

MENTAL PRAYER: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE VINCENTIAN TRADITION

I. ST. VINCENT AND MENTAL PRAYER

1. Some Preliminary Considerations

I use the phrase "mental prayer" purposely in this chapter, rather than "meditation." St. Vincent rarely used the verb *méditer*. He ordinarily employed the phrase *faire oraison*.¹ I recognize, however, the limitations of the phrase "mental prayer" too. St. Vincent aimed not at a mental exercise, but at affective prayer and contemplation. The method which he proposed, which involved use of the mind in focusing on a certain subject, was meant merely as a *method*. It aimed at higher things.

Few things were as important as prayer in St. Vincent's mind.² Speaking to the missionaries, he declares:

*Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything. He may say with the apostle, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." The Congregation will last as long as it faithfully carries out the practice of prayer, which is like an impregnable rampart shielding the missionaries from all manner of attack.*³

It is interesting to note that the word he uses here is *oraison*. He is speaking about the importance of mental prayer. St. Vincent states quite forcefully on a number of occasions, moreover, that the failure to rise early in the morning to join the community in prayer will be the reason why missionaries fail to persevere in their vocation.⁴

To encourage his sons and daughters to pray, he used many of the similes commonly found in the spiritual writers of his day. He tells them that prayer is for the soul what food is for the body.⁵ It is a "fountain of youth" by which we are invigorated.⁶ It is a mirror in which we see all our blotches and begin to adorn

¹Actually he uses *faire oraison* thirty times, while using *méditer* only six times.

²There have been a number of important studies on Saint Vincent's teaching about prayer. I offer here a brief, selected bibliography that may be helpful to the reader. André Dodin, *En Prière avec Monsieur Vincent* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1982); Joseph Leonard, *Saint Vincent de Paul and Mental Prayer* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1925); Arnaud D'Agnel, *Saint Vincent de Paul, Maître d'Oraison* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1929); Jacques Delarue, *L'Idéal Missionnaire du Prêtre d'après Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Missions Lazaristes, 1947); Antonino Oracajo and Miguel Pérez Flores, *San Vicente de Paul II, Espiritualidad y Selección de Escritos* (Madrid: BAC, 1981) 120-135. Today, moreover, there are various collections of the prayers of Saint Vincent, in most of the modern languages. These are similar to those found in Dodin in the work cited above.

³SV XI, 83; cf. III, 539; IX, 416; X, 583.

⁴SV III, 538; IX, 29, 416; X, 566, 583.

⁵SV IX, 416.

⁶SV IX, 217.

ourselves in order to be pleasing to God.⁷ It is refreshment in the midst of difficult daily work in the service of the poor.⁸ He tells the missionaries that it is a sermon that we preach to ourselves.⁹ It is a resource book for the preacher in which he can find the eternal truths that he shares with God's people.¹⁰ It is a gentle dew that refreshes the soul every morning, he tells the Daughters of Charity.¹¹

He urged St. Louise to form the young sisters very well in prayer.¹² He himself gave many practical conferences to them on the subject. It is evident from these conferences that many had difficulties in engaging in mental prayer.¹³ He assures them that it is really quite easy! It is like having a conversation for half an hour. He states, with some irony, that people are usually glad to talk with the king. We should be all the more glad to have a chance to talk with God.¹⁴ He gives numerous examples of those who have learned to pray, in all classes of society: peasant girls, servants, soldiers, actors and actresses, lawyers, statesmen, fashionable women and noblemen of the court, judges. In the various conferences that he gave upon the occasion of the death of Daughters of Charity, he often alluded to their prayerfulness. Speaking of Joan Dalmagne on January 15, 1645 he observed: "She walked in the presence of God."¹⁵

He defines *oraison*¹⁶ as "an elevation of the mind to God by which the soul detaches itself, as it were, from itself so as to seek God in himself. It is a conversation with God, an intercourse of the spirit, in which God interiorly teaches it what it should know and do, and in which the soul says to God what he himself teaches it to ask for."

Among the dispositions necessary for prayer he lists principally humility, indifference, and mortification. The humble recognize their absolute dependence on God. They come to prayer filled with gratitude for God's gifts and a recognition of their own limitations and sinfulness.¹⁷ Indifference enables the person to live in a state of detachment and union with the will of God, so that in coming to prayer he or she seeks only to know and to do what God will reveal.¹⁸ St. Vincent often returns to the need for mortification in order to pray well, particularly in getting out of bed

⁷SV IX, 417.

⁸SV IX, 416.

⁹SV XI, 84.

¹⁰SV VII, 156.

¹¹SV IX, 402.

¹²SV IV, 47.

¹³Cf. SV IV, 390; IX, 216.

¹⁴SV IX, 115.

¹⁵SV IX, 180.

¹⁶SV IX, 419.

¹⁷SV X, 128-129.

¹⁸SV XII, 231.

promptly in the morning. He tells the Daughters on August 2, 1640 that our bodies are like jackasses: accustomed to the low road, they will always follow it!¹⁹

The principal subject of prayer, for Vincent, is the life and teaching of Jesus.²⁰ He emphasized that we must focus again and again on the humanity of Jesus.²¹ He meditated on what Jesus did and taught in the scriptures,²² calling special attention, among Jesus' teachings, to the Sermon on the Mount.²³ Most of all, however, he recommended the passion and cross of Jesus²⁴ as the subject of prayer.

St. Vincent did not hesitate to recommend the use of images²⁵ and books of prayer. Among the latter, he was especially fond of the *Imitation of Christ*,²⁶ Francis de Sales' *Introduction to a Devout Life*²⁷ and *Treatise on the Love of God*,²⁸ Busée's meditations,²⁹ and Louis of Granada's³⁰ *The Sinner's Guide, Memorial of the Christian Life*, and his *Catechism*, as well as Jean Souffarand's *L'Année Chrétienne*.³¹ It is evident that the Vincentians and Daughters used other meditation books too, such as those of Saint-Jure³² and Suffrand.³³

2. Affective Prayer and Contemplation

St. Vincent puts great stress on affective prayer, but, in doing so, he is very reserved about working oneself up into a highly emotional state. He recognizes that the feelings aroused by mental prayer (for example, sorrow at Christ's passion) can be quite advantageous, even though, in themselves, they are not the heart of prayer. The "affections" that he focuses on are geared primarily toward acts of the will. "Affective" love should lead to "effective" love. Our affective acts should tend to become simpler and simpler, leading eventually to contemplation.

Contemplation is a gift from God. While we engage in mental prayer and affective prayer by our own choice, we engage in contemplation only when grasped

¹⁹SV IX, 28-29.

²⁰SV XII, 113.

²¹André Dodin, *En prière avec Monsieur Vincent* (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1982), 197.

²²CR I, 1.

²³SV XII, 125-27.

²⁴SV IX, 32, 217; X, 569; cf. also, IV, 139, 590; I, 134; cf. X, 569: "Is it not a good meditation to have the thought of the passion and death of Our Lord always in one's heart?"

²⁵SV IX, 32-33; X, 569.

²⁶SV I, 382; V, 297.

²⁷SV I, 155-56, 398; III, 551; IX, 13, 44, 50; XII, 2; XIII, 81, 435, 822.

²⁸SV I, 86; XIII, 71, 822.

²⁹SV I, 197; III, 283; IV, 105, 620; VII, 66, 274; VIII, 501.

³⁰SV I, 198, 382; cf. III, 282.

³¹SV VI, 632.

³²SV IX, 109.

³³SV VI, 632.

by God.³⁴ In contemplation we "taste and see" that the Lord is good. Such contemplation, while a pure gift from God, is for St. Vincent the normal issue of the spiritual life. It is quite evident from his conferences that he regarded some of the Daughters of Charity as contemplatives. He encouraged them to become other St. Teresas.³⁵ On July 24, 1660 when he spoke about the virtues of Louise de Marillac he rejoiced at a sister's description of Louise: "As soon as she was alone, she was in a state of prayer."³⁶

3. The Method

The method that St. Vincent teaches is basically the same as the one given by St. Francis de Sales.³⁷ He makes only slight modifications. While putting very high value on affective prayer, he insists again and again on the need for practical resolutions. Particularly in his conferences to the Daughters, there is a lovely mingling of spiritual wisdom and common sense. He is more restrained than Francis de Sales when speaking about the use of the imagination. He warns over and over again about regarding prayer as a speculative study. He cautions about its becoming an occasion for vanity or for "beautiful thoughts" that lead nowhere.

St. Vincent suggested, by way of preparation for prayer, reading in the evening some points that will stimulate mental prayer the next morning.³⁸ He also regarded peaceful silence in the house at night and in the morning as the basic atmosphere for prayer.³⁹

The method he proposes can be presented schematically as follows⁴⁰:

a. *Preparation.* First, you place yourself in the presence of God, through one of several ways: by considering yourself present before Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, by thinking of God reigning in heaven or within yourself, by reflecting on his omnipresence, by pondering his presence in the souls of the just. Then you ask God's help to pray well; you also petition the help of the Blessed Virgin, your guardian angel, and patron saints. Then you choose a subject for meditation, such as a mystery of religion, a moral or theological virtue, or some maxim of our Lord's.

b. *Body.* You begin to consider the subject (e.g. the passion of Christ). If the subject is a virtue, you reflect on the motives for loving and practicing the virtue. If it is a mystery, you think of the truth contained in the mystery. As you reflect, you

³⁴SV IX, 420.

³⁵SV IX, 424.

³⁶SV X, 728.

³⁷Cf. SV X, 587; cf. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, "The Second Part of the Introduction," ch. 1-10; *Treatise on the Love of God* 1.IV, c. 1-15; cf. also A. Dodin, *François de Sales/Vincent de Paul, les deux amis* (Paris: OEIL, 1984) 65-67.

³⁸SV IX, 426; X, 590-91; XII, 64.

³⁹SV IX, 3-7, 120, 219.

⁴⁰Cf. SV IX, 420; X, 573; XI, 406.

seek to arouse acts of the will (e.g., love of Christ who suffered so much for us), by which, under the impulse of grace, you express love of God, sorrow for sin, or desire for perfection. You then make concrete resolutions.

c. *Conclusion.* You thank God for this time of meditation, and for the graces granted during prayer. You place before God the resolutions made. Then, you offer to God the whole prayer that you have made, with a request for help in carrying out the resolutions.

4. Two Related Teachings

a. St. Vincent encouraged the members of his two communities to share their prayer with one another. He recommended that this be done every two or three days.⁴¹ He had learned this practice from others. St. Philip Neri's Oratorians,⁴² for example, were already engaging in repetition of prayer. When St. Vincent recommends it to the Daughters, moreover, he cites the example of Madame Acarie.⁴³ In his conferences to the Daughters, we find wonderful examples of the simplicity with which they shared their thoughts in prayer. He often notes, in addition, how well the brothers⁴⁴ in the Congregation shared their prayer. He tells the missionaries on August 15, 1659 that shared prayer has been a great grace in the Company.⁴⁵

b. Another teaching of St. Vincent, frequently found in his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, is the practice of "leaving God for God."⁴⁶ The poor often arrived unexpectedly and made urgent demands on the Daughters. St. Vincent encouraged them to respond, telling them that they would be leaving God whom they were encountering in prayer in order to find him in the person of the poor. At the same time, St. Vincent urged the Daughters and the Vincentians never to miss prayer.⁴⁷ It is striking that, though he was very firm about the rule of rising early in the morning and never missing prayer, St. Vincent brings his usual common sense to the application of the rule. He tells the Daughters⁴⁸: "You see, charity is above all the rules and it is necessary that everything be related to it. She is a noble woman. You should do what she orders. In such a case it is to leave God for God. God calls you to prayer, and at the same time he calls you to the poor sick person. That is called leaving God for God."

II HORIZON SHIFTS THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE BETWEEN ST. VINCENT'S DAY AND OURS

⁴¹SV IX, 421-422.

⁴²Cf. SV XI, 293-95.

⁴³SV IX, 4.

⁴⁴SV IX, 421-22.

⁴⁵SV XII, 288.

⁴⁶SV IX, 319; X, 95, 226, 541, 542, 595, 693.

⁴⁷SV VIII, 368-39; IX, 426.

⁴⁸SV X, 595.

Three changes in horizon significantly influence attitudes toward prayer today.

1. The liturgical movement

St. Vincent was very concerned about liturgy. He noted that priests often celebrated Mass badly and that they hardly knew how to hear confessions. As part of the retreats for ordinands, he prescribed that they receive instruction on celebrating the liturgy well. But, within this positive context, he was still very much a man of his time. The emphasis of the era was on the exact observance of rubrics. There was little stress on liturgy as "communal celebration," with the active participation of all the faithful. Much of liturgy was private, as in the daily celebration of individual Masses, perhaps with a server. Liturgical celebrations were often regarded more as part of the priest's "personal piety," rather than of his leadership of a local community in prayer.

The liturgical movement, Vatican II, and the implementation of the Constitution on the Liturgy have changed attitudes and practices dramatically. The Constitution on the Liturgy proclaimed liturgy as the summit toward which the action of the Church tends and at the same time the fountain from which all virtue emanates.⁴⁹ Of course, this implies liturgy is not all of prayer. As a "summit" it must rest on a solid foundation. Nonetheless, as is evident from the enormous energy that the Church has invested in liturgical reform over the last 30 years, liturgy plays an extremely important part in the life of the Christian community. Today we speak of a "liturgical piety."

2. Renewed interest in personal prayer

At the very same time, and not just among Christians, enthusiasm for personal prayer is being revived. Courses in seminaries, novitiates, and institutes for spirituality are focusing on some of the classics that teach methods of prayer; for example, *The Cloud of Unknowing*,⁵⁰ *The Introduction to a Devout Life*,⁵¹ *The Way of a Pilgrim*.⁵² There has been renewed research and interest in the prayer of oriental religions and the use of mantras. Thomas Merton called our attention to the rich tradition of the oriental Church in regard to contemplation⁵³ and the "wisdom of the desert." Karl Rahner too focused on the central place of prayer in Christian spirituality.⁵⁴

⁴⁹Sacrosanctum Concilium 10.

⁵⁰Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Doubleday, 1973).

⁵¹Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, translated and edited by John Ryan (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

⁵²Anonymous, *The Way of a Pilgrim* (New York: Doubleday, 1978).

⁵³Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

⁵⁴Cf. K. Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises* (New York, Herder and Herder, 1966).

Concrete signs of this renewed interest are evident in prayer groups, the charismatic movement, the rise of new communities, and the updated practices of many already existing religious communities.

3. There has been a shift in emphasis from the personal to the interpersonal to the social.

One of the persistent dangers in Christian spirituality is "intimism," a kind of piety in which the individual becomes absorbed in himself and gradually cut off from interpersonal and social responsibilities. The person remains passive, almost immune from the contagion of the world.

St. Vincent certainly avoided that temptation! But some of his contemporaries did not. Various forms of quietism were condemned in his day.⁵⁵ Quietists stressed the exclusive efficacy of grace in a corrupt world and advocated total abandonment to God's action, with the individual remaining passive.

Much of the piety of St. Vincent's day, even when it took forms healthier than quietism, tended to be rather individualistic. In the 20th century we have experienced greater emphasis on the interpersonal. Personalist philosophy has had profound influence on contemporary thought and practice. Martin Buber⁵⁶ made the "I-Thou" a part of our vocabulary today.

Beyond that, we have seen an increasing emphasis on the social and societal, with a growing consciousness of the interrelatedness⁵⁷ of all persons and of all human reality. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World⁵⁸ proclaims that the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anguish of contemporary men and women, especially the poor and those suffering affliction, are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anguish of Christ's disciples too. The social encyclicals over the last century have more and more emphasized Christians' responsibility for justice in the world.⁵⁹ The Church's preferential option for the poor is stressed again and again.⁶⁰ Christians are encouraged to develop a global worldview and to play their part in working for the "transformation of the world."⁶¹

These three horizon shifts, of course, in no way negate the importance of mental prayer. Rather, they set the context for it. If liturgy is the "source and

⁵⁵For an interesting treatment, cf. L. Dupré, "Jansenism and Quietism," *Christian Spirituality III, Post-Reformation and Modern* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 130-141.

⁵⁶Cf. M. Buber, *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of Hasidism* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1966).

⁵⁷Cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 26.

⁵⁸*Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

⁵⁹Synod of Bishops, 1971, *Justice in the World* in AAS LXIII (1971) 924.

⁶⁰Cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42.

⁶¹AAS LXIII (1971) 924.

summit" of the Church's prayerful action, then reflection on the mystery of Christ, the gospels, and the human condition is one of its foundation stones. If contemporary men and women, especially the young, are showing renewed interest in various prayer forms, then mental prayer, or "meditation," is finding a significant place among these. If there is a sharp tendency to criticize "intimism" in spirituality and a movement toward emphasis on the interpersonal and the social, then these are ways of broadening the horizons of mental prayer, as well as sharpening its focus.

III MENTAL PRAYER TODAY

Karl Rahner puts the matter utterly clearly: "Personal experience of God is the heart of all spirituality."⁶² St. Vincent knew this, so he encouraged the confreres and the Daughters of Charity again and again to pray.

The Common Rule which he wrote for the Congregation of the Mission called for an hour of mental prayer each day.⁶³ The Vincentian Constitutions of 1984 have modified this, speaking of an hour of personal prayer daily according to the tradition of St. Vincent.⁶⁴ While this prescription is clearly broader than that of the Common Rule, it surely involves a significant period of mental prayer.⁶⁵ The original Rule of the Daughters of Charity demanded two half-hour periods;⁶⁶ their present Constitutions⁶⁷ call for one hour of *oraison* daily.

Today, especially in light of the second horizon shift mentioned above, a rich variety of methods might be proposed as a help in mental prayer. Let me group these schematically under four headings.

| PRAYER OF THE MIND | PRAYER OF THE IMAGINATION | PRAYER OF THE HEART | LECTIO DIVINA |
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| 1. Nature - What is humility? - search the scriptures - search the writings of | 1. Activate the imagination by focusing on a gospel scene. 2. Take the part | 1. At the beginning of prayer, take a minute or two to quiet down and then move in faith to God | 1. <i>Lectio</i> - What is the text actually saying? |

⁶²K. Rahner, "The Spirituality of the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations* XX, 150.

⁶³CR X, 7; cf. also, SV I, 563; VIII, 368.

⁶⁴C 47. For a clear presentation of the history and an explanation of the context of Article 47, cf. Miguel Pérez Flores, "Oración personal diaria, en privado o en común, durante una hora," *Anales* 95 (#3; March 1987) 162-168.

⁶⁵*Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* 19; henceforth, S.

⁶⁶*Rules of the Daughters of Charity*, IX, 1-2.

⁶⁷*Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity* 2.14; cf. also, SV IX, 29.

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| <p>St. Vincent - search some classical or contemporary writer</p> <p>2. Motives - Why should I be humble? - search the scriptures - search the writings of St. Vincent - search some classical or contemporary writer</p> <p>3. Means - How can I grow in humility? - doing humble things - allowing myself to be evangelized by the poor - focusing on the good in others rather than their faults - developing a servant's attitude</p> | <p>of one of the persons in the scene.</p> <p>3. Ask questions. What? Who? Why? How?</p> <p>4. "Be there" in your imagination, returning to the scene as a bystander.</p> <p>5. If the meditation is on a teaching, read the text three times but in varied ways.</p> | <p>dwelling within you.</p> <p>2. After resting a bit in the center of faith-full love, take up a simple word or phrase that expresses your response and begin to let it repeat itself within you.</p> <p>3. Whenever in the course of prayer you become aware of anything else, gently return to the prayer word.</p> <p>4. At the end of prayer, take several minutes to come out, praying the Our Father.</p> | <p>2. <i>Meditatio</i> - What does it say <i>to me</i>?</p> <p>3. <i>Oratio</i> - Speaking with God, using the text as a starting point.</p> <p>4. <i>Contemplatio</i> - Becoming absorbed in the person of Jesus.</p> |
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Let me illustrate each of these methods briefly.

1. *Prayer of the mind*. This is basically the method that St. Vincent proposes. A Vincentian using this method to meditate on humility would proceed as follows:

a. Nature - What is humility?

He would search the scriptures for sections that speak of humility. He might reflect, for example, on Lk 1:46, the Magnificat, and Mary's gratitude for God's many gifts. Or he might turn to Phil 2:5, in which Jesus takes on the form of a servant, humbling himself and becoming obedient even to death. Or he might focus on Mk 9:33, where Jesus speaks about the humility required of leaders. He asks: what is this humility that the gospels recommend? What does it consist of? Little by little, he may come to formulate personal convictions, such as: Humility is a recognition of my creatureliness, that I am totally dependent upon God. It is a recognition of my redeemedness, that I sin often and need God's help to be converted. I am slow to get excited about gospel values. I speak too lightly about others' negative points. I comply too easily with unjust social structures. But I also trust that the Lord forgives me eagerly, and I have great confidence in his power to heal me. Humility is also gratitude for God's many gifts. The humble person, like Mary, cries out that "He who is mighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name."⁶⁸ It involves a servant's attitude. We are called, like Jesus, "not to be served but to serve."⁶⁹ Humility also entails allowing myself to be evangelized by the poor, "our Lords and Masters," as St. Vincent liked to call them. It involves listening well and learning.

Another approach would be for him to search the writings of St. Vincent, or the Vincentian tradition, concerning humility. He might look at the Common Rules II, 6-7 or X, 13-14, and ponder the steps St. Vincent describes for acquiring humility. He could also look into what classical or contemporary writers say on the subject.

The starting-point for this method is thinking, reasoning. This is very important at some stage in the spiritual life, since a person must think through, in a reasonable way, his personal values and what they mean in the concrete; otherwise he might wind up with a fuzzy view of the gospels. It is important that a member of the community be able to articulate, in a way that is coherent both for himself and for others, what his values are.

b. Motives - Why should I be humble?

The same sources mentioned above provide ample motives. Mt 18:4 says that the humble are of the greatest importance in the kingdom of God. Phil 2:9 says that it is precisely because of this attitude, which is found in Christ Jesus, that God highly exalted him. St. Vincent states that humility is the core of evangelical perfection and the heart of the spiritual life.⁷⁰ He also states that it engenders charity.⁷¹

⁶⁸Lk 1:49.

⁶⁹Mt 20:28.

⁷⁰CR II, 7.

⁷¹SV X, 530.

Contemporary writers emphasize the need for us to recognize our utter dependence on God, and to sing out our praise and gratitude for his gifts.

Once again here the emphasis is on thinking and reasoning, but these are geared toward acts of the will; e.g., trust in the Lord, love, gratitude, submission to his will.

c. Means - How can I grow in humility?

The missionary who is meditating might come up with a number of means:

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1. doing humble things, like cleaning the house or emptying the bed-pan of the sick
 2. allowing myself to be evangelized by the poor
 3. focusing on the good in others rather than their faults
 4. developing a servant's attitude, rather than a master's.

In all of this it is important to recognize that the goal is not merely reflection, mental exercise, or a sharpening of one's reasoning or verbal skills. The immediate goal is affective prayer, letting one's heart go and entering into conversation with the Lord. This conversation should result in concrete resolutions and change of life. It will, if we are faithful, become simpler, less verbal, and will lead to contemplation, where more and more God seizes the heart.

Prayer of the mind is very important at various stages in a person's life. At the time of initial formation, especially, it is imperative that a young man or woman come to grips with the *meaning* of gospel values. Unless the person can articulate those values in a way that makes sense both to himself and to others, the gospels will eventually seem irrelevant. There is a whole series of topics that a Vincentian or Daughter of Charity might very profitably ponder. In fact, St. Vincent led his Communities through similar topics by asking them to engage in mental prayer and then joining with them in conferences and repetitions of prayer. At different stages in our initial and ongoing formation we might gain much by using prayer of the mind on the following themes:

- Jesus' deep human love
- his relationship with God as Father
- the kingdom he preached
- his community with the apostles
- his prayer
- sin
- Jesus' eagerness to forgive/his healing power
- his attitude as a servant
- his love of truth/simplicity
- his humility
- his thirst for justice

- his longing for peace
- his struggle with temptation
- the cross
- the resurrection
- Jesus' obedience to the Father's will
- Jesus' gentleness/meekness
- mortification
- apostolic zeal
- poverty
- celibacy
- obedience
- Jesus' joy and thanksgiving.

2. *Prayer of the imagination.* This is basically the Ignatian method. A Daughter of Charity using this method to meditate on the passion narratives, for example, might proceed as follows:

- a. Activate the imagination.

She goes, in her imagination, to the scene. She looks at the local setting, Jerusalem, teeming with people who have come to celebrate the Pasch. She tries to hear the sounds of the crowd, to feel the heat of the day, to sense the smells, to taste what the participants might have tasted. She looks around the scene to see who is there: the faces of excited pilgrims, the pharisees, the scribes, the Romans, Jesus and his followers. She listens to what they are saying. She feels what they are feeling. She notes their personal characteristics.

- b. Take the part of one of the persons in the scene.

Taking the part of Jesus, she imagines, even in the smallest details, what he is thinking, feeling, doing. She loves with him. She grieves with him. She has compassion with him. She aches with him. She is abandoned with him.

- c. Ask questions.

She puts a number of questions to herself. Which person am I in the scene? Why? What is it about Jesus here that captivates me, that draws me to love him? Is there some way he would like me to live out what he is doing in this scene? Who? What? Why? When? How? For whom? Does it all make a difference?

- d. "Be there" in your imagination.

The meditator returns to the scene, but this time as a bystander. She simply watches, listens, and lets the scene work upon her. She stands by the cross beside Mary and John. She takes her place with the spectators in the crowd. She is near Peter or the penitent thief.

e. If the meditation is on a *teaching* (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount) she reads the text three times, pausing after each reading: "Happy are the poor in spirit; the reign of God is theirs."⁷²

The first time she asks: What did Jesus *say*? Was I concentrating? She might examine some commentary too to find the precise meaning of his words. Who are the "poor in spirit"? What is the "reign of God" promised to them?

The second time she tries to listen more attentively. What does Jesus *mean*? What does he mean *for me*? Often the poor do not seem happy to me. Why does Jesus say that they are? Am I among the poor in spirit? Am I really happy?

The third time she speaks directly with Jesus or with his Father about the text. She may even visualize the conversation, sitting with Jesus and his followers by a fire at the lakeside in the evening, feeling some awe, but at the same time deep love. She says to him: "Lord, help me to understand what this is all about. I really want to be poor in spirit, to rely completely on you. I know you love me. Help me, please."

3. *Prayer of the heart*. Today this is commonly called centering prayer. Its classical expression is found in works like the *Cloud of Unknowing* or *The Way of a Pilgrim*. One of its well known contemporary proponents is Basil Pennington.⁷³ It can be summarized in four rules.

Rule 1 - *At the beginning of prayer, take a minute or two to quiet down and then move on in faith to God dwelling within you.*

A lay person or member of a community engaging in this type of prayer would seek first to find a quiet place. She then assumes a relaxed position. She might try to breath deeply and regularly in order to calm down and then begin to focus on God. As a help, she might direct her attention to the words of Gal 2:20: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me. Of course, I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Rule 2 - *After resting a bit at the center in faith-full love, take up a simple single word or phrase that expresses your response and begin to let it repeat itself within you.*

She tries to do this simply, with no strain. She chooses a word or phrase that expresses what is deepest in her heart: God, love, the Jesus prayer. She repeats it slowly, gently: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Or perhaps: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."⁷⁴ Or: "I love you, Lord; thank

⁷²Mt 5:3.

⁷³Cf. M. Basil Pennington, *Call to the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 199-201; "Centering Prayer: Refining the Rules," *Review for Religious* 46:3 (May-June 1986) 386-93.

⁷⁴1 Sam 3:9.

you for your love." There are many possible mantric phrases: "There is nothing I shall want."⁷⁵ "A pure heart create for me."⁷⁶ "Give me the joy of your help."⁷⁷ "Live through love in his presence."⁷⁸ "Your love is better than life."⁷⁹ "You are precious in my eyes."⁸⁰ "I came that they may have life."⁸¹ "Be still! Know that I am God."⁸²

Rule 3 - *Whenever in the course of prayer you become aware of anything else, gently return to the prayer word.*

Other thoughts and images always intrude. The pray-er, for example, might find herself examining the prayer word for its meaning, but this should be avoided. She simply repeats the word and lets her heart go to God.

Rule 4 - *At the end of prayer, take several minutes to come out, praying the Our Father.*

This type of prayer moves deeply into interiority. It is not good to be jarred out of it (this can be like waking up startled from a deep sleep). Rather, the pray-er should relax, be silent for a few minutes, say the Lord's Prayer, recalling God's presence, and then conclude.

4. *Lectio Divina.* A fourth method of prayer, one commonly used in the Church's long monastic tradition, is *lectio divina*. Classical expressions of this method can be found in the writings of the great monastic founders.

The scriptures are the primary, though by no means exclusive, source of *lectio divina*. Sacred scripture is central in the life of the Church. The Constitution on the Liturgy tells us that "in the sacred books the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them; and the force in the Word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her children, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life."⁸³ The bible is, for all believers, the water that gives life to the aridity of human existence,⁸⁴ the food that is sweeter than honey,⁸⁵ the hammer that shatters hardened indifference,⁸⁶ and the two-edged sword that pierces obstinate refusal.⁸⁷

⁷⁵Ps 23.

⁷⁶Ps 51.

⁷⁷Ps 51.

⁷⁸Eph 1:3-12.

⁷⁹Ps 63.

⁸⁰Is 43:1-5.

⁸¹Jn 10:1-10.

⁸²Ps 46:10.

⁸³Dei Verbum, 21

⁸⁴Is 55:10-11.

⁸⁵Ps 19:11.

⁸⁶Jer 23:29.

St. Vincent's prayer and spirituality were deeply rooted in the scriptures. Abelly, his first biographer, said of him: "He seemed to suck meaning from passages of the scriptures as a baby sucks milk from its mother. And he extracted the core and substance from the scriptures so as to be strengthened and have his soul nourished by them...and he did this in such a way that in all his words and actions he appeared to be filled with Jesus Christ."⁸⁸ He also often recommended the use of other books to aid in praying.

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the Archbishop of Milan, frequently proposes the use of *lectio divina* in his talks to young people.⁸⁹ He describes its methodology as follows:

a. *Lectio*. A young person should read the biblical text again and again, trying to understand it in its immediate context and within the context of the scriptures as a whole. The focus here is on the question: What is the *text* actually saying? Martini suggests to young people that they use a pen to underline significant nouns or verbs or adjectives or adverbs and that they make marginal notes. The text is read slowly so that the reader lets the bible speak to him. It will often reveal different things at different times in the reader's life.

b. *Meditatio*. If the emphasis in *lectio* is on what the text itself says, then the accent in *meditatio* is on a further question: What does it say *to me*? What are the values, the dispositions, the changes in my life, that it is demanding? What is it saying *today*, in the here and now, as the living Word of God, as the voice of the Spirit?

c. *Oratio*. Here the focus is on praying. The biblical message arouses a response. It may be fear of the Lord because I am so far from living out what the word of God is actually asking of me. Or it may be adoration of the living God who reveals himself so graciously to me in his word. It may be a cry for help to put the word of God into practice better. In all cases *oratio* consists of speaking with God, using the text and its message as a starting point. The focus of *oratio* is: What does the word of God *move me to say*?

d. *Contemplatio*. Prayer becomes *contemplatio* when it goes beyond a particular passage and becomes absorbed in the person of Jesus who is present behind and in every page of the scriptures. At this point prayer is no longer an exercise of the mind but is praise and silence before the one who is being revealed, who speaks to me, who listens to me, who is present to me as a friend, as a healer, as a Savior. In *contemplatio*, the pray-er tastes the word of God and experiences God's life within himself or herself.

⁸⁷Heb 4:12.

⁸⁸Abelly, Book III, 72-73.

⁸⁹C. Martini, "Educati dalla Parola, Meditazione del Cardinale Arcivescovo Carlo Maria Martini," *Annali della Missione* 100 (# 3; Luglio-Settembre 1993) 203-217.

Cardinal Martini adds that those who enter into *lectio divina* will inevitably, as the fathers of the Church often pointed out, experience four movements in the process. Actually, these terms, or similar ones, are commonly used to describe what goes on as one employs other methods too; e.g., Ignatian prayer.

a. *Consolatio*. Here one tastes God's goodness, the grandeur of the world he created, his redeeming presence. The pray-er rejoices in the mystery of Christ, in God's love, in the beatitudes. Consolation is the joy of the Holy Spirit that fills the heart as we contemplate the mystery of Christ revealed in the scriptures.

b. *Discretio*. Consolation gives rise to spiritual discernment, the capacity to evaluate the various inner movements that I sense in my heart, to distinguish the good from the bad, to recognize my conflicting motives. It is the ability to identify, within my present situation (personal, ecclesial, social, civil), those things that resonate with the gospel message and those things that are discordant with it. It is the capacity to grasp the better, the more, the spirit of the beatitudes. It is the ability to think more and more as Christ did.

c. *Deliberatio*. Discernment leads to decision-making, life-choices, or a commitment to act according to the word of God. It is in the phase of *deliberatio* that *lectio divina* gives birth to concrete judgments based on the gospel.

d. *Actio*. This step is the fruit of one's prayer. The pray-er performs works of justice, charitable service, attentive listening, labor, sacrifice, forgiveness.

IV SOME PRACTICAL RULES FOR PRAYING

I offer these "rules" for the use of those who seek to pray daily. They are not abstract principles; nor are they conclusions which are provable by some deductive method. They are simply a group of practical rules that experience teaches are helpful for those who want to pray. While I take responsibility for their formulation, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to others who have taught them to me.

1. Faithful prayer requires discipline. St. Vincent alluded to this when he spoke of mortification as a prerequisite for prayer. It is important to fix a prayer time and to have a prayer place. Likewise, it is most helpful to go to bed at a reasonable hour if one is to rise early to pray. Today, when there are many diversions that can easily distract us from prayer time (e.g., television, radio, films, etc.), one must often renounce some good, interesting alternatives in order to be a faithful pray-er.

2. Mental prayer demands quiet. Naturally, an apostolic community cannot be completely cut off from its contacts with the poor, as is evident in St. Vincent's conferences to the Daughters of Charity. Nonetheless, one should choose a prayer

time when noise and interruptions are unlikely, when telephones and doorbells will not be ringing. That is one of the reasons why communities have traditionally chosen to pray early in the morning before the busy pace of the day's activities begins. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states: "Silence is nothing else but waiting for God's Word."⁹⁰

3. It is important to be acquainted with various methods, by having, so to speak, a "prayer repertory."⁹¹ The four types of prayer described earlier in this article may be useful in this regard. Different methods will be appropriate at different times in life. We may find ourselves, at later stages in life, returning to methods we used earlier.

4. The pray-er needs to be nourished. Some of the principal elements in the diet are the reading of sacred scripture, good spiritual reading, and, especially in an apostolic spirituality, live, reflective contact with Christ in the person of the poor.

5. Prayer should result in renewed self-definition.⁹² Through it, our values should become redefined and take on an increasingly evangelical character. Prayer should lead to continued conversion. It should result in acts of charity and justice. This is why St. Vincent insisted on "practical resolutions."

6. The pray-er should not focus too much on what *he* or *she* says. What God is communicating is more important. In the long run, prayer is a relationship. While words have a privileged place in a relationship, nonetheless communication goes far beyond words. Some of its deepest forms are non-verbal. Those who are deeply in love can often spend significant periods of time together while saying very little. "Mere" presence is a sign of fidelity. Jesus, in fact, warns us against the multiplication of words in prayer.⁹³

7. Since we are needy, our prayer will often be one of petition, but it is very important that our prayer also take on the other biblical "moods": praise, thanksgiving, wonder, confidence, anguish, abandonment, resignation. Typically Christian prayer is filled with thanksgiving.

8. As Jesus recommends,⁹⁴ we should often pray to do or accept God's will, however it might manifest itself in our lives. This is what St. Vincent meant when he recommended indifference as a predisposition for prayer. This is especially important in times of discernment.

⁹⁰D. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM, 1954).

⁹¹Wilkie Au, *By Way of the Heart, Toward a Holistic Christian Spirituality* (New Jersey: Paulists, 1989) 92.

⁹²Margaret Miles, *Practicing Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 142.

⁹³Mt 6:7; cf. SV XII, 328, where, in the context of praying the office, Saint Vincent, following Chrysostom, compares mindless rattling of words to the barking of dogs!

⁹⁴Mt 6:10.

9. Since we are human, and therefore embodied, physical and environmental conditions can help or inhibit prayer. Images, candles, incense, the beauty of the setting, a tabernacle, lighting, music --- all can be aids to our praying.

10. Distractions are inevitable, since the mind is incapable of focusing on a single object over long periods of time. When distractions are persistent, it is often best to focus on them rather than flee from them, and to make them a topic of our conversation with the Lord.

11. Sharing prayer can be very useful. Each of us has limited insights. We can profit very much from those of others. The faith-witness of others can deepen our own faith. This is surely one of the reasons why St. Vincent encouraged frequent repetition of prayer. Though that practice became over-stylized in the course of the years, it can find many more flexible forms today.

12. Faithful praying demands perseverance. The search for God is a long journey, in which the pray-er climbs mountains, descends into valleys, and sometimes gets stuck on ledges. St. Vincent encourages the Daughters of Charity by telling them that St. Teresa spent 20 years without being able to meditate even though she took part faithfully in prayer.⁹⁵ Sometimes we may feel that we are "wasting time"⁹⁶ in prayer, or we may experience long- lasting "dryness,"⁹⁷ and be tempted to quit. We should resist the temptation. The journey will bring great rewards.

13. The ultimate criterion of prayer is always *life*: "By their fruits you shall know them."⁹⁸ Unfortunately, experience demonstrates that some of those who pray quite regularly may be very difficult to live with. One might, charitably, say that they would perhaps be even worse if they did not pray! But at the same time one might legitimately ask if their prayer has any real connection with life. Ultimately, one cannot judge, in an individual case, what is really going on between God and a person in the depths of his or her being. But one can surely conclude, in general, that there is something very much wrong with prayer that does not result in change of life.

"Let us give ourselves to God," St. Vincent says repeatedly to the Vincentians, as well as to the Daughters of Charity.⁹⁹ He has deep confidence in God, whom he sees both as father and mother,¹⁰⁰ into whose hands he can place himself and his works. The journal written by Jean Gicquel recounts how St. Vincent told Frs.

⁹⁵SV IX, 424.

⁹⁶SV IX, 50.

⁹⁷SV IX, 634.

⁹⁸Mt 7:20, 12:33; Lk 6:44.

⁹⁹For a striking statement of Saint Vincent's attitude before God, cf. SV XII, 133-134, 146-147.

¹⁰⁰SV V, 534; VI, 444; VIII, 55, 256; X, 503.

Almeras, Berthe, and Gicquel, on June 7, 1660, just four months before his death: "To be consumed for God, to have no goods nor power except for the purpose of consuming them for God. That is what our Savior did himself, who was consumed for love of his Father."¹⁰¹

This great man of action was also a contemplative, caught up in God and consumed by his love. His contemplation of God's love overflowed into practical love for the poor. He encourages his sons and daughters:

*Let us all give ourselves completely to the practice of prayer since it is by it that all good things come to us. If we persevere in our vocation, it is thanks to prayer. If we succeed in our employments, it is thanks to prayer. If we do not fall into sin, it is thanks to prayer. If we remain in charity and if we are saved, all that happens thanks to God and thanks to prayer. Just as God refuses nothing to prayer, so also he grants almost nothing without prayer.*¹⁰²

¹⁰¹SV XIII, 179.

¹⁰²SV XI, 407.