

STUDY RESOURCES FOR THE CONSTITUTIONS OF THE CAPUCHIN FRIARS MINOR

A.D. 2020



WITH ALL MY HEART AND SOUL

A FRANCISCAN WAY TO CONTEMPLATION

as introduction to III chapter of the Capucins's Contitutions

by Prospero Rivi OFMCap



(V. Carducci, *The stigmata of St. Francis*, Madrid 1630)

“And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (Jn 12, 32)
St. Francis drawn into the vortex of the Christ’s love

INDEX

PREMISE

INTRODUCTION

1. Contemplative prayer in the Catechism of the Church
2. The Struggle to Pray

CHAPTER 1

God's Face is revealed to the Little Ones

1. Christ crucified, full and definitive revelation of the Face of God - Love
2. Personal and Liturgical Prayer
3. Knowledge of God and Knowledge of Oneself
4. Being able to be silent

CHAPTER 2

The Word is always the Foundation

1. Point of Departure: Lectio Divina
2. From the Word to Life
3. Prayer of the Heart: A humble but precious tool

CHAPTER 3

Mental Prayer in the Franciscan Tradition

1. Some fundamental Texts

Writings and examples from St. Francis

- (a) From the Rule without Bull XXII and XXIII
- (b) From the Rule with Bull V and X
- (c) From Second Letter to the Faithful
- (d) From Biographies

Mental Prayer amongst the Capuchins

- (a) The Constitutions of the Friars Minor Capuchins (1536)
 - (b) The voice of spiritual writers
 - (c) Present Constitutions of the Friars Minor Capuchins
2. From the Letter of Fr. Mauro Jöhri, Minister General of the Capuchins (4th October 2016)
 3. A Difficult but Precious Inheritance

CHAPTER 4

Mental Prayer as a Prayer of the heart - a Franciscan Journey

Discovering that we are loved

Loved as we are

Not just compliance

Like children in the Beloved Son

Loveable because we are loved

Becoming loveable with our brothers and sisters, too

A Heart that is bigger than our own
A gaze that heals wounds
Some practical suggestions

CONCLUSION

Learning to pray means letting ourselves be loved

Translator's Note:

In citing authors writing in languages other than English, official translations have been used where available. Where these are not available, I have taken the liberty to freely translate these excerpts, assuming in a spirit of Franciscan fraternity that the authors have no objection. The original Italian text also contains some 84 footnotes, most of which we decided not to translate for the English edition because many of them refer to works in Italian, which are rarely available in English.

Heather Tolfree

“Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt. 6, 6).

“The Christian exists or disappears with prayer” (H. U. Von Balthasar).

“I believe because I pray” (K. Rahner).

*“My secret is very simple: I pray, and in my prayer I fall in love with Jesus.
And I understand that praying to Him is loving Him,
and this means carrying out His word” (Mother Teresa of Calcutta).*

*If you have lost the taste for prayer,
you will regain the desire for it by returning humbly to its practice.
Do not forget the witness of history:
faithfulness to prayer or its abandonment
are the test of the vitality or decadence of the religious life (Pope Paul VI, Ev. Test. 42) .*

*“Prayer is the breath of the soul and the oasis of peace
in which we can reach the water
which refreshes our spiritual life and transforms our existence” (*
Pope Benedict XVI).

PREFACE

In September, 2017 I concluded my service as educator of young men on their journey towards religious life. Having begun in 1972 - with a gap of three years for higher studies in Rome - I had firstly been involved with adolescents and then with young adult men for about 40 years. From 1985 I had the task of preparing candidates for the Capuchin Franciscan life in Northwest Italy; twenty years as Novice Master, five years with the Postulants, and three years with Post-Noviciate students.

It was a personal grace to have spent my Noviciate during the Second Vatican Council, in 1963-64, and to have lived through the exciting post-conciliar period, with its many lively attempts at renewal which religious life encountered, and in which I was actively involved. On returning to Rome in 1985 I was called by my superiors to be the trainer of young men who were beginning their journey towards our form of life, having some 25 years of rather bold experimentation, shared with brothers of my own age, many of whom later changed direction. The three years I spent in Rome were valuable, settling the previous tumultuous years and sifting through what was holding us back, and should have been dropped. I have always loved and appreciated liturgical prayer and also vocal prayer in community; but for a long time I had no longer been able to pray personally, to just hold the gaze of the Lord. It was a sign of the fatigue which I was suffering in my life as a friar, with all kinds of inconsistencies. In Rome, in the peace of the International College, whilst continuing my studies for my License at the Institute of Franciscan Spirituality, I benefitted from talks on vocational growth by the Gregorian Institute of Psychology, offered to students who attended the Pontifical University. Sr. Anna Bissi's accompaniment helped me, above all, to recognise the interior poverty I was immersed in, to confront it with honesty and to lay the foundations for a recovery of that personal prayer that I had practised with joy in my Noviciate and the first years of religious life, and which in my spiritual family is called "*orazione mentale*" or mental prayer.

On my return to my Province, I became the trainer of candidates for Franciscan life, and I no longer left aside the daily personal meeting with the Lord, and I also tried to introduce mental prayer to the young people, who for years had been entrusted to me, whilst respecting the characteristics of each one. The notes that I offer here were also developed during retreats and courses on spiritual exercises, requested by numerous friars, sisters and laity, and are in large part the fruit of this long School of Prayer. These were designed for, and offered mainly to those who belonged to the Franciscan family. Hopefully this will be a small contribution to the continuation of a reflection, which aids the recovery of that contemplative dimension which remains an essential component of our charism. This is not just for our benefit, but for the entire people of God, who urgently need to recover the contemplative dimension of faith, a faith which will only be kept alive if its beauty is appreciated.

As Pope John Paul II stated in his Encyclical *Novo millennio inuente* (No. 34) or the *New millennial beginning*, every fraternity had to be or become a "prayer school", intended precisely to initiate and accompany those engaging with contemplative prayer, the only way of ensuring that faith amongst our people will persist.

My generation has made a huge effort to accept the revival of those particular values of the Franciscan tradition; arguments against them have been, and in places still are, manifold and

stubborn. On the other hand young people are eager to receive this nourishment, and most of those who have committed themselves to our form of life practise it with conviction and with joyful commitment.

It was a great gift to receive the beautiful circular letter from the Minister General of my Order, just over a year ago, sent to all the various components of the Capuchin family. With reference to Chapter III of the Constitutions, he reaffirmed the importance of prayer in general, but he especially recalled with a delicate and fraternal vigour the need to revive so called “mental prayer”, to practise it together as well as in private. I thought that summarizing it and offering it here as a broad synthesis would be a precious contribution to the deepening of the topic we are engaging with.

I think that in theory contemplative prayer is regarded unanimously as an essential dynamic in Christian life. From the moment when the Son of God assumed a human form from the Virgin Mary, we have finally been able to see the true essential nature, or “face” of God. Whoever adheres to the Christian faith finds in their heart a melting desire to contemplate this face of God in splendour. But when we get down to the concrete, and we want to begin to follow this path, it is not easy to find the right direction with the tools we need, the suggestions for our inner frames of mind to make this possible. The following pages comprise a modest attempt to outline a pathway which can be followed by whoever takes it up with humble determination, in the firm conviction that the fruits which the Spirit allows us to gather along this path will be nourishing and satisfying.

INTRODUCTION

Contemplative Prayer in the **Catechism of the Catholic Church** (nn. 2709-2719)

Some texts will be referred to which contribute to the theme that will be outlined, and show the importance with which the Magisterium of the Church recognises in this kind of prayer, which in the Franciscan tradition has received the name mental prayer, and which the new Catechism calls *Contemplative Prayer* and *Prayer of Recollection*.

What is contemplative prayer? St. Teresa answers: “Contemplative prayer [oración mental] in my opinion is nothing other than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us” (St. Teresa of Jesus, The Book of Her Life, 8,5) . Contemplative prayer seeks him “whom my soul loves.” (Song 1:7; cf. 3:14). It is Jesus, and in him, the Father. We seek him, because to desire him is always the beginning of love, and we seek him in that pure faith which causes us to be born of him and to live in him. In this inner prayer we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself.

The choice of the time and duration of the prayer arises from a determined will, revealing the secrets of the heart. One does not undertake contemplative prayer only when one has the time: one makes time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up, no matter what trials and dryness one may encounter. One cannot always meditate, but one can always enter into inner prayer, independently of the conditions of health, work, or emotional state. The heart is the place of this quest and encounter, in poverty and in faith.

Entering into contemplative prayer is like entering into the Eucharistic liturgy: we "gather up:" the heart, recollect our whole being under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter into the presence of him who awaits us. We let our masks fall and turn our hearts back to the Lord who loves us, so as to hand ourselves over to him as an offering to be purified and transformed.

Contemplative prayer is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more. (Cf. Lk 7:36-50; 19:1-10). But he knows that the love he is returning is poured out by the Spirit in his heart, for everything is grace from God. Contemplative prayer is the poor and humble surrender to the loving will of the Father in ever deeper union with his beloved Son.

Contemplative prayer is the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty. Contemplative prayer is a covenant relationship established by God within our hearts (Cf. Jer 31:33). Contemplative prayer is a communion in which the Holy Trinity conforms man, the image of God, "to his likeness."

Contemplative prayer is also the pre-eminently intense time of prayer. In it the Father strengthens our inner being with power through his Spirit "that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith" and we may be "grounded in love." (Eph 3:16-17).

*Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. "I look at him and he looks at me": this is what a certain peasant of Ars in the time of his holy curé used to say while praying before the tabernacle. This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Thus it learns the "interior knowledge of our Lord," the more to love him and follow him. (Cf. St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 104).*

Contemplative prayer is hearing the Word of God. Far from being passive, such attentiveness is the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child. It participates in the "Yes" of the Son become servant and the Fiat of God's lowly handmaid.

*Contemplative prayer is silence, the "symbol of the world to come" (Cf. St. Isaac of Nineveh, *Tract. myst.* 66), or "silent love." (St. John of the Cross, *Maxims and Counsels*, 53). Words in this kind of prayer are not speeches; they are like kindling that feeds the fire of love. In this silence, unbearable to the "outer" man, the Father speaks to us his incarnate Word, who suffered, died, and rose; in this silence the Spirit of adoption enables us to share in the prayer of Jesus.*

Contemplative prayer is a union with the prayer of Christ insofar as it makes us participate in his mystery. The mystery of Christ is celebrated by the Church in the Eucharist, and the Holy Spirit makes it come alive in contemplative prayer so that our charity will manifest it in our acts.

Contemplative prayer is a communion of love bearing Life for the multitude, to the extent that it consents to abide in the night of faith. The Paschal night of the Resurrection passes through the night of the agony and the tomb - the three intense moments of the Hour of Jesus which his Spirit (and not "the flesh [which] is weak") brings to life in prayer. We must be willing to "keep watch with [him] one hour." (Cf. Mt 26:40).

This Catechism presents a good synthesis in numbers 2721-2724:

The Christian tradition comprises three major expressions of the life of prayer: vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplative prayer. They have in common the recollection of the heart.

Vocal prayer, founded on the union of body and soul in human nature, associates the body with the interior prayer of the heart, following Christ's example of praying to his Father and teaching the Our Father to his disciples.

Meditation is a prayerful quest engaging thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. Its goal is to make our own in faith the subject considered, by confronting it with the reality of our own life.

Contemplative prayer is the simple expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a gaze of faith fixed on Jesus, an attentiveness to the Word of God, a silent love. It achieves real union with the prayer of Christ to the extent that it makes us share in his mystery union with the prayer of Christ to the extent that it makes us share in his mystery.

In the **Catechism for Adults** (CEI) of the Italian Bishops' Conference (nn. 996-997), mental prayer is referred to as prayer of recollection, and it is said that "*as time passes, the practice of meditation*" ("which consists of reflecting on some truth of faith in order to believe it with greater conviction, loving it as a real and actual value, practising it with the help of the Holy Spirit, implies reflection, love and a sense of purpose") *becomes simply the heart prevailing with reflection. Gradually, we reach a prayer of recollection. We are liberated from particular images and thoughts from memories, worries and plans. We focus a simple loving attention towards God, to Jesus Christ, to some aspect of his perfection, to some salvation event. We remain in an attitude of silent love before the Lord present in our heart. We allow ourselves to be transformed by his Spirit, which can lead to consolation or desolation, but for certain to purification and strengthening of our charity. When the fervour of this experience is achieved, one can return to discursive meditation or to vocal prayer.*

2. The Struggle to Pray.

"The Lord gives prayer to those who pray" (Peter Damascene)

For many Christians today, praying is a difficult undertaking. Some sidestep it, saying that it is of no use, or "to work is to pray"; others get close to praying, but make the excuse of not finding time, and those who recognise the difficulty as real, but avoid dealing with it because they do not know how to do it, where to start from. There are also many amongst the most devout, who spout words like the pagans. Praying, however, is not a question of what to say, rather a matter of love, which can be expressed in words, but also in silence, and which progressively surrounds the whole of life, making it a unique and incessant prayer.

However, there is one unavoidable fact - whoever tries to pray more and better very soon discovers that *praying is difficult*. Why?

Prayer is an interior and spiritual act, and internal activities are hard for us who are immersed in the material and attracted to things which affect the senses. This is especially true for us today: we live immersed in a river of images, words, sounds and sensations.

Prayer is an activity which involves both intelligence and the heart, and therefore it is a tiring enterprise. In general, we work more willingly with our hands than with our heads; and furthermore those who consider themselves to be intellectual, often work more often with their imagination or just with the intellect, rather than with the heart and intelligence together.

Prayer is a communication with the invisible. When we pray we cannot see, we cannot feel and we cannot touch our interlocutor, who is the Lord (our senses are completely in tilt). No wonder we get so tired of concentrating all our attention on Him. It is the problem of so many distractions, which should be patiently accepted as an expression of our poverty.

We are lazy by nature. Because of our inherent laziness, real prayer requires a huge effort to move it forward in a committed and serious way. It requires effort and good will to learn a profession or an art, it is the same in learning to do something difficult and not instinctive; it is no wonder that at the beginning prayer also requires a remarkable effort. It is normal, and it would be incorrect to think that this is not for us merely because we are not able to do it easily and spontaneously. An old and wise friar once said, "Prayer is the art of all arts" and we should persevere with the same perseverance as a pearl seeker.

Then there is the mystery of evil and the action of the great tempter-accuser (Satan or the Devil, the separator, the divider), who by very definition tries to divert humankind from union with God and so places countless obstacles in our journey towards a deeper and truer prayer. But with the Easter of the Lord, we were given the Paraclete, the advocate and defender who is seated at our side and feeds our heart with faith and confidence and truly gives us the good news of becoming children loved in the only Son.

When you pray, do not spout words like pagans (Mt. 6,7). Love and friendship can only deepen when it is possible to remain in silence with the other. As long as you need to speak to maintain contact, a relationship remains superficial. This is also true for a relationship with the Lord. Our prayer achieves maturity when we learn to feel good beside Him, without fear, keeping silent under his gaze. If we are committed to loving not with our voices but with actions in truth, "*Before Him we reassure our heart, whatever he reproaches us with, because God is greater than our heart and knows everything*" (1 John 19-20). He knows that we are little and fragile, and he loves us just as we are; we are only asked to carry on the journey. "*Who is the man?*" asks Don Primo Mazzolari - "*someone on the road towards Christ!*"

But the greatest obstacle to reach an authentic contemplative experience is the **restlessness of our heart**, which makes us feel unloveable and makes us continually doubt that we are worthy of the Lord. To spend a long time in silence next to someone whom we feel does not enjoy our company, and whom we do not think has good feelings towards us is difficult, and makes us feel uncomfortable. As we are so often dissatisfied with ourselves, we think that the Lord will also be dissatisfied with us, and so we are tempted to remove ourselves from his gaze. This is a delicate and complex issue, which we will return to again to discuss further.

CHAPTER I

GOD'S FACE IS REVEALED TO THE LITTLE ONES

In that time, Jesus said: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him". (Mt. 11, 25-27)

1. Christ crucified, full and final revelation of the Face of God - Love

To gain an authentic experience of God through contemplative prayer we need to be rooted in the knowledge of the nature of God, which has been fully revealed to us by the only Son. And to do this, we need to revise the meaning of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Theology has always tried to explain why the Son of God was left nailed to the cross. The most appropriate answer to emerge today is that only by this action was He able to fulfil the mission entrusted to him by the Father - to correct and heal the serious distortions which mankind has created over time about the identity of God, including the image of Him which is presented in so many pages of the Old Testament. In other words, only in Jesus, crucified and risen, can we know the true image of the one true God, who is no longer the unknowable God, on whom we have projected the ugly and misleading images which we have attributed to our many idols. Now, the True God is for us the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we are invited to enter into a relationship with this God, and granted this through the only begotten Son and guided by the Spirit, the Comforter.

One obstacle to overcome, then, is the widespread interpretation - both on the higher plane of a certain theology, as on a level of popular piety - that the death of Jesus on the cross is a necessary atonement which God the Father required for the infinitely serious offence against Him, the infinitely great sin of Adam, and those innumerable sins committed by mankind through the centuries. A God, understood in this way, is not so different from the blood-thirsty idols that human beings have developed in various cultures. Unfortunately, this interpretation of atonement/satisfaction presented with a subtle form of reasoning by an influential theologian such as Anselmo of Aosta (1033-1109), dominated Western theology and catechesis up to the recent past. Jansenism, in 17th century France, was the most dark and lasting expression of this. Only with Vatican Council II was this interpretation left behind, and the pages began to be turned to recover a more correct interpretation from the biblical facts. We can now see close up that the death of Jesus on the cross was necessary, but in what sense was it an act of obedience to the Father? This clarification is important to understand how it is only in the image of the crucified Jesus - an adorable image that every faithful disciple desires to contemplate - that we have the supreme and final revelation of the True God.

The Gospel accounts of the last week of Jesus in Jerusalem give evidence that He was fully aware of being very close to a violent death. This brings to the fore the problem of how the mission, which he felt he had received from the Father, can be brought to completion. He was completely devoted to this mission in the last three years of his life: showing in himself, by word and example, the face of the only true God. In the solemn sacerdotal prayer, which summarises and anticipates the profound sense of his coming amongst us and of his death on the cross, he said, *"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this*

is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world.” (Jn 17, 1-6)

The question that Jesus must confront in the face of his own death is how to continue to show the true essence of God, even to those who are about to kill him. That true face of God is seen in everything he said and did up till now, and the only way in which God exercises his regality is by freeing humankind from evil and taking care of them, even when dealing with enemies who deny him. This is what, more than anything else, rests in his heart, because it coincides with the mission which he identifies with: to be the full and complete revelation of the true face, the essential nature, of the one true God.

It is important to state, very clearly, the fact that Jesus does not aim to be killed, just as it is not his own death that God desires. What the Father asks of Jesus, which he accepts with his whole being, is to take his own story as the Son of Man and present it as the full revelation of him, the Father, who is Love and who continues to love humankind even when they are enemies and they deny him. This is what happened in the moment in which they rejected the Son, and condemned him to death.

The death of Jesus is therefore decided, and acted upon, by those who demanded and obtained from Pilate the order of crucifixion. The aim was to declare that he was not credible, not trustworthy, and they wanted him proved a liar, in the most sensational way, before all the people. Basically, with the crucifixion they were shouting, “No credit should be given to this man. He is just an imposter, a liar, who has made a scandalous claim regarding God and his Kingdom. The face of God which he claims to know is a resounding falsehood. He is just one “cursed by God”. This is witnessed in his being hung on the cross: “anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Dt. 21,23; Gal 3,13).

In the face of this situation Jesus does not flee. Instead, he chooses to remain freely and painfully, “I am deeply grieved, even to death” (Mt. 26,38). He continued to receive, share and witness to the desire and longing for God’s salvation for us, His determination to be our God, whom we can experience and feel as Abba, Father, who takes our lives into his own heart. This even when we behave as enemies and oppose him.

But in such a situation, to receive, share and witness this desire that the Father has towards us, Jesus can do nothing other than to accept the final thing that they have left him: the death they wish to inflict on him. It is in this death by crucifixion that man expresses his full and brutal denial of the face of God, whilst Jesus embodies and expresses the extreme gesture of unconditional longing for communion of God with man and his faithful and unlimited dedication to their good; seeking them and offering Himself, even to the point of giving up his life for them, for love of them. In this way, the pierced heart of the only Son of God-Love, becomes the inexhaustible source of that same Love, which wherever it reaches and is received will flower in true life, the life of God.

His “blood” has been “poured out” for us, and his “flesh” was “given” for us (Lk.22,19-20; 1Cor.1, 23-25). For us! For love of us and of our life, he offered himself, his own life. Not because the Father asked him to die; we killed him, he died because of our sins (Acts 2, 22-24; 1Cor. 15,3). But because he carried out this act of death - for which we express our hatred and our rejection

- as the gesture in which he expressed a total and unlimited goodness (that) He wants to the Father, and which the Father and he want for us. The death which we inflicted on him as an act of rejection was lived by him as an act of dedication which by suffering evil himself, is cancelled and so expiated. This is not just because he does not return it, but he roots out any possibility of perpetuating it through a chain of hatred that produces ever new hatred and vendetta. But even more because he wins using the power which the Father asked him to manifest, the only power that He wanted, and could use. It is the defenceless power of a Love which comes from that unimaginable and unlimited love of loving one's enemy, of doing good to those who hate, to bless those who curse. (Lk. 6, 26,35). In this sense, John can affirm that the Cross is the Hour of Glory, both for the Son and the Father; and this in fact is the hour of the supreme and definitive revelation of the Face of God. It is because he has loved his people (that is, all of us) right to the end, that the Son can say in all truth, "Philip, whoever sees me sees the Father" (Jn.14,9)

In summary, what was it that happened so decisively on the Cross to justify its absolute centrality in the very first Christian announcement, which Paul insisted on so powerfully? What happened was that God had finally conquered evil, without destroying alongside it the freedom which it had produced. He did not win by knocking out evil with his omnipotence, chasing it away beyond the confines of his Kingdom, but taking it upon himself, suffering through Christ its consequences, conquering evil with good, which is as if to say, hatred with love, rebellion with obedience, violence with gentleness, untruth with truth. On the Cross, Jesus could "*create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity*" (Eph. 2, 15-16): destroying enmity, not the enemy, destroying it within himself, not in others.

Pope Benedict explains it with his usual theological clarity:

The first Christian communities that Paul addressed knew well that Jesus was henceforth alive and risen; the Apostle does not only want to remind the Corinthians or the Galatians but also all of us that the Risen One is always the One who has been crucified. The "stumbling block" and "folly" of the Cross lie in the very fact that where there seems to be nothing but failure, sorrow and defeat, there is the full power of God's boundless love, for the Cross is an expression of love and love is the true power that is revealed precisely in this seeming weakness. For the Jews, the Cross is skandalon, that is, a snare or a stumbling block. It seems to hinder the faith of the devout Israelite who finds it difficult to discover anything like it in the Sacred Scriptures. With some courage, Paul seems to be saying that here the stakes at play are high: in the opinion of the Jews the Cross contradicts the very essence of God who manifested himself in wonderful signs. To accept the Cross of Christ therefore means bringing about a profound conversion in the way of relating to God. If, for the Jews, the reason for rejecting the Cross is found in Revelation, that is, the faithfulness to the God of the Fathers, for the Greeks, that is, the Gentiles, the criterion of judgement for opposing the Cross is reason. Indeed, the Cross for the latter is moría, folly, literally ignorance, that is, saltless food; thus, rather than an error, it is an insult to common sense... Paul himself, on more than one occasion had the bitter experience of the rejection of the Christian proclamation, considered "insipid", devoid of importance, not even worthy of being taken into consideration at the level of rational logic. For those who, like the Greeks, see perfection in the spirit, in pure thought, it was already unacceptable that God should become man, immersing himself in all the limitations of space and time. Then for them it was definitely

inconceivable to believe that a God could end on a Cross! And we see that this Greek logic is also the common logic of our time.

*But why did St Paul make precisely this, the word of the Cross, the fundamental core of his teaching? The answer is not difficult: the Cross reveals "the power of God" (cf. 1 Cor 1: 24), which is different from human power; indeed, it reveals his love: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (ibid., v. 25). Centuries after Paul we see that in history it was the Cross that triumphed and not the wisdom that opposed it. The Crucified One is wisdom, for he truly shows who God is, that is, a force of love which went even as far as the Cross to save men and women. God uses ways and means that seem to us at first sight to be merely weakness. The Crucified One reveals on the one hand man's frailty and on the other, the true power of God, that is the free gift of love: this totally gratuitous love is true wisdom" (Pope Benedict XVI, *St. Paul, The Apostle to the People*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana/San Paolo, Rome and Milan 2009, pp 73-78).*

Now we can see the Mystery of the Cross in a more appropriate light, and to understand why the saints were so irresistibly attracted to the One who promised, "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*" (Jn 12,32). But for the Lord to be able to attract us, we need to allow him to come closer to us; the magnet of his pierced heart has to cover the distance which allows him to take hold of our restless heart. For this to happen we have to want him, our gaze resting on his wounds and we read them correctly as supreme expressions of God who is Love. "*They will look on the one whom they have pierced.*" (Jn.19,37). Prayer before the crucifix, if viewed in the right light, can also become for us, as it was for Francis, a time in which the powerful magnet of his pierced heart reaches the fragile reality of our own heart (ever thirsty for true love, that is disinterested and unconditional or *Agapic*), and he attracts it to himself. The Spirit is the magnet which makes us fall in love, and this grows in us just as it did with the saints. Historically, contemplation of the crucified Lord has always played a central role for those who have practised contemplative prayer. Through the long line of Franciscans, from Francis, Anthony and Bonaventure, the pierced heart of the Saviour has unceasingly inflamed the hearts of the saints, to arouse in them a moving gratitude, creating a powerful experience of heartfelt prayer, precisely from their mental prayer.

2. Personal Prayer and Liturgical Prayer

There is no need to emphasise the importance of liturgical prayer (the Holy Mass, the Sacraments, Liturgy of the Hours...) - it is beyond discussion. It is known that the Lord Jesus comes objectively to us, as Living Water through the means of the Word of God, liturgical actions, and the Sacraments, in the particular mode of the Eucharist, *culmen et fons*, of the whole life of the Church.

But to actually reach the salvation of this Living Water which runs beside us through the channels which the Lord has given to his Church, we must have a receptacle capable of containing that Living Water. This receptacle is our faith, whether it is strong or weak.

But a question to ask oneself is this - Is personal prayer so very important? Isn't it enough to pray in community, particularly the prayer which we experience with the Church through the Liturgy and the Sacraments? A first response is given to us by St. John Chrisostomos: "*Personal prayer is*

shared liturgy, like the embers and the incense: if you do not have the embers, the incense will not burn”.

Another unexpected response comes to us from Yves Congar, the great Dominican theologian considered the father of the Conciliar Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*. He says: “*With prayer we receive the oxygen to breathe, and the sacraments nourish us. Before nourishment comes the breath, and the breath is personal prayer*”.

We are in perfect agreement with this Franciscan tradition which has always held prayer to be like breathing love, and that amazingly - even though soberly - it is merged in the actual Constitutions of the Capuchins, in which the beautiful Chapter III on *Life of Prayer of the Friars* opens with these words. “*Prayer to God is the breathing of love stirred into life by the Holy Spirit through whom the inner man begins to listen to the voice of God speaking to his heart*”.

It should be borne in mind that “*when a Christian prays, even if he is alone, his prayer is in fact always within the framework of the ‘Communion of Saints’ in which and with which he prays, whether in a public and liturgical way or in a private manner... The Christian, even when he is alone and prays in secret, is conscious that he always prays for the good of the Church in union with Christ, in the Holy Spirit and together with all the Saints.*(Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter on some aspects of Christian meditation*, n. 7).

3. Knowledge of God is knowledge of oneself

Feeling good about ourselves and others depends in large measure on our relationship with the Lord. The quality of our life is in relation to the quality of our prayer.

The way of praying of a certain person reveals a way of seeing and feeling God and the kind of relationship with him: if our reading of the Face of God is false or misleading, our prayer will be poor and frustrating. But as well as revealing his Face, prayer is also the revelation of our own face, most profound and secret.

It is true, in fact, that one of the fruits of prayer is that we gradually and progressively enter into a more profound knowledge of God. Not a God who we think of with those ideas which we have inherited from our education or our culture, and neither the product of our psychological projections, but the real God. Prayer allows us to pass from our ideas of God, our representations, (often false or very narrow) to an experience of God. It is completely different. The main object of this personal revelation of God, the essential fruit of prayer, is to know him as Father. Through Christ, in the light of the Spirit, he is revealed as a tender and merciful Father.

It is also true that a person can only truly know him or herself in the light of God. Everything that we can know about ourselves through human means (life experience, psychology, human science) is not to be dismissed, of course. But this allows only a limited and partial knowledge of our own identity. We can access the depth of our being only in the light of God who is fully revealed as the tender and compassionate Father in the face of Christ crucified and risen. This discovery of God as Father, the fruit which ripens with devotion to prayer, is the greatest of the gifts of the Spirit, the only rock on which we can build the solid foundations of our lives. There is truth in the double adage, *“Tell me how you pray and I will tell you who is your God; Tell me how you pray and I will tell you who you are”*.

“I understand who I am only in what is above me. Rather, in who has given me myself. A person cannot understand him or herself by starting with the self. To the questions in which the words “why” and “I” appear - “Why am I as I am?” ; “Why can I only have what I have?; Why am I, rather than I am not?” no reply can be given starting from the person. The reply to these questions is given by God alone. (Free translation from R. Guardini, *Accettare se stessi*, Brescia 1992, p. 28)

We hear the same advice given by Pope Benedict XVI, *“But this kind of prayer, real prayer, requires discipline; it requires making time for moments of silence every day. Often it means waiting for the Lord to speak. Even amid the “busy-ness” and the stress of our daily lives, we need to make space for silence, because it is in silence that we find God, and in silence that we discover our true self”*.

(Benedict XVI, *Homily* at Westminster Cathedral, 18th September 2010).

4. Being able to be silent

Pope Francis wrote in his recent *Gaudete et Exultate*:

“Holiness consists in a habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed in prayer and adoration. The saints are distinguished by a spirit of prayer and a need for communion with God... For this to happen, however, some moments spent alone with God are also necessary. For Saint Teresa of

Avila, prayer "is nothing but friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary converse, with him who we know loves us"... I would insist that this is true not only for a privileged few, but for all of us, for "we all have need of this silence, filled with the presence of him who is adored"... For each disciple, it is essential to spend time with the Master, to listen to his words, and to learn from him always. Unless we listen, all our words will be nothing but useless chatter...

We need to remember that "contemplation of the face of Jesus, died and risen, restores our humanity, even when it has been broken by the troubles of this life or marred by sin. We must not domesticate the power of the face of Christ"... So let me ask you: Are there moments when you place yourself quietly in the Lord's presence, when you calmly spend time with him, when you bask in his gaze? Do you let his fire inflame your heart? Unless you let him warm you more and more with his love and tenderness, you will not catch fire. How will you then be able to set the hearts of others on fire by your words and witness?

If, gazing on the face of Christ, you feel unable to let yourself be healed and transformed, then enter into the Lord's heart, into his wounds, for that is the abode of divine mercy." (Pope Francis, Gaudete et exultate, 19th March 2018, No. 147-151).

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the great expert of spiritual life, suggests this route to mature discipleship:

*From silence, prayer - from prayer, faith;
from faith, love - from love, service;
from service, peace, serenity; the joy of the heart.*

If we do not learn to cultivate times of silence, we will only have distractions, diversions, that entertainment which Pascal identifies as the principal obstacle to the conversion to which the Father calls us, and which constitutes the only way towards a life that is fully human. We are at the pinnacle of our humanity only when we live as the children of God in that only begotten Son, "*who always satisfies You in everything, through Whom You have done so much for us*". (Francis of Assisi, *The Saint, Earlier Rule* 23,5, New City Press, 1999).

Contemplation, as a time of serene silence under the gaze of God, whose face is also that of Jesus, becomes the highest expression of love. Our prayer, in fact, reaches maturity when we learn to feel close to Him in silence, that silence which alone can express our reciprocal love.

In the classic practice of *Lectio Divina*, "*tacit contemplatio*" or silent contemplation is the final destination after the three movements preceding it: *lectio* (attentive reading of the chosen text), *meditatio* (connecting the Word to my own concrete experience through reflection), *oratio* (asking for the strength to live what I have learned). Finally, *contemplatio* consists of fostering in myself that interior silence that enables me to recognise the faithful presence of the Lord through the course of the life I have already lived, and in the light of Scripture knowing how to read that story of salvation, which He, the Lord, carries forward in me, too.

To avoid any doubt, it is necessary to specify that the kind of prayer we are talking about cannot be improvised, cannot begin and be carried forward randomly, entrusted to good luck. This is not a suggestion to make to those who are beginners in faith, but is the arrival point (and always somewhat uncertain, moreover) of a Christian experience which has reached a certain maturity;

it requires (and presupposes!) an appropriate theological background, the result of a serious and constant familiarity with the Word. As we have seen, and as we will reiterate many times, we can experience that relationship of filial confidence and the humble audacity which mental prayer favours and makes grow, only if we have made space for the true face of God. And we recognise the fullness of God's true face only through the Son nailed to the cross, with his heart broken, and not to other images of the divine which conform to our own little thoughts or the fruit of atavistic fears of our own hearts.

But we must also acknowledge that tedium and frustration can come from silence, rather than true, peacemaking prayer. In fact, only before God, who as the face of Christ, who we know loves us with an *agapic* love (that is, regardless of personal merit and therefore also regardless of my structural poverty) can I be engulfed in silence, overcoming the temptation to run away in the face of my misery, the fragility which is inseparably tied to the finitude of the human creature.

With my multiple limitations on the physical, ethical and spiritual planes, I am challenged and made uneasy inside, I feel the urge to "get out of myself" (to be, therefore, alienated), preferring the noisy company of more or less continuous T.V., Internet, music, rather than the loneliness which silence makes me experience.

Only by allowing the Lord to tame me - like the fox is tamed by the little Prince - can I manage to live reconciled with my limitations, and so move towards maturity in Christ. Patient and progressive acquaintanceship with God, who in Christ is bent over by my limitations, and who has taken it upon himself and has so redeemed them, makes gratitude grow within me, moved by an ever-undeserved love which heals my wounds and allows my heart to experience a profound peace. "*Be peaceful, my heart*" as St. Clare would say, "*because He who has created you has also loved and redeemed you; and You, Lord, who has created me, be blessed*" (*Process 3, 20-22; and Legend 46*)

"The real 'work' of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me" (H. J. Nouwen)

And so...

Try to find silence within you, a deep and still silence, which does not create a void but opens the heart to hear and be aware ever more profoundly of a Presence, discrete and at the same time real, the presence of your God, who is revealed fully in the Face of Christ, and who loves you deeply.

He knows you and knows everything about you, and yet he listens to you. He wants you to tell him about the deep nostalgia that you feel for him. Then he speaks to you to tell you that he loves you and that he gives himself to you because you are filled with him, made finally able to love others just as they are. Keep your words quiet, so that you can listen to his Word, that "Gospel/Good News" which you are hungry for; let yourself build again from it, softly, with tenderness, until your heart has settled down and melts into a confident faith that is the gift of the Spirit: faith which you know that you are "the beloved child in the Only Son".

Do you have the courage to stay alone with Him? Do you want to enter into this communion of Love, the only love able to give peace to your heart and strength to your life? The Lord your God has been searching for you for a long time. Even now, he is at your door, knocking. (Rev. 3,20) And that God who is Love wants to tell you about his love for you, do not be afraid, listen, and try to make these words your own:

When you knock at the door, I want to recognise your presence right away,
 to open wide to you the interior dwelling where you desire to enter.
 When you knock at the door of my soul encumbered with thousands of cares,
 I want to forget my preoccupations, to think only of you.
 Take me into your silence, far from the noise and the agitation of the world.
 Into a silence where my being finds itself in its truth, in its nakedness, in its poverty,
 because this silence allows me to discover my very self.
 Take me into the divine richness of your silence, the fullness able to fill all of my soul.
 Make still whatever in me is not you: whatever is not your presence, all pure, all solitary, all peaceful!
 Impose silence on my desires, my whims, my dreams of escape, the violence of my passions.
 Cover with your silence the voice of my claims, of my complaints.
 Impregnate with your silence my nature too impatient to speak,
 too inclined to exterior and noisy action.
 Impose your silence even on my prayer, that it may be pure zeal toward you.
 Let your silence descend to the depth of my being
 and let this silence ascend back toward you in an homage of love!
 (Jean Galot, SJ)

CHAPTER II

THE WORD IS ALWAYS THE FOUNDATION

“The prayerful reading of God’s word, which is “sweeter than honey” (Ps 119:103) yet a “two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12), enables us to pause and listen to the voice of the Master. It becomes a lamp for our steps and a light for our path (cf. Ps 119:105)... Devotion to the word of God is not simply one of many devotions, beautiful but somewhat optional. It goes to the very heart and identity of Christian life. The word has the power to transform lives” (Gaudate et exultate, no. 156)

As we have already said, to acquire the practice of humble mental prayer there are a few necessary pathways to take which will enable us to meet the essential nature of God and not the fake images that we usually make of him starting from our human experience. This is to relate to the true God and not to an idol of our own making, to place ourselves under His gaze alone, knowing that He loves us.

One of these pathways is that of learning to read our own personal events, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in terms of a “story of salvation”. By taking this huge leap we pass from religion into faith. Religion is the relationship begun by humankind which reaches out to find God in an attempt to draw him to our side. This experience is the foundation of every religious experience which is instinctively processed by our heart. I tie myself to Him who is omnipotent with a series of rites and sacrifices in the hope that I become acceptable to Him.

On the other hand, faith opens us to the saving initiative of God who has come to meet us in Christ, who loved us first, from the beginning, and has revealed to us the possibility of entering into a relationship of Love with Him. This relationship abandons the gestures and the slavish ways of feeling, to enter into the liberty of children loved through the beloved Son. Opening up to this experience of faith is possible, to the extent in which constant attention is given to Holy

Scripture, making us familiar with God's way of acting with his People and with each individual member, and in this way it teaches us to read our own personal events in the light of these salvific events. This means the special and unique kind of prayer known as *Lectio Divina*, whose salient points we will now briefly identify.

1. Departure point - *Lectio Divina*

Lectio Divina continues to be practised and celebrated in the monastic world, through four stages, developed by the Carthusian Guigo II (+1188). This is a form of prayer which starts out with a reading from the Holy Scriptures and has as a goal the contemplation of the essential nature, the face of the Lord. It was practised in monasteries up to the high Middle Ages, with rules that were as precisely defined as the Divine Office. These rules were codified by Guigo II in a letter to his own disciple Gervase, entitled *Scala Paradisi*, or Stairs to Heaven. The method of *Lectio Divina* is conceived, in fact, as a series of four steps - reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation - intimately and logically linked. The steps would allow the monk to reach paradise, in other words, a mystical union with God.

Lectio puts me in contact with God, who has worked and continues to work through the story of salvation, as is narrated in the Holy Scriptures.

In *Meditatio*, I meet the Lord through the story of my own life, a little piece of salvation history.

In *Oratio*, I ask for my story to be turned into that of salvation, so that my personal project may be united into the general project of salvation.

In *Contemplatio*, reflecting with gratitude on the love which is being implemented in me, I go back to the source of that project - my God shows me his essential nature, my little me meets with his great Him.

Reading of the Word must be done with a Trinitarian aspect. Moved by the Spirit, I seek Christ to contemplate the Father. Only in Christ, with Christ and for Christ are we received and loved by the Father. Without Christ, Word of the Father, we would be lost in no sense, we would have no goal to reach for. "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life*".(Jn. 6,68).

In *meditation of the Word*, I try to understand the ways in which God is present in my own personal life, in my little story, of which the Salvation story is the model and paradigm. In fact, in every situation of the salvation story found in *lectio*, I can come across an analogous situation (or situations) present in my life, because the Lord behaves with me in the same way that he had once behaved with Israel. My own life is a salvation story. It anticipates the same finale of the grandiose salvation project regarding human history in its entirety: the meeting with Christ in God on the seventh day. My life is part of this project. Like Israel, I too am also called by faithful God to an alliance of love. I, too, have been chosen by a jealous God. My life, too, is an exodus from my enslavement. I, too, am attracted to the freedom of the desert to experience through trials the goodness of God who nourishes and consoles. I am also called to the promised land, to the celestial Jerusalem. And I, like Israel, build my idols, I bow before them and commit the sin of idolatry. I commit my betrayals, my infidelities, my prostitutions, my delusions and my regrets.

With *meditatio*, I place my life, contorted and chaotic, under the light of the Word and I try to follow the ways of God, abandoning my own paths. Keeping to the Word, I trust in Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, and I try in practice, to follow him. He, the Christ, becomes the Lord of my life.

The Lord has spoken to me in *lectio*, and in *meditatio*. I speak to him in *oratio*. *Oratio* is my reply to Him who questions me with his Word. The reply varies according to the reality of the Word, and according to the situation that the Word descending into my life has highlighted. My prayer is one of adoration, of praise, of thankfulness and of begging for pardon - for the good that is in me and for the evil that is also in me. And whilst I ask the Lord for forgiveness for my sin, I beg him to convert my steps and direct them towards Him. In praying I do not ask God to change towards me, but I ask him to change me, to make me become what he wants me to be. I offer myself to him so that he can do with me what he will. I make this offering in union with Christ, offered to the Father in perfect obedience.

In *contemplatio* the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit wish to establish a dialogue of loving glances with me. In contemplation the Lord asks to contemplate my face, and I am allowed to contemplate his face. The human heart is the unique reality which God cannot obtain with his omnipotence, and it is therefore what he values beyond everything else. The Lord of the universe is forced to knock in order to enter my house, to sit at my table. *“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me”* (Rev. 3,20).

The Lord becomes a beggar to become my guest. He asks permission to enter into intimacy with me, he wants to speak to me at all costs. Even if I rejected him, even if I turned my shoulder, opening myself to idols, he does not surrender, but continues to love me as he did with Israel: *“I will now persuade her, and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her”* (Hos. 2,14).

In *Meditatio* I have examined my existence, counting the times in which the Lord has lovingly intervened. Now, in *Contemplatio*, I understand my worth only because he seeks me, he wants me and he loves me. From my life, I go back to his faithful love. This discovery urges me to give myself to him. He has time for me, and I want to have time for him.

Supported by the Spirit, I want to stay with you,
Lord Jesus, and with you in the Father.
I want to let myself be tamed by you
learn to stay in your company.
As Francis, I do not utter words, but names and attributes.
“You are Abba. You are the Lord, Brother, Friend and Spouse. You are meekness. You
are humility. You are beauty”.
I do not make any suggestions. I just want to stay before you, Lord.
You do not need my gestures, nor my words,
nor my work, but only my heart.
You say to me: “Stay with me. Stay quietly. Do not worry yourself.
Do not be a ruffled lake, if you want to contemplate my image.
Be calm and serene ‘like a weaned child with its mother’ (Ps. 131,2)
Raise your eyes up to me like a slave fixes her eyes on the hand of her owner (Ps.123,2).
I want to stay in you always, Lord.

You don't ask me to enter into love, but to remain in love (Jn. 15,9),
 because I have always been loved by you.
 And I remain here, helpless, so that you can do with me what you will.
 You are enough for me.
 If you speak, I am ready to listen.
 If you are silent, I am ready to wait.
 It is enough for me to know that you are here, in the temple of my heart.
 I am not even aware of praying. It is enough for me to know that I am in you.
 "On that day you will know that I am in my father, and you in me, and I in you" (Jn. 14,20)
 I have climbed up the steps that in my poverty reach up to you.
 I have contemplated on your adorable Face.
 "It is sweet to feel that in my heart love is now humbly beginning to arise,
 It is sweet to understand that I am no longer alone
 but that I am part of an immense life..."
 I cannot learn about love by hearing about it.
 I need to experience it standing in silence before you, Lord.
 But this abiding in you does not exclude me from my brothers.
 I will turn to them with a face radiant with your light and I will shine it upon them.
 I do not want to exclude anyone from my love.
 I will love my friends, and I will love my enemies.
 I do not decide to love others,
 but rather, I want you to love them through using me.

2. From the Word to Life

The road which leads to a mature faith is that which slowly places in the heart the certainty of the faithful presence of God in my life, and this presence embraces every day of our existence, because *"every day is made by the Lord"*. In other words, gratitude that is understood as a memory of the heart is the first component of the experience of faith.

Pope Francis spoke to the Clergy of Rome on the 2nd March 2017 about the importance of cultivating a grateful memory of the good that the Lord has laid along the course of our lives.

"In Evangelii Gaudium I wanted to emphasize the dimension of faith we call "Deuteronomic", analogous to the memory of the people of Israel: "The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore. The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts: 'It was about four o'clock in the afternoon' (Jn 1:39)"(no. 13)

Let us never forget that progressing in faith is never merely a sheer act of the will to believe more strongly from now on; it is also an exercise of returning with our memory to fundamental graces. It is possible to "progress by going backwards", by searching out once again the treasures and experiences that have been forgotten but which nevertheless very often contain keys for understanding the present. This is truly a "revolutionary" thing: to go back to our roots. The clearer our memory of the past, the clearer the future appears to us, because in this way we can see the road that is really new and distinguish it from the roads that have already been taken but that led us nowhere. Faith increases by remembering, by connecting things with a history that has really been lived by our fathers and all the People of God: the entire Church".

And again, in *Gaudate et exultate*, no. 153,

“Prayer, because it is nourished by the gift of God present and at work in our lives, must always be marked by remembrance. The memory of God’s works is central to the experience of the covenant between God and his people. God wished to enter history, and so our prayer is interwoven with memories. We think back not only on his revealed Word, but also on our own lives, the lives of others, and all that the Lord has done in his Church... Think of your own history when you pray, and there you will find much mercy. This will also increase your awareness that the Lord is ever mindful of you; he never forgets you”.

Spiritual theology provides a rich and effective concept to help this work of recovering our past, in the light of the mysterious, yet faithful and caring Presence of our God; it is the concept of *biblical memory* which, as Pope Francis says, typifies the way of believing in Israelite piety, where belief engenders remembering, and memory engenders belief. It is the memory which Moses repeatedly reminded them not to lose, *“Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness.”* (Dt.8,2)

Why did the Israelites believe? Not because their brains are capable of reaching God through complicated reasonings, but because their eyes have seen (Dt.11,3-7 and 29,1-6), because their elders have told him (Dt. 32,7), because in the desert they experienced the delight of the closeness of God and were tested (Dt. 8, 3).

As we have seen, biblical memory presumes a certain familiarity with the Word of God in our own practice too. It is as if the Bible becomes a mirror in which the believer sees the reflection of his or her existential story. In essence, the story of Israel tells what God is doing today in the life of every believer, explaining His way of behaving towards us humans. Holy Scripture describes every possible situation that humans face when seeking salvation.

In my life too, as in the salvation history narrated in the Bible, and repeated in the cycle of liturgy through the liturgical year there are moments of joy and suffering. In my life, as in the story of the people of God, I find moments of sin and solitude, of rebellion and of praise, of betrayal and desert, of freedom and nostalgia, of exile and repatriation, of faithfulness and of abandonment, of tenderness and of rage, of glory and infamy, of idolatry and adoration, of supplication and of cursing, of repentance and forgiveness. In my story, as in the story of salvation, there are events which can rebuild the essential nature of God; in my life God is revealed as patient and faithful, jealous and provident, compassionate and just; spouse, father and brother, wayfarer and travel companion.

Reading my own life in the light of the Bible, therefore, means to discover what my life can and should be according to God’s will. He operates in us as once he operated in our forefathers’ lives; it means to gather the central and most significant events in the life of the people of Israel as parameters with which to measure or unlock the reading with which we interpret our personal story. It is the concept of *biblical category*. Biblical categories are, for example, creation, temptation, the fall, enslavement in Egypt, the Red Sea, liberation, the calling, etc.

For this, as Pope Francis exhorts, we need to often revisit our own personal existence with the eyes of faith to understand the mysterious but real actions of God, what He has done to meet us,

to manifest his love and enable us to recognise it. This is the only way to go from the God of the philosophers (an abstract entity, without a face, who lives in the immense heavens, closed in an impassive silence) to the God of biblical revelation, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus it is possible to wonder at and narrate the marvels of love in the tortuous unfolding of our human lives which are always supported by his providence.

It is during the time of contemplation that we can allow our past to emerge, realising that the presence of the Lord embraces the whole of our lives, from the beginning until today, so that my simple “being” becomes “being like this, because this is how I have been created and worked on”, “*You knit me together in my mother’s womb*” (Ps. 139,13); “*Upon you have I leaned from my birth; It was you who took me from my mother’s womb*” (Ps. 71,6); “*Your hands have made and fashioned me*” (Ps. 119,73); “*Your help has made me great*” (Ps. 18, 35).

Teaching myself to read my life in this way, I prepare the ground to receive the faithful presence of the Lord as a reality which is stronger than every challenge or delusion, “*If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up*” (Ps. 27,10). Each one of us can adapt the text for ourselves - including my closest friends, my brothers and sisters, my husband, my wife, my children...

In this way, certainty grows within me that in the future, too, the Lord will stay faithful in his love: “*I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread*” (Ps 37,25).

This certainty enables me to confront the facts of my life with faith and optimism: “*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?... though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident*” (Ps. 27, 1-3).

Growing in faith is to create daily memories of this paternity-maternity of God, thanks to which it is possible to face life with greater security. It is this authentic faith which allows me to recognise and embrace the *positive* and the *negative* present in my life, which as in the life of every human, is a mixture of light and shade.

In first place, there is *positivity* in recognising and integrating: all the goodness that life has given us from the first day. Allowing this to surface into our consciousness during silent prayer, we can teach ourselves to read it with gratitude and join it to the faithful presence of the Lord in our life. It is like a workout which requires a change in viewpoint, because we are not used to taking an attitude of gratitude towards our story. We do not spontaneously recognise that we are loved, well above what we deserve, nor is it easy for us to interpret those acts of goodness towards us as the providential human mediation by the love of God. But yet, as C. S. Lewis reminds us, “*We do not have the right to expect to be loved by our family members, but we can only cultivate a reasonable expectation, if we and they are more or less normal.*” (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, Jaca Book, Milan, 1990, p.44).

Such ingratitude is the result of that widespread narcissism where one places more emphasis on what has not been received rather than cultivating a grateful recognition of what has been given to us. For sure, we can re-educate our way of remembering, to avoid falling into that frequent occurrence, incisively expressed in a saying of St. Thomas Moore, “*If men receive ill, they engrave*

it on marble, if they receive good, they inscribe it on dust". It is because of that certainty of having received so much love that we can put the bricks in place to construct our affective maturity; nothing, in fact, is more demanding and empowering than the certainty of being already loved.

But there is also a *negative* element in the life of each one of us which needs to be integrated, recognised in all respects as an integral part of our own identity, and recovered as the place and opportunity of a particular experience of God. Mental prayer favours this recovery which, in silence, allows the pain of open wounds to resurface.

These are the steps of this journey:

Recognition, and naming the evil content of sin, causing a sincere regret in its enormous contrast to a Love which every day is revealed through the Word and so many other ways.

Reconciling myself to my own deep personal weakness, recognising and accepting myself as being simply an object for forgiveness. If compassion is love which goes beyond justice, all of us have been created by an act of compassion, shaped by compassionate hands, conceived by a compassionate mind, and placed into an immense design of compassion. In this case, then forgiveness, both giving and receiving, becomes the particular expression of a person who feels reconciled.

Transformation and transfiguration of moral ill; when this is experienced as forgiveness, it becomes the time and place for goodness to grow, because it frees the person from the temptation of cultivating an illusion of grandeur. This was the experience of St. Paul, who almost boasts of his weakness after asking the Lord, many times, to be freed from it (2Cor. 12,9).

Painful situations of the past are revisited under the gaze of the Lord, taking into account what followed afterwards, and they are then reinterpreted in the light of his Easter. We are thus given the possibility of knowing the Lord, that is to say, knowing the beneficial effects he has had on our lives, when we go through suffering.

In short, we have to rebuild our past by restoring it from those components which can continue to have a negative effect on the present. In order to do this, we have to free ourselves from prejudices which a certain psychological view has spread widely in the last few years, prejudices according to which our past irreversibly effects our journey today and tomorrow. It is necessary, rather, to note that the same human sciences suggest today that every human being's past, can never be considered as a destiny, as something that has, or will have, a fatal sequel without any possible alternative.

The new basic principle is this: we cannot be responsible for our past, but are always responsible for our present attitude in facing it, and we are free to give it meaning. Nobody can take away this freedom-responsibility, neither can we escape from the task of learning to give meaning where it appears not to exist.

Molinari (C. Molinari, "Why?" in *Consacrazione e servizio*, 5/1992, p.49) puts it this way:

"When confronted by the incomprehensible, the question to be asked is not why has this happened, but what attitude can I assume in order to make sense of what has happened.? It is possible to re-evaluate past events and bring a new approach to them, including those in creation. This is what Jesus did regarding his senseless and absurd death - he turned it into an event of universal salvation. God was truly absent and it was only the unconditional love of Jesus, which

continued to make Him present in his long desolation and death. In this way, he brought sense and value where it has not existed. He made God present where mankind had made him absent.

Faith, when it is authentic, as Manzoni reminds us regarding the Nun of Monza, allows the person to confer meaning to his or her whole life, including the burden of contradictions and possible disgrace. This happens thanks to the continual re-reading of the Word, to find within it the light of a compassionate love, which is offered to us so that it becomes the key to interpreting our own story, on which forgiveness continues to flow: from the Lord towards us, and from us towards those whom we see as our debtors.

In the *Testament* of St. Francis there is a clear example of the attitude typical of a biblical man. In it, he remembers his own salvation story, and in remembering it, it becomes a blessing given to the experience of the brothers. However, when he was approaching death he turned back to re-read his experience, and every moment seemed like a gift from God. “*The Lord gave me, brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way*” and “*the Lord gave me , and give me still, such faith in priests...and after the Lord gave me some brothers*”. (Testament, 4, 6, 14)

We also have to learn to do this in order to become, like Francis, a “eucharistic person”, that is, ever more able to see the goodness which the compassion of the Lord has already sown in the furrows of our life, which we joyfully give back to Him, who is the source of all good, in the praise of Him and in the service of the brothers.

I attempt to form my internal attitude which these words suggest:

Under your gaze, and in the light of your friendly presence
which I am discovering, Lord,
in a way that is ever clearer and deeper,
I can retrace the main steps of my journey of growth,
even those most difficult and painful,
dwelling with gratitude on the people and events
through which you have already sown so much goodness
in the furrows of my life.
I discover ever more your discrete and delicate interventions,
signs of your free and faithful love
which has gradually guided my steps towards You,
leading me finally here, to the present situation in which I find myself,
where I ask to continue my journey of human and spiritual growth.
With the strength of your Spirit, it is right here with my brothers/sisters,
that you make my faith every stronger,
so that I become ever more able
to place myself trustingly into your hands,
which through experience I know to be trustworthy.

3. Prayer of the Heart: a humble but precious tool

“Repeated often by a humbly attentive heart, the invocation of the holy name of Jesus is the simplest way of praying always”(Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2668)

The mental prayer that we are talking about, is what we consider “*an intimate relationship of friendship, in which we are engaged alone, only with that God who we know loves us*” (Teresa of Avila). And it is not easy to practise. To introduce it into our day or to improve it, if we already are practising it, the following kind of prayer may be useful. It has a number of different names:

prayer of the Name, prayer of the heart, prayer of Jesus, esicastica prayer (from the Greek *Esikia* = silence, peace, simplicity).

Many people have heard of this kind of prayer, but not many have had the courage to deepen it and include it in their spiritual lives. Unless one has taken to heart the true sense of this kind of prayer, and then practised it faithfully and constantly, it is not possible to be sufficiently familiar with it to appreciate its richness. This is the gift from the Lord to whoever prays with simplicity and humility. It can also be useful to use it for the best part of our “time of mental prayer”.

It is a way of praying that allows the gathering of the soul’s energy around an idea which is simple (because everything is centred on the Lord Jesus), and also complete (because He can be seen in all His fundamental characteristics, and it relates to Him in the only correct way - as beggars of compassion). It can be considered as a synthesis of the whole Gospel.

Rising from ancient times from the monks of the Middle East and subsequently cultivated in the Russian Orthodox tradition, this kind of prayer has become familiar to us, too. The Catechism of the Catholic Church dedicates four paragraphs to it (2665-2668), which are worth reading in their entirety.

It is a prayer which is founded in the apostolic exhortations: “*Pray without ceasing*” (1 Thess. 5, 17); “*Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication*” (Eph. 6,18); but also in the words of Jesus himself, who in various parables recommends that “disciples *should always pray and not give up*” (Lk 18,1) and invites them to be “*alert at all times, praying*” (Lk. 21,36)

In Christian spiritual tradition, it has often been wondered just how to put this exhortation to pray unceasingly into practice, as did both Jesus and the Apostles. The desert fathers favoured a formula which we find evidenced in the Gospels, a cry raised up to Jesus by the sick and sinners. This cry has become the prayer of Jesus and consists of unceasingly repeating the invocation: “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!*” This invocation blends together the cry from the blind man of Jericho who begs for healing, “*Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me*” (Mk. 10,47), and the prayer of the publican at the temple, “*God be merciful to me a sinner!*” (Lk. 18,13)

Why is this prayer so precious? Our minds tend to wander continuously, and through instinct, which is marked by sin, choose to turn towards evil rather than towards good; vague desires, impure thoughts, resentment and animosity towards someone, regrets or remorse for deeds sunk in the past, fears or unrealistic dreams regarding the future. From the mind, it all passes to the heart, and as Jesus says, “*it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly*” (Mk. 7, 21-22). It should be remembered that the attitudes cultivated inside us press us to be transformed into behaviours, that is, concrete actions, both good and evil.

As we have seen, liturgical prayer has, and should have, primary position because the Liturgy remains the culmination of all the actions of the Church and the source of all its strength. But liturgical prayer extends into daily life, into the intimacy of the heart of every Christian, and tends to be continuous, such as when we eat, when we work, when we rest. The prayer of the Name represents a humble attempt to have *Jesu dulcis memoria* take root and flourish in us. One of its many benefits is this - the self-knowledge which it leads to is not revealed to us either as the giant of our dreams, nor as the dwarf of our fears, but keeps alive the awareness of being sinners in need of mercy which the Lord always gives us.

Our mind is like a demijohn. If we leave it empty and open, everything will go inside it. We can, however, fill it with the good wine of the Prayer of the Name. A short invocation repeated more and more ends up imprinting itself on our memory and flourishing by itself when the mind is not immediately engaged in something specific. Like connective tissue, it fills all the empty spaces and removes evil, keeping the memory of the Lord alive in us. Slowly repeating the words of the Prayer of Jesus, at the same time trying to open ourselves to their profound truth, is a simple and effective way to enter and stay in silent contemplation.

The invocation can be adapted according to one's own sensibilities. After a few experimentations, it is best to choose one which is theologically correct, and keep it constant. A slightly simplified version from the classic one, is this easier invocation: *Lord Jesus, Saviour, have mercy on me, a sinner*".

CHAPTER III

MENTAL PRAYER IN FRANCISCAN TRADITION

1. Some founding texts

The writings and example of St. Francis

(a) From the Earlier Rule Chapters XXII and XXIII

“Therefore, all my brothers, let us be very much on our guard that, under the guise of some reward or assistance we do not lose or take our mind away from God. But in the holy lover which is God, I beg all my brothers, both the ministers and the others, after overcoming every impediment, and putting aside every care and anxiety, to serve, love, honour and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind in whatever way they are best able to do so, for that is what He wants above all else.”

“Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for Him Who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Who says: ‘Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man’.”

“With our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, with our whole strength and fortitude with our whole understanding with all our powers with every effort, every affection, every feeling, every desire and wish let us all love the Lord God Who has given and gives to each one of us our whole body, our whole soul and our whole life, Who has created, redeemed and will save us by his mercy alone, Who did and does everything good for us, miserable and wretched, rotten and foul, ungrateful and evil ones.

Therefore let us desire nothing else, let us want nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight except our Creator, Redeemer and Saviour, the only true God, Who is the fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good, Who alone is good, merciful, gentle, delightful and sweet, Who alone is holy, just, true, holy and upright, Who alone is kind, innocent, clean, from Whom, through Whom and in Whom is all pardon, all grace, all glory of all penitents and just ones, of all the blessed rejoicing together in heaven.

Therefore let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us, nothing come between us. Wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of the day, every day and continually, let all of us truly and humbly believe, hold in our heart and love, honour, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the Most High and Supreme Eternal Trinity and Unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of all, Saviour of all, Who believe and hope in Him, and love Him, Who, without beginning and end, is unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, blessed, praiseworthy, glorious, exalted, sublime, most high, gentle, lovable, delightful, and totally desirable above all else for ever. Amen.”

(b) From the Later Rule Chapters V and X

“Those brothers to whom the Lord has given the grace of working may work faithfully and devotedly so that, while avoiding idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute.

Let those who are illiterate not be anxious to learn, but let them pay attention to what they must desire above all else: to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity, to pray always to Him with a pure heart”.

(c) From Second Letter to the Faithful

Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, since the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them (cf. Is 11:2) and He will make His home and dwelling among them (cf. Jn 14:23). They are children of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45) whose works they do, and they are spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50). We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined to our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. We are brothers to Him when we do the will of the Father Who is in Heaven (Mt 12:50); mothers, when we carry Him in our heart and body (cf. 1 Cor 6:20) through divine love and pure and sincere conscience and when we give birth to Him through a holy manner of working, which should shine before others as an example (cf. Mt 5:16).

Oh, how glorious it is, how holy and great, to have a Father in Heaven! Oh, how holy, consoling, beautiful and wondrous it is to have such a Spouse! Oh, how holy and how loving, pleasing, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all things to have such a Brother and such a Son: our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave up His life for His sheep (cf. Jn 10:15) and Who prayed to the Father”

Let every creature in heaven, on earth, in the sea and in the depths, give praise, glory, honour and blessing to Him who suffered so much, Who has given and will give in the future every good, for He is our power and strength, Who alone is good, Who alone is almighty, Who alone is omnipotent, wonderful, glorious and Who alone is holy, worthy of praise and blessing through endless ages. Amen.”

(d) From Biographies

From the First Life of Thomas of Celano

“The brothers who lived with him know that daily, constantly, talk with Jesus was always on his lips, sweet and pleasant conversations about Him, kind words full of love.

One of the fullness of the heart his mouth spoke.

So the radiant love that filled his heart within gushed forth.

He was always with Jesus: Jesus in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, he bore Jesus always in his whole body... With amazing love he bore in his heart and always held onto Christ Jesus and Him crucified.” (1 Cel Book 2, Ch. IX, p. 283-4 Vol 1)

From the Legend of the Three Companions, Chapter III.

“Suddenly he was visited by the Lord who filled his heart with so much tenderness that he was unable to speak or move. He could only feel and hear this marvellous tenderness; it left him so estranged from any sensation that, as he himself said later, even if he had been completely cut to pieces, he would not have been able to move.... From that very hour he began to consider himself

of little value and to despise those things which he had previously held in love. Since he was not entirely detached from worldly vanities, this change was not yet perfect. He retired for a short time from the tumult and business of the world and was anxious to keep Jesus Christ in his inmost self, and after selling all he had, he desired to buy the pearl, concealing it from the eyes of mockers. Often, almost daily, he withdrew secretly to pray. He was inclined to do so by that same tenderness he had tasted earlier, which now visited him ever more frequently, driving him to prayer in the piazza and other public places”

From the Major Legend by St. Bonaventure, Chapter X

“Francis... strove to keep his spirit present to God by praying without ceasing lest he be without the consolation of the Beloved. Prayer was a comfort for the contemplative, even now a citizen with the angels in the heavenly mansions, as he sought with burning desire the Beloved from whom only the wall of the flesh separated him.... He firmly claimed that the grace of prayer must be desired above all else by a religious, believing that without it no one could prosper in God’s service.”

“When he was suddenly overcome in public by a visitation of the Lord, he would always place something between himself and bystanders, so that he would not cheapen the sight of the Bridegroom’s intimate touch... often he would say to those close to him, ‘When a servant of God is praying and is visited by the divine, he must say - Lord, you have sent this consolation from heaven to me, an unworthy sinner, and I entrust it to your keeping, because I feel I am the thief of your treasure - . When he returns from his prayer, he should appear as a poor man and a sinner, as if he had not obtained any new grace”.

Mental Prayer amongst the Capuchins

The primacy of the life of prayer, especially contemplative prayer, represents a typical value of Franciscan spirituality, and was strongly reaffirmed in all the Reforms. One particularly rigorous recovery was embarked upon by the first Capuchins, leading to the shaping of some life choices at an existential level. The *Statutes* of Albacina (1529) were for “the friars minor of the so called eremitic life”, and were an authentic, though incomplete, expression of the spirit of the first phases of the reform. The choice of an eremitic life was in order to allow great space for contemplation, with hours and hours of prayer, and in solitary forms which favoured meditation. The expression “eremitic life” also briefly appears in *Ex Parte Vestra* (18th May, 1526) and then in the Papal Bull *Religionis zelus* (July 1528, No. 2). The eremitic tendency, which did not completely accord with the ideal of St. Francis, was corrected in the Constitutions of 1536, in which an admirable balance was achieved between contemplative and apostolic life. A remarkable number of Capuchin writers have tried to diffuse the use of affective mental prayer amongst the ordinary people.

(a) The Constitutions of the Friars Minor Capuchins (1536)

41. Since holy prayer is our spiritual mistress, in order that the spirit of devotion may not decrease in the Friars, but, continually burning on the sacred altar of our heart, may be enkindled more and more, as our Seraphic Father wished, we ordain that, although the true spiritual Friar Minor should always pray, two special hours shall be appointed for the tepid Friars, one after Compline

during the whole year, the other, from Easter until the Exaltation of the Cross, immediately after None, except on days of fast when it shall be after Sext, and from the Exaltation of the Cross until Easter, after Matins.

42. Let the Friars remember that prayer is nothing else than speaking to God with the heart. Consequently, he does not pray who speaks to God with the lips. Each one, therefore, should endeavour to pray mentally, and according to the teaching of Christ, taking diligent care to enlighten the mind and enkindle the affections far more than to frame words. Before the morning meditation, after None or Matins, or on fast days, after Sext, they shall recite the Litanies imploring all the Saints to pray to God with us and for us. And no other Offices shall be said in choir except that of the Blessed Virgin, so that the Friars have more time to devote to private and mental prayer which is far more fruitful than vocal prayer.

(b) Contributions from some spiritual writers

The flight and adhesion to Calvinism by the General Superior Bernardino Ochino in 1542 were explained by chroniclers as resulting from excessive activity, leading to the abandonment of this life of prayer. Paolo Vitelleschi refers to an emblematic dialogue between the vicar Bernadino d'Asti and Bernardino Ochino. The former reproved the latter of being "*engulfed in these meaningless activities of the seculars and the studious, and we never see you praying*". Ochino replied: "*Prayer is unceasing for those who unceasingly do good*", and d'Asti returned, "*But ceasing praying will not lead to doing good*".

There were many able Capuchin spiritual writers in the first hundred years who had practised and spread mental prayer amongst the people. Mentioning a few names and then offering just one citation we can to understand the form and content of their vigorous contemplative experience. Amongst many spiritual writers of the first and second generations, it is worth mentioning Bernardino d'Asti (1484-1557), Francesco Tittilmans (1502-1537), Francesco Ripanti da Jesi (1470-1549), Giovanni Pili da Fano (1469-1539), Battistone da Faenza (1496-1562), Bernardino da Montolmo (1492-1565), Bernardino da Balvano (1500-1568), Gregorio da Napoli (1576-1601), Mattia Bellintani da Salò (1534-1611), Cristoforo da Verucchio (1545-1630), the Blessed Tommaso da Olera (1563-1631), Francesco Gagnand di Chambéry (+1634).

Mattia Bellintani da Salò in his *Practica dell'Orazione Mentale* tells us what is meant by the term "affective prayer". It develops in the soul whilst meditating, because meditating is like putting a log on the fire of love to make it blaze; and when the fire is burning, then we can stay in it: this is the affective dimension of prayer, which he calls the "activity of the heart". This is how he speaks of it:

(4348) "Bind yourself in holy meditations... 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"

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

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, 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 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.*

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.

(c) *The Current Constitutions of the Friars Minor Capuchins*

(4,1-3) *As Capuchin Friars Minor we should renew our knowledge of the genius and ideals of our Fraternity so that, correctly adapted to the times, our life may be inspired by the wholesome tradition of our brothers...*

Following their footprints, let us strive to give priority to a life of prayer, especially contemplative prayer.

(54) *We preserve and promote the contemplative spirit that shines in the life of Saint Francis and of our first brothers. Therefore, we give greater importance to it by cultivating mental prayer.*

Mental prayer is the spiritual teacher of the brothers who, if they are true and spiritual lesser brothers, pray interiorly at all times. To pray, in fact, is nothing other than to speak to God with the heart; in truth, whoever speaks to God with his lips alone does not pray at all. For this reason each brother applies himself to mental prayer or contemplation and, according to the teaching of Christ, the best of teachers, endeavours to adore the eternal Father in spirit and truth, striving earnestly to enlighten the mind and enkindle the heart rather than to formulate words.

Genuine mental prayer leads us to the spirit of true worship, unites us profoundly with Christ, and continually intensifies the effects of the sacred liturgy in the spiritual life.

Moreover, so that the spirit of prayer and prayer itself may never grow lukewarm within us, but may burn more intensely from day to day, we must apply ourselves each day to its practice.

Let the ministers, the guardians, and others who are entrusted with the care of the spiritual life, do their best to ensue that all the brothers make progress in the knowledge and practice of mental prayer.

Let the brothers draw from the genuine sources of Christian and Franciscan spirituality the spirit of prayer, and prayer itself, in order to acquire the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ.

(55). *The fraternities and the individual brothers, wherever they may be, must make the primacy of the spirit and life of prayer a reality as required by the words and examples of Saint Francis and by genuine Capuchin tradition.*

It is of the greatest importance to form one's conscience about the vital necessity of personal prayer. Each brother, wherever he may be, is to make sufficient time each day for mental prayer, for example, one whole hour.

Let provincial and local chapters ensure that all brothers have the necessary time for mental prayer, both in common and in private.

In local chapters let the fraternity raise the question of the communal and individual prayer of the brothers. The brothers and, first of all, the guardians because of their pastoral role, shall consider themselves mutually responsible for encouraging one another in the life of prayer.

As disciples of Christ, though poor and weak, we persevere in prayer, so that those who are sincerely seeking the Lord may feel drawn to pray with us.

May we also foster among the People of God the spirit and growth of prayer, above all interior prayer. This has been from the beginning the charism of our Capuchin brotherhood and, as history testifies, the seed of genuine renewal. Therefore, let us enthusiastically commit ourselves to become skilled in the art of prayer and to pass it on to others.

Education in prayer and in the experience of God, using a simple method, shall be a feature of our apostolic activity. The effort to make our fraternities genuine schools of prayer will bring great benefits.

(56). *Every fraternity must be truly a praying fraternity. In order to achieve this, it is useful, according to the manifold grace of God, to encourage, either in provinces or in regions,*

fraternities of recollection and contemplation in which brothers can devote themselves for some time to the spirit and life of prayer, as God gives them the grace.

Let those brothers, in communion with the provincial fraternity, be mindful of what Saint Francis wrote for those who wish to live religiously in hermitages.

It is the responsibility of the provincial chapter or of the Conference of Major Superiors to determine the advisability of such fraternities and to provide for their administration.

2. From the Letter written by Fr. Mauro Jöhri, General Minister of the Capuchins (4th October 2016)

St. Francis of Assisi, a man transformed by prayer

Dear Brothers,

I am reaching out to you with this letter with which I want to share some reflections on prayer. I write as I am moved by a thought that has been with me for a long time and that pushes me to face a situation that, together with the brother General Councilors, I find in my visits to the circumscriptions of the Order: difficulty in the practice of prayer. I am certain that we can all agree among ourselves, as also we would say to those we meet in our ministry and our work, that prayer is a central element in the life of every baptised person and, in particular way, in the experience of someone who has embraced the religious life. But the reality does not confirm this significance. It is not my intention to add anything to the treatises and manuals on prayer; the literary production on this theme is rich and abundant. I do, however, ask you to read this letter together with chapter III of our Constitutions, where you will find a deep and beautiful synthesis, rooted precisely in the values of the Capuchin Franciscan tradition (...)

PCO VIII, in Proposal 17, has stressed this in an unmistakable way:

The first work of the friars is seeking union with God. The times of fraternal prayer are not a way to avoid our work and pastoral care or an escape from the human toil of work, but are a service that comes from our state of life as consecrated persons. Therefore no friar shall dispense himself from the primary task of liturgical and mental prayer, aware that when one prays he is interceding "on behalf of all humanity." (Const. 49,1)

Our daily lives are punctuated by moments dedicated to prayer, to work, to meals taken together, to recreation, and to rest. The march of time and of our days moves within an adherence to the rhythms and activities that are lived in our fraternities. It is important that none of these comes to be passed over nor disproportionately exaggerated. The rhythms and the activities of our daily lives should help us to live a healthy balance between the various moments. The experience, however, is that often we make exceptions for ourselves; and the first among these is the 'skipping' of both mental and common prayer. Easily enough, pastoral activity with all its demands, time spent with friends, and the use of the mass media become reasons for dispensing ourselves from the times of common prayer; I don't hesitate to affirm that this kind of attitude is increasing significantly in our fraternities. I am convinced that when the making of exceptions for ourselves becomes a habit, the awareness of our belonging to the Lord in the consecrated life grows weak. It's true: God is honoured and loved not only in prayer. Our relationship with Him is built from the evangelical life, from charity, from the gift of self in the work we are called to fulfill. But if the times for praise, thanksgiving, and silence become fewer and fewer, this relationship slackens and the motivations for what we do are weakened. There arises the danger of seeking only ourselves, concerned in the first place with gratifying our own expectations. When the relationship with God becomes weak and is no longer the fundamental reference point of our existence, we risk living in a hypocrisy that, professing to be a religious, a consecrated person, finds itself living the dynamics of a life contrary to this name (...)

Along with the Eucharist and the celebration of the Divine Office, the prayer of our friars has been nourished for centuries by mental prayer made up of longer times of silence. Our origins are rooted in the eremitical life and many of our brothers distinguished themselves by an edifying mystical life and by the compilation of manuals and treatises on the life of prayer. In 54, 1 of the Constitutions we read: *We preserve and promote the contemplative spirit that shines in the life of Saint Francis and of our first brothers. Therefore, we give greater importance to it by cultivating mental prayer.* Continuing in number 54, in paragraph 4, we find written: *Moreover, so that the spirit of prayer and prayer itself may never grow lukewarm within us, but may burn more intensely from day to day, we must apply ourselves each day to its practice.* This affirmation is made even more explicit and concrete in 55, 2: *Each brother, wherever he may be, is to make sufficient time each day for mental prayer, for example, one whole hour.* In many of our fraternities the schedules provides that this hour is broken up into two periods, one in the morning and the other in the evening. Unfortunately there are those who abandon both the first and the second.

I must note with disappointment that mental prayer has become weak and little practiced in our fraternities and is losing the meaning and importance that it represents in relation to our identity. To be together in silence in the presence of God, at the beginning and end of our day, not only sustains our life of faith, but is an eloquent sign of our being brothers who perhaps have to endure conflicts, struggles, and misunderstandings, but are there together, in choir or in our chapels. By praying together in silence we witness to one another that what he hold in common is the Lord. Let us ask the Holy Spirit that, through our prayer, He give us an interior vision turned always to the Lord. Someone who prays, who is capable of silence, takes on a benevolent, merciful outlook toward everything that is around him. PCO VII affirms:

The hermitage, which for the first Capuchins was always on the edges of the town, is not a place in which to avert one's gaze, but to acquire a broader vision of reality, contemplated from the vantage point of God and the poor (...)

I'll share with you a statement, simple but profound at the same time, of a holy monk of Mount Athos: *Prayer is given to the one who prays!* The one who prays with humility and fidelity realises that the giving of space to be apart with God is no longer a seeking based on its own effort, but is itself the good food of our daily lives. Prayer will be that breath that our Constitutions speak of at the beginning of Chapter III: *Prayer to God is the breathing of love stirred into life by the Holy Spirit through whom the inner man begins to listen to the voice of God speaking to his heart.* (45, 1) This breathing of love becomes ever more pure and authentic if it is supported by daily faithfulness. I recall having read a book by a young rabbi who recounted that every day he spent an hour in silence before God. With time he realised that he could do no less, and the prayerful silence was no longer a struggle but a time to which he looked forward (...)

Let us confess it: from prayer we always look for some sensible fruit, immediately perceivable. This is a holy desire that belongs properly to a believer who longs to perceive the closeness of his God. But then there are days, months, and years in which nothing happens. You sit in choir and ask yourself, *'What am I doing here?'* and you respond to yourself, *'I'll go do something else, read a book, continue to prepare a homily.'* We live in a society of thrills, it is true; that which is thrilling is held to be highly meaningful! Also in the life of prayer, after we have had powerful

experiences in which we have perceived clearly the beauty of being with the Lord, there arises the desire that this perception last forever. But that's not how it is. I believe that this situation can go with the experience of the 'without anything of one's own' that makes us free before what has been, and continually opens us to the newness of God (...)

We are called to let ourselves be formed by the Spirit who prepares us for an encounter with Himself that is always new, and in this newness there is also space for dryness and struggle in prayer. Dear brother, on the days when during your prayer your thoughts wander and the mind and heart are exploring memories or planning what you have to do next, don't run away; remain there with your body, let yourself be taken into the arms of 'Sister Fidelity,' stay as you are able before the Lord. If we linger on comparisons with experiences of light and consolation from the past, we cannot enjoy the newness of today and the faithfulness of being with God when his newness is hidden but nevertheless very enlightening. Prayer becomes deep when interior freedom grows. We are no longer determined by results or by the different shades of our feelings, but we are free to receive what God prepares for us. We are called to set off into the deep, to not fear to challenge ourselves with the deep waters and the darkness of night, perhaps even having the same experience as Peter, who, filled with struggle and fear as the waters were covering him could only cry out, 'Lord, save me!' It is moving to think of the strong hand of Jesus that grasped him and brought him back into communion with Him.

To be with Jesus in prayer is a beautiful and holy adventure, full of passion and courage. It would be a real sin to deprive ourselves of this journey. Brother, if perhaps you have interrupted this journey, take it up again with trust! I ask you furthermore not to read these words as a pious exhortation, for you know that your General Minister has no other tools available except to urge you, invite you, and beseech you; the rest is entrusted to your freedom, to your capacity to love. Know one thing: when I ask you, '*Brother, be with God in prayer,*' I am truly desiring the best for you, as does everyone else who helps you to pray (...).

Thomas of Celano tells how St. Francis always sought out a hidden place where he could join to God not only his spirit but every member of his body. When it happened that he was suddenly overcome in public by a visitation of the Lord, so as not to be without a cell, he would make a little cell out of his mantle. Sometimes, when he had no mantle, he would cover his face with his sleeve to avoid revealing the hidden manna. It is important that when we pray each one finds his place and his time, but also the physical posture that can help us to enter into a climate of silence and recollection. We need to learn how to alternate the personal and communal times of silence that are dedicated to mental prayer (...)

Many people ask us to be *men and women of God* before being specialists in the different human and theological disciplines. Our fraternities should become true and proper schools of prayer. It is important to share our prayer with the people. May our pastoral ministry guide people on the way of contemplation. We are called to be men of God, as were our saints who made incarnate the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount and were hardworking in charity. But what always emerges, as an irrefutable constant of their existence, is the relationship lived with the Lord in prayer. I assure you that the school of the saints is always open and I hope that it always has passionate students.

Dear brothers, I conclude here, handing on this letter to each of you and to the fraternities of our Order. Let us challenge ourselves peacefully and truthfully, for what is at stake is precious: it is our relationship with Him who loves us and treats us with mercy. I will be very direct: Brother, it is question of fidelity. Bring your body, your whole person, and your feelings before God every day and then you will be certain that God will take your '*here I am*'—at times even a little weary and sleepy—and bring to fulfillment the good work He has begun in you. Let us quiet the discussions about prayer, but rather live and practice it! I hope that this letter of mine helps you (...)

To each of you, my brothers, I hope for the gift of prayer that is ever more profound as I too will pray for this as I can. And keep praying for me!

I dare to pray that in your consecrated heart you will be able to feel and say with Francis: *You are all our riches to sufficiency. You are all our sweetness!* (FA: ED I, 109)

I extend fraternal greetings to all of you! ”

3. A difficult but precious Inheritance

1. So what do we mean by Mental Prayer? Let's try to summarise.

- If mental prayer is "*an intimate relationship of friendship, spending time alone with Him, whom we know loves us*" as Teresa of Avila says, then it is a time in which we seek "*the love of my heart*" (Song of Song, 1,7) guided by the Spirit, who is the Lord Jesus and through him, the Father.
- It is a silent pause at the feet of the Master, to listen to him with faith and love, but without multiplying thoughts and words; we can also meditate in prayer, but first we must turn our gaze towards the Lord, in a silent familiarity with Him.
- It is a moment in which we can be intimate and say "Thou" to that God who has the face of Christ and which in faith we have recognised as the loveable Father, with endless mercy, received as Lord and Saviour.
- In short, it is a prolonged and silent prayer, whose goal is to keep alive in our hearts the grateful memory of what the Lord has done, continues to do and will do *for us humans and for our salvation*. Each day, it brightens up our purpose and sense of commitment to respond to Him, loving him and serving him through our brothers and sisters.

2. A starting point for Mental Prayer can include contemplating on the Word of God in the daily Mass; continually reading a book from the Bible, the principal Mysteries of the life of the Lord and his salvation actions in our history; one of the writings of St. Francis; the amazing and mysterious beauty of creation; the eternal rewards towards which we are striving; re-reading our own life in the light of faith to give thanks for and to be reconciled with our past; but all this in a calm manner and with long periods of silence, as is recommended by the Masters of prayer.

3. It is a loving contemplation which allows ample space for praise and thanksgiving. But it is also a prayer to ask for the strength that we need to continue to live a life of faith in a secularised world, to taste the joy of belonging to the Lord in a special way as consecrated people, to faithfully carry forward the duties connected to the requirements of our state, to live with faith - in the light and with the logic of the Easter mystery - whatever life presents us with from day to day.

4. From this prolonged “*keeping company with Him who loves us*” largely depends on that serenity, that profound joy which makes a person beautiful: it makes us solid and fundamentally optimistic because we are able to read the things and events in the light of that Kingdom, which is still yet to come, but which certainly will be accomplished. It becomes an effective witness to the great hope so wonderfully described in *Spe salvi*, 27-31.

5. For us friars, too, there is a serious obstacle today that we have to remove, which is a prejudice that largely depends on our superficiality. This obstacle is believing mental prayer to be an eccentric fixation from the first Capuchins and therefore in a certain sense an anomaly to be overcome. Interpreting it through the steadfast Magisterium of the Church, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, as we have seen, strongly emphasises the importance of this form of prayer, and recomand it to be widely practised after previously promoting more sober vocal prayer and meditation.

It has then been widely demonstrated that the contemplative dimension is an essential component which had absolute primacy both in the life of Francis and in all the reforms, both Franciscan and non-Franciscan. The Capuchins were able to recover this with great finesse, and place it at the centre of their lives, correctly interpreting it as central to the charism of the Founder.

6. Both St. Francis and the first Capuchins had perceived the fascination of this contemplative dimension, to the point where they tried to make it exclusive. Both found a remarkable balance between action and contemplation, the former through the advice of Clare and Silvester (Leg. Min. 2,5), and the latter with the arrival of great friars from the Observance who in the wise text of the Constitutions of 1536 corrected the imbalance in a eremitic sense, given by Ludwig from Fossombrone with the Statutes of Albacina.

7. It is the Saints who have best given this rich contemplative experience such a strong affective value; they were both the most beautiful result of it as well as being true spiritual masters.

8. Was it all pure gold? Was there only light in the prayer life of the Capuchins of the past in general, and also in those of the first and second generations? No! Because “*you only have to be men to be poor men*” (P. Mazzolari), there was no shortage of misery and ailments amongst them too. We can see what these were, even if we only catch a glimpse.

- Negatively affected by the theological vision of the time: Luther’s “*By faith alone*” which could lead to a paralysing quietism, which ends up opposing an excess of man being the protagonist, who seemed to be forced into ascetic acrobatics to not displease a God who, in the end, remained majestically far away and always a little frowning.

- The presence of the Lord Jesus is strong, but he ends up being, and still is, more than ever the One who is unjustly hurt by and offended by our sins, and he is therefore also seen as a bit disapproving (this was the time when there was a widespread iconography of the Father and Christ with lightning bolts in hand, barely placated by the Virgin or some powerful Saint such as Francis or Dominic).
- In spite of the wonderful flourishing of very capable theologian friars, as well as friars who were preachers and popular writers of considerable ability and refined contemplative souls - and especially amongst lay brothers - for many, mental prayer remained a mirage, something difficult and tiring. Fr. Valeriano Magni (1587-1661) was a prominent and deep connoisseur of the situation of the Capuchins of his time, and he claimed that the true spiritual masters were few, and ill prepared, and consequently their many disciples were rather bungling and vague. He wrote that “*with reference to the laws which animate the friars to progress through a life of virtue, the Constitutions do not establish anything except that all the friars should continually give themselves to prayer. However, no particular exercise is prescribed, but once initiated by the (Novices) Master, spiritual exercises in force in our Constitutions are no longer practised, not even minimally, but left to themselves and to God*”. (free translation from *I Frati Cappuccini*, Vol I, n. 1870)

The effect of these factors on many friars was (and may still be) an oscillation between the Scylla of scruples, with a sense of culpability, growing over the years, seriously threatening both personal and human equilibrium; and the Charybdis of acedia, which is spiritual tedium, boredom, indifference, anaesthesia; an obscure evil which gnaws at and destroys of meaning things of the Spirit, which the Desert Fathers called the noonday devil. It is caused by discouragement and resignation, seeing oneself ever further from an ideal which requires a certain heroism. Achieving equilibrium, which enables one to escape from both dangers comes, as we shall see, from the Spirit. The Spirit enables us to recognise ourselves as poor (“*with our hands ever empty*”, as Therese of Lisieux said), but as also being on a continual march forward, being neither presumptuous nor discouraged, but humble and trustworthy, confident and faithful to the end.

CHAPTER IV

MENTAL PRAYER AS PRAYER OF THE HEART - A FRANCISCAN JOURNEY

At this point we should set ourselves the task of understanding what we mean by “inner attitude”, which helps us to remain willingly before the Lord, conquering the worries which urge us to flee, like Adam, from his presence. This inner attitude, supported by the Holy Spirit, and in the company of Mary, our Mother, enables us to live this prolonged time before Him, each day, under his gaze full of light and warmth, for a healthy “heat treatment” which heals our wounds and gives us the ability to love again.

We are talking about contemplative prayer, where contemplation means to be taken up by the joy and beauty of divine revelation as good news of the love of God for us in Jesus Christ. As always, etymology plays a role here, too: contemplate comes from the words *con* and *templum*, which means to look at length and with active participation at something beautiful; in our case, being able to see the signs everywhere of the presence of God, perceiving the whole world as a temple. Contemplation is therefore a gift which enables us to remain, for a certain amount of time, in the knowledge of the presence of the Lord, which then enables us, in the often opaque reality surrounding us, to receive everything as a clear sign of his love for us.

It can be said that this may be considered, for the life of the individual, what the eucharistic celebration is for the life of the Church; subordinate to and also deriving from, *culmen et fons*, our identity as children of God.

Discovering that we are loved

In order to pray we must be able to sit in silence, by ourselves, waiting patiently for the Lord to come. As we have already said, and as experience teaches us, friendship deepens only when one can be silent next to the other. It is also true with the Lord. Our prayer only arrives at maturity when we have learned to feel good next to Him, in silence. This presupposes that we have begun to live reconciled to our poverty and to rightly love ourselves. But how can we reach a right love of self? Before asking us to love Him, the Lord asks us to see that we are loved by Him. Only then can we hope that our response is in some way appropriate to his gift.

“Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Mk. 10, 21).

First, the Lord, looking at him, loved him and then he says, go... sell... give... come and follow me. The relative harshness of Christ's words melts away before the experience of knowing that we are loved by Him.

Every person who prays yearns to meet Jesus in order to see Him, but he has to realize that he is seen since a long time from Jesus. This had been Nathanael's experience: *“Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you”.* (John, 1, 47-48). And just like the apostles, it will be a new and extraordinary journey for us, too.

“Your true identity is as a child of God. This is the identity you have to accept. Once you have claimed it and settled in it, you can live in a world that give you much joy as well as pain. You can receive the praise as well as the blame that comes to you as an opportunity for strengthening your basic identity, because the identity that makes you free is anchored beyond all human praise and blame. You belong to God, and it is as a child of God that you are sent into the world”. (H. J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., London, 1997, page 59)

This was the route that Francis took, from the moment he realised that he was loved by God in the silent and deep dialogue before the San Damiano crucifix. He gradually became able to trust Him to guide his own life and to slowly allow himself to be overwhelmed by this love.

“This is the greatness of Francis - he believed in love, he felt loved, he never doubted that he was loved... He was unique, because nobody else felt loved by God like him... In reality, the love of the human towards God is always a response and therefore presumes the experience of being loved by God. This love is always much bigger than the response than any human can make... “You are charity” - the words of St. Francis say that God is love which spreads and is communicated. His is a free love, preceding all other love, and unpaid.. If it were not like this, then He would love us for what we are, and nobody would feel truly loved by God. Francis was the least of all, because most of all he was aware of his poverty. Francis had the experience of being loved for nothing, but of being loved by an infinite love... Feeling loved by God! And loved until death on the cross! This was Francis’ experience... If Christian perfection is to be found in love, it is difficult to find, in the whole of Christian history, a soul more burnt by love than Francis... Francis knew God as love, and he wondered at feeling so loved, which led to a love response in him that few souls have ever experienced with such force.” (free translation from D. Barsotti, *San Francesco preghiera vivente*, San Paolo, Milano 2008, pp. 134-14).

Caught in the vortex of this love he managed to overcome his own nature, ready to suffer something every day in order to be closer to the Lord, with a growing interior joy. True penitence and spiritual joy are, in him, inseparable sisters. We learn from Francis that penitence, when true, comes from joy, is nourished by joy and in turn leads to it.

Loved just as we are

Knowing that we are loved, just as we are, and believing it through and through, is the way to realise that we are loveable within (in our eyes), to also become loveable on the outside (with our brothers and sisters).

To do this we have to allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit to perceive, every more clearly, the face of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. The Desert Fathers knew well that this journey was not easy. They recount the story of a young monk who one day asked an old man, “Father, what is the most difficult job of a monk?” and he replied, “The most difficult task is to pray, pray, using the informal “thou” to God.” And he added, “Remember that a man, three days after his death, in the presence of God still had difficulty looking him in the face and addressing him as “Father” whilst using the informall “thou” this is the most difficult task. (taken from E. Bianchi and B. Baroffio, *La Preghiera fatica di ogni giorno*, Piemme 1983, pp. 11-12).

In reality, it is necessary to make a considerable interior journey to receive the immense gift of the fatherhood of God in the heart, which is incredible. Instinctively we are used to attributing to God the image that we have of ourselves; we think that He sees us with the eyes that we see ourselves. And often, what we think of ourselves is that which has solidified in our hearts through the experiences we have had with others, especially with our parents. It is usually a stern, demanding look, never totally positive. Yet the God we have grown to know in Jesus Christ is really totally different! And we are only dealing with Him. Every other image of God sinks to the level of an idol “*the work of human hands*” (Psalms 115 and 135).

Thomas Merton sheds light on this:

“One of the keys to real religious experience is the shattering realisation that no matter how hateful we are to ourselves, we are not hateful to God. This realisation helps us to understand the difference between our love and His. Our love is a need, His is a gift. We need to see good in ourselves in order to love ourselves. He does not. He loves us not because we are good, but because He is. But as long as we worship a God who is only a projection of ourselves, we fear a tremendous and insatiable power who needs to see goodness in us and who, for all the infinite clarity of His vision, finds nothing but evil, and therefore insists upon revenge.” (Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, Burns and Oates, 1962, London)

Not just compliance

To the perceptive and valuable annotation of Merton, we can add that *the love of the Lord is not pure compliance*, or a mere nod towards our poverty; it is rather a *passion and delight for the beauty which He never fails to see in each and every one of his creatures*, who all exist because He has conceived them, loved them and wanted them, deliberately and freely.

In fact, God has a deep passion for each one of us singly and together. He is passionate about our lives, about everything that has happened to us. A lover, always in love with us, and perennially in trepidation, waiting to be allowed into our company, as a mother wants to share events with her children. The time which we dedicate to contemplative prayer is that in which we say to him, *Maranàtha, come Lord!*

We know through experience what an effort it can be to seek God, and this is what leaps into our eyes when we speak of faith. It exists and it is true. But there is another point of view from which we can read the story of salvation. It is God's point of view. It enables us to appreciate the effort that He has made, makes and will make until the end of time to save humankind, who is the peak of creation and his profound passion, his continued torment. And we see Him as a God who is in love with us, always forced to chase after us, and so often rejected or received badly by us. Through Jesus Christ we have known a God begging us for love, vulnerable and poor, a God whose love is disregarded and rejected, a God who is left nailed, by us, on a cross.

Pope Benedict reminds us of this in the Message for Lent in 2007: ***The Cross reveals the fullness of God's love.***

“They shall look on him whom they have pierced” (Jn 19: 37). This is the biblical theme that this year guides our Lenten reflection... It is in the mystery of the Cross that the overwhelming power of the Heavenly Father's mercy is revealed in all of its fullness. In order to win back the love of his creature, he accepted to pay a very high price: the Blood of his Only Begotten Son. Death, which for the first Adam was an extreme sign of loneliness and powerlessness, was thus transformed in the supreme act of love and freedom of the new Adam. One could very well assert, therefore, together with St Maximus the Confessor, that Christ “died, if one could say so, divinely, because he died freely” (Ambigua, 91, 1056). On the Cross, God's eros for us is made manifest. Eros is indeed, as Pseudo-Dionysius expresses it, that force which “does not allow the lover to remain in himself but moves him to become one with the beloved” (De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 13: PG 3, 712). Is there more “mad eros” (N. Cabasilas, Vita in Cristo, 648) than

that which led the Son of God to make himself one with us even to the point of suffering as his own the consequences of our offences? Dear brothers and sisters, let us look at Christ pierced on the Cross! He is the unsurpassing revelation of God's love, a love in which eros and agape, far from being opposed, enlighten each other. On the Cross, it is God himself who begs the love of his creature: He is thirsty for the love of every one of us. The Apostle Thomas recognized Jesus as "Lord and God" when he put his hand into the wound of his side. Not surprisingly, many of the saints found in the Heart of Jesus the deepest expression of this mystery of love. One could rightly say that the revelation of God's eros toward man is, in reality, the supreme expression of his agape. In all truth, only the love that unites the free gift of oneself with the impassioned desire for reciprocity instils a joy which eases the heaviest of burdens. Jesus said: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself" (Jn 12: 32). The response the Lord ardently desires of us is above all that we welcome his love and allow ourselves to be drawn to him.

Yes, Lord, you have always been searching for someone who welcomes you from the depths of their heart, who opens their life to you, and allows them to be invaded by your passionate love. "Woman, give me drink" you asked the Samaritan woman. And on the cross you cried, "I am thirsty!" Many fathers have interpreted this cry as You asking each one of us to allow You to enter into our lives and be welcomed as the Lord of those lives. This is the thirst that has driven you crazy from your poor birth in Bethlehem, your death, naked, on the cross, and your remaining amongst us in the unnerving darkness of the eucharistic mystery - the three expressions of your self-emptying love that Francis never tired of contemplating. To give meaning to your coming amongst us, it would be enough that one single person, in the entire range of human history, really welcomed you and loved you. And in a certain way You did not even know if that had happened. You have also taken a risk, which happens to us when we decide to truly love; love brings with it a component of risk, it makes us vulnerable, because it can only make a suggestion, and can fall on deaf ears and can be fully or partially disregarded. It is comforting to know that they have been, and are still today, people who - like Mary and John, Peter and Paul, Francis and Clare, Theresa and Ignatius - have said Yes to you, a Yes that is total and for ever. They have been your joy, the joy of their God.

I, the passion of my God, want to become His joy, letting myself be invaded and seized by his Spirit, which wants to shape my face too to look more like that Son whom he welcomes fully, the Lord Jesus. "The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal.2,30). To be your joy, the joy of my Lord and my God - can there be any greater aspiration?

"To pray is to be entertained with Him, knowing that he loves us" (St. Theresa of Jesus)

Nobody voluntarily stays for long in the company of a person that we know just puts up with us. It is, however, sweet to spend time with someone we know cares about us, respects us and considers our presence to be precious. It is another thing to be with a person with whom we are in love. Our starting point is staying for a long time in the presence of Him, who we know is in love with us, with the ardent desire that we fall in love with Him - not forgetting that we can only stay faithful to those people whom we love because they please us.

When there is disaffection, distancing and infidelity begin, at least potentially, and it is thus with marriage, with friendships and at work. It is exactly like this with the Lord; His love reaches us through the Word and the Sacrament (the divine liturgy); but if he does not continue to be a presence which our heart appreciates and which gives us joy, then we slowly draw apart from Him, the source of living water, to seek some surrogate for joy elsewhere, in cracked cisterns (Jer. 2,13). The contemplative prayer that we are talking about is a privileged time in which we allow

the good news of his love to illuminate our minds, and bring peace to our troubled hearts. It is a time in which we become ever more aware of being children loved in the Only Son, and we allow this awareness to root itself in our hearts and become absolute certainty; but it is also the time in which we allow the Spirit to “light in us the fire of his love” and it makes us fall in love with Him.

“The unfathomable mystery of God is that God is a lover who wants to be loved. The one who created us is waiting for our response to the love that gave us our being. God not only says, ‘You are my beloved’. God also asks, ‘Do you love me?’ and offers us countless chances to say ‘Yes’ to our inner truth. The spiritual life, thus understood, radically changes everything. Being born and growing up, leaving home and finding a career, being praised and being rejected, walking and resting, praying and playing, becoming ill and being healed - yes, living and dying - they all become expressions of that divine question: ‘Do you love me?’ And at every point of the journey there is the choice to say ‘Yes’ and the choice to say ‘No’.....

*Where does all this lead us? I think that it leads us back to the ‘place’ we come from, the ‘place’ of God. We are sent into this world for a short time to say - through the joys and pains of our clock-time - the great ‘Yes’ to the love that has been given to us and in so doing return to the One who sent us with that ‘Yes’ engraved on our hearts. Our death thus becomes the moment of return” (LH. J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved. Spiritual living in a secular world*, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., London, 1993 p.)*

Like children in the Beloved Son

The God who is revealed to us in the Lord Jesus Christ is “*love, humility, security, rest, gladness and joy, the protector, our custodian and defender*” as Francis sang in the Praises of God (Francis of Assisi, *Early Documents*, Vol 1, p. 109). And so we can stay (or ‘remain’ as the Gospel of John says) before Him without fear, in a deep peace. We are certain of being welcomed by Him through the greatness of His heart, the tender Father who unceasingly sees in us the features of his only Son. He “*who always satisfied Him in everything, through whom He has done so much for us*” (*The Earlier Rule*, Ch. XXIII, 5); and we abandon ourselves into his arms with the confident audacity that the Spirit urges us to say, “*Abba-Father*”.

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a Spirit of adoption. When we cry ‘Abba-Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness” (Rom. 8,15-16).

Learning from the psalmist, we can allow our experience of being a weaned child, who can stay “*calmed and quieted...like a weaned child with its mother*” (Psalm 13). When we read it with this in mind, it becomes a beautiful psalm:

*“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvellous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.
O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and for evermore.” (Psalm 131)*

Praying as Christians, that is to say, immersed in the mystery of Christ the Saviour and guided by his Spirit, means to place ourselves trustingly and confidently before the face of the Lord; it means allowing his gaze to rest on us and being every more aware that his gaze is filled with tender and unconditional love. He is the only one who can heal our deep wounds which are, to a greater or lesser degree, present in the heart of each one of us; the wound inscribed on our limitations as creatures, which gives us the perception of our limited identity, never fully positive, and therefore always at the mercy of the fear of not being loveable enough.

The long journey which we are asked to embark upon is, in the end, that of passing from the interior situation of being the older brother in the parable in Luke (Lk. 15, 11-32), who sees God as the master who must be submitted to with gritted teeth, and from whom he claims rights, to being that of the younger brother, the prodigal son, who returns with a heart still the same as that of the older brother, but discovers, with emotion, a tender father, to whom he is finally able to abandon himself, full of gratitude. This is the interior change that comes in every true conversion.

Loveable because we are Loved

And so, with a grateful soul, we too can exclaim with the great Augustine, “*Because you loved me first, O Lord, you have made me loveable!*”

A deepening of this dense and fundamental affirmation is offered by another great witness of the authentic Christian experience, that of the Danish philosopher-theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855):

Father in Heaven! You have loved us first, help us never to forget that You are love so that this sure conviction might triumph in our hearts over the seduction of the world, over the inquietude of the soul, over the anxiety for the future, over the fright of the past, over the distress of the moment... You have loved us first, O God, alas! We speak of it in terms of history as if You have only loved us first but a single time, rather than that without ceasing You have loved us first many things and every day and our whole life through. When we wake up in the morning and turn our soul toward You - You are the first - You have loved us first; if I rise at dawn and at the same second turn my soul toward You in prayer, You are there ahead of me, You have loved me first. When I withdraw from the distractions of the day and turn my soul toward You, You are the first and thus forever. And yet we always speak ungratefully as if You have loved us first only once. (The Prayers of Kierkegaard, The University of Chicago Press 1956, p. 17).

This joyful observation, this Good News, which objectively forms the centre and substance of the New Testament, can and should become the foundation of the continuous restoration of our true identity, making us, too, finally conscious, as Francis says, “*of what a person is before God, that he is and no more or less.*” (Admonition, XIX)

God always sees us in the light of his Only Son, just as he conceived us, loved and wanted us; each one of us worth his beloved Son dying, He who took on himself the Cross precisely to ensure that we are also a great treasure in the eyes of God. As Evagrio Pontico says, “*if you want to know*

who you are, don't look at what you have been, but the image that God had when he created you."

What the book of the prophet Isaiah reveals to Israel, is also valid for each person, and these words, overflowing with tenderness and consolation inspired by the Spirit, can hopefully apply to ourselves:

*"But now thus says the Lord,
he who has created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned;
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God, and Holy One of Israel, your Saviour...
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you...
Do not fear, for I am with you...
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created from my glory,
whom I formed and made'. (Is. 43, 1-7)
"Can a woman forget her nursing-child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you". (Is. 49,15)
"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels...
For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch
The nations shall see your vindications,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called 'My Delight Is in Her',*

*and your land 'Married',
 for the Lord delights in you,
 and your land will be Married.
 For as a young man marries a young woman,
 so shall your Builder marry you,
 and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
 so shall your God rejoice over you". (Is. 61, 10 - 62, 1-5)*
*"Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
 we are the clay, and you are our potter;
 we are all the work of your hand." (Is. 64, 8)*

This is the face of God which is revealed in some Psalms, and these texts represent the summit of the revelation of the Old Testament. It is a face which is not only confirmed, but brought to completion in the New Testament, and which reaches its maximum splendour in the Paschal mystery.

Francis was thunderstruck by this face, and he became an extraordinary witness of it and wonderful singer about it, with words full of tenderness which the Spirit placed in his heart after the burning experience of the Stigmata of Verna; a text which he wrote in his own hand and sent to brother Leo "the little lamb of God."

*"You are the holy Lord God who does wonderful things.
 You are strong. You are great. You are the most high
 You are the almighty king. You holy father
 King of heaven and earth.
 You are three and one, the Lord God of gods;
 You are the good, all good, the highest goos,
 Lord God living and true.
 You are love, charity; You are wisdom. You are humility,
 You are patience, You are beauty, You are meekness,
 You are security, You are rest,
 You are gladness and joy. You are our hope, You are justice,
 You are moderation, You are all our riches to sufficiency.
 You are beauty. You are meekness,
 You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender,
 You are strength. You are refreshment. You are our hope,
 You are our faith, You are our charity,
 You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal live;
 Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Saviour."
 (Praises of God, Vol 1, 109)*

As D. Barsotti says, "*this is the greatness of Christianity. We understand what Christianity really is, when we think that God loves us! He loves each one of us! Each one of us becomes God's everything. Francis felt this. He was filled with this truth and this understanding, and he was so overcome with wonder that it paralysed him. To be loved by God... This is the essence of the Praises to God Almighty.* (in *San Francesco preghiera vivente*, p. 383)

*“For me personally, prayer becomes more and more a way to listen to the blessing. I have read and written much about prayer, but when I go to a quiet place to pray, I realise that, although I have a tendency to say many things to God, the real ‘work’ of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me. This might sound self-indulgent, but, in practice, it is a hard discipline... It is not easy to enter into the silence and reach beyond the many boisterous and demanding voices of our world and to discover that the small intimate voice saying: ‘You are my Beloved Child, on you my favour rests.’ Still, if we dare to embrace our solitude and befriend our silence, we will come to know that voice.... Often you will feel that nothing happens in your prayer. You say, ‘I am just sitting there and getting distracted.’ But if you develop the discipline of spending one half-hour a day listening to the voice of love, you will gradually discover that something is happening of which you were not even conscious... The faithful discipline of prayer reveals to you that you are the blessed one and gives you the power to bless others... we have to find the courage to face our own brokenness...” (H. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., London, 1993, p. 62).*

Thanks to you revealing yourself, O Lord, I discover that You do not look at me with my eyes, but with yours. And it is a completely different way of looking! It is a look that is determined by the quality of my life, if I think that a large part of our energies are spent on trying to resist the threatening and depressing feeling of being of little value, which makes us susceptible to every tiny sign of disapproval, as well as touchy and reactive; always grappling with the fear of not being loved enough, because we are not loveable. We suffer, and we make other suffer from that dark evil of depression, which is so widespread today. Only through this prayer which allows me to listen to Your voice, letting it settle in my heart, I am able to free myself from the need to beg for glory - always insecure and fragile - which can come to me from others. The more I allow you to enter my life, the less my perception of my identity will depend on what others think or say about me. This prayer teaches me to not make an idol of interpersonal relationships.

If you love me just as I am, I can also love myself, and finally live reconciled to myself, even with the things that limit me and make me weak. I can then look around me, at the world of my brothers and sisters, with eyes full of compassion, goodness and patience. Because every day I discover that this is the way You look at me, I learn from you to have the same look on my own face, and on the faces of those whom I live closely with, realising ever more that we are all part of an immense and compassionate design, which constitutes our only solid hope.

Becoming loveable with our brothers and sisters, too

Holy Scripture in its entirety, and the New Testament particularly, affirms that our love for God and our neighbour relies on an earlier factor, without which it would be incomprehensible: God’s love for us. This is the factor that precedes every other, the origin and the measure of our love. Love of

One of the most beautiful fruits of prayer, and a criterion of discernment on the authenticity of it, is the growth of love for one’s neighbour. If our prayer is true, it makes us closer to God, we are united to him and this enables us to perceive and share the infinite love which he nourishes in every one of his creatures. Prayer dilates and softens the heart. Where prayer is lacking, hearts become harder and love grows cold.

Benedict XVI reminded us that “*The response the Lord ardently desires of us is above all that we welcome his love and allow ourselves to be drawn to him*”. But then he continues. “*Accepting his love, however, is not enough. We need to respond to such love and devote ourselves to communicating it to others. Christ ‘draws me to himself’ In order to unite himself to me, so that I learn to love the brothers with his own love. ‘They shall look on him whom they have pierced’ (Jn 19: 37). Let us look with trust at the pierced side of Jesus from which flow “blood and water” (Jn 19: 34) Blood, symbol of the love of the Good Shepherd, flows into us especially in the Eucharistic mystery: “The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation... we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving”* (Message for Lent, 2007).

To love God I must first learn that I am loved by Him in Christ Jesus, and so learn to gradually believe, in my heart, that I am loveable. Only in this way can I love myself (and beyond appearances it is not easy at all). And only by loving myself in the light of God’s love, am I able to live the Second Commandment, which tells me to *love my neighbour as myself*. We have to be aware of the fact that it is impossible to truly love our neighbour when we detest ourselves. Without being aware of it, we often move into this vicious circle: we do not love our neighbour, because we do not love ourselves - and we do not love ourselves because we do not believe in the amazing “good news” of being loved by God through Christ Jesus.

People of little faith, we are condemned to be people of little love; without experiencing it, we cannot make our neighbour part of it. Tormented by the fear of not being loveable and incapable of seeing and appreciating the many signs of love which have already punctuated our histories, and which are given to us every day, we become tormentors to those who live alongside us. In this case, the following prayer could be useful:

Lord, reconcile me to myself!
How can I meet and love others,
If I cannot meet and love myself?
Lord, you love me just as I am
and not as I dream,
help me to accept my limited human condition
yet called to overcome it.
Teach me to live with my lights and shades,
my sweetnesses, and my acts of anger,
my smiles and my tears,
with my past and with my present.
Let me welcome myself as you have welcomed me,
to love myself as you love me.
Free me from the kind of perfection that I claim to give myself,
and open me to the saintliness that you want to give me.
Save me from Judas’ remorse,
which engulfed him, never to come out again,
leaving him fearful and desperate, facing his sin.
Grant me the repentance of Peter,
who meeting the silence of your gaze
full of tenderness and compassion, was reborn.
And if I have to cry
let it not be for myself,
but for your unrequited love.

Lord, you know the discouragement
that sometimes assails my heart,
the disgust with myself,
that I always project onto others!
Because you have loved me from the beginning,
You, O Lord, have made me loveable.
May the tenderness that I see in your face
make me finally loveable even in my eyes.
Tell me that everything is possible to one who believes.
Tell me that I can still be healed,
in the light of your gaze and your Word.
And may the compassion which you continuously give me
be the same that I allow to flow over my brothers.

A Heart that is bigger than our own

It is in personal prayer lived in gratuity before the face of the Lord, and only here, that our true and more authentic identity can be remoulded, which allows us to recognise ourselves in all humility as the “pearls and treasures” of God, whilst knowing ourselves to be so small.... and the fear of being worthless and not being worthy of love makes way for confidence and hope.

“By this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts” (1 Jn, 19-20)

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear... whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” (1Jn 4,18)

We never have a reason to bring this hope into question, as long as “*now is the time of mercy*” (2 Cel 38,IX) as Francis described our earthly life.

Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) confirms this in an episode which he narrates, *because “you - he writes to a friend - once repentant - acquire a faith which remains a worthy hope of salvation”*

This episode centres on a young man, who the apostle John leaves in charge of the bishop of a city near Ephesus: *‘I entrust him to you’ - he says - ‘with every concern before this church and taking Christ as a witness’.*

The young man would find hospitality and attention in the bishop’s house. But the bishop reduced his supervision and the young man, influenced by bad company, started committing lewd offences. At the end, despairing of God’s salvation, committed ever greater offences; and even assembled a band which he actively led, both bloodthirsty and extremely cruel.

One day John, passing by this community, asked the bishop to return to him the person entrusted to him, ‘I ask for this young man and the soul of this brother’. The bishop, embittered, replied, ‘He is dead... for God he is dead, as he became evil and corrupt’. Profoundly saddened, the apostle set off to look for the young man. He let himself be arrested by the marauders’ sentries and asked to be taken to their boss. He, armed as he was, waited. When, however, he recognised John, he was overcome with shame and ran away. John chased him with all his might, forgetting his own age, and shouting, ‘Why, son, are you running away from me - I who am old and helpless? Have pity on me, my son. Do not be afraid, you still have hope of eternal life. I will give Christ justification for you. If necessary, I will gladly pay for your death, as the Lord has paid for ours. For you, I will give up my life in exchange. Stop! Have faith! It is Christ who has sent me!

At first, hearing this, he stopped, looking at the ground, and then he threw all his weapons down; then, trembling he cried bitterly. When the old man came up to him, he embraced him asking

for forgiveness, as far as the sobbing allowed, receiving a second baptism with tears, hiding his right hand that had held so many weapons. But John, acting as guarantor for him, swore that he had found pardon for him from the Saviour, beseeching him, begging him, and kissing that right hand, he brought him back to the church, and did not leave there, as is narrated, before placing him at the head of that church, giving an example of sincere penitence and a great sign of second birth, a trophy for everyone to see.” (free translation from L. Padovese, *La Speranza dei Padri*, 1984, pp. 62-63).

Commenting on the attitude of the third servant in the parable of the talents (Mt. 25,14-30), Pope Francis urges us to free ourselves from a wrong idea of God. He says:

“Upon the master’s return, this same servant explained to him the reason for this action, saying: “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground” (vv. 24-25). *This servant did not have a trusting relationship with his master, but was afraid of him, and this hindered him. Fear always immobilises and often leads to making bad choices. Fear discourages us from taking the initiative; it induces us to take refuge in secure and guaranteed solutions, and thus end up not accomplishing anything good. To move forward and grow on the journey of life, we must not have fear; we must have faith.*

This parable helps us understand how important it is to have a true concept of God. We must not think that he is a cruel, hard and severe master who wishes to punish us. If this mistaken image of God is within us our life cannot be fruitful, because we will live in fear and this will not lead us to anything constructive. On the contrary, fear paralyses us; it causes our self-destruction. We are called to reflect in order to discover what our idea of God really is. Already in the Old Testament he revealed himself as “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6). *And Jesus always showed us that God is not a severe or intolerant master, but a father full of love, of tenderness, a father full of goodness. Therefore, we can and must have immense faith in him.* (from the Angelus of Sunday, 19th November, 2017)

A Gaze that Heals Wounds

To pray means first and foremost to place ourselves at the feet of the One, who by pure grace we know as our loveable Saviour. Guided by his Spirit, we can allow faith and confidence to grow and continue to grow in our hearts, allowing his gaze full of compassion to reach us, entering the depths of our being and so healing and bringing peace to our unquiet hearts.

To contemplate means to be invaded by the joy of discovering that his gaze is one of tenderness, of goodness and of satisfaction, just because we are his creatures, loved for ever and ever by his heart so much bigger than ours, beyond the spiritual poverty which still lives in our fragile experience. Perceiving that his gaze comes from the one who created and redeemed us, is like oil which heals the wounds present in the heart of every human. Turning again to the words of Pope Francis,

“We must not become disheartened when we see our limitations, our sins, our weakness: God is near; Jesus is on the Cross to heal us. This is God’s love. To look at the Cross and tell ourselves within: “God loves me”. It is true, there are these limitations, these weaknesses, these sins, but he is greater than the limitations and the weaknesses and the sins. Do not forget this: God is greater

than our weaknesses, than our infidelities, than our sins. And let us take the Lord by the hand; let us look to the Crucifix and go forward.

May Mary, Mother of Mercy, place in our hearts the certainty that we are loved by God. May she be close to us in the moments in which we feel alone, when we are tempted to surrender to life's difficulties." (from the Angelus Sunday 11th March, 2018)

Because you love me just as I am, I can also love myself and find in you the strength to change. Because you, lover of life, love every one of your creatures, I can love them too, beginning with the brothers and sisters you have placed near me.

Your love has the power to make me loving to myself, to others, and to the whole of creation and it makes it possible for me to do what you have asked me to do in the simplicity of every day living.

I often remind myself that, "we can never be too sweet or too good with others, in our way of behaving; sweetness is the first strength and probably the first of the virtues" (free translation from Teilhard de Chardin). In any case, it is the best road to improve myself and the people around me.

It is illuminating to note that there is no contradiction between awareness of our own smallness, and great faith in the Lord. In St. Francis there is an extraordinary harmony between his lucid awareness of the structural poverty of the human, and his awareness of man's highest dignity; the same harmony he sees between our condition of fragility and sin, and our absolute confidence in the compassion of the Father, who in Jesus Christ has opened his arms and his heart to embrace us in an irreversible love.

This admirable equilibrium is one of the many signs of his genius, illuminated by the Spirit. It is a balance which manifests also when, taken up in a pure ecstatic losing of self, he only repeats, "*Who are you, O my sweetest God? And who am I, vilest vermin and your useless servant?*". Francis knows that he is little and insignificant, but he also knows that he belongs to a "*sweetest God ... I am **your** servant!*" This is what gave him the power and strength to grow in following his Lord; ever more aware of being loved in a totally free way, in turn he was able to respond to that love with the passion of the lover, brimful with gratitude.

Learning from St. Francis, I can also honestly recognise that my true treasure is the love which God has for me in Christ Jesus, and not my love for Him, which always comes down to very little...

And so I will not longer find it annoying, but simple and healthy to bring to prayer everything in my life - my joys and my sadness, my enthusiasm and the degradation of the journey, the victory of grace and my sin, my generosity and greed, my caring attention and indifference towards my brothers... Ever more aware that holiness is not so much a sport in which heroes can triumph, but an adventure of compassion in which those who are small and humble are filled with gifts, and what counts is the conviction, joyfully accepted, of my deep poverty, which the compassion of Lord Jesus continuously save me from.

So, we can expose our poverty, without fear, to the sunshine of His love, adding to the great number of sick people in the Gospel (Mt. 9,12 and Lk. 19,10) who recognise that He, and He alone, is the Doctor that we absolutely need. And I can say to Him:

In this new day, Lord, love me.
Even though I am not loveable,
even though I am poor and I love You but a little,
even though I do not deserve it,
Love me, Lord.
When I do not want to love You,
when I am afraid of You and flee,

when nobody loves me,
love me, Lord.
And I will run like John,
I will turn towards You like Mary Magdalene;
My heart will burn like the two at Emmaus...
Love me, Lord,
and make this be enough for me!

Some practical suggestions

If contemplation means to taste the sweetness of resting under the gaze of Him who loves us, and to feel a growing need to respond to his love, passing it on to the brothers and sisters who walk beside us, then proceeding in this form of prayer we are asked to be truly open to allowing the Spirit to work in us, in an interior purification as the fundamental choice of rejecting evil. Some attitudes make an authentic contemplative journey impracticable, because they stop us from experiencing the delights of the Kingdom. Three of these can be mentioned.

- a. Despising the poor and closing our hearts to them;
- b. Cultivating rancour against anyone who has trampled on us, (*ie* cultivating and fomenting or embracing rancour, which is different from being displeased, even feeling angry);
- c. Opening our minds to the dirt which is so widespread in the form of pornography, which pollutes the mind and arouses discomfort and fear in the heart. Our conscience reproaches us for the choices made by the mind, then nourishes the fear of God in our heart.

We need to be aware of these three obstacles, and avoid from them.

Here are a few simple and practical suggestions which can be useful in our challenging but fascinating journey towards contemplation.

1. Prayer is an art; we do not suddenly become people of prayer, but as with any art, we learn with humble perseverance.
1. We learn to pray by praying, just as we learn to swim by swimming. We need to apply ourselves with constancy and regularity, without expecting to see instant results. To pray is, in fact, a poor gesture: it seems like a waste of time. We often get tired of praying because we are not poor enough and cannot bear this poverty of prayer. We are used to fast results and efficiency, but these are not values that apply to interior life, where we take steps rather than strides.
2. The more we pray, the more we feel the need to pray; the less we pray the less we want to pray. In this case, it is the opposite of the body's need for food.
3. In the early stages, the Lord leaves it up to us to find the means and help which we find most useful, as if everything depends on our own effort. Only when we move further along this path does He progressively take the initiative to push us further along, to fulfilling his will and being faithful sons and daughters.

4. The first steps are therefore difficult and rather complicated; just as a child begins to walk, the soul needs to lean on supports. Some concrete elements are therefore important: finding the right *place*, choosing the right *time*, find the best *position* which allows the body to 'do its bit' without being an obstacle; availing ourselves of one or more *icons* which can be meaningful for us, which we can place before us; using the *daily Mass readings*; learning to handle *distractions* with humility, without being annoyed by them, or sometimes even enhancing them, as possible indications of the orientations of our heart.
5. For those who would like a programme to follow, the Mass - which is the peak, the fount and also the paradigm of every prayer of the Church - is also valid for personal prayer. *Initial rites and penitential acts* = silence - the invocation of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary, because they support our prayer - the humble recognition of our sin; *Liturgy of the Word* = readings of the daily Mass, with application to our own life; *Prayers of the Faithful* = requests for help to live the Word and for other necessities; *Eucharistic Prayer* = praise, benediction, thanksgiving, etc.; the concluding *Our Father*.
6. So far as possible, take care of *long term preparation* for prayer (do not be dissolute during the day, check your thoughts and fantasies, use the Prayer of the Name or those aspirations, which are so familiar in Franciscan tradition for keeping alive *Jesu ducis memoria*) in us) as well as the *immediate preparation* (not throwing ourselves into prayer without making space and time for developing concentration and as far as possible prepare the tools that will be used).
7. Bring your life to prayer and prayer to your life, avoiding abstract speculations and spiritual fantasies. Open your heart wide to receive the Lord's love, freed from fear. When there is aridity, read slowly and ruminate on some passage from the Word of God.
8. Patiently wait for the Lord and the joy which He brings, without harbouring demands of any kind - we are in His company mainly to please Him and not for our own gratification. We should not look for God's consolation, but, "*The God of every consolation*" (2Cor. 1,3); and his silence can purify and increase our desire for Him.
9. Lose ourselves in sweet contemplation of the face of the Lord and his free and faithful love (*You are holy, you are strong, you are... you are...: Francis's Praises of God*). Resting in the heart of Jesus "like a child in the arms of his mother" (Ps. 130), allow Him to look at us, staying under his gaze filled with tenderness and entrusting our whole lives, to Him, even our poor reality.

But the most beautiful advice on how to set up our time of mental prayer can be gleaned from J. Philippe who, in his frank realism, exhorts us to not be discouraged, but maintain in us humility and get rid of the illusions of being able to "touch heaven with a finger". He asks: how should we effectively manage the time which we have decided to dedicate to contemplative prayer? Philippe offers us two simple observations: *Take great care of the beginning, take great care of the ending, and from these two we do the best we can!*

To begin, what counts most is to really place ourselves in the presence of God, and this will often be facilitated by some regular practices, in a little ritual which we have been given and with which we begin our time of prayer.. As regards the end of the prayer, his first piece of advice is to faithfully observe the entire time that we have decided to dedicate to this prayer. He also advises that there is no need to finish the prayer discontented. Even if it has been difficult, even if I have the feeling of not having done any good because I didn't feel anything, I was continually distracted, I fell asleep, etc. I should leave my time of prayer contented. I have spent some time

with the Lord, and that is enough. As far as I am concerned, I have not done anything, but He has certainly done something for me and, in an act of humility and faith, I thank Him for that. Whatever my prayer has been, the final word should always be one of gratitude. And I shall gradually see that I am not mistaken in doing this. (paraphrased from J. Philippe, *Imparare a pregare per imparare ad amare*, Gribaudo, Torino 2014, pp. 89-91).

In my opinion, these are the essential ingredients for authentic prayer. If we allow ourselves to be humbly guided by the Spirit, the chief protagonist and unique master of every authentic prayer, each one of us will progressively reach our own way of staying in the presence of the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Learning to pray means letting ourselves be loved

If the kind of personal prayer which we have been exploring is “*spending a certain amount of time in the company of God who we know loves us*” as St. Teresa of Avila says, then it is all about learning to remain there, under the gaze of God, whose face is fully revealed to us in the crucified Christ, whose broken heart gushes with the love which gives us life! Remaining there, allows us to be reached by that gaze, not running from it, either by doing things that seem to be more important, or because we feel we are unworthy of being loved by Him, and so always unable to believe that incredible and beautiful news that is the Gospel (we are loved, and always have been, unconditionally, in the beloved Son). Remaining there, and saying to him, with Francis, “*You are good, all good, the highest good, Lord God living and true... You are beauty, You are meekness, You are all our riches*” (Francis’s *Praises of God*).

But as we have said many times, it is not easy to hold the gaze of the Lord and overcome the instinctive urge to hide ourselves like Adam who, realising that he was naked, (ie poor and limited) tries in vain to remove himself from that gaze, and hears himself being called, “*Where are you, Adam?*” (Gen. 3,9).

To succeed we have to meet the true face of the true God, God who emerges from the Gospel, and we become free, at least a little, from those false ideas about Him that have been lodged in our minds and our hearts. The biggest obstacle is that we tend to confuse the criteria which govern human relationships with those which govern our relationship with the Lord. Which criteria?

“*I love you* (that is, I respect you, I appreciate you, I consider you a precious asset) *if you deserve it, if you are good, if you are worthy of receiving my love*” - this is the refrain that we have heard repeated from our childhood. We have all fed on it. It has penetrated our minds and our hearts as a poison which tends to continuously pollute our relationship with the Lord. Yes, we all have an instinctive, atavistic fear of the Lord, the same fear that a wild animal has of the human. Silent prayer can then be compared to the domestication of an animal, just as the fox and the Little Prince, because our hearts, too, must learn to gradually draw closer to the Lord. Gradually, his face must cease to make us afraid and instead become loveable, reassuring, one which understands us, encourages us, always trusts us and spurs us on to keep on or to get back on the road.

Praying means learning to allow the Good News of God's love, manifested for us in Jesus Christ, to be rooted in our minds until it pervades us totally, so that it becomes an undisputed and indisputable truth. We know that it is not the evidence of our senses and our emotions, but the certainty of His Word that are the foundation. This certainty is like a light for our minds, it illuminates the whole of reality with meaning and value, seen and interpreted through the light of the Easter of the Lord, crucified and resurrected. This is the *renewal of the mind* which St. Paul asked of the Romans, and asks us today (Rom. 12,2); a mind illuminated by the Gospel, which is ever further from the logic of the world and its evaluation criteria, which have an unprecedented strength today. Our minds must therefore work, delicately and patiently,, to convey this evangelical certainty to our hearts. If the mind can be convinced of the logic of coherent reasoning, which comes from faith in the Resurrection, well established on the coordinates of time and space (and such are the solid foundations of Christian faith!), the heart speaks a different language, not that of pure reasoning but that of feeling, that is, of experience. The heart needs to become familiar with this presence of the Lord, because it instinctively perceives the divine world as something *fascinosum et tremendum*, which cannot be approached incautiously, and which arouses fear and trembling.

To overcome this image of God is an arduous undertaking for us; even impossible. Only by accepting the gift of the Spirit, can we reach a more authentic experience of faith, passing from the fear of the slave to the confidence of the son, who through Jesus Christ receives the good news that he/she also is a beloved son or daughter of the Father.

Our hearts have many kinds of resistance. Overcoming them, as we have mentioned, is similar to the domestication of wild animals. In this regard, I am reminded of what happened to a very dear brother of mine. His name is Rainero and for some thirty years has divided his time between his work as an artisan and his work in breaking horses, passing easily from his workshop to the large barn and adjacent area where some twenty horses are kept. He practises what is called "sweet taming", which is different to "harsh taming", the most common kind, through which the horses are forced to submit to harsh treatment, in order to achieve the docility which comes through fear of the owner. "Sweet taming", on the other hand, aims to achieve the obedient collaboration of the animal, creating a relationship of trust, which enables the animal to overcome its instinctive fear of the human. On the one hand we have a horse who submits through fear of the beating it has experienced, on the other hand we have a horse who is obedient because its fear has been overcome by the trust of the person who approaches it with respect. It is so beautiful to see how my brother patiently and determinedly brings forth this "sweet taming" of horses of every type, from foals to adults, who had already had a violent and suffering experience of humans. It is wonderful to discover that the horses that are tamed in such a way then become acquainted with children, young people and adults without any problems.

The "sweet taming" that brother practises reminds me of the way in which the Lord tries to overcome our fear by approaching us gradually to make us aware of his presence. But our distrust of Him is much greater than the horse's distrust of the human. Not by chance does the Lord need a long time to tame our hearts. But yet, his unique, great, divine desire is to overcome our resistance, so that we can approach him, conquered by his love. "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*" (Jn. 12,32).

Yes, going forward in contemplative prayer means allowing ourselves to be tamed, that is allowing the Lord to get close to us, to convince us that we are loved by Him, that we are precious to Him, and that the Father sees us through his beloved Son: *“Suffice Him always for all and through whom He has done and does so much for us”* St. Francis). The light of love which the Easter of the Lord Jesus has shed on the face of each one of us, means that the Father sees us flooded by that light, now made eternally and marvellously His. (*You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord... the Lord delights in you* - Is. 62, 3-4).

This means that we need to make room for the Easter gift of the Spirit which instils in us and increases the firm belief that we are loved by God in Jesus Christ, loved just as we are, made loveable precisely because we are loved. To believe, with St. Paul, that *“neither death nor life..nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Rom. 8, 37-39). This is the heart of the Gospel, and is the most beautiful news that history has every heard. It is so beautiful that it seems almost too good to be true. It is not for nothing, that being accepted and believed requires a deep conversion. *“The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel”*, the Lord Jesus tells us; and when he says *“repent and believe the Gospel”*, it means to free yourselves from your idols, those which have settled in your mind and rooted in your heart, and receive the invitation to enter the Kingdom of the one true God, the one you see in me.

This is truly wonderful news which alone has the power of setting us free. *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”* (Jn. 8, 31-32). In fact, it is the only cure for the fear of being unsightly, unworthy and rejected, a fear which paralyses our hearts and makes us incapable of loving. Being loved first and eternally by a love which is compassion, which the Spirit pours into us, we are enabled to love in turn as we know ourselves to be loved by the Lord.

The greatest challenge and the hardest knot to unravel is always this - accepting with a mind, nourished by the Word, that the Lord's gaze upon me is not like that of my parents or teachers, but a radically different gaze; it is totally and uniquely a gaze of tenderness, of unconditional love. The Father's words to the Son in Jordan and in Tabor are also addressed to us, *“This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him”* (Lk. 9,35). In silent prayer I allow this “light of the mind” to flow into my heart, warming it, reassuring it and allowing me to settle and finally come to rest at the feet of the Lord.

The solid rock on which our real greatness, our indestructible dignity is founded, is to believe in this incredible Gospel: through his beloved Son, we too *are loved by God!* And when, in the Our Father, we say, “Lead us not into temptation” we are asking that we do not allow doubt of the faithfulness of His love to take root, when life disappoints us, betrays us and impoverishes us.

In the sober and dense prayer which is placed at the end of the *Letter to the Entire Order*, Francis offers a clear description of a mature disciple. I think it opportune to mention it here at the conclusion of our attempt to describe a Franciscan way of contemplation.

*“Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God,
give us miserable ones the grace to do for You alone
what we know you want us to do*

*and always to desire what pleases You.
Inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened
and inflamed by the fire of the `Holy Spirit,
may we be able to follow in the footprints
of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
and, by Your grace alone, may we make our way to You,
Most High, Who live and rule in perfect Trinity and simple Unity,
and are glorified God almighty forever and ever, Amen.”*

In a few words, Francis summarises the essential elements of an authentic road of conversion. There is no Titanic effort, no desire to earn a love which precedes us, of which the Spirit makes us gradually aware.

“In no other text did St. Francis condense his teaching in such a vigorous synthesis. Francis tells us about the need for grace, and teaches us that holiness is the fulfilment of God’s will in a journey which brings humankind to God in the imitation and union with Christ, made possible through the actions of the Holy Spirit which illuminates and kindles fire in the human. And that light is certainly faith, as the fire which the Spirit lights is love”. (free translation from D. Barsotti, *San Francesco preghiera vivente*, p. 38)

Since the Mystery of God was made known to us in the human face of the Son of Mary, the road to contemplation has been open to every human person. Going forward means opening ourselves to an experience of profound peace; the peace which the Lord promised to give all those who seek Him with faithfulness and humility. (Jn. 14,27) It is the unique peace which the heart of mankind always has an indelible nostalgia for, as the great Augustine says, since *“God has created us for Himself, and our heart is without peace until we rest in Him”*. (St. Augustine, *Confessions* 1)