

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

The Nature of Prayer

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In the lecture on mysticism, we spoke of the particular form of inward deepening which appears in the mysticism of the Middle Ages from the time of Meister Eckhart down to Angelus Silesius. Its characteristic is that the mystic seeks to make himself free and independent of all the experiences that come to him from the external world. He tries to press on to an experience which will prove to him that when everything to do with ordinary life has been extinguished and the soul withdraws into itself, it still has within it a world of its own, so to speak. This world is always there but is outshone by the external experiences that work so powerfully on human beings, and thus it appears as a light so weak that most people never notice it. Hence the mystic often calls it the little spark. But he is sure it can be fanned into a powerful flame which will illuminate the sources and foundations of existence. In other words, it leads a man along the path of his own soul to a knowledge of his origin, which can indeed be called "knowledge of God."

In the same lecture we observed how the mediaeval mystics supposed that the little spark had to grow by itself, its own nature remaining unchanged. In opposition to this, we emphasised that modern spiritual research calls for a development of these inner soul-forces under conscious control, so that they can rise to higher forms of cognition, which we called Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition. So this inwardly devoted mediaeval mysticism comes before us as a sort of first step towards true spiritual investigation. If we are able to immerse ourselves in the inward fervour of a Meister Eckhart; if we recognise the immeasurable force of spiritual knowledge that this mystical devotion gave to Johannes Tauler; if we appreciate how deeply Valentin Weigel (Valentin Weigel, 1533–1588. or Jacob Boehme, 1575–1624.) were led into the secrets of existence by all that they achieved through this physical devotion (though they certainly advanced beyond it); if we understand how Angelus Silesius was enabled through this same devotion not only to gain illuminating insights into the general laws of spiritual world-order but to give heart-warmingly beautiful expression in his writings to the secrets of the world — if we bear all this in mind, we shall realise the power and depth that resides in this medieval mysticism, and the endless help it can give to anyone who wishes to follow the spiritual-scientific path for himself.

Mediaeval mysticism can thus be regarded — particularly in the light of the last lecture — as a great and wonderful preparatory school for spiritual-scientific research. And how could it be otherwise? After all, the aim of the spiritual scientist is to develop the little spark through his own inner forces. The only difference is that the mystics believed that they could surrender themselves in peace of soul to the little spark and that it would come to shine ever more brightly of its own accord, whereas the spiritual scientist is convinced that we must use our capacities and forces, placed by the wisdom of the world in the service of our will, to kindle the spark to a brighter flame. If, then, the mystical frame of mind is a good preparation for spiritual science, we have, in turn, as a preparation for mystical devotion, the activity of soul which can be called, in the true sense, prayer. Just as the mystic is able to attain to his inward devotion because he has — even though unconsciously — trained his soul for it, so, if we wish to work our way along the same path to physical meditation, we can look for a preparatory stage in true prayer.

During recent centuries, the nature of prayer has been misunderstood in all sorts of ways by this or that spiritual movement, and to gain a true understanding of it will not be easy. If, however, we remember that these centuries have been marked especially by the emergence of egotistic spiritual trends which have laid hold of wide circles of people, we shall not find it surprising that prayer has been dragged down to the level of egotistic wishes and desires. And it must be said that prayer can hardly be more utterly misunderstood than when it is permeated by some form of egotism. In this lecture we shall try to study prayer entirely in the light of spiritual science, free from any sectarian or other influence.

As a first approach, we might say that while the mystic assumes that he will find in his soul some kind of little spark which his mystical devotion will cause to shine ever more brightly, prayer is intended to engender the spark. And prayer, from whatever presuppositions it proceeds, proves its effectiveness precisely by stirring the soul either to discover gradually the little spark, if it is there, gleaming but hidden, or to kindle it.

If we are to study the need for prayer and its nature, we shall have to enter on a description of the soul in depth, bearing in mind the always relevant saying of the old Greek sage, Heraclitus, quoted in an earlier lecture: "Never will you find the boundaries of the soul, by whatever paths you search, so all-embracing is the soul's being." (*Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Herakleitos aus Ephesus, Nr 45. Also, *The art and thought of Heraclitus*. An edition of the fragments with translation and commentary by Charles H. Kahn. CUP, Cambridge, 1979, No. XXXV.) And although in prayer we are at first seeking only for the soul's inner secrets, the intimate feelings stirred by prayer can give even the simplest person some inkling of the endless expanses of soul-life. We have to realise that the soul is engaged in a process of living evolution. It not only comes from the past and is always travelling towards the future; the effects of the past extend into every present moment, and so in a certain sense, do those of the future.

Anyone who looks deeply into the life of the soul will see that these two streams, one from the past and one from the future, are continually meeting there. The fact that we are influenced by the past is obvious: who could deny that our energy or idleness of yesterday has some effect on us today? But we ought not to deny the reality of the future, either, for we can observe in the soul the intrusion of future events, although they have not yet happened. After all, there is such a thing as fear of something likely to happen tomorrow, or anxiety about it. Is that not a sort of feeling or perception concerned with the future? Whenever the soul experiences fear or anxiety, it shows by the reality of its feelings that it is reckoning not only with the past but in a very lively manner with something hastening towards it from the future. These, of course, are single examples, but they will suffice to suggest that anyone who surveys the soul will find numerous others to contradict the abstract logic which says that since the future does not yet exist, it can have no present influence.

Thus there are these two streams, one from the past and one from the future, which come together in the soul — will anyone who observes himself deny that? — and produce a kind of whirlpool, comparable to the confluence of two rivers. Closer observation shows that the impressions left on us by past experiences, and in which we have dealt with them, have made the soul what it is. We bear within ourselves the legacy of our doing, feeling and thinking in the past. If we look back over these past experiences, especially those in which we played an active part, we shall very often be impelled to an assessment of ourselves. We have become capable from our present standpoint of disagreeing with some deeds that happened in our past; we have reached the stage of even being able to look back with shame, perhaps, at some of our past actions.

If we compare our present with our past in this way, we shall come to feel that within us there is something far richer and more significant than whatever we have made of ourselves through our individual powers. If there were not something extending beyond our conscious selves, we should be unable to reproach ourselves or even to know ourselves. We must, then, have within us something that is greater than anything we have employed to form ourselves in the past. If we transform this realisation into a feeling, we shall be able to look back at everything in our past actions, at experiences that memory can bring clearly before us, and we shall be able to compare these memories with something greater, with something in our soul that guides us to stand face to face with ourselves and to judge ourselves from the standpoint of the present. In short, when we observe the stream flowing into us from the past, we feel that we have within us something that extends beyond ourselves. This intimation is the first awakening of a feeling of God within us; a feeling that something greater than all our will-power dwells within us. And thus we are led to look beyond our limited ego towards a divine-spiritual ego. That is the outcome of a contemplation of the past, transformed into perceptive feeling.

What, then, does the stream from the future say to us, again in terms of perceptive feeling? It speaks to us in even clearer and more emphatic language, since we are here concerned directly with emotions of fear and anxiety, hope and joy. For the relevant events have not yet occurred; only the feelings connected with them strike into the soul. And we know that this stream from the future may bring different effects and responsibilities from those we expect. If we can relate ourselves rightly to whatever experiences are surely coming towards us from the dark womb of the future, we shall see how this continually stimulates the soul. We feel how in the future the soul can become far richer, wider in scope, than it now is; we feel that we are already related to the approaching future and that our soul must be a match for anything it may bring.

If in this way we observe how past and future flow into the present, we can see how the life of the soul grows beyond itself. When the soul, on looking back over the past, becomes aware — whether as a judgment or with regret or shame — of a power from the past which is playing into the present but which is greater than itself, this realisation will evoke in the soul a reverence towards the divine. And this reverence, which we can feel working upon us but which is more than we can consciously grasp, evokes one mode of prayer — for there are two which bring the soul into an intimate relationship with God. For if the soul surrenders itself in innermost calm to the feelings engendered by the past, it will begin to wish that the power it had left unused, which it had not penetrated with its ego, might now become a present reality. Then the soul can say to itself. If this power were within me, I should be different now. The divine element I aspire to did not belong to my inner life; that is why I failed to make myself into something of which I could approve today. Having come to this realisation, the soul might continue: How can I draw into myself the unknown which indeed lived in all my actions and experiences, but without my being aware of it, for I was not able to grasp it with my ego? When the soul is brought to this frame of mind, whether through a feeling, a word or an idea, we have the prayer directed to the past. This means that the soul is seeking to draw near to the divine along one devotional path.

Now we will turn to the gleam of the divine that comes with the stream from the unknown future. Here a different frame of mind is evoked. As we have just seen, when we look back over the past we realise that we have not developed our innate capabilities; we see how our shortcomings have prevented us from responding to the divine light that shines in on us, and this feeling leads us to the prayer of devotion, prompted by the past. What, then, is the influence coming from the future that in a similar way makes us aware of our defects which restrict our ascent to the spiritual?

We need only to remember the feelings of fear and anxiety that gnaw at our soul-life in face of the unknown future. Is there anything that can give the soul a sense of security in this situation? Yes, there is. It is what we may call a feeling of humbleness towards anything that may come towards the soul out of the darkness of the future. But this feeling will be effective only if it has the character of prayer. Let us avoid misunderstanding. We are not extolling something that might be called humbleness in one sense or another; we are describing a definite form of it — humbleness to whatever the future may bring. Anyone who looks anxiously and fearfully towards the future hinders his development, hampers the free unfolding of his soul-forces. Nothing, indeed, obstructs this development more than fear and anxiety in face of the unknown future. But the results of submitting to the future can be judged only by experience. What does this humbleness mean?

Ideally, it would mean saying to oneself: Whatever the next hour or day may bring, I cannot change it by fear or anxiety, for it is not yet known. I will therefore wait for it with complete inward restfulness, perfect tranquillity of mind. Anyone who can meet the future in this calm, relaxed way, without impairing his active strength and energy, will be able to develop the powers of his soul freely and intensively. It is as if hindrance after hindrance falls away, as the soul comes to be more and more pervaded by this feeling of humbleness toward approaching events.

This feeling, however, cannot be called forth in the soul by some edict, or by an arbitrary decision with no firm basis. It springs from the second mode of prayer, directed towards the future and the wisdom-filled course of events therein. To give ourselves over to this divine wisdom means that we call up again and again the thoughts, feelings and impulses that go with a recognition that what will come must come and that in one direction or another it must have good effects. To call forth this frame of mind and to give it expression in words, perceptions and ideas — that is the second mode of prayer the prayer of devotional submission.

It is from these feelings that impulses to prayer must come. For they are present in the soul itself, and fundamentally they lead towards prayer in every soul that raises itself even a little above the immediate present. The pre-condition of prayer, one might say, occurs when the soul turns its gaze away from the transitory present towards the eternal, which embraces past, present and future. It is because this raising of oneself above the present is so necessary that Goethe gives to Faust the great lines, addressed to Mephistopheles:

*If to the moment fleeting past
'Linger', I cry, 'thou art so fair!'*

This means: if I were to be satisfied with living merely for the moment —

*Then in fetters you may bind me,
Let me perish, for all I care!*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust I, 11. 1699–1702.

Hence one could also say: It is for the power to pray that Faust begs in order to escape from the fetters of his companion, Mephistopheles.

The experience of prayer, accordingly, leads us on the one hand to observe our narrowly restricted ego, which has worked its way from the past into the present, and shows us clearly how very much more there is in us than we have put to use; on the other hand it leads us to look towards the future and shows us how much more can flow from the future into our ego than our ego has grasped so far. If we understand this, we shall find in every prayer a force that leads us beyond ourselves. For what else is prayer than the lighting-up within us of a power that seeks to transcend what our ego is at the moment? And if the ego is seized by this striving, it already has the power to develop itself. When the past has taught us that we have more within us than we have ever put to use, then prayer is a cry to the divine that it may fill us with its presence. When we have come to this knowledge through our own feelings and perceptions, we can number prayer among the forces that will aid the development of our ego.

We can do the same with prayer directed towards the future. If we live in fear and anxiety about the approaching future, we lack the attitude of humbleness that prayer can bring. We fail to realise that our destiny is ordered by the wisdom of the world. But if we meet the future with humbleness and devotion, we draw near to it in fruitful hope. So it is that humbleness, which may seem to diminish us, becomes a powerful force, enriching the soul and carrying our development to higher levels.

We need not expect any external results from prayer, for we know that through prayer we have implanted in our souls a source of light and warmth: of light, because we set the soul free in its relation to the future and dispose it to accept whatever may emerge from that dark womb; of warmth, because prayer helps us to recognise that, although in the past we failed to bring the divine element to fruition in our ego, we have now pervaded our feelings with it, so that it can be an effective power within us. The prayer that springs from looking back over the past gives rise to that inner warmth which is spoken of by all who understand prayer in its true nature. And the inward light comes to those who understand the prayer of humbleness towards the future.

From this point of view it will not seem surprising that the greatest mystics found in their devotion to prayer the best preparation for what they hoped to achieve through inward contemplation. They led their soul to the point where they were able to kindle to brightness the little spark within them. It is precisely through entering into the past that we can gain access to that wonderful feeling of intimacy which true prayer can bestow. Preoccupation with the external world estranges us from ourselves, just as in the past it prevented the more powerful element in us, the ego conscious of itself, from emerging. We were given over to external impressions and the manifold demands of outer life; they tear us apart and keep us from recollecting ourselves in tranquillity. This is what prevented the stronger divine power within us from unfolding. But now, if we allow it to unfold in the intimacy of prayer, we shall not be subject to the disintegrating effects of the outer world. We shall feel that wonderful inner warmth which fills us with inner blessedness and can truly be called divine. Through their experience a soul that is losing itself in externals can be enabled to collect itself. During prayer we are warmed in the feeling of God; we not only feel the warmth, but we live intimately within ourselves.

On the other side, when we approach the things of the outer world, we always find them involved with what has been called the dark womb of the future. Close observation shows that in everything we encounter in the outer world there is always a hint of the future. If we feel fear and anxiety as to what may befall us, something always thrusts us away. The outer world stands before us like an impenetrable veil. If we develop the feeling of devoted humbleness towards whatever may come to

us from the future, we find that we are able to meet everything in the outer world with the confidence and hope that this feeling engenders. And then we know that in all things the light of wisdom shines towards us. Failing this, in everything we come up against we meet a darkness which spreads into our feelings. So it is hope for illumination from the whole world that comes to us in the prayer of devoted submission.

If in the physical world we are standing somewhere surrounded by the blackness of night, we may feel abandoned and pressed in on ourselves. When morning brings the light, we feel that we are set free, but not as though we were wanting to escape from ourselves, but as though we could now carry forth into the outer world our best desires and aspirations. Similarly, we can feel how surrender to the world, which estranges us from ourselves, is overcome by the warmth of prayer, which unites us with ourselves. And when we carry this warmth of prayer into the feeling of humbleness, it becomes a light. And now, when we go out from ourselves and unite ourselves with the outer world and behold it, we no longer feel torn apart and estranged by it, but we feel that what is best in our soul flows out and unites us with the light that shines in on us from the outer world.

These two modes of prayer are expressed better in images than in ideas. We can think, for instance, of the Old Testament story of Jacob and his soul-convulsing contest in the night (*Genesis* 32, 24–32). He appears to us as if we ourselves were given over to the manifold pressures of the world, where at first the soul is lost and cannot recover itself. When the striving to find ourselves begins, it sets off a conflict between our higher and our lower ego. Then our feelings surge up and down; but prayer will help us to work our way through, until at last comes the moment prefigured in the story of Jacob, where we are told that his night-long struggle is resolved and is harmonised when the rising sun shines upon him. That is in fact what prayer can do for the soul.

Seen in this light, prayer is free from all superstition. For it brings out the best in us and works directly as a force in the soul. Prayer is thus preparatory to mystical contemplation, just as mystical contemplation is itself a preparation for what we know as spiritual research. Our discussion of prayer will have illustrated something often mentioned here — that we pile error upon error if we believe that we can find the divine, or God, within ourselves by mystical means. This mistake was repeatedly made by mystics and even by ordinary Christians during the Middle Ages. It occurred because the practice of prayer came to be permeated by egotism, an egotism which impels the soul to say to itself: I will become more and more perfect and will think of nothing else but my own perfection. We can hear an echo of this egotistic desire when a misguided form of theosophy asserts that if only we turn aside from everything external, we can find God within ourselves.

We have seen that there are two modes of prayer. One leads to inner warmth; the other, imbued with the feeling of humbleness towards the future, leads out into the world and so to illumination and true knowledge. Anyone who looks at prayer in this way will soon see that the knowledge acquired by ordinary intellectual methods is unfruitful compared with another kind. Anyone who knows what prayer is, will be familiar with that withdrawal of the soul into itself, where it frees itself from the disruptive multiplicity of the world and collects itself inwardly, raising its thoughts above the present moment and devoting them to the past and the future. If we are acquainted with this state, when our whole environment becomes calm and silent, when only the finest thoughts and feelings of which we are capable are present in the soul, when perhaps even these vanish and only a fundamental feeling remains, pointing in two directions, towards the God who announces himself from the past and towards the God who announces himself from the future — then, if we have come to live in this feeling, we know that great moments come for the soul, so that it says to itself: I have turned away from everything that my clever thinking creates in my consciousness, from everything brought about by my feelings and perceptions, from all the ideals set up by my will-power and my education — I have swept all this away. I was devoted to my highest thoughts and feelings — even these I have

now banished and have kept only the fundamental feeling already mentioned. If we have reached this stage, we know that in the same way as the wonders of nature meet us when we look at them with pure eyes, so do new feelings, hitherto unknown to us, shine into the soul. Impulses of will and ideals strange to us spring up in the soul, so that from this ground the most fruitful moments arise.

So it is that prayer in the best sense can imbue us with a wisdom beyond our immediate capacities; it can give us the possibility of feelings and perceptions to which we have not yet attained. And if prayer carries our self-education further, it can endow us with a strength of will to which we have not yet been able to rise. Certainly, if we are to accomplish all this, we shall need first to cultivate and cherish the finest feelings and impulses in our souls. And here we must again call attention to the prayers that have been given to mankind on the most solemn occasions from the earliest times.

In my booklet, *The Lord's Prayer*, you will find an account of its contents showing that its seven petitions embrace all the wisdom of the world. Now you might be inclined to say: We are told in this booklet that the seven petitions can be understood only by someone who has come to know the deeper sources of the universe, but obviously the simple man, when he repeats the prayer, will not be able to fathom these depths. But it is not necessary that he should. For the Lord's Prayer to come into being, the all-embracing wisdom of the world had to set down in words what can be called the deepest secrets of man and the world. Since this is the content of the Lord's Prayer, it works through its wording, even for people who are far from understanding its depths. That is indeed the secret of a true prayer. It has to be drawn from the wisdom of the world, and so it can be effective even if it is not understood. We can come to understand it if we rise to the higher stages for which prayer and mysticism are a preparation. Prayer prepares us for mysticism, mysticism for meditation and concentration, and from that point we are directed to the real work of spiritual research.

To say that we must understand a prayer if it is to have its true effect is simply not true. Who understands the wisdom of a flower, yet we can all take pleasure in it? Similarly, if the wisdom of the world has gone into the creation of a prayer, the prayer can pour its warmth and light into the soul without its secrets being grasped. However, unless it has been created out of wisdom, it will not have this power. The depth of wisdom in a prayer is shown by its effectiveness.

Although a soul can truly develop itself under the influence of this power, it must also be said that a true prayer has something to give to all of us, whatever stage of development we may have reached. The simplest person, who perhaps knows nothing more than the words of the prayer, may still be open to the influence of the prayer on his soul, and it is the prayer which can call forth the power to raise him higher. But, however high a stage we may have reached, we have never finished with a prayer; it can always raise us to a still higher level. And the Lord's Prayer is not for speaking only. It can call forth the mystical frame of mind, and it can be the subject of higher forms of meditation and concentration. This could be said of many other prayers.

Since the Middle Ages, however, something has come to the fore, a kind of egotism, which can impair the purity of prayer and its accompanying state of mind. If we make use of prayer with the aim only of withdrawing into ourselves and making ourselves more perfect — as many Christians did during the Middle Ages and perhaps still do today — and if we fail to look out at the world around us with whatever illumination we may have received, then prayer will succeed only in separating us from the world, and making us feel like strangers in it. That often happened to those who used prayer in connection with false asceticism and seclusion. These people wished to be perfect not in the sense of the rose, which adorns itself (Cf. Friedrich Rückert's poem "Welt und Ich": "in adorning itself,/The rose adorns the garden too") in order to add beauty to the garden, but on their own account, so as to find blessedness within their own souls.

Anyone who seeks for God in his soul and refuses to take what he has gained out into the world will find that his refusal turns back on him in revenge. And in many writings by saints and mystics who have known only the prayer that gives inner warmth — even in the writings of the Spanish mystic, Miguel de Molinos (Miguel de Molinos, 1640–1697, Spanish mystic. See his *Guida Spirituale* (1675). Molinos was sentenced to life imprisonment in Rome for this book by the Pope in 1686). — you will come upon remarkable descriptions of all sorts of passions and urges, fights, temptations and wild desires which the soul experiences when, it seeks perfection through inward prayer and complete devotion to what it takes to be its God. If someone tries to find God and to approach the spiritual world in a one-sided way, if he brings to his prayers only the kind of devotion that leads to inner warmth, and not the other kind that leads to illumination, then the other side will take its revenge. If I look back over the past with feelings of regret and shame and say to myself — there is something great in me to which I have never allowed full scope, but now I will let it permeate me and perfect me — then in a certain sense a feeling of perfection does arise. But the imperfection which remains in the soul turns into a counter-force and storms out all the more strongly in the form of temptations and passions. But as soon as the soul, after having recollected itself in inner warmth and intimate devotion, looks for God in all the works where he is revealed and strives for illumination, it comes out of itself, turns away from the narrow, selfish ego, and the storms of passion are stilled. That is why it is so bad to allow egotism to find its way into mystical devotion and meditation. If we wish to find God, but only in order to keep him in our own souls, we show that an unhealthy egotism has crept into our highest endeavours. Then this egotism will take revenge upon us. We shall be healed only if, after having found God within us, we pour out into the world, through our thoughts and feelings, our willing and doing, what we have inwardly gained.

We are often told today, especially on the ground of Theosophy wrongly understood — and warnings against this can never be given too often — that you cannot find the divine in the outer world, for God dwells within you. You have only to take the right path into your inner life and you will find God there. I have even heard it said by someone who liked to flatter his audience: You have no need to learn or experience anything to do with the great secrets of the universe; you need only look within yourselves and there you will find God!

An opposing view to this, must be made clear before we can approach the truth. A mediaeval thinker found the right thing to say about inward devotion, which is indeed justified if kept within its right limits. We must never forget that it is not untruths that do most harm, for the soul will soon detect them. Much worse are statements which are true under certain circumstances, but thoroughly false if they are misapplied. In a certain sense it is true to say that we have to seek for God within ourselves, but just because this is true, it is all the more harmful if it is not kept within its bounds. A mediaeval thinker said: "Who would search everywhere out-of-doors for a tool he needs when he knows for certain that it is in his house? He would be a fool if he did so. Equally foolish is someone who searches in the outer world for an instrument with which to gain knowledge of God when he has it within his own soul." Notice the word he uses — tool or instrument (*Werkzeug*). It is not God himself that one should seek in one's own soul. God is sought by means of an instrument, and this at least will not be found in the outer world. It must be sought within the soul — through true prayer, through mystical devotion, meditation and concentration at various levels. With the aid of this instrument we must approach the kingdoms of the world. Then we shall find God everywhere, for he reveals himself in all the kingdoms of the world and at all stages of existence. Thus we seek in ourselves for the instrument, and with its aid we shall find God everywhere.

Observations such as these on the nature of prayer are not popular today. How on earth — people say — can prayer change anything, whatever we may ask for? The course of the world follows necessary laws and we cannot alter them, but if we want to recognise a force, we must look for it where it is. Today we have sought for the power of prayer in the human soul, and we found that it is

something which can help the soul forward. And anyone who knows that it is the spirit which works in the world — not an imaginary, abstract spirit but actual, active spirit — and that the human soul belongs to the realm of the spirit, will know that not only material forces, following unalterable laws, are at work in the world; but spiritual beings are also at work there, although their activities are not normally visible. If we strengthen our spiritual life through prayer, we need only wait for the effects; they will certainly come. But the effects of prayer in the outer world will be sought only by someone who has first recognised the power of prayer as a reality.

Anyone who does recognise this might try the following experiment. Let him look back over a period of ten years during which he scorned prayer, and then over a second period of ten years during which he recognised its power. If he then compares the two periods, he will soon see how the course of his life has changed under the influence of the forces which prayer poured into his soul. Forces are made evident by their effects. It is easy to deny the existence of forces if nothing is done to call them forth. How can anyone have the right to deny the power of prayer if he has never sought to make it effective within him? Can we suppose that we should know the light if we had never kindled it or looked for it? We can learn to recognise a force which works in and through the soul only by making use of it.

I must admit that the time is not yet ripe for going into the wider effects of prayer, however unbiased the discussion might be. The idea that a congregational prayer, in which the forces of all the participants flow together, has a heightened power and therefore an enhanced strength of reality — that is outside the grasp of ordinary thinking today. Hence we must be content with what we have brought before our souls with regard to the inner nature of prayer. And that is enough, for anyone who understands it will certainly see through many of the objections to prayer that are so easily advanced nowadays.

What are these various objections? We are asked, for example, to contrast an active present-day man who uses his powers to help his fellow human beings with a man who quietly withdraws into himself and works on the forces of his soul through prayer — surely we must regard this second man as an idler compared with the first? You will pardon me if I say, out of a certain feeling for the knowledge of spiritual science, that another point of view exists. I will put it in a somewhat exaggerated way, but there are good grounds for it. Anyone familiar today with the underlying causes of life will feel that many writers of leading articles in newspapers would be rendering better service to their fellows if they prayed and worked for the improvement of their souls, far-fetched as this may sound. Would that more people were persuaded that to pray is more sensible than writing articles. The same could be said of many other intellectual occupations.

Moreover, to understand the whole life of man, an understanding is necessary of the force that works through prayer, and this comes out with especial clarity if we look at particular aspects of cultural life. Who can fail to recognise that prayer, not in its one-sided egotistic sense but in the wider view of it that we have taken today, is a constituent of art? Certainly, in art we find also the quite different aspect expressed in comedy, in the humorous approach which raises itself above what it portrays. But there are also odes and hymns, which are not far removed from prayer, and even pictorial art shows examples of what could be called "prayers in paint." And who would deny that in a great majestic cathedral we have something like a prayer expressed in stone and reaching heavenwards?

If we are able to grasp all this in the context of life, we shall recognise that prayer, seen in accordance with its true nature, is one of the things that lead mankind out of the finite and the transient to the eternal. This was felt especially by those who found the way from prayer to mysticism, as did Angelus Silesius, mentioned today and in the previous lecture. He felt that he owed

the inner truth and glorious beauty, the warm intimacy and shining clearness of his mystical thoughts — as shown for example in "The Cherubinean Traveller" — to his self-training in prayer, which had worked so powerfully on his soul. And what is it, fundamentally, that permeates and illuminates all mystics such as he? What is it but the feeling of eternity for which prayer has prepared them? Everyone who prays can have some intimation of this feeling, if through prayer he attains to true inner rest and inwardness, and then to liberation from himself. It is this intimation which allows us to look beyond the passing moment to eternity, and links past, present and future together in our souls. When we turn in prayer to those aspects of life where we seek for God, then — whether we are aware of it or not — the feelings, thoughts and words which enter into our praying will be permeated by the feeling for eternity which is expressed by Angelus Silesius in lines with which we may well conclude today. They can bring to every true prayer, even if unconsciously, something like a divine aroma and sweetness:

*Forsaking time, I am myself eternity,
Then I am one with God, God one with me.*

Angelus Silesius, Cherubinischer Wandersmann, Book 1, Verse B.

Source: <https://rsarchive.org/Lectures/19100217p02.html>



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