

A Life of Prayer (Silent)

Fr. Jean-Pierre, ocd

Broussey 2019

You have surely heard talk of a **time of prayer**, but prayer isn't reserved for that time only, it needs to be a part of one's **whole life**.

The **Virgin Mary** is the **perfect model** of the **life of prayer**. We enter prayer through **Faith** and Mary is above all a **model of faith**. The Fiat (let it be done) of Mary at the Annunciation is like a program of life for our whole life. We find this in the Our Father, that your will be done. In the letters to the Hebrew, we talk of the faith of Abraham.

The **life of prayer** is simply the **theological life**, in other words, a life based on the virtues of **faith, hope & charity** received at Baptism.

St. Teresa put herself completely into St. Joseph's hands and through St. Joseph trusted divine providence. It is the hope of good that God promises us. God gives himself to us above all in this life through his divine providence. She noticed that those with '**high**' prayer would panic at the slightest setback such as the risk of losing a little money and she couldn't understand this. There isn't a **compatibility** between **worrying** about things of this life and a **life of prayer**. We should be able to discern real **progress** in our own life in this area to help us realize that we have **entered a life of prayer**. **Hope** is the experience of having **no other support but God**. Christ on the Cross is the model of **Charity**. He gives his life for us and tells his Father to forgive because, 'they don't know what they are doing'.

The **theological life** is a **life in the Holy Spirit**. The more we practice prayer, the more we learn to be **docile** to the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who **prays in us**. St Paul told us that **we don't know how to pray as we should**. We need to remember that we are all **beginners** in prayer and need to be docile and open to the Spirit. "Be ready. It's at the hour that you don't think that Christ will come" Luke 12:40. This verse shows that **your whole life** is a **life of prayer**. So as far as a visit of the Lord is concerned, he can come during our time of prayer, when we would expect him, but also throughout our day when we don't expect him. It isn't unusual that we experience a visit from the Lord outside of prayer. It can happen in the middle of the **pots and pans!**

Galatians 5 talks about the **freedom that the Spirit gives**; our Spirit is a Spirit of freedom. "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not

use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So, I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with one other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" Galatians 5:13-18.

Let's look at the **Fruits of the Spirit**:

In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is **charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control**. Against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit let us also follow the Spirit. Let us not be conceited, provoking one another, envious of one another. Gal. 5:22-26.

Why am I talking to you about this? Well, because the practice of silent prayer that Teresa calls us to is an excellent way to both acquire the above **virtues** and experience **contemplation**. The acquisition of the virtues precedes contemplation because we can't draw near to God if we don't allow ourselves to be transformed. The fruit of the Spirit are signs in our lives to indicate to us how to remain in a prayerful **state of mind**.

Charity: this is the **love of God, himself**. It is not a love that we have on this earth in a natural way. It's an **unconditional love** that is independent of the response of the person we love. It is about **loving someone the way God loves them**. It means accepting the good and the bad; even when the person seems to turn away and not accept your love, even if they want to do me harm in exchange. This is what **love your enemies** means.

We are used to this. We have heard it since childhood, but it is nonetheless hard to imagine. No one other than Christ could have said this. It's not possible, **only the Spirit within could enable such a love** as this in us. How do we **live out** this love in a concrete and tangible way? During prayer it's first necessary to feel that love to know that we are loved. We are there in truth before the Lord, completely vulnerable to him. We don't need to be ashamed of our **weaknesses** but instead we can **offer** them to him because all that is good in us comes from him. He already knows everything about us. He wants our entire being especially what isn't from him,

our sin. He wants to take our sin and replace it with **joy**, the second fruit of the Spirit. He took all sin upon himself on the cross. He made himself sin for us St. Paul said because he wants to give us joy.

Joy: The joy that comes from God is not a joy that we are used to experiencing. There is **nothing external** that causes it. It is in us, in our heart, by the presence of God himself. God is love but he is also joy. For a Christian, joy is not an option, joy is the **basis** of the Christian life. Be careful not to confuse it with joy that comes from **habitual satisfactions**. It's joy that comes from an open heart.

Silent prayer is an essential element in a **joy-filled life**; it is a **heart to heart** with the Lord. It is a very special place where we learn to **open our hearts**. Often our hearts close because we are **afraid**. As soon as something threatens us, we shut our hearts, and this shuts off the source of joy. Joy ceases to overflow from our hearts. We are cut off from joy. We are sad, simply because we have closed our hearts. Silent prayer is a **fundamental exercise** to keep the heart open and to experience the joy that overflows from the heart. Love comes from the heart too and can't flow in a closed heart. It just might be necessary to maintain distance with a certain person (or people) because when we are too close, our hearts close. When there are relational problems with certain people, we are obliged to maintain an adequate distance to keep our heart open and to continue to love even those who hurt us and who could cause suffering if we get too close. At the right distance we can continue to pray for them and truly love them.

Peace: St. Paul talks about peace that comes from a **clear conscience**. What is sure to steal our peace is the awareness that comes from our sin. It is enough to have one incident from a distant past that overtakes and torments our whole life. The **sacrament of penance** is there exactly for that reason, to re-establish inner peace and joy after having sinned. It is so important to be able to go to confession honestly. One of the fruits of prayer that often happens to people who start to practice silent prayer is the need to go to **confession**. It is a way to bring ourselves into **harmony** with what we discover in prayer, the presence and the love of God.

Patience: The patience God has with us! How many years has he waited as we distanced ourselves from him and continued to offend him? Take the parable of the servant who has a significant debt towards his master yet makes his friend pay in full. Patience towards all!

There was a **Brazilian family** who took in prisoners coming out of jail and who needed a safe place to stay. One person returned to them at least 10 times and every time he did, he stole something. The family never said a thing to him. Over time they became friends. He admitted to the family that what had touched him the most in his life was that they never said a thing to him. This man **discovered God's face** through their patience. He **discovered God's patience**. In fact, he was so touched by the discovery of God's face that he converted and became a religious.

We can't do better to show others who God is than through **perfect patience**. The smallest lack in this patience is a wound to the witness that we give to who God is.

God never punishes us because we make a mistake, but he does correct us. This correction helps us to change. This has nothing to do with being judged or punished, but he doesn't condemn us.

How many times do we feel obliged to straighten out or correct someone else? St. Teresa suggests that instead of correcting someone's behavior that we try and **cultivate the opposite virtue**. Rather than asking the other to change, I strive to **change myself**, especially if I feel myself advanced on the spiritual path.

Going back to the **thief**, what if the family had stolen from him? Or what if he had seen someone in the family stealing? What a negative testimony that would have been. It wouldn't have made any sense. So, the family was not only **honest** but **cultivated patience**.

Generosity: How often do we expect **recognition** for all that we have done? It can go on for a long time and then one day we present the **bill**. After all I have done for you! That's the way we are! That's the flesh speaking! The fruit of the Spirit is to allow ourselves to be taken over by God's Spirit which causes us to **give freely**. St. Paul said it when he passed the basket in Jerusalem. Give joyously. Give what you want, a little of a lot, it's not important and we aren't forcing you. What is important, is that you give with a good heart! The Spirit of God allows us to give freely. If we have an agenda, it is no longer a gift. To serve is often a way to be appreciated and loved. It's a way to be approved of. When it doesn't seem to work out we seem to hold it against the person who often didn't ask for anything in the first place.

Kindness: It's a universal phenomenon that we notice in people. It's an **internal attitude**. They are already good before they even know who is talking to them. They

don't make any distinction. A person under the influence of the Holy Spirit gives willingly to a good person or to a bad one. They are **always kind** whether things are going well or not.

Somehow **suffering** seems to give us rights. When we suffer we feel exempt from all that we don't or can't do. Kindness isn't dependent on one's state in life. It isn't about being condescending either.

Faithfulness: If someone steals from you each time they come to your home, you can't be sure that something will be there when they leave. There is a risk. But we can't be sure that the day won't come when that person will end up **deserving trust**.

This is what God does with us. If God had to trust what we have done to date, he wouldn't place much faith in us. He would simply do everything himself. But no, it seems the more untrustworthy we are, the more he places his trust in us. He believes in us. It's his undeserved trust in us that changes the world.

We need to believe in each other, even those who don't deserve it. Those who demonstrate by their actions that they aren't worthy of trust. It's in these people that we need to have faith and trust. They need this trust to be able to exist.

Gentleness: We can put gentleness in contrast with **violence** and **hardness of heart** which is already violence. Gentleness has a special importance. Jesus said that we should learn from him who was gentle and humble of heart. Gentleness was surely not valued as a trait of character in the time of Jesus. He draws our attention to what he is and especially towards the fact that he is gentle.

Two people who love one another often say loving things to one another, but should a little judgment creep in, the attitude changes quickly and **violence** ensues.

Followers of Ignatius talk about **good and bad spirits**. They both want to influence us. They whisper to us.

The good spirit is the **Holy Spirit**, the spirit of God. It can come through an angel. The bad spirit is the devil.

We can recognize the bad spirit as it causes us to go from suffering to violence. Why are we violent? Well because something caused us to suffer. Violence has a typical characteristic that is when we receive it, we have a desire to give it back, and not necessarily to the person who was violent towards us. So, the next person to come along could be the innocent recipient of this violence without understanding that we almost feel obliged to act it out. It's like a chain reaction.

Apparently in a nuclear reactor, there is something that absorbs the particles and slows down the reaction. Let's be as Christians in a life of prayer, people who can **absorb violence** and **not pass it on**. How do we do that?

If the bad spirit causes us to go from suffering to violence, the **good Spirit** suggests that we go from **violence to suffering and then patience**. We must accept this suffering with patience and be willing to suffer to not give into violence. It's not about the chance to suffer. It isn't about seeking it. It's unavoidable in any case. So, rather than transforming it into violence, I accept to transform the violence that I receive into pure suffering like the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ. They don't have any ego protection, they don't have any defenses. All they receive, they receive directly in their hearts.

The **life in the Spirit or a life of prayer**, is to receive all in our **hearts**. When we are in prayer, it's easier to receive all in the heart because we are in front of God and he only sends us only good things. There are also things that come out of our heart. Sometimes they're aggressive, but it isn't a reason to be afraid to welcome them because if the Lords show them to us, it's to **set us free**.

Let's take an example of how violence perpetuates itself. The neighbor found a little kitten who would come and sit on his lap nightly and purr. One day the kitten was walking on the kitchen sink with its dirty feet. The neighbor became irritated with it and tossed it out of the kitchen window on the ground floor. The kitten didn't understand what had happened. That same evening when the kitten came to sit on the neighbor's lap instead of purring as it normally did, it began to bite and scratch his hand. He let it do so because he knew he had treated the animal unfairly. There was suffering. After fifteen minutes of aggression, the kitten once again began to purr.

If on the other hand the neighbor had punished the kitten, it would have increased the amount of unexpressed violence in the kitten who would have taken it out on the furniture or in some other way. Violence must express itself somehow.

We are still talking about **gentleness**, the fruit of the Spirit. Can you see how it could have a place in a violent situation? Sometimes violence spills out without us having decided it. Anger comes out all on its own. It's a passion. We don't decide to be angry. It's like a needle that is inserted into fabric, the thread follows the needle; we say all the things that we have wanted to say that hurt

feelings. Normally, we don't say these things to maintain peace with the other person, but we're angry, so we say what we have been wanting to say. Anger is our excuse. The minimum would be to then ask for forgiveness for what we said. Sometimes though, it's not what we said, but rather what we did. We were less attentive, or perhaps critical of the other to hurt them or we said something negative to someone else about them.

All of this is **violence**. We can bring **gentleness** into this situation as soon as we realize it; but often we realize it after or at the same time the situation is occurring. So, as soon as we realize it, we can go from **violence to suffering**. We can admit that we were hurt, that we are fragile, and that we were hurtful.

We can **put gentleness where violence created a wound**. This brings about miracles! Truly it does. Someone is more touched when a person who wounded them asks for forgiveness then by someone who is naturally able to control themselves. We understand because we can behave like that too. Don't be afraid to have been violent but seek to **correct the situation with gentleness** as soon as you realize it.

All of this is part of a **life of prayer**. In prayer, we experience **Christ's gentleness**. We re-experience our past as it emerges from years of being buried. It shakes us up when it comes up during prayer. But remember that it is happening under **Christ's watchful eye**. He is so gentle that we are able to relive the wounds of our lives.

Self-Control: We can take **chastity** as an example. It's not about taking precautions and nailing down our environment. An impulse can come up at any time. Sexuality is simply a part of our make-up. It's a good thing at the outset. It's of course essential to reproduce the race and so love between two spouses is very important.

Self-control isn't about **denying** what is within us which can emerge spontaneously. It isn't about being a master of things we can't control. Self-control is about not being affected in our deepest self by **superficial upsets** be they psychological or physiological.

Suffering doesn't excuse everything. We don't have the right to act as we wish because we've been hurt. We don't have that right either if a force lives within us and is pushing us to do something. It's like an aggressive dog who bites guests. We have a responsibility to restrain the dog and not to make excuses for its behavior if it bites someone. A possible solution to the dog's

behavior is to give it a place to run and not keep it on too tight a leash which will end up making it aggressive. Self-control is about being at **peace** with what we don't control. This includes others too. If we live with people who have characters very different from ours, it can be upsetting. Self-control is about remaining at peace with what could potentially upset us.

We can be at peace with the Lord in prayer. We can be at peace with others. We can love others as we love ourselves. But if we engage in a touchy subject like politics, we unleash all our frustrations. Politicians do put themselves in the public square and so make themselves fair game, right? No! Those who govern were put there by God, or at least he allowed them to have this position. We are obliged to obey them, and the laws they enact even if we don't agree.

Self-control is a **state of mind**; a real **conversion**. Self-control is the **determining element** that indicates if we have moved to **gentleness** and **humility**.

Humility: it is about not believing oneself better or smarter than others or that our opinion is always right. Bars are filled with people who can rule the world. To get along, we tend to side with the person in front of us against someone who isn't there.

St. Paul tells us that the **rebel spirit** won't inherit the kingdom. At a certain point, we can't have **several attitudes**. What we think in certain areas can seem benign because my idea does not impact anyone close to me, but it could involve a neighbor or an estranged family member. All of this translates into an **interior attitude** that we can't change when we are in front of God. If we are like this in daily life, we will be like this in prayer.

The Spirit who is of a discretion and a humility without comparison isn't going to suggest anything to us in this situation. Don't sadden the Holy Spirit who is not a Spirit of disorder. It's often the **principle area of difficulty**. We can go very far in our conversion and yet not want to go through this stage because it **challenges** our way of being with those around us.

This explains why to develop a life of prayer it is suggested that we start **changing all that others can't see**; all that is in the depths of our hearts, our secrets. We can then start living as if we were under the watchful **eye of angels**. Seek to cultivate that **relationship between violence and gentleness**. It will be initially harder to do when we are with others.

We often allow ourselves to be influenced. St. Teresa was perhaps an exception as she didn't say anything bad

about anyone who wasn't there. Everyone knew that about her. This is rare. We can have made a lot of progress but still be far from abstaining from back-biting or being two-faced.

Who can know what is in the heart of our neighbor. Remove the **log and the straw**. It's not that what is in my eye is bigger than what is in neighbor's eye. If, however, but I don't see the straw in my eye, I will project it onto my neighbor and think he has a log in his eye but it's really in mine. To remove the straw from someone else's eye, I must start with my own eye. Don't judge and you won't be judged. What makes us **suffer the most on earth**? Being judged. Don't judge and you won't be judged is not so much by others but by yourself.

What makes us so unhappy in a **life of prayer** is to discover that God is bigger than our heart. In other words, he loves us more than we love ourselves. He has more esteem for us than we have for ourselves. We can learn from him to find that esteem once again in our own eyes.

As we grow in love for ourselves, we will come to love others and vice versa. We will love God. We only have one heart. Our heart only has one-way in. Let's keep our **heart open**. When it closes, we know it, because we are **sad**. So, a **definitive criterion** to know if our heart is closed is we feel sad. If this happens, we need to turn to the Lord and force ourselves to open our heart.

Teresa of the Little Flower turned and **smiled at Jesus** when she felt sad. As soon as something makes us feel sad, we can turn to Jesus as she did and smile.

Teresa of Avila talked about **comforting Christ** who was at the pillar or on the cross. She advised that if we are sad to turn to look at Jesus on the cross in his suffering. She said that he suffered his whole life because his whole life he was acutely aware of the sins of man.

Julian of Norwich, a 14th Century English mystic who had many visions, asked Jesus at one point to show her sin. The Lord did, but it wasn't sin she saw, only suffering. This is how God sees our sin. So, he doesn't want us to sin, as sin is a **source and a sign of suffering**.

Looking at the sinner that we are, and that others can be, is above all seeing someone who is **suffering** and who will **cause a lot of suffering**.

If God tells us to avoid sin, it's like a child who wants to touch a hot stove. It's not to punish him that we tell him not to touch the hot stove, but to prevent him from

having to suffer. Therefore, we talk about mortal sin; because some sin leads to mortal suffering. We aren't always able to identify it ahead of time. We might even think that this evil will do us good.

It's like poison. If we were able to know it was poison by putting our tongue on it, we would never swallow it. To avoid suffering, a bottle of poison is labeled as such. It's a state of mind as Galatian 6: 1-10 points out:

Brothers, even if a person is caught in some transgression, you who are spiritual should correct that one in a gentle spirit, looking to yourself, so that you also may not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he is deluding himself. Each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason to boast about himself alone, and not about someone else; for each will bear his own load. One who is being instructed in the word should share all good things with his instructor. Make no mistake: God is not mocked, for a person will reap only what he sows, because the one who sows for his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows for the spirit will reap eternal life from the spirit. Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up. So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, but especially to those who belong to the family of the faith.

Carmelite or Silent prayer is the prayer of the Church, in church. The more we practice it the more we will realize we belong to the Church. A life of silent prayer must be fed so we are continually sent back to fraternal communion to meet Christ in the Sacraments in the community of the faithful!