



# What is Prayer?

by Laurence Freeman

A very old definition of prayer described it as "the raising of the heart and mind to God." What is the "mind"; what is the "heart"? The mind is what thinks - it questions, plans, worries, fantasizes. The heart is what knows - it loves. The mind is the organ of knowledge, the heart, the organ of love. Mental consciousness must eventually give way and open up to the fuller way of knowing which is heart consciousness. Love is complete knowledge.

Most of our training in prayer, however, is limited to the mind. We were taught as children to say our prayers, to ask God for what others or we need. But this is only half of the mystery of prayer.

The other half is the prayer of the heart where we are not thinking of God or talking to him or asking for anything. We are simply being with God who is in us in the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has given us. The Holy Spirit is the love, the relationship of love that flows between Father and Son. It is this Spirit Jesus has breathed into every human heart. Meditation, then, is the prayer of the heart uniting us with the human consciousness of Jesus in the Spirit. "We do not even know how to pray but the Spirit himself prays within us." Romans 8:26

The Holy Spirit in the modern Church, especially since the Vatican Council in the early 1960's, has been teaching us to recover this other dimension of our prayer. The Council documents on the Church and the liturgy both emphasized the need to develop "a contemplative orientation" in the spiritual life of Christians today. All are called to the fullness of the experience of Christ, whatever their way of life.

This means that we must move beyond the level of mental prayer: talking to God, thinking about God, asking God for our needs. We must go to the depths, to where the spirit of Jesus himself is praying in our hearts, in the deep silence of his union with our Father in the Holy Spirit.

Contemplative prayer is not the privilege of monks and nuns or special mystical types. It is a dimension of prayer to which we are all called. It is not about extraordinary experiences or altered states of consciousness. It is what Thomas Aquinas called the "simple enjoyment of the truth." William Blake spoke of the need to "cleanse the doors of perception" so that we can see everything as it truly is: infinite.

This is all about the contemplative consciousness as lived in ordinary life. Meditation leads us to this and it is part of the whole mystery of prayer in the life of any person who is seeking fullness of being.

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