



ORISON

Posted on September 1, 2023 by A Monk of Fontgombault



An ascent of the soul in search of God, a dialogue, a true encounter, "an intimate friendship in which we often speak alone with the God we know we love," a test of solitude, diligence, interiority and faith... what exactly is an "orison?"

The word "orison," unlike many others in the religious vocabulary, has retained its Christian specificity; yet its quasi-synonym "meditation" is used in other religious systems, and even in a context that may be areligious, such as "mindfulness meditation." There is a kind of irreducibility to the word's passage outside Christianity. To help us understand this, three traditional definitions of prayer are presented.

An Ascent of the Soul

Following Evagrius, the Fathers teach us that prayer is an ascent of the spirit, or soul, towards God. It is thus an activity that enables us to seek out a transcendent Being beyond the human sphere; but contemporary mentality, which refuses with Kant that God can present Himself to us as an object of knowledge, rejects this claim, stigmatized as a dream of selfishly sought union with a transcendent divine, and opposes it to prophetic prayer, where ultimately it is "man who expresses himself." However, far from being a contamination of Christian thought by Neoplatonism, this conception of prayer is rooted in the Word of God: man must seek God, but his thoughts are not those of man (Is 55:8).

A Conversation

Prayer is also defined as a conversation with God, a dialogue. It is a relationship between two people: the one who prays and the living God, both transcendent and accessible. The Latins wanted to explain the word orison, derived from the verb orare, from the word, "mouth," "bone;" even if the etymology is not confirmed by specialists, we can retain the idea: the one who prays speaks, opens his mouth to address God. This is only possible if God has spoken first, revealed Himself. Prayer, then, is a response to God's first word, the beginning of a conversation. Prayer is thus a face-to-face encounter, so to speak, as Deuteronomy says of Moses (5:4). The mystery of prayer is that, although we cannot see God's face, we can nevertheless enter into a relationship with Him. Is this not also where He gives us His Spirit, His breath of life? It is a kind of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation for those of us who are drowning—we need his vital breath. In the desert of Egypt, Saint Anthony the Great already understood this, pointing out in his last exhortation that prayer is a kind of supernatural breathing (*Life of St. Anthony* by Saint Athanasius, no. 91). Pope Francis takes up the image himself: Christians "find an exclusive

concern with this world to be narrow and stifling, and, amid their own concerns and commitments, they long for God, losing themselves in praise and contemplation of the Lord" (*Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 147).

The Secret

In Chapter 6 of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Christ gives us a valuable catechesis on prayer: "When you pray..." You must withdraw, close your door, pray to the Father in secret. You will not see Him, but He, your Father, sees in secret: He will hear you. Your Father knows what is best for you even before you tell Him. Could we not object that, in that case, there is no point in talking to Him? That would be a bit short-sighted, since our very relationship with God, regardless of what He may grant us, is already a great good for man. Dom Guéranger writes in the preface to his Liturgical Year: "Prayer is the first good for man, since it puts him in relationship with God, for there man is in his place before his Creator and Savior." This is true of all prayer, of petition and thanksgiving, but more particularly of prayer itself.

Time

Saint Teresa of Avila formulated the classic definition: "it is an intimate friendship, in which we often converse alone with the God we know we love" (*Autobiography*, 8.5; *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 149). Solitude, assiduity, interiority, faith—these are the characteristics of interior prayer. We have already seen the dimension of dialogue. Saint Theresa specifies that it should take place in solitude, a faithful translation of the Gospel text mentioned above. Above all, she insists on the frequency of prayer: we must "converse often with God." Repetition itself shapes our soul, refines its orientation. For it takes time to become accustomed to God, to detach ourselves from the things of the world. And at the same time, we need to give God time to work in us. "The Word of God dwelt in man and became son of man to accustom man to grasp God, and accustom God to dwell in man, according to the mind of the Father," writes Saint Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.*, III.20.2).. Aristotle had already pointed out that friendship can only be established "when the measure of salt has been exhausted," i.e., when we have eaten so many meals together that we have emptied the salt shaker. If we want to grow in charity, that divine friendship with God, we need to devote time to it.

Finally, faith. We "converse with the God we know we love" through faith, without feeling or experiencing the charity of God that envelops us and calls us to His intimacy. God is Spirit, and it is spiritually that we go to Him, even if sometimes our very sensibility can be touched. The Spirit prays within us with unutterable groanings, St. Paul tells us (Rom 8:26), and this prayer is not perceptible to

the one praying either. St. Anthony the Great said: "Prayer is not perfect when the monk is conscious of himself and of the fact that he is actually praying" (John Cassian, *Conference* 9:31).

The practice of prayer is intimately linked to God's self-revelation in Christ. Faced with an absolutely transcendent God, man is called to submission, not to a trade in friendship; in a religious climate dominated by law, he may be content to observe commandments; but if God reveals himself as Father in Christ, then it is a need to seek Him in secret, to take time for Him, to wait for Him.

This meditation is offered by a monk of Fontgombault Abbey. This article comes through the kind courtesy of [La Nef](#).

[Featured](#): *Repentance*, by Oleg Vishnyakov; painted in 1995.
