

Prayer of the Heart and Contemplation



- By Rev. Fr. Nilindra Gunsekera sss

1. Introduction

Words are important in prayer, and yet once the believer enters into a state of prayer he may leave aside words, images, even the text itself which has provided him with a 'window' through which to gaze upon a deeper reality, namely, God. As his gaze on God becomes more intent, he no longer sees the 'window.' He 'sees' only God. He becomes oblivious of the 'window' through which he gazes upon the presence of God.

2. Prayer of the Heart

The short prayers or invocations such as the 'formula' used in the [Jesus Prayer](#), or even a particular scriptural text that is used in the [Lectio Divina](#), has an inward purpose. We begin initially by focusing our minds and hearts on the short prayer that we recite during the Jesus Prayer or on the meaning of the text that we read in the *Lectio Divina*. As we progress from reading to prayer, and then into meditation, words and images become less important and may cease all together. Gradually the intellect begins to descend into the heart and becomes one with it. Thus, we commence Prayer of the Heart. It is also called Prayer of the Mind in the Heart.

Here heart is to be understood in the biblical sense as signifying not just emotions and affectivity, but the totality of the human person, the deepest truest self, made in the image and likeness of God. At this level, prayer becomes the prayer of the whole person. The prayer of the Heart is not something we recite; it is part of ourselves.

For Isaac the Syrian, the prayer of the Heart is not so much our prayer as the prayer of Christ in us. It is a movement from the prayer which I say, to the prayer which Christ says in me. The Prayer of the heart then refers to the point where my action, my prayer becomes identified with the continuous action of Christ in me. Prayer of the Heart is no longer prayer to Jesus; it is the prayer of Jesus himself.



3. Contemplation

As we have pointed out above, the short prayers used in the [Jesus Prayer](#) and the [Lectio Divina](#) may begin as vocal prayers, but the rhythmic repetition allows the one who prays by the very simplicity of the words he uses to move beyond all language and images into the mystery of God. Cassian sees prayer as a progressive movement towards greater simplicity, more focused intention until at last a state of prayer is reached called the prayer of fire, ‘when the monk seeks to look to Jesus with the pure eyes of the soul’ (X, 6). In this way, these short prayers develop, with God’s help, into the prayer of loving attention or the prayer of the simple gaze where the soul rests in God.

Contemplation is the soul’s inward vision and the heart’s simple rest in God. The essence of contemplation is the opening of the mind and heart to God and the things of God, a preoccupation with God, the habitual disposition of being present to God. Perhaps the best definition of contemplation was given by a French peasant who described his way of prayer to the Cure d’Ars: ‘I look at Him, and He looks at me, and we are happy together.’ To gaze is to love. Our whole soul is in our gaze.

