

DISTRACTIONS

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THE unequivocal command to continual prayer so clearly expressed by Christ in the Gospels is by no means so clearly understood by the average christian of today. That everybody should pray the sincere christian will readily admit, but it is the element of eternity that is either glossed over or assumed to refer only to those who have received a special call to a life of contemplation in the cloister. The fact plainly is that it is a call to all who pretend to follow Christ, and we are bound to pray always. There is no doubt an unconscious prejudice based on a misconception of the meaning of prayer. The reasons for this prejudice may be said to be two which are very closely allied, one being in a sense the cause of the other.

We are very prone to conceive of life in two departments which wrongly we assume to be dissociated from one another: the natural and the supernatural. These two we consider so distinct as to be almost in opposition. Herein lies the difficulty which makes us consider a large section of life in the light of a distraction. Distractions are in this sense inevitable, and therefore to pray always becomes a practical impossibility. We do not like to think that we are being disobedient to God's command, and consequently we pretend that the command is not for us, or even that the command was not really given. The solution to the whole problem may be found if we examine the attitude of theology to morality. St Thomas never denied that there were such things as moral virtues, but from the christian point of view they are not really virtues unless they are vivified by charity. For St Thomas virtue is only really virtue when it is ordered to the ultimate, that is to God. Justice for justice sake is good in the natural order, but for St Thomas it should be justice for God's sake if it is really to be true virtue. St Thomas takes Aristotle's definition of virtue as 'the disposition of a perfect thing to the best' to its real and ultimate conclusion. For the christian clearly the 'best' is God, and

therefore in the christian context virtue to be real virtue must be directly related to God. This does not eliminate the moral virtues but raises them to the supernatural; it supernaturalises what would otherwise remain simply natural; it makes ultimate what would otherwise be limited in its end.

We can now apply this to life, to our natural life, and say that for the true christian there should not in practice be any purely natural life because all can be ordered to God. Indeed the natural life, including its particular condition, in which God has placed us is God's will for us, and is given to us that through it and by it we may work out our eternal happiness. With this in mind, what remains that can be called a distraction, since all should lead to God? Prayer we are told is the raising up of the mind and heart to God, and anything which leads to God raises the mind and heart to God unless through our own stupidity we allow these things to lead us away from God.

What the majority of us call distractions in prayer are the daily preoccupations of life which we have wrongly put in the category of natural things, failing to see that they are the very things God has made part of our lives. Furthermore, we think that God is not interested in our natural occupations, our worries and our trials. We have perhaps lost that simple confidence in God which sent St Thomas to the tabernacle when problems beset him. We try to keep as deep and dark secrets from God the very things which God has put into our lives. Can anybody sincerely think that God is not interested, and very intensely interested, in the daily preoccupations of the mother of a large family? Yet should these very things cross her mind when she is praying, she will surely confess them as distractions whereas she might so very well have made them the very marrow of her prayer. God made her a mother, he gave her children. Mary, the most perfect of all human beings, 'full of grace' and immaculate, free from the slightest suspicion of sin or imperfection, was very much preoccupied in mind when she lost her Son in Jerusalem, and her very seeking after him was her prayer. She of all creatures must have fulfilled the precept to pray always, in the most perfect manner. What

Mary did, many other mothers can and should do without the least misgiving that they are being distracted. Mary's day-to-day life in many respects is the life of many women today, and if she always prayed by the very fulfilment of her domestic duties, so may any woman today.

Prayer, somebody once said, is not what you say, nor even what you do, but what you are. It is a state of being. We must clear our minds of the obsession that to pray is to pour out a flood of words. Words have their place in the social life of the Church, in its glorious liturgy; this is a necessary consequence of our being social animals, but prayer is a far wider thing than this, especially in the light of the commandment to pray always. The very inactivity of our sleep is a prayer provided it is for God. We sleep that we may be the better able to accomplish our daily duties and thereby fulfil the vocation God has given us. The great writers on the spiritual life tell us that many souls have been retarded in their progress by a too-abundant use of words in their prayers. The mind can think of God and the greater mysteries better without words which of their very nature are material and therefore limited. The infinite can never be expressed perfectly by words, whereas we are reminded by the master philosopher that the mind has itself a certain infinity since its very object is being. And God is being, unlimited being, perfect being.

Why should we be afraid of trying to answer the call to perpetual prayer? Only because we misunderstand what prayer really is, because we see life in terms of a multitude of disconnected events the majority of which we think cannot be related to God. The truth is that there is nothing which cannot be directed to God except that which is sinful in itself. Sin denies God because God is being and sin is a denial of being. All being leads to the BEING, and all denial of being recedes from God in the measure in which it denies being. St Francis was brought near to God by nature as he saw it, by the animals and the flowers. These things were in no sense distractions for him, they were the very means by which he was brought to a contemplation of the goodness and truth of their creator. If we see in others a distraction it is only because we fail to realise that St Paul

was not indulging in extravagant language when he reminded us that we were 'temples of the Holy Ghost'. To see God in all things is to denude things of their material and limited nature and clothe them in the infinity of God. 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings.'



A VIRGIN PREFACE

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In treating of the origin of the religious state for women in his Apostolic Constitution, *Sponsa Christi*,¹ the Holy Father refers to the ancient consecration of virgins as '... that solemn rite which is advisedly reckoned among the more lovely of the records of ancient liturgy'. Doubtless this is a reference to the prayers for the *Velatio Virginum* in the Sacramentaries. At least one of these prayers is found in the present rite for the blessing and consecration of virgins in the *Pontificale Romanum*. It is in the form of a preface expressing in singular beauty of language the Church's mind on the sublimity of the state of virginity. As it appears in the Pontifical its wording agrees substantially with that of the so-called Leonine Sacramentary which takes us back to the fourth century. The following translation has been attempted in the hope that it may induce others to study the rite as a whole in the Pontifical. This will reveal an ingenious interweaving of the act of oblation with Christ's sacrifice in the Mass and a wealth of spiritual teaching.

PRAYER OF CONSECRATION

IT is truly meet and just, right and availing unto salvation that we should at all time and in all places, give thanks unto thee, Holy Lord, Father Almighty, everlasting God, gracious dweller in chaste bodies and divine lover of undefiled souls.

For in that Word of thine by whom all things were made, thou dost renew man's nature corrupted in the first of our race by the malice of the devil. And this in such wise as not only to recall it to the innocence of its first beginnings, but even to bring it to a knowledge of those everlasting good

¹ Cf. LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, December, 1951, and January, 1952.