the above categories, God sometimes leads him into one of the other categories and when he is in this situation he should observe the rules of that category, as when a beginner may sometime be raised to the loving category of the proficient by the special grace of the Holy Spirit. In his practices he should then observe the rules of the proficient and vice versa

4351 Thirdly, you should be aware that the exercise of emotions should be carried out with vigour and fervour, and that they ought to be aroused to the best of one's ability.⁶⁹ The emotions are aroused by carefully considering the mystery which is to produce them. However, love has a special way of developing that is different to what usually happens, since no matter how much the soul may be moved by love in the meditation, it can be raised up by God, leaving meditation aside, wondering at and sighing for His love and it can do three things. It can love Him saying: "Lord I desire You alone, You satisfy me," or using heartfelt words like these. Secondly, it can desire to love Him saying: "Lord, when shall I love you perfectly?" "When shall I

⁶⁷ *Proficere* in the text = *progredire*.

⁶⁸ This concept had been expressed already by Ochino and is mentioned by others such as Paolo da Terni, Silvestro da Rosano, Tommaso da Olera etc, in many meditations

⁶⁹ Francesco da Jesi also said the same.

be completely yours out of love?” Thirdly, it may pray that God will grant him love.⁷⁰

These may be done one after the other, as the Spirit moves. This is a most useful exercise which arouses love which should be cultivated as much as possible by every category of person when praying,⁷¹ both those who are beginners and those who are proficient because it will be of benefit to both.

4352 Fourthly, you need to know that all the emotional activities, whether they are the result of meditation or not, that take place in the soul come under two headings. Such emotions are either drawing in or reaching out to grasp something.

Drawing in occurs when the soul is drawn to God by a loving impulse and remains admiring Him with great delight with its eyes fixed on God’s eyes, who also watches it and cherishes it so that they both either converse in personal tones or just remain in silent admiration and the soul feels as if it has been pierced with a mortal wound of love which leaves it limp, as if it had pierced God’s heart with its pure glance for which it makes no excuse, even though the deeper the wound the more it hurts.⁷²

Reaching out towards something occurs when the soul feels alight with a great desire to serve and please God and motivates itself to serve and please Him. In those who are still imperfect in this practice, and who are still bound by their own imperfections and passions, this desire usually produces acts of sorrow, resolutions and prayers begging for emancipation from their own iniquity,⁷³ as has been stated in our practices. However, those who are perfect are more advanced in the above desire, even if they occasionally add a prayer to God to give them the strength and the grace to serve Him perfectly.

4353 While experiencing the movement that is drawing inward the soul has God alone as its object. While experiencing the movement out towards to grasp something the souls looks back on itself and produces sharp jabs provoking running to God. These actions alternate at different times, so that, by loving God, the soul

⁷⁰ Once again it appears that the exercise of love is the heart of “Franciscan” prayer.

⁷¹ *Oratori* in the text – *oranti*.

⁷² This is the first movement of love that comes from God, which is described here in a magnificent manner by someone who has experienced it quite deeply as his biographers relate.

⁷³ This is the prayer for liberation, of the healing of memories, as we say today.

can be lit by the desire to serve Him and this desire can once again take root within the person and inflame him with love.⁷⁴

The most perfect of these two acts is the process of drawing inward, which is the objective of the reaching out, because this is what beatifies the saints in heaven and what is now on earth the joy of the devout soul. Thus we should always aspire to this, without being too impetuous because it is an emotion that draws us in, that is an inner allurements, with which God draws us to Himself. Let us then be drawn and not create upheaval. However, we should be very attentive to run along with this divine invitation and not cause any bother. Because it is quite noble it usually does not last for long and our prayer always finishes with outreach and particularly with petitions by means of which we ask for help.

Fifthly, we should be aware that the fledgling operations of the emotions are of two kinds. One kind arises while at prayer and the other while not at prayer.

[Acts of emotion: resolutions]

4354 Resolutions about actions or words are formed within the person, because when a person is stirred up he resolves to do great things. They are proposals in which a person offers himself to God by wishing to give his all and by wanting to be of service to God and to please Him, even when this requires of him great effort or suffering. These are the equivalent of giving praise and thanks to God for the greatness of His glory and for the good things which he has given us. They also consist of the prayers that we offer to beg forgiveness, grace and assistance.⁷⁵

Although we have placed love in the category of emotion, where it truly belongs, still it may also sometimes pass into the category of actions, because when the heart is on fire and sees itself as obliged to love God, it resolves to love Him that is to undertake acts of love, as responses to the emotion of desire, which when this is put into effect even outside of prayer because the spirit recalls its obligation and its resolve, while still occupied in other external occupations, prompts itself into making an act of love towards God.

⁷⁴ These are the two movements of love like the ebb and flow of the tide, like the breath of life.

⁷⁵ We find a clear example of this in Paolo da Terni in his paradoxical exercises of affective prayer.

4355 Works that are performed exteriorly are the execution of resolutions made during prayer. Executing these works⁷⁶ has as its consequence that we force ourselves to carry out what we promised God in prayer because if we did not do this we would have to amend, feel sorry, and feel so anxious, that we would subsequently be anxious ever after, watching and protecting ourselves. If we did otherwise we would cut the ground from under prayer, and when going back to prayer, we would recall that we never kept what we had promised and we would be so ashamed that we would not dare to make resolutions, and we would give up one of the main parts of prayer.

Returning to the consideration of the internal aspects of prayer, that are a part of prayer, we find that there are four of them: resolution, oblation, praise and petition.

The following rules apply to resolution: firstly it has to be made with great purpose and resolute determination that is it must be as forceful as possible. Secondly, it should be made with trepidation not forgetting your weakness and wretchedness. Be on your guard that there is no hint of presumption. Let all our hope be placed in divine assistance, because I can assure you that every plant which is not planted by the heavenly Father will be pulled up.⁷⁷ For the amount of self that is contained in the resolution, will be amount by which it falls short, while the degree to which it is carried out will correspond to our faith in God.

4356 Thirdly, be careful not to link such resolutions with a vow, since sometimes a soul binds itself to something when it feels enthusiastic, but repents when it cools off. Vows should be made after long and mature deliberation, when the advice of a spiritual guide has been obtained. So make your resolution in appropriate terms and when you promise God to do or say something in the right way which is of benefit to you do not mean to make a vow, but only to stimulate yourself to do something good and to open your heart before God.⁷⁸

The fourth rule is that when you find that you have not carried out a resolution and you come back to prayer, do not yield to confusion, nor lose faith in God's grace, nor let your soul be cast down, since this comes about through presumption and hidden pride. Whoever recognises his wretchedness when he falls into an imperfection, even though he experiences very great sadness, will still remain standing by saying: "I knew that I would perform no better." Have confidence in God's grace, and hope

⁷⁶ Opera in the text = *di queste opere*.

⁷⁷ Cf. Mt 15, 13.

⁷⁸ Here too we see a wealth of experience.

that, if He has not given it to you this time, He will give it next time if you ask Him insistently; if you trust Him and you still act diligently. Therefore make yourself thoroughly humble, but do not despair, just become more careful in future.

[Acts of emotion: oblation]

4357 With respect to offering yourself to the service of God, you should know that this is something that is most pleasing to His Majesty. Therefore it ought to be done frequently from the heart and very resolutely. Therefore it should be put into practice frequently. However, it ought to come from the heart very purposefully. When you really want to act from inner conviction you will see that your senses will draw back, because they do not want to hear even a mention of exertion or pain. Dismiss this and offer yourself generously to God all the more because carrying out God's will means more pain and difficulty for you because in offering yourself like this you will make the most pleasing sacrifice that you could make to God as you offer your lifeless and bleeding will.⁷⁹

By means of this practice there are many who have achieved such a degree of self-denial that they were not only prepared to suffer the pains of Hell, if this was God's will, but even desired to suffer them, and this is not a joke but the truth.⁸⁰ However, even though you are weak, do not take notice of such nonsense, but go ahead with the practice. At the outset simply offer yourself to the service of God in a general way, without going into too much detail. As your understanding and strength increases add that you want to serve Him and that you want Him to accept the offer even if it means effort and pain for you without, however, specifying the effort and pain. As your enlightenment and strength grow, go further in making God a greater offer by saying: "Although I need to forfeit all my wellbeing, honour and life even to the extent of the death of those whom I hold most dear", and words like these.

4358 In the end you will find yourself Once more prepared to enter Hell if this is required for the honour of God. What should you do, if before this happens, your disturbed and uncertain mind hesitates and you find yourself not yet ready to offer or resolve to enter Hell or suffer anything else for the honour of God?⁸¹ In that case you should do one of the following three things. Firstly, retrace your steps. Stop the activity and clear your mind, because this is a temptation to make you fall into sin

⁷⁹ This is the well recognised topic in Franciscan and Capuchin asceticism of "denial of one's own will".

⁸⁰ This is one of the paradoxes of the mystical way of expressing things.

⁸¹ *Faressi* in the text = *faresi*.

or at least to lose confidence in God, showing you that you do not love God, because you are not prepared to suffer for Him. If you have gone back and the thought has gone but the former doubt returns, cast it out without question, while closing your ears so as not to listen to it and help yourself to go ahead with the assurance that you are pleasing God by throwing it out and not listening to it and by thinking about some other wholesome thing go ahead with other acts of meditation or activities.

The second thing to do is to make a proposal to do something horrific, although you do not appear to be prepared or feel obliged to make such an offer, but instead feel that you are making a fool of God or of yourself, still go ahead using what strength you can summon up adding that although you feel quite weak at the moment, still, when the occasion arises perhaps God will provide the grace that fortifies you.

4359 The third thing to do, which is better and safer, is this. Change the proposal into a wish accompanied by a prayer in the following manner. When you offer yourself to God, state the concept like this: “Is it necessary to undergo this ordeal to serve God?” Your weakness will cry out: “I am not ready”. Say impulsively: “O happy me if I had such strength! Oh, when will I ever be that strong? “In this way you will ignite the desire to have such strength and vigour, and immediately ask God to give you such strength. When you have done this, make your offering in this way: “Lord, I wish to serve You in every way but I do not feel brave enough to suffer the pain, the loss or to undertake the struggle. In my heart I want to suffer it completely for You, but since I am afraid of my weakness, give me the grace to suffer and I will be Yours totally”. Do not be afraid that God will not accept this offering even though it appears to be so restricted and small because where there is a lack of preparedness and generosity humility, which is no less pleasing to God, will make up for this.⁸²

[Acts of emotion: praising and thanking God]

4360 The other activity that is intrinsic to prayer is praise. This has two parts: one is to praise God for His goodness, grandeur and majesty, which you consider by meditating on it until you feel aglow and admire and extol the Most High God with praise and adulation. The second is your need to ask Him for a certain grace or forgiveness of sin and you first praise Him using titles denoting goodness or mercy and the like and make use of such praise to advance reasons why His Majesty should listen to you. This second method of praising can be found throughout Sacred

⁸² This is another example of Bellintani’s great wisdom in simplifying and popularising the profound and complicated acts of the spiritual life.

Scripture. Nevertheless the first method is the more perfect. And when it is practised there is this difference between the two in that the second is shorter and praise is mixed with begging, whereas the first method is more drawn out and is made with more deliberation, since praising God with feeling and emotion is a very valuable and laudable activity.⁸³

4361 When you feel moved to praise God because of His grandeur allow yourself to be stirred as much as possible and lift yourself up with great vigour of spirit to an act of thanksgiving, and keep that going until you feel moved by the Holy Spirit to another emotion, such as the stillness of wonder, or love, or confidence, or prayer and the like, or even until the fire goes out and you need to place the wood of another meditation on it to enkindle more different emotions.

The motivation for an act of thanksgiving is the blessings God has bestowed on a creature. Here you should realise that you are bound to give thanks not only for the blessings which you have received but also for those given to other creatures, both in this life or in heaven where the Saints are for whose excellence you should thank God for bestowing it on them.⁸⁴

Furthermore you should offer thanks not only for God's gifts which have produced effects, for God has not been wanting in offering grace even to obstinate sinners. You should do the same not only for graces that have been given but also for those which would have been given if we had not failed, such as when we could have been eternally happy in an earthly paradise with such pleasures, because it was not God who fell, but ourselves who fell and forfeited such a blessing.

4362 Be aware that you can make a venerable leap from thanksgiving to simple praise in this manner. Firstly think about the great benefit that you have received in being enflamed with gratitude and raise yourself up on this to savour divine goodness, which blesses people who sin and are unworthy or who, like you, are ungrateful. Fix your gaze steadily upon this and break out into praise and exultation, not because this has happened to you or some other creature, but because He is the kind of person who also gives His gifts to those who are sinful, unworthy and ungrateful. In the end, for both the first and second part of this activity, that is for simple praise and for thanksgiving, be aware that, when you feel overcome by such reasoning, that is by the thought that God's goodness and His gifts are beyond your power to praise them, and the more you try to pay your debt the further you fall

⁸³ That is: To praise God for His own sake is more worthy of God.

⁸⁴ *Che gli 'ha date* in the text = *che gliele ha date*.

short and lose the struggle, ask the help of every creature, not only of those who are rational and intelligent, but also of those who are not rational, insensate, dead and lifeless to bless and thank God together with you, just as David did and the three Princes in the furnace.⁸⁵

4363 Even more, collect all the praises of the Saints and the Angels and once again offer them to God and present them to Him all together. In addition to this, wish that every creature had an infinite number of tongues with which to bless God together with you. When with all this effort and show you still feel overcome by divine goodness surrender yourself and rejoice that you have a God whose goodness is so great, and rest in peace in the bosom of such goodness and sleep sweetly. Make up your mind to nourish yourself in the activity which I have taught you because it is very fruitful and pleasing to God.⁸⁶

CHAPTER EIGHT

[The last act of emotion: prayer]

4364 The final activity is prayer and this is the main activity in which all the previous activities come together, both those that are part of meditating and those which are part of the emotions. Because of this the whole exercise is known as prayer, since the things that have gone before this prepare for the activity of praying and this is the primary intention of the process. Thus when the heavenly Master taught his disciples how to pray He only mentioned the activity of prayer,⁸⁷ and if you keep the words “Our Father who art in heaven” before your mind they will be of service when meditating. Nevertheless, for your information we shall explain to whom our prayer ought to be addressed.

However, there is no reason to exclude the other activities about which we have been speaking up to now, indeed prayer presupposes them, since we would not ask for something unless we wanted it in the first place, nor would we pray for some evil to be averted if we did not abhor or fear it. Such emotions always come before knowing about praying and thinking about praying..

⁸⁵ This resembles an exposition of the “Canticle of Creatures” by Saint Francis.

⁸⁶ This is a wonderful page about the prayer of praise, which is greatly valued today by ecclesial groups, most of all by the “Charismatics”.

⁸⁷ Cf. Mt 6, 5-9.

4365 Thus they go ahead of praying and meditating for which they provide enlightenment and the emotions both of which provide or are the fuel that lights up the soul for prayer. When Christ asked us to pray: “May your name be held holy” He presupposed that we knew the Majesty of God, as it exists in itself in infinite grandeur, since it deserves to be honoured by all creatures. As He always does good things for us simply as a favour we are always bound to thank Him.

When He wanted us to pray: “May thy kingdom come”, He presupposed that we knew about God’s Majesty and how it had dominion over the whole world and how it is beneficial for us to remain subject to it. We wish to pray that He will reign over us, and, in fact do pray for this, because this is part of His nature and is also beneficial for us.

When He wanted us to pray: “May thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” He presupposed that we were aware of the obligation, suitability and necessity of obeying the will of His Divine Majesty.

4366 When He wanted us to pray: “Give us today our daily bread” He presupposed that we were aware of how great was our need of help both spiritual and temporal for the life of the soul and of the body and of how affable and desirable His gifts are.

When He wanted us to pray: “Forgive us our sins” He presupposed that we would acknowledge that we are debtors who are unable to repay the debt, and yet it is necessary that we erase the debt.

When He wanted us to pray: “lead us not into temptation” He presupposed that we were aware that we were in danger of falling into sin, both because the cunning and strength of our enemies and because of our weakness and tepidity.

When He wanted us to pray: “Free us from all evil” He presupposed that we were aware that we should hate evil. Each of the emotions that accompanies each petition comes from a pious concept which He has taught us. Thus by instructing us to make these petitions, Christ presupposes that we possess both the awareness and the desire that should precede this petition. If we do not have it, He teaches us to obtain it, because whoever gives the command also provides the necessary means to achieve its purpose.⁸⁸

4367 Therefore we have to know more about the activity of prayer. The first thing is the motives that drive us to pray⁸⁹ and there are many of them. Prayer begins with

⁸⁸ Effectively this is a second commentary on the *Our Father*.

⁸⁹ *Spunge* in the text = *ci spinge*.

God who deserves to be petitioned and honoured in prayer. He wants us to pray since He has made prayer a means of our salvation. Therefore He commands us to pray; assures us that we will be heard; sends us worries to make us cry out and infuses great pleasure into the act of praying. He laid out an example of this virtue in His Son and His Saints. He established the Angels as intermediaries in offering our prayers to His Majesty.

The reason for praying is derived from the object which we pray for which is the kind of benefit that it is fitting for us to desire and for which we need to pray in order to obtain. No matter if it is present or imminent evil which needs to be removed from us and which cannot be removed without prayer, we should pray against this evil as well as against the means through which it comes to us such as temptations.

4368 The need for prayer, that is appropriate, fitting and the fulfilment of our duty also comes from within us.⁹⁰ It is appropriate because prayer is an exercise that is performed by a person, a Christian. It is fitting because by means of prayer we provide for all our needs. It is a duty because God wants it and a creature ought to humble himself before his Creator and pay Him honour as he does by praying. It is necessary because without prayer we are not able to pay our debt, we cannot reach our goal and we cannot shake off evil.

Out of these motives the one that comes from God is the highest and the most perfect. You can reduce the others to this by setting your mind to it, since God's will takes precedence all other motives. God wills what is good for us, which is that we are free from evil, by means of prayer. When you find that you have the need to pray, do it because God wants you to make use of this resource.

The second thing that you ought to know is to whom⁹¹ you should address your prayer and the Lord taught you this when He instructed you to say: "Our Father who art in heaven". By the Father He meant the Triune God in Persons Three yet One in substance because all gifts come mainly from Them.

4369 We can still pray to the Saints in two ways. The first is that we can ask them to pray for us and to present our prayers to God, as we do in the Litanies.⁹² The second way by asking them to help us using the virtues and grace that God has given them. If we can ask a person on earth for help, how much more can we ask the Saints who

⁹⁰ That is it is a duty and a necessity.

⁹¹ *A chi* in the text = *alla quale*.

⁹² The Capuchins began their morning prayer with the Litany of the Saints.

are both powerful and sympathetic? We are not putting aside the hand of God because although we do not mention it, we presuppose that they are to help us to the degree that they can and in a proper manner and they cannot do this apart from God. I recommend that you have a devotion to a particular saint whose intercession and assistance you would seek frequently.

The third thing which you have to ask for has been mentioned in the Lord's Prayer. If you follow the practices they will teach you. For the present I say only this to you that you should definitely not ask for things that might bring you good or evil, that is be to your benefit or cause you damage such as temporal goods, for example,, or a taste for prayer or other spiritual gifts, unless you ask, either expressively or silently, for them on the condition that it is pleasing to God. Nevertheless you may ask for what pleases you or improves your lot.

4370 The fourth thing is that the means by which grace is obtained should not be your merits but the mercy of God, His goodness, His providence, His Passion, blood, death, Christ's merits, those of the Virgin Mary or the other Saints. You may use the mystery on which you are meditating at the time.

In the long run you want to pray with warmth and fervour, crying out loudly from the depths of your heart.⁹³

Up till now we have looked at the three parts of our practices: the preamble that deals with preparation; meditation, which places the wood on the fire that kindles the fire in our will; prayer that contains the affections and resolutions. We set out the method for performing these activities. It now remains for us provide information about how to use these practices.

[Advice for the use of these practices]

4371 The first piece of information is this: when you wish to pray, take up this booklet and read through one of the practices and, if you have the time and a good memory, commit it to memory, and then put it into practice, performing the activities in an orderly manner as they are set out in the exercise itself. If you still have the time, memory and will to learn it by heart, take the booklet in your hand and continue to read while performing the activities as they are written down. While doing this read⁹⁴ one or two activities, and then try to perform them from the heart, with as much attention and effort as you can without looking at the book.

⁹³ This is the pleading prayer from the heart mentioned by St Augustine.

⁹⁴ *Legghi* in the text = *legga*.

At this point I shall give you some advice and an exhortation. The advice is that you read the whole of the practice first so that you understand it well, to such an extent that when it is time to arouse the emotion you do not have to think about understanding it, because this would dull the heart considerably.⁹⁵ This piece of advice is beneficial for the first time that you perform the exercise, because, when you come to use it a second time, it will not be necessary to read it again. However it is always good to do this.

This is the exhortation. When you have performed the practice once, and when you return to prayer a second time go through the same procedure, because the first time the activity of the intellect trying to understand, or remember, or even looking at and reading the book, will seriously interrupt devotion. You will discover that you will get a better feel for it the second time and it will appear that you could go over it for two or three times until you felt nourished before going to perform another exercise.

4372 The second piece of information is that if at a certain stage the practice appears to be difficult to understand, do not be surprised or amazed, since I felt obliged to state this since the aim of this book is not to explain theology but only to propose material for prayer in a practical manner and I needed to be brief in order to allow the intellect time to understand meditation without causing confusion in the reader so that he could easily remember the practices. I have no doubt that once you have performed these things for a while, you will be very happy with such brevity and the concise explanation. If there is something that you do not understand at the beginning I make three suggestions. The first is to talk it over with a learned person. The second is to perform the practice, since without doubt; in time you will understand clearly what now appears to be obscure. The third is that if the two suggestions given above do not help you, leave aside the practices that you do not understand, and perform those that are easy and clear.

4373 The third piece of information is that a various times different persons will speak; sometime Christ, sometimes Maria will speak to the soul, sometimes the soul will speak to Christ or even to herself. This is done in order not to confuse you and to activate you better. Be careful to think over the activities well and not hurriedly pass them over since this is the only way that the points will make an impression. It is then up to you to squeeze out the juice.

⁹⁵ This is the motivation of affective prayer.

4374 .The fourth piece of information is that to separate the parts of the practice, the resolutions or acts of emotion are normally placed at the end. However, if you feel a stirring of emotion following an act of meditation, you do not need to wait till the end of the meditation to form a resolution. Furthermore, if you have begun the sequence of activities which I have described as preferable, and feel moved by the Spirit during prayer to do something else, or the mystery prompts you to a different action, or to prolong what you are doing and not go onto the other steps that are described in the practice, always follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁶

Be careful not to be drawn away from your routine and practice by every little thing, in order to avoid the trickery of the Devil, who could, under the pretext of a new enlightenment or devotion, make you wander off, and once he had led you away from your routine, will leave you stranded and not knowing how to return to where you were and thus you will have lost the real thing and gone after a shadow.⁹⁷

4375 The fifth piece of information is that since meditation has no objective other than to stir the emotions, when you feel deeply aroused leave the other actions laid down in the practice and go on with the acts of emotion in the will. Once you have reached your destination and come to the end of the road do not bother with any other road. Perform the emotional activity well and make a manful effort to practice it as daringly as you can.⁹⁸ When, following much practice, you reach the point at which without previous meditation you feel able to fly up to God with affection, you will have no further need of these practices, since anyone who can fly does not need a ladder. Be convinced that true contemplation consists in feeling emotion more than in understanding.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ This is an important suggestion which does not turn the method of prayer into a formality or impose restrictions on the soul's freedom.

⁹⁷ This is a great criterion of spiritual discernment.

⁹⁸ The insistence on this point is striking.

⁹⁹ This concept is present in the *1536 Constitutions* n. 42. We note the marked influence of the great spiritual masters such as Blessed Angela da Foligno, St Catherine of Siena and St Theresa etc.

Here begins the practices to be undertaken by the person who wishes to pray. Concerning the second motive for the Incarnation, that is *love*.

Practice. 11

Preamble

4377 *Christ*: O Soul, who comes before Me to nourish your spirit by contemplating the motives for My Incarnation, know that this food is too rich. Thus while regarding yourself as unworthy of presenting yourself before My face and of eating such perfect food, firstly, humble yourself as much as you can, because it is only those who are humble that I make worthy to be in My presence and receive My grace.¹⁰⁰

Secondly, beg Me not to cast you off, but to at least give you the crumbs that fall from My table, like I did for the Canaanite woman.¹⁰¹

Thirdly, start to humbly contemplate what I propose to you, not out of curiosity, but to honour Me and reap fruit for yourself.

Meditation

4378 One of the reasons (O My much loved soul) that motivated Me to become incarnate and become man was the infinite love that has burnt, is burning and will burn from all eternity in My divine heart because love produces many responses in the one who loves.

Firstly, the lover bestows gifts on the one who is loved, and these are threefold: first, he gives things that belong to him: secondly, he shares acquaintances who belong to him, such as friends and family members: thirdly he gives himself. So, then, O soul, I have given you things that belonged to Me, such as the heavens, the earth, and everything that is in it, even your very self. I have shared my friends with you, such as my Angels, the Patriarchs, the Prophets, the Apostles, the Martyrs, the Doctors and even my Mother together with all my Saints, who arrange everything for your wellbeing and benefit. Finally, so that nothing would be lacking from the perfection of love, I wanted to give you Myself. To bring all my love together, I gave you a most excellent resource by means of which I could become totally yours, namely the Incarnation.

¹⁰⁰ The first approach that Bellintani always recommends in his meditations is an act of humility and the presence of God.

¹⁰¹ Cf Mt 15, 27.

Secondly, love endures every hardship for a friend and provides to all his needs. Since I could not toil for you in My divinity, although you nevertheless were in great need, I took the flesh of your body so that I could work in your service through that medium.

4379 Thirdly, love demands that the lover should visit his friend and keep him company and rejoice at his conversion. Because of this, leaving the Father, I came into the world and laboured as a traveller on earth, in order to live with you, O soul, and be in your company because I delight to be with men.¹⁰²

Fourthly, love brings about union and joins the lover to the beloved. Thus love motivated me to unite Myself with you, a head to the members of the body, as the bridegroom to the bride. In order to do this I needed to become a man, because the head has to be of the same substance as the body, and the bridegroom of the same species as the bride.

Fifthly, of its nature love transforms the lover into the beloved, changing one into the image of the other. As God, I could not transform Myself into you, because as God I am unchangeable. However, I became man and thus assumed the perfect image of humanity, not in any other substance or species, but by means of humanity itself and this is a great witness to My love for you, O soul.

Action

4380 Consider, then, O soul, that it was not without reason that I have demonstrated My love for you by the Incarnation. I did it to stimulate you to love Me in return and to make gestures of love for Me, so that, just as love had humbled Me to becoming a man, so love itself would raise you up to become God.

Secondly, arouse yourself to love Me by means of these considerations knowing for certain that if you had a thousand other things and gave them all to Me without love, it would not make Me happy, since love is all that satisfies love. If you love you will be forced to do the other five things for Me that I did for you. It will happen that you give me your possessions and yourself in my continual service. You will take on all kinds of work willingly out of love for Me. You will visit Me, being delighted by My spiritual presence and will always keep Me in your mind. You will unite yourself to Me strongly, separating yourself from every other creature and entering into the abyss of My divinity by the vehemence of desire and love. You will transform yourself so completely into Me that looking at yourself from every

¹⁰² Cf. Pr 8, 31.

perspective you will see nothing but Me in you, in your thoughts, affections, words and what is divine will be part of every action.

Thirdly, when you have been lifted a little by this stimulation, allow yourself to immediately fall into thinking about your great lack of love, seeing yourself as not having loved, or experiencing any of the five above mentioned effects of love, but rather you have hastily loved things that you should not have loved such as the world. Indeed, you have hated yourself since whoever loves sin hates his soul.¹⁰³

4381 Fourthly, bitterly lament such a loss, with great hatred and contempt for yourself for making such a big mistake taking steps so that the wound which you have inflicted on love might be healed by means of properly directed hatred.

Fifthly, hasten back to the source of mercy, in which you should wash the great wound, begging that the goodness of God would forgive you and give you the gift of love and declaring yourself to have a debt which has not yet been repaid, persuade Me by the love that I have for you and have shown to you, since love makes a person forgive the loved one when he admits his fault.

Sixthly, make a resolution with great vigour of soul, to wish from now on to make up for what you have lacked, or at least not to wish to lose it in future. Fix yourself firmly in this resolve, specifying in detail what you want to do for love.

Seventhly, when you remember that you can achieve nothing by yourself, and that you cannot love the God of love in a way that is pleasing to Him, if He does not infuse love, immediately pray that I will rekindle my holy love in you and bestow on you the fire that I send from heaven to earth.¹⁰⁴ Also use the love that I have for you as a motive, because love does not deny anything to the beloved.

Eighth, pray to Me for the Church and for spiritual and temporal rulers, for your spiritual fathers and family members, friends and benefactors and for special intentions for you and for others. Finally thank Me.

Our Father

Hail Mary.

¹⁰³ Cf. Ps 10,6 (*Vulg*)

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Lk 12, 49.

Concerning the effects that were a consequence of the Incarnation. Practice. ¹⁷.

Prelude

4382 Firstly, how much should I humble myself, O most high Lord, when I raise my eyes to Your infinite Majesty, before whom all the Angelic spirits stand trembling with reverence.¹⁰⁵ My wretched unworthiness weighs me down, since I am less than a worm. This is even truer when I dwell on the malice with which I have offended Your supreme goodness!

Secondly, what is more, I come before You, O lord, unburdened in Your eyes by Your sweet mercy, by means of which You lament over those who will not allow themselves to be gathered under the wings of Your loving providence.¹⁰⁶ You are the one who draws me to Yourself without me even thinking of coming to You.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, I come allowing myself to be attracted and drawn by You. So I come confidently, but with humility and shame.

Thirdly, I come, O Lord, to consult with You in prayer. However, since I am not coming by my own strength, nor could I do this, I do not know how to pray properly. However, because You are drawing me to Yourself in mercy, I beg that You be the one to move me within to contemplate and plead in a manner that is pleasing to You and beneficial to me.

Meditation

4383 The mystery of the Incarnation is so sweet and exalted that you will never finish delving into it. So now consider the effects that follow immediately upon the event of the Incarnation.

Firstly: As a consequence the Angels experienced great the joy that came about first of all from seeing God's glory at work in such a splendid manner and in seeing His most merciful will fulfilled: secondly, in seeing a throne that was once more placed above them in heaven being occupied with greater glory than all the choirs put together and their fall beginning to be repaired, something for which they had longed for so much: thirdly, at seeing human nature so gloriously put on display, the fall of which had saddened so many of them and for whose salvation so many of them had greatly thirsted. If I a sinner doing penance can cause so much joy¹⁰⁸ what

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Gal 2, 10.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Mt 23, 37; Lk 13, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Jn 6, 44; 12, 32.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Lk 15, 7. 10.

must it have been to see the establishment of the One who was to save sinners, without whom no one could have been saved? Fourthly, in seeing the beginning of the undoing of the works of the devil who had already been cast out of heaven and with whom they had formed an irreconcilable enmity and state of war and against whom now by virtue of the One who had been conceived they would prevail on earth as they had prevailed in heaven.

4384 Secondly, the praises of God were revitalized among the Angels because it is their duty to praise God in all His works. However, as this was the greatest of them their praise had to be more superlative.

Thirdly, it is not beyond belief that among the Angels God implanted a new feeling and enjoyment of glory which came about because of their Lord the firstborn and that He prepared a glorious banquet and a gift for them.

Fourthly, the Angels came to earth to adore Him and recognise Him as their Prince, singing new hymns to Him.¹⁰⁹

Secondly, Mary's first reaction was joy, in the first place because she saw that her prayer had been answered so completely and her wishes so abundantly satisfied as she had wanted two things most ardently, namely that the world would be saved by means of Christ and that God's will would be accomplished in her and through her. By doing just what He had done God had carried this out in the best possible manner. Secondly, the Holy Spirit had infused into her extraordinary joy of mind and physical delight. Thirdly, by means of the new ocean of grace which she received from God, as if she had reached the summit of the grace which God had prepared for her, she was freed from the consequences of sin and became the Mother of God and Queen of heaven and of earth. Fourthly, through seeing and feeling the presence, the happiness, the hymns and the adoration of the angelic spirits that turned the little room into paradise.

4385 Secondly, Mary adored Christ in her womb, praising Him and thanking Him for the graces that He had given her and following that she always rested and moved about with great reverence, just as the priest does when he is carrying the Blessed Sacrament. She never took her eyes off thinking about her divine Son whom she carried within herself with humility and great sweetness, with whom she spoke, to whom she prayed. She blessed Him continually and was careful to never do anything that would be unworthy of His presence.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Lk 2, 13-14.

Thirdly, Maria wanted to see Him born and yet she sighed saying: “O, when will I ever be allowed to see You born, my God, my Lord, my Son?” She thought that the nine months were a thousand years, because she was filled with desire. Nevertheless she was content with the divine will.

Thirdly, it is credible that the holy fathers felt some special consolation, even though they may not have known the reason. On the other hand the evil spirits would have felt more than the usual sadness. In the world creatures were given reason to rejoice.

Action

4386 Firstly, force yourself to feel the Angels’ emotions by joining in their joy and their aspirations with your mind and making yourself rejoice too for the same reasons. Secondly, give praise together with them. Thirdly, adore together with them.

Secondly, do exactly the same with Maria by sharing in her joy for the same reasons that made her rejoice, by thinking over everything until you outwardly feel along with her the taste of her mental joy. Secondly, rejoice, praise and pray with her in the same way.

Thirdly, finally withdraw into yourself and consider how joyful Christ’s presence is. When you enter into this thought it will draw you out of yourself and leave you alone with Christ and this will give rise to repentance for your past life and the resolve to emend. This will be followed by prayer to the Baby who lies in the maternal womb and pray that through His humility and mercy He will grant you forgiveness and help.

Pray to the Angels to be with you in your request just as you have accompanied them in their affections and actions. Think of seeing them asking this little Word¹¹⁰ to deepen your prayer significantly and grant you confidence and perseverance.

Finally, make the usual requests as on other occasions. Do not conclude without a devout and heartfelt thanksgiving for having been taken into His most holy presence accompanied by so many spiritual gifts and feelings.

Our Father, Hail Mary.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Rom 9, 28 (*Vulg.*).

Preamble

4387 *Christ to the soul:* O soul who comes before Me to contemplate my mysteries and to pray to Me. If you realise how much I have humbled Myself by coming to you, why having seen Me, can you not humble yourself? Therefore, just as I lead you towards humility by means of My lowliness as an example, so I will rouse you by you being indebted to My grandeur.

Secondly, I wish to introduce you to My secrets and give you a taste for them if you ask. However, pray to Me that you may recognise which are the main graces for which you should now ask to be given to you for prayer and as your prayer continues you will obtain the grace to beg and to beg properly.

Sou: I am convinced of Your humility, O Lord. However, grant me humility, give me the grace of prayer and may You be the one who presents and explains Your sacred mysteries to me inspiring me on to acts of virtue.

Meditation

4388 *Christ:* Listen to Me, then. You know that in itself My birth happened with supreme perfection and was so astonishing that no one could describe how I came to be.¹¹¹ However, at least consider its circumstances.

Firstly, consider how I was born away from my Mother's home, during a journey in a place which at the time was of no consequence, in a stable, so that you will realise that I came to be a pilgrim and to teach you that you were to live as a pilgrim on earth.¹¹²

Secondly, consider how I was born at midnight in the middle of winter,¹¹³ in the first place because I did not waste any time but as soon as I was born I started to suffer for you. Consider well what an uncomfortable experience that was. Also because man's heart was dark and cold and needed the fire which I brought from heaven,¹¹⁴ that would enlighten and warm it.

4389 Thirdly: consider how I was born into such great need of human assistance, because I was homeless, had no roof over Me, was without a fire, without

¹¹¹ Cf. Is 53, 8; At 8, 33.

¹¹² Cf. Ps 38, 13; Heb 11, 13; 1 Pet 2.

¹¹³ Or at the height of winter.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Lk 12, 49.

nourishment which would have been of assistance to My Mother. I had no comfortable clothing in which to be wrapped but had to use some of her clothing, so that you might clearly understand that I had not come into the world for My own comfort, but to be of comfort to you. Secondly, I did this so that you might have a greater love for Me when you thought deeply about how, although I was the one who made everything and who provided¹¹⁵ everything that was needed had, I put Myself into such a needy situation for love of you. Thirdly, I did this so that you would not experience more keenly the loss of what is necessary, but, following My example, grow in the desire for what is necessary.

Fourth, consider how there was no decoration where I was born. First of all this was because I did not need any decorations as, in Myself, I am not only more fair than men but than the angels.¹¹⁶ You decorate things to make them appear more graceful, and I cannot be made more graceful. Secondly, this was so that your eye would not be distracted by looking at anything else but Me, and your whole attention would be fixed on me so that all your happiness would consist in turning your eyes away from the world and fixing them only on Me. Thirdly, this took place because decorations should be in proportion to what is decorated since not every kind of decoration is suitably for everything. However, as all My glory comes from within,¹¹⁷ it is not improved by external polishing. In this respect accept the spiritual ornaments of My Mother's virtues, and of my Guardian, of the presence, witness and festivities of the angels, of divine wonder, of adoration and of praise of the shepherds. Fourth, this took place so that you would not think that I had come to reign and save immediately. Fifthly, this happened because I came to renew the world and introduce new heavenly ways of acting, whereas the custom of Princes to decorate the rooms on the birth of a son was old and outdated, and so I regarded it as fallen out of use.

4390 Fifthly, consider that although I am God, nevertheless to show you that I had become truly man and not just in appearance, I had all the physical conditions that other babies have, and I was weak, could not speak, experienced nothing but natural feelings, suffered ordinary needs, cried, I got dirty and made My Mother control me. However, I did not do this like some children who are a bother and make a fuss by their nature, since I had the most perfect disposition. In other respects I lacked nothing that other children usually have. I gave My Mother no indication that I

¹¹⁵ In the text *proveggo*.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Ps 44,3.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Ps 44, 14.

recognised her, so that when I looked at her I did not know her in a natural way but only in a supernatural way as God with the higher part of My mind. This made her wonder; since she already knew that I was God, just as you are amazed at My degree of humility and want to imitate Me in this.

Sixth, consider how I was born in time to be counted among the servants of Ceasar Augustus, the Emperor, with my Mother and Joseph, and to pay the tax. This was in the first place as you know because I was really the servant of all men to free them from servitude.¹¹⁸ Secondly, this happened so that you would not think that you are above being subject to spiritual and temporal princes or to those who are above you. Thirdly, it happened so that I would be counted among other people and sanctify everyone.

Action

4391 So, my soul occupy yourself with considerations such as these and love and welcome Me with devotion, compassion and reverence since my coming will be of no profit to you if you do not receive me worthily. In order to motivate yourself more effectively, fix your gaze on Me and speak to Me from the bottom of your heart using the above considerations while saying:

“Oh my most sweet Lord, why were You born in such a wretched and uncomfortable place, You, whose glory the heavens cannot contain and who made heaven and earth for us!

O Lord, what kind of companionship for You is living with oxen and donkeys, You who are seated above the Seraphim and in whose presence stand thousands upon thousands of the noblest spirits!

O my most sweet God, how many annoyances did You endure in our valley of tears!” Continue doing this step by step.

Secondly, occupy yourself by turning to the ancient Fathers, who wished so strongly to behold Me, calling upon them in such a heartfelt way and inviting them to come and see that I have become such that all flesh can see Me. How profoundly will the recollection of the ancients move you when you make a comparison between their desire and your own tepidity, by seeing how warm they were, even though I was at a distance from them, and you, who are so close to Me are yet so cold! They had no

¹¹⁸ Cf. Phil 2, 7.

consolation other than to think or converse about Me, since they in fact were not worthy of My presence. You enjoy My presence and yet have so little taste for it!

4392 Thirdly, when you stirred up fervour and discovered your mistake, weep over your misfortune.

Fourth, taught by My example, resolve to withdraw all your love of the world and place it in My alone. Ask that of My as a grace and a favour, so that, when I come to you, My coming may be to your salvation.

Fifth, consider that as I have come for everyone, the salvation of each person is My delight. Therefore, pray to Me for everyone in this order: for My Church, for pastors and Princes who take My place on earth. Pray for those who are closest to you in spirit or who are related by blood or friendship and who have helped you. Pray for the enterprises which are of most concern to you, for yourself and for others, for the living and the dead, and for those who have asked for your prayers, since the trust and faith that they have placed in you obliges you to pray for them.

Finally, give thanks.

Our Father, Hail Mary.

Concerning the altar, the cross and the first word. Practice⁵⁰.

Preamble

4393 Firstly, Your grandeur moves me to be humble, O Lord, when I approach You in prayer. However, Your extreme humility moves me just as much, especially the way this is demonstrated on the cross. So when I wish to contemplate the mysteries of the cross I throw myself down on the ground body and soul in Your sight.

Secondly, these mysteries are higher the smaller they appear to be from the outside. So I beg of You to lead and lift me up to them and give me a taste of them so that they will be of benefit to me.

Meditation

4394 His torture should have been finished when our loving Jesus was placed on the cross since nothing else remained to be done, but that was just beginning.

The distressed Little Angel was fixed to the cross by His hands and feet in great pain, with His eyes raised to heaven. To hammer the nails once again they shifted the cross unskillfully so as to cause more torment.

Then consider how His face, His stomach and His whole body were laid out. The thorns pierced His sacred forehead, the cross pressed on His back and they knelt on Him without any respect. He found Himself in pain from head to foot.

They struck the nails again and this caused Him great pain. If they had to move the cross they did not think of lifting it up but dragged it along the ground. O most holy body, how much you have been dragged!

Secondly, when they raised the cross Maria could only see one arm. O what great sorrow that was! When did she hear blows and cries as they came from the cross? She saw the Jews laughing and being very happy at the great suffering of her Son and what grief did that cause her? The compassionate Mother waited for them to raise the cross. With what great apprehension! Magdalene, or perhaps another woman, or even His Mother handed John or another friend a piece of cloth to drape around Him out of modesty and God wanted it to be placed around Him.

4395 Secondly, they lift the cross up. Here you see that the body is held by only three nails. Now how much pain is that, especially for the hands? The arms that have to support the body are stretched, the wounds swell, and the joints that have already been dislocated become indescribably painful. Secondly, they lift the cross over the hole which they have prepared in the ground, and allow it fall in. O my most merciful Jesus, what pain You suffered from that violent jolt? It was a wonder that in fact Your hands were not torn and that Your body did not fall down. Because of this Your whole body sank and collapsed so that Your knees protruded outwards, and were completely sprained by the abrupt plunge of the cross.

Thirdly, they secure the cross by means of rocks and timber, so that it will not fall and then raise it up from behind and raise it so that it might be seen clearly. How the raising of the cross almost caused Your merciful mother to fall dead, but she was sustained by love and God's will so that she thought more deeply. She fixed her gaze on the cross without batting an eyelid and she tried to get as close as she could and casting her eyes over the whole body she saw the head crowned with thorns, the face covered with blood, wounds in the hands and feet, the skin all torn, but she recovered to concentrate on the divine face of her beloved. O what loving glances! Indeed now a sword pierced her heart! The other women and John did the same and all of them cried.

4396 Third, they then crucified the two thieves which caused her more revulsion. When this was finished some went away and others, such as the soldiers, remained to look on. However, the Jews, that is the princes, priests and Pharisees, could not see enough of it because of the joy they found in His bad fortune, and they made fun of Him saying: "Now that You are there, come down from the cross, if You are the Son

of God, and we will believe in You. Now save Yourself, if You really are going to save others, O King of Israel,”¹¹⁹ and other insulting words. Because of this His merciful mother experienced intolerable anxiety and, because He wanted to take our infirmities upon Himself, also experienced the deepest grief because of their jibes.

4397 Fourth, but without being affected by such things she raised her eyes and her voice to the Father saying: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”¹²⁰ Where is there revenge in Christ on His enemies who begs the Father to forgive them. You would expect that they would be forced to admit their error, or that His blood would run cold while they were at the height of offending Him but He pardoned them and tried to have the Father forgive them. Second, He excused them because of their ignorance and did not make their offense worse as we do. Third, He so beautifully warns those who fall to repent and to take courage. Fourth, when His good mother heard this prayer she concluded: “If He is praying to the Father to forgive these people, He must also want me to forgive them.” Consequently she did two things: firstly she forgave them from her heart for the very serious offense which they had committed by killing her innocent Son. Secondly, she prayed asking together with her Son that the Eternal Father would forgive them, perhaps saying: “Your Son is mine and I forgive them; forgive them too, O Eternal Father.” Fifth, we can believe that this prayer had an effect on some of them, to the extent that they began to admit their sin, even if they were not completely repentant at the time, but only after they had been more enlightened. Sixth, others remained with hardened hearts, resisting the grace God was offering them. When these were satisfied with what they had seen they departed and went off to eat. O what ruthless souls!

4398 Fifthly: in the meantime the soldiers divided Christ’s clothing and when they came to the seamless robe they did not wish to split it, but they cast dice to see who should take it. This caused His mother great sorrow. We might surmise that Magdalene bought the clothing off them and that His mother took it and kissed it, especially where it was stained with blood or where flesh or skin had stuck to it. Then she immediately looked into her Son’s face.

Action

4399 Then, O Christian, gaze on your Lord raised up on the cross. Look at every aspect and contemplate it well as if you were actually present at the cross. To get a feeling for what you are contemplating recall His glory and power, and compare that

¹¹⁹ Cf. Mt 27, 39-43; Mk 15, 29-32. Lk 23, 35-37.

¹²⁰ Cf. Lk 23, 34.

with what you are seeing upon the cross, and feel stabbed with sorrow, wonder, love and desire to serve your God.

Secondly, accept God's gift as he presents you His Son on the wood of the cross since it is certain that this is why He was raised up there and so gaze on Him, contemplate Him, welcome Him, imitate Him and become transformed into Him.

Third, learn to forgive your enemies and to pray for them.

Fourth, be sorry for having crucified Christ, by offending Him with your sins, not just out of ignorance but also out of malice.

Fifth, ask His forgiveness just as He forgave those who actually put Him on the cross and to prepare your soul to receive forgiveness and to grant you the grace of amendment.

Sixth, if Christ prayed for His enemies, all the more should a Christian pray for his Mother Church, for his friends and for himself.

Seventh, thank the Father and the Son for what they have done for you, and just as the Jews cursed Him you should praise Him at least as much.

Our Father, Ave Maria.

Concerning the motive for the descent of the Holy Spirit following the coming of Christ.

Practice

4400 Come Holy Spirit fill the heart of the faithful soul that You see before You. Visit her mind and fill the breast which You have created Yourself with supreme grace,¹²¹ since she is empty and comes to the sea of grace.

If the unclean spirit sees that I am empty he enters into me with seven other worse spirits to my eternal damnation.¹²² So, You, the cleanest of Spirits, occupy the house of my heart first, indeed harass the cruel invader who has already entered, whose vile presence, makes me just as unworthy of Your respect, as it places me in need of Your help. Because of this I have recourse to You.

If my enemy had sufficient strength to stop me having recourse to You, I trust that Your mercy will be enough not to keep me away.

¹²¹ This is a summary of the antiphon *Veni sancte Spiritus, reple tuorum corda fidelium* and the *Veni Creator Spiritus*.

¹²² Cf, Lk 11, 26.

If Your eyes are really as clear as they are said to be, that You cannot endure evil, or consider what is iniquitous, remove what is malicious from me so that I may remain in Your sight.

So that You may fill my emotions with love, consent firstly to enlighten my intellect with the contemplation of Your mysteries, especially Your loving coming close to me, as You are God's love in the human heart which You created to love God with no other love than the love with which God loves Himself and us.

Meditation

4401 O Holy Spirit, because Your coming is a very mysterious result of God's love, if I understand it well, I will certainly be set on fire by this holy love.

Secondly, my desire constrains me with the guidance of You most blessed light penetrating the depths of my being to understand it and to ponder it over well. I shall begin in the first place by pondering how God is filled with infinite riches in Himself. In Sacred Scripture this is expressed by terms such as loftiness, grandeur, power, beauty, goodness, sympathy, sweetness, beatitude, glory, repose, mercy, wisdom, rule, divinity, quintessence, spirit, life, eternity and the like. Nevertheless because I know that God is beyond description, and that such riches are nothing but Himself, I deduce that these words do not really or sufficiently express such immense treasures, and I remain in the shadows which makes me see and firmly hold that these are very precious, beautiful, sweet, and most worthy things, but of a higher worth, beauty, sweetness and value than these words or similar concepts could convey. By means of this firm faith I value infinitely God's infinite riches.¹²³

4402 Second, I ponder over how, to bring these riches to their climax and to enjoy them with pleasure beyond understanding, God knows and loves them, since they would not have achieved perfection without His knowledge and His love, nor would they have provided any joy. However such knowledge and love is not like our knowledge and love nor do they come within the grasp of our intellect and this happens not only because they have the same characteristics as divine riches, but because they are the same as them.

Third, I ponder that the Word of God was born by means of knowledge, and that You, O Holy Spirit proceed from love. I realise that these riches, which share the divine nature, are received from God through knowledge and love in a different way to how they are by their nature. They are the same riches that are divine in the

¹²³ These expressions are reminiscent of Dionysus.

Word and the Holy Spirit, but in a different form. The reason for this is that there is one God only, and only one being who is very rich in these essential riches. There are three Persons who possess this one nature in three different ways: as One, as three Persons, as knowledge and as love.¹²⁴

4403 Fourth, I ponder over how when God wanted to create an image of Himself outside Himself He created the world which would represent the divine riches by means of a multitude and variety of creatures that would include, spiritual and corporeal, heavenly and earthly, simple and composite, live and lifeless, within which there are diverse and different grades, properties, excellence, strength and activity, which are nonetheless united and all connected to make up the universe, in which they represent God's supreme riches, and which altogether form a unity.

Fifth, because knowledge and love could not be missing from the perfection of divine riches this image had to contain a resemblance to its divine exemplar and had to possess knowledge of self and love of self. The intellectual creature, being the only one who understands and loves all the good that is in the world, is the one who possesses the climax of the perfect working of the world.

4404 Sixth, what is most beautiful and good about the world is that it represents God as the image of His beauty and goodness by means of which it was formed. Thus the most perfect knowledge we could have of a creature is recognising it as an image of God and moving on from that to an understanding of God. The most perfect love is to love the creature for God's sake, as the creature is related to God, so that by following that path the human mind will be raised to know and love the infinite treasure of God's goodness.¹²⁵

Seventh, since all the world's riches, that is all the perfection of creatures, are derived from God's perfection, it follows that the creature's knowledge and love come from that of the Creator. This is why God sent His Word to earth, who enlightened every person who was born in this world by becoming man, and why He sent His love to you so that it would set everything on fire by inflaming the human mind with pure burning love of God. This is the reason why following the Son of God You came down on us, O Holy Spirit, to complete this vast plan of God's supreme goodness.

¹²⁴ This is a very clear example of theological meditation, which is both profound and simple.

¹²⁵ Not an echo of St Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*.

Action

4405 From these consideration I deduce how much I am obliged to know and love God, and what a great mistake I make if I neglect to know and love Him. Because, in the first place, this is destroying, as much as I can, the beautiful image of God, by taking away the main characteristic that makes it eminent and extremely noble, while at the same time extracting the knowledge and love from within my soul which are summit of all its perfection. I am abandoning what enables me to rise up to God from within because I am made in God's image.

Second, I do not enjoy created riches since these are enjoyed by knowing and loving and, what is more important, I do not enjoy divine riches. Third, I ruin what God did on earth by diverting it from its objective and taking away its perfection, and what is worse; I ruin the mission of his knowledge and love on earth.

Second, having recognised my error I feel bitter sorrow and I cry and coming to my senses I yearn to experience God's work and yet have rendered them useless and deprived myself of my own wellbeing. O how I would cry, if I clearly recognised my error! I beg of You, Holy Spirit, enlighten me about this, convincing me of my sin, and granting me the gift of tears to bewail, so that, if I have not made You welcome as a fire, I would at least welcome You as water flowing from my eyes in two streams.¹²⁶

4405 Third, likewise I have recourse to You for remission of my error, because just as You refresh what is arid, with flowing tears, so also wash what is soiled removing the stain and healing the wound, closing the scars.¹²⁷ Forgive me, O my most sweet Love, for having rejected Your love. If because You are love, You cannot but love me, let Your loving affection operate in me by forgiving me, not because I deserve it, but by means of the burning flame of Your love, O divine Love, by which You love souls and save them because You love them by drawing them to You through Your mercy.

Fourth, I want to amend my error. I desire to love my kind Creator intensely from now on. O when will my heart be filled with this love? When will this heavenly fire consume all other love in me? When will my heart not dwell on any creatures, but rise above them to the Creator, by loving all in God alone and for God?

¹²⁶ Cf. Jer 9, 1.

¹²⁷ This comes from the Liturgical Sequence: *Veni sancte Spiritus...*, *Lave quod est sordidum etc.*

Fifth, I resolve to redirect my feeling in this way, lest it ever rest on anything that does not come from God, in whom alone my true good abides and not in anything else. I make this firm proposal and unshakable decree with all the strength that I can muster.

4406 Sixth, as You can see I have good intentions, O my Lord, but they will not be productive by means of my power, since my soil is dry and uncultivated and yields nothing but thorns and weeds.¹²⁸ All that is good in me is due to Your grace. Thus I ought to rely on Your good actions in order to observe what I have promised and to carry out these holy proposals. The streams of wishing and fulfilling flow from the same source. So, I beg of You, O Father of the Poor and source of our entire store,¹²⁹ to teach me and help me to do Your will, because You are my God, and Your Spirit will lead me along the right path,¹³⁰ and give me life by no other means than through your name.

Seven, I also pray for all those for whom I should pray. Give life to the Body of the Holy Church, move Your chief members to perform their particular work, spread Your strength to all those members who need it. May my prayers be effective for all those who are closest to me and whom You wish me to help through prayer.

Eighth, I thank You for lifting me above myself. You have raised me to the knowledge and experience of Your heavenly sacraments.

Our Father, Hail Mary.

¹²⁸ Cf. Gen 3, 18.

¹²⁹ These titles are taken from the sequence: *Veni sancte Spiritua*.

¹³⁰ Cf Wis 10, 10; Ps 106, 7.