

## 1989 Vatican letter on 'Christian Meditation'

### **LETTER TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

#### **ON SOME ASPECTS OF CHRISTIAN MEDITATION**

October 15, 1989

#### **I. Introduction**

1. Many Christians today have a keen desire to learn how to experience a deeper and authentic prayer life despite the not inconsiderable difficulties which modern culture places in the way of the need for silence, recollection and meditation. The interest which in recent years has been awakened also among some Christians by forms of meditation associated with some eastern religions and their particular methods of prayer is a significant sign of this need for spiritual recollection and a deep contact with the divine mystery. Nevertheless, faced with this phenomenon, many feel the need for sure criteria of a doctrinal and pastoral character which might allow them to instruct others in prayer, in its numerous manifestations, while remaining faithful to the truth revealed in Jesus, by means of the genuine Tradition of the Church. This present letter seeks to reply to this urgent need, so that in the various particular Churches, the many different forms of prayer, including new ones, may never lose their correct personal and communitarian nature.

These indications are addressed in the first place to the Bishops, to be considered in that spirit of pastoral solicitude for the Churches entrusted to them, so that the entire people of God—priests, religious and laity—may again be called to pray, with renewed vigor, to the Father through the Spirit of Christ our Lord.

2. The ever more frequent contact with other religions and with their different styles and methods of prayer has, in recent decades, led many of the faithful to ask themselves what value non-Christian forms of meditation might have for Christians. Above all, the question concerns eastern methods.<sup>1</sup> Some people today turn to these methods for therapeutic reasons. The spiritual restlessness arising from a life subjected to the driving pace of a technologically advanced society also brings a certain number of Christians to seek in these methods of prayer a path to interior peace and psychic balance. This psychological aspect is not dealt with in the present letter, which instead emphasises the theological and spiritual implications of the question. Other Christians, caught up in the movement towards openness and exchanges between various religions and cultures, are of the opinion that their prayer has much to gain from these methods. Observing that in recent times many traditional methods of meditation, especially Christian ones, have fallen into disuse, they wonder whether it might not now be possible, by a new training in prayer, to enrich our heritage by incorporating what has until now been foreign to it.

3. To answer this question, one must first of all consider, even if only in a general way, in what does the intimate nature of Christian prayer consist. Then one can see if and how it might be enriched by meditation methods which have been developed in other religions and cultures. However, in order to achieve this, one needs to start with a certain clear premise. Christian prayer is always determined by the structure of the Christian faith, in which the very truth of God and creature shines forth. For this reason, it is defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God. It expresses therefore the communion of redeemed creatures with the intimate life of the Persons of the Trinity. This communion, based on Baptism and the Eucharist, source and summit of the life of the Church, implies an attitude of conversion, a flight from "self" to the "You" of God. Thus Christian prayer is at the same time always authentically personal and communitarian. It flees from impersonal techniques or from concentrating on oneself, which can create a kind of rut, imprisoning the person praying in a spiritual privatism which is incapable of a free openness to the transcendental God. Within the Church, in the legitimate search for new methods of meditation it must always be borne in mind that the essential element of authentic Christian prayer is the meeting of two freedoms, the infinite freedom of God with the finite freedom of man.

#### **II. Christian Prayer in the Light of Revelation**

4. The Bible itself teaches how the man who welcomes biblical revelation should pray. In the Old Testament there is a marvelous collection of prayers which have continued to live through the centuries, even within the Church of Jesus Christ, where they have become the basis of its official prayer: The Book of Praises or of Psalms.<sup>2</sup> Prayers similar to the Psalms may also be found in earlier Old Testament texts or re-echoed in later ones.<sup>3</sup> The prayers of the book of Psalms tell in the first place of God's great works on behalf of the Chosen People. Israel meditates, contemplates and makes the marvels of God present again, recalling them in prayer.

In biblical revelation Israel came to acknowledge and praise God present in all creation and in the destiny of every man. Thus He is invoked, for example, as rescuer in time of danger, in sickness, in persecution, in tribulation. Finally, and always in the light of his salvific works, He is exalted in his divine power and goodness, in his justice and mercy, in his royal grandeur.

5. Thanks to the words, deeds, Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the *New Testament* the Faith acknowledges in Him the definitive self-revelation of God, the Incarnate Word who reveals the most intimate depth of his love. It is the Holy Spirit, he who was sent into the hearts of the faithful, he who "searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Cor 2:10), who makes it possible to enter into these divine depths. According to the promise Jesus made to the disciples, the Spirit will explain all that he had not yet been able to tell them. However, this Spirit "will not speak on his own authority," but "he will glorify me, for he

will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn 16:13f.). What Jesus calls "his" is, as he explains immediately, also God the Father's because "all that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn 16:15).

The authors of the New Testament, with full cognizance, always spoke of the revelation of God in Christ within the context of a vision illuminated by the Holy Spirit. The Synoptic Gospels narrate Jesus' deeds and words on the basis of a deeper understanding, acquired after Easter, of what the disciples had seen and heard. The entire Gospel of St. John is taken up with the contemplation of him who from the beginning is the Word of God made flesh. Paul, to whom Jesus appeared in his divine majesty on the road to Damascus, instructs the faithful so that they "may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth (of the Mystery of Christ), and to know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18 ff.). For Paul the Mystery of God is Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3) and, the Apostle clarifies, "I say this in order that no one may delude you with beguiling speech" (v. 4).

**6.** There exists, then, a strict relationship between Revelation and prayer. The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* teaches that by means of his revelation the invisible God, "from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends (cf. Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15), and moves among them (cf. Bar 3:38), in order to invite and receive them into his own company."<sup>4</sup> This revelation takes place through words and actions which have a constant mutual reference, one to the other; from the beginning everything proceeds to converge on Christ, the fullness of revelation and of grace, and on the gift of the Holy Spirit. These make man capable of welcoming and contemplating the words and works of God and of thanking him and adoring him, both in the assembly of the faithful and in the intimacy of his own heart illuminated by grace.

This is why the Church recommends the reading of the Word of God as a source of Christian prayer, and at the same time exhorts all to discover the deep meaning of Sacred Scripture through prayer "so that a dialogue takes place between God and man. For, 'we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles.'"<sup>5</sup>

**7.** Some consequences derive immediately from what has been called to mind. If the *prayer of a Christian* has to be inserted in the Trinitarian movement of God, then its essential content must also necessarily be determined by the two-fold direction of such movement. It is in the Holy Spirit that the Son comes into the world to reconcile it to the Father through his works and sufferings. On the other hand, in this same movement and in the very same Spirit, the Son Incarnate returns to the Father, fulfilling his Will through his Passion and Resurrection. The "Our Father," Jesus' own prayer, clearly indicates the unity of this movement: the Will of the Father must be done on earth as it is in heaven (the petitions for bread, forgiveness and protection make explicit the fundamental dimensions of God's will for us), so that there may be a new earth in the heavenly Jerusalem.

The prayer of Jesus<sup>6</sup> has been entrusted to the Church ("Pray then like this", Lk 11:2). This is why 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. Consequently, it must always be offered within the authentic spirit of the Church at prayer, and therefore under its guidance, which can sometimes take a concrete form in terms of a proven spiritual direction. 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.<sup>7</sup>

### III. Erroneous Ways of Praying

**8.** Even in the first centuries of the Church some incorrect forms of prayer crept in. Some New Testament texts (cf. 1 Jn 4:3; 1 Tim 1:3-7 and 4:3-4) already give hints of their existence. Subsequently, two fundamental deviations came to be identified: Pseudognosticism and Messalianism, both of concern to the Fathers of the Church. There is much to be learned from that experience of primitive Christianity and the reaction of the Fathers which can help in tackling the current problem.

In combating the errors of *pseudognosticism*<sup>8</sup> the Fathers affirmed that matter is created by God and as such is not evil. Moreover, they maintained that grace, which always has the Holy Spirit as its source is not a good proper to the soul, but must be sought from God as a gift. Consequently, the illumination or superior knowledge of the Spirit ("gnosis"), does not make Christian faith something superfluous. Finally, for the Fathers, the authentic sign of a superior knowledge, the fruit of prayer, is always Christian love.

**9.** If the perfection of Christian prayer cannot be evaluated using the sublimity of gnostic knowledge as a basis, neither can it be judged by referring to the experience of the divine, as *Messalianism* proposed.<sup>9</sup> These false fourth century charismatics identified the grace of the Holy Spirit with the psychological experience of his presence in the soul. In opposing them, the Fathers insisted on the fact that the soul's union with God in prayer is realized in a mysterious way, and in particular through the sacraments of the Church. Moreover, it can even be achieved through experiences of affliction or desolation. Contrary to the view of the Messalians, these are not necessarily a sign that the Spirit has abandoned a soul. Rather, as masters of spirituality have always clearly acknowledged, they may be an authentic participation in the state of abandonment experienced on the cross by Our Lord, who always remains the model and mediator of prayer.<sup>10</sup>

**10.** Both of these forms of error continue to be *a temptation for man the sinner*. They incite him to try and overcome the distance separating creature from Creator, as though there ought not to be such a distance; to consider the way of Christ on earth, by which he wishes to lead us to the Father, as something now surpassed; to bring down to the level of natural

psychology what has been regarded as pure grace, considering it instead as “superior knowledge” or as “experience.”

Such erroneous forms, having reappeared in history from time to time on the fringes of the Church’s prayer, seem once more to impress many Christians, appealing to them as a kind of remedy, be it psychological or spiritual, or as a quick way of finding God.<sup>11</sup>

**11.** However, these forms of error, wherever they arise, *can be diagnosed* very simply. The meditation of the Christian in prayer seeks to grasp the depths of the divine in the salvific works of God in Christ, the Incarnate Word, and in the gift of his Spirit. These divine depths are always revealed to him through the human-earthly dimension. Similar methods of meditation, on the other hand, including those which have their starting-point in the words and deeds of Jesus, try as far as possible to put aside everything that is worldly, sense-perceptible or conceptually limited. It is thus an attempt to ascend to or immerse oneself in the sphere of the divine, which, as such, is neither terrestrial, sense-perceptible nor capable of conceptualization.<sup>12</sup> This tendency, already present in the religious sentiments of the later Greek period (especially in “Neoplatonism”), is found deep in the religious inspiration of many peoples, no sooner than they become aware of the precarious character of their representations of the divine and of their attempts to draw close to it.

**12.** With the present diffusion of eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of an attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, *to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian*. Proposals in this direction are numerous and radical to a greater or lesser extent. Some use eastern methods solely as a psycho-physical preparation for a truly Christian contemplation; others go further and, using different techniques, try to generate spiritual experiences similar to those described in the writings of certain Catholic mystics.<sup>13</sup> Still others do not hesitate to place that absolute without image or concepts, which is proper to Buddhist theory,<sup>14</sup> on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ, which towers above finite reality. To this end, they make use of a “negative theology,” which transcends every affirmation seeking to express what God is and denies that the things of this world can offer traces of the infinity of God. Thus they propose abandoning not only meditation on the salvific works accomplished in history by the God of the Old and New Covenant, but also the very idea of the One and Triune God, who is Love, in favor of an immersion “in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity.”<sup>15</sup> These and similar proposals to harmonize Christian meditation with eastern techniques need to have their contents and methods ever subjected to a thorough-going examination so as to avoid the danger of falling into syncretism.

#### IV. The Christian Way to Union with God

**13.** To find the right “way” of prayer, the Christian should consider what has been said earlier regarding the prominent features of the *way of Christ*, whose “food is to do the will of him who sent (him), and to accomplish his work” (Jn 4:34). Jesus lives no more intimate or closer a union with the Father than this, which for him is continually translated into deep prayer. By the will of the Father he is sent to mankind, to sinners, to his very executioners, and he could not be more intimately united to the Father than by obeying his will. This did not in any way prevent him, however, from also retiring to a solitary place during his earthly sojourn to unite himself to the Father and receive from him new strength for his mission in this world. On Mount Tabor, where his union with the Father was manifest, there was called to mind his passion (cf. Lk 9:31), and there was not even a consideration of the possibility of remaining in “three booths” on the Mount of the Transfiguration. Contemplative Christian prayer always leads to love of neighbor, to action and to the acceptance of trials, and precisely because of this it draws one close to God.

**14.** In order to draw near to that mystery of union with God, which the Greek Fathers called the *divinization* of man, and to grasp accurately the manner in which this is realized, it is necessary in the first place to bear in mind that man is essentially a creature,<sup>16</sup> and remains such for eternity, so that an absorbing of the human self into the divine self is never possible, not even in the highest states of grace. However, one must recognize that the human person is created in the “image and likeness” of God, and that the archetype of this image is the Son of God, in whom and through whom we have been created (cf. Col 1:16). This archetype reveals the greatest and most beautiful Christian mystery: from eternity the Son is “other” with respect to the Father and yet, in the Holy Spirit, he is “of the same substance.” Consequently this otherness, far from being an ill, is rather the greatest of goods. There is otherness in God himself, who is one single nature in three Persons, and there is also otherness between God and creatures, who are by nature different. Finally, in the Holy Eucharist, as in the rest of the sacraments—and analogically in his works and in his words—Christ gives himself to us and makes us participate in his divine nature,<sup>17</sup> without nevertheless suppressing our created nature, in which he himself shares through his Incarnation.

**15.** A consideration of these truths together brings the wonderful discovery that all the aspirations which the prayer of other religions expresses are fulfilled in the reality of Christianity beyond all measure, without the personal self or the nature of a creature being dissolved or disappearing into the sea of the Absolute. “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). This profoundly Christian affirmation can reconcile perfect *union* with the *otherness* existing between lover and loved, with eternal exchange and eternal dialogue. God is himself this eternal exchange and we can truly become sharers of Christ, as “adoptive sons” who cry out with the Son in the Holy Spirit, “Abba, Father.” In this sense, the Fathers are perfectly correct in speaking of the divinization of man who, having been incorporated into Christ, the Son of God by nature, may by his grace share in the divine nature and become a “son in the Son.” Receiving the Holy Spirit, the Christian glorifies the Father and really shares in the Trinitarian life of God.

#### V. Questions of Method

**16.** The majority of the *great religions* which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out ways to achieve it. Just as “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions,”<sup>18</sup> neither should these ways be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured. It is within the context of all of this that these bits and pieces should be taken up and expressed anew. Among these one might mention first of all that of the humble acceptance of a master who is an expert in the life of prayer, and of the counsels he gives. Christian experience has known of this practice from earliest times, from the epoch of the desert Fathers. Such a master, being an expert in “*sentire cum Ecclesia*,” must not only direct and warn of certain dangers; as a “spiritual father,” he has to also lead his pupil in a dynamic way, heart to heart, into the life of prayer, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

**17.** In the later non-Christian classical period, there was a convenient distinction made between three stages in the life of perfection: the purgative way, the illuminative way and the unitive way. This teaching has served as a model for many schools of Christian spirituality. While in itself valid, this analysis nevertheless requires several clarifications so as to be interpreted in a correct Christian manner which avoids dangerous misunderstandings.

**18.** The seeking of God through prayer has to be preceded and accompanied by an ascetical struggle and a purification from one's own sins and errors, since Jesus has said that only “the pure of heart shall see God” (Mt 5:8). The Gospel aims above all at a moral purification from the lack of truth and love and, on a deeper level, from all the selfish instincts which impede man from recognizing and accepting the Will of God in its purity. The passions are not negative in themselves (as the Stoics and Neoplatonists thought), but their tendency is to selfishness. It is from this that the Christian has to free himself in order to arrive at that state of positive freedom which in classical Christian times was called “*apatheia*,” in the Middle Ages “*Impassibilitas*” and in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises “*indiferencia*.”<sup>19</sup> This is impossible without a radical self-denial, as can also be seen in St. Paul who openly uses the word “mortification” (of sinful tendencies).<sup>20</sup> Only this self-denial renders man free to carry out the will of God and to share in the freedom of the Holy Spirit.

**19.** Therefore, one has to interpret correctly the teaching of those masters who recommend “emptying” the spirit of all sensible representations and of every concept, while remaining lovingly attentive to God. In this way, the person praying creates an empty space which can then be filled by the richness of God. However, the emptiness which God requires is that of the renunciation of personal selfishness, not necessarily that of the renunciation of those created things which he has given us and among which he has placed us. There is no doubt that in prayer one should concentrate entirely on God and as far as possible exclude the things of this world which bind us to our selfishness. On this topic St. Augustine is an excellent teacher: if you want to find God, he says, abandon the exterior world and re-enter into yourself. However, he continues, do not remain in yourself, but go beyond yourself because you are not God: He is deeper and greater than you. “I look for his substance in my soul and I do not find it; I have however meditated on the search for God and, reaching out to him, through created things, I have sought to know ‘the invisible perfections of God’ (Rom 1:20).”<sup>21</sup> “To remain in oneself”: this is the real danger. The great Doctor of the Church recommends concentrating on oneself, but also transcending the self which is not God, but only a creature. God is “deeper than my inmost being and higher than my greatest height.”<sup>22</sup> In fact God is in us and with us, but he transcends us in his mystery.<sup>23</sup>

**20.** *From the dogmatic point of view*, it is impossible to arrive at a perfect love of God if one ignores his giving of himself to us through his Incarnate Son, who was crucified and rose from the dead. In Him, under the action of the Holy Spirit, we participate, through pure grace, in the interior life of God. When Jesus says, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9), he does not mean just the sight and exterior knowledge of his human figure (“the flesh is of no avail”, Jn 6:63). What he means is rather a vision made possible by the grace of faith: to see, through the manifestation of Jesus perceptible by the senses, just what he, as the Word of the Father, truly wants to reveal to us of God (“It is the Spirit that gives life [...]; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life”, *ibid.*). This “seeing” is not a matter of a purely human abstraction (“*abs-tractio*”) from the figure in which God has revealed himself; it is rather the grasping of the divine reality in the human figure of Jesus, his eternal divine dimension in its temporal form. As St. Ignatius says in the *Spiritual Exercises*, we should try to capture “the infinite perfume and the infinite sweetness of the divinity” (n. 124), going forward from that finite revealed truth from which we have begun. While he raises us up, God is free to “empty” us of all that holds us back in this world, to draw us completely into the Trinitarian life of his eternal love. However, this gift can only be granted “in Christ through the Holy Spirit,” and not through our own efforts, withdrawing ourselves from his revelation.

**21.** On the path of the Christian life, illumination follows on from purification, through the love which the Father bestows on us in the Son and the anointing which we receive from him in the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Jn 2:20). Ever since the early Christian period, writers have referred to the “illumination” received in Baptism. After their initiation into the divine mysteries, this illumination brings the faithful to know Christ by means of the faith which works through love. Some ecclesiastical writers even speak explicitly of the illumination received in Baptism as the basis of that sublime knowledge of Christ Jesus (cf. Phil 3:8), which is defined as “*theoria*” or contemplation.<sup>24</sup> The faithful, with the grace of Baptism, are called to progress in the knowledge and witness of the mysteries of the faith by “the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience.”<sup>25</sup> No light from God can render the truths of the faith redundant. Any subsequent graces of illumination which God may grant rather help to make clearer the depth of the mysteries confessed and celebrated by the Church, as we wait for the day when the Christian can contemplate God as He is in glory (cf. 1 Jn 3:2).

**22.** Finally, the Christian who prays can, if God so wishes, come to a particular experience of *union*. The Sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist,<sup>26</sup> are the objective beginning of the union of the Christian with God. Upon this foundation, the person who prays can be called, by a special grace of the Spirit, to that specific type of union with God which in Christian terms is called *mystical*.

**23.** Without doubt, a Christian needs certain periods of retreat into solitude to be recollected and, in God's presence, rediscover his path. Nevertheless, given his character as a creature, and as a creature who knows that only in grace is he secure, his method of getting closer to God is not based on any *technique* in the strict sense of the word. That would contradict the spirit of childhood called for by the Gospel. Genuine Christian mysticism has nothing to do with technique: it is always a gift of God, and the one who benefits from it knows himself to be unworthy.<sup>27</sup>

**24.** There are certain *mystical graces*, conferred on the founders of ecclesial institutes to benefit their foundation, and on other saints, too, which characterize their personal experience of prayer and which cannot, as such, be the object of imitation and aspiration for other members of the faithful, even those who belong to the same institutes and those who seek an ever more perfect way of prayer.<sup>28</sup> There can be different levels and different ways of sharing in a founder's experience of prayer, without everything having to be exactly the same. Besides, the prayer experience that is given a privileged position in all genuinely ecclesial institutes, ancient and modern, is always in the last analysis something personal. And it is to the individual person that God gives his graces for prayer.

**25.** With regard to mysticism, one has to distinguish between *the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the charisms* granted by God in a totally gratuitous way. The former are something which every Christian can quicken in himself by his zeal for the life of faith, hope and charity; and thus, by means of a serious ascetical struggle, he can reach a certain experience of God and of the contents of the faith. As for charisms, St. Paul says that these are, above all, for the benefit of the Church, of the other members of the Mystical Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:17). With this in mind, it should be remembered that charisms are not the same things as extraordinary ("mystical") gifts (cf. Rom 12:3-21), and that the distinction between the "gifts of the Holy Spirit" and "charisms" can be flexible. It is certain that a charism which bears fruit for the Church, cannot, in the context of the New Testament, be exercised without a certain degree of personal perfection, and that, on the other hand, every "living" Christian has a specific task (and in this sense a "charism") "for the building up of the body of Christ" (cf. Eph 4:15-16),<sup>29</sup> in communion with the Hierarchy whose job it is "not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good" (LG, n. 12).

## VI. Psychological-Corporal Methods

**26.** Human experience shows that the *position and demeanor of the body* also have their influence on the recollection and dispositions of the spirit. This is a fact to which some eastern and western Christian spiritual writers have directed their attention.

Their reflections, while presenting points in common with eastern non-Christian methods of meditation, avoid the exaggerations and partiality of the latter, which, however, are often recommended to people today who are not sufficiently prepared.

The spiritual authors have adopted those elements which make recollection in prayer easier, at the same time recognizing their relative value: they are useful if reformulated in accordance with the aim of Christian prayer.<sup>30</sup> For example, the Christian fast signifies, above all, an exercise of penitence and sacrifice; but, already for the Fathers, it also had the aim of rendering man more open to the encounter with God and making a Christian more capable of self-dominion and at the same time more attentive to those in need.

In prayer it is the whole man who must enter into relation with God, and so his body should also take up the position most suited to recollection.<sup>31</sup> Such a position can in a symbolic way express the prayer itself, depending on cultures and personal sensibilities. In some aspects, Christians are today becoming more conscious of how one's bodily posture can aid prayer.

**27.** Eastern Christian meditation<sup>32</sup> has valued *psychophysical symbolism*, often absent in western forms of prayer. It can range from a specific bodily posture to the basic life functions, such as breathing or the beating of the heart. The exercise of the "Jesus Prayer," for example, which adapts itself to the natural rhythm of breathing can, at least for a certain time, be of real help to many people.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the eastern masters themselves have also noted that not everyone is equally suited to making use of this symbolism, since not everybody is able to pass from the material sign to the spiritual reality that is being sought. Understood in an inadequate and incorrect way, the symbolism can even become an idol and thus an obstacle to the raising up of the spirit to God. To live out in one's prayer the full awareness of one's body as a symbol is even more difficult: it can degenerate into a cult of the body and can lead surreptitiously to considering all bodily sensations as spiritual experiences.

**28.** Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth, which resemble spiritual well-being. To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life. Giving them a symbolic significance typical of the mystical experience, when the moral condition of the person concerned does not correspond to such an experience, would represent a kind of mental schizophrenia which could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations.

That does not mean that genuine practices of meditation which come from the Christian East and from the great non-Christian religions, which prove attractive to the man of today who is divided and disoriented, cannot constitute a suitable means of helping the person who prays to come before God with an interior peace, even in the midst of external pressures.

It should, however, be remembered that habitual union with God, namely that attitude of interior vigilance and appeal to the divine assistance which in the New Testament is called "continuous prayer,"<sup>34</sup> is not necessarily interrupted when one devotes oneself also, according to the will of God, to work and to the care of one's neighbor. "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God," the Apostle tells us (1 Cor 10:31). In fact, genuine prayer, as the great spiritual masters teach, stirs up in the person who prays an ardent charity which moves him to collaborate in the mission of the Church and to serve his brothers for the greater glory of God.<sup>35</sup>

## VII. "I am the Way"

**29.** From the rich variety of Christian prayer as proposed by the Church, each member of the faithful should seek and find his own way, his own form of prayer. But all of these personal ways, in the end, flow into the *way to the Father*, which is how Jesus Christ has described himself. In the search for his own way, each person will, therefore, let himself be led not so much by his personal tastes as by the Holy Spirit, who guides him, through Christ, to the Father.

**30.** For the person who makes a serious effort there will, however, be moments in which he seems to be wandering in a desert and, in spite of all his efforts, he "feels" nothing of God. He should know that these trials are not spared anyone who takes prayer seriously. However, he should not immediately see this experience, common to all Christians who pray, as the "dark night" in the mystical sense. In any case in these moments, his prayer, which he will resolutely strive to keep to, could give him the impression of a certain "artificiality," although really it is something totally different: in fact it is at that very moment an expression of his fidelity to God, in whose presence he wishes to remain even when he receives no subjective consolation in return.

In these apparently negative moments, it becomes clear what the person who is praying really seeks: is he indeed looking for God who, in his infinite freedom, always surpasses him; or is he only seeking himself, without managing to go beyond his own "experiences", whether they be positive "experiences" of union with God or negative "experiences" of mystical "emptiness."

**31.** The love of God, the sole object of Christian contemplation, is a reality which cannot be "mastered" by any method or technique. On the contrary, we must always have our sights fixed on Jesus Christ, in whom God's love went to the cross for us and there assumed even the condition of estrangement from the Father (cf. Mk 13:34). We therefore should allow God to decide the way he wishes to have us participate in his love. But we can never, in any way, seek to place ourselves on the same level as the object of our contemplation, the free love of God; not even when, through the mercy of God the Father and the Holy Spirit sent into our hearts, we receive in Christ the gracious gift of a sensible reflection of that divine love and we feel drawn by the truth and beauty and goodness of the Lord.

The more a creature is permitted to draw near to God, the greater his reverence before the thrice-holy God. One then understands those words of St. Augustine: "You can call me friend; I recognize myself a servant."<sup>36</sup> Or the words which are even more familiar to us, spoken by her who was rewarded with the highest degree of intimacy with God: "He has looked upon his servant in her lowliness" (Lk 1:48).

*The Supreme Pontiff, John Paul II, in an audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect, gave his approval to this letter, drawn up in a plenary session of this Congregation, and ordered its publication.*

At Rome, from the offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, October 15, 1989, the Feast of Saint Teresa of Jesus.

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## Endnotes

\* AAS 82 (1990) 362-379.

1. The expression "eastern methods" is used to refer to methods which are inspired by Hinduism and Buddhism, such as "Zen," "Transcendental Meditation" or "Yoga." Thus it indicates methods of meditation of the non-Christian Far East which today are not infrequently adopted by some Christians also in their meditation. The orientation of the principles and methods contained in this present document is intended to serve as a reference point not just for this problem, but also, in a more general way, for the different forms of prayer practiced nowadays in ecclesial organizations, particularly in associations, movements and groups.

2. Regarding the Book of Psalms in the prayer of the Church, cf. *Institutio generalis de Liturgia Horarum*, nn. 100-109.

3. Cf. for example, Ex 15; Deut 32; 1 Sam 2; 2 Sam 22 and some prophetic texts, 1 Chron 16.
4. Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, n. 2. This document offers other substantial indications for a theological and spiritual understanding of Christian prayer; see also, for example, nn. 3, 5, 8, 21.
5. Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, n. 25.
6. Regarding the prayer of Jesus, see *Institutio generalis de Liturgia Horarum*, nn. 3-4.
7. Cf. *Institutio generalis de Liturgia Horarum*, n. 9.
8. Pseudognosticism considered matter as something impure and degraded which enveloped the soul in an ignorance from which prayer had to free it, thereby raising it to true superior knowledge and so to a pure state. Of course not everyone was capable of this, only those who were truly spiritual; for simple believers, faith and the observance of the commandments of Christ were sufficient.
9. The Messalians were already denounced by St. Ephraim Syrus (*Hymni contra Haereses* 22, 4, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 169, 1957, p. 79) and later, among others, by Epiphanius of Salamina (*Panarion*, also called *Adversus Haereses*: PG 41, 156-1200; PG 42, 9-832), and Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium (*Contra haereticos*: G. Ficker, *Amphilochiana* I, Leipzig 1906, 21-77).
10. Cf., for example, St. John of the Cross, *Subida del Monte Carmelo*, II, chap. 7. 11.
11. In the Middle Ages there existed extreme trends on the fringe of the Church. These were described not without irony, by one of the great Christian contemplatives, the Flemish Jan van Ruysbroek. He distinguished three types of deviations in the mystical life (*Die gheestelike Brulocht* 228, 12-230, 17; 230, 18-32, 22; 232, 23-236, 6) and made a general critique of these forms (236, 7-237, 29). Similar techniques were subsequently identified and dismissed by St. Teresa of Avila who perceptively observed that "the very care taken not to think about anything will arouse the mind to think a great deal," and that the separation of the mystery of Christ from Christian meditation is always a form of "betrayal" (see: St. Teresa of Jesus, *Vida* 12, 5 and 22, 1-5).
12. Pope John Paul II has pointed out to the whole Church the example and the doctrine of St. Teresa of Avila who in her life had to reject the temptation of certain methods which proposed a leaving aside of the humanity of Christ in favor of a vague self-immersion in the abyss of the divinity. In a homily given on November 1st, 1982, he said that the call of Teresa of Jesus advocating a prayer completely centered on Christ "is valid, even in our day, against some methods of prayer which are not inspired by the Gospel and which in practice tend to set Christ aside in preference for a mental void which makes no sense in Christianity. Any method of prayer is valid insofar as it is inspired by Christ and leads to Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. Jn 14:6)." See: *Homilia Abulae habita in honorem Sanctae Teresiae*: AAS 75 (1983), 256-257.
13. See, for example, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a spiritual work by an anonymous English writer of the fourteenth century.
14. In Buddhist religious texts, the concept of "Nirvana" is understood as a state of quiet consisting in the extinction of every tangible reality insofar as it is transient, and as such delusive and sorrowful.
15. Meister Eckhart speaks of an immersion "in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity" which is a "darkness in which the light of the Trinity never shines." Cf. *Sermo "Ave Gratia Plena"* in fine (J. Quint, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, Hanser 1955, 261).
16. Cf. Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 19, 1: "The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. The invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator."
17. As St. Thomas writes of the Eucharist: "... proprius effectus huius sacramenti est conversio hominis in Christum, ut dicat cum Apostolo: 'Vivo ego, iam non ego; vivit vero in me Christus' (Gal 2:20)" (*In IV Sent.*, d. 12, q. 2, a. 1).
18. Decl. *Nostra aetate*, n. 2.
19. St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Ejercicios espirituales*, n. 23 et passim.
20. Cf. Col 3:5; Rom 6:11ff.; Gal 5:24.
21. St. Augustine. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* XLI, 8: PL 36, 469.
22. St. Augustine, *Confessiones* 3, 6, 11: PL 32, 688. Cf. *De vera Religione* 39, 72: PL 34, 154.
23. The positive Christian sense of the "emptying" of creatures stands out in an exemplary way in St. Francis of Assisi. Precisely because he renounced creatures for love of God, he saw all things as being filled with his presence and resplendent in their dignity as God's creatures, and the secret hymn of their being is intoned by him in his *Cantico delle Creature*. Cf. C. Esser, *Opuscula Sancti Patris Francisci Assisiensis*, Ed. Ad Claras Aquas, Grottaferrata (Roma) 1978, pp. 83-86. In the same

way he writes in the *Lettera a tutti i fedeli*: “Let every creature in heaven and on earth and in the sea and in the depth of the abyss (Rev 5: 13) give praise, glory and honor and blessing to God, for he is our life and our strength. He who alone is good (Lk 18: 19), who alone is the most high, who alone is omnipotent and admirable, glorious and holy, worthy of praise and blessed for infinite ages of ages. Amen” (*ibid. Opuscula...* 124).

St. Bonaventure shows how in every creature Francis perceived the call of God and poured out his soul in the great hymn of thanksgiving and praise (cf. *Legenda S Francisci*, chap. 9, n. 1, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Quaracchi 1898, Vol. VIII, p. 530).

24. See, for example, St. Justin, *Apologia* I, 61, 12-13: PG 6, 420- 421; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* I, 6, 25-31: PG 8, 281- 284; St. Basil of Caesarea, *Homiliae diversae* 13, 1: PG 31, 424- 425; St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Orationes* 40, 3, 1: PG 36, 361.

25. Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, n. 8.

26. The Eucharist, which the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* defines as “the source and summit of the Christian life” (LG 11), makes us “really share in the body of the Lord”; in it “we are taken up into communion with him” (LG 7).

27. Cf. St. Teresa of Jesus, *Castillo Interior* IV, 1, 2.

28. No one who prays, unless he receives a special grace, covets an overall vision of the revelations of God, such as St. Gregory recognized in St. Benedict. or that mystical impulse with which St. Francis of Assisi would contemplate God in all his creatures, or an equally global vision, such as that given to St. Ignatius at the River Cardoner and of which he said that for him it could have taken the place of Sacred Scripture. The “dark night” described by St. John of the Cross is part of his personal charism of prayer. Not every member of his order needs to experience it in the same way so as to reach that perfection of prayer to which God has called him.

29. The Christian’s call to “mystical” experiences can include both what St. Thomas classified as a living experience of God via the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the inimitable forms (and for that reason forms to which one ought not to aspire) of the granting of grace. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 68, a. 1 c, as well as a. 5, ad 1.

30. See, for example, the early writers, who speak of the postures taken up by Christians while at prayer: Tertullian, *De Oratione* XIV: PL 1, 1170; XVII: PL 1, 1174-1176; Origen, *De Oratione* XXXI, 2: PG 11, 550-553, and of the meaning of such gestures: Barnabas, *Epistula* XII, 2-4: PG 2, 760-761; St. Justin, *Dialogus* 90, 4-5: PG 6, 689-692; St. Hippolytus of Rome, *Commentarium in Dan.* III, 24: GCS I, 168, 8-17; Origen, *Homiliae in Ex.* XI, 4: PG 12, 377-378. For the position of the body see also, Origen, *De Oratione*, XXXI, 3: PG 11, 553-555.

31. Cf. St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Ejercicios Espirituales*, n. 76.

32. Such as, for example, that of the Hesychast anchorites. Hesychia or external and internal quiet is regarded by the anchorites as a condition of prayer. In its oriental form it is characterized by solitude and techniques of recollection.

33. The practice of the “Jesus Prayer,” which consists of repeating the formula, rich in biblical references, of invocation and supplication (e.g., “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”), is adapted to the natural rhythm of breathing. In this regard, see St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Ejercicios Espirituales*, n. 258.

34. Cf. 1 Thess 5: 17, also 2 Thess 3: 8-12. From these and other texts there arises the question of how to reconcile the duty to pray continually with that of working. See, among others, St. Augustine, “Epistula” 130, 20: PL 33, 501-502 and St. John Cassian, *De Institutis coenobiorum* III, 1-3: SC 109, 92-93. Also, the *Demonstration of Prayer* by Aphraat, the first father of the Syriac Church, and in particular nn. 14-15, which deal with the so-called “works of Prayer” (cf. the edition of J. Parisot, *Afraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes* IV: PS 1, pp. 170-174).

35. Cf. St. Teresa of Jesus, *Castillo Interior* VII, 4, 6.

36. St. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CXLII, 6: PL 37, 1849. Also see: St. Augustine, *Tract. in Ioh.* IV, 9: PL 35, 1410: “Quando autem nec ad hoc dignum se dicit, vere plenus Spiritu Sancto erat, qui sic servus Dominum agnovit, et ex servo amicus fieri meruit.”

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