

The Power of Prayer

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Prayer is perhaps one of the most important elements of religious practice. It can substitute for the sacraments (in some cases absolutely), even though in God's ordinary providence these be necessary for eternal salvation. But nothing else can supply its place. Hence, one of the chief tasks of religious education is a training in prayer. And yet no duty is perhaps more casually undertaken than just this. In many cases, we Catholics are acquainted with vocal prayer only, and this in set texts and formulas. We are fully acquainted with prayer of petition; we have frequently heard of the prayer of praise, of glorification, of thanks, but scarcely anything of mental prayer. Many, indeed, are in the like case with the new converts in Ephesus mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles: "Paul found certain disciples, and he said to them: Have you received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? But they said to him: We have not so much as heard whether there be a Holy Ghost" (Acts 19, 1). They had not received Him and they had never heard of Him. Similarly, many of the faithful can say: "we have not practiced mental prayer; we never even heard of it."

Without mental prayer there can be no interior life. Now all Christians are assuredly called to live such a life and, as a consequence, to foster it. And yet many of the laity hold that such an obligation binds priests and religious only, not themselves. Is it a wonder, then, that the spiritual life of many followers of Christ is so sickly and so superficial? Our religious training is almost wholly confined to instruction on the sacraments; they alone are kept in view. Adults receive a thorough instruction on these before receiving Baptism. We are familiar with instruction for First Confession, first Holy Communion, Confirmation. When at all possible, instruction is given also to engaged and married couples. We need not mention the long training which candidates for the priesthood receive before they are ordained. Instruction with regard to the sacraments is obviously necessary; but it is in fact an instruction which points to the priest. It leads to a certain lack of self-reliance or independence in religious matters. The sacraments are more or less dependent on the priest. But if there are no priests? That contingency must sometimes be reckoned with. As a consequence church and tabernacle are empty, and the altar has no significance. If the spiritual life of the faithful is made entirely dependent on priests or sacraments and these outer supports are suddenly withdrawn, then there is great danger of a religious collapse on the part of many. People have to be Catholics and remain Catholics even when there are no priests or sacraments; they have to be Catholics not merely in Catholic but in pagan, even hostile surroundings.