

Holy Wisdom

On Prayer

The Third Treatise

Fr. Augustine Baker



Stabat Mater PRes

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**Holy Wisdom; Or, Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation – THE THIRD
TREATISE**

By Fr. Augustine Baker, OSB

Authored in the year of Our Lord, 1657

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The Third Treatise

On Prayer



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First Section

Of Prayer in General



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The Excellency of Prayer

§§ 1, 2, 3, 4. Of Prayer in general. What it is.

§§ 5, 6, 7, 8. It is the most excellent and most necessary of all duties.

§§ 9, 10. The division of prayer into mental and vocal, improper.

1 . The whole employment of an internal contemplative life having been by me comprehended under two duties, to wit, Mortification and Prayer, concerning (the former) mortification we have discoursed largely in the precedent treatise. We are now henceforward to treat of the other most noble and divine instrument of perfection, which is Prayer; by which and in which alone we attain to the reward of all our endeavours, the end of our creation and redemption—to wit, union with God, in which alone consists our happiness and perfection.

2. By prayer, in this place, I do not understand petition or supplication, which, according to the doctrine of the schools, is exercised principally by the understanding, being a signification of what the person desires to receive from God. But prayer here especially meant is rather an offering and giving to God whatsoever He may justly require from us—that is, all duty, love, obedience, &c.; and it is principally, yea, almost only exercised by the affective part of the soul.

3. Now prayer, in this general notion, may be defined to be an elevation of the mind to God, or more largely and expressly thus: prayer is an affectuous actuation of an intellective soul towards God, expressing, or at least implying, an entire dependence on Him as the Author and Fountain of all good, a will and readiness to give Him His due, which is no less than all love, obedience, adoration, glory, and worship, by humbling and annihilating of herself and all creatures in His presence; and lastly, a desire and intention to aspire to an union of spirit with Him.

4. This is the nature and these the necessary qualities which are all, at least virtually, involved in all prayer, whether it be made interiorly in the soul only, or withal expressed by words or outward signs.

5. Hence it appears that prayer is the most perfect and most divine action that a rational soul is capable of; yea, it is the only principal action for the exercising of which the soul was created, since in prayer alone the soul is united to God. And, by consequence, it is of all other actions and duties the most indispensably necessary.

6. For a further demonstration of which necessity we may consider:

1. That only in prayer we are joined to God, our last end, from whom when we are separated we are in ourselves, wherein our chief misery consists. 2. That by prayer grace and all good is obtained, conserved, and recovered; for God being the Fountain of all good, no good can be had but by recourse to Him, which is only by prayer. 3. That by prayer alone all exterior good things are sanctified, so as to become blessings to us. 4. That prayer does exercise all virtues, in so much as whatsoever good action is performed, it is no further meritorious than as it proceeds from an internal motion of the soul, elevating and directing it to God (which internal motion is prayer); so that whatsoever is not prayer, or is not done in virtue of prayer, is little better than an action of mere nature. 5. That there is no action with

which sin is incompatible but prayer. We may, lying in our sins, give alms, fast, recite the Divine Office, communicate, obey our superiors, &c.; but it is impossible to exercise true prayer of the spirit and deliberately continue under the guilt of sin, because by prayer, a soul being converted and united to God, cannot at the same time be averted and separated from Him. 6. That by prayer alone, approaching to God, we are placed above all miseries; whereas, without prayer, the least calamity would oppress us. Therefore prayer is the proper remedy against all kinds of afflictions, guilt, remorse, &c.

7. And hence it is that all the devil's quarrels and assaults are chiefly, if not only, against prayer; the which if he can extinguish, he has all that he aims at—separating us from the fruition and adhesion to God, and therewith from all good. And hence likewise it is that the duty of prayer is enjoined after such a manner as no other duty is, for we are commanded to exercise it without intermission. *Oportet semper orare et non deficere*,—*We must needs pray continually and never give over.*

8. In the precedent description of prayer in general, I said that it was an affectuous actuation of an intellectual soul, by which words is signified: 1. That it is not prayer which is performed by the lips only, without an inward attention and affection of the soul—that is, that prayer which is not mental is not indeed properly prayer; 2. That whatsoever employment the mind or understanding exercises in prayer, by discoursing, inventing motives, &c., these are only preparations to prayer, and not prayer itself, which is only and immediately exercised by the will or affections adhering to God, which shall be showed hereafter.

9. Hence it follows that the ordinary division of prayer into vocal and mental is improper, because the parts of the division are coincident; for vocal prayer, as distinguished from (and much more as opposed to) mental, is indeed no prayer at all; and whatever it is,

what esteem God makes of it, He shows by His prophet, saying: ‘This people honours Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. In vain do they honour Me,’ &c.

10. Yet both a good sense and a good use may be made of that division, being explicated after this manner, viz.: that though all true prayer may be mental, yet, 1. Some prayers are merely mental without any sound of words; yea, there may be such pure blind elevations of the will to God, that there are not so much as any express internal words or any explicable thoughts of the soul itself. 2. Other prayers may be withal vocally expressed in outward words, the soul attending to the sense of the words pronounced, or, at least, intending to do so, and this is properly vocal prayer.

Vocal Prayer

§ 1. Of Vocal prayer.

§§ 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. By vocal prayer the ancients attained to perfect contemplation. And why this cannot so well be done in these times.

§§ 10. How voluntary vocal prayers may be made instrumental to contemplation.

§§ 11. That vocal prayer of obligation is upon no pretence to be neglected.

§§ 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. Of attention required to vocal prayer, and of the degrees of it.

1. The design of this Treatise being to deliver instructions concerning internal contemplative prayer, therefore little shall be said of Vocal prayer, and that little also shall be of it considered, as it may among others be, an instrument or mean to bring a soul to contemplation.

2. It cannot be denied but that in ancient times many holy souls did attain to perfect contemplation by the mere use of vocal prayer; the which likewise would have the same effect upon us if we would or could imitate them both in such wonderful solitude or abstraction, rigorous abstinences, and incredible assiduity in praying. But for a supply of such wants, and inability to support such undistracted

long attention to God, we are driven to help ourselves by daily set exercises of internal prayer to procure an habitual constant state of recollectedness, by such exercises repairing and making amends for the distractions that we live in all the rest of the day.

3. Notwithstanding God's hand is not shortened, but that if He please He may now also call souls to contemplation by the way of vocal prayer, so as that they are their general and ordinary exercise; which, if He do, it will be necessary that such souls should, in their course, observe these following conditions:

4. The first is, that they must use a greater measure of abstraction and mortification than is necessary for those that exercise mental prayer. The reason is, because internal prayer, being far more profound and inward, affords a far greater light and grace to discover and cure the inordinate affections; it brings the soul likewise to a greater simplicity and facility to recollect itself, &c., and therefore vocal prayer, to make amends, had need be accompanied with greater abstraction, &c.

5. The second condition is, that those who use vocal prayer must oblige themselves to spend a greater time at their daily exercises than is necessary for the others, to the end thereby to supply for the less efficacy that is in vocal prayer.

6. The third is, that in case they do find themselves at any time invited by God internally to a pure internal prayer (which is likely to be of the nature of aspirations), they then must yield to such an invitation, and for the time interrupt or cease their voluntary vocal exercises for as long time as they find themselves enabled to exercise internally. These conditions are to be observed of all those who, either in religion or in the world, desire to lead spiritual lives, and cannot without extreme difficulty be brought to begin a spiritual course with any kind of mere menial prayer.

7. And, indeed, if any such souls there be to whom vocal prayer (joined with the exercise of virtues) is sufficient to promote them to contemplation, certain it is that there is no way more secure than it, none less subject to indiscretion or illusions, and none less perilous to the head or health. And in time (but it will be long first) their vocal prayers will prove aspirative, spiritual, and contemplative, by their light and virtue illustrating and piercing to the very depth of the spirit.

8. But in these days this case is very extraordinary, and indeed unknown; and therefore contemplative religious persons ought not, upon any pretence, to dispense with themselves for the exercise of mental prayer, whatever pretensions or temptations they may have thereto. They may, perhaps, find their vocal prayers to be more clear and undistracted, and, on the contrary, their recollections to be painful and disturbed; but yet, in time and by constancy in pursuing internal exercises, they will find the contrary, and perceive that the ground of the difference was either some present corporal indisposition, or perhaps a temptation of the devil, to move them to a neglect of exercising in spirit. Since certain it is, that little less than a miracle will cause vocal prayers, to imperfect souls, to become contemplative, or sufficient to produce profound recollection; the which effects even those that have long practised internal exercises do not find in the reciting of the Office. Such seeming extraordinary contemplations, therefore, as seem to come to souls, none knows from whence, without any great merit or due disposition on their part, are not much to be esteemed, but rather to be suspected; and, however, they deserve not that therefore the solid exercises of internal prayer should be neglected.

9. To the like purpose we read that St. Ignatius found extraordinary illustrations in soul being at his study of human learning; whereas at his ordinary mental prayers he could find no such effects, but, on the

contrary, much difficulty and obscurity; but this in time he discovered to be the working of the devil.

10. The use of voluntary vocal prayer in order to contemplation may, in the beginning of a spiritual course, be proper: 1. For such simple and unlearned persons (especially women) as are not at all fit for discursive prayer; 2. yea, even for the more learned, if it be used as a means to raise and better their attention to God; yet so that it must always give place to internal prayer when they find themselves disposed for it.

11. But as for that vocal prayer, either in public or private, which is by the laws of the Church of obligation, no manner of pretences of finding more profit by internal exercises ought to be esteemed a sufficient ground for any to neglect or disparage it; for though some souls of the best dispositions might perhaps more advance themselves towards perfection by internal exercises alone, yet, since generally, even in religion, souls are so tepid and negligent that if they were left to their own voluntary devotions they would scarce ever exercise either vocal or mental prayer; therefore, inasmuch as a manifest distinction cannot be made between the particular dispositions of persons, it was requisite and necessary that all should be obliged to a public external performance of divine service, praising God with the tongues also (which were for that end given us), that so an order and decorum might be observed in God's Church, to the end it might imitate the employment of angels and glorified saints in a solemn united joining of hearts and tongues to glorify God. This was necessary also for the edification and invitation of those who are not obliged to the office, who perhaps would never think of God, were they not encouraged thereto by seeing good souls spend the greatest part of their time in such solemn and almost hourly praying to and praising God.

12. Now, whereas to all manner of prayer, as hath been said, there is necessarily required an attention of the mind, without which it is not prayer, we must know that there are several kinds and degrees of attention, all of them good, but yet one more perfect and profitable than another; for, 1. there is an attention or express reflection on the words and sense of the sentence pronounced by the tongue or revolved in the mind. Now this attention being, in vocal prayer, necessarily to vary and change according as sentences in the Psalms, &c., do succeed one another, cannot so powerfully and efficaciously fix the mind or affections on God, because they are presently to be recalled to new considerations or succeeding affections. This is the lowest and most imperfect degree of attention, of which all souls are in some measure capable, and the more imperfect they are the less difficulty there is in yielding it; for souls that have good and established affections to God can hardly quit a good affection by which they are united to God, and which they find gustful and profitable for them, to exchange it for a new one succeeding in the Office; and if they should, it would be to their prejudice.

13. The second degree is that of souls indifferently well practised in internal prayer, who, coming to the reciting of the Office, and either bringing with them or by occasion of such reciting raising in themselves an efficacious affection to God, do desire without variation to continue it with as profound a recollectedness as they may, not at all heeding whether it be suitable to the sense of the present passage which they pronounce. This is an attention to God, though not to the words; and is far more beneficial than the former. And therefore to oblige any souls to quit such an attention for the former would be both prejudicial and unreasonable. For since all vocal prayers, in Scripture or otherwise, were ordained only to this end, to supply and furnish the soul that needs with good matter of affection, by which it may be

united to God, a soul that hath already attained to that end, which is union as long as it lasts, ought not to be separated therefrom, and be obliged to seek a new means till the virtue of the former be spent.

14. A third and most sublime degree of attention to the divine Office is that whereby vocal prayers do become mental; that is, whereby souls most profoundly and with a perfect simplicity united to God can yet, without any prejudice to such union, attend also to the sense and spirit of each passage that they pronounce, yea, thereby find their affection, adhesion, and union increased and more simplified. This attention comes not till a soul be arrived to perfect contemplation, by means of which the spirit is so habitually united to God, and besides, the imagination so subdued to the spirit that it cannot rest upon anything that will distract it.

15. Happy are those souls (of which God knows the number is very small) that have attained to this third degree, the which must be ascended to by a careful practice of the two former in their order, especially of a second degree! And therefore in reciting of the Office even the more imperfect souls may do well, whensoever they find themselves in a good measure recollected, to continue so long as they well can, preserving as much stability in their imagination as may be.

16. And the best means to beget and increase such a recollected way of saying the Divine Office is the practice of internal prayer, either in meditation or immediate acts of the will, the only aim and end whereof is the procuring an immovable attention and adhesion of the spirit to God. And this, as to our present purpose, may suffice concerning vocal prayer.

Internal Affective Prayer

§ 1. Of internal prayer in general, and principally of internal affective prayer.

§§ 2, 3, 4, 5. The excellency and necessity of affective prayer, and that it was practised by the ancients; and not discursive prayer or meditation.

§ 6. The great necessity of it in these days.

§§ 7, 8. The testimony of Cardinal Bellarmine to show that vocal prayer, &c., sufficeth not.

§§ 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15. Five admirable virtues of internal affective prayer.

§§ 16, 17. An exhortation to constancy and courage in pursuing the exercise of it.

1. Internal or Mental prayer (which is simply and merely such, and) which we made the second member in the division of Prayer in general (if indeed it be a distinct kind), and of which only we shall treat hereafter, is either, 1. imperfect and acquired; 2. or perfect, and that which is called properly infused prayer. The former is only a preparation and inferior disposition, by which the soul is fitted and made capable of the infusion of the other, to wit, the Prayer of Contemplation, which is the end of all our spiritual and religious exercises.

I shall therefore, in order, treat of them both and of their several special degrees, beginning with the lowest, and thence ascending orderly till we come to the highest, which will bring a soul to the state of perfection.

2. But before I come to deliver the special instructions pertinent to the exercise of the several degrees of internal prayer, it will be very requisite, by way of preparation and encouragement, to set down the necessity and excellency of internal prayer in general; I mean especially of that which is Affective. For as for discursive prayer or Meditation, the world is but even burdened with books, which with more than sufficient niceness prescribe rules and methods for the practice of it, and with too partial an affection magnify it, the authors of such books neglecting in the mean time, or perhaps scarce knowing what true internal affective prayer is, which, notwithstanding, is the only efficacious instrument that immediately brings souls to contemplation and perfect union in spirit with God.

3. Some there are that, because they do not find in the writings of the ancient Fathers and mystical Doctors such exact instructions touching the practice of internal prayer as are now common and abounding in the Church, do therefore undervalue and despise it as a mere human invention, not at all necessary, but rather, on the contrary, subject to great inconveniences, exposing souls to illusions, errors, &c. And therefore they, in opposition to it, do only recommend and exact vocal prayer, and a solemn protracted performance of it.

4. Notwithstanding, to any one that shall heedfully read the writings, not only of the ancient solitaires, but likewise of St. Augustine, St. Basil, St. Gregory Nazianzen and others, it will evidently appear that they both knew and practised most profound and recollected devotions internally, yea, and exhorted souls to a continual attendance

to God and His divine presenoe in the spirit; sufficient proofs whereof shall occasionally hereafter be inserted.

5. True, indeed, it is that they have not delivered any exact methods for the practice of such prayer, which in those times were not at all necessary, or at least not at all needful to be communicated to the world. For to souls that lived (as anciently they did) entirely sequestered from all worldly business or conversation, in continual laborious and penitential exercises, having no images of creatures to distract their minds, and much less any inordinate affections to creatures to depress them from mounting to spiritual union with God, it was more than sufficient for such to know that their duty and the end of their solitude was to live in a continual conversation with God, suffering themselves to be conducted and managed by His Holy Spirit. To such, all other more nice or particular instructions would have proved but distractive and entangling; and therefore we see that our holy Father, though he ordained daily conventual short recollections for the exercise of (that which he calls) pure prayer, yet he neither interprets what he means by such prayer (for all his disciples understood that sufficiently), and much less does he deliver any instructions how to exercise it.

6. But in these days, in which religious persons and others that aspire to spiritual contemplation do either want the means to enjoy, or have not the courage and strength to support, such solitude and austerities, lest the spirit of contemplation should fail in the world, God raised up first in Germany masters of contemplative prayer, as Suso, Harphius, Eschius, Thaulerus, &c., in former times, and more lately in Spain, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, &c., who, no question, by the direction of God's Spirit (as the grace of miracles conferred on them may witness), have judged it necessary to supply the want of the foresaid advantages, by adding a certain obligation to the daily

practice of internal recollected prayer, prescribing orders and times for the performance of it. They have likewise more exactly discovered the degrees and progress of prayer, and, in a word, most earnestly do they exhort souls to a diligent pursuance of it, professing that without it, it is impossible to comply with the essential design of a spiritual or religious life.

7. I will content myself in this place to express the grounds and sum of the exhortations of those and other illuminated persons (the glorious instruments of God for the reviving of decayed spirituality in the world) by producing a passage of Cardinal Bellarmine's, which may be applied to this purpose, taken out of one of his sermons (in fer. 2. Rogat.), which is this, *Ego illud mihi videor verissime posse affirmare, &c.*—that is, 'This I believe I may most truly and confidently affirm' (saith he) 'that without a diligent pursuit of internal prayer none will ever become truly spiritual, nor attain to any degree of perfection. We see many which oftentimes in the year do approach to the Sacrament of Penance, and, as far as human frailty and infirmity will permit, do with sufficient diligence endeavour to purge away all the stains and uncleanness of sin; and yet they make no progress, but are still the very same that they were, and having been at confession, if a week after they come to the same tribunal again, they bring neither fewer nor lesser faults than such as were formerly confessed. Yea, without offending against truth, I may add somewhat more strange than all this, to wit, that we see sometimes religious persons and not a few priests which by their vocation and habits profess sanctity, and, moreover, do assiduously read divine Scriptures and books of piety; they do often (if not daily) celebrate the most holy Sacrifice; they have neither wives nor children, but are free from all cares and solitudes which may distract them from a continual attendance to divine things; and yet, after all this, they are so void of all devotion and the Spirit of God,