

The Path of Mental Prayer

a conversation of love



written by Paul Buis

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Introduction

This series of meditations is inspired by the **Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer**, written by Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, OCD in 1943. Fr. Gabriel's booklet is based on the teachings of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, as expressed in the **Instructions for Novices**, which was originally published in 1591. In addition to the teachings of Fr. Gabriel, these meditations are imbued with the spirit of **Lectio Divina**, the ancient practice of reading, meditating, responding to, and contemplating the Word of God.

May this series of meditations helpful inspire an effective daily practice of mental prayer throughout your spiritual journey.

I. A Conversation of Love

(Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer, 1.6-14, 2.1-6)

“So he said to Samuel, ‘Go to sleep, and if you are called, reply, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” When Samuel went to sleep in his place, the Lord came and revealed His presence, calling out as before, ‘Samuel, Samuel!’ Samuel answered, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’ ... Samuel grew up, and the Lord was with him, not permitting any word of His to be without effect.” (1 Samuel 3.9,10,19)

Sharing Hearts

A gentle word, a soft caress,
A child rests on Father’s knee;
Sharing their hearts, with tenderness,
In complete trust and purity.

This is the ideal mental prayer:
Sharing hearts spontaneously;
Out of a pure love, to declare
One’s trust in His will completely.

So many things leave love obscure:
Seeking comfort or one’s own gain;
Tainted by self, love is impure –
In hearts detached, pure love will reign.

The mind sets the heart’s direction:
A rudder that steers the ship’s course;
The subject of meditation
Sets the theme for the heart’s discourse.

The path of mental prayer is learned;
The ways of God’s love are discerned.

Holy Spirit, guide me on the path of mental prayer; that I may approach the Lord with the loving confidence of a child trusting completely in His will. Amen.

II. Preparation

(Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer, 2.7, 3.1-6)

“I have stilled my soul, hushed it like a weaned child. Like a weaned child on its mother's lap, so is my soul within me.”
(Psalm 131.2)

“Be still before the Lord; wait for God.” (Psalm 37.7)

Prayer's Preparation

Vagrant affections of the heart,
And wild horses of the mind,
Should be corralled and kept apart –
In times of prayer, these are confined.

The prepared heart and mind are freed
To focus on the Lord alone;
To follow, with the Spirit's lead,
Unto the foot of the Lord's throne.

The humble child of the Lord
Draws near to Him with loving trust;
Preparing to receive His word –
A precious gift He will entrust.

In His presence, the child rests
With confidence, held in His love;
Prepared to welcome the soul's Guests,
With heart lifted, eyes raised above.

Good preparation is needed;
Lest the Lord's word go unheeded.

Holy Spirit, grant me the grace to recollect the wandering thoughts and affections of my mind and heart in You, that I may be stilled as a child resting in Your presence. Amen.

III. Reading

(Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer, 2.8, 3.7-13)

“You have been born anew, not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God, for: ‘all flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of the field; the grass withers, and the flower wilts; but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ This is the word that has been proclaimed to you.” (1 Peter 1.23-25)

Seeding The Word

The text, chosen with thoughtful care,
Is set before the heart at peace;
Slowly, the mind distils, for prayer,
The essence that the words release.

The purpose of the text is clear:
Engaging the mind to ponder;
Expanding the stilled heart to hear,
The Word with joy and sheer wonder.

The text meets the soul on its way:
Not too advanced nor far afield;
To nourish the heart for the day,
Seeding prayer for a heavy yield.

Scripture provides the purest seed:
The Word set in the Gospel's clear;
The Psalms speak for us in our need --
No richer text could we revere.

Each day a new text is seeded;
In prayerful hearts, tilled and weeded.

Holy Spirit, may the seed of Scripture, planted in prayer, take
root deep in our souls, and yield an abundant harvest of God's
grace. Amen.

IV. Meditation

(Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer, 2.9, 4.1-9)

“Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.”
(Luke 2.19)

Cherishing The Word

A mental sketch behind closed eyes,
May help the mind focus in prayer;
Lest it wander or fanaticize,
Or drift aimlessly unaware.

The mind ponders, discursively,
The text, as words are etched within;
Assisted by its imagery,
And led by the Spirit therein.

The heart maintains a loving gaze,
Upon the Indwelling Divine,
With gratitude willing to praise --
A bloom basking in bright sunshine.

The heart treasures the precious word:
Plumbing depths of its mystery,
Sprouting the seed as it is stirred --
Rooting it in its history.

The cherished Word spreads its roots deep;
Nurtured with love in hearts that keep.

Holy Spirit, help my heart to cherish the Word of God in the depths of my being, to nurture it with love, and to ponder it with a loving gaze that penetrates the depths of its mystery. Amen.

V. Colloquy

(Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer, 2.10-11, 4.10-16)

“In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him... But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” (Matthew 6.7,8,6)

The Language of Prayer

From the reflecting heart arise,
Loving responses to the word,
Which spontaneously surmise –
The soul’s soliloquy is stirred.

With heartfelt words, simple and pure,
And convictions of faith and love,
From a heart molten and tender,
The soul speaks to the Lord above.
The words assist the soul to pray;

He knows all that the soul speaks of.
Words can ramble in disarray –
The best language is silent love.

Without the noise of human word,
The Spirit speaks with love and grace.
In loving silence, He is heard –
A colloquy held Face to face.

In prayer, colloquy is the core;
In silent love, graces outpour.

Holy Spirit, help me to respond to the Word with tender convictions, and to listen to You with the language of silent love. Amen.

VI. Thanksgiving, Offering, and Petition

(Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer, 2.12-15, 4.17-19)

“Whoever loves Me will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our dwelling with him.” (John 15.23)

The Gifts of Prayer

With gratitude for gifts of grace
And the blessings His love bestows,
Astounded by heaven’s embrace –
Heartfelt thanksgiving overflows.

With heart surrendered to His will
And determined to persevere,
Knowing that the cross can fulfill --
A loving zeal’s lifted from fear.

The mind recalls the souls prayed for;
The heart begs Him to intercede,
With loving mercy, to outpour
His grace to fill their ev'ry need.

The total gift of self prepares
The soul to receive heaven's Guest;
Nearing the close of mental prayer,
The soul enters into His rest.

The gifts of prayer sought from the Lord
Are manifest in grace outpoured.

Holy Spirit, ignite the zeal of my heart with humble gratitude
and determination to do Your will, that I may be made a worthy
instrument for the outpouring of Your grace on souls. Amen.

VII. Distractions

(Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer, 5.1-8)

“Mary sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to Him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me.’ The Lord said to her in reply, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.’” (Luke 10.29,42)

Discarding Debris

Distractions of the mind abound:
The senses turn to stimuli,
As thoughts and notions float around --
Silence can be a great ally.

Distractions are debris that churn,
In the pool of the mind's eye;
The soul detached from them will learn
To disregard them drifting by.

The time of prayer is God's to hold;
To turn the mind's focus away
Willfully is withdrawn and cold --
It suspends prayer in disarray.

A quiet time in prayer's corner,
With an icon or cross to view
Will help the strewn mind to foster
Attentive silence He'll imbue.

With persistence, silence is reached;
As distraction's debris are beached.

Holy Spirit, help me to disregard the distractions that float by,
that all of my attention may be kept for the Lord, resting my
mind in silent peace before Him. Amen.

VIII. Aridity

(Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer, 5.9-16)

*“O God, you are my God-- for you I long! For you my body
yearns; for you my soul thirsts, like a land parched, lifeless,
and without water.”* (Psalm 63.2-3)

Parched

When consolations ebb away,
And the heart thirsts without relief,
The will must stand alone to pray
As love rests solely on belief.

The thirst may have been self-induced:
When zeal's lost to tepidity,
Or seeking comfort has reduced
Prayer to thirsts of aridity.

The trials of life, with their pain,
Can rob the heart of joy and peace.
Sometimes His mercy falls like rain;
Often, the dryness will not cease.

The heart advanced in ways of prayer,
Strengthens fervor in times of drought:
Redoubling faith and willpower,
When prayer is more dry than devout.

The Lord seeks to perfect the soul;
Detachment from comfort's the goal.

Holy Spirit, increase my faith and strengthen my will in times
of dryness, that I may seek the Lord alone in prayer, without
expecting gifts of comfort. Amen.

IX. Presence

(Little Catechism of the Life of Prayer, 6.1-12)

*“And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the
name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father
through Him.” (Colossians 3.17)*

Bearing His Presence

In mental prayer, the love distilled
From Love is meant to be outpoured;
As earthen vessels cleansed and filled,
We're primed for service of the Lord.

From the Word and the Eucharist,
Our souls are filled with His essence;
Sent out from Mass, bearers of Christ,
To serve others in His presence.

From time to time, calling to mind
His presence, with brief prayers and praise,
Holds the heart near Him, intertwined
With His will and His loving ways.

To live with Him in each moment,
To share His kindness on the road,
To see His hand in each event –
In the ev'ryday, He's bestowed.

His presence recalled on the way,
Will sanctify the ev'ryday.

Holy Spirit, help me to recall the Lord's presence frequently
throughout the day, to share the ordinary events and tasks with
Him, so that they may be sanctified by Your grace. Amen.

References

Scripture quotations are adapted from several Catholic editions

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