

ST GREGORY OF SINAI

How Everyone Should Pray

Sit down, sometimes on a stool so as to give your body discomfort, and sometimes on a bed so as to relieve and relax your body; remain patiently in that position, as much as you can, so as to accomplish the command of the divine Paul, who asks us to remain at prayer for a long time, to 'persevere in prayer' (cf. Rom. 12 : 12), to not haste to avoid the labour nor to relax from it, but to show patience, to keep the head inclined, to gather your intellect in the heart, and to call on the aid of the Lord, saying: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me'. Even if after a while the shoulders and the head begin to ache, persevere in these labours and, with all your love and all your desire, seek the Lord in your heart. For the Kingdom of heaven is for those who do violence to themselves. They are violent ones who seize it (cf. Matt. 11 : 12), as the Lord has said, wanting to show in this way that such violence, such ardour, such labours draw forth prayer. Perseverance is effective in all things, though indeed it might lead to some pain in body and soul.

HOW TO SAY THE PRAYER

The Fathers differ in their recommendations on the manner in which to pray. One demands that we say the prayer complete: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.' Another, to say a part of it: 'Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me', which is easier for the weakness of the intellect. For the intellect alone cannot say by itself purely and perfectly 'Lord Jesus', if not with the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 12 : 3). The words should not be constantly changed, nor should they be spoken sometimes one way and sometimes another. But one can change from time to time, so as not to lose attention through repetition. Similarly, some instruct us to say the prayer with the lips, and others with the intellect. I say that both should be used. Sometimes the intellect relaxes and cannot say anything, sometimes it is the mouth which grows tired. That is why we should pray with the intellect and with the lips, sometimes with the one, and sometimes with the other. Nevertheless, when one prays with the mouth, one must speak calmly, humbly, without noise, so that the voice does not come to spoil the intellect's focus, but only so that it gets used to the long work, and starts to progress in this work of prayer, until it receives the grace of the Holy Spirit in its prayer. At that point there is no longer any need to pray with the lips. It is no longer possible. For in gratitude and joy, we will then speak the prayer with the intellect alone.

HOW TO CONTROL THE INTELLECT

Know that nothing can master the intellect by itself, if it is not mastered by the grace of the Holy Spirit. For the intellect does not let itself be mastered, not by nature, since it is always in movement and it cannot naturally come to a halt, but because it is dissipated in its negligence, dispersing itself here and there ever since its origin. For by transgressing the commandments of God, we separate ourselves from him, we distance ourselves from him, and then we lose the intellectual sense, so we no longer know when we are with God and when we are cut adrift from him. Since our intellect, detached from God, is pulled on every side, like a servant. That is why it cannot master itself and cannot remain at rest other than by heading once again to God, submitting entirely to his commandments, and praying often and confiding our faults to him each day. Now we are at fault at all times. But he pardons us on the field, if we pray him with humility and contrition of heart and if we invoke his holy name always. Until it approaches God in this manner and it meets him thus with great joy, the intellect can be mastered by God and no longer dispersed into all the senses. The breath of respiration, when we hold it back with the mouth, also naturally allows control of the intellect.

Nevertheless, the intellect does not remain in one place for long, and it disperses again. But when prayer is at work in the heart, prayer keeps guard with the heart over the intellect, making it rejoice, and which stops the intellect from dispersing. It happens as a result that at the moment where the intellect holds itself in the heart and prays, then thought is occupied with other things and loses interest. They master their thought who are perfect in the Lord, those who, in Christ Jesus, have arrived at this grace, when their intellect does not disperse more and is no longer separated from God.

HOW TO FORCE THOUGHTS AWAY

A novice cannot expel a thought, if God does not expel it. Only the strong can combat and chase mind away. Nevertheless, even they cannot force them away all by themselves. It is with God that they fight and that they force them. You, when thoughts come, call often on the Lord Jesus, say the prayer without pause, and they will depart. They cannot bear the warmth of heart which comes with prayer. The warmth burns them, and they flee. As John Klimakos says: 'With the name of Jesus, beat and bruise your enemies.'¹ For our God is a fire which consumes (cf. Deut. 4 : 24)

¹ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*; E.T., Step 21 §7.

malice. Our Lord, who comes quickly to our side, will render justice to those who call on him day and night with all their soul and with all their heart (cf. Luke 18 : 7), as the divine Luke says in the parable of the unjust judge. The novice, whose prayer is still powerless, should hold himself upright, call God to his aid, and the Lord will chase away his thoughts. Then he should sit down again, and set himself to pray again. But those whose prayer is strong, every time when thoughts of ease and sexuality war on him, he should also hold himself upright, raise his hands and ask for help from God. Nevertheless he should fear illusion and not do this for long, for fear that the devil will show him figures and fanciful images in the air to fool him. For to have intellect at the same time above and below, in the heart and in all things, and to guard is infallibly and save it, is only possible for the perfect.

ON THE LIFE OF STILLNESS¹

He who is looking for the life of stillness should have these five virtues as a foundation: silence, temperance, watchfulness, humility, and patience; in addition, these three works which please God: psalmody, which is to say prayer with the voice, reading, which is intellectual prayer, and a small amount of manual work if one is weak. For the virtues which we have spoken of contain all the others and they work together. From the first hour of the day, the one seeking the life of stillness should begin with the prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me', and consecrate himself to the memory of God with attention and the stillness of the heart during that hour; at the second hour, he should read; during the third pray with the lips; the fourth say the prayer of the heart; the fifth, read; the sixth, psalmodise, that is, pray out loud with the lips; at the seventh, say the prayer of the heart; at the eighth, read; at the ninth psalmodise; at the tenth, eat; at the eleventh, sleep, if it is necessary; at the twelfth, psalmodise the vespers. So pass the stages of the day in a way pleasing to God.

If you want to know how to best pass the hours of night, listen. The nocturnal vigil has three ways: that of novices, that of mediums, and that of the perfects. The first way is to sleep half of the night and to wake for the other half, either before the evening until midnight, or else before midnight until dawn, and to spend this watch of the half of the night sometimes psalmodising, sometimes praying. The second way is to watch an hour or two for the evening, then to sleep four hours, and then to get up for matins, then psalmodise and to pray for six hours. The third way is to pass the entire night in vigil, stood upright.

Above all, the life of stillness requires that one have faith, patience, love and hope, with all the heart and with all force. For he who believes, even when he does not find what he

wants in this life, whether by negligence, or for any other reason, even then it is impossible that at the hour of his death he will not receive in total certainty the fruits of his faith and of his labour, and that then he will not see liberty, who is Jesus Christ. But he who does not have faith will be judged at the moment of his death. For he who is enslaved to the pleasures of the flesh and seeks the glory of men and not that of God, this one, it is said, does not believe, even if seems that he does from his words, through the simple confession of faith. Such a man suffers illusions, he is indistinct, and he does not know it. For he will hear the Lord: 'Because you have hated me and you have not received me in your heart, but you have sent me away, I also will send you away before me.' It must be the case that the faithful believes that all the words of God are truthful, that it is possible to put them into effect and that he confesses his own feebleness, so as not to incur a double condemnation, if it comes to pass that he does not accomplish them and does not believe.

Nothing can bruise and humiliate the heart (cf. Ps. 51 : 19) like silence and the life of stillness, when one lives with discernment. And nothing ravages the life of stillness like these six passions: freedom of language, over eating, lose talking, distractions, pride, and presumption. The unhappy man who is accustomed to them is taken with vertigo, and, in the end, becomes insensible. Nevertheless if he repents, if he starts again with faith and fervour, he will rediscover what he desired, if that is he is humble and turns himself with love toward those who have experience. But if he is dominated by one of the passions we have named, then all the other evils come to assail him with disbelief, the despoiling of all good, the filling up of all the passions and the devotion to vertigo and to the confusion of demons. The unhappy man becomes irascible and enemy of those who practice the life of stillness, whom he blames while turning his words against them, like double edge sword.

Likewise, if one does not give oneself up to grief, it is impossible to bear the trials of the life of stillness. For he who accepts grief and meditates on the terrible things which precede and follow death, he acquires patience and humility, the two fundamentals of the life of stillness. But he who seeks the life of stillness without these two virtues, has in him always the presumption and the negligence. Now those two evils do nothing but give rise to dispersion of the intellect and lead us to relaxation and laziness. It is then that intemperance, the daughter of negligence, softens and relaxes the body, darkens and hardens the intellect, and that our Lord Jesus Christ departs, when the crowd of thoughts and of ideas find themselves in the place of mind.

Nothing renders the soul relaxed, lazy, hard and without intellect, like egoism, that is to say the unreasonable love of ourselves, which is the mother, the cause and the nurse of passions. For it prefers repose of body to the labour of virtue, and thinks that one can bear oneself without giving oneself to virtuous works, and in particular to some reasonable efforts

¹ See Vol. 4 'On Commandments and Doctrines' 99, 101, 103, 104, 108 and 106.

which demand the commandments. It arouses laziness and powerlessness in the soul of the man leading the life of stillness and brings to the works of asceticism a relaxation such that it becomes incurable.

HOW TO PSALMODISE¹

Some psalmodise from time to time (that is, singing the psalms, the troparia, and other prayers), others psalmodise a lot, still others not at all. You, do not psalmodise too much, for you will create confusion. It is followed by a relaxation. Psalmodise from time to time, for doing things in measure is excellent. But a great deal of psalmodising is appropriate for active monks, who do this so as to understand what they sing and to give themselves something to do. But those leading the life of stillness must please themselves with praying to God in their heart, detaching from all thoughts. For the life of stillness, according to John Klimakos, is abstention and rejection of all thought coming from the senses and from the intellect.² The intellect, when it expends all of its power in frequent psalmody, is in fact very feeble afterwards, and cannot pray inside as it ought.

That is why, John Klimakos says, 'during the night consecrate most of the time to prayer, and only a little to psalmody.'³ When, there where you are sitting, you see prayer work and be in unceasing movement in the heart, do not let it go and do not relieve yourself in psalmody, but remain sitting, until prayer quits you of its own accord. For then you leave God down below in the heart, there where you pray, and you get up to speak with him externally, with the lips, with the means of psalmody. You descend from what is elevated to what is low, and you create confusion. You trouble the intellect out of its calm and its stillness. For God is peace (cf. Eph. 2 : 14), aside from all confusion and from all noise. Our praise should be angelic, without confusion, as our way of life is angelic, while the prayer of the lips, the sensible appeal with the voice, signifies the appeal of the intellect. This psalmody has more than anything been forbidden, so that we raise ourselves from what is sensible to what is true and inner essential. For it is to those who do not know essential prayer that it has been given to psalmodise a lot, with a great diversity, beyond all measure, and to never stop, until they are exhausted by this low rate action, and approach in this way to contemplation, and discover inner essential prayer at work in their heart. For this other prayer is the work of the life of stillness, while the former is that of communal life. Nevertheless each person, if he perseveres on the road where he was been called, will be saved (cf. 1 Cor. 7 : 24), according to the Apostle. That is why I have feared to write, in fear of misleading the weak, when I see you live with them.

For he who gives himself to intellectual inner essential prayer because he has heard about it or because he has read about it in books, should be very attentive to what is written, so as not to go astray. He who has tasted the honey of the grace of God is held to psalmodise in measure and to devote the greater part of his time to prayer. But when nonchalance affects him, then he should psalmodise, or read from the Acts of the Fathers, to grasp how they lived and were saved. If some have said that many of the Fathers remained awake all night, psalmodising and not giving themselves to intellectual inner prayer, we will respond to them with the Scriptures that not all of the works of the Fathers were perfect, and that the little virtues are not little for the great, because they are strong and they use virtues as they want, but also the great virtues are not great and perfect for the little men, because they are weak and do not know how to use them as is right. For it is today as in other times, the Fathers were not all active men, nor all contemplative men. All the active men are not indefinitely committed to action. Many are elevated into contemplation, have put aside action, are separated from all and rejoice only in the contemplation of God, knowing that they were receiving divine nourishment. They could no longer psalmodise, nor meditate otherwise, when they found themselves in ecstasy of the contemplation of God, until it happens, in this life, to enjoy what they wanted most, but partially, as if as a deposit. Others have dedicated themselves until the end to one action and have been saved; they waited until the next life for recompense. Some have had no certainty until the hour of their death, or even after their death when their holy relics were embalmed; and yet they knew that they were saved. All received grace at the moment of their baptism, but for many good reasons, not all have tasted the honey of grace during the present life, as many others have. Still others are consecrated to two, to psalmody and prayer, and have led their life in this way and encountered no obstacles. Others have kept to the life of stillness to the end, very wisely, alone with God alone, they are united. The perfects, we have said, can do everything in Christ who gives them the power.

HOW TO EAT AND DRINK⁴

As for the stomach which controls the passions, what can be said? If you want to paralyse it and render it dead in part, do not spare it. For it has often dominated me. Like a slave, I serve it and do what it orders me to do. It works with the demons, and it is the home of passions, because it is free for all disorders. It is what makes us fall, but it is the same thing which, when it is in good order, relieves and corrects us. It is what makes us lose grace and the dignity we have received, the dignity of paradise, and then in holy baptism. For we have neglected the commands of God, which keep and augment the grace in those who apply and attach themselves to progress in the soul, but we, we embolden ourselves in pride, we think

¹ See Vol. 4 'Different Ways of Psalmodising', Vol. IV, p. 266 ff.

² *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*; E.T., Step 27 §51; p. 188.

³ *Ibid.* Step 27 §77; p. 191.

⁴ See Vol. 4 'How to partake of food', Vol. IV, p. 280 ff.

that we are united to God and that we are not abandoned by grace.

The Fathers say that there are great varieties in the manner by which the body can be nourished. Some bodies have need of little, others of a lot, for sustenance of their natural energy. Each, according to his force and state, requires appropriate nourishment. Nevertheless, he who gives himself continually to the life of stillness should never be satisfied, but should always be hungry when he rises from the table. For while his stomach is heavy with food, his intellect is troubled and he cannot pray with purity as he ought. He grows unfocused under the exhalation of numerous foodstuffs, and he quickly tries to fall asleep. And it is then, in sleep, that he is submitted to dreams and infamous fantasies.

He who wants to find safety and does violence to himself for the Lord so as to live in the life of stillness should, to my mind, satisfy himself every day with a pound of bread and three or four glasses of water or wine, eat little, and when any food is put before him to avoid satiety, and so as to avoid pride, to eat everything without disdain (for it is the creation of God, who is very good) and while rendering thanks to God for everything. Such is the advice of the wise. As for those who are weak in their soul and in their faith, and lack firmness, it is better for them that they abstain from many types of food. The divine Paul recommends that they do not eat anything but legumes (cf. Rom. 14 : 2), because they do not believe yet that they are watched over by God, whose providence extends over all his creatures.

You who are old, and who search a rule in matters of nourishment, what can we advise? There are young people who are incapable of eating their soup by weight and measure. How can you do so, who are old? That is why you should live freely in everything. If you are vanquished for having eaten too much, accuse yourself, repent, condemn yourself for having been intemperate, and put yourself back to the task. Do not cease to do so always, falling, getting up, condemning yourself and not others, and you will find repose. You will win despite the slips, when you condemn yourself, and release yourself to repentance and humility.

Do not transgress the rule which we have described, and it should suffice you. For nothing strengthens the body so well as to take bread and water. That is why the prophet says: 'Son of man, eat your bread by the pound and drink your water in measure' (Ezek. 4 : 16). Food has three standards: temperance, contentment and satiety. Temperance is to have hunger when one has eaten. Contentment is to eat sufficiently, and to be neither hungry, nor satisfied. Satiety is to have the stomach a bit full, to have eaten a lot. But to eat after having been satisfied, that it to open the door to gluttony, with which comes sexual lust. So chose the best way, as much as you can. Do not exceed measure, neither in excess nor in want. Be hungry and be satisfied, be strong in all and not indifferent, that is the behaviour of the perfect.

OF ERROR, AND THER SUBJECTS¹

Know precisely what error is, so as to keep away from it, and be attentive to never lose your soul. For the natural inclinations of men, and singularly those of the novice and the independent monk, push them toward a life lived with the demons who, by means of thought and fantasy, never cease to circle around them, and to push them toward pits and to dig ditches to make them fall. There should be no astonishment if some go astray, saying or doing something instead of another, confusing large numbers of Christians who have no spiritual knowledge of like things, and covering those who practice the life of stillness with hatred and opprobrium. For there is nothing astonishing in a novice or an independent monk being fooled, even after a severe asceticism. It has happened to many, today as in other times. The memory of the name of God, which is intellectual prayer, because it is the highest of all actions and the summit of all the virtues, like the love of God, the first of all the commandments, and it requires a great deal of attention, of piety and fear.

He who wants with impudence, impiety and insolence, to use this admirable work of the intellectual prayer and to search without fear to say the name of God inside himself and to approach God incautiously, will immediately descend (if God allows it) into illusion and is destroyed by the demons. For with pride and presumption, he aims to attain that which exceeds his force and his state. He has daring, until the time comes, to call God into himself by the means of the intellectual prayer. But often, when we see a similar audacity in higher things, the compassionate Lord does not permit that we should be tempted by the demons, and he lets us become conscious of our state and our pride, so that we can repent, return back and redress ourselves, before we become the shameful thing of demons and the fool among men. That is why he who wants to devote himself to this marvellous work should interrogate those who have experience, so that he can gather from them what to do, so that he can learn submission and obedience from them, can engage with fear of God and humility, and so that he can make proof of patience; thus he will not return to the darts rather than wheat, nor will he find perdition in lieu of salvation.

As for you, brother, if you live in the life of stillness, if you give yourself to this work as it deserves, and if you hope to unite yourself to God through the means of intellectual prayer, pay careful attention to never accept anything whatsoever of the sensible or the inner essential which seems to you to be from the external or which comes from your own self, neither fantasies in which the image of Christ is modelled in your intellect, or of an angel or a saint, for the intellect has in itself, by nature, the faculty of fantasising, it can easily give form to what it desires, and so do a great deal of harm to

¹ See volume 4, p. 281 ff.

those have are inattentive. The only memory of that which is good and of what is evil arouses ordinarily the fantasy in the intellect, man being carried to imagine things which come from his memory. He who receives them becomes imaginative, and not still.

That is why you should not give faith to a thing, even something good, and gather it together, before having examined and having interrogated those who have experience, so as to avoid harm to yourself. When it comes to you, do not let a thing come easily, but hold it at a distance, and watch your intellect attentively beyond any figuration, all form, all colour. For often, to test those who combat and see where their resolution takes them, God sends them such a thing. And even if the thing comes from God, he who, having seen with his intellect or with his eyes, receives it without examining and without interrogating those who have experience, that person is easily misled by the devil, for he is naive.

Each, and especially the novice, should apply himself to say the intellectual prayer in his heart, for there he will not be beguiled, and nothing else can be admitted, right up until the passions are stilled. God does not reproach those who, in order to remain unbeguiled, is strictly attentive to himself, and who, on that account, receives nothing, even if it comes from God, without having examined it, nor without having interrogated those who have experience. God praises him for being attentive and reflective.

Nevertheless, he cannot ask advice from just anyone, but only from a virtuous man, spiritual, tested, who watches over other monks, and who has experience. For nobody can guide others if he has not the gift of discernment and if he does not know how to distinguish good from evil. Each, through what he has done, through what he has understood, has a spiritual knowledge and a natural discernment, but not everyone has the discernment of the Holy Spirit. It is not easy to find such a reliable man, gifted with such discernment, in his works, in his words, in his thoughts, and to have him for a spiritual guide. In proof that it is possible to know that he is reliable: what he says, what he does, what he thinks is confirmed by divine Scripture. It is necessary that he is reserved and measured in all things. For the devil habitually gives the appearance of truth to error, especially where novices are concerned, transforming a man's vices to make them seem like spiritual virtues.

That is why he who wants to attain to the pure prayer should pass his life in stillness, fear, grief, under the direction of those who have had experience, and while consulting them. He should at all times afflict himself, weep over his sins, tremble, fear being damned and separated from God, here and in the next life. For the devil, when he sees anyone passing his life in grief and affliction, cannot support being near to him. He is burned by the humility which affliction arouses and he departs, in his pride. But he goes towards those who, presumptuously, imagine they can attain the highest things and

who, impudently, look for ways to touch what surpasses their power. He approaches them as if they were his own, and he draws them into his net with ease.

The supreme weapon is to always have prayer and grief inside, so as not to fall from the joy of prayer into presumption, and to stay humble so as to remain guarded and safe. For true prayer is that warmth of heart which is found in the invocation of the Lord Jesus Christ coming, as the Evangelist says, to throw fire on the earth (cf. Luke 12 : 49) of our heart, to burn our passions and revive joy and gentleness in our soul. You also, brother, desire this prayer, so as to find and possess it in your heart, keeping your intellect always spotless of all fantasy and of all thought. And do not fear. For the God who we look for is with us and does not cease to protect us.

If some certain people have entered into error, consider that they have arrived there because of their pride and their independence, for they have let themselves be led by their own wishes and not by the counsels of those who have experience. For he who, with obedience and humility, while asking for guidance, who gives himself to prayer and seeks God, will never go wrong, through the grace of Christ who wants to save all men (cf. 1 Tim. 2 : 4). If a temptation arrives, it is then like a test and a crown. Through the ways that he knows, God quickly accords his help. As the Fathers say, the machinations of demons cannot harm those who live rightly, who do not seek to please men and who avoid pride. But those who lead their life with presumption and by their own will, lose their way easily and are a danger to themselves.

There are three virtues which we must keep, while at all times examining ourselves to see that we bear them: temperance, silence and self-accusation, which is to say humility. They contain and keep all the others. It is through them that prayer is born and grows continually.

Grace appears in different manners in those who give themselves to the work of prayer. Among some, it arises in the fear and trembling which shakes the foundations of the mountain of passions and bruises the petrified heart, while mortifying the sensations of the flesh. Among others, it manifests itself in the joy and the rejoicing of the heart, what the Fathers call a leap. And then there are others, above all among those who have made excellent progress, in whom God awakens grace with peace, gentleness, calm, because Christ is come to live in their heart, according to the divine Paul. That is why God has said to the prophet Elias that the Lord is neither in the violent wind, nor in the trembling of the earth, that is to say in the effects of grace which manifest in novices, in the fear of God and the joy of heart, but that the Lord is in the gentle wind (cf. 1 Kings 19 : 11-12), peaceful and luminous. He has shown through this where perfection is found.

Question: What should we do, when the devil appears as an angel of light and tries to deceive a man?

Answer: He who sees this such things should not allow them onto the field, but first test and discern good and evil in them, and only then believe. For that the one should come with grace, and that the demon cannot give grace, is obvious. The demon (even if it were to appear like an angel of light) will not arouse gentleness in man, nor light, nor rejection of the world, nor a halt to passions and pleasures; those are the works of grace. What it does is pride, laziness, presumption, and every other malice. In the manner in which it works, you can therefore know if the light which shines in your soul is of God or of Satan. Lettuce is similar to a bitter salad leaf, and the vinegar is similar to wine. But when you taste them, you know the difference. It is the same for the soul of man. If it has discernment, it knows the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the fantasies of Satan.

Nevertheless, know that this kind of error has three causes: pride, the jealousy of demons, and that God steps aside it for our correction. Pride comes of lightness of the intellect. Jealousy of demons comes from progress. The stepping aside of God comes from sin. The error which comes from pride and jealousy is easily cured, when a man becomes humble. But that which comes from the stepping aside of God often lasts until death.

Equally, we should know that the demon of pride comes in those who are not attentive in their heart. You, brother, be always ready to undertake combat with the demons. If a fantasy arises, do not be concerned. If you see a sword which pierces you, or a lighted fire which burns you, or a savage and ugly figure, or a dragon, or whatever it may be, do not be afraid, do not recoil. But resist, confess the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will see victory, with the flight and the dispersion of your enemies.¹

Again know this game which the demons often employ. They make a double attack. First they assail you so as to appear like tempters. If you seem to call for help, others arrive looking like angels, and seem to chase the first away, who in turn appear to fear and turn around, so as to fool you and oblige you to love those angels like saints which had seemed to put the demons to flight.

Often again they will suggest lovely thoughts to you and incite you to pray against them who appear to be tempting you, or they incite you to resist them. If you do that, then they will seem to be vanquished by you and will seem to fly from you, so as to fill you with pride and so that you will think you have made progress, and that you have defeated thoughts and purged the demons.

¹ This paragraph and the two following come from Evagrius, Chapters on prayer 92, 95, 134.

