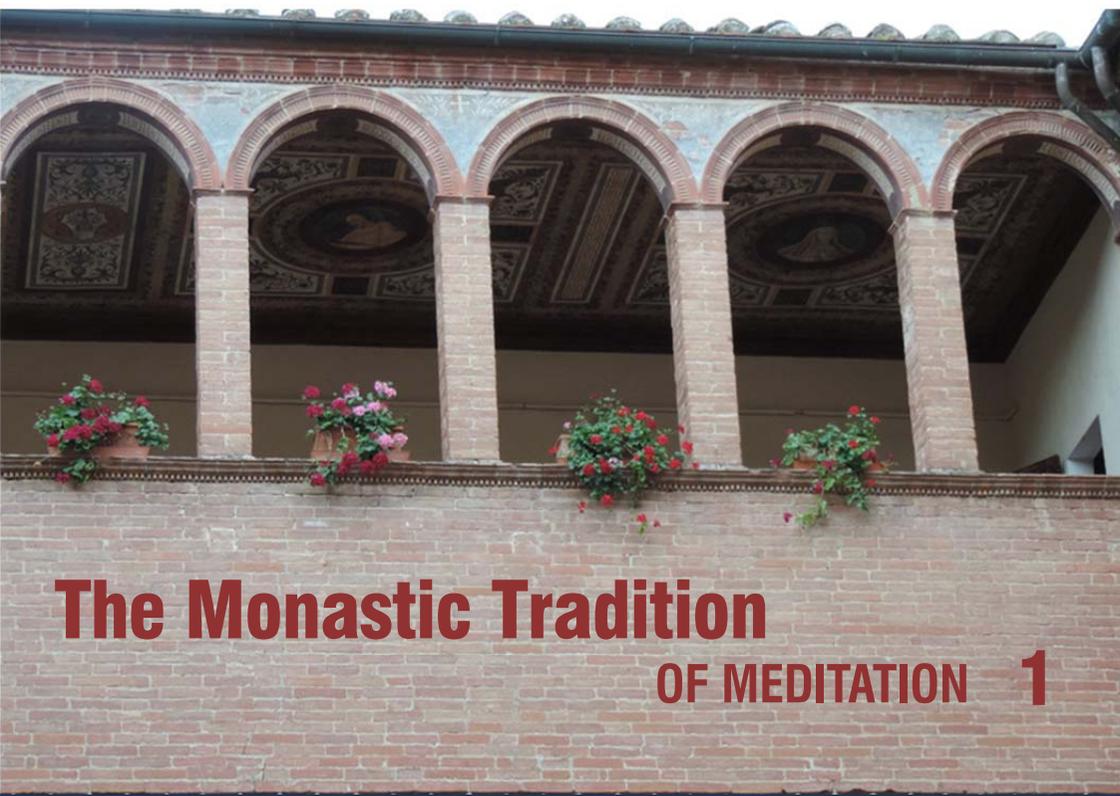




Meditatio
TALKS SERIES 2016 A · JAN- MAR

LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

Welcome address by Abbot Primate Notker Wolf OSB



The Monastic Tradition OF MEDITATION 1

*Listen my son to the words of your Master,
and listen with the ear of your heart.*

St Benedict

Excerpts from talks at the conference on Meditation and
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*The goal of every monk
and the perfection of his
heart incline him to
constant and uninterrupted
perseverance in prayer
and, as much as human
frailty allows, it strives
after an unchanging and
continual tranquillity of
mind and perpetual purity.*

(John Cassian)

1

Meditation in the Monastic Tradition

Welcome Address by Notker Wolf OSB

Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Confederation

I'm very happy that you have come here for this week of studies and practice of meditation in the monastic tradition. After Vatican Two, the tradition of meditation and contemplation has been taken up much more than before. Interest was shown especially by faithful people of the Church who found that Christian life had been determined too much by dogmatic and legal restraints. There was no longer the real life. The heart had moved into the intellect, faith to theology, meditation into ritualism. And they said this is not faith, our eternal relationship with God.

There was a time in 1966 when Karl Rahner the great Jesuit theologian said the pious of the future will be a mystic. He insisted very much on this mystical part of our Christian existence. The contemplative tradition was taken up by spiritual masters. There was quite a number. But these spiritual masters were looking outside also of the Christian tradition in order to enrich their own Christian tradition and open it up also to wider groups outside Christianity.

There was a time after Vatican Two when people gave the impression that contemplation and meditation is done only in the orient, no longer in Western spirituality, no longer in Western monasteries. The then Cardinal Ratzinger – out of his office came a document on meditation where a fear is shown that the centre of salvation would disappear in modern meditation. When I read it I thought, but you have no real experience of contemplation and meditation, what it means. Perhaps he or the other authors had not experienced the need of unity of body and soul, and to prepare also our body to open up our soul towards God. It is not simply reflecting upon sacred texts or mysteries. That is not sufficient; we need more.

We have to prepare our whole existence, to open up our whole existence towards God. Therefore, what they proposed was more an intellectual reflection on the mysteries of Christ. Of course, they were theologians by profession. I think we have a different experience, perhaps a deeper experience trying, in our daily life, to struggle through our existence not only by work and prayer but also by meditation.

After Vatican Two, another thin stream has developed in our monasteries into a larger stream. Thank God for the *lectio divina*, the *ruminatio* of sacred texts, like the mantras, repeating those sacred texts continuously. By repetition it may become superficial, but it can also become like a screwdriver, going more and more inside the body and our soul. Happily, I've very often said, perhaps *lectio divina* is at the root of a reform of our monastic life. The soul opens up to the Word of God. This goes beyond any kind of reflection or exegetic study. It changes the whole human existence in order to become a new creature, to become a new creation as St Paul would put it. It is God himself, his Spirit, who by this is working in us and transforming us. It's not our method, it's not our doing, it's not our creative reflection, but it's opening up so that God can work inside of us and transform us.

The basic attitude of a Christian should be that of the 'listener of the Word' as Karl Rahner also put it, to listen to the Word of God, because this can bring us real salvation. And this corresponds to the first words of the Rule of St Benedict:

Listen my son to the words of your Master, and listen with the ear of your heart and not only with your outer ears.

Therefore, you will not find a special method of meditation in St Benedict, perhaps the repetition of sacred texts. But for St Benedict it is God himself who forms you. The daily routine of a monastic life in a community is the training camp of a monastic in order to be transformed. It's the whole monastic life which would be the method of meditation. It should bring you in front of God. And transformation is the gift of divine grace. Nevertheless, throughout the whole monastic tradition, we find ways of opening up our hearts in a

special way in order to be able to listen more carefully to the Word of God. I think also in John Cassian and all these people we have a long series of spiritual masters in the whole tradition to lead us to a closer union with God.

This week you will receive a lot of input; I hope so. But not only as input, but also the chance to practise different ways in order to find your own way. There are a number of articles and books on lectio divina, on how to do it. Oh it becomes very complicated! This is not my way; I cannot memorise all the different steps. But when I get up, for example, from my short siesta, I take the New Testament and take some of the texts, sit down, and my inner eyes open up to God, my ears open up also to God, and I let myself be touched by the Word of God. And it has become my daily nourishment.

After the practice of many years, the attitude of listening can bring you to a basic contemplative attitude of living in front of God continuously, to stay with God, to stay together with God, and to experience the joy of being loved by God. Open up, relax; God loves you. Japanese Buddhist monks asked me several times why Christian monastics are so full of joy. I said I don't know if that's true, but it was interesting that they made this remark. I reflected a bit, and I said, perhaps because we know and we are aware that we are loved by someone, by someone who embraces us or, as in Psalm 139 it says, 'He embraces us and puts his hand on our head.' It is wonderful to experience that.

Each Christian and especially the active ones need an inmost contemplative layer or else work becomes just an activity of busy bodies. It is important that your activity is flowing out of the depth of your heart so that it's not a superficial one. We have simply to watch Jesus Christ. His strength was his contemplation, his prayer at night on the mountain, where he withdrew into solitude. And I think this can be also our strength. His preaching and his work has been a manifestation or even a revelation of his unity with God's will, with his heavenly Father. The kingdom of God is supposed to permeate all human beings.

I think, my dear sisters and brothers, this week can become an important beacon in your life. You have come here together to drink

not material wine but the spiritual nectar. That's important. We are drinking this wine until perhaps we are drunk with God. This comes up to my mind, Psalm 42:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you
O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall
I come and behold the face of God?*

Dear sisters and brothers, I do hope that you will have the chance to draw and drink much of the living water during this week. God bless you.



2

A Universal Monastic Wisdom

Whatever is universal and can transcend ethnic and religious, social, political divisions, is a very valuable resource and also a source of hope in our rather troubled and divided world. Monastic culture should above all today witness to the fusion, to the coming together of these two centres of intelligence, the head and the heart.

One of the great monastic scholars of the last century, Dom Jean LeClercq, in one of his great books called *The Love of Learning and The Desire for God*, he describes the fusion of head and heart in the Western civilisation, at least until something began to change in the 12th century with the rise of scholasticism, the rise of the universities. These were great moments in the intellectual life but also a movement that began to divide head and heart, where theology became separated from contemplation. This separation of mind and heart, theology and prayer, created a dysfunction in Western civilisation that in a real way we could say has contributed to the present crisis of our culture, of a world that is so dangerously off-balance – an over left-brain civilisation.

This great monastic wisdom has survived; it hasn't always flourished, hasn't always been excellent but it has somehow survived, like the Church. It has survived, and as it survives it continues to make a witness and to be an inspiration, because this wisdom is not only relevant for the monk in the monastery, in the cloister, it is universal. The monastic archetype according to St Benedict is simply a sign of what is within each of us, the true seeking of God. The monk is not closer to God than a married person. But, the married person witnesses to certain values and certain richness of human life, and the monk witnesses to other certain values and richness.

John Main in this rather special and unique combination of being

a Benedictine monk, his rediscovery of meditation as part of the Christian tradition and his own charism for courage and for trying new forms of this life, had an insight into the universality of the call to contemplation. And that phrase, 'the universal call to contemplation', belongs in the Vatican Council documents which were written in the early 1960s. John Main had a profound insight into this – his understanding of the mystery of how community is born at a deep level and grows in all levels through the experience of shared silence, that when we actually pray together in silence we create community in some form. Whatever form of prayer it is, it nourishes and creates community. He lived it in a relatively small scale in his own life, but he laid the foundations of what was to come later.

At the heart of his vision was a very simple teaching on prayer, something essential. Raimon Panikkar said that John Main had the genius of simplicity and also he had the ability to transmit this to the world beyond the cloister, even to those with different forms of belief. So even in this modern age which many would see as an age of monastic decline, the succession of monks have spoken from this wisdom tradition of universality to a world in civilisational crisis. Think of Thomas Merton, Henri le Saux, Bede Griffiths, John Main, Thomas Keating, Sr Joan Chittister. What we see is something very intriguing and very significant; out of what might look to be a declining aspect of modern religion, our monastic institutions, we see great teachers of the spirit in the modern world. Jean LeClercq had read and wrote many books, and he had a wonderful openness to other traditions. He also felt that his own tradition, his own Western Christian tradition, was so rich, so inexhaustibly stimulating and interesting that it was enough for him; he would never master it completely. It is a very serious insight there for us to go deeper to dig deeper in one well, the well of our own tradition.

The Dalai Lama who knows the West very well, knows the spiritual crisis of the West, advises people in the West to get to know their own tradition, to get to know our own Christian tradition before we go running in a hundred different directions superficially into others. Then of course we are much better prepared for dialogue with other religions.

Monasticism is essentially concerned with one thing, and that is prayer. Monks may run schools or universities or hospitals or guest houses or parishes, but all of these are secondary; you don't need to be a monk to do those things. These are the fruits of contemplation. It's the essential focus, the essential concern of the monastic tradition, which remember is essentially also a lay movement where the first Christian monks did not want to become priests. St Benedict himself was not a priest (we should always remember this when we talk about the monastic witness to contemplation); it's a lay witness to contemplation.

I think it is fair to say as Cardinal Basil Hume once said when he was ordaining one of our monks in London; the monk pretended not to hear what he was saying, but he said to this monk: 'You know this is a wonderful moment in your life and a wonderful moment for your community; you are receiving this wonderful gift of priesthood that you can use to serve the world, but it is in some way diminishing your monastic vocation.' I think he said that as the Archbishop of Westminster; as a Benedictine monk and former abbot, he understood maybe better at that point of his life, to what degree the monastic charism is a lay charism.

What John Main and Bede Griffiths especially believed, as I think did all the monks, monastics I mentioned, is that the mission of modern monasticism is of course to a simple life, to a humble life, to a sustainable life of modest expenditure and moderate use of resources. But above all, the mission of monasticism is to be a teacher of the essential nature of prayer; the meaning of that inner room that Jesus tells us to enter.



3

Opus Dei, the Work of God of St Benedict

I'd like to talk about two aspects of monastic prayer that will help us to understand the meaning of meditation: these two terms *Opus Dei*, a phrase that St Benedict uses to describe the Divine Office, the vocal prayer of the monks, and *oratio pura*, the phrase John Cassian uses, which goes back to the desert tradition. St Benedict points to Cassian as the next stage in the monastic journey of prayer. Just a word about the Rule of St Benedict, which was the dominant standard of monastic life in the Western Church. The Rule of St Benedict is a short little work (about 13,000 words) written at the end of the 6th century. It is probably the single work that has had more impact on Western civilisation apart from the Bible for all of that period, because out of the life Benedict legislated for or wrote about, came most of the great social institutions of the West from hospitals to schools, even to the civil service.

The goal of the life of the Desert Fathers, of the early monks, was to pray without ceasing; that was the goal of the monastic life. And it was to come to prayer without ceasing through the work of developing purity of heart. Cassian in his *Conference* on the goal of the monk says the ultimate goal is the kingdom of God. In that kingdom of God we will be in this state of continuous prayer. But the immediate goal has to be something that we can work on day by day, immediately, and that he says is purity of heart, which means to become single-pointed. The pure of heart are those who can keep their attention focused and remain consistent and faithful. 'Set your mind on God's kingdom before everything else' and everything else will fall into place in due course, according to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:33). So prayer and work.

The work of the monastery, the work of the monk, at the time of

Benedict was primarily manual work. Benedictine monks, unlike Buddhist monks, are expected to live by the labour of their hands. Buddhist monks are not allowed to work; they depend on the generosity of the laity. Benedictine monks as a whole are supposed to work. That work could be manual work, working in the fields; it could be the work of artisans producing goods (today, things like chocolates, liqueurs and scented soaps); and later it became intellectual work, the great contribution of monastic life to Western society.

This work was balanced by *lectio*, what he calls *lectio divina*, the mental work of nourishing the mind through disciplinary reading for the benefit of the monk's soul. This was not reading for distraction as you might read a magazine today just to entertain yourself in the dentist's waiting room; nor was it for entertainment, just reading to see what the rich and famous are doing; or merely as an intellectual exercise to gain information. The reading that Benedict requires of the monk is specifically designed to nourish the soul and it is in fact part of the process of continuous prayer. So the work and the *lectio*, the mental work and the physical work, are both integrated into this project of coming to continuous prayer – St Paul refers to that in the First Letter to the Thessalonians. So much so that for the early monks, even when the monk is asleep he should be praying. The prayer is literally continuous. This understanding of the goal of the monk had a huge impact on the whole of Western society. It was a formula that affected the way education and culture and medicine and most of the great institutions developed.

At the heart of this was the requirement that each monk should read. That was quite a rare thing in the 6th century, but if the monk was supposed to read the Psalms and sing the Psalms, which we will look at now as the *Opus Dei*, then of course he had to be able to read. The *Opus Dei*, St Benedict says, is the regulating principle of the monastic day. There are eight periods of prayer, community, liturgical, vocal prayer. You have the vigils in the morning – you wake up before dawn as in waiting for the Risen Christ to appear. And then at lauds a little later after sunrise, we welcome Christ at dawn. And then we have the little hours in the middle of the morning, at

midday, the middle of the afternoon, and then vespers in the early evening. So the whole day is punctuated by these strong moments where we stop and pray communally. Even if the monk was travelling – St Benedict has a chapter on when monks travel – they are required to keep observance of these times of prayer. And then finally compline at the end of the day when there's also a *memento mori*, a reflection on death, remembering that just as each day ends, so eventually each life will end as well.

So this is the cycle. The *Opus Dei*, the work of God, is a cycle, a continuous cycle, a wheel of prayer constantly turning in order to take us somewhere. Wheels are meant to turn, not just to spin in the middle of the air. Wheels touch the ground, they touch the ground of our lives, both individually and in community. For Benedict this prayer journey takes place in community. Benedictine monasteries of course developed the art of Gregorian Chant, of performing these hours of prayer to a very high degree very beautifully – probably not at all what St Benedict would have been familiar with. It wasn't his intention that monasteries should become centres of Gregorian Chant or centres of liturgical expertise.

What was the purpose of punctuating the day with these strong moments of liturgical prayer revolving around the recitation of the Psalms, of hymns, of canticles? It's very important for Benedict. He says, 'Let nothing be put before the *Opus Dei*, the work of God.' So if you're working in the fields or you're writing a manuscript or you're doing an email or you're reading a book, you drop what you are doing when the bell goes, when the signal goes and you go down to join the rest of the community for the time of prayer. That's the important element of the Benedictine ethos.

At our Benedictine oblate community in London, in *Meditatio House*, we pray together and we integrate meditation with the Office as well, which is what I'd like to come back to later. We have another kind of office, our International Centre, our international office, on the top floor of the house, so we have people working up there during the morning and the afternoon, and we make it a rule in the house that when it comes to the time of prayer, which is in the prayer room, the meditation room on the ground floor, everything

else in the house stops. Those working in the kitchen will stop what they are doing and join the prayer; similarly the people working in the office upstairs. It can be irritating if I'm just in the middle of something – I've just got to make some phone calls. Benedict is not an absolutist, but he would say this is a general rule. There can be exceptions to the rule of course, but don't make the exception the rule. The exception proves the rule, it doesn't become the rule. Clearly Benedict thinks that this work of God in the Divine Office, the Liturgical Hours, is a very important part of the life. He gives 12 chapters of the Rule to describing how the Opus Dei should be structured, how the Psalms, the hymn, the canticles and the readings should be organised, and he goes into a lot of detail: which Psalms, how to divide the long Psalms, and what Psalms to say at what seasons of the year, and so on.

Especially after the 2nd Vatican Council there was a recommendation that the prayer of the Divine Office should be extended to, made available to, and should be encouraged to be practised by lay people in ordinary life. Some of you do that; our Benedictine oblates, take up some part of the Divine Office each day. But on the whole, it hasn't engaged the spirituality of modern people very strongly. Maybe because we haven't quite understood why it's there, why it's being done.

The purpose of the rhythm of the Opus Dei is to create a balance and to create the conditions for continuous prayer. That means prayer that isn't just endless but is continuous. It's not that we are praying verbally, vocally or mentally 24/7 but that we are releasing within us the prayer of the Spirit. It's only the prayer of the Spirit that can be continuous. So if we are to pray continuously, it's because we open our heart to that continuous prayer of the Spirit.

St Benedict says all 150 Psalms should be said each week. I think a vast majority of monasteries would adapt that now so that it might be over a four-week cycle or even longer. Discipline is what St Benedict is offering us in the Rule, a regular structure, and like all disciplines, all regular structures, it's very difficult to do on your own. We do it for a few days and then we get distracted. We lose motivation, we forget, we become undisciplined. So we need a structure –

call it a church, call it a meditation group, call it a religious order, call it a monastery, depending on what it is, what you're doing and what kind of support you need.



4 Oratio Pura, Pure Prayer of Evagrius

Evagrius, one of the great teachers of the Christian desert in the 4th century, is famous for his teaching on pure prayer, or a prayer that is without images or concepts, a prayer of a radical simplicity, a radical poverty of spirit. He recognised that these periods of pure prayer might be quite short periods of imageless prayer, where we are really free of thought where the mind is as clear as the sky is in Rome today. But he recognised also that these short periods of imageless, concept-free, thought-free pure prayer, was a return to a radical simplicity. It was touching, as the Buddhist might say (Evagrius is often well understood by the Buddhists), touching the nature of mind. Touching the depths of the soul we might say. Never try to see any shape or form in your prayer, he says.

For the Desert Fathers prayer essentially meant this pure prayer that Evagrius describes. It takes consciousness to the limit of the mind. That is what poverty of spirit means – to experience mind, consciousness itself. In his three great works, chapters on prayer, reflections and on thoughts, Evagrius describes this different perspective in very short little teachings or aphorisms. The pure prayer of the desert monks replaced, in their view, the temple sacrifice. It replaced all external forms of religion, because it takes you to the essential sacrifice which is the sacrifice of the heart, the sacrifice of attention, or worship in spirit and in truth – the worship that Jesus says the Father wants. It doesn't matter whether you worship on that mountain or on this mountain; the worship the Father wants is worship in spirit and in truth.

The teaching of Evagrius on pure prayer is not inconsistent with the singing of the Psalms; it's just how he approaches the psalmody. When the monks came together from different parts of the desert

periodically, they prayed the Psalms together, or they might even do their psalmody, singing the Psalms or reciting them, in their cells on their own. The essential reason that Evagrius understands for the singing of the Psalms is what he calls the healing of the passions. The word that the Hindus would understand to describe this would be 'chanting'.

When we had the first group of lay people living as oblates years ago at Cockfosters, we just had meditation. And after a while, I thought it would be good if we did the Office; it just seemed right. We needed a little bit more structure. And there was a big resistance among some of these guys and girls to the Psalms. Some of them just accepted it; others didn't really like it. All this angry imagery, all these words, the imagery of the Psalms can be quite shocking at times: 'We don't want to do this!' I thought, this is an interesting moment. So I said, 'Why don't you just do this for a month. It's a very ancient tradition; maybe we have forgotten what it is for, but let's try it and see if we can remember what it is about.' After about three weeks, after it had become a habit, it had been accepted and you could feel that it was beneficial to the group. We recited the Psalms as a way of leading into meditation. Then we had the half-hour of meditation followed by either the Benedictus or the Magnificat in the evening or the Gospel at midday. So we had integrated meditation, pure prayer or the work of coming to pure prayer, we had integrated that into this traditional format. This was of course John Main's approach, to keep the traditional Office because he understood why it was there, but to build in this work of imageless prayer, pure prayer, meditation into it so that they supported each other.

Evagrius saw this when he said the psalmody, especially when it is undistracted psalmody sung mindfully, we can begin to see this is mindful practice. These forms of prayer such as the Divine Office, we've become very familiar with or over-familiar with, often forgetting why they came into existence. We forget *why* they were there, and we only get a tenth of the benefits actually they can bring us. So Evagrius, I think, had this very contemporary insight into the meaning of psalmody, the singing of Psalms, as a healing of the

passions, as a kind of therapy in which all creation and all human feelings can be recognised, noticed, understood. When you get to know the Psalms and you recite them regularly, there are some emotions or some thoughts or ideas which you just skip over because you are not familiar with them at that moment, but there are other times when you may be feeling very strongly one of those emotions. It could be anger for example, against your enemy who has done you some harm, and this emotion of anger is expressed in the Psalm. You notice it expressed for you, and of course it helps to heal it or to regulate it. Evagrius of course understood that this coming together of the personal and the collective experience, or personal and collective history, happens in Christ. And he says the reason that the psalmody is therapeutic is because we meet Christ the physician. We meet Christ in this body of sacred writing.

By the 4th century, Psalms had become a principal tool of Christian prayer. In reciting or singing the Psalms, the passions were calmed and, Evagrius says, 'the body's disharmony can be corrected'. So he saw a physical effect of the chanting of the Psalms. There is no doubt why a lot of monasteries make their living by producing CDs of Gregorian chant. It is very calming not only to the mind but also as he says correcting the body's disharmony, because it is the humanity of Christ that we are connecting with through this exercise. We meet Christ the physician, Christ the healer.

In particular, Evagrius says, it is the healing of *thumos*, a Greek word for vigour. The sense in which Evagrius uses it in the ascetical tradition, it is when the mind is over-excited, when we get hot under the collar especially with anger. We need *thumos*; we need this sort of energy to live, but it easily becomes over-active. The singing of the Psalms according to Evagrius as it were takes it off the boil. He says popular songs arouse *thumos*, but psalmody cools it. Here, I think, is a very interesting and useful insight from the ancient monastic tradition into a form of prayer that Benedict recommends and made central to the life of the Church. We call the Divine Office, the *Opus Dei*, now the prayer of the Church. All deacons and priests and monks, are supposed to say the Office every day, so it's the prayer of at least the clerical Church.

If we go back to these roots, we might get a better understanding of what is the essential purpose of this form of prayer. I think what reveals the meaning and the purpose of it is a rediscovery of the prayer of the heart, of that pure prayer of meditation. So that gives us a nice insight into the balance between organised and structured prayer. Beginning to understand it in this way makes a lot of sense of the other aspects of the ascetical monastic tradition, for example, the guarding of the heart. It's a necessary tool or practice, if you want to grow in continuous prayer, to watch the thoughts of anger or other disordered states of mind that may arise, catching them as soon as they arise, balancing the work, reading and prayer times of your life while making sure that every day respects the need for wholeness that we have, which is reflected in those three dimensions of body, mind and spirit. What I think this can also help us to see is that meditation does not replace other forms of prayer.

I've spoken often to individual monks about meditation, and I hear very much the same reason for not doing it as I hear from people working in investment banks: 'I don't have time. I don't have time for it.' And it's true. If your life is organised around certain events and commitments and responsibilities, it may seem as if making more time available for meditation is going to be a big problem for you. But it only *seems* as if it is, because we know that meditation creates more time. It expands your experience of time and, like everything else in life, it's a question of priority, what is really important to us. Meditation in itself does not threaten the other forms of prayer such as the Divine Office; the *Opus Dei* is not threatened by *oratio pura*. Quite the reverse; we will understand the meaning of the *Opus Dei* and the other forms of prayer, if not least the Eucharist itself, much more clearly and richly when we have made time for the practice of meditation, of pure prayer. And the reason for this is of course that all forms of prayer (John Main says there are no *methods* of prayer' there's only the prayer of Christ) all forms of prayer lead, in the Christian understanding, into the prayer of Christ, prayer of the spirit.

The distinction between *Opus Dei* and the prayer of the heart might reflect the structure of our human consciousness, the left and

the right hemispheres. Modern brain research says that the left and the right hemispheres, these two hemispheres which deal with quite different ways of perception, different kinds of attention, are nevertheless, not operating separately. In fact, the latest science says they are both involved in all forms of attention in all forms of activity that we are involved in. And yet at the same time there is a world of difference between these two hemispheres, these two kinds of attention, both active, both involved. And I think that is a good metaphor for understanding the relationship between the different forms of prayer. Meditation, this prayer of the heart, this oratio pura, does not replace other forms of prayer.



5 The Conferences of Cassian on Prayer

I'd like to speak about John Cassian. John Cassian is a bridge between the Eastern Church and the Western Church. He became a monk and studied and practised deeply in the Egyptian desert before coming to the West bringing the wisdom of the desert monks to the Western Church, and had a profound influence on whole of Western spirituality. He adapted the life and the spirit of the desert to the different environment and circumstances of the early monastic movement as it was developing in southern Europe. This pattern of adaptation and translation is of course at the heart of all tradition. Tradition would die out if it just stayed the same. So tradition is like a river that is flowing. It's a passing on; not a passing on of an experience, so much as a passing on of the container or the receptacles or the stimulants that allow that experience to awaken in individuals and in communities in different generations.

John Cassian and his influence on John Main is why we are here. I think it is reasonable to think that that tradition took another step, another adaptation, in John Main in the late 1960s, early 70s. And that was exactly the perception the great French Benedictine scholar Adelbert de Vogüé took in an essay he wrote in *Monastic Studies* in 1984. After John Main had died, I asked him if he'd like to write something, and the title of his essay was 'From John Cassian to John Main'. He makes the point that just as Cassian was a bridge between the Eastern and Western Churches, so John Main, sharing in that, could also be seen as something of a bridge between of the Christian and the non-Christian worlds.

John Cassian was born in what is probably modern Romania in about the middle of 4th century and died in Marseilles in about 435. He seems to have had a good education; he knew Latin and Greek.

With a friend called Germanus, he left his home to make a pilgrimage to what was probably the heart of the most vital and dynamic centre of Christian spirituality and the Christian world at that time, which was northern Egypt where the monastic movement was flourishing. So he and Germanus, two young pilgrims, monks to be, made their pilgrimage from Romania first of all to Bethlehem. They joined a monastery in Bethlehem, spent three years there, but found it wasn't helpful. They were eager for the work of God, they wanted to go grow, they wanted to go deeper, they had a hunger for prayer, a deeper experience, a deeper knowledge of God, for spiritual growth, and they found they weren't getting what they needed in Bethlehem. So they asked for a short leave of absence and went to Egypt. They felt a bit guilty because they never got permission to stay there permanently, but they disobeyed their abbot and stayed there for the next fifteen years. Cassian and Germanus went to Constantinople, and there he was ordained as a priest. He came to Rome on a mission for the patriarch of Constantinople. When he was in Rome, he was invited by the Bishops of southern France to go and establish a monastery there. And so he moved to Marseilles and set up a double monastery, the monastery of St Victor for men and women, and there he died in about 435.

The local bishop was having some trouble with the monks of the area. They were not as disciplined, organised and respectable as they are today; the monks were on the wild side of life, as they should be actually. They've become domesticated now but they were a little difficult to control, so the Bishop asked Cassian if he could develop a theology and an ideology of the monastic life for the nascent monastic movement in that part of Europe; if he could distil and adapt the wisdom, the teachings that he had adsorbed in Egypt, in that environment.

His three great works are the *Institutes of the Monks* which deal with some very practical issues like clothing, and times of prayer, rather similar to Benedict's chapters on the Divine Office – rules of life, moral behaviour, food, things like that. The *Institutes* were then followed by the *Conferences on Prayer*. There were 24 of these *Conferences* which were put into the mouths of great teachers of

the desert, a rather dramatised version of the teaching, the 24 conferences reflecting the 24 elders in the Book of Revelation.

The two *Conferences on Prayer* (9 and 10) form the structural unity of the *Conferences*. These two conferences are the hinge on which the whole of the conferences depend. He is very clearly a bridge between the Eastern and Western Churches. He is quoted at great length in the *Philokalia*, and of course St Benedict in the West refers to Cassian and is deeply influenced by Cassian, and prescribed that Cassian should be read at meals in the monastery every day.

What is Cassian talking about? I'd like to look at these two *Conferences*, 9 and 10. Let me give a little background, the main themes of Cassian's work and vision. His primary interests are not speculative or theological in the academic sense. His main theme and interest is how to achieve unceasing prayer; he is practical. And purity of heart is the way in which we do that. So he says:

The end of every monk and the perfection of his heart incline him to constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer and, as much as human frailty allows, it strive after an unchanging and continual tranquillity of mind and perpetual purity.

So equanimity, the great universal meditative principle of calmness and evenness of mind.

In order to do this and the work of purifying the heart and the emotions, as we saw, was to abandon anxiety. As Jesus says in his teaching: 'Do not worry about what you are to eat, what you are to wear; these are the things for the heathen to worry about.' (Matt 6:31) So abandon anxiety, let go of your worries and purify the emotions. And he says this letting go of anxiety has different stages. At first, you let go of anxiety about fleshly matters. You're worried maybe about something at work that is causing you temporary anxiety and becomes a source of distraction at the time of prayer and maybe keeps you awake at night. He says this is material anxiety; he's not saying they are unimportant; quite the reverse. He's just saying they are important but we have to learn how to lay them aside. But he

says if we let go of the anxiety and even the memory of affairs and business which we should not allow to enter into our minds at the time of prayer, this is the great principle of guarding the heart.

The first step in coming to continuous prayer is to know what is going on in your mind and in your heart. So when a suspicious-looking thought or feeling shows you their presence, you check them and you say, what is this feeling of anger, or hatred, or jealousy, or despair, or whichever one of the states of mind that we want to lay aside. You notice it and work on it. It's not just noticing it; you also have to work on it in an appropriate way. So in this way, he says, we begin to let go of all negative contents and attitudes of the mind – the way we detract other people, the way we speak against them, gossip, idle speech, talkativeness, fooling around without real humour just for the sake of it, anger of course, sadness, lust and avarice. All of these things need to be noticed and uprooted, he says, not just laid aside but uprooted.

Because prayer is the central goal and meaning of the monk's life for Cassian, it's very important for him how we prepare for prayer. He recognises that whatever our soul is thinking about before the time of prayer will come into our minds when we pray, through the operation of memory. So we must prepare ourselves before the time of prayer to be the prayerful person that we wish to be. The way you live is going to determine the quality of your prayer. The early Christians understood this. We call it spirituality, or in a secular sense we call it lifestyle. The way you live is the way you pray; the way you pray is the way you live. Because, he says,

The mind in prayer is shaped by the state that it was previously in. And when we sink into prayer, the image of the same actions, words and thoughts, will play themselves out before our mental eyes. And therefore before we pray, we should make an effort to cast out from our hearts whatever we do not wish to creep up on us as we pray. And in that way, we can fulfil the injunction 'pray without ceasing'.

In order to do this we have to make some changes in our way of living. And I think most people who meditate will notice fairly quickly

that their life begins to change, because there are things that you may be doing that are inconsistent with what you are doing in the times of meditation. This may not be dramatically obvious to you at first, but it will be increasingly clear to you that there are certain things that don't harmonise with your meditation. To put it crudely, if you're watching four or five hours of TV every day, you are going to find it difficult to meditate and you'll be well aware that all that TV-watching, or web-surfing, or mindless distraction is interfering with your prayer.

The next point he makes is that life has to be simplified. This is the positive meaning of asceticism. Cassian, like all the other monks of the desert, is very concerned about how much we eat, how we live, and even how we earn our money, because the monks of the desert earned their own living maybe by working as manual labourers or making mats or doing other very simple tasks like that. So, he says we have to be very conscious of the simplicity of our life.



Whatever our soul is thinking about before the time of prayer will come into our minds when we pray. The way you live is the way you pray; the way you pray is the way you live. So in order to come to continuous prayer we have to make some changes in our way of living.



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Fr Laurence explores the monastic tradition of meditation which John Main OSB recovered for modern people yearning for spiritual depth. The monk's goal was to 'pray without ceasing'. Monastic prayer had two aspects: the *opus dei* or vocal prayer and *oratio pura* or imageless prayer. Meditation integrates our two centres of intelligence, the head and the heart, and so enables continuous prayer where work and prayer are not separate but flow one into the other.



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