

The mental prayer that is practiced for so long at a time as to be a weariness must inevitably end up sterile and wasteful. Those who cannot manage longer at prayer than the minimum fixed by the rules of their monastery have ample opportunity of compensating in one way or another. Prayer is not confined, after all, to the time spent in the act of formally addressing God from a kneeling position.

St. John Chrysostom says that a soul should be as ready to pray in the marketplace as in the oratory; when sitting among friends as when attending services in church. The interior cry of love can still go up to God, he says, when there are no doves for the sacrifice, when there is neither wood nor fire nor knife nor altar. The soul itself is the altar and the sacrifice and the Temple.

If the monk cannot have unceasingly upon his lips the syllables of prayer. St. Pachomius would have him practice prayer in his heart "While going from his cell to the oratory, from the oratory to his cell, while fulfilling an office; before, during and after work in the open, and even while lying awake in bed".

In the last analysis what God wants of the monk is what He wanted of Abraham – that he should walk before Him, and be perfect. The contemplative life, the Benedictine vocation, can mean nothing more nor less than this. □



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