

# DISCOVERING NON-CONCEPTUAL PRAYER

By MICHAEL BARROW

WHEN I WAS four years old we moved to a road in Seven Kings where to a new-comer all the houses looked identical. To find the house when I went out, I used to leave my teddy-bear in the front porch, and for me it symbolized home, a separate world that no-one outside would ever understand. Something of that still remains, but I feel such a joy and enthusiasm for the experience of non-conceptual prayer which I have enjoyed for the last couple of years that all I want is to share it with anyone who will know what I am talking about. I would run a thousand miles to share it—and then not know what to say when I got there. So I hope by writing it down I may be able to share something of what I have received.

When I joined the jesuit novitiate over thirty years ago, we were taught, pretty unsystematically but quite effectively, how to use scripture for praying. At first we simply ‘did an hour’s meditation’ each day without much hint of what that was supposed to be. The guiding principle then, and later, was: ‘Keep faithful to the hour: put in the time and do not worry too much what happens during it’. But after a month we were launched into the thirty-days’ retreat and during it the master of novices made use of the time assigned to ‘points and meditation’ for unfolding the meditation for us. So by doing it rather than by learning the theory, we came to appreciate the different levels of scripture and how to use them with other spiritual exercises in prayer. What was thus started in the retreat grew and developed throughout the next two years.

Meditation was essentially discursive. Intellectual considerations, which I had previously considered preparation for prayer, became the main part. Anything ‘mystical’ was considered airy-fairy and lacking in substance—or else beyond us. I remember being told that Robert Stuart’s books were rather too contemplative and would be more suitable later on, and I was too shy to say how helpful I had found them as a schoolboy. I was similarly discouraged from reading Thomas Merton’s *Seeds of contemplation* which appeared about this time. The use of the intellect received more

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

encouragement, perhaps because that is easier to explain than the simpler and more contemplative forms. But as a basic training in using the gospels to pray, it set us on the right road, so that years later it came to me as a surprise to find how little this was practised by the clergymen from other Churches I directed, who followed a more exegetical or moralizing approach.

Although our training neglected the contemplative aspect, over a longer period of time prayer quite naturally became less discursive, with a gradual diminution of the use of the natural faculties. I sometimes wondered if my prayer was becoming easier or if I was becoming more tolerant of boredom. On the other hand, when I found prayer distracted or in other ways unsatisfactory, I thought the obvious remedy was to return with greater vigour to what I had been taught in the beginning, echoing my earlier school reports: 'Would do better if he tried harder'.

This natural growth in simplicity is mirrored in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. Very early on he proposes the use of the imagination as well as the intellect, 'imagining Christ our Lord present on the cross', seeing him and speaking to him. Moreover, he suggests not only using one's visual imagination but applying in fantasy each of the five physical senses to the subject of prayer. The aim is to leave aside intellectualizing and to go beyond even the physical imagination to 'tasting the divinity' of Christ and 'smelling the fragrance of the infinite'. With such expressions in the Spiritual Exercises, where never a word is included merely for colour or for good measure, St Ignatius opens the soul to a more directly contemplative experience of God. But his tight economy of words has often allowed this important aspect to escape notice.

At the end of the Exercises he proposes ideas (named unromantically the Second and Third Methods of Prayer) for using everyday prayers such as the Our Father and Hail Mary in a contemplative way or like a mantra, to experience the touch of God unhampered by intellectual activity. As with the rosary, we can get so caught up in the method as to forget its purpose; I had been told so often to dwell on the particular mystery of the rosary and not the words that it was years before I realized that it was better to think of neither and just to experience the presence of God.

Perhaps many who do not receive much formal training in prayer come naturally to a deeper contemplation, leaving thought aside. I am pretty sure my mother did. But for those of us whose spiritual journey is more systematic, the transition to non-

conceptual prayer is more marked. We were told from the beginning that all the 'masters of the spiritual life' taught that it was necessary to pass from meditation to contemplation when the time came. But somehow the time never came. Definite signs would indicate when the transition was to be made, and in particular the inability to use discursive prayer. But I could never be sure that I qualified in that respect because I had never found discursive prayer very satisfying anyway, and so the point at which it became unsatisfactory was not likely to be particularly marked. Moreover, in the period after the noviceship when I might now expect a person to make the transition, I was not as faithful as I should have been. Knowing, therefore, from St Ignatius and others, that tepidity or laziness in spiritual exercises can stunt one's spiritual growth, I was convinced that the obvious solution lay in renewed fidelity to my earlier training with its preludes, points and colloquies.

In contrast to this and in contrast to much of our studies at the time I remember the excitement of reading Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, John of the Cross and the English mystics, but it seemed perfectly clear that this was to be a theoretical and vicarious excitement, not for the likes of us. A friend who shared my enthusiasm, later wrote to me from Japan: 'How are the mystics going? Or have you gone over to collecting stamps?' It was only recently that I noticed how the author of the *Cloud of unknowing* suggested that this excitement might be an indication to take up this prayer.

The fear of claiming 'mystical' experiences I have found to be a real barrier not only in my own journey but for others whom I have directed. I do not find people trying to identify with advanced mystical states, but rather displaying reluctance to discern genuine spiritual movements within themselves for fear of being classified as 'advanced'. Consequently, spiritual directors who like to locate their clients' position in particular nights or castles or islands instead of simply helping them to take the next step in the direction in which they are being drawn, can do their directees a serious dis-service. A sure way to destroy or weaken the gentle working of God's grace is to classify it as an extraordinary gift or use technical language which conveys the impression that they have joined the ranks of the mystics.

For myself it was a series of rather prosaic needs that opened the way to non-conceptual prayer. I was finding my work as a

parish priest too much for me and I knew that this was largely subjective, not that I had more to cope with than before. But the fact remained that I was caught up in a vicious spiral, my very sense of being overwhelmed making me less able to cope. I could never be fully alive to the present moment or even given to the work in hand, as I was constantly planning the next hundred and one jobs. I felt I would reach the Parousia asking, 'Where do we go from here?'

The only thing that could lift me free of the maelstrom of parish activity was what Anthony de Mello calls 'awareness exercises' at the beginning of his book *Sadhana*. Their name misled me, conveying the idea that their aim was solely to increase awareness of my physical functions and of the world around me. He describes them as ways of becoming more aware of one's body or one's breathing, but their powerful and far-reaching effect was to draw my attention away from the relentless treadmill that went on inside my head. So I saw them less as a way to prayer than as a method of finding some peace of mind and soul.

About the same time a preacher introduced me to what he called 'centring prayer'. The expression did not convey very much nor did he explain it, but two remarks gave me courage: you do not have to be an enclosed contemplative in order to practise contemplation and you do not necessarily have to do it for long periods of time. For some people these statements would be obvious, for others they would need a great deal of qualification, but for me it was a sign to dive in. To a non-swimmer the water may appear cold and too deep. Once you are in, it is beautiful.

The term 'centring prayer' I find ambiguous and unhelpful and I have since come across it used with widely differing meanings. For some it is a general quietening of the faculties prior to beginning a period of prayer, whether mental or vocal, whilst others give it the very precise technical connotation of a deep stillness at the centre of one's being where all else is forgotten. I also find it suggests a direction that is more restrictive than is necessary. St Paul's prayer for my hidden self to grow strong so that Christ may live in my heart through faith, is inspired and inspiring but it is only one image of the process. To speak of God being 'within' or 'above', to think of the Holy Spirit 'welling up' within me or 'falling afresh' upon me are all images which may be used to express and deepen one's relationship with God. For that reason I find it means more to speak of 'non-conceptual

prayer' as going beyond such images. At the same time I do realize that 'centring' is a more attractive term and has acquired a very definite meaning amongst certain groups.

What I had half-glimpsed in my inaccurate appreciation of centring prayer and awareness exercises, was brought into focus by *The cloud of unknowing*. God cannot be grasped by thought but only embraced by love. I am now convinced that one of the greatest handicaps to my reaching God in prayer has been my determination to 'make a good meditation'. Conceptual prayer, whether using imagination or discursive reasoning, has been a constant obstacle to my being touched by God. Only by deliberately ridding my mind of all concepts can I now hope to open my heart to him. I can never come to know the love of Christ which is beyond all knowing, as long as that knowledge remains intellectual.

The thoughts have been holy and moving and sometimes very loving, the promise of first-rate homilies, but for me in prayer they have paralyzed the action of God's love. It is possible to do holy things and think holy thoughts all day long and never become holy. In fact, until I give up and allow God to take over, my longing for a closer union with him in prayer seems doomed to frustration. I now feel like a man who has been waiting for such a long time for a door to be opened—only to discover that it was never locked. The illogical suspicion still comes to mind that if it is as simple as that it cannot be true. But I find that it is true and that there is no more to it than this: put aside all thoughts and allow God to take over. As long as I insist on being in control by my thought, then I am shutting God out.

Perhaps to reach this point in my journey I needed to follow the route I had taken: to come to God by reasoning about scripture, by imaginative prayer and by a more simple awareness of God in prayer until the time came for me to make the deliberate transition to non-conceptual prayer. But I am certain I need not have waited as long as I did and that many religious soon after a couple of years' noviceship and non-religious after a similar period of serious attempts at prayer, should be open to approaching God in this way. It is especially desirable that they have good spiritual direction at this juncture, but unfortunately many serious directors who nod in agreement with St John of the Cross's condemnation of blind guides who refuse to allow souls to go beyond rudimentary meditation and imagination, lose their nerve when a person wants to practise non-conceptual prayer.

I am not saying that this is the way for everyone. It will vary according to particular graces or perhaps even according to psychological type, but it is certainly a much more usual way than is commonly taught today or practised. Given that most people find the pattern of their prayer to be growing more and more simple, it is normally to be expected that those who remain faithful will usually come to a form of non-conceptual prayer, although this may come after a longer or shorter period. Failure to come to it is not necessarily due to a lack of fidelity to prayer, for it is not meant for all. But often the converse is true: many would find it easier to remain faithful to a life of prayer if they had the spiritual training and direction to lead them to this form of prayer when they are ready for it. Yet warnings against the dangers of attempting such prayer are far more common than encouragement to go forward. Quietism is no longer a temptation: the modern need to be constantly active makes us dread anything that smacks of *dolce far niente*.

Yet the doubts and fears that are voiced at this stage of transition do not differ radically from those experienced with regard to discursive meditation in the early days of a noviceship or seminary training. Firstly, there is the temptation to ask: 'How do I do it? Just give me a technique'. The desire of disciples to be given a sure method is surpassed only by the eagerness with which masters are anxious to elaborate rules which they have discovered—until the whole thing is reduced to a technique. I acknowledge the same inclination in myself, but by far the best advice is to discover for yourself what suits you in bodily posture and in ways of getting rid of thoughts and evolve your own technique. The main thing is to put away thoughts as they occur. Nothing else. It may help to repeat a word without averting to its meaning; it may help to notice any thought that comes to mind and then dismiss it. You are more likely to find the best way for you to do it by observing yourself than by all the hints they give you in books. Some people will talk of having or seeking a general loving awareness of God and gradually you may experience something of the sort, but be content with seeking thoughtlessness and leave the rest to God's working in you.

'In that case, how do I know it is prayer?' How often did I voice that same difficulty when first introduced to meditation. I would spend the time thinking holy thoughts and being plagued with distractions and I asked: 'Is this praying?' Eventually, on the

word of others and because I was capable of nothing else, I stayed with it and came to accept that this counted as prayer, the means of putting myself directly under God's influence either by thought or by imagination. The same doubt occurs when entering this new realm of prayer, but the training and habits of a lifetime, as well as the natural desire to control the process, still persuade many that the thought or image content must be its guarantee. However, what determines that it is prayer, whether conceptual or not, is simply the intention of the one who does it.

It may be possible to adduce theological arguments or theories of how it works to convince people of the efficacy of non-conceptual prayer. For myself I can only say: experience it and you will see. How else could you convey the beauty of colour to a blind child or the powerful tenderness of love to one who has never known it? Once a person has embarked on this new pattern of prayer any dangers of illusion and self-deception are not such as to defy the guidelines for discernment suggested by St Ignatius.

The discernment of spiritual influences is always needed for growth in prayer, but perhaps it is more easily applied in time of retreat. For myself a thirty-days' retreat last year, as part of a sabbatical, offered an excellent opportunity. During a similar retreat twenty years before, I had described to the director how I felt drawn to a simple prayer of loving awareness, but he suggested that if I was making the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius I ought make the discursive exercises entailed. Over the years since, other retreat directors had like misgivings about abandoning the use of specific exercises and texts of scripture and I lacked the confidence to go it alone.

Last year, after the first few days, my director agreed and encouraged me. The general pattern I adopted was to read through the particular exercise or relevant text of scripture, but outside the formal time of prayer. At the beginning of the prayer-period I usually voiced a petition for the particular grace I was seeking such as sorrow for sin, sharing in the passion of Christ, an awareness of God's goodness. Then I spent the period, lasting an hour or a little longer, simply ridding myself of all thought. The time thus spent chasing away distractions was usually rather tedious and I often needed the support of the director to face doubts about the validity of what I was doing. But for the most part it was like undergoing surgery: anaesthetizing the mind to allow the Holy Spirit to operate.

I realize that when trying to put into words what happened, it is only too easy to make the blankness of mind seem depressing like the words 'dark' or 'gloomy'. Charlie Brown's cousin Linus once described a blinding snow-storm as 'pitch white', and perhaps that would be a better description of what was happening much of the time. It was often hard work and usually seemed longer than it was in reality; only after the prayer, when reflecting on it, could I use such expressions as weightlessness rather than thoughtlessness, or a gentle oblivion while conscious of what was happening. From time to time I was tempted to go back to discursive meditation again, but there was no sound reason to use thought processes in an attempt to achieve what was already happening more obviously under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

What confirmed me in this more than anything else was consolation which came without apparent cause. I know some commentators on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius do not consider consolation to be technically without previous cause if you have asked for that particular grace. All I can say is that whilst I spent periods of prayer without anything evidently happening, outside the time of prayer I experienced deep movements, sometimes very sudden and unexpected, sometimes gradual and almost imperceptible. In either case, the graces of clarity and affect were the sort I might have expected following the discursive exercises of the retreat, but at a depth that makes me consider it a major event of my life. More often than not there was no obvious cause for such movements of consolation, certainly not from the content of the prayer-periods. Nor was it possible to detect any pattern of when to expect those sudden movements whilst the more gradual ones could be identified only over a longer period and less easily described. Noticeably I became more sensitive to interior movements of grace.

After the retreat, then, I became more conscious of the importance of monitoring spiritual movements within myself. These are now more likely to be seen outside the time of prayer but are an indication of its effects. During Holy Week and Easter in a parish, for example, the parts of the liturgy I might reasonably have expected to be moving were less marked than the other occasions when I experienced unexpectedly powerful emotions, not always clearly of joy or sorrow. The content of faith and the form of God's presence became more obscure but with a certainty I had not previously known. I can understand Carl Jung's response to a

television interviewer, 'I no longer believe. I know'.

Movements of consolation, both when sudden and when gradual and less easy to discern, gave me confirmation that I was on the right track. I certainly needed it at times. The classic signs which indicate when a person should pass from meditation to contemplation, *viz.* the inability to use discursive prayer and the desire to rest in the Lord, are not always easy to pinpoint. St Ignatius's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, and especially the occurrence of consolation without previous cause, which he attributes directly to God alone, prove more reliable guidelines. But it will not be easy to apply them to this matter without making at least an experimental attempt to pray non-conceptually for a period of time.

For this reason, the annual retreat can be a good time for experimentation and, where it seems apt, a skilled director should be willing to suggest the practice. It may be necessary to initiate the suggestion in view of the hesitation and suspicion that have marked its development in recent years, provided of course that the director takes care not to pressurize the retreatant. It may be questioned whether a retreat is an opportune time for it, since retreatants are away from their usual directors, but for most it is an easier time to verify the experiment and to discover if this is a suitable form of prayer to continue afterwards.

Whilst the period of retreat is good for an initial experimentation and discernment, a longer period of settling into it and persevering will be needed to confirm its suitability. At first, after making the transition, a person may reasonably devote all or most prayer-time exclusively to non-conceptual prayer. But no-one gets to the stage of abandoning for good all meditation on the life of Christ and in particular his passion. As time goes on, discernment and spiritual direction will be needed to decide how much time be given to non-conceptual, and how much to conceptual prayer. It is important for individuals to evaluate the spiritual movements involved, as I find that in such matters spiritual experts can cling mordantly to untried theories.

In this regard, for instance, I have myself always taken it for granted that a person should be well-versed in discursive prayer and the use of scripture before attempting non-conceptual prayer. The experience of others, dealing with individuals and with groups, make me seriously question if this is so. But old habits of thought die hard and it is important to know our prejudices if we are to

be open to the movements of grace.

Similarly, it may easily be supposed *a priori* that an essentially active and apostolic life would militate against an aptitude for non-conceptual prayer. My own experience and that of other directors I have consulted, indicates that those who have responded most readily to the suggestion are people taken up with very busy schedules. When the pace of life makes it virtually impossible to turn their thoughts from business matters to prayerful activity, the only solution may be to shut down on all thought processes. 'From all endeavour ceasing and all my cares releasing, I threw them amongst the lilies there to fade'.

In considering the proportion of time given to different ways of praying, whether vocal or discursive or fantasy or non-conceptual, I had in mind the regular period given daily to private prayer. This is apart from spiritual reading, liturgical prayer and other exercises. It is good, too, to consider on what other occasions non-conceptual prayer may be used with advantage. For myself it is ideal in the course of a busy day for a period as short as five minutes, even surrounded by an untidy sea of paper. Not only does it have the relaxing effect of withdrawing me from the overwhelming dissipation of too many occupations, but somehow it integrates my external work with my spiritual life.

Different again may be the use of prayer in making a decision, even outside of a retreat. As part of such a process, whether done by an individual or by a group, those involved will 'go and pray about' the advantages and disadvantages of a particular course of action. Usually this means that, after asking for enlightenment and guidance, they give thought to the matter in hand in an atmosphere of prayer. But before the process starts they may need a period of prayer for purification from prejudice and for openness to the will of God. This latter type of prayer is very different from 'prayerful consideration' of a topic and it may very profitably be spent as submission to the Holy Spirit in non-conceptual prayer. Again, after making the decision, a period may be given to praying for confirmation; this is not sought by a further consideration of the pros and cons but by losing oneself in God so as to read the signs of consolation and desolation. Both the prior prayer for openness to God's will and the subsequent prayer for confirmation may equally consist of scriptural meditation, offering Mass or reciting vocal prayer. But the colour of the prayer is receptive and for many a non-conceptual approach will be best.

It would be nice if I could complete this article with a testimony of my own noticeable increase in virtue as a result of this prayer. Some of the books and directors record such things as sincerity, simplicity, kindliness and patience growing effortlessly instead of by the previous resolutions and efforts of the will. I am still hoping. But one thing I can record: I now enjoy prayer as never before. That is poorly expressed and could be misleading, in that I often find the time given to prayer tedious with no great hope, or ambition, that it will improve. But in another way I really love it and feel enormously grateful for such a gift. It means so much to me that I am frustrated at not being able to analyze and express it better.

Perhaps it is best confirmed by a card I received whilst typing out this last page. The lady who wrote had landed a wonderful new job in which she feels inadequate and inexperienced: 'Do you remember telling me about your prayer—just emptying yourself? That has been such a gift to me. It may not be like anything you meant to say to me, but my use of it—or dare I say the Lord's use of it in me—has brought me back to him on numerous occasions that have been so difficult in the last few weeks'.

The water is not as cold as it looks, once you are in and have let go of the side.