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Praying with the Masters Today

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We pray in different ways – petitionary, thanksgiving and other kinds of prayer – but the goal is always towards contemplation of God, contemplatio Dei.

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Contemplative prayer is not something you arrive at on your own. You prepare by practising your formula of piety. If you practise it faithfully, God will give you the gift of what Cassian calls oratio ignita – *fiery prayer, which inflames the heart and also allows you to pray the scriptures, especially the Psalms, as if you are composing them.*

1
Everyday Mysticism

> *Mysticism is recognition of God's transforming presence in our lives and an attempt to find a deepening of that sense within our lives.*

My life's work as a theologian and a historian has been dedicated to trying to recapture the riches of the tradition for the contemporary world. G K Chesterton once called tradition the 'democracy of the dead'. They get a vote as much as we get a vote, and we can learn from them. They are not past and gone; they are still alive. They are still having that effect on contemporary society in terms of spirituality, mysticism and meditation, which is central to both of those.

I've been reading John Main for many years actually, always with great appreciation. When you read John Main, it often seems like it's very simple and straightforward but I've discovered that there are unusual depths to John Main's thought and to his teaching, and so I am happy to repay back to a group like this something of the things that I have learned from reading John Main over the course of these years.

I often get asked: Tell us what mysticism is, and why is mysticism important, and indeed why is mysticism necessary. Henri Bremond, the great scholar of French mysticism in the early part of the 20th century, says 'It is not possible to ignore the mystics without dis-owning the self. There is something crucial to the message of the great mystics about what it means to be human, what it means to be a human person.

Second quotation, from Karl Rahner, one of the great theologians of the 20th century. Rahner once said: 'The Christian of the future will either be a mystic [that is, he would have experienced something] or would not be a Christian at all.' 'The Christian of the future will either be a mystic or not be a Christian at all.' That quotation from Rahner may give us a wider picture of what a mystic is.

Mysticism is a word that is very easily misunderstood. For some people, it means something bizarre, something uncanny, weird, magical, strange. For others, mysticism it's the realm of paranormal

religious experiences, strange things – visions, stigmata, levitations, inedia or going without food for years and years, severe asceticism – things that we don't have in our own lives or very few of us could have, or even things that we don't see around us very much. There are even people within the Christian communities that recognise, of course, that great saints can be described as mystics or contemplatives, but that mysticism is an elite phenomenon – it is something that is meant only for the privileged few; not something that has anything to do with normal everyday Christian life.

What I am going to try to do is to emphasise that the mystical element in religion, is integral and necessary to all Christian life. Indeed, I think it is part of the vocation that Christians are called to, from their baptism on. Mysticism is recognition of God's transforming presence in our lives and an attempt to find a deepening of that sense within our lives. I think all Christians are mystics and are called to mysticism and called to a deeper consciousness of that mystical element. And that mystical element, I would emphasise, is interactive with the other aspects of our religious faith.

The great English scholar Baron Friedrich Von Hügel wrote a very important book called *The Mystical Element of Religion*. Von Hügel identified three elements to what he called 'healthy religion', the institutional, the intellectual and the mystical, typified through the three apostles – Peter representing the institutional, Paul representing the intellectual, and the Apostle John representing the mystical, the spiritual element if you will. Von Hügel insisted that it is only the healthy interaction of all of those aspects of religion – institutional, intellectual and mystical – that produced the sane, normal, well-balanced religious personality and even the well-balanced religious group or, if you will, denomination. If one or the other of these elements sought to suppress the others or forget about the others or disregard the others, that was where danger started.

I think Von Hügel had a very deep insight there: that the mystical element is not religion in itself, but it's an element in religion. It's an aspect of religion that integrates with the institutional, that integrates with the intellectual, but it brings something to the whole, the integrated whole, that neither the institutional nor the intellectual side of religion can do, important though they may be.

Mysticism is not just a matter of performing certain acts, doing certain kinds of things. It's a whole way of life; it's a change of mentality. Certainly that mystical element consists of prayer, it

consists of certain forms of asceticism, it consists of meditation, it consists of contemplation, et cetera, but it is the attitude from which those are performed that is the most important thing. The mystical or contemplative dimension changes the way that we do all of our religious acts and our outlook on the world. Many of you are familiar, of course, with Thomas Merton. If you read Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton is very good on that, on what he called 'the use of the contemplative' as an integrative change of attitude rather than the performance of a particular activity. Meister Eckhart says in one of his sermons, 'If you think you are finding more of God in church than you are in the stable (or rather the workplace), you are buffling up God's head in a blanket and stuffing him under a bench.' You find God everywhere, it's not that you disregard the Church and the prayer that you are supposed to be involved in in the Church, but your attitude should be that I can find God in the stable, I can find God in my workplace as well.

Another misunderstanding – mysticism is not individualistic. It's personal but it's personal within the community and the community of the Church. And indeed the mystical gifts that are given to even the greatest figures in the history of mysticism – think of Saint Teresa of Avila, for example – are not for her alone. They are for the community, her religious community of reformed Carmelite nuns and for the Church as a whole. And the only test for who may or may not be a true mystic is the Gospel test: 'by their fruits you will know them'. Anybody can claim a vision; anyone can claim some kind of special experience; but in the history of the Church, the only people who can be known as part of this tradition are the people whose fruits are known, both in their own lives and also in the effect they've had on others.

But in the great traditions, not only the Christian tradition – the Jewish tradition, the Islamic tradition, et cetera – the mystics are integral parts of those traditions. So we can, I think, speak about the term 'everyday mysticism'. Everyday mysticism, this is not an elite phenomenon. It is not a phenomenon only for the very, very few. It is not a phenomenon which is characterised primarily by some kinds of special, miraculous paranormal experiences; these happen but they are never the core. Mysticism is an everyday consciousness of God's deepening presence in our lives and the transformation that's meant to effect in us. ■

2
Mystical Consciousness

> *The mystic doesn't learn new or more information about God, but the mystic gets a better sense of the reality of God. It includes the positive sense of knowing God more directly, but also includes the negative sense, the deeper realisation that God cannot be understood.*

What about this word, this term, 'mysticism', 'mystical consciousness'? Let me give you my understanding – I don't call it a definition. Mysticism is that part or element of Christian belief and practice that concerns the preparation for consciousness of an effect, what mystics themselves have described as a direct, immediate and transformative presence of God. Let me take each of the important elements in that description.

First of all, mysticism is a part or element of religion. It's not the whole of religion. And the healthy mystical element is only healthy if it recognises that there is an institutional and intellectual side of Christianity as well.

Secondly, that description indicates that it is a process. It is preparation for consciousness of an effect. In other words, it's a life journey. It's not a moment of particular, say, union with God or whatever. Many philosophers who study mysticism think they study mysticism when they only study a few descriptions of the final experience – the acme experience of union with God or something else. I think that is a bad mistake because what we are studying is the process by which a person – the contemplative or the mystic – prepares for over a long period of time, has some kind of experience or moment of consciousness that is transformative, and then goes out to live a life that uses that new experience, that new transformation, in order to effect change in themselves and change in other people.

So mysticism has to be studied as a process, as a life journey, rather than as focusing in on this one kind of moment of consciousness. Mysticism for me describes a consciousness of this direct or immediate moment of God's presence in our lives.

Why ‘consciousness’? Most students of mysticism talk about mystical ‘experience’, and it is true that the mystics do have experiences of the direct presence of God. But for a lot of us, when we do hear the word ‘experience’, we think of feeling something or sensing something. And I think consciousness is a much larger term because mysticism is much more than just some kind of new feeling, some new kind of emotion, some new kind of sensation. It often includes that, but consciousness enables us to tie in the whole inner life. In other words, consciousness is our sense of awareness that exists both in terms of our sensation, in terms of our thinking, in terms of our loving and deciding. These are all conscious acts. And to have a transformative moment of God’s presence in our lives may not even involve a new sensation or new feeling, but certainly involves a new kind of thinking and a new kind of loving. That’s why I think the term ‘consciousness’, in a certain sense, is more expansive. Not to exclude experience (and mystics themselves use the term ‘experience’ a good deal), but to emphasise that it is more than just a new feeling of something that I’ve never felt before. But what did you think about it? How did it affect your life? How did it lead you to new ways of understanding and loving? And those are all conscious acts that are connected with and flow from that transformative kind of moment.

So mystical transformation involves sensation, it involves thinking, it involves loving, it involves deciding, it involves acting, et cetera. The mystics claim that we can have consciousness on three levels – not only consciousness of objects perhaps, and a consciousness of ourselves, but a kind of co-presence of the divine, a co-presence of God. That third level of God in us, in our prayer life and even in our daily activities, is most of the time not present in our minds, but the mystical tradition insists that it can become present, it can become more powerful, it can in a certain sense even become overwhelming. So mystical consciousness is a three-level consciousness

Of course it’s going to differ very much because it’s on a continuum of that consciousness. That’s another very important point. Certainly there are the great mystics and the great contemplatives – people like Teresa, Meister Eckhart, Bonaventure, Augustine, or Origen in the early Church, and many other figures we can point to. But the fact that these people have a much deeper sense of this divine co-presence or meta-consciousness doesn’t mean that others can’t share it, that everyone doesn’t have a

certain access to it. They just go further along the way. It's like playing a game – lots of people play basketball but only a few people are supreme basketball stars. It's like learning to play an instrument – lots of people practise at an instrument but the really great players go on and play in symphony orchestras.

Everybody is called to it, but we are called to it in terms of different ways. The great players, whether it be in sports or in music or an art, are kinds of inspirations for the rest of us who are aspiring to that deeper kind of transformation, but it doesn't exclude us. We are on that continuum. They're just ahead. They are examples, and examples not so much of their own activities (they all say this), but examples of divine grace. So there are no two classes – the elite mystics and the ordinary Christians. There is a continuum of mystical consciousness in every Christian, I believe, who is trying to live a deeper life.

There are two other issues regarding that description that I have given.

One is: Can we have a direct or immediate experience of God in our lives? The mystics do insist that God becomes present to them in a more immediate fashion than in other kinds of activities. And it is that immediacy which may involve even a kind of direct consciousness of God that, I think, the mystics themselves testify to. They all insist, however, that there is a great difference between what we call an immediate experience of God and the final experience of God in heaven. Whatever consciousness they can enjoy in this life is a kind of foretaste at best for what's the final goal.

I want to say just a little bit about the notion of transformation, mystical consciousness as transformative. The transformative aspect of the deeper consciousness of God is absolutely crucial. It changes people, and it changes people in a way that improves them and that improves those around them. And it involves a transformation that is both affective and intellectual – two major powers of the human, the power to know and the power to love. So this transformation takes place affectively – affectively, because it gives one a deeper sense of loving God and being loved by God. And it changes intellectually – it gives us a deeper sense of *who* God is, not *what* God is. Nobody knows what God is; Thomas Aquinas and everybody insist on that. Nobody can know what God is.

So the mystic doesn't know more about God. What we know about God, some of it comes from our reason, most of it comes

from our faith. The mystic doesn't learn new facts about God or more information about God, but the mystic gets a better sense of the reality of God – a more immediate, intuitive or connatural sense about God -- knowing God in a new way, not more stuff about God. It includes the positive sense of knowing God more directly. But the mystics insist that it also includes the negative sense – the deeper and deeper realisation of what we can never know – what God is – understanding that God cannot be understood. We all say that's true, but do we really know it? The great mystics say it; think of Meister Eckhart as a perfect example of this. He says that 'the deeper you get into the mystery of God, the more you realise you cannot know what God is'. ■

3
The Mystical Tradition and Mystical Language

> *We can't talk about God as an object because God isn't an object, so the mystics speak about God through images that suggest rather than exhaust. So when we read the mystics, we have to be conscious of that.*

The great mystical tradition is almost two thousand years old, and we are part of what I would like to call a textual community. These mystical texts were written down to help other people, sometimes within small religious groups, sometimes within larger communities, to help them along the way, along that path to transformation. These mystical communities, these textual communities, exist today. In a certain way they are even strengthened today; we have more of the riches of the Christian mystical tradition available today to readers than we probably had ever before. The main thing, of course, is to recognise that we stand within that tradition.

If you read almost any of the great mystics, they will tell you of the books that influenced them so much, for example Teresa of Avila in her *Life*, chapter 8, Teresa was a kind of an indifferent nun, she really wasn't much of a nun at all. She tried to practise interior prayer but she wasn't getting anywhere. For twenty years, she said she didn't get anywhere and then grace changed her. But part of that change came through seeing a statue of the bleeding Christ during Lent and meditating on it. Part of it came from reading St Augustine's *Confessions*, she tells us in chapter 8. She said she read the *Confessions* that had just been translated into Spanish actually, and when she came to the place in Augustine's *Confessions* where he describes his conversion, suddenly she felt as if the saint were talking directly to her. She opened her heart and grace, in a certain sense, poured in. But she got that through the inspiration, the medium if you will, the instrumentality of reading about Augustine's conversion in the *Confessions*. So, mystical books do have effects.

Here's a little story to illustrate that. A mystical beguine, a free-form religious woman in Austria, Vienna, Margaret Von Becken, we

have a life of her by her friar confessor, a Franciscan, and he tells the story about her. She could probably read the Office but she really, was not fully literate. So he and she would read Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Song*s together. She would ask him questions about what is Bernard saying, what he means here. And he would explain Bernard's deep mystical teaching to her as they read the *Sermons* together.

What's nice about these little vignettes – what Teresa tells us about herself and what Von Becken's confessor tells us – is that you get a sense about how these texts have been used by people and have influenced people and have been instruments, I would say, of grace in terms of the pursuit of a deeper awareness of God's presence in our lives.

The study of mysticism is really a study of the language that the mystics have left us because we have no direct access to the consciousness of any past figure, even the consciousness of people of today. What we have is the record that they leave to us in their words and in their teachings. All mystics insist that God is utterly ineffable, cannot be spoken about, but they sure say a lot. They go on and on. They feel compelled to speak about that which one cannot speak because that is what they are called to, inviting others to try to reach that kind of consciousness which would change people. Because God isn't an object, so we can't use objective language in talking about God. We have to use a language that's more like poetry than it is an objective description in any scientific kind of fashion. So when we read the mystics, we have to be conscious of that. It could still be deeply theological language and it can have coherence and a precision, but it is not an objective language.

We can't talk about God as an object because God isn't an object, so the mystics use what I call 'verbal strategies' for speaking about God. They speak about God through images that suggest rather than exhaust. For example, in the 13th century on, mystics begin talking about God as the 'abyss'. God as the abyss. One of the traditional images used about the absolute infinite unknowability of God, is God described as an infinite ocean in which the soul can swim like a fish, or as a vast expanse of the air in which the soul flies around like a bird. Mystics also use a variety of metaphors. They use paradoxes. They use oxymoronic expressions. Think of the whole issue of the 'brilliant darkness of God' – how can you have a 'brilliant darkness'? But putting two ideas that do not go together in

the world of common experience makes a suggestion to us about the world of that uncommon world of deeper consciousness.

Mystical language is also always both positive and negative. It describes God in positive terms: God is good, God is kind, God is benevolent, God is a great shining light, et cetera. The Greeks call this kataphatic language – positive language. But the mystics always insist that we can't talk about God, so negative language is better – apophatic language more than positive language. All mystics use and combine positive language with negative language in a whole variety of ways. And most mystics insist there is a third level, a level that goes beyond both affirmation and negation because God is ultimately beyond all our affirmations and all our negations. So I would like to say that we have kataphatic language (the positive), apophatic language (which is seen as more correct and negative). And then you have hyperphatic language. Hyperphatic language – you go beyond yes and no; you go into a kind of realm where you are testing the limits of human expressibility.

The Presence and Absence of God.

When we begin to read the traditions, we begin to see that a lot of mystics talk about God's absence. God is not here. God is either absent or sometimes God seems to be punishing those who love him the most. There is always a complex interplay between presence and absence when we talk about consciousness of God. I have two quotations.

The first one is from Simone Weil, the great French philosopher and mystic of the 20th century. Many of you of course have read her. I hope you have profited from her the way that I have. She once said – this is in one of her notebooks: 'Contact with human creatures is given us through a sense of presence. Contact with God is given us through a sense of absence. Compared with this absence, presence becomes more absent than absence.'

My second quotation comes from John Main. My favourite of John Main's books (I've read them all) is *The Way of Unknowing*[1]. He has a wonderful chapter on God's two silences – the silence of revelation and the silence of absence:

> One of the things we must learn in our meditation as we mature, as we go further down the path, is to be equally content with either of these forms of silence – either with

> the infinite sense of his presence, or with the total sense of his absence. And it's hard for us, because when we start to meditate we haven't got to the stage where we can be equally content with absence as with presence, and we are always looking for our meditation to satisfy us. We are always looking to show to ourselves, to prove to ourselves that it works, that now we know God, that now we've learnt to live in his presence. But the purpose of the second form of silence – his absence – is to purify us so that we might become strong – strong in love, strong in fidelity – and to ensure that we love God for himself and in himself and not just for any manifestation of his presence.[2]

That interplay between the presence and the absence is crucial to the mystical tradition. ■

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[1] This title is published as a book and as an audio CD (recording John Main's voice)
[2] The Collected Talks of John Main Vol IV. *The Way of Unknowing*, CD 1 Track 2

4
Mystical Contact as Gift from God

> *Mystical contact with God is a gift. It's not something we do on our own. We prepare through our own efforts in cooperation with grace, but the mystical contact itself is very much a gift. It comes at God's discretion.*

Mystical contact with God is a gift. It's not something we do on our own. We prepare through our own efforts in cooperation with grace, but the mystical contact itself is very much a gift. It's not self-help. You can prepare, but the gift comes at God's discretion. All the great mystics insist on this.

There is a famous text in the tradition that is used over and over again by mystical authors. There was an anonymous monk sometime around the year 500 of the Christian era, who wrote under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite. But this very famous text where the author is reflecting on his teacher, who is somebody he called Hierotheus –the holy one. He talks about Hierotheus learning from God, not by his own efforts but by undergoing or being subject to divine grace. He learnt – the Greek is – not by *mathein*, which is your own efforts (think of mathematics), but by *pathein* – by undergoing or being subject to, being given a divine grace. It is not something that we do on our own. It's something we receive; it's something we undergo. Almost all the great theologians – St Thomas of Aquinas, St Bonaventure and various others who wrote about mystical grace as a reception – cited that passage about Hierotheus.

A mystical contact is something that happens to us as individuals and sometimes happens within human interchange either with another person or sometimes with a collective body – a body of the church or worshiping community. One of the most famous of all mystical accounts is in Augustine's *Confessions*, at the end of Book 9, where he and his mother Monica are getting ready to sail back to Africa and they begin talking about heaven together and they have a joint mystical experience, a joint moment of mystical consciousness, the two of them. He says, 'As we were talking, our minds were raised

up, raised up above the earth, raised up above the heavens, and we came to a brief touch of that supernatural world, and then came back down.'

Within the conversation here of mother and son, God gives the gift of some kind of more direct contact with him – very typical of other aspects of the tradition as well. Teresa of Avila, in her *Life* once talks about having a conversation with one of her confessors and says pretty much the same thing – that they were so wrapped up in their conversation about divine things that they both had a kind of joint experience. I think this can be true collectively, both in terms of certain moments of liturgical worship, certain types of prayer groups. ■

5
Jesus the Contemplative

Contemplative prayer tradition begins with Jesus. He has public prayers that he teaches to others, the Lord's Prayer being an example, but then Jesus prayed to his Father privately, apart from others, as a key aspect of his whole life.

Contemplative prayer tradition begins with Jesus the contemplative. If you look back at the New Testament texts, you'll find that Jesus spent his life praying. He prays the Jewish liturgical prayer obviously; the Last Supper, in a certain sense, was something like the Jewish liturgical prayer. He has public prayers that he teaches to others, The Lord's Prayer being the example, but then Jesus prayed to his Father privately, apart from others, as a key aspect of his whole life. Let me just cite a few texts.

> Matthew 14:23
> After he dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.'
>
> Mark 1:35
> In the morning while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place and there he prayed.
>
> Luke 5:16
> He would withdraw to deserted places and pray.
>
> Luke 6:12
> Now during these days he went up to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God.

There's a whole series of texts from the New Testament that talk about Jesus' prayer life and his dedication to it, particularly at night, by separating himself from others, by going up into the mountain. So, contemplative prayer goes back to Jesus as the model of contemplation.

Also with regard to the New Testament, there are two key texts that are central to almost every Christian mystic and spiritual writer

as they meditated on what prayer means. The first one comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. Paul says:

> Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ for you.

So what does it mean to pray without ceasing? There is a parallel text in Luke's Gospel 18:1.

> Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart.

So a big problem for Christian writers about prayer is, how can you pray always without ceasing? That's text number one.

> Text number two is also from Paul, 1 Timothy 2:1.
>
> First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone.

Supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings – Paul is laying out four different kinds of prayer. The commentators, the students of prayer, will say, 'What are those four kinds of prayer? How do we understand them? Are they separate? What do they mean?' et cetera.

You could almost write a history of Christian doctrine of prayer around the interpretation of those passages and then also, of course, with the model Jesus as the 'Pray-er', the model of prayer. ■

6
Origen

> *We pray in different ways – petitionary, thanksgiving and other kinds of prayer – but the goal is always toward* theoria Theo*, contemplation of God,* contemplatio Dei.

This first talk deals with contemplative insights from early Christianity. I will look at four authors briefly – Origen, Evagrius Ponticus, John Cassian and Gregory the Great – as representing what I call the Christian contemplative tradition.

The person who really first gives us the theology, in a way, of Christian mysticism and contemplative wisdom is Origen. Origen was born in Alexandria. He was from a Christian family. His father died a martyr and, you know the story about the young Origen, he wanted to be martyred too. He wanted to run out to proclaim himself a Christian, but his mother hid his clothes so he couldn't be martyred. But he grew up to be the Catechist of the Alexandrian Church, which was the official teacher. The Bishop of Alexandria was the liturgical leader, but the Catechist of the Alexandrian Church, who was Origen, was the official teacher. His dedication was to the study of Scripture, the study of the bible and the preaching of the bible and commentary on the bible, sort of a kind of introduction to theology, what he called *On First Principles* – a systematic theological view of Christianity.

Origen wrote a treatise on prayer, somewhere around the year 233 or 234 (*Peri Euches* in Greek, but a treatise on prayer). Origen's Treatise on Prayer is the first treatise that really tries to treat contemplative prayer in a deep way. To Origen it is important because he insists in this treatise that prayer is not just petition; it's also contemplation. It never rules out petitionary prayer – that is obviously very very important – but he insists that prayer is primarily contemplative practice. Origen insists that all Christian prayer is Trinitarian. I'll read a quotation:

> Therefore the discussion of prayer is so great a task that it requires the Father to reveal it, the first-born Word to teach

it, and the Spirit to enable us to speak rightly of so great a subject.

So, Christian prayer is always Trinitarian. We know that liturgical prayer, particularly as understood in the ancient Church, was always Trinitarian as well. It's directed to the Father, through the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's the essence of liturgical prayer. But what Origen is saying here is that all prayer, not just liturgical prayer, Eucharistic prayer, but that all prayer has a Trinitarian dimension and it is incumbent on Christians to recognise that if you pray as a Christian, you're praying in a Trinitarian fashion.

Origen talks about the benefits of praying. He talks about the distinctions of kinds of prayer. He talks about what we should pray for. But this is where he lays out his fundamental teaching that prayer is contemplation. Again I quote,

> For the eyes of the mind are lifted up from earthly things and from their being filled with the impression of material things. And they are so exalted that they peer beyond the created order and arrive at the pure contemplation of God.

That's the goal – the pure contemplation of God, and conversing with him reverently and suitably as he listens to us. So we pray in different ways – in terms of petitionary, thanksgiving and other kinds of prayer – but the goal is always toward *theoria Theo,* contemplation of God, *contemplatio Dei*.

Origen is very much concerned with the issue raised by 1 Thessalonians 5: how can you pray all the time? How is it possible to pray all the time? We have lots of other things in life that we have to be engaged in. His answer is that if you have the proper *attitude*, your whole life is a prayer. Let me read the text again:

> And he prays constantly, who unites prayer with the deeds required and the right deeds with prayer. For the only way we can accept the command to pray constantly (as referring to a real possibility) is by saying that the entire life of the saint, taken as a whole, is a single great prayer. What is customarily called 'prayer' is then a part of this prayer.

Then he goes on to say 'prayer in the ordinary sense ought to be made three times a day' and he cites also some scriptural quotations from both the Old Testament and New Testament, from figures like David and Peter and others praying in the morning,

praying at midday and praying in the evening. He says, so there are specific times for a particular prayer, but the point of praying constantly is that the whole life of the Christian, the whole life of the Christian saint, should be a prayer, if it is indeed conducted according to God's will and according to the proper attitude'. So that is how you pray constantly, although you also set aside particular times for prayer. You can see kind of the beginning of the Christian doctrine of the times of prayer; he also mentions of course that some places in scripture, they talk about praying in the middle of the night. So you can see the kind of beginnings of the courses of prayer that monks later adopted. But his major point here is the point that we have to see these particular acts of prayer as part of an entire life. If we get into that mind frame, we can indeed pray constantly the way that Paul is advising us.

This relatively short treatise of Origen is a coherent doctrine of prayer related to the major scriptural texts that I have already talked about and organised according to the Trinitarian core of Christian life. His understanding of prayer is as much Christological as it is Trinitarian. Christ is the guide to mystical and ineffable contemplation. Christ is the guide to mystical and ineffable contemplation.

So prayer is Trinitarian. It is also Christological. Prayer can be constant if it is properly understood and practised. That's Origen. ■

7
Evagrius Ponticus

> *Bread nourishes your body, virtue nourishes your soul, but spiritual prayer nourishes your* gnos *or* pneuma – *your higher dimension where you have an access towards God.*

Evagrius Ponticus (that is of Pontus), end of the 4th century, was born about 345 and died in 399. Evagrius was a Byzantine nobleman in Constantinople in the emperor's court, from a very important family. He served in the court. He had a crisis and a conversion. His crisis was supposed to be a love affair with somebody else's wife and he realised that this was not the thing to do. So he changed his life. He gave up his courtier life and abandoned that, and he went out to the desert to live with the *monachoi* the early monastics. It was only about two generations old, monasticism in the Egyptian desert and in the deserts of present-day Palestine around the year 300 or so. Christian free-form asceticism had become organised by Anthony the Abbot and by various southern monastic leaders into the early monastic communities. Evagrius joined these communities sometime around maybe the year 370. It was difficult for him because most of the early monks were peasants who were used to a difficult life. Evagrius was from a noble family; he had been used to a very soft life. So he had to get acclimatised to the difficult asceticism and life in the desert, and he talks a good deal about that.

In the 4th century monasticism became what I call a kind of locus or bearer of mystical tradition, that these organisations of a particular form of life, a professional life of 'pray-ers', became the centre, not the whole but the centre, of Christian mystical praying and Christian mystical teaching. And the monastic layer of Christian mysticism is the fundamental layer, from the 4th century down to the 12th century and afterwards.

Most of the great teachers were monastic teachers, Even the early bishops who were important for the Christian tradition, people like Ambrose and Augustine in the West and Basil and Gregory of

Nyssa in the East, were bishops, but they were also often monastic founders and sometimes lived the monastic style of life. So the history of Christian mysticism and monasticism are very closely entwined from the period of around the year 400 down through 1210 and afterwards. It still of course remains true today, how significant monasticism is for current spirituality, mysticism and the like.

Evagrius had been well educated theologically, particularly in the tradition of Origen, though what Evagrius brings to the monastic world is a new theology that enabled him to express the values of early monasticism in a theological form that was much influenced by Origen and Origen's teaching.

Evagrius talked about the soul's progress to God in terms of three basic steps. There was the practical level of ascetic living –what the monks were practising here in the desert, what he called the *praktike.* It's an ascetic living in which the monk struggles against the evil inclinations in fallen humanity – we call them the seven deadly sins. For Evagrius there are eight wrong thoughts or wrong tendencies – *logismoi* is the Greek term here. They are really the ancestor of the seven deadly sins that he lays out in ascetical treatises, in which he takes the wisdom of the monks about the necessary kinds of ascetical practices you need to help overcome these tendencies in your life in order to reach what he calls *apatheia*.

Apatheia is a term that stoic philosophers had used to describe their basic kind of indifference to everything, but Evagrius doesn't mean it that way. Evagrius means *apatheia* as a perfect kind of balance that you can arrive at, after you overcome most of your evil tendencies. His disciple Cassian talks about it as 'purity of heart'. Purity of heart or perfect self-balance would be another way and that's the goal of ascetical effort, *apatheia*. If you have reached a certain kind of balance, if you've reached a certain kind of purity of heart, then you are ready to begin the contemplative stage, contemplative knowing, the theoretical stage – *theoretike*. And you contemplate God in nature. But then on a higher level you contemplate God theologically – *theologike*. That's the contemplation of the Trinity which he also talks about as 'pure prayer' or knowledge of the Trinity – gnosis.

Three stages: practical asceticism, contemplation of creation as a product of God and then direct contemplation of God as Trinity and pure prayer. .

One of the modes that Evagrius uses can be found in a treatise that he writes on prayer, a short treatise. It consists of 153 short sayings; we call them aphorisms. They are meant to be meditated upon because when you first read them over, either they seem bizarre or you wonder what exactly he is trying to get at. This was a mode of teaching among the desert abbas. A young monk would go to a desert father with a problem – some difficulty in his life, with his prayer life or with his ascetical practice – and ask the abba, 'Give me a word. Give me a word; give me something.' And the abba would give him a brief saying that he then was supposed to meditate upon and try to understand and use for his prayer practice and also for his ascetical practice.

What Evagrius is doing in the *Direzione* is giving you a series of such aphorisms on the nature of prayer. And you just don't read them over. You can read them over but you have to think about them. As you think about them, pray over them, meditate on them, they begin to reveal a certain depth of teaching about the nature of prayer. Let me give you a few of these aphorisms as the examples. There are 153 chapters.

> Chapter 3
> Prayer is a continual intercourse of the spirit with God. What state of soul is then required that the spirit thus might strain after its Master without wavering, living constantly with him?
>
> [So what state of soul is required for that? The state of soul is *apatheia* – the health of soul, the perfect balance, the purity of heart.]
>
> Chapter 23
> If you know how to practise patience, you shall ever pray with joy.
>
> [So prayer and patience have to go together.]
>
> Another chapter
> At times just as soon as you rise to pray, you pray well. At other times, work as you may, you achieve nothing. But this happens so that by seeking still more intently and then finally reaching the mark, you can possess your prize without fear of loss.
>
> [The prize being pure prayer.]

Chapter 52
The state of prayer can be aptly described as a habitual state of imperturbable calm. [That's apatheia. There are many ways to translate it: imperturbable calm, perfect balance, purity of heart, et cetera.] It snatches to the heights of intelligible reality the spirit who loves wisdom and which is truly spiritualised by the most intense love.

[So you see it's bringing in a whole series of patience, love, apatheia – a very rich kind of term, almost impossible to really translate adequately into English.]

One that I like, Chapter 60
If you are a theologian, you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian.

[It might rule out contemporary theology, but that is the meaning of theology for the desert fathers – that is, a theologian is one who prays well. A person who reaches *theoria theologike* – theological contemplation, direct contemplation of the Trinity – prays the best.]

Another one, Chapter 101
Just as bread is nourishment for the body and virtue for the soul, so is spiritual prayer nourishment for the intelligence.

[Now intelligence here is the Greek term *gnos* and it means the higher dimension of knowing ('intelligence' might not be the best translation here). What Evagrius is doing here is taking a text, that's 1 Thessalonians 5:23[1]. It's actually a text that is crucial to all early Christian understanding of humanity, all Christian anthropology. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:23: 'May your spirit and soul and body be kept sound.' Spirit and soul and body – so there are three basic components in the Pauline anthropology. There's the body, there's the soul, but higher than soul is spirit, *pneuma*, that is the direct opening towards the divine. And before the entry of Aristotelian thought in the 13th century almost all Christian anthropology was based on humans as composed of these three aspects, if you will. And that's what our friend Evagrius is saying here: Bread nourishes your body, virtue nourishes your soul, but spiritual prayer nourishes your *gnos*

or *pneuma* – your higher dimension where you have an access towards God.

The value of prayer is another one.
The value of prayer is not found merely in its quantity, but especially in its quality.

So you can read through Evagrius's little treatise and find these aphorisms that, if you think about them, meditate on them, you get a deeper understanding about what he means by this progression of prayer towards the pure prayer that is identical with theological contemplation, that gives you some kind of access to the Trinity. ■

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[1]May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ

8
John Cassian

> *The Lord locates the primary good not in activity 'however praiseworthy, however abundantly fruitful, but in the truly simple and unified contemplation of himself'.*

John Cassian is the third figure that I want to look at. Evagrius was very influential, and perhaps the greatest influence he had was on John Cassian.

John Cassian's dates are 360 to 435, which makes him almost an exact contemporary of Augustine of Hippo. What is fascinating about Cassian is that he is a kind of bridge between East and West, particularly with regard to monasticism.

He was born in the East – somewhere in the Balkans, perhaps Romania or present-day Bulgaria. He was born into a Latin-speaking family but he also became important in the Greek Eastern Church and of course, knew both Greek and Latin. He too went out into the desert to live with the desert monks and to learn from the desert monks – both the abbas who lived in Egypt and those who lived in present-day Syria and Palestine. He spent many years there interviewing some of the most famous desert leaders, the most famous abbas, and taking down their wisdom. Then he gradually moved west with his friends at a time of great upheaval in the Eastern and Western Empire. But he moved to the western part of the Empire. He spent some time in Rome but then he went to Southern France (Gaul in those days). There he became a monastic founder and one of the earliest key figures in the history of Western monasticism, founding monasteries around Marseille and other kinds of places, but then also writing in Latin to convey the wisdom of the Eastern monastic tradition to these new Western monks in the communities that he was founding.

He writes two very important works. The first is called the *Conferences* (*Colaciones*). This is a series of 24 talks, or we could call them interviews, that he and his friends had with famous fathers of the Egyptian and Syrian desert, like Abba Isaac or Abba Arsenius or various others. They would go and talk to them about

monastic life, monastic prayer, monastic practices and now he is recording all that material, writing it into a fairly substantial book which is probably the most important book after the *Rule of Benedict* for Western monasticism. This is the book that all the Western monks read, along with the scriptures of course. Along with the *Rule of Benedict*, they read Cassian's *Conferences* over and over and over again. He also writes something he calls the *Institutiones*, the *Institutes*, and that's more about monastic practices. But I want to talk more about the *Conferences*; particularly the Conferences that deal explicitly with prayer.

One of the things about Cassian is that Cassian is writing for monks, and this is very obvious. He's not explicitly writing for everybody. Part of the issue in reading Cassian is, how far this material, that is specifically written for monastic communities, is applicable to everyday Christians. I think it is applicable, but you have to make certain adjustments and certain kinds of transitions.

Cassian on prayer is of great importance and the key conferences among these 24 conferences are *Conference 1* – where he sets out the nature of the monastic life in general – which is interviews that he and his friends had with Abba Moses, and then *Conferences 9* and *10* which are interviews that he and his friends had with Abba Isaac on prayer. They go to Abba Isaac and they say, 'What about prayer? Tell us about prayer: What does it mean? How do you practise prayer?'

Let's start with a few remarks in *Conference 1* where he lays out the nature of the monastic life. This is the Conference with Abba Moses. They ask Abba Moses, 'What is the monastic life? What is it supposed to be like?' And the Abba tells them that the aim of our profession, our way of life, is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. But our point of reference, our objective, is 'purity of heart' – *puritas cordis* in Latin – which is really Evargrian *apatheia*. You might say that 'purity of heart' is still the best translation that one can have. Abba goes on to say, 'purity of heart, without which, it's impossible for anybody to reach the target'. So the target, the aim, which is the kingdom of heaven, can only be reached if you practise apatheia, *puritas cordis*. Purity of heart is also *caritas*; it is perfect charity as the same *First Conference* goes on to say. That is, everything that is done in the monastic life is done to get purity of heart and perfect charity, perfect love for God and love of neighbour.

And for the monk contemplation, he insists, is the foremost practice of the monastic life. I quote:

> You'll know that the Lord establishes as the prime good – contemplation, that is the gaze turned in the direction of the things of God. The other virtues are all practised for the sake of this one.

As we look at Luke 10 (he's talking here about the famous Mary and Martha story where Martha has been identified with activity and Mary has been identified with contemplation) he says that story tells us the Lord locates the primary good not in activity 'however praiseworthy, however abundantly fruitful, but in the truly simple and unified contemplation of himself'. So for the monk, contemplation is always the key practice, however important activity may be. There are various forms of contemplation: direct contemplation of God, contemplation of God in nature, contemplation of God in his saints in the whole Christian community.

When you transit then to *Conferences 9* and *10*, Abba Isaac talks about prayer in a specific sense. He talks about both the exercise of prayer in general and then the exercise of constant prayer, praying ceaselessly. And for him, he prays ceaselessly by practising what he calls a formula of piety, a *formula pietatis,* that we might call today a mantra. And the formula of piety that Abba Isaac teaches to Cassian and his contemporaries is taken from the Psalms – Psalm 69: 'God, come to my aid. Lord, make haste to help me.' 'God, come to my aid. Lord, make haste to help me.' And Cassian says that the monks should seize upon that particular term and practise it constantly as the way of always praying. Let me just read you a text,

> The same thing happens with contemplation. You need a model and you should keep it constantly before your eyes. You learn to turn it in a solitary way over and over in your spirit, as you use it and meditate on it, as you lift yourself upward to the sublime sights. What follows now is the model to teach you, the prayer formula for which you are searching, and which you should meditate on constantly. This is something which has been handed on to us by some of the oldest of the fathers and it is something which we hand on to only a very small number of souls eager to know it. Keep

> the thought of God always in your mind – you must cling totally to this formula of piety. 'God, come to my help. Lord, make haste to rescue me.

He goes on with a long paragraph about almost everything that's in this prayer. It's a cry for help to God. It expresses humility. It conveys watchfulness. It gives us a sense of our frailty. It gives us an assurance of being heard, confidence in help, as the voice filled with the ardour of love and charity for God. So that particular formula of piety, that particular mantra for Cassian, is fundamental to the monastic prayer that he is teaching.

And this will lead eventually, if you practise this constantly, Cassian says, to the gift of what he calls 'fiery prayer', *oratio ignita,* which ignites your soul in love. That's contemplative prayer, which is not something you arrive at on your own. You prepare by practising your formula of piety. If you practise it faithfully, God will give you the gift of what he calls *oratio ignita* – fiery prayer which inflames the heart and also allows you to pray the scriptures – and Cassian points particularly at the Psalms – to pray the scriptures from within, not from the outside. To pray the scriptures, especially to pray the Psalms, as if you're composing them, not as if you're reading a text but as if you're writing the text. And for Cassian, that kind of prayer which you can reach by practising your formula of piety is the highest kind of prayer. ■

9
Gregory the Great

> *Contemplation is open to everyone, because contemplation is given to the highest (the prelates, bishops and priests) and it's given also to the lowest, to everybody. Everyone should be a contemplative in some way. It involves both internal understanding, and love and desire.*

Pope Gregory the First (540 – 604) has been called the Doctor of Contemplaciones, the doctor of contemplation. He was a high Roman official from a very aristocratic family who became a monk. He founded a monastery in Rome on the Caelian Hill and lived as a monk. But then, because of his connections and because of his abilities, he was kind of dragged in to becoming Pope because the times were critical and they needed the kind of leadership that Gregory could provide. So very reluctantly – because he had to abandon his monastic life of contemplation – he agreed to become a pope.

There is a very rich teaching on contemplation; it's why he is called the doctor of contemplation. Gregory never writes a treatise devoted to prayer the way that Origen and Cassian and Evagrius did. So you have to kind of piece it together from his many writings and that makes it somewhat more difficult. But he too was of key importance for the history of Christian monasticism and mysticism. A French scholar says, 'Benedict gave the Western monks their rule; Gregory gave them their mysticism.' He's one of the most widely read of course of later mystics in the Western tradition by Protestants as well as Catholics.

He doesn't give definitions of contemplation or sketches of the stages of contemplation as we find in Evagrius. I would describe Gregory as giving us a phenomenology of contemplation – a description of how it affects and works in the life of the Christian, both the monastic Christian and also I think general, because Gregory insisted that contemplation is for everybody, not just for the monks.

A few phrases: 'Divine contemplation is a kind of sepulchre of the mind in which the soul is hidden.'

'The human soul is lifted high by the engine of contemplation, so that the more it gazes on things higher than itself, the more it is filled with dread.' And why it fills you with dread is because the more you contemplate, the more you can also realise the awesomeness of God and the distance between us and God. So there is both a delight and a dread involved in contemplative practice, when you practise this machine that hauls you up on high.

'The simple contemplative life', he says in another text, 'is for us only to behold its beginning – that is, the one who says, "I am the beginning" as Jesus says in John 8.'

What Gregory does too is, he locates contemplation within the whole history of salvation, and this is a new dimension. He says, 'History unfolds in four great stages, all of which are stages of contemplation.'

In the first stage, Adam was the perfect contemplative in the Garden of Eden. He had direct access to contemplating God. But after Adam's fall, we no longer have access to contemplation. We cannot contemplate. We cannot fulfil our destiny as humans. There is a wonderful description here – the analogy he gives to this is of a child being born in prison. His mother is in prison and the child is born in prison. He has never seen the light. His mother can tell him about the light but he has never seen the light. And we're like that, we're like a child born in prison. We no longer have the contemplative dimension. We can read in the scriptures that contemplation is possible. That's the second stage. The third stage is salvation. Christ restores the possibility of contemplation in this life – not fully, because we're not equivalent to the way Adam was before the fall, but the contemplative restoration takes place as the preparation for the full contemplation to come in heaven.

So the history of salvation in its four great chapters is the history of contemplation for Gregory. It's the story of *contemplaciones*. Contemplation therefore, since Christ restores us to the possibility, is always Christological. And it's also the product, it's pneumatological, that is, it is the product of the Holy Spirit acting within us. He makes that very strongly possible.

Contemplation, he insists, is open to everyone, because contemplation is given to the highest – he means the prelates, bishops and priests – and it's given also to the lowest, to everybody.

It's given to the monks (perhaps more often than others) but everyone should be a contemplative in some way, according to Gregory. It involves both internal understanding, and love and desire – so both love and knowledge.

And then he has some reflections on what he called the practice of contemplation. Contemplation for Gregory is what we might call a liminal situation – it's half way between our experience in the present life and experience in heaven. And it's always lived in the kind of polarity of the mutual interactive aspects of human life: light and dark, sound and silence, joy and fear, satisfaction and hunger, within and without, et cetera. So you can never expect contemplation to be perfect as that includes both dread and delight. Because contemplation brings us closer to God, we recognise how far we still have to go, but it also brings a kind of delight. And it's particularly important for trying to work out the rules of the relationship of action and contemplation.

Fundamentally, these rules are three. Contemplation and action are good and necessary. All Christians must practise both. Contemplation in itself is higher, but thirdly, contemplation must yield to active love of neighbour in the case of a neighbour's necessity. So those are the three fundamental rules, if you will, for the Christian life and how they reflect both on our activity and our contemplation.

What I've done is very briefly introduce four key figures in the early history of contemplation – four figures that, although they are far separated from us in time and in their contexts, I think, with careful reading and meditation, we can see the wisdom that they had to give us ■

Contemplation and action are good and necessary. All Christians must practise both. Contemplation in itself is higher, but contemplation must yield to active love of neighbour in the case of a neighbour's necessity. So those are the three fundamental rules, if you will, for the Christian life and how they reflect both on our activity and our contemplation.

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In these talks, he draws on the experience and writings of the Christian mystics who saw the mystical or contemplative practice as crucial to what it means to be human. McGinn describes the mystical element as necessary to a balanced religious personality, integrating with the institutional and intellectual elements but also bringing something to the whole. Beginning with Jesus as the first contemplative, McGinn traces the development of the Christian contemplative tradition as represented by the earliest mystics Origen, Evagrius, John Cassian and Gregory the Great.

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